

CHARTING BRAZIL IN BORGES

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'Je suis l'espace où je suis.'
Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (1957)

Given tendencies for reading Borges as an abstract writer, it is perhaps not surprising that less attention has been paid to his representations of *space*, in contrast to the vast bibliography dedicated to discussing *time* within his fiction. Likewise, while the intertextuality and wealth of literary-philosophical allusions in Borges's texts have been extensively analyzed, much less has been written on the significance of geographical references. Yet Borges suggests the reading of spatial signs in his fiction as indicative of the interrelatedness between language, history, place and time. In "La penúltima versión de la realidad" (*Discusión*, 1932) he provides a theory of time as inseparable from space, reminiscent of Bakhtin's *chronotope* and some of the notions being developed in the field of cultural spaces:¹

¹ Borges seems to have anticipated the move away from a "Kantian perspective on space" in current theoretical writings in the fields of philosophy and the social sciences, moving towards an understanding and representation of "*space as process and in process* (that is space and time combined in becoming)," to quote from Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift's "Introduction" to *Thinking Space* (3). For Mikhail Bakhtin's exegesis and application of the concept of the *chronotope* ("the primary means for materializing time in space," where "Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible"), see "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics" in *The Dialogic Imagination* (250).

Creo delusoria la oposición entre los dos conceptos incontrastables de espacio y de tiempo [...] Por lo demás, acumular espacio no es lo contrario de acumular tiempo: es uno de los modos de realizar esa para nosotros única operación [...] El espacio es un incidente en el tiempo y no una forma universal de intuición, como impuso Kant. (OC 132)

Expressed here in general terms (*espacio, tiempo*), this notion finds particular expression in Borges's fiction through the demarcation of cultural spaces—a process that occurs not only by mentions of places, but also by the naming of characters and discussions of etymologies.

Addressing the subject of the functions of space on another occasion, Borges writes of how “el espacio, en los textos supracitados [he had just quoted from *Martín Fierro*, *El payador* and *Don Segundo Sombra*], tiene la misión de significar el tiempo y la historia” (OC 180). Here Borges again approximates *space* and *time*, while also introducing the association of *time* and *history* (implying a subordination of the two to space, at least in the “textos supracitados”). The result is a move away from Time as an abstract category. And in fact, amongst the three texts he mentions, Borges could have included his own fiction, where geographical references (the *space* in the texts) signify cultural attributes (expressed in terms of *time* and *history*), constructing (or enacting representations of) what we may deem *cultural spaces*.

In keeping with the critical trend of discovering a Borges whose most “universal” and “abstract” fiction is not removed from a socio-historical context, and given the two countries' more recent approximations, it seems relevant to examine how Argentina's neighbor, Brazil, figures and operates systematically within his texts. Considering cultural relationships between both nations, therefore, this study intends to put in evidence the dynamics of space where the nucleus is the literature (and to a lesser extent, the person) of Jorge Luis Borges in contact with Brazil.²

² Besides those mentioned later in this essay, several other scholars have considered the relationship between Borges and Brazil, most notably Raúl Antelo and Jorge Schwartz in the latter's compilation, *Borges no Brasil*. Davi Arrigucci Jr. and Leyla Perrone-Moisés have also worked on tracing parallels between Borges and Brazilian novelists like Machado de Assis and Guimarães Rosa.

The frontier region between Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina appears as a significant space in at least six of the stories published in *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949), perhaps the two most discussed short story collections originating in Latin America during the first half of the 20th century. In all six (“La forma de la espada,” “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbius Tertius,” “El muerto,” “Emma Zunz,” “La otra muerte” and “El otro duelo”), a rather clear pattern emerges: the frontier region is characterized as a space of shifting or blurry identities, of archetypal *orillero* figures, and of lawlessness or violence. These qualities are magnified when associated to the Brazilian side of the border, a process that occurs in the first three of the six stories listed, those on which this essay will focus.³ Indeed, the critics who have addressed the region of the *frontera* between Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina in Borges’s fiction tend to highlight the association of that space with smuggling activities and the vague evocation of Brazil as a mysterious and primitive land.

Balderston, who adopts a different approach to a similar subject as this essay’s, in “Gauchos y *gauchos*: Excursiones a la frontera uruguayo-brasileira,” notes Brazil as a “lugar diferente, enorme, misterioso,” and how a “mezcla de lenguas, la circulación de identidades, el transporte de contrabando” characterize this frontier (78). In Fishburn and Hughes’s *A Dictionary of Borges*, the entry for “Brazil” also stresses the “illicit traffic” of its frontier with Argentina (39). And of what she deems “esa misteriosa zona,” Ana María Barrenechea writes:

Tanto él [Borges] como otros compañeros de generación (Amorim, Ipuche) pensaban que el litoral y el Uruguay son más elementales que la pampa argentina y que la esencia de lo criollo se conserva en esas regiones más puras. El mismo amor al peligro que les hizo fizarse en

³ There are several other references to Brazil in Borges’s literature: most characterize it either as somehow “exotic” or distant, frequently as a place where someone –often not an Argentine– had been (OC 302-303, 401, 627, 1073; OCC 41, 46, 309, 328; *El libro de arena* 127), within the context of the frontier region or gauchos (OC 874; OCC 171, 526, 839; *El libro de arena* 42, 50, 52, 55, 123; *Textos recuperados* 2: 128), or in relation to war –Brazil and Argentina were at war from 1825-1828 over present-day Uruguay; the three countries were allies in the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay (1864-1870)– (OC 179, 561, 563, 1056; OCC 516, 518; *El círculo secreto* 87; *Textos recuperados* 2: 266; *Textos recuperados* 3: 128).

la figura del compadrito, los llevó a buscar en Entre Ríos, el Uruguay y la zona fronteriza del Brasil, el mítico lugar del coraje. (24)

Emphasizing somewhat similar elements, Pablo Rocca, in an essay entitled "Historias nacionales de un diálogo complejo," observes the "inexistencia del norte argentino o la región andina en el discurso borgiano." He then adds: "Su literatura, cuando refiere o comenta algún topos reconocible será el de la 'pampa' criolla de origen hispánico. Por eso no entra en ese registro Rio Grande do Sul, que es apenas el escenario de la violencia, el ignoto margen de la barbarie intocado por la 'civilización'" (15). Rocca is not entirely accurate in excluding the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul as a *topos reconocible*, given Borges's trip to that region in 1934 and the deep impression it left on him: it was in the town of Sant'Anna do Livramento that the writer witnessed for the first and only time someone die, killed in a knife fight. The experience resonates in his fiction, and although the nature of that incident in Brazilian territory may help elucidate its designation as a scene/setting of violence, it is not *only* ("apenas") that.

A somewhat hurried interpretation of how Brazil is represented as a distant and vast unknown in Borges's fiction might point to a latent *argentinidad*. After all, the geographic proximity of the two countries does not necessarily translate into cultural affinity. The literary dialogues between the two neighbors have been notoriously slim: in an essay entitled "Spanish American & Brazilian Literature: a History of Disconsonance" David William Foster cites as a "synecdoche of Argentine cosmopolitanism" how one may find books in English, French, Italian, Yiddish, German, even Japanese and Chinese. However, he remarks, "it is impossible to find books in Portuguese" (2). Likewise, Emir Rodríguez Monegal deems Brazil and Argentina as "culturalmente de costas," with their backs to each other (13). Indeed, in a work notorious for its referential plurality and vast eruditeness, we find but one episode where Brazil constitutes a "literary space," when Borges makes a reference to Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (1902) in a footnote to "Tres versiones de Judas" (OC 516).

The editor-narrator of that footnote addresses the *lector argentino* with the assumption that he/she will identify a parallel be-

tween Antonio Conselheiro and Almafuerte: "Euclides da Cunha, en un libro ignorado por Runeberg, anota que para el heresiarca de Canudos, Antonio Conselheiro, la virtud 'era una casi impiedad'. El lector argentino recordará pasajes análogos en la obra de Almafuerte."⁴ By drawing an analogy between the two figures, the editor-narrator (presumably closer to the author, more "authoritative" since the comment is offered in a footnote) presupposes some similarity between the two cultures. That alone discourages the interpretation of Borges's lack of knowledge about Brazilian literature as paradigmatic of a *rioplatense* formation. In a 1933 essay for the *Revista Multicolor de los Sábados* of the newspaper *Crítica*, rather than emphasizing the cultural distance between Brazil and Argentina (something his fiction would explore), Borges opens a commentary on the poetry of the Brazilian Ribeiro Couto with an unorthodox viewpoint of intercontinental relations:

Es opinión general (o quejumbre mecánica general) que los hombres de las diversas Américas no nos conocemos bastante. Si omitimos de esas Américas la del Norte [...] pienso estrictamente lo contrario. Pienso que infinitamente nos parecemos, con escasas y miserables variantes de color local [...] No sé si desprende de lo anterior que mi desconocimiento de la lírica del Brasil no se avergüenza demasiado de ser total. No se vea en ello un desdén: véase la indolente convicción — tal vez equivocada, pero no ilógica — de que personas parecidas a mí, o a los amigos que frecuento, y provistas de una biblioteca no muy distinta, no pueden depararme vastos asombros. (*Textos recobrados* 2: 82-85)

In this short text Borges seems to treat the commonplace comment about the cultural "disconsonance" between Brazil and Argentina with irony, which does not mean that he pays lip service to the Brazilian poet. While challenging the "general opinion" that "we men of the various Americas do not know each other well enough," Borges never pretends to know much about Brazil-

⁴ Borges quotes from the 5th chapter ("População multiforme") of Euclides da Cunha's account of the Canudos uprising (in the interior of the Northeastern state of Bahia) led by Antonio Conselheiro: "Para Antônio Conselheiro - e neste ponto ele ainda copia velhos modelos históricos - a virtude era como que o reflexo superior da vaidade. Uma quase impiedade."

ian literature, in contrast to his intimacy with Portuguese literature.⁵ Peculiarly, however, Borges places the contention that “we [Latin Americans] are infinitely alike” as “strictly the opposite” of the notion that “we do not know each other,” while both might of course be simultaneously true: two cultures may be infinitely similar without knowing each other. One may consider the fallacy to be deliberate, in which case the implication would be that “we [Latin Americans] know each other” indirectly by virtue of sharing a similar heritage. Therein lies the justification for Borges’s lack of engagement with Brazil’s literature: “personas parecidas a mí” and “biblioteca[s] no muy distinta[s]” could not produce anything too different.

A few months after the publication of that essay Borges travelled to Rio Grande do Sul with the Uruguayan novelist Enrique Amorim (related to him by marriage). Regardless of whether (or how) Borges’s personal conception of Brazil changed after his 1934 trip and over time, one constant remains in his fiction: it is always a space tied to Argentina, or an Argentine “eye.” In thinking of the question Sarlo presents as central to Borges’s writing—“¿cómo puede escribirse literatura en una nación culturalmente periférica?”⁶—if Borges had an acute perception of Argentina’s peripheral status and of the center-margin dynamics within it (e.g.: Buenos Aires as center and the province’s suburban regions as marginal), his native country is “displaced” to the core in the stories where Brazil is evoked. Without exception, Argentina stands at the

⁵ The privileged space devoted to Portuguese letters by Borges sets him apart from most non-Brazilian Latin American writers. He grew up listening to his mother read Eça de Queiroz, and was also a serious reader and admirer of Camões. Besides writing an encyclopedia entry on Portuguese literature and an essay entitled “Destino y obra de Camoens,” Borges composed a sonnet honoring the Portuguese poet (“A Luis de Camoens,” published in *El hacedor*, 1960). For a fuller discussion, including the relationship between Borges and Fernando Pessoa, see Balderston’s “Borges and Portuguese Literature.”

⁶ In the first chapter to *Borges, un escritor en las orillas*, Sarlo writes: “No existe un escritor más argentino que Borges: él se interrogó, como nadie, sobre la forma de la literatura en una de las orillas de occidente. En Borges, el tono nacional no depende de la representación de las cosas sino de la presentación de una pregunta: ¿cómo puede escribirse literatura en una nación culturalmente periférica?” (12).

discursive center of those texts: usually they are set in Buenos Aires, and Brazil is the place from where news (of death, in "Emma Zunz") or an artifact (the eleventh volume of the encyclopedia in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius") arrive, and these elements serve as a catalyst that propels the plot. Variably, an ostensibly *porteño* narrator ("El muerto") or the narrator's interlocutor (the Irish man in "La forma de la espada") tell of events that portray Brazil as a cultural space. Borges, however, never sets a story there, and it is not even a place where action occurs, a role reserved to the Argentine or Uruguayan sides of the border.

At this point, Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between "space" and "place" seems particularly useful as a guideline to Borges's mentions of a city, a nation, or their landmarks. In *Space and Place* Tuan defines "space" as more abstract than "place," conjecturing that "when a space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place" (73). Familiarity in Tuan's text implies that the "human experience" stands at the center of his conception of place. Tuan, in turn, defines "experience" as any way "through which a person knows and constructs a reality" (8). In Borges's work it seems hard to detach the term from the hiper-literary nature of his relationship to the wor(l)d.

With those preliminary notions alone we may distinguish Borges's portrayals of Buenos Aires and India, for example. Buenos Aires, constant in the cartography of his stories with its streets, buildings and neighborhoods, could certainly be considered a "place." As a setting or point of reference for his stories, Buenos Aires's landscape is familiar to the point of having been interiorized: references to the city tend to be of specific locales but void of modifiers.⁷ In other words, Borges's texts assume the readers'

⁷ Borges seems to have inadvertently developed his own "theory of space" in a text entitled "El mapa secreto," where his "intimate" and "secret" Buenos Aires illustrates the "interior spaces" of which Gaston Bachelard famously writes about in *La poétique de l'espace*: "Buenos Aires, desde luego, es algo más que una determinada extensión surcada de calles que se portan en línea recta y en la que hay muchas casas bajas y muchos patios. Para todo porteño, Buenos Aires, al cabo de los años se ha convertido en una especie de mapa secreto de memorias, de encuentros, de adioses, acaso de agonías y humillaciones, y tenemos así dos ciudades: una, la ciudad pública que registran los cartógrafos, y otra, la íntima y secreta ciudad de

prior knowledge of Buenos Aires's landscape and demonstrate his intimacy with it. India, on the other hand, proves to be more "abstract," falling in the category of "space" as Tuan defines the term. The entry for "India" in *A Dictionary of Borges* captures what the signifier evokes in Borges's fiction: "Borges often alludes to the vastness of India and the variety of its people, referring to them as 'vertiginous' and emphasizing their association with the non-rational and chaotic" (120).

The "Epilogue" to *El Aleph* reveals the importance Borges placed on setting and comes close to articulating the distinct and opposing functions of Buenos Aires and India within his narrative: "La momentánea y repetida visión de un hondo conventillo que hay a la vuelta de la calle Paraná, en Buenos Aires, me deparó la historia que se titula 'El hombre en el umbral'; la situé en la India para que su inverosimilitud fuera tolerable" (*El Aleph* 183). Distant India, relatively unknown to Borges and his implied audience of the 1940's, perhaps allows the narrative to conduct more imaginative and far-fetched associations. When Borges explains that he "situated it in India so that its inverosimilitud could be tolerable," it remains ambiguous whether the lack of verisimilitud (were the story not set in India) would be intolerable to him (the author) or to the readers, and we may imagine this ambivalence as desirable. Nevertheless, India grants the story a discursive "liberty" that Yi-Fu Tuan associates with space, as opposed to the "stability" of place.

Perhaps the logical assumption is that due to the lack of literary allusions, Brazil would be "freed" as a fictional space (fitting Tuan's description of space as opposed to place), much as we have observed with India, which becomes re-defined on a mythical level as a space denoting vastness and chaos. Brazil, however, provides an exception when compared to either "unknown" and

nuestras biografías. A ese mapa personal podemos agregar hoy, venturosamente, otros puntos, donde se ejecutaron los hechos de la revolución [the *Revolución Libertadora* of 1955, ending Perón's second presidential term], y que definen (público y entrañable a la vez) un mapa de glorias" (*Textos recobrados* 3: 26-28). The "mapa personal" or "mapa secreto de memorias" (memories of encounters, farewells, experiences) of Borges's text also elucidates Tuan's conceptualizing of *place* as *space of the familiar*, intimately connected to *human experience* ("acaso de agonías y humillaciones"....).

“known” *literary spaces* precisely due to its non-literary *cultural* ties to Argentina.⁸ Brazil constitutes a cultural space that is intrinsically tied to Borges’s experience and understanding of what Argentina *is*, by representing in part what Argentina *is not*, or in Borges’s imagination, what it once *was*. This interplay is manifested in the construction of Brazilian “spaces” as a place of smuggling (reflecting an empirical reality), of linguistic diversity (revealing Borges’s enduring interest in etymologies), and of a mythical past where gauchos still exist (projecting Borges’s nostalgic notion of the *gauchesco* hero and of the foundations of Argentina).

A passage from *Ficciones*’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” condenses these elements, which other stories will treat in greater detail:

Una tarde, hablamos del sistema duodecimal de numeración (en el que doce se escribe 10). Ashe dijo que precisamente estaba trasladando no sé qué tablas duodecimales a sexagesimales (en las que sesenta se escribe 10). Agregó que ese trabajo le había sido encargado por un noruego: en Río Grande do Sul. Ocho años que lo conocíamos y no había mencionado nunca su estadía en esa región... Hablamos de vida pastoril, de *capangas*, de la etimología brasilera de la palabra *gaucho* (que algunos viejos orientales todavía pronuncian *gaúcho*) y nada más se dijo –Dios me perdone– de funciones duodecimales. En setiembre de 1937 (no estábamos nosotros en el hotel) Herbert Ashe murió de la rotura de un aneurisma. Días antes, había recibido del Brasil un paquete sellado y certificado. Era un libro en octavo mayor. Ashe lo dejó en el bar, donde – meses después – lo encontré. (19)

An aura of mysteriousness is suggested here by the narrator (and his friends) not having known about Herbert Ashe’s stay in Rio Grande do Sul. A description of the conversation that followed touches on key elements of Borges’s representation of the region: “vida pastoril” signals the rural (in opposition to the urban, Buenos Aires), and “*capangas*” hints not only at the illegal acti-

⁸ By known literary spaces one may understand those where geographical references tend to conceal a specific literary allusion. For example, Borges’s reference to the word Egypt as signifying the river Nile originates in Book IV of the *Odyssey* (Fishburn and Hughes 49).

vities and violence of the frontier, but also at Borges's use of a word's etymology as a means for organizing space, like "la palabra *gaucho*," whose origin he situates in Brazil.

The word "*capanga*," to which the narrator brings attention by italicization, does not feature in many dictionaries of the Spanish language, although it is a term used in Argentina and Uruguay with virtually the same meaning as in Brazil.⁹ The term appears in another story: it is a *capanga* called Ulpiano Suárez (who not coincidentally speaks Spanish "de una manera abrasilerada") who shoots Benjamín Otálora at the end of "El muerto." The usage of *capanga* in that story seems close to the Brazilian denotation of the term, of *capanga* as a "guardaespalda."¹⁰

In both stories the association of *capanga* with Brazil is also etymological, since the term derives from the Tupi.¹¹ Regardless of whether Borges was aware of the word's roots, the importance he placed on etymologies is revealed by the recurring reference to the origins of the term *gaucho* in Brazil. That subject—to be addressed in greater detail later in this essay—is the third topic discussed that afternoon by the narrator of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and Herbert Ashe: "hablamos [...] de la etimología brasilera de la palabra *gaucho*." Like the use of *capanga*, the narrator's preference for "brasileira" here instead of the Spanish form "brasileña," as well

⁹ The *Diccionario de Lunfardo* translates "capanga" as "jefe o capataz, arbitrario, autoritario." The English translation by James E. Irby and Donald Yates wisely preserve the word *capangas*, though its meaning would come close to that of "henchmen."

¹⁰ In fact, when introducing the word in "El muerto," Borges explains Ulpiano as "el capanga o guardaespaldas."

¹¹ Tupi was spoken along Brazil's coast upon arrival of the Portuguese; the Jesuits unified it into a system they called "Língua Geral" (general language), which remained widely spoken in Brazil until the 19th century. The people designated as the Tupis were closely related to the Guaranis, whose language Borges mentions in a remote association to Portuguese in "La biblioteca de Babel." The association follows a procedure of Borges's poetry, of lists that combine randomness with meaning: "Mostró su hallazgo [one of the "libros impenetrables"] a un descifrador ambulante, que le dijo que estaban redactadas en portugués; otros le dijeron que en yiddish. Antes de un siglo pudo establecerse el idioma: un dialecto samoyedolituano del guaraní" (74).

as the earlier spelling of "Río Grande do Sul"¹² (diverging from the usual "Río Grande del Sur" in Spanish), are also examples of the *transculturation* particular to the border region between Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay.¹³

In Borges's texts, then, Brazil eludes Tuan's categorization of "place" and "space" by simultaneously representing an unfamiliar literary space and a "cultural space" (manifested linguistically) that overlaps with Argentina's. At the same time, a place-space dichotomy is complicated by how the mysteriousness that characterizes evocations (of the "unknown" space) of Brazil tends to conceal a revelation, a process exemplified in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

Among the short stories addressed here, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" contains the only reference to a Brazilian space that does not belong to the country's Southern region. In the "Posdata de 1947" we learn: "En marzo de 1941 se descubrió una carta manuscrita de Gunnar Erfjord en un libro de Hinton que había sido de Herbert Ashe. El sobre tenía el sello postal de Ouro Preto, la carta elucidaba enteramente el misterio de Tlön" (*Ficciones* 34). Ouro Preto, first capital of the state of Minas Gerais and one of the cultural centers of 18th century Brazil after a gold rush had made it prosperous, in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" becomes just a "space" (in Tuan's sense) in the map. However, from Ouro Preto comes the letter that once open, offers something akin to a map of a map, the all-important revelation of a "place" (Tlön) that is not territorial but imaginary.

Any conjecturing of "space" or "place" in this text, however, must take into account its sort of *structure en abîme*. To again think

¹² In fact, "brasileira" and not "brasilera" would be the correct form in Portuguese, and "Río Grande do Sul" (without the accented *i* of *Río*) is the proper spelling. These slight "mistakes" could be dismissed as an editorial oversight or a misprint, but even if accidental, they remain quite useful as a model for precisely how Brazil (and tautologies) function within Borges's fiction: the slight divergences produced by mimesis are the spaces of transformation, where meaning reveals itself.

¹³ Fernando Ortiz coined the term "transculturation" in the 1940's, describing the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures. Balderston makes a similar point (*Borges* 87).

of Yi-Fu Tuan and one of Borges's favorite metaphors, Ouro Preto — origin of the letter that "elucidaba enteramente el misterio de Tlön" (34) — is like the peculiarity in the labyrinth that if noticed and identified, can serve as a source of orientation (Tuan 74). And in fact, by having the "real" intrude in the "fantastic" (and vice versa), the "ordered" amidst the "chaotic," they are approximated.

While the geographical concreteness of Ouro Preto deserves to be deemed an "intrusion" in this particular story, Borges's depiction of Brazil and the frontier does in fact correspond to certain socio-historical facts. The *transculturation* extrapolated from the choice of "brasileiro" instead of "brasileño" (common in ríoplatense Spanish) has an even clearer expression in another character from *Ficciones* that (like Herbert Ashe) comes to the River Plate region through Brazil: John Vincent Moon, the Irish protagonist of "La forma de la espada." Moon's shifting identities are further indications of the Brazilian frontier region as a space of the unstable and of movement, but they also create the sense of a transnational place.

Moon, who will assume the role of narrator himself, is introduced by an initial narrator who tells us that "su nombre verdadero no importa" (137). At the end of the story told by Moon and retold by the narrator, we learn his name, and the irony of that sentence is unmasked: the until-then anonymous "Inglés" had been narrating a tale where a man named John Vincent Moon had supposedly betrayed him. That traitor, we learn at the end, is the very man telling the story. Moon, or the "Inglés," as it turns out, is also not English but Irish.

He is presented as a mysterious character from the beginning: "venía de la frontera, de Río Grande del Sur; no faltó quien dijera que en el Brasil había sido contrabandista" (137), and the Brazilian "frontera" again constitutes a space of smuggling. Here we have a more general and stereotypical evocation of Brazil where Rio Grande do Sul appears in Spanish: Río Grande del Sur. Seeing as this seems to be the only place where Borges spells the Brazilian state in its Spanish version, we may infer a deliberateness. We can further deduce that this story's narrator is from Argentina based on another subtle detail: he claims to have met Moon in

Caraguatá when he had been traveling “Norte,” and Caraguatá (in Uruguay) could only be North to an Argentine.

The frontier as a space where personal identities and national boundaries are blurred is clearest in this story: “todos en Tacuarembó le decían el Inglés de *La Colorada*” (137). Not only does the “Inglés” not hail from England, but the constitution of an identity through rumors (“no faltó quien dijera”) also reaffirms the ambiguities of the “frontera.” These “ambiguities” are territorial and linguistic, but they may also be of a moral nature. In “La forma de la espada,” at first the presence of an Englishman might even represent the intrusion of a supposed element of “civilization” in the barbarian “pampas” (to adopt the terms employed by Rocca). The mysterious “Inglés” who cites Schopenhauer and Shakespeare agrees with the narrator that a country with England’s spirit is invincible (138), only to reveal his actual nationality as Irish (his story of betrayal involved participation in a conspiracy for the independence of Ireland). And at last, as the story nears its end, Moon prefigures the revelation of his identity as the villain of his own tale when he says “[Moon] cobró los dineros de Judas y huyó al Brasil.” The story ends with his confession: “Yo soy Vincent Moon. Ahora desprécieme” (145).

If the criminal running off to Brazil represents almost a trope of the North American cinema in the first half of the century, ironically, Borges partly subverts the expected dichotomy of “civilization” versus the “primitive” forces that rule the rural “frontera.” Although the violence associated to this frontier space is reinforced (the afternoon Moon left for Brazil, “vio fusilar un maniquí por unos borrachos,” 145), it is only there that Moon comes even close to having his behavior governed by any sort of principle: he confesses his shameful act and seems to demonstrate the remorse of one who understands he cannot be forgiven.

While Borges’s fascination with the “primitive” and violent system of ethics that he associates to the *orilleros* and to the *frontera* is merely hinted at in “La forma de la espada,” it is addressed rather explicitly elsewhere. In “Historia del tango,” for instance, he writes: “Tendríamos, pues, a hombres de pobrísima vida, a gauchos y orilleros de las regiones ribereñas del Plata y del Paraná,

creando, sin saberlo, una religión, con su mitología e sus mártires, la dura y ciega religión del coraje, de estar listo a matar y a morir" (OC 168). The images of the "orilleros," "gauchos" or "cuchilleros" evokes an Argentina that to Borges only existed in the past and outside of the urban Buenos Aires, in the "regiones ribereñas."

Although Sarlo writes of Borges creating a "Buenos Aires myth in 'las orillas,'" ¹⁴ the geographic "orillas" in relation to the Argentine capital conjure "la dura y ciega religión del coraje, de estar listo a matar y a morir" to a much greater extent. When the Brazil-Uruguay *frontera* figures within a text, Buenos Aires relocates to the "center," it represents the "civilized" and urban. Nowhere does the dynamics of that relationship seem clearer than in "El muerto." Set at the end of the 19th century, the story opens by devising a cultural distance between the suburbs of Buenos Aires and the frontier of Brazil:

Que un hombre del suburbio de Buenos Aires, que un triste compadrito sin más virtud que la infatuación del coraje, se interne en los desiertos ecuestres de la frontera del Brasil y llegue a capitán de contrabandistas, parece de antemano imposible. A quienes lo entienden así, quiero contarles el destino de Benjamín Otálora, de quien acaso no perdura un recuerdo en el barrio de Balvanera y que murió en su ley, de un balazo, en los confines de Río Grande do Sul. (*El Aleph* 29)

Once more we have the associations with smuggling, shifting identities and violence. But here the narrator directs himself to *those that understand* the impossibility of someone from the suburbs of Buenos Aires ascending to the position of captain of the "contrabandistas" in the border region.

This same narrator, whose direct voice gives us the entire account (unlike the narrator-editor who introduces John Vincent Moon's narrative voice), wants to tell the "destiny," not the "story" or "adventure" of Benjamín Otálora. That alone prefigures how our "triste compadrito" from the "suburbio," with an "in-

¹⁴ Sarlo argues that Borges "invented an image of Buenos Aires in which he presented a city untouched by migration and demographic complexity." She reminds us that "the real Buenos Aires where he was living seemed chaotic and its heterogeneity menacing and un-aesthetic," claiming "his main response to this experience was his creation of a Buenos Aires myth in 'las orillas'" (*Writer* 56).

fatuation for courage," has little control over what will happen to him. In the first paragraph we are told Otálora dies in "los confines de Río Grande do Sul," (here spelled as in in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius") with "confines" emphasizing a spatial distance and vagueness that translates temporally, as the story proceeds without too many clues to remind us of Otálora's sealed fate (he is, of course, the "muerto" of the title): we do not know if he will die days, months, or decades after 1891, when the story begins.

Otálora's death sentence comes from Azevedo Bandeira, leader of the *bando* he becomes involved with. Otálora, deluded by what he perceived as a series of "successes" and blinded by his own ambition, thought he would be able to overthrow Bandeira. In the epilogue to *El Aleph*, Borges describes Bandeira as a "tosca divinidad, una versión mulata y cimarrona del incomparable Sunday de Chesterton" (181). The destiny of Otálora, of course, rests with this "divinity," who decided for his death as soon as the "triste compadrito" thought of challenging his power. In conjunction with Alazraki's interpretation of the story as an example of "el universo como libro de Dios" (35-76) we may also read Bandeira as a construction of the "local," grounded socio-historically and constructed with particulars that render him paradoxically "incomparable" like Chesterton's Sunday.

In the "Epilogue" Borges also informs us that "Azevedo Bandeira, en ese relato, es un hombre de Rivera o de Cerro Largo" (181). The detail is not insignificant: both towns are along the border between Brazil and Uruguay, and Rivera is precisely the Oriental side of the Brazilian Sant'Anna do Livramento. The "Epilogue" further establishes Bandeira as a character from the "frontera," but is careful to maintain the unstableness associated to the identities originating there: Bandeira is from Rivera or Cerro Largo. The story itself is no less ambiguous about his precise origin: "Alguien opina que Bandeira nació del otro lado del Cuareim, en Río Grande do Sul" (132), where we again have "opinions," hearsay or rumors as a source of information on someone's identity in that region.

Although the text simulates impreciseness in its geographical organization, Azevedo Bandeira's names become another exam-

ple of Borges' suse of etymology to conjure space and time, reinforcing the character's identity and origin. Azevedo is the Portuguese version of Borges's family surname, Acevedo. The name suggests Jewish ancestry, and attests to the fact that Borges originates from Portugal through both the maternal and paternal sides of his family (the surname Borges also comes from the Portuguese). Azevedo Bandeira's own surname, on the other hand, besides being Portuguese for flag, quite possibly also references the Brazilian *bandeirantes*.¹⁵ Like Azevedo, in whose face are "el judío, el negro y el indio" (30) and the cultural space of Brazil, the *bandeirantes* were characterized by overlapping identities and a system of ethics based on "la dura y ciega religión del coraje, de estar listo a matar y a morir." The poem "El conquistador" from *La moneda de hierro* (1976) would contain the hendecasyllable: "en el duro Brasil fui Bandeirante" (57).

In further setting Azevedo Bandeira's identity as distinct from something that finds its meaning in the *rioplatense* region, Borges sets the character apart from the "urban nostalgia" of the *gaucho*,¹⁶ perhaps indeed situating him closer to the *Bandeirantes* and a Brazilian cultural space:

Sólo una vez, durante ese tiempo de aprendizaje, ve a Azevedo Bandeira, pero lo tiene muy presente, porque ser *hombre de Bandeira* es ser considerado y temido, y porque, ante cualquier hombrada, los gauchos dicen que Bandeira lo hace mejor. Alguien opina que Bandeira nació del otro lado del Cuareim, en Rio Grande do Sul; eso, que debería rebajarlo, oscuramente lo enriquece de selvas populosas, de ciénagas, de inextricables y casi infinitas distancias. (32)

By writing that "ante cualquier hombrada, los gauchos dicen que Bandeira lo hace mejor," the narrator suggests Bandeira cannot

¹⁵ The *bandeirantes* explored the South American continent in organized expeditions called *bandeiras*. Motivated by missionary zeal and the search of Indians to enslave or gold to mine, the expeditions comprised of converted Indians, criollos and recently arrived settlers, who ventured deep into the continent's territory from the 17th through the early 19th centuries. As a result Brazil expanded its domains considerably. The main *bandeiras* left from São Paulo, but they were also active in present-day Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul.

¹⁶ In "El duelo" (1970), the narrator contends that "el culto de los gauchos" is a "nostalgia urbana" (OC 1055-56).

be categorized as a *gaucho*, and that differentiation is tied to a spatial sign: the “other side” of the Cuareim river (which forms part of the boundary between Brazil and Uruguay) is associated to something vaguely negative “que debería rebajarlo,” and denotes a landscape which is essentially different from Uruguay’s, something that does not correspond to an empirical reality. In the text, the “selvas populosas” and “ciénagas” of Brazil contrast with the “inagotable llanura” or the “interminable llanura” of the Uruguayan side, where “el primer sol y el último la golpean” and where Otálora finds a “new life” and “se hace gaucho” (31). The “interminable” and “inagotable” of the llanuras, however, provide a parallel to the “casi infinitas distancias” of Rio Grande do Sul, both uniting temporal and spatial amplexity.

The characterization of space (“llanura”) and time (“inagotable”) as indivisible is by no means exclusive to this region; in fact, it is conveyed by two images privileged by Borges, the labyrinth and the river. Perhaps the clearest passage to illustrate this notion of space-time¹⁷—and to identify how it functions peculiarly in the case of the Brazilian *frontera*—may be found in “El Sur,” where the spatial movement goes on the opposite direction of Otálora’s (North to South instead of South to North), but the shift (center to margin, urban to rural) is parallel and the effect on/of time similar. In “El Sur,” Dahlmann leaves the “entrañas” (again echoing the “interior spaces” of Bachelard) of Buenos Aires on a train toward the South, eventually reaching where/when “todo era vasto, pero al mismo tiempo era íntimo [...] La soledad era perfecta y tal vez hostil, y Dahlmann pudo sospechar que viajaba al pasado y no sólo al Sur” (*Ficciones* 211).

In “El muerto,” the exteriority is less dreamed and more concrete than in “El Sur” (where no cultures and people “turbaban la tierra elemental”), so the notion of simultaneously moving to the

¹⁷ Incidentally, since current theory often presents the conceptualization of space in terms of its relationship to time as an opposition to tendencies of modernity and “tyrannies” of historicism and developmentalism, it is worth noting that the etymology of space already foresees the “time-space compression” (to borrow a term fashionable in globalization studies). *Spatium* also denotes a “stretch of time” (Barnhart 1039).

North and the past produces different effects. In “El muerto,” the changes provoked by spatial movement are of a mostly socio-historical nature, and unlike “El Sur,” it does not produce awareness or even suspicion on the part of the characters (as it does with Dahlmann, adding the dimension of a spiritual journey to the spatial-temporal train ride of the story).

With the move North, “empieza entonces para Otálora una vida distinta, una vida de vastos amaneceres y de jornadas que tienen el olor del caballo” (31). Here again time and space “compress,” with the “amaneceres” implying time and “vastos” signifying space. Anything seems possible amidst the open spaces, the new life and promise of “llanura inagotable” which Otálora encounters, perhaps leading the reader to forget that his destiny is sealed and announced by the title—which of course, means the following passage is not entirely void of irony. Away from his native Buenos Aires suburb, Otálora seems to get in touch with something supposedly “in his blood”:

Esa vida es nueva para él, y a veces atroz, pero ya está en su sangre, porque lo mismo que los hombres de otras naciones veneran y presienten el mar, así nosotros (también el hombre que entreteje estos símbolos) ansiamos la llanura inagotable que resuena bajo los cascos. Otálora se ha criado en los barrios del carrero y del cuarteador; antes de un año se hace gaucho. (31)

In the North (Buenos Aires obviously being the geographic center and point of reference) Otálora “se hace gaucho,” justifying the association of the Uruguay-Brazil border region with the (supposed) origins of Argentina, “de *fundación mítica*,” representing a “retorno a las fuentes de la patria [Argentina]” according to Rocca (19-20). Once more, the conception of space cannot be separated from that of time, where time signifies “history”—which in Borges must always be approached carefully, with the understanding of history as always, in a sense, “mythical,” a fabrication.

It remains unclear whether the narrator’s “nosotros” in the preceding passage refers to Argentines, *porteños*, *rioplatenses* or whether it is a broader “we” articulating the yearning for the “llanura inagotable.” It includes the narrator, however, and

Borges himself spoke often of how the “gauchos” were to be found in Uruguay and even more in Brazil, expressing a sort of similar “ansia.” In a 1984 interview with a Brazilian magazine, Borges is posed with the question: “Have you been to Brazil many times?” After replying “very few” and bringing up the ten days he spent in Sant’Anna do Livramento (not failing to mention he saw someone get killed there for the only time), the writer proceeds:

I always remember that region, the gauchos. The first gaucho I ever saw was in Montevideo... I had never seen a gaucho before, here in Buenos Aires there weren’t any... But in Rio Grande do Sul, everyone is called a gaucho, be they lawyers or doctors, right? An uncle of mine, a Uruguayan historian, told me once that in Uruguay the older people would say *gauchos* or *gaúchos* without distinction, and that not only the word but the character came from the South of Brazil. There were gaúchos there before Argentina, just as there I think they are still around, while here they don’t exist anymore.¹⁸

Not surprisingly then, even in the 1890’s when “El muerto” takes place, a character “se hace gaucho” in Northern Uruguay. That manipulation of space in the fiction of the 1940’s and the declaration in the 1984 interview are both part of a tendency in Borges: “[cada vez más] desconfiando irónicamente de un discurso ‘mayor’ sobre la fundación gauchesca de la cultura argentina” (Sarlo 17).

It seems to be the case that characters like Bandeira (or the urban *cuchilleros*, *orilleros* and *compadritos*) seduce Borges and capture his imagination, though that does preclude them from being employed as mechanisms that represent ruptures from prior portrayals such *marginal* characters received within Argentine literature. What permits Bandeira’s character to differ from other *marginal* figures is partly his likely origin in Brazil, a territory sometimes portrayed as belonging to a transnational cultural space, other times evoked as distant, mysterious, even barbaric. In all instances, however, what

¹⁸ Indeed, *gaucho* in Brazil applies to anyone born in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The quoted interview was first published in Portuguese in the *Revista Status* (São Paulo, Aug. 1984, n. 121, p. 21-29) and reprinted in Schwartz (509-22). The translation is mine.

prevails in Borges, it seems, is the understanding that these “myths of courage and masculine endurance flourished as the cultural response to a social environment” (Sarlo, *Writer* 30).¹⁹

Borges’s careful constructions of the cultural space of Brazil within his texts evidence an understanding of this “social environment.” At the same time, to Borges there seems to be some primordial essence to the *gaucho* and in the frontier with Brazil (as well as in the pronunciation of the old Uruguayans) he finds the *gaúcho* archetype. His evocations of the cultural space of Brazil, then, like a metaphor, at once constitute an aesthetic artifact and socio-historical commentary. Numerically, Brazil does not figure prominently in Borges’s fiction, yet its charting reveals the attention of an author who sought to meticulously plot his fiction.²⁰

Despite their scarcity, Borges’s references to Brazil reveal, as we have seen, quite a complex *map*—a map being itself a symbol of the space-time compression observed by/in Borges. In other words, a map—at least before they became mere reproductions of satellite photographs—presents *space as an incident in time*, revealing the contours and features of a space known at a certain point

¹⁹ On the process whereby these “marginal” figures became privileged and heroicized in literary discourses, Sarlo writes: “la historia de los tiempos que fueron está hecha de arquetipos’ [...] Borges señala el contradictorio mecanismo por el cual una identidad nacional (que se supone inspiradora de valores positivos) está fundada sobre tipos sociales vinculados con la insubordinación y la delincuencia, que los letrados purifican en sus nuevas lecturas del pasado” (“Crítica” 270).

²⁰ A quick inventory (accounting for rivers, mountains, countries, cities, regions, streets, bridges, buildings) using Evelyn Fishburn’s and Psiche Hughes’s *Dictionary of Borges*, which draws from *Ficciones*, *El Aleph* and *El informe de Brodie*, reveals that almost 40% of the geographic references in that *corpus* are located in Argentina, more than 90% of which are in or around the city or province of Buenos Aires. Outside of Argentina, India is the most frequently mentioned (25 times). A combined European total reaches 89, led by England (15), Greece (11) and Ireland (10). North Africa appears 26 times (14 of which with Egypt; there are no mentions of Sub-Saharan African locations), Asia Minor 10, Persia and the Middle East 13, and the rest of Asia 9 (including China, 5 times, for a continental total of 57 if we include India). Finally, the Americas, which Borges often spoke of as a single continent, are present in 48 instances (including the U.S. and Mexico, excluding Argentina), 30 of which reference somewhere on the border region of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay (a total more than twice that of the Argentinean spaces outside of the Buenos Aires province).

in time to the cartographer(s) responsible for its design. And if we are to adopt the image of a map as a metaphor for Borges's work, we may understand him as a cartographer-author guided primarily by a literary imagination. Yet, as the treatment of Brazil proves, the socio-historic and geographic contexts confirm Borges as a careful and deliberate cartographer, in whose maps no detail is idle.²¹

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²¹ This study, it need not be said, does not extinguish the potentials of the subject: the importance of the Tacuarembó, a river with its nascent in Sant'Anna do Livramento and which figures in three of the stories discussed, remains unexplored. The significance of the "space" of Brazil in "Emma Zunz" -where a letter informing Emma of her father's death comes from Bagé, not accidentally in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, near the frontier with Uruguay- was also only treated in passing. Balderston's "Gauchos y gaúchos: Excursiones a la frontera uruguayo-brasileira" addresses that story in greater detail.

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