



Lateinamerika denken und *beschreiben*

Festschrift für Susanne Klengel

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Coffee Poetics in Brazilian Modernism

Laranja no café é azeda ou tem vespeira

Popular saying from São Paulo

Extractivism and Modernism

A brief exercise in memory would enumerate a profusion of extraction materials and their presence in modern South American literature. Iron, gold, silver, coffee, mate, tobacco, sugar, cocoa, rubber, horses, cattle, and more. Labor relations in the production and/or extraction of these materials, as well as the prior relationships of interspecies coexistence between indigenous groups and the beings with whom they shared the territory, are also privileged themes in many works that have attained canonical status.

Despite that, Modernity and the aesthetic expressions produced at its core, are portrayed as often detached from the processes of material resource extraction and transportation that make it possible. This detachment is particularly dynamic in the global peripheries, within territories of the former colonies. These contrasting terms Extractivism and Modernism—one rooted in the economy and the other in art history—are not usually considered together. Extractivism, in economic terms, contrasts with Industry, for example, being associated with archaic forms, remote places, dirt, huge amounts, and simplicity. In contrast, Modernism, in aesthetic terms, is linked to contemporary and futuristic forms, Europe, large urban centers, brightness, uniqueness, and high complexity.

But precisely in the periphery, within a context structured by Extractivism, Modernism and its artists must produce a distinct form of aesthetic perception and expression. The themes and forms of extraction are so conspicuous that the

avant-garde artist faces two options: either succumb to its influence, creating a distinct form of Third World Modernism, or produce literature with ideas and forms that are deliberately “out of place” (Schwarz 2014). As we will see in the coming examples, both poles (as the majority of the literature of the time has elements of both) represent valid responses to the influence of Extractivism. The first option involves integrating the themes and forms of extraction into modernist aesthetics, creating a unique local flavor. This approach is evident in the work of Cassiano Ricardo, who romanticizes the coffee plantation as a modernizing force. The second option involves creating literature that deliberately clashes with the dominant European modernist forms and ideas, highlighting the “out of place” nature of the periphery within the global context. Oswald de Andrade, particularly in *Pau-Brasil*, seems to practice a combination of both. He incorporates local themes like *Pau-Brasil* and coffee but does so through fragmented forms and ironic juxtapositions that challenge conventional modernist aesthetics. His “modernist extractivism” can be seen as the act of extracting local cultural elements and historical narratives and recontextualizing them within a modernist framework, often with a critical or satirical intent.

Thus, one of the typical strengths of Modernisms, the clash between the traditional and modern innovations, finds a fertile context in the periphery. There, the archaic element is not a museum piece, a niche remnant, or a travel colonial account but a present, living part of the social fabric in resistance. While European Modernisms emerged in an advanced Modernity context referring to traditional artistic themes and forms almost from their seclusion or even social disappearance, modernist literary production in other regions of the planet emerged in a much more hybrid composition, especially considering colonial contexts. This economical, historical and cultural conjunction demands a type of literary reading which not only pays attention to the extractive “motifs” and “topoi”, but which also considers literature as part of the macro-international exchanges, defending the extraction, giving testimony against it, acting itself as an export product or attempting to change the exchange relations.

Coffee and Modernism in São Paulo

The power of coffee in the modernist imagination is extravagant. Its circulation as a highly valuable commodity underpinned the industrialization of São Paulo and, with it, the creation of a local Modernism — that is, a variant of European fashions, with a local flavor. One clear example is the celebrated history of coffee in the poetry of modernist Cassiano Ricardo, author of “Marcha para o Oeste” (1940), a true eulogy of São Paulo’s bandeirantismo, romanticization of genocide and disguised praise of white supremacy. In poems like “Lavrador”, “Taperá” (1925), “Cantilena”, “Café-Expresso”, “Moça tomando café” (1936) he tries to craft a poetics of coffee, sensitively describing the plant, the production, and the effects of it in São Paulo and Paris’ urban life. There is also a very specific bellicose strategy in the representation of the coffee plantation as a war on the so-called wasteland (and on its people, one could say). In the poem “Soldados verdes”, we read:

O cafezal é a soldadesca verde,
Que salta morros na distância iluminada,
Um! dois! um! dois! – de batalhão em batalhão,
Na sua arremetida acelerada
Contra o sertão. (Ricardo 1929).

The ideology of coffee as a saving, modernizing, and civilizing (i.e., military) force is summarized here. That which would distinguish the industriousness of São Paulo from the rest of the country came through coffee plantation, in the strange amalgam of archaism and modernity (Cardoso 1960: 473). Rationality of the “casa grande” and the farm operated in this conjunction between the apparent archaism of slave or semi-slave labor, and the apparent modernity of state financing for the export according to the tastes and values of the international market.

Mário de Andrade offers a different kind of representation in his opera “Café”, a critical but still mystifying view of the fruit. The libretto, an opera without protagonist heroes or romantic couples, but almost entirely sung by choirs and allegories, was written in 1942 and takes place during the great Cof-

fee Crisis of the previous decade, as a result of the New York Stock Exchange crash in 1929. Mario focuses on the crisis and its crimes — such as the clandestine burning of tons of bags of coffee to try to increase its price on the stock exchanges¹ —, on the workers of the city and of the countryside, and especially on the women worried about feeding their children after the destruction of jobs on the farms, at the train station (ironically called “ESTAÇÃO PROGRESSO”), and at the ports. Like true bacchantes, they join the revolution in the final act, unified in the mythological figure of the Mother, with a capital letter.

It is a social opera, with incursions into popular poetry and music, into the stories of immigration and slavery, and into the relationship of these processes with the financialization of everything. What is surprising, however, is the permanence of the promise of coffee almost as a national or popular destiny. Like a roulette addict, the ex-colony cannot give up the dream of the next commodity high. Extraction is the country’s productive and economic destiny. This ambiguity is also well-marked in the first part of the text:

Café! Café! Eu exclamo a palavra sagrada (no deserto)
Café!... O seu fruto me trazia o calor no coração
Era o cheiro da minha paz, o gosto do meu riso
E agora ele me nega o pão...
Que farei agora que o café não vale mais! (Andrade 2005: 426)

As a true fetishized commodity, coffee is simultaneously fruit, drink, comfort; and value, money, a supersensible thing on the very level of the sacred and which sharpens the sensibility, which guarantees the comfort of life (also, what keeps the workers awake in long shifts of the fabric). In the manner of a prayer to the baby Jesus, in search of comfort, but also justice, “The Stevedores and their Women” sing looking at the sacks of coffee at the end of the first scene:

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1 There is also a striking poem on this subject by Norah de Figuerôa entitled: “Nas labaredas do ouro – A tragédia do café” (1932): “Sobre as fogueiras do café, / Desse café queimado em sacrifício / Ao deus Moloch do momento hodierno /. – O momento é fenício! / A conquista do ouro é o ideal insano! / E Moloch eviterno / Exige carne e exige sangue humano!” / (Apud Magalhães 1939: 314).

EU SOU AQUELE QUE DISSE:
 Eu tenho fome! eu tenho fome!
 Grão pequenino
 É uma fome antiga, de milhões de anos que renasce Grão pequenino
 Nem todo o trigo do universo feito pão
 Acalmava esta fome antiga e multiplicada
 Fome de fome
 Fome de justiça
 Fome de equiparação
 Fome de pão! FOME DE PÃO (Ibid.: 428–429)

Again, this seduction, the coffee as “*pharmakon*”, is not seen only as a cause of the maintenance of misery in monoculture, but as a possibility of liberation for the workers. The resurrected small coffee bean (and the plantations that come with it, one should ask, or some other mode of production?) is in the same universe of hunger, which is no longer only material hunger, but historical. In the context of coffee poetics, this highlights how even as coffee fueled São Paulo’s modernization, the underlying history of exploitation and inequality tied to its production persists, linking Extractivism and modernism through a continued hunger for ‘historical justice’.

The Case of *Pau-Brasil* (1925), by Oswald de Andrade

Is it a coincidence that the first poetry book by the modernist poet, in the young industrial heart of the continent, is titled *Pau-Brasil*? And that in the same city, modernist magazines are called *Klaxon* at one point and *Terra Roxa* (the red soil from São Paulo, extremely fertile for this crop) at another? In *Tietê, Tejo, Sena: A obra de Paulo Prado* Carlos Berriel describes the proximity between the production of São Paulo coffee and modernist ideas at the beginning of the century. In the figure of Paulo Prado (and, in a distinct way, in Oswald de Andrade), the two seemingly strange movements come together as one. He provides context: “It was the period when coffee dictated national politics. It was the main primary product in the balance of international trade. Eighty

percent of the world's coffee was produced in Brazil, and ninety percent of Brazilian production came from São Paulo. Prices reached high levels" (Berriel 2013: 63).

The first section of Oswald's poetry book, "Por ocasião da descoberta do Brasil", is a kind of invocation of the muse, and program presentation, bringing the ironic notion of "Discovery." After all, it was the Portuguese who needed to be uncovered from their clothes, as Oswald ironically says in another poem. But there is the absurdity of pretending to discover a land where people already live. Not only that, but the "dis-covery" gains a more tragic geological dimension when thought not in terms of navigation or clothing but of the land and what the land covers. If the peoples from the land specialized over millennia in planting and harvesting in multiple layers, in a kind of quilt of many fabrics, animals, plants, minerals, spirits, integrated through multiple hands and paws sewing the land, the European discovery of Brazil is then a sudden lifting of this fabric, destroying the subtlety of hiding and revealing, and the delicate web of relationships.

In "falação," a transposition of parts of the "Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil," published in the same year, the book's program emerges. The first line ends with the word "Exportação" (Export), in uppercase. "Exportação" is initially considered in an economic and historical sense but is then brought into the present of enunciation in the cultural and poetic sense, resembling an analysis of the literary system or a "world literature" *avant la lettre*. Poetry is viewed in a global context, as a system of influences and valorization. However, it is not a nationalist chessboard where nations compete on equal footing but a one-way street between center and periphery that the poet seeks to traverse and invert. He is attentive to the economic dynamics of literary exchanges and expresses what could be ironically labeled as a national-developmentist desire for "exporting poetry". Not just any poetry but poetry "emaranhada na cultura": "A formação étnica rica. A riqueza vegetal. O minério. A cozinha. O vatapá, o ouro e a dança." In other words, poetry loaded with local values and things. "A história comercial da América" initiated by Pau-Brasil, which names the country, is seen in its cultural dimension. Commerce and Culture, Pau-Brasil and Pau-Brasil poetry. The revisited past as a project for the future. But also undeniably, a kind of return to the original Extractivism.

In the second section of the book, “História do Brasil”, Oswald employs the technique of montage in its purest form, selecting excerpts and placing them out of context. Considering Extractivism not only as a historical practice but as a mode of relation; could we see a connection between poetic technique and the economic model? Oswald cuts excerpts from historical travel accounts, even preserving the original spelling, and reassembles them. From this perspective, in colonization literature, women, fruit, animals, rivers, mountains, and minerals are indistinguishable. Everything is to be taken; everything is a “still life,” as one of the poem titles suggests. As a poet-editor, the author selects the colonizing discourse, picking here and there the initially fascinated and then the merchant’s view that sees everything as commodity. The “*fatos estéticos*” are extracted and technically inserted into new contexts. From mere observations, folklore, popular culture (with which the extractor has only an external observer’s relationship, like a tourist or a scout), they become “*poesia de exportação*”. Is there a formal imitation — even a critical one — of Extractivism? Or is it a literary Extractivism assembled precisely to satirize colonial Extractivism?

Certainly, on the other hand, it must also be said that if the poems directly speak of colonizing chronicles, the ironic titles of the passages precisely mark the distance between the modernist poet and the chroniclers. The landscape in the chronicler’s view is like a kind of supermarket, and each item follows indistinctly as in a shopping list. But by removing phrases from the rhetorical and harmonious flow of the chronicles, Oswald would precisely highlight the extractivist gaze. The ironic montage would distinguish the truth content of the reports from their literary landscape full of “humanistic” stylistics.

The third part, “*Poemas da Colonização*,” confirms the strategy of presenting Brazil’s history in snippets and propaganda pieces. The indigenous element, from the first encounter, gives way to slavery as the driving force — and, why not say, as the fuel — of the colonial machine: “*O ouro da carne preta e musculosa*.” In other words, the dehumanized body transformed into a wealth-producing machine, the black body not as valuable as gold, but reduced to its ability to extract that gold to be exported. There is a certain haunted joy that reminds the contemporary reader of Gilberto Freyre. A kind of coexistence between the trickster and the macabre.

Nevertheless, there is also a representation of black people with agency, which was not very obvious for the time. They are workers with names who engage in technical trades, such as “O Narciso marceneiro”, “O Casimiro da cozinha”. And if regulated rape produces “filhos/escravos escravas”, there is no peace because suddenly “Ambrósio” may attack “Seu Juca” with a knife. Almost all the poems present images of violence portrayed with naturalness, within the ideological context of legalized slavery under the King’s order and legitimized by God’s grace. On the positive side, the fundamental Black contribution to the Portuguese language and to Brazilian culture as a whole also begins to emerge.

Moving on to the fourth section, “São Martinho”, which opens with a poem typical of Drummondian lyricism, “noturno”: “Lá fora o luar continua / E o trem divide o Brasil / Como um meridiano”. Discreetly, in an almost romantic key, Modernity is announced by another locomotive that separates the new from the archaic. It is a historical cut that the second poem, “prosperidade”, will explain. The transition from slavery, sugar, and mining to coffee and the industrialization it made possible — in an apoteotic tone. After all, we arrive in São Paulo and to the poet’s ancestors. The first-person plural appears in the poems for the first time.

The gaze, on the one hand extractive, on the other critical, is repeated here. The “bandeirantes” are first called “cruzados agrícolas”, then it is confessed that they “fizeram filhos nas senhoras e nas escravas”. It is a phallic power that is presented as the progenitor of lands, farms, and people. The description of the material to be extracted — coffee, and the land and the sun and the water and the arms necessary to extract it — aestheticizes it. “O cafezal é um mar alivanhado”. The mate chimarrão is the “ouro em pó” of the “cavaleiro do gado”.

After coffee, images of another Brazil, the urban one, that is gradually being constructed. From then on, the book portrays and praises urban acceleration and the arrival of the lyrical self who writes in the present, in São Paulo, recounting parties and car trips. “Cafezais/cidade”, montage and historical synthesis of the coffee plantation that produces the city.

The issue is not only economic but also ideological. Not only did the “archaic” extraction of raw materials provide the funds for the industrialization of São Paulo, but the coffee plantations themselves, producing for export, were already capitalist enterprises rationalized according to the financing,

production, distribution, and consumption chains linked to the international market. The farm is not the opposite or ancestor of the factory, but its model. The representation of this relationship between coffee and factory appears in Oswald in a less triumphant and more complex way (because it also values the non-modern element and the forces other than the Portuguese white). In a way, the session is also — within this spirit of ‘Paulistânia,’ — a direct heir of Paulo Prado.

Aesthetic facts

It may be helpful to revisit the “Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil” and its organizing concept of “fatos estéticos” (“aesthetic facts”) which scrambles the dichotomies of essence and appearance. An aesthetic fact is something that is as it seems and seems as it is. A simplification that is also a transcendence of the phenomenological dualism. The fact, above all, asserts itself. It is up to the modern poet to appropriate, extract from the aesthetic facts their poetry, by embracing everything — vegetal, animal, mineral, and cultural. The language — “natural e neológica” — repeats this strange relation between immanence and transcendence.

It is surely possible to characterize what Oswald does with elements of the landscape and traditional cultures as aesthetic Extractivism. But it is crucial to notice that this path is a two-way street: Now, he also extracts from the so-called center, establishing a double flow of exchanges. First, the aesthetic appropriation of local landscapes and cultures by the modernist artist; and second, the artist’s simultaneous engagement with and extraction from the dominant cultural center, creating a reciprocal flow of influence. Later in his work, Oswald will also call this form of exchange as “Anthropophagy”, abandoning the idea of poetry exportation that placed only one direction in a process that is, in reality, dual. In fact, Anthropophagy is not extractivist because it implies (at least in the Tupinambá version) a temporal relationship, exchange, and identification from the other. The devourer, by devouring, also becomes devoured. Extractivism is much closer to the dialectic between master and slave, which maps a relationship of mutual self-definition, but is immobile in time. There is

codependency, but there is no exchange of positions between master and slave, as there is between devourer and devoured through generations.

Is it possible then to call Extractivism a movement of exchanges, even if unequal, as presented in the development of the book? Especially when there is a project designed for the here and now of the less favored part of the exchange? In other words, in a one-way street such as colonization, to speak of exportation is already to speak of trade in a broad and sovereign sense (as an exchange between peoples). With the limitations outlined here, the proposal for cultural exportation can also be seen as a search for communication and equality between parties that needs to have as an initial gesture the valorization of the local.

The concept of “*fatos estéticos*,” provides a powerful and specific avant-gardist framework for understanding how Brazilian Modernism grappled with the pervasive impact of Extractivism on the nation’s economic, political, and artistic spheres. In a former colony deeply shaped by resource extraction, this principle becomes particularly resonant. The modernist artist, by embracing the totality of the Brazilian landscape as legitimate subjects for poetry, directly confronts the material foundations of the nation. This aesthetic appropriation is not merely a reflection but an active engagement with Extractivism, acknowledging its central role in shaping Brazilian identity and artistic production in the early 20th century.

Ultimately, the coffee poetics present in the works of Cassiano Ricardo, Mário de Andrade, and Oswald de Andrade reveal a spectrum of modernist responses to extractivism. Ricardo largely valorizes coffee as a catalyst for São Paulo’s industrial progress, while Mário de Andrade offers a more nuanced perspective, acknowledging coffee’s economic power while also highlighting the persistent social and historical “hunger” it leaves in its wake. Oswald de Andrade, through the fragmented, ironic style of “*Pau-Brasil*,” undertakes a complex cultural project. He not only extracts and recontextualizes local elements, including the very symbol of Brazil, the *Pau-Brasil* tree, and the history of colonization, but also engages in a critical dialogue with international modernist trends. These diverse poetic engagements with coffee and other forms of extraction underscore the central role of these economic activities in shaping the Brazilian modernist imagination and its multifaceted artistic

expressions. They are therefore a rich thematic and methodological approach for better understanding the history of Brazilian literature in the context of global exchanges and its specific position in it.

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