

Hybrid Romances in Borges and Baudelaire

Presented in Toronto, Canada at the ACLA 2013

“Occupy the Territory:

Mapping and Unmapping Social Space in Nineteenth-Century Europe”

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Introduction

I begin with what Ann Laura Stoler calls a “spark” — an unexpected and uncalled for moment of recognition. I was reading *La Fanfarlo*, one of Charles Baudelaire’s earliest pieces, for nothing more than the pleasure of the text when I came across this line:

Samuel Cramer, qui signa autrefois du nom de Manuela de Monteverde quelques folies romantiques – dans le bon temps du romantisme – est le produit contradictoire d’un blême Allemand et d’une brune Chilienne. Ajoutez à cette double origine une éducation française et une civilisation littéraire, vous serez moins surpris, - sinon satisfait et édifié, - des complications bizarres de ce caractère.

Samuel Cramer, who, in the past, signed a handful of Romantic follies under the name of Manuela de Monteverde — in the heyday of Romanticism— is the contradictory product of a wan German and a Chilean brunette. Add to this the double origin of a French education and literary culture and you will be less surprised — if not satisfied and edified — by the bizarre complications of his character.

I immediately recalled another passage, with which I was more intimately familiar:

El hombre que desembarcó en Buenos Aires en 1871 se llamaba Johannes Dahlmann y era pastor de la Iglesia evangélica; en 1939, uno de sus nietos, Juan Dahlmann, era secretario de una biblioteca municipal en la calle Córdoba y se sentía hondamente argentino. Su abuelo materno había sido aquel Francisco Flores, del 2 de infantería de línea, que murió en la frontera de Buenos Aires, lanceado por indios de Catriel: en la discordia de sus dos linajes, Juan Dahlmann (tal vez a impulso de la sangre germánica) eligió el de ese antepasado romántico, o de muerte romántica.

The man who landed in Buenos Aires in 1871 bore the name of Johannes Dahlmann and he was a minister in the Evangelical Church. In 1939, one of his grandchildren, Juan Dahlmann, was secretary of a municipal library on Calle Cordoba, and he considered himself profoundly Argentinian. His maternal grandfather had been that Francisco Flores, of the Second Line-Infantry Division, who had died on the frontier of Buenos Aires, run through with a lance by Indians from Catriel; in the discord inherent between his two lines of descent, Juan Dahlmann (perhaps driven to it by his Germanic blood) chose the line represented by his romantic ancestor, his ancestor of the romantic death. (167)¹

The “spark” that I experienced was a moment of disconcerting familiarity, akin to the Borgesian event when a man, walking down the street, finds himself simultaneously strolling through his own past. Samuel Cramer, the hero of *La Fanfarlo*, and Juan Dahlmann, of Jorge Luis Borges’ *El sur*, are hardly the same man: they inhabit different cities, occupy different centuries, were written by radically

¹ All Borges translations from Kerrigan 1962.
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different authors. Nevertheless, they are called into being through parallel sentence structures and they bear the weight of parallel lineages. As when, in another Borges essay, all men who recite William Shakespeare become William Shakespeare, in this moment Cramer and Dahlmann are, against all odds, the same man. At the moment of recognition, this similarity seemed arbitrary: as Borges writes in *El sur*, “*A la realidad le gustan las simetrías y los leves anacronismos* (526) (Reality favors symmetries and slight anachronisms [169]).” Further reading, however, unfolded a series of startling and suggestive similarities. In this paper I will trace several implications of this comparative work.

I begin with a Borgesian reading of Baudelaire. There is precedent for “Borgesian” readings of earlier texts inspired by the short story “Pierre Menard, author of Don Quixote,” in which Borges suggests that by imagining new contexts for a work, we can transform its meaning. Although there are traces of this methodology in my work, today I will begin with a colonial reading of Baudelaire. This approach puts me in the respectable shadow of Christopher L. Miller and Gayatri Spivak, among others. In this case I read *La Fanfarlo* as, if not American, then an Americanist story, caught up in anxieties over contamination and hybridity. Here I am not so concerned with identifying or calling out certain racist tendencies in Baudelaire’s works, as other scholars have so effectively done. Instead, in this Borgesian reading of Baudelaire, I will be looking at the ways that the rural/urban paradigm in *La Fanfarlo* contains traces of larger colonial concerns.

My “Baudelarian” reading of *El sur* is more in line with a Pierre Menard approach to comparative study. Baudelarian readings Borges, particularly the excellent work by Sylvia Molloy, tend to seek out the *flâneur* behind Borges’ gaze, most frequently in relation to his early poetry. The similarity between Samuel Cramer and Juan Dahlmann, however, is not their *flaneurie*. For that reason, my reading follows Emilio Renzi in imagining *El sur* as a nineteenth century story despite its explicit twentieth century context (Piglia 1992). It is in the dissonance between the nineteenth century story and its anachronistic twentieth-century setting that I locate my Baudelairian reading of *El sur*.

I will begin by briefly comparing these two texts. I will then trace my Borgesian reading of Baudelaire by examining the genealogical ambiguity and provincial anxieties of the story. I will finish by tracing these anxieties through *El sur*, considering the implications of anachronism in Borges' work.

A Brief Comparison

La Fanfarlo, Baudelaire's early (and only) novella, tells the story of a disillusioned young poet who sets out to meet a former lover and later begins an affair with a dancer known as La Fanfarlo. Samuel Cramer, the hero of the tale, is a self-deprecating or parodic version of Baudelaire himself; the novella is both imitation and parody of the great French writer Honoré de Balzac (see in particular *La fille aux yeux d'or*). Although *La Fanfarlo* sustains the concern with urban misanthropy present in Baudelaire's more popular later works, it lacks the radical modern aesthetic of the *Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*, and is often disregarded in studies of Baudelaire.

El sur, in contrast, was published by Jorge Luis Borges in 1954 during what was arguably his most successful period as a writer. Published in his famous collection *Ficciones*, it tells the story of Juan Dahlmann, a librarian who could be a parodic version of Borges himself. After suffering from an accident and being taken to sanitarium, Dahlmann departs for a family ranch in the Argentine pampas, where he falls into a mysterious and anachronistic duel. Unlike *La Fanfarlo*, *El sur* is marked by the spartan prose characteristic of Borges' mature work, and by a highly experimental narrative in which the story seems to follow simultaneously a realist and a fantastic vein.

The differences between these stories are radical, and yet they share startling similarities. Never mind that Borges claimed not to care for Baudelaire. As the always-insightful Sylvia Molloy informs us, "Nevertheless, curious details in this erratic relationship [...] allow us to suspect that the memory of Baudelaire persists uncomfortably in the work of Borges, *under erasure* (Molloy 16). We need only read *La Fanfarlo* and *El sur* side-by-side to accumulate a list of parallels. Both characters, Baudelaire's Cramer and Borges' Dahlmann, are the sons of a *criolla* mother and a German father.

Both live a literary life in the cramped spaces of a bachelor's apartment. Both depart from that apartment only to come face-to-face with a horrible reality, which they transform, or try to transform, or imagine they are transforming, into a romantic novel. Furthermore, both stories are a reworking of earlier texts. Baudelaire's has been linked to that of Balzac, while Borges' is not only a reworking of the nineteenth century narrative poem *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*, but also of his own earlier work. Finally, both heroes are often read as reflections and parodies of the authors themselves.

Borges to Baudelaire

In her book *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt sets out “to underscore the transcultural dimensions of what is canonically called European Romanticism” (138). For Pratt, the accounts of Alexander von Humboldt's American journeys, published in the early nineteenth century, were essential to the development of German romanticism and highly influential across Europe. Romanticism, in other words, is a transatlantic hybrid genre, singular in form, plural in origin.

We can say the same of Samuel Cramer. Cramer's mother is described as “une brune Chilienne,” which we can translate as a Chilean brunette. Yet there is ambiguity in this description, just as there is ambiguity in the “brune enchanteresse” of Baudelaire's poem “Dame créole.” In his now-classic 1985 study *Blank Darkness*, Christopher Miller describes this term “brune” as multivalent, simultaneously evoking the dark-haired *creole* of French descent, and the dark-skinned *creole* of African descent (100). Just as the term “creole” itself could mean French-by-birth, French-by-heritage, or French colonial subject, the word “brune” marks difference without clearly defining it.

Cramer's father was a *blême Allemand*, a pale German man. When set in opposition the *brune Chilienne*, it emphasizes that the father is Aryan and the mother, though racially indeterminate, is not. The distinction between dark and light, which is also a distinction between male and female, German and Chilean, old world (or old generation) and new, is brought to the forefront. The meaning of this difference, however, is increasingly unclear. Cramer, we are told, wrote “*quelques folies romantiques?*”

(some romantic folies) under the name of Manuela de Monteverde, a name that is clearly Spanish and female, implying that the romances are the product of a creole and female imagination. Yet the romances (written “*dans le bon temps du Romantisme* [in the good days of Romanticism]”) simultaneously evoke a literary genre that was German in origin. From the first sentence of the story, the meanings of race, gender and genre become unhinged.

Miller, attempting to explain Baudelaire’s concept of “Creole creativity,” distinguishes between overly academic and the overly barbaric approaches to art. This binary between academic and barbaric will have a familiar ring to anyone who studies nineteenth century Argentina. Unlike *Facundo*, in which the forces of civilization must fight against the native barbarism of the Americas, Baudelaire’s more complicated interpretation treats both civilization and barbarism as equally “academic” or unproductive when it comes to beauty and art (Miller 95). Oppositions lead to impotence, and in Cramer, who is the child of civilization and barbarism, or at least Germany and America, this impotence is apparent. Cramer is the bungled masterpiece, the slacker-entrepreneur, the ardent believer and passionate atheist. As the narrator writes, “[He] always seemed to me like the god of impotence — a modern, hermaphroditic god,” (107)².

The argument here is that Cramer embodies the unification of traditional binaries, but that this unification leads to impotence. The important point is that in Cramer’s case, it is impossible to trace his impotence backwards towards a more potent or productive past. Just as the racial origin of Cramer’s mother is indeterminate, the contaminant in Cramer’s personality is unclear. We cannot simply say that Cramer’s weaknesses of character are the product of colonial impurity. Rather, we must recognize that all origins breed corruption and lead to impotence when they are brought together in Paris.

Baudelaire is known as a quintessentially Parisian writer, and his poetry was essential in shaping the modern urban imagination. We can thus read the move to Paris as part of Baudelaire’s greater project. But if we read it in light of the colonial context, and more specifically, the ambiguities

² “Vous serez moins surpris, — sinon satisfait et édifié, — des complications bizarres de ce caractère” (3). *Hybrid Romances in Borges and Baudelaire – ACLA 2013*
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of identity shaped by the expansion of European consciousness and culture across straights and ocean and back again, then it holds other meanings. When Samuel Cramer departs from his apartment and encounters Madame de Cosmelly, she evokes for him a series of memories of their days in Lyon, during which they shared a “*jeune roman*” (6) – a young romance, but also, with the emphasis on *roman*, a novelistic romance. The more provincial Lyon is relegated to the past, a past that is novelistic by nature and romantic by genre. Later, Madame de Cosmelly describes her own sad story as a “*roman de province*” – a provincial novel, but also, specifically, a French romance (18). We can add to this the description of La Fanfarlo as bearing “*des habitudes d’outre-Rhin et d’outre-Pyrénées*” (some habits from the outer-Rhine and the outer Pyrenees) (21), that is, the habits of the borderlands. The outskirts, provinces, and borderlands take shape as the site of the novelistic, the exotic, and the not-coeval: characteristics that parallel the colonial imaginary. Even as colonial anxieties impinge on the cosmopolitan city, the provinces become colonial.

Baudelaire to Borges

Emilio Renzi once said that Borges “*es un escritor del siglo XIX. El mejor escritor argentino del siglo XIX*” — is a nineteenth century writer, the best Argentine writer of the nineteenth century (Piglia 127). We need look no farther than the genealogy of Juan Dahlmann, the protagonist of *El sur*, to demonstrate this point. It’s not simply that Borges is repeating, almost word-for-word, the descriptive language of Baudelaire’s 1847 story, which is itself a repetition of Balzac’s earlier texts. In the beginning of *El sur*, Dahlmann is introduced as a hybrid character, with an Argentine first name and a German surname (much like Cramer’s double names). “In the discord inherent between his two lines of descent,” Borges writes, “Juan Dahlmann (perhaps driven to it by his Germanic blood) chose the line represented by his romantic ancestor, his ancestor of the romantic death.”³ Strangely, Dahlmann’s Germanic blood is treated here as *romantic*, just as later, fate will find Dahlmann climbing the stairs

³ “En la discordia de sus dos linajes Juan Dahlmann (tal vez a impulse de la sangre germánica) eligió el de ese antepasado romántico.”

with a copy of Gustav Weil's translation of *Tausendundeine Nacht*. This marks an inconsistency in the Dahlmann family timeline. Unless Dahlmann's father was already an old man when he left Germany, he would have been a contemporary of the German realists and naturalists, not of Goethe and Schlegel. Dahlmann's choice of Weil's translation, printed in 1837, is similarly anachronistic. Together these two examples show a selective reconstitution of the German past that relocates Dahlmann in the mid-nineteenth century by erasing almost a hundred years of history. The story claims to begin in Buenos Aires in 1939; it positions itself alongside *La Fanfarlo*, however, as a text written almost a century earlier.

To understand more precisely the positioning of *El sur*, I turn to the concept of *criollismo urbano* as described by Eleni Kefala in her reading of Borges' early poetry collection, *El Fervor de Buenos Aires*. According to Kefala, *Fervor* was part of a larger project to develop a new *criollo* identity that merged a modern aesthetic with a uniquely Argentine national identity. As she argues, in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* Borges locates this *criollismo urbano* in the *orillas*, the outskirts of the city, because it is a liminal place between urban cosmopolitanism (linked to Europe, but also to undesirable European immigrants) and the pampas, where the gauchos (as represented by the 1872 gauchesque epic poem *Martin Fierro*) lived.

Of course, by the time Borges was writing *Fervor*, and even more so by the time he wrote *El sur*, the gauchos were gone from the pampas: from its inception, *criollismo urbano* was a work of creative anachronism. Much like the provincial landscape of *La Fanfarlo*, the pampas for Borges are the product of a novelistic and romantic imagination. Specifically, it is German romanticism that shapes Juan Dahlmann's gauchesque narrative; like Samuel Cramer, Dahlmann's hybridity is central to the construction of his story, and impossible to deconstruct into discrete threads. Rather than being the "pure Argentine past" as it is often imagined, Dahlmann's voyage to his family's *estancia* can be read as a journey into an imagined literary past constructed out of a hybrid genre – part romanticism, part gauchesque.

However, as I have argued, in *El sur* the city is anachronistic too. As a consequence, it is not Dahlmann's journey into the south that represents a step backward in time, but rather Dahlmann himself. One implication seems to be that the romantic genre, while laying claim to a kind of cultural purity, is instead polysemous and hybrid - just as it appears in Baudelaire. A second is that the dichotomy Borges establishes between rural and urban landscapes is a facade: just as Dahlmann's hallucinations cross the *umbral*, or threshold, between geographies, so the contamination of hybrid identities is reciprocal and exists in urban and rural spaces alike. This is also apparent in *La Fanfarlo*, where the eponymous woman herself is a reminder that in Europe, the provinces are also borderlands.

Both *La Fanfarlo* and *El sur* represent a geographic dichotomy in which an urban center is contrasted with a provincial alternative set apart in space, time, and literary genre. In both stories, this dichotomy is shown to be false: in the case of Baudelaire, it is the universal presence of cultural and social contaminates that undermines the use of the provinces as a romantic retreat, while in the case of Borges, it is time itself that serves as a contaminating element, transforming the city into a memory of itself. When we resituate *El sur* within the context of the Second World War, the Nazi party, and peronism in Argentina, however, it becomes clear that the modern legacy of German romanticism and *criollismo* is a deeply troubling one. The story's anachronism can thus be understood as an effort to flee the consequences of these literary exercises, seeking safety in a romantic past. As we have seen, of course, that romantic past offers no more security than its twentieth-century present.

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