

**Re-fictionalizing the Argentine Dream:  
Poverty and the Return to Literature in *La virgen cabeza***

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The present essay examines the role of literature in Gabriela Cabezón Cámara's 2009 shantytown novel *La virgen cabeza*. While critical reception has mostly focused on the new subjectivities produced in the novel's *villa miseria*, this essay argues that the text is focused less on endlessly producing new identities and more focused on using literary form to lay claims to the material wealth of the world in order to demand a life lived in equality regardless of who they are. I make these arguments by pursuing two angles. The first seeks to place Cabezón Cámara's novel in dialogue with a longer historical tradition in Argentine culture by comparatively reading it with Roberto Arlt's *Los problemas del Delta y otras aguafuertes* (1941). Second, it uses this historical contrast to critique recent critical reception that integrates the novel into the vein of political theory developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. While the novel does indeed dialogue with the concept of the multitude, a closer reading of the text reveals a more ambivalent perspective regarding that model. By understanding the novel's insistence on fictionalizing the realities of the *villa* by endorsing what the novel calls the "[un] volver al principio, a la literatura," it becomes possible to engage with a political horizon that

emerges not only what happens or from what is seen but rather from what is understood.

In December 1941, just a few months before his death, Roberto Arlt published a series of *crónicas* in the newspaper *El Mundo* examining the difficult lives and experiences of those living in the Paraná Delta, located to the north of Buenos Aires at the conjunction of the Río Paraná and the Río de la Plata. In this series of “*aguasfuertes*,” often referred to as “Los problemas del Delta,” Arlt seeks to undo “[una] falsa imagen” (“La vivienda” 9), which had been developed about the region’s inhabitants. As he notes, the prevailing image of the Delta could be summed up in “la triple asociación de las palabras ‘isleño-fruta-canoa’[...]...[las cuales evocan] un estado primitivo” (“La vivienda” 9). Arlt’s project in this series of writings operates on two levels. On the one hand, he critiques this “falsa imagen” by revealing it as narrative and arguing that the image of *isleño* primitivism is completely misunderstood: “aparentemente el isleño es un hombre que vive primitivamente; pero, en realidad, la vivienda no es un rancho, sino una casa con sus divisiones distribuidas como lo requieren las necesidades del civilizado” (Arlt, “La vivienda” 11). On the other hand, Arlt seeks to replace this narrative not with a competing one, but rather with the visible truths of the Delta, which he finds in the deficiencies of the region’s economic and infrastructural problems, such as crop speculation, the lack of access to *frigoríficos* [refrigerated storage for agricultural goods] and poor communication networks. By revealing this Arlt hopes that “[de estos] *hechos*[,] [pueda surgir] *la evidencia* de la técnica con que se lesionan los intereses de una de las más heroicas comunidades que engrandecen al país” (Arlt, “La vivienda” 10, my emphasis).

What emerges in Arlt’s newspaper writing about the Delta, then, is a demand that the “*hechos*” dispel the “falsa imagen,” that the truth of the Delta replace the false narrative that circulates and frames the country’s misguided understanding of the region and its inhabitants. To put this another way, what Arlt seeks to present to his readers is a collection of reality fragments: the “*hechos*” and “*evidencia*” that are the origin and experience of the problems faced by the men and women of the Delta.<sup>1</sup> Arlt not only sees himself as correcting what we might call the realist fictions developed about the region, but also understands this process of de-fictionalization as central to addressing “la sordera crónica de los poderes públicos” (“La vivienda” 10). Indeed, what is of

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<sup>1</sup> As Arlt notes, many Delta residents are male because they have sent their families to the city to work or to avoid the harsh conditions of the region.

particular importance is that his readers understand the actual lives and experiences of what he calls “el sobreviviente de una multitud de fracasados” (“La lucha” 15). Characterizing the Delta residents in this way, he notes that “[estos] hombres tuvieron que improvisarse” (15) as “dueños de quintas que habitaban la hermosa casa que habían construido con sus propias manos, que comían el pan fabricado con el trigo que sembraron, sobre la mesa construida con la madera de un árbol que ellos plantaron...[hecha con] máquinas rústicas que la necesidad les hizo inventar” (16). Championing their ownership of the land and their control of the production of agricultural commodities, he argues that:

el Delta argentino es uno de los pocos lugares donde aún existe un puñado de hombres libres. Poco importa que algunos de estos hombres libres sean analfabetos o que en ciertas circunstancias se comporten como unos perfectos brutos; lo importante es que allí descubrimos asentada una casta de hombres cuya fuerza moral es un suceso. (Arlt, “La lucha” 16).

What Arlt’s journalism seeks, then, with its demand for de-fictionalization is to give form and voice to emerging political configurations of freedom, improvised in the abandonment and impoverishment in the Paraná Delta “a menos de cuarenta kilómetros de Buenos Aires” (“El problema” 38), so that they could make claims on the Argentine state and “engrandec[er] al país” (“La vivienda” 10).

As I will argue in what follows, Arlt’s account of the de-fictionalized Delta that exists in tension with a “falsa imagen” shared by the state and the media, produces a nexus of political and aesthetic issues that serve as an important precursor for understanding Gabriela Cabezón Cámara’s novel *La virgen cabeza* (2009), a text depicting contemporary Delta residents, or at least residents who live someplace between San Isidro and Tigre “al costado de la autopista rumbo al Delta” (40) in the fictional *villa miseria* or shantytown named “El Poso.” Like the Delta mentioned above, the *villa* in Cabezón Cámara’s novel could also be collapsed into a false image characterized by a triple association: *pibes chorros-cumbia-pobreza*. Indeed, as Qüity, the novel’s journalist-narrator, notes: “los de afuera simulaban que no había nada atrás de las murallas, a lo sumo hacían de vez en cuando una cena de beneficencia o iban a sacar fotos o regalar cosas viejas...la prensa sólo ocupaba de ellos en casos de desalojos, robos, a veces un asesinato o de vez en cuando el hit de una cumbia” (149). Yet, while Qüity, like Arlt, is a reporter, her goal is not to correct this false image by presenting the *villa*’s problems but rather by depicting its solutions. Or more specifically, she aims to write “la nota del año” (78) by narrating the life and actions of Carlos Guillermo, better known as “la Hermana Cleopatra,” a transvestite prostitute “con un look Eva Perón” (33) who, in

claiming to possess direct communication with the Virgin Mary through the medium of a cement statue, was able to convert the *villa* into an organized and productive community.<sup>2</sup>

Discovering that the *villeros*, very much like Arlt's *isleños*, were "libres" and "alegres" and that "el centro del potrero [era] limpio como un living burgués después del trabajo de las hermanitas" (58), Qüity, like Arlt in the case of the Delta, uncovers to the public outside "El Poso" a reality about the fictionality of the reigning media images and narratives used to understand the *villa* and its inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> And yet, there is also a clear distance between Arlt's *crónicas* and Cabezón Cámara's novel, which participates in a tradition of surprising plot turns marked by contemporary novelists such as César Aira, Roberto Bolaño or Mario Bellatin.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, rather than something like Arlt's direct, de-fictionalized journalistic report on the concrete demands made on the state at the "Segundo Congreso Isleño" (Arlt, "El problema" 39), Qüity's narrative in Cabezón Cámara's novel is a love story. After Qüity becomes romantically involved with Cleo, "El Poso" is violently razed. Together, living their "lesbianismo bizarro," they use false identities to escape (via an island in the Delta) to Miami where they write a cumbia opera together, one that is so successful that it earns them millions of dollars. Beyond these clear contrasts at the level of content, what is perhaps most striking about the differences between Arlt's *crónicas* and Qüity's *nota* is that while the former gives textual form to the voices of the poor so as to justify and make claims on the state—" [nuestra] situación se remediaría inmediatamente si el Estado interviniera

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the *villa* is filtered through a post-Peronist lens. As Cleo says, "Si Evita viviera, seríamos peronistas" (87).

<sup>3</sup> Though it was published in *El Mundo* ten years before the pieces on the Delta I discuss above, Arlt wrote a *crónica* entitled "El dueño de sí mismo" (1931), which is included in the compilation *Los problemas del Delta y otras aguasfuertes*. In this piece, he described the lack of happiness that money brings and then notes: "¿Cuál es la verdad, entonces, que debe regir nuestra vida, seriamente, sin que seamos unos infelices? Y la verdad es ésta: Vivir como un rico, siendo substancialmente pobre. Es decir: crear en nosotros discernimiento y voluntad" (46). This parallels the Independence and "moral force" Arlt would later observe in the Delta residents, and it connects to the poverty, joy and freedom of the "happy multitude" in Cabezón Cámara's text.

<sup>4</sup> Aira, of course, joins Arlt to his own tradition in his essay on Arlt, championing Arlt's tendency in his fiction toward an expressionism and distortion that creates a distanciation between everyday lived reality and the "protoartistic" observations of his protagonists who could see otherwise. The interruption of the narrative with observed reality in the *aguasfuertes* might be understood as a counterpoint to this tendency, which sought through an engagement with everyday lived experience to produce a cultural transformation. See Sloan for an account of Arlt's practices of engagement and distanciation in his journalism (819, 822-27). Cabezón Cámara participates in the variant realist tradition marked by Arlt and Aira.

construyendo un frigorífico” (“El problema” 39)—the latter produces the poor as a commodity for the market.

This is so not just in the context of the opera, but it is also what motivates Qüity to enter the *villa* in the first place. She was seeking to write a *pièce de résistance* that would win her a grant from the New Journalism Foundation so that she could quit her job writing a daily crime beat and “volver al principio, a la literatura” (31). In other words, in distinguishing Qüity’s daily writing from the writing of her desire, Cabezón Cámara seems to be hinting at the old dichotomy separating newspaper and literary writing, that is, a writing oriented toward the market and the world as opposed to a writing oriented toward the self and art. But in making no claims on the state, one could argue that this is a distinction without a difference given that both models—journalism and literature—are entangled in the same capitalist mode of production that produced the poverty in the first place. In other words, Cabezón Cámara faces a problem that comes into view quite clearly when we place her novel in dialogue with Arlt’s *crónicas*, produced at an earlier moment in economic and political history. While Arlt can make use of the journalistic space to de-fictionalize the Delta’s “puñado de hombres libres,” separate them from a “falsa imagen” and make claims on the state, Cabezón Cámara is writing under the conditions of neoliberalism and only has the space of the capitalist marketplace. El Poso’s “multitud alegre” inevitably emerges as commodities in the simulacra of mass media.

It is perhaps for this reason—the complete integration of the literary into mass media and the marketplace—that critical reception has tended to ignore the question of literary form in this novel, preferring instead to propose readings centering on the liberational aspects of the novel’s “sexualidades no normativas” (2) as does Juan Francisco Marguch, or elements of *kitsch*, mass media and millenarianism in the description of *villa* life, as does Cecilia González. However, Paola Cortés-Rocca, who has written two articles on the novel, does take up the issue of the literary if only to collapse the fictional into the real:

el objetivo central de la narrativa ya no parece ser el de producir representaciones del mundo, ni poner en escena los procedimientos verbales que marcarían la especificidad de lo literario o su peculiar intensidad. Se trataría más bien de construir objetos que se presentan a sí mismos como dispositivos de *exhibición de fragmentos del mundo, no importa si son realidad o ficción, precisamente porque operan un vaciamiento de las categorías de autor, sentido, obra.* (“Variaciones” 39, my emphasis)

This collapsing of reality into fiction or the shifting of fiction into reality through pastiche, *bricolage*, postautonomy or another similar claim or technique has already been incorporated into the conventions for understanding postmodern literature.<sup>5</sup> But, what is crucial to Cortés-Rocca's essay, and what she argues is innovative about the novel, is precisely the point I wish to question: the denial that the specificity of the literary is central to constructing the communitarian models that she champions in her reading. As she argues, Cabezón Cámara's novel and other texts like it,

[n]o nos ofrecen alguna versión de la retirada de lo común o del desencanto finisecular, sino que muy por el contrario, *se presentan como fragmentos de una nueva imaginación política*: conjeturan nuevas formas de sociabilidad y asociación comunitaria, figuran nuevos modos de activismo, imaginan nuevas utopías políticas. ("Variaciones" 48, my emphasis)

Or, as she puts it in her more recent essay, "[la villa es] un espacio que funciona ya no como proveedor de temas para la máquina de representación de lo otro, sino como fuente de estrategias, experiencias, formas de asociación y proyectos comunitarios y políticos" ("La villa" 197). This is all made possible by conceptualizing "la comunidad villera como el espacio en el que decanta la discusión sobre la biopolítica y el biopoder, como la geografía desde la cual conjeturar nuevas aproximaciones a la política contemporánea" ("Variaciones" 40).

I wish to question the centrality of biopolitics and biopower to the political project the novel imagines by interrogating the primacy of the "return to literature" to the novel's structure. The dynamics of subject production are certainly present in the novel, but their primacy only emerges by understanding the presentation of new political imaginaries as contingent upon the exhibition of non-representative "world fragments" in which the fictional and the real are indistinguishable. What I will argue, however, is that the novel insists on a distinction between the literary—a fictional narrative with aesthetic intent that must be read—and other sorts of texts and in so doing puts forward a space in which alternative political models can be imagined not because we cannot distinguish what does exist from what exists no longer, not yet, or do not exist at all. In other words, for *La virgen cabeza*, it is not Arlt's de-fictionalization nor is it Cortés Rocca's postautonomous claim for indistinguishable fragments of reality and fiction that are proposed. Cabezón Cámara instead insists on the renewal or return

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<sup>5</sup> See Goldgel-Carballo for a description of the Levi-Staussian *bricoleur* in the context of Argentine shantytowns. For a critique of postautonomous literatures, see Di Stefano and Sauri.

to the specificity of the *literary*, a strategy of fictionalization that seeks to achieve under the conditions of neoliberalism what Arlt sought to achieve at an earlier moment in political and economic history with his strategies of de-fictionalization: a valorization of freedoms that exist beyond state and market control. As we will see, the political alternatives the novel develops are based not in the biopolitics of subject production but rather in the imagination and interpretation of alternative worlds that do not depend upon subject positions. However, before analyzing how the novel argues for the importance of the specificity of the literary, I will explain why a biopolitical reading of the novel might be so attractive. I will then suggest some of the problems that arise when we understand the novel in this way and will end the essay with a discussion of literary form and the ways in which it makes available a political horizon that could not be understood without engaging Cabezón Cámara's insistence on the "return to literature."

#### *The Limits of Biopolitics*

It is easy to understand the process by which Cortés-Rocca reaches her conclusions about the centrality of biopolitics and biopower in the novel. The narrative Cabezón Cámara creates about "El Poso" and its poor residents—who include, among others, "travestis, paraguayos, pibes chorros, peruanos, evangelistas, bolivianos, ucranianos, porteños, católicos, putas, correntinos, umbandas, cartoneros, santigueños y todas las combinaciones posibles" (72)—can in some ways be read as a corrective to the frustrations Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri express in their 2000 study *Empire*. In the first book of their trilogy, they lament that, "postmodernist authors seldom adopt [the poor] in their theorizing...[even though] the poor is in a certain respect an eternal postmodern figure: the figure of a transversal, omnipresent, different, mobile subject..." who is "the foundation of the multitude" (Hardt and Negri 156). That the diversity of the subjectivities that the *villa* collects not only produces a community that preserves difference—everyone from Catholics and evangelicals to Ukrainians and Umbandas—but it also produces new forms of life ("todas las combinaciones posibles") and makes it possible to suggest that Cabezón Cámara had Hardt and Negri in mind as she was writing the novel. Indeed, as Cortés-Rocca notes, the novel actually describes the *villa* community as "[una] alegre multitud" (89), and she aptly cites its coincidence with Hardt and Negri's terminology.

Indeed, *La virgen cabeza* can in some ways be read as a literary representation of Hardt and Negri's postulations about resistance "in the age of Empire." For example,

we can take some of Qüity's observations about life in the *villa*. In "El Poso," she notes, "nos dedicamos casi exclusivamente al placer" (81); "éramos libres" (89). This was so not only because "[e]n el barroco miserable de la villa [con] cada cosa siempre arriba, abajo, adentro y al costado de otra, todo era posible. Y eventualmente divertido...[donde] todo cogía con todo..." (111). This contact between bodies produced the very identity of the *villa* itself: "desde su centro mismo la villa irradiaba alegría. Parecía cosa de la Virgen y Cleo, pero éramos nosotros, era la fuerza de juntarnos" (28). Indeed, the contact that produces multitude, which seemed to have its origin in Cleo and the Virgin, was actually produced by the individualized collective action of the multitude of *villeros*. Nevertheless, these individual actions also hinged on following Cleo's translation of instructions from the Virgin. In a version of this dynamic, we see a group of "pibes chorros" respond by sneaking into the Parque Japonés in Palermo to fill nylon bags with water and carp from the ponds so that the *villeros* could convert the pit at the center of the *villa* into a fish farm.

Contrasting the shantytown's aquaculture in the twenty-first century with the oligarchic cattle industry that made Argentina's economy in the nineteenth century, Cortés-Rocca argues that the novel hints at "un regreso burlón al siglo XIX" ("Variaciones" Cortés-Rocca 41) but at the same time is also at work in depicting the biopolitical production of the new: "como ocurre siempre con cualquier paisaje, las geografías producen subjetividades" (Cortés-Rocca, "La villa" 186). Because the carp farm works something like a compost pile—with the fish eating "lo que comíamos nosotros" (Cabezón Cámara 67)—this new, emerging economy can be based in a system in which "la villa ocupa un lugar similar al que ocupaba la estancia o la hacienda mexicana en el imaginario decimonónico: una unidad económica, política y cultural que a la vez es una suerte de miniatura del espacio nacional" ("La villa" 185). Yet unlike the "foundational fictions" that depicted those rural spaces, Cortés-Rocca asserts that in the *villa*, "no [hay] un régimen de alimentación ligado a la propiedad de la tierra" (Cortés-Rocca 43). Or, to put it explicitly in the terms of Hardt and Negri, the *villa's* carp farm is a clear example of the production of the commons: "Lo que es el estanque es la villa [...] los pibes [q]uerían bombear, hacer guardia, alimentar a los peces, organizar cosechas... Puede parecer poco pero hay poco más que pedir" (86).

The *villa*, then, emerged as the site from which the production of the common could begin—"esa comunidad carnicera de carpas" (86)—and was rooted in the actual reality of aquaculture. However, it was also—perhaps more importantly for Cortés-Rocca's demand to "conjeturar nuevas aproximaciones a la política contemporánea"



(“Variaciones” 40) from the model of the multitude—rooted in the production of a new cultural knowledge that was developed from that common life and the common wealth. As Qüity notes, “comíamos juntos al mediodía y a la noche, todos comíamos” (88): “El asado era nuestra forma predilecta, los gourmets villeros tenían su decálogo secreto para asar casi cualquier cosa” (88). This “secret code,” produced from a knowledge generated by a life lived in common but that maintains difference, finds its parallel in the cultural thread that stitches this multitude together: the incongruous altar of popular religious devotions.

From el Gauchito Gil, Jesús Malverde and el doctor Pantaleón to la Difunta Correa, Catalina de Siena and Joan of Arc, the statues made of concrete comprising the “panteón villero” became a space around which “las travestis, las pibas, las gordas desdentadas, los pibes chorros, los albañiles estaban...reunidos...convencidos de que la Virgen iba a protegerlos” (56). In other words, the Virgin served as a conjunction point: the diversity of religious beliefs functions in relation to differences of the *villa*'s many believers and practitioners. As a result, the religious, like the culinary space, created a context in which diverse subjectivities not only find expression in the articulation of new forms of culture and life surrounding the aquaculture of the carp farm but also could find protection of their difference in their devotion to the Virgin or another member of the pantheon. Indeed, as Cleo puts it, no doubt expressing her fundamentalism with respect to belief in the Virgin, “A la Virgen le gustamos los negros...y las negras también le gustamos y las negras travestis para mí que le gustamos el doble” (125). It was precisely this difference that the Virgin would protect towards the end of the novel when the corrupt collusion of the state, capital and mass media led to the *villeros*' violent confrontation with the owner of the land where “El Poso” was located. Rather than organize into an efficiently organized unit to combat the hierarchical state forces that would raze their neighborhood and wipe out their community, they insistently refused the impulse to form an army-like counterpoint to defend their territory: “no éramos un ejército, insisto, hubiera sido dejar de ser nosotros, los libres, los alegres” (133). Resistance through networks, freedom, joy, contact, difference, the production of the commons by the poor: all these lead to Hardt and Negri's conception of the multitude. And in this way, Cortés-Rocca's reading of Cabezón Cámara's novel as a re-articulation of Hardt and Negri in a *porteño* dialect is quite plausible.

And yet, this affirmational reading of the multitude and the conception of the *villa* as a utopian space for imagining new political forms, bumps up against a series of

observations in the novel that lead precisely to the opposite conclusion. Indeed, the production of a commons in the *villa* is not expressed in utopian revolutionary terms but rather in the language of a neoliberal managerial bureaucracy. For example, when the “villeros empezaron a ir a las universidades para contar su experiencia autogestiva” (89), “la villa se llenó de gente, estudiantes, fotógrafos, militantes de ONG que administraban el diezmo de culpa, antropólogos y periodistas” (89). While Cortés-Rocca (echoing Hardt and Negri) reads “El Poso” as an ideal expression of “una nueva imaginación política [que conjetura] nuevas formas de sociabilidad y asociación comunitaria, [y figura] nuevos modos de activismo [y] nuevas utopías políticas (“Variaciones” 48, my emphasis), what the novel depicts in narrating the villeros’ encounters with the university and the media is an alternative reading of “El Poso:” this collective action converted into a myth of upward mobility, or what the novel calls “el sueño argentino” (90). That is, those who manage and facilitate certain aspects of the neoliberal social system take up “El Poso” as an ideal of what might be or what is to come for the “villas y villas y más villas” (80) that continue to spring up all over the country. Or to frame this differently, if, as Cortés Rocca argues, the “sueño argentino” is tied up with the *villa*’s ability to adapt the nineteenth-century Mexican *hacienda* to the conditions of the neoliberal city, the novel’s depiction of the *villa*’s integration into the media and academic managerial system shows how the *villeros*’ collective action can be understood as a variation on Mexican muralism. Diego Rivera’s painting in which women, revolutionaries, workers and peasants triumph with the Marxist maxim, “el que quiera comer que trabaje” (Figure 1) is exchanged in El Poso for a similar sentiment in re-articulated in a neoliberal key: “en este país el que se esfuerza recibe su recompensa” (90).

*The Limits of the “Argentine Dream”*

While one might limit this conversion of the multitude producing in common into a group of neoliberal entrepreneurs as a product of the mass media and academic discourses critically depicted in the novel, it’s hard to see how one could sustain a utopian reading of the *villa* once we fully consider the perspectives of Qüity and Cleo, whom Cortés-Rocca poses as the novel’s utopian voices. Indeed, as Qüity notes, “las villas siguen siendo tan parecidas a los jardines de Edén como los monos a los cohetes que llevan turistas a la luna... No se espera de ningún edén que huelga a mierda, por citar una de las abundancias que rompían todo reflejo. Es que oler a mierda no es sencillamente feo; oler a mierda es oler a descomposición, a muerte in progress” (80).



Figure 1

This emphasis on the *villa* as a space of loss and death (rather than only productive joy, freedom, commonality, contact and creativity) is reasserted dozens of times throughout the novel. We could note as a key example Cleopatra’s reality check on the “Argentine dream:”

[sí,] hablaban de ‘sueño argentino’ pero nos cagaban a tiros. Festejábamos cuando no nos mataban a los cien... Yo me los imaginaba, a veces cuando yo era chica, ligándose un peluche por cada negro muerto. Porque nos tiraban por eso, mi amor, por negros, por pobres, por putos, por machos, porque nos cogían, porque no nos cogían; qué sé yo por qué: a lo mejor practicaban para la guerra [...] en la villa todos festejábamos cuando no nos moríamos. (91)

Or, we can move from this training ground for war to the actual “war” towards the end of the novel in which Cleo’s young nephew Kevin, along with 182 other *villeros*, were killed as “El Poso” was razed and the entire community forcibly removed amid the sound of bulldozers, military helicopters and machine gun fire to make way for a real estate development, or what the novel calls “el tsunami inmobiliario” (132).

Though the *villa* multitude resisted the bulldozers of finance capital, Qüity notes that the multitude failed: “perdimos...no fue suficiente. Suficiente solo hubiera sido transformarnos en un ejército, pero trocados en fuerza armada hubiéramos dejado de ser lo que éramos: una pequeña multitud alegre” (132), an observation that ultimately leaves a pessimistic view of the political possibilities for the *villa* as utopia in particular, and Hardt and Negri’s model for future political action more generally. Though their identities will be protected, the multitude’s resistance will inevitably fail where only an army will do: individuals are cut off from the community as their lives come to a violent

end. Or, as Qüity succinctly puts it at another point in the novel, “ni aun en esos días [cuando la villa existía] tenía mucha fe en las multitudes” (111).

Of course, this conundrum of the networked multitude, characterized by “creativity, communication and self-organized cooperation” (*Multitude* 83), as opposed to the people’s army—efficient, disciplined, hierarchical, centralized, but ultimately eliminating of difference and the democratic (with the aims of increasing its efficiency)—is at the heart of Hardt and Negri’s reflections in their 2004 follow-up study *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. As Hardt and Negri point out in that study,

[n]etwork struggle...does not rely on discipline...[it] resists and attacks the enemy as military forces always have, but increasingly its focus is internal—producing new subjectivities and new expansive forms of life within the organization itself [...] no longer [does] taking power of the sovereign state structure the goal...in the network form...the organization becomes less a means and more an end in itself. (*Multitude* 83)

Cortés-Rocca echoes a parallel assertion by explaining away the loss of the *villa* by noting that the multitude is mobile, flexible and nomadic. After the destruction of “El Poso,” Cortés-Rocca notes, “nuestras heroínas, luchadoras incansables, levantan lo que queda, lo meten en una bolsa del supermercado Coto y se lo llevan a otra parte. Se van a Miami, a ese lugar que la novela cínicamente identifica como el corazón mismo de Latinoamérica o la villa global” (Cortés-Rocca 45). Reading the novel’s central structure—“villa, massacre, Miami” (18)—in the way proposed by Cortés-Rocca, then, “massacre” becomes the necessary path from the local (claims on the sovereign state) to the global (a counterforce to Empire).

However, in this reading, “El Poso” itself—its specific circumstances, the specificity of its organization, its history and cultural particularities, the 183 victims of the massacre—are incidental and not a loss as such.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the *villa* is not a place but rather a community, one that can re-constitute itself anywhere: the multitude can be contained in a supermarket bag or can expand to occupy the entirety of the world.<sup>7</sup> But,

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Kevin and his death is mentioned in neither of her essays.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible to read the destruction of the *villa* as the emergence of the multitude on a world scale: “Y acá estamos. Nosotras, en Miami, convertidas en estrellas, previa temporadas paranoica en mi casa y de duelo en la isla. Wan está en China y solo este año volvió a Argentina. La Colo y el Gallo, en el hogar de Laferrere. Helena en el acuario con su Klein y sus delfines parlanchines. Los ciento ochenta y tres podridos o ya hechos polvo en el cementerio de Boulogne. Los demás, no sé” (134). If we read this dispersal throughout the world, their conversion into earth itself (“ya hechos polvo”) or their omnipresence with an unknowable location, it is possible to see a hopeful model for the multitude. But this necessarily discounts the unnecessary loss of life as simply one more ingredient for metaphor or a useable reality

I believe it noteworthy to highlight that the “new villa” the novel depicts is constructed from materials purchased with Qüity and Cleo’s more than ten million dollars, the result of the success of the *ópera cumbia* they write together about their experiences of love and loss. But we might ask, does this privatization of the commons in the mobile and global *villa* produce new subjectivities oriented toward liberation? What I will suggest below is that the novel also projects a deep pessimism—rather than only an overarching optimism that underscores the majority of critical readings of the novel—regarding the model of the multitude, a pessimism that comes into view as a product of the time spent in Miami.

This is a substantial part of what makes *La virgen cabeza* more contradictory, or, perhaps we might say nuanced, in its depiction of emerging forms of political resistance than readings like Cortés-Rocca’s would have us believe. And I point this out not so much to criticize her reading—which, as I have already noted, builds on the ways in which the novel makes literary many of Hardt and Negri’s observations about the emergence and function of the multitude—as to move us toward exploring the ways in which Cabezón Cámara puts forward the space of the literary as a corrective to some of the weaknesses of Hardt and Negri’s own theorizations. In the next section, then, I will discuss the way the novel is constructed, that is, some of its formal aspects, which thus far have been neglected by the novel’s critical reception. Finally, I will link these observations to the turn of events in the novel’s epilogue, which makes clear the centrality of the “return to literature” to political horizon the novel imagines.

#### *The Limits of the Cultural and the Return to Literature*

As I’ve mentioned, the novel is framed as Qüity’s *crónica* of Cleo’s communications with the Virgin, her organizational efforts, the razing of the *villa* and their eventual escape to Miami. But periodically throughout the novel, Cabezón Cámara inserts transcriptions of Cleo’s audio-recorded critiques of Qüity’s narrative. “Mi amor, te olvidás de todo vos,” begins a typical chapter of this type, “voy a tener que grabarte cada dos páginas que leo, no vamos a terminar nunca si seguís así” (91). And what she records is her own account of events and a critique of Qüity’s narrative choices. For example, early on in the novel, Qüity explains how, with the help of Daniel—a national security agent and Qüity’s friend—they were able to forge false identity documents and

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fragment to produce the freedoms of the future. I question this reading, and it is for this reason that I think the novel has a more ambiguous view of the multitude than Cortés Rocca’s reading would have us believe.

escape to an island in the Delta and later to Miami after “El Poso” was razed: “A Miami fuimos en avión como corresponde. Nos cambió un poco la identidad; yo terminé siendo Catalina Sánchez Qüit y Cleo logró uno de sus sueños más difíciles: tener su nombre en los documentos. Desde entonces, por fin y para siempre, se llama Cleopatra Lobos” (19).

Of course, later in the novel, when Cleo inserts one of her recorded critiques, she questions the primacy of creating a new identity, focusing instead on making claims against police corruption and the abandonment of the *villa* to a mafia headed by the boss of private security agency, “ex policía, capo de la Agencia de Seguridad más fuerte del conurbano” (40):

¿Cómo no contastes que fuimos a reclamar justicia y que nos pusimos nosotras, todas las travestis de la villa, al frente de la marcha cuando fuimos para la intendencia a pedirle, a exigirle más bien ...que respetara nuestros derechos? Y no estamos hablando de que nos pongan nuestros nombres de mujer en los documentos, total nadie tenía documentos allá, estábamos hablando del derecho a vivir, aunque nos dijeran Guillermo, Jonathan o Ramón. (93)

In perhaps an even more striking critique of Qüity’s account of their shared life, the destruction of the *villa* requires Cleo’s narration because Qüity left “El Poso” that day to return to her apartment and check in at the newspaper (Cleo claims that she went to her apartment to take drugs). For her account of the *villa*’s destruction, Qüity, must rely on “las copias de las cámaras de seguridad y de lo que habían llegado a filmar unos chicos de una universidad alemana que estaban haciendo un documental y los celulares de los pibes” (122). Cleo, on the other hand, can insert a first-hand account of that day: “Vos no estuvistes, Qüity. Estuve yo. Tengo que contarlo yo. Te dicto. Anotá bien, porque te estoy diciendo las cosas como fueron” (123). Based on these assertions, we might be tempted say that Cabezón Cámara is staging the fall of literature (Qüity’s failed narration) and civic identity (the right to one’s name on a document one does not possess) in favor of a testimonial appeal or the multitude’s insertion of her voice into *la narrativa letrada* in order to subvert it: “a mí tampoco me querían dejar hablar en ningún lado” (93).

In this vein of subverting the authority of the literary, we could point to Cleo’s status as a regular on mass media outlets. At age 12, she appeared on the talk show *Crónica* after she was a victim of her father’s homophobic violence, and she appeared once again some years later once she began having visions of and conversations with the Virgin:

Las cámaras siguieron filmando, los videos empezaron a circular y Cleopatra disfrutaba. Con el pelo recogido como la abanderada de los humildes, caminando a los saltitos como la reina de la TV y rubia como las dos, la 'travesti santa'...predicaba abrazada a la estatua que un albañil agradecido le había hecho en el potrero de la villa. (34)

And yet what becomes clear in reading Cleo's performative interactions with the media and her conversational, almost confessional recorded interruptions of Qüity's narrative, is that she does not opt for a de-fictionalized account of the *villa* in the style of Arlt's *crónicas* of the Delta, but rather for a carefully stylized narrative that makes visible the illusionary world of the *villa* that she creates by stitching together the incongruities of revelation and lived experience. It is in this context that we can understand the plot twists that distance the novel from Arlt's journalism and align it with the literary tradition led by César Aira. In fact, it is possible to pair *La virgen cabeza* with the forms of the literary that are created by including what Patrick Dove calls in his study of César Aira's shantytown novel *La villa* (2001) "mass media technics."

Critiquing Beatriz Sarlo's account of mass media as functioning in service of neoliberalism through its substitution of the simulacrum for the sign, Dove locates in Aira's novel an interrogation of mass media's fantasies of "complete inclusion" and "complete coverage" (Dove 16). Expressing optimism for a possible escape from both the neoliberal dreams of complete inclusion in the market and the developmentalist visions of modernity and representation through the integration of mass media into literature, Dove affirms that "one possibility to be drawn from Aira's novel is that what remains to be narrated is the event of overexposure or the sense of loss of sense. This would also be to say: the world in its opening onto what it is not or what it is not yet" (25). What Dove argues is that Aira's dialogue with mass media in the novel creates a concept of the literary that functions as a counterpoint to something like television, which always "acts as a prosthesis" (27), a technology that makes it possible to see what is not there, a medium that makes an absent reality present. The literary, Dove argues, also functions as a prosthetic mechanism, one that enables us to interact with a world that is not or is not yet present by creating what he calls a narrative form of "in-between time" (26), one that makes it possible to imagine through a specifically literary form the possibilities for the creation of communities socialized outside "the calculative drives of modern techno-science and neoliberalism" (26).

Dove's work on Aira can be deployed as a powerful critique of readings such as Cortés-Rocca's, those that affirm that in Cabezón Cámara's novel "[hay] fragmentos

del mundo [y] no importa si son realidad o ficción” (“Variaciones” 39). Indeed, the novel itself is an actualization of the desired “return to literature” that is the origin point of the story, and it distinguishes Cabezón Cámara’s literary project from both Qüity’s *nota* and Cleo’s audiovisual performance. However, to understand the function of the literary in *La virgen cabeza*, it is important to understand first the function of Cleo’s audio recording, and her appearance on mass media outlets where she discusses the world revealed to her by the Virgin. The insertion of these transcribed and described audiovisual texts enable Cabezón Cámara to insist on the primacy of the literary as a corrective to the documentary and security camera footage that informs and is the basis of the views of the *villa* embodied in both the “Argentine dream” and Qüity’s observations and conclusions in her *nota*.

As I have noted, we can understand Qüity as attempting to make her narrative work textualize those security cameras through her ethnographic journalism, thus inscribing her report within the terms of the de-fictionalizing tendencies I observed in Arlt’s text above. And yet, unlike Arlt’s conversations with the Delta residents, Qüity’s screens and conversations are all surface, images of surveillance and readymade narratives that she can put to use. While they communicate the “productive life” of the poor as a corrective to the reigning, prejudicial narratives about the *villa*, in deploying these images and narratives in her *nota*, Qüity’s account of what takes place in “El Poso” only works to polish those “world fragments” for presentation, to make them the basis of “la nota del año.” Or to put this more simply, Qüity makes that productive and comunal life market ready: “tanta visita, tanta foto, tanta nota y tanto documental nos pusieron en todas las pantallas y *cambió el modo de estar en el mundo de la villa*, que siempre había optado por una prudente discreción” (149, my emphasis). These non-literary texts—that provide the materials that Qüity hopes will lead to a prize-winning story—that make the *villa* visible to those on the other side of its walls. While it produces a visibility that makes the “Argentine dream” a map that university students, anthropologists and NGOs can share with other *villeros*, this public view of the *villa*’s creative common spaces also changes their realities. In making them visible to government officials and real estate investors, the “Argentine dream” becomes a nightmarish reality as these forces buy the newly-visible, newly-productive land and use deadly force to wipe its residents off the map.

It is to Qüity’s documentary tendency, then, and to Cleo’s sense that these *notas* and photos made the productive life of “El Poso” beneficial to everyone but the *villeros* that we can attribute Cleo’s recorded complaints to Qüity and her intervention in the



narrative: “para vos, [Qüity, mi amor,] ‘éramos tus gallinas de oro’” (78). As Cleo notes, Qüity’s narrative—her polished reality fragments that are used by the market and the neoliberal state—resides outside the creative common space that the *villa* makes possible: “no tenés imaginación, necesitás que las cosas pasen para poder escribirlas” (76). For Cleo, however, her central focus is precisely imagination and revelation, or what, following Dove, we could call prosthetic world making: bringing into view what is not or is not yet, beautiful fictions that are made present through her audiovisual interventions and mass media performance. As we witness her stylizations of her own body into the divas of the televised or populist past (Eva Perón, Susana Giménez) or her (neo)baroque stylizations of the *villa* itself with its public displays of unique religious statuary, we can understand Cleo as an artist conversant in “mass media technics.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet, to reach this conclusion seems simply to return us to the unresolved contradictions I highlighted before: doesn’t Cleo simply remake her body and produce new subjectivities by bringing bodies into contact around these artistic interventions? And don’t they take place outside the space of the literary, in the mass media simulacrum Sarlo suggests? On both accounts the answer is, of course, yes. But what Cabezón Cámara suggests in *novelizing* this shantytown in which the dual poles of its world are unified—freedom and lack; joy and sorrow; life and death; man and woman; de-fictionalization and pure performance—is that their relation can only come into view through an engagement with limits: both chosen and unchosen.<sup>9</sup> The move to fictionalize them through the literary gesture is not reducible to Qüity’s polished reality fragments nor, importantly, to the pure possibility of Cleo’s prosthetic world making.

This becomes clear as the novel ends. After Cleo had recorded all of her comments on Qüity’s text, she left a “Dear John” letter, telling Qüity that she’s spent \$9.7 million dollars to make the Virgin a nomadic cathedral, covered in prosthetic skin, adorned with diamonds, jewels and gold and powered by solar energy (and Cleo’s own energy developed by connecting a bicycle to a generator). Having spent much of the money they had collected with the success of the opera, she’s left Qüity and their

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<sup>8</sup> As José Antonio Maravall famously pointed out, Baroque society was the first mass media society (or society of spectacle). See González’s article for a reading of *La virgen cabeza* in relation to Nestor Perlongher’s account of the Baroque.

<sup>9</sup> González argues that the novel cultivates a series of “juegos conceptistas.” In line with the argument I have been pursuing here, it might be said that the novel’s exploration of the Baroque can be integrated into the reading of the art-commodity in postmodernism: a work that seeks to navigate its orientation toward the market, that is, as a commodity, on the one hand, and toward the production of a non-market oriented community, that is, as an artwork on the other. For a reading of this dilemma, see Brown.

daughter Cleopatrita behind to go to Cuba to reproduce with her mobile cathedral what she created in “El Poso”:

me tengo que ir a Cuba, Qüity. Fidel parece eterno, pero no lo es y ni la Virgen sabe si se va a ir al cielo o al infierno, pero que la isla se va a ir a la mierda lo saben hasta los niños en China. Y van a necesitar a la luz de Dios y de la Virgen Santa y yo se la voy a llevar porque Ella me lo ordenó. (154)

That religion will come to replace or correct the product of the liberational guerrilla model that connects the “multitud alegre” from “El Poso” to the Cuban Revolution is not surprising.<sup>10</sup> In *Commonwealth*, the final volume of their trilogy, Hardt and Negri, reading Foucault’s understanding of the fundamentalist Islam of the Iranian Revolution, highlight his observation that the biopolitical power of religion—“care for daily life, family ties, and social relations” (*Commonwealth* 36)—could “radically change their subjectivity” (36). And they see power in this: “if deployed differently, diverted from its closure in the theocratic regime, could bring about a radical transformation of subjectivity and participate in a project of liberation” (36).

As we saw above, Cabezón Cámara’s project is conversant with Hardt and Negri’s “different deployment” of the biopolitical, but as I have also argued, her work envisions the limits to this “radical change in subjectivity,” both because it puts the *villa* and its forms of productivity on the map for the market and because the freedoms *villeras* like Cleo seek are defined “[a partir] del derecho a vivir” rather than through ever-evolving forms of subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Cabezón Cámara develops a literary form that seeks to bridge the divide separating the demand for de-fictionalization from the possibilities for mass media technics, one that she compares to religious thinking in the context of Cleo’s conversations with the Virgin:

Y todo tenía que ser como estaba escrito... Me regaló la Biblia para que la lea. Es larguísima. Le pregunté si no me la podía meter en la cabeza de otra manera, ella que hace tantos milagros por todos lados, pero no, dice que hay que trabajar para que Dios vea nuestro esfuerzo y nos recompense. (66)

Everything needed to be as it was written: not as it happened (as Qüity would have it) nor as it was seen (as Cleo would prefer). The liberational projects proposed in the novel will not come into being through “miracles:” whether they be the economic ones of neoliberalism that promise vast sums of wealth in exchange for commodities produced for market (such as the cumbia opera or the journalistic *nota*) or the

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<sup>10</sup> On this issue, see Bosteels’ reading of the confluences between Marxism and Christianity in *Memorias del subdesarrollo*.

<sup>11</sup> See Zamora for an account of the shift from inequality to exclusion (the foundation of Foucault’s biopolitics) in the thought of the left.

technological solutions proposed by the mass media prostheses (such as Cleo's nomadic cathedral and its spectacular images).

Cabezón Cámara's novel seeks an escape from the forms structured by neoliberalism or populism by developing a narrative constituted by its limitations. By insisting on the process of reading and interpreting, we get an account not just of what has happened—the strategies for survival developed in the *villa*, the story of its destruction by the collusion of market and state, the attempts to recreate it in Miami or Havana—but also what could happen by recognizing the limits of defining the future via strategies of survival alone. A world without the poverty lived by the *villeros* will not come into being by making the “Argentine dream” a reality. Cabezón Cámara instead seeks to achieve through fictionalization what Arlt sought to achieve through his strategies of de-fictionalization: a valorization of freedoms that exist beyond state and market control. By maintaining the “Argentine dream” as a dream, that is, by re-fictionalizing it through novelistic form, the desired world the novel imagines—“el derecho a vivir aunque nos dijeran Guillermo, Jonathan o Ramón” (93)—dialogues with the unrealized demands of Arlt's Delta residents: a demand for access to the material wealth of the city and the world, a demand for a life lived in equality regardless of who they are. While the shape these rights and demands will take are developed in response to the specificities of a given historical moment, an understanding of those demands today under institutionalized forms of neoliberalism cannot be put in our heads any other way. The logic of the novel insists that they must be written, read and interpreted not as pure possibility nor as indistinguishable reality fragments but rather as a communal life that has been imagined and written in a literary specificity that can be read and understood in its dream-like literary form.

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