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Itinerant Citizens: Imagining Global Citizenship in the works of Osvaldo Soriano¹

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Traditionally citizenship has been conceived as a contractual relationship between a nation-state and its citizens. Derek Heater (2004) defines citizenship as a “form of socio-political identity” (1) among several other models. This contract dictates a covenant of rights and obligations: the citizen pays his/her taxes, obeys the laws and, in exchange, receives services such as security, certain infrastructural amenities and, in some instances, social services, as for example access to health care, public education, social security. Heater postulates that “[g]ood citizens are those who feel an alliance to the state and have a sense of responsibility discharging their duties” (2). The keywords here are “alliance to the state,” which constrict the idea of citizenship to a specific geo-political realm. But

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what happens when the citizen is confronted with the nation-state in crisis? This is to say, what occurs when the state no longer maintains its end of the bargain due to social or political—or both—imperatives, such as authoritarian regimes, the collapse of the national economy, among other events? Under such circumstances, can (and should) the citizen maintain his/her “alliance to the state?” And how does a national crisis impact another feature of citizenship, namely, sociability?

This essay explores the issue of citizenship under duress as it appears in two novels by Argentine writer Osvaldo Soriano. I will analyze two texts that use travel as an allegory to represent the crisis of “territoriality” in post-transitional Argentina (Storey 2012). This predicament of territoriality allegorizes the Argentine crisis after its 1983 democratization and the ensuing transformation of the notion of “citizenship” as a pact between the citizen and the nation-state. For David Storey, a territory is not simply a geographical area circumscribed by political boundaries. Rather, a territory is always crisscrossed by the vectors of power and sociability (*Territories* 27). The two novels considered here depict territories where national power (to provide for its citizens, i.e. to maintain its side of the social bargain) is evanescent and where, therefore, sociability is frequently under duress. As such, the two novels by Osvaldo Soriano this article discusses are emblematic of some of the preoccupations uttered in the works of Argentina’s Generation of ’72. The writers that belong to this group reflect on how the factors such as the 1976 military coup de état impacted notions of national belonging (one has to consider that several of the writers in this group went into exile) and hence, of national citizenship (Nicholson 2011).

Both of Soriano’s texts examined here, *Una sombra ya pronto serás* (1990) and *La hora sin sombra* (1995), feature itinerant protagonists that travel towards a continually deferred and, at the same time, unknown destination. Travel in these two novels signifies the crisis of territoriality. The constantly changing landscapes that appear in *Una sombra ya pronto serás* and in *La hora sin sombra* indicate the characters’ difficulty in establishing emotional and social attachments.

Though I propose that two novels' scenarios are a deterritorialized landscape, both texts posit their narratives in Argentina, specifically rural Argentina. Nonetheless, despite the specific geo-political landscape, the two novels portray the nation-state as an entity that has lost its relevance not only politically but also ideologically and culturally. The result is a geo-symbolic vacuum that does not provide social, civil, political or cultural anchors for the characters that roam it. It is nonetheless significant that both texts take place in Argentina's interior regions, in the national space *par excellence* of the *pampa*. By locating his narratives within this territory, Soriano communicates a sense of nostalgia for an idealized nation with its symbolic and material connotations (i.e. community, national identity constructed through national institutions such as the school). In sum, space and dislocation are integral elements in the two novels and contribute to tracing a dystopian cartography of post-transitional Argentina.

The emphasis on spatiality and movement through space in *Una sombra ya pronto serás* and *La hora sin sombra* provides an important commentary on the transformation of citizenship as constructed vis-à-vis national territory. If, as Storey argues, "territory is more than a mere backdrop of the material manifestation of a set of social relations bound into the intersections of power, space and society (Brighenti 2010a), the spatial is not simply the outcome of the social but the two are intrinsically bound up together (Delaney 2009)" (27), then the weakening of territoriality implies a deterioration of the social links that signify this territory. In the case of Soriano's narratives, the decline of the nation-state is the consequence of both past and present socio-political conditions, namely the 1976-1983 dictatorship, the economic crisis that shook the country in the 1980s and the transformation of Argentina's socio-economic make-up in the 1990s.

As indicated in the two texts discussed in this article, Osvaldo Soriano's *oeuvre* mingles political engagement with aesthetic consciousness. His first novel *Triste, solitario y final* (1973) parodies the detective genre and has as two of its main characters both the author, Osvaldo Soriano and one of literature's most famous private eyes, Philip

Marlowe.² Additionally, the novel is set in Los Angeles, Marlowe's stomping grounds. Metafictionality in Soriano's novels serves as a critical device (in the lines of the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*) that allows the reader to appraise the narrative critically, reflecting upon the power structures that the text comments upon.

This type of meta-fiction appears in Soriano's last novel, *La hora sin sombra*, which thematizes the creative process through the lens of a father-son relationship. In the text, a writer in crisis goes on a road trip searching for his dying father who "había escapado del hospital vestido con la ropa de un roquero al que habían internado por caerse del escenario" (*La hora* 15). The preposterous image of the aging and terminally sick father clothed in rock star garb inaugurates a narrative in which incongruity is a leitmotif. Absurdity, which is also a central theme in *Una sombra pronto serás* and *El ojo de la patria*, allegorizes the Argentine national condition in the aftermath of its 1983 transition to democracy. Humor becomes a tool through which the novels' narrators question prevalent national narratives, such as Argentina's insertion into a cadre of modern nations (Díaz-Zambrana 2005).

As suggested above, the unraveling, or unsettling of traditional social, and, in the case of *La hora sin sombra*, familial order, and the weakening of a body politic is a corollary of socio-economic and political developments in post 1983 Argentina, but also has roots in the country's 1976-1983 dictatorship. Such roots are evident in small hints in each text, such as the redundant and forgotten army outpost that appears in *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, which is commanded by an official with the aspect of a "linyera. ... Ya no se distinguían los galones y el uniforme era una mezcla de bombacha de paisano y chaqueta desteñida. En el pecho llevaba unas cuantas condecoraciones hechas a mano con pedazos de madera y latas viejas" (*La hora* 234). As in *La hora sin sombra*, the absurdity of the scene typifies the grotesque violence of the authoritarian regime. However, unlike *No habrá más penas ni olvido*, published in 1979—at the height of

² Soriano's metafictional play with Raymond Chandler's character is paradigmatic of the interest that the Generation of '72 expressed in mass culture. The noir genre is an integral part of this culture and takes a prominent place in the fictions of this generation.

the military dictatorship—and *Cuarteles de invierno* (1982), the two above cited novels are not overtly political. Instead, these narratives approach politics circuitously precisely in order to reveal that the political sphere is no longer one of citizenship and that the latter is also largely absent from both the civil and particularly the social realms. As suggested by T.H. Marshall, though the three domains of citizenship have their specificity, they are also interrelated.

In *Citizenship and Social Class* (1952) T.H. Marshall divides citizenship into three categories: the civic (legal recourse), the political (representation, e.g. vote) and the social (access to services such as education and healthcare). To these three ambits one might also add cultural citizenship, namely the right to assert one's identity—be it personal or collective. In other words, “Cultural citizenship is about becoming active producers of meaning and representation and knowledgeable consumers under advanced capitalism” (Isin and Wood 152).

As indicated above, each of the spheres overlaps with the other. Thus, for example, social rights can circumscribe political, civic rights and cultural rights. Frequently, socially disadvantaged citizens have less access to judicial recourse and often these same groups have difficulty having their demands met by legislative bodies. The degree to which each realm exists within a nation-state varies and is, in part, bounded to historical circumstances. James Holston (2007) proposes that many recent democracies, as for example those in Southern Cone countries after democratic transitions in the 1980s, evidence a disjuncture in their domains of citizenship. Holston concentrates on the disjointedness between the political and the civil realms, maintaining that in new democracies, “political institutions democratize with considerable success, and although they promulgate constitutions and legal codes based on the rule of law and democratic values, the civil component of citizenship remains impaired, as citizens suffer systematic violations of civil rights and commonly encounter violence, injustice and impunity” (“Citizenship in Disjunctive Democracies” 77). The distinction between different realms of citizenship is not limited to the civil and political. It can also extend to the social sphere. Constitutions might thus declare that “Todos los habitantes

de la Nación gozan de los siguientes derechos conforme a las leyes que reglamenten su ejercicio, a saber: de trabajar y ejercer toda industria lícita...” (Article 14, *Constitución argentina*) but, Argentina in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s saw massive unemployment due to the implementation of neoliberal policies as well as structural adjustment measures, which came on the heels of an economic crisis prompted by Argentina’s foreign debt, lack of investor confidence, budget deficit and hyperinflation.

The Argentine economic crisis began during the dictatorship. In the early 1980s, Argentina underwent near stagnant economic growth combined with an annual inflation rate of over 100%, a deficit of over US\$ 4 billion and an external debt of approximately US\$ 27 billion. By the end of the dictatorship, approximately 27% of the adult Argentine population was unemployed. This economic scenario, combined with the Malvinas debacle, forced the military out of power (“Inflation” 156). However the democratically elected president, Raúl Alfonsín, inherited the disastrous economic conditions of the previous regime. Attempting to control the damage, he implemented economic packages (Plan Austral in 1985, Plan Austral II—the Australito in 1987, Plan Primavera in 1987 and Plan Primavera II in 1988) designed to curb inflation and promote job growth, to no avail. In 1987, partly as a result of the ongoing economic crisis, Alfonsín’s party the Radical Civil Union (UCR) suffered significant losses in the upper and lower houses. In 1989 Peronist candidate Carlos Saúl Menem replaced Alfonsín, who left the presidency five months before the end of his mandate. Menem promptly adopted a series of market-friendly reforms, in effect fulfilling the dictatorship’s economic program (Richards 1997, Klein 2007).

These measures were exacerbated in 1991, when then minister of foreign affairs Domingo Cavallo devised and carried out the *Plan de convertibilidad*, pegging the Argentine peso to the dollar. In addition, responding in part to international pressure, president Menem privatized large sectors of the national industry, including the national airline, telephone and petroleum companies. Menem also slashed public funding, which, together with the privatization of state enterprises led to massive

unemployment. The measures were successful in the short term, the Argentine stock market rallied as a response to the policies and the deficit was reduced. However in the long term these policies proved disastrous. Consumer goods became too expensive due to a surplus of imported goods and the newly privatized industries downsized en masse, leading to considerable unemployment (Klein 166-168). Additionally Menem significantly augmented labor flexibility, eroding workers' rights.³ Labor flexibility had an impact not only on job stability, but also on incomes. The Argentine middle-class was decimated and the country, which had long prided itself on its strong middle class, underwent not only a social, but also an identity crisis.

David Storey links neoliberalization with a transformation of territorial and, by extension, social organization. He maintains that neoliberal policies that privilege private rather than state engagement in social matters put the onus on communitarian rather than governmental (i.e. supra-communal) solutions to socio-economic issues (*Territories* 7). This shift in turn can affect the perception of national belonging and of citizenship. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman associates the state's drawback from the public sector to a disintegration of citizenship as society becomes increasingly individualized (*Liquid Modernity* 16-17). In this context, one can argue that citizenship rather than vanishing is transformed. The collective sphere is reduced to smaller groups centered on common interests and goals. An example (though not an unproblematic one) is NGOs that address social needs of specific groups.

Specifically in the case of Argentina, Beatriz Sarlo affirms that the dictatorial past, combined with the post-transitional economic crisis promoted a rupture with the idea of a national collectivity. Instead, alternative social identities and projects are privileged. Such identifications are often more localized and respond to specific interest such as security or

³ Menem used executive degree to prohibit "strikes and compulsory, binding arbitration of labour disputes for public employees and others working in industries considered essential" (Inflation 160). Moreover, he allocated significant power to employers who had greater latitude in their employment practices enabling them to hire temporary workers for longer periods of time and who could be dismissed without notice and without cause. These temporary workers were also considered ineligible for the full range of fringe benefits afforded regular full time workers, which further helped to reduce firms' labour costs (Inflation 160).

recreation. Sarlo notes that: “Del estallido de identidades no surgió una nación plural, sino su supervivencia pulsatile. La nación se perdió en el extreme de la pobreza” (*Tiempo presente* 19). *Una sombra ya pronto serás* broaches this loss and the subsequent individualization through the metaphor of the continuous voyage.

Destination Nowhere: Journey and Loss in Una sombra ya pronto serás

Una sombra ya pronto serás follows the anonymous protagonist, a computer engineer, who returns to his native Argentina from a long sojourn abroad. The motives for this return are unclear. In Europe, “tenía una buena situación” (*Una sombra* 22), but his material circumstances in his homeland are more precarious. As the narrative advances, the protagonist’s time in Europe fades from the novel, signaling his increased hopelessness. The protagonist’s unstable economic—but also psychological—condition, together with the metaphor of the journey, are the threads that weave the narrative together.

The novel’s timeframe is unspecified, communicating the idea of a timeless present in which the text’s characters are trapped. At the same time, the cast of unemployed and underemployed nomadic characters and the setting of impoverished and ghost towns, shutdown and destitute businesses suggest Argentina during the 1980s. According to Rosana Díaz-Zambrana, Soriano “crea una platea que favorece la presencia de exiliados, desposeídos y la conflictiva espectralidad del regreso a la que debiera vivenciarse como casa. En el caso de Soriano, el elemento cómico sirve para reforzar lo trágico, en el sentido del planteamiento de Ionesco acerca de cómo la desesperación producía la intuición de lo absurdo en lo cómico” (250). In *Una sombra ya pronto serás* the voyage is performed at the social and geographic margins of the nation, as exemplified by the anonymity of the novel’s main character and his destitute appearance at the beginning of the narrative (“ya me estaba pareciendo a un linyera” [*Una sombra* 11]).

Una sombra ya pronto serás begins *in media res* with the protagonist stranded in the middle of nowhere without any money: “Nunca me había pasado de andar sin un peso en el bolsillo. No podía comprar nada y no me quedaba nada por vender” (*Una sombra* 9). Beyond squarely

locating the reader in a rural landscape—there are no cities in the novel, only desolate small towns, the abrupt *mis-en-scène* introduces us to the prevailing sense of disorientation that pervades the text and which encompasses not only the spatial environment, but also extends to the social and psychological spheres. We find ourselves in a world without any apparent order. It is a parallel universe inhabited by various types of social misfits.

Though apparently already standing at the margins—he hints that he has lost his job (*Una sombra* 10)—the protagonist's penury catapults him further outside the hegemonic socio-economic realm that is governed by monetary exchange. If previously he could use conventional transportation mechanisms (i.e. the train), now his travels are far more precarious. He must either walk or hitchhike. *Una sombra ya pronto serás* oscillates between these two modes of journeying. Whereas walking emphasizes the protagonist's almost complete solitude, hitchhiking creates fleeting companionship, alternative forms of community that last for the time of the journey together. In this sense, the temporary sociability the protagonist encounters evokes the idea of micro communities that form in lieu of a larger national collectivity.

Without money and alone in the midst of a no-man's land, the protagonist begins his wanderings through the Argentine countryside. Initially it appears that he seeks to receive reimbursement for his train ticket (the train in which he was travelling broke down). But his final destination is obscure—though the protagonist mentions that he is *en route* to Neuquén province, he does not seem to make any concrete effort to reach his purported endpoint. During his journey he encounters a colorful array of fellow travellers who also seem to be lost in the desolate landscape that surrounds them.

Similar to the protagonist, his fellow travellers are trickster figures who attempt to survive in an inhospitable environment. Most are, like the protagonist, haunted by a sense of loss and, paradoxically, a hope to recover from this loss that is permeated with the consciousness that this endeavor is impossible. Coluccini, a failed circus owner, the protagonist's

first companion, drives a decrepit Gordini⁴ and wants to go to Bolivia. The novel thus reverses the established economic migratory pattern in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century whereby Bolivians came to Argentina in search of employment. Coluccini's proposed route thus indirectly highlights the acute state of national crisis. For Coluccini, Bolivia represents the possibility of overcoming a series of losses, not least economic ruin: "En otra época tuve un Buick y también un 505, pero me agarró la tormenta" (*Una sombra* 18). His itinerary, however, does not follow a linear map that would take him from his current location to Bolivia, but seems rather circular. This circularity, an orbit that is described around semi-abandoned travel stations, empty fields, villages and rotundas signifies the voyages' futility. Coluccini, similar to the novel's other characters is literally and metaphorically lost. Spatial markers, reflecting a muddled social order, and the characters' own psyche, serve only to confuse the travellers. When the protagonist asks Coluccini if he recognizes a certain enclosure, the former circus owner responds: "Son todas iguales, Zárate, como los árboles. Hice mil quinientos kilómetros con los curas y nunca supe si iba para el norte o para el sur"⁵ (*Una sombra* 178). The confusing cartography transmits the characters' hopelessness—throughout the narrative he repeats the adage: "¡l'avventura è finita!" Coluccini's words indicate his knowledge that he will not reach Bolivia and recuperate his losses, both literal and metaphorical. Nevertheless he continues to nurse this illusion, stretching it into a non-existent future. After Bolivia, he plans to continue his travels, to Rio de Janeiro or to Miami (*Una sombra* 18). The continual deferment of a destination suspends both Coluccini's failure and repeats it. Rosana Díaz-Zambrana observes that in *Una sombra ya pronto serás* "la circularidad del viaje es la encerrona simbólica del fracaso igualmente insuperable. En este viaje-sin-regreso de la desesperanza sólo la voluntad de aventura y la capacidad de identificación entre los viajeros

⁴ Throughout *Una sombra ya pronto serás* as well as in *La hora sin sombra*, cars are signposts of a past era. Specifically they denote a more affluent Argentina where citizens could afford imported cars and a Fordist (rather than post-Fordist) economic model—with the social implications that these mode of production connotes.

⁵ Coluccini calls the protagonist by the name of his former associate, who escaped to Australia with the former's family.

pueden franquear la omnipresencia de la soledad en las que serán siempre rutas sin salida” (251). Soriano’s novel oscillates between the, albeit impermanent, social bonds that are established *en route* and the underlying reality of a crisis of citizenship that impairs longer-term sociability.

Similar to topographical markers, in the novel maps lose their power to orient the traveller. Instead they confirm the sense of disorientation that suffuses the narrative. The characters’ bewilderment vis-à-vis these useless documents denotes both their loss/es and their search for new prospects (economic, personal, emotional). As such, maps in *Una sombra ya pronto serás* allude less to an ordered space, created for example by a central administration in order to control the national territory, and more to the crisis of these institutions, the disorder of this territory and the power structures that organize and control the national space.

Doreen Massey states that traditionally maps function as “ordering representations” (*For Space* 106). However, maps can also destabilize order. These are “situationist maps” that attempt to “disorient, to defamiliarise, to provoke a view from an unaccustomed angle. On the other hand...[such maps] sought to expose the incoherences and fragmentations of the spatial itself” (*For Space* 109). Maps reoccur throughout *Una sombra ya pronto serás* but are ineffectual guides. At the beginning of the protagonist’s adventure, he consults a map, but ends up doing “a recorrido absurdo, dando vueltas y retrocediendo y ahora me encontraba en el mismo lugar que al principio o en otro idéntico” (*Una sombra* 9). The narrative’s imprecise maps create a breach that offers the reader—and the characters—a glimpse into an “unaccustomed angle” of Argentine society. The pampa, symbol of national identity (Ponce 8), becomes a proxy for the entire nation. It is, however an emptied and ghostly space, and not the terrain of the fabled *gauchos* (only two of them appear in the novel, just to disappear quickly). If, in the nineteenth century, the pampa was the frontier to be conquered and “civilized,” in Soriano’s narrative, it has been abandoned by any ordering venture. Remnants of a former organization, such as damaged and incorrect road signs underscore

the contrast between a past order and the present disarray. The defamiliarization provoked by equivocal maps and/or by a confusing landscape connotes the chaotic and constrictive state of social and personal affairs that the novel's characters confront.

Take, for example, Rita and Boris, a young couple that the protagonist meets at one of the several service stations he passes through. They seek to drive to the United States in their old Mercury via the Pan American Highway. Though their motivations are not spelled out in the novel, their desire to go north connotes a lack of perspectives in Argentina (Boris has a degree in physics). The couple's desired migration pattern, similarly to the protagonist's own itinerary, reflects the "brain drain" that the country endured during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. While during the 1960s, Argentine *emigrés* came from mainly the educated, professional classes, in the 1970s and 1980s the migratory population expanded to include unskilled labor as well. The motives for emigration also change. Until 1983, emigrants sought to flee from political violence. In the post-transitional period Argentines have migrated for economic and educational reasons.⁶

Like other characters Rita and Boris dream of escaping into a different reality. This desire recurs in the novel in the mention of faraway destinations. Beyond Bolivia, Miami and Rio de Janeiro, the characters hope to reach Cleveland and Alaska (Ponce 31) or, as in the case of Coluccini and the protagonist, have estranged family in Australia or in Spain. These locations symbolize adventure (Alaska, Bolivia), excitement (Rio de Janeiro) or economic potential (Miami, Europe), all of which are absent from the bleak landscape that represents Argentina in *Una sombra ya pronto serás*. Rita and Boris cannot, however, find the highway north. Their itinerary, like that of Coluccini, remains circumscribed to the same back roads that the protagonist transverses, suggesting the same circular movement described by the two men.

As indicated above, the characters' itinerary takes them through a ruinous countryside. Coluccini gives the protagonist a ride to Colonia Vela,

⁶ Adela Pellegrino indicates that an important percentage of Argentines emigrate to pursue post-graduate degrees in the United States and in Europe ("Skilled Labor Migration" 13).

the first station in the novel's *via crucis*. For Corina Mathieu (1988) Soriano's fictional town is a microcosm of Argentina. Accordingly, in *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, Colonia Vela evidences the marks of Argentina's national crisis. Whereas a closed-up movie theater alludes to the country's economic breakdown, a monument to the men who fell during the Malvinas conflict in the central square signals the country's recent historic traumas.

The town is generally described as run-down and is dotted by signs that indicate the population's impoverishment. Thus, for example, a well-frequented soup kitchen organized by the local church tends to the needy population, many of which seem to be new to this type of charity. These are people who are uncomfortable with their destitution: "La gente hablaba poco y se lanzaba miradas furtivas" (*Una sombra* 33). The shame encapsulated in the cautious gazes is suggestive of a pauperized middle class that is still grappling with its new socio-economic status. This new social positioning contrasts with the prevalent notion of Argentine national identity. Beatriz Sarlo observes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the understanding of being an Argentine citizen, "implicaba trabajar, leer y escribir, votar. Ser argentino también significaba un imaginario articulado por principios de orgullo nacional, posibilidades de ascenso social y relativo igualitarismo" (*Tiempo presente* 28). In other words, to be "Argentine" meant that one had access to all four ambits of citizenship: the civil, the political, the social and the cultural. In contrast, Soriano's text describes the weakening of both the social and the civil spheres of citizenship (the political realm is largely and significantly absent from *Una sombra ya pronto serás*). The soup kitchen in Colonia Vela attests to the lack of the basic right to nutrition. And it also indicates the absence of a welfare state that could provide for the essential needs of its population. In its place, private and/or non-profit organizations assume this function. The changed socio-economic panorama profoundly affected Argentines' self-perception, as well as their social relations and political engagement (Grimson and Keller 2005).

The prevalence of a market-oriented logic is a recurrent theme in the novel. It dictates a change not only of living standards, but also of ideology and ethics. Paradigmatic are the characters of Barrante and the

priest Salinas. Barranté wears a Perón pin, evoking an era of incremented state intervention. Nonetheless, contradicting this insignia and the state-sponsored economic policies of the Perón era he believes that private initiative is the salvation to Argentina's woes. In a parody of the neoliberal ethos,⁷ Barranté declares that: "Si nos dejan trabajar a los privados vamos a salir adelante. Mire toda la riqueza que tenemos ..." (*Una sombra* 108). His words stand in stark opposition not only to the surrounding landscape, but also to his own professional standing.

Though he is a private entrepreneur, Barranté's business represents this economic model and ridicules it. He wanders the *pampa* carrying an onerous contraption with which he bathes *paisanos*. But the enterprise is not lucrative, thus contradicting Barranté's own beliefs in private business. Barranté is a parody of the self-made man proposed by capitalist ideology. His entire figure and the device he carries are "un error y allí, en el descampado, se notaba en enseguida. (...) Movía las piernas como balancines y tenía unos brazos largos que sobresalían de las mangas. El traje era holgado pero le faltaban casi todos los botones y el pantalón tenía unas rodilleras imposibles de planchar" (*Una sombra* 107). The character's shambolic appearance challenges the image of the successful private entrepreneur (which appears in the figure of the banker Lem). In particular the ill fitting and derelict suit comments on Argentina's identification with European cultural models. The suit symbolizes the presence and influence of European culture within the Argentine socio-cultural imaginary. But Barranté's ruinous *traje* signifies the disintegration of such models within a changing social, political and cultural panorama.

Barranté emblemizes the plethora of unorthodox occupations that composes the book's informal economy, and which seems to be the only functional economic sector. Since the 1970s and until recently, the Argentine economy has steadily lost jobs in the formal sector. These have

⁷ David Harvey postulates that in neoliberal ethos: "While individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. This principle extends into the realm of welfare, education, health care and even pensions (...). Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (...) rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism)" (65-66).

been—partially—replaced by part-time and/or informal employment. In both cases, workers often are deprived of the benefits offered by full-time labor: pensions, healthcare, paid leave etc. Members of the working class were, in effect, what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls the “collateral damage” of consumer society, or what Bauman calls the “underclass” (*Consuming Life* 122). This underclass conjures “an image of an aggregate of people who have been declared off-limits in relation to *all* classes and the *class hierarchy itself*, with little chance and no need of readmission: people without a role, making no useful contribution to the lives of the rest, and in principle beyond redemption” (*Consuming Life* 123, emphasis in the original). Barrante reflects the precarious position occupied by the members of the informal sector, the de facto “underclass” that has no space within the sanctioned national imaginary. Not only is he lost in the territorial margins of the nation, unable to reach its economic and symbolic centers (Buenos Aires for example), but also his professional activity is obsolete. As a result, his earnings are so low that he cannot eat more than twice a week. And, being a widower, he has a son to whom he cannot send money. When Barrante is accidentally killed his social marginalization is exacerbated. He is interred in a nameless grave; near the wire fencing that separates a gas station from the adjourning empty fields. The location is a borderline between the terrain inhabited by fellow travellers and a no-man’s land.

In contrast to Barrante, the priest Salinas typifies the successful side of the free market. He has privatized soul saving. Salinas goes from ranch to ranch performing religious duties in exchange for cash. His business is lucrative to the point that he is saving to buy a Renault 12 and has outsourced some of his services to two lay associates. The market-friendly priest offers a re-interpretation of the biblical maxim: “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24) by making his clients believe that “los ricos pasan por el ojo de la aguja” (*Una sombra* 164). The priest’s words signal the prevalence of a market-oriented rationale in all realms of life, including the spiritual one. Within this framework, one can, quite literally, buy an entrance to eternity. Not only does human life

become commodified, but also the “soul,” i.e. the spiritual life and the institutions that attend to it (Bauman 2007). Not surprisingly, social bonds become part of an economy of exchange.

Exemplary is the relation between the protagonist and his *socio*, Lem. Lem is the “lost banker,” searching for the arithmetic formula that will allow him to win a fortune in gambling. Unlike most other characters in the novel, Lem apparently is affluent. In contrast to Barrante, he wears tailored suits, eats imported chocolate and drinks expensive whiskey. But analogously to the book’s other characters, Lem is also an eternal wanderer.

Lem and the protagonist engage in an unproductive business relation and their association suggests a dis-encounter between two strangers. Like the protagonist, Lem is a solitary wanderer simultaneously fleeing for unknown reasons and in search of an elusive goal (“...me perdi en el camino” [*Una sombra* 104]). His ongoing travels connote a cosmopolitan elite that, due to its socio-economic standing, is not constrained to a particular territory. Appropriately, Lem likes to (or must) travel, seemingly without any specific destination, driving a flaming Jaguar.⁸ The car is an enclosed territory that contains the banker’s life, creating a space mostly detached from any material territory. As he transverses various locations he remains bound to the circumscribed sphere of his car. The Jaguar is paradigmatic of Lem’s deterritorialized space: though Lem has driven from Alaska to Kuala Lumpur, the vehicle’s papers are from New Jersey.

Lem’s car-residence is diametrically opposed to the traditional notion of a home, and, by extension of homeland as a fixed entity, delimited by geo-political boundaries and signified by structures of political and symbolic power. Instead, the Jaguar is both a fragmented space and a non-space (Augé 1995). On the one hand, the car is a fragmented space in that it condenses the character’s lived experiences in bits and pieces. These are symbolized by the haphazard collection of items in the vehicle: water bottles, cigarette packs, scraps of paper. The car, with its objects and the memorial slivers that these denote, signals Lem’s truncated personal

⁸ The car, an English brand, is significant in that it too alludes to British culture as referential for certain social sectors in Argentina.

narrative. This notion of truncation is highlighted by the character's demise: he commits suicide without leaving any explanation behind.

On the other hand, while the historicity condensed in the car contradicts the notion of it as a non-space,⁹ the Jaguar is nonetheless a non-space in that it is a terrain where relations of contractuality prevail—in this case, the business transactions between him and the protagonist. The non-space is a locale void of affectivity. If territory is an important factor in the formation of self and social identity, the ambulant “territory” of Lem's car proposes that his individual and communitarian identities are unstable or nonexistent. Indeed, more than any of the book's other characters, Lem seems unable to engage in any social relationship. The meetings between his fellow travellers and him are ephemeral, marked by unfinished dialogues and incomplete projects, emblemizing estrangement rather than dialogue and communication. Deterritorialization here signifies the coming apart of a collective sphere, and, by extension, of a collective project.

The combination between Lem's interminable journeys and his profession can be read as metaphoric of the spread of deterritorialized finance capitalism that eschews production and the exchange of material goods. Indeed, finance capitalism was one of the motors of the Argentine economy in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. In an article that Soriano wrote about the state of the Argentine economy, he describes this type of financial transaction:

En noviembre de 1988, depositar dinero a plazo fijo en cualquier banco, redituaba una ganancia del 8 por ciento mensual en dólares. El fenómeno atrajo capitales que sólo circulaban en el mercado financiero para regresar luego, bien engrosados, a sus seguros refugios de Nueva York o Suiza. Se calcula que 10 mil millones de dólares venidos del extranjero circulaban por los bancos y se multiplicaban con la especulación a costa del Estado. (“Vivir con la inflación” 41)

This speculative game became routine, a means to safeguard the income from galloping inflation. For Bauman, this “free-floating capitalism” (*Liquid Modernity* 149) is both a symptom and the cause of liquefying

⁹ For a discussion of inhabited non-spaces please see Brantley Nicholson's and Lucia Reinaga's “On Pirate Cinema and Crying in Airports: A Conversation with Alberto Fuguet.”

social relations. In contrast to the “free-floating capitalism” emblemized by Lem is the barter economy that sustains Nadia, a (phony) clairvoyant, who dreams of emigrating to Brazil. In exchange for her services, her clients pay her “pollos, tortas, morcillas, salamines y otras cosas que no supe para qué podían servir” (*Una sombra* 54). Paradoxically this barter economy is related to the globalized capitalism performed by Lem. It represents the underside of deterritorialized finance capitalism. Impoverished by joblessness and by inflation, Nadia’s customers cannot but compensate her with non-monetary goods.

Like its itinerant characters, *Una sombra ya pronto serás* describes a circular narrative movement. The novel ends where it began, with the protagonist sitting in an empty train wagon—another space that symbolizes deterritorialization, waiting for it to depart, but not knowing whether this will happen (“La partida estaba prevista para las ocho pero no decía de qué día ni yo sabía en qué fecha estábamos” [*Una sombra* 250]). The scene is ambivalent, leaving open the possibility of a forward movement, toward a goal, or a future, while at the same time accentuating immobility and waiting. Significantly, the protagonist is alone in his wait. The social relations that he established during his trip having all gone their own way, in search of ephemeral opportunities somewhere else. *Una sombra ya pronto serás* thus insinuates that, under crisis, citizenship as a communitarian endeavor becomes brittle. And yet, there is always the chance of reencounters.

A History of Dis-encounters: Family and Nation in La hora sin sombra

In an interview with Verónica Chiaravelli for the newspaper *La Nación*, Osvaldo Soriano synthesizes two main themes of his fiction: loneliness and limit situations with which his characters have to deal. These two reoccurring themes appear in *Una sombra pronto serás* and are also the axes that organize Soriano’s last novel, *La hora sin sombra*.

La hora sin sombra has two layers. On the one hand, it is the story of the relationship between father and son. The son, a writer, learns that his hospitalized father is dying, and decides to abandon him—just as the father has abandoned him in the past. He plans a road trip through the

Argentine provinces during which he will also write a travel book, something to the effect of a *Guía de las pasiones argentinas* (*La hora* 35). The father, however, takes a trip of his own, escaping the hospital in which he is interned wearing the clothes of a rock star. As a consequence, his son transforms this trip into a search for both the missing parent and himself. In the process, his travel book mutates into a combination of familial history, travel narrative and a belated *Bildungsroman*. It is, probably, the text that we are reading.

On the other hand, the novel thematizes the creative process. The novel that the author-narrator is composing, and for which he received an advance from his editor, is a metafictional commentary on Soriano's own aesthetic formation (Martínez 9). Beyond portraying the trials and tribulations of a writer in crisis, the novel also contains multiple references to Argentine literary luminaries such as José Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares. For Tomás Eloy Martínez, who wrote the prologue to *La hora sin sombra*, this text is "construido como una reflexión sobre lo que él (Soriano) leyó, escribió y vivió. O, mejor dicho, como una autobiografía encubierta" (9). In other words, in this novel, Soriano creates a parallel between life and art. And, following the line of his previous works, *La hora sin sombra* also centers on solitary characters, confronted with borderline situations, specifically the line between (literary) creation and (parental) death. For Cristián Montes Capó, *Una hora sin sombra* is a narrative of orphanhood. Accordingly, the narrative relates the loneliness that haunts the protagonist to a generalized sense of abandonment that is underscored by solitary routes and that can be read as an allegory for a crisis of the national community. The protagonist, who is at the point of being orphaned, feels that he is an outsider within a larger community: "Ya era tarde para mí; no había participado, no era compinche de la tribu" (*Una sombra* 139).

Similarly to *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, *La hora sin sombra* rotates around journeys, internal as well as physical. However, unlike the former, the latter does have a specific, existential (and artistic) goal. As indicated above, the narrator-protagonist wants to find his father and to write a story in which "de nuevo estuviéramos juntos" (*La hora* 23). By

extension, the voyage also serves as an exploration of Argentina, both geographically and socio-culturally—as suggested by the narrator-protagonist’s original scheme to write a “story of Argentine passions.”

But to reach this target, the narrator-protagonist describes a circular trajectory, interspersed with chance encounters and ephemeral social relations. It is, in short, a journey of discovery in a landscape that is defined by spatial and temporal dimensions. For Doreen Massey, such a space is “the sphere of dynamic simultaneity, constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations. It is always being made and therefore, in a sense, unfinished (except that ‘finishing’ is not on the agenda)” (107).

As a result *La hora sin sombra* depicts the national territory envisioned as a moving cartography. In other words: the narrator-protagonist of *La hora sin sombra* describes a terrain where the spatial coordinates are not fixed, but ever changing according to the social and symbolic relations that occur within these coordinates. Consequently, analogous to *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, the idea of the nation as a determinate, fixed territory is destabilized. In this framework, the definition of citizenship, this is to say, belonging to a specific geo-political community, also changes. Community is described by local or individual affinities, ties, interests that often are impermanent.

Whereas *Una sombra ya pronto serás* focuses primarily of marginal/ized characters that physically and symbolically inhabit the nation’s frontiers, *La hora sin sombra*, though not eschewing these individuals completely, centers on characters that are not completely socially peripheral but that still allegorize the precarious citizenship on the nation’s borderlands.

Soriano relies on the memorial discourse to represent the national landscape. Hence, for example, similar to *No habrá ni pena ni olvido*, Peronism is both the symbol of a better time, and a questionable enterprise. In the novel, Juan Domingos Perón appears as a benevolent, but somewhat ingenuous leader who finances the protagonist’s father’s dream to construct

a city of crystal. In the novel the overly optimistic populist president denotes a fallacious confidence that covers a conflicted reality.

The city is a metaphor for the aspirations of middle-class Argentines during the 1940s and 1950s. Throughout these two decades, the country's bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie believed in the establishment of Argentina as a modern nation, where progress and social ascension were viable.

Projected to be built as the new southern capital (in the Antarctica), the glass metropolis represents the fusion between a positivist and a mythical vision of Argentina. Envisioned as an enchanted oasis, a "palacio transparente, que fuera una gigantesca biblioteca llena de jardines y fuentes de aguas termales...[una] metrópolis para iluminados" (*La hora* 44), the city also captures Argentina's economic and political ambitions to become a global power. Ernesto, the protagonist's father believes that nuclear power, which, according to the narrative, is one of Perón's ambitions for Argentina, can power his city (*La hora* 45).¹⁰ Furthermore, the city's anticipated location, in the South Pole, denotes Argentina's aspirations for territorial expansion. Ironically, those ambitions are wrecked in the Falklands conflict, another recurring theme in Soriano's texts.

While the glass metropolis represents a fabled modernity, it also stands as a symbol of the brittleness of these ambitions. In this framework the city's obliteration in 1955 during the *coup de état* that deposed Perón hints at the gradual destruction of this vision. Modern Argentina gradually morphs into a dystopia, which will culminate in the 1976-83 dictatorship.

Retracing his father's story and his dreams, the protagonist goes in search of the city. He hopes to find "su piedra filosofal" (*La hora* 47) there. His route passes through an empty and desolate landscape that reaches nightmarish proportions on the isle. The deserted roads that lead to the city and its isolated location suggest its peripheral location, at the

¹⁰ According to the narrator-protagonist, "En ese tiempo Perón había traído al país al profesor Richter, un austriaco chiflado que había empezado a trabajar en un laboratorio de Bariloche con el propósito de lograr la fusión nuclear. Ese procedimiento revolucionario, que no tenían ni los rusos ni los norteamericanos, iba a dar energía a todo el continente y convertiría a la Argentina en una potencia mundial" (*La hora* 45).

borders to the national cartography. This remoteness allegorizes the distance of the utopian national projects to the contemporary reality in which the narrator lives.

The conviction and simultaneous interrogation of Argentina as a modern nation also transpires in the narrator-protagonist's description of his mother's trajectory, from country girl to urban sophisticate and finally to embittered provincial housewife. In pictures of her taken during the 1940s,

se ve a mi madre reluciente y feliz; parece una chica coqueta y atrevida, aunque las fotos son instantes de la vida que después no encajan en ninguna parte. Posaba para Gath y Chaves y otras casa de moda, aunque el éxito le llegó cuando empezó a hacer propaganda del jabón Palmolive. Todavía tengo una instantánea en la que está subida al pescante de un Packard, que era el coche más famoso de la época. (*La hora* 17)

The luxury vehicle in the photograph highlights the affluence enjoyed by Argentines between 1939-45, when beef and wheat, two of the country's main commodities, were in high demand on the global market. Likewise, both the car and the Palmolive soap, two North American imports, imply the insertion of Argentina into a global economy. While it exports raw resources, the country imports the industrialized products that connote a stylish modernity *en par* with nations such as the United States. In this context the Packard, similar to the *Torino* that the narrator-protagonist drives, epitomizes a sense of nostalgia for the auspicious times during which the photo was taken. That these times are long gone becomes clear when the *Torino* goes up in flames—together with the snapshots of his mother's glitzy past.

The snapshots transmit both the optimism of a modern and urbane young woman, and by association, of the nation that she represents in the advertisements, and the subjacent sense of tragedy that will rupture this cheerful imagery/imaginary. Underlying this sunny imagery, however, the protagonist discovers that Laura, his mother, “despreciaba a la humanidad entera, incluidos mi padre y yo, que fuimos un estorbo en su vida” (*La hora* 17). Her bitterness ensues from her personal disappointments, especially from her aborted affair with Bill Hathaway, a

charming African-American basketball player recruited by the Palermo sports club.

Laura's past, similar to the nation's past, is reduced to a handful of photographs, postcards, incomplete memorial vestiges. The protagonist, who seeks to understand who his mother was, is unable to reconstruct her image from these fragments. Likewise, national history is disjointed, pieced together randomly. Recalling a beating he witnessed earlier in his trip, the protagonist reflects: "¿Qué hacer con aquel acto de cobardía? Podría escribirlo, tal vez. Escribirlo sin modelos, sin descripciones, sin emoción. Sería una manera de ponerme a tono con este tiempo, cegar la memoria, borrar el pasado" (*La hora* 139). Here personal memory dialogues with the country's collective memory, with the unsettled mnemonic blanks of the recent (authoritarian) past.

Whereas the protagonist's mother ultimately settles into a mediocre existence and marries a provincial shopkeeper, the nation goes through the 1976-83 *proceso de reorganización nacional*, the Malvinas conflict and the post-transitional socio-economic crisis. This history underlies the narrative that we are reading. We learn *en passé* that the protagonist has just returned from exile and that Ernesto, his father, was a messenger boy of sorts for the Montonero guerrilla, having gone into exile in 1978. Exile alludes not only to Argentina's dictatorial past, that continues to haunt the country, but, as in other texts of the Generation of '72, exile is also a symbol for the coming apart of the national territory, and of the sense of displacement felt by both those who return to the country in the aftermath of the military regime, and those who remained.

La hora sin sombra uses the memorial discourse to map the national territory and the protagonist's own trajectory. For Amalia Ran, "la reconstrucción del pasado privado impulsa la revisión de otro tipo de historia: la oficial argentina y sus símbolos populares. La recuperación del padre desaparecido implica, por ende, otro giro hacia el origen e induce ciertas aclaraciones respecto al modo de ser argentino" (26). Not coincidentally, much of the narrator's itinerary takes him through barren landscapes and small, dying towns. If memory in our contemporary period is associated with specific sites (Nora 1989), then bleak locales, such as the

pampa and run-down beach towns that the protagonist transverses signifies an emptiness of memory. The only significant memorial site of *La hora sin sombra* is the rebuilt *Torino* that the protagonist inherits from his father and with which he begins his road trip. Nonetheless, as the car burns down in a fire, his memories also go up in flames—at least temporarily.

Despite the loss, the protagonist must continue his voyage on foot or by public transportation—echoing the journey/s of *Una sombra ya pronto serás*. Dislocation is the only way that he can recuperate his lost novel (that burned down with the car) and, therefore, his past and the national history that is inscribed into the individual storylines that he pursues (that of his progenitors' and his own). *La hora sin sombra* also evokes the *Una sombra ya pronto serás* in the bizarre and fleeting acquaintances that the protagonist makes on his way. Paradigmatic is Walter, who inhabits a storm hole. The character combines strangeness with a quotidian normalcy: he prepares a *mate* for the protagonist who ventured into the storm hole. Upon leaving Walter's abode, the latter hears him repeating "¡Ah, el horror, el horror!" (*La hora* 151). The sentence parodies Kurt's words in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and its echoes in Marlon Brando's performance of Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In this framework, Walter's words suggest a parallel between Marlowe's and the protagonist's quest. Both transverse a dark(ened) territory punctuated by isolated and, at times, bizarre, interactions.

Space in the text exemplifies Massey's conception of it as a locale where diverse and, at times, divergent trajectories meet up. Random encounters, such as that with Walter or when the protagonist comes across the fugitive Pastor Noriega, establish signifying vectors on the map that the protagonist is tracing while he journeys. Nonetheless, the various paths that coincide with that of the protagonist do not ultimately create a coherent topography. *La hora sin sombra* traces a fragmented map of Argentina.

On the one hand, *La hora sin sombra* articulates writing as a means to counter this disjuncture. It is through writing that the protagonist re-encounters his father and reconciles with him. Nonetheless, on the other

hand, the narrative suggests that this project is doomed: “Una novela es como una tormenta en el océano, pasa y no deja huella” (*La hora* 179). However, similar to a storm, the novel also leaves debris, fragments that can be used to assemble an alternate story. *La hora sin sombra* ends with the protagonist finding the buried copy of the burned narrative that he was writing about his parents. The only thing missing is an ending: “Sólo faltaba agregar el final” (*La hora* 288). The finale suggests an ongoing process of constitution, both personal and collective, a mobile mapping of the nation and its communitarian spaces.

The Generation of '72 is one marked by various types of displacements. Beyond the (often forced) geographical dislocations, the writers who belong to this grouping are also in-between political places (between the utopian project of the Cuban Revolution and Salvador Allende's brief presidential term) and between cultural markers (bookended by the success of the *Boom* and their own vision of Latin American culture, which included international pop and mass cultures). Finally, the authors of the Generation of '72 had to navigate different social configurations: pre, during and post-dictatorial. *Una sombra ya pronto serás* and *La hora sin sombra* evidence the imprint of these experiences and moments. Specifically, the idea of fragmentation—individual, social, cultural and territorial—transmits the nostalgia for a lost unity, a communitarian whole. Nonetheless, at the same time Soriano's texts transmit the knowledge that this collectivity is but a shadow.

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