A Contra corriente
Una revista de historia social y literatura de América Latina
A Contra corriente
A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America
Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 2013, 389-419
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Travelers in the Margins: Post-dictatorship, Economic Reform and Solidarity in João Gilberto Noll's *Hotel Atlântico* and Osvaldo Soriano's *Una sombra ya pronto serás*

Jennie Irene Daniels
Olivet Nazerene University

In Argentina and Brazil, the 1980s were a time of political change and severe economic adjustments. The failure of the war with Great Britain over the Falkland Islands (known as Las Malvinas in Argentina) weakened the political strength of the dictatorship's *junta* and helped create an opening for democratic elections in 1983.[1] Brazil's dictatorship had already begun its transition by this time, and transitioned to democracy in 1985 after twenty years of continuous military rule.[2] The oil shocks of the early

[1] Hunter, Wendy. "Negotiating Civil-Military Relations in Post-Authoritarian Argentina and Chile." *International Studies Quarterly* 42.2 (June 1998): 305. Web. *JSTOR*. 22 February 2012.

[2] Faro de Castro, Marcus, and Valladão Carvalho, Maria Izabel, "Globalization and Recent Political Transitions in Brazil." *International Political*

1970s negatively affected Brazil's economy, and even though Argentina did not import oil at the time,[3] the debt crisis in the early 1980s cast economic uncertainty over the entire region.[4] Transitional governments therefore had to respond not only to the international debt incurred by the military regimes, but also to an unstable global economy. In compliance with purportedly autonomous regulatory agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and in agreement with trends in the region, both countries began to implement structural adjustments to promote a neoliberal economic model during the 1980s (Jordana and Levi-Faur 106).[5] The two nations also initiated talks of a joint market, which have since developed into the Common Southern Market (*Mercado Común del Sur* in Spanish and *Mercado Comum do Sul* in Portuguese).[6]

In this article I discuss how two novels address the subjective situation of large-scale adjustments of the transition and their effects on Argentine and Brazilian society. *Una sombra ya pronto serás* by Osvaldo Soriano (1990) and *Hotel Atlântico* by João Gilberto Noll (1989) speak to the situation of the shrinking middle class, which had been quite sizable in Argentina though relatively small in Brazil, and show how middle class characters deal with their increasing impoverishment. Through abject protagonists and the allegorical portrayal of the nation via the journey they takes, each novel paints a critique of post-dictatorship society and previous styles of government. They denounce authoritarian, personalist and paternalist forms of government, which have taken different shapes in each country, as well as the constrictive spaces brought about by free market

---

Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique 24.4 (October 2003): 471. Web. *JSTOR*. 22 February 2012.

[3] Bela Balassa, "Adjusting to External Shocks: The Newly-Industrializing Developing Economies in 1974-1976 and 1979-1981." *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv, Bd.* 121.H.1 (1985): 119, 121. Web. *JSTOR*. 23 February 2012.

[4] Peter Kingstone and Joseph Young, "Partisanship and Policy Choice: What's Left for the Left in Latin America?" *Political Research Quarterly* 62.1 (March 2009): 31. Web. *ProQuest*. 2 October 2012.

[5] Jacint Jordana and David Levi-Faur. "The Diffusion of Regulartory Capitalism in Latin America: Sectoral and National Channels in the Making of a New Order." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 598 The Rise of Regulatory Capitalism: The Global Diffusion of a New Order (March 2005): 106. Web. *JSTOR*. 23 February 2012.

[6] "Globalization": 478.

policies; however, both novels also reveal limited possibilities for characters to develop lasting, productive relationships within these spaces.

Transitional Policies

The two novels were written and published in 1989 and 1990, respectively, only a few years after the end of the regions' dictatorships. While Argentina and Brazil have similar macro-histories, they differ upon a closer inspection. Before turning to how the novels represent constrictive spaces and difficulties in establishing relationships, here I briefly describe the historical context within which each author wrote.

A key aspect to understanding how the novels fit into their national contexts is the type of dictatorship that governed each country, and how the economy developed before, during and after each regime. Argentina had a different trajectory of development than other Latin American countries, and from Brazil in particular. Describing the country in the 1920s-30s, Carlos Waisman asserts that the standard of living was as high or higher than many countries in Europe in terms of "nutrition, health, consumption, and higher education."[7] Brazil, on the other hand, had yet to develop in these areas. However, in spite of apparent prosperity, the Great Depression a few years later greatly affected Argentina and Brazil, and demonstrated the dependence of their economies on trade.[8] In both countries, liberalism had been put to the test during World War I (WWI), and in Argentina, nationalism began to take a firmer hold over economic policy in the 1920s, seen in the creation of state-owned *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales* (YPF) and the rise of the automobile industry and textile plants.[9] In Brazil, nationalism rose with the beginning of the Republic in 1889 and garnered

[7] Carlos *H* Waisman, *Reversal of Development in Argentina: Postwar Counterrevolutionary Policies and Their Structural Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 7.

[8] Jonathan C. Brown, *A Brief History of Argentina* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2003), 186. Stanley E. Hilton, "Vargas and Brazilian Economic Development, 1930-1945: A Reappraisal of his Attitude Toward Industrialization and Planning." *The Journal of Economic History* 35.4 (December 1975): 758. Web. *JSTOR*. 17 March 2012. Lars Schoultz, *The Populist Challenge: Argentine Electoral Behavior in the Postwar Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, c1983), 14-15. Print.

[9] *Brief History*, 177-86.

strength during the 1920s,[10] but economic nationalism took root only after the Great Depression took the wind out of Brazil's export-dependent economy. Though many scholars have claimed that industrialization became a priority during Getúlio Vargas's New State (*Estado Novo*, 1937-1945), Stanley Hilton argues that from the beginning of his first provisional government (1930-1934), during his presidency (1934-1937), and especially after the *golpe* in 1937, Vargas implemented policies that favored nationalist industrialization (576).[11] Consistent with many other Latin American countries around the same period, Argentina and Brazil withdrew economically and increased national industry. Import-Substitution Industrialization (ISI) became the dominant economic policy after the depression of the 1930s, as the administrations placed higher tariffs on foreign goods and encouraged national industry. A strong reaction against liberal theory, this seemed a logical transition, because foreign trade diminished drastically in the wake of World War I and the depression years.

The theme of authoritarianism runs throughout the novels, but this is not rooted solely in the most recent dictatorships; populist figures Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955, 1973-1974) and Getúlio Vargas (dictator/non-elected president 1930-1945, president 1951-1954) have also greatly influenced politics. Generally referring to a movement in the non-property holding sectors, populism has led to a politically conscious working class in both countries. Torcuato Di Tella defines its basic qualities as, "a political movement which enjoys the support of the mass of the urban working class and/or peasantry but which does not result from the autonomous organizational power of either of these two sectors. It is also supported by non-working-class sectors upholding an anti-*status quo* ideology."[12] Alberto Ciria adds to this definition that populist movements usually have a charismatic leader who serves as a key, organizing agent.[13] Perón and Vargas are classic populists. For example, Perón's position in the Labor

[10] James R. Curtis, "Praças, Place, and Public Life in Urban Brazil." *Geographical Review* 90.4 (October 2000): 485-6. Web. *JSTOR*. 17 March 2012.

[11] "Vargas", 756.

[12] Qtd. in *Populist Challenge*, 5.

[13] Alberto Ciria, *Política y cultura popular: la Argentina peronista 1946-1955* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1983), 48.

Department prior to his presidency aided the formulation of his government's strong ties to labor unions and to the working class. He granted concessions to labor, such as reinstating the eight-hour workday, and quite effectively brought unions under the control of the government. In addition, most workers earned higher wages, could take maternity leave, and had health benefits, paid vacation time, and higher job security. YPF became the national petroleum producer, and the state bought electricity, meatpacking and telephone companies, and British-owned railways.[14] The concentration of the working classes in cities, as opposed to in rural settings, set the stage for unions to become important political factors and for workers to have a powerful political voice. Even though populism is problematic as a form of political representation, as a process it integrated the workers as a political sector while politicizing them. Class conflict in both Argentina and Brazil is responsible in part for a history of alternating between military and civilian regimes during the twentieth century.

Populism has greatly influenced political practices in Argentina and Brazil, and is important to understand because of its perpetuation of corporatism in Brazil, as well as for its role in the development of an acute political consciousness of the working classes, especially Argentina's. This political consciousness, not only among workers, but also progressive clergy, students and professors, led to questions about the distribution of wealth in society. Social turbulence stemming from class conflict became the primary justification for the military dictatorships to assume and retain power, and the regimes supported conservative sectors of society. Brazil's dictatorship lasted longer than Argentina's; it began earlier than the Southern Cone regimes, and was very distinct in quality. Relative calm surrounded two periods of repression, and the repression was on a much smaller scale. Unlike in the Southern Cone, intellectuals were not a primary target of the state, though they did share in it to a certain extent; literature was relatively uncensored, and instead, political opponents more closely in touch with the populace, such as union organizers, as well as journalists, took the brunt of state wrath.[15] The Argentine military, in contrast, feared

[14] *Brief History*: 210-12

[15] Joan Dassin, "Testimonial Literature and the Armed Struggle in Brazil." *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*. Eds. Juan E.

writers and journalists, whose oppositional ideas could significantly influence public opinion, along with union organizers, the largely middle class militant *Montoneros*, and the People's Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*, ERP).[16]

The methods of state repression, in addition to the targeted populations, differed. Where the Brazilian tactics were fairly standard dictatorial practices, such as incarceration and torture, Argentina's seven-year regime employed violence to instill fear in the general population and thus secure passivity. A common practice was to disappear political opponents or people who, though they themselves were not dissidents, worked in low-income settings or had friends, family members, or acquaintances among the opposition.[17] State agents often detained such individuals openly and used buildings in high traffic areas as concentration-elimination camps. This reconfiguration of repressive techniques turned disappearance into a surreal form of terror and source of power for the dictatorial state:[18] repression became a *secreto a voces*, a terror that was visible and either officially denied or blamed on leftist opposition.[19] In part for this reason, even though Brazilian and Southern Cone cultural production addresses a shared history of authoritarian and populist figures, Southern Cone literary works often explore the process and aftermath of state violence and terror in the memory of the populace, while Brazilian ones tend to include the specter of Vargas but eschew mention of the most recent dictatorship.[20]

Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 165. Ales Moreira, Maria Helena, "Cultures of Fear, Cultures of Resistance: The New Labor Movement in Brazil." *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*. Eds. Juan E. Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen, and Manuel Antonio Garretón (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 192.

[16] Andrew Graham-Yooll, "Argentina: The State of Transition 1983-85." *Third World Quarterly* 7.3 (July 1985): 586-7. Web. *JSTOR*. 22 February 2012.

[17] Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas. *Nunca más*. 8th ed. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2009: 13. Print.

[18] Calveiro, Pilar. *Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2008), 27-8.

[19] Feitlowitz, Marguerite. *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

[20] Examples of works concerning authoritarianism and/or populism include Rubem Fonseca's *Agosto* (1990), Silviano Santiago's *Em Liberdade* (1981), Sérgio Sant'Anna's *Simulacros* (1977), Luisa Valenzuela's C*ola de lagartija* (1983),

Another factor contributing to differences between literary and cinematic production of the Southern Cone and Brazil, is that while in the former countries a search for truth and justice has been ongoing, in Brazil injustices committed by the regime have only recently begun to be addressed under president Dilma Rousseff (2011-present).[21] As the two countries made transitions to democracy in the early 1980s, the military regimes' endeavors to protect their ranks limited new civilian leaders' attempts for redress. Impunity laws granted them freedom from prosecution for human rights violations, but Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) initially tried to overturn this. Wendy Hunter notes that Argentina's military had the least autonomy in Latin America during the post-dictatorship. Alfonsín took advantage of this weakness to create a civilian-led ministry of defense that would control military expenditures, promotions, assignments, arms production, defense strategy, and separate external and internal defense. However, wary of repercussions, he set an end date for new cases against military personnel, and when confronted by revolts by junior officers that strengthened the military's position by suggesting a lack of discipline, the president issued a pardon for those under the rank of colonel.[22] Brazil's transition began several years before democratic elections, and ensured the position of the elites.[23] José Sarney, the running mate of Tancredo Neves, was sworn in as president after Neves died in the interim between the election and the inauguration. Even though Sarney maintained high popularity and had strong political ties, he had little *de facto* political power as president.[24] Military officers retained their immunity from prosecution, and there was no official redress for state violence under the dictatorship. Unlike the Southern Cone nations, Brazil's

---

and Manuel Puig's *The Buenos Aires affair* (1973). For examples of works dealing with the memory and trauma of the Southern Cone dictatorships, see Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante* (1994) and *Nocturno de Chile* (2000), Tununa Mercado's *En estado de memoria* (1990), Matilde Sánchez's *El Dock* (1993), as well as various writings by Mario Benedetti and Ramón Díaz Eterovic.

[21] "Human Rights in Brazil: It Isn't Even Past". *The Economist* (19 November 2011): 40-1.

[22] "Negotiating Civil-Military Relations," 296, 305-6.

[23] "Argentina," 576.

[24] Robert R. Kaufman, *The Politics of Debt in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico: Economic Stabilization in the 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 1988), 50.

transitional government did not open an inquiry into human rights abuses; instead, *Brasil: Nunca Mais*, which was similar to the truth commissions of Argentina and Chile, was a production of the Archdiocese of São Paulo.

The 1980s, when the official democratic transitions began, were turbulent economic years for many countries in Latin America. Civil wars raged in El Salvador and Nicaragua,[25] while the collapse in oil prices and rising interest rates brought Mexico to a severe debt crisis in 1982.[26] Chile and Colombia managed to have a slightly higher income per capita at the end of the decade than at the beginning,[27] but Chile's real minimum wage remained lower in the mid-1980s than in the early 1970s.[28] While Chile maintained an inflation rate of approximately twenty percent per year, Argentina and Brazil experienced hyperinflation in the late 1980s, surpassed only by Peru. In Brazil, inflation rates jumped from 230% in 1987 to 682% the following year, and rose to 1,287% in 1989, the year in which Noll published *Hotel Atlântico*. Argentina's inflation rates were even higher: the already high 343% in 1988 soared to 3,079% in 1989, and fell slightly to 2,314% by the time Soriano published *Una sombra ya pronto serás* in late 1990.[29] This hyperinflation introduced severe difficulties in meeting daily needs, especially among the middle and lower classes: many Argentine and Brazilian workers were pushed into the informal sector.[30] In Brazil, hyperinflation resulted in increasing income inequality between 1986 and 1989, and affected the poor disproportionately.[31] Promises of

---

[25] Samuel A. Morley, *Poverty and Inequality in Latin America: The Impact of Adjustment and Recovery in the 1980s* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 7.

[26] Rudiger Dornbusch, Jose Vinals, and Richard Portes, "Mexico: Stabilization, Debt and Growth." *Economic Policy* 3.7 (October 1988): 243-6. Web. *JSTOR*. 13 March 2012.

[27] *Poverty*, 7.

[28] Marcus J. Kurtz, "Understanding the Third World Welfare State after Neoliberalism: The Politics of Social Provision in Chile and Mexico." *Comparative Politics* 34.3 (April 2002): 299. Web. *JSTOR*. 15 February 2012.

[29] *Poverty*, 24, see Table 1-8.

[30] *Poverty*, 91. Ricardo Paes de Barros, Rosane Mendonça, and Sonia Rocha, "Brazil: Welfare, Inequality, Poverty, Social Indicators, and Social Programs in the 1980s." *Coping with Austerity: Poverty and Inequality in Latin America*. Ed. Nora Lustig (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995), 244.

[31] "Brazil," 269.

stabilization were a primary factor in Argentine society's acceptance of the economic shocks later carried out under Carlos Menem.[32]

The dictatorships played a major role in shaping the health of transitional economies, which is a significant player in both novels. Scholars with varying views on the economy agree that inflation in Argentina was the result of poor decisions under the latest regime. Luis Beccaria and Ricardo Carciofi explain that while Argentina's military dictatorship attempted to integrate the country's economy into the global market and end ISI, it incurred massive public debt and failed to restructure public finances. In short, they blame inflation on policy incoherence. [33] Faro de Castro and Valladão de Carvalho note that privatization of state corporations began under the regime, paving the way for the implementation of other neoliberal policies in the post-dictatorship.[34] The Brazilian dictatorship did not begin implementation of neoliberal policies other than privatization; rather, presidents Fernando Collor de Mello (1990-1992) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) carried out this process. Still, Brazil's regime did little to change gross social inequalities: Geisa Maria Rocha points out that even as Brazil's touted "economic miracle" (1968-1973) caused booming growth rates for the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the Gini coefficient shows high inequalities.[35] Economic contraction in the 1980s hurt the poorer classes even further.

Nameless Wanderers

Una sombra ya pronto serás and *Hotel Atlântico*, written in the midst of austerity measures near the end of the 1980s recession, have many thematic and stylistic similarities that facilitate a comparison between them. Both may be read as allegorical of their contemporary national

[32] Kurt Weyland, "Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe." *Comparative Politics,* 31.4 (1999): 395. Web. *JSTOR*. 1 February 2010.

[33] Beccaria, Luis, and Ricardo Carciofi, "Argentina: Social Policy and Adjustment during the 1980s." *Coping with Austerity: Poverty and Inequality in Latin America*. Ed. Nora Lustig (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995), 190.

[34] "Globalization," 477.

[35] Geisa Maria Rocha, "Celso Furtado and the Resumption of Construction in Brazil: Structuralism as an Alternative to Neoliberalism." *Latin American Perspectives* 34 (September 2007): 134. Web. *Sage*. 2 October 2012.

climate. Each novel also has a nameless protagonist, a male in his forties. These characters narrate in the first person, relating their aimless wanderings through provincial Argentina and from Rio de Janeiro to Rio Grande do Sul, respectively. The reader sees events through their eyes, and in this way understands the subjective realities of formerly middle or upper-middle class characters. In addition, both protagonists have little or no money by the time the stories begin. They have no family or friends nearby and have difficulty forming lasting relationships with others. Similarities between the novels provide a basis for comparing the plight of Brazil and Argentina's middle classes during the early post-dictatorship years, and reveal brief alliances that characters form with one another to avoid starvation, homelessness, and abuse at the hands of more powerful people.

The plots of these novels are otherwise quite different. In *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, the story begins with the narrator waiting on a broken-down train. Although this is unfortunate, it has not interrupted any specific travel plans. The journey was already in progress, but lacked a destination; the narrator expresses vaguely that he would have gone to Neuquén. When it becomes evident that no one is coming to fix the train, he begins to wander around the interior of what appears to be Buenos Aires province, although the location is never explicitly stated. Here, the journey shifts from linear to roughly circular: the narrator attempts to leave the region with the various characters he meets, but is unable to escape the endless Pampas and a few scattered towns. The characters, many of whom are trying to leave Argentina, are representative of several middle-class groups. Lem, a lost banker, wants the protagonist, who has previously worked in computing, to help him break the bank of a casino (*saltar un casino*) using probability calculations. They stay together in a hotel and travel in Lem's Jaguar. Other characters also offer him a ride. Coluccini, an Argentine circus master who pretends to be Italian, is trying to go to Bolivia; while Nadia the fortune-teller plans to eventually join her children in Brazil. Boris and Rita, a young couple, offer to take the protagonist with them on their way to Ohio, but end up leaving him behind. After many adventures with these characters, the protagonist discovers that the culprit

for the province falling apart is the free market. This knowledge helps him break out of the aimless and circular journey, and he gets back on the train, only to wait.

Unlike the lost narrator of *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, in *Hotel Atlântico* the narrator is not confined to an inescapable region. Instead, he is trapped in a deteriorating body. On his journey, the protagonist encounters many dangerous situations, and only has a vague sense of where to go next. Along the way, the reader is introduced to other traveling characters and sees a portion of their journey. However, their journeys from fortunate life to abject death only make sense to the reader once the protagonist's destination is complete. The novel represents quality of life and life itself as deteriorating in the early post-dictatorship as a result of poor social and economic prospects for middle and lower class citizens. The first scene introduces death as a primary motif, with a corpse being removed from a Rio de Janeiro hotel as the protagonist enters. Immediately afterwards, he asks the hotel receptionist to come to his room. This sexual encounter and those that follow initially represent the protagonist as hyper-masculine. However, as his situation becomes more precarious, the narrator has dreams of being a woman. His subsequent feminization is a gendered representation of Brazil's marginalization under the transition. Once a popular actor in soap operas but recently unemployed, the protagonist lives off the sale of his car and, later on, the charity of others as he travels from Rio de Janeiro toward Florianópolis. At different points along the way, he stays with a priest, accepts a ride from men who attempt to murder him, and, after fainting, wakes up in a hospital with his leg amputated by a doctor who plans to use the operation on this famous ex-actor to boost his popularity in the upcoming mayoral race. The protagonist and his nurse, Sebastião, escape from the hospital, and after a brief stop in Porto Alegre, check into a small hotel near the beach, where the protagonist dies.

The two authors are of the same generation, but experienced dictatorship in their countries differently. Between them, Osvaldo Soriano (1943-1997) and João Gilberto Noll (1946-) have written several novels, news articles and short stories, and garnered several literary prizes. Yet

Soriano's work is decidedly more overt in its political and social critique. Born in 1943, Soriano wrote for Jacobo Timermán's newspaper *La opinión* before fleeing Argentina in 1976. He lived in exile as a journalist in France, Belgium and Spain, publishing novels as well, such as *No habrá más penas ni olvido* (*Funny Dirty Little War*, 1979; in Argentina 1983) that use past political moments to critique the present. Upon his return to Argentina in 1984, Soriano wrote for the left-of-center periodical *Página 12*, and kept writing novels.[36] Noll, in contrast, continued publishing in Brazil during its military regime. Even though his work provides sociopolitical critiques, this has not been his goal as a writer. Noll distinguishes himself from other writers of the 1960s generation by claiming literature should go beyond a critique of contemporary issues, and that it will not necessarily change society or politics. Instead, he says that he explores rites and liturgy in his writing because he believes literature should interrupt the mechanical constraints of society.[37] The novels therefore contain elements of these very different life experiences.

Abjection and Journeys

One of the most salient themes in these novels is abjection. The setting and middle class characters of *Una sombra ya pronto serás* reveal fissures in a society that gives preference to international market interests in the wake of a brutal dictatorship, while the increasingly marginalized characters of *Hotel Atlântico* are rejected persons who threaten to disturb economic growth. Julia Kristeva defines the abject as:

> death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What

[36] Graham-Yooll, Andrew, "Obituary: Osvaldo Soriano." *The Independent* (5 February 1997). Web. 23 February 2012. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-osvaldo-soriano-1277008.html>.

[37] "Cronologia." *João Gilberto Noll*. Web. 23 February 2012. <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/cronologia.html>. "Política: João Gilberto Noll." *Tiro de Letra*. Web. 23 February 2012. <http://www.tirodeletra.com.br/politica/JoaoGilbertoNoll.htm>.

> does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.[38]

The narrator-protagonists are what Kristeva denotes "dejects," or people through whom the abject exists, because they are precisely what interrupts or contradicts notions of transition and stability. The deject, like these protagonists, "*strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing (…) Instead of sounding himself as to his 'being,' he does so concerning his place: '*Where* am I?' instead of '*Who* am I?'"[39] Their journeys in the novels respond more to location than to identity, and emphasize their proximity to the abject, or the object that threatens to engulf them. Even though the protagonists attempt to escape from disturbances and disorder, they cannot reject something so wholly part of their being. Noll's narrator is slowly being consumed by death because he is a disturbance to the neoliberal order as an increasingly socially marginalized character. However, Soriano's narrator, once able to uncover the source of the abjection with which he and the rest of the country is tainted, appears to begin to change.

Each novel provides an allegory of its contemporary national context through the journey of the everyday protagonists. As many in the middle classes suffered through the recession of the 1980s and economic reform, these protagonists are unemployed and no longer fit in their old lives. Each begins a journey with no defined destination. Although some scholars find Fredric Jameson's theory of third world literature as allegory problematic, it holds true for these novels. Noll's novel, as well as Soriano's, may be concisely described by Jameson's statement, *"the story of the private individual destiny [as] an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*."[40] The anonymity of the protagonist-narrators augments the novels' allegorical portrayal of Argentina and Brazil in the post-dictatorship. Neither man tells the other characters his name, nor does he ever state it. This anonymity serves to

---

[38] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

[39] Ibid. Emphasis in original: 8

[40] Jameson, Fredric. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *The Jameson Reader*. Eds. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 320. Italics in original.

detract from the narrators' identity, for the other characters in the novels and for the reader. The basis of their identity is past professional experience (Soriano's protagonist has worked as an computing engineer, while Noll's has been a well-known a soap opera actor), and any present characteristics that may stand out.[41]

The congruence between the economic, political and social situation in Argentina and Brazil as outlined above and the inescapable problems the individuals face in the narratives underscores their journeys as allegorical. The embattled situation that Noll's narrator faces in his declining health, in addition to bad weather, marginalized spaces, and the frequent deaths of acquaintances, takes the reader on a journey through urban and rural areas in Brazil to reveal economic and social marginalization, political corruption, and increasing inequality in a nation that already leads the world in this area. Soriano's narrator's problems are no less related to Argentina's national situation, as he wanders about the decadent province and meets other middle class characters also trapped in circumstances they cannot escape. Although the end of *Una sombra ya pronto serás* shows the protagonist as having identified the cause of the abject situation through his denunciation of neoliberal policies, his hope does not erase the fact that the train is still immobile and the province is sinking into ruin. Read as allegory, this novel provides a warning as clear as Noll's protagonist being swallowed by the abject in his death; the Argentine and Brazilian situations at the turn of the decade were perilous, and threatening in very real ways to the middle classes and the economically marginalized.

The title of Soriano's novel presents the threat the characters face. The English translation of the title, *Shadows*, does not capture the full meaning of the Spanish title: *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, a shadow you soon will be.[42] The looming shadow is the loss of identity, where the

[41] Noll's protagonist is a famous actor and clearly not the conventional everyman. However, I identify him as such because his present circumstances indicate that he has lost the cultural capital he once possessed. Although he was a man to be imitated and a projection of viewers' desires in the soap operas, in the present the protagonist is simply another abject character. In addition, only one person throughout the novel recognizes him upon meeting him, and this leads to the amputation of his leg for the benefit of a politician's campaign.

[42] Even though the "you" could appear to be the protagonist, the title also seems to generalize the possibility of fading into shadows. Since the novel is

individual does not disappear entirely, but rather no longer occupies space in society and is confused with masses of similar people. The future that the protagonist used to think possible is, like his very person, gradually fading into a mere remnant of what it once was. After working in computing in Europe during the dictatorship, the narrator has returned to Argentina, but his children have remained abroad. Though middle class, the narrator has no home and is unemployed, representing a loss of two major sources of identity in bourgeois society (i.e. property and work). Another character, Lem, is the first to point out that the protagonist is a shadow,[43] which is ironic because many characters describe Lem as a lost banker with no distinguishing physical characteristics; he too is a shadow. The reader recognizes that each of the middle class characters is only an echo of what he or she once was, but the narrator-protagonist is the only character who realizes this about himself. Near the end of the novel, in the wake of the excitement of having cheated to win an inter-town *truco* match, the narrator says of himself and Coluccini, "I had the sensation that we did not exist anymore for anyone, not even for ourselves… What drew our attention was to watch our own fallen shadows, and perhaps we would soon become confused with them" ("[t]uve la sensación de que ya no existíamos para nadie, ni siquiera para nosotros mismos… Lo que nos atraía era mirar nuestra propia sombra derrumbada y quizá pronto íbamos a confundirnos con ella"[44]).[45] The threat of living in a precarious and inescapable situation is that these characters will cease to occupy any physical space. Like shadows, they may even lose their identities and be confused with one another in the same way that Coluccini and the protagonist bet their memories in *truco*, and in how the protagonist wonders whether he is actually the source of other characters' voices.[46]

Aside from the threat of losing their identities, many characters in Soriano's novel are stuck in this province. Spatial representations portray a

---

detective fiction, the protagonist does the logical work of putting together the pieces of the crime. However, as allegory, the reader becomes another investigator who may soon become a shadow.

[43] Soriano, Osvaldo, *Una sombra ya pronto serás* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1991), 93.

[44] All translations are mine.

[45] *Sombra*, 226.

[46] Ibid., 149-51, 241, 247.

desolate and stifling atmosphere that corresponds to the prospects of wide swaths of the lower middle classes during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Dreams of being trapped in an "asphyxiating labyrinth" ("laberinto asfixiante") and having "equations impossible to solve" ("ecuaciones imposibles de resolver") reveal the level of internalization of the narrator's immobility and impotence upon his return to Argentina.[47] On his way south to Neuquén, the protagonist's train breaks down. Other wandering, middle class characters who have cars have been trying to find their way out of the country, and offer to take him to locales such as Bolivia and Ohio. However, the province in decline seems to impose its decay on the visitors. For all of their driving, the characters cannot escape from the region. In fact, their cars cannot enter fourth gear, which creates a sense of frustration that is amplified by the fact that there is no way to leave the region. The portrayal of space as oppressive and binding limits what the characters can do, but also permits the reader to examine it in detail, revisiting each of the three towns and the secondary characters that the protagonist cannot leave behind in his journey.

In addition, the capital has begun to ignore the interior as well as the new poor, formerly middle class characters the interior represents. These characters find themselves trapped in a microcosm of the nation under market policies that lower their standard of living, limit job opportunities, and reduce them to memories, shadows, of what they used to be and hoped someday to achieve. This situation is portrayed as typical: a clerk in the garage sums up the attitude of many characters when he states, "Whoever passes through here is already screwed" ("El que pasa por acá ya viene jugado").[48] Many characters comment that they are lost, are going in circles, or feel like they cannot get anywhere new. All of these characters used to be middle class, but they, like the narrator, have entered the neglected realm of poverty, a space that is marginal to the nation. This space in the novel is described as a completely different sphere, removed from the commercial and political epicenter of the country.

[47] Ibid., 94, 176.
[48] Ibid., 102.

The fact that there are no maps or street signs to indicate where the characters are or where they should (or could) go enhances the sensation of being trapped. Stuck in the confines of this space, the characters have no means of escaping, and the outside world seems to be removing traces of identity from the province even as those on the inside plunder what resources are left. The provincial space of the novel is, like the characters, beginning to disappear or turn into shadows. At the garage mentioned above, the narrator says, "I went into the office and glanced at the map. Junta Grande was not on it, and neither was Triunvirato or Colonia Vela. I told the guy and he explained to me that they had sent him the wrong route guide, but that he was already used to seeing it there" ("Entré en la oficina y le eché una mirada al mapa. Junta Grande no figuraba allí ni tampoco Triunvirato ni Colonia Vela. Se lo dije al tipo y me explicó que la habían mandado una hoja de ruta equivocada pero que él ya estaba acostumbrado a verla allí").[49] The region and towns that trap the characters, slowing their movement within a deteriorating environment, appear to be disappearing from official national registers. In addition, during the course of the novel unnamed characters steal the telephone wires, thus gradually cutting off communication to the region.

During the Southern Cone and Brazilian dictatorships, confining spaces often reconstruct the pressure of being unable to escape the reach of state violence [see, for example, characters like Marcelo Maggi from Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980) and the Eligible Bachelor (*Jovem Promissor*) of Sérgio Sant'Anna's *Simulacros* (1977)]. Yet in these novels, as well as in others from the late dictatorships and post-dictatorships such as Mario Levrero's *El lugar* (1982) and Diamela Eltit's *Mano de obra* (2002), the oppressive, constrictive or maze-like spaces suggest that a somewhat more vague power is placing restrictions on the characters. Half a decade after the end of the dictatorships, Soriano's and Noll's protagonists identify the economy as a significant factor in the reconstruction of space as oppressive in the novels.

Space in *Hotel Atlântico* does not play the same confining role that it does in *Una sombra ya pronto serás*, but it does reveal a process of

[49] Ibid., 102.

exclusion. Where the narrator in Soriano's novel travels slowly around a province allowing the reader to understand the marginalized periphery as a space of disappearing identity and declining significance, the journey that Noll's narrator takes, explores various places in Brazil and the social spaces within them. In particular, property ownership offers an example of contention between people of means in the novel and marginalized characters. Two places where this conflict occurs are the brothel the narrator visits and the apartment building that used to be his friend's grandmother's house. In both cases, the space is subsumed by commercial interests while the marginalized inhabitants are further disenfranchised. Willem Assies notes that,

> The [dictatorship] years 1964-1981 have been characterised as a period of institutional consolidation and massive expansion of a Brazilian welfare state. They saw the effective organisation of federal and state public systems in the areas of basic collective goods and services (education, health, social assistance, social security and housing) and a massive expansion of coverage in the context of rapid urbanization.[50]

However, Brazil has long been known as a country with one of the greatest income inequalities in the world, and these policies did not effectively improve inequality or social mobility; in fact, inequality has increased since 1964. [51] Under José Sarney's (1985-1990) transitional government, economic crises caused inflation to spiral out of control in spite of attempts to rein it in with a new currency and an open market agreement with Argentina.[52] Spaces such as the brothel and Sebastião's grandmother's former house reconstruct socio-economic exclusion as the removal of marginalized people from dominant areas.

The brothel's prostitutes are marginal characters, and in this sense their status is the same as it has been historically. Yet the narrator's description of this space suggests that the manner in which they experience

---

[50] Willem Assies, "Theory, Practice and 'External Actors' in the Making of New Urban Social Movements in Brazil." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 18.2, Special Issue: Social Movements and Religious Change (April 1999): 214. Web. *JSTOR*. 3 November 2011.

[51] "Theory," 214. Soares, Gláucio Ary Dillon. "After the Miracle." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 15.2, Socioeconomic Change in Brazil (Winter 1978): 283. Web. *JSTOR*. 15 March 2012.

[52] "Globalization," 478.

exclusion has changed. During the years prior to the protagonist's stay there, they have been confined to the brothel, and thus relegated even further to the margins of society for commercial benefit. The brothel is not as prosperous as it once was, so an acquaintance of the narrator's has decided to help it become more integrated with the contemporary market through the drug trade. The grounds are now used to cultivate illegal substances. Thus, one form of illegal commerce has substituted another,[53] and this has occurred through changes not to the house but rather to the rest of the property. The land that used to provide protection and privacy to the sex workers from the surrounding environment has been converted to use for profit, because in the changing economic order the sex workers no longer earn enough to justify their living in this space. They earn enough to support themselves and their needs, but the novel shows that in this moment there are potentially more profitable returns through activities other than prostitution. The sex workers are thrice marginalized subjects in this respect: they are marginalized socially by their profession, regionally through the separation between the brothel and the rest of the population in that area, and physically by the walls between the house where they live and its surrounding property.

A second example of how the novel's spatial representations portray increasing exclusion is later in the novel, when the protagonist and Sebastião, his nurse and friend, decide to visit Sebastião's grandmother in Porto Alegre. By this time in the novel, the protagonist is almost entirely dependent on Sebastião, both physically and economically. He is unemployed, has no money, and is crippled from the unnecessary amputation of his leg. Although the narrator-protagonist was once a well-off actor, he has quickly slid into poverty with no chance of escape. Yet Sebastião is also a marginal subject, which the reader learns through the emphasis on his skin color (black) and on his childhood and youth. Born in Porto Alegre and raised by his grandmother, Sebastião has had to seek work in other cities. He is a delocalized character without family ties, because his grandmother was illiterate and therefore could not keep in

[53] Prostitution is not illegal in Brazil, but running a brothel or otherwise employing prostitutes is.

contact with him. Given his age and social class, Sebastião's situation suggests that as for many urban workers during the dictatorship, falling real wages and conservative modernization have contributed to his exclusion from the overall economic growth of the "Brazilian Miracle."[54] The dictatorship may have made social welfare services more available, but the novel suggests that opportunity and class mobility remained elusive for the poor and working classes.

The scene in which Sebastião and the narrator attempt to find the grandmother's house clearly points to changes to the city brought about by the neoliberal transformation of urban space. They arrive at the street where she used to live only to find in her house's place a new apartment building four stories tall. Across the street is the same small shop that Sebastião remembers from his childhood. The contrast between the old city and the new shows how the reorganization of urban space by new commercial interests affects the population that was already living there. Since the grandmother has passed away, the space that she once occupied has been converted to multiple family dwellings. Her illiteracy impeded contact with Sebastião, so commercial interests assumed her property upon her death. Rosana Díaz Zambrana explains that the dissolution of the house as a point of reference and return provokes feelings of abandonment. In this journey, lacking a home contributes to the disintegration of the protagonist's identity.[55] It excludes him and Sebastião from society since they no longer have anywhere to return to; they are condemned to travel in the margins, perpetually. Once commercial interests began to buy, the poorer inhabitants have been forced out. Even though the house should have been Sebastião's, he and the narrator will not have the opportunity to live in the new apartment building given their financial and social situation. The two of them have been dislodged by corruption and economic marginalization, and negated a place in the new urban space.

---

[54] Wendy Wolford, "This Land is Ours Now: Spatial Imaginaries and the Struggle for Land in Brazil." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94.2 (June 2004): 411. Web. *JSTOR*. 3 November 2011.

[55] Rosana Díaz Zambrana, "Memoria, sentido trágico y el viaje de aniquilación en Hotel Atlântico de João Gilberto Noll." *Romance Quarterly* 56.2 (Spring 2009): 145-6. Web. *ProQuest*. 7 June 2010.

Soriano and Noll carry out effective critiques of neoliberalism and its effects on peripheral nations in abject narrator-protagonists on wandering journeys. Through spatial representations of the Argentine province and various locales in Brazil, the novels call into question increasing social and economic marginalization during the post-dictatorship transition to democracy. Although they do this in very distinct ways, each represents his nation's transition as a time in which the lower and middle classes are losing economic and political power, and the lower classes are becoming increasingly impoverished.

Economic Critique

Hyperinflation at the end of the 1980s, along with amnesty for the military for crimes against human rights, limited the possibility for social justice. The recreation of this space through journeys is only a part of the novels' social commentary. *Hotel Atlântico* and *Una sombra ya pronto serás* both explicitly address the economic situation in their respective countries. Noll's novel alludes to poor economic performance and the displacement of poor and middle class characters, and Soriano's directly critiques the free market. But the authors do so not only through the characters' dialogue; the genres of the novels also contribute to this critique. Soriano manipulates the detective novel to denounce neoliberalism, while Noll's *novella* mimics a film to portray the economic climate.

Una sombra ya pronto serás is a detective novel with a non-human criminal: neoliberalism. The story, though it appears to simply be the journey of a lost, abject protagonist, distorts the elements of crime fiction in order to discover this criminal. Ana María Amar Sánchez notes that the key components of the genre (crime, mystery, investigation, detective) articulate "three essential terms (…): *crime*, *truth*, *justice*" ("tres términos esenciales (…) *crimen, verdad, justicia*").[56] Though upon a first reading these themes may not appear clearly defined, a closer reading reveals the novel as a reworking of the hard-boiled variant. Instead of suspense,

[56] Amar Sánchez, Ana María. *Juegos de seducción y traición: Literatura y cultura de masas* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2000), 47.

Soriano weaves a sense of oppression into the seemingly inescapable labyrinth within which they travel. Luis Martín Cabrera argues that Argentina's crime fiction differs significantly from the genre in other Latin American countries, where it developed later. The detective figure in particular becomes fragmented, and even more so in Soriano's work in the early 1990s due to Argentina's political and economic history. Martín Cabrera states that "the detective—a strong rational subject—is an incongruent figure in a society that has been abandoned to the unruly organization of free market politics and corruption."[57] I posit that the detective figure is three-pronged in this novel. Lem, a non-descript banker, is a Marlowe-esque version of the North American hard-boiled detective,[58] but the narrator also appears to be the investigator, albeit unknowingly as he wanders through the province meeting locals and other middle-class wanderers. Indeed Lem's suicide is what leads the protagonist to realize the root of the crime.[59] Yet the reader is also an important actor in this novel, since he or she must ultimately put together the clues: often, a clue is simply a mention of a monument or a passing comment, and the reader must allow Argentina's past to inform the reading. Together, the reader, Lem and the protagonist discover the truth, but justice is more elusive and left undone in the novel.

But what is the crime under investigation? The reader finds it shrouded in the mystery of how the situation in Argentina came to be so poor, with impoverished provincial towns and middle class citizens trying to flee the country. Why are the buildings in ruins and the characters roaming in circles? Clues that aid the discovery of the crime include references to leftist political opposition and the fallen, corrupt dictatorship. Unlike Pinochet's regime in Chile, the Argentine dictatorship did not implement neoliberalism, but it did set in place certain policies that facilitated the shift beginning after the democratic transition and completed by president Carlos Menem (1989-1999). [60] Recent

---

[57] Luis Martín Cabrera, *Radical Justice: Spain and the Southern Cone beyond State and Market* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 99-100. Print.

[58] Ibid., 105.

[59] *Sombra*, 229.

[60] *Radical Justice*, 100-1.

impoverishment is another clue, and even though it goes unsaid in the novel, this is most likely related to hyperinflation brought about by poor economic policy under the regime. In addition, the novel decries citizens taking advantage of one another, including priests and the police. Though not a new phenomenon, the novel imagines it as very common in this abject setting. As a clue it points more to a moral failing under neoliberalism than to financial desperation. Finally, as Marina Guntsch notes, each car's year , which the narrator generally does not fail to mention, points to national glory years that the narrator interprets as "an uninterrupted line of the failures of the national ideal."[61] The crime that he and the reader discover is neoliberalism, the culmination of a destructive process begun in 1976 and completed with Menem's appropriation and transformation of populist governance.

Neoliberalism implemented by the military regime and continued in the present is the culprit of the novel's state of abjection. This variation on the conventional detective novel is congruent with other trends in the genre, such as the increasing skepticism toward the state and corporations, the legitimacy of the bourgeois order during the late capitalism of recent years,[62] and the depiction of crime—especially by Latin American writers—as embedded in society and social, political and economic institutions.[63] While both Amar Sánchez and Glen Close mention the role of the economy in the evolution of the genre, Ricardo Piglia argues that the hard-boiled variety may be read as a symptom of a capitalist society because all aspects of the genre revolve around capital: the detective is paid to solve a crime that usually involves money.[64] However, because neoliberal capitalism—the cause of abjection in the novel—is intricately tied to the political order, there will be no justice for the violent deaths of two characters. Amar Sánchez states,

---

[61] Guntsche, Marina, *Entre la locura y la cordura: Cinco novelas argentinas del siglo XX* (Mendoza: Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, 1998), 187-8.

[62] Mandel, Ernest, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 124.

[63] *Juegos*: 60-1.

[64] *Juegos*, 60-1. Glen Close, *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Discourse on Urban Violence* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 18-19. Ricardo Piglia, *Crítica y ficción* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2006), 61-2.

> The genre in its canonical form not only constructs a tranquilizing response in which order always triumphs, but rather proposes a type of violence and criminality enclosed, able to be dominated and explained. The Latin American story breaks this pact, destroys this harmony between society/justice/law upon representing the crime as *a product of* the political and social institutions. It not only breaks the pact, but rather there is no legal space or legitimacy to which to turn.
>
> [El género en su forma canónica no sólo construye una tranquilizadora respuesta en la que el orden siempre triunfa, sino que propone un tipo de violencia y de criminalidad acotada, dominable y explicable. El relato latinoamericano quiebra este pacto, destruye la armonía entre sociedad/justicia/ley al representar el crimen como *producto de* las instituciones políticas y sociales. No sólo se quiebra el orden, sino que no hay espacio legal ni legitimidad a la que recurrir.][65]

Justice falls outside the realm of the possible in the novel because in order for there to be a legitimate space in which to seek it, the neoliberal order would have to be abolished. Still, although Soriano's detective (whether the protagonist, Lem or the reader) initially does not know what Amar Sánchez calls rules of the game,[66] or even that there is an investigation to solve, the crux of the economic critique lies in his awakening through these deaths. The brief friendships between the narrator and the characters that die, lead to the discovery of neoliberalism as the culprit for abjection, and the potential of some form of resolution, though not justice for the past.

The genre of Soriano's novel plays an important role in the uncovering of a major social problem and its denunciation. In a similar way, the form of Noll's novel aids in the portrayal of a country torn by economic crisis and mismanagement. *Hotel Atlântico* is a fast-paced *novella* with little development of ideas, with weather often serving as a marker of the protagonist's circumstances. Narration jumps from scene to scene with bare descriptions of the setting and secondary characters. Virna Vieira Leite claims that the way of describing and marking transitions mimic theater, although perhaps the descriptions correspond more closely to film.[67] Theatrical or filmic elements include in particular the numerous

---

[65] *Juegos*, Emphasis in original 60-1.

[66] Ibid., 65.

[67] Virna Vieira Leite, "O Abismo da Angústia em *Hotel Atlântico*, de João Gilberto Noll." *Revista Eletrônica Literatura e Autoritarismo* 15 (Janeiro-Junho

comments about the weather that pervade the narrator's account. He frequently dwells on the unseasonal cold, but he also mentions heat, also often unseasonal, as well as ominous rain and wind. Using a very conventional literary form, the weather trope corresponds to the protagonist's circumstances. The U.S. woman whom he meets on the bus loans him her ex-husband's jacket to fight off the freezing cold, emphasizing the protagonist's precarious situation as a traveler with no baggage.[68] A torrential downpour adds to the confusion the night he meets the doctor who later amputates his leg; the protagonist passes out in the rain, only to wake up with his leg gone.[69] Yet sunny skies greet the protagonist and his nurse Sebastião as they flee the hospital, indicating the joy of escaping its confinement and beginning a new journey.[70]

Nice weather is rare and brief in this film-like novel. The narrator notes very cold weather—unusual for these regions of Brazil—more often. Descriptions and images set the tone for each narrative section, each of which is divided by spaces instead of chapters, and corresponds to the economic critique. The reader does not learn the season until the end of the novel, and only knows that the wind, rain and cold are incongruent with the time of year. This serves to emphasize the precariousness of the narrator's journey, as well as to create an ominous tone throughout the novel. However, at the end of the novel the reader discovers that the unusual weather is related to Brazil's economic situation. Sebastião has never seen the sea, so after visiting his grandmother's old neighborhood in Porto Alegre, the two find a small beach hotel. The owners, a married couple, are very happy to have guests, and it appears that few people have stayed there that season. When Sebastião asks about their lack of business,

> The man responded that in other years during the spring the beach hotels already received a good number of guests on the weekends. That year, with the cold sticking around, hotel business was almost at a standstill.
> –It's the crisis also– the woman [his wife] reminded him.

2010). Web. <http://w3.ufsm.br/grpesqla/revista/num15/art_08.php>. 23 February 2012.

[68] João Gilberto Noll, *Hotel Atlântico* (São Paulo: Francis, 2004), 26.

[69] Ibid., 76.

[70] Ibid., 98.

> [O homem respondeu que em outros anos durante a primavera os hotéis do litoral já recebiam bom número de hóspedes nos fins de semana. Aquele ano, com o frio custando a passar, o movimento dos hotéis era quase nenhum.
> –É a crise também– lembrou a mulher.][71]

The woman's comment points to the real cause of the lack of guests: the economic crisis. The weather mimics the country's hard times. As in many situations throughout the novel, weather corresponds to how circumstances affect the narrator, and is often a trope that creates an oppressive mood or menacing tone.

Faro de Castro and Valladão de Carvalho explain a variety of factors that contributed to economic turbulence in 1989, the year Noll published the novel. They argue that rocky financial markets in the "lost decade" of the 1980s were the result of global liberalization trends. Other external factors included the end of the Cold War and the United States' calls for multilateral trade policy, as well as the use of "structural adjustment conditionalities" by international aid agencies as a way to address debt incurred by the military regimes. Internally, besides the transition to democracy, the creation of a new constitution in 1988, and growing pluralism in society and the economy, these authors note the "subjecti[on] of 'economic populism' to political fragmentation," which occurs as the central government cedes increasing control to local politics after 1983.[72] These factors are never explicitly mentioned in the novel, but instead come into play through the characters' circumstances: the narrator has lost his job, Sebastião's grandmother's house has been replaced by an apartment complex, the property around the brothel has been converted to make drugs, and tourists no longer frequent the beach hotel. The novel presents economic turmoil as impersonal, and the reader must do the work to link it to the above situations as the primary factors in their creation.

In addition, this economic turmoil is pervasive, affecting the hotel's business as well. It is the effect of something happening at a national level, like the weather. Maria Carlota de Alencar Pires suggests that marginalization in *Hotel Atlântico* represents the sectors of society left out

---

[71] Ibid., 105.
[72] "Globalization," 466, 471, 476.

of the globalization process that Brazil was undergoing. She says of this novel and the film *Central do Brasil*, "The oppression, the unemployment, the poverty of those living in the margins of this country-giant are the same blades that cut across these two narratives, creating a separation between a very poor Brazil and the Brazil tuned into the new paradigm of globalization" ("A opressão, o desemprego, a pobreza dos que habitam à margem desse país-gigante são as mesmas lâminas que cortam transversalmente essas duas narrativas, operando a separação de um Brasil muito pobre daquele sintonizado com o novo paradigma da globalização").[73] The couple in the hotel, Sebastião, the narrator and the rest of the characters, who are identified primarily by their social status,[74] have no part in this system that favors those with ties to international capital. Lowered trade tariffs and free market policies made it even easier than in the past for international actors to gain access to Brazilian markets. The critique of the market crowding out local marginalized people as formerly marginal spaces become subsumed into spaces controlled by central actors (national and international) is strengthened by the cinematic representation of weather reconstructing the problems and contradictions in Brazil.

Solidarity and Relationships

Each of the novels discussed here addresses not only the economic and political context within which these characters struggle, but also imagines possibilities for forming the type of relationships that will aid them in this struggle for survival. Many acquaintances or friendships fail to develop into anything beneficial, and some are even harmful. However, each protagonist does manage to form a meaningful friendship or relationship that suggests limited possibilities for bettering his situation.

---

[73] Maria Carlota De Alencar Pires, "*Central do Brasil* e *Hotel Atlântico*: a estética da morte e a fragmentação subjetiva na irreversibilidade da globalização." *Inventário*. Web. <http://www.inventario.ufba.br/06/06mcarlota.htm>: 23 February 2012.

[74] Nayara. Silva Santana, "No Trânsito da Memória: A Construção Identitária em 'Hotel Atlântico', de João Gilberto Noll." Anais do V Congresso de Letras da UERJ-São Gonçalo. Web. <http://www.filologia.org.br/ cluerjsg/anais/v/completos/ comunicacoes/Nayara%20Silva%20Santana.pdf>: 12. 23 February 2012.

Alliances and solidarity are the key to survival—*Una sombra ya pronto serás* providing a more hopeful outcome than *Hotel Atlântico*.

Much of the novels describe failed relationships between the protagonists and those they meet on their journeys. Yet relationships also serve to resist the abject circumstances these have brought about. The deaths of two acquaintances/friends in *Una sombra ya pronto serás* are key to understanding the critique of neoliberalism in the novel. This is possible because of the clues mentioned above, which the reader and narrator have noticed, as well as with the deaths of Barrante and Lem. The only proponent of neoliberalism, Barrante, decries the state for getting in the way of progress; significantly, the narrator notes that everything about him is just wrong.[75] When he dies, caught in the literal crossfire of a lovers' quarrel, the narrator says, "I gave him a pretty long speech about the inconveniences of the free market economy" ("le hice un discurso bastante largo sobre los inconvenientes de la economía de libre mercado").[76] This is the most explicit criticism of this economic model, but neoliberalism as criminal is still not clear. This only happens with Lem's suicide, when he leaves a note for the narrator.

The lost banker, Lem, is one of the most important minor characters. Lem is one of the characters with whom the narrator has the most contact, and there is a certain consistency in running into, as well as leaving and receiving notes for, each other. Lem's death represents the inability to beat the system; through probabilities, he wants to break the bank of a casino (*saltar un casino*) with the protagonist, but in the end he discovers that this is not possible and commits suicide. The narrator says, "it upset me that I had not paid attention to his signals, that I had not noticed in time that the dice were loaded, that whatever bet he has made, it was a lost cause" ("me daba bronca no haber prestado atención a sus señales, no haber advertido a tiempo que los dados estaban cargados, que cualquiera haya sido su apuesta siempre estuvo perdida").[77] The clues were there, but only through previous contact with Lem could the protagonist really understand why he committed suicide. The brilliance of this

[75] *Sombra*, 108-9, 113.
[76] Ibid., 129.
[77] Ibid., 229.

discovery is that it is symbolic of the trap in which all of these characters find themselves. The narrator-protagonist never saw any dice; he never even saw a casino. There was no way for him to know they were loaded. In fact, he is not referring to real dice, but rather to Lem's situation when he realizes that this wealthy, non-descript, lost, world-travelling banker shot himself because from the beginning his bet was a losing one. Neoliberalism caught some of the wealthy in the same trap as the middle classes and those dwelling in the province. Lem's death in particular frees the narrator-detective from discovering the culprit of the decadent, "asphyxiating labyrinth" ("laberinto asfixiante"),[78] within which he has been trapped. It also allows him to hope for a way out.

Likewise, the death of Noll's protagonist and his relationship with Sebastião show the potential that relationships have for dealing with the dire conditions he faces in the novel. Like Soriano's narrator, Noll's also has been trapped, but in his case it is through the deterioration of his body.[79] As the weather at the last hotel is linked to the Brazilian economy, so this deterioration closely resembles the narrator's diminishing social and economic capital. Once an actor, he has enjoyed an upper-middle class lifestyle and certain social perks. But the novel begins *in medias res* as he has already embarked on this journey. The last remnant of his success was his car, which he sold before the novel began. As money grows tight, the protagonist is increasingly feminized. He claims to be too tired for sex in the brothel, and is essentially castrated by the amputation of his leg, being unable to perform sexually with the surgeon's daughter.[80] Without work, home, money and one of his legs, Noll's protagonist develops a homoerotic bond with his nurse, and dies deaf and blind on the beach; holding Sebastião's hand, his last thought is, "Sebastião is strong" ("Sebastião tem força"),[81] an appeal to Sebastião's masculine strength on which he relies. This relationship, the culmination of a process of feminization throughout the novel, is the protagonist's only tie to society. He lacks any other friendships, and would otherwise have died alone.

---

[78] Ibid., 94.
[79] "Abismo."
[80] *Hotel*, 45, 90.
[81] Ibid., 110.

However, there are limitations to the resistance that the solidarity between the two engenders. They are able to escape the grip of the surgeon together, but the grandmother's house has still been replace by commercial interests, and the narrator's health declines. The feminization and death of economically impotent characters is a recurrent theme throughout the novel, and indicates a connection between wealth and gender in Brazil. The novel opens with a corpse being removed from the hotel where the narrator first stops on his journey, but there is no explanation of how the man has died. Shortly thereafter, a woman from the United States posing as a divorced anthropologist commits suicide on the bus next to the narrator, while he sleeps.[82] In the next town the protagonist stays with a womanizer-turned-priest. Mistaken for a priest in borrowed robes, the protagonist performs the last rites of a dying woman.[83] This is the beginning of the end of the narrator's sexual exploits and hyper-masculine portrayal, as well as of his money. The brothel where he refuses a prostitute follows, and then the amputation of his leg and subsequent dependence on Sebastião. Many of the characters rely on one another in their resistance to others who take advantage of them, but ultimately solidarity is only a means of resisting, but not avoiding, being overcome by one's abject circumstances.

Noll's protagonist dies on a beach, brought physically to nothing through a state of complete dependence. Lem's death provides insight to Soriano's narrator, who realizes that neoliberalism is responsible for his bleak surroundings. Case solved and denunciation complete, he climbs back onto the train and waits expectantly for its departure. These endings are not simply indicative of expectations for the middle classes of Brazil and Argentina. If anything, the growth rate of Argentina's GDP was more negative than Brazil's, which began to liberalize in 1987.[84] In addition, though both countries experienced hyperinflation, Brazil's was decidedly less.[85] Yet Soriano's narrator's actions suggest the possibility of resolution, while Noll's accepts death in the company of a friend. What these novels

---

[82] Ibid., 31.

[83] Ibid., 66.

[84] Rob Vos, Lance Taylor, & Ricardo Paes de Barros, eds. *Economic Liberalization, Distribution and Poverty: Latin America in the 1990s* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2002), 14 see Table 1.2.

[85] *Poverty*, 24 see Table 1-8.

reveal is the subjective experience of how relationships may be affected by economic policies implemented at the national level.

Conclusion

The subjective experiences of these protagonists demonstrate that while forming permanent relationships is unlikely, it is not impossible and can lead to better understanding and/or management of a difficult reality. Even though his body deteriorates as poverty and powerlessness overcome him, Noll's protagonist does not despair; his last thought is to commit himself to Sebastião's strength. Soriano's protagonist, on the other hand, claims that he has formed more relationships in the few days in the province than during his whole time living in Europe.[86] As bleak as the asphyxiating province is, he could be lonelier. This reality, however, ensnares and debilitates, and both novels take care to denounce the political and economic factors that help to create such degradation and abjection. In spite of differing historical trajectories and types of dictatorships in their countries, the authors depict their increasingly neoliberal, globalized societies, combined with corporatist practices in Brazil and neopopulism in Argentina, as spaces that constrict the middle and lower classes, marginalizing them or shutting them out of dominant society.

[86] *Sombra*, 119.