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Monuments and Ephemera: The Biblioteca Ayacucho

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The interest of the name ‘the people’, as I see it, lies in staging its ambiguity. Politics, in this sense, is the enacted discrimination of that which, in the last instance, is placed under the name of the people: either the operation of differentiation which institutes political collectives by enacting egalitarian inconsistency or the operation of identity which reduces politics to the properties of the social body or the fantasy of the glorious body of the community. Politics always involves one people superadded to another, one people against another. (85)

—Jacques Rancière, “The People or the Multitudes,” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010)

Estimado Ángel Rama, Biblioteca Ayacucho, Venezuela:
Recibí los ejemplares. No podía creerlo. Me parecía la *Guerra y la Paz* por el tamaño! Es sensacional por lo completo de cronología y demás. Creo que fue un acierto no ‘peinarlo’. Pocos autores pueden escribir así y ser grandes escritores.

En tren de hacer observaciones diría q’ la tapa no me convence. Podría servir para cualquier escritor. Pero se trata de una edición estupenda. Es de esperar que el lector no se asuste por el tamaño y lo compre. [...]

—Mirta Arlt, Julio 9, 1978 (30 años 88)

A general shift occurred in Venezuelan policy under the auspices of the so-called *Gran Venezuela* project of the 1970s. The oil industry was

officially nationalized on January 1, 1976; iron and steel a year earlier, creating new—although perhaps illusory—pacts between the Venezuelan state and its people (Coronil). The historic presence of foreign business interests (Standard Oil, owned by the Rockefellers, being a notable example) was mitigated, albeit far from eliminated. These economic displacements mirrored and also enacted changes in the cultural sphere.

Sustained and emboldened by the very particular circumstances of the oil bonanza resulting from new OPEC legislation and a flowering political exile community of intellectuals from the Southern Cone, Venezuela in the same period became a cultural refuge and a point of reference for the rest of Latin America.¹ Characterized by conspicuous oil-begotten largess, Carlos Andrés Pérez, whose first presidency spanned from 1974 to 1979, established the new *Ley de Cultura* (1975), as well as its contingent institution, the *Consejo Nacional de la Cultura* (CONAC) (1975). The latter facilitated the creation of an intricate web of cultural entities and agencies. Benefiting from the new institutions, the Biblioteca Ayacucho, a publishing project established in December of 1974, was founded by presidential decree No. 407 under Carlos Andrés Pérez.² Roughly equivalent to the Library of America in the U.S. (founded in 1982), or Bibliothèque Pléiade in the private sphere in France (1930s-present), under the guidance of the Venezuelan politician and intellectual José Ramón Medina and the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama, its literary director, the collection proposed the creation of an affordable collection of Latin American classics ranging from Pre-Hispanic to contemporary works. Founded upon the assumption of a Latin American singularity, in Rama's

¹ This perception has been problematized by several prominent critics. *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (1997), by Fernando Coronil, is a notable work. Coronil attempts to shatter the myth of Venezuela as an 'exceptional democracy,' revealing a dark underbelly of structural inequality largely masked by petro-prosperity until the late 1980s.

² The state-publishing house Monte Ávila Editores, founded in 1968 by Simón Alberto Consalvi, represents another meaningful publishing endeavor of the period. Monte Ávila Editores is known for having published some of the first Spanish-language translations of the Frankfurt school in Latin America. The Ministerio de Cultura also published the Biblioteca Popular Venezolana in the 1940s and 1950s. Although the Biblioteca Ayacucho was an important model of lettered culture in Venezuela of the period, it was not the only one. Because of the participants involved and the logic of the collection, it does, however, serve as an important barometer.

words, the lens used in the selection of the texts was “culturalista”³ and included works from “las variadas disciplinas de las letras, la filosofía, la historia, el pensamiento político, la antropología, el arte, el folklore y otras” (30 años 71). The amalgam was intended to relativize the seemingly false autonomy of genre, as well as to represent the hybridity of discourse that had historically marked lettered fields in Latin America. The prologues, written by Latin American intellectuals from throughout the continent, scattered throughout the university systems of Latin America, North America and Europe, became not only anticipatory of the internal texts and of fractures in former systems of thought, but autonomous spaces to generate not only new projects, but spaces of enunciation.

The originality of the Biblioteca Ayacucho collection, today numbering 247 volumes, was not found in the authorial inception of the volumes—that belonged to another stage in the life of the text, but in the choice and breadth of titles and genres and in the ordering and juxtapositions of these texts within the particular “culturalista” logic of the project. Ayacucho, thus, would represent the solidification of a shift toward the conception of literature as a “social document,” rather than as an autonomous literary sphere (Franco 47). Jean Franco and Claudia Gilman, among others, have detected this change in the contrast between certain Latin American publications and publishing organisms of the 1960s, in particular *Mundo Nuevo* (1966-1968), edited by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, and Revolutionary Cuba’s *Casa de las Américas*; or in the opposition located in the rivalry between Rama and Monegal at the Uruguayan periodical *Marcha*, which in personalist terms underlines and synthesizes a discrepancy in methodology and in their construction of literature as a

³ Rama uses the term “culturalist” to communicate the collection’s embrace of a broad view of ‘culture’ (as opposed to an adherence to *belle-lettriste* precepts), as well as to indicate the collection’s exploration of social and symbolic constructions particular to Latin America as a spatial and identitary unit (“construcción de una cultura original que se han ido cumpliendo en el continente desde sus orígenes.”) Rama writes: “Es ante todo una Biblioteca concebida con un criterio culturalista latinoamericano que intenta recoger las aportaciones centrales de construcción de una cultura original que se han ido cumpliendo en el continente desde sus orígenes. Eso significa que junto al aporte central representado por las letras en sus diversos géneros, se atiende igualmente a la filosofía como a la historia o al pensamiento político; a la estética o la teoría de las artes como a la antropología, a la economía y a la sociología” (30 años, 1).

critical and ideological object. It is important to recall that on November 14, 1982, in the context of Rama's U.S. residency battle, which would eventually lead to Rama's residency being denied on political grounds, an article in *The New York Times* described The Biblioteca Ayacucho as "a Venezuelan-based publishing house, which like the magazine *Semanario Marcha*, frequently publishes the works of Communist writers." The article, conditioned by a paranoid and distorting gaze of the Cold War era, in which communism at moments became a blanket and emptied term describing no more than a nebulous enemy espousing oppositional economic claims, is indicative of more than just sensationalism: it instead shows the importance of the collection in an period battle waged between North and South; left and right; materialism and liberalism.

The collection's significance, thus, can be localized in the construction of a new or parallel vision of what constituted the Latin American canon. While the 1980s and 1990s precipitated a rewriting of the scholastic canon(s) along gender and racial lines, and simultaneously bore a countermovement of Western Canon apologists, as well as their attendant critiques, the last two decades have brought new, albeit complementary, modes of reading canonical constitution.⁴ Seth Lerer, speaking from the disciplinary coordinates of book history, posits that the notion of canons—and their rewritings—can be redrawn not only by titles, but also through the ordering of objects. Thus, in Lerer's formulation canon constitution is also a spatial and material process that takes place, quite literally, upon the context of a shelf, and later as an abstraction (231). Under this prism, the original Biblioteca Ayacucho, long before its digitalization, spatialized as a material and conceptual object a new cultural logic and embedded this logic

⁴ In the United States, John Guillory is an important critical reference vis-à-vis the first movement. Harold Bloom and *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) is a key standard-bearer of the second, what Román de la Campa evocatively called, in *Latin Americanism* (1999), "the voices that now seek to contain and reorder discursive dispersal from within the bosom of Western art and philosophy" (143). Although I will not pursue this question further here, Guillory's treatment in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993) of exclusion on the level of literary production (rather than on that of selection), literary liberal pluralism and its relative neglect of class, as well as what Guillory sees as the compensatory aspects of canon formation as regards voids in political representation have interesting points of contact with the formation of The Biblioteca Ayacucho.

within both institutional and private collections. Its design and typeset—initially Fairfield and Garamond, serif Venetian Old Face types in the interior, and a variant on Diderot on the cover—connote tradition. The embedded B and A of the collection’s logo, designed by the exiled Argentine graphic designer Juan Fresán, through its negative space and thick rounded lines pulled toward post-war modernism.

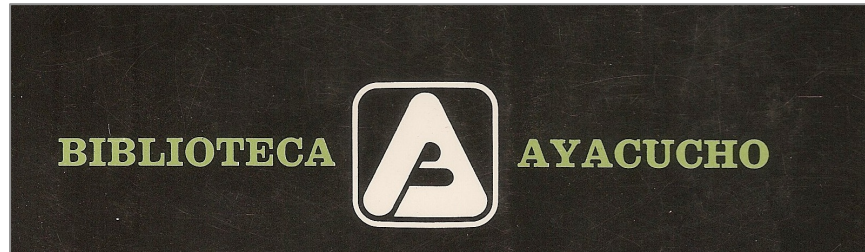


Image 1: Logo designed by Juan Fresán for the Biblioteca Ayacucho

The project’s continuation, with comparatively austere material qualities, during Hugo Chávez Frías’s presidency (1999-2013) is nourished by both continuations and ruptures with its 1970s precedents. Through the lens of both discursive *and* material factors, this article regards state-run publishing in Venezuela from the 1970s to the present as the diachronic rewriting of both canons and their contingent subject categories, specifically, the *people*, understood in my analysis as the reader and the writer. Considering these lettered objects accumulated and aggregated over more than forty years, I posit that the concept of canon is not only spatial, but also temporal, as it relates to questions of epoch, history, and the passage and interrelation of time.

Signs of a Decade Exhausted

Ángel Rama’s diary, published in Spanish as *Diario: 1974-1983* in 2001 by the publishing house Trilce in Uruguay, places the Biblioteca Ayacucho in new light. The diary’s personal digressions are peppered with reflections on Rama’s editorial work. The entries transform, for a broad academic public, Ayacucho’s ubiquitous editions, today indistinguishable from many of the very titles that Ayacucho salvaged and consecrated across Latin America, into a project not only defined by textual content, but also

by its material and organizational vectors.

It is in the context of the diary that we may see Biblioteca Ayacucho as both the continuation of the utopian projects of the 1960s—a decade characterized by its democratizing ideals and redistribution of cultural capital (Franco 86; Gilman 40)—as well as the exhaustion of some of these paradigms. In Venezuela, as in many other countries, the questioning and crisis of institutionalized lettered culture reached a peak the 1960s. The first Rómulo Gallegos Prize, awarded in 1967, would be fraught with conflict, as the recipient, Mario Vargas Llosa, at least for the moment supported the Cuban Revolution, while the Venezuelan state of the period found itself tarnished by policies of guerilla pacification. Internally, this questioning took shape most famously in the artistic movement *Techo de la Ballena*, from which arose Caupolicán Ovalles's poetry printed on bricks. Thus, the social unrest that permeated the epoch manifested itself in the violence of the poetic gesture, the shapes and modes of culture. Upon Rafael Caldera's anointment as president in 1969 two years later, these conflicts became institutionalized further and with a greater explicitness through the student strikes and the closure of the Universidad Central de Venezuela close to a year.

The 1970s, in contrast, was a period of fragile consensus. Like Rama's diary, the Ayacucho project was launched in 1974, the same year that the Ministry of Education instituted an educational reform initiated in 1969.⁵ This reform, essential to the contextualization of Ayacucho, was articulated as a result of and as part of the formerly mentioned *política de pacificación*. "Pacification" was associated with the extermination of the armed guerrilla struggle (Olivares 9) and a logic of economic developmentalism, that, among other gestures—including (not insignificantly) a program of tele-education, run by the then state-run

⁵ Despite the usefulness of the periodization that I establish, as Alejandro Velasco insists, this period was not entirely pacific as regards lettered spheres. The mobilization of high school and middle-school students in high-profile popular protests in the public housing complex called 23 de Enero throughout the 1970s, one of which occurred in June of 1974, is an example of how subjects associated with institutionalized education continued to confront—rather than merely affirm—the state and established authority (Velasco 172). Hence, the importance of the adjective "fragile" when speaking about this consensus.

Compañía Anónima Nacional de Teléfonos⁶ de Venezuela and other government entities (Olivares 253), would expand access to the university system and open new state-run campuses. Eight new public higher educational institutions thus were created between 1969 and 1972; in the same period the student body in institutions of higher education increased by 83% (Olivares 41). The outlines of the student subject had changed drastically, including new sectors of society, while the figure of the guerilla was systematically extinguished in the state imaginary.⁷

In both Venezuela and in Latin America 1974 implied a passage from one era to another: a year that simultaneously evoked closure and aperture, culmination and a terminus a quo. The right-wing military coup by Augusto Pinochet Ugarte and the subsequent seizure of President Salvador Allende's State press *Editora Nacional Quimantú* (1971-1973), among other notable shifts in state political power, cast Ayacucho as recipient of a legacy displaced, shifted north of the Southern Cone and to the west of Cuba, whose revolutionary swan song had been sung three years before at the close of the Padilla incident in 1971.

Rama had supported Cuba's Revolutionary government, and had referred to it as a "Revolución en las puertas del Imperio" (Rama, *Diario* 130), yet, at the genesis of the Biblioteca Ayacucho, like many other Latin American intellectuals during the *quinquenio gris*⁸ had become (publicly and, to a greater extent, privately) disenchanted with Castro's Cuba as a cultural and political project. For Rama at this juncture Cuba was a space sullied by the Padilla incident and by what the latter's incarceration meant as regards creative freedom on the island. The literary journal and publisher, *Casa de las Américas*, to which Rama had contributed in the 1960s, in 1974 had a poetry section that Rama described in his diary as

⁶ The Compañía Anónima Nacional de Teléfonos was privatized in 1991 under the second Andrés Pérez administration; it was renationalized in 2007.

⁷ A precedent to the educational expansion of the late 1960s and early 1970s can be found in the period of the Gallegos presidency (1948), in which 50 million bolivars were allocated for the construction of the Universidad Central Campus, and "37,000 adults had learned to read and write, and a record number of 5,500 people entered the halls of higher education" (Pino Iturrieta 39). These inclusions in the lettered city are countered, however, by their implicit obverse of illiteracy: "30 percent of the populace was illiterate. Only .08 percent of all Venezuelans had more than a secondary-school education" (Pino Iturrieta 41).

⁸ Term coined by the Cuban intellectual Ambrosio Fornet.

“desoladora,” published alongside “editoriales pseudo revolucionarios,” replete with “pacotilla retórica” (Rama, *Diario* 45). Turning our gaze south, all *Quimantú* and many other Latin American publishing projects, especially those in the Southern Cone—the *Centro Editor de América Latina* (CEAL)⁹ being a notable example—could offer Rama were their exiles: Fernando Alegría (*Quimantú*) and Daniel Divinsky (*Ediciones la Flor*) are only two examples, paralleling his own “uprooted” circumstances.¹⁰

The Archive of the Biblioteca Ayacucho in Caracas is filled with letters colored by the dark events of the period in the Southern Cone:¹¹ academics requesting their letters never to be sent to their homes, marginalized in the university system of their home countries. The Latinamericanism (composite of Latinamerican(ist) thought) constructed by Biblioteca Ayacucho is epochal. On the one hand, it is a product of Venezuela as an economic center propelled by the oil boom of the 1970s; on the other, it is conditioned by the aftershocks of the 1960s reread through the gaze of exile and marginalization that, in the period, had become a daily reality for large portions of Latin America. Recalling Said’s famous reflections on the concept of exile, the Biblioteca Ayacucho may perhaps be seen as a paper and ink “invention” of a continental, collective “self” (184), an archival “us” (177) borne of the “uprootedness” of the Latin American 1970s that is rechanneled through the webs of prologue writers, compilers, bibliographers and translators dispersed throughout vast webs in Latin America, Europe, and the United States, who request and receive copies of the diverse volumes.

⁹ Once again, despite the heuristic usefulness of the tentative periodization that I propose above, we must recall that shifts in a certain mode of state run editing and cultural projects occurred before the foundation of Ayacucho, as well as after its founding. Any periodization, however, is inevitably fractured as history rarely begins and ends choreographically.

¹⁰ In 1974, acting as a visiting professor at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, Rama had found himself in forced exile in Venezuela, his Uruguayan passport revoked by the right-wing military regime that had taken power.

¹¹ For a more detailed account of the Archive’s epistolary contents, see Carlos Pacheco and Marisela Guevara Sánchez’s “Ángel Rama, la cultura venezolana y el epistolario de la Biblioteca Ayacucho” (2003/4).

Titles that Rewrite History

Instead of setting its sights on contemporary literary production, a gesture that would have meant attending directly to the void that Cuba's dominant cultural sphere seemed to now represent for Rama, and a large portion of his peers, the Biblioteca Ayacucho turned primarily to the past.¹²

Writing in 1980, Rama insisted that the Biblioteca Ayacucho's construction of the past involved a forward march, proposing "un futuro." He wrote:

[S]iendo una vasta recuperación de pasado, en gran parte perdido u olvidado, la integración cultural es un intento revolucionario que, en cuanto tal, se propone un futuro, construyendo la visión utópica de un continente y de una sociedad ideal. En estas condiciones, el pasado no es recuperado en función de archivo muerto, sino como un depósito de energías vivientes que sostienen, esclarecen y justifican el proceso de avance y transformación revolucionario. ("Biblioteca Ayacucho" 63)

Rama bases his "revolutionary" reading of the collection on a premise of futurity and, subsequently, of utopia contained within an archival past.¹³ He imagined an alternative future and realm of possibility and elasticity in the past—incarnated physically and conceptually in the form of books, when futurity, in its more traditional conceptions, had been arrested in a large part of the Latin American continent. It is perhaps what Svetlana Boym, referring to other contexts, would call a past that is simultaneously "retrospective" and "prospective." Yet, it must be insisted upon that, unlike many projects of the 1960s with equally constructive premises that would have seemed to live in an eternal present, Biblioteca Ayacucho's vision of its own present instead bolsters itself upon a logic of excavation. Consonant with this *modus operandi*, the commemorative date recognized on the

¹² The publication of the Boom writers represents an exception: Julio Cortázar (1980), José Donoso (1990), Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1990), Gabriel García Márquez (1989), and also would appear to suggest a commercial feature of the collection.

¹³ Upon the cover flaps of some of the books from the early 1980s, are repeated promotional statements from intellectuals of the period: Leopoldo Zea, Ernesto Sábato, Álvaro Mutis, among others. Alberto Lleras writes: "Se trata de libros que fueron, en sus días, eminentes, pero que la indolencia americana olvidó en algunos casos, y las nuevas generaciones desconocen...libros que sí se salvaran de una catástrofe suramericana dirían bien qué significó para la humanidad de su tiempo este trozo del mundo nuevo." Echoing Rama, Lleras would appear to describe a forgotten archive, re-archived as an explanatory capsule of 1970s Latinamericanism.

Biblioteca Ayacucho covers—the announced and manifest date at the moment of its inception, was not that of the fall of a large part of Latin America’s parliamentary democracies—that is, its present, rather the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Ayacucho of 1824: “Creada en 1974 como homenaje a la batalla que en 1824 significó la emancipación política de nuestra América, ha estado desde su nacimiento promoviendo la necesidad de establecer una relación dinámica y constante entre lo contemporáneo y el pasado americano, a fin de revalorarlo críticamente con la perspectiva de nuestros días.”

Departing from the half-epic tone that permeates almost any discussion of the 1960s, perhaps the most interesting moment in Rama’s diaries is found early on in the register of self-questioning and complaint. On September 25th, 1974, Rama writes:

Me temo que no va a ir a ningún lado. Además, que yo no duraré mucho en este lugar.

Escovar Salom¹⁴ cuestiona el primer título, los escritos de Bolívar, con este argumento: Ya son muy conocidos! Es tan asombroso que es inútil decirle que los libros que justamente deberán formar la Biblioteca son los más conocidos. Me limito a argumentar que en otras áreas del continente, desgraciadamente no es igualmente conocido. (!)” (42)

This exclamation in the diary reveals with clarity the axes of the project: it is not the celebration of a minor or cult writer, the most recent literary star, or even exactly the lost work, as Rama’s archival theorization would perhaps initially have seemed to suggest, rather the editorial rethinking of the classics of Latin American history and narrative—perhaps a lost work of another ilk, understood in this case, as continental cultural “heritage.” In other words, the volumes of Biblioteca Ayacucho are none other than the declarations and the proclamations; the “national” novels; the history of the motherland; a far cry from the obscure avant-gardes that other editorial projects have resuscitated. Instead it was a canon, but in a certain sense, due to its geographic place of enunciation of Latin America and its rejection of classic Hispanism, a rogue canon, a canon that avoided the usual paths of the former metropolis and so-called “universal”

¹⁴ According to the diary’s explanatory notes, Escovar Salom was a Venezuelan politician, Chancellor of the Republic, and a member of the Biblioteca Ayacucho Editorial Commission.

literature, that even in 1974 continued to reign over the reprints of classics in Latin America.¹⁵ This rejection of classic Hispanism can be traced to projects such as those of the Fondo de Cultura Económica, especially their collection *Tierra Firme*, which dates from as early as the 1940s and which also aspired to disseminate a vision of Pan-Americanism; as well as to earlier endeavors, such as the first *Biblioteca Ayacucho*, comprised of Latin American works of history, printed in Spain in the 1920s by the Venezuelan writer and intellectual Rufino Blanco Fombona from Spain.

On a local level, a critical editorial in the Caracas-based newspaper *El Nacional* from the period further attests to a continued resistance. The editorialist insisted that *Ayacucho* would never be able to compile 300 *Latin American* works—that is, without including titles by Spanish authors, unless they were to include “basura” (Rama, *Diario*, 39) like Mariátegui. Latin American writers were, thus, deprecated and associated with waste and the disposable, deemed below the standards of durational canon formation. Furthermore, we must not forget that even the first title published by the Cuban presses following the Revolution fourteen years earlier was none other than *Don Quijote de la Mancha*.

The idea behind the project, thus, is not the novel title, but a novelty understood through the format and the editorial project in its totality, and the symbolic reassignment thereby implied. The texts’ originality was not to be found in their verbal content, but rather in their format and editing. It would be within the material and physical paths of the collection where its novelty principally would reside and resides: its innovation was found in its diffusion and the visual-sensorial properties of both the book itself and its distribution cartographies.

¹⁵ In an interview from the 1970s of Julio Cortázar, with Joaquín Soler Serrano, in which Cortázar speaks of the Boom of Latin American literature, starting in the 1960s as a juncture in the patterns of reading of Latin American readers: “Hemos sido leído por primera vez por nuestros compatriotas. Yo pertenezco a una generación que no leía a los escritores latinoamericanos, sino con cuentagotas. Teníamos a Borges. Teníamos a Arlt. Y, allí se acababa. Estábamos envueltos en Europa.” This declaration is of course hyperbolic and is conditioned, like any anecdote, inevitably by personal experience, even if that individual may be a protagonist of the Boom. That being said, it is a useful perspective to maintain in our purview while analyzing *Biblioteca Ayacucho*’s project: one that under an unfair microscope may appear unnecessarily conservative: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nY9eX-BDvs&feature=related>.

Continuities and Ruptures: Forms and Readers

What has been read primarily in terms of cultural policy, webs of intellectuals, the redefinition of canons through verbal or textual content, can be complemented and sometimes redefined under the lens of material questions. Books are constructed with the idea that there is meaning to the tactile sensations, size, format, color saturation, paper texture and density of a book. These factors give us a vision of the reader imagined from the perspective of the publication.¹⁶ Covers speak to this question as they both construct readers and appeal to them. A classic, such as those published by the Biblioteca Ayacucho, will be published a hundred times in the span of 100 years throughout Latin America, yet its distinct covers and formats will indicate for whom it is intended or imagined and in what spaces and states of mind it is intended or projected to be read. An extremely small format, for example, 7 by 5 by 0.4 inches may be designed and manufactured, as in the case of the Allende-era *minilibros* (Chile, 1971-1973), among other popular editions of these dimensions, either for reading in any space, and/or as a sort of talisman—pocket bible—carried flush against the human body as if it were part of one's daily personal articles [Image 2]. Or, it can be designed, as the Bibliothèque Pléiade based in France, with similar height and width dimensions to the Biblioteca Ayacucho (7.2 by 4.6 by 1.8), yet more than four times thicker, leather bound, printed on impossibly fine bible paper, with Garamond type in its interior and precious gold lettering on the spine. In this case, culture is sacralized through its materiality, yet bound, as a painting is framed, in an effort to convey value, permanence, and a demarcation from quotidian life.

¹⁶ For a historicized discussion of the social and class implications of formats, especially the paperback and the pocketbook, see Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 17-22.



Image 2: *Quimantú's minibros* (1971-1973); dimensions: 7 X 5 X 0.4 inches

The covers of Biblioteca Ayacucho's *Colección* adhere to a formula devoted to tradition. Especially if we consider the critical notes and timelines that accompany the editions, the dimensions (12 x 8 inches, with a minimum depth of an inch), therefore, medium-sized, instead of pocket, incline the reader toward a solitary experience in the silence of interiors, that is, private spheres, rather than the 'public' reading encouraged by pocket editions. Instead of choosing original drawings or images, each work is adorned by the reproduction of a painting or another form of artwork, many from the national museum system. It would seem to be based on an 'elevated' idea of culture that lends itself to reverential readings.

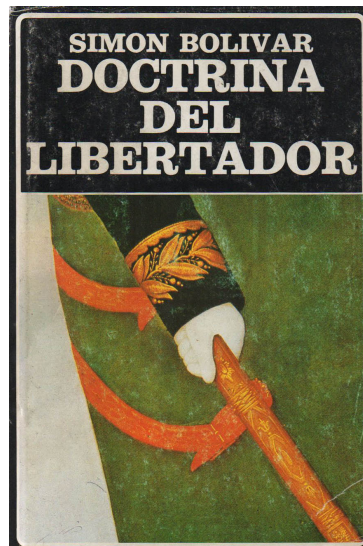


Image 3: The Biblioteca Ayacucho, Vol. 1, 1976

The collection, however, re-signifies these works under its own particularized aegis. This particularity is not only found in its geographic location in the Americas—territorially expanded through the inclusion of Portuguese-speaking Brazil and the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and chronologically amended in its inclusion of pre-Columbian works as sites of interrogation—but in the re-reading of certain far-reaching axes of identity, such as class, race and ethnicity.

Attempting to capture a broad “sociological” band of society, cultivated writers were conscientiously juxtaposed with those only recently initiated into lettered culture or with narratives forged by an oral tradition.¹⁷ The collection represented a restructuring of canons, elite writers are juxtaposed with autodidacts: el Inca Garcilaso, son of an Inca noblewoman and a conquistador, is printed within the same canon as Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, writers recently integrated into lettered culture. What in another context could have been construed as works of the elite, for instance, the poetry of Ruben Darío, the founder of Latin American modernist poetry (*Poesía* 1977, N°9), or arguably works of the *people*, such as the Roberto Arlt’s novellas¹⁸ (*Los siete locos* (1929); *Los lanzallamas* (1931) 1978, N°27), are brought under a new logic of readership and spectatorship that solidifies previous less definitive attempts at canonization.

¹⁷ Despite including a large part of the Latin American canon of liberal thought, albeit with many a scathing prologue, there is still an exclusion, or at least a backgrounding, of twentieth century economic liberals. This may be read through the prioritization and visibility, or lack thereof, of their writings within the collection, a hierarchy implicit in their volume numbers. Rama addressed, or perhaps, better said, was forced to defend this question when he came under political fire in the United States. (See 1987 Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*.) Decisions in favor of political pluralism were far from easy in the political climate in which Rama was working. The Argentine intellectual Juan Carlos Ghiano, for example, refused to participate in the Lugones volume due to Borges’s inclusion. Ghiano wrote on September 8, 1975: “Te pido disculpas por mi saludable empecinamiento y quedo a tu disposición para una colaboración que crea aceptable.”

It is also important to note that, contrary to geographic, ethnic, racial and economic particularity, questions of gender were decidedly less legible in the context of Biblioteca Ayacucho’s project. Here one may also read an exclusionary impulse working parallel to its inclusionary project.

¹⁸ Argentinian writer that, at least in his journalistic work and his first editions, was commonly associated with a working-class readership.

In the project's prologues, the Uruguayan critic Carlos Real de Azúa reveals—and scourges—the underlying power structures, institutional spaces, and readership implicit in the original reception of the flowery rhetoric that constitutes Rodó's *Ariel* (N°3). Darío (N°9) is transformed (or historicized), by Rama, into “el primer *escritor*, lato sensu, de Hispanoamérica,” not because of his ‘genio,’ but rather for being “un intelectual riguroso, moderno, austero en su producción” (X). The Argentine critic Adolfo Prieto, in turn, codifies Arlt's (N°27) *lunfardo* and poor “syntax” and “lexicon.” He depicts a writer who, in Arlt's self-portrayal in the prologue to *Los lanzallamas*, from which Prieto quotes liberally, wrote with a lack of frills imposed by the working conditions of the *edificio social*, yet, who later capitulates to the cultural codes of style and artistic prose. Furthermore, almost all of the initiatory texts lay bare the original distribution and promotional mechanisms of the texts at hand, demystifying the writerly profession—no longer formalism's world unto itself, but rather a material world integrated into the world of class and commerce, “el trabajo intelectual.” In these movements back and forth across a spectrum of textuality, the canon's sacralizing gestures are problematized by the hybridity of discourse and by the embrace of the writer as a professional—rather than as an anointed creator.¹⁹ Yet, looping

¹⁹ The art that adorns the book's covers, likewise, forms an intricate cartography of visual and textual relations, resituating certain works, while canonizing certain previously underrepresented collectives through media and its subjects: Guamán Poma's drawings are published interspersed within his text sprinkled with Quechua; the writings of Guatemalan Independence-era leader José Cecilio del Valle are complemented by a detail of a mural painting from the Bonampak Temple (730 and 810 A.D.); Fernando Ortiz, and his *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, with a nineteenth century lithograph borrowed from a cigar label. These pictorial objects that at another moment could have been categorized as ethnographic, archeological, and commercial, are placed alongside the works of academic painters interested in social subjects, such as Arturo Michelena (1863-1898); or muralists, associated with social realism, such as the Mexican Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and the Venezuelan Héctor Poleo (1918-89). The covers may also be considered part of a process of tardy canonization of the colonial, as well as an affirmation of the modern so-called kinetic artists embraced by the state in the previous two decades as a “metaphor” for the energy fueled state (Balteo), a thesis that ties them to the artistic institution from which they were drawn. As a recent exhibit at the Galería Nacional—an institution founded parallel to Ayacucho in 1976—suggested, the Ayacucho cover art represented an historical alliance between the museum and the publishing house, nourishing a fruitful exchange between the national museum system and its covers (*Lecturas*), both serving as vehicles in the expansion of Americanism as a prestige category. The

back to the format at hand, the canon is paradoxically reaffirmed: the textual support of a definitive, prologued edition is seemingly constitutive of the concept of canonicity itself.

Like authorship, the reader is also placed in tension. Reflected in the language of Rama's correspondence and the previously discussed physicality of the editions, Ayacucho's reader is also an equivocal category. While the collection's topics may reflect an expanding vision of the subjects of lettered culture, its format would seem to point to a city within the city—the university, albeit a structure launched on the course to modernization, understood in inclusionary terms. Thus, on the one hand, Biblioteca Ayacucho not only appeals to, but also *reflects* the modernization of this vision of the university, publishing works necessitated by the implicit broadening of subjects inserted within its system and with access to the symbolic capital associated with these spaces. On the other hand, it would appear to represent a restricting and delimited audience—books meant to be read within enclosed walls and within the confines of circumscribed roles. Let us take an example from Rama's correspondence housed at the Archive of the Biblioteca Ayacucho in Caracas, Venezuela. A letter, dating from August 26th, 1975, is addressed to Gonzalo Losada, founder of the Argentine publishing house Losada, and requests the rights to *Canto General* by Pablo Neruda and to three works by Miguel Ángel Asturias. Rama writes:

No sé si ya le han llegado noticias de este espléndido proyecto de una biblioteca latinoamericana que ha decidido patrocinar el gobierno venezolano. Se trata de un intento de recoger las grandes obras del pasado desde el Inca Garcilaso de la Vega y Simón Bolívar en adelante, en ediciones pulcramente anotadas y prologadas con serios estudios, además de completadas con cronologías informativas. Pienso que es una excelente contribución al mejor conocimiento de nuestro pasado, que será de gran utilidad para los *estudiosos y profesores* de toda América. (emphasis is mine)

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas (MACC), formerly known as the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas Sofía Imber, likewise was founded in 1973. The interactive exhibition *Lecturas: Biblioteca Ayacucho en la Galería de Arte Nacional* (2010) displayed both artwork associated with Biblioteca Ayacucho as well as the books themselves with which the spectators were encouraged to interact.

According to this version, Rama would appear to clearly designate as Ayacucho's readers "*estudiosos*" and "*profesores*," that is, the learned class; he does not even mention the student population. The Spanish word "*pulcro*," that I have translated as "immaculate," furthermore, is significant in this respect; the term not only indicates a question of care, but also has connotations of 'aesthetic' immaculateness, and points toward questions of good taste.²⁰ In a letter from June of 1976, he adds, "Como verá también no hay ninguna posibilidad de que pueda competir con sus ediciones, no solo por el precio (doce dólares) sino por sus características académicas." The expensive editions are an additional mode of distancing the collection from the pocket editions that Rama had edited in the past.

However, in another letter from December 12, 1975, addressed to Fernando Alegría, a former participant in *Quimantú*, then in exile, Rama specifies the criteria for the prologue that Alegría will write for the second volume of the collection, referencing a different readership base. Here, Rama insists that "las notas van dedicadas a un público general—no de especialistas—y, por lo tanto, son preferentemente informativas e históricas." Here, the project would appear to seek out a different sort of reader than the learned subject sketched out for Losada, perhaps even a democratization of what sort of reader these texts for centuries relegated to the exclusive—and elite—readership circuits of archives, would be *intended for* and *for whom they would be legible*. These are difficult questions, of course, as they are dependent on shifting readership practices and marked

²⁰ This proposed immaculateness is not always carried to fruition. In a letter from August, 5, 1976, Losada writes: "La edición me parece seria y, desde el punto de vista gráfico, atractiva. Por cierto que el ejemplar que hemos recibido tiene varias páginas en blanco, así es que le agradecería que me enviara alguno nuevo para tener un libro como Dios manda." Or, in a letter that Rama writes from Washington D.C. on April 1, 1979, in reference to research he has carried out at the Library of Congress: "El problema más complejo al que he venido dedicando atención es el referente a la pulcritud de los textos que publica la Biblioteca Ayacucho. Hecho un estudio de algunos de ellos aprovechando las notables ventajas bibliotecarias de las Universidades de Washington y de la Biblioteca del Congreso, cuyo director de la Hispanic Division Sr. Carter se ha puesto gentilmente a nuestra disposición, se encontró que algunos de los textos que ya fueron utilizados en nuestras ediciones adolecen de imperfecciones, algunas graves.

La pulcritud, rigor y exactitud de nuestros textos es asunto capital para asentar el buen nombre de la Biblioteca en el medio académico internacional, por lo cual he comenzado a recoger materiales inhallables en nuestras bibliotecas y archivos para la preparación de los textos."

by the varied motivations with which Rama writes to the varied subjects with whom he corresponded throughout his tenure at the Biblioteca Ayacucho.²¹ It does, however, open an inquiry regarding the reach or implications of generating a *lettered* readership through critical editions.

The word “democratize” implies questions of broader publics and the reproduction and mass production of previously unattainable cultural goods. It also suggests an obscure relationship with notions, as indicated by its lexical root, associated with the political system, that in its ideal or “idealistic” state takes the form of a “government by the people for the people” (Rancière, “Does Democracy Mean Something?,” 47). Despite these general coordinates, democratization has passed through many visions, permutations and owners. Each project carried out in its name would appear to construct a particular definition of this term, a new layer to a timeworn etymology that can no longer be traced to any clear origin. For certain left-leaning projects of the 1960s, to democratize meant to create worker’s books and a worker-reader. Ayacucho proposes a different sort of democratization of much more sobering dimensions; it is as much the assimilation of new subjects within a particular symbolic order—that is, the definitive, scholarly edition—as it is a retreat from the expansion of readership. It is a vision emerging from a continental and integrated people [*pueblo*] who will be guided once again by the figure of the expert, an expert who defines which texts one must read and how. In the most concrete of senses, the burden is now devolved upon the “specialists of diverse disciplines” (Rama, “*La Biblioteca Ayacucho*” 71) who met in 1976 in Caracas for the Seminario de la Cultura Latinoamericana to plan Ayacucho’s future collection.²² Nevertheless, under the rubric of classics and its implicit passage of time, these texts form a collection of “elevated” culture that is relocated from the salons of the elite, to the rooms in the

²¹ We must not forget that, in the case of Losada, Rama is trying to negotiate the rights to the works. This forces him to distinguish his project from Losada’s public and editions to avoid invading his editorial territory. In the case of Alegría, he is perhaps attempting to temper the latter’s academic voice, or to create a palatable offer for the exiled writer already ensconced in the comfort of Stanford and Palo Alto.

²² The intellectuals who would attend included Leopoldo Zea, Luis Alberto Sánchez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Ernesto Sábato, Tulio Halperín Donghi, Gonzalo Rojas, Miguel Otero Silva, José Emilio Pacheco, Carlos Real de Azúa, Antonio Candido, Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda, and Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot.

university library, to the world of academics and intellectuals. The debate is redeployed to new, yet still delimited, cultural stages or settings.

As difficult as its democratizing aspirations—or lack thereof—may be to determine, what did occur with the Biblioteca Ayacucho is a very particular reinterpretation of how history is constructed. Rama, who in the early 1980s was teaching at the University of Maryland, would begin to distance himself from the project, yet would still leave a definitive mark upon the collection.²³ As an intellectual figure, Rama acted as a link to certain historiographical impulses of the 1960s that may be linked to a materialist, as opposed to a liberal, lens.²⁴ Biblioteca Ayacucho revisited this decade, whose left saw history as cyclical and teleological, as economic and political. To make history under this logic was to change historical distributions and weights, to shift one's historical gaze from the universal to the local; or, from Europe to the periphery. In the case of Ayacucho, it meant to redirect these analyses toward a redefinition of the past, which, in turn, redefined the past-present of the Venezuelan 1970s. Biblioteca Ayacucho was indistinguishable from this commitment to Time and Space and its subsequent reorganization: it was reinterpetative, and continuously resignifying. Nonetheless, the questions to which we must return, is for whom this was legible, and, what sort of readers was it constructing. What is clear is that Biblioteca Ayacucho proposed to establish a dialogue with a reader who was interpreting the history of the Americas, in its diverse permutations, whether visual, textual or oral.

Though the continuities between Rama's 1970s and Venezuela's present are elusive and lend themselves to reductive readings, it would seem reasonable to posit a connection, albeit a tenuous one, between the initiatory volume of the Biblioteca Ayacucho, *Doctrina de Simón Bolívar*, and certain historiographical allusions contained even within the renaming of the country—The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in honor of this Independence-era hero. This volume, incomprehensible for Rama's contemporaries due to its very ubiquity, is definitive in establishing the

²³ Rama died, along with his wife Marta Traba and several other Latin American intellectuals, in a plane crash in 1983.

²⁴ I believe this is a fair statement in the context of the collection as a whole. Some of its participants, however, speak from a liberal political perspective (for example, Augusto Mijares, and Tulio Halperín Donghi).

historical logic of the collection. It acts as a thread between Rama's redefinition of history through print, and Bolívar, the rhetorical keystone of contemporary Venezuelan politics. According to Christopher Conway's *The Cult of Bolívar in Latin American Literature*, Hugo Chávez, through his appropriation of the figure of Simón Bolívar, "self-consciously surrender[s] himself to History" (152). Yet, this "History" through which Chávez and his government filter Bolívar's figure is a vision of history that the Biblioteca Ayacucho played a part in naturalizing and canonizing within a paradigm of 1960s Americanism. Published by the liberal Venezuelan historian Augusto Mijares (1897-1979) in 1976 and republished in 2009,²⁵ the Ayacucho prologue for this edition is included in Chávez's speeches, as is Pablo Neruda, the author of Ayacucho's second volume—in particular his depiction of El libertador in *Un canto para Bolívar* (1941) that is not included in the Ayacucho edition of *Canto General* (1938-1949).²⁶ The Biblioteca Ayacucho's rewriting of history, read through Augusto Mijares's prologue and the selection of texts, was not a military strategy, but, rather, disproportionately social and educational reform. This Republic of "morals and lights," as Bolívar articulated it in the Congress of Angostura, is in part what has made the current historical allusions to the figure decipherable. It is what makes legible, under an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist lens, the union of Che Guevara, the 1960s Marxist revolutionary, and Simón Bolívar, the Independence-era Liberal, as a double independence read as precedent of the present.

The Texture of the Present

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the cultural field, especially in letters

²⁵ It was published with the same prologue and text selection—albeit with a much more explicative index, and an updated bibliography—and a similar initial print run of 3,000. The chronology was simplified by excluding the columns present in the original Biblioteca Ayacucho editions of "Historia de Venezuela y Latinoamérica," as well as "Historia Mundial."

²⁶ Chávez quoted Mijares explicitly in his parting address delivered from the Palacio de Miraflores, the 8th of December, 2012 before leaving for his final operation in Cuba: "la respuesta de todos y de todas los patriotas, los revolucionarios, los que sentimos a la Patria hasta en las vísceras como diría Augusto Mijares, es unidad, lucha, batalla y Victoria."

and in particular vis-à-vis the state, has been radically restructured.²⁷ Mass literacy, through the literacy program Misión Robinson, and publishing, articulated within Bolivarian judicial framework as the “radical democratization of knowledge,”²⁸ has not, however, receded from Venezuela’s state-sponsored cultural sphere. In the last decade there have been both continuations and breaks with previous publishing traditions.²⁹ Both Biblioteca Ayacucho and Monte Ávila have grown, publishing larger print-runs and a wider variety of titles.³⁰ The National Cultural Council (CONAC), historic champion of the state-run publishing houses, nevertheless, was discontinued in 2008. However, in 2005, The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela established its own publishing house, called El Perro y la Rana, a complement and refractory heir to already existing projects from the 1960s and 1970s, whose catalogue is both heterogeneous and capacious, ranging from historical and political texts, to national literary classics (*Doña Bárbara*), U.S. produced Latin American literary theory (*Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina*), and regional Venezuelan writers. These works are sold alongside books from the

²⁷ Jean Franco and Claudia Gilman in the *Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* (2004), and *Entre la pluma y el fusil. Debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina* (2003), respectively, discuss this problematic in greater detail.

²⁸ Juridical and Normative Framework of Book and Reading Policy. Strategic Plan 2007-2013 of the Ministry of the People’s Power for Culture. Strategic Line 5: To radically democratize the socialization of knowledge, permanently updated and renewed, contributing to the emancipation, and increase in knowledge of our people, and the affirmation of socialist values. [Spanish: Marcos Jurídicos y Normativos de la Política del Libro y la Lectura. Plan Estratégico 2007-2013 del Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura. Línea Estratégica 5: “Democratizar radicalmente la socialización del conocimientos, permanentemente actualizados, contribuyendo a la emancipación, el aumento del nivel de conocimiento de nuestro pueblo y la afirmación de los valores socialistas” (Presentation for the Centro Regional para el Fomento del Libro)].

²⁹ For a critic who addresses exclusionary mechanisms of Bolivarian cultural politics, see Gisela Kozak Rovero’s “Políticas culturales y hegemonía en la revolución bolivariana: ‘ética y estética socialistas’” (2006). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the friction with the state presses that Kozak’s article turns to is not new to contemporary Venezuela. The well-known “independent” publisher *Pequeña Venecia*, founded by Blanca Strepponi and Antonio López Ortega in 1989 (lasting until 2005), was established in the hopes of creating an alternative space separate from Monte Ávila and Biblioteca Ayacucho (Gackstetter 305), under an “Liberal Democracy.”

³⁰ As regards the continuation of the project’s mass production, in 2013 and 2014 paper shortages in both the public and private sphere have significantly reduced print runs, quickly making the phenomenon historical, due to practical constraints.

Biblioteca Ayacucho and Monte Ávila, in a state-sponsored bookstore chain called *Librerías del Sur*, at book fairs, and, at least in theory, in a program called *Bodega Cultural*, in which books are sold alongside basic foodstuffs and *artesanías* through the windows of private homes in working-class *barrios* [Image 3]. Most of their prices range from 15 to 30 bolivars, that is, between two to three dollars (official exchange).³¹

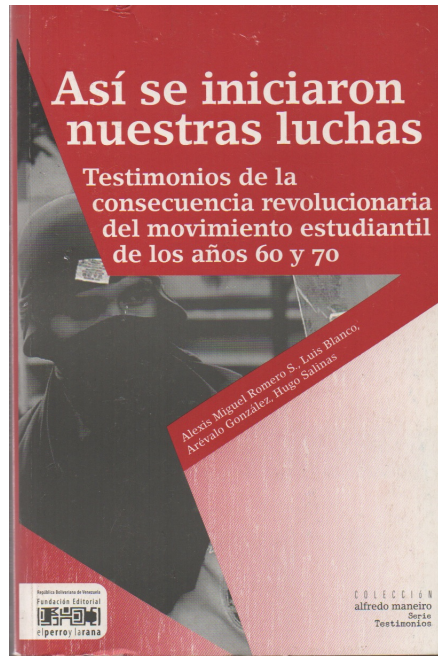


Image 3: El Perro y la Rana book, Colección Alfredo Maneiro, Serie Testimonios, 2010

Today, in an era in which independent publishing ranging from boutique presses to the Cartoneras working with photocopies and collected cardboard covers abound in Latin America, the gesture of emitting print culture from the centralizing force of *state* presses—whether regional or the national Imprenta de la Cultura—and from a centralized editorial staff, as is the case in Venezuela, may appear hierarchical. The horizontalization of symbolic capital, however, can be read in various policies. Access to printed

³¹ In July of 2013, the official exchange rate was 6.5 bolivars to a dollar. Dollars at the time were sold on the parallel market at 30-33 bolivars to a dollar. (This discrepancy has widened in the interim.) However, in comparative terms, a beer bought in Caracas cost approximately 10 bolivars; a ride on a bus, 5 bolivars.

Changes in price as regards *Ayacucho's* editions, are also significant. In his initial letters, Rama references a price range of 5 to 10 American dollars—depending on the letter and the edition. Biblioteca Ayacucho sells (c. 2013), at a price that ranges from 1 to 8 dollars (official exchange rate), or at 23 cents to \$2 (parallel market).

authorship, for instance, has expanded, opening up these spaces of consecration to a wide range of local and regional writers that are published alongside Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov, a gesture that in its juxtaposition redefines—democratizing and/or desacralizing—what it means to be a printed “author.” Furthermore, the fact that one of the first Bolivarian forays into printed culture was not distributed within the enclosed and delimited space of the bookstore, but rather in public plazas, is noteworthy.³² At least in Caracas, the gesture represents a desire to break down the spatial barriers imposed on the reader influenced by increased privatization and the political and social discourse of insecurity, as well as the spatial barriers that Caracas’s modern rethinking in the 1950s—through a logic of highways, superblock housing complexes, and very little regard for pedestrian and public life—resists (Achugar 21; Velasco 169).

These horizontalizing factors associated with authorship and space may be paired with the printed books’ physical quality. While Ayacucho’s pristine bone-colored pages from the 1970s and 1980s³³ may be construed as monuments of paper and ink, the books printed in the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s—as ephemera—argue for a different thesis on culture. In contrast to 1970s-era Biblioteca Ayacucho, whose pages were printed on high-end Antique, state publishers in contemporary Venezuela use bond paper. Historically used to print bonds and stock certificates—hence the name—bond paper, inherently non-durational, prone to deterioration, has a grammage ranging from 40 to 60 grams per square meter.³⁴

³² Here I am referring to a scholastic edition of one million copies of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, published in conjunction with *Alfaguara*, one of the largest commercial publishers in Spain, in a Bolivarian reprint of their 400th anniversary edition of the classic work. It was not published with Monte Ávila Editores—the state-run publisher whose genre tendencies could have accommodated a text such as that. Other pre-El Perro y la Rana publishing endeavors include, La Biblioteca Familiar (2003), pamphlet-like editions of classics, distributed in boxes of 22 titles in plazas and in the missions by the Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes and La Biblioteca Básica Temática (2004) (pocket-size editions, distributed in packages tied with elastic at public libraries and reading rooms).

³³ Within the industry, this paper was referred to as Antique, not because of age, but rather due to the connotations this level paper quality conjures up, as it points toward the annals of high-end publishing tradition. For this observation I am indebted to Maribel Espinoza, editor of Biblioteca Ayacucho in the 1990s.

³⁴ This is on par with the grammage of conventional North American newsprint or mass market paperbacks that runs at approximately 45. One well-

By using paper of this grammage, state presses inherently imbue reading with an air of the quotidian, with daily rhythms and spaces. Thus, the books' materiality projects a reader who moves in different circuits and in different ways than Biblioteca Ayacucho in the 1970s. Using a similar philosophy, that is both pragmatic and symbolic, hard covers and book flaps even at Biblioteca Ayacucho have been temporarily eliminated.³⁵ The "book" as object and concept has been pared down, brought to its minimal unit. In the face of our present increasingly dominated by digital logics and its democratic potential through self-publishing and permanent, multi-authorial works, state-sponsored print culture in Venezuela, which since 2007 provides parallel digital projects in PDF format, represents an ambivalent affirmation regarding print as a modality of knowledge. Inhabitants of new and old shelves, these books, on the contrary, simultaneously point to a crisis in traditional forms of lettered culture, and of a *dying* discourse, oscillating between fetish³⁶ and homage, on the meaning and value of canons printed on ink and paper.³⁷

known collection of the period was called "Cada día un libro." With its frequent imprints and mass print runs, it subscribed to a production logic not unlike that of the newspaper prints that share the same machinery with these books in the Bolivarian *Imprenta de la Cultura* in Guarenas, an hour outside Caracas. However, the content of these books, rather than the genre amalgamations inherent to the daily news, is made up of monographs of literature, history, and sociology, among other genres.

³⁵ Edgar Páez, then Executive Director of the *Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho*, and Carlos Noguera, President of *Monte Ávila Editores*, provided this information regarding grammage, and confirmed the official elimination of hardcovers and book flaps in separate interviews on June 14th, 2012 in Caracas, Venezuela.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, in "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting" (1931), deemphasizes the importance of "utilitarian value" for the book collector, stressing instead "the scene" of the book and its insertion in the "tactical sphere," as these books relate to an individual owner, rather than to a public collection. How this tactile relationship and private ownership mark a continued investment in print both in the private and public spheres is an open question. Lerer also discusses this affective relationship with print in his spatial understanding of the canon, as does Uruguayan Hugo Achugar (Uruguayan exile in Venezuela in the 1970s and 1980s) in *La biblioteca en ruinas* (1994). Achugar also contemplates the question of print's relationship with the collective versus the individual.

³⁷ In "Languages, Books, and Reading from the Printed Word to the Digital Text" (2004), Roger Chartier insisted on the uniforming nature of digital literacy and dehierarchization of discourse that is its result. "Thus a textual continuity is created that no longer differentiates discourses on the basis of their materiality" (142), he wrote, pointing toward the fluidity and changing nature of typography in the digital sphere and the disappearance of material genre codes that make

Yet, the use of print in the present in general and in The Biblioteca Ayacucho in particular may also be viewed under a less nostalgic light and less in the vein of tradition. New media, after all, have not generated a clear answer as regards democratization. Rather, they confront relentless countercurrents of digital privatization³⁸ and the reproduction of non-digital accumulations of capital transferred to the textual-visual-aural market of the internet (Markley 4-5).³⁹ It is within this double bind that print in Bolivarian Venezuela comes to the surface.⁴⁰

To declare, however, that The Biblioteca Ayacucho and other Bolivarian print projects have made audible the silenced, visible the historically invisible, and filled the public sphere with type—declarations that many researchers of Bolivarian Venezuela seem compelled to affirm or impugn—would be difficult to ascertain. Instead, the question must be reoriented and resized to more sober dimensions, by seeing these publishing projects as no more than another layer in the historical grounding and materialization of the written word and its subjects in Latin America, a history marked by constant displacement and reformulation.

bookstores tactilely and visibly legible even before entering into a textual sphere. Despite eliminating prestige categories such as bookbinding, paper quality and size, PDFs under Bolivarianism maintain, however, many of the codes and hierarchies of print: linearity, design, typography, logos and collections. Within the prism of these matters, Bolivarian presses—whether print or the digital PDFs found on the Ministry of Culture websites since 2007—point towards a vertical paradigm of inalterability.

³⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept "expropriation of the common" developed in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) is useful in this context.

³⁹ When evaluating digital democracy in Latin America, it is essential to take into the account its relationship with the so-called digital divide. Ewan Robertson, "New Study Says Venezuela is a World Leader in Increasing Internet Usage." *Venezuelaanalysis.com* 14 Aug 2012: <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/7169>

⁴⁰ Despite having their own digital platform, Ayacucho still collaborates with googlebooks, sending their books to California for digitalization. The collaboration began in 2007. The publishing house also makes use of U.S. based servers in lieu of the servers based in the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture.

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