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Journal

CHASQUI-REVISTA DE LITERATURA LATINOAMERICANA, 41(2)

ISSN

0145-8973

Author

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Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed

eva, Julia. *Sentido y sinsentido de la rebeldía*. Trad. Guadalupe Santa Cruz. Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 1999.

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JOSÉ MARÍA ARGUEDAS'S *EL SEXTO* AND THE GROTESQUE BODY: THE JAPANESE CHARACTER AT THE BOUNDARIES OF NATIONAL BELONGING

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No, no hay país más diverso, más múltiple en variedad terrena y humana; todos los grados de calor y color, de amor y odio, de urdumbres y sutilezas, de símbolos utilizados e inspiradores (Arguedas, "No soy un aculturado..." 258)

As is common in the opus of José María Arguedas (1911-69), in his third novel, *El Sexto* (1961), everything that is evil and vile is associated with the urban, coastal, and Criollo (or *Misti*, to use the Quechua term for Caucasians) life, while the provincial, Andean, and Quechua population and motifs enjoy a much more positive image.¹ Even though it is not set in the highlands, the novel has often been interpreted as a confrontation between these two seemingly incompatible cultures and worldviews. In fact, several dialogs support this assessment. Thus, when an inmate named Pedro claims that there is no difference between him and the miner Alejandro Cámac, the pro-

¹ José María Arguedas Altamirano was born in the province of Andahuaylas in the southern Peruvian Andes. Although he was a *Mestizo*, he grew up in a humble Quechua community. He learned the Quechua language before Spanish, but only some of his poetry was published in Quechua. He was known to write his poetry in Quechua before translating it into Spanish. The rest of his poetry, his novels and his anthropological texts were all written in Spanish. Along with Ciro Alegria and Manuel Scorza, Arguedas is considered one of the three great *indigenista* writers in Peru. He wrote numerous anthropological studies, the collections of short stories *Agua*. *Los escoteros*. *Warma Suyay* (1935), *Amor mundo y todos los cuentos* (1967), and *Cuentos olvidados* (1973); the novels *Yavar fiesta* (1941), *Diamantes y pedernales* (1954), *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*, 1958), *Todas las sangres* (1964), *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1971); and the collections of poetry *Túpac Amaru Kamaq taytanchisman*. *Haylli-taki*. *A nuestro padre creador Túpac Amaru* (1962), *Oda al jet* (1966), *Qollana Vietnam Llaqtaman / Al pueblo excelso de Vietnam* (1969), and *Katatay y otros poemas*. *Hic jayllikunapas* (1972). With *El sexto*, Arguedas won in 1962, for the second time, the Ricardo Palma National Award for the Promotion of Culture (Premio Nacional de Fomento a la Cultura Ricardo Palma).

tagonist's communist and fatally ill cellmate, an indigenous apriista from Arequipa known as Mok'ontullo reacts by telling him that it is impossible because Cámac is an Indian. Mario Vargas Llosa is one of the critics who have abided by this perspective:

En realidad, la prisión es el decorado que usa Arguedas para representar, igual que en *Los ríos profundos*, un drama que lo hostigó toda su vida, el de la marginalidad, y para soñar desde allí con una sociedad alternativa, mítica, de filiación andina y antiqúisima historia, incontaminada de los vicios y crueldades que afean la realidad en que vive. (*La utopía* 212)

In fact, Vargas Llosa considers this novel Arguedas's best articulation of what the former calls "the archaic utopia," that is, an expression of Andeanism and social immobilism; in other words, a rejection of modernity and the industrial society. Ciro A. Sandoval and Sandra M. Boschetto-Sandoval have also analyzed the countercolonizing scheme and the "Andean paradigm of cultural reindication" present in *El Sexto*.

Yet little attention has been paid to other players in this power exchange. In a power inversion of what happens outside the prison in Peru, several Afro-Peruvian inmates (blacks and "sambos") are among the most powerful in the prison. By the same token, there is a fourth culture that is prominently represented in the novel, adding fuel to an already "uncomfortable" heterogeneity: we have an added element in an unnamed character of Japanese origin who was apparently imprisoned for vagrancy (like another victimized vagrant in the prison, the Pianist) and whom an Afro-Peruvian inmate known as Puñalada derogatively calls Hirohito.³ In this way, even if it is, as several critics have argued, one of Arguedas's minor works, *El Sexto* has the merit of being one of the first Peruvian novels to incorporate a Japanese (or perhaps Nippo-Peruvian) character.

While Cámac condemns the widespread moral degeneracy in the capital city ("—La corrupción hierve en Lima—dijo [Cámac]—porque es caliente; es pueblo grande" [33]), it pales in comparison with the unrestrained vice and depravity that pervade the prison of *El Sexto*. Indeed, Arguedas chooses a specific chronotope to explore the paradoxes and dilemmas of Peruvian nationhood: the penitentiary. Most narrative events in the novel are subordinated to its suffocating atmosphere and enclosed spatial relationships. By the same token, the intrinsic connectedness between spatial and temporal categories recontextualizes the worldviews and ideologies of each of the groups in *El Sexto*. Through a national allegory, this overcrowded space merges with the time of the action to become the organizing center of the plot, a laboratory in which characters unsuccessfully try to

³In Latin America, "sambos" (*zambos* in Spanish) are people of mixed African and Amerindian origin. Although the English term is considered derogative, I use it because I consider it the closest translation.

³Besides the Japanese man, there seems to be a Chinese inmate, one of Maravi's thugs, in the prison. Although, in Latin America, the nickname *El Chino* does not necessarily guarantee Chinese origin (after all, the Japanese Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori was known as *El Chino*), the fact that the words *el chino* are not capitalized in the novel suggests that we are indeed dealing with a Chinese or Sino-Peruvian man. However, in other scenes this same character is described as "a man with slanted eyes" ("un hombre achinado" [31]). He is in charge of guarding Clavel, the sexually abused indigenous boy, and following him the few times he is allowed to leave his cell. He also strikes the Pianist in a different scene.

⁴Along with Sara Castro-Klarén and Alberto Moreiras, Phyllis Rodríguez-Peralta has also pointed out the aesthetic limitations of the novel: "In *El Sexto* Arguedas tried to paint a humanity capable of triumphing over surrounding brutality. Unfortunately, faceless prisoners, the constant cacophony of political dissension, and the obvious division of art and politics lessen his success" (227).

resolve Peru's cultural relations and sociopolitical contradictions. The carceral setting in *El Sexto* forces numerous social interactions, cultural exchanges, and power struggles that mimic those taking place at a larger scale in the nation. Issues of political affiliation, class, educational level, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual preference are negotiated and sometimes become blended into a teleological discourse of belonging or not to the Peruvian nation. The Andean and Criollo worldviews are not the only ones that collide and have to come to terms with their respective claims to Peruvianness; men of African descent are also forced to coexist with other inmates of indigenous descent (Indians and Cholos) and Criollos, as are communists and apriistas, educated idealists and illiterate masses, military and civilian, or gay and straight inmates. Whereas outside the prison communists and apriistas, for example, would normally have avoided one another, and Hirohito perhaps would have been separated from non-Japanese Peruvians by the counter of a barber shop or grocery store, in the prison, another heterotopia of deviation, the latter has nowhere to hide; there is no other member of his ethnic community that can offer him protection. Whether he likes it or not, the Japanese character, like everyone else, has to share a common space, perform his theatrical role, and suffer its fatal consequences.

This uncommon commingling of disparate elements of society provokes grotesque situations. In this context, looking for the foundations of the grotesque, Galt Harpham affirms: "In all the examples I have been considering, the sense of grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately in something else. The most mundane of figures, this metaphor of co-presence, also harbors the essence of the grotesque in the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together" (13). From this perspective, Hirohito's grotesque behavior, as well as the comments that other inmates make about him portray him as a foreign alien who has eerily infiltrated the boundaries of the Peruvian nation. Even though one could easily argue that Gabriel, the protagonist of *El Sexto*, is also unable to integrate himself into a violent reality that he cannot quite grasp, at least he still considers it his reality, his society, and, for this reason, he strives to find sociopolitical solutions. In contrast, in the case of Hirohito his irredeemable rootlessness prevents him from belonging in the narratives of the Peruvian nation synecdochically performed in the prison. This Japanese man should not be there; his inability to blend in in the prison makes him even more grotesque than the rest of the inmates. Furthermore, the complete dislocation that has alienated Hirohito also happens to antagonize other characters, who have come to mistrust everything about him: the military outfit he was wearing when he arrived to the prison, his mysterious and seemingly fake smile, the feigned way he walks, and even the reasons why he will not find a hidden place to defecate. In other words, in a hellish underworld of injustice and barbarism, this shadowy character who walks clumsily by the prison walls and barely understands Spanish represents the most obvious Other, a site of ambiguity that some of his fellow inmates find almost offensive. His level of abjection is remarkable even among the most wretched and degraded members of society, precisely because he does not belong in the prison and, by extension, in the national imaginary of Peru. However, it is never clear whether this is partly the reason Puñalada, one of the prison gang leaders along with Rostia and Maravi, feels the need to torture and marry him until he loses his mind.

Castro-Klarén and Madrid argue that Arguedas's oeuvre "is anchored on the need and the search for self-definition" (141). For this reason, he incorporates episodes from his own life, including his childhood. Indeed, between November 1937 and October 1938, during Óscar Raymundo Benavides's dictatorship, Arguedas was incarcerated in a federal prison called *El Sexto*, located in Lima's central Avenida Alfonso Ugarte, for participating in an assault of college students against the fascist Italian general Camarotta, who was visiting the University of San Marcos. This experience would mark his life. As Vargas Llosa explains in *La utopía arcaica*, the outrageous acts of violence witnessed in *El Sexto*, contributed "a agravar, con una pesada carga, la maltratada vida emocional de Arguedas, aguzando sus sentimientos de inseguridad y su patética identificación con los humildes y los indefensos" (110). Later, Arguedas used this painful experience as inspiration for his novel *El Sexto*, a fictionalized testimonial (or a "narrativa metatestimonial urgente" (699)), as Ciro

Sandoval calls it⁵), where we find in Hirohito one of the most memorable secondary characters of Asian origin in Latin American literature. The story is told, in a straight forward prose devoid of formal experimentation, by Arguedas's alter-ego, a twenty-one-year-old *serrano* (or Andean) student named Gabriel Osorno, who claims not to be affiliated with any political party. This autobiographical protagonist describes the worst types in Peruvian society, who are responsible for numerous atrocities committed with impunity in the prison. After so much hunger, suffering, and torture, several inmates, including Hirohito, progressively become demented.

Arguedas himself explains, in a letter he wrote to doctor Murra in 1960, the main topics in the novel:

¿Puede Ud. Imaginarse lo que significaría para mí ver cómo los asesinos violaban a los hombres hasta volverlos locos? Esa es la parte medular de mi novela. Pero también el Sexto era un prisión política y juzgo con la libertad que he sabido conservar a los líderes de los partidos aprista y comunista que conocí en el Sexto. (Las cartas 50)

Likewise, in a 1961 letter to his friend John, Arguedas denounces:

Odio desde la infancia el poder fundado en la riqueza material. Y casi todos los que me rodean no persigue otro fin más alto para sus vidas que ese miserable objetivo. Te parecerán ingenuas mis palabras, pero a ti se te puede hablar con *ingenuidad*. El Sexto y todos mis pocos relatos están plenos de odio a esta parte oscura del ser humano y de una fe absoluta en que podrá vencer el mal. (Las cartas 65)

Indeed, although the autobiographical first-person narrator and other idealist characters in the novel never lose their faith in the possibility of building a better Peru for the most marginalized and oppressed in society, the denouement of the story, with the death of Hirohito and the protagonist's cellmate, is quite pessimistic. Even the precious freedom to speak openly about politics that the political prisoners have found in *El Sexto* is offset by their inability to disseminate their ideas to the outside world or to the inmates who are either insane or too dehumanized to care about social issues.

Hirohito, a thin Japanese inmate with a sparse beard and a permanent, humble smile on his face, is one of the victims of the brutality that reigns unstrained in *El Sexto*. He wears dirty rags, which get progressively deteriorated as the plot evolves, and lives in the courtyard on the first floor, which is the equivalent of Dante's ninth circle of hell. He shares this ominous space with murderers and vagrants (*vagos*), who are considered the dregs of society. Two of the most powerful inmates, Puñalada and Maraví, constantly humiliate the vagrants by using them as carriers (*paqueteros*) of their excrement. These two gang leaders and their thugs, Colao and Pate'Cabra, also rape some of them, strike them whenever they want, and deprive them from any sort of human dignity. In fact, these abuses seem to work as their escape valve and as a way to show their power to the rest of the inmates. In particular, the sadistic Puñalada vents his frustration for not being corresponded by Rosita, a gay and transvestite inmate, by constantly humiliating Hirohito. Besides kicking the Japanese man in the stomach and chest until leaving him unconscious for laughing at Maraví, in some of the numerous scatological scenes in the novel Puñalada makes his victim defecate in motion or dancing, or kicks him to make him fall all over his own excrements. The latter is so scared that he does not even dare to bend down his knees when he is using the latrine. These circumstances inevitably accelerate the Japanese man's physical and mental decay. He spends the rest of the time picking fleas from his armpits to eat them or to throw them on the floor.

⁵Ciro A. Sandoval explains his term: "Con el distintivo 'metatestimonial' queremos resaltar la intertextualidad del texto con el discurso institucional académico que surge de la praxis de Arguedas como escritor y traductor de visiones etnoculturales e ideológicas" (699).

Cámac expresses his empathy for the most exploited inmates: "Aquí, en mi pecho, está brillando el amor a los obreros y a los pobrecitos oprimidos" (27). Likewise, Gabriel bemoans the pathetic situation of three inmates: the submissive Hirohito, the helpless prisoner known as The Pianist, who lost his mind after being repeatedly raped, and an indigenous boy known as Clavel, who also lost his sanity after being turned into a sex slave. To describe his own sorrow, he zeroes in on Hirohito's face, which, in his view, "trascendía una tristeza que parecía venir de los confines del mundo, cuando 'Puñalada', a puntapiés, no le permitía defecar" (23). In neo-naturalist fashion, the narrator provides a detailed description, in the first scene in which the Japanese man appears, of how he takes off his rags to defecate as fast as he can, before Puñalada or Maraví can see him. These grotesque situations, along with his fear, also awaken the curiosity of other inmates, who laugh and applaud after Hirohito has finished. The latter's only defensive reaction is to smile back, showing relief and, according to the narrator, almost happiness. It is never clear, however, whether this passive reaction is a calculated defensive performance or yet another sign of his insanity. From this scene we can conclude that, whereas other inmates simply exclude Hirohito from the narrative of the nation, Puñalada, by forbidding his primary needs, seems to go further with this prohibition: he virtually denies the Japanese man his right to exist. Interestingly, Mikhail Bakhtin, in the chapter "The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources" of his *Rabelais and His World*, associates this bodily function with both birth and death:

All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interiorization. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (93)

In the end, the Japanese man's agony turns him into a sort of martyr, as the narrator's words suggest a few pages later: "En el japonés y el 'Pianista' había algo de la santidad del cielo y de la madre tierra" (106).

Like the protagonist of Augusto Higa's *La iluminación de Kazuo Nakamatsu*, Arguedas's Japanese character is always walking. He moves by the shadow of the walls from the latrines to the corners, as if he were trying to return to Japan. But more so than his constant walking and picking fleas from his body, one of his most notable traits is his resilience, as Gabriel points out: "No los machucaron, sin embargo, hasta formar una masa sin nombre, como a los otros. En el cuerpo del japonés se arrastraba el mundo, allí abajo; conservaba su forma, aun su energía. De los váteres a los rincones, caminando, o apoyado en la estaca, llevaba un semblante que no muere" (106). Unlike the Pianist and other vagrants, who resign themselves to licking leftovers from the floor or blood from the fights, or simply die of hunger, Hirohito does not hesitate to fight tenaciously in order to have access to the man who delivers the food every day. In contrast with his docile compliance with the humiliating performances ordered by Puñalada and others in the latrines, whenever Hirohito is trying to find food, he withstands the showing, kicking, and elbowing of stronger inmates and, when he is pushed back, he returns even if he has to crawl between their legs. These scenes of resistance separate him from stereotypical images of Asian docility in the Americas. The black man who delivers the food admires Hirohito's bravery so much that he defends him from others and even drops extra food on his bare hands. After the Japanese man devours his ration, the inmates who were unable to receive any food relieve their jealousy by punching and kicking him until they make him vomit. Once again, Hirohito's only reaction is to protect his stomach and to smile. The political prisoners feel compassion for him and try to give him cans of food, but the other inmates steal them from him on the same day. Eventually, on the day they noticed that Hirohito had not gone to get his food, everyone realized that his end had come.

Although we are never told whether Hirohito was born in Peru or not, in some scenes he seems to not understand Spanish well. In addition, an inmate named Prieto points out that "para maldita su suerte atravésó el Pacífico en busca del Perú ¡que era de oro hace 500 años!" (25). Besides pointing to his foreign origin, the mere act of crossing the Pacific five hundred years too late, when Peru is no longer "made of gold," seems to be seen by a character named Prieto as an insane act that constitutes the first step toward his eventual madness. At any rate, if he is indeed Peruvian, other characters seem to conceive of him as if he represented the human boundaries of the Peruvian nation. For example, at one point the narrator states: "Los vagos se fueron acercando a esa celda, aun el japonés vino corriendo, encorvado, rascándose los sobacos" (89). Likewise, when the inmates dance in the prison, Hirohito stays, indifferent and seemingly alienated, in his own world: "El japonés se quedaba solo, rascándose, apoyado en la estaca, sin comprender ni interesarse por el tumulto ni el baile" (180). Adding to his awkwardness, perhaps because of his insanity, while other characters fear the intimidating Maraví, Hirohito is the first one to laugh when he sees the gang leader walking inebriated through one of the corridors. As a result, Puñalada beats him so hard that he will die soon after.

As stated, Hirohito eats fleas and defecates while he dances. He is undoubtedly a grotesque character and, as such, he is not only a source of both affinity and antagonism, but also a site of ambivalence and ambiguity. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham explains, "the grotesque is always a civil war of attraction/repulsion" (11). Tellingly, while Gabriel feels sorry for this Japanese man whom he describes as "desperdicio humano" (24), he also mistrusts him. In his grave dialogs and speeches about Hirohito and the Japanese people, he negotiates his own feelings of attraction and repulsion for the unknown. Thus, he compares Hirohito's permanent smile and his dirty face to the red, immense, and sad sunset he sees from the prison, which, he claims, "despertaba sospechas irracionales" (23) when one faced it directly. Gabriel also speculates about the motivations behind Hirohito's constant smiling and suspects that he may be faking his clumsy walking: "empezó a caminar con la torpeza, como fingida, con que solía andar. Avanzó sonriendo hacia quienes aplaudieron. Con esa sonrisa fija, humildísima, aplacaba a sus camaradas de prisión; aun, a veces, a 'Puñalada'" (23). At times, the Japanese inmate is, indeed, successful at eliciting his fellow inmates' commiseration. For example, in a different scene later in the plot, Puñalada "sonrió tristemente" (64), as if he suddenly felt empathy for the Japanese man, after giving him some sugar to make the fleas he was chewing taste better. In any case, the symbolic gesture of giving him a sugar cube, something one would associate with a reward for an animal, indirectly degrades and animalizes the Japanese character even more than his eating fleas. Other inmates seem to be equally mystified by Hirohito's behavior. They debate, for instance, about the reasons he does not try to find a different place to defecate. While Gabriel argues that he goes to the latrine in self-defense, as a way to please Puñalada and his gang, an inmate named Prieto follows the stereotype arguing that Hirohito's "japanese discipline" prevents him from doing otherwise. The indigenous aprista Juan 'Mok'ontullo provides a third theory when he blames Peru for this bizarre situation.

The prison of *El Sexto* is also a site of voluntary and forced performances, in both the metaphorical and the literal sense. Thus, whereas Hirohito is forced to dance or move around while he defecates, Clavel is coerced into wearing women's dresses and lipstick, and, after Puñalada dies, some inmates imitate his peculiar way of calling people's names. The political prisoners also recall the humiliating and grotesque scene that took place when Puñalada forced the Pianist to "play the piano" on the Japanese man's ribs while the latter was forced to lie on the floor and defecate. These compelled and degrading performances are also complemented by voluntary performances of "manhood," such as the demonstrations of power by the gang leaders; or "womanhood," such as Rosita's way of walking, dressing, and cooking for her "husband," the Sergeant; or affiliation, such as the political anthems sung by the communists and the apristas.

Hirohito is also an unaware performer. In this experiment in nation building that takes place within the walls of the prison, he represents the absolute Other against whom the nation must be conceived. In the midst of all the unstable sites of nationhood constructed by the different power

struggles taking place, he comes to embody that which is certainly not Peruvian. Apristas, for example, try to expel communists from the national body by accusing them of being *vende patrias* or sell-outs to the Soviets, of having betrayed Peru. Likewise, indigenous inmates (Indians and Cholos) tell communists that they will never be able to feel the world with the same depth (and, implicitly, to be as Peruvian) as a man who has grown up seeing the spectacular landscapes of the Andes and has experienced an older, ancient Peru. By contrast, Hirohito, with his linguistic shortcomings and the insurmountable barrier that is his foreign (almost "un-Peruvian") phenotype, never has the luxury of being seen, at any point in the plot, as part of the national body. No one can exclude an individual that was never included in the national discourse or the political agendas in the first place. He is simply an uncomfortable obstacle that has to be eliminated or at least ignored, an outsider who does not belong anywhere and who should not be there, in the middle of the nation-building conundrum. Adding to his mysterious aura and demeanor, according to Cármac, he had arrived to the prison in a military outfit. Incidentally, this detail is reminiscent of the Japanese fashion that, as Seiichi Higashide explains in his testimonial *Adiós to Tears*, was turned into the "people's uniform incident" by the FBI. Because of this "uniform," Cármac sees in his death the end of Japanese militarism, even though he was a harmless victim. Gabriel, however, refutes these hostile accusations: "—Hermano Cármac—le dije—. El militarismo japonés tiene su agregado en la Embajada. Este 'Hirohito' llevaba una representación más alta. Se levantará sin duda; no es mortal" (107). When Cármac also dies soon afterward and they are dragged together to a truck, a major speculation sarcastically: "—El japonés va a fregar al cholo en el camino. Esto 'japonés' ni muerto son tranquilo" (138). In this instance, therefore, Hirohito is no longer presented as a danger to national security, but as an inconvenient nuisance, as a stereotype. By contrast, Gabriel does take Hirohito seriously. He dedicates solemn words to him and his people, while addressing the spirit of his dead cellmate:

El japonés, ahora que no es ya sino espíritu, recordará los cantos amados de su pueblo, que es tan martirizado como el nuestro. Cantaréis juntos siempre porque a ti y a él, los echarán a la fosa común; lanzarán tierra y piedra sobre ustedes, con desprecio. El Japón es un pueblo más grande que el nuestro; pero no lo dejes ir allá, lo volverían miserable otra vez. (138-39)

Arguedas, through his narrator, expresses his deep compassion for the Japanese man, one of the innocent victims of the brutality in the prison and, by extension, in Peru. There is, in Gabriel's speech, an internationalist feeling of fraternity toward Japanese people, another nation that has suffered injustice at the hands of their rulers. Instead of seeing Hirohito as an accident in the road to nation building, he chooses to establish parallels between the oppression of the underprivileged masses in both countries. In any case, it is worth noting that, although Hirohito's madness is presumably a consequence of all the abuse he suffered in the prison, it is not clear whether his race or ethnicity was a major factor in the way he was treated, particularly if we take into account that the Pianist, a Criollo, or Clavel, an indigenous Peruvian, were raped numerous times and treated even worse.⁶

⁶In Arguedas's posthumous novel, *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, there is a brief example of xenophobia against the Japanese:

La procesión se detuvo un instante frente al mausoleo de un antiguo comerciante japonés que había sido principal en el puerto cuando fue puerto algodonero. El mausoleo era tan nuevo como el arco y estaba frente a él, reluciendo. Moncada alcanzó allí a la multitud, pero cara el médano; dio media vuelta, militarmente, bajo su cruz, como si fuera una escopeta, la apuntó hacia el mausoleo:

—Japoneses solito—dijo—. Forastero. ¡Te mato a ti, mato a todos! (64)

Certain passages in *El Sexto* evidence Arguedas's self-exploration, particularly when he is trying to understand his country through parallels between the prison and Peruvian society. Thus, Cármac asks: "¿Dónde está la diferencia entre el negocio de esos, de afuera, y de éstos, aquí dentro?" (26). Along the same lines, when asked by Alfonso Calderón about the experiences that inspired *El sexto*, Arguedas not only describes the prison as a microcosm of the country, but he also voices his idea that urban life perverts citizens:

Encontré allí lo que los sociólogos llaman una 'muestra completa' del Perú. Entre los quinientos presos que estaban, desde los sujetos más perversos hasta los más esclerados y serenos y los fanáticos, distribuidos en pisos libremente comunicados por escaleras. Vi allí también lo que aún seguiría llamando infernales escenas y conflictos sexuales. (*El zorro* 405)

In Arguedas's literary efforts to understand Peruvianness and to reconcile the Andean and Criollo worlds, he finds a question mark in the Japanese character, who further complicates a situation that was already quite convoluted. What is the role of Hirohito in the conflict between the two Perus, the indigenous and the Criollo? If the prison of *El Sexto* can be considered a microcosm of all the injustice and outrage in the country at the time when Arguedas wrote the novel, one could reasonably argue that this nameless and hapless Japanese man can also be seen as a synecdoche of his community's dilemma. Moreover, the Andean or *serrano* characters, who, like Arguedas and his alter-ego protagonist, conceive of the city as the source of all perversions and impurities, find in the Japanese man the most extreme strangeness; as stated, they consider his face, his smile, his outfit, and even the way he walks suspicious. In this context, Anne-Marie Lee-Loy, referring to the Chinese in West Indian literature and to the narratives used in the articulation of national identity as belonging, argues: "There is more than one way to imagine the boundaries of national belonging, and the fictional images of the Chinese capture this inherent instability" (4). I argue that the same can be said about the fictional image of the Japanese man in *El sexto*. In this "sample" of the nation that Arguedas find in the prison, Hirohito represents the liminality between the Peruvian and the non-Peruvian, the human borderland of the nation. Furthermore, his mysterious behavior and appearance epitomize the deceitful nature of everything urban. Like the sexual aberrations witnessed in the prison, Hirohito's pitiful behavior contributes to the justification of the *serranos'* anti-urban *ethos*.

In this novel, Arguedas shows a neo-naturalist fascination for that which is filthy and oppressive in society. He depicts numerous grotesque scenes that emphasize primary bodily needs dealing with evacuation, eating, and sex. Regarding excretion, early in the plot, for example, we learn that the civil governor had ordered the informers to cover the political prisoners' mouths with the vagrant excrements. In addition, gang leaders order their "paqueteros" or carriers to take their feces, wrapped in newspapers, to the latrines. With respect to eating, the prison food is rotten, Hirohito eats fleas, and vagrants lick the floor looking for leftovers and blood, or eat trash and spit from those who have already had some food. In turn, sexual scenes are dominated by exhibitionism, rape, and gang rape. Within this wide display of grotesque scenes in the novel, Arguedas has found the epitome of the unsightly and bizarre in Hirohito. While the most grotesque aspects dealing with sex are embodied by other characters (the transvestite Rosita, the gang raped Clavel and the Pianist, or the black vagrant who shows his immense penis for a few cents), Hirohito is the center piece of the scenes dealing with grotesque eating and evacuation. It is, in fact, his determination with getting to the front line in the food delivery scenes and with eating as fast as he can, as well as his obsession with defecating without being discovered by his nemesis, Puñalada, that make this secondary character remarkable. In the end, all these degrading scenes inextricably link human physiology to sociopolitical and cultural conflicts. Corporeal and social exchanges become, in fact, inseparable: the progressive decay and eventual death of the grotesque body augur a similar degeneration of the social realm.

In *El Sexto*, Arguedas exhibits an ostensibly progressive stance in defense of indigenous people and of an innocent member of a minority group, the Nikkei community. Yet these passages are offset by the subconsciously homophobic and somewhat racist overtones that characterize the rest of the novel. As Vargas Llosa indicates in *La utopía arcaica*, Cármac seems to have convinced Gabriel that homosexuality could never exist in the Andean world, as it is simply a result of urban vice: "Lo hubiéramos matado en su tiempo debido, si hubiera sido. Allá no nacen" (34), argues Cármac in *El sexto*. Likewise, Vargas Llosa continues, black and *mulato* characters are portrayed in a very negative light and miscegenation is seen with suspicion:

El andinismo y el acañ de conservar la tradición quechua en su mayor pureza generan el inconsciente racismo que informa la novela: la distribución de cualidades morales y espirituales según la condición étnica de las personas. Ya hemos visto que los serranos en la novela tienden a ser buenos, generosos y virtuosos, en tanto que los costeños, sobre todo si son negros o mulatos, se los diría condenados a la crueldad, codicia y corrupción. Lo que dicta esos sentimientos, más todavía que el prejuicio contra el hombre de color, es el sueño de la pureza étnica—otra pieza clave de la doctrina indigenista—, el oscuro temor de que la hibridación racial, el mestizaje, la confusión de razas, puedan destruir la integridad del pueblo quechua. (*La utopía* 220)

Vargas Llosa's comments are reminiscent of the notorious polemic between Arguedas and another Boom author, the cosmopolitan Argentine Julio Cortázar. In his famous "Carta a Roberto Fernández Retamar," sent from Paris in 1968, the latter had condemned the excessive nationalism or provincial "telurism" of some Latin American writers. In his view, any literature conceived as exaltation of the local or influenced by an ethnological or folkloric perspective was a type of nationalism or even racism. Arguedas felt insulted by his comments and responded, also in a public letter published in the magazine *Amaru*, defending his engaged literature in defense of indigenous people and mocking the Argentine's argument that a writer could discover the authentic roots of Latin America better from Europe than from the provincial position of one who never leaves his own country. The polemic continued later in letters sent to *Life* magazine, the journal *El Comercio*, and even in Arguedas's posthumous and unfinished novel *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1969).

In all, even though *El Sexto* has the merit of being one of the first Peruvian novels to include a character of Japanese origin, this element of Peruvian nationality and culture is incorporated through the prism of the grotesque. Avowedly inspired by real-life events, Arguedas's character situates the ethnic group he represents at the outskirts of Peruvianness. He is a sort of human border, the Other against which all the contradictions of Peruvian nationhood are performed and constructed. Hirohito's insanity and alienation as well as the disgusting acts he is forced to perform make him the source of laughter and sorrow for other inmates. His amorphous appearance, which elicits both empathy and disgust from others, ultimately becomes a bizarre distortion of the Japanese element in Peruvian culture.

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EL MIMETISMO ALUCINADO: EL MUNDO DE LA VENDEDORA DE ROSAS

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Walter Benjamin: la mimesis, la utopía y la tecnología

En "Experiencia y pobreza" (1933), Walter Benjamin define la pobreza en dos sentidos: el primero, de índole negativa, consiste en la pérdida de la capacidad para transmitir experiencia. Los hombres volvían de la guerra, dice el filósofo, deshechos y sin nada que contar después de ver tanta destrucción. El segundo y más importante, de carácter positivo, reconoce los límites del conocimiento ante un mundo que ha sido totalmente transformado por la tecnología, pues "lo único que no ha cambiado [son] las nubes" (216). Unos años antes, en el "Programa de un teatro infantil proletario" (1928), Benjamin escribió que el dilettantismo aristocrático, en su obsesión por "grandes obras" o "prestaciones artísticas", saturó los armarios con "cachivaches conservados con piedad para, recordando la juventud, torturar luego a los propios hijos" (385). Esto significa que, según él, la "herencia cultural" consiste en un pesado bulto que nos impide vivir a plenitud el *Jetztzeit* o tiempo del ahora.¹ Es por esto que la experiencia de la pobreza benjaminiana coincide con la segunda definición y tiene como meta deshacerse de "la riqueza cultural" abandonándola en la casa de empuños "por la centésima parte de su valor, a cambio de la calderilla de lo 'actual' ("Experiencia" 222).

Benjamin se vale de la imagen del bárbaro para desarrollar su argumento sobre la experiencia, pero lo hace de tal modo que invierte por completo su sentido.² Primero, equipara la barbarie destructiva con "la cultura" de la civilización en tanto es la violencia la que funda y conserva la "herencia cultural".³ "No hay documento de la cultura que no sea a la vez un documento de

¹Benjamin formula el concepto del *Jetztzeit* o tiempo del ahora en la tesis XVIII y en el "Apéndice A" de sus *Tesis sobre la historia*.

²La palabra bárbaro proviene del griego βάρβαρος y del latín *barbarus* y en los dos casos tiene una acepción peyorativa para referirse al extranjero. El origen del término es onomatopéyico e imita burlonamente el sonido *bar, bar, bar*, de la impericia lingüista de los que no son nativo-hablantes de una lengua; es decir, en su inicio, bárbaro se refiere a "aquél que balbucea". Con el tiempo, la palabra se tornó más etnocéntrica y se la utilizó para (des)calificar tanto a personas carentes de educación—incultas o groseras— como a gente cruel debido a que ese era el imaginario que la Roma imperial tenía de las tribus germanas y otros pueblos.