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Cucurto's Cardboard Coloring Book: Argentine Independence and Other Stories to Recycle

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CUCURTO'S CARDBOARD COLORING BOOK: ARGENTINE INDEPENDENCE AND OTHER STORIES TO RECYCLE.

Resumen

Washington Cucurto es un autor que llena algunos vacíos en la historia de Argentina, ahora que el país está ocupado revisando las historias oficiales de la Independencia. Este artículo pretende mostrar cómo a través de la particular mirada que tiene de los negros, de su forma de re-escribir la literatura y del trabajo que ha realizado con su proyecto de Eloísa Cartonera, historia y literatura resultan materiales reciclables. Materiales que terminan por ampliar el campo de acción del arte en el desarrollo social.

Washington Cucurto fills in some blanks in Argentine history, now that the country is busy revising official stories of Independence, starting with the May Revolution of 1810. Paul Veyne had already told us that the only real difference between *Writing History* – which selects data from incomplete records, organizes them in more or less believable sequences, and implies motivations – and writing novels is that novels have to be entertaining. So Cucurto entertains himself, as he says in the book, by writing the Revolution from a black perspective. He is in good company as he colors in the founding fictions of the Americas. I've been reading, for example, Ariel Dorfman's masterful *Americanos: Los pasos de Murieta* whose hero is less the title character – a swarthy scourge of the gringos who were overtaking California in the 1850s – but his right-hand man, so to speak, is a brilliant and loving Peruvian mulato who actually lost

his right arm as a child when his master discovered the dangerously educated slave tracing the word 'liberty' in the dust of Lima's port.

Dorfman revives the enchantment of 19th c national novels where *laissez faire* was as much a slogan for productive lovers as for economically liberal states, with a twist: I don't mean that making a hero of the irresistible Peruvian slave is twisted in terms of the tradition – Enrique López Albújar – himself a mulato – had already done that in *Matalaché* a tragic love affair set in 1816 –on the brink of Peru's revolutionary war – between the master's daughter and the hero whose punishment is to die in a vat of boiling soap – Dorfman's narrator is *Jabón*, jaboncito, who practically gets under his characters skin with every intimate contact (March 493). The twist I mean is to make a Chicano legend depend on an admirable black hero and on his Chilean ward whose English first name and Spanish surname hint at the mutual attractions of opposite sects. Dorfman's entire text is the crossing and double crossing of linguistic lines: written in English, –he says – translated into Spanish by another transnational of unstable be-longings.

Cucurto, on the other hand, undoes the national novel along with its heroes instead of really re-writing history, maybe because he can't sustain the long narrative line. Or maybe he just wants to get a rise out of readers whose liberalism he strains to the breaking point with elaborately staged bad taste. Cucu, as he likes to be called, revives the classics to rough them up, along with whatever vestige of solemnity remains in Argentina after the economic debacle of December 2001 and the next 10 days while five presidents succeeded one another and failed the country. *1810: The May Revolution for Blacks* is actually entertaining some of the time, especially if you increase your fictional tolerance for sexist, racist, and just plain smutty language. Thankfully, I don't know

enough Argentine slang to be offended by all the words here; and I'm certainly not going to ask anyone for explanations.

For Cucurto's Buenos Aires "black" means unwelcome foreigners, dark people who talk funny, "Todos los inmigrantes somos negros" writes a journalist from Jujuy.¹ Since 1980 we've begun to recover the history of Afro-Argentines, with George Reid Andrews² among many others now. "María Lamadrid, president of *Africa Vive*, refutes the common belief that Afro-Argentines vanished, and she calculated the first Black census in a long time, concluding that there are approximately 2,000,000 people of African descent living in Argentina ranging in skin tones from "high yellow" to "jet black."("Blacks in Argentina") Others think there are fewer.

But Cucurto seemed unaware of this recovery when we spoke in October 2009. Like so many Argentines, Cucurto assumes that blacks vanished within about 50 years, from the mid-19th century, when they represented from 25-30% of the population in Buenos Aires to the end of the century when they had all allegedly been killed off in the wars. All the blacks? I asked Cucu. Didn't the women stay home and serve as everything including wet-nurses, which meant of course that they were having babies too? Cucurto looks mulato more than indigenous, but he doesn't identify as African. I've heard others call this writer who was born Santiago Vega "el Negro Cucurto," the funny family name is his own variation on Cucu, a playful resignification of naughty and black; Washington

¹ *Bibliopress*, Argentina's Library of Congress, Silvana Castro, Misceláneas: Buenos Aires: jungla multirracial y multiétnica" <http://www.bcnbib.gov.ar/bibliopress/bibliopress9-1.htm>

² Morrone, Francisco C. *Los negros en el ejército: declinación demográfica y disolución*. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1996.

is the nickname friends gave him, apparently because it's popular among dark Paraguayans, and Northern Argentines like Cucurto.

Guess who else was practically Paraguayan, meaning black in Cucu's Spanish? It is the hero of 1810, José San Martín, who is also the liberator of Perú.³ His army was notably African, and famous for crossing the Andes to continue the war against Spain. Cucurto couldn't have missed the 1999 conference on the history of black Argentines, covered extensively by the standard newspaper *Clarín*, or the 2006 commemoration of black martyrs to Argentine Independence: *Africa Vive* had "convinced a national deputy to organize a ceremony [. . .] that took place in one of the traditional halls of the National Congress and was attended by the commander-in-chief of the army and the head of state. The national deputy spoke in honor of the fallen black soldiers and then awarded honorary degrees to the heads of several black organizations." (Aidi) It would be neat to say that this army of Africans and Indians who fought for racial freedom as the foundation for political freedom is the hero of Cucu's book, but he doesn't abide conventional heroes, only celebrants of cumbia and local beer and endless sex that would make the Marquis de Sade blush. That's why he prefers San Martín over the slightly more noble – in all senses – Belgrano, or the ideologically advanced Moreno brothers. San Martín is "strategically ambiguous" in security parlance.⁴ Not really white but black too, not really heterosexual, because he's gay too, not really revolutionary, because the

³ Peru's independence movement was led by José de San Martín of Argentina and Simón Bolívar of Venezuela. San Martín proclaimed Peruvian independence from Spain on July 28, 1821. Emancipation was completed in December 1824, when Venezuelan General Antonio José de Sucre defeated the Spanish troops at Ayacucho, ending Spanish rule in South America. Spain subsequently made futile attempts to regain its former colonies, but in 1879 it finally recognized Peru's independence. See U.S. Department of State: <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35762.htm>>

⁴ U.S. relationship to Taiwan, since it recognized China under Nixon. US supports Taiwan's defense system against China, though it does not recognize the island officially as an independent republic.

great caudillos of Latin America are only clear about wanting power: “I should confess that, as narrator, I’m a victim of my own recklessness, I have no idea how to continue this disgusting story; I’m more confused than the Little Liberator of America who isn’t sure if he’s fighting for the Revolution or against it [...]” (122).

Portrayed here as a dealer in slaves at the behest of the Spanish Crown, which was double-dealing with England, San Martín then fell in love with the blacks, more with *negros* than *negras*, though he did have an affair with African Olga Cucurtú while he was rounding up slaves. And their baby, Ernestito [Che Guevara’s given name] would survive the mother’s death to grow up in Argentina and lead the popular forces – blacks, Indians, paraguayos – before father and son burn up at the very end, in a passionate kiss on the sinking carrier of coal” (black bodies) that had crossed Africa’s Atlantic to make Argentina.

Cucurto’s basic approach to writing is to riff on the classics, not only on Mitre’s official history learned in school, but also on national and international classics. Chapters of the novel recall *El matadero*, by Esteban Echevarría, *Hombres de maíz* by Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Justine* by Marquis de Sade. One Addendum re-writes Borges’ *Aleph* as the *Phale*, phallic joke intended, always, where the narrator is inducted into the mysteries of an underworld service industry [of cab-drivers, prostitutes and drug dealers who reveal to him a system of organization that outdoes his above-board administrative imagination and stays fueled by ambitions of future decency, possession of means of production and self-possession.]; Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” turns into a “Dama tocada” with predictable innuendo and explicit sex too.

Re-writing is Cucurto's 'divertimento', he says, doing more homage than harm to the greats. They need to inspire everyone, soccer players too, he says in his paid job as a sports writer: "Get rid of those play stations and read Onetti, or at least Fontanarrosa, read Osvaldo Soriano, at the very minimum [. . .] It sounds crazy I know, but let me tell you that with more cultivated, sensitive, ball players, readers of poetry, Argentine soccer would be a lot better off. And don't let any of those bright kids get on the field if they haven't read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for starters[. . .]" ("Libros sí"). Cucu's sheer pleasure in playing with literature, pilfering and re-deploying like all good writers do, is a profound lesson in literary criticism, and also an inspiration to publish – even when the conditions seem devastating. During Argentina's economic crisis, Cucurto co-founded Eloísa Cartonera with visual artist Javier Barilaro to make books from used cardboard and unpublished literature donated by distinguished contemporary writers.

In March 2007, we invited Cucu's partner and also the director of a spin-off publisher in Lima to facilitate workshops for Harvard's Cultural Agents. We learned how to make beautiful books from discarded materials and how to use them in the classroom. It struck me -- while we played with Edgar Allen Poe -- that literature was recycled material too. This was a moment of truth for me and for other teachers of language and literature crouched on the floor to cut cardboard, hunched happily over tables invisible under the mess of cuttings, tempera paints, scissors, string, and all kinds of attractive junk. Until then, Cultural Agents had been drawn outward from its academic setting to highlight compelling but under-represented arts that should stimulate scholarly reflection. We had convened, and we continue to convene, scholarly seminars on major thinkers who inspire Cultural Agency (Friedrich Schiller, John Dewey, Antonio Gramsci Hannah

Arendt, Jacques Ranciere, among others) and we promote a broad range of artists who understand their work to be interventions in public life. Even before the major event of Augusto Boal's workshops in Theater of the Oppressed in December 2003, Cultural Agents had featured photographers who teach poor children to take new perspectives and reframe their lives. We showcased "The Jewish Latin Mix: Making Salsa" to celebrate the mostly unsung collaborations among Latino and Jewish artists. We hosted related seminars on Indigenous radio that keep languages alive and their speakers informed, on student dance troupes that keep them from dropping out of school, muralists who direct crews of teenagers to occupy public space and to earn a sense of ownership. These events and explorations have had some notably lasting effects (see for example the case of Boal's workshops that developed projects of racial and ethnic inclusion at the local high school, and also AIDS prevention programs in Tanzania.)

Nevertheless, from my perspective as a teacher of language and literature, the admirable cases we pursued represented other people's work, fascinating as examples to be theorized and even as techniques to appropriate for effective teaching. "Youth Arts for Social Change" tries to make good on the inspirations as the material of a Harvard Extension School course for local artists and educators.

But the Cartonera was a turning point for me, personally. Literature came back to the center of my teaching and writing, newly energized as an adventure in recycling. To acknowledge, in good faith, that teachers of the humanities are cultural agents – perhaps the fundamental agents for Gramsci's organic cultural revolution – is to take seriously, and to take credit for, the responsibility to train taste. Taste is another name for the judgment that civic life depends on. Although judgment is an innate faculty, to follow

Kant, it needs to be exercised through training by examples, which is why Aristotle insisted that the virtue of practical wisdom was not governed by rules but by the development of judgment through habituation (Larmore 48). It's different from reason, not its irrational opposite. In fact, reason depends on judgment which is of another order, Kant says in the *Third Critique*. It is more like a grammar than like logic, in Stanley Cavell's appropriation of Wittgenstein, so that usage, not argument, develops a sense of right or wrong judgment (42). Intellectuals exercise judgment even when they mistake the activity for reasonable argument. And they can change their minds, learn a new grammar, Gramsci assured us, but the process is painfully slow for those intellectuals who identify as risk-averse professionals rather than creative agents. Real teachers take risks, Paulo Freire encouraged us "It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained" (20).

Recycled Words:

Literature as recycled material, it had never occurred to me before. So simple a summary, it sounds like a joke and cuts through much of what we have learned and taught as sophisticated literary criticism, with its daunting words such as intertextuality, traces, iteration, point of view, focalization. The technical terms become user-friendly by losing their elite edge and gaining a broad accessibility when readers can abstract the particular functions to arrive at a general principle about literature being made up of reusable pieces, cuts and pastes and pastiches. For example, one of the activities that Milagros taught us was the character portraits. She arranged us in pairs to sit back to back, while one described a character from the story we had all read and the partner sketched the description. Then the participants switch roles, so that in about ten minutes

both will have described and sketched. The amusingly diverse results, after we tape the portraits on the “gallery” wall, make visible the range of interpretations and re-interpretations of the same characters, demonstrating the impossibility to read or to draw without filling in the missing information, highlighting one or another feature of the text, and adding original details. We could not clearly distinguish between reading – which had seemed passive to some – and the active intervention of completing the text, or writing. Where was the precise division between reception and production, understanding and imagination? I had never experienced so effective and painless a lesson in deconstruction and in reader-response theory. It was positively fun, and I have repeated the activity many times with similarly pleasurable and profound results. When the participants are graduate students or colleagues, an extra measure of satisfaction comes from reflecting on the theoretical principles (One of my brightest graduate students commented after the first workshop: “I don’t hate narratology any more!” By now the Cartonera is part of Harvard’s training program for new teachers of foreign languages.) When we work with primary school children, the technical terms don’t figure in the reflection. But in all cases, the lessons are as clear as they are welcome: Each participant is an author and an authority of the work produced; interpretation exercises critical and creative faculties and the range of plausible interpretations is worthy of admiration for oneself and for fellow interpreters. Admiration is the glue of voluntary societies such as democracy, Antanas Mockus taught me, not toleration which suggests one citizen’s largesse in the face of other, implicitly inferior subjects.

It is obvious, that books and plays and poems are made up of words, motifs, plots, characters, grammatical structures, elements that already exist in other contexts and that

authors borrow and recombine to produce arresting new works. Novelty is in the poaching and the recombination, not in the material which, logically, must already have been used if the new creation hopes to communicate, which is why Wittgenstein dismissed the possibility of private languages. All language is borrowed or taken over. Everyone knows that Cervantes played on chivalric and picaresque sources to write *Don Quijote*; and he shamelessly claimed to have lifted the entire manuscript from an Arab author. Shakespeare, too, is notoriously not the author of his plots in great plays, but the genius re-writer of appropriated stories. To introduce students into writing by acknowledging the liberties that great writers take is to demystify the classics, to expose them as products of human interventions open to new incursions by young people.

Hip hop artists are good at this game; and among our best Cartonera facilitators are members of Familia Ayara, an Afro-Colombian hip hop collective. The work continues with Conaculta in Mexico, and we hope to scale up through work with the Ford Foundation. But mostly, I'm looking forward to collaborating directly with Cucurto in Buenos Aires. The liberating approach to playing with the greats comes to the Cartonera from Cucu. There's no anxiety of influence here, because he figures the country is too racist to let him pass for the new Borges or Cortázar. So he just catches them and everyone else at the same game he enjoys: light handed lifting or stealing. [Appropriation is the word post-modern visual artists use]. "Cucu," – his alter-ego Santiago practically jumps out of his skin at the beginning of the novel – "this is a historical discovery: all Argentine literature is stolen stuff. It's crazy! Shameless!" (1810 11) And by the end of this reckless shuttle from orgy to battle on a double crossing and loony loom of black and white, hetero and homo but always over-sexual, it turns out that the recycled stuff that

Cucu had lifted “[...] and all the other Argentine classics were written by descendents of those Black soldiers. That is to say, it’s black literature, written by bourgie and bleached out Black-begotten Argentines.” (189)⁵

In the book I am preparing, *Ripple Effects: The Work of Art in the World*, I return to Cucurto and to Eloísa Cartonera. The book explores arts interventions that follow through on an inspiration, press a point and provoke changes in related discourses or practices. Humanists have an opportunity today to consider a vast but still virtual area of aesthetics: the effects of art after the first moment. How else can we presume to talk of the transformative power of art if not through its ripple effects? Think of Augusto Boal, from Forum Theater to Legislative Theater in Brazil; of ACT UP, which pursued AIDS treatment and the legal right to health until medicine and the law changed. Now I hope you’ll also think of the Cartonera, along with these better known feats of art in social development. It has revolutionized the world of books in Latin America. Today there are at least 30 Cartoneras, challenging the assumption that good literature appeals only to elite readers. The houses hire garbage pickers, develop cooperatives as in Eloísa’s case, and give young writers a chance to reach the public. When we asked Cucurto what his publishing criteria were; he said that he had none that all fiction and poetry had some feature or quality that merited our appreciation, and his profoundly democratic generosity won my admiration forever.

⁵ “[...] y otros clásicos argentinos que fueron escritos todos por descendientes de estos soldados negros. Es decir, una literatura negra, escrita por aburguesados y emblanquecidos descendientes de negros.”

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