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“Provincial Cosmopolitans and the Literary System of the Americas”

In a 1932 preface to the vanguard Argentine literary journal *Sur*, or “south,” the editors—who included the magazine’s founder, the French born Victoria Ocampo, as well as Jorge Luis Borges, and an advisory board made up of the US novelist and journalist, Waldo Frank, and the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset—described the public they sought to speak to and to create through the prose and poetry of their magazine. “South American, North American and European writers,” they wrote, “will find in the pages of *SUR*, with a new criteria and rigor, all of the problems concerning our spiritual life, our moral values and our intellectual facts. These problems will be our problems; this America ‘our America’ [*nuestra América*].” Of the many questions such a statement might provoke, I want to begin with two fields. The first is the most basic, and therefore, perhaps the least visible. Namely, what *is* a literary journal, let alone an Argentine vanguard literary journal? How can we define a literary journal against other kinds of literary objects, such as the poem, the author, or the novel? And can any of the qualitative reading practices currently available to literary scholars address a journal *as* a journal, rather than a temporary platform for significant poets or a mouthpiece for recognizable editorial personalities?

The second series of questions, which arise on the heels of the first, center around what it means for a literary journal like *Sur* to represent “our America”? That phrase, which invokes the Cuban-born patriot, essayist, and poet José Martí’s 1891 declaration “*Nuestra América*,” has since become a continuous call to unify Latin America against

European imperialism, and the then incipient U.S. empire. How does a journal gain such representational status? How would we take the editors statement seriously, and test *Sur*'s claim? In other words, what does “nuestra América” look like?

Scholars of Latin American, transnational and hemispheric literature have readily addressed this last question, and embraced Martí's declaration, setting out to track down a number of consequential poets, and tracing the circulation of their texts or their selves across the Americas, in order to, as Kirsten Silva Gruesz argues, “reject the hegemonic map of America and its traditional locations of centers and margins of culture” (xviii). However, while scholars might think they intuitively know what such a map looks like, one fairly straightforward method to estrange readers' expectations is to merely produce a map of the Latin American poetry network at one period in literary history to enact just the kind of recentering Gruesz and others set out to accomplish through the thick description of historically inflected literary analysis. Beginning with such a map, I will question what a more quantitative approach might tell us about “our America,” and then fuse this question with the work of defining the object of the literary journal *Sur*.

[SLIDE 1]

Here is one representation of the poetry network in Latin America from 1910-1945, the period of what I will refer to as global modernism, although the periodizing terms of Latin American poetry poses some challenges to this global concept. This map represents more than 8,000 poems from almost 1700 poets published in more than fifty different literary and cultural journals throughout Latin America during this thirty-five year period. To produce this map we collected a number of different bibliographic indices of the period and entered into a spreadsheet this metadata: the poets' names, the titles of

poems, the date and place of publication. We then filtered this metadata through the network analysis software Gephi to produce an image of the publishing record in Latin America and the shared affiliations between different poets and journals.

In the resulting map, the yellow nodes indicate the journals, and the size of these nodes indicates the relative abundance of published poems within their pages. The obvious giant in this poetic solar system—or, in a more local metaphor, the O’Hare airport of this transportation network—is the Costa Rican magazine *Repertorio Americano*—which served as a kind of warehouse for Latin American poetry and culture throughout the period, and its practice of republishing poems that first appeared elsewhere helps explain some of its gargantuan size. To add yet another metaphor to the mix, in the words of the Mexican critic and diplomat Alfonso Reyes, *Repertorio Americano* “maintained and watched over the nervous system that connects our sister republics” (181-182). Reyes’s metaphor is a fairly apt descriptor of the map, his qualitative evaluation matching the numerical abundance of the journal, whose process of accumulation activates the concept of “our America” and works against the possible disintegration of the continent’s cultural ties. It is a reminder that publishing is active archiving, the construction of a library of the present as it unfolds. And, at least in Reyes’s evaluation, merely the quantity of publishing and republishing in *Repertorio Americano* served to strengthen the collective ties between the individual nations of Latin America and make “our America” exist on paper as well as in the minds of region’s readers.

The much smaller node of *Sur* tells us that fewer poems were published in this journal relative to *Repertorio Americano*. While *Sur* published 203 poems between 1931

and 1945, *Repertorio Americano* accounted for more than 3500 poems over just a slightly longer period.

Thus, the sheer quantity of the bibliographic record already begins to tell us a different story than the one we usually encounter about canonical influence, and the outsized significance of particular actors in a network. Based on those literary canons, one might expect *Sur*'s presence to loom larger on this map. Closely attached to one of Latin America's most famous writers, Borges, who translated U.S. poets like Langston Hughes, Edgar Lee Masters, and T.S. Eliot in its pages, as well as the first Spanish translation of an excerpt from Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the serialization of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, *Sur* has often been recognized by scholars as the most important literary journal in Latin America. Writing in the volume *The Culture of a Century: Latin America in its Magazines*, the Argentine scholar of cosmopolitanism María Teresa Gramuglio states, "there are few journals [that compare] with...[*Sur*'s] broad influence on our continent, and there are few which have played such a decisive role in the formation of a modern literary culture for a significant number of Argentine and Latin American readers." But for all of its apparent influence—a matter I will touch on only at the very end of this talk today—was *Sur* representative of "our America"? Based on its bibliographic record alone, what kind of claim can *Sur* make for producing or embodying such a totality?

Relative abundance provides one sense of a journal's role in the larger network, but position on the map adds to that story. Returning to our network image, we might wonder again about *Sur*'s marginal position relative to the center of the network. The distance between these journals also tells us something about their relationship within the

larger system. In Gephi, the relative distance between nodes indicates one version of social proximity. In our case, that proximity is defined by the number of poets both journals “share,” that is the number of poets who have published in both journals, or the co-presence of poets in a single journal. The lines or “edges” extending from each journal to the poets are thicker or thinner depending on the number of poems said poet contributed to the journal. *Sur* is confined to the lower right of the map because it rarely publishes the same poets published in *Repertorio Americano*, for instance, and even more rarely those poets published in Cuba’s *revista de avance*, Mexico’s *Contemporáneos*, or the *Revista de Chile*, all of which reside on the far left of the map. Instead, *Sur* composes its own solar system, proximate to only a number of other Argentine journals where many of *Sur*’s editors, and Borges, in particular, had previously worked and published.

[SLIDE 2]

Sur emerges from the ashes of a number of earlier Argentine journals, such as *Prisma* (1921-1923), *Proa* (1922-1926), and *Martín Fierro* (1924-1927), published between 1921 and 1927. However, the historical difference between these journals and *Sur* does not push them away from each other. While we can’t justifiably extrapolate out from this case across the network to say that historical circumstances are not responsible for some of the distance we see between journal-agents, in the case of these journals the passage of time does not control network proximity. Instead, *Prisma*, *Proa*, *Martín Fierro*, and *Sur* forge an Argentine, and even a Borgesian sub-network within the Latin American network. Notably, one Argentine journal remains on the Argentinian side of the map, but somewhat outside of this subnetwork. **[SLIDE 3]** This odd man out, *Claridad*, was radically inclusive within Argentine poetry—its editors followed the belief

that “accumulation was an editorial principle, and totality was truth” (Montaldo). We can see the battle between this method and *Sur*’s more particular aesthetic community represented in quantitative form as both sought to create “our America” and to gain traction and establish position in the Argentine social and literary field.

[SLIDE 4] While the network map depicts *Sur* as marginal within the field of Latin American poetry, turning to the journal’s own numbers might produce a different understanding of its relationship to “our America.” Given the editors’ bold claim to produce a new version of this unified field, we might expect *Sur* to draw on a large number of authors from throughout Latin America. And, indeed, the journal’s national makeup appears diverse at first. Only 25% of the poets included in the journal come from Argentina. However, of the 203 poems published in *Sur* from 1931-1945, non-Argentine Latin American poetry in Spanish makes up just 16% of the journal’s publications, and Argentinian poets account for 44% of the journal’s production. Compared with similarly sized journals, such as Cuba’s *Revista de Avance* (216), in which Cuban poems make up 38% of the total output, while other regional poets combine for 27% of the journal’s publications, we can see that *Sur* provides minimal attention to Latin American poets writing in Spanish outside of Argentina. Even in journals like *Cuba Contemporánea*, *México Moderno*, or Mexico’s *Contemporáneos*, all of which published much higher rates of their own nationally affiliated poets, the rates of publication from regional poets are higher than in *Sur*.

This percentage breakdown only confirms what we already see in *Sur*’s marginal placement within the map of the poetry network of the Americas. [SLIDE 1 AGAIN] Combining the network analysis with the national and regional distribution in these charts

we find an adamant *provincialism* in *Sur* as well as in Argentine poetry journals more generally. This provincialism exists against expectations: Argentinian poets dominate the system in sheer numbers—their 215 poets make up 13% of the total network, whereas the next closest Latin American nation, Mexico, trails them by more than 100 poets at just 6% of the network. And yet, despite this numerical hegemony, less than 20 Argentine poets appear in non-Argentine journals. While less than 10% of Argentinian poets publish outside Argentina, 45% of Cuban poets and 46% of Mexican poets are published outside of the journals in their countries of origin. Combined with the very low numbers of Latin American Spanish speaking poets from countries other than Argentina published in *Sur*, we can see that *Sur* in particular, and Argentina more generally is provincial within the literary system or network of Latin America.

One factor that might produce such provincialism within a regional literary network is local or national dialect. Whereas in much transnational literary network theory the lack of translation or the slow process of a translated text might help explain asymmetrical literary communities, within a regional network in which everyone speaks the same regional language—in this case, Spanish—local and national dialects can impede transnational circulation. [SLIDE 5] In Argentina, the *porteño* dialect of Buenos Aires, a dialect which spread throughout much of the country, replaces standard Spanish pronouns like the informal second person “tú” with “vos,” and subsequently conjugates words differently: “you can,” or “tú puedes,” in standard Spanish becomes “vos podés” in this dialect. The particular slang that exists within this dialect is known as *lunfardo*, which became strongly associated with tango lyrics from 1917 forward. At least one of the magazines included in our network list, *Cara y Caretas*, a popular illustrated journal,

was known for its use of *lunfardo*, and notable Argentine writers from Evaristo Carriego to Borges, his friend and sometimes writing partner Adolfo Bioy Casares, and the novelist Roberto Arlt used this coded language in their writings from the 1920s to the 1940s. The use of *lunfardo* also sometimes functioned as a verbal act of resistance against Spanish norms, as when Borges and a friend published a *lunfardo* screed under the pseudonym “Ortelli y Gasset” in response to a Spanish writer’s claim that Madrid was “the intellectual meridian of Latin America.” Borges went on to include *lunfardo* phrases in his second book of poetry, *Luna de enfrente* (1925), but then edited the phrases out in favor of standard Spanish in later editions of the book in order to write what he called a more “universal” literature.

Given *lunfardo*’s canonically important place in the literary history told about this period, we could expect it to limit Argentinian poetry’s diffusion throughout the network. And yet, when we built a dictionary of *lunfardo* terms and then ran those terms across the digitized texts from the journals on our map, the jargon was so small as to be statistically irrelevant. [SLIDE 6] This slide shows us that the machine found only 18 poems out of 961, or 1.9% that included *lunfardo* in the Argentinian journals.

If a provincial dialect did not stop the work of Argentine poets from circulating in other national journals throughout the network, the Argentine journals could also be isolated by another version of provincialism: a lack of reading, engaging, and translating works from abroad. However, *Sur*’s enthusiasm for texts outside Latin America reveals a different position. If we look back at its publishing record, we notice that not only does *Sur* possess the lowest level of publications from contributors of other Spanish speaking Latin American countries, but it also includes more than double the next highest

percentage of translations. [SLIDE 4 AGAIN] Based on this information, *Sur*, we might say, was the embodiment of the Argentine poetry network's *provincial cosmopolitanism*. Isolated from the rest of the network in Latin America, the journal featured the highest percentage of translations within Latin America. It was less "our America," and more "America's Europe," a port of misplaced ideas that would apparently close them off from the rest of Latin America.

And yet, while *Sur* remains provincial within the total system, when we look at the journal's place within the translation network, we see that those journals from whom they were previously the most marginal [SLIDE 7], journals like Cuba's *Revista de Avance* and Mexico's *Contemporáneos*, become their close neighbors when we consider the co-presence of translated poets. [SLIDE 8] Indeed, *Sur*'s affiliation with Mexico's *Contemporáneos* is even tighter than the Argentine journals' connection with the smaller journals that spawned it, such as *Proa* or *Martín Fierro*. [SLIDE 9] To represent this information in yet another way, we can see in this slide that *Sur* once again sits at the center of its own system, but that system is now comprised of the journals of Cuba and México. Provincial within the regional literary system, but connected through the translation network, *Sur* in this map points to a third space in networked identity, in which the cosmopolitan or extra-regional literary system brings together journal communities previously marginal to each other.

Perhaps just such a version of "our America" was at stake for *Sur*'s editors when they entered the regional field in 1931: an America whose bonds come not from connections internal to the regional field, but through relation to this extra-regional world. However, in closing, we should of course consider that there were also other

actors in this field who might offer us a version of “nuestra América” more in line with Martí’s initial call to unite Latin America against the imperial forces of Europe and the United States. [SLIDE 10] Notably, those individual actors do not include Martí—who appears nowhere in our network—and even the most well known of Martí’s contemporaries, Rubén Darío, or the famous poets of the vanguard, such as Borges, Vicente Huidobro, or Pablo Neruda appear to only link isolated networks. The most quantitatively significant poets of the network are three female poets: [SLIDE 11] the Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet and diplomat Gabriela Mistral (aka Lucila Godoy Alcayaga), the Argentine Alfonsina Storni, and the Uruguayan Juana de Ibarbourou, who gained the appellation “Juana de América” in 1929.

It is to these poets that we might turn to find “our America,” and it is to Juana de América, in particular, one of the network’s most published and widely distributed poets, who might help us reimagine the literary canon of the Latin American vanguard. In one attempt to join the network analysis I have pursued throughout this talk to the stylistic or semantic field of the words that make up the poems in this network, we compiled a corpus of Juana de Ibarbourou’s first three books of poetry, and tested the words in this corpus against the words of several of the journals in our network. [SLIDE 12] What we found does not necessarily tell us about Juana’s style, nor about the journals themselves. Instead, the co-occurrence of terms the machine learning associated with Juana’s writing and those terms the machine associated with the journals helps us observe at the linguistic level a claim that was already borne out in our network maps. Despite the fact that Juana de Ibarbourou lived in Montevideo, just across the Río de la Plata from Buenos Aires; despite the fact that her poetry appears throughout Latin America more than any other

poet; and despite the fact that her contemporaries recognized her representative stature, her poems never appeared in *Sur* nor in any of its related journals, nor did the presence of her style. Juana de América, therefore, provides at least a first, speculative step in linking network and semantic analysis in the Latin American poetic system, and points the way forward for a more thorough reimagining of our America.