

Shellhorse, Adam Joseph. *Anti-Literature: The Politics and Limits of Representation in Modern Brazil and Argentina*. U of Pittsburgh Press, 2017. 264 pp.

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In *Against Literature* (1993), John Beverley asks, “Are there experiences in the world today that would be betrayed or misrepresented by literature as we know it?” (69). As the nod to Beverley in the title suggests, Adam Joseph Shellhorse’s *Anti-Literature* picks up this question, taking it in a new and timely direction. For Beverley the subaltern critique of literature as a hegemonic cultural institution must come from extra-literary forms, as exemplified by *testimonio*. Taking the opposite tact, Shellhorse asks what would seem to be a long-overdue question: might “literature as we know it” be most effectively subverted from within? “Anti-literature” is the term Shellhorse gives to experimental texts that make space for previously excluded perspectives within literature not by mimetically representing historically marginalized experiences but, rather, by self-reflexively questioning the limits of literature as a representational regime.

The stakes of this ambitious project amount to no less than reconceiving of the relationship between literature, politics, and identity in Latin America. Tracing an intellectual history that runs from Oswald de Andrade’s *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928), through the debates about Sartrean commitment on the pages of *Contorno* in the 1950’s, through Ángel Rama’s *Transculturación narrativa* (1982), through the emergence of subaltern studies in the 1990’s, to Jon Beasley-Murray’s *Post-hegemony* (2010), Shellhorse challenges a predominant narrative, which (largely indebted to Rama and his account of the ‘Boom’) understands Latin American literature as a representational project whose success in aesthetic as well as political terms lies in articulating the specificity of Latin American identity. This narrative, according to Shellhorse, problematically reproduces a literary regime that is state-centered, class-based, and paternalistic. Shellhorse thus follows Alberto Moreiras, among others, in calling into question the promise of narrative transculturation: the identitarian impetus to represent the whole of a nation or a culture inevitably leads to the exclusion or cooption of minoritarian experience and the reduction of difference to sameness.

At the same time, argues Shellhorse, this representational model of literature fails to account for the radical potential of textuality itself: “literature’s powers of texture, syntactic subversion, affect, and, crucially, the work’s semiotic density” (168). Beyond ignoring the political power of form, what

Shellhorse dubs “the Latin American literary regime of representation” becomes a reactionary force; it “encodes, territorializes, and represses the revolutionary potential of the experimental text” (22). Drawing on Beasley-Murray’s politicization of affect and Jacques Rancière’s notion of the sensible in “Aesthetics as Politics,” Shellhorse attributes to anti-literary works a political power that resides not in a given text’s content, message, or ideology but, rather, in its capacity to reconfigure affective relationships and subvert the sensible, which Shellhorse defines in Rancière’s terms as “the system of implicit rules for seeing, speaking, and making that unite and divide a community” (8). *Anti-literature* thus joins recent interventions in Latin American literary studies such as Francine Masiello’s *El cuerpo de la voz* (2013) in calling for the re-valorization of the materiality of language and of the immanent, affective experience of reading as forms of political engagement.

The modern Brazilian and Argentine texts Shellhorse presents as case studies of anti-literature (ranging from the 1920’s to the early 2000’s) self-consciously engage with their generic conventions, their media specificity, and their inescapably mediated nature in order to lay bare their status as constructed cultural objects and to interrogate the limits of the literary. It is precisely in their self-reflexive and anti-representational aesthetics that Shellhorse locates their political commitment: a form of solidarity with the subaltern, the feminine, and the minor that does not attempt to fully translate marginalized voices into literary form but, to the contrary, calls formal attention to the impossibility of doing so without radically reconceiving of what we consider literature to be.

The first chapter, devoted to Clarice Lispector’s *A hora da estrela* (1977), analyzes the novel’s self-reflexive scrutiny of the act of representation: the educated, middle-class, male narrator agonizes over the task of representing an indigent female subject, Macabea. Drawing on Luce Irigaray’s notion of the feminine, Shellhorse reads Macabea’s subjectivity as thwarting the narrative and epistemological structures the narrator seeks to impose through its distinctly feminine alterity, characterized by the “noncategorizable language of the affect” (35). Chapter Two turns to David Viñas’s film script turned novel, *Dar la cara* (1962, 1963). Challenging the predominant view of Viñas’s literature as an overly schematic vehicle for ideology, Shellhorse argues that it is precisely Viñas’s formal experimentation at the limit between the filmic and the novelistic that enables a break with the “civilizing” role assigned to Argentinian literature as far back as Sarmiento and Echevarría: that of representing otherness and thereby inscribing it in a state-centered national identity. *Dar la cara*, he contends, suspends the possibility of mimetic representation by summoning minoritarian communities (composed of Jewish *marranos*, homosexuals, artists, and activists) through a mobile, prismatic gaze that never reduces them to stable objects of representation. The third chapter makes the case for the centrality of Oswald de

Andrade's *Manifesto antropófago* (1928) to Brazilian concrete poetry. Working against the predominant reading of *antropofagia* as an identitarian framework, Shellhorse focuses on its self-reflexivity: the way "cannibalizing" diverse discourses, media, and cultural objects disrupts the logic of mimetic representation. Through the lucid historical account he provides of the relationship between the two movements, Shellhorse locates the often-missed political intervention of concrete poetry in its abandonment of lyrical subjectivity in order to participate in extra-poetic systems such as advertising and pop culture by "devouring" them (77).

These first chapters build towards Shellhorse's extended treatment of the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos in the second half of the book. Chapter Four tackles Campos's monumental prose poem, *Galáxias*, whose composition spanned thirteen years of military dictatorship (1963-1976). Shellhorse argues that the poem's open construction—consisting of 50 nonsequential *cantos*, lacking punctuation, pagination, plot, as well their accompanying hierarchical structures—invites a revolutionary form of participation from the reader. Faced with the void of authority and guidance left by the author's renunciation of representation, she must undergo the "ordeal of affect" (118) that results from grappling with the immanence and materiality of language. Chapter Five puts Campos's writings on the baroque in Brazil in dialog with "Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina" (1966) by the Northeastern writer Osman Lins. In this novella, Shellhorse argues, visual ornamentation and condensation of language yield a non-representational, affective "monument to the subaltern" (141). Shellhorse's close, textual reading of Lins is particularly satisfying: it succeeds in exhuming the often-ignored political commitment of the experimental writer while still attending to the richness and poetry of his language. The sixth and final chapter analyzes Campos's experimental poem, "O anjo esquerdo da história" (1996), which was composed in memory of nineteen massacred peasant participants in the Landless Workers Movement (MST). Shellhorse argues that rather than representing the subaltern (as other, as victim), the poem aspires towards a language and a syntax capable of expressing (through its rhythm, enjambment, graphic use of punctuation, and movement across the page) the violence, friction, and future-oriented momentum of the MST's struggle. Shellhorse presents "O anjo" as a "limit case" of anti-literature's abandonment of referentiality, a text that crosses literature over into uncharted territory (194).

As becomes particularly evident in these last chapters, one of the most important contributions of *Anti-Literature* is its recuperation of the radical politics of formally experimental and self-reflexive works, which have too often been dismissed as "narcissistic, elitist, intransitive" (23). It must also be said that the *Anti-Literature's* own representational politics (which works stand in for greater

movements) and pointed indifference to received notions of major and minor constitute a significant intervention in the field. Focusing on the capacity of language to reconfigure the sensible from a subaltern, feminist, and anti-authoritarian perspective, Shellhorse charts an alternate account of Latin American literary modernity. Forms, voices, and experiences relegated to the margins of the ‘Boom’—a movement that has always privileged the Hispano-American, cosmopolitan, male novelist—are given center stage in Shellhorse’s anti-literary narrative. These include poetry, genre- and media-defying hybrid forms, feminine and subaltern perspectives, and Luso-Brazilian writing.

Though *Anti-Literature* presents itself as a study in modern Brazilian and Argentinian literature, all but one of its chapters are devoted to Brazilian texts. This refreshing inversion of the predominant model in Latin American literary criticism, in which Brazilian works often play token roles, does, however, encounter its own trouble. David Viñas’s *Dar la cara* is made to stand in for what is presumably (based on the elaboration of its Brazilian counterpart) a richly varied anti-literary tradition in Argentina, and by extension in Spanish-America. In a similar fashion, it seems that the full weight of the feminine/feminist vein of resistance that Shellhorse locates as central to anti-literature falls on Clarice Lispector, the single woman writer included in his corpus.

More generally, one is inevitably left wondering what other experimental writers and texts might be encompassed by anti-literature, both within and beyond the Brazilian context. Might this model of reading illuminate the feminist lines of flight from authority and the subversion of logocentrism in Ana Cristina Cesar’s *Cadernos de Portsmouth*? The negativity and orality of César Vallejo’s *Trilce*? The fusion of fictional and documentary forms and the turn towards embodied, affective experience in *Nuevo Cine Argentino*? Would its antagonistic stance towards the institution of literature or its claim to minoritarian politics be compromised if it were called upon to account for the formal innovations of an author as canonical (yet undeniably invested in pushing the limits of literary language) as João Guimarães Rosa? In essence, the unanswered question is: what makes anti-literature unique within the broader category of avant-garde literature? Is it a matter of its particular political inflection? The extremity of its genre-defying, multi-medial, and anti-representational aesthetics? At the end of the day, is it possible, helpful, or in keeping with the anthropophagist spirit of anti-literature to rigorously cordon it off from other avant-garde explorations of the limits of representation? I ask these questions not to suggest that *Anti-Literature* is an incomplete study but, rather, to underscore its status as a seminal study poised to spur ongoing conversation and debate.

Though the work may appear most immediately relevant to scholars of Brazilian concrete and experimental poetry, Shellhorse’s model has implications far beyond the specific case studies offered.

It will prove equally thought-provoking to those interested in subaltern studies, critical genre studies, and the limit between literature and other media, and it is indispensable reading for anyone interested in the politics of avant-garde form in Latin American literature.