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“Los festivales son las verdaderas novelas”

Pola Oloixarac’s *Mona* and the Latin American Writer on the World-Literary Circuit

During a fevered evening at a literary festival in the Swedish countryside, the eponymous protagonist of Pola Oloixarac’s *Mona* (2019) makes the following proposition to a fellow writer, the Macedonian Chrystos: “No es que en nuestra época no haya personalidades literarias... si no que vienen a lugares como estos creyéndose escritores y se van como personajes. ¡Los festivales son las verdaderas novelas!” (Oloixarac 2019: 110). Mona’s declaration is in part a response to an earlier complaint by Chrystos about the lack of “grandes personalidades” on the contemporary literary scene and, specifically, of celebrities such as those of the Latin American literary “Boom” of the 1960s and 70s (42). Chrystos’s complaint is explicitly about how market pressures have shifted the writer’s habitus, making her a (mere) professional, akin to a professor, lawyer, or dentist. But Mona’s proposition, too, is about the intersection of literature and the market. In Mona (and the novel’s) analysis, the contemporary circuit of fairs, festivals, and other such events requires a performance of writerly persona that makes of writers not (rounded) personalities but (flat) characters, as reliant on as they are limited by stereotype. Characters, to extend the point, in a narrative they do not control, set against the background of the exhaustion of a fantasy of global integration that emerged in the wake of the Cold War, promising smoother and more equitable forms of exchange. This fantasy is also the “one-world thinking” that undergirds dominant theories of world literature that, per Amir Mufti, envision literary relations beyond or without borders but which, like the false promise of globalization itself, continue to function as a “border regime” regulating movement (Mufti 2016: 4–9). Articulated in the putatively borderless space that is the rarified milieu of the elite literary festival, Mona’s complaint is ultimately about the practices of differentiation on which such spaces rely and which, in turn, determine the making and circulation of contemporary literature.

Oloixarac’s *Mona* emplots the dynamics of the contemporary world-literary field, at once participating in and proffering a critique of the conditions of its existence. My task in this essay is to elucidate the terms and tactics of this critique, which shifts from a biting satire of the literary festival – a critical attitude that caused some reviewers to bristle, but which Adam Morris, who translated

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the novel in to English, celebrates as Oloixarac's trenchant "bitchiness" – to a more subdued but no less cutting examination of the operating logics of the liberal world order, particularly as pertains to discourses of human rights and gendered violence (see Brindisi 2019; Doyle 2022; Morris 2021). Mona has suffered a violent sexual assault just prior to her departure for Sweden, with the details slowly revealed over the course of the narrative. In narratological terms, this structure of suspense and disclosure serves to create narrative momentum, offering a measure of resolution at the novel's conclusion. Conceptually, I contend, it is central to the novel's engagement with questions of literature and the market.

My analysis is in dialogue with scholarship on publishing infrastructures and other literary institutions that condition the making and circulation of literature, whether it be the United States publishing industry (e.g. Sinykin 2023), the institutionalization of creative writing in (U.S.) universities (McGurl 2009), the cultural value of prizes and awards (English 2008), or the influence of non-governmental and non-profit organizations (Brouillette 2019). I am particularly interested in the ways in which writing from the "South", invoked here as a conceptual rather than simply geographic designation, enters into and is shaped by a world-literary field still dominated by institutions of the Global North. There is a rich compendium of such scholarship in Latin American literary studies[1]. Beyond Latin America, scholars have looked at the ways in which the participation of writers from the postcolonial world in US creative writing programs has shaped the global Anglophone novel (Nadiminti 2018), prizes and workshops have impacted contemporary African literature (Wenzel 2006; Suhr-Sytsma 2018; Tunca 2018), and events such as the Jaipur Literary Festival have constructed a particular vision of the Pakistani novel (Sivaram 2019; see also Kantor 2018: n14, 479 and Bilal 2022).

Literary festivals in particular have emerged as a "new authority" in the contemporary literary field, with the proliferation of such events from the 1990s onward constituting what Ana Gallego Cuiñas playfully terms "el *boom* de las ferias del libro y de los festivales literarios" (Gallego Cuiñas 2022; Sapiro 2016 and 2022). While much of the business of publishing takes place at book fairs, literary festivals have gained a corresponding importance, becoming a new source of income for writers and contributing to the valuation and distribution of their work to new audiences (Sapiro 2016: 17, 2022: 204; see also Gallego Cuiñas 2022: 175–176)[2]. But, as Kristen Stern argues in an analysis of Francophone African writers at the

1 See, for instance, the volumes Müller/Locane/Loy (2018), Müller/Siskind (2019), Guerrero/Locane/Loy/Müller (2020), Guerrero/Loy/Müller (2021), and Moraña/Gallego Cuiñas (2022), as well as Sánchez Prado (2018), Locane (2019), Gallego Cuiñas (2022, 2019a and 2019b), and Cedeño (2009).

2 For more on the commercial function (and effects) of book fairs, see Bosshard (2021), Bosshard/García Naharro (2019), and Bosshard/Anastasio/Cervantes Becerril (2022).

Étonnants Voyageurs Festival in Saint-Malo, France, such events also assign clearly circumscribed roles to the writer (Stern 2019). Writers have addressed their experiences of such spaces in their fiction, as in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Jumping Monkey Hill" (2006/2009), inspired by her participation in the workshop for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2003. Such works are not simply comic or rancorous *romans à clef*, but, per Nathan Suhr-Sytsma and Daria Tunca's readings of "Jumping Monkey Hill", works about the making and meaning of fiction (Suhr-Sytsma 2018: 1102). This thinking guides my reading of *Mona*, where Oloixarac envisions the novel not just as a product of the market but as a metaphor via which the operations of the market can be elucidated.

In the Latin American literary field, *Mona* can be placed alongside such works as Alberto Fuguet's (nonfictional) writing about his time at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa or Alan Pauls's novel *Wasabi* (1994). For the purposes of this essay, however, I read *Mona* in dialogue with César Aira's *El congreso de literatura* (1997), which takes place at a festival in Mérida, Venezuela. In addition to working as a writer and translator, Aira's narrator-protagonist, "Aira" (one of the author's many partial doubles), is also something of a *sabio loco*, who attends the conference with the intention of cloning Carlos Fuentes, chosen because he is both a "Celebridad" and a "Genio reconocido y aclamado" (Aira 2004 [1997]: 25). But instead "Aira" unleashes a horde of giant silkworms that threaten to destroy the city, having acquired his genetic sample from Fuentes's necktie via a cloned and miniaturized wasp. "Aira" must then save the city, which he does using a prop from the production of one of his plays by a local university theatre group.

Aira in *El congreso* is fundamentally concerned with questions of doubling, copying, and imperfect reproduction. These are not mistakes, but rather figures for artistic creation. "Aira's" cloning process produces what are paradoxically described as "clones no parecidos" ("non-similar clones", per Katherine Silver's translation) that, as Heather Cleary argues, serve to valorize "the reproduction of texts, beings, and ideas alike under the productive sign of (monstrous) deviation" (2021: 52). There is a similar play with partial or imperfect doubling at work in *Mona*, where Oloixarac's protagonist, a young woman who found immense success with her first novel, as Oloixarac did with *Las teorías salvajes* (2008), both does and does not resemble her Argentine author. Mona Tarrile-Byrne is a Peruvian writer living in the United States, where she is enrolled in a PhD program at Stanford University, as Oloixarac was for a time, and conducts research on the Amazon, which is also an interest of Oloixarac's and an important location in her second novel, *Las constelaciones oscuras* (2015). Yet, if *Mona* invites identification between author and protagonist, it also interrupts suggested parallels. Famous but not yet established, Mona is struggling to write a second novel. In the

kaleidoscopic logic of the novel's play with doubles, she is just one of many non-similar doubles for the author. I take *El congreso*, therefore, as both an antecedent and counterpoint to *Mona*, as it helps to elucidate key aspects of the more recent novel.

For both Aira and Oloixarac, the festival condenses and makes visible the material circumstances under which literature is produced and circulates. Both writers must then grapple with the legacies of the Boom, as the moment in which Latin American writing was consecrated in the world republic of letters, to invoke Pascale Casanova's formulation, and which largely remains the measure against which Latin American writing and writers are received outside of the region today (see Casanova 2004 [1999]: 324–328; Gallego Cuiñas 2019a: 42; Bencomo 2009). If the Boom – or, more precisely, a version of the Boom[3] – is the prevailing model, each novel instead proffers figures for (and figures itself as) a non-similar reproduction of that model. Foremost amongst these figures are the silkworms produced by "Aira's" cloning of Carlos Fuentes. These were not a matter of mistaken source material, as "Aira" observes: "¿Cómo iba a saber ese pobre instrumento clónico descartable [the wasp] dónde terminaba el hombre y empezada su ropa? Para ella era todo lo mismo, era todo 'Carlos Fuentes.'" Even literary critics, he continues, struggle to separate the person of the writer from his work (71). Ultimately, "Aira" decides, the transmutation of Fuentes into the silkworms is the result of literary greatness passing through "los telares de la vida", a turn of phrase that invokes the weaver's loom as well as more large-scale forms of mechanized production (72). The silkworms, then, are the most precise, if not faithful, copy of an established model, and they serve as counterpoint to *El congreso*'s own textual play.

Mona, meanwhile, has been declared by one critic – a former editor of Julio Cortázar, now head of Mona's department at Stanford – as "la heredera del Boom" (Oloixarac 2019: 9). In France, her editor at the prestige house Gallimard was previously the translator of Gabriel García Márquez (42). But Mona in fact bears little resemblance to these (supposed) predecessors. While she may have been hailed as a "fenómeno radical" in the pages of what the novel calls "una revista cubana que era el Chanel de la izquierda latinoamericana", founded by Fidel Castro as the cultural arm of the Revolution (a reference to *Casa de las Américas*, a key venue for the dissemination of the Boom), Mona glibly imagines the magazine "apilándose digna en el baño del Líder" (9). Finally, both Oloixarac and

3 I have in mind here what Ángel Rama describes as "la arbitrariedad que caracterizaría el *boom*" from its diffusion to Barcelona and outward from there, his point being that this process produces an increasingly distorted image (Rama 1984: 53–54).

Aira also engage with the Boom at the level of form, proffering the registers of the absurd or surreal as a pointed deviation from the magical realism more readily associated with that earlier moment. See, for instance, the group of silent strangers in black who wander the grounds of the festival in *Mona* as well as that novel's apocalyptic dénouement. For both writers, then, the Boom appears as the sticky residue of a prior moment, an ill-fitting but nevertheless unavoidable point of reference.

Written about two decades apart, however, *Mona* and *El congreso* capture distinct historical moments and, consequently, operate at different scales. The scope of the festival in *El congreso* is regional in both location and audience, providing the occasion for exchange amongst Latin Americans. While *El congreso* begins with the protagonist discovering long-hidden treasure and sudden wealth, "Aira" makes clear that recent years have been marked by an economic crisis (simply: "la crisis") affecting a publishing industry struggling in the wake of a "periodo previo de euforia" and its attendant contraction (Aira 2004 [1997]: 16). Which crisis exactly is not clear, but that is the point: the cultural life of the region has long been punctuated by the externalities of boom-and-bust economic cycles, more recently combined with the longer-term consequences of public disinvestment from the arts spurred by the neoliberal logic of so-called structural adjustment.

Mona, by contrast, seems to have escaped these regional realities, and is instead carving out an existence as part of the moveable feast of the world-literary circuit. Supported by a scholarship at Stanford and invitations to festivals, residencies, and other events, she has access to a very different kind of glamour: for instance, during the festival Mona writes a series of poems, in French, that will be part of an advertisement for the luxury brand Hermès (Oloixarac 2019: 74–77). But glamour is not without precarity. Mona is one of thirteen finalists for the (fictional) Basske-Wortz Prize, which will be awarded at the end of the festival – most likely to an Icelandic poet whose work few attendees have read. The narrative repeatedly emphasizes the underlying tensions of the event, referred to simply as "la Meeting," as in this early description: "cuatro días de lecturas y amenas conversaciones en un exclusivo resort del campo sueco. Cuatro días de intriga y quieta desesperación, hasta ver quién se llevaba el botín de doscientos mil euros" (24). Here, the delicate shift in narrative perspective between the two sentences (the narrative is largely focalized through Mona) juxtaposes the outlook of festival organizers with that of participants, for whom material questions might surpass the intellectual ideals of the meeting; or, to be more precise, whose material realities are often studiously overlooked by the institutions in which they are embedded. For Mona, the Basske-Wortz not only represents the possibility of escape (she imagines using the money to live in the Brazilian Pantanal) but, as a

difficult conversation with her editor makes clear, Gallimard will likely only publish that second novel if Mona wins the prize (14 and 49).

If Mona is not free of the economic concerns that afflict "Aira", the differences between the worlds they inhabit are still significant. The distinction of historical moment (late twentieth century versus early twenty-first) conditions that difference in scale (regional versus global), placing *El congreso* and *Mona* on different sides of an historical divide that is also the period in which an earlier optimism about the promises of globalization saw the emergence of the notion of the "post-global" as, to quote Alfred López, that which is "glimpsed at those moments where globalization as a hegemonic discourse stumbles" or, per Tejumola Olaniyan, the moment in which it becomes clear that the "dominant protocols" of the existing formation have frayed (López 2007: 4; Olaniyan 2016: 389)[4]. It is the period in which "the exhaustion of the globalist project becomes evident once and for all" (Müller/Loy 2023: 1). "Exhaustion" here signals the disintegration of a particular fantasy of global integration, understood to have been uneven and fragmented all along – an erstwhile "*deseo de mundo*", to invoke Mariano Siskind, that has become an "*unworlding* of the world" (2019: 206–207).

The notion of "*unworlding*" notwithstanding, the sphere Mona inhabits remains staunchly worldly in its aspirations. As Mona's invitation to the Meeting declares, in English: "*Our warmest congratulations*, Miss Mona Tarrile-Byrne. *The world is yours*" (Oloixarac 2019: 13). The festival is a world peopled by translators and interpreters, whose multilingual and cosmopolitan denizens converse easily about works such as *Don Quixote* or *One Thousand and One Nights* (standard texts, to underline the point, of the world-literary canon). Monolingualism, whether in English or Spanish, is seen as *déclassé* and a refusal to engage with the wider world (28, 38–39). Mona herself explicitly identifies as belonging to "la sociedad global de los escritores" over and above a regionally or linguistically delimited affiliation, and specifically that of the Latin American writer (28). Yet this ideal of a global society of writers is also marked by ambivalence, on the part of Mona as much as the novel. Crucial here is the self-reflexive dimension of the satire, as the novel often does what it decries and vice versa. The novel draws much of its comedic force from national stereotype (a posturing Iranian, a pushy Israeli, a lascivious Frenchman, a frequently naked Swede), culminating in the extended comedy of a soccer match between the writers from Sweden and "el Resto del mundo" (115–117). Per Mona, these national types: "Eran las armas de *world lit*, el modo en que cada uno se apropiaba de su localismo y desde esa atalaya jugaba a

4 For more on the post-global as it pertains to Latin American literature, see the volume Müller/Loy (2023).

su porción del universal literario" (106). At the same time, there is little regard for any real specificity in the realm of *world lit*, where places as distinct as Peru, Argentina, and Brazil are often treated as interchangeable; as Mona remarks, "El Sur era el origen más grande y más laxo del mundo" (109).

In this aspect, *Mona* reads as a literary rendering of critiques of the so-called "global novel" that have emerged in the last decade or so. Here, the global novel is understood as the literary correlate of globalization, itself a project of mass-cultural homogenization where local specificity remains only as affectation or personal branding. This kind of literature, per critics, favors breadth over depth and the "smooth" or toothless to anything that might be considered challenging. Tim Parks, for instance, sees the global novel as overly oriented toward the Anglosphere, lending itself too easily to translation and sacrificing cultural specificity, with experiments in form giving way to the more portable blueprints of genre fiction (Parks 2010, 2013). In an essay for *n+1*, meanwhile, the editors of that magazine offer an explicitly politicized critique, finding in what they term "world lite" a divestment from political questions in favor of defanged (and often also deracinated) meditations on trauma, personal or historical. As they write: "Today's World Lit is more like a Davos summit where experts, national delegates, and celebrities discuss, calmly and collegially, between sips of bottled water, the terrific problems of a humanity whose predicament they appear to have escaped" (*n+1* editors 2013: n.p.).

Oloixarac's critique largely aligns with that of the *n+1* editors. Both, for example, highlight the "unavoidably, increasingly, transnational" nature of contemporary writing and the contemporary writer (*n+1* editors 2013: n.p.). Both also locate the literary festival (the fictional Meeting as well as established proceedings such as the Hay Festival, with its many international iterations) within the larger network of publishing houses, agencies, foundations, prizes, and, crucially, universities that make up the circuits of *world lite*. Before Stanford, Mona was at Princeton and, like Oloixarac and Fuguet, she has also participated in the Iowa International Writing Program, described in the novel as "una residencia célebre en el medio de la nada yanqui" (Oloixarac 2019: 30). Given these affinities, it is little surprise that the *n+1* editors cite Oloixarac's *Las teorías salvajes* as an example of "uncompromising work" that "suggests the outlines of a thorny internationalism opposed to the smoothly global" (*n+1* editors 2013: n.p.).

But if *Mona* is not simply a rancorous *roman à clef*, it is also more than a substantiation of such criticisms. What Oloixarac's novel brings to the critique of *world lite* is a view from *within* its circuits. The novel registers not just Mona's embodied experience of elite US institutions as a newly minted "woman of color" (a topic that receives pointed, if dismissive, attention) but also of the pressures of visa requirements (although Mona holds a European passport, her US visa is in

jeopardy) as well as the alienation and isolation that that these spaces can foster. It also provides a glimpse of the sexual economy of the festival circuit, an alternate network of affiliation that is as much comic as dismal. Examples include descriptions of an earlier encounter with the Colombian writer Marco Guncio at the Hay Festival in Cartagena de Indias; a scene, also at the Hay, in which Mona must avoid a Prix Goncourt winner ("el prix Goncourt") whom she kissed in the pool the night before; and, most pointedly, Mona's encounter with the French writer Philippe Laval masturbating in the women's bathroom at the Meeting. Far from accentuating the vapidity of its setting, the novel's insistent (equal parts bawdy and unsparing) attention to and descriptions of sex serve to emphatically reinsert the body, as material object and site of desire, into a world putatively principally concerned with the life of the mind. Oloixarac's point, therefore, is not that the field of *world lite* is removed from the material realities that affect most of the world, as in the Davos comparison made by the *n+1* editors, but that – much as the "post" in post-global indicates not an epochal shift in the global so much than the exhaustion of the global as hegemonic discourse – it is shot through with those material realities in ways that are often overlooked or ignored.

This returns me to Mona's exclamation, cited at the start of this essay, that literary festivals flatten writers from personalities into characters. These, much like E. M. Forster's description of flat characters in the novel, are easily recognizable and memorable types constructed around a single idea or quality that "have not to be watched for development" (Forster 1927: Loc 901–937). Following Alex Woloch, character flatness can be understood as consequence of the necessary economy of "character-space" (Woloch 2003: 15). But what is interesting about *Mona*, as a novel, is that all its characters – including Mona, despite her complaints – are largely flat. Flatness, then, becomes less a matter of the necessary distribution of attention that produces character-space than a function of the operating logic of the world described in the novel. Put a little differently: in the neoliberal cultural marketplace, flat characters are equivalent to what in our contemporary moment is often termed "branding". If Oloixarac's comparison of the literary festival to the novel is an instructive metaphor, what is at stake in *Mona* are questions of agency; that is, of the extent to which individuals are aware of and engage with the flattening pressures of the world-literary market. The novel elaborates on these questions through a series of proxies for both Mona and her author, the result being a chain of non-similar doubles that serve to illuminate different dimensions of the problem. Here, the French writer Philippe Laval and the Colombian Marco Guncio function as contrasting cases.

Shortly before Mona's encounter with Philippe, he delivers a lecture plagiarizing large parts of Samuel Beckett's *Malone meurt* (1951), strategically omitting its most famous line about failing again and better. The theft goes unnoticed by the

audience (Oloixarac 2019: 102–105). Stunned, Mona imagines that perhaps this is some kind of gesture, "algo del orden de la performance" (103). Her interpretation is correct, to the extent that when she confronts Philippe, he frames his actions as the pathetic protest of an unlikely winner of the prize, adding that for him the purpose of attending festivals is to be so repulsed as to be left with no option but to stay home and write (105). This discussion prompts Mona's initial reflections about national or regional stereotype as "las armas de *world lit*", where Philippe's choice to "centrarse en su patetismo personal" befits his "marca regional" as a French writer (106). But the subsequent encounter in the bathroom, which Mona experiences as doleful rather than threatening, shifts that line of thinking. Appalled, Mona returns to the bar, where she makes her declaration to Chrystos about festivals being the real novels (109–110). The issue is one of intent, as Mona's estimation Philippe has shifted from understanding his actions as a tactical, considered engagement with stereotype (a "performance") to nothing more than another flat iteration of an overly familiar type. To underline the point, Morris, who worked with Oloixarac on the English translation, inserts an additional sentence following Mona's exit from the bathroom: "Philippe's branding was stale. The lecherous Frenchman thing was beyond cliché – nobody could outdo DSK[5]" (Oloixarac 2021 [2019]: 134). Mired in his flatness, Philippe becomes an indicator of the risk that all the writers in attendance at festival run and, at the metanarrative level, that the novel and even Oloixarac herself are subject to.

For Mona, these risks constellate around her identity as a Latin American (if not quite Peruvian) writer whose status is buttressed by the aura of the Boom. While her connection to the Boom may inspire (playful) envy from someone like Chrystos, Mona is wary of the association in ways that go beyond her apparent contempt for its reflexively leftist politics. Rejecting the marriage of writing and politics as the *sancta sanctorum* (a phrase Mona also uses of refer to her genitals) of the Boom, Mona instead imagines the Boom, like all artistic vanguards, as fundamentally a matter of interpersonal affinity ("Ese llevarse bien y ser amigos") to which artistic (or, political) purpose is ascribed only after the fact (8, 123–124). And yet, Mona also cannot entirely resist the imperatives of the character she is expected to play. After making her comment to Chrystos, Mona takes the stage at the bar and sings the boleros "Perdida", written by the Mexican Alfredo Gil and popularized by his Trio Los Panchos with the Argentine Maria Martha Serra Lima, and "La flor de canela", by Peru's Chabuca Granda, shifting the gender of

5 The reference is to the French economist and politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who was forced to step down as managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2011 following allegations that he sexually assaulted a hotel worker; he has since faced other allegations of this kind.

that song's male addressee (*limeño*) to the feminine *limeña* (110–113). The performance receives a standing ovation from her fellow writers, but Mona is overcome by emotion and quickly leaves the stage.

The Colombian Marco represents a very different mode of embodying the persona of the Latin American writer. The author of a novel about a time-jumping hacker who travels to the ship of Sir Francis Drake titled *Cartagena en llamas* (Cartagena in flames), Marco arrives at the Meeting dressed in the costume of a techno-pirate, complete with cowboy boots and wide-brimmed hat, later adding a feather[6]. His lecture to the group begins with a series of declarative commonplaces:

> Soy colombiano vengo de Sudamérica. Para aquellos que no sepan, tenemos presidentes que suenan como cantantes de reguetón: Chávez, Lugo, Lula. Todo lo que pasa en el mundo lo inventamos antes: el Donald Trump es un aprendiz de república bananera, que es nuestra especialidad. Tenemos excelente café, nos sobran sitios para vacacionar, y criamos los mejores jugadores de soccer [English in the original] antes de que los compren los equipos de ustedes en Europa y que puedan verlos jugar todas las semanas. Nuestra Virgen María es Karl Marx, a quien siempre recurrimos cuando queremos mostrar que somos escritores pero también buenas personas, que somos escritores marxistas, de izquierda, como corresponde [...]. (80–81)

In the novel's satirical register, Marco's exuberance is the stuff of high comedy, magnifying to the point of absurdity – like Aira's silkworms – stereotypes of Latin America and its writers. The audience responds favorably to Marco's opening statements, and gamely follows his transition to the convoluted claim that Google has become the "contranovela de la novela humana" in which humans are now characters performing for the non-human reader (82–83). As an antecedent to and uncanny double for Mona's later claim that festivals are the real novels, the importance of Marco's argument lies less in its coherence than in the shrewdness with which it is presented. Per Mona, the audience is receptive to Marco's declarations because "la tecnología no solía parearse con Latinoamérica" (83). In contrast to Philippe, Marco is not so much embodying his regional brand as making a strategic, and calculated, performance of it.

What separates Marco from Mona, then, is the purpose to which such tactical engagement is put. As becomes clear in a later conversation about the Nobel Prize, while Marco is an astute observer of the terms under which Latin American writers have been rewarded in the world-literary market, he cannot see beyond its economy of prestige. He understands, for instance, that an earlier preference for

6 Marco also functions as a non-similar double for Oloixarac, who is also interested in questions of technology, speculation, and surveillance, as explored in *Las constelaciones oscuras*.

left-leaning Latin American writers by the Nobel committee ("comunista que había, comunista que se lo ganaba") has shifted toward a putative centrism that rewards figures such as Mario Vargas Llosa (described as "un intelectual de la derecha neoliberal globalizada"), but goes on to claim that the Nobel will be awarded to artificial intelligence before either himself or Mona (90–92). Through Marco, Oloixarac articulates the ends of a particular vision of the Latin American writer (political, socially relevant) that has become increasingly uninteresting to the international market as anything but leftist nostalgia. In its place, Marco offers the posture of a knowing skeptic who has already anticipated a technological turn in which machines will do the writing. As Mona deduces, this is nothing more than another act of branding that will inevitably grow stale. Neither Philippe nor Marco, to return to Forster's terms, has "to be watched for development". Mona, meanwhile, continues to strain against the flattening imperatives of her participation in the festival, even as she occasionally appears to embrace them. Yet Mona's singing of the two boleros is born as much of the character's internal conflicts about her self-presentation as of the slow-building tension of the violent assault that Mona has not yet fully recalled; at this juncture in the narrative, Mona is nearing her breaking point.

In introducing *El congreso* and *Mona* at the start of this essay, I gave a plot outline for the first and a description of the conceit for the second. Indeed, *Mona* is thin on plot but thick in atmosphere, both in terms of the satire of the festival and in the sense of foreboding that culminates in the description of the protagonist's sexual assault. While from the beginning it is clear something happened to Mona prior to her departure for Sweden, her memory is fractured. Repeatedly, the reader is given brief flashes of dialogue or images from which the narrative cuts away. Only in the penultimate chapter, in the context of a tender sexual encounter with the Swedish writer Sven, does Mona fully recollect the event. But even this moment of realization is forestalled. Rather than consider what might come next for Mona – Sven's question about whether she plans to stay in Europe, for instance, remains unanswered – the narrative once again shifts attention elsewhere. The final chapter instead describes the lecture by the Icelandic poet, during which the lake at which the writers have gathered begins to churn, a wall of water rises, and a creature emerges from the depths. These phenomena first appear as reflections of Mona's emotional state but are then shown to be unfolding in the world. At the novel's close, all is destroyed, per the closing lines: "la carpa blanca volaba deshecha bajo la tormenta como si nunca hubiera conocido más que la lluvia, el polvo y la nada" (Oloixarac 2019: 143).

Read against the conclusion of Aira's *El congreso*, where the protagonist heroically dispatches the silkworms and continues with his affairs, the ending of *Mona* branches in two directions, neither of which seems fully satisfactory: first, the recollection of the assault and, second, the clearing of the stage. The latter is a

fitting finale for a thoroughgoing satire, where all that remains for the author to do is annihilate the caricatures that have served their purpose. The slow revelation of the former, meanwhile, creates narrative tension by lightly borrowing from the genre conventions of the thriller. This branching generates a jarring incongruity in tone between the satire and what are revealed as the novel's meditations on violence, trauma, and memory, which has been poorly received by some critics (Doyle 2021; Stein 2021). In a more generous reading, Adam Thirwell proposes that the dynamics of revelation that structure the plot in *Mona* indicate that violence, trauma, and memory are the novel's true subject (Thirlwell 2022). This would position *Mona* against the *world lite* critique, in so far as a focus on personal trauma is understood as constituting the evasion of more pressing political questions. But it is telling that, having revealed the assault, the novel does not then use this traumatic event to posit the psychological or moral growth of its protagonist, resisting the imperatives of the trauma plot, itself derived from the Bildungsroman as closely associated with the narrativization of human rights (see Slaughter 2007).

Rather than representing its true (if partially hidden) subject, the novel's interest in violence, trauma, and memory in fact works in concert with its larger critique of the contemporary world-literary system, as enacted through its satire of the festival. Throughout the novel, Mona anxiously follows news of Sandrita, a twelve-year-old girl disappeared from the Lima neighborhood of Rímac, where Mona's mother was born; Sandrita is eventually found in the Rímac river, strangled and showing signs of sexual assault by multiple assailants (Oloixarac 2019: 74, 111–112). Mona reads this news between her renditions of "Perdida" and "La flor de canela," quietly dedicating the latter to Sandrita and "todas las niñas que viven aun muertas bajo los ríos" (112). The gesture, as the stuff of well-meaning tribute, leaves Mona distraught but is lost on her audience (113). Mona's interest in Sandrita's case and reaction to the news of her death, which combines panic and identification, anticipating the full recollection of her own assault, position Sandrita as another non-similar double for the protagonist, where the differences between their circumstances are significant. The two belong to different worlds: Mona is alive at an elite literary festival in the Swedish countryside; Sandrita is dead in a marginalized neighborhood in Lima. Yet, in keeping with Oloixarac's emphasis on questions of money and the body disrupting the high ideals of the festival, what might appear as two worlds are in fact part of the same; as with the very real material questions of money and sex, violence, and sexual violence in particular, are intrinsic to the world of the festival.

Mona's interest in Sandrita also serves to contrast with the occasional references in the novel to questions of human rights and, in particular, to the Holocaust as the point of origin for the contemporary international human rights fra-

mework that is at the heart of the (neo-)liberal world order. These are introduced via the Israeli writer Hava, whose insistence on repressed memory as a volcano waiting to erupt is partially affirmed by the novel's narrative arc, but who has also made questions of human rights her "brand" (Oloixarac 2019: 53–54). Indeed, where instances of historical violence are referenced by other Meeting participants, these are most often glib – as in a joke made about the Armenian genocide when the Armenian poet in attendance briefly goes missing (29) – or simply part of a speaker's self-mythologizing, as with the Iranian (and Danish) writer Abdullah Farid. Counter such tendencies, Oloixarac is more interested in the effects of violence in the present than in the legacies of historical trauma, which, in the Latin American context, would be stuff of post-dictatorship narrative and of what Fernando Rosenberg has called "la novela de verdad y reconciliación". Per Rosenberg, such novels endorse a discourse of human rights "que autoriza y reproduce una división geopolítica de modernidades cumplidas o pendientes, ahora con los derechos humanos como medida universal" (2009: 94). In satirizing the nominal attachment to principles of human rights by the festival participants, Oloixarac shows the extent to which these ideas have themselves been flattened, reduced to little more than *idées reçues*, effectively undoing the logic of the division Rosenberg describes. While amply recognizing the material effects of that imaginary in the world, *Mona* shows the exhaustion of a hegemonic discourse that (falsely) promised global integration and has instead delivered ever-shifting terms of differentiation (a correlate of the flattening pressures Mona experiences) and exclusion. The literary festival, as synecdoche of the contemporary world-literary system, then, is one of the places in which that exhaustion can be glimpsed.

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