




THE MERCOSUR FICTION: POLITICS AND LITERATURE IN GABRIELA AGUERRE'S *O QUARTO BRANCO*

*FICÇÕES DO MERCOSUL: POLÍTICA E LITERATURA EM O QUARTO
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Sarah C. Lucena¹ 

Georgetown University, United States of America

Abstract: This paper discusses the viability of speaking of a Southern Cone identity as a Mercosur's project by analyzing Gabriela Aguerre's *O quarto branco* (2019). Departing from the official Mercosur's discourse about its project of regional cultural integration and in connection with Diego Olstein's (2017) concept of American Divergence, I argue that the lack of success of Mercosur in creating the notion of a common identity for the Southern Cone is linked to the historical foundation in which lies the creation of the bloc. By reading Aguerre's novel in view of such divergent framework, I propose that the regional integration that Mercosur longs for can be achieved via literature – specifically through Benedict Anderson's (2016) concept of print-capitalism, for which novel in print functions as the seed and fabric from which large groups of anonymous peoples can commune and identify. When representing the dualities at play when moving across the Southern Cone borders, Aguerre's novel both contests and accepts such duality while suggesting that the Mercosur's common identity is still not a reality, yet achievable in the realm of fiction and communal imagination.

Keywords: Southern Cone; Brazil; Uruguay; Gabriela Aguerre; Print-capitalism.

Resumo: Este artigo discute a viabilidade de se falar de uma identidade do Cone Sul como um projeto do Mercosul por meio da análise de *O quarto branco* (2019), de Gabriela Aguerre. Partindo do discurso oficial do Mercosul sobre seu projeto de integração cultural regional e em conexão com o

¹ PhD in Romance Languages from the University of Georgia, USA. Assistant Teaching Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Georgetown University, USA. Email: s11757@georgetown.edu.

conceito de América Divergente tal como proposto por Diego Olstein (2017), argumento que o fracasso do Mercosul em criar uma noção de identidade comum do Cone Sul está relacionado à base histórica sobre a qual se funda o bloco. Ao ler o romance de Aguerre à luz desta perspectiva analítica, proponho que a integração a qual o Mercosul almeja pode ser alcançada através da literatura – especificamente a partir do conceito de capitalismo impresso proposto por Benedict Anderson (2016), no qual a novela impressa funciona como a semente e o tecido a partir do qual grandes grupos de pessoas desconhecidas se unem e se identificam. Ao representar as dualidades em jogo quando cruza as fronteiras do Cone Sul, o romance de Aguerre tanto contesta quanto aceita esta mesma dualidade ao mesmo tempo que sugere que a identidade comum do Mercosul ainda não é uma realidade, embora possa ser alcançada no plano da ficção e da imaginação compartilhada.

Palavras-chave: Cone Sul; Brasil; Uruguai; Gabriela Aguerre; Capitalismo impresso.

Resumen: Este artículo examina la viabilidad de hablar de una identidad del Cono Sur como proyecto del Mercosur a través del análisis de *O quarto branco* (2019), de Gabriela Aguerre. Tomando como punto inicial el discurso oficial del Mercosur sobre su proyecto de integración cultural regional y en conexión con el concepto de América Divergente propuesto por Diego Olstein (2017), argumento que el fracaso del Mercosur para crear una identidad común del Cono Sur está relacionado con la base histórica sobre la cual se funda el bloque. Al leer la novela de Aguerre a la luz de esta perspectiva analítica, propongo que la integración que pretende el Mercosur se puede lograr a través de la literatura, específicamente desde el concepto de capitalismo impreso propuesto por Benedict Anderson (2016), en el que la novela impresa funciona como semilla y tejido desde los cuales se juntan y se identifican grandes grupos de desconocidos. Al representar las dualidades en juego al cruzar las fronteras del Cono Sur, la novela de Aguerre cuestiona y acepta esta misma dualidad al tiempo que sugiere que la identidad común del Mercosur aún no es una realidad, aunque puede lograrse en la ficción y la imaginación compartida.

Palabras clave: Cono Sur; Brasil; Uruguay; Gabriela Aguerre; Capitalismo impreso.

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1 Fiction and borders

In March 2021, Latin America celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), a trade bloc established in 1991 by its founding countries Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay, geographically referred to as the Southern Cone countries. Self-described as “a union of countries working as one to secure the well-being of their people” (MERCOSUR, 2022b), Mercosur’s original members intended to promote mutual integration at many levels, including the opening of borders for Latin-American citizens; the creation of a common monetary fund to support structural convergence; and even the elaboration of the Citizenship Handbook, a manual to foster the idea of the so-called “Mercosur citizens”.

Critics of Mercosur argue that the bloc is weak and lacks political, economic, and social relevance and integration. For instance, Leslie Bethell (2010) shows that the establishment of good frontier relations in the Southern Cone has not been successful since long before the emergence of Mercosur, with confrontations dating back to the 1800s. Maria Prado (2001) argues that the creation of Mercosur revealed asymmetries that characterize economic and social relations among the members of the bloc and questions whether Mercosur can effectively forge a sense of a common, regional affiliation. Finally, Mahrukh Doctor (2013, p. 522) sums up the question by acknowledging that “the overwhelming impression in the academic literature as well as in the media and public perception is of a stalled regionalism process with few beneficial outcomes” in the economic, political, and social arenas.

The present article proposes a look at Mercosur’s mission of deepening integration among its member countries from a cultural perspective. Reading contemporary fiction produced in the transit of the Southern Cone borders, I look at how a literary narrative moving between

Brazil and Uruguay dialogues with the political efforts of Mercosur to forge a supra-national common identity among citizens of both countries. Published in 2019, *O quarto branco* by Brazilian Uruguayan writer Gabriela Aguerre brings the story of the twin sisters Glória and Gaia, born in a cold Monday during the fall season of dictatorship in Montevideo. However, and establishing the mood for a series of distressing events that occurs in the novel, the reader soon learns that only one of the sisters survived, while the other one died a few weeks after being born. At the time of her death, their mother decided to change their names. Hence, the daughter who survives, originally named Gaia, became Glória, which was the original name of the deceased child. Only seventeen years later, already living in São Paulo, Glória learned about the changing of names when reading her mother's old journal. Such unplanned discovery determines Glória's being in the world from that moment on. In a trajectory of search and reconciliation with her own past, the moving between borders serves as a journey of tentative reconnection between her duplicated self, fragmented in two names, two sisters, two countries.

From such bisected path, whether geographical or subjective, Aguerre's novel offers a reading of Glória's experience as a metaphor of a broad, collective experience of the group of nations in the Southern Cone, raising questions related to the efforts of the region to converge into a common, regional identity. How dual belonging is subjectively arranged for citizens of the Southern Cone, as in the case of Brazil and Uruguay? Can regional blocs like Mercosur surpass the individual idea of nation and nationality and create attachment despite centuries of divergent paths? Finally, given the potential of cultural products to create narratives of belonging, how is literature offering an alternative to understand such question of affiliation between Southern Cone countries from a cultural, discursive perspective? Amid this context of little success regarding the collective meaning of the Southern Cone as an integrated community, it is fundamental to ask how, thirty years after the creation of Mercosur, the

literary text has been documenting such dynamic of affiliation between citizens of the bloc and dialoguing with their imagination as a community.

2 Uneasy position

From a symbolic perspective, when Mercosur establishes itself over such territories, it also establishes a reinterpretation of this space from the point of view of the identity affiliation, an issue pointed out by Nestor García Canclini (1996) when he says that Mercosur-type agreements begin to see consequences around culture that go beyond a commercial reorganization between the countries involved. Similarly, Hugo Achúgar and Francisco Bustamante (1996, p. 128) talk about the need for economic reorganization to reflect or encompass the identity reorganization. Both authors also state that there is an ambiguity present in the original purpose of Mercosur, which is at times seen as a customs union tool, of economic nature; whereas at other times intends to be seen as a model of regional integration, aiming at the inclusion of political and social aspects for the creation of a sense of community in the Southern Cone (ACHÚGAR; BUSTAMANTE, 1996, p. 127).

Still at the level of symbolic production in the cultural arena, the impression does not seem to differ from what has been pointed out above by Prado (2001), Bethell (2010), or Doctor (2013). To forge cooperation and integration in the field of culture, in 1995 it was signed the Resolution GMC 02/95, a protocol for cultural integration with the purpose of promoting exchange of the bloc's common historical and cultural heritage named Mercosur Cultural. Actions developed by Mercosur Cultural included all but a few seminars and conferences. Later, in 1996 the Protocol for Cultural Integration was approved, and in 2008 it was the time for the Declaration of Cultural Integration – two instruments that made it official the role of culture as a key element to deepen regional integration. Regarding the Protocol for Cultural Integration, the official note states that:

By means of the Protocol, Member States commit to foster cooperation and the exchange between cultural agents and institutions aiming at promoting cultural and artistic expressions from MERCOSUR. This can be made possible through the creation of cultural spaces, cultural actions, and co-productions that express MERCOSUR's historical traditions, common values, and member countries' diversity. (MERCOSUL, 2022a)²

The somewhat vagueness of the proposal does not seem to have been translated into any widely known initiative that engaged the bloc in actions of mutual integration and affiliation. As Valéria T. Graziano and Mónica Guariglio (2022, p. 159) explain, “despite such preliminary initiatives, it would take some time until the proposed ideas reflected concrete outcomes”³, also highlighting the importance of symbolic representations as a means for regional integration. Initiatives such as the Mercosur Cultural itself as well as the Património Cultural del Mercosur and the Bienal del Mercosur go relatively unnoticed by the public, even though they happen regularly. As an anecdote to illustrate the case, in 2011, at the eighth Bienal del Mercosur, Canclini (2013) raised the following question regarding the relevance of the bloc in its cultural role: “Why should there be a Mercosur Biennial if there is no Mercosur art?”. By asking that, he was pointing to the Bienal's difficulty in representing artistically the process of integration of the Southern Cone countries, supporting the notion that the establishment of the bloc on a geographical space does not automatically creates the notion of community.

Another juxtaposing perspective that serves as a model for understanding the contradictions between politics and experience in terms of affiliation in the Southern Cone is offered by Diego Olstein's idea of American Divergence. American Divergence is a concept proposed by Olstein (2017, p. 256) that is directly tied to two earlier events in world

² All quoted citations originally published in Portuguese are translated by me and will be indicated as so by a footnote of the original text: “Com o Protocolo, os Estados Partes se comprometeram a promover a cooperação e o intercâmbio entre instituições e agentes culturais, com o objetivo de promover a difusão das expressões culturais e artísticas do MERCOSUL. Isto pode ocorrer, entre outros, com a criação de espaços culturais e a realização de coproduções e ações culturais que expressam as tradições históricas, os valores comuns e as diversidades dos países membros do MERCOSUL”.

³ “apesar desses avanços iniciais, levaria um tempo para que estas ideias ganhassem densidade e concretude”

history: the Greatest Divergence, a separation “between the trajectories of the Old and New Worlds”, that is, an imaginary line splitting Eurasia from America; and the Great Divergence, a division “within the fates of societies in the Old World”, that is, a north-south axis within Eurasia. Such “challenges of divergence” portray an arrangement of the world into two schemes, “one between the Old and New Worlds, and the other within either the Old or the New World” (OLSTEIN, 2017, p. 256). But it also speaks of cultural and economic legacies as well as points to factors such as the consequences of a feudal past, maritime power and trade, and ultimately the exploitation of natural resources and enslaved people.

It is thus under such geographical disposition that the American Divergence is shaped. As an east-west axis inherited from the two previous greater divergences, the American continent finds its course split into a British North America, “created by a capitalist modern ‘fragment’”; and Latin America, a “medieval feudal ‘fragment’” (OLSTEIN, 2017, p. 255). In the case of the American Divergence, such diverging fates between north and south points towards ties, legacies, and traits of historical and cultural nature, whether it considers the European side or the American side of the Atlantic as the reason for the American Divergence (OLSTEIN, 2017, p. 256). Equally significant, it leads to another disquieting aspect: the fact that, regardless of which divergent perspective Latin American is observed from, the region finds itself in the “losing side”, in political, economic, or social terms, in this global scheme (OLSTEIN, 2017, p. 257).

Narrowing down the perspective of the American Divergence to look at how regional relations have been developed in the southern part of Latin America, it is interesting to note how the divergent perspective offers a useful alternative to understand the making of border relations in the Southern Cone. As Leslie Bethell (2010, p. 470) points out, Brazil’s relationship with its neighbors had been characterized by a mutual disinterest for a significant period of time. Besides, the current frontiers of the Southern Cone were established based on a perception that Brazil and Hispanic America were not part of the same unity. Instead, as Maria Prado

(2001, p. 132) shows, it was common, from the Brazilian point of view, to refer to its neighbors as “the other America”, “where disorder, dissent, and fragmentation pervaded, all fed by republican ideas”⁴.

Such perspective was reflected in the many territorial disputes among Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. In the Hispanic side, the Portuguese domination was perceived as worse than the Spanish one (PRADO, 2001, p. 134). For the Brazilian perspective, the Southern Cone region belonged to Brazil due to the “natural frontiers” that linked the Amazon to the River Plate. For both sides, what was at stake was a divergence of ideas manifested in the political course – a “unitarian” monarchy versus “fragmented” republics – of the nations involved.

Thus, the creation of Mercosur in 1991 is built over hundreds of years of dispute in which the differences that separated Brazil and its Southern Cone neighbors were highlighted much more frequently than the similarities that existed between them (PRADO, 2001, p. 146). Ten years after the bloc’s formation, Prado (2001, p. 147) debated whether Mercosur would bring changes from a cultural perspective that would modify historically divergent relations in the Southern Cone. Twenty years later, Bethell (2010, p. 481) argued that it was still unrealistic to speak of a “Latinamericanization” of Brazil as there was no considerable engagement between these group of countries. Thirty years after the Treaty of Asunción was signed, it is probably safe to assume that it is still a challenge to think of an established Southern Cone community or identity, as such idea still inspire small popularity to the wider audience, questioning the relevance of the bloc from a cultural perspective.

⁴ “onde campeavam a desordem, a desunião e a fragmentação, todas alimentadas pelas ideias republicanas”

3 Text and imagination

Benedict Anderson (2016) offers an alternative for the creation of a shared sense of affiliation that is yet to be established among the Southern Cone countries. As he argues in his *Imagined Communities* (2016, p. 53), neither economic interests nor ‘natural’-geographic, politico-administrative, or market zones in themselves create a sense of attachment enough to unite a group of strangers under a shared understanding of commonality. Such statement follows Anderson’s quest for explaining why, for example, Brazil or the United States managed to create and sustain “the affective bonds of nationalism” amidst a vast geographical area, whereas Spanish America conceived individual conceptions of nation and nationalism; that is, the fact that the whole Spanish American empire fragmented itself into eighteen separate states with self-contained characters:

The original shaping of the American administrative units was to some extent arbitrary and fortuitous, marking the spatial limits of particular military conquests. But, over time, they developed a firmer reality under the influence of geographic, political and economic factors. The very vastness of the Spanish American empire, the enormous variety of its soils and climates, and, above all, the immense difficulty of communications in a pre-industrial age, tended to give these units a self-contained character. (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 52)

How, then, a consciousness of connectedness emerges when the ideological forces and constraints of an empire show different results in terms of nation consciousness and formation, as in the case of Brazil and Spanish America? That is when Anderson offers us the case of print-capitalism to explain this social, invisible glue that “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 36). As he explains, the appearance of print-capitalism – the reproduction of texts in print that allowed for the creation of new, rapid lines of communication and the spread of ideas – was of central importance to

establish the basis for national consciousness: “Speakers of huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper” (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 44).

As a result of this new possibility to consume texts in print in such a scale that expanded the once narrowed notion of belonging, communities gradually became aware of their own interconnectedness (or exclusion) through language, “aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field” and that only such peoples belonged under such language commonality (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 44).

There – where capitalism as a “system of production and productive relations” meets print and the diversity of human languages – lies “the embryo of the nationally imagined community” (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 44). If economic interest is not sufficient to unite a group of people unknown to one another around the same identity affiliation, it is languages and their reproduction in written form that offers the conditions for the creation of an imagined community; and these texts, responsible for building a layer of collective meaning in which an increasing number of people can identify with one another forging bonds of brotherhood and community (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 36, 53).

The backbone of Anderson’s print-capitalism surfaces through the newspaper and the novel, in which the latter “is clearly a device for the presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogeneous, empty time’” (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 25). The format of the novel brought in a new mode of apprehending the world through the imagination of characters and plot in an analogous activity with that of the readers, as “a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community”, anonymous, but in simultaneous activity (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 26). Upon reflecting on the links between social experience and the literary perspective, Regina Dalcastagnè (2005, p. 14) shows how each reader, when opening a book placed in their hands, begins a searching process. A journey to establish connections with experiences that can either mirror

their own present, past or future existence, as well as to allow this reader to be in contact with events that they hope to never live in the extraliterary realm. Novels can also offer those who are reading the chance to “understand what it means to be a different person, live in a faraway land, speak a strange language, be of a different sexual identity, a different way to look at the world”⁵ (DALCASTAGNÈ, 2005, p. 14), that is, to experience intimately otherness through reading.

For Dalcastagnè (2005), the possibility to portray and legitimate a diversity of perspectives constitutes the fabric of the novel, translated through multiple representations of places, characters, and narrators, but also involving the participation of a diverse set of authors and readers engaged in narrating and dialoguing with this multiplicity. That leads us to look at literature according to what Anderson (2016, p. 141) describes as a cultural product, whose varied styles in “poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts” are capable to imagine, sustain, adapt, and transform the sense of attachment and belonging that people feel for their imagined community, imagined shared affiliation. That is precisely what Aguerre’s novel does when it narrates the different dynamics of affiliation between Brazil and Uruguay in her celebrated *O quarto branco*, published in 2019. By centering the narrative at the experience of national duplicity that shapes her protagonist, Aguerre lets her readers examine what it means to be a citizen of the Southern Cone from a personal, intimate perspective, the one that emerges not from resolutions on the establishment of market zones, but from the reality of everyday life and experiences organized through text and imagination.

⁵ “entender o que é ser o outro, morar em terras longínquas, falar uma língua estranha, ter outro sexo, um modo diferente de enxergar o mundo”

4 Lost and found

Born in 1974 in Montevideo, Gabriela Aguerre moved with to Brazil at a very early age, what makes her identify herself as both Brazilian and Uruguayan or, as Brazilian writer Ana Marta Cattani (2022) puts it, “Brazilian born in Uruguay, Uruguayan born in Brazil”⁶. Before writing novels, Aguerre worked as a journalist, publishing articles primarily on tourism and traveling in Brazilian media. For this reason, the material for her first novel, *O quarto branco* (2019), has always been next to the writer through her professional and personal journey and was used to elaborate the identity puzzle of *O quarto branco*’s protagonist, Glória. Regarding Aguerre’s own experience of living within the duality of two geographical and affective spaces, languages, cultures, histories, identities, the writer explains:

I like to think that from the start I didn’t have to choose – I feel this bordering zone between two countries, two languages, a different me that could have been had I stayed, a me that would never exist if my parents had not migrated, witnessing the richness that comes from such a state of impermanence.⁷ (AGUERRE in CATTANI, 2022)

Aguerre’s first novel started as a disorganized pile of drafts written during a creative writing workshop and without any stated intention of being published nor nominated as a finalist for the *Jabuti Award*, the most prestigious literary prize in Brazil. The narrative begins when Glória, at age 40, finds out altogether that she had lost her job and could no longer conceive – “the romance is built from shipwrecks and new beginnings”⁸, as explains Stefania Chiarelli on Aguerre’s novel (2019, p. 1). The theme of the novel is developed from the absences that compose the life of Glória. The absence of her twin sister, who died a few days after being born, reflects a gap in Glória’s past, whereas the impossibility of having children represents a hole in Glória’s future. Her present moment feels like a shipwreck floating

⁶ “Brasileira nascida no Uruguai, uruguaia nascida no Brasil.”

⁷ “Eu gosto de pensar que desde já não preciso escolher – e tateio essa zona fronteira, entre um país e outro, uma língua e outra, um outro eu que poderia ter sido se tivesse ficado, um eu que jamais existiria se meus pais não tivessem emigrado, observando a riqueza que vem desse estado sempre impermanente.”

⁸ “de naufrágios e recomeços se constrói o romance”

in shock and demands that Glória embarks on a journey of self-discovery so that she can make sense again of who she is in this new, imposed reality. The loss of her sister, the weight of carrying her name, the distance between São Paulo and Montevideo, and the impossibility to conceive seems to put Glória in a never-ending state of reinventing and renegotiating with herself. It is then in such moment of crisis that Glória decides to return to Uruguay, a place homely than any other home, where arriving was always a relief, and where speaking Spanish means to feel at home (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 28, 55, 61).

Even though Glória moves to Brazil shortly after being born; even though she is linguistically and culturally fluent in this country, has created bonds, professional experiences; witnessed affections born and die in Brazilian territory, it is Uruguay that is materialized in Glória's memory as her first home in the world – separate and distinct from Brazil. These two countries are not felt by Glória as a continuum of her history: when Glória refers to Uruguay, she feels joy for she was born in this different country (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 28). Even in Brazil, she continues to think about the sounds of words with a Castilian accent, “my way of thinking with an accent so that I no longer forget my mother tongue”⁹ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 29). In fact, the separation between the mother tongue, Spanish, and the foreign language, Portuguese, marks Glória's perception of herself as being outside of her culture of origin. Upon returning to Uruguay, Glória explains her relationship with the language:

When hearing the first human contact in Spanish, usually the officer at customs, I would proudly reply with the same accent, as though seeing again a family member, I'm back, it took me a while but I'm here, now I stay, the strange becoming familiar, recognizing myself immediately, hearing my voice not as if it belonged to someone else, but to myself. Fit in.¹⁰ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 55)

Glória explains this moment when her identity is in pieces: “I was sad and lost like everyone one day becomes or could become and then

⁹ “meu jeito de pensar com sotaque [que é] para nunca mais esquecer minha língua materna”

¹⁰ “Ao ouvir o primeiro contato de um ser humano feito em espanhol, geralmente o oficial da alfândega, orgulhosamente eu devolvia o mesmo sotaque, como quem revê um parente, estou de volta, demorei mas cheguei, agora fico, o estranho virando familiar, reconhecendo-me imediatamente, ouvindo minha voz não mais como se fosse de outra pessoa, mas de mim mesma. Encaixada.”

un-become and find themselves again”¹¹ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 37). With this image of a shipwreck, she admits that she needs to go back to Uruguay, making this a return journey so that a fresh start is possible. The loss of her sister, which also generates the symbolic loss of her baptismal name, together with the loss of the possibility of becoming pregnant and imagining her continuation in the world, transport her back to Uruguay as the only possible starting point to find herself again and reorder herself in the world: “The plane lands in the airport runway and I feel that something inside me settles down”¹² (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 55).

In Montevideo, there is still a clash between the old and the new that reinvents the city, an air of progress that bothers Glória as she prefers, without any feeling of guilt, everything that does not change, the past with the face of the past, and explains: “Even though some parts are missing, here I will rebuild mine”¹³ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 56). Glória also insists on remaining legally tied to Uruguay, that is, as a regular citizen, “existent, on paper, in the statistics, one of the three million – and not just one out of the thousands who went away”¹⁴ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 57).

The image of reorganization is recurrent in the narrative and always linked to Uruguay. Prior to the trip, when packing, there comes the feeling of order: “Nothing gives me a stronger sense of organization than packing. It’s not only about what needs to go, but what stays: everything is in its right place, for the right reasons”¹⁵ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 53). Once in Montevideo, the city makes it possible to “reconnect with a possible organization of the world”¹⁶, and being in Uruguay means to “learn again to reorganize the world” (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 56-7). At one point, the protagonist asks: “Would Gaia seek comfort in structure?”¹⁷ – a rhetorical question that opens two paths: what her twin sister would be like, but also

¹¹ “Eu estava triste e perdida, como todos um dia ficam ou podem vir a ficar, e depois desficam e se encontram”

¹² “O avião vai aterrissando na pista do aeroporto e sinto que algo dentro de mim se aquieta”

¹³ “Mesmo com partes faltando, aqui vou remontando as minhas”

¹⁴ “existente, no papel, nos números, uma dos três milhões – e não apenas uma dos milhares que moram fora do país”

¹⁵ “Nada me dá mais a sensação de ordem do que arrumar uma mala. Não só o que precisa ir como o que fica: tudo vai permanecendo no lugar certo, pelas razões certas”

¹⁶ “entrar em contato com a organização possível do mundo”, “reaprender a reorganizar o mundo”

¹⁷ “Gaia seria de procurar conforto na ordem?”

what Glória herself would be like had she continued to be named Gaia. The elaboration of her pains through such questions starts to be developed in Uruguay, showing how the external organization begins to reflect in the interior of the character.

After a few days in Montevideo, Glória decides to take a trip within the trip, leaving the city towards La Paloma, a resort town unpopular to visit in the middle of winter. But that is where the protagonist goes, digging deeper into the Uruguayan space: “I look at my trip as a journey back, through no-places. A trip within, perhaps, turning everything I see into a composition of past and present”¹⁸ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 84).

Her relationship with Brazil and as a Brazilian is also explored in the narrative, bringing out the other’s gaze and the perception of herself as symbols of her search for meaning through the trip to Uruguay. Still in Montevideo, Glória observes a group of Brazilians from afar. She intends to get closer, but instead she chooses to just listen to the conversation pretending not to understand what the group says. On a similar, yet ambiguous tone, Glória doesn’t like it when the uncle she meets in Uruguay refers to her as “the Brazilian niece”; however, once in La Paloma, she introduces herself as Brazilian, perhaps to justify her visit to the coast in the middle of winter, something that only foreigners would do. There, she answers questions about Brazil, about “the people, the currency, but I can’t say what’s going to happen in the next episode of the telenovela”¹⁹, in any case recognizing in it a way to connect with Mirta and Dolores, mother and daughter and hostesses in La Paloma (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 95).

The whole trip lasts no more than a few days, a few weeks. Glória returns to Brazil, and since before arriving in Uruguay, she already knew that she did not intend to spend a long time in her country of origin. Back in São Paulo, it seems that the Uruguayan internal reorganization is unraveling, and as anxiety kicks in, a desire to feel at home again emerges. The separation between languages appears again:

¹⁸ “Enxergo a minha viagem como uma viagem para trás, por não lugares. Uma viagem para dentro, talvez, fazendo de tudo o que vejo uma composição de passado e presente”

¹⁹ “os brasileiros, os preços em real, mas não sei responder o que vai acontecer nos próximos capítulos da novela”

I find it odd the language they speak because it's also my language, but I haven't gotten used to it, and all my information are still processed in Spanish and then turned to Portuguese with some effort, a little mixed up, the fishhook coming back sometimes with the wrong word, looking like it's the right one, but I move forward, the chest no longer throbs.²⁰ (AGUERRE, 2019, p. 108)

The narrative comes to an end and remains in a place of loss and search, but also of acceptance for who and where one is. The places occupied by Brazil and Uruguay for the protagonist remain split, and it seems that each country has a different emotional function, an even contrasting one, but which matters for Glória's perception of herself.

Thinking about the intersection between the two countries in collective terms from their intersection in Glória's experience, there is a difficulty of interaction that oscillates between finding oneself in such juxtaposition only to feel lost in it again, symbolized by Glória through the linguistic mismatch, the discomfort of being portrayed as a Brazilian, but also the recognition of this same Brazilian identity depending on the context. And then, of course, the return to Brazil to complete her journey.

Regarding the circulation of the literatures of Mercosur among the countries of the Southern Cone, José Luís Jobim (2022, p. 10) points out to the difficulty of interaction between the literary works of these countries resulting from the absence of mechanisms that support the encounter and circulation of works produced in the Southern Cone. As he explains, cultural products originating from outside of the Southern Cone circulate much more easily in the region than the local ones, showing a dissymmetry in terms of circulation:

For example, the circulation of North American cultural products (music, cinema etc.) and literature in Southern Cone countries benefits from widespread dissemination and marketing, supported by the economic and soft power of the country of origin. In contrast, the literature or cultural products of the Southern Cone depend

²⁰ "Acho estranho o idioma que falam, porque é também o meu mas ainda não me acostumei, e todas as minhas informações ainda são processadas em espanhol, depois vertidas ao português com algum esforço, o recipiente todo meio misturado, o anzol voltando às vezes com a palavra errada, parecendo certa, mas vou indo, o peito já não lateja."

much more on agents from the academic community with links to state apparatus to make an impact beyond national borders. North American literature can dispense with the involvement of university teachers to bring it to the fore in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay, because it has many other forms of support to ensure its circulation; but literature from those countries must rely on those agents so as not to risk becoming even more invisible abroad. (JOBIM, 2022, p. 9)

And by *abroad* Jobim means the circulation of works from the Southern Cone within the region itself, where what prevails among them is a definition of a “cultural identity via sharp contrasts” although there are certain commonalities when it comes to their literary systems (JOBIM, 2022, p. 11). Achúgar and Bustamante (1996, p. 144) are also suspicious of the feasibility of cultural integration of the Southern Cone when they ask if “Isn’t it an illusion?”²¹. Giulia Barão and Marysol Rodríguez (2022, p. 230) speak of the integration as a dream – “the dream to live in a united and integrated Latin America”²² – in which the circulation of peoples and cultural products are fundamental to establish a cultural space for Mercosur. In any case, in the contemporary production written in Brazil, Gabriela Aguerre is joined by nationally recognized writers such as Paloma Vidal (Brazil-Argentina), Carola Saavedra (Brazil-Chile), and Julián Fuks (Brazil-Argentina), authors who transform their dual national affiliation in substance for their narratives²³.

It is true, however, that such substance doesn’t seem to be quite working yet towards the creation of an imagined community, a literary project that aims at inventing an imagination for a common, recognized Southern Cone identity. Reasons could vary from the lack of a more robust financial investment to promote this project, or an even more compelling marketing strategy to better showcase the already ongoing initiatives for a seemingly cultural integration – such as the Bienal del Mercosur or the Mercosur Cultural commented above. Another significant agent that plays a major role in disseminating this identity project are the universities,

²¹ “Não será uma ilusão?”

²² “el sueño de habitar una América Latina unida e integrada”

²³ Eurídice Figueiredo (2020) offers an elucidating reading of the work of these writers – Aguerre included – from the standpoint of the filiation narrative proposed by Viart & Vercier (2008).

especially in programs under the umbrella of Latin American Studies. As Jobim (2022, p. 9) puts it, our literature relies on universities to reclaim visibility. Thus, investigating what is the place of Brazil within such program's narratives about Latin and South America and how the relationship between the Mercosur's countries is convened or portrayed in such program's discourses is a valid indicator of how a Southern Cone identity has been perceived and used to elaborate on the understanding of the region.

Finally, it is of fundamental importance to comment on the centrality of the BIPOC communities, acronym coined by Lorgia García Peña (2020) to refer to Black, Indigenous, and people of color, for the discussion of what constitutes the Southern Cone identity. The inclusion of the BIPOC experiences as part of the Southern Cone narrative would at the same time contest how Aguerre's novel is seen as a one representation of the region while expanding its limits for a much more complex and comprehensive understanding of the region's history and experience. Similarly, a close look at how border communities in the Southern Cone negotiate belonging through language and culture would present creative, viable ways to elaborate a communal identity.

This paper claimed that it is through fiction that the birth of the Southern Cone imagined community seems to be possible; that is, it needs fiction circulating easily, in print, establishing lines of communication and identification that go beyond common external tariffs, abstract regulations, and free circulation of goods to make sense of a reality that in its essence is a common one for a diverse, anonymous groups of people. Mercosur can and should allocate sources to encourage this project, as its outcomes would reflect "that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (ANDERSON, 2016, p. 36). As Anderson (2016, p. 154) concludes, if it is through language that "pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed", novels, then, can pave the way for the Southern Cone identity, in which the tentative

Mercosur narrative of common belonging can finally transition from a fictional abstraction to an imagined, yet tangible reality.

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