DISCOURSES OF OTHERING: MARIANO MELGAREJO, THE BOLIVIAN BEAST

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The dictatorship of Bolivian caudillo Mariano Melgarejo lasted barely six years (1864-1871), yet his flamboyance, his explosive ascension to power and equally volatile demise inspired long-lasting controversies and numerous literary interpretations. Parting from the postmodern skepticism towards the notion of the ultimate “truth” and the belief that historiography is as scientific as it is creative, this essay examines Luis Landa Lyon’s Psicopatología de Melgarejo (1925), Alfredo Iriarte’s Bestiario tropical (1986), and Félix Alfonso del Granado’s Las memorias de Holofernes (1992). While drawing from the same repertoire of historical and folkloric anecdotes on Melgarejo’s hyperbolic persona as a phenomenon placed outside the norm, an atavistic “other” with an ogre-like physique, all three authors illuminate different ideological battles over cultural hegemony illustrative of the time of their respective production; battles that hinge on racial hybridization, class, and environmental determinacy.

“...y empuja el bestial paso vacilante
el minotauro boliviano andando
hacia las salas de oro clamoroso.”

“Bolivia (22 de marzo de 1865)”
(Pablo Neruda 342)

Two poems from Pablo Neruda’s Canto general deliver an indignant and pained interpretation of Bolivia’s turbulent history during the reign of Mariano Melgarejo: “Bolivia (22 de marzo de 1865)” and “Melgarejo.” The first recounts the impromptu personal coup d’état that placed a brutal militar in the presidential seat, while the second laments Bolivia’s collapse under the
caudillo’s barbaric rule. Through raw images of bodily excretions and detritus, Neruda stages the strongman’s violent incursion into power, where battlefield mud, manure, filth, blood, decapitations, and brain matter shore up a spectacle of gore. Melgarejo staggers in amidst the bloodbath and scatology; his beard underscores his frenzied savagery: “Barba de infamia, barba horrenda/sobre los montes rencorosos/barba arrastrada en el delirio/barba cargada de coágulos/barba hallada en las pesadillas/de la gangrena, barba errante/galopada por los potreros/amancebada en los salones” (Neruda, “Melgarejo” 341).

The subject of nightmares, Melgarejo’s hirsuteness is a frenzy of atavism that clashes with political decorum and pollutes its surroundings. The symbol’s potential is apparent: it constructs the historical identity of a man-beast whose inhumanity is conveyed through a primitive physique and equally savage conduct. The caudillo, Neruda’s “bestia borracha” (“Melgarejo” 340), “búfalo ensangrentado,” and “tempestuoso espectro apenas sostenido por la furia” (“Bolivia” 342), eclipses everything around him. Under his evil gaze, the masses cower as spineless pawns, and “civilized” opponents perish along with their proposals for a better Bolivia.

Neruda is not alone in immortalizing Melgarejo’s barbarism and outsized personality. In fact, the excesses surrounding the caudillo have long inspired historical and popular imagination, leading to a wealth of biographies, historical novels and fictionalized histories published regularly since Melgarejo’s death all the way to the present millennium. As early as 1962, Charles W. Arnade pointed out the wealth of emotive writings when it comes to the Bolivian caudillo, noting that this “vast Melgarejo literature... instead of being strictly factual and based on original documentation, is nothing other than historical psychology, production more of myth than truth” (352). According to Andrade, even though Melgarejo’s case is particularly prone to anecdotes, he bemoans all Bolivian historiography—with the exception of the production of one historian, Gabriel René-Moreno— as tainted by sloppy documentation and excessive social interpretation.¹

Furthering Arnade’s point, Hayden White (and many other postmodernists) would respond with a counterargument that all history is in fact interpretative, since making sense of the past requires illuminating and contextualizing traces of past events, an endeavor that is in
itself creative, not factual. White thus problematizes traditional historiography, arguing that
distory is a literary enterprise rather than a scientific one, because knowledge of the past
reaches us by means of our own superimposed narrative structures. With a postmodern
skepticism towards the hegemony of grand narratives or the notion of an ultimate “truth,”
White sees as much fiction in history as history in fiction, since the choice of unprocessed
records ultimately included in a given account depends on the whims and biases of a given
historian. These are man-made constructs after all, which are subjective and often
contradicting one another, even when interpreting the same events or individual. White refers
to the historians’ “reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are:
verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which
have more in common with the counterparts in literature than they have with those in
sciences” (“The Historical” 192).

This is not to say that postmodernism strives to eliminate history altogether; quite to
the contrary, it appears to be obsessed with history as a failed metanarrative in need of
reconfiguration. Postmodernists strive to rethink history, going against, in White’s own words,
“a professional historiography in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their
own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of
objectivity” (“Introduction” 152). Convincing history has always involved art, where authors
employ artistry (through topoi, tropes, figures, emplotment, characterization and so forth) to
transcend the truth-reality distinction and successfully conjure up the past, where there is no
conflict between the truth-content and affective and poetic functions. White’s appreciation for
the imaginative resources of invention and representation when it comes to cultivating history
allows us to explore the interpretative writings on Melgarejo, which, while drawing from the
same repertoire of historical and at times folkloric anecdotes, deliver very different stories (and
assessments) of excess and dysfunction. Aside from shedding light on this extravagant Bolivian
caudillo, they reveal tensions and interests vested in each interpretation, thereby illuminating
the ideological battles over cultural hegemony pertinent to each text, battles that hinge on
racial hybridization, class, and environmental determinacy.
In line with the postmodern exploration of competing ideologies, this essay examines the accounts that illustrate Melgarejo’s hyperbolic persona as a phenomenon squarely placed outside the “norm,” whatever this “norm” might be. Luis Landa Lyon’s Psicopatología de Melgarejo (1925), Alfredo Iriarte’s Bestiario tropical (1986), and Félix Alfonso del Granado’s Las memorias de Holofernes (1992) highlight Melgarejo’s ogre-like physique and beastly temperament, thus presenting an atavistic “other” whose reign falls somewhere between the realm of animals and men. Because many of the descriptors refer as much to Melgarejo’s character as they do to his appearance, this essay explores the caudillo’s “bodily life in the cultural and the political imagination” (Giorgi 36). In keeping with the premises of cultural studies, it addresses the discourses around Melgarejo’s physical person as a site of inquiry and a battleground of conflicting agendas. The accounts that present Melgarejo’s obnoxious and inebriated body as a disruptive force in need of correction also illuminate the prejudices, concerns, and ambivalences of the era in which they were produced. Drawing from positivistic pseudo-science and from tales of the tropics and the marvelous, they foreground Melgarejo’s brutish hold over both the Bolivian nation and the imagination of intellectuals.

Melgarejo’s dictatorship lasted barely six years (1864-1871), yet his ascension to power, rapid demise, and tempestuous personality produced controversy and inspired numerous interpretations delivered with a wealth of imagery and figurative language. Depicted either as ignorant or charismatic, boorish or well-mannered, kindhearted or pitiless, hideous or handsome, Melgarejo appears to be many men, all depending on whom we choose to believe, and the anecdote we take into account. Indeed, he inscribed himself in Latin America’s popular imaginary as a flamboyant if not disastrous leader, the subject of criticism and undying legends. Remarkably, there are also those who think highly of him.

Yet the affection for Melgarejo typically has little to do with his politics, nor does it stray far from bewilderment, exalting in turn his larger-than-life personality, impetuous nature, an occasional generosity, and his all-consuming love for one woman, his lover Juana Sánchez. He was not a bland bureaucrat, nor did he amass personal riches. He loved to drink, fight, and make love. These qualities assured him an undying presence in narratives of romance and adventure—as in La tempestad y la sombra (2000) by Néstor Taboada Terán—while political
appraisals condemn his presidency as a serious step backward in Bolivia’s path towards modernization. Rightly so, for among other fiascos, the bellicose caudillo made political concessions to Chile and Brazil that deprived the country of significant expanses of territory and natural resources. Moreover, with the decree published on March 20, 1866, he disposed the indigenous population of its communal property rights, throwing Bolivian peasants into servitude and poverty. His rule however does not differ much from what the larger picture of the nineteenth-century Bolivian politics reveals. Chronic politics of insubordination, constant revolts that bred transfer of allegiance, personalist power and military dominance that operated by successive schism, all contributed to notorious turmoil of Bolivian politics with revolutions and uprisings occurring in numbers barely under two hundred times in just one century (Dunkerley, “Reassessing” 23).

**Melgarejo’s Aberrance vis-à-vis Racial Discourses of the Early 1900s**

Some of the new tools of nation-building at the turn of the twentieth century were the doctrines of environmental determinism, as well as racial and medical discourses on biocultural *mestizaje*, all brought into place through a “liberal-positivist spirit of science, rationality, progress and reform” (Larson 138). Indeed, discourses of moral construction were imbued with health metaphors, where “science, sanctioned and stimulated by myth,” seemed to provide them with legitimacy, only to deliver subjective commentaries that had nothing to do with objectivity (Sanjinés 285). Likewise, concepts of collective psychology—which tended to depict group character flaws to allegedly sanitize living conditions—were deployed by cultured elites as a powerful interpretative framework. One such example is the 1909 *Pueblo enfermo* by the Bolivian Alcides Arguedas, an essay that gave its author international fame and a lifelong controversy at home. Governed by an organicist metaphor, racial determinism, and biological fatalism, *Pueblo enfermo* contends that Bolivia’s backwardness stems from its rugged geography, where the spirit of the Indian majority from the Altiplano is organically linked to its immediate environment: dry, harsh, and devoid of aesthetic appreciation.

Similarly, the author of *Psicopatología de Melgarejo* establishes a direct connection between Bolivia’s notorious dictator and disease. Informed by the emerging science of
criminology with key figures in the likes of Cesare Lombroso, the founder of Italian School of Positivist Criminology who related crime to an individual’s bodily anomalies and behavioral patterns, Luis Landa, a practitioner of forensic medicine and the founder of an Institute of Criminology in La Paz, sought to assert the caudillo’s deviancy through various manifestations of his behavior. Landa’s only motivation, he stressed in his introduction, was to diagnose illness in order to apply the appropriate therapy (ii). Governed by biological fatalism, Landa’s treatise foregrounds the drunkenness of Melgarejo’s father as a conduit to the caudillo’s well-documented intemperance. In a deterministic fashion, Landa asks rhetorically, “¿No pasaría lo mismo con Melgarejo, hijo de un criminal alcohólico? ¿Qué influencia pudo tener sobre él el pasado patológico de su padre?” (78-9). Indeed, Melgarejo’s rule was generously drenched in a cloud of alcohol. As Dunkerley writes, “Melgarejo’s fierce dedication to the consumption of chicha...created an almost schizophrenic atmosphere at his peripatetic court as the president veered from sober effusions of affection and generosity to arbitrary drunken acts of exceptional cruelty” (Americana 470).

Melgarejo’s military career and unparalleled bravery on the battlefield do not make a favorable impression on Landa, as it did on many others. Quite the contrary, they symptomize the behavior of a suicidal maniac who reveled in warfare, and had no respect for human life, including his own: “parece que en Melgarejo la sangre, el humo de la pólvora, los gritos de angustia; de dolor, despertaban en él, sentimientos de león dormido, del salvaje domesticado, con ancia de matar o hacerse matar; con una ancia loca como el toro frente al trapo rojo” (Landa 135). Melgarejo emerges as a bloodthirsty beast ruled solely by rage; his most pronounced characteristic, like that of any carnivore, appears to be his instinct to kill and devour (135).

If Melgarejo shined on the battlefield, he also shocked in soirées and public events, says Landa. Crude, depraved, and preternaturally hairy, Melgarejo was virtually inadaptable to an urban (read: civilized) environment, living instead according to his own, degenerate morality (Landa 218, 157). Landa cautions that Melgarejo’s actions could make the reader blush with embarrassment, because the caudillo’s debauchery became a matter of national gossip, and worse, of international diplomacy scandal. Landa cites an episode when Melgarejo made a
foreign minister kiss the hand of the caudillo’s concubine, and worse, ordered one of his generals to kiss her genitals (157). Yet under what circumstances these acts were carried out remains unexplained. In Melgarejo, un tirano romántico (1958), Max Daireaux addresses the subject of the caudillo’s mistress, referring to the bizarre ceremonies that showcased Melgarejo’s “barbaric cult” towards his lover’s body: “¿Cuántas veces...no obligó a sus ministros a adorar la desnudez de su amante! En la gran sala que le servía de oficina presidencial, obligaba a Juana a mantenerse de pie sobre una mesa, completamente desnuda...En seguida todos, en lenta procesión, daban vuelta alrededor de ella como alrededor de una estatua” (130-1). Juana, by Daireaux’s account, felt spellbound by Melgarejo’s forceful personality, which she described as that of a “toro feroz” (132).

This is not a romanticized, rousseauesque savage whose inherent kindness stands out against urban corruption, but rather what Hayden White classified as a variation on the same myth in contemporary writings, a “presocial category...unable to participate in the life of any society, whether primitive or civilized” (Tropics 179). Interestingly, White notes that today’s buen salvaje is “conflated with the popular notion of psychosis, to be seen therefore as a form of sickness and to reflect a personality malfunction in the individual’s relation with society” (Tropics 179). Thus Landa’s medical treaty aligns with today’s conflation of savagery and disease, but while for Landa this was just a stepping stone towards a sweeping ethnic diagnosis, today’s approach would limit discourses of savagery to the idiosyncrasies of a single deranged individual.

Yet the true force behind Landa’s argument lies in his racial verdicts, which unmask the prejudices and discrimination of the era. Melgarejo was a cholo (born of a Spanish Creole and an indigenous mother) and as such, he presumably possessed all the indicators of degeneration found in the hybrid race (Landa 90). He was moreover the bastard child of a lowly Indian and a Spanish soldier, thereby lacking any social rank that would justify his position in higher circles. The cholo in Landa’s definition constituted the epitome of ugliness and disharmony, a freak of nature both in appearance and personality: “El cholo es pues más bajo que alto, gordo casi obeso, de color cobrizo, de ‘greña áspera y revuelta’ sin ninguna simetría...en la estructura de su cuerpo no existe armonía de líneas, podemos decir que es contrahecho; su psicología es
oscura y confusa” (91). This is where the body and its biology prove to be a principal terrain where colonized relations are made discernible to the eye, and where they ultimately are fought out. Biological essentialism entrenched in judgments and biases can be traced, after all, all the way back to the Conquest and colonial expansion.

These definitions seem to be more symbolic than factual, in that other accounts of Melgarejo stress an impressive figure that does not coincide with Landa’s pejorative profile. Moisés Alcazar in Páginas de sangre (1967) speaks of “la fiera y las colosales dimensiones de su figura terrorífica” (99), which paralyzed many an adversary. Likewise, Granado (1992) describes the caudillo’s head as “majestuosamente leonina, adornada por una regia barba en la que fácilmente cabía la fuerza del universo” (13). This “hombre atrayente y magnético” was adored by men and women alike; women formed lines to catch a dance with him in soirees, and people in general surrounded him whenever he played the guitar or sang with great skill (Granado 11). In the same manner, Tomás O’Connor D’Arlach provides a flattering assessment of Melgarejo expressed by the Chilean writer Ramón Sotomayor Valdez, a man who knew the caudillo personally. Melgarejo in Sotomayor’s eyes was “colosal en el cuadro en que se le contempla. Todo se ve obscuro y pequeño en torno de ella, porque los hombres que le rodean, parecen estar allí solamente para hacer resaltar la grandeza del amo” (D’Arlach 11).

If in today’s discourse Landa’s assertions disqualify any pretense of objective science, one needs to contextualize his approach within the intellectual production of the era. Indeed, the writings of Bolivian elites in the early 1900s wrestled with racial hybridity, appreciating its folklore but condemning the savagery. These Eurocentric intellectual texts shared and divulged many tenets of the evolutionary racism then in vogue. Threatened by the democratizing forces that would endanger the future of their own hegemony, La Paz’s letrados were confronted with the key paradox of postcolonial nation-making, of how to unite this deeply heterogeneous nation for the sake of progress and modernization, all the while maintaining the Creoles’ privileged position (Larson 137).

Landa was not the only thinker who attempted to capture the cholos’ “inferior” character. Likewise, Arguedas’s Pueblo enfermo dedicated various pages to the cholos’ essential constitution. The vices attributed to this group as a biocultural entity included alcoholism,
laziness (248), the tendency to blindly follow strongmen (70), and an extreme, yet frequently misdireced bravery (72). For Arguedas, the *cholo* was perverse, emotionally unbalanced and above all, vengeful, thus exhibiting all the symptoms of the barbarian (103).

Worse yet, *cholos* only grew more dangerous when they occupied positions of influence. Landa ponders on how little Melgarejo must have seen the power of semi-acculturation at his uncle’s house, thereby realizing that he, too, could inject himself into politics, despite his lack of studies and the obvious degeneration of his race (“vio cómo los suyos sin más preparación que él, por un golpe de audacia, llegaban a ocupar los puestos públicos de más representación,” 100). In Landa’s words, “el saber le ha hecho daño [a Melgarejo],” a comment that illustrates the fear of the intellectual elites in the face of the growing participation of racially mixed citizens in the public sphere (91). Constructing a collective psychology that would implicate degeneration of Bolivia’s hybrid and indigenous population was an ideological weapon squarely blaming “the other” for the nation’s woes.

Writing of the Creole elites, Brooke Larson observes that they “reorganized the category of *cholo* as an acculturating, semiliterate, prerational political subject” (147). And indeed, a phalanx of Bolivia’s pedagogues, physicians, thinkers, and ethnographers set out to constrain the *cholos* and Indians within an easily malleable frame of inferiority and degeneration. Though on the surface, the elites appeared to wish to include the subalterns in the nation-building project, in reality they wanted to make sure that such a place was safely below their own in the hierarchy. An example of this segregation was a new model of schooling in the 1900s, where manual labor was promoted over literacy for the indigenous populations (Larson 152). Another point of the elites’ anxiety included suffrage. Literate minorities would become a more powerful group, gaining an access to knowledge and political discourse through their demographic majority. Manuel Rigoberto Paredes, who advocated for bringing the Indians into the fold of civilization in *Mitos, supersticiones y supervivencias populares en Bolivia* (1920), nonetheless cautioned against the *cholo* ‘electoral mob,’ while Franz Tamayo, a mestizo himself and the author of the celebrated *Creación de la pedagogía nacional* (1910), saw *cholos* as social parasites steeped in atavistic thinking. Arguedas did not object to *cholos* within their own community (‘cuando permanece sin salir de su medio, revela, a pesar de sus muchos vicios,
excelentes cualidades de carácter,” 70), yet considered them problematic if not dangerous upon acquiring some knowledge (“se exaltan sus instintos dominadores, y es ambicioso por cosas vulgares y de poca significación... agresivo y susceptible al extremo, llegando a veces a la ruina de sus intereses,” 70). René Moreno, too, overemphasized the racial aspect by seeing his nation as ruled by two destructive social forces, “the military praetorians and the militant plebs. Both are either Indian or mestizo, and so radically incapable of either comprehending or practicing republican duties and virtue” (cited in Dunkerley, Americana 466). In short, Bolivia’s letrados argued for restricting the cholos’ sovereignty and literacy, and for keeping them away from the political sphere.

What Landa and other intellectuals from the La Paz’s elite make transparent is their preoccupation with the cholos’ growing power. At stake was the Creole cultural domain, whose beneficiaries did not want to relinquish their monopoly on power and knowledge to the ‘degenerate hybrid races.’ The intrusion of the racially ambiguous plebe into the creation of a modern national identity, they warned, would signal the regression, deterioration, and eventual decline of the nation. These texts also attest to the challenge that both literate cholos and Indians were presenting to the old establishment, to the tumultuous postcolonial transitions, and the so-called Indian problem, in a nation shattered by wars, constant rebellions, and moments of anarchy. The letrados could no longer protect their socioracial exclusivity since the new groups, acculturated by conscription and education, were knocking at their door.

How do these assessments illuminate Landa’s medical treatise on Melgarejo? Is it just about Melgarejo’s reign, or is it about people like Melgarejo, who could, like him, gain control over knowledge and power with one simple act of outrageous bravado? Could they undo whatever good the intellectuals have achieved in the name of progress, and throw the entire nation into social turmoil that would upset if not do away with traditional hierarchies? Perhaps it is not the fear of one man that governed Landa’s lengthy pseudo-clinical writing. Instead, Melgarejo exemplifies—if not epitomizes—a brutish semi-cultured cholo of poor taste and emotive excess who must be restricted because his essential qualities would (and did) do a disservice to the nation-making program of progress and modernity. His drunkenness, impulsivity, and audacity exemplify a vulgar, low-class ‘cholo-caudillismo’ which threatened
oligarchic longings for racial order and hierarchy. Landa must have remembered how Melgarejo, a new hybrid subject of history, injected himself into politics by sheer muscle power, eliminating the elected president, Manuel Isidoro Belzú, during his very inauguration, and announcing himself to the crowds gathered for the other man as his stronger, more audacious replacement. He proved to be a destabilizing threat, and the Creole elites did not want to relive it. Through texts like Landa’s narrative, letrados argued for obviating any future nightmare of a decayed “cholified” republic.

**Melgarejo in Late Twentieth-Century Writing: From Degenerate Cholo to a Zoological Oddity**

Whereas the early twentieth-century profiling of the Bolivian caudillo mobilized racial discourses of the castas and the importance of maintaining the old hierarchies of privilege, later accounts deploy an exoticizing lens stylistically and thematically consistent with colonial European travel writings on the tropics. This powerful colonial trope used in postcolonial writing continues to approach the tropics as a symbolic locus of wonder, chaos, and social backwardness, where the reigning culture is that of violence and disorder. Discourses of tropicality rely heavily on the cultural stereotype of Otherness, a compelling imaginative construct based on the binary oppositions between the human and the telluric, here and there, self and other.

More recent takes on Melgarejo by Alfredo Iriarte (1986) and Félix Alfonso del Granado (1992) draw from the field of zoology to qualify the caudillo through the dichotomy of the human and non-human. The very title of Iriarte’s widely reprinted text applies the othering angle in at least two ways; Bestiario tropical not only characterizes its subjects of ruthless dictators as fauna rather than human, but also brings to the fore the wilderness (read: backwardness) of the tropics as its organizing principle. Rather than address in the very title the madness and cruelty of the leaders in the likes of Anastasio Somoza, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo and Melgarejo—themes that constitute a common thread in the stories—it exoticizes the very dictators it proposes to describe.

This positioning is far from accidental. The prologue to Bestiario tropical, authored by Leonel Giraldo, buttresses the distinction within Latin American nations by positing its Colombian author as a man of letters (read: of the traditional Bogotá elites). The contrast
drawn between the author and the subjects of his inquiry (eccentric dictators from unmanageable non-democratic nations) brings to mind Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the “Imperial Eyes” within the postcolonial world. In this case, the hegemony originates from Bogotá, the metropolis smugly referred to as the Athens of Latin America:

Iriarte ha visitado cada una de las repúblicas bananeras en las que los gorilas hendieron sus pezuñas. Hombre de tertulias, alcanzó a recolectar innumerables testimonios...Iriarte es uno de los contados colombianos que trabaja apertrechando entre gordos diccionarios y que se afana por insufrarle a nuestra lengua acartonada la vívida impureza de la época de Cervantes. (Giraldo 14-5)

Iriarte positions himself as an intrepid traveler from the Latin American metropolis, almost an eyewitness to the dictators’ madness and their infernal governments. Equipped with Western knowledge, he engages in the adventure of exploring the unrestrained botanical and zoological excess that stretch outside the polis. He applies a distancing satire and parody to the politicized gorillas, whose aberrant behavior merits metaphors straight from zoological manuals. From the colonial cartas de relación through Romantic costumbrismo, the tropics have been ambivalently perceived as a locus of wonder and danger, of adventure and precarious potential. Early discourses on the American marvelous aimed at possessing or rejecting what is unfamiliar and scary, yet desirable (Greenblatt 22-3). Salient characteristics of the discourse of tropicality include distancing ironic narration and a “distrust of conventional aesthetic categories,” where the descent into atavism is made manifest through physical disarray, wanton cruelty, and transgressing various taboos (Wilie 3). Though the awestruck descriptions in Iriarte’s bestiary lack passages on nature per se—the staple of early discourses of tropicality—they make up for it with their focus on savage leaders and their equally savage courts, Lesley Wilie’s “tropes of telluric and indigenous barbarism” as “a space of disease, degeneration and savagery” (16). Thus, Iriarte’s take represents a throwback to Europe’s claim of hegemony, where the epistemic legacy (dictionaries, linguistic purity, and Don Quijote), underpins the author’s credibility as a letrado. Through “[j]ourneys of urban Latin Americans...[to] the moral hinterlands beyond the city,” old-style tropical aesthetics keep alive the venerable distinction between civilization and barbarism (Wilie 3).
That the frigid Altiplano of Bolivia could be bunched inaccurately together with the unruly tropics, shows how little interest this author has in geographic precision. Rather, what prevails is the all-encompassing ideology of symbolic othering, of a tropical imaginary in need of a postcolonial uplifting, where the periphery and cultural center remain clearly separated. Although the prologue to Iriarte’s *Bestiario* goes on to accept ‘tropical dysfunction’ as an all-inclusive predicament of Latin America in general (the bestiary being a testimony of “nuestras vergüenzas,” 15), in reality, the polarity is more illustrative of “us versus them,” with an engulfing grotesque and pathology ever lurking in the boondocks.

When we zoom in on the descriptions of Melgarejo’s body and his conduct in Iriarte’s and Granado’s accounts, it is the scope, size, rarity and novelty of the caudillo that prompts the deployment of the discourse of wonder and the supernatural. Whether it is to applaud Melgarejo (Granado) or to excoriate him (Iriarte), these interpretative practices summon the marvelous, the monstrous, and a disorienting otherness, which confine Melgarejo to a beastly framework.

Granado’s *Memorias de Holofernes* narrate Melgarejo’s story from the perspective of his beloved horse, Holofernes, whose bond with his master surpasses any natural connection between two disparate species. In fact, Granado shores up a symbiosis so seamless between the dictator and his beast that it is difficult to assess where one ends and the other begins. Indeed, the two appear whole and resplendent only upon unification:

Mariano a caballo era un regalo a los ojos, una sinfonía a los oídos, jinete y potro se movían con el mismo brillo, como conectados con el mismo vínculo y ligados por el mismo lazo...saltaban audazmente sobre las tapias juntos, eludiendo, esquivando y soslayando obstáculos en el camino, como si en ambos circulase la misma sangre. (10)

With one heart and one powerful will, this image is of a mythical amalgamation, a half-human, half-equine centaur embodying the primeval and the untamable, a hybridity that is no longer racial but zoological.

His beastly sway is particularly pronounced on the battlefield. Granado’s florid language paints a picture of herculean courage and resilience, where Melgarejo’s innate barbarism makes him an invincible opponent. The caudillo’s body is virtually indestructible, as he at one
point extracts deadly bullets from his own wounds before returning to action. This “máquina de guerra infernal, un instrumento mortífero de combate…un ogro imbatible e indomable…calentando su daga al rojo vivo, entre copa y copa se fue extrayendo del cuerpo siete balas matadoras, como quien se limpia los dientes, las insertó en su collar de combate” (Granado 22-3). This formidable physique and fearlessness, lacking any comparable antecedents, would astonish and paralyze Belzú’s troops. Simply put, Melgarejo was not like other men.

The emphasis on the caudillo’s awe-inspiring physique returns with frequency in Granado’s account, where, whether winning or losing in combat, he would invariably horrify his opponents, as if his body were artificially constructed. In an insurrection against the anticlerical José María Linares (Bolivia’s president before Melgarejo himself), Melgarejo fought against one lieutenant Schoeder “cuerpo a cuerpo, como gladiadores, diente con diente como felinos, se sacaban pedazos de cuerpo” (Granado 27). Even though Melgarejo lost this showdown, “se levantó con su propia fuerza recogiendo los pedazos dispersamente esparcidos de lo que fue su cuerpo” (Granado 27). This description not only likens Melgarejo to a cyborg whose body parts can be detached and reassembled at will, but it also suggests gigantism, one of the leading tropes of the discourse on the tropics (Stepan 147). And, what should have been the death penalty for his revolt against Bolivia’s government resulted in a pardon, because, in Granado’s interpretation, the fearful and nervous Linares simply did not dare to execute someone so frightening (27).

Even the very beginnings of Melgarejo’s story suggest the arrival of an infernal monster. His colossal size at birth, his alleged ugliness, and the ghastly sounds that he emitted terrifed everyone present—even including the priest and Melgarejo’s mother. The horrified padre was compelled to follow up the baby’s christening with an immediate exorcism: “El recién nacido parecía un lobo disfrazado con piel de oveja: abrió sus ojos negros como la noche…y emitió un sonido gutural que parecía un aullido salvaje, que…sacudió la brisa y se esparció por la atmósfera…hasta llegar como un látigo admonitorio a las montañas vecinas, para azotar la tierra y saludar el día” (Granado 2-3). Later on, the rebellious and antisocial adolescent is thrown out of school, where no one had ever seen such a beast, much less knew how to
restrain it: “escapa aullando...Cuando lo alcanzo a divisar, solo le veo la cola, desaparece por los campos” (Granado 8).

Yet the author’s frequent evocation of the hideous does not serve to equate the caudillo with evil, but rather to relate the inexplicability and uniqueness of his subject, a man who ultimately could not and did not fit in the petty world of human networks filled with dishonesty. In fact, only his horse, a creature close to nature like Melgarejo himself, Granado suggests, could be a companion to his master, “el Sancho al Quijote de Melgarejo” (102). In fact, it is through the voice of the principled Holofernes that the text recuperates Melgarejo’s innate goodness, trampled upon and ridiculed by his enemies, both while alive and when long dead. Granado bemoans the deriding legends and anecdotes that to this day smear the figure of the caudillo (131-2), or the comparisons that rate him inferior to the manipulative and humorless Belzú, who “inficionaba el odio de razas” (135). Granado is even more outraged when popular opinion equates Melgarejo with bloodthirsty and power-hungry tyrants from neighboring nations, men who, like Juan Manuel de Rosas, worked hard to earn their terrible reputations.

In fact, the conclusion of Granado’s account constitutes a long soliloquy to the defeated caudillo. Between praises of character and passion, Holofernes covers it all: “Qué injusta es la gente, mi general...Usted nació sin padre, sin nobleza, ni abolengo, usted nació pobre pero el orgullo rebosó siempre en su alma, no usó el poder para enriquecerse” (129-30). When it comes to the caudillo’s personality, Holofernes evokes the classic buen salvaje: “Usted se distinguió siempre por ser vivaz, valiente y audaz, por su genio alegre, franco y generoso” (132). Granado blends the caudillo’s savagery with his natural virtue, displaying how the leader’s integrity was squandered by opportunistic advisers, on a backbiting and cowardly opposition, together with the callous multitudes and the individuals to whom he had given power only to be betrayed by them. Thus Holofernes, the caudillo’s dear and faithful friend, condemns Bolivia together with its corruption and treacherous ways: “En Bolivia, solo los que tienen hijos hombres que los defiendan son respetados mi general, aquí no se libra ni la virgen María” (133). The horse’s and his master’s deaths put an end to a beautiful relationship between two beings who lived above the pettiness of their opportunistic contemporaries. From beyond the grave, the deceased caudillo reciprocates the appropriation for his one and only worthy
Stephen Greenblatt made note of the striking “ideological malleability” that has accompanied the discourse of the marvelous, and this indeterminacy is put to test in these two, late twentieth-century accounts on Melgarejo (24). If Granado evoked the monstrous and supernatural in his otherwise eulogizing reinscription of the caudillo into Bolivia’s tumultuous history, Iriarte summons the discourse of tropical marvel to condemn this insane half-breed of humble birth, who never once lived a moment of sobriety (43). A similar comparison can be drawn between Juan Domingo Sarmiento’s two versions of barbarians, where Facundo Quiroga, the “Tiger of the Plains,” was intriguing in his savagery the way the Argentine flatlands and their autochthonous flora and fauna can be. They were intriguing, argues Carlos C. Jáuregui, because, ultimately, they were tamable and containable. Yet when the savage coincides with the state, such as is the case with Rosas, fascination can only give way to horror, where there is no safe distance from cold, unfeeling monstrosity. Thus, for Jáuregui, the seduction of the barbarian ends where the horror starts, the savage seduces our imagination as long as he can be understood, poeticized and controlled (265). In comparison, Granado’s untamed Melgarejo could not, and did not, fit in the corrupt networks of power in Bolivia. Rather, he naively sacrificed his passion and skill for others’ benefit. Iriarte’s version evokes Sarmiento’s horror over Rosas; Melgarejo was the state and as such, he takes blame for its rapid deterioration.

It will be instructive to contrast Melgarejo’s birth narrative in Iriarte and Granado. The former’s revulsion and abhorrence parallel the more or less identical anecdote of a hideous infant found in Granado’s narrative, a child whose revolting appearance frightened everyone, including his own progenitors. Sickened by the newborn’s unattractiveness, his father, “lleno de asco por haber engendrado un sapo, escapó a toda prisa y vomitando toda suerte de blasfemias” (Iriarte 44). The priest who baptized the fiend “contuvo las bascas” (44) as he first set his eyes on the child, while later on, the nuns who were burdened with his upbringing—no one else could stand his sight—were so repulsed by “monstruelo,” that they sent him off to a sordid orphanage, where in an “ambiente nauseabundo,” the freakling barely learned to read and write (45). Thus, in Iriarte’s tale, Melgarejo’s presence offends the senses and elicits
uneasiness, panic, and contempt. Vomit and nausea, two key concepts deployed repeatedly by the author, set the stage for this sensory overload. Even his parents and the otherwise charitable nuns feel the urge to recoil, as if his physical ugliness were to defile or, worse, contaminate them. It does not help that the child engages in the universal taboo of coprophagia, “de que hacía permanente ostentación” (Iriarte 45). The unflattering youth and his bodily excretions are a dangerous matter from which everyone, including the narrator and the reader, should protect themselves from defilement and contagion.

In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller emphasizes the power of the rhetoric of disgust, which, by definition, presupposes the inferiority of its object. By doing so, it is also “an assertion of a claim to superiority that at the same time recognizes the vulnerability of that superiority to the defiling powers of the low” (Miller 9). Thus Iriarte’s text, pervasive with anxiety and judgment, buttresses a politics of difference by exalting Melgarejo’s sickening and uncultured otherness. The primitive caudillo deviates from the norms in an essentialist way, by simply being what he physically is. As he gets older and politically influential, his sinful deeds only intensify in strength and reach; now he can infect anyone by contact or mere proximity.

The aversive style accompanies Iriarte’s tale of visceral sensory experiences, where among drunken bravado, raucousness, and a total disrespect for democracy, Melgarejo turned the presidential palace into a site of pestilent zoological curiosity. This sullied atmosphere is reinforced by Holofernes’s constant presence, since the tyrant’s equine sidekick in war and fiesta was upgraded by his master from the royal stables to the presidential chambers. Trained to drink *chicha* like a human, Holofernes actively participated in an interminable bacchanalia together with his perpetually inebriated master. These acts were tolerated if not applauded by Melgarejo’s toadies and acolytes, men as defective as their outrageous leader. Iriarte does not spell it out but his logic is clear: As the horse assimilated to humans in its systematic debauchery, so did Melgarejo’s underlings regress to beastliness due to the animal’s constant presence. Thus, for Iriarte, the interspecies friendship so cherished by Granado serves as proof of the caudillo’s degeneration and inhumanity.

Their saturnalia, and particularly the hangovers suffered by Melgarejo and Holofernes alike, were apocalyptic in their cacophony of wails and profanity:
Muy de madrugada, [Melgarejo] atronaba los ámbitos palaciegos con sus imprecaciones y blasfemias, que siempre formaban un dúo desconcertado y malsonante con los relinchos dolientes de Holofernes…Amo y caballo habían despertado hostigados por las agruras y demás tormentos derivados de la bebezón, y exigían en sus respectivos idiomas (que por cierto, no diferían mucho) un calmante inmediato. (Iriarte 49)

The anecdote provides access to a phantasmagorical world of extravagance and the bizarre, where a grotesque symphony of man and beast reverberates in the palace halls. Iriarte’s satirical tone constitutes a serious denunciation of how far a crazed tyrant can go in his power, where his subjects are too complacent or terrified to stand up to him. His monstrosity spills out of his private chambers, polluting the presidency, the government, and the entire nation—eventually degrading Bolivia to a grotesque farce.

Yet this imperial bedlam is but a prelude to the final and ultimate offence where disgust truly tightens its grip. Once Melgarejo’s guests are all sleeping off the bender, the bored caudillo invites his horse to urinate on them while he revels in the spectacle of filth and extreme humiliation:

Cuando los invitados, embrutecidos, yacían en el piso tumbados por la gula y la embriaguez, la gran diversión del Mandatario Supremo era dar una orden a Holofernes que, ya beodo y henchido por los copiosos diuréticos, avanzaba hacia los caídos en el báquico zafarrancho y los hisopeaba con potentes y cálidas micciones. Luego de generar estos inusitados aguaceros, Holofernes se ovillaba mansamente y dormía la mona junto con sus ensopados compañeros de juerga. (Iriarte 48-9)

A site of ungodly odors and filth, Melgarejo’s court presents a sensory overload of Bakhtinian baseness. Iriarte’s reader can vividly imagine a viscous mass of bodies glued together by Holofernes’ prodigious output. More permanently, the victims are stripped of their humanity. For Miller, disgust not only has powerful image-generating capacities, but it also plays a significant role in “organizing and internalizing many of our attitudes toward the moral, social, and political domains” (18). By painting Melgarejo’s rule through the (unverifiable) anecdotes of booze and urine, Iriarte posits the caudillo as a vile, gross other in possession of immense defiling powers. Melgarejo’s court is a cradle of beasts polluted beyond repair, beasts destroying civilization in an orgy of bacchanalia.
Thus late twentieth-century accounts abandon the racist angle on Melgarejo as they move instead towards folkloric tales fueled by anecdotes. Nonetheless, the fear of the savage remains as strongly embedded as ever, echoing prior racist accounts examined earlier. Iriarte’s sarcastic and calculatedly hyperbolic spectacle of the tropical bizarre rehashes the leitmotif of the tropics as a space of degeneration and contagion, of primitivism and pathology. It attests to imperial anxieties upon crossing from the urb to the periphery, but above all, it illustrates the fear of a civic-minded Latin America faced with what they perceive as a substandard and unruly boondocks; a boondocks that produce beasts of the likes of Melgarejo and his equally repulsive followers. This disgust notwithstanding, there is also a trend to unearth Melgarejo’s humanity buried under his catastrophic political moves and rampant alcoholism. Granado’s argument that Melgarejo’s innate goodness was squandered by opportunistic advisers is no literary embellishment, in that many such accounts were written in the twentieth century. Going back to the initial discussion of Hayden White and postmodern approaches to history: today’s knowledge of historiography informed by the wealth of deconstructionist debates on history vis-à-vis the postmodern condition pushes for plurality. It is understood that each emerging story is laden with ideology and that history is constructed on both sides of the barricades. Likewise, the story of Mariano Melgarejo repels and intrigues, unveiling multiple ideologies all the while proving that the “Bolivian brute” continues to excite the literary imagination.

Works Cited


Notes

1 One of the reasons provided by Arnade is that as late as 1883, Bolivian historians complained that no single place in Bolivia (archives, library, or government office) stored a complete set of national publications. The documents were dispersed, unorganized, and often stored in private collections (341-2).

2 Cultural studies see the body as molded by history, and continuously interacted with by numerous forces. Its examination in the context of its surroundings and historical time reveals various mechanisms of power that come into play (Giorgi 36).

3 A remarkable number of anecdotes have been recorded on Melgarejo’s life, largely owing to Tomás O’Connor D’Arlach’s 1912 El General Melgarejo. Hechos y dichos de este hombre célebre. Reprinted with frequency to this day, the book’s success attests to Bolivians’ enduring interest in their flamboyant caudillo.
As James Dunkerley explains, the decree “stipulated that all Indians must register title to property under their name within sixty days and at a charge of 25 to 100 pesos, which would ‘consolidate’ their lands and relieve them of any further obligation to pay the tribute” (Americana 473). In practice, it meant that upon the predictable failure to pay this sum, the destitute and largely illiterate indigenous population lost their ancestral lands, which then reverted to the state and was sold by auction to Melgarejo’s close circle of advisers, who thereby amassed fortunes.

Juan Pablo Gómez, for example, marvels at Melgarejo’s military talents: “Ninguno tenía una hoja de servicios más honrosa que él: todo lo conquistó, nada le dio el favor” (31). D’Arlach equally praises Melgarejo’s martial integrity: “[t]odos sus ascensos militares los debió a sus buenos servicios, ninguno al favoritismo” (8).