

SIGNIFICATION AND THE LATIN AMERICAN NOVEL
FORM: REFLECTIONS AFTER FERNANDA MELCHOR,
ÁNGEL RAMA, AND LOUIS HJELMSLEV

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The 2017 publication of Fernanda Melchor's novel *Temporada de huracanes* (*Hurricane Season*), as well as its recent and successful release in English and other languages, provides a useful juncture to reflect on the question of form in contemporary Mexican and Latin American fiction.¹ The book was widely received after its original publication, and while a significant number of leading authors and literary critics published mostly positive reviews, a few others were less enthusiastic.² After its release by New Directions, translated into English by Sophie Hughes, the book's acclaim, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, was boosted by high-profile positive reviews on its release date as well as by and its short-listing for the Man Booker International Prize.³ *Hurricane Season's* rapid consecration certainly lends itself to a Bourdieusian study on the ways in which books accrue symbolic capital to become integrated into world literature. I will, however, resist my instinct to pursue a purely sociological approach and defer that analysis for a possible future study on the institutions of contemporary Mexican literature.

Instead, this essay uses *Hurricane Season* as a reference point for a larger conversation on questions of the novel-form in Latin America, raising a conceptual constellation that includes Ángel Rama's critical work and the legacies of Louis Hjelmslev's linguistics. Although I will address specific moments in the book, I do not intend for this study to be a close reading or a monographic essay. I am certain there will be many of those to come, given that the book has galvanized substantial attention. I am interested in placing *Hurricane Season* at the center of a discussion seeking to rethink a discrete genealogy of narrative form in Latin America and the problems embedded within structural functions of that form. My choice of *Hurricane Season* is not necessarily the result of any personal affinity I might have with it—although I do consider it a very good novel—but rather of its success. The book's visibility is indicative of changes in the practice of literary form in Mexican and Latin American fiction, within which the book is at the same time illustrative and unique.

Rather than an interpretive essay, my methodology reconstructs

a concrete juncture between structuralist analysis (as represented by Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* and its theoretical descendancy) and Latin American sociocritical traditions from the 1970s and early 1980s (particularly Rama's work on the novel-form). I will not activate the mechanistic and orthodox applications of structuralist methodology that filled so many books in the past, to which I am allergic, even though I recognize that such works strove to produce a rigorous approach to form and language that is not always matched by critics these days. Rather, I explore the ways in which theories of language were (mis)read and appropriated by critics like Rama to develop theories and readings of literary form concerned with the politics of literature and the cultural specificities underlying the Latin American novel. In this context, I posit *Hurricane Season* as a spark that triggers reflections on its formal genealogies. In short, this essay is not "on *Hurricane Season*"—i.e., an effort to provide a critical reading of the book itself— but rather "after *Hurricane Season*"—i.e., an attempt to theorize questions of literary form through its historical linkages and ruptures.

Born in Veracruz in 1982, Fernanda Melchor has produced fiction framed by her home state's brutal descent into criminal violence and political corruption, which took place, particularly, during the administration of PRI governor Javier Duarte (2010-2016). Duarte's administrative tenure was characterized by an astonishing rise in crime, corruption, economic contraction, and intimidation of civil society.⁴ Melchor irrupted into the literary scene with a book of nonfictional *relatos*—the term she emphasizes to describe the gathered texts—entitled *Aquí no es Miami*.⁵ The book in general, and its award-winning *relato* "Veracruz se escribe con zeta" in particular, is written in a precise prose that, at the time, was a significant contribution to longstanding traditions of *crónica* and *reportaje*.⁶ *Hurricane Season* is located in a fictional region, which, even though it is filled with plausibly Veracruz names (La Matosa, Gutiérrez de la Torre, Villa), is never openly identified as Veracruz. My interests do not reside in a discussion of how Melchor reflects upon the reality of Duarte's Veracruz. Rather, given that Veracruz is such an intense site for the processes that define late neoliberalism in Mexico, Melchor's work in *Hurricane Season* provides a key example of the ways in which fiction mediates, represents, and even sidesteps longstanding processes of literary figuration of the social in Latin America.

Melchor's fictional debut was released almost concurrently to *Aquí no es Miami*. *Falsa liebre* narrates the lives of four characters marked by the precarity and violence of life in the country's tropical region.⁷ The book's writing was significantly different from Melchor's previous work and contained an elegant realist style that does not quite consolidate itself throughout the novel. *Falsa liebre* is a better-than-average novel, but it feels somewhat half-baked and under-edited, and perhaps more

interesting as part of the development of Melchor's writing than as an object of engagement in its own right. In any case, I agree with Anadeli Bencomo's statement that one of the significant merits in Melchor's work is that she breaks with enduring traditions of idealization of Veracruz in literature and cinema and becomes the writer that recalibrates the state as a "tropicalist dystopia."⁸ Part of the impact of *Hurricane Season* results from the significant qualitative development of Melchor's writing, and the consolidation of her powerful style in a book that uniquely captures the brutality of one of Mexico's epicenters of violence.

Hurricane Season is a polyphonic novel whose plot is sparked when a group of children discover the corpse of La Bruja. A central plot point (spoiler alert) is that La Bruja is a trans woman who provides subterfuge to young men conflicted in their masculinities and queer desires. Melchor structures the book around her murder, but the narrative structurally resists the convention of noir and of detective fiction, rhizomatically navigating the voices and perspectives of different people involved, and articulating a never-coalesced narrative voice produced by the meandering across the consciousness of individual characters. The novel is written in a prose style that can only be properly described as furious: all the chapters are written in a single, continuous paragraph characterized by punctuation and flow that recreates oral narratives, alternating between first, second and third person, full of vernacular expressions, calculatedly aggressive. The action unfolds in a non-chronological way, focusing on the crime but interspersed with many flashbacks. According to Melchor's own account, the novel was inspired by an actual crime that took place in Ciudad Cardel, a town close to the port of Veracruz. Melchor, a journalist by trade, claims that she was unable to work the story as a *reportaje*, and so she opted instead to investigate the implications of the murder through fiction.⁹

It should not surprise anyone that *Hurricane Season* has already generated a body of criticism given the significance and visibility it acquired since its publication. Besides the reviews, a few scholarly articles have been published. The three scholarly pieces I have been able to find revolve around questions of gender and the body and focus on the fact that male violence, queer affect, and transphobia are central to the book. Concretely, two different studies examine the book through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to discuss, respectively, the idea of domination, and the use of the theme of gossip as a space for the abject.¹⁰ A more suggestive reading is proposed by Gloria Luz Godínez Rivas and Luis Román Nieto, who focus on La Bruja to discuss the implications of the figure and its archetypal history. Following work by Silvia Federici and Sayak Valencia, among others, they discuss the way in which marginal and divergent sexualities allow one to imagine pleasure and affects as sites of respite and resistance in the face of violence.¹¹

These readings are significant in their alignment of Melchor with

longstanding discussions regarding the gendered nature of violence in Mexico, including questions of femicide. Concerned with the brutal nature of violence against women in general and trans women in particular, Melchor's writing also points to questions about the politics of literary form, informed by gender, but also showcasing an intervention in longstanding practices of both regional representation and literary language. I believe the novel activates key legacies of twentieth-century fiction, which allow its writing to become a productive site to explore the illuminations and cognitive limits of Mexican and Latin American writing on violence. To be sure, my choice of engaging the novel should not be read as a sign that I believe it to be perfect. Far from it. Some of the skeptical critical voices, particularly those of Gabriel Wolfson and Christopher Domínguez Michael, raise important points about the limits of Melchor's wager that will be incorporated into my argument. Indeed, part of my concern here is the ways in which the enormously inapprehensible reality of Mexico's necropolitical present renders any attempt of its formalization a partial and significant failure.

My discussion of the theory of form departs from Melchor's explicit location of *Hurricane Season* within genealogies that lead back to the work of García Márquez in the late 1970s.¹² In a separate essay, which could be regarded as a precursor of this one, I developed a longer discussion of the concept of narrative transculturation in the context of ideas of the theory of the novel and the global novel. I also unfolded this discussion into an analysis of works by Jorge Volpi and Daniel Sada at the turn of the century.¹³ The prior essay deployed a binary distinction between the cosmopolitan and the transcultural novel to account for the conditions of literary writing circa 1999. *Hurricane Season*, and Melchor's literary aesthetics, have found significant resonance because her work stands in many ways at a new crossroads emerging in the late 2010s regarding the possibilities of literature under violence, and the exhaustion of the writing paradigms that found their peak nearly two decades earlier in the work of Sada and Volpi.

Melchor performs a genealogical rarity in citing García Márquez's approaches to literary form in contemporary Mexican literature. There is not, to my knowledge, any other Mexican literary work of such importance claiming that genealogy, in part due to the general break that contemporary Mexican fiction has adopted in relation to twentieth-century literature. Melchor credits fellow Mexican editor and novelist Martín Solares, a well-regarded author of crime fiction in his own right, for the recommendation of *The Autumn of the Patriarch*.¹⁴ She elaborates on this reference in an interview. According to Melchor, during the process of writing, she was interested in oral storytelling, but did not want to tell the story in monologues. She says that in *The Autumn* "I discovered a very free, very complex voice that knew how to recount events from an enormous distance, almost like a

voice of God and nevertheless that same voice got inside the characters and speaks like them.”¹⁵ Melchor further notes that García Márquez’s narrator leaps across times, a feature that also appears in her novel. It is significant for my purposes that Melchor’s interest in García Márquez is fundamentally formal, rather than thematic, tying her not to the object of representation in his work, the dictator, but rather to its textual and formal stakes.

By dialoguing formally with García Márquez, Melchor links *Hurricane Season* to a particular moment in the Colombian writer’s fiction (roughly from the mid-1970s to the Nobel prize in 1982), and in so doing, Melchor weaves into her work the formal concerns that arose during a particular moment of Latin American literary writing and criticism. One could indeed tie Melchor’s own work as a journalist to García Márquez’s *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981) and his book on Miguel Littin, *Clandestino in Chile* (1986), but I will leave this to a potential follow-up essay. For the time being, I am interested in a different question. The politics of allegory and totalization that defined significant swaths of Latin American literary form in the 1960s were dialectically challenged by more aporetic practices of writing, which consolidated gradually in the course of the 1970s. For many years, scholars and theorists used the prefix “post”—“post-Boom,” “postmodern”—to account for the divergent practices of literary writing that departed from the *doxas* of the literary Boom and the various literary regionalisms that surrounded it, including those encompassed by the concept narrative transculturation as defined by Rama.¹⁶ Yet, a more detailed look at the way in which Rama engages García Márquez’s formal work in this period point towards what Rama himself would call a “literary series,” an autonomous and specific cultural sequence, which are correlated to social series through the mediation of language.¹⁷ What I propose here, then, is to render explicit the literary series that connects García Márquez with Melchor, at the formal level, by dialoguing with Rama’s own reading of García Márquez and the conceptual problems it raises for *Hurricane Season*. Melchor’s novel is a new concretization of a Latin American literary series, where her particular capture of vernacular language mediates between a form explicitly borrowed from the Colombian writer and the “social imaginary” (a term Rama also uses in his discussions of sequence and series) of violence in contemporary Mexico.

In his reading of *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, Rama argues that the novel is at the antipodes of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* due to the role language itself plays in the book. Rama notes that the novel operates on the basis of “incessant accumulation” so that

narrative events are voluntarily immobilized because they are perceived as ‘black suns,’ those holes that radiate mysterious energy, and then, by accumulating successive dependent phrases, of series of open images, of

adjectival chains, of adverbial substitutions, of superimposed verbs to break down a single action, they are endowed with long, undulating resplendent beds, whose multicolored glow is swept away by a void.¹⁸

Rama clearly intends this as a negative characterization. His reading expresses frustration regarding the devices, down to grammar usage, by which García Márquez constructs a collective narrative voice. In Melchor's writing, as in García Márquez's, there is a proliferating language surrounding a significant void of meaning at the heart of the novel. In these terms, Melchor appropriates techniques García Márquez developed for the narrative mediation of violence. In my previous essay, I discussed Daniel Sada's *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* as a novel very much working on a similar procedure, but which I sought to describe through the idea of transculturation. Like Sada, Melchor recreates at one level the traditional terms of the dialectic of literary transculturation—the tension between cosmopolitan Modernist form and oral and vernacular forms of storytelling—, but with a twist, given that the both Modernist and transcultural devices have both gradually become exhausted in contemporary fiction. Instead, there is an increasingly identifiable transcultural dialectic between high forms of language expression tied to historical forms of Latin American literary writing and deterritorialized forms of regional speech marked by the grammars of violence and necropolitics.

Having said this, I do not find it particularly productive to invoke the concept of transculturation to read *Hurricane Season*, where it may perform little critical work beyond describing the obvious. I am more interested in the fact that, in Melchor's novel, the narration of a foundational necropolitical event (the death of La Bruja), operates through the same mechanism that ties the symbolic and material narration around death to linguistic excess, a procedure that I previously discussed regarding Sada.¹⁹ In *Hurricane Season*, however, there is an avoidance of the kind of sprawl that characterizes *Porque parece mentira* and other works of Latin American fiction of the 2000s —2666 the most well-known.²⁰ Unlike Bolaño, who unfolds the plot in five autonomous quasi-*nouvelles* reputedly intended for separate publication, Melchor enacts a more contained encapsulation of an event disclosed at the very beginning of the novel through centripetal narratives that traverse the impossibility to construct it through tensional devices, like detection or suspense. I would speculate that Rama would have felt in the reading of *Hurricane Season* a similar frustration as the one *The Autumn of the Patriarch* elicited. In both cases, the novels are, at face value works, engaged in political questions urgent at the level of the social imaginary—dictatorship in García Márquez, transfemicide and gender violence in Melchor. Yet both mediate these questions through chapters in which a compulsive and proliferating verbal utterance wraps itself around a

latent content which haunts the narrative—regional history, economies of extraction, clientelist politics. The fact that this latent content (what I will call below, appropriating a term from Hjelmslev, content-purport) is never uttered as such but rather formalized in a decentralized apparatus of signification makes Melchor's writing neither programmatic nor subject to elicited interpretation.

In the few but significant reviews that appraise Melchor's literary writing skeptically and even negatively, one can see varieties of this issue presented as a problem. Gabriel Wolfson, for instance, praises the "the repeated and classic structure" based on the "same agglutinating speech, a voice that, without exceeding its confined settings, moves with ruthless ease from one character to another, from one lexical register to another, between different times, recipients, and gazes."²¹ Yet, Wolfson also notes "foreseeability," a lack of originality in resources (Rama levels a similar complaint against García Márquez in this regard too) and ultimately an inability of her style to significantly intervene in the story itself (a "multicolored glow ... swept away by a void," Rama would say).²² More pointedly, and expressing a more general distaste with dirty realism as such, Christopher Domínguez Michael argues that the reality the book seeks to capture is "nothing that any reader of newspapers, to say nothing of those who survive the everyday horror in the Gulf of Mexico, wouldn't already know."²³ In a position axiomatically opposed to realism, Domínguez Michael contends that Melchor, like other realist writers, "fabulates a universe that does not require fabulation" and relies too much on sordid sexual references that lack proper sense—a claim that the above-cited studies on the workings of abjection contradict.²⁴ Ultimately, Domínguez Michael, behind his performative ambiguity, challenges the very method of the novel. He writes: "Faced with the horror, I suspect—only suspect—that Fernanda Melchor had nothing left to do but explain it, childishly (I say it without disdain, tropologically), resorting to magical thinking, to the fairy tale, to a witch who embodies Evil, exercises it, controls it, and ends up being its victim, knowing herself to be deep down, immortal."²⁵

Both Wolfson and Domínguez Michael point to the same problem, albeit from different points of view: the imbalance between stylistic excess and a fairly obvious plot. The predictable set of signified elements is in part literary—the plainness of the mystery behind the murder of la Bruja—and in part a question of the relation between literature and reality. They mark a stalemate founded in the representational challenges of a reality that is both impossible to apprehend in its brutality, and readily available in the mediascape to any (Mexican) reader who would be interested in this novel. Yet, in invoking *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, Melchor carries into contemporary fiction a poetics of verbal mediation built over the imbalance between a Latin American literary series defined by maximalist forms of writing—the

Baroque, the total novel, etc.—and a social imaginary of violence that is both overcoded in its everyday omnipresence and inapprehensible through language in its horror. I read in these terms Rama’s ungenerous characterization of *The Autumn* as “a flying crisscross of quetzals of which only the unfolded tails—which blend, cluster together, wave in all directions, and hide the heads and bodies that they extend—are perceptible.”²⁶ At the heart of this assertion is a critique of a mode of literary writing that imbalances the equilibrium between “expression-form” and “content-form” to begin introducing Hjelmslev to the conversation, the kind of structuralist terminology that underlies Rama’s own concepts of literary language. Melchor’s literary apparatus is predicated on language practices readable through the structuralist arguments on the arbitrariness of the sign, and, more specifically, through Hjelmslev’s transformation of the idea of the signifier and the signified into what he called the “plane of expression” and the “plane of content.” A first account of Melchor’s language can point out that there is a formalization at the level of expression, in her highly phonemic prosody, dissonant the content, i.e., the construction of a semiotic regime to figure the social imaginary of “violence” in contemporary Mexico.

Rama’s importance within the rise of what we now call Latin American cultural studies often obscures his profound dialogues with structuralist linguistics and adjacent theories.²⁷ His culturalist approach and his commitment to the social life of literature is often at the antipodes of mechanistic forms of structuralism, which became somewhat pervasive in Spanish-language academies of his time.²⁸ Yet, methodologically, he incorporated the insights of structuralist theory—which I think remains illuminating to speak about literary language as such—into his accounts of the Latin American literary system in general, and his sociocritical studies of concrete literary texts and phenomena in particular. His work remains enlightening, even if dated at times, because of its location at the crossroads of Marxism, literary sociology, linguistics, and the specific lineages of Latin American literary criticism. Rama’s writings invoked here can be more properly described as part of a larger project to understand Latin America out the systematic study of the relationship between literature and society. But even if Latin American critics at the time challenged structuralist claims of the universality of the text as Eurocentric, Rama often extrapolated from linguistic theorizations to discuss historicity of concrete Latin American literary forms. One example of this, which I find particularly relevant to my own argument, is the unfolding of the sign into expression and content—symmetrical functives which themselves are composed by form, substance and purport. These concepts were most influentially theorized by Louis Hjelmslev in his *Prolegomena to the Theory of the Language*.²⁹

Hjelmslev’s work—framed by the Danish School of Linguistics and central to the structuralist theory known as glossematics—provided an

alternative to Ferdinand de Saussure's binary model of signifier and signified, as well as an account of the materiality of language, the mechanics of style and signification, and the semiotics of connotations, among other things. Perhaps the most famous (mis)appropriations are those of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and, more significantly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, all of whom extracted categories from the *Prolegomena*, without fully echoing Hjelmslev's zealously taxonomical scheme.³⁰ For my purposes, I appropriate Hjelmslev's account of the plane of the content to discuss Melchor's writing. Hjelmslev believes that both expression and content—which essentially name phonic and conceptual abstraction, respectively—not only interact with each other in the constitution of the sign, but also are constituted within themselves by three levels: form, substance and purport. Miriam Taverniers defines these categories in relation to the plane of the content: content-purport (derived from the ideas of *pensée* and *sens* in Saussure) refers “to unformed and unanalyzed thought;” content-substance is “an area of purport that appears, *qua area*, as the result of the specific way in which a particular language carves up or ‘forms’ this purport;” content-form is the “the ‘content’ that is expressed in the construction[...] and that is defined in terms of the formation principles of [...] language.”³¹ Hjelmslev believes that substance only exists insofar as there is form. Strictly speaking, Hjelmslev's model is not a theory of literature, but of language, and as such, it is designed to account for everyday linguistic utterances. This is why Hjelmslev limited the sign to the articulation of expression-form (made up of phonemes) and content-form. In fact, *prima facie*, this account would appear in contradiction with sociocriticism, insofar as Hjelmslev himself follows a fairly orthodox account of the inherence of signification.

And yet, Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena* turned out to be very theoretically generative because his account of the sign openly acknowledges that semiotic analysis could appropriate the tools of linguistics for questions (like the concepts of national and regional languages or the formal structure of media) that far exceeded his own language descriptions. This is in part due to the fact that the ideas of form and substance, as Hjelmslev defines them, trace all the way back to Platonic Idealism and to Aristotelian accounts of matter and substance in the *Metaphysics*.³² More relevantly, Hjelmslev theorizes not only a “denotative semiotic” to describe language itself (what he calls “natural” language). He also opens the possibility of a “connotative” semiotic “whose expression plane is a semiotic” and “metasemiotics” understood as a “semiotics whose content plane is semiotic.”³³ As Taverniers notes, while Hjelmslev did not deepen on these ideas, it created the opening for structuralism “to analyze geographical, historical, political, social, psychological, and other related aspects that are connoted by language.”³⁴

Hjelmslev's glossematics do not appear, in retrospect, to have gotten their full due in literary theory. Roman Ingarden's phenomenological

model, which has an alternative account of language stratification, and Algirdas Julien Greimas's structural semantics, a tributary but very distinct model, had significantly more reach.³⁵ On the other hand, glossematic theories of the literary work from the time tend to be too caught in linguistic and semiotic description, focusing, as many linguistic approaches, more on the problem of the sign in itself than in literary questions proper. Even with an account of connotation and even dialogues with other theorists, the most important of these theories, Jürgen Trabant's semiology, is fairly clinical.³⁶ The important thing to keep in mind is that, while Hjelmslev's categories are first and foremost linguistic, the opening provided by his theory of connotation opened wide pathways for redefinitions and appropriations that have rendered them productive beyond orthodox approaches. One of the most illustrative examples comes from Umberto Eco. Eco develops a model in which Hjelmslev's account of the sign, and its elements, may in fact have different meanings according to different theorizations.³⁷ He interprets Hjelmslev by essentially saying that different theorizations may deploy the structural relation between all functionives (purport-substance-form; expression-content, etc) according to a variety of models. In this account, it becomes clear that Hjelmslev's linguistics, more than eliciting fidelity, provides an infrastructural theory of language and signification that can be in fact unfolded, as it ultimately happened, in various philosophical, aesthetic, and critical directions.

Deleuze and Guattari's heretical reading is particularly useful to illustrate the direction in which I seek to push Hjelmslev here. According to Ronald Bogue, Deleuze and Guattari were interested in Hjelmslev's model "because it subverts the traditional opposition of form and content, labels as arbitrary the designation of levels as either expression or content, and posits a material substrate, which precedes the formation of the planes of expression and content."³⁸ As Deleuze and Guattari themselves note, Hjelmslev allowed them to think the relationship between expression and content as something that bears "no analytic resemblance, correspondence and conformity between the two planes. But their independence does not preclude isomorphism, in other words, the existence of the same kind of constant relations on both sides."³⁹ In other words, the model allows one to think both linguistic deterritorialization and reterritorialization, or, as Deleuze and Guattari themselves put it elsewhere, Hjelmslev's linguistics "constitutes a decoded theory of language of which one can also say—an ambiguous tribute—that it is the only linguistics adapted to the nature of *both* the capitalist *and* the schizophrenic flows."⁴⁰

When transposed into the question of literary language, Hjelmslev's linguistics triggers the concurrent formulation of two problems, which would otherwise be in contradiction with each other. On the one hand, this theory of language accounts for strictly isomorphic conceptions of literary writing,

in which the form of expression and the form of the content are mediated through homology. This, I will argue later, is a feature of Rama's implied system of literary value. At the same time, as José Pascual Buxó developed in *Las figuraciones del sentido*, it permits accounting for partial and even disrupted homologies in the formal mediations between literary and social systems, as is the case in many forms of Baroque and avant-garde semiosis.⁴¹ Another version of this is observable in Trabant, who, in a peculiarly Hegelian moment, noted that in the significations at the level of language (*langue* in the French structuralist sense) we can refer to extralinguistic reality without ever uttering it.⁴² This, of course, allows for the theorization of signification as an immanent process, without disavowing referentiality or interpretation, which Trabant himself locates in the domain of hermeneutics.⁴³

Hjelmslev's theory of language has deep formal implication for literary studies that were not fully developed in its time. This peculiar model of obsessively schematic orderings of particular structures bound by an almost infinite set of potential reconfigurations provides a multiplicity of accounts not only of the articulation of expression and content in form, but of the tensions within each plane, from the material utterance of language to the construction of meaning. Hjelmslev's model grants expression and content their own levels of form, substance and sense, which means essentially that in the moment of emergence of signs (or in the signification of structures of literary form), the two planes may be strictly symmetrical, but may also articulate non-isomorphic relations of different kinds. If the functive relationship between expression and content is necessary, the relationship between the concrete materializations of form and substance, both within and between expression and content is arbitrary: "we thus recognize in the linguistic *content*, in its process, a specific form, the *content-form*, which is independent of, and stands in arbitrary relation to, the *purport*, and forms it into a *content-substance*."⁴⁴

Without delving further into Hjelmslevian schematics, or the dizzying set of categories that underlie it, it is possible to see how this concept of language helps in accounting for crucial semiological elements in works that destabilize formal homology, like *Hurricane Season*. Unlike most structuralist analyses, this account of language allows for the understanding of the expression-content logic within the work, but also "content-purport," which generally directs to a semiotically amorphous matter.⁴⁵ This means in part that we can understand "violence" in Mexico not so much in terms of a realist subject matter in the novel, but rather as a semiotically amorphous content-purport that links the social system of violence and the individual semiotic objects (novels, films, etc.) that generate cultural forms for its mediation. The novel's system of signs does not, in my view, indicate a willingness to engage in a denotative form of realism, avoiding the articulation of the murder of la Bruja as a stand-in for violence in

Mexico at large. Rather, Melchor articulates the content-substance of her work—the semantic structure—in a way in which meaning is suspended in a space of indecision between the identifiable referentiality of contemporary Mexico and the fictional construction of a self-referential reality. In other words, the content-substance of the work establishes a necessary mediation between content-purport and content-form, Rather than foreclosing it into a denotative meaning, it articulates a sort of void that allows for the historicity of Mexico to be read at the level of interpretation. Following Trabant's Hegelian intuition, the novel can connote and even refer to the extralinguistic reality, but not utter it.

One way this procedure manifests itself concretely is by constructing a system of floating signifiers through naming. Melchor's narrative form maneuvers through the articulation of characters and places into both a loosely collective subject of the utterance and an empty transcendental signifier that establishes relationships of connotation with Veracruz and Mexico, sometimes even explicitly, but never actually configures it at the level of its internal content.⁴⁶ One can turn here to Roland Barthes's Hjelmslev-informed analysis of the construction of form and concept (which correspond to expression and content). According to Barthes, the concept has a "truly open character," as "a formless, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function."⁴⁷ The key point here is that the operations of narrative formalization in *Hurricane Season* (and in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* in its own historical terms) perform, perhaps without deliberation, a weakening of the homological relationship between literature and society. As Barthes puts it in his concept of myth, "[w]hen it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains."⁴⁸ Melchor's saturation of signifiers very much operates as what Barthes calls "an abnormal regression from meaning to form, from the linguistic sign to the mythical signifier." This does not mean that there is such abstraction that the historical and social nature of the concept disappears, but rather "the meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a timed richness." Mexico, Veracruz, violence, are not fully constituted realities or referents for the literary work to allegorize. Rather, they are concepts which constitute "less reality than a certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept."⁴⁹ Melchor figures a realism that only partially resists its status as a document, pre-empting it from the immanent structure of signification and deferring it to the act of interpretation.

In these terms, the constellation of meanings tied the names of characters and places in *Hurricane Season* provides a very clear example of the structure of signification at large. As far as places go, the novel builds its

internal cartography through toponyms that follow the same procedures of impoverishment through the articulation of form. If one regards Veracruz as the content-purport of the novel, there is an intermediate point in the formation of signs that refuses to fully territorialize the narrated world into realism, but at the same time offers only a semi-deterritorialized apparatus of referentiality. If the state of Veracruz has a city called “Martínez de la Torre,” named after a landowner who donated the lands to the locality, the novel names a city “Gutiérrez de la Torre,” which is, incidentally, the last name of a politician who has been accused of women trafficking and sexual abuse. Without presuming authorial intention (it may in fact be a simple word displacement), the point here is that names are always in a space of semantic indecision. This happens to Villa, the big city of the region in the novel, a shortening of the city’s full name, Villagarbosa, but also facing semantically towards the original name of Veracruz, Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, the name given by Hernán Cortés to what would eventually become the most important port city in the Gulf of Mexico. My intention here is not to embark on a sign-by-sign operation of decodification. More precisely, I follow Eco here, when he asserts, contra Hjelmslev’s own understanding of his theory, that in fact the “decisive point of whether or not a sign is present” is not the mere existence of the articulation between expression and form but “whether it is interpreted.”⁵⁰ In the structure visible through this interpretation, Melchor’s narrative leads the reader to both infer historical and ideological meaning from a chaining of signs, and to engage with an enclosed semiotic system within the book’s plane of content. This is one of the reasons why *Hurricane Season* can be at the same time so culturally specific and so frictionlessly readable in translation.

This is even more palpable in her use of character names. The name “La Bruja” brings in itself a whole semantic constellation that includes everyday socio-mythical practice. We can remember here the town of Catemaco in Veracruz, where *brujos* practice local traditions of *santería*. In addition, the term figures a complex elements of the content-purport related to sexual dissidence, the historical substrata of gender, queer pleasure, marginalization and colonialism activate themselves with contemporary forms economic inequality, as the detailed analysis by Godínez Rivas and Román Nieto suggests.⁵¹ All the other characters that carry a narrative function—through the appropriation of their individual voices by the collective voice constructed through indirect style—are named through significations that are at the same time precise and identifiable, and ironically trivial. Luismi, the young man who is the protagonist of sorts, is an open reference to the popular singer Luis Miguel, to the point that *boleros* famously sung by the pop star play a crucial role in the affective configurations of the plot.⁵² It is worth noting that, in her translation, Sophie Hughes left the lyrics in Spanish, so the reference to the singer would be completely unbeknownst

to a reader in translation, but that irony is not indispensable for the reading of the novel itself. Munra, the man who drives Luismi and his group the day La Bruja is murdered, is a man with a disability and a broken body. His nickname appears to refer to the Spanish transliteration of Mumm-Ra, a mummified demon priest and the villain of the ThunderCats media franchise. And, as it would be evident even to less aware readers, Brando, the young man in love with Luismi, and left brokenhearted by his rejection, appropriates the figure of one of the icons of masculinity in Hollywood and ironically places the name on a queer character, unable to fulfill his desire. All of these names are forms of expression that carry indeterminate amounts of content-substance tied to the denotative and connotative chains constructed between books and readers—gaps of indeterminacy as the hermeneutics of literature contemporary to structuralism called this feature of signification.⁵³

In Hjelmslev's model, this type of signification system belongs to a connotative and metasemiotic levels of language, which points towards content-substances marked by their historicity, such as vernacular idioms, but also to the equivocal relationship between sign and social meaning discussed by Barthes.⁵⁴ Perhaps the best example of this in Melchor's system of names is La Matosa. The town as narrated by the novel appears to be fictional, although the toponym is used: there is a township in Alvarado, as well as a natural reserve that bear the name. In any case, the site appears to be in an in-between space between an identifiable geographical site in Veracruz, a fictional town in the long tradition of places like Macondo and Santa Teresa in Latin American literature and what may be called, extrapolating from Michel Foucault, a sort of "heterotopia of deviation," in this case a fictional site "in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed."⁵⁵ La Matosa, as a name, formalizes a *long durée* of Veracruz history that is not explicitly raised, but that haunts *Hurricane Season* through and through.

Francisco de la Matosa was an Angolan maroon who commanded the troops of Gaspar Yanga, who led a free Black town in Veracruz at the turn of the seventeenth-century.⁵⁶ Even though readings of the novel do not appear to notice this fact, it is unquestionable that the legacy of Afro-Veracruzans, often diluted in the national history of *mestizaje*, underlies the world of *Hurricane Season*, just like it remains a nebulous purport in many formal articulations of Mexican modernity.⁵⁷ Blackness is not an explicit theme, but it is hinted at in the novel as a factor of some characters' lives. Yesenia, the first narrator, is not only named after a well-known character in Mexican melodramatic narrative, but is also defined by her "exquisite hair" that was unlike "Grandma's sheep's hair [as] she called it, "fuzzy black-girl hair."⁵⁸ In another passage, when La Bruja surreptitiously stalks a group of young men, her desire-infused gaze focuses on their "backs lustrous like buffed leather,

shiny and dark like the seeds of a tamarind, or creamy like dulce de leche or the tender pulp of a ripe sapodilla. Skin the color of cinnamon, of mahogany and rosewood..."⁵⁹ Blackness operates here as a marker at the level of the form of the content and the form of the expression, both in the rhythm of the prose (which a page later would briefly intersect with the beat of a *cumbia*) and in the constant listing of signifiers denoting skin color, a spectrum of tones common in Afro-Veracruzian communities.

Tied to the sign of La Matosa, markers of Blackness like this one point towards a whole unformalized purport that is present in the novel through connotation. It is not that the novel operates through Blackness as a theme or as an identity of the characters—in fact, it is telling that this is never really the case. But in naming the town “La Matosa,” building into the form of the content a history of Blackness subtracted from its referential density, the lives of different characters, many of them directly articulated to the many legacies of slavery and colonialism in the region, operate into what Frantz Fanon called the “zone of nonbeing” in which the “incline stripped bare of every essential” and the potential of “a genuine new departure” defined Black lives. *Hurricane Season* weaves into its structure of signification not an allegory centered on Black life, but rather the floating signifiers of an existence (embodied in Luismi, Yesenia and even the non-Black characters of the book) in which they “cannot take advantage of this veritable descent into hell,” as Fanon himself notes.⁶⁰

The bare inscription of Blackness in the form of the content reproduces itself in various other articulations of the substance of the content. Throughout the novel we are palpably exposed to the regime of capitalist exploitation that shape La Matosa’s history, from cane sugar and oil extraction, to prostitution and alcohol. The novel does not engage on the concrete material conditions of capitalism as such, but rather on the ways in which the deterritorialized lives of her abject characters are often pulled to networks of capitalist aspiration. This is the case of Luismi, when he becomes the lover of an oil engineer, whose promises of a job in the company, unthinkable if one considers Luismi’s lack of education and drug addiction, provide a cruel counterpoint to his destitution. The system of signification I have described in the past few pages, and the Hjelmslev-informed analysis I have outlined, provide at this point the possibility of placing *Hurricane Season* into a more sociocritical light. *Hurricane Season*’s literary and linguistic devices function by imbalancing the different aspects of expression: forms that exceed substances, expression that overwhelms content, signs that weaken and empty references. It belongs to a genealogy of Latin American writing—*The Autumn of the Patriarch* is my key example—that destabilizes the allegorical modes of narrative that cross the history of the novel (from national romances to total novels). By breaking isomorphism and homology, they create systems of signification that do not seek epistemic access to

the Real, or to the content-purport in Hjelmslevese, but rather construct literary machines that function on the deterritorialization and the voiding of meaning in relation to sociopolitical and sociocultural realities.⁶¹

In Rama's case, his reference to Hjelmslev allows him to understand his own system of literary value in relationship to the way in which expression and content shape social sense into systems of signs. In other words, Rama's critical writings often value fiction in which literary writing is a space of mediation of cultures in the context of combined and uneven development, i.e., transculturation. But as far as literary form goes, Rama's theorizations often confer positive value to homological forms of literary writing in which the forms of expression and content embody some form of true representation of the Latin American social. As Richard Rosa notes, Rama's work seeks to "correct what he understands as an imbalance between language and reality in Latin America." This leads to a situation in which Rama "privileges these moments in which he sees, albeit fleetingly, a harmony is achieved, a balance that manifests a glimmer of the organicity that is its guiding idea."⁶² Hugo Herrera Pardo builds on this insight, noticing how the idea of "transformation," signaled by Rosa, unfolds in Rama to terms such as "transmutation," "and "transculturation," and even "transposition," "translation," and "transcription."⁶³ One can even pinpoint how Hjelmslev himself informs Rama's conception. In his writings on *la gauchescas*, Rama notes that Hjelmslev's idea of the content-form would be useful "to observe the exact agreement between a reality managed by the speaker and the lexical distribution of language."⁶⁴ Rama accounts for the use of language in authors like Estanislao del Campo through Hjelmslev's concept of "[the] phonetic zone of meaning," to later invoke his theory of connotation as a way to underscore the solidary and functive relations between linguistic utterance and regional and national language.⁶⁵

What underlies Rama's account is an understanding of the politics of literature in which a Gramscian understanding of the literary writer as an agent of modernity intersects with the praxis of literary form as a space in which the aesthetic, ideological and sociocultural layers of Latin American culture are embodied as experience. Mabel Moraña explains that Rama's transculturation model recognizes "his ideological-philosophical filiation in a Gramscianism of tremendous influence on the intellectual left of those years," and posits that "Rama writes from a conflictive tributary positionality, on the one hand, of the myth of Left messianism of the 1960s but also interested in analyzing the degrees of possibility and the probable consequences of intellectual cooptation in their new modalities of articulation with the State and cultural institutions, which include the praxis of literature."⁶⁶ While this particular point leads to Rama's influential work in *The Lettered City*, for my purposes it is significant to underscore the fact that García Márquez played a key role in the formation of Rama's idea of the politics of

literature, even if the Colombian writer is mostly engaged in texts secondary to Rama's canon.⁶⁷ More crucially, Moraña continues, Rama sees in this moment "a different form and in his opinion an unknown lettered affiliation of the multiple projects of modernity" so that "transculturation stresses lettered mediation as a praxis of appropriation and re-presentation of exogenous and internal cultural content, which, upon converging, form dialectically, giving rise to totalities that are more than the sum of their parts."⁶⁸

Rama's appropriation of structuralism often sidelined more open and indeterminate accounts of signification (such as those in Deleuze, Guattari or Derrida) in favor of homological accounts that captured totalizations of the social.⁶⁹ In this Rama subscribes and contributes to a theoretical understanding in which, as Lucien Goldmann famously put it, "the novel form seems to me, in effect, *the transposition on the literary plane of everyday life in the individualistic society created by market production.*" As such, Goldmann continues, "There is a *rigorous homology* between the literary form of the novel, as I have defined it with the help of Lukács and Girard, and the everyday relation between man and commodities in general."⁷⁰ Rama's own idea of homology, however, signals to a different direction from Goldmann's somewhat schematic account, since, as José Eduardo González notes, Rama did not believe that the "idea of collective consciousness has been transcended or that the novel can no longer be used as a tool by a social group."⁷¹ Rama is by no means the only literary critic who incorporated notions of formal and even ideological homology. This is famously the case of Roberto Schwarz's work with nineteenth-century Brazilian literature, both in his homological account of literary form and social structure in Machado de Assis, and in his general critique of the non-homology between European liberalism and Brazil's slavist society.⁷² The key is that Rama goes beyond Goldmann and Schwarz, and their description of the novel form as thoroughly inscribed in bourgeois society, to restore into the literary a form of political and epistemological privilege that some of the Marxist critics contemporary to him were challenging.

In between a Marxist criticism that saw in the novel—as Schwarz, Goldmann, and others did—a vehicle through which one could read the figuration of capitalism into form, and a line of structuralist linguistics that displaced the literary from the realm of aesthetics to the territory of immanent signification, Rama advances a theory of form that evolves over time, but that shares in the background the political privilege of the literary in the experience of Latin American modernity. The word experience here is vital and has a significant genealogy in Latin American literary theory. In his foundational essay *El deslinde*, Alfonso Reyes asserted that "the issue, for literature as such, refers to a pure experience, to a general human experience [...] Literature expresses to man how he is human."⁷³ Rama echoes this idea in the last line of his lectures on García Márquez. He notes that *One*

Hundred Years of Solitude invokes “the most comforting value of reading: it is this experience, an experience that human beings already seem incapable of having in any way if not by way of literature.”⁷⁴ This idealism is not in fact alien to structuralism or semiotics. Umberto Eco places the term “experience” as the content-purport in a theory of the code that he lays out as a possible version of Hjelmslev’s sign.⁷⁵ Elsewhere, Eco recognizes that the “exchange of signs produces a modification of the experience”, and interpretation as a “concrete situation in which one can obtain the perceptual experience of the object the sign refers to.”⁷⁶ In a way, the inscription of experience in literary theory by Rama is a humanist restoration (in Reyes’s wake) of the epistemological relationship between reader, text, and referent, while accepting the immanence of meaning. Indeed, the very point of Reyes’s literary theory, which predates structuralism and does not appear to have any influence of his linguist contemporaries, was to emphasize the immanence of the literary as such by discerning it from “ancillary” concerns.

The politics of literature embodied in Rama’s theory of form is not only a question of the homology and the isomorphism between the literary and the social, but also the center of a human experience that only a literary text tarrying through form can achieve. This is perhaps why Rama’s model does not allow for the development of a theory of allegory beyond homology, in the way Fredric Jameson did in his discussion of Hjelmslev and of Greimas’s four-term signification theories.⁷⁷ Jameson’s model is fundamentally interpretive, and he invokes Hjelmslev in particular to argue for an expansion of formal analysis towards detection and the political unconscious. In Jameson’s conceptual work, the complex articulation of the sign allows him to develop a richer account of the relationship between form and society put forward by Goldmann, and other even more orthodox base-superstructure Marxist models.

Conversely, Rama’s method functions descriptively—the identification of the instances of crystallization of the homology between literary form and society—which, in parallel, seeks to identify the intellectual and socio-historical conditions of the act of writing leading to those forms. Ultimately, Rama’s various interventions in the question of form lead to prescriptive programs for the literary writer. In his trajectory, we can see these prescriptions in different ways, including startlingly phenomenological and even existentialist versions of it: “To concentrate an experience, it is worth expressing a precise, unique, fatalized form, a content of life, it is worth concentrating life in art so that it remain like a revelation within a world of appearances.”⁷⁸ This would ultimately evolve, in *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, into a more precise demand for “well-designed techniques and shrewd artistic structures that fully translate the imaginaries of Latin American societies that have been crafting brilliant cultures for centuries.”⁷⁹ Literary value and even canonicity, in this account of form, elevate not works whose codings

of political unconscious require interpretation, but rather those which in themselves “unveil” the deep form of experience, or “fully translate” Latin American cultural complexity into structures and techniques.

There is a political and even utopian bent to the idea of homological literary works that programmatically and deliberately capture the totality of social experience and cultural specificity—as in the postulation of an idea of critique as the account of the history and emergence of those works and part of the project of “urgent literature.”⁸⁰ It is not hard to see here why books like *The Autumn of the Patriarch* and *Hurricane Season* disrupt this model of criticism. Melchor’s inability to fully and immediately account for the reality of Mexican violence, read by both Wolfson and Domínguez Michael as fundamentally flawed, turns out to be, in fact, a feature, and one that discloses an antithetical politics of form in relation to the one envisioned by Rama. García Márquez wrote *The Autumn* in the downswing of the post-Boom, in the middle of a time saddled with the question of dictatorship. The apparent dissonance between its style and this political urgency was the object of strong critiques. Gerald Martin, who would become his biographer, reproached García Márquez’s “misconceived historical perspective” and general failure of his novel in accounting for the gravity of the experience of dictatorship.⁸¹ Melchor writes at a point where the utopian sense that fueled Rama and the political imperatives that Martin advocated are no longer central to Latin American literary production. As Gustavo Guerrero discusses in a recent book, substantial infrastructural changes in Latin American writing of the twenty-first century, including the emergence and growth of the market and the displacement of the nation and the region in favor of a system of world literature pose new historical conditions to the very nature of literary writing in Latin America.⁸² Rama’s homological model could be advocated in the 1970s because there was still a notion—even if in some contexts it was merely residual—of the ability of literature to capture totality. The changes described by Guerrero at the level of the literary system render that capture unthinkable.

In Rama’s definitions of Latin American literary forms, there exists not only a political agenda, but also a fundamental cognitive problem about the capture of totality—contradictory totality, as Antonio Cornejo Polar termed it.⁸³ I will not rehash here the debates on hybridity and heterogeneity, or the conceptual framework of postmodern theory. But it is worth remembering that, as indicated in Jean François Lyotard’s foundational work, the idea of the postmodern was both an epistemological concern (a “report on knowledge” no less) and a theory of language, of the speech act, and of language games.⁸⁴ In contemporary narrative, though, the epistemological crisis of literary form and its political ramifications are no longer a crisis of legitimacy, but a feature of the contemporary system of literary cognition and utterance. One could riff off and point out the many ways in which the

most canonical of contemporary world literature often points to the excess of the signifier and the epistemological inoperativity of totality, from Roberto Bolaño and Kazuo Ishiguro, to Karl Ove Knaausgard and Olga Tokarczuk. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is an interesting point of reference, because it was not yet a postmodern text *tout court* but rather a novel that deployed the repertoire of Latin America's literary forms, as described by critics like Rama, but did so hollowing out the epistemological project of totality and the politics of the novel in itself. This accounts for the critical readings by both Rama and Martin.

Yet, the political stakes and consequences of its form have become more visible over time. Jean Franco, in a lucid reading, signals a passage of the novel in which "García Márquez describes the emissary's mule falling down the mountainside and plunging to its death through a geography that is also a series of national clichés that have been embalmed in scholastic geography, history and literary texts."⁸⁵ Franco argues that the mule's fall embodies "the fall of language into secular knowledge," through its references to discourses like romantic fiction and geography textbooks. In doing so, Franco contends that "García Márquez demonstrates a process of secular disenchantment in which literature is complicit." All of which has a meaningful consequence for the politics of literary form: "the antistate is not envisaged in a utopian future, but in a rapidly disappearing past." One can see here an antithesis to the politics of literary form envisioned by Rama—where the process of democratization of the letter and formal capture of totality carry a utopian bent. Pedro Demenech convincingly argues, reading Rama's *La novela americana* alongside Pedro Henríquez Ureña, that Rama's methodological investments in categories of totality and organicity drew directly from the tradition of the "utopia of America."⁸⁶ As such, the literary corpus of Latin American writing provided for him a way to challenge the secular disenchantment described by Franco and by postmodernists like Lyotard: "in the face of the loss of value, order and hierarchy, it is this American utopia that rearticulates mechanisms, guaranteeing possibilities to face a world that deviates the critical spirit from its course. The critic's hardest task, then, is to provide meaning to this utopia by making something of that critical spirit to endure and prevail."⁸⁷

Contemporary literary works like *Hurricane Season*, along with many other books published in the late 2010s in Latin America, belong to an epoch in the literary field where the secularization of literary language has, over time, decimated the utopian bent of the Latin American novel. It is a literature that accompanies the crises of the sociopolitical mobilizations and utopias that defined Latin America's political agendas at the turn of the century, including Mexico's post-PRI "democratic transition" and the South American pink tide. Even the way in which we can imagine any kind of allegorical and homological relation between literary form and either

the mode of production or the capture of society has become severely disrupted by the ways in which neoliberal and necropolitical processes have gutted the projects of modernity and modernization axiomatic to Latin American theories of the novel. If anything, what we see in mainstream Mexican literature over the last few years is a paradoxical equilibrium between what I call elsewhere “anti-World Literature” (i.e., an anti-utopian gesture challenging the promises of the global and the worldly) and a denationalization by which supranational and transnational modes of writing have been consolidated.⁸⁸ The vocabularies to account for the aesthetics and politics of representation in contemporary Mexican literature and culture—necrowriting, disappropriation, gore capitalism, drug war capitalism, femicide machine, narco-machine, narco-accumulation—are profoundly anti-utopian and contramodern, based on the ways in which the violence of new modes of capitalism and social alienation shape the contemporary experience of the country and the region.⁸⁹ David E. Johnson takes this even further by positing a literary theory, built on Mexican works, premised on the notion that literature itself “concerns—which does not mean either “represents” or “thematizes”—constitutive violence.”⁹⁰ It is not hard to observe how the very definitions of Latin American representational form are being developed in the opposite directions of the ideas of totality, organicity, transculturation, and other forms of figuration and cognitive mapping of the social that occupied Rama and other critics of his time.

Contemporary Mexican works like *Hurricane Season* operate in a non-homological and open form of the language, which can be described through Hjelmslevian conceptions of language. “For Hjelmslev, there is no interpreted system,” writes Guattari in his notes, “only interpretable systems.” As a result, “there is never any closure back onto semantic or grammatical ‘normality.’”⁹¹ What I would contend is that recent works of Mexican literature, and elsewhere in Latin America too, have become deeply concerned with a politics of writing that no longer can articulate utopianism, and writing methods that refuse closure onto semantic, and also formal, normality. We can see an evolution in this direction on the most visible Mexican novels concerning Central American migration. In Antonio Ortuño’s *La fila india* and Alejandro Hernández’s *Amarás a dios por sobre todas las cosas*, both from 2013, we still see a testimonial politics of the novel, which, as Felipe Oliver Fuentes Krafczyk notes, is oriented towards the visibilization, respectively, of the ties of the Mexican state to migrant abuse, and of the experience of the immigrants themselves.⁹² Emiliano Monge, in his 2015 novel *Las tierras arrasadas*, writes in an in-between space of signification by laying out what Fuentes Krafczyk identifies as tragic form, while focusing on “residual” bodies and subjectivities, a reading put forward by Alina Peña Iguarán.⁹³ The most recent and most prominent case is that of Valeria

Luiselli's 2019 novel *Lost Children Archive*, which completely sidesteps direct narration of the migrant experience—in fact Luiselli published an essay on that subject to take it out of her novel.⁹⁴ In this avoidance, Luiselli writes a novel about living as a middle-class person in a country haunted by long histories of anti-migrant violence and settler colonialism, structured in the tension between a first person narrative that opens itself out of signification as the book advances, and an archive where Luiselli renders visible the mechanisms and sources of her work. It is a novelization of the forms of anti-utopia and anti-totality that rule contemporary Mexican writing.⁹⁵

As *Hurricane Season* has reached the shores of English-language publishing, its figuration of the vernacular and the social has lent itself to problematic readings that fail to understand the ways signification operates in Mexican literature. A case in point is David Kurnick's review of *Hurricane Season* in *Public Books*, where he contrasts Melchor with Luiselli, whom he indicts for her novel's metafictional "trappings" as a mask for the book's centering on "middle-class characters" that "inhabit a geopolitical crisis as a kind of ethical thrill ride." Unlike Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, Kurnick sees in Melchor's *Hurricane Season* a "ferocious rhetorical and narrative power, a profane colloquial energy that almost serves as a protest against the cruelty that it recounts."⁹⁶ This is strikingly different from the criticisms of Melchor's style by Wolfson and Domínguez Michael, who argued that the book is marked by its inability to capture or meaningfully politicize a well-known reality. The fact is that such a dichotomic reading—based on a system of literary value that divides books according to questionable classifications of privilege and marginality—falsifies the novels' constellations of meaning, both sociologically and formally. Melchor—like Luiselli—is by no means a marginal writer, but rather someone who has developed her career within well-established structures of the Mexican, and now world, literary field. Even as she emerged from the world of journalism and independent publishing, her international success is tied in part to her prominence within the catalog of Penguin Random House Mondadori, currently the most powerful player in Spanish-language editorial publishing. And while even the most elite members of the Mexican intellectual class can become minoritized and marginalized in the literary field of the United States due to structural anti-Mexican prejudice, Melchor and Luiselli's transnational success is due in no small part to systems of literary trade and transnational circulation that have, after the success of Roberto Bolaño, become far more attentive to Mexican and Latin American writers.

Readings like Kurnick's—based on a cheap dichotomy between what he calls Luiselli's "liberal moral gymnastics" and Melchor's "profane colloquial energy"—are symptomatic of a patronizing understanding of the

Latin American (and US Latinx) writer as a purveyor of authentic experience from below. More importantly, they miss not only the aesthetic and ideological diversity of most Latin American traditions—where both cosmopolitanism and colloquialism have been constitutive, as is the case pretty much everywhere else— but also the nature of the formal wagers and politics of Mexican fiction as such. The exceptional success of both *Hurricane Season* and *Lost Children Archive*—in my view the two most consequential works of Mexican literary fiction of the past decade measured in terms of reception and impact—is thus not a factor of their resistance to any model of literary hegemony. Rather, they participate in the emergence of new literary doxas thanks to their distinct and successful embodiment of a politics of literature that captures the very impossibility of homology—and of utopian politics— as a feature of the novel form in contemporary Mexico and Latin America. As narratives of immigration and violence they are not particularly interesting. But they are definitely fascinating in their distinct explorations of the imbalances between expression and content in relation to a content-purport that is no longer Latin American modernity but its rolling catastrophe.

Even as Mexican literature enjoys nearly unprecedented success in the realm of world literature and translation, writers tarry constantly through an impasse in cultural politics created by neoliberalism. There are different approaches as to how we can move forward. Some critics like Domínguez Michael have doubled down on the critique of realism as a mode of narrative and an assertion of the aesthetic autonomy of literature, as seen in his reviews of *Hurricane Season* and other novels of violence. Others, like Oswaldo Zavala, update Rama's prescriptive model and advocate the need for a new programmatic literature that insists "on the political and economic failure of modernity."⁹⁷ I personally think that both Luiselli and Melchor orient their works in that direction, although Zavala disagrees with their approaches.⁹⁸ In any case, *Hurricane Season's* meaningful literary politics are not in its referent, but rather in the inscription of forms of signification where the content substance can no longer be homological or even allegorical.

Regardless of the possible programs for Latin American literature to come, Melchor's activation of past forms—and past critical and theoretical approaches to the relationship between language, politics and society— opens interpretive horizons that allow for the reading of contemporary Latin American literature in their historical and aesthetic constellations. The complex politics of literary criticism as embodied by Rama and his contemporaries, and the generative and frequently forgotten theories of language put forward by thinkers like Hjelmslev, provide rich archives for the reformulation of textual critique and intellectual history. They can perhaps be instruments of a possible path for the study and critique of literature, against the grain of critical defaults, including the presumption

of inherent resistance in literary form—an idealism that should not be disavowed, but which always requires the counterweight of reflexivity. Perhaps more importantly, it provides us with tools in the intractable task of thinking the potentialities and materialities of writing in the necropolitical era, and it helps us to find, even in the most mainstream works, forms and languages to antithetically engage the territorializing and totalizing subsumption of culture in the wake of neoliberalism.

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NOTES

¹ Fernanda Melchor, *Temporada de huracanes* (Mexico City: Literatura Random House, 2017). English translation: *Hurricane Season*, trans. Sophie Hughes (New York: New Directions, 2020). Given that this particular essay addresses audiences both in English and Spanish, I will use in the text the title of the English translation when available, or the Spanish original otherwise. I will cite any other literary text available in both languages in English, but I will provide the Spanish original in the notes. Finally, for texts originally published in Spanish and translated into English, I will provide reference to both.

² Some of the most substantial and worthwhile reviews showing the continued praise of the book include: Antonio Ortuño, “Por fin,” *Letras Libres*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.letraslibres.com/espana-mexico/revista/por-fin>; Lucía Treviño, “Temporada de huracanes” de Fernanda Melchor,” *Revista de la Universidad de México* 841 (October 2017), 157-61; and Nicolás Medina Mora Pérez, “Las comas del huracán,” *Nexos*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=43611>. It is of note that Roberto Pliego, a widely read reviewer from the newspaper *Milenio* and famous for his trashings of new fiction releases, reviewed the book positively. See “Habitantes de un cementerio,” *Milenio*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.milenio.com/cultura/habitantes-de-un-cementerio>. A notable exception was Christopher Domínguez Michael, Mexico’s most widely read and most polarizing critic, who wrote an uncharacteristically and deliberately ambiguous review centered on the question of whether realist fiction can capture the Mexican present. See “Novísimos: La bruja,” in *Confabulario*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/entrada-de-opinion/columna/christopher-dominguez-michael/cultura/2017/05/17/novisimos-la-bruja>. I visited all of the websites for this article on June 6, 2020. As a response to initial reviews, Gabriel Wolfson published a text that reflected on his desire to temper the intense enthusiasm surrounding the novel and to discuss the ways in which the Mexican literary field constructs books of the moment. See Gabriel Wolfson, *Crítica* 177 (2017), 159-65.

³ See, for example, Julian Lucas, “A Mexican Novel Conjures a Violent World

Tinged with Beauty,” *The New York Times Book Review*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/books/review/hurricane-season-fernanda-melchor.html>; Amanda Denis, “A Terrible Beauty: On Fernanda Melchor’s *Hurricane Season*,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 31, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-terrible-beauty-on-fernanda-melchors-hurricane-season>; Ana Cecilia Álvarez, “Season of the Witch,” *Bookforum*, April/May 2020, <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2701/fernanda-melchor-s-many-voiced-mexican-noir-23948>. I also published a review: see Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, “Fernanda Melchor’s *Hurricane Season*: A Literary Triumph on the Failures of Modernization,” *Words Without Borders*, April 2020, <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/fernanda-melchors-hurricane-season-a-literary-triumph-ignacio-m-sanchez-pra>.

⁴ For a full-fledged discussion of Duarte’s devastating administration, see Alberto J. Olvera, *Veracruz en su laberinto: Autoritarismo, crisis de régimen y violencia en el sexenio de Javier Duarte* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2018).

⁵ Fernanda Melchor, *Aquí no es Miami* (Mexico City: El salario del miedo, 2013). A significantly revised version was published: *Aquí no es Miami* (Mexico City: Literatura Random House, 2018). References to this book are from the new edition.

⁶ For a reading of Melchor in the context of new Mexican literary journalism, see Patricia Poblete Alday, “Crónica narrativa contemporánea: Enfoques, deslindes y desafíos metodológicos,” *Literatura mexicana* 31, no. 1 (2020), 140. There is a second essay to be written on Melchor and the *crónica*, but to keep the present essay under control, I decided to sidestep the question.

⁷ Fernanda Melchor, *Falsa liebre* (Mexico City: Almadía, 2013).

⁸ Anadeli Bencomo, “Acapulco, del tropicalismo a la distopía urbana,” *Telar* 17 (2016), 25-37. As evidenced by the title, Bencomo’s focus is on Acapulco, and she mentions Melchor as an example in Veracruz of the process she seeks to analyze.

⁹ This account comes from Sophie Hughes, “*La realidad mexicana*: An interview with Fernanda Melchor,” *Southwest Review*, April 1, 2020, <http://southwestreview.com/la-realidad-mexicana-an-interview-with-fernanda-melchor>.

¹⁰ See Davy Demas, “Aux frontières du corps proper: De l’abjection comme stratégie de domination dans *Temporada de huracanes* (2017), de Fernanda Melchor,” *Crisol*, série numérique 11 (2020), 1-29; Marcos Eduardo Ávalos Reyes, “*Temporada de huracanes* de Fernanda Melchor: Una lectura del cuerpo desde el terreno del chisme y la abyección,” *Connotas* 19 (2019), 53-70. Both of these essays reference Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹¹ Gloria Luz Godínez Rivas and Luis Román Nieto, “De torcidos y embrujos: *Temporada de huracanes* de Fernanda Melchor,” *Anclajes* 23, no. 3 (2019), 59-70. See also Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*

(New York: Autonomedia, 2004) and Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo gore* (Barcelona: Melusina, 2010). English translation: *Gore Capitalism*, trans. John Pluecker (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2018).

¹² Melchor, *Temporada de huracanes*, 223. The acknowledgements are missing in the English edition, which is unfortunate, because they provide this and other interesting references for reading.

¹³ Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, “The Persistence of the Transcultural: A Latin American Theory of the Novel from the National-Popular to the Global,” *New Literary History* 51 (2020), 347-74.

¹⁴ Melchor, *Temporada de huracanes*, 223; Gabriel García Márquez, *El otoño del patriarca* (Mexico City: Diana, 2015). English translation: *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

¹⁵ “encontré una voz muy libre, muy compleja, que sabía contar los acontecimientos desde una distancia enorme, casi como una voz de Dios y sin embargo esa misma voz se metía en los personajes y habla como ellos.” Gerardo Antonio Martínez, “La literatura entre el arte y la violencia extrema,” *Confabulario*, August 10, 2017, <https://confabulario.eluniversal.com.mx/entrevista-fernanda-melchor-temporada-de-huracanes>. All translations from sources in Spanish are by *FORMA* editors unless noted otherwise.

¹⁶ For examples of the use of “post,” see Donald L. Shaw, *The Post-Boom in Spanish American Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) and John Beverley, José Oviedo, and Michael Aronna, eds., *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ For the development of the idea of “serie literaria” alongside Rama’s general idea of the literary system, see Ángel Rama, *Literatura y clase social* (Mexico City: Folios, 1983), 9-10 and *Literatura, cultura, sociedad en América Latina*, ed. Pablo Rocca (Montevideo: Trilce, 2006), 94-109. José Eduardo González usefully discusses the ways in which Marxist concerns about the relationship between literature and society, as well as the problem of mediation, influence the development of the idea of “secuencia” in Rama. See *Appropriating Theory: Ángel Rama’s Critical Work* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 100-101. It is worth recalling too that Rama derived this concept from the Russian formalist Yuri Tynyanov, as González also notes. See J. Tinianov, “Sobre la evolución literaria,” in *Teoría de la literatura de los formalistas rusos*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. Ana María Nethol (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1970), 89-101.

¹⁸ “acumulación incesante”; “los hechos narrativos son voluntariamente inmovilizados porque se les percibe como ‘soles negros,’ esos agujeros que irradian energía misteriosa, y entonces, mediante la acumulación de sucesivas frases dependientes, de series de imágenes abiertas, de cadenas adjetivales, de sustituciones adverbiales, de verbos superpuestos para ir desmenuzando una sola acción, se les dota de largas y ondulantes caudas resplandecientes, cuyo brillo multicolor es arrasado por un vacío.” Ángel Rama,

La novela en América Latina: Panoramas 1920-1980 (Santiago de Chile: Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2008), 487-89.

¹⁹ I borrow this formulation from Adelaida López Mejía's reading of García Márquez, which she unfolds in different themes, particularly the patriarch's continuous facing of the dead and their remains. Despite the differences, I think that the bind between repetition in language and the spectral presence of dead does manifest itself in Melchor's narrative. See Adelaida López Mejía, "Burying the Dead: Repetition in *El otoño del patriarca*," *MLN* 107, no. 2 (1992), 298-320.

²⁰ Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2004). English translation: *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2008). I resist here a deeper engagement with Bolaño because I am personally resistant to the Bolañization of Mexican literary studies, particularly the way in which so many studies often derive their full analysis of contemporary Mexico out of *2666* without bothering to discuss any Mexican literary work whatsoever. I do recognize though that there is an important line of reading Bolaño in our field, and I do also value the theoretical work done in some (though by not means all) of these essays. Acknowledging the impossibility to fairly cover all that production, I would recommend a couple of studies that would provide a good dialogue with my arguments here: Oswaldo Zavala, *La modernidad insufrible: Roberto Bolaño en los límites de la literatura latinoamericana contemporánea* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures, 2015); John Kraniuskas, "A Monument to the Unknown Worker: Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Radical Philosophy* 200 (2016), 37-46 and Patrick Dove, *Literature and "Interregnum": Globalization, War, and the Crisis of Sovereignty in Latin America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 215-59.

²¹ "estructura repetida y clásica"; "mismo parlamento aglutinador, una voz que, sin rebasar sus reducidos escenarios, se mueve con despiadada soltura de un personaje a otro, de uno a otro registro léxico, entre diferentes tiempos, destinatarios y miradas." Wolfson, "*Temporada de huracanes*," 164.

²² "previsibilidad"; "un brillo multicolor arrastrado por su vacío." Wolfson, "*Temporada de huracanes*," 163. See note 20.

²³ "nada que no sepa cualquier lector de periódicos para no hablar de quienes sobreviven al horror de todos los días en el Golfo de México." Domínguez Michael, "Novísimos: La bruja."

²⁴ "fabula en un universo que no requiere fabulación." Domínguez Michael, "Novísimos: La bruja."

²⁵ "Ante el horror, sospecho—sólo sospecho—que a Fernanda Melchor no le quedó otra cosa que explicarlo, infantilmente (lo digo sin desdén, tropológicamente), recurriendo al pensamiento mágico, al cuento de hadas, a una bruja que concentre el Mal, lo ejerza, lo controle y acabe siendo víctima de él, sabiéndose en el fondo, inmortal."

Domínguez Michael, “Novísimos: La bruja.”

²⁶ “un entrecruzado volar de quetzales de los cuales sólo son perceptibles de las colas desplegadas que se mezclan, se arraciman, se agitan en todas direcciones y ocultan las cabezas y los cuerpos a los cuales prolongan.” Rama, *La novela*, 489.

²⁷ It is telling that two new and excellent books on Rama make little or no reference to this. In Javier García Liendo’s book, focused on mass culture, there is no substantial reference to semiotics and structuralism. See *El intelectual y la cultura de masas: Argumentos latinoamericanos en torno a Ángel Rama y José María Arguedas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2017). More significantly, José Eduardo González, quoted before, does an excellent job of tracing Rama’s genealogy to the Frankfurt School in general and Benjamin in particular, and even raises Rama’s interlocution with Cassirer’s idea of form, which would merit further discussion. Yet, while González discusses the influence in Rama of works by structuralism-adjacent literary sociologists like Lucien Goldmann or Robert Escarpit, and even identifies Russian formalism as a source, he does not study the various references to structuralist linguistics proper in Rama’s work. See González, *Appropriating Theory*.

²⁸ I must anecdotally confess here that this essay in part exists because of my training as an undergraduate student at University of the Americas-Puebla was fully imbued by this. In my first three semesters, I took seminars on Saussure and Hjelmslev, and a class on structuralist and poststructuralist theory. The neighboring university, BUAP, had (and perhaps still has) a Center of Language Sciences as well as a separate Program of Semiotics and Signification Studies, and structuralism and semiotics remain a core part of their program’s curriculum.

²⁹ The origin of this terminology as used here, and in Rama’s work, is Louis Hjelmslev’s influential discussion of expression and content in *Prolegomena to a Theory of the Language*, trans. Francis J. Whitfield (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 47-60. I will spare readers a technical description of this work, very popular in Spanish-language academies between the 1970s and the 1990s (in fact both Gabriel Wolfson and myself, graduates of the same undergraduate program mentioned above, participated in courses where this book was taught extensively). For a short explanation of the terminology see Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 64-73. One should remember that Hjelmslev’s work is very extensive and there are various books in which the categories are developed and deepened, many of them translated into Spanish by Gredos. Since most studies refer primarily to the prolegomena, I will stick to that in this essay. A full-fledged and more contemporary discussion of Hjelmslev’s model can be found in Miriam Taverniers, “Hjelmslev’s Semiotic Model of Language: An Exegesis,” *Semiotica* 171 (2008), 367-94.

³⁰ See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016). Hjelmslev appears more significantly in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism*

and *Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane (New York: Penguin, 2009) and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). It is worth keeping in mind that the influence of Hjelmslev spreads across the works of both of them.

³¹ Taverniers, "Hjelmslev's Semiotic Model of Language," 376. See also Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*, 47-60.

³² Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 67-68; See also Charalampos Magoulas, "The Ancient Roots of Modern Semiotics: Aristotle and the Semiotic Triangle," *Philosophical Inquiry* 29, nos. 1/2 (2007), 46-56.

³³ Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*, 114.

³⁴ Taverniers, "Hjelmslev's Semiotic Model of Language," 372.

³⁵ Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); A.J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at Method*, trans. Daniele McDowell et. al (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

³⁶ Jürgen Trabant, *Semiología de la obra literaria: Glosemática y teoría de la literatura*, trans. Jose Rubio Sáez (Madrid: Gredos, 1970).

³⁷ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979), 54.

³⁸ Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze and Guattari* (London: Routledge, 1989), 126-27.

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 108.

⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 243.

⁴¹ The most significant book of Hjelmslev-infused literary criticism in Latin America may be José Pascual Buxó, *Las figuraciones del sentido: Ensayos de poética semiológica* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984).

⁴² Trabant, *Semiología*, 333-34.

⁴³ Trabant, *Semiología*, 336-37.

⁴⁴ Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*, 52.

⁴⁵ If anyone is interested in the technicalities of this, good visualizations of Hjelmslev's idea of the sign can be found in Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, 67 and Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*, 51-55. For Hjelmslev's own discussion, see *Prolegomena*, 92.

⁴⁶ This is a concept that mirrors Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Hjelmslev. According to François Dosse, they saw his book as "their prolegomena of their theory of the collective agent of utterance." See Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Intersected Lives*, trans. Deborah Glassman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 232. It is worth noting that one could connect here Melchor to other manners of collective enunciation, particularly those of the Latin American *crónica*, a topic that merits separate discussion.

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies: The Complete Edition in a New Translation*, trans.

Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 229. For a full-fledged discussion of the ways in which Barthes expands on Hjelmslev, see Taverniers, “Hjelmslev’s Semiotic Model of Language,” 372-75. It is also worth noting that this line is significant in Fredric Jameson’s critique of semiotics. See Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 159-60.

⁴⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 227.

⁴⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 227-28.

⁵⁰ Eco, *Theory*, 89.

⁵¹ See Godínez Rivas and Román Nieto, “De torcidos y embrujos.”

⁵² Melchor, *Temporada de huracanes*, 181; *Hurricane Season*, 182.

⁵³ For a key text on gaps of indeterminacy, see Wolfgang Iser, “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response,” in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. J.K.M. Newton (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 195-99.

⁵⁴ On this, see Taverniers, “Hjelmslev’s Semiotic Model of Language,” 370-72.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), 22-27.

⁵⁶ On Yanga and his longstanding effect on Veracruz and Mexico, see Charles Henry Rosswell, “The First Liberator of the Americas: The Editor’s Notes/ ‘El primer libertador de las Americas’: Notas del editor,” *Callaloo* 31, no. 1 (2008), 1-12. A mention of the role of La Matosa can be found in Jane G. Landers, “African Ethnicity, Corporate Identity, and the Evolution of Free Black Towns in the Spanish Circum-Caribbean,” in *Slaves, Subjects and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*, eds. Jane G. Landers and Barry M. Robinson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 126.

⁵⁷ This topic would require many articles of its own, but I recommend the brilliant analysis of Yanga’s rebellion and its implication for thinking the role of Blackness in Mexico, in Ricardo A. Wilson II, *The Nigrescent Beyond: Mexico, the United States, and the Psychic Vanishing of Blackness* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 9-32.

⁵⁸ “cabello primoroso;” “el pelo de la abuela, pelo de borrego decía ella, perro crespo de negra.” Melchor, *Temporada de huracanes*, 55; *Hurricane Season*, 46.

⁵⁹ “espaldas relucientes en su lustre de cuero bruñido; brillantes y prietas como el hueso del tamarindo, o cremosas como el dulce de leche o la pulpa tierna del chicozapote maduro. Piel coor canela, color caoba tirando a palo de rosa...” Melchor, *Temporada de huracanes* 26; *Hurricane Season*, 18.

⁶⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove,

2008), xii. This is itself a topic that would merit a completely new discussion and I hope work on *Hurricane Season* and other contemporary novels through the lens of critical race theory is developed in the near future. I am in part inspired here by Christina Sharpe's work on the "wake" in relationship to Blackness, death and the legacies of slavery. See *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 20.

⁶¹ I am well aware that in this sentence I introduce acritically and without elaboration the Lacanian concept of the Real. However, besides presuming familiarity of readers with it, it is worth noting that Hjelmslev is a reference, often underdiscussed, in Lacan's engagements with structuralism. One could certainly argue that the form/substance/purport triad that constitutes both form and expression in Hjelmslev could be rendered parallel to the Lacanian triad of symbolic/imaginary, Real, which would require a long investigation, but I nonetheless presume here. For discussion of Hjelmslev in relation to psychoanalysis, see Yannis Stravrakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1999), 23 and, more generally, Michel Arrivé, *Linguistics and Psychoanalysis: Freud, Saussure, Hjelmslev, Lacan, and Others*, trans. James Leader (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1992).

⁶² "corregir lo que entiende es el desajuste entre el lenguaje y la realidad en América Latina."; "privilegia estas instancias en que ve realizarse, aunque sea pasajeramente, una armonía, un ajuste que manifiesta un atisbo de la organicidad que tiene como idea guía." Cited in Ángel Rama, *La querrela de la realidad y el realismo: Ensayos sobre literatura chilena*, ed. Hugo Herrera Pardo (Santiago de Chile: Mimesis, 2016), 16. Due to COVID-19 library restrictions I have been unable to access Rosa's original essay in full, but I think the extensively cited and discussed passage in this edition accurately reflects his position. The original citation of this text is Richard Rosa, "Acuñaiones: Ángel Rama y la economía de la letra," *Estudios* 22/23 (2003-2004), 41.

⁶³ "trasvasamiento"; "transmutación"; "transculturación"; "transposition"; "translation"; "transcription." Rama, *La querrela de la realidad y el realismo*, 17.

⁶⁴ "para observar la estricta concordancia entre una realidad manejada por el hablante y la distribución lexical de la lengua." Ángel Rama, *Los gauchopolíticos rioplatenses* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982), 193.

⁶⁵ "[la] zona fonética del sentido." Rama, *Los gauchopolíticos rioplatenses*, 195, 219.

⁶⁶ "su filiación ideológico-filosófica en un gramscismo de tremenda influencia en la izquierda intelectual de esos años."; "Rama escribe desde una posicionalidad conflictiva tributaria, por un lado, del mito del mesianismo de izquierda de los años setenta pero intrigada por analizar los grados posibles y las consecuencias probables de la cooptación del intelectual en sus nuevas modalidades de articulación con el Estado y las instituciones culturales, incluidas la praxis de la literatura." Mabel Moraña, "Ideología de la transculturación," in *Ángel Rama y los estudios latinoamericanos*, ed. Mabel Moraña (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 1997), 141.

⁶⁷ This is not to say that his reading of García Márquez is not influential or formational. Juan Poblete does a good job positing the writings on García Márquez as formational to Rama's more general account of the Boom and transculturation. See Juan Poblete, "The Boom, Literary and Cultural Critique," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019), 206-208. It is also worth considering Paula Andrea Marin Colorado's extensive discussion of Rama's García Márquez and the reception of his critique in Colombia. See "La narrativa de Gabriel García Márquez vista por Ángel Rama y la recepción de su crítica en Colombia," *Estudios de literatura colombiana* 30 (2012), 109-28. I thank Santiago Rozo for pointing me to this article. Unfortunately, Marín Colorado does not address the Rama texts central to my argument here. I also discuss Rama's lectures on the García Márquez and the national popular in my precursor piece, "The Persistence of the Transcultural."

⁶⁸ "una forma diversa y a su juicio inédita de afiliación letrada a los proyectos múltiples de la modernidad"; "la transculturación enfatiza la mediación letrada como praxis de apropiación y re-presentación de contenidos culturales exógenos e internos, que al confluir se integran dialécticamente dando lugar a totalizaciones que son más que la suma de sus partes." Moraña, "Ideología de la transculturación," 141.

⁶⁹ This is not to say that Rama was completely impervious to them, Deleuze in particular. Deleuze and Guattari do appear as theorists of desire in Rama's work, although at times he inscribed Deleuzian ideas of singularity and openness into fairly structuralist analyses of text. See, for instance, his analysis of Martí in Ángel Rama, *La crítica de la cultura en América Latina* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985), 136-41.

⁷⁰ Lucien Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1975), 7.

⁷¹ González, *Appropriating Theory*, 94.

⁷² See, respectively, Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*, trans. John Gledson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) and Roberto Schwarz, *To the Victor, the Potatoes*, ed. Ronald W. Sousa (Leiden: Brill, 2020). I recommend this new edition rather than older translations of the misplaced ideas essay, because it finally brings to English Schwarz's important book

⁷³ "el asunto, para la literatura propiamente tal, se refiere a la experiencia pura, a la general experiencia humana [...] La literatura expresa al hombre cuanto es humano." Alfonso Reyes, *Obras Completas XV. El deslinde. Apuntes para la teoría literaria* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997). I will not go into further detail here because I have discussed it extensively in Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, *Intermitencias alfonsinas: Estudios y otros textos (2004-2018)* (Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León/ Universidad Iberoamericana Torreón, 2019), 19-50.

⁷⁴ "el valor más reconfortante de la lectura: es esta experiencia, experiencia que ya el ser humano parece no ser capaz de alcanzar de algún modo si no es a través de la literatura."

Ángel Rama, *García Márquez: Edificación de un arte nacional y popular* (Montevideo: Universidad de la República, 1987), 105.

⁷⁵ Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 53.

⁷⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 192-94.

⁷⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 73

⁷⁸ “Concentrar una experiencia, vale por expresar una forma precisa, única, fatalizada, un contenido de vida, vale concentrar la vida en el arte para que permanezca como un ‘develamiento’ dentro del mundo apariencial.” Rama, *La novela en América Latina*, 113. For a thorough reading of this moment in Rama, including the continuities between him and Rama, see Rafael Mondragón, *Un arte radical de la lectura: Constelaciones de la filología latinoamericana* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2019), 425-39. It is worth noting that Mondragón is himself the latest iteration of this line of identification between literature and the human experience as central to Latin American literary creation and critique. In a different section of his book, Mondragón also identifies Rama’s early writings in Uruguay, which, in dialogue with Antonio Candido, mandated the construction of a literature that promoted historical development. See Mondragón, *Un arte radical de la lectura*, 349.

⁷⁹ Ángel Rama, *Writing Culture: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, trams. David Frye (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 84. A good discussion of the implications of Rama’s program in this regard, related to the problem of modern rationality and cultural autonomy, see Guillemro Mariaca, *El poder de la palabra: La crítica cultural hispanoamericana* (Santiago de Chile: Tajarar, 2012), 74-77.

⁸⁰ “literatura urgente.” This is how Rama frames his writings on the novel genre. See *La novela en América Latina*.

⁸¹ Gerald Martin, *Journey Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989), 271-77. Martin even disavows the praise that Rama concedes to some elements of the novel.

⁸² Gustavo Guerrero, *Paisajes en movimiento: Literatura y cambio cultural entre dos siglos* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2018). It is also useful to consider the way Latin American critique has moved into new forms of theorization based on post- and decoloniality, deconstruction, subalternity and neoliberalism, as well as the challenge to these models from the market and the growing visibility of the Latinx community. For a primer, see Román de la Campa, *Rumbos sin telos: Residuos de la nación después del Estado* (Querétaro: Rialta, 2017).

⁸³ Antonio Cornejo Polar, *La formación de la tradición literaria en el Perú* (Lima: Centro de Estudios Literarios Antonio Cornejo Polar/ Latinoamericana, 2017), 149-64.

⁸⁴ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff

Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁸⁵ Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 129-29.

⁸⁶ “utopía de América”

⁸⁷ Pedro Demech, “The Utopia of America: Time and Authenticity in Ángel Rama’s critics,” *História da Historiografia* 29 (2019), 244-70.

⁸⁸ See Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, “Writing the Necropolitical: Notes around the Idea of Mexican Anti-World Literature,” in *World Literature and Dissent*, eds. Lorna Burns and Katie Muth (New York: Routledge, 2019), 141-60.

⁸⁹ Defining these categories substantially would require another lengthy article but readers can refer, respectively, to the following books for their discussion: Cristina Rivera Garza, *The Restless Dead: Necrowriting and Disappropriation* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2020); Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*; Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014); Sergio González Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine*, trans. Michael Parker-Stainback (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2012); Rossana Reguillo, “The Narco-Machine and the Work of Violence: Notes Toward its Decodification,” *E-misférica* 8, no. 2 (2010), <https://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-82/reguillo>; Gareth Williams, “Decontainment, Stasis and Narco-Accumulation,” *The Global South* 12, no. 2 (2018), 96. It is worth noting that Williams has a forthcoming book on the subject: *Infrapolitical Passages: Global Turmoil, Narco-Accumulation and the Post-Sovereign State* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

⁹⁰ David E. Johnson, *Violence and Naming: On Mexico and the Promise of Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 8.

⁹¹ Félix Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus Papers*, trans. Kéline Gotman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 217.

⁹² Felipe Oliver Fuentes Kraffszcyk, “La novela mexicana sobre la migración centroamericana,” *América Crítica* 2, no. 1 (2018), 45-46. See also Antonio Ortuño, *La fila india* (Mexico City: Océano, 2013) and Alejandro Hernández, *Amarás a Dios sobre todas las cosas* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2013).

⁹³ Fuentes Kraffszcyk, “La novela mexicana sobre la migración centroamericana,” 50; Alina Peña Iguarán, “Vidas residuales. El arte en los tiempos de guerra. *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015) de Emiliano Monge,” *Mitologías hoy* 17 (2018), 135-49; Emiliano Monge, *Las tierras arrasadas* (Mexico City: Literatura Random House, 2015). English translation: *Among the Lost*, trans. Frank Wynne (Melbourne: Scribe, 2019).

⁹⁴ Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (New York: Knopf, 2019); Spanish translation: *Desierto sonoro*, trans. Daniel Saldaña París (Mexico City: Sexto Piso, 2019). The essay on children is Valeria Luiselli, *Los niños perdidos (un ensayo en cuarenta preguntas)* (Mexico City: Sexto Piso, 2016). English version: *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in*

Forty Questions (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017).

⁹⁵ Since this is not an article about Luiselli, I will not take this point further here but it is important to acknowledge that *Lost Children Archive* is not a Latin American novel in the traditional sense. Written in English, it inhabits institutionally the space of American fiction more successfully than it does the Mexican literary field (where the novel has received comparatively little attention). But then again it is a book that forces us to think how much Latin American writing is bound by Spanish and Portuguese, by geography or even by the transcultural experience of modernity as such.

⁹⁶ See David Kurnick, “Books and Abandonment,” *Public Books*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.publicbooks.org/books-and-abandonment>.

⁹⁷ “en el fracaso político y económico de la modernidad.” Oswaldo Zavala, *Volver a la modernidad: Genealogías de la literatura mexicana del fin de siglo* (Valencia: Albatros, 2017). On the editorial matters I sidestep in this piece, see Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, *Strategic Occidentalism: On Mexican Fiction, the Neoliberal Book Market and the Question of World Literature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018) and “El efecto Luiselli: Notas sobre la nueva literatura mexicana y la lengua inglesa,” in *World Editors: Dynamics of Global Publishing and the Latin American Case between the Archive and the Digital Age*, eds. Gustavo Guerrero, Benjamin Loy and Gesine Müller (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), forthcoming.

⁹⁸ Zavala has a very critical approach to the ways in which Mexican literature participates in hegemonic forms of world literature. He has published a critique of Luiselli’s early works in these terms in *Volver a la modernidad*, 151-73. He has not published on Melchor, but in personal conversation he has noted similar critiques to the ones he unfolds generally on the representation of violence in *Los cárteles no existen: Narcotráfico y cultura en México* (Mexico City: Malpaso, 2018). I recognize the exceptional importance of his work to the discussion of contemporary Mexican fiction and I agree with its general push and framework. I do find his argument a bit too sweeping when confronting individual works. My methodological conversation with his critique (and with him personally) has to do with my own interest in the ways in which literature that is visible, read and translated can be analyzed to understand the formation of hegemonic systems—and problematically critical stances within them.