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The Exploded Word in Three Novels by Bernardo Carvalho



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Abstract: Critics have commented on the power of writing—the biblical Word as creation—in Bernardo Carvalho’s work. It forges connections through words between others who are out of place, searching for order in what appears to be chaos. However, this motif from both Genesis and the New Testament is also mediated by another creation narrative: the Big Bang or Initial Singularity. Like the undeliverable letters in Rubem Braga’s “O pessoal,” rupturing bonds made of words can be as unpredictable as splitting an atom. A singularity as simple as a letter’s altered trajectory can result in something new and unexpected at the point of disconnection—such as Braga’s *crônica*. As we examine three novels by Carvalho, *Nove noites*, *Mongólia*, and *O sol se põe em São Paulo*, what emerges is that the same process occurs when the undelivered letters of Manoel Perna, the Westerner, and Michiyo fall into the hands of the books’ narrators. On one hand, the progressive entropy in the system can be said to “explode” the Word. However, the narrators then take up the Word to write new realities. By appropriating its power and reinventing how it is used, they explode the Word a second time.

Keywords: Bernardo Carvalho, contemporary Brazilian novel/romance brasileiro contemporâneo, *Mongólia*, *Nove noites*, “O pessoal,” *O sol se põe em São Paulo*, Rubem Braga

Introduction

In Rubem Braga’s *crônica* “O pessoal,” an elderly letter carrier laments the growing number of letters he comes across that bear the wrong address. Braga suggests that increased urban growth and development are the likely cause. The mailman agrees, but then adds “Mas reparando bem o senhor vê que o pessoal anda muito desorientado” (50). First published in January of 1957, this *crônica* comments on the toll that progress and growth in the post-war *desenvolvimentismo* of Juscelino Kubitschek had taken on the human element of community—how expanded transportation and communication infrastructure ironically sever human connections as easily as they promote them, leaving us feeling less sure of our place in the world.

Many of the novels by the contemporary Brazilian writer Bernardo Carvalho return to this theme a half century later, particularly three from the first decade of the new millennium, *Nove noites* (2002), *Mongólia* (2003), and *O sol se põe em São Paulo* (2007). In these books, letters that do not make it to their intended recipients emerge as symptomatic of twenty-first century communities, narratives, identities, and human relationships cut off from one another, despite the world’s increasing connectivity. They have succumbed to intensifying disorientation amid globalization—to say nothing of urban violence, war, suicide, and terrorism—and a haze of disillusionment reminiscent of the “tristeza indefinível” Braga describes at the end of “O pessoal” (50).

Yet, at the same time, Carvalho’s novels also exemplify the potential that Luiz Costa Lima sees in *freitas*. While they recall the fragmented aspects of our contemporary world, the fact that their components are not “perfeitamente encaixados” allows for unexpected developments. Anomalies make “a constituição de ângulos imprevisos” possible (11). “O pessoal,” as is typical

of a Rubem Braga *crônica*, invites reflection by distilling the literary essence of banality. It uses undeliverable letters as a physical manifestation of disrupted ties between people to contemplate the latent poetry in isolation. As Lima suggests, this disruption in a system of writing leads to a new and unexpected creation: a *crônica* that goes on to affect more people than a letter ever could have.

Not unlike a postal network, which reifies connections between individuals through words, some critics have commented on the theme of the power of writing, or the biblical Word as creation, present in Carvalho's work. This motif from both Genesis and the New Testament similarly embodies the search for connection between others who are out of place. But it is also mediated by another creation narrative: the Big Bang or Initial Singularity. As with Braga's undeliverable letters, rupturing bonds made of words can be as unpredictable as splitting an atom. On a textual level, any singularity, an aberration as simple as a letter's altered trajectory, can result in something new at the point of disconnection. As we examine *Nove noites*, *Mongólia*, and *O sol se põe em São Paulo* together, what emerges is that this phenomenon—the “Exploded Word”—occurs when the undelivered letters of Manoel Perna, the Westerner, and Michiyo fall into the hands of the books' narrators. On one hand, the progressive entropy in the order of the Word that this interrupted correspondence represents can be said to “explode” it. More importantly, the narrators then take up the Word to write new realities in a different way. By appropriating its power and reinventing how it is used, they explode the Word a second time.

Carvalho, Contemporary Trends, and the Exploded Word

Born in Rio in 1960, Bernardo Carvalho is one of the most important voices in contemporary Brazilian fiction. He debuted on the literary scene in 1993 with a collection of short stories and has since published eleven novels and been distinguished with the most prestigious literary awards of the Portuguese-speaking world. His writing reflects an upbringing during the height of postmodernism, including narratives that are fragmented, labyrinthine, ambiguous, densely intertextual, paranoid, and metafictional. Carvalho's work also inhabits global spaces, with itinerant characters entangled between Brazil and places such as the Middle East, Mongolia, or St. Petersburg. This section will contextualize many of these aspects of Carvalho's fiction within contemporary criticism—particularly Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the altermodern—as well as identify the two levels at which these novels exemplify the “Exploded Word.”

As Leila Lehen has observed, it is impossible to single out an “overarching perspective of present-day Brazilian fiction . . . given the multifaceted and constantly shifting contemporary literary panorama” (“Contemporary” 208). This variety notwithstanding, many vectors of contemporary literature in Brazil remain acutely aware of the wrestle with the spirit of postmodernism. Its legacy, which influenced the formation of so many writers, has proved tenacious both within Brazil and without. Numerous contemporary elements, including those mentioned in the previous paragraph, still trace an organic and evolutionary lineage back to it. Some would rather call this a coda to postmodernism, while others, like Godofredo de Oliveira Neto, prefer “post-postmodern” (225). Regardless of the terminology, however, the relation between writers like Carvalho and the ghostly contours of postmodernism are neither mutually exclusive nor particularly dichotomous.

For example, Carvalho's style kept its distance from the resurgent brutalism and neo-naturalism of the 90s, gravitating instead toward unstable narratives “à beira da dissolução” that we associate with postmodernism (Vidal 84). Furthermore, despite the fact that *Nove noites* was published after the year 2000, Beatriz Resende speaks for many in calling it a postmodern classic (82). I do not disagree. Yet Carvalho's books, for all their postmodern characteristics, also readily lend themselves to a number of international post-postmodern critical perspectives. To give a few examples, he shares much with what Héctor Hoyos has called “novels of South-South escapism.” With a marked interest in border-crossing, his fiction not only avoids (directly) addressing questions of national identity, but also destabilizes and innovates with “the

familiar circuits of transnational cultural exchange” in its narratives and aesthetic (67). This presents “an opportunity to cross-pollinate Latin Americanism and world literature, without forgetting their dissymmetry,” in a contrapuntal relationship (8–9). Similarly, Enrique Dussel’s “transmodernism”¹ refers to networks of the contemporary world that critique modernism’s aesthetics and politics by undermining the Eurocentric, hierarchical, and linear narratives tied up in center-periphery relationships (López-Calvo 1–2). Carvalho’s penchant for paradox is relevant to Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s concept of “metamodernism,”² which embraces simultaneous dichotomies such as hope and irony or unity and fragmentation in an oscillation that observation only perpetuates instead of resolves.

However, among this multiplicity of overlapping perspectives, the one that perhaps best speaks to the particular brand of connectivity in these three novels is what Nicolas Bourriaud has termed “altermodernism.” Bourriaud envisions the altermodern as a global, aesthetic manifestation of connections forged through the artistic act in lieu of traditional referentiality. It privileges interaction in a world without centers or peripheries to produce an open-ended, hybrid process that accumulates and shifts as an artist moves among others and communicates with them, “tracing lines in all directions of time and space” (“Altermodern” 13). In literature, Alison Gibbons describes it as narrative through the dialogues between “a series of pluralized accounts.” In them, “Time is explored as a spatialized landscape whereby past, present, and future can be woven together in a complex network (an archipelago) which, in itself, enables a reexamination of our present reality and experience.” In particular, it is significant that *Nove noites*, *Mongólia*, and *O sol se põe em São Paulo* take “the journey format, while the figure of the traveler, the nomad”—e.g., Carvalho’s narrator-writers—“provides a character whose movement through time and space traces our intersubjective memories and identities” (240).

Whatever the preferred label, many critics have gestured in the direction of similar descriptions of connectivity in Carvalho’s writing: Rex P. Nielson observes that *O sol se põe em São Paulo* reveals the hyphen in identity (217). Leila Lehnen highlights the theme of “a literatura como âncora de sujeitos deslocados” (“Pôr do sol” 121). Edward King comments that this pattern of links extends “between seemingly unconnected spaces and times” by way of narrator-protagonists (109). Karl Erik Schøllhammer describes “nexos de sentido” that coalesce “pela força da criação artística e literária” (122). Sandra Sousa has articulated the nature of this connective, creative power in terms of the biblical Word that was God (192).³

While Sousa’s work highlights the authority of naming and its relation to identity, here we will focus on how, like Guimarães Rosa’s Jó Joaquim (in “Desenredo”), Carvalho’s narrators wield the Word as the power to create different realities. Yet instead of using speech to engage with it—as in the biblical “And God said . . .”—they do so through the act of writing. Their reorganization of the narratives that they travel between brings about the shift in perspective David Loy alludes to when he comments, “Unaware that our stories are stories, we experience them as the world. . . . When our accounts of the world become different, the world becomes different” (5). One reason the potential of the Word recalls the interconnectedness so many see in Carvalho is because it pertains to locating a sense of order in a contingent existence. As in the biblical accounts of the creation of the cosmos, it operates as an organizational force among individuals, like gravity. This dovetails with our letter motif, as “O pessoal” demonstrates, because letters in particular are an avatar of a system of the written word that reinforces connectivity and order.

The prominence of letters also invites comparisons to epistolary literature. In general, epistolary elements in a narrative provide a heightened sense of realism by giving the impression of telling a story or documenting history through primary sources and eyewitness accounts. Perhaps this has served Carvalho a little too well. To his “complete dismay,” *Nove noites* and *Mongólia* “ended up being read respectively as autobiography and as a travel log” (“Fiction as Exception” 4). Sonia Aurora Miceli has explored both the epistolary and travel dimensions in these two books. Though she shares my opinion about the importance of “a figura da carta extraviada ou interceptada,” she focuses on the literary interaction with ethnography (85).

However, the epistolary vein of the three novels examined here also evokes the Word. After all, one of the most widely read examples in the epistolary literary tradition is the New Testament, which contains both actual letters and “documents thrown into epistolary form” (Archer 296). In traditional interpretations of its epistles, the apostles serve as conduits to God, dictating the Word as letters to be disseminated among the believers as a way to maintain order in the early church. By implication, this highlights not only the breaking down of conventional order that undelivered letters (or even the postmodern) represent, but also how Carvalho’s narrators—all of them writers—perform a role that goes well beyond that of scribe. Instead, the lines they trace in the interstices of their pluralized accounts recall the aesthetic of connection in Bourriaud’s altermodern archipelago.

While the Word may channel the power of creation, that power also chafes at the limits and structure imposed by language. In Jewish tradition, one does not pronounce the name of God because, as Edmond Jabès suggests, the divine bows to no such constraints: “In the *exploded word*, God collides with the hostility of the letters” (377, emphasis mine).⁴ Similarly, Carvalho’s work resists notions of consensus and flourishes in anomalies. As he articulates it, “the powers of literature” reside in “the potential creative strength of a radical subjective singularity” (4–5). Carvalho is referring to his fondness for paradox, exception, and individual creativity. But his use of the term “singularity” is also significant alongside the biblical account of the Word, as it evokes a contrapuntal creation narrative: the Big Bang or Initial Singularity. In the technical sense, this (capital-S) “Singularity” can refer to the Big Bang specifically, an earlier period before the laws of physics as we understand them, or both (Drees 223). Here, I use the term in the latter, more encompassing and colloquial sense: the chaos that seeds the universe with infinite potential.

Like the universe itself or the *Correios* in “O pessoal,” as any system expands, things go awry and connections are missed. While anchors between others (to use Lehen’s terminology) certainly contribute to connectivity, they can also give way to occurrences that, more like the Singularity, react against the order of the Word or the “the hostility of the letters” that Jabès describes. For instance, when dropped from a moving body, anchors cause course changes, like a spacecraft tethering itself to the moon in order to slingshot toward another destination. Similarly, the hyphen in identity that Nielson refers to illustrates both sides of this phenomenon: it is a gravitational tie, but also a disruption because it breaches the border of a culture, a nationality, and the very words it joins.

As Clarice Lispector contemplated in *A hora da estrela*, the act of writing “Não se trata apenas de narrativa, é antes de tudo vida primária que respira, respira, respira. Material poroso, um dia viverei aqui a vida de uma molécula com seu estrondo possível de átomos” (13). She even transcribes parenthetical supernovas—“(explosão)”⁵—a textual intersection of the Word and the Singularity. In the three novels by Carvalho, the Exploded Word manifests itself at the point where the two meet and in how their writer characters take advantage of the Singularity to reinvent the Word.

In *Nove noites*, *Mongólia*, and *O sol se põe em São Paulo*, the Word is exploded in two ways—and it is the second that embodies the texts’ relation to Bourriaud’s concept of the altermodern. First, at a higher level, the undelivered letters of Manoel Perna, the Westerner, and Michiyo, along with other examples of interrupted writing, represent the weakening gravitational forces between characters who feel cut off from others in worlds where order is breaking down. Letters gone astray symbolize this because they are literal fragments of a system of words. They represent a postmodern subversion of the biblical Word’s creational model, in which hierarchy and order are succumbing to the (capital-S) Singularity.

Second, and more crucially, amid the entropy of the broader Singularity affecting identities, narratives, and times, the letters fall into the possession of nomadic writer characters, who function as smaller (lowercase-s) singularities to organize the world in a way that is fundamentally different from the biblical tradition of the Word. While in one sense they reaffirm its creative potential—because the Word remains their tool of choice—they also reinvent how its power is

wielded. Instead of beginning with the light and the darkness, creating a new universe from the top down in perfect hierarchical taxonomy, they travel among the fragments of time, place, and identity. They radically reconnect the nomadic letters with other narrative pieces in something reminiscent of the archipelago Bourriaud describes. Through new juxtapositions, this process reveals sometimes one alternate possible reality, sometimes the prospect of a multiverse of others. Thus, the more encompassing Singularity faced by Carvalho's narrators first explodes the "Word that was God." But when these characters write, they reinvent the Word by repurposing its power, effectively exploding it again.

Nove noites

When the nameless narrator of *Nove noites* comes across the name "Buell Quain" in a newspaper article, he becomes obsessed with the mystery of why Quain, an American ethnologist (and real historical figure), committed suicide among the Krahô tribe in the Amazon basin in 1939. As the narrator attempts to fill in the missing pieces of Quain's story, he intermingles his own memories with others' testimonies, surviving correspondence, photographs, and, most significantly, the account in letter form by Manoel Perna. Perna's undelivered letter is just one of many examples of correspondence interrupted by literal explosions, terrorism, and death, all of which evoke the entropy of the Singularity. Throughout the novel, the narrator's journey among these different times, places, texts, and genres exemplifies the altermodern archipelago in that he abandons the attempt to solve the mystery, and instead allows the juxtapositions to suggest multiple interpretations. As Beatriz Resende has commented, it is a fragmented aesthetic that recalls the postmodern without falling into parody. The narrative journey results in "uma espécie de convite ao leitor para que complete o texto com seu próprio repertório" (80). The writer character does not employ the Word to restore a definitive order or narrative of the world, but to highlight that there are many possibilities.

Perna was an engineer in charge of a liaison post in Carolina, Maranhão, where Quain customarily stopped for letters and supplies en route to or from indigenous territory (making him Quain's mailman). The narrator imagines a nine-part letter by Perna that describes his interactions with Quain during the nine nights he and Quain spent in each other's company. It includes his insights into Quain's personality, past, and motivations as possible linchpins to the mystery. Perna writes for "quando você vier" (7). This *você* would be, at least in the narrator's literary vision, Quain's former lover, the photographer Andrew Parsons.

As with Braga's *crônica* and Perna's letter, correspondence gone awry is a deliberate, recurring metaphor. At one point, Quain tells the story of a ghost ship whose passengers and crew foist letters onto the sailors they meet at sea, begging for someone to deliver them to their loved ones. Yet when the living make landfall, the addressees are all found to be deceased or unknown. The narrator exchanges emails with someone in New York, who he hopes will be able to track down difficult information. But the attacks of 9/11 interrupt them, and they never communicate again. When he sends more than 150 letters to possible relatives of Quain throughout the United States, he gains little for his efforts because they arrive at the peak of the anthrax scare. When one is returned with holes punched in it—literal singularities in the written word—even he lets the hysteria get the better of him and runs to wash his hands and blow his nose.

These references to high-profile acts of terrorism reinforce the historical conceit and underscore the fragility of contemporary communities and traditional referentiality. The narrator notes that Quain killed himself on the day that Einstein wrote to FDR about the possibility of the atomic bomb. The implication is that both suicide and the power of mass destruction are grounded in the same ethos of alienation, tearing holes in communities like the effects of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease on the brain of the narrator's father. For instance, as he considers a 1939 photograph of some of Quain's colleagues, the narrator senses that the ethnologist's absence is made more acute by the deaths of those who knew him. "A realidade é o que se compartilha,"

and with every remembrance of Quain that the deceased take to their graves, he ceases to exist a little bit more (167).

In addition to the historical photographs of Quain's colleagues and two of Quain himself, the inside back cover of the original edition offers an unusual picture of the author. It shows Carvalho as a boy holding hands with an indigenous man in the Xingu, presumably taken during one of his trips with his father. As Celiza Soares points out, the landscape behind them undermines cultural myths by portraying a stark contrast with the "vegetação exuberante" we associate with the Indianism of the nineteenth century (28). The insertion of the author into the narrative's setting also adds a physical dimension to the blurring of fiction and reality in the novel, extending it to the tangible border of the text. This playful autofiction, a transgression and critique of the expectations of genre, is emblematic of what Marília Ribeiro has called Carvalho's "techniques of deception" (308). It also speaks to the nomadism of the altermodern artist and text: though the narrator does not travel the physical distances of his counterparts in *Mongólia* and *O sol se põe em São Paulo*, this *homo viator's* most significant trajectory is through time and "among the signs" (Verhagen 804).

In contrast to all the interrupted writing and allusions to real explosions, the most common device for tracing anchor points among people in the novel is the Word. Much of the intertextuality hints at the power of literature and the written word to reconfigure connections between selves and others. Representative examples include the young man reading Joseph Conrad to Parsons in the hospital, prompting the narrator to interact with him and with the photographer; the people that crowd doors and windows to hear the speeches in honor of Humberto de Campos; or the preface to Quain's first book, which recalls how Quain was drawn to the themes of friendship and immortality in the epic *Gilgamesh*.

The link between family, friendship, and the passage into immortality is also central to a funerary wake tradition in the Caribbean—curiously named "Nine Nights." It culminates in a ceremony on the ninth night following death to allow the spirit of the dead to pass on (Simpson 229–30). Huon Wardle explains that, because of the region's "highly mobile" population, a Nine Night celebration often calls back a family diaspora that "provides an open-ended framework, itself made up of varied and varying cultural elements that has the power to bring people together," in which "a nexus of intra-island and transnational social relationships . . . are continuously reformulated" (250). There is an unusual degree of synchronicity between this description of nomadic family members returning to an archipelagic home in order to connect and reformulate their memories of the dead and the narrator's altermodern journey to reassemble the shifting fragments of Quain's life. His search even functions almost like a funerary wake, in the sense that contextualizing Quain among a network of others does not seek to bind him, but rather free him from the purgatory of the ghost ship. Yet as he ultimately discovers, he cannot accomplish this without channeling the power of the Word.

After the narrator spends months sifting through tangible material, looking to organize definitive links in the correct order, he finally gives up. The entropy of the Singularity is too powerful to reconstruct the past. He decides instead to "fazer [da pesquisa] realmente uma ficção" (157). At one point, Perna had opined that what the ethnologist wanted more than anything was to discover a society where even familial relationships could be chosen—a world "no qual por fim ele coubesse" (47–8). Because Quain's ideal eluded him in life, the narrator approximates it in his novel by juxtaposing the points and people from his research in an altermodern archipelago of possibilities that pushes through the estrangement its characters experience. From the broken connection of Manoel Perna's letter and the other fragments the narrator encounters, he writes a new narrative. He does not use the Word to make the world whole again. Rather, he repurposes it to trace the multiplicity of potential paths between others, helping them and the reader to connect to what is already there, even if it must remain, like the Caribbean Nine Night ceremony, open-ended.

Mongólia

The author picture in *Mongólia* takes a cue from *Nove noites*, showing Carvalho in front of Tsambagarav, the prominent peak of the Altai Mountains in western Mongolia. Also like its predecessor, it features a narrator plunged into a rabbit hole of discovery after reading about a tragic death in the newspaper. However, instead of the pointillistic historical/fictional scaffolding the narrator wrestles with in *Nove noites*, *Mongólia*'s text is fragmented in more textual/tectonic ways. It deals with different accounts of the same journey over the same nomadic landscape, one of which is, like Perna's account, a lengthy, undelivered letter. The novel's nameless narrator, feeling as if he has been putting off his calling as a writer for decades, takes upon himself the task of piecing the different disrupted texts together into something new and unexpected. As Aurora Alvarez notes, it constitutes "um projeto estético que apreende a multivocidade narrativa . . . que mostra que o mundo fracionado entre o Ocidente e o Oriente não se restringe a esse binarismo, ao contrário, apresenta-se em toda a sua pujança polifônica, em um embate nunca concluído . . ." (290).

When the narrator learns that a former colleague in the diplomatic corps has been shot while trying to recover his son from kidnappers, it reminds him of an incident six years before involving a Brazilian photographer who had gone missing in Mongolia. Searching through his archives, he finds the report his colleague—identified only as "o Ocidental"—had made of his efforts to find the photographer, written as a letter to his wife. Throughout, the Westerner makes use of the missing photographer's travel diaries, which had been left behind when he disappeared. The narrator proceeds to write his own version of these events, combining his recollections and commentary with summaries and quotes from the Westerner's and the photographer's accounts of their travels. The resulting text literally renders the slippage between these three authors and their three narratives: the narrator's words are printed in a serif font, the Westerner's in an italic serif font, and the photographer's in a sans serif font. Sometimes the text jumps between authors and fonts in the middle of paragraphs and events. For example, in this passage, we see all three contribute to the description of a remote Buddhist temple and the surrounding area in the same paragraph:

Como o templo solitário que avistamos no alto do morro quando cruzávamos o vale de Orookh, e onde no passado se erguia o mosteiro de Ariin Khuree, a pequena construção solta no meio da planície na saída de Bayan-uul parece ter sido abandonada antes de terminarem as obras, o desaparecido registrara no seu diário. . . . O lago não ficava longe, entre a planície desértica e as dunas de Mongol Els, num pequeno oásis. Chegaram em pouco mais de uma hora. *Passamos por câfilas de camelos magros e maltratados. A paisagem é formada por camadas de cores diferentes. Conforme nos aproximamos, começo a entender melhor o que vejo.* (133–34)

Aided by the photographer's journal and guide, the Westerner attempts to retrace the same route the photographer took six months previously. As he travels around Mongolia, he feels a similar disorientation to that endured by Buell Quain, if for different reasons. Instead of searching for merely a different way of identifying points of reference, the Westerner would settle for any at all. Even the few, isolated human constructions he finds—small Buddhist temples, like the one described above—make it appear "como se as construções também fossem nômades e se movimentassem pelas planícies . . . como se o próprio terreno fosse movediço" (134). As the Westerner experiences the nomadic lifestyle and terrain, he feels surrounded by the entropy of the Singularity.

At one point, the Westerner gets frustrated with his guide and their constant searching for people that he neither likes nor understands instead of the places mentioned in the travel diaries. The guide explains, "Você me pediu para fazer o mesmo percurso que fiz com ele [o fotógrafo] há seis meses. Acontece que esse percurso *depende das pessoas* que encontramos no caminho.

Num país de nômades, por definição, as pessoas nunca estão no mesmo lugar. . . . Os lugares são as pessoas” (115, emphasis mine). The photographer’s writing is not the map to places, but to people, who provide the only points of reference in the map-scape the Westerner is traveling. This is borne out near the end of the book when their paths finally cross because they have both made a personal connection with the same one-armed Mongolian man.

Similar to *Nove noites*, the narrator cannot reverse the Singularity represented by the Westerner’s undelivered letter to his wife. His death cannot be undone, and a broken family cannot be made whole. Like the biblical creational model of the Word, the map of Mongolia at the beginning of the book is revealed as an impossible ideal of order. By the novel’s conclusion, it stands only as a monument to the futility of creating a definitive representation. Rather, as Alvarez notes, the journal and letter left by the photographer and the Westerner become “matéria apropriada,” whose function the narrator must reinvent (307). As an altermodern nomad between the times, memories, and trajectories, his interactions with the different accounts transform how the Westerner is remembered, not unlike the open-ended synchronicity between *Nove noites* and the Caribbean funeral wake. The narrator repurposes the textual maps just as he does the power of the Word to radically reorganize the narratives so that new juxtapositions reveal different connections.

The Westerner was killed trying to recover his son, yet, in a sense, as with Buell Quain in *Nove noites*, the Exploded Word gives him alternate possible lives in the archipelago of Mongolian pathways he shares with the photographer—who turns out to be his long-lost half-brother. By the time the two finally come face to face in the one-armed man’s yurt, the web of connections between their narratives has developed to such an extent that it is no longer obvious who is who: “Sou eu na porta, fora de mim. É o meu rosto em outro corpo, que se assusta ao nos ver” (176).

O sol se põe em São Paulo

Once again, the plot of *O sol se põe em São Paulo* hinges on a nameless writer character who receives an undelivered letter. The grandson of Japanese immigrants, he agrees to write the life story of the elderly owner of a Japanese restaurant he frequents. Calling herself Setsuko, she begins her account in Japan after World War II. It involves a supposed love triangle between a woman she worked for named Michiyo, Michiyo’s husband, Jokichi, and Masukichi, an actor of the Japanese theater tradition known as *kyogen*. According to Setsuko, she used to act as a courier, delivering letters between the three of them.

Unlike *Nove noites* and *Mongólia*, Carvalho dials back the use of obvious markers of auto-fiction by making all the characters either Japanese or of Japanese descent—which, as Stefania Chiarelli notes, means the novel is something of a rarity in Brazilian literature (71). Still, as in *Nove noites*, the story arc also incorporates historical people and situations to obscure the limits of the historical, the real, and the fictional. At one point the (real) Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki even attempts to write a serialized novel using the main characters as his protagonists. Like this incomplete novel, Setsuko conveys a bleak sense of being untethered in post-war Japan, where traditional cultural structures are toppling and established points of reference, such as “os mitos nacionais de raça e religião,” are breaking down (145). Jokichi (Michiyo’s husband) ritually participates in this cultural shift when he fakes his own death so that he can pursue a war criminal known as “o conde” to Brazil. There, he kills the count to restore the honor of a common soldier, whose identity the count had stolen, inverting centuries of hierarchy.

Assumed names and identities abound: Jokichi stays in Brazil and lives out his days with a different name and family. Setsuko herself is revealed to actually be Michiyo when she vanishes halfway through telling her narrative. The narrator returns to her house only to find it has been razed. However, at her restaurant, she leaves behind a letter addressed to the *kyogen* actor, Masukichi, that had been returned as undeliverable. In order to finish the story that he is writing, the narrator decides he must visit the land of his forebears and deliver it.

When the narrator arrives in Japan, he finds that the cultural upheaval in Setsuko's tale has culminated in what he perceives to be an un-mappable chaos, not unlike what the Westerner experiences in *Mongólia*. When attempting to find the house where the actor, Masukichi, had lived—in a sense, tracking down an old proponent of an element of ancient Japanese culture—he is stymied by the address numbering system, which corresponds to chronology of construction rather than to spatial arrangement. Reminiscent of the waning power of the biblical Word, the spoken word fails him, since everyone refuses to help him when they realize that he does not speak Japanese. He eventually discovers that Masukichi's house was destroyed in an earthquake. Like a nomadic landscape, the earth itself has become “movediço” and opened up chasms in more than just the ground. Caught between two demolished houses, as if swallowed up by the Singularity, the letter remains undeliverable.

While in Japan, the narrator meets up with his sister, an encounter that reinforces the reversal and splintering of the past. Though college educated, she has moved back to the country that her grandparents left in search of a better life, only to work as an unskilled laborer. The novel's title implies a gravitational tie between Japan, the “Land of the Rising Sun,” and Brazil. Her unexpected return destabilizes this relationship, also symbolically undermining the order of the biblical creation narrative in which the Word separates the light from the darkness. The narrator, for his part, despite not feeling truly at home in São Paulo—calling it “hell” as part of a conspicuous reference to William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—also feels an aversion to his Japanese heritage. Similarly, Setsuko/Michiyo's traditional Japanese house and garden in São Paulo's Paraíso neighborhood reiterate the theme of being caught between cultures as between heaven and hell (a prominent thread the book shares with *Nove noites*). Michiyo describes her situation in Brazil after immigrating as if the world had disappeared. She envisions herself, Jokichi, and Masukichi—no longer sending each other letters—as cut off and alone (139).

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, frequently alluded to in the text, posits that contraries, such as the Singularity and the Word, are an essential aspect of the nature of creation (xvi). It also engages with the tradition of the Word as prophecy. The text is replete with examples of such things, especially the narrator's proposed university thesis on literature as premonition and instances of real Tanizaki novels prefiguring the plot. This emphasizes its investment in the creative power of the Word, in which literature influences reality, though it always remains in tension with the entropy of the Singularity. For example, as Setsuko/Michiyo observes to the narrator in the beginning, “O Japão que eu conheci não existe mais. . . . Preciso que você imagine” (31). That is, the pre-World War II Japan of her youth experienced the Singularity quite literally in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (in an implicit callback to the birth of nuclear weapons mentioned in *Nove noites*), but she does not want the narrator to recreate it. In an example of the linguistic turn Paloma Vidal sees in Carvalho—in which language as representation transitions to language “como produtora de realidade” (84)—Michiyo urges him to create *a* Japan, one that has never existed before.

It was Masukichi and his letters that first disrupted the balance of Michiyo and Jokichi's marriage, ultimately slingshotting them both to Brazil, new lives, and new identities. The narrator, now in possession of the letter addressed to Masukichi, can no more deliver it than reverse what has transpired. The past, like the old Japan represented in Michiyo's old-fashioned, anachronistic house, can never be reanimated. Rather, it must be transformed like Jokichi, who, in order to keep on living, had to die and be resurrected—not reborn as himself, but inserted into a new life. As in *Nove Noites* and *Mongólia*, the undelivered letter, through the narrator, embarks on a new trajectory. The Exploded Word, however, encompasses not just the letter, but also Tanizaki's abandoned novel about the lives of Michiyo, Jokichi, and Masukichi. By taking up the story of the interrupted novel, the narrator is not finishing Tanizaki's work, but exploding it, reorganizing it and the past around the revelations in the undelivered letter and the Japan he imagines. The narrator promises to give this new version to Jokichi's daughter, whose comprehension of her place in time and space will also be rearranged as she sees her position shift in relation to the altermodern archipelago of connections between narratives, times, and others.

Conclusion

In 2001, a letter in a red envelope was mailed from Maine. Addressed to Lawry and Charlie Meister in California and postmarked September 10, it was loaded onto a Los Angeles-bound flight in Boston the next morning. Some days later, the Meisters received an overnight delivery from the United Kingdom. Like the narrator in *Nove noites*, Lawry Meister admits to having had to push aside some anxiety upon receiving something unexpected from someone she did not know at the height of the anthrax scare. However, she opened it anyway, finding the letter from Maine, its red envelope covered in ash, and a handwritten explanation from Raviv Shtaingos, a businessman based in London. Shtaingos had picked the Meisters' letter up off the street in lower Manhattan while fleeing the destruction of 9/11 and forwarded it to them when he arrived home.

The letter itself contained nothing more than an invitation to Lawry's sister's wedding rehearsal dinner, yet it had survived being flown into one of the Twin Towers. Shtaingos later commented that "Sending the envelope that fell to the ground was my unremarkable act of defiance to the chaos." The Meister letter is now in the 9/11 Memorial Museum (Farrell). Like in a Rubem Braga *crônica* or one of these three novels by Carvalho, the interrupted word was transformed from something banal into something unexpected. A written symbol of a ritual union between two people, solemnized with performative words, passes through a singularity. Its trajectory is cut short, and in that anomaly, someone else takes it up.

In the aftermath of the chaos, the letter's role has fundamentally changed. Like the undelivered letters in these narratives, it is no longer just a broken tether between two people. It not only has drawn Shtaingos into its orbit, but in the museum its gravity attracts countless people from places much farther away than London. Straddling an ocean and the "heterochronological territory" of pre- and post-9/11, the Meister letter, like the letters and characters in these books, symbolizes the pluralized itinerancy of the altermodern experience (Gibbons 240). It is an object, in Bourriaud's words, "spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination" (*Aesthetics* 21). As a fragment of an exploded past, it is not rewritten, but it is transformed—or exploded again—by new juxtapositions, coming to represent a new reality. In these novels by Carvalho, the writer characters enact this same process. From the entropy of the larger Singularity, they take the fragments that remain and repurpose the power of the Word to place them in new configurations, thus opening up the possibility of new realities.⁶

The narrators' writing in these novels documents what Carvalho calls "a search for truth, for a truth that is not in the world we see" ("Fiction as Exception" 9, emphasis mine). Though he acknowledges the "tragic nature" of this search, it is nevertheless critical. To apply Jabès's comments on the collision of God and the hostility of language to truth, if truth is as impossible to write as it is to pronounce the name of God, it is the act of failing to articulate it that most powerfully suggests it might exist. In the words of William Franke, "its structural incompleteness keeps it open and always on the way to what it cannot represent" (106). It must remain open because, if it ever stops expanding, it will contract into oblivion. The fundamental paradox of the Exploded Word is to persist in writing what, in order to survive, can never be definitive or whole.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade, one of the poets laureate of those out of place, appears to shrink from this task in "Poema de sete faces" when he discredits the power of art or literature as superficial—because a rhyme is not a solution:

Mundo mundo vasto mundo,
se eu me chamasse Raimundo
seria uma rima, não seria uma solução.
Mundo mundo vasto mundo,
mais vasto é meu coração. (53)

Yet, in spite of himself, Drummond cannot let such cynicism stand uncontested. In the face of the knowledge that literature cannot provide a panacea to all the world's ills, still he offers up an ironic, self-aware answer: another rhyme, an acknowledgement that our hearts compel us to try anyway. As with the narrators in *Nove noites*, *Mongólia*, and *O sol se põe em São Paulo*, the lack of a definitive solution is precisely why one must continue to write.

NOTES

¹Dussel is not the first to use the term in a post-postmodern context—see Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, *La sonrisa de Saturno: Hasta una teoría transmoderna* (1989).

²James and Seshagiri's 2014 article in the *PMLA*, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution," is unrelated.

³In context, Lehnen's, King's, and Sousa's comments in this paragraph all refer to *O sol se põe em São Paulo* specifically, but their observations are also more generally applicable.

⁴In French: "Dieu, dans le mot explosé, Se heurte à l'hostilité de la lettre" (505).

⁵Such as, "Agora (explosão) em rapidísimos traços desenharei a vida pregressa da moça até o momento do espelho do banheiro" (28).

⁶Though I have refrained from including Walter Salles's 1998 film *Central do Brasil* for reasons of focus, it also tracks with much of this analysis. The urban violence and chaos, fragmented relationships, and undelivered letters at the beginning give way to a nomadic search through space and the past for connection. It even culminates in Dora helping to create a new textual reality for Josué by adding his name to the letter she reads to his brothers.

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