

PATRICIDAL PASSIONS: ASSAULTING THE FATHER/MOTHERLAND IN REINALDO ARENAS' *EL ASALTO* AND JOÃO GILBERTO NOLL'S *A CÉU ABERTO*

PAIXOS PATRICIDAS: ASSALTANDO O PÁTRIA EM *EL ASALTO*, DE REINALDO ARENAS E *A CÉU ABERTO*, DE JOÃO GILBERTO NOLL

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines how traditional formulations of nationhood/national identity are contested in two Latin American novels: Reinaldo Arenas's *El asalto* (1991) and João Gilberto Noll's *A céu aberto* (1996). These texts demystify the enunciation of a stable, productive national space by interrogating the conflation of familial unit and national unit(y). The family ties of *El asalto* and *A céu aberto* contradict the stereotypical union of (heterosexual) "star-crossed" lovers of Latin America's foundational romances in that they present the reader with, at best, dysfunctional families. By questioning the heteronormative construction of the nation/hood, these two novels expose the multiple expressions of violence and oppression inherent in said construction. Both *El asalto* and *A céu aberto* reveal how authoritarian practices go hand in hand in the establishment of normative sexualities, and, by extension, hegemonic formulations of national identity.

KEYWORDS: Authoritarianism. Heteronormativity. National Identity.

In her now canonical study on Latin America's national romances of the nineteenth-century, *Foundational Fictions* (1992), critic Doris Sommer reveals how these texts linked the discourse of family building to the projects of national consolidation that gained relevance after the wave of political emancipations of Latin American countries. In this frame of reference, the familial module served as the paradigm in relation to which the nation should be construed. And, according to Latin America's foundational fictions, the ideal family-nation was based on a heterosexual paradigm.

Sommer maintains that the "natural and familial grounding along with its rhetoric of productive sexuality, provides a model for apparently non-violent national consolidation during periods of internecine conflict... after the creation of new nations, the domestic romance is an exhortation to be fruitful and multiply" (SOMMER, 1992, p. 6). The appeal to be "fruitful and multiply" connotes the necessity to populate the vast expanses of the newly-emancipated territories with loyal (and, in turn, productive) citizens – good "sons" and "daughters" of the fatherland.

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In its encouragement to be “fruitful and multiply,” the national romances of the nineteenth-century implicitly excluded non-heterosexual subjectivities and alliances from the nation-building project. Their “non-productiveness” did not fit the model of “procreate and populate” divulged in works such as José de Alencar’s *Iracema* (1865).

Thus, the discourse that Latin America’s foundational fictions projected was, in essence, that of a patriarchal and hierarchical familial, and, by extension, national organization. This is, the familial unit as well as national corps were both governed by the law of a powerful father. This figure symbolized not only the authority of the *pater familias* but also the supremacy of the male-controlled state in which heterosexual law reigns supreme. Heterosexual national discourse contains an implicit policy of often-violent exclusion of sexual otherness. Brazilian critic Silviano Santiago asserts that “It is precisely the violence of a heterosexual identity movement that expels from its space both homosexuals (whether out or not) and any and every other citizen who has ‘traits’ that differ from the ‘norm’” (SANTIAGO, 2002, p. 18). The non-heterosexual subject is considered not only as a threat to the formation of the nuclear family but, concomitantly, also as a danger to the productivity of the national family.

If the nineteenth-century saw the emergence and consolidation of politically autonomous nation-states in Latin America, paralleled in the cultural realm by the preponderance of foundational fictions whose aim was to extend and buttress the nation-building projects into the cultural sphere; then the twentieth-century bears witness to the undermining of both the nation-state and its attendant national romances. Disjuncture and fragmentation, not unity and cohesion are the keywords of late twentieth-century national and cultural discourses.

The disjuncture within formulations of national identity and concurrently, of the nation-state, is a phenomenon whose origins lie not only in the inherent artificiality of national constructions; but also in the processes of globalization that trigger flows of economic as well as cultural and human capital. For Christina Marie Tourino, “Industrialization, globalization, and US economic and foreign policy have set unprecedented numbers of bodies in motion across national borders. Along with other dependent nations, tribes, and continents, Latin America has seen many of its citizens migrate, immigrate, and go into exile” (TOURINO, 2002, p. 1). Responding to these socio-economic and political phenomena, recent-day Latin American literature often not only comments on the disintegration of the nation-state and its corresponding cultural discourse, but also seeks to

question national discourses governed by a logic of homogeneity, in which otherness, be it ethnic, socio-political or gender is excluded.

The novels *El asalto* (1991) by Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas and *A céu aberto* (1996) by Brazilian author João Gilberto Noll are exemplary of the projects of deconstruction of the nation that proliferate in twentieth and twenty-first century Latin American literature. Albeit emerging from different contexts – Arenas’s text is an allegory of the Cuban Revolution and Noll’s book alludes to a less transparent, more general frame of reference that, however, indicates the hubris of Brazil’s most recent dictatorial period, both *El asalto* and *A céu aberto* interrogate the premises that favor a homogeneous and predominantly heterosexual logic of national articulation².

Commenting on *El asalto*, Rubén Ríos Ávila suggests that Arenas rejects the national “home” because “the Martían, and in a general sense the modern, idea of the nation as such is too narrowly defined by a governing principle of an imagined community as the homogeneous product of consensus. Such a nation leaves no space for those who do not fit within the prescribed universality of the prevailing rhetoric of unity and harmony” (ÁVILA 1998 108). Rejecting consensus as paramount to tyranny, *El asalto* provides an alternative snapshot of the picture-perfect “imagined community” (ANDERSON, 1983) envisioned by dominant discourse. Similarly, *A céu aberto* explodes the idea of the nation (notwithstanding in a less dystopian fashion) as a homogenous construct modeled after the nuclear family.

This essay examines the questioning of the nation in Reinaldo Arenas’s *El asalto* and João Gilberto Noll’s *A céu aberto*. In both works, the authors fashion the nation as a conflictive realm where fixed identity categories are subverted in a hallucinatory voyage that assaults the possibility of a stable, heteronormative national discourse. Instead, the nation becomes a cultural, social and political pandemonium where individual and group identifications collapse.

Instead of the foundation fictions articulated in nineteenth-century works such as Jorge Isaac’s *María* (1864-67) or José de Alencar’s *Iracema*; Arenas’ *El asalto* and Noll’s *A céu aberto* deconstruct the enunciation of a stable, productive national space by questioning the conflation of familial unit and national unit(y). The family ties of *El asalto* and *A céu aberto*

¹ The historical frame of reference of *A céu aberto* is not explicit. Nonetheless, the novel can be read partly as an allegory of Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964-1989). The allegorical dimension of Noll’s oeuvre has been discussed by Idelber Avelar in his book *The Untimely Present. Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. For Avelar, Noll’s fiction emerges from and engages with the postmodern, post-dictatorship context.

contradict the stereotypical union of (heterosexual) “star-crossed” lovers of Latin America’s foundational romances in that they present the reader with, at best, dysfunctional families. In the genealogies of *El asalto* and *A céu aberto*, it is the bondage of hate and incest rather than the bonds of love that predominate within both the nuclear and the national family. The result is that Arenas’ and Noll’s (un)familiar romances unravel hegemonic domestic as well as the national fabric(ation)s.

In the fictions of Arenas and Noll, incestuous and perverse Oedipal and brotherly bonds substitute the metaphorical integration of two conflicting segments of the populace common in the nineteenth-century works. Moreover, in both *El asalto* and *A céu aberto*, the incestuous alliances, instead of producing the offspring necessary for the survival of the nation, conclude with death: in both cases, the murder of one family member by another. In the framework of the two texts, death is the only viable option, since the family and the nation are oppressive (and thus also lethal) systems. In Arenas’ and Noll’s texts, the productive heterosexual family structure is superceded by the internecine configuration set in the dissolving space of a (non) nation.

Reinaldo Arenas’ posthumously published novel *El asalto* is the last installment of his “pentagonía,” a cycle of five texts in which the author comes to terms with his own biography vis-à-vis Cuban history, specifically the demise of the Cuban Revolution and its devolution into authoritarianism. The preceding texts of the pentagonía are *Celestino antes del alba* (1967); *El palacio de las blanquíssimas mofetas* (1982b); *Otra vez el mar* (1982a); and *El color del verano* (1991b). Rebecca Biron indicates, the novels of the pentagonía “relate the gay writer’s conflicted relationship to the Cuban state as they follow the growth of the author-identified narrators. They trace the stages of boyhood, adolescence, and manhood, and they contextualize that initiation in the stages of Cuban history from the Batista regime through the Revolution and its betrayal” (BIRON, 2000, p. 123). Biron observes that, through the *corpus* of the pentagonía, the narrative reveals the writer’s progressive disenchantment with the conditions on his native island. This process becomes evident in the increasingly disillusioned narrative of the works that comprise the pentagonía. Literary critic Jesús Barquet coincides with Biron’s interpretation of the pentagonía. For Barquet, the last text of Arena’s biographical cycle culminates the “anti-utopian” imagery that runs through the pentagonía (BARQUET, 1993, p. 123)³.

² Brad Epps, in his article “Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality” also emphasizes the aggressive and dystopian nature of *El asalto*. Epps states that “[r]ecalling the work of Kafka,
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Appropriately, the fictional cycle of the pentagonía climaxes in the aggressive and eschatological story of *El asalto*. This last text was written while the author was living in New York City and was suffering the effects of AIDS on his body. The apocalyptic tone of the book thus reflects not only Arenas' view of the socio-political conditions on his native island but also the devastation of his own physicality due to disease. Not surprisingly, images of decay and abjection punctuate the novel, establishing a mural to social and personal corrosion.

Similar to the other texts of the sequence, *El asalto* presents an allegory of Cuba in which the difficult conditions in the Caribbean island are mirrored in a violent, hyperbolic language. Rage and impotence coalesce in a language that is riddled with foul words and disturbing imagery. The linguistic realm replicates the authoritarian socio-cultural conditions of the dystopian island nation in which the novel's action takes place. Verbal aggression parallels the hostility of the state against its citizens. Furthermore, the anger that infuses the text is also mirrored in the imagery that prevails in the text. The first-person narration repeatedly (and gleefully) focuses on scenes of killing, torture and degradation.

The plot of *El asalto* revolves around a nameless narrator-protagonist who pursues his mother in order to kill her. In his endeavor he is propelled by an all-consuming hatred towards the maternal figure. His abhorrence grows exponentially as the protagonist's resemblance with his progenitor – who he dehumanizes – increases. The main character explains that

[n]aturalmente, siempre he odiado a mi madre. Es decir, desde que la conozco. Al principio mi odio hacia ese animal era por rachas. Después se quedó fijo. Un día me miré en un espejo y ví que me daba un aire a ella. Otra vez me volvía a ver y ví que me iba viendo cada vez más parecido a ella. Volví a mirarme, y al poco tiempo, al remirarme, ví que aún me parecía más a la maldita. Entonces ya mi odio no fue fijo sino creciente (ARENAS, 1991, p. 14).

The protagonist's odium combines hatred towards the mother with self-loathing. These emotions disclose a rejection of origins and, consequently, of the logic of the family that the protagonist perceives as perverse and repressive. This is manifest in the mother's usage of the word "son" ("hijo") as an instrument of manipulation and of humiliation. The transformation of the word's connotation reveals that the familial structure does not correspond to emotional and material support but instead it is synonymous with oppression. And the same repressive

Burroughs, and Orwell, *The Assault* depicts a realm of absolute terror. It is a work of astonishingly ugly beauty, merciless in its rage" (EPPS 1995 275).

structure is associated with the motherland, the nation, for which the mother is a metaphor as well as a synecdoche.

Therefore, beyond rejecting all genealogical bonds, the protagonist also rebuffs all linkage to a larger community, including the oppressive national one. For the main character, the nation is a perverse extended family. He becomes a member of this family only in order to ultimately subvert it.

In *El asalto*, negative metaphors of the family abound and extrapolate from the private into the public realm. The citizens of the dystopian nation to which the protagonist belongs are stripped of their adult status and, concomitantly, of their legal (as well as human) rights and become children of a malevolent dictator father, the Reprimero or Reprimerísimo. Mimicking the rhetoric of familial speech and a patriarchal political demagogy, the tyrant has the habit of addressing his subjects in mock benevolence as “hijitos míos.”

The representation of the dictator-figure as the “father of the nation” remits the reader to the national romances of the nineteenth-century that, according to Sommer, privileged the formulation of the nation in patriarchal and hierarchical terms. In *El asalto*, the patriarchal and hierarchical configuration of the national arena is taken to perverse extremes, ensuing in a nightmarish police state. The citizens, “sons” and “daughters” of the nation, are held not by affective ties to the national community but by the tyrannical state apparatus that deprives them of individual and social freedom.

Beyond the infantilizing of the national populace, the very concept of the family becomes the simile of the autocratic organization of the nation. Thus, the national space is divided into “polifamiliares.” In an obvious dig at the social policies of the Cuban Revolution, these “homes” are simulacra of communitarian living where the citizens are allocated a minimum space in which all their daily rituals and necessities are performed in perverse proximity.

For Ríos Ávila, in *El asalto* “[t]he domus becomes the prison of harmony, the hell of enforced rhyme” (ÁVILA, 1998, p. 113-4). In the context of enforced co-existence, living becomes an ongoing enactment of basic human necessities in front of an antagonistic public, a continuous exercise in humiliation. At the same time, the forced community of the polifamiliares functions as a control mechanism that employs citizens as informers. The home, traditionally seen as the space where the individual can retreat from the scrutiny of the public gaze is altered into a depraved *panopticum*, where personal actions are the object of

public interest and where any deviance from the norm set forth by the hegemonic norm is castigated.

An example of the authoritarian structure of the nation is made evident in the creation of the “Gran Tropa de la Reconquista Moral Patria,” whose purpose is to rid the national body from the transgression of non-sanctioned (i.e. homosexual) desire. The agent of the “Gran Tropa”

enérgico, con sus esbeltas piernas y con su andar marcial y provocador ha de pasearse, elevándose por sobre las cabezas rapadas cuyas fosforescencia oscila o parpadea entre las barreras. Si la alimaña vil está sola, el agente, que en ningún momento podrá evidenciarse como tal, podrá, para estimular el criminal, sobarse con su garfia las entrepiernas. Si la alimaña vil dirige su cabeza hacia el radio [between the knees and the waist] ya señalado, podrá ser aniquilada al instante y luego remitir su caso para el aniquilamiento burocrático (ARENAS, 1991, p. 93).

Thus, in *El asalto*, tyrannical power manifests itself in both a modern guise, through the mechanisms of surveillance that follow the citizens of the dystopian island everywhere; but also assumes its pre-modern form, in the spectacle of punishment inflicted upon the bodies of the nation’s deviant sons and daughters.

Because of this oppressive milieu, the individual has no choice but to isolate itself in order not to become a victim of the familial/state violence. Consequently, despite the forced co-existence in depraved mimicry of the extended family, any affective ties are obliterated since, “el desconocimiento del otro – excluyendo naturalmente, a los agentes de la contrasusurración – es casi total” (ARENAS, 1991, p. 54). The polifamiliares parody not only the repressive state apparatus but, as Rebecca Biron points out, they also ridicule “the Cuban government’s rhetoric of social planning and organization, along with its denial of a disintegrating infrastructure in the 1980s” (BIRON, 2000, p. 127).

In addition, the polifamiliares are also a bitter satire of the neighborhood defense committees that are, in the words of Brad Epps “only the most popular manifestation with seeing and revealing, detecting and denouncing. That what is detected and denounced includes particular sexual identities...” (EPPS, 1995, p. 234). The polifamiliares of *El asalto* combine the coercive structure of the neighborhood defense committees and the discursive mechanisms that limit individuality in a hubristic parody of intimidation.

Additionally, through the metaphor of the polifamiliares, the perception of the state as the benevolent “parent” that satisfies its citizen’s social needs is invalidated. Instead, it is the citizen who becomes enslaved to the needs of an omnipresent, omnivorous state that devours

the (re) productive energy of its citizens. These dehumanized, literally reduced to swine and cows, farm animals that perform endless labor for the advantage of the institutionalized order (“Durante toda la tarde las vacas e los cerdos han trabajado febrilmente” [ARENAS, 1991, p. 22]).

In the dystopian and repressive realm that the protagonist of *El asalto* inhabits, the citizen is coerced into an endless cycle of productivity that, in theory, exists to benefit the greater national good. Leisure and pleasure are abolished and transformed into compulsive production. In this frame of reference, sexual intercourse is not only strictly regimented but it also is performed only in conjunction with procreation. The participants are therefore bestialized and transformed into breeding animals. Not only are individuals identified and treated as such by the state, but they also perceive themselves in these terms. In this framework, intercourse becomes grotesque. Arenas’ depiction of sexuality as a state-sanctioned “(re)productive” act parodies the ideology of individual sacrifice required by the Cuban Revolution.

The physicality and excess of the sexual act fills the protagonist with disgust. For him, it is “más abominable es ver cómo a veces, ya en el polifamiliar, naturalmente, luego de haber firmado un convenio y la autorización, se enredan en el acto de procreación patria. La batalla comienza con gimoteos y patadas, algo de puñetazos y un andar en cuatro patas. Finalmente se toman” (ARENAS, 1991, p. 25). In the protagonist’s description, the individuals engaging in sexual activity are repeatedly bestialized, compared to dogs, pigs and even spiders and scorpions (“Finalmente, cuando el que hace de alacrán agujonea a la araña, ésta da un alarido” [ARENAS, 1991, p. 25]). At the same time, intercourse itself is tantamount to violence, reflecting a logic of abuse rather than the engagement between lovers. The main character’s denunciation of intercourse is tantamount to a negation of the heterosexual ethos in which the family insures the endurance of the nation.

Nonetheless, contrary to Arenas’ autobiographical novel *Antes que anochezca*, in which the Cuban author celebrates homosexuality, in *El asalto*, the writer mimics homophobic discourse in order to parody the anti-gay rationale that predominated in the rhetoric of the Cuban state. Evidencing a barely dissimulated fascination with homosexual activities, the novel’s protagonist nonetheless scorns those guilty of the “*perversión repugnante*” (ARENAS, 1991, p. 84, emphasis in the original). In order to counteract his own latent attraction towards this “perversion,” the main character decides to eliminate sexual transgression by creating a “Tropa de la Reconquista Moral Patria” (ARENAS, 1991, p. 91).

Paradoxically, illicit desire infiltrates the national sphere at all levels, including the higher echelons of the repressive power-structure. Thus, when “[u]na tropilla de agentes perfectamente ataviados de rojo, hombres jóvenes, muchachos casi, se acercan moviendo culos y piernas y entrepiernas. Todos quedan extasiados mirando, junto con el Gran Secretario” (ARENAS, 1991, p. 114). Not even the leaders of the nation are exempt from gazing lustfully at the private parts of the handsome males. The protagonist reacts with horror to the overt desire on behalf of his superiors. For him any sexual longing implicates a perversion that needs eradicated. His exaggerated repugnance towards homosexual desire masks – and, at the same time reveals – the omnipresent threat of “nonproductive relations,” and that extends to the protagonist.

Sexual desire poses a menace to the main character, whose aim is precisely to obliterate the productive, heterosexual logic of the family incarnated in his mother’s monstrous body. The peril stems not only from the protagonist’s aversion to libidinal desire – but precisely from his incestuous yearning for the mother. The novel’s denouement is therefore an Oedipal scene in which the main character at the same time violently possesses the paternal/maternal figure and kills her, reenacting upon her body the violence that the state perpetuates upon its citizens.

Upon finding his mother, who, he discovers, is none other than the dictatorial father figure of the Reprimero, the protagonist is possessed by parallel emotions of rage and unbridled lust. Unable to control his own phallus that metamorphoses into a libidinal weapon, the main character rapes the maternal/paternal monstrous figure and, at the moment that he impales the mother with his giant penis, she explodes into various incongruous elements⁴. The final scene thus negates not only the logic of the family as the appropriate model for the nation as both the maternal and the paternal authority are destroyed, but it also denotes the failure of heterosexual productivity proposed by nineteenth-century foundational texts. The abnormal union between the mother and the son is not fertile but results in destruction.

³ Kessel Schwarz, in his essay “Homosexuality and the Fiction of Reinaldo Arenas” observes that, throughout Arenas’ fictional production, one can observe a fascination with the phallus, paired with a fear of castration. In *El asalto*, the protagonist kills his mother with his penis in order to preempt the ultimate castration of him, this is, her murder of the protagonist. In this context, the mother, instead of representing life, becomes an emblem of death as well as of the protagonist’s own death-drive. In this frame of reference Rubén Ríos Ávila interprets the murder of the mother-father dyad as an emancipatory act on behalf of the protagonist, an overcoming of his own marginality vis-à-vis the hegemonic. Ávila maintains that: “[by] killing the phallic couple embodied in the mother as *Reprimerísimo*, Arenas enacts the fantasy of overcoming the source of his abjection, the possibility of killing the ambiguous objects of desire who simultaneously lure him into the house and cast him from it” (ÁVILA, 1998, p. 114).

Nonetheless, it is precisely in the ruin of the familial unit that the potential for a non-oppressive national reconstitution emerges. Consequently, in *El asalto* the destruction of the authority-figure is complemented by the obliteration of its repressive power structure. The mass “que permaneció impávida empieza a lanzar garfiazos, abaten ya las tribunas, las atalayas, y los parapetos, con las mismas astas de las banderas se abren paso, derrumbando polifamiliares, noparques, altavoces y celdas ambulantes” (ARENAS, 1991, p. 140). The juxtaposition of the polifamiliares with the loudspeakers and mobile jail cells underscores the repressive apparatus formed by the association between the logic of the state and that of the familial organization. The destruction of both opens new venues to imagine the nation, in which heterosexual productivity is no longer compulsory.

The critique of the intersection between national discourse and familial structure is also present in *A céu aberto*, by the Brazilian writer João Gilberto Noll. In this book, Noll composes a dizzying narrative in which the anonymous protagonist tells the story of his strange life and unorthodox relationships. The text oscillates between realistic and fantastical narrative modes. In Noll’s novel, traditional family ties and gender boundaries dissolve and are reassembled into incestuous combinations and polymorphic gender constructions. As in *El asalto*, in Noll’s text, the family initially represents an oppressive heterosexual order, dominated by an authoritarian patriarchal power.

A céu aberto begins with an incident that reveals both the intensity and the fragility of family ties. The novel opens with the protagonist-narrator taking his younger brother, who is ailing, to the war front in order to request money for medicines from his father for the sick boy: “[t]oquei no seu braço, a pele estava fria. A mão tremia. Eu era o mais velho, eu precisava fazer alguma coisa pela saúde do meu irmão. Pensei logo no nosso pai. A gente não tinha mais ninguém” (NOLL, 1996, p. 10). In this frame of reference, the traditional familial structure, in which the older sibling assumes the role of his brother’s keeper, is problematized as the relationship between the two brothers metamorphoses into one of sexual desire. In addition, the absence of the authoritarian father (and the inexistence of the mother) augments the sense of fragmentation and ultimate dissolution of the familial organization. For even though the father is portrayed as the – albeit oppressive – nucleus of the familial organization, he is absent, creating an affective and material vacuum with which the sons must come to terms.

As in Arenas’ *El asalto*, in *A céu aberto*, the family – composed at first by the male triad of father and two sons – represents the nation. Nonetheless, whereas in Arenas’ text, the

nation centered on the figure of the mother, in Noll's novel, the nation is symbolized through the figure of the father. It is hence, an overtly patriarchal structure and does not contain the ambiguity represented by the composite figure of the Reprimero/mother present in *El asalto*. Furthermore, similarly to Arena's text, in *A céu aberto*, the father figure is not only the *pater familias* but also the representative of state power and of state violence.

This violence assumes its most concrete form in an absurd war that the protagonist "não sabia bem para que servia" (NOLL, 1996, p. 10) and in which the father is actively involved as a general. The meaninglessness of the conflict reflects an ideology of gratuitous violence and destruction espoused by the father, who "faria tudo ao seu alcance para que as guerras não cessassem, sempre mais, que todos os países fossem varridos do planeta e que do planeta só sobrasse uma superfície amnésica e letárgica" (NOLL, 1996, p. 27). For the paternal figure, war is not waged for a specific meaning but rather is a ritual through which the nation comes into being and through which the masculine self can construct itself, inserting himself within the national body and perpetuating a cycle of aggression and oppression.

War and the word, both in the literal and the metaphorical conquest of a foreign tongue, are at the beginning of nationhood in *A céu aberto*. Both mingle to create the mythical foundations of the nation. The aggressive foundational fiction narrated by the protagonist tells of a warrior hero who consolidates the nation through the defeat and murder of his enemies. In taking the life of the adversary and ripping out his tongue, this mythical hero figure also dislodges the story of the rivaling nation and, in the ensuing aperture, inserts the national foundations. Indeed, these are sustained by the very body of this mythical father figure "o homem que hoje dá com seu esqueleto a sustentação para o totem lá no ponto culminante do monte, esse homem chegou ao fim da batalha e cortou com um facão a língua do outro, do nosso inimigo" (NOLL, 1996, p. 22). The body-totem lies at the summit of a hill, symbolic for the phallus, reinforcing the preponderance of a masculine articulation of the nation. It is also relevant that the founding national myth of *A céu aberto* does not contain a feminine figure. The nation is engendered solely by the male body and is a realm of homosocial bonding/bondage.

Despite the primacy of the masculinist, patriarchal vision of the nation, the father figure is largely absent from the story, appearing rather a shadow on the narrative horizon that erupts violently into the account at particular moments, only to disappear into abruptly again. Paradoxically, it is in this absence that he assumes a threatening quality. The menace

embodied by the father's authority becomes concrete when the older brother is forced to enlist in the army and the younger sibling is dressed in women's clothes and given as a bride-child to a stranger.

The bizarre ceremony, a combination of baptismal and nuptial rites emasculates the young boy and preempts his participation in the formation of a national discourse dominated by the aggressive rhetoric of war and destruction. The older sibling also interrogates aggressive nationalism. He rebels against the paternal authority and deserts the battlefield, the arena of a brutal enactment of masculinity. The protagonist questions the law imposed by the father's belligerent logic, feeling

no meu corpo inteiro uma descrença brutal em tudo o que eu passara a ver desde que vi meu irmão vestido de noiva ou de fêmea na primeira comunhão, não sei, desde ali pouco me importava com o que fizessem de mim, que me matassem, me ferissem, me esquarterassem, me trucidassem tudo bem, mas eu decididamente não tinha mais nada a ver com aquela merda toda de exército de guerra de pai de irmão vestido de noiva... (NOLL 1996 63).

The image of the younger sibling dressed in "drag" disconcerts the main-character and, at the same time, forecasts the future relationship between the two brothers.

Moreover, the ambiguous matrimonial ceremony contains a performative aspect that concurrently undermines and reinforces the hegemonic construction of the family based on the union of a heterosexual couple. For Judith Butler performativity entails citationality. Butler asserts that "[p]erformativity is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (BUTLER, 1993, p. 12). The nuptial scene in *A cé aberto* cites the norms of hegemonic social order. But, in its echo, its repetition of gender and socio-cultural regulations, the drag wedding transforms such conventions into a parody. As a result, the matrimonial theater witnessed by the disconcerted older brother suggests an alternate gender space, one in which heterosexuality does not dominate neither the formulation of the private family nor of the national family. The metamorphosis of the younger sibling destabilizes the notion of both gender and sexual fixity as ontological limits placed on the subject.

Reflecting upon the construction and the limitation of the material and symbolic body and its relationship to both the articulation of sex and of gender, Judith Butler maintains that

what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most

productive effect. And there will be no way to understand “gender” as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of the matter, understood either as “the body” or its given sex. Rather, once “sex” itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm. “Sex” is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which “one” becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility (BUTLER 1993 2).

The polymorphous physicality and sexualities inscribed within *A céu aberto* defy precisely the cultural intelligibility of the bodies and of their sexes within a heteronormative socio-cultural structure. Instead, the indefiniteness of both material and sexed bodies interrogates the notion of the concept of a stable subject that abides by the laws of heteronormative society and, by extension, questions the ideal of a national space dominated by said directives.

The unorthodox (queered) matrimonial scene initially left open and seen from afar by the main character gains clarity once the siblings reencounter. Sigmund Freud () argues that the child enjoys a stage of polymorphous perversity in which it explores multiple sexualities before moving to the reductiveness of genital sex. In *A céu aberto*, the transmutation of the younger sibling’s body alludes to this polymorphic perversity while preempting the binary limitation of genital sexuality.

The younger brother’s body, having been feminized in the past retains its flexible physicality, shifting from the male to the female form. In its unfixed nature, it incites his older sibling’s polymorphous desire. Upon seeing nude pictures of his brother, the protagonist feels an incestuous desire towards his nubile body (“olhei-o de soslaio e cheguei a pensar que ele poderia ser a mulher com quem eu sempre sonhara” [NOLL, 1996, p. 73]). Noll eschews rigid gender categories and concomitantly, the binarism of gender distinctions, creating instead spaces for fluid genres of sexuality and sexual identification.

The mutability of identities is, according to Idelber Avelar, one of the defining traits of Noll’s fictions. Avelar notes that “[t]he paradox proper to Noll’s texts is that nothing seems permanent and everything is in flux, yet the notions of becoming and change have all but disappeared” (AVELAR, 1999, p. 190). In *A céu aberto*, gender variations do not merely lead to an alteration in identity but to an ultimate absence of identity and identifications.

The lack of the protagonist’s proper name reveals the indeterminacy of individual subjectivity. This impreciseness of personal identity is paralleled by the inconclusiveness of both the historical and the geographical frames of reference. Shirley de Souza Gomes Carreira maintains that “[a]ssim como em romances anteriores *A céu aberto* é a expressão de um

narrador cuja identidade não é definida, que relata experiências sem qualquer estrutura temporal ... Igualmente imprecisa é a estruturação do espaço” (CARREIRA, 2000, p. 43). The impreciseness in temporal and territorial setting challenges and critiques the articulation of the nation in stable (territorial as well as ideological) terms. Without historicity or geographical boundaries, the nation floats orphaned of signification. At the same time, the nation’s lack of physical or symbolic anchors reflects the increased deterritorialization of the national space and its citizens. For Octavio Ianni, in the present, globalized era, “[a] despeito das marcas originais, da ilusão da origem, tudo tende a deslocar-se além das fronteiras, línguas nacionais, hinos, bandeiras, tradições heróis, santos, monumentos, ruínas. Aos poucos, predomina o espaço global em tempo principalmente presente” (IANNI, 2005, p. 94). For Ianni, this deterritorialization connotes both a crises of traditional socio-cultural structures on which the very concept of nation-state was based and the creation of new forms of affiliations that transcend the geographical as well as the social and cultural boundaries of nation states. Written in the aftermath of the military dictatorship, in a period of recrudescence of neo-liberal policies and its concomitant erosion of the national power in the social, economic and political realms, *A céu aberto* plays with the idea of a territory devoid of materiality, a symbolic terrain of loss where, nonetheless, the sequels of authoritarianism persist in nefarious manners, populating the subconscious of the citizenry. It is a transitional domain that contains the abject remnants of the regime’s many victims which haunt the national and the individual corpus, resulting in the crises of sociability and of ontology that manifests itself in a fragmented national landscape and schizophrenic psyches, littered with the various corpses, victims of authoritarian violence.

Notwithstanding the melancholy depiction of nationhood in *A céu aberto*, the notion of a cohesive nation state, a locus of coalescence of traditions is not a viable alternative either. Rather, the national sphere and its reduced version, the familial *domus* are seen as constrictive to the individual who seeks to overstep the boundaries of both, stepping onto the non-space of “a céu aberto.” The protagonist asserts that “a céu aberto tudo me abrigava melhor do que numa casa, ali não tinha natureza social a cumprir” (NOLL, 1996, p. 102). Thus, if the absence of a proper name indicates the indefinition of the subject, then the lack of the nation’s name points toward an (desired) erasure of a defined national ambit. It is in the open space that the protagonist can transcend the social constraints imposed by national and social affiliations.

The volatility of gender roles and of the national sphere is paired with the transgression of the incest taboo, resulting in the demolition of normative sexuality which functions as a vital element in the construction of the nation and of national discourse. Gomes Carreira signals that “[n]a economia da obra de Noll percebe-se que as forças do corpo e da paixão configuram-se como transgressões à ordem social repressora” (CARREIRA, 2000, p. 49). *A céu aberto* defies the heteronormative discourse, overwriting the foundational fictions of the nation.

As indicated by Doris Sommer, the foundational fictions of the nineteenth-century proposed the amorous relationship as a metaphorical alliance between conflicting or heterogeneous societal factions. The ideology behind these partnerships was the unification of the nation itself. But, by articulating the coming-together of distinct societal (and, at times, ethnic) subjects, the national romances also banned the specter of incest from their pages and, by extension, from national discourse. Indeed, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ alliance theory (1969), the incest taboo serves precisely as a manner of fomenting exogamous unions. In this respect, the proscription of incest ensures the (healthy) survival of the nation through the reproductive act implied in the heterosexual, non-incestuous marriage that fosters solidarity between various groups.

A céu aberto undermines this rationale by maintaining romance within the family. The protagonist’s desires are directed towards his own kin. Observing the female body into which his brother had metamorphosed, the main character admits that

[e]u já era um homem apaixonado, ainda mais por saber que aquele corpo percorrera um itinerário tão tortuoso para chegar até ali. Dentro daquele corpo de mulher deveria existir a lembrança do que ele fora como homem, e boliná-lo como eu fazia naquele instante deixava em mim a agradável sensação de estar tentando seduzir a minha própria casa, onde eu encontraria o meu irmão quem sabe em outro momento. (NOLL, 1996, p. 76-77).

In *A céu aberto*, the familial unit and by extension, the nation, become the site of a claustrophobic love that, in the end, results in unproductiveness. But, beyond this, the idea of nation-formation through heterosexual nuptials is undermined by the polymorphous nature of sexuality and gender in Noll’s text.

If the younger brother is the metaphor for the mutability of gender constructions, then the protagonist embodies the fluidity of sexual desire. His carnal lust is directed and consummated in both hetero and homosexual unions. The primacy of the heterosexual logic,

directed towards the perpetuation of the national family is hence destabilized in favor of a rationality that privileges pleasure.

At the same time, in his libidinal flexibility, the protagonist is inevitably also a marginal character. Living under open skies, apart from “civilization,” outside the contact with a greater community, when he does enter the communal space, the polis, he becomes a fugitive for having rejected the father’s bellicose doctrine as well as the dominant logic of the heterosexual family. The main character’s past as a deserter eventually catches up with him and obliges him to leave his country and go into exile.

It is significant that before abandoning definitively the national territory, the protagonist murders his brother’s female incarnation, his wife, after having intercourse with her. In the sexual act, he ejaculates several times, speculating that “[q]uem sabe numa dessas tenha lançado nela a semente de uma outra criança” (NOLL, 1996, p. 137). The assassination ends the possibility of procreation, negating the reproductive logic of the sexual act. Instead, sex serves as foreplay to individual and social death.

Because of both his desertion and his crime, the protagonist must flee and becomes a stateless exile, traveling aimlessly as a sex-slave on board of a ship. His sexuality once again negates the heterosexual logic that locates pleasure within the sanctioned space of marriage between woman and man. Instead, the protagonist becomes the object of male desire, having to submit to the sexual whims of the ship’s captain⁵. In this context, sex is associated with the abject, practiced in the abject space of the ship’s cabin.

The abject, for French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1982), is, at the same time that which is repugnant and fascinating, it repulses and attracts our attention. This ambiguity defies the construction of stable identity boundaries. In the abject, self and other are not clearly distinguishable. Thus, by undermining fixed identity categories, the abject also interrogates the social order that demands and is based on limits and borders. As a result, the abject exposes the fragility and the constructed nature of the frontiers of identification and of social demarcations. In *A céu aberto*, the physical borders between self and other are transgressed through a sexuality that involves the production and consumption of bodily matter: sweat, sperm, excrement, urine. These substances represent the erasure of inside and

⁴ Fábio Figueiredo Camargo sees the ship’s captain as an embodiment of a castrating father figure: “O comandante de navio, um pai castrador que prende e ao mesmo tempo protege o homem sem nome em uma cabine de navio para a satisfação de seus desejos sexuais” (FIGUEIREDO, p. 5). If the captain is interpreted as a paternal figure, then the relationship between the protagonist and the former assumes an incestuous quality as well, echoing the amorous relationship between the siblings.

outside; they project the interior onto an exterior surface, revealing the hidden physicality of the subject.

In the proliferation of the liminal matter, the ship's cabin where the protagonist is held becomes the scene of a ritual dissolution of the main character's subjectivity as he becomes increasingly excluded from the outside world: "Pensei que realmente o mundo exterior não me pertencia, ... chegaria um momento em que me encontraria definitivamente a descoberto fora do navio, sem reconhecer mais nada, sem saber com que lidar, para onde ir. O meu país, com a guerra terminada, me aceitaria depois de tudo como cidadão?" (NOLL, 1996, p. 149). Citizenship, this is, the notion of not only belonging in legal but also in cultural terms to a specific and constrictive geo-social territory becomes precarious when the subject transgresses the limits dictated by a discursive norm in which the distinction between self and other must be observed. Floating in the open sea, a space itself metaphorical of non-belonging, the protagonist once again defies the norms of rigid gender and socio-cultural identifications. His defiance is underscored in the novel's finale.

When the protagonist finally arrives at a fixed destination and goes ashore, it is suggested that he might be a terrorist ("na parede da cabeceira da cama havia um cartaz chamando a atenção da população para um perigoso terrorista internacional. Na parte superior do cartaz, um tosco retrato falado de alguém que poderia passar por mim, verdade: o mesmo formato de rosto, queixo, olhos, nariz" [NOLL, 1996, p. 163]). It is significant that the terrorist act performed in the last pages of *A céu aberto* is the bombing of the police station, a site that concentrates the authoritarian power of the state. By exploding this place, the narrative suggests the demise of the nation as a controlling ambit.

Both *A céu aberto* and *El asalto* end with the protagonists gazing at the sea. The image connotes the dissolving of boundaries at both the subjective and the national levels. The main character of Arenas' text disengages from the celebrations that ensue following the toppling of the dictatorial Reprimero, and walks to the beach "[c]amino hasta la arena. Y me tiendo" (ARENAS, 1991, p. 141). After the incestuous murder of the tyrannical parents, the protagonist can finally rest facing the open horizon. In comparison, *A céu aberto* concludes with transgressive laughter: "[r]ir, dar uma boa gargalhada como se estivesse a céu aberto, logo ali, perto do mar" (NOLL, 1996, p. 164). Thus, at the end of both narratives, only laughter and the open spaces of the non-nation remain.

RESUMO: Este ensaio examina o questionamento da formulação da nação em dois romances, *El asalto*, de Reinaldo Arenas (1991) e *A céu aberto* (1996), de João Gilberto Noll. Ambos os textos desmistificam a enunciação de um espaço nacional estável e produtivo ao interrogar a confluência entre a unidade familiar e a unidade nacional. Os laços familiares em *El asalto* e *A céu aberto* contradizem o estereótipo da união heterossexual da maioria dos romances fundacionais latino-americanos. Ao questionar a construção heteronormativa da nação, estes dois romances expõem as múltiplas expressões de violência e opressão inerentes à tal construção. Tanto *El asalto* como *A céu aberto* nos revelam como práticas autoritárias acompanham o estabelecimento de sexualidades normativas e, como extensão destas, formulações hegemônicas da identidade nacional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Autoritarismo. Heteronormatividade. Identidade nacional.

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