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**PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY
AND POLEMIC BILINGUALISM
IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE
MEMOIR OF IMMIGRATION:
MARIO CASTELLS' *EL MOSTO Y LA QUERESA* (2012)**

Abstract

This essay explores Mario Castells' deployment of Guaraní and Jopará (urban Spanish-Guaraní pidgin) within his Spanish-language memoir as a politically-charged form of immersive pedagogy (i.e., teaching the reader Guaraní as an end unto itself) but also as an autobiographical trope through which to explore the psychology of migration, multicultural identity, and memory. Political and historical context is provided to better understand the author's and the novel's positionality with respect to migration and nationalism. The essay also positions Castells' appropriation of Anglophone models of the immigration memoir and reflects on broader trends in multilingual writing about migration beyond Argentina and North America.

Keywords:

memoir ♦ Guaraní ♦ Jopará ♦ Paraguayan community in Argentina ♦ multilingual fiction

In a decidedly oral register, the unnamed speaker of Mario Castells' 2012 novelistic and folksy memoir *El mosto y la queresá* (*The Ketchard and the Mustsup*) narrates a family history of immigration through a bifurcated chronology that has become, by the 2010s, already conventional to the ever-more-codified international genre of the immigration memoir. To wit, Castells introduces the story as difficult to remember for how far back in his life it occurs, but also for how profoundly migration (and the second life of assimilation) shifts the terms of experience and memory. This bifurcation frames the narration of how his brother Emigdio "came" to Argentina, alternating the frame story told from his markedly Argentine (and Argentinized), adult retrospect with that earlier perspective from which moving to Argentina would seem a distant and intangible future prospect. This juxtaposition is the occasion for a project of linguistic pedagogy, ostensibly to better understand that distant childhood world in Paraguay, and whose motivations have everything to do with contemporary language politics and immigration debates in Argentina. It's a first novel in the sense that introducing its author and its author's voice is established by the paratextual apparatus of its publication to be as important, or more, than the story it tells. It is not explicitly autobiographical, but the narrator's introduction marks it early on as a very personal work in thematic and emotional terms, which has the implicitly political effect of humanizing and making more accessible the experience of a typical Paraguayan immigrant to Argentina. In fact, we might even say it is more personal for its 'mythological' rather than factual mode of presenting family lore, immigration tales, border geography, and family histories. Moreover, the obliquely personal stakes and tone also make the memoir's political stakes more explicit, given that for the Argentine fiction-reading middle classes, immigration, and specifically the cultural and governmental demands for assimilation, have been at the forefront of political debate since the early 1980s. It is presumably for this reason that the memoir's only references to Argentina and Paraguay as sovereign and distinct nation-states are inflected with an ironic tone, as if no one who sincerely believed in those abstractions would bother reading a book selected from this shelf in the bookstore. To move outward through these concentric circles of meaning, I will first introduce the memoir's stakes and its relationship to its reader, before analyzing some key passages to show how the context of those immigration debates inflects the memoir's narrative structure and the playfully opaque pedagogy by which it familiarizes its reader with code-switching and Jopará. In addition, this memoir can show us how the Euro-American genre that I will call the "memoir of

immigration” has been imported and appropriated in Latin America by the contemporary literary market, and how it might continue to evolve formally and politically going forward.

Firstly, we might start by providing a characterization of the playful linguistic and cross-cultural pedagogies central to (and by now routine in) the international genre of the memoir of immigration, in which a reader presumed to have no experience or familiarity with a multicultural milieu learns “the basics” of its culture and some kernel of ostensibly useful vocabulary. The narration and dialogue both evince a folkloric, countrified tone and at times the narrator jokes openly about how “cliché” (*cursi*) the language of its characters is when they think they’re being poetic, heightening the difference not just of worldview but also of language between the retrospective narrator and the lovingly recreated dialogues of his rural, unworldly characters. Intimately linked to the contrasts amid this verbal texture is the almost slapstick, picaresque pace and structure of the memoir’s episodic narrative, rich in asides and both retrospective and contemporary commentaries. Excluding the idyllic opening scene of Emigdio hunting in a swamp and the brief and rhapsodic epilogue, the bulk of the narrative alternates between chaotic episodes of drunken, sexual, criminal, and/or socially awkward misadventure. These episodes are narrated in an emphatically oral and Guaraní-inflected flurry of idioms and cultural references which the reader grasps only retrospectively or inductively. In between episodes, the narrator gives pithy summaries of intervening events to move the story efficiently along to its next scene, and these summaries are narrated in a much more standard Spanish that is more transparent for the Argentine reader not familiar with Guaraní or its pidgins. This structure heightens the sense that the story’s carnivalesque scenes are not digression or examples, but the core substance of the story, and that the linguistic texture of their narration is inseparable from the meaning and purpose of the work, breathlessly immersing the reader in linguistically unfamiliar territory with the false promise of a glossary and linguistic introduction that still leave the reader grasping to inductively arrive at the meaning of much of the dialogue.

Elaborating further on the *texture* of these two modes in literary as well as sociolinguistic terms, we could describe them, respectively, as a mode of insistently multilingual and heteroglossic narration, and another mode for the more transparent contextualization of the frame story, which proceeds more slowly and circumspectly in the tones of wise and civil retrospect to heighten the contrast with the intervening chapters heavy in foreignness and orality. (For a contemporary and thorough application of Bakhtin’s heteroglossia to the immigration/multilingual novel, see Doris Sommer’s 2004 *Bilingual Aesthetics*.) In more concrete terms, if you were to neutrally count the words of the work, approximately 85% of

them are written in Spanish, some of them unmistakably evocative of Buenos Aires and some of them so Paraguayan that the narrator glosses them parenthetically for a presumably unfamiliar Argentine readership. Another 10% are Guaraní words that you could find in a dictionary of Standard Guaraní, a living indigenous language essentially universal to modern-day Paraguay and serving as its second official language since being promoted by an ascendant Stroessner a generation before the events narrated here. Another 5% are “Jopará,” a type of emphatically bilingual slang specific to the Paraguayan-Argentine immigrant community, which fuses Guaraní and Spanish morphemes in a systematic pidgin that can be quite opaque to someone without a basic knowledge of both languages or a lived experience of the immigrant milieu of [predominantly rural] Paraguayans living in urban Argentina. One would have to be reading quite quickly to mistake this systematic codeswitching for an incidental or unconscious artifact of multilingualism; the texture and form of the narration, and the linguistic work these require, are quietly but unmistakably tied to the political stakes of writing fiction that dignifies and illuminates one of Argentina’s biggest, yet most invisible immigration communities. The casual reader looking to read *only* the Spanish will be so lost as to not follow the plot, much less understand the memoir and its social world: this structure constitutes the work as a fundamentally didactic one, all but forcing its reader to learn some introductory modicum of Guaraní and Jopará to be able to report honestly having ‘read’ it.

In practice, this somewhat demanding didacticism is experienced (not always pleasantly) by the Argentine or further-afield reader as an experience of having to deduce one’s way out of confusing situations—a surprising level of discomfort (or we might even say, an ‘affective barrier’) familiar to anyone who has taught language by the communicative method. The book includes an alphabetized glossary rather than footnotes, complete with a layman’s introduction to the pronunciation of Guaraní orthography, but even the casual reader using this glossary sparingly will notice before long that it lacks entries for a majority of the Guaraní and Jopará terms used, leaving the reader to guess at the rest from context cues and by analogy to previously defined terms. The decision to include a definitively inadequate glossary seems to me a clear sign that the text is intended to be pedagogical, yet not intended to be *easily* or painlessly pedagogical, announcing to its reader that language will be learned, but gradually shifting the onus onto the reader as if by oversight.

For example, in addition to codeswitching into Standard Guaraní for most of the vocabulary associated with *yerba mate* (not for lack of one-to-one equivalents in Argentine Spanish, and without even an implicit explanation), the narrator furthermore seems quite intent on convincing its intended Argentine readership of the Guaraní origins of the classic Argentine

vocative, “Che.” (For the sake of fairness, I should mention that the jury is still out on the subject in Argentine linguistic academia, with plausible theories tracing it to Latin vulgates, as well as to various other South American indigenous languages.) Usually translated as the Spanish “mi” or the English “my,” “che” is a title of affection and familiarity in Guaraní that bleeds over into situations where characters, otherwise speaking entirely in Spanish, will refer to each other as “che amigo” or “chamigo.” In the book’s first few usages of the morpheme, when the “che” precedes a Guaraní noun, the whole phrase will appear in the glossary; then, “che _____” phrases start popping up in entire sentences of Guaraní or Jopará that get glossed as a whole by the narrator; finally, the morpheme “che” starts being attached to new non-Spanish nouns, many of them not appearing in the glossary either with or without the prefix. None of the non-Spanish or partially Spanish words are italicized or otherwise marked typographically, which one could readily interpret as a political gesture given the denigration of Guaraní in Argentine culture¹, as a pedagogical tactic of immersion and confrontation, or as some combination of the two.

It’s worth noting, however, that a generational divide yawns between the impure and unromanticized Guaraní of Castells and the legacy of South American indigenismo, in which access to an indigenous worldview or Herderian *Volksgeist* is imagined as reward for some amount of induction into indigenous language and/or experience. Paraguay had already been made officially and effectively bilingual as part of a populist (and officialist) project of refiguring the nation as effectively homogenous and mestizo, so peppering a Spanish-language novel with (standardized, national) Guaraní—or with urban Guaraní pidgin, for that matter—cannot be argued to have any substantial subtext of recuperating or entering into an indigenous sphere seen as distinct from a Spanish/*criollo* one. (For a fascinating account of the failings of Stroessner’s officialist *indigenismo* and the dissident *indigenismos* of the 1970s and 1980s, see Harder Horst 2010.) The heteroglossia of Castells’ mestizo milieu is porous, fluid, and hybrid, with references to anti-indigenous racism but without clearly marking which characters are partially or fully indigenous, as if to rob that racism of its referent; Castells’ Guaraní is casually impure, unselfconsciously mixed and redeemed from those conflicts, worlds away from a respectful classical *indigenismo*² that would take as its object a monolithic and distinct Guaraní identity distinct from a Hispanophone Paraguayan one. It is native to a bilingual, contact-zone Paraguay in which linguistic practice and ideology are more fluid and less observant of an artificial boundary between the two languages that essentially the entire populace speaks fluently. (On contact-zone sociolinguistics, see Sebba 1997; for a thorough literature review of recent challenges to fixed, monolithic identities

corresponding to unitary language, see Pavlenko and Blackledge’s introduction to Pavlenko 2006.)

All this can make for a somewhat exhaustingly didactic read even for a linguistically savvy and academic reader, and furthermore a deceptive one, if said reader were expecting the kind of light, 100-page comic novella that usually wins prestigious first-novel prizes. That said, the reader is likely expected to realize somewhere around the halfway point that what she is reading is equal parts language textbook, light fiction, and reflexive sociology of immigration, the reading of which requires a very different form of exertion than more conventional memoir fare. Castells, it should be noted, has a degree in Literature from one of Argentina’s top universities, and is on multiple grant-funded social-science working groups that analyze and serve the Paraguayan immigrant community. The memoir may have been sold to Argentina’s novel-reading public with an express eye towards educating them in new and unforeseen ways, but in some ways Spanish-fluent readers of *Critical Multilingualism Studies* are the work’s ideal readers, since its focus is in essence more sociolinguistic than historical or sociological.

Now, I called the memoir’s didacticism *somewhat* exhausting because, like any successful language teacher, the narrator weaves in rests, downtime, familiarity, and generous amounts of placating humor in between reading-comprehension exercises of varying intensity. The seamless blending of familiarity and opacity, as well as the rhythmic alternation of carnivalesque scenes and narrative monologues that read at different paces, are what saves this work from being excessively or unpleasantly didactic, or so demanding or dry as to leave the reader demoralized before finishing it. In fact, on the subject of this often-boring but sometimes brilliant tradition of utilizing the popular novel as a kind of community outreach, it’s worth mentioning Junot Díaz, to whom Mario Castells has been compared in much of the press surrounding this work and the prizes it has won in Argentina. One influential Argentine reviewer, Mario Lezcano, even referred to this memoir’s use of Guaraní and Jopará as “more systematic” than the bilingualism of Junot Díaz. With all due respect to Lezcano, I think that might be selling both Díaz and Castells short: Díaz very deliberately and systematically foregoes a glossary, explaining this strategy in numerous interviews³, instead opting for a kind of active reading which critic Caseilles-Suárez has called “radical hybridism” (Caseilles-Suárez 2013); Castells, on the other hand, takes this strategy even further, perhaps, by impishly giving his reader only a very partial glossary and a few inline glosses, keeping her scribbling in the margins and deducing morphemes like a language student a little past her comfort level.

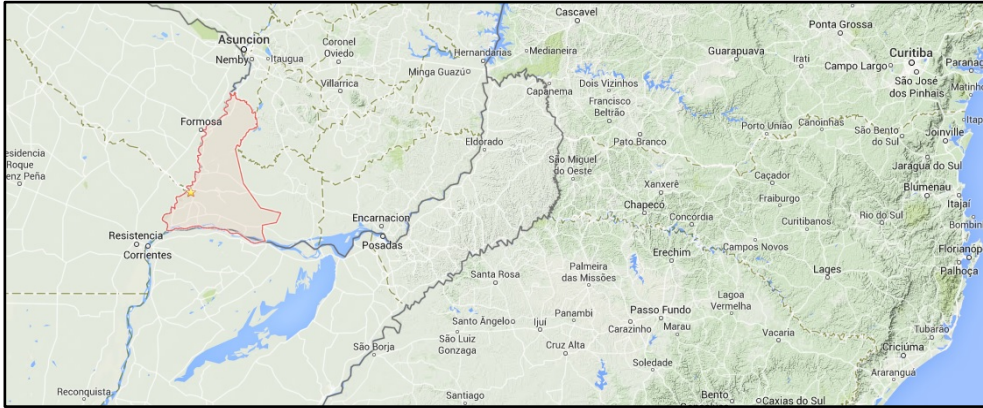


Figure 1: The memoir's borderland geography right on the Argentine-Paraguayan border

Of course, the parallels to Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, which was a bestseller in Argentina two or three years before Castells' book came out in 2012, go beyond their shared linguistic heteroglossia and their shared desire to innovate in the novel of immigration: on both linguistic and narrative levels, there is an insistence on the untranslatable, the oral, and what Doris Sommer has named "emphatic particularity"—in Díaz' work in particular as well as in the tradition as a whole (2004: 30). The entire narrative is set in a very specific and vividly-described part of rural Paraguay called Ñeembucú near the border with the Argentine province of Corrientes, yet its setting in history is deliberately vague until the penultimate page of the narration. This has the effect of emphasizing geography over history, cultural and geopolitical specificity over a dictatorship periodization which might lessen that specificity by homology to other dictatorships. Indeed, I would argue that in the place of that historical homology, Castells writes for a reader that will instead homologize his border settings to others which have been novelized more richly and famously in recent decades. With just a few descriptions and asides, Castells makes felt the presence of that geopolitical but also sociolinguistic border exerting itself just a few pages into the story, when the narrator explains that the capital city of the bordering Argentine province of Corrientes is "days" closer than is Pilar, the capital of the Paraguayan province in which the events are set. Long before this, the narrator refers offhandedly to jeans sent home from Buenos Aires, to casual border-crossings for this or that bargain, to naturalized Argentines living in the town, and to cousins living permanently abroad, all border tropes familiar to anyone who has read any two immigration memoirs from the US-Mexico border or of the Caribbean-Latino diaspora. Between these conventional tropes of the immanence of the border to everyday life along it, the equally conventional tone of melancholic retrospect on the part of the frame-story narrator,⁴ and the linguistic show-and-tell for the reader's benefit, the narration signals to its reader the contours of the genre of the immigration memoir—entire chapters before emigration is even mentioned in the diegesis.

Like in many novels of immigration, emigration is foreshadowed and insinuated by the generic momentum and the form of the narrative, even by the historical and literal setting, long before it is thematized by the protagonist, making for a kind of dramatic irony whereby the reader is waiting for the other shoe to drop. The narrator doesn't even mention emigration as a possibility until the protagonist develops personal reasons to go abroad halfway through the story, despite having referred various times by that point to the repressive Stroessner dictatorship, contextualizing for even the least-familiar Argentine reader the broader historical forces that drove out the lion's share of Argentina's 20th-century Paraguayan immigrants. Indeed, Emigdio metonymically stands in for a whole generation of Argentina's Paraguayan immigrants that arrived during the three decades of Stroessner's rule, a generation comprising over half of its population of approximately 600,000, according to official census estimates (for a quick overview of the history and economics of this mass migration, see Richards 1996). The protagonist, apolitical and motivated by a comic combination of lust and mischief, comes from a family that suffers a fairly typical persecution at the hands of local political elites, a historical backdrop which the reader need not know much about to understand the story, but about which, like the Jopará dialect, the reader can learn quite a bit through diligent and deductive reading.

Having established in broad strokes these thematic and political stakes of the memoir, I would now like to turn to specific passages of interest to the North American reader seeking to be introduced to different contexts of multilingualism. To do so, I'll analyze some key passages, starting with the epilogue. The narrative ends abruptly with Emigdio and his wife leaving Paraguay on their wedding day; in the final sentence, Emigdio wakes up in Argentina—married and hung-over—to the sobering news that the current President-General of Argentina, Leopoldo Galtieri, whom the narrator refers to as a “Correntino thug,” has declared the invasion of the Malvinas Islands—the kind of thuggish and autocratic gesture that marks Argentina as not different enough from Stroessner's Paraguay. (Rosario, the second most Paraguayan city in Argentina and Castells' hometown, remembers Galtieri not just as the last dictator of the Junta, but also as the officer at the helm of the repression of the second “Rosariazo” Uprising in 1969, a key event in the escalation of state violence leading up to the Junta proper). The tone of the epilogue pivots sharply on this hinge, suddenly speeding past child-rearing, divorce, some long-distance moves, a career, a rapid maturation and a total personality reversal in a few mere sentences. Nineteen years pass and deliver us suddenly to the narrator's present in the frame story that's been implicit all along, the moment from which

the preceding episodes have been meticulously remembered and narrated with rich sadness and deep sobriety.

The last narratorial aside explains, retroactively, this tragic undercurrent of retrospect that has been palpable beneath the comic scenes narrated in the present and the ironic asides that comprise the story. This explanation, my favorite passage in the memoir, hinges on its only appeal to any sort of academic or meta-folkloric frame of reference, which is also, tellingly, the only reference to a cultural framework beyond those of Argentina and Paraguay:

The pain of exile is a storied theme throughout [world] history. Its origins date back to Ancient Greece, where it was applied as a political punishment. *I know now* that our Guaraní myths have something in them *linking our social behavior to that sentence*. We wander circling around ourselves. The tragic destiny of it persists, but far from the pathos of tragedy. I know that many of my countrymen, regardless of what the demographers might maintain on the basis of estimations more precise than mine, live in this borrowed homeland almost better than anywhere else. In the final reckoning, exile doesn't hit that hard in a country that we also feel as our own, and aside from a few minor xenophobic idiocies, there are no limits on how we can develop as a culture. But we can definitely see how that *undermining fissure*, that oozing wound of nostalgia, makes Paraguayans—the most nostalgic of all this land's foreigners, a title which does not need superfluous proofs—strange and stoic characters. Built from laughter and from a sweet language that few understand, we remain firm and strong while hiding from view our deep cracks. The pain of Emiyo, a truly jovial man, oozed like the wound of Filoctetes. (translation and emphasis mine)

La pena del destierro es viejo tema en la historia. Su origen se remonta a la sociedad griega antigua donde se lo ejerció como castigo político. *Ahora también sé* que hay algo de nuestros mitos guaraníes *que une esa condena a nuestros comportamientos sociales*. Peregrinamos en torno a nuestros mismos. El destino trágico persiste pero lejos del patetismo de la tragedia. Sé que muchos compatriotas, no importa las cifras que los demógrafos sustenten según estimaciones más precisas que las mías, vivimos en esta patria prestada casi mejor que en ninguna otra parte. Al fin de cuentas, al exilio pega blando en un país que también sentimos nuestro, y más allá de algunos idiotismos xenófobos menores, no hay limitaciones para que nos desarrollemos como cultura. Pero sí podemos ver que ese *resquebrajamiento*, esa herida de nostalgia que supura, nos hace a los paraguayos—los más nostálgicos de todos los extranjeros de esta tierra y no necesitamos redundancias para probarlo—extraños personajes estoicos. Armados de la risa y de un idioma dulce que pocos entienden, nos

mantenemos firmes y fuertes ocultando quebrantos. La pena de Emiyo, un hombre realmente jovial, supuró como la herida de Filoctetes. (102)

Firstly, it should be noted that within Paraguay, but far more so within Argentina, the power relations between Spanish and Guaraní (as languages and as cultures) are hardly even—all things indigenous, as elsewhere in Latin America, are denigrated in a wide range of social and cultural contexts, marked with the stigma of being backwards, pre- or a-historical, and *local*, despite decades of governmental and cultural efforts to overcome this colonial legacy. In this context, Castells is cleverly and artfully undermining this linguistic and cultural hierarchy when he uses an analogy from Classical (i.e., “universal” and Euro-centric) Greece to explain the particularities of an emigrant’s melancholy, reversing the presumption that this “universal” culture would be native to, or only accessed via, the modern metropole. This reversal is reinforced but also complicated by the empathically first-person and retrospective claim (“I now know”) that an unnamed “something” in Guaraní mythology harkens to this myth, putting the rural and oral traditions of Paraguay somehow *closer to* Greece than all the universities and Neoclassical façades of Buenos Aires. Secondly, this Greek myth’s poetic and abject central metaphor, the wound perpetually oozing pus, is one that the narrator seems to almost stutter on appositionally, as if it were so great a mental effort to put into modern words (or at least, into Spanish words) that doing so required a few attempts. The narrator tropes it with the esoteric mouthful of *resquebrajamiento*, which could be parsed literally as a “fissuring” or a “parching,” or more figuratively as an act of undermining an endeavor, for instance a moral resolve or a project. What project, exactly, is being undermined by this never-healing wound? Emigration itself, assimilation, or the garden-variety life-project of any adult citizen, for which “Emiyo” here stands in, his name presented in its Guaraní diminutive?

Coming as it does at the end of the story, Castells’ excursus deliberately makes these questions unanswerable, like koans or never-healing wounds. I would point out, however, that the sentence following the definition of the Paraguayan-emigrée variant of the Philoctetes myth doesn’t state what project the wound fissures or undermines, but it does define these undermined, split subjects as *speaking* subjects in terms of their sweet laughter and their sweet language “understood by few.” Indeed, the work seems to take quite seriously the metaphor of language-learning as cultural competency, such that much of its intentions hinge on the ambiguity between understanding (linguistically) and understanding (socially) that “sweet” language of the narrator’s childhood. To put it another way, the Guaraní they maintain at great expense within their community and through pedagogical efforts like this work of fiction might be the “sweet language” he’s referring to, but the Guaraní interferences

and inflections in their hybridized Spanish could just as well be what the narrator is characterizing as “sweet,” oozing out the untranslatable traces of the Old Country and its tongue. Either interpretation is viable, and in either case this ties together the political and social project of the memoir with its linguistic project of “undermining” [*resquebrajando*] the insular and emphatically particular Spanish of Argentina’s literary tradition by smuggling into it Guaraní and Jopará, such that the hybrid language of these subjects can be “understood” by the reader, and along with it their particular worldview, temperament, and Grecian “stoicism.”



Figure 2: James Barry “Study for ‘Philoctetes on the Island of Lemnos’”, 1770

This retrospective excursus explains best, perhaps, the linguistic method and didactic stakes of the work as a whole, but is hardly an apt explanation of the dynamics of Spanish and Guaraní’s interaction earlier in the story, during the narrator’s teenage years when he makes a first attempt to write a love letter in “pure” Spanish in Ñeembucú. Here, perhaps, a less critical and complicated conception of the value and utility of “pure Spanish” is made palpable in the longest (excepting the Guaraní expletive interjection) and “purest” passage of

cartoonish International Spanish which the reader can imagine the teenage protagonist declaiming and over-enunciating between pubescent voice cracks. For brevity I'm skipping much of the juvenile poetry mostly pastiched together from high school required readings:

The chink in his armor of having almost lost her to another gallant's hands *opened up* for my "captain" a new ingenuity and *the Spanish language*.

I've long held, Mademoiselle, a desire I've wanted to manifest to you, he said. [...] Because the affection I feel for you, my dear, is no letter written in the water.

Omongetaaa hína! The root of Emigdio's rhetoric was mostly to be found in his reading of an old book of love letters, widely disdained throughout Ñeembucú and all of Paraguay, although folded into that foundation he also took as a resource the poetry of [national folk bard] Emiliano R. Fernández. Besides, as *kitsch* is neither an object of consideration or a cause for laughter *in our country*, the discourse of my brother must have been, I imagine, unprecedented in its soundness and appropriateness, worthy of the poet of Guaraní jungles and valleys. (translation and emphasis mine)

El quebranto de casi haberla perdido en manos de otro galán *le abrió* a mi kapéto el ingenio y *el castellano*.

Hace tiempo, señorita, que tengo un deseo que manifestarle, le dijo. [...] Por el cariño que siento por usted, señorita, no es letra escrita en el agua.

¡Omongetaaa hína! La clave de la retórica de Emigdio estaba sobre todo en la lectura de un viejo libro de cartas amorosas, de tan bastarda fama en el Ñeembucú y todo Paraguay, aunque al variar el fundamento tomó por recurso las poesías de Emiliano R. Fernández. Siendo además que *en nuestro país* no se pondera la *cursilería* ni causa risa, el acto de mi hermano habrá sido, me imagino, de una postulación y seguridad inaudita, digna del poeta de las selvas y los valles guaraníes. (32)

This comically un-literary and unworldly scene is interesting to contrast with the coda about Philoctetes exactly because of the way it is overlaid with retrospective importance in the phrase of the "opening up" of Spanish to Emigdio. We could interpret this opening up, perhaps, as a first experience of fluency and mastery of the tongue, but also of the social power and international mobility that it implies—an opening up, as well, of the possibility of emigration by the same token, and an exertion of a kind of worldliness born of formal education and of the informal education of border life. There is, at the same time, a certain way in which the retrospective shame that the narrator invites his Argentine reader to share upon reading the hackneyed juvenilia is presented as an artifact of *cross-cultural*

interpretation. To be precise, this sentimental verbal kitsch is unsustainable and ironic for the reader precisely because of a conception of kitsch that the narrator claims to be foreign to the sweet language of “their country.” But by “country,” does the narrator mean Paraguay as a whole or his particular countryside home, which, to twist the aphorism of Porfirio Díaz, is so close to Rosario and so far from Asunción?

This shows, perhaps, the degree to which there are not just two languages at play here, but also two cultures and two histories, and neither of them monolithic or discreet at all; indeed, the internal divisions within each (urban/rural, educated/popular) are precisely the points of contact and congruence at which the novel playfully crosses back and forth across the border reified by the novel’s pedagogical premise. And in ways crucial to the mythopoetic register of the memoir, both of these cultural idioms entail two different but historically intertwined folklores and senses of verbal wit, which some would argue to be deeply infused with Guaranisms. Indeed, the emphasis on yerba mate, “che,” gaucho lore, the Correntine period in Galtieri’s military career, etc., all point obliquely to the centrality of this borderland in Argentine history and culture. One place where this is made salient is a folksy scene typical of Argentine *gaucho* rural lore (codified by the national literary tradition), which the memoir playfully reimagines as a kind of multilingual slapstick. Confusingly, this scene is also an occasion for teaching the reader words not included in the glossary but readily deducible from context, which works (in a move familiar to any language teacher) exactly because of the formulaic imagery and predictable rhythms of oral folk traditions:

In those times, the Argentine Chaco was gathering up thousands of *braceros* that would then follow the harvests all around the North. According to the bolder gossip, though, in Pampa Vargas he *made an enemy playing truco* [cards] with a couple of Correntinos that had tried to *cheat him*, so he had to sink a few *jekutus* into one of them with his *poí-tongue*, after which he had to come back to the valley lickety-split. (translation and emphasis mine)

En aquellos tiempos, el Chaco argentino amontaba a miles de *braceros* que luego seguían la hoja de ruta de las cosechas del norte. Pero, según atestiguan las malas lenguas, en Pampa Vargas *se enemistó jugando truco* con una pareja de correntinos que le habían querido *trampear* y terminó hincándole varios *jekutu* con su lengua *poí* a uno, tras lo cual tuvo que volver rapidito para el valle. (40)

It is worth noting here for the non-Argentine and non-Paraguayan reader the clever effects created by this transposition, whereby the quintessential gaucho scene of a cardgame-incited knife-fight, which invariably uses a specifically Argentine archaism for “knife,” here teaches

the reader a new and Guaraní word for knife since that is the only possible thing a “lengua poi” could be. One side-effect of this maneuver is the tendentious implication of a Paraguayan origin to certain aspects of the *gaucho* mythology nationalized by the Argentine tradition, or if not an origin, at least a coextension and congruity: to wit, aspects of the economic and cultural forms of *gaucho* life predate the colony and the introduction of Spanish to the continent and arbitrary boundaries first between viceroyalties and later between nations. Similarly, the term *bracero*, which the casual North American reader might mistake for a borrowing from the US-México context, refers (as it might in a text from the US-Mexican border) to a history of transnational labor flows, in which seasonal labor was recruited internationally, establishing a precedent for a porous political and cultural border in the region (on this local history, see Chapter 2 of Abramovsky 2012 and Solberg 1987). In a curious sleight of hand, Castells is using Argentina’s ubiquitous national myths to elucidate what is analogous in Paraguay’s ostensibly distinct culture, a maneuver to which I’ll return below.

One last example of linguistic hybridity played as both comic relief and as allegory of national subjecthood might help to enrich the discussion of Castells’ manipulation of the formulae of the memoir of migration beyond the terms we’ve seen thus far. In the manipulative hands of an expert politician and demagogue like Stroessner, the mother tongue of essentially every Paraguayan was conscripted to the task of consolidating the fatherland *at the expense of its [largely indigenous] dissidents*:

...and then came the ubiquitous [song] “General Stroessner,” which we never failed to appreciate, especially the part that says, “ha ñamuñamba umi- ava tie’me umi ndohaihuíva ku ñãne retã” *which means much more than* “we’ll chase off those impertinent *Indians* that don’t love our fatherland”; it was a phrase clanging with virility, a magical phrase enlisting us for a unique display of force and patriotism. Every time I sang it, I wanted to be part of that historical skirmish. What did those *Indians* think, that we’d let them bring down our beloved Paraguay without defending it like brave countrymen? (42)

...y la tan repetida [canción] “General Stroessner” que no parábamos de apreciar, especialmente esa parte que dice: “ha ñamuñamba umi ava tie’me umi ndohaihuíva ku ñãne retã” *que significa mucho más que* “corremos a todos esos *indios* impertinentes que no quieren a nuestro país”; era una frase de gran contundencia viril, una frase mágica que no encomendaba un despliegue de fuerza y patriotismo únicos. Cada vez que la cantaba quería ser parte de ese histórico escarmiento. ¿O qué se creían esos *indios*, que dejaríamos que fundieran nuestro amado Paraguay sin que los defendiéramos como bravos paraguayos? (42)

This moment is rich in narrative and political tension, suspended comically between youthful naïveté and complicity in the past and retrospective embarrassment at this internalized racism in the present. I won't dwell too much here on the political significance of this historical retrospect in the 2010s, but it does bear mentioning that this is the kind of linguistic and cultural dirty laundry that few Argentine readers would have heard anything about, in that it scandalously problematizes the schema of / Spanish : modernity :: Guaraní : indigenous tradition / that so many Argentines might be inclined to take for granted by their education and upbringing. As Castells waxed in the context of an eight-week course on the role of Guaraní in Paraguayan literature he taught after the success of the memoir, “literature plays the role of mediator between modernity and tradition” (Vignoli 2013)—Castells’ perverse wrinkle on the aphorism here being that “modernity” can include violence and dictatorship, not just progress and experimentation. The emotional dissonance of this scene, in which the narrator remembers dissociating himself from “those impertinent Indians” to be part of a national project quick to racialize dissent even as it consolidated a mestizo officialist national identity, is exactly the kind of psychological complexity and ideological contradiction that the memoir’s intimacy sets us up to navigate, as if within a family. What’s more, the unpacking of this historiographical knot is troped, like the cross-cultural learning narrated and re-enacted in the readerly experience, as a difficulty of *translation*: the social context is explained as “what *else* the phrase means, i.e., what is left out of a translation into Spanish of this song that was “everywhere,” diffuse and without source.

What, then, does all of this *South American* analysis show about the *international* genre of the migration memoir, and the status of multilingualism in Latin American literature? I wouldn't pretend to spin out from this one example any general theory of South America's appropriation of the Anglo-American immigration memoir tradition, nor could I in the space left even get through the usual geopolitical and epistemological preludes necessary to contextualize such a theory (although the interested reader could do worse than to start from Torres 2004, Sommer 1999, or Sommer 2004 for such context). Much of what has been written about Díaz' radical hybridity (Casielles-Suárez) and about the “weird English” that comes to inhabit the literary canon in the wake of such influential literary successes (Ch'ien 2005) might well apply to a whole wave of writers in the coming years looking to make Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Swahili weirder, as the *lingua francas* of various transnational empires become the soil from which springs new linguistic and cultural richnesses. I do consider it worthwhile to speculate whether Castells' book, as I mentioned before, might not have been conceived and constructed after having read Junot Díaz' seminal work, the

translation of which was a bestseller in Argentina two years before Castells published his memoir; it strikes me as improbable that he wouldn't be at least familiar with Díaz' work, given its critical and academic reception in Latin America, even though he makes no explicit allusions to Díaz' work in the memoir. Indeed, if Castells was inspired by the reconfiguration of the terms of the immigration memoir post-*Oscar Wao*, there is no reason why he should feel compelled to namecheck Díaz or any other intertexts in the North American tradition, since such an allusion would threaten to reduce immigration to Argentina to a mere analogue or echo of immigration to the US, which would be both culturally reductive and politically reckless. It seems Castells chooses not to overplay the sense in which Argentina is a promised land for Paraguayans fleeing a stagnant economy or a repressive regime, or to otherwise give primacy and centrality to the Argentine culture from which and for which he writes, keeping his focus entirely on the stated goal of "understanding" his childhood, his language, and the origins of that distinctly Paraguayan form of emigrant nostalgia. The particularity of his subject leads him to downplay, perhaps, the subtle and structural ways in which the genre in which he chooses to study that subject are international and comparative *a priori*—a familiar contradiction between authorial intention and genre theory.

While the degree to which Castells consciously or unconsciously cribs maneuvers and tropes from the hemispheric genre of the immigration memoir is up for debate, the particularity of his vision and the linguistic opacity he uses to communicate it to his Argentine readership are indisputably novel and significant contributors to that genre. Castells' memoir is a narrative miniature of that fissure in the psyche of every migrant that "undermines" his or her assimilation (no matter how effective and convincing)—at the same time as it "oozes" a certain nostalgic emotional and ideological remainder irreducible to unitary racial or national identities. Inheriting as he does a whole tradition of multilingual explorations of migration's inner psychic workings in a charged political atmosphere, Castells does a lot to figure this remainder linguistically, as the friction and excess overlooked by conceiving of languages or cultural as distinct and monolithic. Perhaps the genre of the immigration novel always testifies to that messy remainder by definition, but perhaps in the coming years, as writers try to find narrative forms to explore and analyze their respective contexts of migration, cultural capital, and transculturation, they will come to detach further from the political and cultural stakes normalized in the genre's infancy in the Global North, and take the genre in new directions farther South.

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¹ Since the 1970s, Paraguay, Perú, and Bolivia have taken turns being the biggest sending nation of immigrants to Argentina; in the wide majority of cases, these immigrants are ethnically indigenous or mestizo and often speak Spanish as a second language. Given Argentina’s history of massive European immigrant and assimilation since the mid-nineteenth century, this has changed substantially the terms of immigration debates, leading to anti-indigenous and anti-immigrant racism openly expressed by politicians and social leaders, particularly during times of economic hardship when the public perceives there to be less surplus and growth to share with the “recently-arrived.” For some English-language perspectives from various social scientists on anti-Paraguayan, anti-Peruvian, and anti-Bolivian racism in contemporary debates around immigration, see Ceriani Cernadas, Astiz, Richards, and Albarracín.

² For a recent, critical revision of early-twentieth century indigenismo building on the late work of Cornejo Polar and incorporating non-literary discursive formations, see Coronado: “in relation to indigenous subjects and cultures, lettered indigenismo operates as a mechanism that constantly evokes an indigenous object. As it does so, indigenismo may create novel cultural forms, but it does so always at a distance that reflects the gap between Hispanic society and indigenous cultures. Indigenismo’s many cultural products do not close this distance; on the contrary, they mark it.” (*The Andes Imagined* 17)

³ SLATE: What about the fact that in certain stretches of Oscar Wao, readers who don't speak Spanish won't be able to understand? Do you expect them to pick up a dictionary? Or is the specific sense less important than the sensation of the language?

DÍAZ: I've almost never read an adult book where I didn't have to pick up a dictionary. I guess I participate more in my readings and expect the same out of my readership. I want people to research, to ask each other, to question. But also I want there to be an element of incomprehension. What's language without incomprehension? What's art? And at a keeping-it-real level: Isn't it about time that folks started getting used to the fact that the United States comprises large Spanish-speaking segments? (O'Rourke 2008)

⁴ For a Freudian take on the immigration novel’s endemic nostalgia, see Sommer 2004.