

Book Review: “The More and Less than Literary”

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Adam Joseph Shellhorse. 2017. *Anti-Literature: The Politics and Limits of Representation in Modern Brazil and Argentina*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

This book inherits an old question for Latin American studies: “What is literature?” Yet, the places from which Adam Shellhorse seeks an answer leads him to open a new field or, at least, to add an important folio in the developing field of works that have taken on the task of rectifying “the Boom’s well-documented exclusions—concerning women’s writings, Brazil, and minoritarian works” (11). *Anti-Literature* manifests a certain urgency for finding a way to speak about these gaps without reproducing the hegemonic logic of representation that has dominated canonical readings of the subaltern in Latin American literature and ignored issues of social justice with respect to the subaltern, the minoritarian, and the feminine.

Anti-literature is founded in opposition to literature, but an answer to the question of “What is literature?” is never offered here for several reasons that do not constitute a failure in Shellhorse’s project. Configured by a corpus of works (or literary moments) that interrupt the literary norm without constituting a new norm, the concept of the anti-literary is nontotalizing. Anti-literature is found, in Shellhorse’s interpretation, in all the places where “literature” resists “literature,” in the postliterary, where the prefix *post-*, Shellhorse says, “designates not so much a chronological dimension (‘after’ hegemony), but rather a critical and differential signifier” (7).

Critical in what sense? To understand Shellhorse’s project fully, we must consider his book’s inherent criticism of the academy’s canonical reading of Latin American literature. *Anti-Literature* is partly in dialogue with this tradition, which Shellhorse knows very well, as demonstrated in his scholarship, although the terms of the dialogue and the interpretation “of literature” are not those of the canon. Shellhorse’s readings of Lispector in chapter one, “Figurations of Immanence: Writing the Subaltern and the Feminine in Clarice Lispector,” should be understood as one exchange in this conversation.

Following Lispector's own "anti-literary" statements that seem to reject all political interpretations of her work, Shellhorse proposes reading *A hora da estrela* (1977) through a more profound and radically political lens that demonstrates the extent to which traditional notions of political engagement—the very notions rejected by Lispector—tend to rely on predetermined ideas of literature and women's writing. Shellhorse reads her syntax, in particular, as a means for interrogating our political relation to language: "In Lispector, the question of politics did not concern representing the marginal, the subaltern, or even women through literature. [...] For Lispector the question of *vanguardia* concerned the creation of a new relation to syntax and the being of language" (30).

Shellhorse adopts a similar interpretative approach in chapter two, "The Letter's Limit: Anti-Literature and Politics in David Viñas." He attempts to do justice to the full spectrum of Viñas's literary commitment and, specifically, to the particular and diverse ways in which his work addresses and intervenes in the political. According to Shellhorse, at stake in the Argentinean's work "is a necessary regeneration of language that purges it of the abrasions and ideological clichés of bourgeois calculative logic. Literature must turn against itself, in opposition to its historically sedimented image" (47). In this interpretation, Viñas's work would challenge the traditional concept of literature, along with the perceptions and notions that have historically organized the logic of its institution, with the effect of operating a redistribution and resignification of writing.

Shellhorse sees a similar effect modeled by the work of the Brazilian poets discussed in chapter three, "Subversions of the Sensible: The Poetics of Antropofagia in Brazilian Concrete Poetry." For Oswald de Andrade and the Brazilian concrete poets, true revolution in literature consists of changing the very concept of the literary. In this sense, Shellhorse reads Andrade's cannibalism of the nonpoetic (popular speech and media) as a strategy to renew poetry. This operation also has the effect of making "poetry" and daily life converge in ways that inspire a more complex understanding of language as a field; no longer simply a given, language is now open to transformative interventions. Shellhorse also underscores the continuity between Andrade's project and the ideas of modernists and late modernists like Pound, Mallarmé, Cummings, and Joyce, which has the advantage of providing a new context (continental modernist ideas) for reading Brazilian concrete poetry heavily influenced by Andrade's work. In so doing, Shellhorse reconstructs the nonidentitary logic at stake in the aesthetic operations of both Andrade and the Brazilian concrete poets. To the same end, Shellhorse mobilizes the concept of intertextuality in chapter four, "The Untimely Matter of Anti-Literature: The Politics of Representation in Haroldo de Campos's *Galáxias*." In particular, his insistence on intertextuality challenges the longstanding but problematic dichotomy between a text's "autonomy" and its concrete historical intervention.

Finally, chapter five, "The Antinomies of Anti-Literature: The Politics of the Baroque in Haroldo de Campos and Osman Lins," bears the double function of analyzing the baroque poetic of sensation at play in Osman Lins's work as a case study of subaltern writing and, at the same time, sampling the rich possibilities for rediscovering Latin American literature by moving beyond the perspective of the Boom.

Anti-Literature is committed to rescuing the most minoritarian legacies of the avant-garde, to sensitizing us to the value and merit of works that became “literature” precisely by resisting it, and to recuperating the feminine and other overlooked literary expressions and demographics. In this sense, the book establishes important milestones in the constitution of “another” understanding of literature from the perspective of what literature in the traditional sense resists, rejects, omits, or overlooks. Shellhorse also denounces the ideas behind the canon’s discrimination against and overall uneasiness with texts that deny belonging to only one genre or even to literature as a whole, for example, texts that resist univocal readings. Shellhorse is also careful to point out that anti-literature is not a quality that belongs to a corpus of texts as a property; the anti-literary is not a tradition or a “new” canon, but rather a force that emerges from literature’s encounter with and investment in all that is left out (which, moreover, is always changing). In Shellhorse’s words: “To speak of writing’s powers of resistance is to consider language as a generative semiotic assemblage. Yet it is also to rethink the matter of writing not as an organized system or fountainhead of the ‘real,’ to be sure, but as a sensory aggregate that affirms chance, play, and the untimely opening of the event of the text” (167).

Theory provides Shellhorse with the concepts needed to engage the complex literary and multimedial aesthetic operations at stake in the works of Clarice Lispector, Oswald de Andrade, the Brazilian concrete poets, Osman Lins, and David Viñas. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, Shellhorse mobilizes the concept of affect in particular to replace that of representation in *Anti-Literature* and thereby to free literature from essentialist framings (23, 168): “No doubt our concern with affect over representation entails a paradigm shift” (167). Yet, despite quoting Deleuze and Guattari on multiple occasions, Shellhorse never explains what affect is, how it works, or how exactly and to what extent it might replace the regime of representation. In this sense, *Anti-Literature* seems to address only readers with a preunderstanding of the philosophical notions and concepts he puts to work in literature and other media.

The conclusion, “The Untimely Secret of Anti-Literature,” invites reflection on the role of anti-literature in addressing the present and the challenges set by the present for literature when literature is faced with the duty of having to speak for what is silenced (violence, abuse, trauma): “Is anti-literature capable of creating a common language to come” and still be anti-literature? The question is an invitation to continue reading minorities and writing about what is always and has always been left out.