


Barthelme's "Paraguay," the Postmodern, and Neocolonialism

Daniel Chaskes  
*University of British Columbia*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

---

## Recommended Citation

Chaskes, Daniel. "Barthelme's "Paraguay," the Postmodern, and Neocolonialism." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.4 (2012): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1822>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1822)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 578 times as of 11/07/14.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 14 Issue 4 (December 2012) Article 9**

**Daniel Chaskes,**

**"Barthelme's 'Paraguay,' the Postmodern, and Neocolonialism"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/9>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 14.4 (2012)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss4/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Barthelme's 'Paraguay,' the Postmodern, and Neocolonialism," Daniel Chaskes explores the analytic opportunities afforded by conjoining globalizing critical approaches with a story by an author who has often been circumscribed by the postmodern rubric. Donald Barthelme's "Paraguay," written the summer after Nelson Rockefeller's fact-finding mission to South America in 1969, provides a chance to consider modes of anti-colonial critique in Barthelme's work. It also offers examples of a more self-reflective criticism aimed at the U.S. counterculture and, less consciously, the indeterminacies of postmodernism. Chaskes reads "Paraguay" with the aim of understanding Barthelme's hemispheric interest and he investigates the multiple cultural touchstones Barthelme draws on in a text that suggests troubling parallels between the New Left, the avant-garde, and the neocolonial political project. "Paraguay" offers a uniquely postmodern take on social commentary in which the text's form enacts the very tendencies being scrutinized: habits of seeing non-U.S. peoples as subjectless and placeless.

**Daniel CHASKES**

### **Barthelme's "Paraguay," the Postmodern, and Neocolonialism**

Global contact has been established as a major topical and formal component of modernist literature, but scholars have not yet, I submit, considered those same transnational vectors of influence in the study of U.S. postmodernism. For a body of literature that engages the transatlantic slave trade explicitly (e.g., Toni Morrison), the war in Vietnam (e.g., Donald Barthelme, Norman Mailer), World War II (e.g., Thomas Pynchon), the intersections between art and global terror (e.g., Don DeLillo), and immigrant lives in New York City (e.g., Grace Paley), global elements remain surprisingly under-investigated by scholars, particularly those texts, such as the one discussed in the present article, concerned with locations outside established (Euro-U.S.) transatlantic stomping grounds.

A good deal of this oversight has to do with the politics of canon construction. Postmodernism as a label is most often applied to white males and an allegedly narrow set of preoccupations. Rone Shavers sums up the problem in a recent reevaluation of William Gaddis's perceived elitism, writing, "the genre of literary postmodern fiction is now considered to be exclusively white and male, mainly because of its most visible and/or popular members," adding, "literary postmodernism is now perceived in popular culture to be solely one among various 'multicultural' identities present in the world" (162). Casual lists attempting to identify preeminent postmodern texts usually include work by DeLillo, Pynchon, Paul Auster, Barthelme, John Barth, Robert Coover, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Lethem, etc.: the outcome is inevitably a homogenous group of U.S. authors depicted as either lamenting lost masculinities (see Craig Medvecky on Barthelme), metafictionally navel-gazing in the fashion of pampered academics (see Gore Vidal on Barth, Barthelme, and William Gass), or protesting the unjust and silent power structures of the West, not necessarily for their propensity toward exploitation, but for their surreptitious functioning. It is as if, according to this particular interpretational bias, what has most crucially been perpetrated against these disgruntled authors is the withholding of earned patriarchal privilege and a reconstruction of traditional social process.

Contemporary analytic methodologies built upon globalist perspectives do promise to pull the postmodern into their sweeping transhistorical and transnational visions. The field of global U.S. studies, for example, has questioned exceptionalist ideologies as well as credulity towards narratives of Adamic heroism and uniquely moral struggle. Wai Chee Dimock argues national politics of protectionism and sovereignty compromise the politics of the discipline, insisting "the field can legitimize itself as a field only because the nation does the legitimizing" (2). For these critics, localized experiences in the U.S. are, as is the local for all peoples, in contact with places outside increasingly indistinct territorial markers. In *Apostles of Modernity*, for example, Guy Reynolds investigates the relations between twentieth-century authors and ideologies of global development. He considers DeLillo and Richard Powers and examines how these postmodern authors responded to "a fresh internationalist paradigm" (201) at the end of the twentieth century. Reynolds finds both authors imagine the U.S. citizen abroad during this period as consistently confronted with rebukes to exceptionalist ideology, while being helpless to shed a national identity.

Still, this fledgling project remains incomplete. Postcolonialism, perhaps the most visible transnational critical practice, maintains microcanons of national and regional interest which have exacerbated the perceived male whiteness of the postmodern. Whereas scholars studied geomodernism with regard to the role of non-Western authors in high modernist literary production and considered the ways in which modernity was experienced outside metropolitan capitals, authors who might otherwise be considered part of a contiguous global postmodern phenomenon have instead been siphoned away, placed under the aegis of the postcolonial in Africa and Asia, or in the case of Latin America, a subject of this essay, the neobaroque and transmodern. In Latin America this partitioning follows a scholarly tradition, established by autonomy-minded intellectuals like José Martí and Octavio Paz, of protecting non-Anglo writers from the neutering effects of an assimilationist cultural globalism. Postmodernism is for these authors more than a cultural form; rather, it is representative of a cultural politics. The result of these divisions has been the codification of postmodernism as a category restricted to North America (U.S./Canada) and characterized by a distinctly North American anxiety over postmodernity. The postmodern in such a conceptualization

excludes interest in Latin American subjects and is closed to the allegedly parochial, anti-dictatorial politics of boom-generation authors such as Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes. While the postmodern has occasionally been found to document a transracial language and history in the U.S., as in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (see Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure), extranational exclusions have tended to reinforce the postmodern's reputation as a swan song for a white boho middle class mourning a loss of power, authenticity, and leisure. The placement of authors into more nationalized and regionalized categories has perhaps preserved certain subaltern identities, but it has also essentialized those same authors at the expense of a comprehensive theory of late-century avant-garde literary production that acknowledges a universal exchange of method. So too have these critical habits precluded an understanding of the transnationalist ethics often exhibited by the avant-garde.

My concern in the present study is not primarily with disciplinary politics, however. Nor is it with defending a universal postmodernism of the sort that intends to be inclusive but reinforces suspicions of exclusionary Anglo-centrism. I am instead concerned with establishing the particulars of Barthelme's vision of hemispheric connectivity by way of the short story "Paraguay." I hope doing so might diffuse a number of the suspicions which underly critical treatment of Barthelme's work by showing a radical (if imperfect) planetary consciousness at work in one of Barthelme's most intriguing texts. Johnny Payne has written a previous essay dedicated (in part) to the politics of "Paraguay" in which he yokes "Paraguay" to Uruguayan protest writer Nelson Marra's "El Guardaespaldas." Payne finds that "Barthelme, in a manner analogous to Marra, reconstitutes the detritus of language and narrative conventions into a parodic commentary on the stale rhetoric of official culture" (53). Payne attends to how these works parody right-wing methods of control, with particular concern for the Uruguayan military dictatorship, but does not wade into colonial dynamics, as I do here.

Barthelme has often been cast as the lead mascot of high postmodernism, a nod, it seems, to his conceptualist prowess. The treatment of postmodernism as a phenomenon belonging largely to the U.S., in terms of both literary production and cultural subject, has therefore limited comprehensive understandings of Barthelme's writings on the Vietnam war, European communism, Latin America, and even domestic ennui, which is best understood in his work as part of a global state of autocratic bureaucracy and homogeneity. A close reading of "Paraguay" makes it clear that far from belonging to a movement closed to an awareness of the Other, Barthelme remained sensitive to various forms of U.S. foreign intervention even as he seemed unable to keep his own fiction from reproducing certain imperial politics (in more detail on the work of Barthelme, see Chaskes). Here, I argue that the indeterminacies produced by Barthelme's aesthetic mimic a blindness toward the Other found in the political and countercultural classes. Jonathan Arac has described the literature of the U.S. in the age of its neocolonial power as characterized by an irreducible cultural, political and historical complexity — what Arac terms "imperial eclecticism." Such a conceptualization is useful for an analysis of Barthelme's "Paraguay," for while Barthelme was a vocal opponent of the nation's interventionism, the story eludes simple political categorization. It is at once skeptical of a privileged, imperial gaze toward Latin America and at the same time open to the possibility of a constitutive rendering of Latin America through form. Further, it mocks the exploitation of Latin America occurring in the service of cold war interests, but itself uses Latin places rather indelicately as a tool to understand troubling connections between postmodern poetics and totalitarian strategies of suppression.

Barthelme's various treatments of U.S. power are often overshadowed by a set of neuroses that can prove limiting for literary critics. In *The Dead Father*, for example, anxieties over the unchecked political authority of the Nixonesque antagonist are refracted by the lens of father-hate that Barthelme spent his career disconsolately gazing through. "Cortes and Montezuma," another story on Anglo-Latin relations, depicts a homoeroticized relationship between the European and Mayan leaders with an eye toward dramatizing the fleeting loyalties of sexual companions--another frequent motif for Barthelme. And large portions of "Paraguay" appear dedicated to defending the story's own formalisms, a self-conscious lapse into the realm of postmodern poetics that enacts one of genre's most roundly vilified indulgences. What fascinates me about Barthelme's texts, however, is the way aesthetic, biographical, and social interest merge and transfigure. His texts remain politically potent while accommodating self-criticism. I suggest that in "Paraguay," which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1969 and was included in the collection *City Life* (1970), Barthelme both critiques and himself enacts the tendency by US-Americans to see non-U.S. locations as placeless, that is, to treat them as promising vessels for

the U.S. political and cultural imagination. In doing so he manages to challenge the legitimacy of various forms of U.S. neocolonial thought and activity while problematizing his own response to such activity, and the politics of postmodern form more generally.

"Paraguay" is at once a mock travel guide, an outlandish exercise in fantasy, and the record of an expedition. Although the narrator describes his journey with the detached interest of the anthropologist, by the story's end he finds himself marching at the head of a column charged with the task (familiar to readers of Barthelme) of "allowing a very wide range of tendencies to interact" (*City Life* 27). The destiny of the nation, in other words, ends up as similar to the collage-inspired aesthetic path of the author. Leading up to this moment, the story is divided into subsections, some of which are predictably named according to the travelogue genre (i.e., "Where Paraguay Is," "Temperature") while others allude to some of the region's more outlandish customs regarding art and hygiene ("Rationalization" and "Skin").

A central conceit behind the story is that it does not refer to the South American nation of Paraguay, but to its negative. Once the destination is announced, the narrator adds an addendum that it is "not the Paraguay that exists on our maps. It is not to be found on the continent South America; it is not a political subdivision of that continent, with a population of 2,161,000 and a capital city named Asunción" (*City Life* 20). A vaguely international, but ultimately indeterminate setting is not unusual for Barthelme. His stories tend to wander peripatetically through temporality and geography. In "The Abduction from the Seraglio," for example, a Texan sets out to recover a former lover from the Turkish-style harem of the title. And *The Dead Father* reads like a European fairy tale; its delusional patriarch and his forced march across a landscape populated by inns and kingdoms would not be out of place in Cervantes or an Arthurian tale, the latter a genre Barthelme pastiched more unambiguously in his novel *The King* (1990). Settings are routinely taken from experience, from reading, and from objects of childhood delight.

Barthelme's stories, in other words, exist in an unrecognizable topography: a cosmopolitan landscape of biographical and intertextual allusion, geographic play, and abstraction. Frequently, the transposition of place on place animates an ironic sense of Barthelme's own time and location. In "The Abduction from the Seraglio," from *Great Days* (1979), Eastern and Western juxtaposition mirrors the discord between the love object's former sixties radicalism and her more recent attempts to establish a liberal-bourgeois respectability. "Paraguay" also suggestively pairs the familiar with the foreign, but the central juxtaposition in "Paraguay" is between the Paraguay of common apprehension and its negation: the Not-Paraguay announced at the story's introduction. The insistence on Paraguay's status of alterity recalls Barthelme's claim in his essay "Not-Knowing" that the artist "discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet speakable, the as-yet spoken" (*Not-Knowing* 15). It is this ontological and philological horizon that Barthelme's phenomenologist mentor Maurice Natanson insisted would expand the horizons of the imagination and return it to the real with renewed vision. It is, further, a process Barthelme detected in practices of jazz variation, which he considered a template for artistic production: "There is one thing of which you may be sure: I am not going to play 'Melancholy Baby' as written. Rather I will play something that is parallel, in some sense, to 'Melancholy Baby,' *having to do with* 'Melancholy Baby' commentary, exegesis, elaboration, contradiction. The interest of my construction, if any, is to be located in the space between the new entity I have constructed and the 'real' 'Melancholy Baby,' which remains in the mind as the horizon which bounds my efforts. This is, I think, the relation of art to the world" (*Not-Knowing* 32; emphasis in original). The gap between Paraguay and Not-Paraguay is an imaginative space of opportunity fixed on a real subject. According to such a logic of alterity, the real Paraguay is the substrate awaiting discovery and reflection beneath Not-Paraguay's hallucinatory irreality. Such a premise, however, raises the ethical issues so elliptically at work everywhere in "Paraguay": is Paraguay in need of outside discovery? Should place and history be constituted within the postmodern by processes of imagination?

Of course, Paraguay had already been discovered by the political imagination in the U.S. and that is precisely what the story sets out to critique. "Paraguay" appeared in *The New Yorker* on 6 September 1969, following by a few months Nelson Rockefeller's well-publicized fact-finding tour of Latin America on behalf of the Nixon administration. The government was then providing loans and military training throughout the region in exchange for cooperation in eradicating communist factions,

and in Guatemala the Green Berets had intervened against rebels more directly. Twenty years later, in his final interview, Barthelme, having grown even more attentive to Latin America during the era of Reagan's interventionism, described ongoing efforts in Central America as "clearly wrong" (*Not-Knowing* 312). His comments suggested a dismay stemming from guilt over continuing foreign interference following the war in Vietnam. Barthelme had been an early and ardent opponent of the war, and wrote two stories, "The Indian Uprising" and "Report," which pointed to the self-aggrandizement of U.S. power.

In the run-up to Rockefeller's visit, *The New York Times* ran a story documenting efforts by Paraguayan clergy and students to petition the government for the release of political prisoners, who had in some cases been held without trial for over a decade. This was thanks to what the article described as the nation's longstanding "state of siege" (Browne, "Paraguayans"). But Rockefeller's visit only prompted further political purges. In Rio de Janeiro, prominent dissidents had been jailed in preparation for the governor's arrival. And his visit to Paraguay that same week was met by little of the anticipated mass protest, a testament to the efficacy of the Stroessner regime's apparatus of repression. The newspaper *Comunidad* did publish a piece linking Rockefeller family oil interests to the Chaco war with Bolivia, but dissent had largely vanished (Browne, "Harassment"). Rockefeller's diplomatic junket turns to fodder for satirization in the opening pastiche of "Paraguay." Barthelme lifts a full paragraph from Jane E. Duncan's *A Summer Ride through Western Tibet* (1906), which he dutifully attributes in a footnote. The passage describes Duncan's journey through the Deosai Mountains of Pakistan on her way into Tibet and appears near the beginning of her book. With Duncan are a platoon of "coolies" whom she pays before descending to the valley below (*City Life* 20). Barthelme modifies only the final line: "I paid each man his agreed-upon wage and, alone, began the descent. Ahead was Paraguay" (20). There is a banal Orientalist quality to the passage that immediately and unmistakably introduces a theme of global conquest. As political satire, the pastiche is rather forthright; Rockefeller, like Duncan before him, had exercised the soft-power of information-gathering on behalf of an empire whose power in a given region was then ascendant. The fantasy of a stoic U.S. isolationism that characterizes narratives of reluctant military and diplomatic activity unravels against comparisons to traditional imperial enterprise.

After the opening pastiche, however, the story largely forgoes invoking contemporary hemispheric politics, and instead imagines U.S. neocolonial hegemonies in the guise of more surreptitious cultural forms. Nameless artist-missionaries have aggressively reformed the local art industry in "Paraguay" and have taken the participation-based empowerment politics of the U.S. conceptual arts movement to its extreme finality. Here, "Each citizen is given as much art as his system can tolerate" (*City Life* 23). Further, the artists have replaced pre-modern production methodologies with pop-art's technological efficiencies: "Production is up. Quality-control devices have been installed at those points where the interests of artists and audience intersect. Shipping and distribution have been improved out of all recognition. (It is in this area, they say in Paraguay, that traditional practices were most blameworthy.) ... Foamed by a number of techniques, the art is then run through heavy steel rollers. Flip-flop switches control its further development. Sheet art is generally dried in smoke and is dark brown in color. Bulk art is air dried, and changes color in particular historical epochs (23). The artists, in autocratic spirit, have also reified meaning generation in the arts by implementing a process of "rationalization" in which art is "translated into a statement of symbolic logic" prior to its enforced distribution (23). And so a system of art distribution that in some aspects recalls the democratizing principles behind sixties-era innovations like happenings, pop-art, and performance art is here also a system of semiotic control.

The passage is consistent with Barthelme's chronic distrust of a counterculture that condemned conformism but in which he often detected ideological enforcement. Barthelme's novel *Snow White* (1967) had just a few years earlier described a set of young activists who struggle to achieve intellectual coherence but who nonetheless exhibit a striking sense of certitude when discussing social reform. "Paraguay" extends the scope of that certainty, and gestures toward the New Left's dubious interest in Latin America following the 1959 Cuban revolution. In his landmark essay "Caliban," Roberto Fernández Retamar documents the popularity of the Caribbean in 1971 as an object of leftist affection, a popularity Retamar traces to the perpetuation in the English-speaking imagination of a certain Caribbean inhabitant Columbus describes in his letters: the Taino Indian, a peaceful and

paradisiacal figure. The lure of the Taino has, according to Retamar, long been a potent force for colonialist idealism. "The notion of an edenic creature comprehends," writes Retamar, "a working hypothesis for the bourgeois left, and, as such offers an ideal model of the perfect society free from the constrictions of the feudal world against which the bourgeoisie is in fact struggling" (7). These missionaries resemble those same "perpetuators" who, as Retamar says, "unflaggingly propose to countries emerging from colonialism magic formulas from the metropolis to solve the grave problems colonialism has left us and which, of course, they have not yet resolved in their own countries" (7). It is not difficult to see in the description of an automated production of universal art evidence of a certain overbearing utopian spirit of access and consciousness-raising.

The transformation of form into a socially-useful unit of meaning is perfectly articulated by the source of the story's second pastiche: *The Modulor* (1954), Le Corbusier's combination memoir, manifesto, and textbook. In the text, subtitled *A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics*, Le Corbusier proposes a "new visual measure" that might match the architectural demands of the "modern mechanized society" (17). According to Le Corbusier, measurement systems were hampered by regional difference and a lack of precision. The metric system, according to Le Corbusier, had led to "the dislocation and perversion of architecture" (20). He proposes standardization as a means to unlock the potential of industrial production. The source of the pastiche is a section titled "The Wall," in which Le Corbusier describes constructing an apartment building along the Boulevard Michelet in Marseilles: "Our design for the lift tower left us with a vast blind wall of in situ concrete coming down to the ground in front of the main entrance hall ... There was thus a danger of having a dreary expanse of blank wall in that immensely important part of the building. A solution had to be found. The great wall space would provide an opportunity for a gesture of thanks to the 'Modulor': the stone of which I have just spoken would be placed in front of it; and, instead of standing in the shadows, the Stele of the measures would be brought there also. The great concrete wall monument would be divided, by means of deeply incised grooves, into panels of varying sizes, representing the figurations of the 'Modulor'" (142). The stone to which Le Corbusier refers was a ceremonial first-stone, designed as "an architectural improvisation in honour of the 'Modulor'" (138). In Barthelme's rendering however, the wall area, originally conceived as a testament to the visual power of Le Corbusier's new standard, is reimagined as a site of play and chance:

Our design for the lift tower left us with a vast blind wall of *in situ* concrete. There was thus the danger of having a dreary expanse of blankness in that immensely important part of the building. A solution had to be found. The great wall space would provide an opportunity for a gesture of thanks to the people of Paraguay; a stone would be placed in front of it, and, instead of standing in the shadows, the Stele of the measures would be brought there also. The wall would be divided, by means of softly worn paths, into doors. These varying in size from the very large to the very small, would have different colors and thicknesses. Some would open, some would not, and this would change from week to week, or from hour to hour, or in accord with sounds made by people standing in front of them. Long lines or tracks would run from the doors into the roaring public spaces. (*City Life* 24)

Le Corbusier's belief in regimented, universal solutions to the experience of modernity is being scrutinized here. Whereas art in "Paraguay" seems to work in accordance with colonial aims of standardization and progress, the reworking of "The Wall" offers a momentary respite. Here the regulation of form becomes the randomization of experience. The second pastiche is therefore much like the first: neatly parodic. The juxtaposition, furthermore, in the story between pastiche, narrative, and phony anthropology offers a playful counterpoint to the standardization of the arts described above. "Paraguay" takes aim at the imposition of Western cultural solutions in foreign places by presenting its own genre-defying take on those same solutions and the text suggests a remedy to homogenizations of form.

Leading the standardizing reforms in "Paraguay," apart from Le Corbusier's intertextual presence, is the artist Herko Mueller. Herko would not have been out of place in the downtown New York milieu Barthelme found alternately exhilarating and exasperating. Herko is an emissary of left-wing cultural forms, an artist-reformer cut from the mold of happenings pioneer Allan Kaprow. Herko may also be, in a typical bit of Barthelmean layered arcana, a reference to Max Mueller, another Victorian Orientalist author. Mueller contributed translations to *Sacred Books of the East*, a series that appeared beginning in 1879 and which made Muslim, Confucian, Buddhist, and Hindu scripture available in the West for the first time). Herko describes his occupation as an "arbiter of comedy" who establishes performance

parameters to be carried out by an audience in the interest of stimulating the imagination (*City Life* 21). The performative arts in the U.S. had tacitly opposed the violent politics of U.S. expansionism by emphasizing participation, the sacred immediacy of lived experience, and the futility of rational establishment orders. As Kaprow explained in his 1961 essay "Happenings in the New York Scene," happenings are "a moral act, a human stand of great urgency, whose professional status as art is less a criterion than their certainty as an ultimate existential comment" (21). Barthelme had often combined various discursive practices in his texts with aims in many ways consistent with Kaprow's principles of chance and empowerment.

Herko, however, offers little illumination on the humanizing and destabilizing potential of chance, such as it was explored by Kaprow and described to an extent in "Paraguay's" rendition of "The Wall." His comedies appear to be little more than a set of rules for which he acts, as he describes it, as watchful "umpire" (*City Life* 22). The real opportunities for chance and expression in this scheme are minimal. His mixture of neocolonialist ambition with hackneyed practices of social reform seems instead to point toward a critique of two developments then affecting the major leftist organizations (such as the Students for a Democratic Society [SDS]) Barthelme kept a watchful eye on: an expanding anti-colonial agitation, and increasingly radical political positions. The 1969 convention of the SDS, for example, split acrimoniously over strong support among delegates for the Worker Student Alliance. Since his time in the Korean War, in which he served as a journalist and was exposed to the broadcasts of Radio Moscow, Barthelme pointedly rejected communism and Marxism more generally as an ideology of totalizing control. In fact, his fiction expresses a sensitivity to all totalizing systems, no matter the ruling political ideology. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that this combination of elements within the New Left — of support for proletarian-led reform with a sense of transnational responsibility — would have struck Barthelme as ironically similar to mainstream imperial politics. Although Herko aspires to cultural practices that emphasize human authenticity, he represents practices of ideological uniformity. Thus it is in "Paraguay" that tacitly Manichean forces (Herko and Rockefeller/narrator) work in tandem as paternal forces of conquest and control. "Paraguay" records the subjugation of local inhabitants at the hands of an inchoate and monolithic influence, one that is both right and left-leaning, establishment and radical.

Herko not only represents an allegedly progressive cultural movement, but is also at the center of the story's complex racial politics. Herko insists the Paraguayan mestizos are "the glory, pride, present and future of Paraguay" (*City Life* 22). But there is a problem among this population the narrator laconically refers to as "the problem of the shedding skin" (20); it seems the population prefers "pink, fresh, taut" replacement skin (26). Herko's wife Jean, herself a mestizo, is seen by the narrator sitting "on a rubber pad doing exercises designed to loosen the skin" (23). The discarded skins are "like disposable plastic gloves," a description that finds commonalities between the practice of flesh whitening and consumer waste (22). A desire to achieve whiteness entails mimicking U.S. culture's cycles of commodity use and disuse. There is a fundamental irony Herko seems unaware of; in introducing rationalized, commercial art objects, the artists have introduced the people of Paraguay to a process of consumerism they extend, very much like their northern neighbors, to identity politics. And while it may be too much to imply causality, the authentic multiracial Paraguayan identity Herko celebrates patronizingly is one the Paraguayans have rejected, choosing (or consuming) instead a vision of U.S. life based on its Anglo-normativity and its thrust toward identity performance. The standardizations of meaning and experience Herko and the artists bring produce the expected outcome: a (racialized) homogeneity of personhood.

Given the story's backdrop of forced modernization, the skin-whitening of the Mestizo bears similarities to historical patterns of anti-indigenous racial erasure. In an article on Indian representation and miscegenation that provides some useful context for this discussion, Debra Rosenthal reviews genres of Andean Indian portrayal used by Latin American literary scholars that she argues would advance understandings of native peoples throughout the Americas. Novels of the socialist Indigenista genre, common to the Andean region during the first half of the twentieth century, encouraged an aggressive process of racial mixture in the interest of national progress. Rosenthal describes the socialist Indigenista genre as depicting "interracial mixing with whites so that Indian race and culture loses distinct identity, on the theory that the Mestizo would inevitably adopt the dominant white culture and reject Indian identity as inferior" (126). Herko's support for the



mestizo, with consideration given to his role as ringmaster of mass production, looks suspiciously as if it belongs to a larger tradition of de-Indianization. The standardizing modernization charitably undertaken in "Paraguay" implies the Mestizo remains a single, tenuous step away from pre-modern folk practices. Caught between the modern and the primitive, the Mestizo can be forgiven for symbolically moving toward the modern by shedding darker, mature skin. Further, de-Indianization involves historically a sexual politics also reproduced in "Paraguay." The Indigenista process begins with contact between the Spanish male colonizer and an Indian woman, a moment duplicated in Barthelme's story via Herko's marriage to Jean and his sharing of Jean with the narrator — an event alluded to briefly in a passage titled "The Temple" that describes the "very free" sexual customs of Paraguay (*City Life* 26). Though in part a likely play on bohemian sexual mores, Jean's objectification continues the practice of liberalization through male sexual conquest.

One discovers a troublesome deferral of Paraguayan identity in the story, thanks to its fidelity to the principles of not-knowing. If, according to Barthelme's model of jazz variation, the space between the imagined and the real creates an opportunity for understanding on the part of the reader, it is necessarily a partial, imaginative understanding. Barthelme had previously parodied the limitations of the U.S. imagination in his preeminent anti-war story, "The Indian Uprising," published in 1965. In that text, the Vietnamese masses are conjured according to the limited means of popular culture. An insufficiently understood Other emerges constructed out of Westerns, cartoons, and historical myth. In the story's final lines, the enemy remains a shiny, costumed mystery: "I removed my belt and shoelaces and looked (rain shattering from a great height the prospects of silence and clear, neat rows of houses in the subdivisions) into their savage their black eyes, paint, feathers, beads" (*Unspeakable* 11). The story parodies the easy racisms embedded in the U.S. cultural imagination and connects those attitudes to an indifference towards military action.

In "Paraguay," expectations of the foreign are again subverted, but at the expense of a more roundly-informed mimesis. Herko's patriarchal cultural missionizing is satirized, but the Paraguayan people remain invisible. There are no descriptions of a native population, save Jean, and instead only a parodic accounting of customs. Descriptions of odd phenomena, such as the temperature at which intercourse takes place (66-69 degrees) in Paraguay's "silver cities" mock the degrading zoologist's lexicon at work in travel guides, but leave one guessing as to what authentic and humanizing material such texts have excluded (*City Life* 21). In short, a formal economy of imagination becomes too broad in "Paraguay" and the real Latin American nation often seems a randomly-chosen signifier that remains unknown. The limited knowledge of the Other that "The Indian Uprising" invokes is not meaningfully overcome here.

To its great credit, and that of Barthelme's work more generally, "Paraguay" does acknowledge the limitations of deferred meanings. Those same passages which articulate a postmodern poetics of the indeterminate simultaneously invoke the ways in which incomprehension enables autocratic methods of suppression. For Barthelme, there could be no doubting the risk of an epistemology that values mystery and obfuscation as real. In a passage ominously named "Terror," Jean tells the narrator, "we try to keep everything open, go forward avoiding the final explanation. If we inadvertently receive it, we are instructed to 1) pretend that it is just another error or 2) misunderstand it" (*City Life* 24). The error to which Jean refers was one of uniquely bureaucratic monstrosity, that of the accidental death of "a statistically insignificant portion of the population" (22). In that error the monstrous euphemistically hides, and the refusal to witness such monstrosity is no doubt coaxed by the mechanisms of total power. And in the passage "Behind the Wall" (a title which itself unmistakably points to cold war iconography, in addition to Corbusier's text) a luminous field of red snow must, at Jean's urging, be accepted simply as "an ongoing low-grade mystery" (27). The parallels between the formalisms of the story and autocratic methods of censorship, terror, and civil control expose the uneasy equivalences between the rhetorics of oppressive regimes and avant-garde formal antagonisms. Barthelme would write that not-knowing can be "meliorative" and refer specifically to the need to revive a language that supported Stalin's corrupted certainties and American aggression in Vietnam (*Not-Knowing* 16). But here not-knowing is both a radical formal quality and the achievement of repressive logics, an odd and probing combination.

But while Paraguayan people remain largely absent and silent, they are not altogether powerless over the narrator and perhaps even the reader. For in traveling to Paraguay, the narrator becomes

inextricably linked to its inhabitants. By the story's end the narrator has accepted, at Herko's bequest, a position as mace-carrying unit leader in an ill-defined military campaign. It is clear by this point in the text that the narrator has won more than a shepherding responsibility; he has gained a kind of dual citizenship. At the story's close, the narrator knows not whether he is marching away from Paraguay, or deeper into its territory: "We began the descent (into? out of?) Paraguay" (*City Life* 27). It is as if escape, once one has been implicated in the nation's destiny, is impossible. The narrator's migration has become a journey of mutual affectiveness, for he submits Paraguay to his scrutiny but gains a measure of belonging. "Paraguay" is in this regard consistent with what Mary Louis Pratt describes in her study on travel writing as the formidable powers of influence found within the "contact zone," her term for the space of exchange between colonizer and colonized. The term "invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect" (8). Although exchange takes place "within radically asymmetrical relations of power," it requires a degree of mutual dependence (8). Similarly, the narration describes a place of ultimately transformative interaction. The narrator poses as an objective visitor, yet idealized detachment is not an option. He ends up repeating patterns of sexual and political exploitation but finds himself naturalized following these experiences. We might consider the text itself such a contact zone, where the reader's opportunity to encode the Latin American comes with the cost of involvement. Although readers may construct Paraguay through postmodern acts of imagination, they are in turn constructed by the text, forced into a state of inquiry and ironic reflection that destabilizes assumptions of U.S. unassailability. The hints of geopolitics in "Paraguay," and of various forms of imperial ambition in particular, while somewhat inscrutable, were nonetheless at odds with prevailing U.S. national identities rooted in altruism and fairness.

Latin America is imagined in "Paraguay" as a place of profoundly indeterminate character, an imaginary that resists cold war diplomatic strategizing and left wing utopianisms. While this indicates a sensitivity to the limits of the rigidly-conceived ally/enemy polarities then failing spectacularly in Southeast Asia, as well as to the limitations of the resistance movement, that same indeterminacy results in a problematic invisibility of Paraguayan identity. Thus does "Paraguay" challenge orthodoxies of right and left while demonstrating that the ethnocentrism which make such manipulations possible are not easily overcome. Barthelme interrupts the emerging narrative of Latin America, but in doing so ends up putting the postmodern on trial. As the text shows, the process of formal omission bears troubling similarities to that other cold war political reality: the radical censorship carried out by autocratic power. Still, there remains in "Paraguay" a quality to Barthelme's obfuscation that plainly reverses the reasoning behind neocolonial authority. In my making this final point, it is worthwhile to briefly turn to Edward W. Said: just as Said tells us the Occidental writer approaches the East by assuming a knowledge drawn from previous Orientalist documents (including, of course, travel narratives), Barthelme's knowledge of Latin America is mostly secondhand. Barthelme had never been to Paraguay or anywhere in Latin America, save a brief sojourn to Mexico City as a teenage runaway. Barthelme mentions Borges, Márquez, and Fuentes as writers whose work he admired, but this appetite for Latin texts would not develop until later in his oeuvre.

In conclusion, Barthelme's choice of subject in "Paraguay" was likely inspired by newspaper reports and magazine articles. But whereas the Occidental writer establishes a knowledge base with a view towards explication for an interested public, Barthelme in "Paraguay" replaces the act of illumination with investigation. As Said writes, "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West" (20). But Barthelme remains suspicious of his sources and his own synthesis of them and makes Paraguay speak only by cleverly not allowing it to, a process which keeps it suspended between understanding and estrangement, voice and voicelessness. In not speaking, "Paraguay" avoids misrepresentation and encourages curiosity, even while risking its subject's invisibility. The struggle between knowing and not-knowing is a central paradox of the text: It is both a work of political advocacy and a satire of such advocacy, a postmodern work of incomplete figuration and a consideration of the dangers of any measure of ignorance.

## Works Cited

- Arac, Jonathan. "Imperial Eclecticism in *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Man*: Literature in a Postcolonial Empire." *Boundary 2* 37.3 (2010): 151-65.
- Barthelme, Donald. *City Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970.
- Barthelme, Donald. *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*. Ed. Kim Herzinger. New York: Random House, 1997.
- Barthelme, Donald. *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968.
- Birla, Ritu. "Postcolonial Studies: Now That's History." *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Ed. Rosalind C. Morris. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. 87-99.
- Browne, Malcolm W. "Paraguayans Urge Action on Political Prisoners." *New York Times* (14 May 1969): A2.
- Browne, Malcolm W. "Rockefeller Meets Little Harassment in Paraguay." *New York Times* (21 June 1969): A3.
- Chaskes, Daniel. *Beyond Fragmentation: Donald Barthelme and Writing as Political Act*. Ph.D. Diss. Vancouver: U of British Columbia, 2012.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. "Planet and America, Set and Subset." *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. 1-16.
- Kaprow. "Happenings in the New York Scene." *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Ed. Jeff Kelley. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 15-26.
- Le Corbusier. *The Modulor: A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics*. Trans. Peter De Francia and Anna Bostock. 1954. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966.
- Medvecky, Craig. "Reconstructing Masculinity: Donald Barthelme's *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*." *Contemporary Literature* 48.4 (2007): 554-79.
- Mvuyekure, Pierre-Damien. *The "Dark Heathenism" of the American Novelist Ishmael Reed: African Voodoo As American Literary Hoodoo*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P, 2007.
- Payne, Johnny. *Conquest of the New World: Experimental Fiction and Translation in the Americas*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1993.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Retamar, Roberto Fernández. "Caliban: Notes Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America." *Caliban and Other Essays*. Trans. Edward Baker. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. 3-45.
- Reynolds, Guy. *Apostles of Modernity: American Writers in the Age of Development*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008.
- Rosenthal, Debra J. "Race Mixture and the Representation of Indians: *Cumandá*, *Aves sin nido*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Ramona*." *Mixing Race, Mixing Culture: Inter-American Literary Dialogues*. Ed. Monika Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal. Austin: U of Texas P, 2002. 122-39.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- Shavers, Rone. "The End of *Agapē*: On the Debates around Gaddis." *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*. Ed. Joseph Tabbi and Shavers. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2007. 161-81.
- Vidal, Gore. "American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction." *New York Review of Books* (15 July 1976): 31-39.

Author's profile: Daniel Chaskes teaches English literature at Miami-Dade College. His interests in scholarship include transnational U.S. modernism, theories of postmodernism, and contemporary U.S. ethnic fiction. Chaskes's publications include "Shout It Out Loud: Grace Paley and the Radicalization of Maternity," *Journal of Modern Literature* (2012). Email: <[dchaskes@gmail.com](mailto:dchaskes@gmail.com)>