

The Correspondence Between City and its Margin in the Jewish Novels of Isaac Goldemberg and Mario Szichman

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Abstract: The paper sheds light on Isaac Goldemberg's *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* and Mario Szichman's *At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal* to bring in focus the Latin American marginal in spatial and ethnic terms. The spatial in the said novels is traced in the shady peripheries that have given refuge to those who have been ousted by the privileged. The ethnic is manifested by the community of migrant Jews who remain in the constant fear of a pogrom being around the corner. Lima, in Goldemberg, and Buenos Aires, in Szichman, were the two major cultural hubs of Latin America during the late 20th century. Yet there existed a deep-rooted anti-Semitic wave that often goes unvoiced in the mainstream Latin American literature. The paper attempts to underscore the importance of Goldemberg and Szichman's novels with respect to a hegemonic universality, represented by the texts, where the plural voices of the spatial and ethnic marginals coexist subverting the absolute frame of power.

Keywords: Hegemony, marginal, space, performativity, universalism, particularism

The Jews as the ethnic marginal in Latin America have evolved over time from the vulnerable status of a migrant community to the empowered position of a potential subject, influencing the urban panorama of the mid-20th century. Isaac Goldemberg's *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* and Mario Szichman's *At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal* portray the marginalized Jewish minority against the Peruvian and Argentine urban context respectively. The economic and cultural prospect of the Peruvian capital, Lima, hovers over Goldemberg's narrative that, primarily, revolves around the decisions and choices made by Don Jacobo Lerner to negotiate the present Peruvian reality with his Jewish past. Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital, acts as the primary witness to the impact of an elitist political culture on the Pechofs' crooked but innocuous aspirations in the face of an impending anti-Semitic pogrom. The city in the said novels is both the site and character where and around whom the narratives unfold. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre emphasizes the problematics of space, an idea that has developed from a mathematical denomination of structure to the Kantian embodiment of consciousness. Lefebvre traces the philosophical history of space to emphasize the conflicts between symmetry and asymmetry, the concrete and abstract, the objective and subjective, embodied by the entity of space (Lefebvre 2). In one of his interviews, Mario Szichman relates his experience of working in collaboration with television as a news editor, "this experience helped me imagine the scenes of my novels as if they decorated and put people as they lived backstage, spying on history from behind" ("esa experiencia me ayudó a imaginar las escenas de mis novelas como si fueran decorados y a mis personajes como viviendo entre bastidores, espionando la historia por su enves," Google Translate trans., quoted in Hall 56). Szichman's use of the theatrical term, "bastidores," that stands for the wings or backstage, stresses upon the marginal place, inhabited

by his characters, with the history of the privileged, unveiling at the fore. The term, “espiando,” is also pertinent in this context as it refers to the act of peeping at rather than participating in the discourse of history. In response to Szichman’s reference to the Jewish characters, spying on the play of history from the backstage, one may read Goldemberg’s idea of history as participating in mythical memories. Goldemberg alludes to his idea of the Jewish exile as a synthesis of history and myth where both the Latin American present and primal Jewish past assimilate (Goldemberg, “A Journey”). However, the paper argues that besides the Jewish characters, the city too is an entity of particularism, engaged in an exchange with its Jewish counterpart. In an alternative scenario to the centre/margin binary, the city, as an embodiment of the objective and concrete, participates with the personal myth of the Jewish consciousness while the dominant ideologies of nationalism and ethnic majoritarianism lurk behind.

Northrop Frye, while he argues the importance of Shakespeare’s plays to be founded on his characters rather than any historical relevance, writes, “[i]n drama, characterization depends on function: what a character is follows from what he has to do in the play. Dramatic function in its turn depends on the structure of the play: the character has certain things to do because the play has such and such a shape” (Frye 271). The performative aspect of the texts of Goldemberg and Szichman may be traced in their embodiment of the historical consciousness that is subject to change. Goldemberg’s novel, written in 1976 with the rise of subaltern voices in the spectrum of Latin American literature, trails back as early as 1920s when the mass exodus took place from eastern Europe and ends with reference to mid-1930s with the World War II hovering above. Although Szichman wrote *At 8:25 Evita Became Immortal* in 1981 as part of the same movement in which Goldemberg marks his emergence, the novel is based in the Argentina of 1952 when Evita Perón dies; moreover, there is intimation of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919 that the Pechofs had witnessed before they left their Russian homeland. Goldemberg and Szichman’s novels may be read across the lines of early, middle and late-20th century, not without a changing spatial paraphernalia. The element of characterological dimension of the city, in the vein of Frye’s argument, may be tracked in the “function” or role the city plays in unfolding the plots. Lima is represented as the elusive chalice in the trajectory of Don Jacobo Lerner from being a “[man] of enterprise” to a “[c]razy man” (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 45, 21). In pursuit of Lima, Lerner leaves Chepén and abandons Bertila, Efraín, the son Berila conceives of Lerner, León Mitrani, his childhood friend with whom Lerner is reunited in Chepén, and Samuel Edelman, the Jew Lerner looks up to. Lima, with its prospects as well as effects of alienation, is not only a static site of narrative development. It functions as an identity with changing contours of promises and discrimination that both attract and repel the Wanderer. Buenos Aires participates in the cynical humour of Szichman’s narrative by indulging in a wry mourning of the death of Eva Perón. The city halts to an absolute stasis with the death of the First lady which, in turn, unleashes an extravaganza of lamentation, “[a]t eight twenty-five, the time when the lady became immortal, death certificates were cancelled until further notice, the silence of uniforms fell everywhere, everywhere there were funereal whisperings, and a cold, thin rain made everything gray” (Szichman 6). “Eight twenty-five,” when the entire Argentine capital had to refrain from any form of activity as a display of condolence, bears a symbolic importance in Szichman’s narrative, besides being an allusion to the ideology of nationalism. The temporal denominator of “eight twenty-five” also acts as a spatial denominator of standstill, embodied by the city, that is as threatened as the Jewish minority by the exuberant manifestation of political cult.

Lynne Huffer, in “There is no Gomorrah”: Narrative Ethics in Feminist and Queer Theory,’ finds her notion of ethics against the discourse of sameness thrust upon the feminist and queer identities leading to the procedure of further relegating the queer. Taking the cue from the French novelist Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, Huffer stresses on the element of inaccessibility of the other as she traces the effacement of alterity through narrative repetition. While both Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God for their subversive acts of homosexuality, Gomorrah’s identity is merged

with that of Sodom, “[i]n the sedimented, centuries-old text called “Sodom,” how do we hear Gomorrah? (Huffer 3). Brandy Daniels, while attempting a reading of Lynne with relation to Christian ethics, writes, “[n]ot only is Gomorrah actually destroyed along with Sodom, but the particularity of its difference is discursively destroyed, collapsed into Sodom . . .” (Daniel 298). Colette’s reading of the Biblical allusion renders the spatial element of Gomorrah an alterity that is performative in nature. Gomorrah is not only the other to the Lord’s sense of righteousness, but also to Sodom; this repetitive manner of othering renders Gomorrah an effacement (Huffer 2-3). Huffer’s intervention in Colette’s discourse lies in her act of tracing a narrative ethics that is manifested by repetition, difference, effacement and a spectral presence of the effaced other. Lima is manifested in Goldemebg’s novel as an entity that bears the inscription of effacement of Lerner’s past. As soon as Jacobo Lerner arrives at the capital, the city ceases to be an embodiment of fulfilled promises and dreams. The first place Lerner visits after he alights from the bus, that has transported him from Chepén to Lima, is his brother, Moisés’s store. It is Moisés’s exponentially growing business in Lima drives Jacobo to leave Chepén while he was assured by his brother of a partnership in the latter’s commercial firm:

He walks toward the Central Market where his brother Moisés has his store. When he reaches the corner of Abancay and Moquegua, he asks a passerby to show him the way. He goes around the block and stops at Jirón Huanuco. He walks a block more and arrives at his brother’s store. The metal gate is down and secured by two enormous padlocks. Jacobo goes into the shop next door to ask about his brother’s address. The owner of the shop, a fat man with oily eyes, tells him that he has made no mistake, that indeed Moisés Lerner’s place of business is the neighbouring one, but it has not been open for more than a week. He does not know what might have happened. (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 76-77).

Huffer argues that the other is marked by its repetitive absence that eventually asserts the essence of the other’s inaccessibility. The epistemology of knowing the other is guided by a narrative ethics of repetitive absence (Huffer 2). The winding path of Lima to Moisés’s store, of which Lerner’s self is unfamiliar, is marked by a differentiability of delay and absence with respect to Chepén’s parochial approachability, that Lerner had once availed and then abandoned. By the time Lerner arrives at the closed store of Moisés, he must have realized that he has confronted the Gomorrah of Lima.

Rupayan Mukherjee’s “In the Aura of Objects: Flanerie, Remembrance and De-subjectification in *The Museum of Innocence*” traces the journey of a flaneur who strolls around the city of Istanbul collecting objects that do not correspond to the urban bourgeoisie consciousness. Mukherjee reads the lovelorn protagonist, Kemal, in Orhan Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence*, as the alternative historiographer who dwells on the fringes of the urban milieu:

Fusun is the embodiment of the ecstasy which Kemal the flaneur seeks in his relentless quest of the cityscape. This journey is not limited to a topological confinement where the city is validated as a mere locational paradigm. Instead, Kemal’s exploration of the urban heteropolis constitutes a consciousness of the other temporalities . . .” (Mukherjee 48)

Jacobo Lerner’s interaction with Lima is no less a flanerie that Mukherjee describes, in the context of Kemal, as “an urge to hunt and in turn be haunted” (48). Lima comes to manifest the spectral form of Lerner’s past that he desperately and vainly tries to locate in the material. The past pertaining to a Jewish legacy is de-subjectified as Lerner confronts the element of duality in the city-space of Lima; gradually, Lerner, the Wanderer, turns into Lerner, the flaneur. The process of Lerner’s de-subjectification oscillates between the material and abstract. The more Lerner tries to manifest his identity through objects, the more dissipated his memories become leading to an evanescent sense of self. In contrary to his aspirations of entering into a partnership in his brother’s business and starting a devout life by marrying a Jewish woman, Lerner establishes himself as a brothel-owner in Lima. Mir Yarfitz’s “Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina” discusses the rise of Varsovia Israelite Mutual Aid and Burial Society, a welfare organization, that was run by the Jewish

brothel owners, pimps, Madams and traffickers in women during the early 20th century. Although Yarfitz traces the Argentine scenario particularly, the circumstances were not very dissimilar in Peru either. Emphatically pertinent, especially, is Yarfitz's reading of the conflict within the Jewish community between the brothel-owners and those who led the mainstream living that consisted of an important aspect of the contemporary urban formation (Yarfitz 3). Yarfitz also writes that, in variance with popular anti-Semitic representation of Jewish traffickers that was partly racist, many Jewish prostitutes were reported to claim of their consensual participation in the sex-trade (16). The self, that Lerner's Gomorrah-Lima contradicts, addresses the Jews as a "restless race" to be "mixed with our own Indian one, the issue of which would certainly be the ideal type of Andean man," as documented in the "Chronicles:1923" (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 7).

The Lima Jacobo Lerner interacts with, not without anxiety, does not necessarily cater to the Peruvian nationalist ideology of procreation:

. . . Jacobo cultivated the friendship of other Jews who, like him, had no family. Men deformed by solitude, whose dreams were shaped by illusions. They met, usually, at Jacobo's whorehouse, where they would give themselves heart and soul to the dissonant atmosphere. On these nights their lust went unbounded, and they left the marks of their emptiness on the bodies of the courtesans. (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 150)

The material prosperity, earned by Lerner, ironically enhances his alienation from his own community that, in turn, contributes to the Peruvian nationalist ideology of assimilation. Not unlike Kemal who oscillates between the liminal, represented by Fusun's memories, and the dominant force of his bourgeoisie reality, the line demarcating an object-obsessed consumerist urban self from the other that lurks around the insignificant is blurred in Jacobo Lerner as well. The countless wanderings, undergone by Lerner that begins from his village, Staraya Ushitza, via the Dneiper River, Kiev and Koresten in the Soviet Union, Krakow and Warsaw in Poland, Hamburg in Germany, Port of Callao, Chepén and ends with Lima in Peru, could be tracked as the graph that leads to his eventual material prosperity; for instance, Lerner's possession of a living room with "armchairs covered in a flowered material . . . with their plump and dusty cushions," a dining room with "eight chairs upholstered in red velvet around the heavy, dark table," a study with an "old walnut desk," a bedroom with "the Louis XVI bed" and other valuables (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 30). As the solitary ailing Jacobo Lerner, confined to his sickbed, ponders over his possessions, asymmetrical lines of memories interrupt the inventory of objects owned by him. Mukherjee signifies *flânerie* as an act that unsettles the "ontological singularity of the self" making way for a "suggestive, speculative and . . . non-empirical reality" (Mukherjee 49). Memories in Lerner is not only a medium of performing the de-subjectification; the mnemonic itself embodies the *flânerie*, chugging across the winding terrain of the past only to end in the entangled paraphernalia of the urban, "[h]is life seemed like a trip that began in Chepén and ended in Staraya Ushitza, in front of the abandoned body of his father, and as if Lima were a weightless region somewhere between these two spaces" (Goldemberg, *The Fragmented* 31).

The relation between city and the marginal is being traced in the present discussion in a two-fold manner: the Jewish characters comprise an element of alterity like the othered half of the city, manifesting poverty, prostitution, theft and acts that exceed morality in the normative sense; besides being in correspondence with the city as its counterpart, the Jewish characters are also based upon the plane of the city. In the context of the second scenario, the Jewish presence marks a periphery on the urban plane with the elite occupying the centre while in the first, the Jews embody a peripherality along with the alternative form of the urban. The affliction caused by the extravagant mourning following the death of Evita Perón, the First Lady, is shared by the Jewish family of the Pechofs and the city of Buenos Aires alike:

The funeral of the lady put Buenos Aires into suspended animation. Past and future were linked by the deterioration of some buildings and the addition of a few new ones that never went beyond the stage

of frames and scaffolds . . . Daily life ceased on the first day of the funeral. The Pechof family, who had not yet buried Rifque, found to their dismay that the signing of death certificates had been forbidden. (Szichman 5–6)

The death certificate of Rifque, signed by a government official, where the Pechofs have forged their identity as some Gutiérrez Anselmi, would transform their identity from being migrant Jews to aristocratic Christians. A wreck of their aspirations brings about a series of performative acts on the part of the Pechofs as they learn new mannerisms and alters their furnishings to fit into an Argentine Christian surrounding. The city of Buenos Aires too undergoes a change of belongings as public transport vehicles go out of circulation, street-lights are replaced with vapor lamps, roads are covered with cobbled stones instead of asphalt due to the declining economy of the state (Szichman 5). The resources of the city that are perturbed by the event of Evita Perón's death has also made the lives of the Pechofs more difficult with respect to the mundane, "[f]orced by the rising price of cement, he got himself a good-looking son called Roni, and offered him as *chazin* to millionaires interested in marrying off their big-nosed daughters" (7).

The city, in a way, contributes to the performativity of duplicity carried on by the marginal in order to oppose the monopoly of the political elite; the contribution is, however, mutual. In response to Salmen's protests against assimilation of the Jewish identity with the Peruvian Christians, Jaime, the protagonist and one of the Pechof siblings, says to his brother, "[y]ou live in Argentina. Here there are tangos and good looking women in the outskirts of the city . . . there are creeks and valleys, Muñoz the Badman, students who seduce beautiful girls, and musicians who made the tango triumph in Paris" (32). Contradicting the precept of classical Marxism of absolute universality, Ernesto Laclau suggests a universal existence where particularities exist in a paradoxical relation of conflicts. As a result, the conflict-ridden structure renders the position of power unstable and contestable. Laclau terms such a relation as the hegemonic turn in the discourse of politics (Laclau 47). The city and the Jewish characters in Szichman complement as well as contradict each other. While the Pechofs laboriously look for means to disguise their past, Buenos Aires with its aristocratic lineage hinders the materialization of those plans. The Pechofs, in this context, is the marginal in the spatial sense as they are relegated to the corners. Towards the fag end of the novel, the Pechofs are shown fleeing Buenos Aires lest they face an enquiry, "[u]p front, in the cab, Jaime watched the blunt snout of the panel truck relentlessly charging on like a bull against his years of training, his posturing, his fine phrases, abolishing illustrious memories while the city sank into the pampas like a block of ice in water" (Szichman 287). The hegemonic relation between the city and Pechofs leads to a constant play of domination swinging from one side to another. The anti-Semitic doctor, whom Jaime invites to his place to convince him of their Christian lineage so that he signs Rifque's death certificate, dies in a brawl at the Pechofs' house. The Pechofs, defeated, leave Buenos Aires in a panel truck with a war trophy, nevertheless, ". . . and in the panel truck was the trunk. The doctor within it served to confirm that [Jaime's] fight to liberate himself from a history without a future had to start at ground zero once again" (288).

In response to Stefan Rummens's charge of ambiguity against Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's idea of hegemony in a democratic structure, Mouffe states that the empty place of power in a hegemonic relation of domination refers to an occupied position at the centre that is open to contestations. Unlike a totalitarian state, a democratic state initiates a political order where the occupation of the power-position is temporary (Mouffe 678–679). While tracing the trajectory of a hegemonic relation, Mouffe suggests the turn from the political category of antagonism to that of agonism, "[b]ut there is another way in which the antagonism or the friend/enemy distinction can manifest itself, namely in an agonistic way. When we speak about agonism, the conflict is not one between friends and enemies but between adversaries who recognize the legitimacy of each other's position" (683). Goldemberg and Szichman's novels represent the correspondence between the city and Jewish margin, which also pertains to the margin of the city itself, as an agonistic one. With their own

maneuvers of dominating each other, be it through a spatial othering of the Jews on the part of the city or objectifying the city into a trope to attain commercial gains on the part of the Jews, the two share a conflict-ridden formation that is irreconcilable yet democratic. The two forces add to each other's forms of agency in destabilizing the unmediated binary of centre/margin. The totalitarian attempts of the Peruvian nationalist ideology to reduce the Jews into a mere racial element and that of the Argentine elite to indulge the masses in cult politics are countered by the agonistic relation between the city and its margin. Moreover, the city does not only embody one of the particularist forces, but also the terrain of negotiations on which those variety of particularities negotiate, a condition suggested by Laclau as necessary for the formation of public space (Butler, Laclau et al. 7).

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