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Getting Out of Fiction: Luiz Costa Lima, Hayden White, and the Debate on the Literary

ABSTRACT

In *Control of the Imaginary*, Luiz Costa Lima counsels against viewing Euclides da Cunha's foundational text *Rebellion in the Backlands* as literary or as a discourse of fiction, for he believes that fiction, like mimesis, is misunderstood within a literary context. Costa Lima disagrees with Hayden White's own metahistorical hermeneutics which posits that literary forms inherently exist within narratives of history. Despite the relative lack of acknowledgment of the other on the part of both critics, their work benefits from a simultaneous reading, as the dialectical nature of their articulations of history becomes evident and informs the other's approach. Their respective interpretations of Lévi-Strauss' notion of 'getting out of history' create space for an alternative approach to Cunha's *Rebellion*, one which demonstrates that the text exemplifies important elements of the literary and the scientific that both critics touch upon. At the same time, such an approach assists in understanding how Cunha's text transcends an opposition between fiction and reality precisely because of its incorporation of multiple discourses.

BIOGRAPHY

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GETTING OUT OF FICTION: LUIZ COSTA LIMA, HAYDEN WHITE, AND THE DEBATE ON THE LITERARY

The fictional is a critical use of the imaginary.
—Luiz Costa Lima, *Control of the Imaginary*

In the last twenty years, the need for a different approach to literature has become increasingly evident. The historiographic model, which prevailed in the nineteenth century, came to a crisis early in the present century. It had been characterized by the diachronic ordering of literary facts, seen as *documents* of an era, a nation, or an individuality.
—Luiz Costa Lima, *The Dark Side of Reason*

Written at the beginning of the twentieth century, and following what at first appears to be an historiographic model, Euclides da Cunha's foundational text *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands)* has been read as a document of its socio-historic moment of production as much as a document of earlier history because of the racial determinacy that characterizes its critical narrativization of a country in conflict. Writing of Cunha's text in his own critical work, *Control of the Imaginary*, Luiz Costa Lima concludes that there exists an impropriety in speaking of the book that gave rise to Brazilian nationalism as a work of fiction, for 'mimesis is a process the final result of which is the fictional product...A work then, cannot contain the double structure of discourse of reality and discourse of fiction.'ⁱ Cunha's description of the Canudos military campaign at the turn of the twentieth century complicates attempts at discursive classification, as it hovers between historiography, geography, sociology, and biological and racial determinism, as well as self-conscious dramatization. Via his complicated identification with the oppressed in his narrative (detailing federal troops' suppression of the rebellion sparked by the religious visions of occultist Antonio Conselheiro), a narrative that is explicit in its attempt to portray events as accurately and realistically as possible, Cunha is himself commenting upon a physical manifestation of control of the imaginary, as opposed to the ideological control that Costa Lima details in his monograph. However, Costa Lima adds a caveat to his own conclusion, namely that a danger develops 'only if we insist on calling *Os Sertões* a work of literature or of fiction without setting out to attempt [an] understanding of what in fact we mean when we use such language.'ⁱⁱ Phrased in such terms, the distinction between history and fiction as literature ceases to be as concrete as is initially delineated. Costa Lima further develops his analysis of Cunha's text in *Terra Ignota*, yet this follow-up concerns itself more with the historical context and construction of the foundational text – thus seeing Alexander von Humboldt's writing as an historiographic marker from which Cunha's can be distinguished – than a continuation of the attempt to trace the control of imagination or the writing of fiction in relation to contemporary interpretation.

Costa Lima worries that only those 'who fear that its [*Rebellion in the Backlands*] place in history may be being lost with the eclipse of its guiding theory attempt to open the gates of literariness to it,'ⁱⁱⁱ perhaps based upon an earlier contention that the nineteenth century work of Jules Michelet became lost to history and could only be redeemed via literary, which is to suggest fictional, discourse. Such an act brings with it negative associations, for in the 'realm of day-to-day life, fiction is synonymous with deceit, fabrication, falseness, fantasy, or pretense. It is only within literary or artistic experience that it finds the desideratum necessary for the process of mimesis.'^{iv} However, Hayden White, briefly referenced earlier in Costa Lima's critical analysis of historical writing, contends that it is the form of a particular type of writing that defines its interpretation more than simply its content. In the article which Costa Lima glosses, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," White denotes historical narratives as verbal fictions that share more in common with literary than scientific discourse. In contrast to Lima's assertion of the impossibility of a mimetically-oriented text simultaneously containing both the discourses of reality and fiction, White suggests that critics should 'recognize that in realistic, no less than in imaginary, discourse, language is both a form and a content and that this linguistic content must be counted among the other kinds of content (factual, conceptual, and generic) that make up the total content of the discourse as a whole.'^v As such, he does not view references to the literariness of historical writing as a subversion or denigration of its authority, but rather a testament to the employment that all narratives, whether scientific or literary, are subject. Writing at contemporary moments, both White and Costa Lima develop a metahistorical hermeneutics; both seek to get beyond or 'out of' history in a diachronic sense, and the historical narrativization that each describes in fact dialogues with the other. This is immediately visible in their interpretations of what the consequences of 'getting out of history,' the phrase they adopt from Lévi-Strauss, are. Nonetheless, it is a dialogic relationship which these critics have largely left unrecognized in their own writings.

The sociological reading which Costa Lima attributes to Cunha's important work stems from his own tracing of the nineteenth century development of historiography in *Control of the Imaginary*. The framework of Costa

Lima's historiographic understanding is built upon his response to theoretical lacunae he discovers in other critics of discourses of reality who suggest that 'the difference between day-to-day fictions and fictions recognized as such is a transitory one,'^{vi} without actually threatening the central role of objectivism in history. He expresses disappointment with several critics of historiography, one of them being Hayden White, though the large trajectory of the survey of historical writing does not allow much opportunity for in-depth discussion. The nineteenth century focus of White's most famous work, *Metahistory*, is also perhaps most closely related to Costa Lima's own reformulations of mimesis and romanticism in Brazilian literature, yet it is "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," an essay that comments about the historiographic discipline's reliance upon the techniques of literature, to which he refers in his critique. Costa Lima concludes that White's refusal to expose himself to counterattack 'any more than necessary'^{vii} is not convincing, and as a consequence, neither is White's contention that the narration of an historical event is essentially a literary or a fictional operation. At the same time, he does appear to support White's attempt to, as Costa Lima couches it, 'reestablish an alliance [between historiography and fiction] that has been destroyed by scientism, and thereby to contribute to an authentic theory of history.'^{viii} Nonetheless, White is largely forgotten after this instance of agreement, suggesting that his approach to verbal artifacts does not ultimately assist Lima's own approach. In essence, this theoretical approach in *Control of the Imaginary* regarding the mimetic is designed to inscribe a representational difference between discourses of reality and fiction, while White wishes to confuse such boundaries (Costa Lima's later work, which will be discussed shortly, tends towards a similar rejection of categorization).

At the same time, this dismissal is surprising on certain grounds, as both writers are concerned with re-viewing unproblematized understandings of representation, both historical and literary. In his collection of essays, *Figural Realism: Studies In the Mimesis Effect*, White maintains the need to 'reject, revise, or augment the older mimetic and model theories of historical discourse...In this view, historical discourse is not to be likened to a picture that permits us to see more clearly an object that would otherwise remain vague and imprecisely apprehended.'^x Here, White does not distinguish between mimesis and *imitatio* in the specific senses that Lima does with reference to a confusion within Romantic politics. For Costa Lima, mimesis is often glossed incorrectly, for its product intends to represent the inner potentialities of an object, while *imitatio* is concerned only with the superficial appearance of those objects.^x Nonetheless, White recognizes the potential pitfalls of attributing scientism to mimetic representation which purports to be systematic; he is most interested in how internal rather than external components of verbal or literary artifacts are formed, a process that allows a work such as Cunha's *Rebellion* to be approached from a different angle. As a literary artifact which aims at creating a mimetic representation of the Canudos military campaign, as well as the physical conditions that created the setting for such events, *Rebellion* not only challenges classification within a single literary mode, but it also elides strict categories of literary or scientific discourse. This issue will be returned to momentarily.

Illustrative of the contemporary critics' overlapping yet simultaneously divergent concerns is their interpretation of Lévi-Strauss's contribution to the shift within the discipline of history. In his chapter entitled "Fates of Subjectivity" Costa Lima quotes Lévi-Strauss' pronouncement in *The Savage Mind* that 'it is history that serves as the point of departure in any quest for intelligibility. As we say of certain careers, history may lead to anything, provided you get out of it.'^{xi} Costa Lima in turn modifies the declaration, indicative of the caution with which he initially interprets the claim, for he believes that today 'history can lead to everything, as long as one gets away from factual history...In other words, if Lévi-Strauss's attack on the popularized ideology of history should be judged impeccable and should prove itself to be fertile ground for the new generations of historians, its weakness would lie in its confusing history, as a specific activity, with current thought about it.'^{xii} In this early work, Costa Lima in effect inscribes a divide between historiography and critical writing about historiography, whereas White maintains that critical, metahistorical awareness needs to be exercised at all times within the act of writing historiography. Although White also stresses that history is an 'activity,' the specific linguistic representation of events rather than the chronological events themselves, he believes that it is vital to compare historical writing with contemporary theory – this is not conflation, but rather the grounds for and duty to historical consciousness. Indeed, if Lévi-Strauss is guilty of confusing history as an activity with thoughts about it, then Cunha also crosses the line in *Rebellion*. As Cunha writes in his preface,

this book, which originally set out to be a history of the Canudos Campaign, subsequently lost its timeliness when, for reasons which need not be mentioned here, its publication was deferred. We have accordingly given it another form, the theme which was the dominant one in the beginning... It is our purpose to sketch in, however inadequately, for the gaze of future historians, the most significant present-day characteristics of the substrates to be found in the backlands of Brazil.^{xiii}

Cunha is aware that his work has lost its 'form' as historiography. Inadvertently, it would appear that Cunha did 'get out of history,' despite his intentions to appeal to future historical work. Yet, because of this critical awareness, the new textual form develops into a comment upon how history is constructed.

White also criticizes Lévi-Strauss in “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” yet he misses an opportunity to invite critical debate with Costa Lima in a 1982 article entitled “Getting Out of History,” which was written two years before Costa Lima first published *Control of the Imaginary* in the original Portuguese. I say it represents an opportunity missed, for White substantially revised the article for inclusion within his 1990 collection *The Content of the Form*.^{xiv} As an epigraph to the article, White employs the same above mentioned quote by Lévi-Strauss that Costa Lima does. However, while the latter views a movement out of history as synonymous with an abuse of fact, White understands this movement as a welcome next step, a transcendence of current practice which would reconfigure the borders of the discipline. In this respect he concludes, ‘The problem may be not how to get into history, but how to get out of it.’^{xv} First and foremost, this is because facts are constituted by language, in White’s opinion, thus they are not simply given historical occurrences but are separate from the events themselves.

“Getting Out of History” concerns itself primarily with Frederic Jameson’s Marxist approach to the master narrative of historiography, not because White necessarily espouses the same ideological concerns, but rather because Jameson’s relationship to viewing historical discourse from outside it is not dissimilar to White’s own metahistorical stance. In fact, by subjugating literature and its critical concerns to the totalizing horizon of history, Jameson is in a very general sense enacting a reverse of White’s claim that historical narratives are inherently literary. White sees a parallel between philosophers of Marxism and of history, as they have unilaterally attempted to bestow on both disciplines the authority of science as a justification of method. The production of art and literature, concerned with the possibility of ‘imagining a better world,’^{xvi} claims the authority of ‘culture’ rather than that of ‘society,’ claimed by science and politics, and it is the forms of art’s products which help define such a distinction. For Jameson, according to White, the most important form is ‘narrative, conceived as a ‘socially symbolic act’ which by its *form* alone, rather than by the specific ‘contents’ with which it is filled in its various concrete actualizations endows events with meaning.’^{xvii}

Costa Lima provides an example of the power of form to influence meaning when he notes how critics have associated Cunha’s text with tragedy or even linked it to Greek tragedy. Yet White maintains that ‘no historical event is intrinsically tragic; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view...Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral.’^{xviii} Indeed, it is through cues that the writer provides that readers decide the type or form of writing – tragic, comic, romance – and it is only then that the story may be fully comprehended, according to White. Cunha enacts this same process. It is a process of imagination in the way that Costa Lima defines it, located between the realms of the fictional and the mimetic, but also on a separate level:

The difficulty with the notion of a truth of *past* experience is that it can *no longer* be experienced, and this throws a specifically *historical* knowledge open to the charge that it is a *construction* as much of imagination as of thought and that its authority is not greater than the power of the historian to *persuade* his readers that his account is true. This puts historical discourse on the same level as any rhetorical performance and consigns it to the status of a textualization neither more nor less authoritative than “literature” itself can lay claim to.^{xix}

As Costa Lima points out, Cunha arrived at Canudos in time only for the last of several expeditions, yet this does not stop him from reconstructing the military’s previous attempts to control the population. Cunha’s self-awareness in his construction of the work acts to increase the appearance of a created setting. Exploiting a sense of the dramatic with an awareness of historical construction, he compares the Brazilian landscape to a stage^{xx} and rhetorically halts the reader in the midst of his section on biological determinism of the races so that he does not ‘run ahead of our “story”.’^{xxi} Even as he claims that ‘[h]istory here is more theatrical, less eloquent,’^{xxii} Cunha is intensely aware of his role in the narrativizing process without ever articulating his presence until the final segment of the work when he feels obligated to testify in a textual ‘deposition’ against the atrocities of torture which the federal troops inflicted upon the rebels. Part of Cunha’s success in the text is precisely the effect of getting out of history, rather than getting in.

But this element of fiction is not to be counted against the writer, as White reads Jameson. His purpose, according to White, is to explain how the ‘necessity’ of history is ‘too important to be consigned to the faculty of reason alone. It is ‘rather to the ‘imagination’ that this task is to be consigned, more specifically to the ‘narrative’ capacities of the imagination.’^{xxiii} Here White provides a reading that would seem to nearly overlap with Costa Lima’s explanation regarding the mechanics of control of the imagination. Yet historical writing is not only necessarily literary in its approach to representation, but history itself is also a combination of reason and imagination. Therefore, both the discourses of fiction and reality are simultaneously present, and while Cunha’s work may escape easy classification, both discourses are visible within it. Thus, the question of which

discursive category to assign Cunha's *Rebellion* becomes not one of a binary dividing fictive and real, but rather one of inclusion, such that the discursive terms are interdependent. The result is an example of the definition Costa Lima provides at the beginning of *Control of the Imaginary*, where '[t]he fictional is a critical use of the imaginary.'^{xxiv}

Cunha's text is not a work of 'pure' fiction, but it is dependent upon the mechanics of fiction, not only for its representation, but also for its internal construction. An assignment of literariness does not in any way lessen its discourse of reality. The multiple descriptors of 'scientific' and 'literary' are, in fact, testaments to the text's ability to get out of or move between literary modes, perhaps as a precursor to the intellectual space that Brazilian critic Silviano Santiago has claimed as the 'space in-between' for Latin American artists and critics: '[s]omewhere between sacrifice and playfulness, prison and transgression, submission to the code and aggression, obedience and rebellion, assimilation and expression – there, in this apparently empty space, its temple and its clandestinity, is where the anthropophagous ritual of Latin American discourse is constructed.'^{xxv} As Santiago explains, unless European models are revised with signification specific to the cultural context within Latin America, the latter's 'product would be a mere copy,'^{xxvi} a silence as opposed to a reaction, and here it is not mimesis of the European model that is the issue, but rather pure *imitatio*. Costa Lima articulates just such a failure in Brazilian Romanticism's mistaking of nostalgia for the self-reflection that characterized its European counterpart.^{xxvii} Cunha, however, does not create a copy of a model or of a discourse of reality, but rather a hybrid whose form – the form that Jameson and White believe controls meaning and exercises the imaginary – escapes binaries, as it is both scientific and literary and simultaneously neither.

At first, it would seem that Costa Lima would not locate *Rebellion in the Backlands* in such an in-between space as the one Santiago prescribes, for he asks rhetorically in *Terra Ignota*, 'Would it be fair for us to expect that he [Cunha] had freed himself, in contrast to other men from the coast [involved in the Canudos campaign], from European imitation?'^{xxviii} (Given its predication upon, but also cannibalization of, the techniques that Sarmiento's *Facundo* utilized in 1845, however, it may be instructive to see Cunha as appropriating an already diluted European model in an antecedent of modernist anthropophagy.) It is also in this later exploration of Cunha's work that Costa Lima has noted that the elements of literature, as a continuation of the types of nineteenth century historical fiction famously analyzed by Georg Lukács, can be considered to enter into *Rebellion* only in the sense of a subtext, a form of ornamentation that is subjugated under the rubric or central 'scene' of science.^{xxix} That said, Cunha's text may better be classified as an *instance* of literature, in a similarly recent nuance given to the term by Costa Lima, who has continued to develop his critical project regarding the control of writing in *The Dark Side of Reason* (a composite translation of *Sociedade e Discurso Ficcional* and *O Fingidor e o Censor*) and *História, Ficção, Literatura*.^{xxx} In these monographs, the critic revisits the discourses of fiction and reality to examine the very assumptions underlying the use of 'discourse' as a framing concept. Ultimately, he settles in a space between several definitions, perhaps in the end allying himself with notions of simultaneous obedience and rebellion that Santiago espouses in his notion of intellectual in-between space.

After pointing out Foucault's reductivist approach in presupposing only the negative or exclusionary aspects of the control discourse exerts, Costa Lima concludes that literature's very 'power' lies in its inherently hybrid form, such that it cannot be reduced to or envisioned within a specific [or single] discursive form.^{xxxi} In taking issue with definitions of power, Costa Lima discovers here a disturbing pattern, which White's own writing has also helped to reify: in the same way that definitions of mimesis and fiction have been stripped of their initial nuances and thus come to be valued for only one half (the negative portion) of their historical definitions, so too has 'discourse' been pigeonholed in such essentialist terms. In other words, categorizations of discourse as an encapsulating concept can control just as much as religious, State, or artistic institutions themselves do. With this pronouncement, Costa Lima demonstrates a shift in the emphasis he placed upon literature and fiction in *Control of the Imaginary*, as he now distinguishes between the two writing forms, and neither is ornamental, but instead foundational: 'literature in itself does not fit in a concept. The concept most capacious of accounting for it would be the concept of fiction. But if we consider literature and fiction, what should we do with regard to genres such as biography, autobiography, essays and the letter?'^{xxxii} To this list we could easily add historiography and literature that follows models of historiography, of course. Thus, for Costa Lima at this later stage, if literature is never 'in' a single discourse, in its irreducibility it is never completely 'out' of particular discursive forms either, even if it remains out of fiction.

At the same time that it remains out of fiction, Cunha's work does accomplish the task of fictional: critical use of the imaginary. This is because literary fictions and everyday, or non-literary, fictions are not equivalent. Literary fictions, as Costa Lima points out, put themselves into question in the process of their narrativization; the truth of fiction 'is the showing of itself as fiction.'^{xxxiii} It is precisely a parallel meta-awareness that White demands of responsible historiography, although he does not claim that this self-disclosure equates to fiction,

merely the use of the devices and tropes of fiction. For Costa Lima, fiction does not claim truth, but rather an apprehension of truth, with 'Truth' being the impossible metanarrative that White points out institutionalized historiography has claimed as its territory, suggesting a common ground in their preoccupation with the powers of fiction.

Costa Lima, however, has theorized the potential powers of fiction and literature in greater detail than has White, particularly in relation to the novel. In a manner of historicizing his earlier work on Cunha, he turns to the so-called first novel in the Western tradition, *Don Quixote*, claiming for Cervantes a space of fictionality where he champions 'the author's ability to place himself outside of his narrative,'^{xxxiv} finding this intrigue far more compelling than the satirist's parodying of chivalric romances, a genre Costa Lima demonstrates to have been dethroned years before Cervantes' novel appeared. He views *Don Quixote* as the first instance of literary fiction, which contains within its narrative the tools for self-reflection and theorization that were only picked up in the late eighteenth century. The novel reveals its fictionality through its narration, and this effect is only heightened by the flimsy levels of narratorial illusion which are meant to be noted and deconstructed by the reader. The novel is not a distant allegory but rather present fiction, and Cervantes' distinction between fictitious and the fictional does not only have repercussions for literature. Costa Lima claims that ignoring this distinction can explain 'why History has come to assume its intellectual role in the West,'^{xxxv} and here the critic is not lauding such a role. The centrality of history is a result of the domestication of imagination, an institutionalized form of control that simply co-opts whatever new model fiction produces to systematize it rather than directly attacking its variance from the establishment.

Such a form of control was the initial fear that prompted Costa Lima's (and my own) use of Cunha as a marker of hybridity. If *Backlands* is 'banned' as a fiction by virtue of the classification of critical response, then its value becomes downplayed, as convenient inclusion within the establishment removes its transgressive potential. What Costa Lima has termed:

control of the imagination should not be confounded with censorship either of literary works or tendencies. Censorship is rather a punctual prohibition, sanctioned by norms, and condemns the circulation of works with a given combination of characteristics. In contrast, control involves a more delicate decision: something is perceived as unacceptable, improper, or base, but its production is not simply prohibited. Since it is not, the very control applied to it can serve as a stimulus for another form of artistic expression.^{xxxvi}

With this in mind, Costa Lima in *The Dark Side of Reason* takes a page from Santiago by adopting a prescriptive tone against literary production influenced by foreign expectations (in the chapter "Literature and Society in Hispanic America"), as he distinguishes between two forms that have polarized Spanish-American literature: documentality as mimesis, and its opposition, fiction as critical imagination. The latter grouping lifts the ban on fiction, while the former becomes trapped in imitation, although it has traditionally been more highly valued by international audiences. As such, the relationship that White characterizes, historiography's dependence upon the elements of fiction, becomes reversed – another form of control. In Costa Lima's characterization, much of even post-independence fiction ends up being carefully produced to adhere to historiography's discourse of reality via its documentary approach.

The Brazilian critic suggests a method of getting out of history by promoting Jorge Luis Borges' overt fictionalization of all genres and models that find their way into his work. As Costa Lima puts it, 'It is no accident that so many analysts have said that in Borges there are no differences between essay, criticism, and fiction proper. Everything he touches becomes fiction.'^{xxxvii} The end result from a critical perspective is that those readers who would control now become the controlled by the text. Cunha certainly does not attempt to radically fictionalize the events of *Backlands*, though, as has been pointed out, the text similarly inhabits a space between criticism, historiography and 'fiction proper,' thus perhaps an alternative to Borges' extreme model does already exist. Yet Cunha does promote self-disclosure, as he lays bare his involvement in the historical narration, rather than claiming a final truth for his book. White and Costa Lima attempt to avoid claiming truths by focusing upon processes, yet, unavoidably, they too attempt to exert control over the imaginary, be it historiography or fiction. To return to Costa Lima's initial preoccupation which began this essay, *Rebellion in the Backlands* does display the double discursive structure of fiction and reality; as a form of hybrid literature, which Costa Lima later demonstrates it to be, it must do so, as its strength stems from its inclusivity. As such, Costa Lima's concerns regarding literature can be conceived as an extension of the project to recuperate the organic definitions of fiction, mimesis, and discourse, which stresses that each term's partial or misrepresentation has allowed the creation of stark binary taxonomies and rigid control. The next step in this process of self-disclosure, then, would be to discern whether texts such as Cunha's can help counter the same

process of critical control in which Costa Lima and White are also necessarily involved, by adopting a new strategy – not by getting back into history or accepted mimetic models, but instead by getting out of fiction.

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