

Becoming Menard? Geopolitical Readings and the Authorial Subject in César Aira

Niall H. D. Geraghty

To cite this article: Niall H. D. Geraghty (2022) Becoming Menard? Geopolitical Readings and the Authorial Subject in César Aira, *Romance Studies*, 40:1, 1-18, DOI: [10.1080/02639904.2021.1950360](https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2021.1950360)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2021.1950360>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 15 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 192




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Becoming Menard? Geopolitical Readings and the Authorial Subject in César Aira

Niall H. D. Geraghty 

Leverhulme Early Career Fellow and Lecturer in Latin American Cultural Studies, Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, , London, University College London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article discusses César Aira's critical engagement with Jorge Luis Borges's masterful short story 'Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*'. While there are few overt references to Borges's story within Aira's essayistic output, it will be shown that those that do exist are highly significant. Indeed, it will be argued that Aira's literary process — developed at length and in detail across his critical work — is heavily indebted to 'Pierre Menard'. Opening first with a reflection on Borges's *Evaristo Carriego*, the article explores the ways in which Aira discusses Borges's story in relation to the Duchampian ready-made, uncovers its importance within his analysis of exotic literature, and argues that Aira inverts Menard's labour by shifting his focus from the act of reading to the act of writing in his re-creation of the story. In this way, it will be proposed that Aira advocates an a-personal process which nonetheless affirms a central place for the individual author, while simultaneously producing works of geopolitical significance. Ultimately, it will be shown that the story provides the inspiration for Aira's conceptualization of the literary work as a temporal event, and the promotion of a formless marginality which undermines colonial taxonomies.

KEYWORDS


Jorge Luis Borges; César Aira; 'Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*'; Duchampian ready-made; postcolonialism; literary process

Introduction

'Componer el Quijote a principios del siglo diecisiete era una empresa razonable, necesaria, acaso fatal; a principios del veinte, es casi imposible. No en vano han transcurrido trescientos años, cargados de complejísimos hechos. Entre ellos, para mencionar uno solo: el mismo Quijote.'

(Borges 1990, 448)

It is rather unusual to open an article with the admission that one is setting out to complete a task they have already undertaken. Nonetheless, given the subject matter of the present essay, that is, contemporary engagements with Jorge Luis Borges's masterful 'Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*', it is perhaps appropriate. I previously examined the relationship between Ricardo Piglia and 'Pierre Menard', situating his reinvention of the story in the context of 'postmodern critiques' which question the function of the authorial subject, and more recent 'postcolonial' interpretations which emphasize the story's geopolitical

CONTACT Niall H. D. Geraghty  n.geraghty@ucl.ac.uk  Leverhulme Early Career Fellow and Lecturer in Latin American Cultural Studies, Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

importance. Thus I argued that Piglia essentially inverted Menard's labour, employing the creative use of plagiarism to politicize the story and, by extension, further develop the postcolonial critique it contains. While in the present article my attention turns to César Aira, in it too, I will examine the ways in which Aira inverts Menard's labour in order to further Borges's exploration of the authorial subject and the postcolonial significance of 'Pierre Menard'. Moreover, through a close structural correspondence between the two articles, I hope to demonstrate certain parallels between the literary projects of each contemporary Argentine author.¹ This is not to suggest, however, that the repetition of the exercise will produce the same results. Not only does Borges's pretentious frame narrator famously assert that Menard's *Quijote* 'es casi infinitamente más rico' than Cervantes's original, but Menard demonstrates a particular ability to maintain two contradictory positions simultaneously, declaring Cervantes's *Quijote* to be 'innecesario' before lauding it as 'la obra inmortal' and asserting that its composition was 'una empresa razonable, necesaria, acaso fatal' (1990: 448). I invoke Menard's latter position above for two primary reasons. First, Menard here acknowledges that his almost impossible task is continuing to write *after* the *Quijote*. So, too, I wish to propose that a key question Aira seeks to address is: how to continue writing *after* 'Pierre Menard'? Second, and as we will later see, I wish to propose that Aira essentially resolves the problem by considering Borges's story a temporal event, as in Menard's assessment of the *Quijote*.

Sandra Contreras — whose book *Las vueltas de César Aira* (2002) is a touchstone in criticism of the writer's work — argues persuasively that it is in Aira's essays that the Borgesian legacy is most obviously found (2013, 186). It is also the case that Aira's essays cumulatively describe his literary process, and that an understanding of literature *as* process is the cornerstone of his own artistic endeavours. Significantly, in Julio Premat's study of the self-figuration of Argentine writers as authors (a study which also incorporates Borges and Piglia) he briefly proposes that Aira's process can be directly linked with 'Pierre Menard' (2009, 237–39). Premat, however, describes Aira's literary process at a level of abstraction that allows a particularly wide degree of flexibility, and in the same comparison he incorporates writers as divergent as Leopoldo Lugones and Osvaldo Lamborghini, only the latter of whom forms part of Aira's self-selected literary genealogy. For my own part, I will build on the work of Contreras and Premat, closely examining the presence of Menard in Aira's essayistic writing to argue that it is a fulcrum of his literary process. By tracing the ways in which Aira variously repeats, recreates, or consciously rejects Menard, I will also demonstrate that Aira's engagement with the story has a postcolonial resonance and important implications for the authorial subject. In my study of the geopolitical significance of Piglia's experimentation with 'Pierre Menard', I began first by considering Borges's relationship with one of his Argentine precursors, Macedonio Fernández. In the case of Aira, however, I turn instead to another of Borges's beloved forebears, namely, Evaristo Carriego.

Carriego, Borges, and Reinvention

'These patterns in Carriego's life that I have described will, I know, bring him closer to us. They repeat him over and over in us, as if Carriego went on living in our lives, as if for a few seconds each one of us were Carriego. I believe that this is literally the case, and that these fleeting moments of becoming him (not of mirroring him), which annihilate the supposed flow of time, are proof of eternity.'

(Borges 1984, 63)

In a notorious article written in the early 1980s, Aira denounced the contemporary Argentine novel as 'raquítica y malograda' (1981a, 55).² In Aira's opinion, writers of the period lacked both passion for literature and talent, and the literary scene was in need of rejuvenation. In another article published later the same year, Aira continued on the same theme proposing that 'el dispositivo borgeano puede ser la mejor herramienta para reactivar nuestra historia literaria' and, more specifically, that Borges's biography of the minor poet Evaristo Carriego 'podría servir como manual de revitalización' (1981b, 85). Crucially, within the same discussion Aira reflects on Borges's work in the light of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975), arguing that 'de la primera a la última página, es el trabajo de un operador de una literatura menor'. Thus Aira includes Borges in a minor literary genealogy including 'los gauchescos, Sarmiento, Mansilla, Macedonio, [y] Arlt' which he contrasts with the dominant line of supposed 'maestros' 'Lugones, Larreta, Mallea, [y] Sabato' (1981b, 84–85). Much as Borges felt that 'Carriego podía ser contrapuesto a Lugones, invirtiendo, con esta sola operación, todas las jerarquías estético-ideológicas que organizaban a la literatura argentina' (Sarlo 1989, 7), so, too, Aira returns to his example to overturn the dominant poetics of Argentine literature in the 1980s which he had denounced with such vehemence. Significantly, Aira also precedes various postcolonial interpretations of Borges's oeuvre by essentially arguing that, in *Evaristo Carriego*, the poet 'emerges as a cipher and mouthpiece of a distinctive local identity and as the founder of a poetic tradition of the "orillas", or margins, to which Borges affiliates himself' and which he would later expand into a critique of colonial geopolitics (Fiddian 2017, 39).³ Similarly, Aira's argument also entails a re-assessment of the authorial subject.

Steven Boldy notes that in his unusual biography Borges 'becomes a sort of double or ghost of Carriego' which, in turn, 'prompts seminal musings on the relationship between reader and writer and the dissolving of the notion of personality' (2009, 24). In this way, *Evaristo Carriego* prefigures 'Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*' which is arguably the apotheosis of Borges's reflections on the relationship between readers and writers. For his part, Aira develops a similar argument by utilizing Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the 'collective assemblage of enunciation' (1986, 18) to argue that the abandonment of individuality found in innumerable Borges characters (including Menard) becomes 'un dispositivo para deshacer al escritor'. Echoing Deleuze and Guattari's political argument, he also proposes that 'volver colectivo lo individual es hacer de la literatura una política, la única que vale la pena' (1981b, 85). Ultimately, it is these interrelated impulses, to turn to the internal margins of Argentina and to reject the individual author in favour of a more collective experience, which Aira draws from Borges's interpretation of Carriego and applies to his own work.

As Reinaldo Laddaga notes, Aira's literary universe is that of 'cierta clase media baja de barrio o de ciudad pequeña' in the Argentine provinces (2001, 39). These spaces provide the setting for many of Aira's fantastic novels which open with realist depictions of everyday life (whether historical or contemporary), accelerate through series of absurd situations or monstrous metamorphoses, and reach astonishing or cataclysmic conclusions. Importantly, a trace of the initial class perspective also carries into Aira's conception of literature as process. Indeed, Aira specifically advocates a return to process because, in

this way, 'el poeta podrá ser un hombre como todos, [...] liberado de toda esa miseria psicológica que hemos llamado talento, estilo, misión, trabajo, y demás torturas' (2000, 166–67). As he puts it elsewhere, through the adoption of process the writer can be liberated from 'toda la pesadilla del yo, de la que trato de despertarme' (1994, 72). The use of the reflexive verb 'despertarme' in Aira's witty re-conception of Stephen Dedalus's description of history, however, betrays the difficulty of escaping the self through impersonal process. Indeed, the stubborn re-emergence of the subject is the paradox that lies at the centre of Aira's own literary process and emerges from his critical reflection on the Duchampian 'ready-made'. Crucially, this also becomes the major articulation which binds Aira to 'Pierre Menard'.

Borges, Duchamp and the Ready-Made

In *Sobre el arte contemporáneo*, Aira declares that he has always sought inspiration for his literature in the visual arts and proceeds to reflect on his own 'mito de origen' (2016, 30). Indeed, with certain Borgesian overtones, Aira describes the precise moment at which he discovered this originary animus: the teenage purchase of *Marchand du Sel*, the collected writings of Marcel Duchamp. Of course, Aira consistently refers to the Duchampian ready-made in his critical writings, just as several critics invoke the concept in their discussion of 'Pierre Menard'. In a particularly rigorous example, Graciela Speranza traces the connection through Borges's wider oeuvre (2006, 91–145), while her larger study of Argentine culture 'después de Duchamp' incorporates analysis of both Aira and Piglia. It is certainly notable that, where Piglia actively adopts the creative use of plagiarism promoted in 'Pierre Menard', Aira celebrates the same feature in the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik. Nonetheless, a difference emerges in Aira's proposal that, for Pizarnik, the works of Lewis Carroll were 'un ready-made que sólo había que firmar' (1998, 80),⁴ a comment which echoes his assertion that 'el *Quijote* es un ready-made que cualquiera puede firmar, y nadie repetir', as illustrated by the fable of Pierre Menard (1997, 14). Where Piglia is drawn towards the creative potential of 'las atribuciones erróneas' promoted by Menard's friend and commentator (Borges 1990, 450), Aira instead concentrates on the artist's signature as the unrepeatable element which concomitantly emerges with every work.

As Contreras notes, what Aira discovers within the Duchampian ready-made is the paradoxical coupling of 'la impersonalidad de lo ya hecho y la singularidad de la firma', which he denominates the 'mito personal del autor' (2002, 31). Nonetheless, I would argue that both Duchamp and Menard are essential references from which Aira derives his conception of the ready-made. As is well known, Borges's narrator describes two methods that Menard considered adopting to realize his fantastic project. First, following Novalis's fragment which describes 'la total identificación con un autor determinado' (Borges 1990, 446), Menard imagines literally becoming Miguel de Cervantes. Dismissing this plan as too easy, Menard opts instead to reproduce the *Quijote* by remaining himself, a minor symbolist poet from Nîmes. In Aira's brief discussion of 'Pierre Menard' he instead argues that the first strategy is impossible because 'el escritor [...] es una singularidad histórica' and therefore cannot be repeated (1997, 14), and that it is Menard's project which proves the point. As Borges's narrator makes clear, Menard's repetition of the *Quijote* produces an entirely new work, yet he illustrates the differences between the texts by referencing the *historical discrepancies* between the lives of each

author. Menard's reproduction of a fragment of the ninth chapter of the *Quijote* is 'asombrosa', precisely because Menard was 'contemporáneo de William James'; his argument in favour of arms over letters even more astonishing because he is an 'hombre contemporáneo de *La trahison des clercs* y de Bertrand Russell' (Borges 1990, 449). In discussing Pizarnik's poetry, Aira proposes that the myth of origin is a central feature of modern art, while postmodernism instead 'disuelve al origen personal, lo difunde a un repertorio transpersonal' (1998, 44–45). Nonetheless, what he discovers in 'Pierre Menard' is that process-art may produce impersonal and repeatable texts, but that the author is a singular unrepeatable event which is inseparable from that same work. Moreover, Aira effectively synthesizes Menard's two strategies by arguing that the artist ultimately repeats *themselves*.

It is somewhat surprising that Aira praises Pizarnik's poetry because it is written '*como si no hubiera proceso*'. Clarifying the position, however, Aira stresses that one should read Pizarnik's poetry '*como si el proceso se reabsorbiera en lo previo, en la vida, en la infancia, en el mito personal*' (1998, 26). Indeed, Aira goes on to make the claim that every writer ultimately repeats the originary impulse which led them to become an artist, that 'el escritor revive a lo largo de toda su vida su origen', that '*su vida es su mito de origen*' (1998, 43). Thus Aira proposes that a writer must totally identify with *themselves*, with the person they were when they first became an author, in order to continue writing. By shifting his focus to the ready-made and the 'mito personal', then, Aira effectively synthesizes Menard's two writing strategies: total identification persists, but the author must remain who they already are. This is not to suggest that Menard has simply displaced Duchamp, but rather that both are essential references for Aira's literary process. The crucial point is that, where Duchamp's repurposing of everyday 'ready-made' objects is designed to alter our perception of the reality which surrounds us, Aira combines this impulse with the legacy of Menard and the 'mito personal' in order to *rediscover* everyday reality. Reflecting on Aira's relationship with sexually rebellious writers such as Pizarnik, Copi, and Lamborghini, Patrick O'Connor argues that, where these writers 'all wrote much less than they "should have", distracted by the pains and pleasures of their excesses', Aira instead allows innumerable 'irregular lives to be played out by means of fictional selves' so that he himself can continue to live the quiet, even humdrum, lower middle class existence which often serves as the starting point for his literary fantasies ([1999] 2019, 24). Behind the names Carriego and Pizarnik, then, one finds Duchamp and Menard, and the means through which Aira transforms the world around him while remaining in place in Flores, the largely lower middle-class neighbourhood in which he lives. As Aira notes (1993c), this is also the neighbourhood of the socially committed writer of the early twentieth century, Roberto Arlt, which suggests that this decision could be considered a minor political act. Given that Aira makes free use of 'universal' art and culture in order to discover this particularly Argentine reality, it also seems to reflect the geopolitical argument outlined in Borges's famous 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' (1951). Nonetheless, it is in discussing this essay that Aira most famously rejects his literary forebear.

Much Ado about Innovation

Borges's 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' is in essence 'a polemical argument about nationalism' played out in the cultural sphere (Sarlo 2001b). Reflecting on 'gauchesco' literature and a novel celebrated by nationalists at the time, Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), Borges emphasizes the work's intertextual and intercultural

qualities to reject the very idea of 'autochthony', affirming instead 'the freedom of Argentine writers to draw at will on the entire Western tradition' (Fiddian 2017, 181) with an irreverence he argues they share with Irish and Jewish literary traditions. In addition, Borges famously proposes that the proof of 'la autenticidad del *Alcorán*' is the absence of camels in the text and that Argentine writers should similarly excise all 'color local' from their work (1990, 269). For its part, Aira's essay 'Exotismo' is primarily an essay on the exotic genre which he traces from its origins in early travel writing and the exoticist depictions of foreign nations, through writings in which these same 'foreigners' were imagined out of place in Europe, to the self-representation of these same 'foreigners' as exotic in order to sell this vision to Europeans (1993b, 73–75). As it progresses, the essay also becomes 'un extraño regreso desviado a la afirmación de la nacionalidad' (Contreras 2002, 72) and Aira directly rejects Borges, arguing that the proscription of local colour is an argument made in bad faith. Indeed, Aira challenges Borges's presumption that 'authenticity' is a positive value, proposing instead that 'el artista es artista justamente de la transmutación de los valores' (1993b, 76). More than this, however, Aira questions the very nature of 'authenticity' as a goal, or even a possibility, proposing that one has to *become* an Argentine writer and that the means to do so is through the overt and conscious use of stereotypical images and the profusion of local colour. Certainly, this is a tactic Aira has deployed in such novels as *Ema, la cautiva* (1981c) and *La liebre* (1991) which adopt a foreign perspective which, in turn, 'se traduce en la inflexión de formas de narración o estilos extranjeros', as Contreras argues (2002, 48–49). Of course, in 'Pierre Menard', too, Borges adopts a foreign perspective and style through the creation of his French narrator. Where Aira overtly acknowledges the influence of Mário de Andrade's *Macunaima* (1928) in promoting the adoption of a stereotypical perspective, I would also suggest that he subtly invokes Menard.

'Pierre Menard' precedes 'El escritor argentino' by several years, yet here too Borges's narrator lauds the fact that Menard's *Quijote* 'desatiende o proscrib[e] el color local' (1990, 448).⁵ While it may appear that Aira simply rejects Menard in this instance, it is notable that in delineating the genealogy of the exotic genre, he pays particular attention to French literature, highlighting an important contrast he finds between the works of Victor Segalen and Pierre Loti. For Aira, Segalen immersed himself in Chinese culture and 'se legitima volviéndose chino', while Loti showed no interest whatsoever in immersing himself in Japanese culture and 'puso la literatura del lado del status quo, y la usó para no volverse japonés, para seguir siendo francés' (1993b, 79). If these two propositions sound familiar, I would suggest it is because they are, once again, Menard's two writing strategies: where he first considered becoming a Spanish novelist of the 17th Century to compose the *Quijote*, he instead opted to remain a French poet of the 20th to complete the task. In this instance, Aira specifically rejects Loti in favour of Segalen, and thus appears to invert Menard's process. When one considers what these strategies represent for Borges, however, a more profound inversion comes to light. As Boldy argues, Menard's two strategies 'represent polar opposite notions of reading', one in which the critic discovers the 'univocal meaning intended by the author', and one in which 'meaning depends on the circumstances and whims of each reader' (2009, 76). Both Borges and Menard's commentator opt for the latter interpretation reinventing the act of reading through 'la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas' which allows one to read any book as if it

were different (Borges 1990, 450). And this ‘como si fuera’ becomes all important when it is remembered that Aira specifically states that the lesson he draws from Andrade’s *Macunaíma* is that ‘el brasileño debe hacer [...] “como si ... ” fuera brasileño’ (1993b, 79). Where Menard may have gained for us the ability to read any book as if it were different, Aira instead proposes that it is the writer who must act “‘como si” yo fuera otro’ (1993b, 74), thus enacting a profound shift from the act of reading to the act of writing. Indeed, in another talk focussed on Borges and entitled ‘La cifra’, Aira argues that the fundamental core of Borges’s literature is ‘la metamorfosis del lector en escritor’ (Contreras 2002, 269), which takes Menard as its model and gains for Borges ‘la más perfecta autonomía personal’ to read as one wishes (Aira [1999] 2019). Fully to understand Aira’s reinvention of Borges, however, it is necessary to read ‘La cifra’ with another of his essays, ‘El último escritor’ (1997).⁶

It is useful to bear in mind that Aira remains an avant-garde writer insofar as he repeatedly insists that the discovery of the ‘new’ is the most important goal for which an author can strive and the fundamental principle underpinning his literary process. This is clearly seen in ‘La innovación’ where Aira proposes that ‘lo nuevo es el gran ready-made’ and that ‘la fórmula de lo nuevo’ is Baudelaire’s maxim ‘la poesía debe ser hecha por todos, no por uno’ (1995, 29). This avant-garde impulse is also found in ‘El último escritor’, where Aira argues that every writer must consider themselves the *first* writer because only the progenitor ‘establece los paradigmas de calidad [...] por los que serán juzgados los demás’. In making this argument Aira also explicitly proposes that ‘el *Quijote* es la primera novela, y la mejor, porque nadie podría ponerse a la altura del paradigma que estableció’ (1997, 14–15). In a certain sense, then, Aira confronts the very problem addressed by Menard when composing the *Quijote*: how to continue writing *after* the *Quijote*? As we have seen, Menard responded by transforming the act of reading into writing, thus winning the freedom to re-invent literary history as one wishes. While Aira also recognizes that ‘el instrumento esencial de la literatura es la libertad’, he shifts the focus to the act of writing, championing ‘la única libertad auténtica del escritor, [...] la de clausurar definitivamente el pasado volviéndose él mismo el último escritor’. Aira essentially proposes the cultivation of a millenarian perspective which transforms the author into a temporal agent who brings the past to a conclusion and opens to a new future. And Aira illustrates the argument by using Menard as an example (1997, 14). Turning to ‘Exotismo’, it now seems that Aira seeks to bring the Menardian cycle to an end by turning from reading to writing and the incessant drive of innovation. Viewed in this way, Aira seeks to become Menard while radically transfiguring the ready-made model. The difference between them is thus most discernible in their approach to publishing; where Menard only ever produced fragments of his *Quijote* which were never published, Aira incessantly publishes new novels in an ever-expanding series. This, too, is an essential part of his literary process which he has denominated the ‘huida hacia adelante’.

Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better

Drawn from his analysis of Pizarnik, Aira’s ‘huida hacia adelante’ involves a decision to produce new material every day and never correct what has been written previously (1998, 80–81). For Aira, this allows him to incorporate ‘la completa improvisación

definitiva' into his novels so that they 'avanzan en espiral, volviendo atrás sin volver, avanzando siempre, identificadas con un tiempo orgánico ... Novelas biónicas, mutantes ...' (1994, 70). This process is also reflected in the content of Aira's novels, given that they frequently accelerate forward through series of wild transformations. Nonetheless, as Reinaldo Laddaga notes, they also end abruptly and without warning, culminating in the betrayal of 'el capital narrativo acumulado, incendiando, simplemente, el edificio narrativo que han erigido' (2001, 46). Each novel ends in glorious failure which is overcome by beginning a new novel composed in the same manner, in a pattern that appears endlessly to repeat itself. In this way, Aira's tendency towards hyper-productivity is the second component of the 'huida hacia adelante'. As Speranza argues, it also stands in sharp contrast to Borges's drive to purify his prose into the most concise and perfect form (2006, 305–06). This trait, in turn, is echoed in Menard's obsessive correction of his *Quijote* and Aira's inversion allows him to escape the fate of classic works which invariably become 'una ocasión de brindis patrióticos, de soberbia gramatical, de obscenas ediciones de lujo', demonstrating that 'la gloria es una incomprensión y quizá la peor' (Borges 1990, 449–50). In fact, Aira strives to convert failure, misunderstanding, and even stupidity into positive literary virtues.

Aira's novel *El congreso de literatura* perfectly conforms to his description of the texts produced through his 'huida hacia adelante'. Aira himself appears in the novel as a crazed scientist who sets out to clone Carlos Fuentes by training a wasp to extract his DNA during the titular congress. The plan is thwarted due to the fact that the insect cannot distinguish between the man and his clothes and accidentally extracts the DNA from a silk worm in his tie. When Aira subsequently clones the organism it is transformed into a gargantuan monster which destroys the city hosting the conference. I would suggest that the novel could also be considered an absurd parody of 'Pierre Menard' which highlights the differences in each author's approach to writing. In discussing Borges's story, Julio Prieto proposes that 'como los ready-mades de Duchamp propone una repetición que oscila entre la broma y la reflexión estética o filosófica' (2010, 61) which has frequently been associated with Borges's own literary project. While it may be hyperbolic, Aira's novel functions in much the same manner, encapsulating many of the key features of his literary process: Fuentes represents the unrepeatable component of a ready-made source; the cataclysmic annihilation wrought by Aira's creation reflects the millenarian drive of 'El último escritor'; the B-movie plot echoes his avant-garde defence of 'literatura mala' as a means through which one can discover the new (1995, 29); and the novel grotesquely illustrates Aira's belief that art 'es la transmutación de los valores' (1995, 30) and that 'el malentendido es la fuerza interior de la metamorfosis' (2007, 35–36). Where the two texts diverge, however, is in their depiction of stupidity. Discussing 'Pierre Menard', Alicia Borinsky proposes that, as the eponymous author's project tends towards 'a radical anonymity', 'Menard's reviewer [is] a fool because he believes in the importance of voice and individual producers' (1986, 157). Aira essentially adopts both positions, retaining a strong belief in the importance of the individual author, while arguing that a-personal process diminishes the value of individual works, including his own. Both processes may be destined to end in comic failure, but in Aira's case, he happily accepts the role of the fool. Indeed, he has even argued that it is an essential component of regional difference, that European literature 'se apoya masivamente en la calidad', while 'la nuestra puede permitirse todo. La estupidez, o sea todo' (2013, 533). This is to say that

the difference between Aira and Menard become the difference between Europe and the Americas, and returns us once more to 'Exotismo' and the question of geopolitics.

Postcolonial Aira?

It is important to note that Aira not only incorporates stereotypical representations into his Argentine novels, but also utilizes such images in his depictions of other nations. By his own admission, Aira has never visited some of these countries and they instead represent 'espacios de pura ficción, de pura invención, donde puede pasar cualquier cosa' (Dapelo and Aira 2007, 51). Similarly, Aira tends to invoke orientalist images in his Argentine tales, both those of a historical nature such as *Ema, la cautiva*, and contemporary novels such *La guerra de los gimnasios* (1993a). Aira may defend Segalen's strategy in 'Exotismo' and promote the method among Argentine authors, but across his wider body of work he frequently embraces Loti while representing the East. Once more, Aira strives to undertake Menard's two strategies simultaneously, producing a certain ambivalence in his position which is, in itself, reminiscent of Borges. While Borges has been hailed as a visionary precursor to Edward Said and his conception of orientalism (Boldy 2009, 32), others offer a more tempered view, praising the incorporation of non-Western thought into Borges's work while recognizing that 'he advocates the Orient at a distance, filtered through the European translations of Lane and Burton, Waley and Kuhn, with inevitable elements of Orientalism' (Aizenberg 1992, 26). It is my proposal that Aira shares this approach.

In discussing Piglia's engagement with 'Pierre Menard', I argued that he utilizes the logic of Borges's 'Kafka y sus precursores' (1951) — which inverts the normal conception of influence and argues that a writer necessarily creates their own progenitors — to re-order Argentine literary history from the perspective of 'Pierre Menard', tracing the history of erroneous attribution through the work of Witold Gombrowicz, Macedonio Fernández, and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. I now contend that Aira applies the same logic in his own literary work, tracing the history of Argentine orientalism, which has been an essential element of the imaginary construction of Argentina, in his own literary work. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, there is a remarkable parallel between Aira's orientalist descriptions of the pampa in *Ema, la cautiva* and the use of similar imagery in *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845) where Sarmiento describes native barbarism in orientalist terms and contrasts it with European civilization (2019, 31–32). As I also proposed, Aira counteracts this tendency by invoking both Lucio V. Mansilla's *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* (1870), which consciously describes indigenous culture using European categories, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of the 'everyday paradox of third-world social science' which posits that postcolonial social scientists and historians continue to find concepts produced in Europe eminently useful in describing their own realities despite the fact they were produced in ignorance of those same cultures (Chakrabarty 2008, 29; Geraghty 2019, 47–50). This latter concept is the same I invoked when discussing the postcolonial significance of Piglia's *Respiración artificial*. The problem, however, is that I did seem to take Aira's novel rather too seriously, draining the humour from the text in a way which Aira himself has discredited. As he has stated: 'me siento vagamente insultado, siento el riesgo de una mutilación, cuando alguien se toma en serio un libro mío' (1994, 72).

As Contreras observes, 'lo frívolo — en tanto falta de seriedad e índice de la importancia de la obra — es el signo mismo del arte de Aira, de su sensibilidad y de su provocación' (2002, 30). A key element of this provocation is that Aira intentionally courts academic interpretations of his work while deploying humour to mock that same analysis. This, too, is a central trait of Borges's 'Pierre Menard' which is a serious intellectual undertaking, yet deploys 'a panache of irony' and 'a nice touch for bitchy humor' (Lefkowitz 2001, 75–73) to satirize the pretentiousness, class bias, and bigotry found in Menard, the narrator, and the wider French academy. For sure, Borges's subtle ironies are supplanted by a taste for the absurd in Aira, yet they equally invite academic interpretations. For example, the series of outlandish connections drawn between European and indigenous cultures in *Enma, la cautiva* all too readily appear as absurdist exaggerations of Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, and Aira did translate *The Location of Culture*, yet he also decried its author as 'un farsante' and declared that 'fue la única vez que traduje sin entender absolutamente nada de lo que estaba traduciendo' (Dapelo and Aira 2007, 42). In the case of Aira's 'Exotismo', however, I would suggest that it is a serious critique of Coloniality and Occidentalism which is ultimately *justified* by Aira's comic approach.

For anti-colonial thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo, 'coloniality' refers to 'an embedded logic that enforces control, domination and exploitation' (2005, 6). Others expand the critique arguing that this logic is absorbed by the colonial subject and becomes an essential part of their own self-representation. For example, Chakrabarty comments on the 'comical misrecognition' he experienced while watching 'Bengali plays in which Bengali actors, cast as colonial Europeans, acted out their heavily Bengali-accented imitations of how Europeans might have spoken Bengali, that is to say, their own stereotypes of how Europeans may have perceived' them (2008, x). And Aira, too, cultivates this same 'comical misrecognition' in order to expose the logic of coloniality which produced these stereotypes in the first place. Indeed, in 'Exotismo', Aira explicitly demonstrates that the exotic genre 'entails the mobilization of stereotypical representations of non-Western societies as part of the West's self-fashioning as an imperial power' and thus exposes the 'bond between knowledge and power in the West', as in Fernando Coronil's description of 'Occidentalism' (1997, 14). As Aira opens his essay:

La prosa cristalina del Siglo Clásico es el comentario perenne a una imagen luminosa, a un cristal a través del cual nos dice que será posible ver por siempre: el Hombre. Los Universales se concentran en esta figura, y todo el resto desciende al mundo sublunar. (1993b: 73)

The use of capitals invokes seemingly universal concepts and Aira continues by drawing on Montesquieu to highlight that such thinkers felt themselves to be French, or European, purely by chance and, in an enlightened manner, identified instead through the category 'Hombre'. Nonetheless, Aira exposes the fallacy at the heart of Reason by arguing that this figure was in fact geographical, finding its centre in Europe and spreading across the world with colonial expansion (1993b, 73). In establishing the genesis of the exotic genre in this manner, Aira's essay closely echoes the work of Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh who argue that binary oppositions, beginning with the division between human and non-human, are in fact 'colonial differences' (2018, 155).

As Mignolo and Walsh continue, they extend their critique forward in time arguing that the logic of coloniality is reconfigured in 'the opposition between Christians and non-

Christians, masculine and feminine, white and nonwhite, progress and stagnation, developed and underdeveloped, First and Second/Third World' (2018, 155). So, too, Aira argues that in the 19th Century the exotic genre mutated and followed the expansion of capitalism (1993b, 74–75). Indeed, when Aira moves on to critique Borges's 'El escritor argentino' as a bad faith argument, he situates his commentary within the same logic. As Aira argues, authenticity 'no hace más que separar al buen profesional del mal profesional, al serio y confiable del chapucero', and 'el mito que subyace a toda esta dialéctica es el del Hombre' (1993b, 76). Similarly to Mignolo and Walsh, Coronil, and others, then, Aira demonstrates that dichotomous understandings of the world originated in Europe and served to reproduce colonial power-structures. In her discussion of Aira's critique of 'El escritor argentino', Contreras recognizes that Borges's essay strives to undermine 'la jerarquía presupuesta en las dicotomías central-marginal, inferior-dominante, que mide las literaturas y las culturas según límites y su grado de hegemonía'. In contrast, she proposes that what Aira admires in the essay is the '*poder de innovación* que la define', which becomes '*su poder de metamorfosis y transformación*' (1995, 46–47). I would suggest that these two positions are essentially linked in Aira's literature.

Formless Marginality

In *Respiración artificial* Piglia's literary alter-ego, Emilio Renzi, argues that Roberto Arlt intentionally wrote in poor Spanish in order to counter-act the nationalistic policing of language promoted by writers such as Leopoldo Lugones (2008, 134). Both Contreras and I have invoked Piglia's assessment while discussing Aira's celebration of 'mala literatura' and proposed that it, too, subverts certain 'jerarquías heredadas' (Contreras 2002, 126–33; Geraghty 2019, 139–40).⁷ Similarly, Speranza analyses Aira's literary process through Georges Bataille's concept of 'lo informe', the formless, defined as 'una operación que permite poner en marcha una desclasificación radical (*déclassement*), en su doble acepción de descenso y desorden taxonómico' (2006, 297–98). Here, too, a linguistic and conceptual parallel can be drawn between Bataille's 'informe' and that of 'lo amorfo' proposed by Witold Gombrowicz to counter-act the dichotomous structuring of the world produced by dominant cultural 'forms' (Grzegorzcyk 1996, 25) which I invoked in my discussion of Piglia's relationship with 'Pierre Menard'.

As discussed in that article, while Piglia argues that Borges and Gombrowicz echo each other in their celebration of the power of marginal cultures to alter dominant traditions, he also proposes that, in terms of literary style, they stand in opposition (2000, 72–78). For Piglia, Borges's prose style was derived from that of the French intellectual émigré Paul Groussac (an argument echoed in 'Pierre Menard' through Borges's creation of his French narrator) and that, together with Lugones, these writers constitute the dominant style of Argentine writing. In contrast, he reflects on an unusual translation of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* produced in collaboration with the author to contend that it blends the literary styles of Arlt and Macedonio Fernández, and that these three represent the minor strand of Argentine literary style. In Aira's case, he appears simply to reject 'Pierre Menard' and align himself with this minor tradition: Prieto has demonstrated the affinity between Aira and Macedonio (2005) and, as we have seen, Aira consciously connects his work to Arlt. Regarding Gombrowicz, it is notable that, as Tomás Abraham argues, 'Aira nos llama nuevamente al paraíso de la invención, de la ocurrencia, de la mezcla de materiales, de la *infancia libre*' (2004, 151–52 my emphasis), a comment which links his work with the Polish exile who tracked 'el conflicto entre lo maduro

y lo inmaduro' onto that between 'forma y caos', and the relations between young and old nations (Grzegorzczuk 1996, 18). When leaving Argentina, Gombrowicz was asked what advice he would give to young authors and famously declared, 'muchachos, maten a Borges' (Anonymous 2017), nonetheless, in this regard they draw close once more, and a clear connection can be made with Aira.

As previously noted, Speranza contrasts Aira's 'huida hacia adelante' with Borges's concise prose fiction, and Contreras follows a similar line, but adds an important comment: that Aira's improvisational and metamorphic literature diverges from the 'la preeminencia del orden' in Borges's stories (2013, 185). Of course, Borges does not simply champion order over chaos, and in stories such as 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and 'La biblioteca de Babel', the creation of a perfect, rationalized order has often been read as a critique of totalitarianism (see Boldy 2009, 78–87, 95–97; Sarlo 2001a). Moreover, Borges, much like Gombrowicz, tracked the divergence between order and chaos onto the differences between nations, arguing that 'el mundo, para el europeo, es un cosmos, en el que cada cual íntimamente corresponde a la función que ejerce; para el argentino, es un caos' (1974, 659). For his part, Aira clearly echoes both authors when he states that 'el mundo comienza, y ya es un caos' (2007, 19). Moreover, this chaotic perception of the world is an essential element of the postcolonial critique I find in his work.

Similar to Mignolo and Walsh's argument that 'racism and sexism' have historically emerged as 'two constitutive pillars of the colonial matrix of power' (2018, 157–58), so, too, Aira's perception of the world as a formless chaos can be also be seen through the ways in which he undermines these dichotomous categories. In his historical novels set in the pampas of Argentina, for example, Aira deploys comical misrecognition to exaggerate racial categories to the point of ridicule. This process reaches its zenith in *La liebre*, a novel structured around an increasingly absurd series of twins, doubles and pairs which culminates with the revelation that the protagonist (an English naturalist and Darwin's brother-in-law) is, in fact, the son of indigenous cacique Cafulcurá and the long-lost twin of his son Namuncurá, both of whom were real-world Mapuche leaders. In Aira's mischievous experimentation with gender, however, the subversion of taxonomic categories is fully accomplished. In *Cómo me hice monja* ([1993] 2004), the first-person narrator is a young César Aira who self-identifies as female and, astonishingly, describes her own murder. The narratorial 'Aira' never achieves maturity nor becomes a nun. Instead, Aira establishes a series of binary oppositions (male/female, adult/child, alive/dead) and simultaneously undermines each of them. For Francine Masiello, Aira's novel 'exposes the fallacies of logic underlying the process of binary thought' and 'explores (and mocks) the structures of apprehension that are central to all interpretive experience' (2001, 94). In this way Aira's work closely echoes Foucault's critique of the power structures created through the taxonomic interpretation of the world found in *The Order of Things*, a book which famously cites Borges's 'El idioma analítico de John Wilkins' as its originary inspiration. Due to the parallels between Aira's 'Exotismo' and the work of Mignolo and Walsh, however, it can be argued that Aira consistently subverts the very basis of *colonial* knowledge through its celebration of chaotic, formless marginality.

Reading with Aira

Within Aira's fiction he consistently undermines binary thinking and the world he describes generally descends into a metamorphic, monstrous, chaos. For these reasons, critics such as

Speranza and Contreras distinguish Aira's literature from the concise and controlled style of Borges's literary prose. When one turns to Aira's *literary criticism*, however, the distinction does not hold. Cumulatively Aira's essays describe the self-contained, holistic, and carefully ordered range of concepts which constitute his process and dictate the form and content of his fictional writing. Much like Borges, then, Aira's work entails a struggle between chaos and order, the latter emerging in Aira's work in the form of a literary process intimately entwined with 'Pierre Menard'. Moreover, these essays invariably govern the manner in which critics (including myself) read and comprehend Aira's novels, a further point of contact with Borges and Piglia. As Alberto Giordano observes, critics frequently seek out 'la posibilidad de reconocer en los ensayos de Borges una batería de proposiciones que definen los alcances de una poética que explicaría la complejidad de su literatura' (2015, 109). So, too, Pampa Olga Arán notes that 'resulta poco menos que imposible hablar de la obra de Piglia sin hablar "con" Piglia, porque [...] su crítica es historiográfica, interpela la tradición total de la narrativa argentina que reasigna en nuevas topologías valorativos' (2003, 120). So, too, I argue that it is almost impossible to analyse Aira's literature without referring to his essayistic writing. Moreover, Arán's conception of historiographical criticism becomes another feature shared by Aira and Piglia that is ultimately indebted to Menard.

In 'Sobre los clásicos' (1952), Borges offers a reappraisal of classic literature, arguing that the elevation of literary works to exemplary status depends not on the merits of the texts themselves, but on the emotional investment made by readers from a given nation which lead them to read the books as if 'en sus páginas todo fuera deliberado, fatal, profundo como el cosmos y capaz de interpretaciones sin término' (1974, 773). Although he never acknowledges or cites Borges's essay, Aira's 'Los libros del pasado' is very much a meditation on this previous text. Aira channels Borges most clearly by arguing that the selection of classic books does not rely on literary merit or aesthetic criteria, that 'no es un efecto mecánico del juicio, sino una transformación operada por el tiempo' (2002, 60–61). Where Borges invokes the continual transformation of books from the past due to the act of reading in the present, however, Aira instead proposes that the transformative effect of time is to strip away the individual, psychological genesis of the text following the death of the author such that they assume mythical status and can be absorbed into History, where History is the register of perceptions which make an understanding of the past possible. Aira continues by arguing that the classics are thus the actualization of those same perceptions which allow us a glimpse of the 'paisajes maravillosos en los que se creó el mundo' (2002, 61–62). Developing the argument set out in 'El último escritor' but excluding the author in this case, Aira conveys the sense that literature condenses the past into the present where it becomes a living presence and the progenitor of historical sense.

Where Borges's analysis of classic literature runs contrary to Menard's assessment of the futility of intellectual labour, his invocation of the ceaseless transformative potential of reading is shared with his earlier story. Similarly, Aira appeals to Borges's fictional creation to project his temporal understanding of literature into the future. In closing his article, Aira declares that those books which arrive from the past are simply those which could never be written in the present, not because they have already been written, but because 'el menor intento de escribirlos desencadena el proceso de transformación, como le pasó a Pierre Menard' (2002, 61–62). This is no cause for concern, however, as this 'abre automáticamente el presente a lo nuevo, a la libertad, y la literatura tiene oportunidad' (2002, 62). Thus Menard becomes the very model of the writer who transforms literature

into a temporal event, a caesura which divides time into before and after, re-ordering the past to situate themselves as the last writer, opening to the new to become the first. As previously discussed, in Piglia's literary and critical work he, too, attempts to re-order Argentine literary history from the perspective of 'Pierre Menard' by applying the logic of 'Kafka y sus precursores' and tracing the history of erroneous attribution back through time. In Aira's case he advances the argument, applying the logic of 'Pierre Menard' to explicate the process by which a writer not only re-orders the past, but projects his work into the future. As we have seen, both authors engage with 'Pierre Menard' in order to conduct literary experiments which simultaneously undermine yet reinforce the authorial subject, and extend the postcolonial critique found in Borges's writing. Perhaps the most important lesson they draw from Menard, however, is a specific temporal understanding of literary tradition, and from Borges, the inclination to act as their own greatest critic and explicate the temporal event that their work will become.

Conclusion: Becoming Menard

'I believe that Carriego was the first observer of our poorer neighborhoods and that this, in the history of the Argentine poetry, is what matters. The first – in other words, the discovery, the inventor. *Truly I loved the man, on this side of idolatry, as much as any.*' (Borges 1984, 105)

In a book chapter discussing the relationship between Aira, Piglia, and Borges, I suggested that one link between the younger authors and their precursor is Harold Bloom's concept of 'the anxiety of influence' (see Bloom 1997; Geraghty 2020). Nonetheless, given that Borges himself described his relationship with his influential forebears Macedonio Fernández and Evaristo Carriego (with which I closed both this article and that focussed on Piglia) by reworking Ben Jonson's tribute to Shakespeare and invoking the language of love, it seems that this model may not be appropriate. Certainly, the relationship between Aira, Piglia, and Menard seems rather more affectionate than anxious. Two further issues also require further attention. First, as Ben Bollig notes, my previous work presents a particularly male dominated corpus (Bollig 2019, 1363),⁸ a criticism which also holds true for the work of Premat and Speranza. Second, in each more recent article, I have felt it necessary to follow all three authors' own critical interventions in analysing their works, such that they almost seem to gain primacy over the literary texts themselves. I would now suggest that these three seemingly unrelated problems have a common solution.

While there is no question that 'Pierre Menard' has had a profoundly influential effect on both Aira and Piglia, it is important to note that its celebration of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attribution has generated more than one literary genealogy. Indeed, as part of a forthcoming study of queer transnationalism and decolonial feminism, Natasha Tanna draws on Jonathan Letham's celebration of collage and 'the ecstasy of influence' (February 2007) and José Esteban Muñoz's critique of academic rigour as a heteronormative ideological construct which excludes ephemeral forms of queer evidence (1996), to analyse the creative use of plagiarism in works by Ena Lucía Portela and María Moreno. I want to close this article by now suggesting that, perhaps, Borges, Piglia, and Aira, could also be inscribed within this tradition. In celebrating the potential of erroneous attribution, Menard's acerbic narrator proposes that it allows one to read 'el libro *Le jardin du Centaure* de Madame Henri Bachelier como si fuera de Madame Henri Bachelier', the joke presumably being that the book was, in fact, ghost written

(Boldy 2009, 72; Borges 1990, 450). The reader, however, is left with the question: who wrote Madame Henri Bachelier's book? Given that 'Pierre Menard' appeared in the collection *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, invoking as it does the image of the labyrinth and indirectly the Minotaur, I would suggest that it is Borges himself who substitutes one mythical creature for another,⁹ and indulges in a little literary cross-dressing.¹⁰ Similarly, Teresa Orecchia Havas analyses several stories and *La ciudad ausente* and finds 'un interesante vaivén genérico masculino-femenino' in the way in which Piglia attributes the power of story-telling to the 'voz femenina', albeit under male control (2006, 279). Finally, as Abraham rather provocatively puts it, 'Aira es más travesti que Puig, Copi y Lamborghini' (2004, 166) and he has performed as a female narratorial subject in texts such as *Yo era una niña de siete años* (2005), *Yo era una chica moderna* (2004), and *Yo era una mujer casada* (2010). While Borges's declaration of love for Carriego and Macedonio is one of *philia* rather than *eros*, when viewed from this perspective (and rather shamelessly to paraphrase O'Connor 1999, 24) the relationship between Aira, Piglia and Borges may not be gay, but it is queer.

Prior to announcing his love for Carriego, Borges celebrates him as the inventor of the urban margins of Buenos Aires. As other critics argue, from this basis Borges develops a geopolitical critique of relations between nations, and a postcolonial defence of Argentina as a marginal nation (see Fiddian 2017; Sarlo 2001c). For their part, Aira and Piglia extend this critique further still, evoking a formless marginality that undermines binary thinking and colonial taxonomy. Of course, such a critique equally subverts other dichotomous categories structured on the hierarchization of difference. In a recent volume focussed on the creative potential of the urban margins in Latin America, for example, my colleague Adriana Laura Massidda and I follow Foucault and note that 'urban marginality continues to be linked to class, political, racial, sexual, corporeal and other differences, as it is necessarily implied in the exercise of power' (2019, 5), and we trace a tendency in European theory (found in the work of Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze and Foucault) to challenge the power dynamics at play in dichotomous forms of thought which endlessly reproduce new margins (Geraghty and Massidda 2019, 18–21). Where Mignolo in particular frequently criticizes such theory as 'a Eurocentred critique of modernity' and opposes it to truly decolonial thought (2011, xi), it is notable that, just as Foucault cites Borges as the inspiration for *The Order of Things*, Deleuze cites 'Pierre Menard' as the vindication of his attempt to overcome Western metaphysics and the hierarchization of difference in *Difference and Repetition* (2001, xxi-xxii). Much like Aira and Piglia, then, Deleuze finds in 'Pierre Menard' the basis for a radical defence of heterogeneity, and the reference to Borges's story demonstrates a final way in which the periphery continues to re-create the centre.

Notes

1. As Tomás Abraham notes, Aira and Piglia constitute 'dos imanes' of contemporary Argentine culture to whom 'se pegan los miembros de la cultura literaria argentina', representing 'dos modos alternativos — quizás enfrentados, quizá no tanto — de practicar el arte de escribir' (2004, 109).
2. The same essay also disparaged Piglia's *Respiración artificial* (1980) and his approach to literature, the source of much of the apparent conflict between them (1981a, 58).
3. Beatriz Sarlo first suggested that Borges was a writer of the margins in 1989 while Piglia made a partially similar argument in 1986 which was subsequently published as 'La novela polaca' (Piglia 2000; Sarlo 1989).

4. Aira also discusses the direct incorporation of works by Olga Orozco and Antonio Porchia into Pizarnik's poetry (1998, 71–75).
5. As Daniel Balderston argues, this omission may also have geopolitical significance in that it allows Menard to avoid a certain French proclivity to view Spain as an exotic 'Other that guaranteed French claims to be the true heirs to Roman ideals of clarity, order, and civilization' (1993, 31).
6. The argument in 'La cifra' is remarkably similar to that proposed by Piglia in *El último lector* which I have discussed previously. While the close correspondence between the titles of Piglia's book and Aira's later talk may be coincidental, the substitution of 'lector' for 'escritor' is highly significant, marking a point of divergence and connection between the two contemporary authors.
7. Contreras is far more attentive to the ways in which Aira's process is devalued by 'serious' authors, such as Piglia (2002, 131–33).
8. This is an issue which I have also acknowledged (2020, 136n11).
9. Theseus, of course, slayed the Minotaur *and* defeated the Centaurs. Dante also depicted the Minotaur as having the body of a bull and the head of a man, an image closer to that of the Centaur (Fishburn and Hughes 1990, 130, 197).
10. This would certainly account for the fact that, although the narrator disparages Bachelier's 'false' catalogue of Menard's writing, he includes one of her entries in the form of a footnote (Borges 1990, 444, 446n1).

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship, and I am very grateful for their support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Niall H.D. Geraghty is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow and Lecturer in Latin American Cultural Studies at University College London. His research focusses on the intersections between critical theory, politics and contemporary Latin American cultural production. Niall's first book, *The Polyphonic Machine: Capitalism, Political Violence, and Resistance in Contemporary Argentine Literature* (University of Pittsburgh Press: 2019), focussed on the analysis of select texts by the Argentine authors César Aira, Marcelo Cohen and Ricardo Piglia written in the period 1979–1998. He is currently working on a project involving a radical re-examination of the work of Argentine artist León Ferrari (1920–2013) which also explores the interrelations between politics and religion in twentieth-century Argentina, and the potential correlations between contemporary philosophy and liberation theology.

ORCID

Niall H. D. Geraghty  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4144-8672>

References

Abraham, Tomás. 2004. *Fricciones*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.

- Aira, César. [1999] 2019. "La cifra: Homenaje a Jorge Luis Borges." *Präuse*, 5. <<https://revistaprause.blogspot.com/2019/10/la-cifra-cesar-aira.html>>, accessed 19 July 2021.
- Aira, César. 1981a. "Novela argentina: nada más que una idea." *Vigencia* 51: 55–58.
- Aira, César. 1981b. "¿Quién es el más grande de los escritores argentinos?" *Vigencia* 53: 84–85.
- Aira, César. 1981c. *Ena, la cautiva*. Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano.
- Aira, César. 1991. *La liebre*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.
- Aira, César. 1993a. *La guerra de los gimnasios*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.
- Aira, César. 1993b. "Exotismo." *Boletín del grupo de estudios de teoría literaria* September (3): 73–79.
- Aira, César. [1993] 2004. *Cómo me hice monja; La costurera y el viento*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo.
- Aira, César. 1993c. "Arlt." *Paradoxa. Literatura/filosofía*: 55–71.
- Aira, César. 1994. "Ars narrativa." *Criterion* 8 (enero): 70–72.
- Aira, César. 1995. "La innovación." *Boletín del grupo de estudios de teoría literaria* April (4): 27–33.
- Aira, César. 1997. "El último escritor." *El Banquete: Revista Anual de Literatura* 1 (October): 11–17.
- Aira, César. 1998. *Alejandra Pizarnik*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo.
- Aira, César. 2000. "La nueva escritura." *Boletín Del Centro De Estudios De Teoría Y Crítica Literaria* October (8): 165–170.
- Aira, César. 2002. "Los libros del pasado." *Guaragua* 6 (14): 59–62.
- Aira, César. 2004. *Yo era una chica moderna*. Buenos Aires: Interzona.
- Aira, César. 2005. *Yo era una niña de siete años*. Buenos Aires: Interzona.
- Aira, César. 2007. *Diario De La Hepatitis*. Buenos Aires: Bajo la Luna.
- Aira, César. 2010. *Yo era una mujer casada*. Buenos Aires: Blatt & Ríos.
- Aira, César. 2013. *Nouvelles Impressions du Petit Maroc*. E-book ed. Desterro: Cultura e Barbárie.
- Aira, César. 2016. *Sobre el arte contemporáneo seguido de en la Habana*. E-book ed. Barcelona: Literatura Random House.
- Aizenberg, Edna. 1992. "Borges, Postcolonial Precursor." *World Literature Today* 66 (1): 21–26.
- Anonymous. 2017. "Homenaje a Witold Gombrowicz." <<http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/novedades/?p=20088>><<http://www.bnm.me.gov.ar/novedades/?p=20088>>, accessed 31 July 2020.
- Arán, Pampa Olga. 2003. "Voces y fantasmas en la narrativa argentina." In *Umbrales y catástrofes: Literatura argentina de los '90*, edited by Pampa Olga Arán, Candelaria de Olmos, Silvio Mattoni, Cecilia Pacella, Roxana Patriño, Susana Romano Sued, 113–168. Córdoba, Argentina: Epoké.
- Balderston, Daniel. 1993. *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bloom, Harold. 1997. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Boldy, Steven. 2009. *A Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*. Woodbridge: Tamesis.
- Bollig, Ben. 2019. "Review of Niall H.D. Geraghty *the Polyphonic Machine: Capitalism, Political Violence, and Resistance in Contemporary Argentine Literature*." *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 96 (8): 1363–1364.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1974. *Obras completas 1923-1972*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1984. *Evaristo Carriego: A Book about Old-Time Buenos Aires*. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni and Susan Ashe, trans. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1990. *Obras completas. 1, 1923-1949*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.
- Borinsky, Alicia. 1986. "Repetition, Museums, Libraries." In *Jorge Luis Borges*, edited by Harold Bloom, 149–160. New York: Chelsea House.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2008. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Contreras, Sandra. 1995. "Variaciones sobre el escritor argentino y la tradición." In *Borges: Ocho ensayos*, edited by Sergio Cueto, 35–51. Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo.
- Contreras, Sandra. 2002. *Las vueltas de César Aira*. Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo.
- Contreras, Sandra. 2013. "Aira con Borges." *La Biblioteca* 13: 184–198.
- Coronil, Fernando. 1997. *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dapelo, Luis, and César Aira. 2007. "César Aira." *Hispanamérica* 36 (107): 41–53.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1986. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Polan Dana. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Deleuze, Gilles. 2001. "Preface." In *Difference and Repetition*, xix–xxii. Patton, Paul ed. London; New York: Continuum.
- Fiddian, Robin W. 2017. *Postcolonial Borges: Argument and Artistry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fishburn, Evelyn, and Psiche Hughes. 1990. *A Dictionary of Borges*. Revised ed. London: Duckworth.
- Geraghty, Niall HD, and Adriana Laura Massidda. 2019. "Introduction." In *Creative Spaces: Urban Culture and Marginality in Latin America*, edited by Niall HD Geraghty and Adriana Laura Massidda, 1–28. London: Institute of Latin American Studies.
- Geraghty, Niall HD. 2019. *The Polyphonic Machine: Capitalism, Political Violence, and Resistance in Contemporary Argentine Literature*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Geraghty, Niall HD. 2020. "Argentine Responses: César Aira and Ricardo Piglia." In *Jorge Luis Borges in Context*, edited by Robin W. Fiddian, 130–137. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Giordano, Alberto. 2015. "La resistencia a la ironía: notas desde (hacia) los ensayos de Borges." *Variaciones Borges*, 40: 99–113.
- Grzegorzczak, Marzena. 1996. "Discursos desde el margen: Gombrowicz, Piglia y la estética del basurero." *Hispanérica* 25 (73): 15–33.
- Havas, Teresa Orecchia (2006), "Retratos ficcionales en la narrativa de Ricardo Piglia. Variaciones sobre el retrato del (autor en) artista", *Cahiers de LI.RI.CO: Littératures contemporaines du Río de la Plata* (Figure d'auteur/ Figuras de autor; Saint Denis: Université de Paris 8 Vincennes), 277–295.
- Laddaga, Reinaldo. 2001. "Una literatura de la clase media. Notas sobre César Aira." *Hispanérica* 30 (88): 37–48.
- Lefkowitz, Larry. 2001. "Borges as Comedian as Author of Author of the Quixote." *Variaciones Borges* 12: 71–75.
- Letham, Jonathan. February 2007. "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism." *Harper's Magazine*, 59–71.
- Masiello, Francine. 2001. *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2005. *The Idea of Latin America*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E Walsh. 2018. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1996. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8 (2): 5–16. doi:10.1080/07407709608571228.
- O'Connor, Patrick J. 1999. "Cesar Aira's Simple Lesbians: Passing 'La prueba.'" *Latin American Literary Review* 27 (54): 23–38.
- Piglia, Ricardo. 2000. "La novela polaca." In *Formas breves*, 69–80. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Piglia, Ricardo. 2008. *Respiración artificial*. 3rd ed. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Premat, Julio. 2009. *Héroes sin atributos: figuras de autor en la literatura argentina*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Prieto, Julio. 2005. "Vanguardia y mala literatura. De Macedonio a César Aira." In *César Aira, une révolution*, edited by Michel Lafon, Cristina Breuil, and Margarita Remón-Raillard, 181–94. Grenoble: Université Stendhal - Grenoble 3.
- Prieto, Julio. 2010. "Pierre Menard, traductor de Valéry: entre muertes del autor." *Variaciones Borges* 29: 53–77.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. 1989. "Borges y la literatura argentina." *Punto de Vista* 12 (34): 6–10.
- Sarlo, Beatriz 2001a. "Borges, a Writer on the Edge. Ch. 5". <<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi5.php>><<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi5.php>>, accessed 16 June 2020.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. 2001b. "Borges, a Writer on the Edge. Ch. 2.", <<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi2.php>><<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi2.php>>, accessed 16 June 2020.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. 2001c. "Borges, a Writer on the Edge." <<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi0.php>><<https://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi0.php>>, accessed 16 June 2020.
- Speranza, Graciela. 2006. *Fuera de campo: literatura y arte argentinos después de Duchamp*. Barcelona: Anagrama.