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EXILE AND THE SENSE OF PLACE IN FERREIRA GULLAR'S *DIRTY POEM*¹

Leland Guyer

Wander here
Wander there
Work is done, get out of town
The city isn't in me now.²

The man is in the city
as a thing is in another
and the city's in the man
who's in another city.³

Although in relative terms our age is probably no more introspective than others, we seem to be approaching the end of the twentieth century with a heightened awareness of what appear to be powerful new forces at work. Indeed, some of the elements that emerge from contemporary dialogues suggest a kind of worldwide giddy intoxication with the prospect of sharing a piece of the "new world order pie." With the relaxation of political tensions between the superpowers and with ever more affordable access to modern means of communication, all manners of interchange have begun to flourish not only between the largest and/or most prosperous nations but also between nations and peoples who in other times would have been excluded from similar processes. High-speed travel and microchip-based communications have nearly eliminated certain constraints formerly imposed by distance and socioeconomics. Politics and technology have joined forces to enable a global exchange on an unprecedented scale.

We like to think of what we call globalization as high-tech and pertaining generally to the waning years of the twentieth century. Of course, our notions of globalization, as perhaps everything in the postmodern age, are tinged by perspective. Certainly features of contemporary globalization have been with us for a long time, and certainly not all of those features

have their basis in telecommunications and international political and economic accords. Nor do all the players in globalization wear pin-striped suits and ride in first-class compartments. Since there is little agreement on the exact meaning of the term *globalization*, for the purposes of this paper I will take a broad view of the term to include the darker variations of human displacement, or global dispersion. I will use the term to include such movements as migrations, refugee resettlements, and, particularly, all forms of exile.

Periodic migrations have been a way of life for Brazilians for hundreds of years. Ever since the Portuguese colonized a large part of the Americas in the sixteenth century, Brazilians have traveled in search of wealth, fame, security, or religious conversions. Lured by the promise of a new life in the vast tropical lands of Brazilian Amazonian rain forests and wetlands, countless persons have sought their fortunes in enterprises such as farming, gold mining, and ranching. Many of these same persons have also periodically left their new homes, driven away by diseases, insects, poor soil, isolation, abuses of power, and a hundred other reasons.

Certainly one of the most poignant and recurrent stories throughout Brazilian history is the periodic migration of persons from the semiarid lands of the Northeast. This region, known as the *sertão*,⁴ has held much of the appeal that the tropical areas have had for Brazilians seeking a better life. However, when the droughts come to this area, as they inevitably do, a large portion of the poorest persons pack what they can and travel to industrialized cities in search of work. These *sertanejos*, also known as *flagelados* (scourged, whipped) or *retirantes* (refugees or, more literally, those who draw back), often find the relatively sophisticated life in the city as untenable as in the *sertão*, albeit for different reasons. This is the sense expressed by the first epigraph from Chico Buarque's song "Assentamento" (Settlement) at the head of this essay. Disillusioned and dejected, the *sertanejo* observes that "The city isn't in me now," and longs to return to the land that some time before had driven him away.

The second epigraph, from the concluding verses of Ferreira Gullar's near-epic, semiautobiographical masterpiece *Poema Sujo*, or *Dirty Poem*, expresses a different relationship with the

city when he laments that “the city’s in the man / who’s in another city.” As Chico Buarque’s persona, Ferreira Gullar, born José Ribamar Ferreira in 1930 in the state of Maranhão, is from the Brazilian Northeast. As with Buarque’s *sertanejo*, circumstances forced Gullar to leave his country and join the ranks of the legions of twentieth-century exiles from Latin America who sought new and uncertain lives in countless points on the globe.

In short, this paper will sketch Gullar’s sense of space within the context of his exile from Brazil in the 1970s. Toward this end, it will recall some of the events that precipitated his forced departure. It will also make reference to some of the details of his search for a new home. Finally, it will examine elements of his *Dirty Poem* that reveal some of the ways that the “city’s in the man” and render a view of Northeastern Brazilian human displacement that differs significantly from Sebastião Salgado’s glimpse of the landless in *Terra*.⁵

Ferreira Gullar is unlike most of his regional compatriots in that he ultimately made a highly successful transition from the cultural and economic isolation of São Luís. Today, he serves on the prestigious but underused Federal Council on Culture and as a writer and consultant for Rede Globo Television. Although he now writes little poetry, he remains a prolific art critic. However, his efforts to join the cultural elite of his country and to enjoy a measure of material comfort in Rio de Janeiro, where he lives today, did not come without extraordinary effort and a price.⁶

Gullar wrote *Dirty Poem* in 1975 while he was in exile in Buenos Aires, Argentina, having fled his country in 1971 out of fear for his life. Exhausted and dismayed by years of separation from his country and family, and fearing that he would soon be apprehended by a system as hostile as the one he had escaped, he decided to write a form of “last will and testament” and at the same time recover some of the past that gave his life both meaning and solace.

* * * * *

Gullar’s childhood in São Luís do Maranhão gave little initial evidence of the improbable course his life would take. The city lies just south of the equator on the northeastern Brazilian coast.

It is a tropical island city, separated from the mainland by estuaries of the Bacanga and Anil Rivers. First established by the French in 1611, São Luís soon acquired the trappings of the dominant Portuguese colonial society. Today São Luís slowly loses ground to the ravages of persistent heat, humidity, and neglect, but its residents cling proudly to its mixed colonial past with sporadic efforts to control the physical decay of the city. If São Luís was a distant outpost in the seventeenth century, it is notably isolated even today, despite modern mobility and communications. The city has the feel of an earlier era, but in the 1930s and '40s it was profoundly out of step with the more industrialized portions of the country, and there was little of the exciting and innovative cultural world that defined larger southeastern cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

Gullar gained his formal education at a trade school, but he found early in life that issues of art, literature and philosophy attracted him more than the trades, and he educated himself with the relatively few books to which he had access. His early years impressed upon him the value of poetry's utility, a theme that would mark the most significant points in his aesthetic trajectory.

When in 1954 he published his first book of poetry, *A Luta Corporal* (The Body's Struggle), the prestigious São Paulo group of concretist poets flattered him with praise and urged him in their direction. Although history shows that the Brazilian concretists articulated fundamentally important themes in both their poetry and their theory, Gullar found them exceedingly cerebral and thought that they "negated the essence of poetry." Along with various other conceptual artists such as Hélio Oiticica, Gullar played a pivotal role in an offshoot of concretism, called neoconcretism. In this phase of his career he wrote "spatial poems," culminating in 1959 with his "Poema Enterrado" (Buried Poem), an experiment more with space than with words, which came to an unfortunate watery end, and which he is fond of calling "the only poem in Brazil with an address."

By 1961 the stature he had attained within the communities of artists and writers had helped him secure a nomination as president of the Cultural Foundation of Brasília⁷ during the short presidential term of Jânio Quadros.⁸ In retrospect, it does not surprise him that this kind of work was unsatisfying, but it did

offer him a vantage point from which he came to appreciate some of the vast inequities of a world that would erect a new national capital on the basis of a campaign promise by a presidential candidate, regardless of the consequences.

Gullar quickly abandoned his avant-garde trappings and in 1962 joined one of the Peoples' Culture Centers, leftist student organizations engaged in making the arts more accessible to the masses. He hoped that this environment would enable him to respond artistically and more directly to his persistent concern for the social meaning and value of art. This experience did not last long, however, since in 1964 worsening political, economic, and social conditions led to a rightist military coup that would hold power until 1985.

Having been associated with persons and organizations judged subversive, Gullar suffered periodic harassment by the military police, and in 1968 he was even jailed for a short period. He was officially denounced as a Communist amid an environment where the torture and disappearance of political prisoners became commonplace. He went into hiding, and in 1971 he slipped out of the country and traveled from Buenos Aires to Paris to Moscow and then to Santiago, Chile. He arrived in Santiago just in time to witness the 1973 coup that overthrew the Salvador Allende government. With a deft application of Brazilian *jeitinho*,⁹ Gullar slipped through a dragnet that proved lethal to many Chileans and foreign nationals suspected of leftist sympathies. He fled the country, going first to Buenos Aires, then to Lima and back to Buenos Aires.

Unfortunately, Argentina was no friendlier to him than either Brazil or Chile. His passport had expired, and leaving the continent had become impossible. All he had left was his poetry, and it was to his poetry that he would turn for comfort and support.

I felt that I could die at any moment and that I had to write a poem that would say it all, that would bring some resolution to my life, that would leave nothing unsaid, that would be my last will and testament.... And, at the same time, the poem would be my way of clinging to life and to joy and to create a new foundation I could stand on. I was devastated, and perhaps for this reason I chose to return [in my imagination] to São Luís do Maranhão, to my childhood, to those happy days which,

although not always so happy, were days to whose memories we always cling.

I had tried to write about my life in São Luís before. I had tried to write about its people and its universe because of their links to the problem of time, to the problem of the mortality of things, about the things that end but remain within us. I wanted to recover that time and show that what had died was still alive. It was a return to the past, but it was more. So as not to become mired in the past, I also wanted to bring the past into the present. And there's that mystery of time and space, that relationship that had bothered me from the very beginning and that is present throughout *Dirty Poem*. I was looking for non-metaphysical profundity, the essence of concrete reality.

Dirty Poem has no vertical profundity, that is, if it has any profundity at all. . . . What makes it different is its horizontality. It transcends itself through the relationships things have with each other. . . . It's the material relationships that things have with one another. For instance, the pear connects with the living room, which in turn connects with the persons, who in turn connect with the city, which connects with the entire world beyond it. And the pear[.]...it works its chemical processes internally. It has sugars; it has alcohols; it has its own death processes, amid whose work emerges something new. This is what fascinates me — the complexity of real things, their reality, and their concrete and non-metaphysical existence.¹⁰

* * * * *

Although *Dirty Poem* is an enormously complex work that reflects much of Gullar's life of political and aesthetic thought, it is in large part about recovering the past in order to endure the present. The pleasant memories surrounding family and community life imprint themselves on one's mind. But so do the frightening, confusing, and shameful events of childhood. Together they compose a foundation for one's life. It was this foundation that Gullar sought in his despair, and it was this foundation whose dimensions he traces that reveal some of the essence of his present.

The work opens with a series of dark and uncertain images with little to unify them but a sense of incomprehension through the eyes of a bewildered child. A more fully aware, apparently autobiographical, persona quickly emerges in the poem, and the

events and images that he recalls establish a theme that extends through many of the pages that remain. He is able to retrieve many memories but, lamentably, time and life's complexities can be enemies:

Her name..., her name was...
I lost it when my flesh cooled down
I lost it night and day in the confusion of a new town
I lost it in the profusion of all that went down.¹¹

Of course, since he is recalling both his personal and aesthetic past, he employs a tone and style consistent with the period of his life. Tender romance and rhymes clearly mark his memories at this stage.¹²

He laments that he has forgotten a great deal, but he manages to reconstruct past lovers, relatives, birthday parties, soccer games, music, painters, burials, school lessons, foods, fishing, sensations, and scores of other defining memories from the past. He retrieves his memories with some effort, but even as they begin to flow he confronts himself with an essential question: "Why bother with a name from that evening hour in São Luís do / Maranhão sitting at the table with parents and brothers / beneath a fevered bulb, within an enigma?"¹³ Two pages later, he repeats a variation of the question: "And afterall / what's so important about a name?"¹⁴ He suggests an answer to the question in a way reminiscent of his earlier words when he referred to his interest in "the complexity of real things, their reality, and their concrete and non-metaphysical existence." He recalls:

... things as real as the embroidered towel
or my aunt coughing in her room
or the glow of the dying sun on our porch at our front
window
so real that
they burned out forever
Or did they?¹⁵

So the answer appears, although leisurely, as he responds with a question as to whether they did, in fact, burn out. But he

remains uncertain: "I don't understand the fabric of my flesh or the vertigo I feel / that drags me through the streets."¹⁶

Gullar notes a kind of time-space continuum in which memory merges with the present and thus creates a link not only with time but with space:

Many
there are many days in a single day just
because the things themselves
comprise them
with their flesh (or iron
whose name that matter-time
embodies
whether dirty
or not).¹⁷

And from this generalized statement about synchronous time-space linkage, he extrapolates an asynchronous time-space environment as he writes the poem decades removed and thousands of miles apart from his childhood São Luís. It was a

...double day
one within and one without
the room
one at my back and the other
in my face
pouring one into the other
through my body.¹⁸

He extends diurnal simultaneity to the nocturnal:

In any night there are many nights
but in a different way
from how days merge into
a day
(especially where they live
with little light).¹⁹

Therefore, as he fills out his view of synchronicity, he hastens to add a layer of social criticism that runs throughout the work, referring to the poor who have little access to modern conve-

niences, but again he quickly adds an exception to the notion that there is only one night when he allows that the rich might enjoy a separate but parallel simultaneity: "And thus the many nights / seem only one / or two at most."²⁰

Gullar takes the opportunity to explore in some detail his memories of the poor of São Luís who lived in shacks on stilts (*palafitas*) in the mud-flat intertidal zones that surround the city. His memory of the overwhelming smell of decomposition that would fill the air twice daily as the tide receded provokes suggestions of corruption and death and leads him to return to the idea of the parallel time-space continuum of the rich when he compares the earthy rot of the mud flats with the rather more prim ripening of a banana on a plate in a sunny window.

Another problematic image he evokes is of the Timbira Indians, as they were never a part of Gullar's past, having been eliminated long before his time. Nevertheless, they remain, somewhat removed as he imagines, embodied in the birds that still hide in the trees and fly above the city.

But nothing remains of those
Timbira Indians, except stories told in books
and some poems that hope
to evoke the shadows of the warriors²¹

Throughout these recollections we see that the city remains within Gullar, but he correspondingly sees himself also within the city he relives:

Water rushes through your gutters
it drags me through your streets
in coat and tie
My face looms in your mirrors
in ancient faces I appear
I see you in my many faces.²²

Just as the city, its persons, and its things are part of him. Gullar is equally a part of the city, its persons, and its things. Near the end of the poem he sums up all of the preceding when he writes:

The man is in the city
as a thing is in another
and the city's in the man
who's in another city.²³

* * * * *

At first we see how the loss of objects, of people, and of memory afflict the poet while he tries to reconstruct his former life as he writes in Buenos Aires. But he recovers his momentum, as well as a great deal of the past, and he recalls a rich texture of memories in terms of the smells, the sounds, the colors, the fears, the scandals, the people, and, indeed, all of his simple evocations of São Luís. Repeatedly, he returns to graphic memories of sexual experience and the vivid image of the physical body, which his dire adult circumstances would threaten daily, and to the various events of his aesthetic and political life.

As stated at the beginning of these reflections, the notion of globalization is complex and difficult to define. Indeed, anyone who considers globalization beyond very limited views must conclude that it presents both exciting new opportunities as well as disturbing implications. For instance, enhanced distribution of necessary goods, more efficient communications and travel, and greater transnational business opportunities seem to promise greater global health, wealth, and even political stability. To be sure, the effects of globalization have been broadly beneficial to many persons. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the urgent concerns of those untouched by its benefits. Many remain homeless, landless, and powerless, whose plight the Brazilian Sem Terra Movement recognizes. In "Settlement," Chico Buarque sings of how the displaced landless become cynical about the opportunities of the city when migration fails to ease their poverty. The city to which the Northeasterners flee comes to represent loss and oppression rather than opportunity and freedom. On the other hand, at his lowest emotional ebb, Ferreira Gullar appeals to his fond memories of the city. But this is a specific city. It is the city of his youth, the idealized, mythical image of São Luís. As is the case with the landless, the spatial displacement that Gullar suffers promises opportunity, or at least a reprieve, but ultimately it is unsatisfying because it is

forced and because it is simply not home. In both cases the persona appeals to the mythical past to give comfort to the present.

Notes

1. All texts cited in this paper are translations from Portuguese by Leland Guyer.
2. Chico Buarque, "Assentamento," in Sebastião Salgado, *Terra*, with an introduction by José Saramago (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997), 103.
3. Ferreira Gullar, *Poema Sujo*, 5th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1983), 102.
4. The *sertão* is a portion of the northeastern region of Brazil characterized by scrubland, cactus, periodic devastating droughts thought to be due to the climatological effect of *El Niño*, and endemic poverty. There is one major river in the area, the São Francisco, and it provides a relatively stable environment, but along this river relatively few landholders have controlled the most desirable parcels. Not having access to reliable sources of water, most of the region's other inhabitants are subject to the vagaries of the weather for their continued survival. Much of the Northeast is *sertão*, although most of the eastern Atlantic coastal area has reliable amounts of rainfall.
5. *Terra* is a magnificent photographic essay by the Brazilian Sebastião Salgado. Similar in style and focus to some of his earlier work, this book, which was released simultaneously in scores of different countries in 1997, portrays the plight of the persons for whose benefit the Sem Terra (without land, or landless) Movement emerged.
6. All of the biographical data on Ferreira Gullar derive from information he provided the author of this article. The sources are a written letter, dated 9 April 1985 and a personal interview conducted at his home in Rio de Janeiro on 2 July 1985.
7. Brazil has had three national capitals: Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and Brasília. The last capital, inaugurated in 1960, was built amid enormous controversy, following a 1956 campaign promise by Juscelino Kubitschek. Everything about its construction was questioned, from its isolated location in the nation's central plain to its radically modernist design and apparent disregard for certain practicalities and Brazilian cultural values; but perhaps the largest objection to its construction was the enormous cost that a relatively poor country would have to bear in the name of goals not always shared by the masses. A clear symbol of the city's dubious success is the persistent ring of surrounding shantytowns, established by the very workers who built the city and who then, in turn, could not afford to live in it.
8. Jânio Quadros remained in office only six months. His running mate and successor, João Goulart, who inspired Gullar's adopted surname, was widely perceived as a dangerous-thinking leftist whose threatening presence helped trigger a military coup against the government.
9. *Jeitinho*, literally meaning "little way," is a word Brazilians use to signify an able use of wit and cunning to accomplish whatever is necessary when lesser mortals would give up a cause as lost. A Brazilian may use *jeitinho* to influence

the outcome of matters as important as complex diplomatic negotiations or as insignificant as the purchase of soccer tickets when none appear to be available.

10. Leland Guyer, "An Interview with Ferreira Gullar," in *Discurso Literario* 5 (1987): 38.

11. Gullar, *Poema Sujo*, 12.

12. Certain memory markers repeat with interesting frequency in the poem. Following is a list of often-repeated words in *Dirty Poem* that have at least a tenuous connection to time and space. Only words that occur at least ten times appear on the list. The most obvious pattern that emerges from this list is the juxtaposition of images pertaining to social organization and elements of nature, the connection between the two underscoring the kind of earthiness that runs through this homage to life and justice.

<u>Occurrences</u>	<u>Word Variants/ Approximate Translations</u>
46	<i>cidade(s)</i> —city
29	<i>casa(s)</i> —house
26	<i>cheiro(s), cheirando</i> —smell
22	<i>dentro</i> —within
19	<i>homem(ns)</i> —man
19	<i>árvore(s)</i> —tree
18	<i>apodrece, apodrecia, apodrecendo, apodrecer</i> —rot
17	<i>mesa(s)</i> —table
14	<i>terra(s), terrenos, terrestre</i> —earth
13	<i>quitanda(s), quitandeiro</i> —grocery store
12	<i>tempo</i> —time
12	<i>lama</i> —mud
12	<i>janela(s)</i> —window
11	<i>roupa(s)</i> —clothing
11	<i>quintal(ais)</i> —backyard
11	<i>águas</i> —water
10	<i>sujo(a, os, as), sujar</i> —dirty
10	<i>sonho, sonham, sonhando</i> —dream
10	<i>quarto(s)</i> —room
10	<i>cozinha</i> —kitchen

13. Gullar, *Poema Sujo*, 13.

14. *Ibid.*, 15.

15. *Ibid.*, 14.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 37.

18. *Ibid.*, 38–39.

19. *Ibid.*, 43.

20. *Ibid.*, 44.

21. *Ibid.*, 60.

22. *Ibid.*, 79.

23. *Ibid.*, 102.