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Fence as Tragedy, Fence as Farce: Primitive Accumulation in *Redoble por Rancas*

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NGOs, social movements, political theorists, critical legal scholars, Internet entrepreneurs, indigenous communities: this is merely a partial list of the variety of people who have mobilized some kind of defense of the *commons*, in response to the global use of intellectual property law to regulate and commercialize the products of human creative labor. Whether it be the “new digital enclosures” of the Internet or the commercial appropriation of traditional knowledge and cultural patrimony, it is clear that a general struggle against “enclosures of the commons” is a primary battlefield in the fight to construct a more just and equitable future. Yet the language of commons and enclosure has a much longer history connected to struggles over land appropriation, especially in connection to what has traditionally been understood as “primitive accumulation.”¹ In the Andes in particular, the defense of communal availability of knowledge produced by the community has been articulated in an ecological language that connects community, land, and living well.”² Accordingly, contemporary attempts to construct a normative legal defense of the commons in a globalizing world (namely, the recent Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador) draw a direct line from the originary primitive accumulation of the Iberian conquest of the Americas, through struggles in favor of land reform and against the tradition of *latifundio*, all the way to modern-day incursions of biopiracy and the privatization of natural resources.

It is useful, then, when thinking about contemporary Andean struggles against the enclosure of the commons in all of its manifestations, to return to previous historical moments of primitive accumulation in order to understand the present better. Although it has not traditionally been interpreted as such, I propose a reading of Manuel Scorza’s *Redoble por Rancas* (1970) as a novelization of how a particular community lived a historical moment of primitive accumulation. *Rancas* is not a programmatic instruction manual for how Andean *comuneros* ought to recuperate their dispossessed land (although some critics fault the novel

for not being this). It is, however, an intricately constructed novel that uses Cervantes-like humor and irony, along with mildly experimental techniques, in order to dramatize a historical process of primitive accumulation that the novelist himself witnessed in the Peruvian Andes in the 1960s. *Rancas* presents a novelized answer to the question: how does a contemporary community actually live the process of liberal enclosure and accumulation by dispossession?

Although Manuel Scorza (Lima, 1928; Madrid, 1983) is one of the most widely-translated Peruvian authors of the twentieth century, he has received much less critical attention than his compatriots and contemporaries José María Arguedas and Mario Vargas Llosa. *Redoble por Rancas* (1970) is the first installment in Scorza's five-part cycle *La guerra silenciosa*, which, in its totality, attempts to represent the historical struggles of the inhabitants of the Department of Cerro de Pasco as they fight to recuperate control and ownership of their communal lands from the Peruvian government and multinational mining interests. In the novelistic cycle, Scorza fictionalizes and dramatizes historical events that took place in the Department of Cerro de Pasco between the late 1950s and the mid 1960s. *Rancas*, in particular, is a funny book; Kokotovic calls its humor "mordantly ironic" and adds "Scorza's satire of established authority is virtually unrelenting" (114).

Redoble por Rancas tells, in essence, two stories. Each story is told in alternate chapters, in what has best been described as a narrative double helix. The first story, told in the odd-numbered chapters, is that of the impending, and finally frustrated, confrontation between Héctor Chacón "el Nictálope" and Judge Montenegro. The second, told in the even-numbered chapters, is that of the parallel confrontation between the *comuneros* of the subsistence agricultural community of Rancas and the multinational Cerro de Pasco Corporation; the latter's presence manifested through the corporation's goons and the anthropomorphized fence they install in the cover of darkness.

In the first decade after the appearance of *Redoble por Rancas* and the other four novels in the *Guerra silenciosa* cycle, Peruvian critics paid little attention to Scorza's literary production. In Tomás Escajadillo's words, Scorza suffered a conspiracy of silence at the hands of the Peruvian literary establishment for reasons that had more to do with Scorza's personal and political life than the literary merit of his novels.³ When Scorza's novels began to be an object of interest to the Peruvian (and Latin American) literary establishment, the majority of the limited critical attention directed towards Scorza's work developed under the

rubric of *neoindigenismo*. Scorza's cycle narrates the intrusion of multinational capital into the life of communally-orientated villages in the Andes; in this aspect, the novels fall into the aesthetic category of Latin American *indigenismo*: literature written by Western-educated, non-indigenous Latin Americans who take as their subject matter the native population, in Scorza's case, the Peruvian Amerindians.⁴ Yet Scorza incorporates much of the formal innovation that marked the Latin American Boom: novels like Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), which, through narrative experimentation and stylistic modes such as magical realism, found an international audience and solidified a recognizable and marketable "Latin American aesthetic."

Thus the critical appraisal of Scorza's work, particularly that of *La guerra silenciosa*, has revolved around the questions of narrative heterogeneity and the problem of subaltern representation. In Antonio Cornejo Polar's estimation, *La guerra silenciosa* is a fundamentally heterogeneous work, in that it employs Western narrative forms in order to tell an Andean (i.e., non-Western) story. Others have questioned whether Scorza's "strange" elements arise organically from an Andean cosmivision or whether they are imported from the internationally successful magical realist novels; in other words, whether Scorza merely imposes the imported model of magical realism on Andean reality, or whether the "fantastic" events he narrates have some organic connection to the Andean world he represents.⁵

But this does not seem to be the most interesting line of criticism with which to approach Scorza's work. What *is* worth rescuing from *Rancas* is the arrival of the Fence. In the novel, the Fence itself becomes a character; indeed, it becomes the principle antagonist of the second narrative thread, parallel to Judge Montenegro—the greedy and corrupt sub-official—in the first thread. Scorza presents the Fence as an invading organism that rips a tear through the fabric of communal Andean life, yet what is more interesting is that the novel details the Fence's arrival in the community. The Fence first appears in an inchoate state, transported via that other hallmark of modernity's late arrival to a savage frontier: the railroad. The train "vomits" forth a group of unknown men, men who we will later learn work for the Cerro de Pasco Corporation, a multinational mining company.⁶ The men unload rolls of wire; after a brief lunch, they begin digging post holes. At first, the *ranqueños* watch, amused, at the Fence (from this point on in the story, always capitalized as a proper noun) wraps its way around Huiska, one of the barren peaks in the region: "Huiska is a barren

peak. It hides no minerals. It has no water. It refuses to even grow the most miserable grass. Why enclose it? With its barbed-wire necklace Huisca looked like a cow shoved into a corral. The *comuneros* almost died laughing” (*Drums* 24).⁷

Soon, however, the *comuneros*’ laughter dies down, as the Fence grows kilometers daily and devours everything in its path. It becomes a voracious worm that gobbles up lakes, peaks, and even towns. Locals must now walk kilometers along the length of the fence simply to traverse their villages: “Now the land, all the land, was growing old as a spinster behind a fence that no man’s feet could follow. The closest villages were days away” (*Drums* 181).⁸ Sheep, trapped within the confines of the enclosed land, begin to die of starvation:

“The highway to Cerro de Pasco was a sixty-mile-long necklace strung with dying sheep. Starving herds chewed the last blades of grass growing on the narrow strips of land tolerated by the Fence on either side of the highway. That grass lasted two weeks. The third week the livestock began to die. By the fourth week one hundred eighty sheep had died; by the fifth, three hundred twenty; by the sixth, three thousand” (*Drums* 73).⁹

Strangely enough, as the Fence transforms from eyesore to existential threat for the *comuneros*, it becomes increasingly invisible to the upper classes of the Department. In one of Scorza’s more fantastical flourishes, he describes a “blindness epidemic” that ravages the rich folk of the Department:

“No one ever learned why an epidemic attacked Cerro de Pasco. An unknown virus infected the eyes of its citizens. Apparently the victims enjoyed perfect vision except for a mysterious partial blindness that made certain objects invisible to them. A patient affected by the disease, who was able to describe, for example, the spots on a sheep half a mile away, could not see a fence at a distance of one hundred yards” (*Drums* 159-60).¹⁰

As Scorza spins out the absurd tale over several pages, he suggests—reporting rumors overheard by the town gossips—that the blindness was caused by a fruit-born virus from peaches and plantains imported from the Amazon; since the poor *comuneros* could not afford such delicacies, this explained their immunity to the disease. And thanks to the convenient blindness of almost all of the officials in the Department, the Fence continues to grow unabated, and the *comuneros* find themselves radicalized to the point of political action. At that point, the *comuneros* do indeed become visible to the Cerro de Pasco Corporation, but only in the form of targets: the novel ends with the Corporation’s massacre of the protesting commoners. What the *comuneros* initially understood as a farcical endeavor undertaken by uninvited foreigners quickly degenerates into tragedy as the unimaginable becomes normalized, and the *comuneros* suffer the violence of dispossession.

Yet for all of its feigned invisibility, the Fence brings a new sense of order and measure to Cerro de Pasco. As Rodríguez Ortiz has observed, it is the one object capable of universalizing, equalizing, and quantifying the indefinite proliferations of geographic names:

“Especially for a reader unfamiliar with Peruvian geography, the plurality of names and the geographic breadth creates a certain reality effect by way of an ambiguity that synthesizes the many distinct spaces: Rancas, Yanacocha, Yurscayan, Huariaca, Tambopampa, Huancayo, Cauta, Piscapuquio, are a few of the recognizable names that upon first glance appear to presuppose their (rarely indicated) geography proximity, but also the wide open space of rhetorical effects in the text. All of these multiple spaces become one thanks to the limiting presence of a fence erected by the mining company, and what becomes singular and reduced in its configuration (an anonymous company run by foreign capital and capitalists) imposes a limit upon what is in reality unlimited” (my translation).¹¹

Of course, the question of whether that unlimited and overlapping world needed to be limited and measured is of another order. This is the conundrum at the heart of primitive accumulation. It is the originary violence that inaugurates a place into the world of capitalism modernity, the *ex novo* separation between producers and means of production that is the perquisite of a market economy (De Angelis 35). As David Harvey explains, primitive accumulation, or accumulation by dispossession, does the “necessary” work of transitioning a society into the modern capitalist world by “the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of the rights to the commons” (Harvey 145).

In Rancas, the Fence does the work of enclosure: not only does it serve as the visual reminder and material codification of that line between *mine* and *thine*, but furthermore it creates a new metric that robs the land of its social past and erases the history of communal practices that had previously constituted the place. In pretending that the communal lands were available for enclosure and appropriation in the first place, the Fence creates its own myth of wilderness, wasteland, and frontier that it posits *and* erases. “Before my arrival,” Scorza’s anthropomorphized Fence seems to proclaim, “there was an infinite, immeasurable, and unknowable expanse of wilderness. I bring reason and measure.” So says the Fence, but the Fence—even as it tames the slovenly wilderness—gives neither of bird nor of bush. Indeed, it is Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” that seems best to reflect the process Scorza dramatizes:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

What Scorza shows is that the so-called “wilderness,” the common land of the *comuneros*, is precisely *not* slovenly, and that “dominion,” or in this case, enclosure, robs the land of its fecundity. Or rather, that the land only *becomes* slovenly through the act of primitive accumulation: the claim of “gray and bare” dominion over all that used to be wild and free. Fence can only measure itself; in drawing the line of measure, it erases the community. Enclosure is always a *process*; if fence can ever serve as origin, it is only via some form of appropriation and erasure.

It is this process that connects Scorza’s commons and Stevens’s slovenly wilderness: the specific intervention of an object produced by industrial society—a jar, a fence—into a landscape which said object comes to dominate and define. The object thus becomes a synecdoche for a whole that the object itself brings into being. The Fence becomes a totalizing synecdoche for appropriated land; the jar becomes a totalizing synecdoche for a tamed and enclosed former wilderness. Such *creatio ex nihilo* can also be read into the process of primitive accumulation, especially as that process manifests itself in contemporary critiques of imperialism, globalization, and neoliberalism. Theorists such as David Harvey and Massimo De Angelis have expanded on Marx’s and Luxemburg’s concept of primitive accumulation as a one-time event in the transition to capitalism, in order to propose an ongoing process of accumulation by dispossession as “an inherent and continuous element of modern societies” whose “range of action extends to the entire world” (De Angelis 29). It is precisely in unmasking the dispossession suffered by the *ranqueños*, using a combination of experimental techniques, bitter satire, and first-hand knowledge of the historical events, that *Rancas* succeeds as a moving and beautiful piece of literature.

Yet some critics interpret *Rancas* and *La guerra silenciosa* as a whole as a literary failure, especially in light of the author’s stated intentions in the prologue to produce “the exasperatingly real account of a lonely battle” and his position as more of a “witness” than a

“novelist.”¹² According to these critics, Scorza works himself into a (static, non-dialectic) corner while trying to negotiate the two distinct traditions of the *indigenista* novel, on the one hand, and the Latin American Boom novel, on the other. So while he may employ a savage irony in the portrayal of the real injustices suffered by the *comuneros* (the blindness epidemic, for instance), the fantastic/magical realist register in which he operates leave Scorza without any way to attack the concrete contradictions he details. Losada sees this process as ultimately culminating in an ahistorical position that robs Scorza’s characters of any agency (Losada 110-11). This critique, then, is as political as it is aesthetic: from his “heterogeneity” (to use Cornejo’s formulation), the bourgeois Scorza can only approach the *comuneros* from an ahistorical position that appeals to timeless myth and fantasy in the explanation of reality.

Mabel Moraña takes this line of criticism even further: she accuses Scorza’s work of ideological folly. Scorza’s *La guerra silenciosa* cycle—as exemplified in *Rancas*—presents an ideological justification of defeat; according to her reading, the mythical-fantastic, far from deconstructing the dominant ideological vision (represented by the arrival of the Fence, the train, and the Cerro de Pasco Corporation), rather superimposes that ideological vision on the *comuneros* themselves. The very cyclical and fantastic nature of the five novel cycle—where each attempt at organized resistance ends with a massacre—in a sense conforms to dominant ideology because it presents defeat itself as the inevitable and timeless confirmation of an eternally recurrent myth. In a word: it is power itself, according to Moraña, which becomes mythologized in Scorza’s novels. Expanding on Losada, she advances: “It is a vacillating, distant, and troubled petty bourgeois consciousness which produces a mythic conceptualization of power and solidifies history and class struggle in the neutral plane of fantasy” (my translation).¹³

In Moraña’s reading, the neutralization of struggle is an ideological operation. This position seems to posit a different location from which an escape from ideology is possible; Moraña’s criterion for aesthetic judgment would not be, then, a question of telling *better stories* but rather of correct empirical confirmation. *How to correctly represent the comuneros’ struggle against the Fence?* This question directly attacks the problem of narrating the story of a historical defeat while maintaining open the possibility of radical change. Understood broadly, that problematic involves revealing the appropriation and enclosure (or, in Harvey’s terms, the accumulation by dispossession) that lies beneath and behind “modernizing” projects on American soil, while also somehow empowering the *comuneros* in fiction so as to

overcome their historical defeat.

Moraña's point is that Scorza's myth-making forecloses the possibility of radical change by removing Rancas and the *comuneros* from history itself. One could argue, however, that Scorza's presentation of power is mythologizing because the Fence itself is a mythological creature: Fence creates its own origin story by erasing the past and imposing itself as the only proper way to measure and understand the very world which it has brought into being. Scorza's novel is valuable in that it makes visible the appropriation and enclosure that unroll themselves with each kilometer of the Fence. The Fence, analogously, represents the erasure of the *comuneros'* land; more generally, Fence erases the commons. For better or for worse, Scorza does not counter the dystopian Fence and the Cerro de Pasco Corporation behind it with a positive or utopian political project. Scorza does, however, insist that there *is* something before the existence of Fence, and he names that thing *community*. In unmasking Fence to reveal the original appropriation that lies behind Fence's self-proclaimed origin story, Scorza combats accumulation by dispossession via the demythologization of the dispossessing object itself. Fence scars the land in a way that makes absolute return to an unenclosed community impossible. The *comuneros*, forced through dispossession into political organization against a two-fold liberal and imperial antagonist (the Peruvian State and the multinational Corporation, respectively), must engage that antagonist within the fenced arena of global modernity. Yet in *Rancas*, Fence is as mythological a creature as any other character in the narrative, and part of the *comuneros'* rise to political consciousness involves rejecting Fence's own self-serving mythological origin story. The most damaging and dangerous myth in *Rancas* is the myth the Cerro de Pasco Corporation tells itself: that Rancas and the surrounding communities are wastelands in dire needs of enclosure and improvement in the first place.

Notes

¹ Primitive accumulation is a central concept in the first volume of Marx's *Das Kapital*, especially Part VIII, "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation." Primitive accumulation is the historical event that makes possible the transition from a feudal mode of production to a nascent capitalist mode of production. In Chapter 31 ("The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist"), Marx explains: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. [...] These methods depend in part on brute force, e.g., the colonial system. But, they all employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power" (435-36). For contemporary interpretations of "primitive accumulation" as "accumulation by dispossession" and "enclosure," especially as articulated by David Harvey, see works cited.

² For an introduction to the discourse of "living well" (*buen vivir* in Spanish; *sumak kawsay* in Quechua), see Karl S. Zimmerer, "The Indigenous Andean Concept of Kawsay, the Politics of Knowledge and Development, and the Borderlands of Environment Sustainability in Latin America," *PMLA* 127.3 (May 2012): 600-06.

³ Escajadillo investigates the motivation behind the "conspiracy of silence" in "Scorza antes de la última batalla" and the complementary interview "Scorza antes del última combate." Scorza himself, in the interview with Escajadillo, attributes the negative reception among Peruvian literary critics and academics to his irreverent use of humor in a socially committed novel. Scorza elaborates: "Yo creo que en ese sentido a veces hay el error de considerar que las buenas causas tienen que estar unidas al aburrimiento. Yo creo que justamente una de las aportaciones que probablemente yo he hecho a la novela indigenista es el tono de desenfado, el humor, y todo eso, que por lo demás es mi tono personal" (Escajadillo, "Combate" 67).

⁴ Cornejo Polar describes the essential aspects of *indigenismo*: "su heterogeneidad conflictiva, que es el resultado inevitable de una operación literaria que pone en relación asimétrica dos universos socioculturales distintos y opuestos, uno de los cuales es el indígena (al que corresponde la instancia referencial), mientras que el otro (del que dependen las instancias productivas, textuales y de recepción) está situado en el sector más moderno y occidentalizado de la sociedad peruana. Esta contradicción interna reproduce la contradicción básica de los países andinos" ("Neoindigenismo" 550).

⁵ For discussions of magical realist and *indigenista* linguistic registers in *Redoble por Rancas*, see Schmidt (1991), Estrada (2002), Estrada (2007), and Ohanna (2005). For general bibliography, see Schmidt's essential "Bibliografía" (1991), Schmidt's 1993 supplement "Nuevas aproximaciones," and Escorzo's "Suplemento" (1993).

⁶ Cerro de Pasco Corporation (1902-1974) was an American-owned multinational mining corporation that exercised near-monopoly control over mining in Peru for a significant part of the twentieth century, until it was nationalized during the left-wing military coup of General Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-75). According to the "historical note" that accompanies the Julian D. Smith manuscript collection at the Saint Louis University Library, "the company [...] consolidated its grazing land by expropriating the property of local communities. Cerro was therefore accused of having created a pool of unskilled labor for itself by forcing local people off their land." Smith was the manager of the Cerro de Pasco Corporation's Lima office; a comparative study of his diaries and Scorza's documentary and narrative accounts of the real-life events portrayed in the *Guerra silenciosa* pentalogy is a promising and as-yet unexplored line of inquiry. See <<http://archon.slu.edu/?p=creators/creator&id=47>>.

⁷ "El Huiska es un cerro pelado que no esconde mineral, ni ojo de agua, ni tolera el más mísero pasto. ¿Para qué encerrarlo? Con su collar de alambre el Huiska parecía una vaca metida en un corral. Se murieron de risa" (*Rancas* 179). All translations are Edith Grossman's (*Drums for Rancas*). The page number in the body of the text refers to the Cátedra edition; the page number in the footnote refers to Grossman's translation.

⁸ "Ahora la tierra, toda tierra conocida, envejecía soltera detrás de un cerro que los pies de ningún humano eran capaces de seguir. Los pueblos más cercanos distaban jornadas" (*Rancas* 342).

⁹ "La carretera a Cerro de Pasco era un collar de cien kilómetros de ovejas moribundas. Rebaños famélicos rascaban las últimas matas en las estrecheces que, a cada lado de la carretera, toleraba la imperiosidad del Cerco. Ese pasto duró dos semanas. La tercera el ganado empezó a morir. La cuarta semana fallecieron ciento ochenta ovejas; la quinta, trescientas veinte; la sexta, tres mil" (*Rancas* 232)

¹⁰ "Nunca se supo por qué una epidemia azotó Cerro de Pasco. Un desconocido virus infectó los ojos de los habitantes. Aparentemente, las víctimas gozaban de la integridad de su visión, pero un novedoso daltonismo les

escamoteaba algunos objetos. Un enfermo capaz de señalar, por ejemplo, las manchas de una oveja a un kilómetro, era incapaz de distinguir un cerco situado a cien metros" (*Rancas* 321)

¹¹ "La pluralidad de nombres, especialmente para el lector ajeno a la geografía peruana, la amplitud geográfica crea un especial efecto de realidad por medio de una ambigüedad que sintetiza lo distinto: Rancas, Yanacocha, Yurascayan, Huariaca, Tambopampa, Huancayo, Cauta, Piscapuquio, son algunos de los nombres identificables después de un rastreo que pareciera presuponer su cercanía (indicada pocas veces) geográfica o mensurable, pero también el espacio abierto de efectos retóricos en el discurso del texto. En el fondo todas esas localidades llegan a ser una sola por la presencia limitante de un cerco tendido por la compañía minera, y lo que es uno y reducido en su configuración (una compañía anónima con capitales, capitalista y cabezas fuera del Perú) impone una limitación a lo realmente ilimitado" (Rodríguez Ortiz 106).

¹² "Más que un novelista, el autor es un testigo" (*Rancas* 149).

¹³ "Es la conciencia de la vacilante, lejana, e inquieta pequeña burguesía que produce una conceptualización mítica del poder y estatiza la historia y la lucha de clases en el plano neutral de la fantasía" (Moraña 185).

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