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Wandering the Camino Real: The Walking Archive and *The Unreal, Silver-Plated Book*

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If the metaphor of the journey has long been used to describe history, what would it mean to insist that history is a journey taken on foot, such that each stop at a monument to a statesman or war hero also became the opportunity to wander off the given path? This is the implicit challenge posed to our notions of history by the Argentine artist Eduardo Molinari in his book *The Unreal, Silver-Plated Book / El Libro Plateado y Real*.¹ *The Unreal Book* is

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among a collection of books Molinari has authored under the aegis of El Archivo Caminante (The Walking Archive). El Archivo Caminante is a meta/counter-institution of sorts: it is at once an actual archive and a platform for research and artistic practices that question the work of history and historical archives in order to re-imagine their potential. The archive itself has an open and constantly evolving collection that includes documents Molinari has obtained through archival research; photographs taken during his walks; “documents” of his own authorship such as collages and drawings; and what Molinari calls “trash documentation,” which are residues of mass culture he has found or others have donated and that include everything from advertisements and news clippings to maps, posters and flyers from the streets.

While the archive is a work in itself, Molinari draws from it to create more bounded compositions, such as videos, site-specific installations, and books like *The Unreal Book*. As a performatic entity, the Walking Archive frames Molinari’s transdisciplinary practice, which he describes as “research carried out through artistic methodologies.” While he draws on historical and ethnographic research, he transforms these as he entwines them with approaches gleaned from militant research, psycho-geography, walking as an artistic practice, travel writing, and experimental approaches to narrative. The result in *The Unreal Book* is a text of many voices that can be understood on multiple registers: as a work of art, a document of transversal research, and an experimental essay that takes up questions central to studies of coloniality, historiography’s reproduction of subalternity, and the negotiation of state and colonial violence in representation.



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The Unreal Book is a record of an investigation Molinari began in 2001, in the midst of a financial crisis that devastated Argentina’s working and middle classes and brought with it massive popular uprisings and political upheaval. The crisis brought into national and international consciousness the savage dimensions of Argentina’s neoliberalization, for which the country had been known as a “poster child” of the International Monetary Fund. As Argentina’s economy collapsed under the contradictions of this program, Molinari set out to investigate the subjectivities and institutions it had produced and which had, in turn, avowed

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and sustained it. Yet, more specifically, Molinari sought to understand how these events connected to Argentina's colonial legacy, which is often disavowed in its national consciousness. What better way to trace the imprint of the colony in the present than to literally follow its tracks? In this case, the Spanish colonial economy was symbolized in the Camino Real—a transcontinental route used by the Spanish Empire to take silver from Potosí, through Lima to Buenos Aires and, finally, to Europe. Molinari plots his investigation along the course of the Camino, beginning in the National Archives in Buenos Aires and then proceeding along its path to Argentine cities and towns where colonial administrative bodies were once located.

As he moves between these sites, Molinari's inquiry into how both colonial and pre-Conquest sites and edifices have been memorialized, invisibilized, re-purposed, and re-signified becomes a catalyst for proliferating histories and often unexpected travel accounts that comprise the book's layered and fragmented narratives. For example, these include the story of the first appearance of the Virgin of Copacabana; a visit to simulated ruins that commemorate the purportedly extinguished indigenous civilization of the sub-Andes; and the long history of a lot that once hosted a colonial customs house, which was turned into a national mint, then a state university, and then a glitzy shopping mall in the 1990s. Refusing any unified or linear narrative, the text moves between the times and spaces of Spanish colonialism, nineteenth century nation-building and genocide, popular insurgency and state terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s, and, finally, the heyday of neoliberalism in the 1990s, as well as the organized resistance that emerged that same decade with the rise of the unemployed workers' (*piquetero* or "picketers") movement.



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As Molinari's investigation follows the Camino Real, it also traces a movement between distinct repositories of the past, from the Argentine state's national archives and the municipal archives of far-flung towns, to historic markers, erased sites, collective memory and rumor, and, finally, sacred sites and ritual practice. This movement demarcates the limits of the archive, and of History perhaps, as it points to

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collocations of memory, life histories, and ways of knowing that escape their logics and representational mandates. This becomes especially evident in two of the stories at the heart of the book. The first of these is set in and around Tilcara, a town in northwestern Argentina named for the indigenous people who first lived there. In Tilcara, Molinari encounters a local history centered around the Virgin of Copacabana, her sanctuary in the mountains, and the two unusual sculptures of Christ it has housed: the first an homage to a slain *guerrillera* and, the second, the more contemporary figure of an indigenized Christ known as the Kolla Christ.

When Molinari participates in the annual pilgrimage from Tilcara to the Virgin's sanctuary he sees that, even beyond the presence of the Kolla Christ, the entire rite is an admixture of indigenous and Catholic symbolism. He sees indigenous practices and worldviews make themselves present as "one story within another"—dominated, but not assimilated and certainly not extinguished. Thus, the colonial struggle for domination is very much alive in the present. Here it is manifest in a dominant culture's struggle to impose a singular representational regime upon a present that is, in fact, heterogeneous: "The official discourse of the church attempts to leave no room for double readings" (42). What Molinari signals, in effect, is the epistemic violence of coloniality, whose deformations and obfuscations cannot be deciphered or even recuperated by the historian's prose. Instead, in *The Unreal Book*, this "story within another" appears as a rupture in the text, resisting representation. In its opacity, it signals the difference Dipesh Chakrabarty—in *Provincializing Europe*—describes as marking the border *and the relationship* between the discourses that define the modern and other worlds they actively silence (110).

The Unreal Book also marks out a point of epistemic fissure when it turns to the history of the 1960s and 1970s. Molinari travels to Córdoba, which was the site of a major civil uprising in 1969 led by workers and students. As he finds this particular past to be somehow absent, Molinari comes to ask what is—and what can be—preserved of the memory of a generation that was characterized by its revolutionary vision and manifestations of popular power. In a passage titled "Fireflies, Documentary Nothing" [*Luciérnagas, Nada documental*], Molinari suggests that the worldview of this generation, its ardor and aspirations, far exceed the place history has accorded them. This is not only a question of political defeat; it also signals a certain limit of historical representations, which look to accretions of historical evidence but are less able to capture emergent subjectivities and collective desires that (may) become counter-hegemonic projects.

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But, of course, the generation of the left Molinari is writing about is also remembered for the extreme repression it suffered. In Argentina, as throughout South America, it was targeted by authoritarian regimes and state-led terror campaigns that attempted to stamp out leftist ideologies and forms of solidarity to pave the way for a new economic order. If we read Molinari's meditation on the silence enshrouding this generation's struggle, it points toward a way of thinking of the project and scope of political violence beyond what human rights discourse permits. Rather than focusing on the material, individualizing violence of state terror and repression, he points to the violence that was wrought upon a political imagination; the epistemic marginalization of what was once a vital worldview. That is, to the degree it managed to contract the political horizon for the generations that followed or set the radical aspirations of the past beyond the present's imagination, the legacy of political violence continues to make itself felt.

While the Walking Archive works *from* history—taking up its archives, national myths, and signposts of the march of the state—it wholly refuses the work *of* History, instead returning to us a story full of holes, or rather, threads of many stories that cannot be transcoded into just one. For Molinari, this is not just a deconstructive labor. As he follows fissures along history's route, he marks these spaces of difference, though he does not purport to represent them. Thus, if the Walking Archive can be said to have its own historiographical project, it would be a commitment to what lies at the border of invisibility—what Molinari describes as “worlds that are opening, not yet existing.”

Jennifer Flores Sternad's work as an academic and curator focuses on political thought and cultural production in the Americas that connect to left social movements and anti-imperialist struggles. Her projects this past year included *Arrhythmias of Counter-Production: Engaged Art in Argentina, 1995-2011*, an exhibition she curated for UCSD's University Art Gallery; a workshop on narrative, political imagination and La Otra Cultura she co-directed for UNAM's Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco; and publications in several edited volumes: *Live Art in LA, 1970-1983*; *Art and Activism in the Age*

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of *Globalization*; and *MEX/LA: Mexican Modernisms in Los Angeles*. She holds a B.A. in Literature from Harvard and an M.A. in Art History from UCLA, and is currently pursuing a PhD in American Studies at NYU.

Notes

¹ This new bilingual edition, with an English translation by Brian Whitener, was published by Fiction Department for the exhibition *Arrhythmias of Counter-Production: Engaged Art in Argentina, 1995-2011* at the University Art Gallery of the University of California, San Diego. The book is half of a diptych: its complement was an installation composed of scores of documents drawn from The Walking Archive. More information can be found on the publisher's website, <http://ficción.de>.

Works Cited

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