



THE DESOLATE PARADISE: EMPIRE, EXILE AND EXISTENTIALISM IN COLONIAL
LATIN AMERICA: ANTONIO DI BENEDETTO'S *ZAMA* AND JUAN JOSÉ SAER'S
THE WITNESS

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The Desolate Paradise: Empire, Exile and Existentialism in Colonial Latin America: Antonio di Benedetto's *Zama* and Juan José Saer's *The Witness*

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ABSTRACT

The link between exile and existentialism is often lost in the depersonalised world of the Other, where individual expression and desire, as well as the individuals themselves, are blurred by the broad metaphors and sweeping generalisations used to describe and understand groups of people. Yet, both Antonio di Benedetto's *Zama* and Juan José Saer's *The Witness* offer precise and distinct visions of the powerful effect exile and oppression have on the individual and their sense of identity, belonging and hope. Recently translated into English, *Zama* subverts traditional imperial/colonial stereotypes to offer a more complex vision of the existential effect of colonisation on the individual. Similarly, *The Witness* deconstructs the age of exploration and complicates the received wisdom of this period of history and its silenced characters.

Both novels use the colonial period as an allegory for Latin America's position in a contemporary global setting, and as such speak to groups struggling for sovereignty or autonomy. In addition, either explicitly or by implication, both novels turn the Latin American gaze back toward Europe and so offer insights for those looking to understand their role as colonisers in the postcolonial Anglophone world. This essay aims to identify the existential pressure created by exile and examine how the struggle for identity manifests itself in Latin American literature. Given that Latin American writers continue to find inspiration and allegory in the colonial experience even after two centuries of independence, and given that the Anglophone world has much less experience of the postcolonial setting, it seems highly relevant that we study these insights in detail.

KEYWORDS: english literature, postcolonial, exile, existentialism, sovereignty

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The link between exile and existentialism is often lost in the depersonalised world of the Other, where individual expression and desire, as well as the individuals themselves, are blurred by the broad metaphors and sweeping generalisations used to describe and understand groups of people. Yet, both Antonio di Benedetto's *Zama* and Juan José Saer's *The Witness* offer precise and distinct visions of the powerful effect exile and oppression have on the individual and their sense of identity, belonging and hope. Following Fanon's assertion that the "same behaviour patterns obtain in every race that has been subjected to colonisation" (25), it will be assumed that both novels, set in Latin America's colonial past, instruct far beyond their historical, geographical and political setting. By subverting traditional stereotypes in a colonial environment and presenting more complete and complex characters who observe from a decentred position - and either explicitly or implicitly turn the gaze back toward Europe - they offer valuable lessons for any group struggling for sovereignty or autonomy.

THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

The enslaved, exploited or exiled protagonist is embedded within the Latin American literary tradition (Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 149) and *Zama* as a character is widely understood in this vein, as the *criollo* who "accepts the conqueror's values and so denies his own identity and ties to the land" (Serra, 143). Yet *Zama* is more complex than this, and his middle position in the colonial administration means he plays the role of both exploiter and exploited. This essay aims to develop this idea further using the lens of exile and the understanding that *Zama* is, in effect, exiled *within an internal colony* where "dominant and subordinate populations intermingle" (Barrera) and indigenous or enslaved peoples are subjugated as Other.

Yet, while *Zama* is set within a definite historical period, in and around colonial Asunción in the final decade of the eighteenth century, it is not understood as a historical novel. Instead, as Saitta states, di Benedetto deconstructs the traditional architecture of this genre, using the context as a vehicle to express contemporary existential ideas in a Latin American setting. This "regionalist" tendency in di Benedetto's work (Allen, 75), means that *Zama* is recognised less as an attempt to respond creatively to the established European philosophy and more as a spontaneous expression

of existentialism in Latin America, a depiction which shatters the idea that existentialism is simply a European response to the Second World War (Saer, 2010, 47).

This same juxtaposition of exile and existentialism can be applied to *The Witness*, where a 15th century voyage to the South American continent is ambushed by cannibals who devour everyone on board except the teenage narrator who is saved but held captive for ten years. Already an orphan before going to sea, the protagonist finds himself abandoned a second time, alienated not only from the people around which his identity would usually be expected to form, but also from his homeland. This enforced exile drives a redefinition of the self against a more powerful foreign Other, and echoes Saer's own self-imposed exile in Europe, so that while it is true that *The Witness* can be read as a novel about history (de Grandis, 1993, 417), memory (Ohanna, 25), language (Gollnick, 107), or even as parody (de Grandis, 1994, 37), it can still be placed within the context of the return to democracy and the development of themes such as exile and home which were tackled by other contemporary Argentinian writers (O'Connor, 78).

UNDERSTANDING EXILE

The Witness explores the intense psychological damage of exile by offering a forceful vision of the role of "home" in the psyche of the individual. Set in the age of exploration but before colonisation proper begins, the narrator poignantly finds himself alone to bear "witness" to a way of life which is held by a group who are about to become a "people without history" (Mignolo, 64).

As such, the tribe have no wish to hold the boy indefinitely and they release him as soon as they see the next wave of Spanish conquistadors arrive in the area. The cabin boy spends a total of ten years with the tribe, so by the time the Spaniards find him alone in his canoe he has little memory of the Spanish language and is barely recognisable as European. The conquistadors vow to sail upriver to destroy the village around which the tribe's world is built, and while the cabin boy cannot stop the ensuing carnage, he understands that the tribe would rather die than to be taken prisoner and therefore separated from their homeland.

It is hard for me to imagine the scattered or captive survivors anywhere else but in that yellow beach crisscrossed by naked bodies. That place was also the centre of the world which they carried within them; the visible horizon around it was made up of concentric rings of problematic reality whose existence became less and less likely the further away one went from that central observation point ... If anything existed, it could not do so outside of that place (126).

Here, home is presented as a place carried within the individual with separation from that home creating a fracture within the self. Put another way, individuals without a home lose some part of their basic humanity. This presents the first of three reversals in the novel: it is no longer the indigenous peoples who are denied their humanity but the Europeans who, through their lack of connection to the land, are relegated to a non-human position in this fundamental aspect. In addition, the old hierarchy which foregrounds European colonies over indigenous land claims is also inverted because it is the tribe who feel the call of home most acutely, leaving the adventuring Spaniard as the one who has no claim to the land. Finally, by choosing death while fighting for the homeland, Saer undermines the enslaved, exploited or exiled trope of native peoples across the world and challenges the myth that the Americas were taken without resistance, essentially flipping the narrative from European conquest to indigenous resistance and thereby restoring a sense of dignity to the vanquished people. Taken together, these three reversals complete a full subversion of the archetype of the *foreign cannibal*, confirmed as ancient by the Herodotus epigraph that opens the novel (1), and in doing so Saer presents an imaginative view of pre-Columbian life that meets his goal as a writer of avoiding “exoticism”, which he considered the “ghetto of Latin American-ness” (Rowe). His vision is neither superficial nor patronising, sympathetic nor romantic, and it offers a subtlety and nuance to the social structure that is usually reserved for explaining the European social structure. Furthermore, this lack of home forces a kind of psychological death or loss, in which the individual is forced to live within a “problematic reality”. The members of the tribe understand instinctively one of the most powerful psychological effects of exile; that once separated from home an attempt will be made to bridge the gap mentally and nostalgia will corrupt the memory of

the home by making it more intense than the reality (Berg, 4). This is why the home cannot exist “outside of that place”, beyond the direct experience of the place where home is situated. This goes beyond mere solipsism to include a fundamental link between the individual and the world of objects, a kind of symbiosis where, “the tree was there, and they were the tree. Without them there was no tree, but without the tree they too were nothing. Each was so dependent on the other that any trust was impossible [and] it was impossible to break the vicious cycle” (128). The same can be said of the link to the land. Remove either one from the equation and negate both. In this there is also a final message; that Europeans might take the land but because they could never establish this fundamental link, they could never fully own it. In this, the whole European colonial project is subverted as a superficial enterprise lacking spirituality and not the stated divine mission in search of souls for a Catholic God. As such, it is not Europeans who are destined to achieve salvation through the coloniality/modernity project that gave birth to the Enlightenment (Mignolo, 83), but the indigenous tribes who had already achieved a kind of salvation through their link to the land.

There is, of course, an issue with Saer’s use of ‘Indians’ to express his ideas on empire; it demonstrates that for non-indigenous authors, indigenous societies remain available for use as vehicles to express ideas, as convenient and malleable metaphors upon which any story or concept can be superimposed. The only difference is the message; in place of European supremacy we now have postcolonialism. While Saer’s development of a narrative about indigenous peoples in the age of discovery does present a break from the traditional Argentinian literary focus upon “neo-European” themes (de Grandis, 1993, 417), and while it does go some way to authenticating their experience in the literary canon, these experiences continue to be truncated and their stories are still narrated - and thereby authenticated - by proxy, by an Argentinian writer looking not to subjugation but to further his own ideas and agenda which are not necessarily indigenous.

As stated, in addition to exile to or from a place, we can also understand exile *within a place*. This oppression is no less fierce because it lacks the removal of people from their homeland and culture. In fact, the internal colony is more subtle and pernicious and can be considered “more poignant than exile from a place or exile to a place. Exile, viscerally, is difference, otherness” (Bevan, 3).

As a member of the *criollo* class, it is exactly this otherness within an internal colony which Zama experiences. As second-in-command to a Spanish born *Gobernador*, Zama's Spanish descent places him in a higher social-strata than the indigenous and *mestizo* population around him but his birth in the Americas excludes him from the highest positions in the imperial administration which he fiercely desires. As Allen notes in her preface to the novel, "the risk that those born in the colonies might identify more with the conquered than with the conquerors was too great" (92). So, while there is no racial difference between Zama and Europeans, a glass ceiling renders him Other in an internal colony where his life and limitations have been mapped out for him by a force which he cannot see, an institutional racism which maintains power in the hands of the Spanish crown, and it is from this that all his frustration flows. Yet this is far more complex than a simple master/slave relationship. In Barrera's terms, Zama both "intermingles" with the "dominant and subordinate populations" and at the same time is both the dominant and subordinate class. It is the feeling of being from the subordinate class, however, which is felt most keenly as the colonial social structure creates an "inferiority complex [which] is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly" (Fanon, 25).

In a vain attempt to combat this, Zama pompously displays his love of Spain through his conspicuous but exclusive choice of "Spanish" women (478), as it is through their conquest that he is able to validate his own worth as Spain's equal. These trophy women demonstrate his desire to "not only to be accepted but to be absorbed" (Ashcroft *et. al*, 201) into the dominant culture, and as such Zama feels he has the right to "dominate and possess" them (Nespolo in Serra, 144, author's own translation). When things do not go well for Zama in this regard, his self-loathing surges, preventing him from looking at himself in the mirror because he knows "that if Marta's eyes had been on me I would have felt the need to cut myself a little" (1075). Here we see the power of the colonial gaze acting through the Spaniard Marta. Just as the "Western surveying gaze somehow constitutes itself as Western when looking at the Orient" (Richon in Beardsell, xi), Zama internalises the gaze and so idealises Marta as Western while despising himself because his is an American. It is striking that he does not rebel against the gaze but instead censors himself and then resigns

himself to it, stating that he looks in the mirror “defiantly at first, and then later with greater calm” (1071). The control exercised over an individual here is not public but private; not physical but psychological; Zama can never become the Spaniard he so badly desires, so he cannot become fully absorbed into the ruling colonial culture. This will be explored in more detail below.

While Zama is gazed upon from above, his middle position in society means that he is also able to exercise this same power over those below him.

Cloaked by the vegetation ... I made out the nape of a neck, but whether it was a white women's or a *mulatta's*, I know not. I had no wish to go on looking, for the sight held me spellbound and it might be a *mulatta* and I must not lay eyes on them so as not to dream and render myself susceptible and bring about my downfall. I fled (313).

In spying on this young girl, Zama gives us an insight into the tormented mind of the *criollo*. In identifying first the “white woman” and then the “*mulatta*”, Zama's syntax reflects the racial hierarchy of the colony and yet crucially he omits his own *criollo* class, thereby confirming his isolation within his own country. In addition, he feels instinctively that if the woman is not “white” then she presents sufficient danger to bring about his “downfall”. Because Zama has internalised the European supremacist logic of the Spanish empire and its hierarchy, this downfall can be interpreted as a racial downfall. Zama feels threatened by the individual *mulatta* because any romantic encounter could lead to children who are not *criollo* but *mestizo*, which would represent for Zama a drop in social status for all his descendants. Therefore, it is through Zama's gaze, which has internalised Spain's gaze, that he becomes both the oppressor and the oppressed. It is not the individual who is threatening to Zama, but the very existence of other American classes, representing, as they do, that which Zama would prefer to forget; that he when viewed from Spain he is no different to the *mulatta*. The result of empire is the creation of a class of administrators who are socially controlled, aggrandised yet alienated, and like this they are prevented from unifying with other Americans and demanding autonomy.

The ambiguous position of the *criollo* is further explored through Zama's role as a colonial magistrate. His legal decision to support the hacienda system against the welfare of ‘two hundred

natives' (747) further highlights the psychological control which Spain exerts upon him. Essentially, this decision is an act of kinship with Spain on Zama's part; he is demonstrating his loyalty and dedication to the crown. As such, Zama could reasonably expect this act to be repaid with some other demonstration of trust by Prieto, a Spaniard representing the crown and empire. When Prieto challenges Zama's decision on the grounds of fairness, Zama immediately retaliates by questioning Prieto's loyalty.

Very deliberately I said, as if upon deep reflection, 'Is it a Spaniard I address, then, or an *americano*?'

His reply was reckless. 'A Spaniard, señor! But a Spaniard who is astonished by all the *americanos* who try to pass for Spaniards and not be what they are.'

Now I was furious. 'You count me among them?'

He hesitated an instant, and then contained himself. 'No'; he said. (747).

Here, as Serra points out, Zama refuses to assume his American-ness and reclaim land rights for himself (147). Yet it goes further than this. Zama censors himself in both syntax and diction; first by promoting "Spaniard" above "*americano*", and second by choosing an adjective over a noun to specify those born in the Americas. This self-censorship both betrays and reinforces the disdain with which he views non-Europeans, and by extension himself, so Zama is not only failing to claim his land rights but is also complicit in his own enslavement. In other words, while Spain establishes the empire, it is Zama who maintains it internally. We can infer that Zama understands this, which is why he reacts "furiously" to Prieto's accusation, but his failure to rebel against this understanding merely reinforces the power of empire over the psyche of those who have invested in it.

In addition to the effect of colonial rule on Zama himself, the novel later describes the oppression of all groups living under the colonial system; from the slave, whose lack of freedom is obvious, to the free men and women whose choices are reduced. In the novel, a mule driver wants to marry a free *mestiza* woman who embroiders for Luciana, a Spanish woman with whom Zama is having an affair. The *mestiza* woman is mute, yet the mule driver is so "eager for liberty that he sees no obstacle in her condition" (1236). This is not the first time the mule driver has desired

freedom. As a young man, he escaped from a *hacienda* to join the *Guaicuru*, an indigenous tribe free from Spanish rule. Once caught, as a punishment, his feet are cut open and smeared with poisonous resin, permanently hobbling the man. Luciana is asked to consent to the marriage, as she has power over the girl who works for her. Consent is granted, but Luciana then consults Zama as magistrate as to the validity of such a blessing given the mute girl has never verbally expressed her consent in the first place. The matter is left unresolved for the reader, as Zama's musings soon return to the sexual conquest of Luciana through "the kiss I deserved" (1252). In this episode, we see success of empire's divide-and-conquer strategy. Zama is so obsessed with integrating himself into the world of the ruling class that basic questions of individual sovereignty and human dignity are irrelevant to him.

In this anecdote, di Benedetto juxtaposes a slave with Zama's "free" romantic partner in order to bring into question the status of those under colonial rule whom are considered "free", and the legality of the enslavement of those who aren't. As a mute, the free girl becomes a synecdoche for all voiceless people and narratives under colonial systems who have never consented to rule by a foreign power. They are free because they are not in chains, but they are not free in the choices they make and have little recourse to settle disputes in the law.

There is one further anecdote in the closing chapters of the novel, where di Benedetto expresses the effects of exile in their most extreme form. Zama embarks on a military campaign to track down the outlaw Vicuna Porto so that he can "win back [his] titles" (2764). The band of soldiers come across an indigenous tribe who have been blinded by their enemies, the *Mataguayo*, as punishment. However, after a time the tribe becomes accustomed to blindness, and even starts to appreciate its advantages:

Shame, censure and recrimination no longer existed. Punishment was not necessary. They turned to one another out of collective need and common interest ... Some of them, to isolate themselves even further, beat their own ears until the tiny bones within were crushed ... When the children reached a certain age, the unseeing ones who knew their children could see – were penetrated with unease. They found no rest. They abandoned their ranchos

and wandered off into the forests ... Something pursued them or drove them on. It was the gaze of the children ... Just a few, who were still adapting to a nomadic life, had yet to be overcome by this restlessness (3032).

Here, the violence of exile is expressed through the brutality of the blinding and yet even in this seemingly desperate state the tribe is still able to find a new kind of freedom, a permissive freedom that releases them from “shame, censure and recrimination”. Some members of the tribe even choose to make themselves more “free” by deepening the state of exile and making themselves deaf. Crucially, the tribe does not die out and solidarity increases as they pull together in the “common interest”. The implication here is that in some way life is improved, just as the lives of all exiles might be said to improve as they adjust to the relative safety of their new home.

However, while exile brings freedom it does not bring peace. The next generation of children are not born blind, and the parents grow to fear the gaze of their children who judge them and thereby take away their newfound freedom. The tribe is forced into a never-ending state of flight, condemned to forever flee from the gaze of their own children, constantly tormented by the fear of loss of freedom, because confronting this loss would mean confronting the enormity of their situation. Having initially only lost their sight, their situation becomes, in effect, a full state of exile as a permanent split is created between the generations, and the tribe leaves its home and splits up the family in an attempt to maintain the freedom they can feel slipping away from them. There can be no going back, no return home. Exile is presented as a permanent state, but one which contains two layers. The first layer is more apparent and not of their own volition; their blindness is a punishment inflicted by another tribe and can never be reversed. The second layer is a matter of choice. The tribe choose to wander because they do not want to return to the original state of shame. In this, exile is more than simply a sanction enforced by a more powerful other, it is assimilated into the individual, forcing them to change and so betray their motherland willingly. Our understanding of exile develops as we begin to appreciate this more pernicious torment within the psychology of the individual. It is not simply a case of wanting to go home as is so often assumed.

This doubling of exile can also be seen in *The Witness*. In addition to the initial decade of

exile in the Americas where the protagonist loses his mother tongue, the cabin boy is also eventually returned to Spain where he sees and hears his native culture as if for the first time, thereby constituting a second but distinct exile. In this we see the postcolonial paradox, where the colonial world pushes all else to the margins, but in doing so allows the margin to turn “upon itself and act to push that world through a mental barrier into position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic and multifarious” (Ashcroft, *et. al.* 268).

In Saer’s response, crucially, it is not the initial process of exile which is presented as most problematic, although this is not without its intense complications, but the return home. “The first years were years of shadows and ashes ... my abrupt re-entry into the world had left me in a state of shock and any reason or desire I might have had to go on living was almost non-existent” (112). This is in stark contrast to the description of the original exile, in which the protagonist’s religious mentor makes the unchallenged statement that he “lived close to paradise for ten years and had never known it” (33).

Psychological studies on exiled Latin Americans living in Sweden confirm this phenomenon. In 1996, Swedish researchers found that “repatriated refugees had significantly higher shares of not feeling secure compared with Latin Americans [who remained] in Sweden” (Sundquist & Johanssen). Exile is permanent not because there is a physical barrier between subject and their land, but because there is a psychological barrier that works through the knowledge that the former country has been irreversibly changed by political and social forces which they can no longer influence and therefore experience at a distance, a phenomenon explored through the cabin boy’s outcast status.

As an outcast, the protagonist befriends a group of poor traveling actors who learn his story and turn the events into a play, which becomes a hit across Europe because there is an unquenchable thirst for stories of the New World. Yet, in writing the play, the cabin boy and the old man are not concerned with accuracy and suppress these to focus on fulfilling the general public’s expectations.

I simply left all truth out of the verses I wrote and if the odd scrap slipped through by mistake, the old man would make me cross it out, less concerned with the exact details of my experience than with his audience’s expectations (114).

In this there is a clear example of what Mignolo terms the “invention of the idea of ‘America’” (93) and how the narrative of “America [enters] into the European consciousness” (90) through culture. It is a vision where “truth” is “crossed out” because it is less important than the grand narrative, but its complete eradication is not necessary because eventually this “gradual transformation of past experience [into a cultural product leads] to the erasure of any trace of actual historical events” (de Grandis, 1993, 36). This reaches its starkest expression when the play is transformed into a mime so it can be taken to foreign lands where “the absence of words made the play even thinner” (119). This has no adverse effect on the play’s success, however, because the grand narrative has already captured the public’s imagination.

Long, long ago the true meaning of our cheap parody must already have been written into some grander plot that also encompassed us ... the kings who came to be entertained by our play must have seen something in it we did not; how else could one explain the absurdity of the secret orders given to their treasures to reward us so munificently (115).

Here we see that “invention of America” is deliberate and supported financially but secretly by the European power structure to deliberately manipulate public opinion to support political action along imperial lines. Therefore, the allegory of the play demands that the reader challenge their own preconceptions of the themes of the novel; exile, coloniality and the Americas, and where these come from. However, in this there is also a further, implied challenge to the reader: that these ideas are then turned back towards Europe and placed under the same scrutiny. If we assume that the Latin American narrative has been “invented” and understood from the “perspective of modernity” (Mignolo, 91), where progressive linear forces promise to deliver populations a form of enlightenment through development, then it can be assumed that the European narrative has also been “invented” and understood in the same way. In addition, as “there is no modernity without coloniality, because coloniality is constitutive of modernity” (Mignolo, 82) we can ask what role coloniality plays in the narrative in Europe itself. Just as the “grander plot” of enlightenment through modernity is undermined in the Americas by the oppression wrought by colonisation, so it is also possible in Europe that the foregrounded dream of modernity is not fully realised because

it is subverted by coloniality, which has been “crossed out” but not eliminated. This invisibility of coloniality allows the “audience” of western cultures to continue to invest psychologically in the brutal logic of modernity, just as Zama invests and internalises the brutal Spanish narrative without ever questioning it. This also prevents the western “audience” from questioning their own position in the matrix, which, while privileged, still carries within it Zama’s oppressed/oppressor paradox, essentially trapping western citizens and excluding them from the realisation of the modernist dream of enlightenment. It’s possible that many Europeans, free to travel as they wish to any corner of Latin America, would consider many of the locals they met as exploited or oppressed, but how many would also be ready to face the fact that they themselves are the oppressors and at the same time enslaved in that very system? And if Europeans cannot recognise the reduced stereotype of themselves, how can they come to a meaningful understanding of the Americas, which is constructed through this same system of stereotyping and reduction?

On final point on empire: once the play has made him rich, the protagonist leaves the theatre. In this final critique, Saer offers no possible escape from the omnipotent empire. Even individuals with an ambivalent relationship to the imperial project, and even those who seem to stand against it, can be co-opted and even benefit hugely from it. The cabin boy becomes independently wealthy, just like any *conquistador*, and through his role as crown propagandist he becomes just as involved in the subjugation of a continent and its people.

EXILE TO EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism demands a shift from a state of “existence” to a state of “being” where individuals define their independent place in the universe and take full responsibility for the discovery of meaning in their lives (Rapoport, 1). However, the existential crisis born of the institutional racism of the internal colony inhibits this process of finding meaning by removing autonomy, trapping Zama in a world defined by the imperial power in Madrid. “Here was I, in the midst of a vast continent that was invisible to me though I felt it all around, a desolate paradise, far too immense for my legs. America existed for no one if not for me, but it existed only in my needs, my desires, and my fears,” (608). In this passage, Zama demonstrates his failure to fully connect to

the land and universe around him whilst in the internal colony. Psychologically separated from his land and his countrymen by assimilating the very ideals that isolate him, Zama lives within a false and fractured reality. The land is for him the “desolate paradise”, a place he cannot see because he looks toward Europe for validation. He therefore does not experience life directly but abstractly, through the conflicting emotions of desire and fear which are influenced by the colonial power through artificially enforced social hierarchies. It is this which prevents him from establishing an authentic self fully rooted in the place of his birth. In place of demanding autonomy, Zama instead demands ownership, taking the colonial viewpoint that the continent exists for him alone, yet as a native-born American he also feels that he is inherently one of the colonised and therefore secondary to the more powerful coloniser. He again finds himself in the middle position, unable to own land like the Spanish while at the same time being alienated from the land.

Zama reflects bitterly on this situation in the short opening chapter of the novel, where existential imagery appears in triplicate. The sentiment of the novel’s opening dedication, “[t]o the victims of expectation” is immediately reinforced by the opening image of the dead monkey caught in the ebb and flow of the tide. “All his life the water at the forest’s edge had beckoned to a corpse” (271). Zama sees in this a reflection of his own situation. Just as the monkey desires something which he cannot have, so Zama craves a promotion which is denied to him by virtue of his birth in the Americas. In this ambiguous but revealing image (Saer, 2010, 48), Zama effectively sees Europeans and Americans as distinct species but still refuses to accept things as they are. He does not actively rebel against the colonial system, however, and instead broods over the unfairness, lusting after promotion and fretting that his “petition to the viceroy might be obstructed” if he is “viewed as an *americano* who offended against the honour of Spain” (597). We see in this an intellectual denial of his own identity: to be Spanish first means a negation of the American self. Alienated from his dream by the imperial state, Zama instead pretends to be Spanish through gestures and womanising and so becomes only a *pastiche* of a Spaniard. It is a process which leaves the original American self intact; a counterfeit self which carries within it the essence of what he despises.

The third existential image in the opening chapter further reinforces this: the tale of the fish spurned by the river. These fish spend their days at the banks, never in the central stream, constantly battling against the current to survive. They are like the monkey, Zama recounts, but it is harder for them because they are still alive. Yet just as Zama is on the cusp of understanding his situation, he recoils and becomes “reluctant to think of these fish and myself at the same time” (294).

In this failure to confront himself, Zama can be placed on Sartre’s spectrum of existential thought, where “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards” (Sartre, 345). Zama appears to have encountered himself, but is unable to define himself as authentic whilst living under a race-based system of oppression. This search for definition and meaning is later explored through Zama’s hunt for Vicuna Porto, the outlaw terrorising Asunción but whom no-one has ever seen. Once the military force is well into its quest, Porto makes himself known to Zama as “a soldier in the legion sent in pursuit of Vicuna Porto” (2728), he is among them, and as such, their goal “seems to run ahead of [them], a moving target” (2867). Zama himself concedes that “this is very much like the search for freedom, which is not *out there* but within *each one*” (2873). This trope, of the fugitive hiding among the ranks of those charged with hunting him down, is the ideal metaphor for the existentialist search for definition that is so often misplaced “out there” and so becomes a moving target. Di Benedetto’s novel, then, can be seen as an account of the protagonist’s drive towards self-realisation within a colonial context. Zama’s complex personality is neither rebel nor master nor slave and yet equally all three, and it is through his experience that we can challenge our understanding of the colonial world.

Indeed, both di Benedetto’s and Saer’s use of confused and misguided protagonists acting under existential pressure erodes the whole myth of European superiority, and this disruption at the top of the hierarchy has implications for all positions on the hierarchy. If we assume that power is relative, and a reduction in power for one group automatically means an increase in power for a second, then both novels represent an increase in the importance of indigenous customs and ideas over the confused and struggling European or *criollo* groups. While this is again implicit and not explicit, it represents a reversal of the concept of American inferiority, and through this the

logic of coloniality, if not the reality of coloniality, is impaired. We see a movement in the literature towards a decentring of the European historical narrative and a decolonial shift in understanding the experience of colonisation. This disruption potentially creates space for indigenous narratives to come to the fore without needing to be authenticated by western systems of knowledge. This, in turn, could lead to narratives which are much less reductionist or stereotypical.

Through all his suffering lies the opportunity for Zama to achieve the true nature of his essence. At the end of the novel, Zama is held captive by Vicuna Porto, who decides that he should “die a double death from mutilation” (3131) for the dual crime of being betrayer and informant. Zama reasons that as long as he is not dead, he is still able “to choose between life and death” (3131), echoing Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* (1) and signalling a final realisation of the fundamental nature of his essence. Zama, therefore, is ready to accept his fate which he assumes is to live “without arms, without eyes” (3131), but Porto shows mercy and only removes his fingers, advising him to “bury the stumps in the ashes” (3136) to stem the flow of blood. He passes out, and is eventually rescued by a stranger.

It wasn’t the Indian, it was the blond boy. Filthy, in rags, still only twelve.

He was me, myself from before; I had not been born anew. I understood that when I recovered my voice and was able to speak. Smiling, like a father, I said ‘You haven’t grown...’

With irreducible sadness he replied, ‘Neither have you’ (3141).

Having failed to recognise himself in either Europeans or Americans, Zama finally recognises himself in the blond boy who fails to grow (Serra, 151). This failure to develop adult autonomy shows that the colonial forces were never going to allow Zama to achieve a state of autonomy, and therefore his failure to complete his existential journey. Furthermore, it is the blond boy who pursues and evades Zama throughout the novel, his hair colour identifying him as the perpetrator of petty crimes or mischief (2454). The blond boy, therefore, can be taken for the reality of the European empires which established themselves in the Americas, and by extension all empires. The civilising force of empire is a myth, as in reality they are “filthy” and childlike, almost accidental in their success. They can be cruel and greedy while seemingly innocent of their own

crimes, seeing only their goodness. Yet this is not the full story. They can also be a positive force, so the close of the novel can be read as a reminder that empire is also powerful driver of human history and cannot be dismissed as wholly destructive. In addition, the boy's omnipotence, his ability to appear and disappear throughout, reflects this ambiguous nature of empires, and if we are to read *Zama* as able to instruct beyond its historical setting, then what we learn about the Spanish empire is true for all empires. The very fact of their hegemony makes them omnipotent, but the effect of the empire is also universal and touches all those who come into contact with it. And, just as the empire itself is omnipotent, so the phenomenon of empire can also be considered universal, whether it be Spanish, French, British or the United States. The logic of the empire, of bringing resources to the core and of homogenising culture around a powerful centre is here to stay, so di Benedetto's and Saer's insights also become universal, as the psychological impact of not being part of the master narrative is something which will be repeated in any colonial experience.

This ending confirms why *Zama* is an important contribution to the existentialist movement. Modernism and colonialism are two sides of the same coin, so it seems fitting that existentialism, once established in modernist Europe, finds expression in its colonial counterpart in the Americas, where free will and independence are hampered by institutional racism. Yet *Zama's* yearning for independence never dies, and in the irony of his escaping the psychological restrictions placed on him by the colonial power once he has been physically disabled we again find the modernity/coloniality complex: *Zama* is finally free to achieve his own destiny but the colonial scars are permanent and inhibit the success of any autonomy.

The existential drama is also played out in *The Witness* through the annual ritual of cannibalism, intoxication and fornication, which is the tribe's "one celebration" (83) and leaves them "like a sick patient making a slow recovery from illness" (67). The cabin boy remembers that, "it was as if they danced to and were ruled by a silent music, the existence of which the Indians sensed but which was inaccessible and dubious, at once absent and present, real if indeterminate, like that of a god" (83). Just like *Zama* with his estrangement from both the land and society, the tribe are unable to determine and therefore access the forces that rule them and in an attempt to get closer

to that god-like knowledge they embark on the orgy of cannibalism and drunkenness which plunges them into the “blackness” (89). In other words, their solution to universal existential questions is to periodically destroy their day-to-day consciousness and thereby “pass from one world to another ... where they would once again forget everything” (87). This ritual, however unmentionable, brings the tribe a form of enlightenment which distinguishes “between the internal and the external world, between what now stood in the luminous air and what stood in the dark, they had become the sole support of that harsh reality, the one true people” (145). This clarifies an earlier explanation in which the protagonist states that the tribe eats human flesh because:

At some time, before they understood their individual identity in the world, they had experienced the void. That must have happened before they began eating the flesh of those who were not true men, those from outside. Before, in the dark years when they floundered with the others, they used to each other ... They turned towards the outside world and became the tribe that formed the centre of the world, ringed by a horizon whose outer limits became more problematic the further it was from that centre. Despite the fact that they too were from that unlikely world, they struggled up to a new level of existence. Thus, even while their feet were still sunk in the primeval mud, their heads, liberated, inhaled the clean air of truth. However, from their obvious anxiety it was clear that their victory was by no means irreversible” (138/139).

That the language in this extract mirrors the Sartrean levels of existence is self-evident. In this case, cannibalism can be taken as a metaphor for the existential struggle which all men face and which can be surmounted. For the tribe, cannibalism has its roots in the messy, perfunctory world of the everyday, but through their discovery of eating the flesh of those from outside of their circle of existence they are able to rise up and define themselves as the only true men, those who are enlightened about the state of the world. Yet this does not end the struggle. It must be fought continuously and in this we can assume that their definition of “truth” is in fact a fraud. They have not, as it at first seems, achieved a state of enlightenment, but something else, something impermanent, because it is built upon acts which are not pure but violent and unsavoury.

Strong parallels exist here then between the tribe's ritual and the conquest of the Americas, with its promise of enlightenment through modernity. Cannibalism, therefore, can also be read as a metaphor for empire through which Europe itself, and not the Americas, can be understood. As a taboo, cannibalism reflects the unsavoury nature of subjugation back toward Europe, where it has been historically considered, through modernity, as progress. Consequently, just as cannibalism fails to deliver lasting enlightenment for the tribe because it is built on violence, so modernity's ability to deliver freedoms in Europe is questioned while its feet are "sunk in the primeval mud" of coloniality. In addition, while the tribe's deadly violence toward those from distant lands for ceremonial reasons seems unthinkable, it clearly echoes the Spanish crown's policy of saving souls for the Catholic God. Additionally, the tribe's belief that it is the centre of the universe seems parochial and unscientific, yet this again chimes with the medieval church's belief that it was at the centre of a world bordered by a horizon which, at the time of the conquest of the Americas, would have still dominated the European psyche. Moreover, the tribe seem prescient in their belief that the world becomes "problematic the further [one is] from the centre", as witnessed by Zama and his crippling identity crisis in the distant colony. Additionally, the tribe appears to have innate knowledge of the "reversible" nature of the world and through this the impermanence of any human endeavour, such as empire. Thus, when Saer claims that "each day they paid what they could of the unpayable price demanded of them for having hauled themselves out of the swamp [...] which left them with an unending sense of disorientation" (146) he is alluding not to the tribe but to the Europeans who vanquished them, whose murderous acts in the name of modernity can be considered just as "disorientated." In this interchangeability, there is no blame because there is no fundamental difference between one people and another, between one invasion – or belief - and another. All are justified and rationalised by those who undertake them, and all individuals may confuse glory or religious fervour with personal understanding of what it means to live. Saer's message, therefore, is that empire is not the way for humans to become "true men", and because empire is dictated by dogma, then dogma should be avoided.

In the closing scene of *The Witness*, the cabin boy has reached old age and every night settles down to record his life in his memoir. He recalls a night spent in the Americas with the tribe, when a bright full moon, much more intense than usual, illuminates everything as if by sunlight or artificial means. The light is so bright that it creates a “confused” atmosphere and threatens to “reveal [their] true nature to [them]” (164). This description reinforces the earlier idea that a reversed and copied situation that is otherwise superficially the same can expose the true nature of European civilisation to Europeans. However, this is taken further when the bright night is interrupted by an eclipse.

By plunging a night which was bright as day into darkness, this eclipse represents the reversal of the reversal. Here, the pre-Columbian day is reversed to create the moonlit modern/colonial copy of which we are still apart, leaving the eclipse as what comes next. Saer leaves this open, but most notably the situation does not return to an original ‘day’ state, some kind of pre-Columbian paradise, but instead takes on a new form. It moves beyond the binary opposition of night and day, imperial/colonial, of using Latin American theory to explore Europe, and toward a situation where sun and moon perform each other’s functions of light and dark, where European knowledge is “delinked” from the established modernity knowledge system (Mignolo, 1598) and indigenous knowledge is liberated and used in conjunction with it. Neither is subservient to the other, but instead they work interchangeably under a new “paradigm of co-existence” (Mignolo, 1711).

This paradigm of co-existence promotes other systems of knowledge which crucially are in no way “reduced or compared one to the other” but are instead accepted as “*different*” (Mignolo, 1676, italics in original). It implies co-operation, and so is the antithesis of the colonial state of competition, where one culture vanquishes another. For example, if the Greek principles of knowledge of “knowing how, knowing what and knowing that” coexist and complement the Kichua categories of “learning to be, knowing to be and knowing to do” (Mignolo, 1676) but do not obscure them, then neither one is seen as inferior. Neither is silenced, like di Benedetto’s *mulatta* is silenced. The implications are far reaching, for if systems of knowledge are considered equal then so are the people who subscribe to them. In addition, it is self-evident that this would create a broader system for society to build knowledge upon and if this could be turned outwards from the Americas,

so that Kichua categories co-exist with ideas from across the globe, then the benefits would be plain to see. Collaboration, after all, avoids subjugation and so is reminiscent of Saer's insight that to become "true men" the domination of other groups must end. Finally, because there is no inequality in this system, it is not destined to be overturned or reversed by those excluded from it, and so can prove long-lasting and prosperous.

CONCLUSION

Both *Zama* and *The Witness* use the colonial period as an allegory for the contemporary Latin American sphere, and can be used to understand the wider world. Saer attempts to reverse situations, subvert stereotypes and avoid reducing generalisations. Through these texts we see a link between exile and the existential issues created by exile, and di Benedetto gives us a stark demonstration of the effect of institutional racism on the psychology of an individual who we might otherwise assume to be a comfortable member of the ruling class. Through *The Witness* we see a form of exile writ large for the continent, where all Latinos are first exiled from Europe to Latin America, and then back to Europe in the 20th century. We learn lessons when theories are turned back on themselves, and open ourselves to new ideas through the delinking of knowledge systems.

However, in Saer there are two things which remain insurmountable. The first is the use of the European perspective to tell a global story, and this leads on to the second, the metaphorical use of the 'Indian' and its subsequent distortion of reality. The use of a group of people as a vehicle to express ideas, any ideas, including those deemed positive, will always reduce those people to a trope and this will always have the potential to be dehumanising. The use of people as literary features is an imprecise method of explanation and does little for outsiders hoping to understand the way they live. It is difficult to see how this can be avoided, given the way humans understand messages through allegory and metaphor, but at least we are offered a powerful vision of the dangers of doing so. These texts offer us a new look at an old problem; Empire, and for those interested in postcolonial issues, there is much to learn.

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