Unfinished Transitions:

The Dialectics of Rural Modernization in Latin American Fiction

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To begin, a bit of laconic wisdom from the great landowner of Jalisco, Pedro Páramo, the title character of Juan Rulfo’s 1955 novel. Meeting with his lawyer, who has decided to leave town in the wake of the Mexican revolution, Pedro Páramo states: “Ustedes los abogados tienen esa ventaja: pueden llevarse su patrimonio a todas partes, mientras no les rompan el hocico.”¹ (You lawyers have that advantage: you can take your patrimony everywhere, so long as you don’t get your face smashed in).² A law degree, the landowner reasons, is a mobile form of wealth, in implicit contrast with land, which as classical political economists like David Ricardo had long noted, is fixed and non-reproducible.

If we were to take Pedro Páramo’s words at face value, we might say that he would like to free himself of the shackles of land, to carry his patrimony everywhere. But this interpretation is not entirely correct, for there is no small degree of cynicism in the landowner’s words. The reason the lawyer had come to Don Pedro in the first place was in the hope of being awarded a tip after so many years of dedicated service. The landowner—who fully understands this expectation—responds not as feudal lord but as a bourgeois individual, who as Marx writes in the Grundrisse, “carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket.”³ Hence we are faced with a paradox: the lawyer—the carrier of mobile wealth according to the landowner—appeals to a system of
favor, while, as Jean Franco has pointed out, the landowner appeals to bourgeois values that would free him from favor altogether. At this point in the narrative we already know that his large land holdings had been begotten precisely through the system of personal favor and violence to which his lawyer now appeals. Hence the relevance of the last words of the sentence spoken to the lawyer: “you can take your patrimony with you, so long as you don’t get your face smashed in.” Even when bourgeois values are announced, and the impersonal relations of the cash nexus revealed, violence is never far behind.

But the landowner’s cynicism aside, there is a deeper truth lodged within his identification of the inherent advantages and disadvantages of land as a conduit for the circulation and accumulation of capital. On the one hand, as noted, land is fixed and non-reproducible. But as the geographer George Henderson notes regarding agriculture, “capital needs blockages; it invests in them so that it has access to something corporeal through which to circulate. This is partly what lies behind Marx’s quip that ‘The true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself.’”

Pedro Páramo, in accordance with his own observations, seems to be unable to overcome the rootedness of his “patrimony” in land. He doesn’t grow in influence in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of 1910; rather, following the townspeople’s refusal to mourn his great love Susana San Juan, he dictates the town’s death. As a result, the once fertile lands surrounding the town of Comala become dry and desiccated. Following the landowner’s own death at the hands of his illegitimate son Abundio, the townspeople themselves turn into living dead, the murmullos (murmurs) encountered by Pedro Páramo’s estranged son, Juan Preciado, at the beginning of the novel. These events are not presented in a linear manner. The great stylistic innovation of Pedro Páramo is that it
oscillates between two narratives strands, located in two different temporal frames: one focused on the rise and fall of the landowner, and a second, located in the present, in which everyone—including Juan Preciado himself, is dead. In strictly narrative terms, the death of the landowner marks not the end but the starting point of the novel, framed as the present in which the murmurs of the dead can still be heard. The Comala of the present is a town of the damned, poised, as Abundio puts it, “on the coals of the earth, at the very mouth of hell” (Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 6).

I begin with this short incursion into *Pedro Páramo* as an introduction to the main issue at stake in this essay: how Latin American literature written in the mid-twentieth century—a high point of concerns surrounding land tenure systems and the so-called “peasant question”—register the uneven dynamics of rural modernization within paradigms of peripheral capitalist development and accumulation. Focusing on Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, together with the Chilean writer José Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has No Limits*, 1966), I explore how literature imagined rural societies as a kind of hell. In turning to these two key texts, I argue that rural hell, even though described as static and timeless, belongs fully to the history of modernity. In what follows, I develop my argument in three parts. First, I resituate the question of the rural—a key setting of Latin American “Boom” literature—within intertwined histories of global capitalism and literary modernism. Second, I return to *Pedro Páramo* to argue that the novel’s vision of rural hell emerges from a specifically Mexican history of uneven rural modernization, marked by a period of intense primitive accumulation in the late nineteenth century, followed by a seemingly endless period of social neglect in the mid-twentieth century. Third, I show how Donoso’s novel *El lugar sin límites*, set in 1960s Chile, continues this
dialectical movement, albeit through a very different history, to imagine how abandoned rural spaces might be incorporated into projects of accumulation once more. Taken together, these novels represent always uneven and always unfinished transitions to capitalism that from the vantage of the mid-twentieth century could be grasped as a living hell.

**Rural Modernization/Rural Modernisms**

The argument I am developing seeks to revise and challenge deeply established, commonsense notions about the status of the rural in Latin American fiction, but also more broadly, Latin American processes of modernization. Since the nineteenth century at least, a key narrative of modernity has been the progressive march from the countryside to the city. As a result, the continued existence of the rural in Latin America until well into the twentieth century has thus most often been approached as a register of backwardness, tradition and feudalism. And yet, as dependency theorists and world-systems analysts were the first to argue, the rural has long been the site of cycles of extraction and accumulation that form part of a larger history of global capitalism: under Spanish colonialism, for example, agricultural settlements were created to serve silver mines; under nineteenth-century liberalism, entire regions were remade to export or cash crop production. As Andre Gunder Frank has argued, even institutions that seemed to exist completely outside of capitalist social relations in Latin America—notably, the hacienda—are in fact their abandoned creations.

In turning to the ways in which literary texts mediate rural histories of capitalist modernization, I am inspired by materialist literary critics such as Raymond Williams,
whose classic *The City and the Country* was perhaps the first to consider, from a literary perspective, the dialectical processes that join rural and urban in a single if uneven and disjointed circuit.\(^\text{10}\) In Latin America, as the Uruguayan literary critic Ángel Rama notes in his landmark work *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, it was the literature of the rural hinterlands (*regiones*) that reinvented Latin American literature in the early- to mid-twentieth century, in no small part because of the violence with which rural areas were drawn into capitalist modernity during the interwar period.

More recently, critics such as Fredric Jameson and Neil Lazarus, together with scholars associated with the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), have argued that uneven development provides a horizon for modern literary production, and modernism in particular, in centers and peripheries alike. For Jameson, the temporal disjunctions characteristic of high modernism, for example, might be read as the formal expression of the continued existence of peasant regimes well into the twentieth century throughout much of Europe: “what we call artistic or aesthetic ‘modernism’ essentially corresponds to a situation of incomplete modernization.”\(^\text{11}\) A provocative thesis indeed: it is the ultimately the “persistence of the old regime” (Arno Mayer’s phrase), peasant in nature, that shapes the literary mode often assumed to be the consummate expression of industrial and urban modernity (*Jameson, A Singular Modernity*, 141). Lazarus, in turn, has pointed to the ways in which uneven modes of development animate texts from Africa and Latin America, especially with regard to the coexistence of wage labor and coercion, or subsistence farms and factories. Positioning himself against postcolonial critics who have insisted upon the incommensurability of texts, Lazarus works toward a
reading of postcolonial literature as constituted not by “fundamental alienness” but rather by “deep-seated affinity and community, across and athwart the ‘international division of labor.”’"\(^{12}\) The Warwick collective has recently taken a similar tack with respect to debates on world literature, asserting that this category should be interpreted as “the literature of the world-system”—of the modern capitalist world-system, that is.”\(^{13}\)

Given that Latin America was incorporated into global commodity networks on the basis of raw materials and agricultural products, rural literature might be viewed not as a meditation on local color or vanishing tradition (as it has most often been approached), but instead a formal expressions of an uneven but “singular” modernity, to use Jameson’s term.\(^{14}\) Furthermore, as Mary Louise Pratt has observed, the Latin American Boom—the region’s most famous articulation of high modernism—“is heavily nonurban: from Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (Cuba, 1953) through Arguedas’ *Los ríos profundos* (Peru, 1958), Fuentes’ *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (Mexico, 1962), Vargas Llosa’s *La casa verde* (Peru, 1966), and Darcy Ribeiro’s *Maira* (1967).” Going a step further, Pratt points to an instance in which the transculturation of European modernism to Latin America involved a parallel shift from urban to rural settings: “When in his masterpiece *Grande Sertão: Vereda* (1956; English title, *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*), the Brazilian João Guimarães Rosa wanted to imitate James Joyce, he substituted the city of Dublin with the vast interior plains (the sertão) of Brazil.”\(^{15}\) We might add that in addition to Rulfo’s well-documented Mexican interlocutors, such as Mariano Azuela and Agustín Yáñez, *Pedro Páramo* may bear some relationship to T. S. Eliot’s 1922 poem “The Waste Land,” which had been translated into Spanish by Enrique Mungía, Jr. as “El Páramo” in the Mexican avant-garde magazine *Contemporáneos* in
If it is true that modernism writ large might be approached as a formal mediation of uneven development, why is it that texts of the Latin American Boom are, as Pratt points out, largely set in rural areas? The answer, I suggest, lies not so much in the fact that the rural stages a clash between “tradition” and “modernity” (as if these two forces were easily distinguished from one another in complex historical contexts), but rather because rural zones have long been subject to the painful contradictions of uneven modernization. They have been caught, for example, between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production, and the mobility of capital and the fixity of the soil; they have been brought into and thrown out of circuits of accumulation at different moments in history. From another perspective, rural areas are frequently isolated from great centers of capital (whether national or global), but never isolated enough to remain autonomous or independent from them. These are precisely the contradictions, I argue below, that establish the historical conditions for Rulfo and Donoso’s literary incursions into rural hell.

**Two Seasons in Rural Hell: Pedro Páramo**

To return to *Pedro Páramo*, it is often noted that its setting, Comala, is feudal and patriarchal, with the novel’s transcription of peasant orality held up as an index of the traditional world. In Rama’s otherwise perspicacious reading, for example, he sees Comala as conservative and reactionary; it is the modernist author who brings modernity to the context through experimental literary technique. But I would argue that the novel’s symbolic power hails precisely from the fact that the social space of the novel is
already modern; more precisely, it is the uneven qualities of this modernity that might be registered through experimental literary form, as I explore below. Rulfo’s ingenious structure, in which the voices of the living (now long dead) mingle with the voices of the living dead (from the grave), can be read as the formal expression of a long history of dispossession in Comala, followed by a period of abandonment. This argument both builds upon and departs from classic readings of this novel; considered a crowning achievement of Mexican letters, the novel is noted for its mixture of hyper-local elements (such as peasant speech and lifeways) and “universal” themes (such as the Oedipal myth and the journey to the netherworld). I too want to argue that there is indeed something “universal” about *Pedro Páramo*, but in a way very far from what early critics imagined. Following Neil Larsen, we might say that the novel’s temporal confusion is itself a “determined and concrete form of the historical and universal development of colonial and neocolonial capitalism.”

Building on Larsen’s argument, I want to analyze the novel’s representation of two distinct moments of land-based accumulation: one at the turn of the twentieth century, in which Pedro Páramo rises to power as a landowner and cacique or political boss; and another, following the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and Cristero counter-rebellion of 1926, in which a dry, desiccated, and abandoned countryside is imagined as being inhabited only by the dead. These two periods, intercalated in the novel, represent alternating “seasons” in rural hell: one marked by violent dispossession and the other by the living death of social abandonment.

We can begin by noting that Pedro Páramo is a character made possible by uneven and combined development. He is the unique creation of the regime of Porfirio
Díaz (1876–1910), the period of Mexican history immediately preceding the Revolution that witnessed an unprecedented opening of the country to foreign capital, and with it, the vast enclosure of previously common lands. The *raison d’être* of the landowner in this period is to accumulate property under a private system.

When we first meet Pedro Páramo in the novel, however, he is not a landowner, but a young man living in town. Indeed, he doesn’t even set foot on the hacienda his father owns until after the latter dies. It is not accidental, to my mind, that the young Pedro Páramo is not only identified with town life, but also with new and modern practices and things. In this first scene in which Pedro Páramo appears, he is prevailed upon by his grandmother to clean the corn mill; he asks to buy a new one, because “this one’s so old it isn’t good anyway” (Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 13). She sends him to the store to buy one on credit, to be repaid once the corn is harvested. These mentions of credit relations and monetized crops give way to Pedro’s mother’s request for two additional items: a strip of black taffeta (to be placed on the front door to announce Pedro’s grandfather’s death), and some caffeinated aspirin (*cafiaspirina*). Conjoining the old and the new, and death and bodily stimulation, these two commodities gesture toward the dialectic of uneven modernization that will characterize the novel as a whole. In another scene, the young Pedro complains to his grandmother about his work in an office, where he looks after a baby and a telegraph machine, all without getting paid. The telegraph—like the railway—was a key instrument that linked the countryside to far-flung markets during the Porfirio Díaz era; more importantly, the future landowner gives us the novel’s only reference to wage labor in the entire novel by complaining about its absence.

Already, our vision of the feudal lord is complicated: his origin is in the town, in shops
and a telegraph office, and not on the hacienda. Thus he is first associated, even if only obliquely, with wage labor and modern communications. And yet the character is mixed: the incipient bourgeois is associated not only with the wage relation and commodities, but with stealing: he finds a coin in the house and pockets it, only to replace it with a larger coin he subsequently finds. This strategy of accumulation, first tried out with coins, will be replicated with respect to land once he inherits from his father and relocates to the Media Luna ranch.

Pedro Páramo doesn’t become a landowner simply because he is anti-modern or archaic, but rather because this is his historical role during a moment of intense primitive accumulation. As the sociologist and anthropologist Roger Bartra points out, “during the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, the pace of the concentration of land and the plundering of the peasants is astonishing,” calling to mind Marx’s classic analysis of primitive accumulation. Nearly 90 percent of Mexicans held no land, making the Porfiriato the greatest moment of landlessness in the country’s history. Pedro Páramo is the face of this moment of primitive accumulation, which contrary to the term’s valence in English, is not primitive at all; instead, as Rosa Luxemburg was among the first to point out, the non-capitalist sector has functioned historically as an ongoing site of accumulation for the capitalist sector, as exemplified in Luxemburg’s time by the ongoing plunder of Europe’s colonies. In the case of Pedro Páramo, the capitalist and non-capitalist sectors are embedded within the same social formation. As Patrick Dove has shown, drawing from the work of Luisa Paré, the role of the cacique or local boss is to “facilitat[e] relations between the worlds of capital and
tradition, metropolis and periphery, in such a way that these domains are prevented from collapsing in on one another.”

In his rise to power, Pedro Páramo employs two main strategies of domination: one sexual, the other land-based. Upon inheriting the hacienda, he gets out of debt by marrying the main creditor’s daughter, Dolores Preciado. With this marriage, women are revealed as an original site of accumulation, continued in the landowner’s—and later his son Miguel’s—demand for free access to women’s bodies, often through rape. The sexual economy of the hacienda is sustained through the forced submission of women, and the steady production of illegitimate children. The limit to sexual accumulation comes in the form of Pedro Páramo’s childhood love, Susana San Juan, the feminine ideal who, though allowing herself to be brought to live with the landowner in middle age, refuses to return his love.

Sexual accumulation, in turn, functions as a precondition for and in tandem with a second form of land-based accumulation. Following his marriage to Dolores Preciado, Pedro Páramo initiates a regime of terror against neighboring landowners. He has his administrator Fulgor Sedano kill Toribio Aldrete, after the latter has hired a surveyor to mark boundaries. Pedro Páramo’s response is that “la tierra no tiene divisiones” (land cannot be divided), a statement that on the surface denaturalizes property relations while in effect justifying the creation of a single property in his own hands (Rulfo, Pedro Páramo, 23). This original act of dispossession, in turn, reverberates into the present: Juan Preciado spends his first night in Comala in the room where Fulgor hanged Toribio, listening to the dead man’s screams. The violence of dispossession makes its imprint on
novelistic form in an even more dramatic way in the case of a discussion, set in the time of Pedro Páramo, between two unidentified voices:

<EXT>Night. Long after midnight. And the voices:
“I’m telling you that if we have a good corn crop this year I’ll be able to pay you. But if we lose it, well, you’ll just have to wait.”
I’m not pushing you. You know I’ve been patient with you. But it’s not your land. You’ve been working land that’s not yours. So where are you going to get the money to pay me?
And who says the land isn’t mine?
I heard you sold it to Pedro Páramo.
I haven’t been anywhere near him. The land’s still mine.
That’s what you say. But everyone is saying it’s his. (Rulfo, Pedro Páramo, 44)<EXT>

These voices, eventually revealed as belonging to Galileo and his unnamed brother-in-law, condense a story of debt between family members, ultimately resolved by Pedro Páramo’s claim to the land. What is striking about this passage is its insistence upon the disembodiment of the two speakers, who can only be perceived as voices. This is one way dispossession can be registered as modernist form in this scene, but also more broadly in the very premise of the voices of the dead circulating in the present as “murmurs” or “echoes.”

Readers might rightfully object: the proposition that the dead can speak—treated as a formal principle of Pedro Páramo—is rooted in a long history of popular Mexican
belief, itself constituted by much older Catholic and indigenous traditions. This is true, but what interests me here is the extent to which the full expression of these beliefs through modernist literary form is made possible by specific acts of dispossession in the past. In similar fashion, the Catholic eschatology undergirding the novel (anchored in an opposition between heaven and hell) can become the novel’s formal principle only once the religious world is desacralized through monetary relations. This is a world in which, Franco has already shown, “[d]ivine providence can . . . be commuted into . . . cash (“Journey to the Land of the Dead,” 440). The main agent in this process is Father Rentería (whose name suggests a relationship to money via the word “renta” or rent), who accepts payment from Pedro Páramo to absolve his son Miguel, even though the latter was responsible for the rape of his niece and murder of his brother. The priest denies absolution, on the other hand, to Dorotea, a beggar woman who procured young girls for Pedro Páramo’s son Miguel. In such a context, heaven becomes a place reserved for the rich, and hell is revealed to be a place on earth. In this manner, the Porfirian transition to capitalism and popular Catholicism converge to produce the novel’s vision of hell.

And indeed for a character like Dorotea, one of the talking dead, hell began long ago. A figure of dispossession, Dorotea lived a life of such misery that her only solace was a baby she never actually had. As she reveals to Juan Preciado in the grave the two now share for eternity, “Now that I’m dead I’ve had time to think and understand. God never gave me so much as a nest to shelter my baby in. Only an endless lifetime of dragging myself from pillar to post, sad eyes casting sidelong glances” (Rulfo, Pedro Páramo, 60). Here and elsewhere, Dorotea allows us to establish a link between the
metaphorical hell of dispossession—experienced during the time of Pedro Páramo—and the literal hell experienced after his decline and death. This, in turn, is the story of Comala itself, which at different moments is brought into circuits of accumulation (mainly through dispossession), and left to languish.

By intercalating episodes from past and present, oscillating between these two “seasons” in hell, *Pedro Páramo* provides a stunning reading of the situation of the Mexican countryside between the nineteenth-century Porfirio Díaz regime and the period following the Mexican Revolution of 1910. As others have pointed out, the liberatory aspects of the Revolution, especially land reform, are nowhere to be found in *Pedro Páramo*. Moreover, the landowner’s downfall does not result from the Revolution (in fact he is able to pay off the revolutionaries to stay in power), but rather from a personal decision to condemn the town to hunger and death. One the one hand, this eventuality can be interpreted as marking the figurative death of great nineteenth-century Porfirian haciendas with the arrival of the Mexican Revolution. And yet, on the other hand, Rulfo’s depiction of a “dead” countryside emptied of people and food in some respects resembles a new chapter in post-revolutionary Mexican history. In Mexico, but also in other parts of Latin America after the 1930s, the countryside increasingly came to occupy the role of provider of labor and cheap food to industrializing cities. Food prices were kept low to keep wages in the city low, and resulting crises in the countryside pushed peasants to find work in urban centers like Guadalajara or Mexico City. The *ejido* system—the form of small landownership that emerged from insurgent peasant demands after the Revolution—facilitated the proletarianization of peasants at the same time as it preserved the non-capitalist sector as a kind of shock absorber in a process Bartra has called
“permanent primitive accumulation” (*Agrarian Structure*, 29). National markets were never vibrant enough to absorb peasants completely, leading to a situation in which “a good part of the peasant population remains tied to the land, but under such conditions of misery and pauperism that they can scarcely be classified as farmers” (24).

These perspectives on post-revolutionary crises in the Mexican countryside allow us to appreciate the interpretive power exerted by Rulfo’s vision of rural hell. The once-fertile land seems able to give no more; the town is populated by ghosts who cannot be absorbed by heaven.29 Yet even in this state of decline, the condemned continue to suffer. Part of the unsurpassed brilliance of *Pedro Páramo* is that it gives literary form to permanent or unending primitive accumulation, a process that oscillates between past and present, and between moments of active dispossession and neglect. Within the novel’s complex formal organization, these oscillations are never finished; instead, they continue to happen, over and over again. While this movement might be seen as circular and mythical rather than dialectical, the novel allows us to identify the roots of “permanent primitive accumulation” in history. When Juan Preciado, upon descending into Comala for the first time comments on the town’s sadness, his guide Abundio remarks: “Son los tiempos, señor” (*Rulfo, Pedro Páramo*, 6). (It’s the times, señor [Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 4]). This hellish present is experienced as unending, but contemporary nonetheless.

**El lugar sin límites: Rural Hell in the Longer Durée**

I have been arguing that the hell represented by Rulfo provides startling insights into the dynamics of uneven rural modernization, caught between logics of dispossession and abandonment at different moments of history. These contradictory dynamics are
present most powerfully through the novel’s central trope, which is that of a rural hell on earth. I now want to turn to another novel from mid-twentieth-century Latin America that is also constructed around a similar trope, the Chilean novelist José Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has No Limits*, 1966).  

In Rulfo’s experimental novel, characters speak from beyond the grave in temporally disordered fragments; Donoso’s novel, by contrast, is hyper-realistic, focusing on a twenty-four hour period in Estación El Olivo, a small town poised on the edge of a large wine estate in Chile’s central valley. Whereas Rulfo’s hell is conjured by the hot, windless plains of Jalisco in August, in Donoso’s it is signaled by the oncoming chill of winter in a dying town with no electricity. Rulfo’s novel oscillates between periods before and after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, while Donoso’s isolates a single day in the early 1960s (with a set of scenes that flash back to twenty years earlier). And if in *Pedro Páramo*, hell is defined by dispossession followed by abandonment, *El lugar sin límites* continues the dialectic by positing a period of abandonment followed by a new round of dispossession, in a cycle seemingly without end.

At the center of this new round of dispossession is one of the most fascinating characters of twentieth-century Latin American literature, La Manuela, an aging loca—or feminine-identified queer man—who has lived for twenty years performing in the now-decrepit brothel in Estación El Olivo. The atmosphere of *El lugar sin límites*, critics have long noted, is suffocating and rendered bearable only by the presence of La Manuela. The novel opens when one Sunday morning La Manuela awakens with a start to remember that “Pancho Vega andaba en el pueblo” (Donoso, *El lugar sin límites*, 11; Pancho Vega was in town). A year earlier, Pancho—a former peon on the nearby
estate—had assaulted La Manuela on a visit to the brothel, ripping her already tattered but prized Flamenco dress. Over the course of the next twenty-four hours, the novel uses Pancho’s return—which La Manuela counters with a mixture of dread and desire—as an opening onto daily life in Estación El Olivo: we see La Manuela going to the home of Ludovina, a former servant in the landowner’s home, in search of gossip and thread to mend her dress; Pancho in a humiliating exchange with the landowner who has lent him money to buy the truck to allow him to leave the town; and La Japonesita, La Manuela’s daughter and madam of the brothel, as she dreams of the Wurlitzer piano she will buy once electricity is finally brought to the town.

The rich details brought out in Donoso’s realist representation are always played out, cruelly, against a landscape that is relentlessly bleak and absolutely non-conducive to life. When the novel opens, Estación El Olivo has already entered into what seems like irreversible decline. As we learn, the age of the railway has ended, and a highway has been built at a remove from the town, consigning it to isolation. Paradoxically, while the highway signifies modernity and mobility, for the inhabitants of the dying town of Estación El Olivo it equals fixity in time and space, a fixity itself figured as a kind of hell. As the novel’s epigraph reveals, the title El lugar sin límites is taken from a conversation between Mephistopheles and Faust in Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus: “Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed in one self place; but where we are is hell, And where hell is, there must we ever be” (Donoso, Hell Has No Limits, 5). This epigraph locates us in a hell that has no limits, that moves wherever one goes, but it also establishes the problem of a rural hell from which certain subjects cannot escape. The most chilling confirmation of this inability to escape comes in the novel’s climax, when after performing for Pancho
and his brother-in-law Octavio at the brothel, La Manuela is brutally beaten by them in a fit of homophobic rage and left for dead.

I will return to the scene of Manuela’s brutal beating; for now, I want to stress that the metaphorical hell depicted in the novel is framed by waves of uneven and incomplete rural modernization, a *longue durée* that can be glimpsed in the twenty-four hour period represented. At first glance, the hell of Estación El Olivo is a context that modernity has (literally) passed by, a reading that has become commonplace among critics. But the reverse is also true; hell in *El lugar sin límites* is figured as a context in which new projects of accumulation—and with them, dispossession—can emerge. This becomes clear when we examine the social universe of the Chilean *fundo* (agricultural estate) represented in the novel, which from different angles can either be seen in a process of decay or reconstitution, or perhaps both at once.

The great social fact governing Estación El Olivo is the fundo belonging to the local landowner, Don Alejo. Whereas Mexico had experienced major land reforms under the ejido system in the decades following the 1910 Revolution, land remained highly concentrated in Chile in the mid-1960s, and so the figure of the large landowner remained very much alive. Accompanied by four fierce guard dogs wherever he goes, Don Alejo is the god-like (or diabolical) figure whose influence extends as far as his seemingly endless vineyards.

The continued pull of the landowner’s patriarchal power is made startlingly clear by his relationship with Pancho, the character whose return to Estación El Olivo frames the action of the novel. Pancho had been born on the fundo, the son of a *tonalero* (cooper)—although it is also suggested that he might be one of Don Alejo’s many
illegitimate sons—and grew up as a helper in the landowner’s house, and playmate to his
daughter. Pancho is able to leave the world of the fundo by taking to the highway,
becoming a truck driver in the nearby city of Talca. There, he marries and prepares to buy
one of those “houses that looked alike, only painted different colors so that they don’t
look alike” (Donoso, *Hell Has No Limits*, 40). But as Hernán Vidal has pointed out,
Pancho’s dream of mobility and small ownership free from the patriarchal relations of the
fundo is an illusion.\(^{34}\) For it was Don Alejo who financed his red truck with a loan, and it
is Don Alejo who has the power to call him back to demand payment, as he does in a
scene of intense humiliation and infantilization.\(^{35}\)

Manuela, on the other hand, seems to enjoy a more positive relationship with the
landowner, who accepts her (though he ignores her when he walks through town to mass
with his wife) and offers her some degree of protection in the town. “Why he even looked
like the Good Lord [*Tatita Dios*], with his China-blue eyes and his snowy mustache and
eyebrows” (Donoso, *Hell Has No Limits*, 9, 12). Personal control and protection, or
coercion and favor, are, of course, two sides of the same patriarchal coin, establishing
relations of dominance and subordination internalized by everyone on or near the estate.

Don Alejo’s fundo, then, remains a bastion of patriarchal social relations, even as
former peons like Pancho take to the highway and move away from the estate. Don Alejo
is a patriarch, but in keeping with the historical role of the Chilean landowner, he is also a
capitalist. As the sociologist Alejandro Saavedra notes, since at least the nineteenth
century, the Chilean landowner has been a double-sided figure, one who “simultaneously
incarnates two different roles: that of landowner and agricultural businessman
(*empresario agrícola*).”\(^{36}\) Similarly, Maurice Zeitlin and Richard Earl Ratcliff maintain
that Chile’s landowning class merged with financial and commercial elites through inter-marriage throughout the nineteenth century, making it difficult to delineate conflicting interests among members of the Chilean oligarchy.\textsuperscript{37}

I cite these historical works as reminders that the question of class in \textit{El lugar sin límites} is more complex than has been generally assumed. Almost uniformly, critics have assumed that the novel points to the decline of a traditional landed oligarchy, and the rise of an urban bourgeoisie, sometimes allegorized by Pancho’s brother-in-law and gas station owner Octavio.\textsuperscript{38} But this narrative often assumes the backward and/or feudal character of this class, overlooking their historical role as agents of capitalism. It also naturalizes the shift from the countryside to urban space in a narrative of modernization, overlooking the participation of rural space itself within different projects of accumulation.

The long history of agricultural business on Don Alejo’s estate appears throughout \textit{El lugar sin límites}. At one moment, for example, we see La Manuela traversing a part of town where there sits an “antediluvian threshing machine,” yellowed and rusted with urine, and used as a plaything by children (Donoso, \textit{El lugar sin límites}, 21; Donoso, \textit{Hell Has No Limits}, 19). The fact that the threshing machine is rusted and no longer in use leads to its identification by Manuela as “antediluvian”; but of course, no machine can be antediluvian. Instead, modernization has been going on long enough on the estate to produce its own set of ruins. The presence of the threshing machine—which is not used for wine production—might even point us to a longer history of wheat production in Chile’s central valley after 1850, when it became an export crop to Peru and California.
If we posit wheat production as one possible origin of capitalist agriculture a hundred years earlier on the estate, the intensification of wine production already establishes a second moment within longer waves of accumulation. At some point, more land was given over to wine production, leading to a present landscape of vineyards as far as the eye can see. Don Alejo probably did not oversee the birth of wine production on his estate, but he did use his political influence to get a train station built in the 1940s, as a means of taking his crops to market. During this moment of economic expansion, Don Alejo was not content to remain a producer of wine for local markets. Instead, he wanted to build a town on his estate, constituted by small proprietors, in what is described in the novel as the partial “parcelización” or parceling of the fundo.

Don Alejo’s plan to “parcel” the fundo is revealed in a pair of chapters that flash back to a moment twenty years earlier, what was in retrospect a moment of hope and possibility. At this moment Don Alejo has just been elected senator of the republic. La Manuela arrives on the train as part of a group of performers for a celebration at the brothel, and quickly becomes friends with the madam, La Japonesa Grande (who is dead by the time the novel opens). During the celebration, La Japonesa Grande tells la Manuela of Don Alejo’s grand plans:

<EXT>Now he’s selling us selling us land here in Estación, but I know him and I haven’t fallen for it yet. According to him, everything’s on its way up. Next year he’s going to parcel out a block of his land and he’s going to make a town out of it, he’s going to sell model homes, he says, with easy payments, and when he’s sold all the lots he’s going to have electricity brought to town and then we’ll be riding high for sure. (Donoso, Hell Has No Limits, 86)<EXT>
Through the voice of La Japonesa Grande, the novel marks Don Alejo’s attempt to dedicate part of his agricultural estate to the construction of “model homes” with loans made to would-be proprietors. This marks a project of diversification away from land as a source of production. Once Don Alejo’s plan is put into effect, he will not only be an agricultural businessman sending wine to domestic markets, but also a real estate developer and banker, providing credit to would-be small proprietors.40

Why take from agricultural land to create model properties? Why add real estate agent and lender to his portfolio of activities? Doubtless because Don Alejo senses some opportunity in such a transformation. If land, as discussed earlier, can act as a conduit for capital, it can also act as a barrier, and Don Alejo’s attempt to diversify might be seen as an attempt to overcome those limits. La Japonesa Grande displays healthy skepticism towards Don Alejo’s promises (“I haven’t fallen for it”), even as she voices excitement at the prospect of social mobility it promises (“we’ll be riding high”). Indeed, the first small property to be created on the estate is the brothel itself, as the result of a bet between La Japonesa Grande and Don Alejo that the former can succeed in having sex with La Manuela. The fact that the first small property is created through a sexual bet, in which ownership of a brothel is at stake, is significant on several counts. First, as in the case of Pancho’s loan, patriarchal domination is itself inscribed in the move toward independence: to wit, having sex in front of the landowner and his friends (surely not one of the “easy payments” imagined by La Japonesa Grande). Just as the brothel is a site of patriarchal control, it is also already a site of commercialization in its own right. The brothel is the place where women sell their bodies to men, and where—as Ben Sifuentes Jáuregui points out—queer subjects like La Manuela incite homoerotic desire among men
as part of homosocial bonding. The brothel is in this way a place where sexual commerce converges with and upholds other forms of commerce (political and economic) among men. And perhaps paradoxically, if the brothel is a space of sexual transgression (though stabilized through compulsory heterosexuality), it is also the place where bourgeois desires for property ownership and upward class mobility are most strongly expressed in the novel.

The story of La Japonesa Grande’s collusion with La Manuela actually begins when the former promises the latter that participation in the bet will make her an owner. La Manuela, who has moved from brothel to brothel since she was ejected from her home on another fundo after being discovered kissing a boy, dreams: “Me a proprietress. No one can throw me out, and if it’s true this town’s on its way up, maybe life won’t be so bad, and there’s hope even for an ugly fag like me” (Donoso, Hell Has No Limits, 101). To become a property owner, for La Manuela, means dignity and respect, upward mobility as well as stability. It is not only before but immediately after the complex sex scene that the question of property ownership is underscored; La Japonesa Grande tells La Manuela, “te ganaste la casa como una reina” (Donoso, El lugar sin límites, 105; You won the house like a queen [my translation]).

The cruelty of this flashback is that we already know that this moment of hope has given way to one in which it seems that time has stopped altogether. But hell, as in Pedro Páramo, is not static but dialectical, and this is not the end of the story of land and accumulation in El lugar sin límites. For the novel also imagines a new phase of accumulation that emerges as a direct response to the ill-placed highway. Now that the plan for the town has failed definitively, Don Alejo has another trick up his sleeve: to buy
back the properties he had sold or given away, in order to transform the land underneath
the houses back into production as agricultural land. Manuela figures this out when Don
Alejo comes around asking about Ludovina’s house (bought years earlier from Don Alejo
by her husband) and then tries to convince La Japonesita, who began to run the brothel
after La Japonesa Grande’s death, to sell it to him and open a restaurant in Talca. Later,
Pancho’s brother-in-law Octavio, who has accompanied him to Estación El Olivo, tells
him that Don Alejo is planning to

<EXT>Tear down the houses and plow the town, rich, fallow land, and plant
vineyards as if the town had never existed, hell, that’s what he’s after. Now that
his plans for making Estación el Olivo an important town have fallen through,
because he thought the highway would come right by his door. (Donoso, *Hell Has
No Limits*, 117)<EXT>

And here, we realize suddenly that just as Estación El Olivo was born out of agrarian
modernity tied to the train and died of a new phase of modernization dominated by the
automobile and highway, the space that constituted the town will be thrown back into
circuits of capital once more, this time through a *return* to agriculture. The next phase of
modernization, that is, is not that of small property owners in a town, but rather that of
capitalist agriculture on a reconstituted fundo.

It is with reference to the return to agriculture as a strategy for accumulation that
the novel’s multiple references to the vineyards acquire importance. Even before figuring
out Don Alejo’s plan, for example, La Japonesita says to herself that “El Olivo no es más
que un desorden de casas ruinosas sitiado por la geometría de las viñas que parece que
van a tragárselo” (Donoso, *El lugar sin límites*, 45; El Olivo is nothing but a few run-down houses scattered by the geometry of vineyards which seem on the verge of swallowing them [Donoso, *Hell Has No Limits*, 52]).

Once we know of the plan to reconstitute the fundo, the temporal organization of the novel acquires added meaning, for the single Sunday in which the action takes place occurs in the immediate aftermath of the autumn wine harvest. The completion of the wine harvest signals the end of an agrarian cycle and the beginning of a new one, in which the houses under the rested soil might be reincorporated into the production process. The short intensity of human life is, retrospectively, framed within the longer rhythms of capitalist agriculture. Here we should stress that even though the temporal organization of the novel is to some extent organized by nature, this framing functions *not* as a leftover of a traditional peasant past (in which the changing of the seasons can still be registered as a key facet of social existence), but rather as a symbol of the temporal scheme of capitalist agriculture, in which nature is harnessed to the process of accumulation.

It is also crucial to note, with respect to the centrality of wine production to the novel, that Manuela’s brutal beating and probable death at the hands of Pancho and Octavio occurs in the bramble on the edge of Don Alejo’s vineyards, into which she vainly tries to cross in search of the landowner’s protection from these two men. Her attempt is in vain, however, not only because Don Alejo’s power as a landowner is in decline, but because the social logic to which the vineyards correspond is wholly indifferent to the fate of subjects like La Manuela. Don Alejo’s prerogative to dominate (in the case of Pancho) and protect (in the case of La Manuela) seems to have reached its
own limit in an emerging context: hence he is pictured, with ironic narrative distance, as waiting “benevolently” on the other side of the vineyards as the two men beat La Manuela into unconsciousness and possibly death (Donoso, *Hell Has No Limits*, 179). Meanwhile, Don Alejo’s four fierce guard dogs roam the recently harvested vineyards, restricting their protective capacities to the property. What happens in the bramble does not concern them.

And so *El lugar sin límites* gestures not simply to the decline and decay of a traditional social order, but rather toward a new project of accumulation, however tentative. Under this new project, small ownership becomes an impossibility, a turn thrown into relief in the case of Manuela; she might have entertained the thought of becoming a property owner at a specific moment in time, but in the longer *durée* of Chilean modernity, this subject-position is rendered impossible. In this regard, it is highly significant that at the moment before she is beaten, she figuratively returns to the subject she once was before becoming La Manuela: Manuel, the *loca* born as a peon on another fundo, cast out of that space after she was discovered kissing a boy: “La Manuela woke up. He wasn’t la Manuela. It was he, Manuel González Astica. He. And because he was a he they were going to hurt him and Manuel González Astica was terrified” (Donoso, *El lugar sin límites*, 175, my translation). Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that we identify “real” Manuela as Manuel, or that we identify a class position as the “truth” behind sexual identity and desire. Rather, Manuela’s queerness, and the violently homophobic reaction it provokes, should be situated within an equally brutal system of property relations. Vulnerable precisely because of her sexual identity, she is annihilated
in the transition from one oppressive system (patriarchalism) to another (a less personalistic system in which property nonetheless remains in the hands of a few).

What I find most striking about the resolution of *El lugar sin límites* is that it prefigures a project of *reconstitution* of property relations following a (modest) reform, an oscillation that eerily prefigures the history of agrarian reform and counter reform in Chile. Agrarian reform was initiated under the Christian Democrat government of Eduardo Frei (1964–70)—mainly as a bulwark against the threat of Communism in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution—then continued much more radically under Allende’s Socialist Popular Unity government (1970–73).\(^{42}\) With Pinochet’s 1973 coup, reform was brought to an abrupt halt as land was reconverted into large holdings. As many historians have shown, after 1973, most of these holdings were not returned to their original owners, but sold to an emerging class of Chilean entrepreneurs as well as to multinational agricultural conglomerates.\(^{43}\) Wine estates, in other words, were not always returned to the Don Alejos of the world, but sold by the Pinochet regime to agricultural conglomerates, which in turn redirected Chilean agriculture away from domestic production toward more lucrative export markets. Today, a Chilean wine estate is more likely to be owned by the Cousiño group or Gallo wines than a resident landowner like Don Alejo.

Donoso, of course, could not have foreseen in its specificity what Díaz and Martínez call Chile’s “great transformation” after 1973.\(^{44}\) But what his novel does imagine is a future in which a reform in the realm of property relations might be reversed with a counter reform. This reversal dovetails broadly with recent history not only in Chile, but also across Latin America, where since the onset of neoliberalism, land
reforms have been rolled back—often through force—to make way for reconcentrated properties dedicated to agroindustry. In Mexico, for instance, the article of the Constitution that forbade the sale of communally held ejidos was repealed in 1994, as a condition for the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), paving the way for a further round of rural dispossession and expulsion.

Donoso and Rulfo’s mid-twentieth-century novels illuminate the sometimes fast, sometimes painfully slow oscillations between dispossession, social abandonment, and repossession that, historically, have constituted processes of uneven rural modernization in Latin America. It should be noted that the novels of the Boom marked both a high point in Latin American literary engagements with the rural and its swan song, for after the 1970s, Latin American literature, like the region’s societies themselves, became increasingly urban. Even so, novels such as Pedro Páramo and El lugar sin límites remain strikingly relevant to a history of the present. Against today’s de-peopled landscapes of industrially produced soy, avocados, or tomatoes, these literary words allow us to glimpse not a world of lost tradition, but rather earlier chapters in a longer history of uneven and incomplete—though always brutal—rural modernization. To return to Rulfo’s metaphor, literary texts allow us to hear the murmullos or murmurings of historical transitions within our own present.

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4 Jean Franco, “Journey to the Land of the Dead: Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*,” in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*, ed. Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen E. Newman (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 429–46. Franco writes: “In *Pedro Páramo*, money dispenses the overlord from any personal confrontation, absolves him from the moral consequences of his actions . . . . The social structure of feudalism appears to be preserved in *Pedro Páramo* but it has been demolished from within by money, which imposes a new kind of relationship, one based on value” (442). This contradiction between economic and non-economic means of accumulation might not be simply an aberration lived on the peripheries of global capitalism, though it is perhaps most startlingly on display in these contexts. As Franco Moretti has recently argued, our very understanding of the bourgeois should proceed according to a dialectic between rationality and utility, on the one hand, and primitive accumulation, on the other. In his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, Moretti identifies an “unresolved dialectic of the bourgeois type himself, and of his two ‘souls’: suggesting, contra Weber, that the rational bourgeois will never truly outgrow his irrational impulses, nor repudiate
the predator he once used to be. In being, not just the beginning of a new era, but a beginning in which a structural contradiction becomes visible that will be never overcome, Defoe’s shapeless story remains the great classic of bourgeois literature” (Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* [London and New York: Verso, 2013], 35, emphasis in original).


6 The two periods represented in *Pedro Páramo* are contained within the double meaning of the fictional place name Comala; in Spanish, *comal* is a Nahuatl-derived word for a griddle used for making tortillas, and hence the name corresponds simultaneously with maize production (Comala’s past) and hellish heat (Comala’s present). It should be noted that the only references to Comala’s past fertility and abundance in the novel come from the nostalgia-tinged, Arcadian recollections of Juan Preciado’s mother, Dolores Preciado, which provide a sharp contrast with the desert-like landscape encountered by Juan Preciado.

7 In Latin America, considerations of the countryside as temporally and spatially outside of what we today call capitalist modernity date back at least to the post-Independence period in the nineteenth century, as in the liberal Argentine statesman and writer D. F. Sarmiento’s dichotomy between the “barbaric” countryside and the “civilized” city. The Peruvian Marxist Carlos Mariátegui, in turn, writes in the early twentieth century that “[e]l capitalismo es un fenómeno urbano: tiene el espíritu de burgo industrial, manufacturero, mercantil” (capitalism is an urban phenomenon: it has the spirit of the industrial, manufacturing, mercantile burg); the Peruvian countryside—notably the highland hacienda—is a remnant of the feudal past that has blocked the proper arrival of bourgeois modernity (José Carlos Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* [Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2007], 25, my translation).


14 On the late nineteenth-century model of export-driven growth—which itself relied heavily on rural extraction, and its relationship to Latin American literary production—see Ericka Beckman, Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America’s Export Age (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). See also Joshua Lund, The Mestizo State: Reading Race in Modern Mexico (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). While not framed explicitly around questions of uneven development, this recent work on Mexican and Meso-American literature highlights how literary form is constituted through ongoing waves of primitive accumulation.


Efrain Kristal, 232–44 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 233). Take, for example, Eliot’s evocation of a place where “the sun beats / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water” (quoted in Wilson, “Pedro Páramo, 233). I am thankful to Manuel Gutiérrez for pointing me to this possible relationship between Eliot and Rulfo.

Ángel Rama notes that Rulfo belonged to a reactionary, conservative landowning class in Jalisco, where “contingents of Spaniards created a rural culture there under conditions of isolation” (Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America, trans. David Frye [Durham: Duke University Press, 2012], 69). As part of a class ruined by the Revolution and Cristero War, writes Rama, Rulfo’s “main innovation” was, paradoxically, “to recover popular speech and use it as a substitute for educated bourgeois writing and to go back to the use of the narrative structures of popular tales” (74).

In his well-known reading, for example, the Mexican novelist and critic Carlos Fuentes argues that Rulfo’s rewriting of Oedipus, Electra, Jocasta, and others, allows him to place “the thematics of the Mexican countryside and revolution into a universal context” (La nueva novela hispanoamericana [Mexico City: Joaquín Moritz, 1969], 16, my translation). Note that for Fuentes, Mexican history always occupies the place of the particular and can only become universal through recourse to established Western myth.

Pedro Páramo’s grandfather, moreover, is in a larger scheme a newcomer to Comala: according to Pedro Páramo’s grandmother, her husband “erred” (jerró) in coming to the town (Rulfo, Pedro Páramo, 11). In similar fashion, Richard Rosa, discussing the tendency to identify the land- and slave-owning class in the Colombian novel Maria as “aristocratic” and “patriarchal,” reveals that the rise and fall of the family hinges on financial speculation (Finance and Literature in 19th Century Latin America (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, forthcoming). In both cases, landowners identified with the past are in fact agents of historical change under emerging regimes of accumulation.


In “Pedro Páramo: Clausura de un proceso histórico,” Saúl Sosnowski notes, “the first step of expansion is by way of the body: Pedro Páramo’s sex pays debts, acquires documents, takes possession of land. His sex fertilizes fields and populates Comala’s lands” (Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica, no. 13–14 [1981]: 57). I would amend this to note that it is the exchange of women—not the landowner’s sexual fecundity—that makes the accumulation of land possible. But Sosnowski is right to note the fundamental importance of marriage and sex in the landowner’s rise. This is not accidental: as Maria Mies has argued in Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour (London and New York: Zed Books, 1986), sexual appropriation is itself a form of original accumulation;
historically, the enclosure of the commons and the domestication of women occurred at the same moment. In *Pedro Páramo*, sex functions as a site of appropriation throughout the novel. The landowner demands access to women’s bodies and fills the town with bastard sons. His son Miguel, a bastard recognized by the landowner, rapes the women of the town; when they seek redress, Pedro Páramo’s lawyer tells them they should be grateful they will have a light-skinned child “güerito,” gesturing toward the racial hierarchy that undergirds property relations in the Mexican countryside (Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, 58).

26 My translation.

27 With respect to how the Revolution appears in *Pedro Páramo*, Wilson writes that “[t]he official history of Mexico bypassed Comala . . . . No land reform, no social justice, just the powerful “macho” Pedro Páramo,” who is able to bend the revolutionaries to his will (“*Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo,” 238). Even when post-Revolutionary land reform appears explicitly, as it does in Rulfo’s short story “Nos han dado la tierra” (“They Gave Us the Land,” 1945), it figures as a form of dispossession; the story follows a group of men as they travel to the piece of remote and barren land they have been given by the state. Rulfo is, of course, not alone in this pessimistic vision; José Revueltas’s magisterial *El luto humano* (*Human Mourning*, 1943), one of the novels that inspired Rulfo, focuses on the continued impoverishment of peasants after the Revolution.


29 Rulfo wrote *Pedro Páramo* in a moment of intense rural to urban migration, both within Mexico and to the United States (under the Bracero program), in which villages were transformed into ghost towns. Moreover, Jalisco’s intense corn production led to grave soil erosion, contributing both to poverty and migration. In *Pedro Páramo*, the idea of a ghost town is literalized, as is too the idea of a totally barren landscape. These twin crises of the countryside are more explicitly linked to the post-Revolutionary context in Rulfo’s short story “Luvina” (1953).
named after a rocky town described as “reseca y achicada como cuero viejo” (dried up and shrunken like old leather), and inhabited only by “puros viejos y los que todavía no han nacido” (only the old and those who haven’t yet been born) (in El llano en llamas [México: El Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992], 21, 25, my translations).

30 José Donoso, El lugar sin límites (Barcelona: Editorial Bruguera, 1984).

31 La Manuela is referred to in the novel as a loca (literally “crazy woman”), best translated into English as “queen” or “faggot.” She is also referred to as a “travesti,” or “transvestite,” a term that refers to her performance of femininity. The name Manuela, in turn, is a feminized variant on the male name Manuel (which as we learn is her given name).

32 Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Donoso’s novel are from José Donoso, Hell Has No Limits, trans. Suzanne Jill Levine (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1999), 7.

33 For example, Laura García-Moreno contends that “[t]he hellish quality of existence in El Olivo cannot be dissociated from the obsolete status to which village life is abruptly submitted by modern forces of progress represented in the highway” (“Limits of Performance: Art, Gender, and Power in Jose Donoso’s El Lugar Sin Límites,” Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana 26, no. 2 [1997]: 26–43, 31). Mario Rodríguez Fernández, in turn, writes that the highway represents modernity, while the villages alongside it represent the “small hells (infiernos chicos) of premodernity” (“El lugar sin límites: Historia de un cronotopo y la crucifixión de un dios,” Revista Chilena de Literatura 48 [1996]: 97–100, 98, my translation). As I argue below, it is not premodernity but rather modernity that is experienced as hell in the novel.


35 In this scene, Don Alejo sets his guard dogs on Pancho, only calling them off at the last minute; he then demands that Pancho account for his failure to make payments on his loan. When Pancho responds defiantly, “yo no firmé ningún documento” (I didn’t sign anything), rage swells in the
landowner, as he reminds Pancho that he has already cut off the latter’s trucking routes with a mere phone call (Donoso, *El lugar sin limites*, 45; Donoso, *Hell Has No Limits*, 38). I cite this conversation because earlier, we saw how Pedro Páramo, faced with an appeal to patriarchal duty by his lawyer, shirked his responsibility by acting as a bourgeois; Don Alejo, faced with an appeal to bourgeois contract, responds by reasserting his patriarchal power. These two responses correspond with the landowner’s ability to act as feudal lord or bourgeois at will, depending on circumstances.


38 See, for example, Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat, *José Donoso, impostura e impostación: la modelización lúdica y carnavalesca de una producción literaria* (Gaithersburg: Hispámerica, 1983), or Virginia Talley, “Animalized Others in *El lugar sin limites,*” *Neophilologus* 95 (2011): 221–33.

39 The historian José Bengoa writes that the wheat export economy entered into crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century; one response to this crisis was wine production (*Historia Social de la agricultura chilena: Tomo I: El poder y la subordinación* [Santiago: Ediciones Sur, 1988]).

40 In his reading of Balzac’s novel *The Peasants*, Georg Lukács discusses how Balzac plots the transformation of landless peasants on a seigniorial estate into smallholders in 1840s France. He argues that this novel gives literary form to what Marx demonstrates in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; namely, that in the transition from feudalism to capitalism the feudal lord is replaced by the capitalist usurer: “the liberation of the peasants from feudal exploitation is tragically nullified by the advent of capitalist exploitation” (Georg Lukács, *Studies in European
In *El lugar sin límites*, we don’t see a transition from the feudal lord to the capitalist usurer; instead, they are the same person.

41 Much recent criticism on *El lugar sin límites* has focused on questions of travestism, sexual identity, and desire, particularly through the figure of La Manuela (see especially Ben Sifuentes Jáuregui, “Gender without Limits: Transvestism and Subjectivity in *El lugar sin límites,*” in *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy [New York: New York University Press, 1997: 44–62]). Such criticism provides a withering critique of the patent homophobia of early readings of the novel, in which homosexuality was either read as a stand-in for something else (the carnivalesque, class opposition, etc.) or as unquestioned evidence of “perversion” in the decadent town.

42 As in the case of *Pedro Páramo*, land reform never directly appears in *El lugar sin límites*, although the novel’s emphasis on the transformation of rural social relations, along with its emphasis on small property ownership (the emphasis of land reform under Christian Democrats) might be interpreted as a veiled response to land reform. It is only in Donoso’s 1976 novel *Casa de campo*, written in the aftermath of the military coup against the Unidad Popular, that communist and socialist movements are inscribed into his fiction (at their moment of defeat).
