

The Littered City: Trash and Neoliberal Urban Space in *El aire*, *Bariloche*, and *La villa*

En este artículo, analizo el papel de la basura en la representación del espacio urbano en tres novelas argentinas escritas durante un período de implementación intensiva de políticas neoliberales en ese país: El aire de Sergio Chejfec, Bariloche de Andrés Neuman y La villa de César Aira. Considero la manera en que los desechos sirven tanto para consolidar como para interrumpir la coherencia de los espacios representados en las novelas en cuestión. Propongo, además, que la presencia de la basura en estos textos funciona como un indicio del impasse temporal que genera el neoliberalismo.

Palabras clave: *basura, neoliberalismo, producción del espacio, literatura argentina, cartoneros*

In this article, I analyze the role of trash in the representation of urban space in three Argentine novels written during a period of wholesale implementation of neoliberal policies in that country: Sergio Chejfec's El aire, Andrés Neuman's Bariloche, and César Aira's La villa. I examine the way that waste acts both to consolidate and disrupt the spaces represented in the novels, and I propose that the presence of trash in these texts serves to signal the temporal impasse generated by neoliberalism.

Keywords: *trash, neoliberalism, production of space, Argentine literature, cartoneros*

“The superior economic performance of countries that establish and maintain outward-oriented market economies subject to macro-economic discipline is essentially a positive question. The proof may not be quite as conclusive as the proof that the earth is not flat, but it is sufficiently well established as to give sensible people better things to do with their time than challenge its veracity.”

John Williamson, “Democracy and the ‘Washington Consensus’” (1330)

Trash is a potent force. Despite its repulsiveness and supposed lack of value, it is inextricably linked to activities of consumption and circulation in market economies and, as such, it is an important factor in the modern

production of space and spatial practices. In thinking about the powerful role that the material plays in the production of space, it is essential to remember that:

Material practices transform the spaces of experience from which all knowledge of spatiality is derived. These transformative material practices in part accord with discursive maps and plans (and are therefore expressing of both social relations and power) but they are also manifestations of symbolic meanings, mythologies, desires. The spatialities produced through material practices ... also constitute the material framework within which social relations, power structures, and discursive practices unfold. (Harvey, *Justice, Nature* 112)

Henri Lefebvre famously theorized that space is not a fixed, preexisting category but rather a social production arising from complex dialectical processes involving lived experience, representational practices, and ideology (17). David Harvey contributes to that theorization by emphasizing the role of materiality and material practices in the production of space, and his contribution serves as a useful point of entry for thinking about the centrality of a specific type of material – trash – in framing the way that we think about the production of urban space in Latin America.

Here, I will focus on the way that trash is represented as central to understanding the production of urban space in the context of neoliberalism. More specifically, I will examine three Argentine novels – Sergio Chejfec's *El aire* (1992), Andrés Neuman's *Bariloche* (1999), and César Aira's *La villa* (2001) – that reckon with the production of space in Buenos Aires during the 1990s. As is well known, this was a decade of wholesale neoliberal reform in Argentina. In an attempt to curb hyperinflation and stimulate economic growth, in 1991 President Carlos Menem acceded to the demands of the International Monetary Fund and brought Argentina's economy into line with the so-called Washington Consensus, which involved large-scale privatization, labor and financial deregulation, and the Convertibility Plan that pegged the value of the Argentine peso to the U.S. dollar. While this structural adjustment program reined in inflation and stimulated economic growth, it also led to increased unemployment, higher rates of poverty, and an increasingly unequal income distribution. As the decade wore on, external public debt climbed and the economy went into recession. By the end of 2001, Argentina's economy collapsed: "unemployment reached 25 percent, and if underemployment is considered this implies that over 50 percent of the population was in some way unemployed. Poverty escalated to over 50

percent of the population, 10 million of whom were extremely poor” (Teubal 186).¹

The thrust of my argument is that *El aire*, *Bariloche*, and *La villa* expose the noxious effects and implications of the logic of neoliberalism by linking that logic to the social production of space. The logic of neoliberalism goes beyond “the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life” and holds that “the market is the most efficient and moral institution for the organization of human affairs [and] could and perhaps even should replace all other institutions (e.g. family, state, community, and society) as the primary mechanism for producing, promoting, and preserving social order” (Springer, et al. 2-3). Another way of saying that the market is or ought to be the standard for the articulation of all aspects of social life is that social relations (including the production of space) come to be defined in terms of production and consumption, the twin market activities whose constant acceleration supposedly constitutes growth, development, and progress. However, there is a third factor that is intertwined with both production and consumption: waste. As Rachele Dini notes,

At heart, capitalism is driven by two very different visions of waste. Manufacturers and retailers are at pains to minimise the waste involved in production and distribution, and to put by-products and expired merchandise to use ... And yet the hope of manufacturers ... is that their costumers will use their products *inefficiently*, and dispose of them soon, so that they might purchase a newer version of them ... The accumulation of detritus is inherent to modernisation. (6; emphasis in the original)

In other words, lurking behind the market reforms whose purported aim was to integrate Argentina more fully into a world economy predicated on steadily increasing rates of consumption are the material consequences of disposal: the production of trash.

If disposal is the condition of possibility of consumption in market economies, is it not also the condition of possibility of art produced in this type of economic-cultural order? Art that is conscious of this reality, that does not see trash as an inevitable byproduct of the creation of beauty, knowledge, or progress, but rather takes trash as the very basis of its aesthetic project and, in spite of being a product of the market, takes a conscious, critical stance toward market logic, is art that expresses the “true love of the world” that Slavoj Žižek proposes as a way of confronting the reality of the trash we produce instead of perpetuating the utopian fantasy of a possible future without waste (*Examined Life*). As we struggle

to understand what it means to be human in the midst of ecological crises that are characterized by the paralyzing paradox of both being our fault and seemingly escaping our control, thinking about trash instead of ignoring it has the potential to help us put into practice a love of the world that is not an attempt to remake it in our own image. A memorable scene from the documentary *Examined Life* shows Žižek holding forth on the subject of trash while walking around a waste treatment facility. Over the hum of machines processing trash and in between moments in which the Slovenian critic pokes around the remnants of refrigerators and soft-core porn magazines, he talks about the fundamentally conservative nature of the ecological movement, alleging that the idea of a thing called “nature” that requires human intervention to save it from destruction – that is, as an object exterior to culture upon which culture can act – is dangerous for two reasons. First, it makes nature into a victimized Other that is dependent on a superior force for its survival: the transcendent human subject. Žižek calls this ideology conservative because, while cloaked in progressive, anti-industrial or anti-extractive rhetoric, its structure is the same as that of the instrumental rationality that it attempts to combat. Second, it sets the stage for a paralyzing disavowal of imminent ecological catastrophe by fomenting the fantasy of getting back to a pristine nature that shows no trace of human activity or presence and therefore atoning for our history of ecological exploitation and destruction. Elsewhere, Žižek has taken up the issue of how the ideology of recycling participates in this fantasy:

The ideal of “recycling” involves the utopia of a self-enclosed circle in which all waste, all useless remainder, is sublated: nothing gets lost, all trash is reused. It is at this level that one should make the shift from the circle to the ellipse: already in nature itself, there is no circle of total recycling, there is un-usable waste ... This is why the properly aesthetic attitude of a radical ecologist is not that of admiring or longing for a pristine nature of virgin forests and clear sky, but rather that of accepting waste as such, of discovering the aesthetic potential of waste, of decay, of the inertia of rotten material which serves no purpose. (35)

The texts that I consider here assume this “properly aesthetic attitude of a radical ecologist” as defined by Žižek; Chejfec’s, Neuman’s, and Aira’s novels represent the production of space in Buenos Aires during the 1990s as a function of the circulation of trash while considering both the paralyzing, destructive nature of that connection as well as the potential for trash to serve as a basis for reorganizing social relations and spaces. In this sense, they contest the hubristic discourse of neoliberalism’s market

logic as the natural (i.e., correct) order of things, a discourse that is succinctly and smugly expressed by John Williamson in the epigraph that opens this article. By challenging the veracity of that discourse, the novels I analyze here could be considered, from Williamson's point of view, as nonsensical and a waste of time. But as we will see, some very productive thinking can arise from waste.

THE PLACE OF TRASH IN *EL AIRE*, *BARILOCHE*, AND *LA VILLA*

The aesthetic dimension of trash is central to *El aire*, *Bariloche*, and *La villa*. All three texts were written during a period of intensive implementation of neoliberal policies in Argentina, policies whose apparent purpose was to integrate the country into the global market. Neoliberalism, as David Harvey puts it, "holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (*A Brief History* 3). But just as it is possible to see how the neoliberal brand of "social good" in large part produced the socioeconomic conditions that brought about the Argentine economic crisis at the turn of the century, Chejfec, Neuman, and Aira – albeit in remarkably different ways – manage to show that if market logic is a logic of disposal, then by submitting all human activity to the domain of the market, human relations end up being articulated in terms of trash.

In this way, I think it is important to consider the part that trash plays in these novels, all of which deal with middle-class men, who, in one way or another, are compelled to follow the trajectory that trash takes as it circulates around the city of Buenos Aires. In Chejfec's novel, *El aire*, the protagonist is a man named Barroso, who returns home from work early one day because of a fire in his office building. This change in his daily routine allows him to be in his apartment the very moment when Benavente, his wife, slides a letter under the door telling him that she is leaving him. The narrative accompanies Barroso over the course of the next several days as he observes the ever-increasing amount of detritus that fills his apartment while he also wanders the streets of a Buenos Aires where glass has become money and, as such, people dig through the trash to find bottles to exchange.

Bariloche, Neuman's novel, tells the story of Demetrio Rota, a municipal garbage collector who picks up trash with his partner el Negro along the same route day after day. When he is not working, Rota spends his time obsessively putting together jigsaw puzzles, all of which portray scenes of Nahuel Huapí Lake and the wooded areas surrounding the city of Bariloche (Rota's home town). As the novel's fragmented narrative

progresses, we piece together the connection between Rota's obsession with puzzles and both his first sexual experience, which occurred by the shores of the lake, as well as the trauma occasioned by his family's move from Bariloche to the Argentine capital after his father lost his job at a sawmill. The discrepancy between the idealized space represented by the jigsaw puzzles and the spaces that Rota inhabits in Buenos Aires triggers a deterioration in his mental state and, at the novel's end, Rota quits his job and walks into the landfill, sinking into the waste of Buenos Aires.

In *La villa*, Aira presents us with Maxi, a young bodybuilder who lives in the Flores neighborhood close to a *villa miseria* or shantytown. Maxi spends his time lifting weights and wandering around his neighborhood. One day, without ever knowing why, he starts helping the *cirujas* or *cartoneros* (cardboard/trash pickers) with the heavy carts in which they collect trash and recyclable materials that they find in the street. Little by little, Maxi approaches the *villa*, a space that he finds increasingly fascinating. While all of this is occurring, Cabezas, a police inspector who suspects that the *villa* is the epicenter for the trafficking of an illegal drug called *proxidina*, becomes interested in Maxi's presence in the *villa* and his connection to the *cartoneros*. As a result of a frenzied chain of events, Maxi, his sister, and one of his sister's friends get caught up in a police investigation that sets the stage for a reflection on police and judicial corruption and the media-driven spectacularization of marginalized spaces like the *villa miseria*, whose inhabitants end up saving Maxi from the malicious designs of Inspector Cabezas.

What I am proposing here is that, besides the mere presence of trash, what links these three novels is the way that trash acts as the point of articulation for the characters' actions, their relationships, in short, their way of being in the world. In this sense, these texts offer a critical reading of neoliberalism that takes into account the way that production, consumption, and disposal are bound together. But I also think that the presence of trash in these novels acts as more than just a mirror that reflects the decrepitude of the "freedom" that the free market provides. What these texts do is invite us to consider the power that trash has. For John Scanlan, "Garbage is the formlessness from which form takes flight, the ghost that haunts presence. Garbage is the entrails, the bits or scraps, the mountain of indistinguishable stuff that is in its own way affirmed by a resolute dismissal: it is *refuse-d* (not accepted, denied, banished)" (14; emphasis in the original). Like the abject, trash is what used to be a part of us (on an individual or societal level) but is now excluded from our subjectivity. It is the material objects that, in a consumer society, used to be the things with which we constructed our identities but, upon losing

their value or for some other reason, become excluded, relegated to the dump, where we assume that their connection to us, their role in forming our identities, has been neutralized. But, as Scanlan suggests, trash has a ghostly quality that refutes what appears to be the clear, neat separation between us and what we throw away. For this reason, Julia Kristeva affirms that despite the act of separation by which the abject is expelled, "... from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). The ambiguous challenge that trash presents is part of what Chejfec, Neuman, and Aira capture in their novels, and in what follows I will analyze the way in which this challenge manifests itself in these three texts. First, I will examine the connection between waste and urban space, emphasizing the paradoxical way in which trash can articulate cohesion among diverse parts of the city while at the same time underlining the fragmentation and disintegration of urban spaces. Next, I will move on to a consideration of an element that is strongly linked to space: time. In this section, I will analyze the way the trash that undergirds the articulation of space functions as a material index of postmodern temporality in *El aire* and *Bariloche*. I will close my reading of these novels with a reflection on the way *La villa* signals the possibility of seeing in trash a new aesthetic horizon that allows us to imagine alternative forms of social interaction.

TRASH AND URBAN SPACE

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre posits that space does not exist *a priori*; that is, it is not a pre-existing dimension into which social actors step, but rather, space becomes constituted as the subject inhabits it and, therefore, space itself is an ongoing manifestation of a process of signification in which the subjective experience of space is one and the same with the production thereof (17). This leads Lefebvre to theorize that the production of space is a dialectical process that occurs in the tensions and flows that arise among three spatial vertices: spatial practices (how space is perceived by those who inhabit it), representations of space (how space is conceived by the technicians that design and execute allocations of space), and representational spaces (how the inhabitants of a space appropriate and modify it by means of engaging with it on an imaginative-symbolic level) (33-39). While this dialectical production of space may present itself as a fluid, coherent system, one of the paradoxes of the regime of *neocapitalism* is that the city "includes the most extreme separation between the places it links together" (Lefebvre 38). In decoding the signifying processes involved in the production of space in a modern city like Buenos Aires, elements that simultaneously link and separate

serve to underscore the uneven, potentially marginalizing qualities of the way that space is lived.

Trash is just such an element. On the one hand, trash collection is a means by which waste circulates throughout the city, following established routes between homes or businesses and places of collection, like landfills (as is the case in *Bariloche*) or *villas miseria* (as happens in *La villa*). On the other, the need to separate garbage from other material and contain it in predetermined locations that are normally much closer to the homes of the working poor than those of more privileged classes signals the discontinuities of urban space. As such, following trash's movements from one place to another is a way of both establishing connections between different spaces and understanding urban geography. That trash functions as a metonym of neoliberal spatial politics (the linked-but-separate logic that underwrites the neoliberal city) in all three of the novels I analyze here is a gesture that calls to mind works like Esteban Echeverría's "El matadero" (1838) and Bernardo Verbitsky's *Villa miseria también es América* (1957). As Patrick Dove notes, both works employ the spaces evoked in their titles as metonyms for the disconnectedness of urban space in Buenos Aires: Echeverría's *matadero* is "a poetic image of postindependence Argentina's inability to align itself with the progressive temporality of modernity" and Verbitsky's *villa miseria* is a disavowed, unappreciated product of modernization that "highlights the innate dignity of the working poor against liberalism's tendency to disparage these groups as something less than human" (*Literature* 168; 169). Read in light of this aspect of the Argentine literary tradition, it is clear that the reflection on the link between social inclusion/exclusion and the fragmentary nature of urban space present in *El aire*, *Bariloche*, and *La villa* does not represent a new area of concern. However, what distinguishes these novels' treatment of the theme from the spatial metonymies I cite above is their insistence on engaging with the aesthetic potential of trash itself, a material that is produced across urban space, circulates throughout the city, and continually threatens to exceed the boundaries of the spaces where it is confined.

The flow of trash throughout the city is especially evident in *Bariloche* and *La villa*. In Neuman's novel, Rota and el Negro, city garbage collectors, go out every morning to pick up trash in the section of Buenos Aires that lies west of Puerto Madero, travelling through a zone delimited by Avenida Independencia, Paseo Colón, and 9 de Julio (15). The novel even details how they stop for breakfast every day at the same bar on Calle Bolívar (17).²

Aira's novel exhibits a similar concern with establishing the route travelled by the anonymous *cirujas* in *La villa*: "Venían de las populosas

villas miseria del Bajo de Flores, y volvían a ellas con su botín” (13). In fact, Aira dedicates several pages to a detailed description of their daily trajectory as they walk through the streets, filling their homemade carts with materials that they pick from other people’s garbage: they leave the shantytown at sunset and head toward Plaza Flores, and from there they follow Avenida Rivadavia; then they travel the length of both Directorio and Bonorino before arriving back at the *villa* with their cargo (13-17).

Besides the fact that Aira and Neuman describe the circulation of trash as a fluid movement among diverse pockets of urban space, both novels also emphasize the apparent invisibility of this material flow. In *Bariloche*, we are reminded time and again that Rota and el Negro do their job in the wee hours of the morning when the streets are empty and no one is there to notice them. And Aira’s narrator gives us a more explicit reflection on the naturalization of the phenomenon of garbage pickers:

La profesión de cartonero o ciruja se había venido instalando en la sociedad durante los últimos diez o quince años. A esta altura, ya no llamaba la atención. Se habían hecho invisibles, porque se movían con discreción, casi furtivos, de noche (y sólo durante un rato), y sobre todo porque se abrigaban en un pliegue de la vida que en general la gente prefiere no ver. (13)

By underscoring the efficiency with which trash travels through the city (whether it is collected by people hired by the city or not) and the banality of its circulation, Aira’s and Neuman’s novels manage to represent how trash participates in the production of coherent, cohesive urban spaces. To return to Lefebvre’s terminology, waste management seems to help strike a balance between the conceived space of city planners and the spatial practices of city residents. This gives us an image of the city as a rational system, a body or organism whose smooth operation depends on efficiently moving around or altogether eliminating trash. However, at the same time, both novels also account for the abject quality of this material that seems to lend coherence to the urban experience. One morning, after finishing his route, Rota reaches the landfill and observes it in the morning light:

Lo que más destacaba a aquella hora era el cristal y también el plástico. Más tarde serían sobre todo las latas, y ya casi al atardecer de nuevo los plásticos y los cristales, aunque Demetrio jamás llegaba a verlo. Ahora él contemplaba el relucir de las astillas de cristal, los bidones vacíos y abollados como los opacos islotes supervivientes de alguna ira metódica e inmundada que lo hubiera arrasado todo. No sabía qué hacían al cabo de los años con todo aquello, adónde iban a parar los

excedentes de la montaña, a qué estómago o a qué garganta ... Se le ocurrió imaginar que la mole, una vez digerido su banquete hediondo, excretaba las sobras hacia el corazón de la ciudad, y de allí partían diseminadas a los hogares y a los contenedores de las calles que más tarde volverían a alimentar el basurero, una y otra vez. Era curiosa la cuestión de la mierda y de su itinerario. (Neuman 103)

Imagining trash's itinerary as a closed cycle of ingestion and excretion that perpetually increases the size of the landfill serves to underscore the ambiguity of the connection between trash and the production of space: on the one hand, trash's habitual routes show the connections that tie the city together, but, on the other hand, trash ends up in zones of abjection, places that the vast majority of urban dwellers prefers to ignore. Thus, trash has the power to signal the gaps that arise among the vertices of Lefebvre's spatial dialectic in the regime of neocapitalism. By following the paths that trash travels in these three novels, we begin to see that waste serves to enact fragmented, deteriorated urban space.

Besides the passage that I just quoted from Neuman's novel, perhaps the most potent indication of the deterioration of space in *Bariloche* is Rota's failure to articulate a representational space that would allow him to develop beneficial spatial practices in Buenos Aires. As an outsider who moves to the capital in his adolescence, he never manages to fit in – to find his place – in the city.³ His only attempt to imagine a space of his own is his obsessive assembling of jigsaw puzzles with images of his birthplace. Bariloche is always just out of his reach, just as it lies outside of the narrative fragments that make up the novel. The only place in the text to present an "objective" vision of Rota's birthplace is the space between the novel's epigraphs and the first chapter, where we read what appears to be a fragment taken from a geography manual: "Bariloche: c. emplazada sobre la orilla merid. del lago Nahuel Huapí, prov. de Río Negro, 41º 19' lat. S, 71º 24' long. O. Limítrofe con prov. de Neuquén. Estación sismográfica. Accid. más imp.: cerro Catedral y monte Tronador" (Neuman 13). The precision of this paratextual description of the space that Rota longs for offers a sharp contrast to his fragmented memories of the place and the fact that the final puzzle he tries to put together is missing several pieces, which makes his imaginary reconstruction of Bariloche impossible (158).

What is more, Rota's insistent attempts at reconstructing the lost space of his childhood are accompanied by the gradual emergence of a crisis within the narrative fabric of the novel, which is composed of very brief chapters that present a variety of narrative modes. Most of the chapters are narrated in a fairly conventional fashion: an "omniscient" voice deftly unravels the plot while subsuming other forms of discourse

(like dialogue) into the narration itself by omitting attributions and punctuation that would distinguish it from the narration. This narrative mode does the work of advancing the plot, but it is frequently interrupted or fragmented by other modes. There are, for instance, several chapters in which Rota himself recounts memories of his first romantic and sexual experiences in his hometown (Neuman 39-41; 61), as well as two chapters narrated by Rota's colleague el Negro, who describes Rota's increasingly erratic behavior at work (89-91; 118-19). Even more disruptive are what could be called the novel's lyrical passages, which, unlike the externally- or internally - focalized passages I have mentioned, seem only to stall the plot of the novel. These fragments are detailed descriptions of wooded landscapes with long sentences full of adjectives and metaphors. At first, they are confined to their own chapters (19; 45), but as the novel progresses, they appear without any explanation or transitions in the middle of the more narrative chapters (82; 138). While the purpose of these passages is never spelled out, it becomes increasingly clear that they are descriptions of the puzzles Rota obsessively puts together in his apartment. That these puzzles are ciphers of his frustrated desire to infuse his adult life in Buenos Aires with meaning and the objects he takes into the dump with him at the end of the novel is key to understanding both the trashing of Rota's subjectivity and Neuman's use of the logic of trash to signal the tension between order and disorder, value and disposal that underlies the structure of *Bariloche*. In other words, trash does not just contaminate and deteriorate Rota's ability to find an appropriate place for himself in the city to such an extreme that he throws himself away.⁴ At the same time, the specter of trash suffuses the novel's structure in that the narrative fragments dedicated to describing Rota's puzzles (useless objects that turn out to have always already been trash) interrupt, contaminate, and ultimately overtake the narrative modes that propel Neuman's novel forward. In this sense, the narrator's description of the landfill as "un horizonte de fragmentos extrañamente organizados" would also seem to refer to the novel itself (166).

While trash frustrates the individual's attempts to develop representational spaces in *Bariloche*, in Aira's novel, the presence of a *villa miseria* - the place where *cirujas* take the trash items that they pick - in the middle of the city signals a disparity between spatial practices and hegemonic spatial representations: the *villa's* emergence next to a middle-class neighborhood interferes with the designs of engineers, architects, and city planners for the regimentation of space; as such, it represents a subversion of the attempts made from places of officially sanctioned power to impose coherence on the city. What is more, in *La villa*, Aira

registers how perceptions of space are conditioned by social class.⁵ For the middle class, for example, the *villa miseria* is a place of trash – an *espacio-basura* – not only because the *cirujas* transport material waste there, but also because it embodies their anxieties about delinquents, immigrants, and other marginalized populations. The fear that Flores’s middle-class residents exhibit toward the people in the *villa*, whom they see as “trash people” (*gente-basura*), is clearly distilled in the letter published in the newspaper *Clarín* by one of the novel’s characters, the father of a young girl who dies in a drug-dealing incident just outside the *villa* (Aira 41). But at the same time, the *villa*’s “exotic” squalor makes it a place of spectacle that the middle class can consume from the safety of their living rooms, which is made quite clear by the highly dramatized TV broadcast of the police raid on the *villa* that leads to the novel’s denouement, a live broadcast charged with “la expectativa de millones de televidentes enganchados en tiempo real” (Aira 147).⁶ In fact, the disjointedness of how social space is perceived is bolstered on a formal level by Aira’s technique of stitching together a variety of discursive styles throughout the novel that track characters’ movements in and around the *villa*: anthropological discourse (the narrator’s description of *cartoneros*’ work), police procedural (Inspector Cabeza’s investigation), news media sensationalism (the coverage of the torrential rainstorm and Cabeza’s investigation), and government anti-drug discourse (a speech in which a judge condemns drug trafficking at the end of the novel).

If the *villa miseria* acts as both a place of trash and a place of spectacle from the perspective of the middle class, for its lower-class inhabitants, it is their home: they themselves built and defined this space and maintain a strong affective connection to it. The TV broadcast of the police raid that serves as a pretext for morbid middle-class pleasure ends up providing Alfredo and Adelita, two of the *villa*’s inhabitants, the opportunity to see their home from a new vantage point. When they see the onscreen images, we read: “Alfredo suspiró: ‘Hacía tanto que no la veía, a la Villa...’ Adelita le tomó la mano y se la apretó” (Aira 159-60). Adelita’s gesture communicates an affective bond with the *villa* that the middle class, with the exception of one character in the novel, is completely unable to comprehend. That exception is Maxi, but I will postpone any reflection on the perspective that he has of the *villa* until the end of my discussion of these three novels.

The process of disturbance and fragmentation of urban space that trash causes in *Bariloche* and *La villa* reaches its zenith in Chefec’s *El aire*, a novel in which the production of space breaks down so much that the spaces that surround the protagonist Barroso become completely deteriorated, which is reflected by the steady path he follows toward his

demise: the novel ends with him bleeding to death in his apartment. In a way, the Buenos Aires of Barroso's wanderings is a city that is absent of itself, or of a certain conception of itself: Benavente (Barroso's wife, whose name is a clear evocation of "Buenos Aires"), has fled to Uruguay. The points of origin of the three letters that she sends her husband instructing him not to chase after her – they come from Carmelo, Colonia, and Montevideo (Chejfec 18; 122; 151) – mark the increasing distance between the deteriorated Buenos Aires of the novel and the idea of a stable, well-ordered Buenos Aires. So, Barroso wanders through a Buenos Aires shot through with absence in the same way that, as Dianna Niebylski has noted, protagonists in several of Chejfec's novels move through the city without trying to understand it because they simply cannot conceive of an alternative to their meaningless meandering (20-22).⁷

I said that in *El aire* the city is marked by absence, but perhaps such an affirmation is not entirely correct because there is a very significant presence that fills Barroso's experience of the city: that of trash. Unlike the places where trash surfaces in *Bariloche* and *La villa*, waste does not emerge in *El aire* where you might expect. For example, there is a route along which Barroso repeatedly walks that leads him to the outskirts of an abandoned area of the city. The first couple of times he passes by this place at night and he cannot see because of the darkness. But one morning Barroso goes to this area and sees by the light of day that it is a vacant area with buildings in ruins that are overgrown with wild plants. However, what is notable is that "[n]o había latas tiradas, vidrios rotos, pedazos de caucho ni piras de desechos humeantes" (Chejfec 60). Explicitly listing the trash that *is not* in this place is significant because it signals the fact that it is not to be found in its proper place. If that is so, then where can the trash be found? The answer that the novel provides is that it has invaded the spaces of the middle class and the spatial practices of consumer society. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this invasion is the construction of a series of *villas miseria* by marginalized populations, not on the outskirts of the city or in pockets of unoccupied land between more established residential zones, but rather on top of middle- and upper-middle-class apartment buildings. From the moment that Barroso reads a newspaper article about the "tugurización de las azoteas," the proliferation of these precarious dwellings begins to worry him, and they become "una confusa amenaza" that he never manages to understand (Chejfec 63; 66). The other important facet of the way that trash contaminates space and spatial practices in the novel is the transformation of discarded glass into money. Once again, Barroso discovers this phenomenon in the newspaper, where he reads an ad that says, "VIDRIO ES DINERO" (Chejfec 74). Exactly how

and why glass has become common currency is never explained, but what is made clear in the scenes in the novel in which people dig through the trash looking for bottles to exchange for necessary goods is the fusion of the circuits of capital and the pathways that garbage follows throughout the city.⁸ Once again, we see the way in which the circulation of waste problematizes the production of space in the regime of neoliberalism, simultaneously consolidating and deteriorating urban spaces.

TRASH AND TIME IN *BARILOCHE* AND *EL AIRE*

Referring to the need to name and conceptualize the antinomies that characterize the postmodern condition in order to create the possibility for alternative systems of social organization, Fredric Jameson writes:

Of the antinomies, perhaps we can conclude a bit more, namely that their ceaseless alteration between Identity and Difference is to be attributed to a blocked mechanism, whereby in our episteme these categories fail to develop, fail to transform themselves by way of their own interaction, as they have seemed able to do in other moments of the past (and not only in the Hegelian dialectic). If so, that blockage can only have something to do with the absence of any sense of an immediate future and of imaginable change ... for us time consists in an eternal present and, much further away, an inevitable catastrophe, these two moments showing up distinctly on the registering apparatus without overlapping or transitional stages. (70-71)

In both *Bariloche* and *El aire*, time is represented as the eternal present that Jameson describes, a present that, in the face of the impossibility of imagining a different type of future, is emptied of meaning. In Neuman's novel, when Rota's family moves to Lanús, young Demetrio finds work as an apprentice to a watchmaker, a good-natured man given to quipping that "¡El tiempo cambia con los tiempos!" (152). Despite his enthusiasm, time never really ends up changing for Rota.⁹ The monotony of his days is a constant throughout the book: he and el Negro collect trash along the same route day after day, they eat in the same bar, and Rota goes home every day to put together what amounts to the same jigsaw puzzle over and over again. In this sense, the spatial practices that trash helps define in the novel are inscribed in an eternal present.

For Barroso, in *El aire*, time is also an endless repetition of itself that plays out in the trash spaces I analyzed above. After his wife leaves him at the beginning of the novel, he begins to wander the streets constantly. As Beatriz Sarlo has noted, "Barroso no se mueve para buscarla, ni siquiera para comprender por qué ella se ha ido: se mueve, en cambio, para que sus

itinerarios por la ciudad y los suburbios ocupen un tiempo que, de pronto, se ha vaciado” (32). And this empty time brings no difference from one day to the next: “Sin advertir la repetición, Barroso terminó haciendo el mismo recorrido del día anterior, el previo y todos los demás” (Chejfec 120). What’s more, Chejfec underscores the isolated quality of an eternal present that has no fluid connection with either the past or the future by beginning his novel with the following quote (and ending it with one that is almost identical):

Esto puede parecer contradictorio, o en todo caso infrecuente, pero fue la circunstancia que le permitiría soportar la agotadora tensión de su época: el pasado era el olvido, el futuro era irreal; quedaba por lo tanto el presente aislado del universo, como una burbuja suspendida en el aire que necesita sin embargo de ese mismo tiempo del que está exiliada para permanecer flotando sobre su ambigüedad. (13)¹⁰

The tension that this quote invokes is certainly due to the asphyxiating quality of a present cut off from past and future. However, it could also be thought of in formal terms since the novel opens and closes with the same passage. At first blush, it seems that the repetition underscores the circular quality of Chejfec’s narrative structure: Barroso is alone in his apartment at the beginning and end of the novel, and, in this sense, not much has changed. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, the trajectory that the narrative arc traces does not really bring us back full circle. At the novel’s outset, Barroso is alive and well; he has a job, Benavente has not yet left him (as far as he is aware), and his apartment is in order. But by the time the narrative circles back to the opening/closing passage, he is unemployed, alone, and dead or dying in an apartment full of trash. The *tensión de su época*, then, is manifested in the not-quite-circular narrative structure that Chejfec deploys, a semi-circularity that follows the contours of a wasted gesture (needless repetition) that, paradoxically, is not wasted because it draws attention to the temporal impasse upon which the novel reflects.

Jameson suggests that the perception of time as an eternal present is due to a blockage that does not allow for a new future to be imagined, and I think that what Neuman and Chejfec propose in their novels is that trash is the material index of this blockage.¹¹ At every turn in both texts, the repetition of the present *ad nauseum* is associated with waste, the trajectories it follows, and the spaces where it accumulates. In *Bariloche*, Rota gazes at the landfill one morning and imagines himself looking at the same landscape every day: “Sintió que no le importaba la idea de quedarse

viendo aquello todas las mañanas de toda la vida, sólo hacía falta seguir igual, seguir así" (104). Additionally, at the end of the novel, after failing to bring his idealized past into the present via his puzzles, all of the distinct temporalities that Neuman puts on display dissolve into the temporal and material homogeneity of the landfill (166-68). And in *El aire*, there is a constant association between the waste that builds up in Barroso's apartment and the repetitive nature of the present. When he sees a pile of dirty dishes and food waste in his kitchen, it all looks to him like "el panorama de un presente eterno" (Chejfec 85). But the newspapers that fill up his apartment are the objects that best synthesize the intersection between trash and postmodern temporality:

Los diarios ocupaban los rincones de la casa y se apilaban sin orden, muchas veces mal plegados y paulatinamente más sucios de pringue y polvillo. Había días que recordaba una noticia antigua y al querer releerla sin estar sin embargo seguro de cuándo había aparecido, acababa sentado en el piso, abstraído bajo la maraña de papel, hojeando semanas o meses enteros y encontrando varias otras cosas que lo distraían y excitaban aún más que el recuerdo asociado a la búsqueda original. (46)

Further along, Chejfec characterizes the way in which Barroso reads newspapers as "recorridos a través de un tiempo desarticulado" and "el viaje atemporal por la anarquía de la prensa periódica" (46; 75). In short, the mess of grimy, dusty newspapers piled in Barroso's home is an index of a perception of time in which the events of one day are no longer distinguishable from those of another. Furthermore, given the disposable nature of newspapers and their state of disorder, they represent time reduced to trash, trash time (*tiempo-basura*).

The homogenous quality of the representation of time in Neuman's and Chejfec's novels evokes the homogenous, empty time that Walter Benjamin considers as a key concept in order to understand liberalism's conceptualization of progress, a teleological view of history that would seem to justify the triumph of neoliberalism as necessary and inevitable: "The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself" (261). In *Bariloche* and *El aire* trash updates Benjamin's dictum for the neoliberal era. Instead of evoking homogenous, empty time, what these novels do aesthetically is to imagine literarily the time of neoliberalism – a time in which a market that articulates everything in terms of the cycle of production-consumption-disposal will supposedly bring about universal progress – as a

homogenous time that occurs in spaces filled with trash. In this way, Neuman and Chejfec answer both Žižek's call to find the aesthetic dimension of trash and Benjamin's admonition regarding the basis for critiquing the prevailing logic of progress. These novels identify the inability within the neoliberal present to imagine change, and they allegorize the temporal impasse set up by an endless present full of trash. As Jameson affirms: "... the Identity of a present confronting the immense unthinkable Difference of an impossible future, these two coexisting eyeballs that each register a different kind of spectrum. It is a situation that endows the waiting with a kind of breathlessness, as we listen for the next missing tick of the clock, the absent first step of renewed praxis" (71). *Bariloche* and *El aire* make apparent this absent step, the gap between the present and a new social praxis. Instead of celebrating neoliberalism in Argentina as a sign of economic, social, and political progress, they reanimate the detritus that fills their pages, grasping bits and pieces of the debris of history that resist incorporation into the triumphal narrative of capitalism and repurposing that debris as an aesthetic element that critiques the narrative of progress as one that produces social and environmental degradation and destruction.

LA VILLA AND TRASH (A)E(S)TH(ET)ICS

In its quality as a mass of undifferentiated things, trash serves in Neuman's and Chejfec's novels as material indices of what we could call the "trash-time" of neoliberalism. But we should not forget about Aira's novel. Might *La villa* have something more to tell us about trash? I believe that it does and, by way of conclusion, I want to propose that, with respect to what concerns me here, what distinguishes Aira's novels from the other two is that it takes a step beyond the critical-diagnostic level by suggesting the possibility of using trash to imagine a change, a future that breaks the mold of the eternal present.

The relationship that Maxi develops with the *cirujas* (and the other inhabitants of the shantytown thereafter) in *La villa* is the only example in the three novels under consideration here of solidarity that cuts across class lines.¹² But it is not the paternalistic brand of support in which someone from the middle class sees himself as superior to or more fortunate than a given marginalized population and thus deigns to help members of that population. On the contrary, it is quite clear from the novel's first page that there is no hidden motivation behind the help that Maxi offers the *cirujas*: "Nunca se le ocurrió verlo como una tarea de caridad, o solidaridad, o cristianismo, o piedad, o lo que fuera; lo hacía, y basta" (Aira 9). Maxi's entrance into the lives of the *cirujas* seems to be

something like solidarity without ideology, ethics that spring forth from physiological impulses (it is important to remember that Maxi is characterized as someone who does not think and who is ruled by his biological urges) and not the desire to implement predetermined changes or improvements.¹³ But perhaps the most suggestive aspect of the relationship that arises between Maxi and the *cirujas* is the very thing that makes it possible: the physical strength that Maxi has developed as a bodybuilder. We must not forget that a bodybuilder is a person who lifts weights not to gain strength in order to pursue some other activity, but rather simply to get bigger muscles. In this sense, Maxi's bodybuilding exhibits the essence of the capitalist mode of production: "Accumulation for the sake of accumulation" (Marx 652). By the same token, however, Maxi also embodies – both physically and symbolically – the idea of waste, which is made even clearer by the fact that he was unsuccessful in school and has no job. As the narrator puts it, he has no "utilidad social" (Aira 25). By submitting his body to the fundamental law of capitalist production – accumulation for its own sake – Maxi reveals the waste that lies at the heart of the capitalist social order's logic: the relentless accumulation of muscle mass is a waste of time and energy. Paradoxically, what allows Maxi to find an alternative kind of usefulness is his dedication to waste, the "misuse" of his body and his time, at least in terms of a capitalist system that places a high value on productivity.

Maxi's "misuseful" practices run parallel to those in which the *cirujas* and other *villeros* engage with regard to trash. I say that they misuse trash because trash is something that, by definition, has lost its usefulness. But, as Bill Brown reminds us, "Misuse frees objects from the systems to which they've been beholden" (953). And it is precisely the *villeros'* misuse of objects that fascinates Maxi. As Aira's narrator tells us:

[E]n el fondo de la pobreza, en la radical supresión del dinero, se esbozaban otras formas de riqueza: por ejemplo de habilidades. Ya la manipulación de la electricidad señalaba en esa dirección. Y nadie sabía qué habilidades creativas podía tener gente que provenía de lugares muy distantes del mundo, y las más de las veces no tenía trabajo fijo y disponía de mucho tiempo libre. (35)

The abilities born of misuse – misuse of objects, of time, and of space – not only fascinate Maxi; they also end up saving his life at the end of the novel when the inhabitants of the *villa* creatively modify their *sui generis* system of street lights in order to fool Inspector Cabezas (Aira 168). In the same way, Aira's novel seems to suggest the possibility of developing a misuse of trash (recycling, for example) and articulating new social relations around

this resignification of waste materials (something that finds a concrete example in the *editoriales cartoneras* that began with Eloísa Cartonera in the wake of Argentina's economic crisis).¹⁴ In this way, Aira proposes that trash could end up having a central role in the ethical and aesthetic reconfiguration of Argentine society.

The spaces where trash accumulates in and around modern cities seem like a natural part of the terrain. In a sense, they are necessary and for the most part seem unremarkable. However, as members of contemporary consumer societies we are inevitably connected to these spaces, and our habits as consumers contribute to their expansion. The novels that I have considered here confront the reader with the existence of these spaces and the connections between the discourse of neoliberalism and the problems that trash poses. When it comes to portraying spaces of trash and what goes on in them, *El aire*, *Bariloche*, and *La villa* show that trash simultaneously underpins and undermines our conceptions of consumer culture. They make use of a variety of tools like narrative fragmentation, multiple discursive styles, and an emphasis on disruption and uselessness to signal the tension between order and disorder that underpins the articulation of both narrative and urban space.

Whatever representative or narrative strategies are in play, what is certain is that the trash spaces of neoliberalism produce messages that simultaneously consolidate and corrode the liberal discourse of progress and are therefore essential for us to address. The works I have analyzed here confront neoliberalism's reduction of the social to the logic of the free market by revealing not only trash's essential role in that logic but also its paradoxical ability to simultaneously reinforce and disrupt the dialectics of the production of neoliberal space. Novels like *Bariloche* and *El aire* perform the critical task of diagnosing the malaise at the heart of neoliberalism's severing of the present from the past and possible futures. And works like *La villa* suggest different ways that trash and the spaces where trash is gathered can help us see the Others who are systematically excluded from neoliberalism's brand of progress. When it comes to imagining trash's fundamental role in the production of urban spaces, whether it be a landfill, a shantytown, or a middle-class apartment, *El aire*, *Bariloche*, and *La villa* all manage to incorporate and critique essential elements of the logic of neoliberal spatial politics by paying heed to the material practices that condition our knowledge of the spaces we and others inhabit.

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NOTES

- 1 For accounts of the history of the rise of neoliberalism and analyses of its implementation in many parts of the world, see Harvey (*A Brief History*) and Klein. For an overview of how neoliberalism has been addressed across a variety of academic disciplines, see Springer, et al. And for a detailed discussion of the implementation of neoliberal reforms and their outcomes in Argentina, see Teubal.
- 2 In one of the only academic studies on *Bariloche* to date, Lucy Bell addresses the question of trash's movements not from the perspective of the production of space, as I do here, but rather by attending to the way that waste operates as a network (in Bruno Latour's sense of the term) that connects "the 'body' of waste to human and animal bodies" (1048). In her careful reading of the novel, she mobilizes Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality to argue that Neuman's portrayal of trash questions neat distinctions between the human and the nonhuman.
- 3 Fernando Aínsa analyzes *Bariloche* (among other novels written by Neuman) in light of the author's experience as an Argentine living in Spain. For Aínsa, the fact that Rota is a migrant (a *provinciano* in the capital) is key to understanding why he never manages to become integrated into the life of the city (35-37).
- 4 Trash's role in (un)grounding Rota's subjectivity is condensed in a series of questions raised by the narrator as Rota enters the landfill at the end of the novel: "¿Qué había realmente dentro de los millones de bolsas? ¿Cuáles serían suyas? ¿Podría rescatarlas?" (166).
- 5 Dánisa Bonacic analyzes the theme of urban space in *La villa* along these lines by focusing on how the contrast between middle-class spaces and the *villa miseria* in the novel is indicative of social polarization in Buenos Aires.
- 6 While a detailed analysis of this aspect of the novel – the *villa miseria's* portrayal as a commodity produced by mass media and consumed by a middle-class audience – is beyond the scope of this article, I should mention that it is another way in which *La villa* critically engages the logic of neoliberalism. In an insightful analysis of mass media technics in Aira's novel, Patrick Dove notes, "*La villa* illustrates a powerful imaginary that helps drive mass media technics. Let us call it the fantasy of *complete inclusion* and *complete coverage*, allowing these terms to resonate with a variety of cultural economic, epistemological and political contexts in the time of late capitalism. Complete inclusion corresponds, for instance, to the technological administering of free choice and unlimited economic opportunity in the market, while complete coverage names the instantaneous dissemination and

- complete preservation of knowledge through mass media. Total coverage and inclusion are ideological signifiers serving to dissimulate the originary violence, exclusions and divisions that haunt contemporary forms of social organization. *La villa* explores this ideological function by playing with the mediatic notion of full coverage, even to the point of mimicking the media's idiom, while also suggesting that the notion of total visibility also includes its own forms of exclusion" ("Mass Media" 16; emphasis in the original).
- 7 The sense of absence that is evident in *El aire*'s plot is also registered in the way that Chejfec deploys language in the text. Throughout the novel, there are unexplained references to a shift in language that has rendered obsolete a series of words that were common currency during Barroso's childhood. For instance, as Barroso wonders about the contents of an envelope that has just been slipped under his door, we read, "Muchos largometrajes – 'Cintas', tradujo *evocando el vocabulario de la infancia* – recurrían al expediente ... de adelantar algún sobre con el objeto de crear misterio" (13-14; emphasis mine). That the narrative voice is consistently interrupted by this kind of focalization that underscores the *uselessness* of certain words is highly suggestive, not only as a gesture that inscribes absence and loss into the language of the novel (words like *cintas* are absent of their former meaning), but also as an indication of the disposable nature of language, the basic material that makes writing possible.
 - 8 Alejandra Laera sees money in *El aire* as "un elemento particularmente capaz de exhibir, de hacer exterior la interiorización, por la vía de la percepción, la sensación, la vivencia de la modernización, es decir, lo que se dio en llamar modernidad" (60). Due to the difficulties and inefficiencies that glass presents as a form of currency, Laera argues that its use in Chejfec's narrative is an inscription of what she calls "modernidad en remisión," the idea that the crises of contemporary capitalism can be found in the very drivers of capitalism itself (in this case, circulation) (37-69).
 - 9 José Luis de la Fuente also notes the importance of Rota's brief stint as a watchmaker's apprentice as a symbol of the fundamental importance of time in the novel (148).
 - 10 This passage is repeated at the end of the *El aire* with very slight modifications. First, it is not set off by quotation marks. Additionally, there is a change in verb tense. The phrase "*fue* la circunstancia que le *permitiría* soportar la tensión agotadora de su época" shifts to the conditional: "*sería* la circunstancia que le *permitiera* soportar la tensión agotadora de su época" (13; 189; emphasis mine).
 - 11 My use of this expression is inspired by the work of Luz Horne, who identifies a series of material objects that produce an "indexical effect" of reality in a number of Chejfec's novels. For Horne, Chejfec's work is part of a new

manifestation of realism that produces a reality effect by joining narrative techniques informed or inspired by photography with avant-garde aesthetic practices. See esp. pp. 243-44.

- 12 This is not, strictly speaking, the only relationship between characters from different social classes in the three novels I am examining here. In *Bariloche*, Rota becomes very interested in a homeless person who sleeps on one of the streets on his trash route. However, the connection between Rota and this individual, unlike what is made evident in *La villa*, is not based on an ethical relationship with the Other, but rather the fascination that Rota has with a person who lives in the material with which he works on a daily basis.
- 13 For Gisela Heffes, this is one of the novel's shortcomings: "Maxi ... no procura infundir en los cartoneros una conciencia de la clase e informarlos respecto a su estatus en tanto explotados socialmente. Su ayuda puede traducirse en una suerte de caridad que, en lugar de desafiar al status quo, simplemente lo preserva" (190). I would argue that such a reading of Maxi's relationship with the inhabitants of the *villa* is shortsighted and fails to capture the nuances of the inter-class dynamics that Aira imagines in his novel.
- 14 See Bilbija and Celis Carbajal for a thorough consideration of the context in which *cartonera* publishing arose, along with manifestos from eight of the first *editoriales cartoneras*, including Eloísa Cartonera. For a reflection on how Eloísa Cartonera plays with and against the cultural logic of neoliberalism in Argentina, see Bilbija. According to the catalog maintained on Eloísa's website, Aira has published three texts with the *cartonera* publisher: the novellas *Mil gotas* and *El todo que surca la nada* and the short story "El cerebro musical."

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