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NEITHER HERE NOR THERE: MAPPING DONALD BARTHELME'S "PARAGUAY"

Keywords: collage; art/artist; heterotopias; imperialism; consumerism; microminiaturization

Abstract: *The paper explores the manner in which Donald Barthelme's experimental story "Paraguay" expresses the author's critique of the neo-colonial tendencies of the United States in its relationship with Latin American countries, while at the same time pursuing his longtime agenda of restoring language its freshness. Building on the use of collage, borrowing unexpectedly from the specialized lexicons of technology, computer engineering, heraldry, manufacturing, undermining the relational and rationalist projects of modernity, Barthelme creates the image of a surreal country, which is more a representation of human consciousness than a place on the map, a heterotopia not that different from the American society itself.*

*"I thought, What a nice little city, it suits me fine.
It suited me fine so I started to change it."
(Donald Barthelme – "I Bought a Little City")*

Originally published in the September 1969 issue of *The New Yorker*, "Paraguay" came out only four months after Nelson Rockefeller's much publicized and rather controversial fact-finding tour in Latin America on behalf of the Nixon Administration. At the time, Barthelme openly and radically opposed the American interventionism in the area, so much so that he continued to follow the situation in South America over the years and condemn as "clearly wrong" (Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* 312) the ongoing efforts in the region during the Reagan administration. With a consistent social concern infusing his stories and a political engagement appearing in his works as "an obligato, always present in everything" (Nel), Barthelme arguably imagines "Paraguay" as a pretext to put forth his twofold agenda: that of scrutinizing the imperial drives marring the accomplishment of the United States' national interests and that of restoring freshness to a much-handled language, politically and socially contaminated, a language "deeply suspicious of its own behavior" (Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* 515).

At the time the short story came out in print, the disaffected Latin American countries were trying to find ways to reduce the degree of their political and economic dependence on the United States, which was undergoing a period of crisis of confidence and decline in its international prestige. Governor Nelson Rockefeller's rather unfortunate tours in Latin American states aiming to promote goodwill and collect relevant information for further cooperation sparked anti-American protests and led to the denunciation of the

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United States' imperialist aims in the Central and Southern regions of the continent. The Nixon policy of "trade rather than aid" had long been a subject of concern for the Latin American partners, due to the fact that the latter had never actually been in charge of their internal markets, nor of the destination of their economic surplus, with control of their resources permanently in foreign hands, "either through direct appropriation of the sources of the production of raw materials and food, or through the monopoly of demand in the foreign markets" (Fann and Hodges 208). This is how Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro described the new situation on the American continent:

Hegel, in his classic study on the philosophy of history, foresaw the war between the Latin and Anglo-Saxon peoples of the Americas. This war is already taking place. However, instead of troop movements and pitched battles, it is being waged by conspiracies, bribery, contracts, intimidation, coups, programs of sociological studies, economic plans, and publicity campaigns. Through these means of pressure and the compulsion, the United States is implementing, extending, and strengthening its own plan for exploiting our resources, organizing our societies, regulating our political life, determining the size of our population, and determining our destiny. (Fann and Hodges 209)

It is my contention that "Paraguay" represents Donald Barthelme's rendition of the situation described above in an indirect, experimental, mischievous manner, one that reflects both the postmodern author's "affectionate play with language" (Gates), and his ambition to address the very problems he identifies as the contemporary writers' task, which "are not of a kind that make for ease of communication, for work that rushes toward the reader with out-flung arms – rather, they're the reverse" (Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* 15). By exploring his choice to pursue an aesthetics of uncertainty – or what he called "needful obscurity" (Daugherty 10) – in the creation of his fictional Paraguay, I will seek to demonstrate that "an artistic production's failure to offer a direct message is not a failure to make a political argument" (Nel).

Donald Barthelme believed, echoing T. S. Eliot's famous pronouncement, that "art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult" but "because it wishes to be art" and that what is magical about it is that art at once opens up to and resists explanation, "remain[ing] after interpretation, vital – no interpretation or cardiopulmonary push-pull can exhaust or empty it" (Daugherty 11). Exhibiting what Michel Foucault deemed "the profound distress of those whose language has been destroyed" (Foucault, *The Order of Things* xx), the postmodern author took on a project of restoring freshness to language (similar to Eliot's strife "to purify the dialect of the tribe") which apparently made him "ragpick words, phrases, tones of voice, and modes of diction from the obscure and neglected past, from the demotic present and from the surreal specialized lexicons of technology, philosophy, even the military" (Gates).

Time and again arguing that the goal of the writer should be that of speaking the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken (Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* 15), he would get excited about "the combinatorial agility of words" and "the exponential generation of meaning once they're allowed to go to bed together" (Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* 17), maintaining that the process of putting together disparate bits and pieces from various areas of life in order to create something which did not exist before represented an "oddly

hopeful endeavor” (Daugherty 733). Along these lines, he considered that what was exciting about experimentalism in regard to language was the fact that most of it had not been done yet:

Take mothball and vagina and put them together and see if they mean anything together; maybe you're not happy with the combination and you throw that on the floor and pick up the next two and so on. There's a lot of basic research which hasn't been done because of the enormous resources of the language and the enormous number of resonances from the past which have precluded this way of investigating language. (Klinkowitz 32)

To this end, he would experiment with the conventions of fiction and would frequently embrace the technique of collage, appropriating large chunks of already published material, putting dissimilar components down on the canvas in the perpetual hope of creating a new reality. In the Introduction to one of his volumes of stories, David Gates affirms that “terminally well-read as he was, Barthelme knew that all forms had already been done to death. This is part of their charm for us: knowing that he knows that we know he couldn't stay in any of these outmoded modes for long” (Gates).

Interviewing for the New York Times, Barthelme acknowledged that the collage represented “the central principle of all art in the twentieth century, in all media”, subsequently adding that the whole point of collage was to make unlike things glue together in order to engender a new reality, which, “in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may also be much else”, an “itself, if it's successful: Harold Rosenberg's ‘anxious object’, which does not know whether it's a work of art or a pile of junk” (Klinkowitz 30-1).

Roland Barthes opened his *Empire of Signs* (published only one year after Barthelme's short story hit the newsstands) stating that:

I can also – though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse) – isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan. (Barthes 3)

Like Barthes, Barthelme similarly creates some sort of country, a fictional Paraguay, a place that the reader finds is not the familiar Paraguay, “not the Paraguay that exists on our maps”, one that “is not found on the continent, South America” and that “is not a political sub-division of that continent, with a population of 2,161,000 and a capital city named Asuncion.” Like Barthes's symbolic Japan, which is situated “faraway”, Barthelme's Paraguay “exists elsewhere” (Barthelme 128). And, arguably like Escher, the American author “paralyses our intelligence and lures us into entering his surrealistic world which has indeed very little to do with our own” (Strehle 191).

Rather than a physical space, Barthelme's country seems more like a mental kingdom where the reader is allowed access through the means of a travelogue constituted entirely of passages lifted from Jane E. Duncan's “A Summer Ride Through Western Tibet” (1906), fact acknowledged by the author in the footnotes to the text. The passage does not appear to have been chosen randomly, as it bears the marks of human

exploitation and hints to the disappearance of indigenous populations, particularly in tune with the story's underlying criticism of colonial / imperial impulses: "At the summit there is a cairn on which each man threw a stone, and here it is customary to give payment to the coolies. I paid each man his agreed-upon wage, and, alone, began the descent. Ahead was Paraguay" (Barthelme 127).

However, the narrator's (and the reader's as well) descent into the heart of the country is disrupted by surprising "[f]lights of white meat" moving through the skies in the direction of the "dim piles of buildings" on the outskirts of the first of the "silver cities". Together with their "gold areas" counterparts, the image of cities in Barthelme's fictional Paraguay resembles the explorations of imagination through Marco Polo's descriptions of cities in Italo Calvino's celebrated work of the same period, *Invisible Cities* (*Le Città Invisibili*, 1972), where the traveler's eyes met the silver domes, bronze statues and golden elements of the city of Diomira, or the silvery scales of Moriana or enjoyed the lavishness of Beersheba, "a city of pure gold, with silver locks and diamond gates" (Calvino 111). And just like the inhabitants of Calvino's Beersheba would "accumulate noble metals and rare stones" in order to honor the celestial city, so are the inhabitants of Barthelme's fictional land awarded "gold and silver leaves" for producing "the best pastiche of the emotions" ("Paraguay" 129).

Pursuing his course into the first of the cities, Barthelme's nameless narrator is confronted on his first day with a sample of local hospitality from his host, Jean Mueller, a "dark girl wrapped in a red shawl" whose edges were "fringed, and the tip of each strand of fringe was a bob of silver" (note the recurrent metal / image). Much to his chagrin, the narrator "was claimed as her guest" when the woman "placed her hands on my hips, standing facing me" then "smiled and exerted a slight pull". This introduction to local customs seems to prefigure a later moment of intimacy between the traveler and his female host, though not one that the reader can anticipate at this point. Upon claiming his room in the "large, modern" Mueller home, the guest is entertained by his female host with a "tiny sonata" (128) by a fictional composer.

It is at this moment that the story changes tone and style again, and the reader is carried unawares into the realm of anthropology with a parodical section dedicated to a discussion of local temperatures and the people's behavior as a response to fluctuations. Probably contrary to expectations, the people of Paraguay tend to increase their activity and "show more spontaneous movement" (129) as the temperature rises, with males and females exhibiting complicated and rather dissimilar behaviors. It is similarly shown that heat plays a crucial role in the reproductive process, which is influenced by changes in temperatures to different degrees in the "silver cities" and the "gold areas".

Following the openly parodical intermezzo, the story introduces Herko Mueller, the narrator's male host, who is tall and brown, "wears a funny short beard" and is "fond of zippered suits in brilliant colors: yellow, green, violet" (129), which create a rather obvious contrast with his skin. Professionally, the husband is, quite strikingly, "an arbiter of comedy". When asked whether this makes him a drama critic, Mueller's reply is that he is more of an umpire and explains his role as follows: "The members of the audience are given a set of rules and the rules constitute the comedy. Our comedies seek to reach the imagination. When you are looking at something, you cannot imagine it" (129).

Herko Mueller apparently voices Barthelme's creed regarding the relation of art to the world. In the author's opinion, art should always be a meditation upon external reality rather than a "jackleg attempt" at representing it or being it, and it cannot help but being a true account of the activity of mind. And since consciousness is always consciousness of something, "art thinks ever of the world, cannot not think of the world, could not turn its back on the world even if it wished to" (Strehle 191-2).

Herko Mueller's response might also represent a critique of the Paraguayan society, where the rules people are supposed to obey are treated as comedy. The criticism goes even deeper, as the narrator learns that it is not uncommon for government errors to result in "the death of a statistically insignificant proportion of the population (less than one-fortieth of one per cent)", which rightfully renders people uneasy. However, the state's manner of dealing with such issues seems failproof: "[a] skelp of questions is fused at high temperature (1400° C) and then passed through a series of protracted caresses." Eventually, "[a]melioration of the condition results" (130).

Nonetheless, whereas the potential uprisings are dealt with through a welding-like process accompanied by soothing strokes, one of the most important and persistent problems the citizens of Paraguay are confronted with is that of their skin. While Herko Mueller insists that the Paraguayan mestizos are "the glory, pride, present and future of Paraguay", there is a problem with the population that the narrator identifies laconically as "the problem of shedding skin" (130). He is made part of this skin-shedding activity by his female host, who would sit on a rubber pad "doing exercises designed to loosen the skin", as "[s]cores of diamond-shaped lights abraded her arms and legs." This light "placed a pattern of false information in those zones most susceptible to tearing" and was accompanied by whistling noises. Once removed, "thin discarded shells like disposable plastic gloves" are meant to be recycled, by being placed in "the green official receptacles" (130-31), but are often found in the street. The narrator emphasizes the Paraguayans' preoccupation with skin, be it "wrinkling, the new skin, pink, fresh, taut" and he similarly notes their interest in "stories about skin" and "histories of particular skins", thus hinting at anti-indigenous racial erasure impulses. In a similar manner, even the sand is "sifted twice daily to remove impurities and maintain whiteness" (129).

At this point, the critique of American imperial drives becomes harsher, as it is suggested that the neocolonial hegemony of the United States has taken the guise of furtive cultural forms, as nameless artist-missionaries have aggressively reformed the local art industry in "Paraguay" (Chaskes 5). By doing away with the traditional practices, considered most blameworthy, the expected and desired outcome is that "[n]ew artists have been obtained", who "do not object to, and indeed argue enthusiastically for, the rationalization process" (Barthelme, "Paraguay" 130). The colonial aims of standardization and progress have been attained: "Production is up. Quality-control devices have been installed at those points where the interests of artists and audience intersect. Shipping and distribution have been improved out of all recognition" (130). With a language deriving from manufacturing and computer engineering jargon, the narrator recounts that "each artist is encouraged to maintain, in his software, highly personal, even idiosyncratic, standards (the so-called "hand of the artist" concept)." What

follows is that each artist's product is then "translated into a statement in symbolic logic", which is subsequently "minimized" by various clever methods" and the resulting simpler statement is "translated back into the design of a simpler circuit". With its rather futuristic vision of "sheet art", "foamed by a number of techniques" then "run through heavy steel rollers", controlled by "flip-flop switches" and "dried in smoke" (130) till it reaches dark brown, the story "comes straight out of 1960s art-world conversations" (Daugherty 744).

The section dedicated to the local art world and the way in which it is influenced and controlled in order to reach a certain preferred uniformity and consensus is followed by yet another passage, lifted this time from Le Corbusier's *The Modulor* (1954), where the latter describes the construction of an apartment building along the Boulevard Michelet in Marseilles. Entitled "The Wall", this fragment puts forth the postmodern author's critique regarding what he sees as an authoritarian imposition of modernist architecture over society, as "[r]elational methods govern the layout of cities" (Barthelme, "Paraguay" 132).

Having grown up in a house presided over by a larger-than-life father figure who was professionally a modern architect and a great admirer of Le Corbusier, Donald Barthelme's brother Steve notes that in their family home "[m]odernist architecture was a crusade, a religion, and the faithful couldn't just go out and buy a rug like other folks" (Daugherty 21). Barthelme himself remembers that "we were enveloped in modernism. The house we lived in, which he'd designed, was modern and the furniture was modern and the pictures were modern and the books were modern" (O'Hara 2). However, Barthelme's disaffection with modern architecture seems less a result of exaggerated exposure to it first-hand than a consequence of his skepticism concerning the effects of modern rationalist and relational projects. Along these lines, he stated in an interview that

The Bauhaus, Mies van der Rohe and his followers, Frank Lloyd Wright and his followers, Le Corbusier, all envisioned not just great buildings but an architecture that would engender a radical improvement in human existence. The buildings were to act on society, change it in positive ways. None of this happened and in fact a not insignificant totalitarian bent manifested itself. (O'Hara 6)

The people of Barthelme's fictional Paraguay are seemingly controlled by means of insidious cultural and architectural projects, but also through what appears to be a process of silencing the indigenous population. In a fitting mix of consumerism and conformity, "[i]n the larger stores silence (damping materials) is sold in paper sacks like cement" (Barthelme 131), thus laying the solid foundations for a voiceless society. On a similar note, "the softening of language usually lamented as a falling off from former practice" represents in fact a "clear response to the proliferation of surfaces and stimuli" (132). Silence is the expected condition of the locals not only in public spaces, but also in their homes, as silence "is also available in the form of white noise", the extension of which to the people's homes "by means of leased wire from a generating point has been useful" (132). In order for Paraguayans to experience silence both at home and in their daily walks about the city, the "analogous establishment of 'white space' in a system paralleling the existing park system has also been beneficial." "Anechoic chambers"

resembling telephone booths have been “placed randomly about the city” and are said to have actually saved lives.

Such is the process of standardization of local inhabitants that “[e]veryone in Paraguay has the same fingerprints”. And such is the society regulated that when crimes are committed, “people chosen at random are punished for them. Everyone is liable for everything.” Terror derives from uniformity and conformity to the extent that “[s]uch is the smoothness of surfaces in Paraguay that anything not smooth is valuable.” In opposition, sexual life appears to be very free, and couples resort to “very refreshing” “technical refinements” and “procedures” seemingly derived from heraldry: “dimidiation”,¹ “impalement”² and “quartering”.³ The narrator even confesses to having had sex with his female host, while her husband was watching. The apparent promiscuous sexual behavior seems in line with the exoticism expected of people in this part of the (non-Western) world, so Barthelme’s story (self-consciously) plays along.

Probably in an attempt to point to the voracious exploitation of resources in Latin American countries, another problem affecting Barthelme’s fictional realm is the scarcity of wood, due to which the inhabitants “are now paying for yellow pine what was formerly paid for rosewood” and have to hunt for driftwood on the beaches. In a similar reference to Paraguay’s (almost extinct) natural resources, the narrator admires a design project illustrating a collection of rare animals – some real, some fictive creations – where an “[e]lectrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix the animals in place”.

The locals usually try to avoid questioning reality and demanding explanations as “you are once more brought to a stop. You have got, really, no farther than you were before” (132). Like Barthelme’s audience, the inhabitants of Paraguay are instructed to “keep everything open” in “avoiding the final explanation”. “Creative misunderstanding is crucial”, they learn. In his essay suggestively entitled “Not-Knowing” (1982), Barthelme speaks about the liberating possibilities of uncertainty, stating that “not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (12). In a similar vein, he condemns criticism’s “rage for final explanations” and the “refusal to allow a work that mystery which is essential to it.” In this respect, he would famously conclude in an 1981 interview that “[i]n this century there’s been much stress placed not upon what we know but on knowing that our methods are themselves questionable – our Song of Songs is the Uncertainty Principle” (O’Hara 12).

Probably in a similar attempt to render the Paraguayans more easily controllable, there is an ongoing process of “microminiaturization” distressing the region. And since “everything in Paraguay is getting smaller and smaller”, this downscaling “leaves

¹ In heraldry, dimidiation is the method of combining two coats of arms, so that the dexter half of one coat of arms is placed alongside the sinister half of the other.

² Impalement involves placing both coats of arms together, side by side, in the same shield.

³ Quartering is the method through which several coats of arms are joined together in one shield by dividing it into equal parts and putting different coats of arms in each division.

enormous spaces to be filled” and has an acute psychological impact over its inhabitants, and in this respect the “example of the child’s anxiety occasioned by the family’s move to a new home may be cited” (Barthelme 133). It is plainly obvious that this section actually provides a sharp critique of contemporary American society. No doubt that this fictional Paraguay, with its “big empty spaces in which men wander, trying to touch something” (133) resembles Jean Baudrillard’s image of the utopian “desert” in his *Hyperreal America* (1993). Just like Barthelme’s “Paraguay” appears to have no memory and no history, especially since “[s]ome 700,000 photographs of nuclear events were lost when the great library of Paraguay burned” and consequently “[p]article identification was set back many years”, Baudrillard’s America is a comparable “fantastic space”, “relieved of the dimension of culture, history and so on”. Here, space is similarly “like thought itself: a dimension in which everything can become visible, visual and material, in which everything is boundlessly extensive” (Baudrillard 244) and the desert represents the “virtuality of space, its total availability for any event, the no-place where anything is possible and everything can be achieved” (245). Like Barthelme’s fictive realm, Baudrillard’s America is “no space for historical memory”, but rather one for “dispersal, dissemination, a space like that of the desert, the space of potential amnesia and never-ending circulation” (245). An image equivalent to that of Baudrillard’s “desert” is that of the “field of red snow” behind the wall in Paraguay. The narrator is baffled by this mysterious expanse of colored snow which, contrary to his expectations, doesn’t hold any other anomalies and, according to the locals, it just “invites contemplation and walking about in”, like any other snow. In a very Barthelmean manner, the snow “seemed to proclaim itself a mystery”, but one “there was no point in solving – an on-going low-grade mystery” (Barthelme 134).

The microminiaturization process that is under development in Barthelme’s imagined realm can be related to the American society in yet another instance. Even though written many years before what came to be known as the Biosphere 2 experiment (originating in the late 1980s), the short story seemingly illustrates the American people’s interest in (re)creating replicas at a smaller scale (later into the century, Jean Baudrillard would famously discuss Disneyland as a small-scale representation of the United States). Launched with great expectations, the Biosphere 2 project aimed to test survivability of a small group of people living in a self-sustained micro-colony. The “Biospherians” were to live under an enormous bubble erected in the Arizonian desert, which contained replicas of representative biomes on Earth: rainforest, desert, ocean with a coral reef, mangrove wetlands, savannah grasslands, an agricultural system, a human habitat, an underground installation. Jean Baudrillard argued that the microminiaturization specific to the Biosphere 2 experiment represented a “very American hallucination: an ocean, a savannah, a desert, a virgin forest, reconstructed in miniature and vitrified beneath an experimental bubble” (Baudrillard 249). No wonder, then, that the project failed sooner than expected.

In his “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” (1967), Michel Foucault maintained that “[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (1). I would argue that with its linking together of

things incongruous, with its disorder of fragments making it impossible to define an underlying common ground, with its rather unexpected associations and disruption of logic, with its juxtaposition in a single place of several sites in themselves incompatible, Barthelme's "Paraguay" can be perceived in terms of a Foucauldian "heterotopia without geographical markers" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 5), just like Italo Calvino's *Empire of the Great Khan* or Thomas Pynchon's realm in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

According to the French philosopher, heterotopias are disturbing because "they secretly undermine language", because "they make it impossible to name this and that" and because "they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite to one another) to 'hold together'". Much like Barthelme's stories, heterotopias "desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences" (Foucault, *The Order of Things* xix). Foucault believes that one role of heterotopias is to create a space that is as perfect and meticulously well-arranged as ours is ill-constructed, messy and chaotic. To this end, he analyzes how colonies played the role of heterotopias at the level of the general organization of terrestrial space, referring to the "marvelous, absolutely regulated colonies in which human perfection was effectively achieved" when the Jesuits of Paraguay "established colonies in which existence was regulated at every turn" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 8). The lives of Barthelme's Paraguayans appear similarly organized and regulated by rationalization and microminiaturization processes, by the heavy consumption of silence and conformity, by uniformity and historical oblivion, by expectations regarding their appearance and behavior, by their sheer invisibility in the story, with the sole exception of the Mueller couple. In this respect, it has been argued that even though seeking to reveal the American imperialist tendencies, Barthelme resorts to the same neocolonialist drives by not allowing the Paraguayans to speak for themselves, by stifling their voices under the narrator's, who in the end seems to have already become a leader of sorts, with his arms folded around the mace and elected to head the column of people. Other voices claim that, on the contrary, the author makes Paraguay speak only by not allowing it to, in a "process which keeps it suspended between understanding and estrangement, voice and voicelessness" (Chaskes 9). By not speaking, the fictional realm avoids misrepresentation and raises people's curiosity, even at the expense of its invisibility.

Speaking about "Paraguay", Donald Barthelme confessed his particular fondness of "the misuse of language and tone" and of the manner in which the "flat, almost dead tone paradoxically makes possible an almost lyricism". He affectionately believed ("Paraguay" is said to be his favorite among his own stories) that "my Paraguay is an almost-beautiful place" and that "[e]very writer in the country can write a beautiful sentence, or a hundred", whereas what he was actually interested in was "the ugly sentence that is also somehow beautiful", concluding that "'Paraguay' is for me a hint of what I would like to do, if I could do it" (Daugherty 773).

Making use of history to a lesser extent than many of his contemporaries and being much concerned with the possibilities of language, writing and the power of art,

Barthelme nonetheless provides acute criticism of thorny social problems. In spite of his more obvious agenda regarding the redemptive forces of art and of a language in which “words have halos, patinas, overhangs, echoes” (Barthelme, *Not-Knowing* 21), Barthelme nonetheless boasted “all the political, sociological, literary, philosophical, and spiritual anxieties any writer could be blessed with” (Gates). In this respect, his short story “Paraguay” is at once a rather indirect condemnation of the United States’ neo-colonial tendencies in its relationship with the neighboring Latin American states and an example of the postmodern writer’s literary and linguistic workmanship.

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