

Family (Novel), Death, and Polyphony
in Lúcio Cardoso, *Crônica da Casa Assassinada*

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Already in its very title, Lúcio Cardoso's novel *Crônica da Casa Assassinada* (Chronicle of the Murdered House, 1959) conjoins the notions of "house" and (violent) "death," thus pointing to a relation with a potentially universal character. Witness the reflections by the critic Robert Harrison in his book *The Dominion of the Dead*:

The retrieval and perpetuation by which humankind creates a memory and opens its future take place primarily within the human house. The 'in' that the dead abide in—whether it be in the earth, in our memory, in our institutions, in our genes, in our words, in our books, in our dreams, in our hearts, in our prayers, or in our thoughts—this 'in' of the dead's indwelling defines the human interiority which our houses build walls around and render inhabitable. The domestic interior is thus in some fundamental sense mortuary, inhabited not only by the dead but also by the unborn (Harrison 2014, 39-40).

In his philosophical musings, drawing on Heidegger's ontological concept of "dwelling", Harrison also builds on the work of the nineteenth century French classicist scholar Fustel de Coulanges (*The Ancient City*): "The ancient house was first and foremost an institution by which, or in which, the dead were lodged and preserved in their being. To be at home meant to reside within the blessing sphere of the sacred fire, in and through which the dead maintained a *presence among the living*" (Harrison 2014, 38, my emphasis).² Along these lines, it may be assumed that the house serves as a residence for human interiority, and therefore also as a metonymy for and recipient of familial community, as a spatial shell for genealogical time. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine the literary genre of the family saga without this connection between house and death. However, in contrast to this status of the house in classical antiquity, the conjunction between house and death in Western modernity is not limited to the function of domestic foundation, memory, and genealogical continuity; it may also express a state of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny,

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² For a wide-ranging cultural history of the relation between death and housings, see also Laqueur.

which is to say that the past comes to haunt the present in the material container of the house (Vidler 1992, 17-40).

As the recent study *Ghost-Watching American Modernity* by María del Pilar Blanco has persuasively shown, such moments of spectral haunting, theorized at an abstract level in Jacques Derrida's influential book *Specters of Marx* (1993), assume a distinctive function in many (Latin) American cultural narratives, insofar as the spatio-temporal configurations of the colonized American landscapes are reproduced by formal literary innovations that are concerned with ghostly apparitions and auditions, namely the voices of the dead (Pilar Blanco 2012, 4-8). Taking my cue from Pilar Blanco, then, I would like to attend to the cultural specificity of the relation between family house and death in *Crônica da Casa Assassinada*. In the following, I will address the unstable frontier between life and death, present and past, with regard to Cardoso's symptomatic novel. In a first step, in order to better locate this novel, I will briefly address the specific, cultural function of the genre of the family saga in Brazil. I will then proceed to characterize the social, psychological, and narrative profile of the novel. Finally, I will comment on the Gothic register of the novel and the central significance of haunting and spectrality, arguing that the novel's thematic concerns correspond with its specific formal traits.

The family saga in Brazil

A number of prominent Brazilian historians and sociologists have argued that Brazilian society, for much of the twentieth century, has been profoundly conditioned by the colonial-patriarchal heritage of the nineteenth century, and that this peculiar social structure was tied to the rural, semi-feudal structure of the so-called "great house" (*casa grande*), the site of an extended family structure, which was in turn the nucleus of social organization. Under the pressure of developing modernity and economic changes the persistence of the social structure was often indistinguishable from the decline of its exterior manifestations. This, then, is the broader social context for the popularity and persistence of the family saga as a literary form that took on allegorical significance for the complex of national identity. Thus, the noted sociologist Gilberto Freyre has commented on the similarity between regional economies in the American Deep South (the world of William Faulkner) and in the Brazilian Northeast, where the system of slavery was most deeply entrenched

even after its official abolishment in 1888 (Freyre 1946, xix-xx).³ In his signature book *Casa Grande e Senzala* (Great House and Slave Hut, 1933) Freyre has singled out the system of the patriarchal family as the most important center of economic activity since colonial times, as well as insisted on its function as a privileged, representative site of national memory:

The social history of the Big House is the intimate history of practically every Brazilian: the history of his domestic and conjugal life under a slave-holding and polygamous patriarchal regime; the history of his Christianity, reduced to the form of a family religion and influenced by the superstitions of the slave hut [...] (Freyre 1946, xxxvii).

For Freyre, the study of the “domestic life of our ancestors” exerts a strong influence on the formation of the national character until his own present, since it is an “expression of social continuity” (Freyre 1946, xxxviii). In a similar vein, the historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, in his equally famous *Raízes do Brasil* (1936) has referred to the patriarchal family as the principal model for social and political power relations in Brazil.⁴ Several Brazilian novels from the first half of the twentieth century might be seen as typical for this sort of family saga as allegory for national trauma and transformation, such as José Lins do Rego's *Fogo Morto* (Dead Fire, 1943) or Cornélio Penna's *A menina morta* (The Dead Girl, 1954).⁵ As a more recent example for this pronounced tendency in Brazilian literature we might cite the novel *Leite derramado* (Spilt Milk, 2009) by Chico Buarque, in which the male, centennial narrator, Eulálio, remembering the various houses of his life and of his ancestors, talks in an obsessive, monological mode, lying moribund in a hospital bed in Rio de Janeiro, close to his death. The self-legitimizing monologue of Eulálio is strongly influenced by Machado de Assis' novel *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881), and the novel might in fact be labelled a monological family saga, where everything is filtered through an individual consciousness that is in turn representative for the

³ In his pioneering study of the Brazilian novel of the Northeast (1954) the American critic Fred Ellison has not failed to perceive the profoundly parallel situation: “Like the South, the Northeast was during the colonial era the center of a rich agricultural economy based not on cotton so much as on sugar cane, and its society was an aristocracy of large landholders marshaling armies of slaves” (Ellison, 3).

⁴ For a recent appraisal of Buarque de Holanda's discussion of the patriarchal family, compared with Freyre, see the in-depth contextualization by Meira Monteiro 2015, 49-75.

⁵ For a discussion of the melancholic chronotope of the “Big House” theme in Brazilian literature, specifically with regard to post-naturalist authors, such as Cornélio Penna (*A Menina Morta*, 1954), Autran Dourado (*Ópera dos Mortos*, 1968), as well as Cardoso, see Lopes 1999. Cf. Welge 2015, 161-164.

self-perception of Brazilian patriarchy.⁶

Family, Psychology, Polyphony

In contrast to earlier instantiations of the family novel, Cardoso's novel *Crônica da Casa Assassinada* is less rooted in the tradition of social realism that was predominant during the 1930s and instead is frequently associated with the parallel, yet more peripheral evolution of the novel of psychological introspection in Brazil (Bosi 1994, 386); it is deeply influenced by the tortuous psychology of Dostojewski's novels, by the so-called *renouveau catholique* as well as by the work of Cardoso's friend Clarice Lispector. *Crônica da Casa Assassinada*, often somewhat marginalized in Brazilian literary history, has nevertheless established itself as a literary classic.⁷ The entire novel, set at the early twentieth century, is concentrated on a family rooted in the South of Minas Gerais, in a small city of the interior, housed in the building of a *fazenda*, living off the memories of a great patriarchal and colonial past, yet for some time marked by clear signs of social and economic decadence.

The plot of the novel hinges on an incestuous constellation. After all, this is not so uncommon in the modernist family novel, if we think of Faulkner, García Márquez (*Cien años de soledad*; 1967), Nabokov (*Ada, or Ardor*; 1969), [Drechsel Tobin], and in the Brazilian context, of the somewhat later novel *Lavoura arcaica* (Ancient Tillage, 1975) by Raduan Nassar. Yet nowhere else is the notion of incest as much linked with the symbol of death as in the novel by Cardoso. The central character of the novel is Nina, the wife of Valdo, who has thus married into the Meneses family, currently represented by two more brothers. Coming from Rio de Janeiro, the beautiful, alluring woman embodies a sense of urban modernity that is utterly out of place in the confined, rural backlands of Minas Gerais. The marriage between Nina and Valdo might perhaps be interpreted in the sense of a national allegory, given the fact that the two characters represent a conflict between the feudal-agrarian values of the fictional town of Vila Velha and the liberal-democratic values of the then capital Rio de Janeiro, thus alluding to the process of migratory movements and the dissolutions of life forms which began to mark the country of Brazil as a whole, exercising a decisive influence on many writers and intellectuals formed during the

⁶ On patriarchy in the (more recent) Brazilian family novel, see Nielson 2010.

⁷ In the wake of its recent reappraisal, it has now also for the first time been translated into English (Cardoso 2000).

1930's. This semantic opposition, then, already points to a sense of superimposed temporalities.

Valdo's brother, Demétrio, is the true incarnation of patriarchal values in the family of the Meneses. He is married to Ana, yet his aggressive stance against the repeated intrusions of Nina—she comes to the house, then leaves it for a period of fifteen years because of a suggested scandal, then comes back—is psychologically motivated by an attraction to his sister-in-law. The tensions within the family are surrounded by a sense of dark mystery, and the fragmentary information the reader receives from the different characters, leaves also him or her in a state of epistemological insecurity. After the early departure of Nina, we understand that her and Valdo's son, André, grows up alone in the house, in icy distance from his father. When Nina comes back to the house after a period of fifteen years, mother and son fall victim to a fatal, seemingly incestuous attraction, a circumstance of which Ana becomes gradually aware. It is through Ana's narrative that we learn that, in a previous period, both Ana and Nina were deeply in love with the young gardener Alberto, who in fact ceded to the desire of Nina and thus has fathered a child, namely André. Through a complicated interrelation of facts, impossible to summarize here, Alberto is led to commit suicide. Therefore, it is suggested that Nina's incestuous desire for André (who in turn is desperate that she doesn't really love him) is actually motivated by his physical resemblance to Alberto. At the end of the novel, Ana's account reveals the hidden truth that André really is the son of Ana and Alberto—begging the question of whether Nina knew this all along, and of why she left André in the dark about this.

Let us first address the narrative structure and polyvocal make-up of the novel. The novel is polyphonic in the sense that there is no third-person narrator. Instead, the narration is anchored in the voices of twelve different narrators who all tell their part and knowledge of the story from their individual perspectives, often in the form of diaries, letters, or memories, sometimes directed at others (as in the case of Ana's "confessions" to the local priest, Padre Justino), or just written for themselves. Insofar as the mystery of Nina is a sort of focal point on which many of these utterances converge, her "true" identity cannot be captured, not even by her own, diverging self-representation to others. As Timóteo, the third of the Meneses brothers, puts it: "Jamais ser algum havia sido tão infenso às classificações, às dosagens da verdade humana" (Cardoso 2009, 483). The novel, then, resembles the

montage of different voices that do not always converge, that contradict each other, a collection of incomplete fragments—even as, truth be told, the rhetorical, highly florid and baroque-tinged style of the novel changes only very little, as the narrative turns the perspective from one character to another. As we can read in a preface to a recent edition of the novel: “Um universo polifônico, um espelho estilhaçado onde se estampa multiplicado e unico o rosto do autor” (Seffrin 2009, 9). At least at the beginning of the novel, this poplyphonic structure articulates a profound disconnect between the family members, all of them withdrawn to, and isolated in, their own interior consciousness. As the character André puts it: “Nada nos identificava se não o teto que nos cobria” (Cardoso 2009, 165).

All of these different fragments, the reader learns, have apparently been collected and arranged by an intradiegetic, yet anonymous narrator, or rather compiler. Some readers have speculated that this role of authorship/compilation might be attributed to the “melancholic” character of André, the surviving heir of the family (Lopes 1999, 42), but this is not backed up by any concrete evidence in the text. Sometimes the memories or transcriptions of recent experiences are overwritten or corrected by posterior knowledge, thus underscoring not only the written, archival nature of these texts, but also creating a sense of temporal involution, suggesting not so much temporal layering, but rather a static sense of the co-presence of past, presence, and future, of the immobility of time. Although Cardoso’s novel follows largely the register of psychological realism, this deliberate undoing of the temporal order is certainly indicative of a modernist sensibility (Kern 2011, 112; Drechsel Tobin 1978, 174).

After an initial exposition, the moment of Nina’s, the central character’s death, the body of the novel will reconstruct the time before her death; only at the very end of the voluminous novel, in chapter 56, the narrative moves forward to the time after her death. Again, this narrative and temporal structure creates a double effect of immersive, scenic presentification *and* of retrospective hindsight, namely the knowledge that death has always already occurred.⁸ It’s an essentially baroque sense of temporality, where virtually every event occurs under the sign of death. However, one might also say that despite the occasional use of an addressee, the individual prose segments are essentially monological self-reflections. The “genealogical

⁸ This might be compared to the treatment of time, death, and perspective in Tomasi di Lampedusa’s almost exactly contemporary novel *Il Gattopardo* (1958). Cf. Welge 2015, 176.

imperative” of this family novel (Drechsel Tobin) thus receives a characteristic quality that observes the different members of a family not primarily from the outside but from the inside, leaving much of the reconstructive work of piecing together an “underlying” narrative to the reader. Similarly, in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) the author entrusts the narrative (endlessly more difficult, of course) not only to four different voices, but the chapters corresponding to these voices are arranged in such a way that they chart an increasing clarification of what appears at first as an almost impenetrable discourse.⁹

If in Cardoso’s novel all characters basically speak in the same morbidly languid, elaborately rhetorical style, it might be argued that this is an appropriate device for the representation of a deeply involuted family constellation that is cast as a conglomerate of revenants and doubles, where every “individual” psychology is simply another manifestation of a soiled source and a collective destiny. The polyphonic structure of the novel thus portrays the evidence of decadence through different, often contradictory voices, yet still almost always from the inside of the characters. The kaleidoscopic arrangement of the different voices clearly privileges paradigmatic relations (such as the isotopic semantics of death) over a narrative syntagma. It is precisely this technique that is distinctive of novels that engage decadence on the level of both theme and form, and thus evade the effect of an organically coherent totality through the proliferation of descriptive or narrative fragments tied to personal perspectives (Pross 2013, 284-296). Nevertheless, the attractiveness of the decadent paradigm for modernity lies precisely in the paradoxical effect of coherence (Pross 2013, 41).

Similar to Edgar Allan Poe’s story *The House of Usher* (1839), where the physical decay of the house epitomizes the decline of the family, the house of the Meneses family is, to the point of melodramatic overdetermination, a place of gothic haunting and Baroque ruination, leaving no doubt about the inevitable being-to-death, or rather the already-being-dead, as expressed by the temporality of the title, “the assassinated house.” However, the association of the house with death is somewhat paradoxical, given that the protagonism of the house makes it almost anthropomorphic. For instance, Ana, the wife of Demétrio, confesses: “[...] desde que

⁹ William Faulkner’s novel *The Hamlet* (1940), part of the Snopes trilogy, is polyphonic even at the level of style and dialect; the different voices are complemented and framed by a third-person narrator.

entrei para esta casa, aprendi a referir-me a ela como se tratasse de uma entidade viva” (Cardoso 2009, 86). The house as a living being is the precondition, as it were, for what will become an isotopic syntagma of the novel, namely the imagery that describes the house as a dying, ruinous body (cf. Vidler 1992, 69-84). This is observed, not coincidentally, by the pharmacist of the village:

Enquanto dava [...] explicações, conduziu-me à sala, e mais uma vez, com a curiosidade e o prazer que sempre me haviam animado, e como se assistisse à demonstração de um espetáculo mágico, ia revendo aquele ambiente tão característico de família, com seus pesados moveis de vinhático ou de jacarandá, de qualidade antiga, e que denunciavam um passado ilustre, gerações de Meneses talvez mais singelos e mais calmos; agora, uma espécie de desordem, de relaxamento, abastardava aquelas qualidades primaciais. Mesmo assim era fácil perceber que brilhavam mansamente na sombra, suas pratas semi-empoeiradas que atestavam o esplendor esvanecido, seus marfins e suas opalinas – ah, respirava-se ali conforto, não havia dúvida, mas era apenas uma sobrevivência de coisas idas. Dir-se ia, ante esse mundo que se ia desagregando, que um mal oculto o roía, como um tumor latente em suas entranhas (Cardoso 2009, 131).

The physical setting of the house, with its claustrophobic sense of immobility and temporal loops, also suggests a connection between the domestic interior and psychological interiority. In contrast to how this link is played out in the nineteenth-century realist novel (Viera), here all sense of public, social, exterior life is minimized. Notable exceptions are the movements of Nina to the city of Rio (to her elderly lover, the Coronel) and some marginal characters (significantly: the medical doctor, the pharmacist), who, in their individual reports, provide a certain sense of bewildered outside perspective that is not immediately caught up in the self-obsessing psychograms of the family members.

Decadence, Temporality, and Haunting

The house of the family, the *chacara*, through its very material decadence, embodies the fate of the family and its tradition, although the “assassinated” building marks already a displacement from an earlier site of the family holdings, the original extended *fazenda* of Santa Eulália, which was still tied to the mode of economic production responsible for the family’s original, but now all but vanished wealth. This implied change of location, then, is already a sign of decadence. Although Cardoso’s novel appears to be entirely centered on the tortuous

psychological worlds of the characters and a near-anthropomorphic rendering of the atmosphere of the house, there are enough suggestions to get a sense for the drastic economic and social changes in despite of which Demétrio and Valdo eerily cling to a hollowed-out sense of social distinction. For instance, we learn of the huge debt the Meneses owe to the local bank, and that the minor characters of the novel, the employees of the house, receive apparently no financial recompensation whatsoever for their services.¹⁰ The quasi-medieval, feudal sense of obligation and prestige shows that the Meneses are utterly unequipped for the modern, financial system of modernity. According to the observation by the maid Betty, Demétrio seeks to defend the old values which, as rural values, are also understood as the essence of the nation (thus implying a certain contrast between nation and modernity). The true representative for the patriarchal values in the house is Demétrio, the brother of Valdo. His vision of his own identity is rooted in the idea of familial genealogy, invoking a sense of temporal continuity since the time of the Empire:

[...] o Sr. Demétrio, de natureza tão arraigadamente mineira. Mais do que isto: mais do que o seu estado natal, amava ele a Chácara, que aos seus olhos representava a tradição e a dignidade dos costumes mineiros—segundo ele, os únicos realmente autênticos existentes no Brasil. ‘Podem falar de mim’, costumava dizer, ‘mas não ataquem esta casa. Vem ela do Império, e representa várias gerações de Meneses que aqui vieram com altaneira e dignidade’ (Cardoso 2009, 62).

The sense of the new and the antagonistic is embodied by Nina, who on her first arrival at the house remarks: “Essas velhas famílias sempre guardam um ranço no fundo delas. Creio que não suportam o que eu representa: uma vida nova, uma paisagem diferente” (Cardoso 2009, 66). Significantly, Nina arrives at the Meneses estate after travelling there from Rio de Janeiro; the contrast between modernity and archaic live forms, as well as the implied co-presence of these conditions within the frame of the nation, can be seen as typical for the specific spatial coordinates that characterize the phenomenon of haunting in the American hemisphere (Pilar Blanco 2012, 7). In this sense, the figure of Nina, from her first appearance as an exposed corpse, embodies a sense of spectrality.

¹⁰ A key scene concerns the pharmacist of the village Vila Velha, who “sells” a pistol to Demétrio, not for money, but in exchange for mortar and building materials—since apparently financial recompensation is not possible (Cardoso 2009, 50-51).

In this regard, Nina is paired with her confidant Timóteo, who, after an incident with Demétrio, has confined himself, for several years now, in a secluded room of the house, where he is occasionally visited by Nina and the servant Betty. Timóteo is a gay character who dresses up in the clothes of Maria Sinhá, a deceased aunt, who in her turn had been left abandoned in a dark room of the original *fazenda*, as a symbol for the old system of a slave-holding patriarchy: “[...] acabou morrendo abandonado, num quarto escuro da velha Fazenda Santa Eulália, na serra do Baú” (Cardoso 2009, 54). In the current house also her portrait has to be hidden as a shameful secret. The seclusion of the aunt was motivated by a behavior both transgressive and retrograde (dressing in male, aristocratic clothes, horse-riding, whipping the slaves). Timóteo’s reincarnating cross-dressing thus points in several ways to a “return of the repressed,” unsettling not only normative codes of gender but also the temporal sequence from a feudal to a seemingly more updated patriarchal regime. It is an ambivalent sign of necrophilia, a conjunction of transgression and trauma, a taunt with respect to the denial of decadence by the other brothers of the Meneses family.

Timóteo muses that his ancestress “[...] seria a honra da família, uma guerreira famosa, uma Anita Garibaldi, se não vivesse neste fundo poeirento de província mineira” (Cardoso 2009, 55). In this way, then, the figure of Timóteo functions as a temporal hinge, insofar as he points to the family past and inhabits a region that is insecurely located between life and death (Almeida Freitas 2017, 64). In other words, he has the function of a “madman in the attic,”¹¹ a spectral phantasm of the family: “Sou apenas um fantasma dos outros” (Cardoso 2009, 57). Or, in the words of Betty, Timóteo is “o próprio espírito da família, esse eterno vento que se deveria ter soprado também sobre o destino de Maria Sinhá” (Cardoso 2009, 55). The superimposition of Maria Sinhá and Timóteo at first appears like a carnivalesque subversion or perverse eccentricity. Toward the end of the novel, Timóteo emerges from his hidden space in a ghostly, melodramatic appearance that confirms decadence precisely as the “real” identity of the family:

Um verdadeiro espectro, mais portentoso do que a morte, porque ainda vivo e já morto, mais alto e mais solene, porque emissário entre os vivos de uma mensagem que pertencia ao outro mundo. Não, não me senti escandalizado e atemorizado:

¹¹ Cardoso is clearly indebted to this topos of the Victorian Gothic, notably Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. See the classic feminist study by Gubar and Gilbert 1979, esp. 336-71.

sem poder despregar os olhos daquela extraordinária visão, ia reconhecendo nela, não sei por que efeito de subreptícia magia, alguém da minha família, um ser carnal e próximo, que até aquele minuto eu ainda não avistara, cuja personalidade se diluía numa bruma de incompreensão, mas que tinha um direito a um lugar, e vinha reclamá-lo, ostentando o direito irrefutável de uma absoluta semelhança física e seu incontestado calor sanguíneo” (Cardoso 2009, 475-476).

It is clear, then, that Lúcio Cardoso was strongly influenced by the mode of the Gothic novel, combining it with the genre of the polyphonic family novel. In this context, we might recall that Gilberto Freyre, in *Casa grande e senzala*, describes the Brazilian “big houses” in quasi-Gothic terms, namely as houses that have survived themselves and which are haunted by the phantasms of the (feudal) past (Freyre; Monteiro de Barros 2014, 210-211). The form of the Gothic novel had been first developed in England (Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe), was then adapted to the American continent (Charles Brockden Brown), and gained special prominence and relevance in the treatment of racial issues in the version of the *Southern Gothic*, ranging from the short stories by Edgar Allan Poe to the family novels of William Faulkner (Walsh 2013; Pilar Blanco 2012, 51). The figure of the ghost is a typical element of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, its function resides in an epistemological confusion, for it disrupts “the line of demarcation between the so-called ‘real’ life and the irreality of death” (Mosser 2008, 69). Typically, the return of the un/dead in Gothic fiction signifies the resurgence of repressed desires and, in the American version, it often embodies a simultaneity of temporal orders, which in turn points to a coexistence of “civilization” and “barbarity” (Pilar Blanco 2012, 29).

In Cardoso’s novel, the traumatic, spectral resurgence of the past shows haunting not only as a theme of the novel, but as something that also affects literary representation itself (Pilar Blanco 2012, 6), namely a form of narration that consistently disrupts temporal demarcations of reality and boundaries between different subjects (as in the stylistically homophonic polyphony). Although Cardoso’s poetic style, the simultaneously baroque and campy dramatization of decadence, certainly distinguishes him from Thomas Mann, there exists an obvious affinity between *Crônica da Casa Assassinada* and *Buddenbrooks*, namely the fact that the phenomenon of social-physiological decadence does not (merely) signify what is objectively pathological (as in literary Naturalism, to which Mann is indebted) but, on the contrary, a deliberate opposition to notions of the normative order via an explicit aesthetics of decadence (Pross 2013, 40; Weir 2018, 3-4). Both thematically

and formally, then, the involuted nature of incestuous desire signifies (as in García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad*) an opposition to the genealogical narrative of patriarchal order as well as to the "temporal regime of modernity" (Drechsel Tobin 1978, 7; Assmann 2013, 18-20). In the case of Cardoso's novel the emphasis lies not on the chronological extension and circularity of the familial genealogy, but on the spatially claustrophobic nature of the drama as well as the psychological dimension of sexual desire. For instance, Nina has a symbolic relation to the ambiguity of the dead/living aunt, to the extent that her own demonic vitality also contains the kernel of death and destruction, at once embodying and opposing the sense of modernity. Witness her description by Betty:

Pela primeira vez, e de um modo insistente, insinuante, eu sentia o que realmente era a *presença* daquela mulher—um fermento atuando e decompondo. Possivelmente nem ela própria teria consciencia disto, limitava-se a existir, com a exuberancia e o capricho de certas plantas venenosas; mas pelo simples fato de que existia, um elemento a mais, dissociador, infiltrava-se na atmosfera e devagar ia destruindo o que em torno constituia qualquer demonstração da vitalidade (Cardoso 2009, 239).

The example shows that Nina, just like Timóteo, is perceived by the other characters as a sort of phantasm, at times an evil spirit, a being that oscillates between the poles of life and death. These two characters occupy a provisional and transitional position in the order of time, they are representative for a post-naturalist aesthetic, in which temporal demarcations are being dissolved. This can already be observed in the first chapter of the novel, where everything circles around the exposition of her (seemingly) dead body, and where this oscillation is located in the subjective consciousness of André:

Domina-me uma espécie de alucinação; mais uma vez ouço nitidamente sua voz—lenta e sem timbre—que suplica: 'Na janela, meu bem, ponha essas flores na janela.' E vejo-a finalmente, intacta, perfeita no seu triunfo e na sua eternidade, erguida junto a mim com as violetas apertadas de encontro à face. Mas regressa devagar ao mundo que me rodeia" (Cardoso 2009, 22).

The narrative direction of the first chapter circles back from the already dead body to the moribund body, thus again confounding life and death in the subjective perception of André: "Poderia repetir ainda os mesmos gestos dos vivos, pronunciar

até palavras semelhantes—mas a força vital já se despedia do seu corpo e ela se achava nesta *fronteira* indevassável de onde os mortos espiam indiferentes a área por onde transitamos” (Cardoso 2009, 30; my emphasis). Furthermore, the a-chronological arrangement of the narrative units, which have the effect that the reader cannot read the account of Nina’s initial arrival at the house without being aware of her already being dead, reflect her in-between-state in the very structure of the text. Precisely because the kaleidoscopic succession of the different units only really occurs at the level of readerly perception, the reader is thus brought into a similar position to the characters of the novel whose life is centrally haunted by the absent Nina.

The dead body of Nina, victim of cancer, exhaling the odors of decomposition, displayed like a baroque spectacle, is a reminder of life’s transitoriness; in Cardoso’s Catholic vision human sins are there to be absolved by divine grace. In this respect, it should be recalled that already the epigraph of the novel is a citation from the New Testament (St. John), namely the episode of Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, dead since a few days and then brought back to life by Jesus: “Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’” (St. John, XI, 39-40). This notion of resurrection fills the mind of André who, before the arrival of Nina, notes that there is no portrait of his mother in the house (thinking that Nina is his mother), that her name is equivalent with dead matter (“coisa morta”, Cardoso 2009, 208), even as the house reverberates with her felt presence and the clothes in the wardrobe preserve her smell. The scene depicting a sexual encounter between André and Nina is in fact represented as an act of “resurrection,” as a repetition of a certain scene from the past, since André perceives that Nina, instigated by the physical similarity between André and Aurélio, sees in the former “o espectro daquele ser ausente” (Cardoso 2009, 265). The love between them is, as Ana puts it, “eco de um morto” (Cardoso 2009, 275). Toward the end of the novel we are again in the presence of the dead body of Nina, which André experiences as being “como fora deste mundo, no limiar talvez do outro” (Cardoso 2009, 248), and he finally pronounces, like the revelation of an occult truth, the name of Alberto. Valdo, for his part, attributes this sense of Nina being undead to his “hallucination” according to which Nina is placed in a “neutral territory” between “a vida verdadeira e a morte total” (Cardoso 2009, 438-439). After Nina’s death, her clothes are still “living things” (“coisas vivas”)

paralyzing the bystanders—yet another “resurrection.” The uncanny reappearance of Nina after her death, then, is a psychologically grounded sense of a ghostly return (Almeida Freitas 2017, 38).

The survival of the past, then, is a central theme of the novel. However, the presence of the past and of death point to a significance beyond the merely lugubrious. In my view, we can recognize here a distinctive, recurring, often-discussed feature of modern Brazilian literature, namely the topos of an alleged national “belatedness,” the diagnosis that the aspiration toward a desired modernity is deformed and frustrated in a social world that is still marked by the influence of former colonial institutions, especially during a period in which the legacy of the rural aristocracy of the nineteenth century was problematized. If the survival of this retrograde world constitutes an obstacle for modernization, Lúcio Cardoso was, among the intellectuals of this period, certainly not alone in cultivating a certain nostalgic memory of the old aristocratic world (S. Buarque de Holanda, G. Freyre; Meira Monteiro 2017, 37-47). If the novel by Cardoso refers only with very few details to specific historic moments of social and economic change, the central theme of survival points allegorically, via the big house (*casa grande*) as metonymic image for the patriarchal legacy, to this configuration of a national problem. The patriarchal power located above all in Demétrio is certainly there, but it also appears hollowed-out and contested; Demétrio is the only one of the novel’s central characters who is not assigned the position of voice in any of the 56 chapters of the novel.¹²

We might say that *Crônica da Casa Assassinada* complements the examples discussed by Robert Moser in his study *Carnavalesque Defunto: Death and the Dead in Modern Brazilian Literature*, in which the author writes “that the image of the defunto has been both a frequent and profound literary motif in Brazil since the second half of the nineteenth century” (Moser 2008, 51). The psychological orientation of Cardoso’s novel does not exclude the role of social community that Moser sees as characteristic for the Brazilian tradition of treating ghosts in literature:

[...] the defuntos exist on their own account and, in a form that is frequently both carnalized and carnivalized, their return is emblematic of larger social issues that remain collectively unresolved. In this sense, they fall more under the narrative category of ‘cultural haunting’ ([...])” (Moser 2008, 50)

¹² The Latin American novel is haunted by the figure of the patriarchal father, even when he is absent or denied. This much has recently been argued by Valencia 2017, 24-47.

The notion “that the ghost is emblematic of collective social dilemmas” (Moser 2008, 51) is perhaps a tendency particularly strong in the American lineage of the Gothic novel (from its very beginnings in the work of Charles Brockden Brown [1771-1810] to *Beloved* [1987] by Toni Morrison). The very condition of decadence—a given topos of the family saga—refers to something that no longer is as it used to be, but which still manages to survive in some form. The vestiges of the past express this resistance to the time of the present and the figure of the ghost is precisely a sign of this temporal disjunction, a time literally “out of joint,” to cite the words by Shakespeare’s Hamlet elaborated upon by Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1994, 18-29; cf. Almeida Freitas 2017, 72). In Cardoso’s novel, the atmosphere of the posthumous, of the superimposition of the past on the present is visible in the fascinating characters of Nina and of Timóteo, in the fluid, aquatic dissolution of the borders between those subjects that resist the adaptation to patriarchal norms. In the words of Nina: “Quem somos nós que assim passamos como espuma, e nada deixamos do que construímos, senão um punhado de cinza e de sombra” (Cardoso 2009, 41). This, then, is the central paradox of the novel, the fact that the eccentric, sexually ambiguous, non-conforming figures of Nina and Timóteo, refer back to a sense of past tradition. An outside observer of the family, the medical doctor, reveals this ghost-like quality of the past:

E de onde vinha esse prestígio [da família]? Seu passado, exclusivamente seu passado, feito de senhores e sinhaszinhas que haviam sido tidos, Meneses todos, que através de lendas, fugas e romances, de uniões e histórias famosas, tinham criado a ‘alma’ da residência, aquilo que incólume e como suspenso no espaço, sobreviveria, ainda que seus representantes mergulhassem na obscuridade” (Cardoso 2009, 245).

Insofar as the patriarchal roots of Brazilian culture are condensed by the sphere of the house as material testimony to decadence, they signify the symbolic “truth” of the nation-as-family. Moreover, Cardoso’s novel marks an important step in the direction of a post-naturalist family saga, where temporal boundaries are dissolved and subjects are in contrast with their own spectral selves, thus creating a sense of presentness and psychological drama that cuts through any idea of the past being past. What is remarkable in Cardoso is how the socio-historically grounded theme of decadence is refracted in a “unified” polyphony of voices and spectral perceptions

that aspires to the urgency and universality of death in Greek tragedy or the Baroque.

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