

American Incunabula: 'Grotesque Genesis' and the Genealogical Genre

By Ian MacRae

I. The Question of Genre

The title of this paper is a bit of a handful, if not a mouthful; I will work here to define its six principal terms, their references, structures of meaning, and variegated inter-relationships. This is a sketch of a wide-ranging, already completed study, which I will move to 'set up' in this paper's first half, before offering brief readings of key texts in the second. The work is grounded in a simple idea, expressed by many writers, and in this case by the Canadian Jack Hodgins, who early in his career, in response to critics seeking to situate his work, rarely tired of mentioning that the Pacific coast on which he lives runs "all the way down to the tip of South America," and that this "coastline that goes past Vancouver and past my house goes right down past Fuentes' Mexico and Vargas Llosa's Peru and García Márquez's Colombia, and I don't want to make too much of it but there is that connection which is as tangible as the CPR lines across Canada, as far as literature is concerned."¹

Literary traditions have never been self-contained or exclusively local, of course, and the range of concern, influence and ambition of contemporary hemispherical literatures is far from restricted by linguistic, cultural, or political bounds. Academic comparatists have long focused on "horizontal" or East-West relations between American and European cultures, however, leaving inter-American, North-South, or "vertical" concerns to one side. And yet in recent years an inter-American literary and historical framework has slowly emerged, as "we have begun to see a clearer outline to the profile of a group of American nations whose colonial experiences and languages have been different, but which share certain undeniable features."² José David Saldívar speaks in this context of a "new, trans-geographical concept of American culture—one more responsive to the hemisphere's geographical ties and political crosscurrents than to narrow national ideologies,"³ while Earl E. Fitz confidently discerns "a community of literary cultures related to each other by virtue of their origins, their sundry interrelationships, and their socio-political, artistic, and intellectual evolutions."⁴ In Gustavo Pérez Firmat's formulation, the adjective *American*, deployed in "its genuine, hemispheric sense," extends not from sea to sea, but rather from pole to pole, and speaks of a paradoxical continuity—a disjunctive continuum, a discontinuous field.⁵

This regional, inter-American perspective is intended to highlight the shared heritages, sensibilities, intentions and methods that link writers across the conventional boundaries of culture, language, and political jurisdiction. It constitutes America as a discursive system and cultural space, one nominally situated between the more familiar frameworks of national and world literatures, and proposes a dismantling of the once stable grounds of nation, language and history, in favour of a comparative perspective and

¹ Jack Hodgins, "An Interview with Jack Hodgins," by Geoffrey Hancock. *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 32-33 (1980): 33-63, 47, 52.

² Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: the Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Trans. James Maraniss. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992, 85.

³ José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, xi.

⁴ Earl E. Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991, xi.

⁵ Gustavo Pérez Firmat, ed. and Introduction, *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 2.

methodology that incorporates heterogeneity, plurality, contingency, and syncretic cultural formations. This is not to call for a completely autonomous, autochthonous, decolonized American product, of course, nor to neglect the Americas' cultural indebtedness to Europe. The goal is not to occlude differences, these being the very strength of the argument; the complexities of the surveyed literatures cannot be forgotten. There are after all some thirty-five countries, and fifteen territories or protectorates; four principal Indo-European languages and countless indigenous ones, Creoles and pidgins; some 700 million inhabitants, and more than sixteen million square miles of land.⁶ The political, social, and economic differences are vast; to underestimate or blur these differences is naïve as well as dangerous. Yet the interpenetration of American languages, cultures, and literatures only continues to accelerate, prompting J. Michael Dash to speak of "the generalized feeling that the Americas as a whole are being radically redefined in terms of race, culture, economy, and politics."⁷ Indeed, the similar but by no means interchangeable terms of cultural heterogeneity, syncretism, *mestizaje*, transculturation, hybridity, creolization – the processes of making and remaking identity out of manifold difference – have increasingly come to define the complex and inherently multiple identities of contemporary American literatures and societies. Literary and pedagogical theories, the forms and strategies by which we grapple with creative writing, struggle to keep pace. In A.S. Byatt's words, "those of us who write about modern writing need to keep thinking of new – even deliberately provisional – ways to read and to compare what we have read."⁸ And so inter-American studies remains both "necessary" and "urgent,"⁹ for "not enough has been said about this commonality, about the intersections and tangencies among diverse literatures of the New World."¹⁰

Studies of this breadth may appear to succumb to the risk of broad generalization, and a concomitant lack of historically and culturally specific scholarship; admittedly, the subject of inter-American literature "is imposingly and even impossibly broad."¹¹ My own response is to concentrate a series of overarching concerns relating to the literary-historical imaginings of European-American beginnings—an "anxiety of origins"; identity longings arising from a "persistent meditation on cultural autochthony"; an apparent innocence of history, which then proves overwhelming, and apparently "cursed," and so on—into a detailed analysis of a single novelistic series, strand, or genre, a "stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough site of social and ideological action."¹²

By focusing on the articulation and criticism of one series in the twentieth-century American novel, this study addresses a small part of the whole. It is not intended to be inclusive, nor exhaustive; the bounds of the "genealogical genre" as they are constructed here remain porous, unstable, ambiguous, and open to difference, translation and transformation. The methodology is to read genre as a multilingual, comparative object of

⁶ Lois Parkinson Zamora, "Quetzalcóatl's Mirror: Reflections on the Photographic Image in Latin America," in *Image and Memory: Photography From Latin America, 1866-1994*. Wendy Wattriss and Parkinson Zamora, eds. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998, 293-375.

⁷ J. Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998, x.

⁸ A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2000, 3.

⁹ Dash 1998, x.

¹⁰ Pérez Firmat 1990, 2-3.

¹¹ Pérez Firmat 1990, 3.

¹² Catherine F. Schryer, "Records as Genre," *Written Communication* 10 (1993): 200-34, 200.

meaningful differential identity and conceptual contrast, as a series that underwrites comparison. The study draws on a series of representative texts, from diverse geographic, cultural, and linguistic groupings, that furnish what Dash might consider “privileged stagings” of my central concerns. The selected texts – *Os Sertões* (Euclides da Cunha, 1902), *Absalom, Absalom!* (William Faulkner, 1936), *Cien años de soledad* (Gabriel García Márquez, 1967), *The Invention of the World* (Jack Hodgins, 1977), and *Texaco* (Patrick Chamoiseau, 1992) – constitute a grouping that coheres at the higher level of structural units, with strong internal elements of allusion, and complex echoing effects among scenes and speech types.¹³ It is a set of texts in restless dialogue with one another, what Edward Said would call a “contrapuntal ensemble.”¹⁴ These are canonized texts, and this is precisely the point: they address shared forms of literary expression across a diverse range of cultures, composing patterns integral to the American literary-historical imagination. Following Lois Parkinson Zamora, these texts articulate variegated yet significantly shared attitudes towards the past, which in turn “condition literary modes of historical imagining,” resulting in literary structures that are themselves “historicizing frameworks,” not essentializations of the formation of cultural identity, but models or modes of organizing and considering the past.¹⁵ What they can be made to say of race, class, gender, and genre – how their treatments range in valence and articulation across space, time, language, and culture – provide much thick description of the American historical imagination.

Generic texts are formidable works, large in scope and ambition, which seek a vast, encompassing, exhaustive treatment of a fictional world. They are “total novels,” in Mario Vargas Llosa’s sense, in that they create and contain a complete fictional universe, “una naturaleza exclusiva, irrepetible y autosuficiente,” and chart its rise and fall from beginning to end.¹⁶ Founded upon a utopian design and written in an apocalyptic mode, with the retrospective glance of an ordering, totalizing history, these books “remember the beginning, if only to rewrite it,” but always from a point “when the end which will finally give sense to the whole is imminent.”¹⁷ They are “spiritual encyclopedias,” in Frank Kermode’s fine phrase, comprehensive maps and guides, and “Behind all of them is a Bible, thought of as complete and authoritative, a world-book credited with the power to explain everything: a key to creation.”¹⁸ These are large prose-poems that encompass and incorporate prior structures of narrative fiction, and are full of secretive connections; in this sense, and with the exception of da Cunha, they take Joyce’s *Ulysses* as their guide. They declare themselves in a scandalous regional history, correspond to the profounder historicities of their respective regions, are grounded in authorial autobiography, and offer abundant bestiaries of grotesque forms and modes. These then are regional novels in the American tradition as identified by Carlos J. Alonso, in that they are set against the background of a specific

¹³ Any number of other texts, such as for example Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* (1942), José Lezama Lima’s *Paradiso* (1968), Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), Isabel Allende’s *La casa de los espíritus* (1982), and Néida Piñón’s *A República dos Sonhos* (1984), could be added to the list.

¹⁴ In *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993, Said refers on several occasions to a *contrapuntal* perspective as an elaboration or improvement upon *comparative* methodologies, and as an “antidote to reductive nationalism and uncritical dogma” (43).

¹⁵ Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, xii.

¹⁶ Mario Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, Barcelona: Seix Barril, 1971, 480.

¹⁷ Frank Kermode, *An Appetite for Poetry*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, 216.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

geographic region, arise from a “persistent meditation on cultural autochthony,” treat the crisis of identity of Europeans in America, and purport “to represent synechdochically the entire culture of which they are merely a fragment.”¹⁹ These are regional writers and texts in a profound sense, however, in that by mixing “the most intensely local elements with the largest themes and most universal myths,” they transform their own “local backyard(s) into an image of the whole created universe.”²⁰

There is hardly a Western literature of the Americas, of course, that has not been, at some level, however remote, structurally impelled by an engagement with questions of origins, identity, and cultural autochthony. Simply enough, generic texts perform fictions of a founding, or foundational fictions: these are synoptic creation stories of Colonial, *criollo*, and Creole cultures in the Americas.²¹ They recount how the American world was formed, and how things here came to be, “for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist.”²² Creation stories “precede all others in the natural order,” and “provide insight into what races and nations understand of human nature,” says Basil H. Johnston, an Anishinaubae from Ontario.²³ If stories give meaning and value to the world and its things, if they bring us together as they keep us apart – as I believe they do – these are stories of some import, then; the originary narrative is for Michel Foucault “the first fold that enables all historical events to take place.”²⁴ In thematizing and explicating time and space, “the fundamental coordinates of life and narrative, at the highest level of meaning,” creation stories – and the Book of Genesis in particular – constitute for biblical exegete J.P. Fokkelman the foundation of meaning and of reality.²⁵

Genesis, the quintessential originary myth in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is the principal template for these treatments of American foundings. However much Genesis is woven through and riven with cross-cultural tensions, originary narratives in the Judeo-

¹⁹ Carlos J. Alonso, *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990, 4.

²⁰ Allan Pritchard, “Jack Hodgins’ Island: A Big Enough Country” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 55 (1985): 21-44, 21; W.J. Keith, “Jack Hodgins’s Island World”. Rev. of *The Barclay Family Theatre*, by Jack Hodgins. *The Canadian Forum* (1981): 30-31, 31. Though Pritchard and Keith are commenting on Hodgins’ work specifically, their insights apply to all texts in the series.

²¹ The works I am considering here temporally succeed those taken up by Doris Sommer in *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). The term “foundational fictions,” which I borrow from Sommer, is deployed here in a significantly different context: not to describe the positivist, populist, nationalist, patriotic, erotic, “boldly allegorical” narratives – the terms are Sommer’s – that characterize the national romances of nineteenth century Latin America, but rather to address a series of twentieth-century texts, novels, for the most part, and not romances, which effectively dissemble, dissimulate, and otherwise dismember those assumptions and intentions which Sommer’s corpus articulates.

²² Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003, 10.

²³ Basil H. Johnston, “Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature.” *Canadian Literature* 128 (1991). Rpt. in *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. Ajay Heble, Donna Palmateer Pennee, and J.R. (Tim) Struthers, eds. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997, 346-354, 350.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1970, 329.

²⁵ J.P. Fokkelman, “Genesis,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987, 36-55, 43.

Christian tradition downstream from Genesis are typically figured in a declarative, exclusionary, enunciatory language that tends to eradicate difference, to dissolve the complex interweavings of history and cultural identity, and to obviate the fact that all identities are defined relationally against others.²⁶ Robert Kroetsch recalls a settler's childhood in Alberta "secure in the illusion that the land my parents and grandparents had homesteaded had had no prior occupants, animal or human. Ours was the ultimate *tabula rasa*. We were the truly innocent."²⁷ And yet, again with the notable exception of *Os Sertões*,²⁸ generic texts stage creation stories within the most capacious, ironic, and self-reflexive of genres, the novel. As such, they present not only the founding moment, but also the prolegomena of that founding, the introductory preamble, the leading-up to – the recognition that the origin is always already history, a history that is invariably swaddled in deception and fratricide, in incest and violence.

In *Cien años de soledad*, for example, the reader goes on to discover that the first town of the first chapter is already a second town in the second chapter. Before the founding of Macondo, and the loss of "original sin" – the apparent elision of prior transgressions – there has already been the founding patriarch's double violation: the murder of Prudencio Aguilar, and the rape, at spear-point, of Úrsula Iguarán. Macondo's foundational "purity" – the pellucid water and prehistoric eggs of a land prior to language – is mired therefore from the outset in rape, incest, and murder. This profanation of the origin, only belatedly revealed, is also carefully encoded in biblical form: the Buendías' "exodus," *un viaje absurdo* to found Macondo, is to "la tierra que nadie les había prometido" (the land that no one had promised them).²⁹

Kroetsch, in his essay, "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues," goes on to describe his childhood coming-to-knowledge of buffalo wallows, tipi rings, and the Battle River as a sort of boundary between the Blackfoot and the Cree – those traces of people and animals inscribed still on the land, and that continually insist their presence in American creations. The question of territory haunts these texts, concerned as they are with the relationships of language to landscape and human history – the records of people moving across a place. Colonial encounters often meant at a very basic level settling on and controlling land that is settled on and controlled by others.³⁰ The Africans murdered on American plantations and in the Middle Passage, the Amerindians killed by disease and war and a thousand thousand horrors remain "unburied, suffering a fate worse than death and haunting us with the incompleteness of their lives."³¹ In Jefferson Humphries' analysis, "the discovery of the New World, with the slave trade, the European war on Native American societies, and the rape and pillage of the land to make room for agriculture and industry, mark the beginning of our uneasy [American] consciousness, our sense of a loss which we

²⁶ See for example Robert Alter's discussion of the Table of Nations (Gen. 10), (1996, 42-5), as well as David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, 39-77.

²⁷ Robert Kroetsch, "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues," *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989, 1-20, 1.

²⁸ Written with all the force and concordance of the genre, *Os Sertões* is not a novel, but a sociological portrait in prose, an attempt to explain a region in its entirety, and the country's relation to it.

²⁹ Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*. 1967. Edición de Jacques Joset. Madrid: Cátedra, 1996. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gregory Rabassa, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 107/ 31.

³⁰ Said 1993, 7.

³¹ J. Edward Chamberlin, *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?: Finding Common Ground*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2003, 96.

cannot ever satisfactorily define.”³² These haunted, spectral presences, the violent crimes of usurpation, slavery and genocide which mark the European-American founding, account, at least in Faulkner’s works, for a sort of “grotesque genesis,” an Old Testament-style “curse” upon the land and its peoples.

The assembled texts – by da Cunha, Faulkner, García Márquez, Hodgins, Chamoiseau – take therefore as their points of departure what Parkinson Zamora terms “A characteristic historical awareness – what I call an anxiety of origins with respect to New World cultural histories and traditions.”³³ They treat what Roberto González Echevarría considers “the most persistent theme of Latin American literature: how to write in a European language about realities never seen in Europe before.”³⁴ Djelal Kadir identifies this “quest for beginnings” as constitutive, “in a highly suggestive way,” of Latin American discourse, its “paradoxical supreme fiction.”³⁵ I would like to put the qualifier *Latin* under a crude sort of erasure here, releasing *American* to signify in its broader hemispherical context. These theorists – Parkinson Zamora, González Echevarría, Kadir, Alonso – establish paradigms that primarily treat Hispanic American literatures, and which can be applied with what might seem a surprisingly good fit to Hodgins’ work, among other Canadian texts, effectively “Americanizing” the latter.³⁶ This signals a significant if secondary intention of this study, to bring a representative Canadian text into a broader inter-American arena. Even Parkinson Zamora, an exemplary comparatist in many respects, in her claim to use “‘American’ in its broadest geographical sense to refer to the different but related histories of the U.S. and Latin America,” does not extend the reference nearly far enough.³⁷ Nor do many, if indeed any, of the theorists taken up here. This is not a complaint, of course; the problem as Canadian critics remains our own.

In an essay titled “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” Erich Auerbach conceived the *Ansatzpunkt* as a specific point of departure that enables a critic to read contrapuntally across cultures: “The characteristic of a good point of departure is its concreteness and its precision on the one hand, and on the other, its potential for centrifugal radiation.”³⁸ As this paper will demonstrate, the Latin American social imaginaries or partial vantage points considered by the aforementioned critics extend in their concreteness and precision and via ex-centric radiation outwards to articulate Canadian – and Caribbean, and Brazilian – literary and cultural concerns.

This explication of the American origin is old work, and counts itself, alongside appropriation, exploitation, genocide, confusion, and wonder, as among the oldest of

³² Jefferson Humphries, in Humphries and Bainard Cowan, eds. *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997, 166. Humphries is commenting on a poem by Edouard Glissant, “A Field of Islands,” which he has translated in this volume.

³³ Parkinson Zamora 1997, ix.

³⁴ Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier, the Pilgrim at Home*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977, 26.

³⁵ Djelal Kadir, *Questing Fictions: Latin America’s Family Romance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 3.

³⁶ Select texts by Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, Ann Hébert, Clark Blaise, David Adams Richards, and Alice Munro come to mind, though developing this argument is obviously beyond the scope of this study.

³⁷ Parkinson Zamora 1997, xii. My own work here is obviously indebted to Parkinson Zamora’s.

³⁸ Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” *Centennial Review* 13:1 (Winter 1969): 15. I owe this reference to Jonathon Culler, “Comparative Literature, at Last,” in Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, 237-248.

American traditions. It is an abysmal search, one that harbors a twofold tension. On the one hand, as Edmundo O’Gorman’s has demonstrated in *La invención de América* (1958), America can be considered an idea or an invention created by the textual and spiritual traditions of Europe. In this line of thinking, Columbus’ act constitutes the “meaningful culmination ... of a constructive tradition whose radical structures reach down to antiquity.”³⁹ America’s ideas about its own historical identity are irrevocably grounded in European philosophies, languages and traditions – as is the genre of the novel itself. On the other hand, America constitutes “a break, a discontinuity within that tradition,” what García Márquez refers to as the “the second Genesis which began that day,” and with which arose the need to invent “a new reality for an unexpected world.”⁴⁰ This twofold, contradictory tension – a break that is a continuity, and also somehow stochastic, even accidental, in that Columbus’ “discovery” was apparently an errant coming ashore – underlies and irrigates the preponderance of “genesis narratives” in inter-American literature. These are elemental if *specious* acts of a cultural founding – plausible, apparently sound and pleasing, but in fact intentionally sophisticated or fallacious narratives – such as Hodgins’ aptly-named *The Invention of the World*.

That Hodgins’ title both echoes and amplifies O’Gorman’s title and territory is entirely indicative of the spirit of his project. It serves also to index a common understanding each of these texts variously arrives at: that any notion of an “American origin” is merely a dissembling moment, a persuasive yet ultimately specious fiction, *un espejo hablado*, “a speaking mirror.”

In Mircea Eliade’s words, “Settlement in a new, unknown, uncultivated country is equivalent to an act of creation.”⁴¹ The founding communities in generic texts are *created* in precisely this sense, with the family as the principal colonizing unit. Canudos, Sutpen’s Hundred, Macondo, The Revelations Colony of Truth, and Texaco are exemplary imagined communities – cultural fictions, constructs of language and metaphor – in that they are both limited and, for the most part, sovereign.⁴² They are isolated, archaic, and presumably coherent and graspable as symbolic entities. They appear somehow suspended in time, economically underdeveloped, and caught up in the processes of adjusting to technological change and to the passage of historical time. They lack what Parkinson Zamora has called a “usable past”: traditions and histories to connect to, an archive or repertoire of prior responses to lived, situated experience, “acceptable sources of cultural authority, communal coherence, and individual agency.”⁴³ They participate in historical events, but often peripherally, and in ways that promote dependence, and that come to overwhelm them.

Are parallels and intertexts such as these enough to constitute genre? Is the shopworn concept still able to provide useful analytical purchase? Genre is not simply about subject matter, of course – this is a weak criteria for inclusion – nor reductively about form, though this is important. Contemporary genre studies concerned themselves with the way in which the subject matter is treated, and what this treatment *means*. Carolyn Miller usefully argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish.”⁴⁴ As I read Miller’s

³⁹ Kadir 1986, 8.

⁴⁰ Kadir 1986, 7; García Márquez 1997, 30; Kadir 1986, xxi.

⁴¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask., New York: Pantheon Books, 1954, 10.

⁴² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1983, 6

⁴³ Parkinson Zamora 1997, 5.

⁴⁴ Carolyn Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*. Aviva Freedman and Peter

argument, if we consider *form* a rhetorical action the discourse performs, and that is pragmatic or action-based, rather than strictly syntactic or semantic, in that it creates specific effects and particular knowledges, then form, and through form the recurrent situations and rhetorical devices of genre, can be linked to social situation (motive, exigency, history), as well as to social action. It is these specifically *American* social motives and historical exigencies that are rendered visible, hence vulnerable to criticism, in this discussion of genre. In short, the poetics and politics of what I am calling the “genealogical genre” are “enfolded within recurrently renewed structures, visions, stabilities, all of them attesting to” a common order represented by the imaginative historiography – the textual history – of America itself.⁴⁵

By *genre* I mean a language and a conceptual framework, a kind, type, or category of literary work, an imaginative structure that creates, elaborates, and even houses certain structures of knowing and feeling, “of attitude and reference.”⁴⁶ Genres are not fixed, but intertextual, and can be understood as the property of multiple relationships between literary texts. Generic texts articulate the elements, conditions, terms, and inter-relations of a specific discursive formation, a series of “family resemblances” (recurring situations, organizing principles, recognizable forms) that are commonly if diversely held. Such texts are not repetitive or formulaic: each is discrepant, with its own agenda and development, and each reveals an internal formation and a coherence that can be compared as instances of repetition in difference, as well as a set of external (literary, historical) relations that are situated and specific.

Any number of further and specific elements comes to define the genealogical series. There is the presence of a founding patriarch, a protean creator and powerful progenitor, a landscape architect who organizes the community along a quasi-sacred or utopian design (Antônio Conselheiro, Thomas Sutpen, José Arcadio Buendía, Donal Brendan Keneally, Esternome and Ninon in *Texaco*). There is the figure of an archivist, a compiler and collator of texts, an amanuensis who copies manuscripts and takes dictation, who cobbles together histories both oral and written, and who is in search of a positive, comprehensive, totalizing knowledge that is altogether impossible to attain. This figure of the archivist serves also as a figure of the narrator, in that the texts he is writing, interpreting, and obsessing over come to authorize and exfoliate into the novel itself. Da Cunha himself, like Quentin Compson in his anguished orality, as with Melquíades in his workshop interpreting the parchments, and Strabo Becker surrounded by “scrapbooks and shoeboxes of newspaper clippings and cardboard boxes of old photographs” in *The Invention of the World* (9), like “le Criste,” the urban planner in *Texaco*, who must come to grips with l’informatrice, the Source, and her expansive, digressive orality – these characters are redactors and scribes, ones who pore over a heterogeneous trove of narrative possibilities, what González Echevarría has called the “variety of beginnings at the origin.”⁴⁷

Medway, eds. London; Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis, 1994. 23-42, 24.

⁴⁵ Said 1993, 47.

⁴⁶ Said 1993, xxiii. This paragraph draws from Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁴⁷ Take Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909). A journalist, military engineer, and intellectual from Rio de Janeiro, da Cunha travelled north with the São Paulo battalion to cover the third military expedition at Canudos for the newspaper *Estado de São Paulo*. He stayed for the fourth campaign, and for the razing of the town – some 25,000 dead, a scorched earth campaign affected. After the war, troubled and genuinely perplexed by what he had seen, he composed *Os Sertões* in order to explain the massacre to himself, and his country to itself. He struggled to make sense of a fragmentary,

In each of these texts – as in Genesis itself – we go from legendary, vaguely mythical founding figures, long-lived and profoundly generative, to characters whose life-spans and moral ambiguities approximate lived human experience. Multiple narrative perspectives, an indeterminate vision of history, and the sense of a latter community of interpreters reconstructing the violence and agony of an insular founding community that ended in absolute destruction, are common to all. A central Big House or *casa grande*, with all the attendant trappings of what Gilberto Freyre has called plantation culture’s “polygamous patriarchy” – an anxiety regarding miscegenation, the apparent malediction of a violent originary usurpation, a deformed and repressive genealogy, an overbearing and doomed founder – is the spatial and symbolic center of each text, locus of time, place, and genealogy.⁴⁸ Notwithstanding its brutal violence, its reliance on foreign markets and slave labour, its licentious, promiscuous polygamy, the traffic in Africans as slaves and the perverse inequalities which resulted, and the single crop export economies which generated technological stagnation and cultures of inefficiency and neglect, the plantation society of *sencillas* or slave houses centered around a plantation manor represents a new, uniquely American, and decidedly widespread social structure. Indeed, it constitutes a shared trope – a determining, if not overdetermined, symbol – running through the genealogical series.⁴⁹ In each case, as Edouard Glissant notes in a study of Faulkner, “The patrician—a family clan ruled by patrilineal descent—falls apart.”⁵⁰ Something perpetually undermines the establishment of legitimate family, house, and line in these texts, in which the legitimacy of the founding is perpetually threatened, and appears to be cursed.

The texts in the series treat the founding moment self-consciously, and are explicitly about the need for and identity of an American literature.⁵¹ They imagine a moment of fullness and unitary identity at the origin, when desire coincides with reality, and language with landscape, and construct a founding idyll which is brought through grotesque

discontinuous, and contradictory chaos of first-hand reports, memories, interviews, newspaper clippings and published accounts, which he interprets, obsesses over, and which authorize the text, and at the same time exfoliate into it. (I am clearly indebted to González Echevarría’s *The Novel as Myth and Archive* in this section of this paper.)

⁴⁸ Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-Grande y Senzala: Formación de la Familia Brasileña Bajo el Régimen de la Economía Patriarcal*. Prólogo y cronología Darcy Ribeiro. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1977. *The Masters and the Slaves; a Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*. Trans. Samuel Putnam. 2nd ed., rev. New York: Knopf 1966.

⁴⁹ Faulkner’s working title for *Absalom, Absalom!* was *Dark House*; García Márquez’s for *Cien años de soledad* was *La casa*. In *Texaco* “The Big Hutch rose in the center of the outbuildings, sheds, and straw huts. From it poured the fields, gardens, the coffee-sown lands climbing the slope of trees (with precious wood.) The oxen’s exhaustion, the slaves’ despair, the cane’s beauty, the mills’ soft hiss, this mud, these smells, the rotten bagasse existed in order to feed its magnificent airs of power” (44). Even in the rainforests of Vancouver Island, apparently far from subtropical plantation culture, we find in *The Invention of the World* The House of Revelations, with Keneally the dark plantation overlord putting on “those immaculate clothes made somewhere in the Deep South or someplace for their colonels or plantation owners or something,” and riding out on horseback to lord over his *sencillas*, in this case the “log houses for the colony families.” The cornerstone trope of the Big House, linked to the idea of the family as colonizing unit, dissipates over time and within the series; *Texaco* begins again, as does *The Invention of the World*, when the Big Hutch lies in ruins.

⁵⁰ Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*. Translated from the French by Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, 124.

⁵¹ González Echevarría 1997, 53.

transformation to apocalyptic (as in “revelatory”) ends. Such is the Bible’s familiar model and overarching form. For Northrop Frye, the Bible reveals “some traces of a total structure. It begins where time begins, with the creation of the world; it ends where time ends, with the Apocalypse, and it surveys human history in between, or the aspect of history it is interested in.”⁵² This too is the “total structure” of generic texts, a Genesis-to-Revelation overarching superstructure, beginning in an epic cultural founding and ending in revelation. Each installs a totalizing foundational order, only to disseminate and displace it with strategies and structures of provisionality, intertextuality, and radical fragmentation. In positing an origin, these texts discover that such a moment cannot be constituted, and voice instead only its endless dispersal. Theirs is a prolix, inclusive language of surplus and abundance, which is also a discourse of insufficiency, anxiety, and need.

José Lezama Lima, in a series of five lectures delivered in Havana in January 1957, and published as *La expresión americana* (1959), has identified this as the characteristically anxious American strategy of *no rechazar*: “the non-negation, non-rejection of every discourse, including that of the colonizer.”⁵³ Faulkner’s quasi-Baroque rhetorical rage is exemplary here, as are the compendious and mongrel discourses of García Márquez, Chamoiseau, and Hodgins – the latter with a blending and blurring of biblical, classical, American and Irish myths, texts and allusions – though few can surpass the anguished extremes of inclusivity to which Euclides da Cunha aspires. In *Os Sertões* a phalanx of authors and theories both major and minor is cited directly, as works of ethnology, history, folklore, psychiatry, neurology, sociology, meteorology, hydrology, geology, botany and zoology – an exhaustive search for logos, for reason and order – are uneasily incorporated into a burgeoning form. It is an excessive corpus that, like Quentin Compson’s or Strabo Becker’s, refuses to be synthesized or adequately reconciled.

A key to the notion of an American grotesque, this aesthetic of abundance is also a discourse of absence and desperation, one that reflects the fear and emptiness, the alienation and uncertainty, of a strange people in a land that was new only to them. It is, as Lezama Lima explains, an aesthetic of complexity and deception, of distortion and over-elaboration, one that prefers the stylistic intricacies of concept and form over substance and clarity. It is decidedly ex-centric, in that it moves away or outward from a centre, and makes a conscious effort to engage with the discourses of Europe and the West, to mix with, transform, incorporate, exaggerate and disseminate them. This mode, simultaneously self-doubting and subversive, is for Lezama Lima uniquely American in the way that it “inherits,” through translation and transformation, the hegemonic European corpus in a manner that is not strictly oppositional, nor easily and without resistance, but rather that uncomfortably and self-consciously fragments and recombines the shards of the dominant culture into new aesthetic formulas. There is something moving, transitive and unsettled in generic texts, an element that is fluid, mischievous, dissembling, and difficult to pin down. I have selected the “grotesque” as an overarching metaphor for this process of homage and distancing, of incorporation and critique.

The grotesque is an elusive, dynamic term, “a single protean idea capable of

⁵² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Markham: Penguin Books, 1982, xiii.

⁵³ Levinson, Brett. “Possibility, Ruin, Repetition: Rereading Lezama Lima’s ‘American Expression.’” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 18 (1993): 49-66, 52. My “second order” reading of Lezama Lima (see below, cf. Moretti) is informed by Levinson’s work.

assuming a multitude of forms.”⁵⁴ An artistic mode and not a genre, an attitude towards reality as much as a series of techniques, the concept has been at the center of a minor but important outbreak in contemporary criticism and literature, at least since Wolfgang Kayser’s seminal modern definition, in 1957. Originating in the visual arts, only “borrowed” by language and literature in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the grotesque is something which language struggles to name, and with which language maintains an ill-fit. Most broadly, in bringing together the two terms of a conceptual contradiction, the grotesque facilitates the “mixing of what should be discrete and mutually exclusive categories,” thereby enabling the “coexistence of two opposing principles without subordination.”⁵⁵ In short, the grotesque’s “central character, or effect, is self-contradiction.”⁵⁶ With no priority or hierarchy between incompatible terms, there is no possibility of resolution, synthesis, or even facile escape – a means to ease the tension through dissociation. The grotesque then “reflects the violent and twisted struggled occurring in the zone of repulsion that keeps incompatibilities forever separate.”⁵⁷ And yet a necessary traffic, flow, or commerce of energy circulates uneasily and in tension between poles. Thus the grotesque works to ensure a transgression of prohibitions and a flexibility in taxonomy, a marking *and* a crossing of boundaries, an intertwining of polarities, however tense. The grotesque in literature and the visual arts signifies “a civil war of attraction and repulsion,”⁵⁸ one characterized by the teeming, transformative energies of paradox, ambiguity, and self-contradiction, from which it derives much of its ability to be powerful, memorable, and even touching.

More generally, the grotesque as a critical term is nothing more than a series of meanings assigned to it over time and in discourse; these meanings are of course historical, relational, and far from fixed. Two important works continue to irrigate our basic understanding of the term, and their differences – indeed, their blatant contradictions – highlight the antinomies encompassed in grotesque representation. Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin “disagree completely about the nature of the grotesque.”⁵⁹ Their differences hinge on valence, on the emphasis placed on horror or laughter, on the relation of the terrible to the comic, of the mind and imagination to the body and its desires – on which side of the polarity is stressed. This difference is related in turn to the historical and cultural eras which they study: for Bakhtin, primarily the European peasantry of the late Medieval period, for Kayser, the forms of the German Romantic period, and generally the usages of northern Europe.

If every structure or order is founded upon a system of exclusion, grotesque forms and modes roam outside these walls of reason and discretion, and do not simply negate the old order, but question the senses of authority and hierarchy which legitimated it in the first

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982, xv.

⁵⁵ Alton Kim Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface: Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution*. Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert; Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1996, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Dieter Meindl, *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1996, 18.

⁵⁷ Robertson 1996, 2.

⁵⁸ Harpham 1982, 4.

⁵⁹ Bernard McElroy, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989, 14.

place.⁶⁰ The grotesque then is most often classified as “a threat to the system of knowledge by virtue of its liminal position within that system.”⁶¹ This “threat” is in turn generally aligned with Freud’s *Unheimlich*, the uncanny or “unhomely,” that which “arouses dread and horror ... certain things which lie within the class of what is frightening.”⁶² This is a common simplification, however, or the revelation of only a partial truth (and one influentially championed by Kayser), for the extremes of degradation, dread and terror constitute only one side of the grotesque contradiction. The convulsive, contradictory tensions of the comic, what Charles Baudelaire has considered the “gluttonous and rapacious whimsicalities”⁶³ of the grotesque, that generative, productive territory of Rabelais, Bakhtin, García Márquez, Hodgins, Chamoiseau, Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, and so many other late twentieth-century writers, are inherent in grotesque disturbances and threats. For one contemporary critic of the visual arts, “The grotesque is hybridity without constraint, hybridity par excellence.”⁶⁴

There is an element of incommensurability in *Cien años de soledad*, for example, a multi-layered complexity, a richness of imagery and incident, an extremity of behaviour and emotion that does not quite tally with the experience of quotidian reality, that evades a normative taxonomy, and that doesn’t easily resolve into expectations of harmony, unity, or canonical, symmetrical beauty. It is another way of reading tradition, one that “places” an inherited corpus rather than being placed by it, responding with a superfluity, an abundance of pleasure and dismay, a cartoonish world of two-dimensional characters who eat until they almost die, make love eight times a night, and rot in their houses with green mould on their teeth, “buried alive.” These figures embody a roving, often contradictory tension that generates a humorous ambiguity and ironic amusement, as well as the slightly queasy, disorientating feelings characteristic of the grotesque as a literary mode.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, to consider another example, Goodhue Coldfield, Miss Rosa’s father, makes a deal with the “demon” in handing Sutpen his eldest daughter Ellen, before ultimately abandoning both his life and Rosa, incarcerating himself in the attic to avoid the Civil War, and in support of his abolitionist beliefs. His we might call a grotesque *stillness*, absurd in its preternatural quietude; eventually he starves himself to death. Henry similarly finds sanctuary in a “bare stale room” of Sutpen’s Big House when he finally returns, as he tells Rosa, “To die.” His too is an inconsequent, aberrant solitude, grotesque in the life it excludes. Jim Bond and Clytie, tilling a forlorn plot behind the decaying mansion after Sutpen’s death, similarly exist aimlessly and without consequence, in a state of empty inviolability, the endless monotony of a strange marginality. These are variations of an exemplary American solitude, a theme and condition that García Márquez hyperbolizes and

⁶⁰ See Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

⁶¹ Leonard Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race: the Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, xvii.

⁶² Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny.” 1919. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey; in collaboration with Anna Freud; assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. 17. London: Hogarth Press, 1973-1974, 219-252.

⁶³ Charles Baudelaire, “The Essence of Laughter” (1855). *The Essence of Laughter: And Other Essays, Journals, and Letters*. Ed. Peter Quennell. New York: Meridian Books, 1956, 125.

⁶⁴ Robert Storr, “Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque.” *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque*. Catalogue for SITE Santa Fe’s Fifth International Biennial (2004-05). Sarah S. King, ed. Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2004: 8-33, 27.

eccentrically expands in *Cien años de soledad*, as with the chalk circle drawn around Colonel Aureliano Buendía, “Lost in the solitude of his immense power.” In *The Invention of the World*, Keneally keeps his colonists away from the town, similarly barred from life’s essential mobility. From Euclides da Cunha’s perspective – urbane, intellectual, the voice of the city moving to understand a barbarous country – the citizens of Canudos are likewise ossified, recalcitrant, grotesque.

II: Readings in Genre

In “Conjectures on World Literature,” Franco Moretti cites Max Weber: “It is not the ‘actual’ interconnection of ‘things’ ... but the *conceptual* interconnection of *problems* which define the scope of the various sciences. A new ‘science’ emerges where a new problem is pursued by a new method.”⁶⁵ Inter-American literature – like the *method* (not uncontroversial) in world literature for which Moretti is arguing – can be said to constitute not an object of study but a *problem*, one that remains relatively new, and that requires a new critical method. As Moretti explains, “no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That’s not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager—a hypothesis, to get started.” In cultural fields as vast as world or American literature the relationship between analysis and synthesis is one of the things at stake. Hence Moretti suggests “second-hand” or “distant” readings in order to articulate patterns both larger and smaller than those which “close” textual readings – and the small, familiar canon they rely on, and indeed produce – generally allow. Moretti usefully champions a distant reading, where distance “*is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems.” Such is the method in practice here, one which is able to house or frame Said’s *contrapuntal* perspective, and which serves as a means to read texts across a wide array of cultures and languages, as a way “to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant.”⁶⁶ These are reading strategies through which the inter-American literary-historical imagination – and elements such as race, class, gender and genre – may become visible in a wide and deep discursive field.

As noted, the Hebrew Bible organizes and orients generic works. It serves as an inherited and recognizable form, a guarantor of eschatological significance and teleological sense, for characters, narrators, and novelists alike. The Book of Genesis in particular functions as a map and guide, a principal template for these foundational fictions. In Genesis, an epiphanic myth of racial purity and cultural priority, God’s Covenant descends the patriline of His chosen people, and genealogy is adopted as a means of schematizing a complex regional history, such that “the terms ‘fathers of’ and ‘begot’ are essential metaphors for historical concatenation.”⁶⁷ There is in Hebrew tradition a “predisposition of language and culture to imagine historical concatenation genealogically”⁶⁸; the Hebrew word for “time” is the same as for “generations.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Franco Moretti, *New Left Review* 1, January-February 2000, 55; Max Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy,” 1904, in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York 1949, p. 68.

⁶⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993, 32.

⁶⁷ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996, 42. My own work in this section is indebted to Alter’s.

⁶⁸ Alter 1996, 19.

⁶⁹ Hebrew tradition was far from isolated in this regard. “Herodotus measured time by generations, as the Etruscans did, and by reigns, as the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians did. Polybius measured time by quadrennial Olympiads; ... Most history, like most people until quite recently, ignored

Genesis belongs to that class of texts which upon rereading become all the more interesting, innovative, and inexhaustible than we had at first remembered.⁷⁰ It is well known that biblical lexicon is surprisingly limited, and that biblical rhetoric, noted for its rigorous economy of language, hinges everywhere on significant repetition, not variation, as its most significant formal instrument. This repetition of precise verbal formulae is employed as a means of demarcating and framing various episodes in Genesis, and to introduce, summarize and separate various themes and scenes. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig have designated this dense exploitation of critical words and terms *Leitwortsil*, literally, “leading-word style.” “A *Leitwort* is a word of a word-root that recurs significantly in a text, in a continuum of texts, or in a configuration of texts: by following these repetitions, one is able to decipher or grasp a meaning of the text, or at any rate, the meaning will be revealed more strikingly.”⁷¹ In Shimon Bar-Effrat’s formulation, “The key word establishes a relationship between separate stages of the narrative, conveying the essential point directly. It reveals the meaning and the implicit message of the narrative ... [it] is not a supplement (exposition of ideas or views) but meaning apparent in the story itself.”⁷²

In the Babel story, for instance, the word “language” is repeated five times in just 121 words. Another *Leitwort* in Genesis is *zeraʿ*, generally meaning *seed*, and as applied both to human agriculture and biology. In the deity’s cited speech, *zeraʿ* is continually present. “And the LORD appeared to Abraham and said, ‘To your seed I will give this land’” (Gen. 12:7). And again to Abraham: “I will greatly bless you and will greatly multiply your seed, as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the shores of the sea” (22:17). As God’s covenant descends from God to chosen patriarch, and from father to chosen son, Abraham’s son Isaac is blessed before birth: “I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant, for his seed after him” (9:1). So too is Isaac’s son Jacob: “And the land that I assigned to Abraham and Isaac, to you I will give it, and to your seed after you and I will give the land” (Gen. 35:12).

A more concrete, physical example occurs when Onan, who “knew that the seed would not be his” – referring to the progeny of his brother’s widow should he impregnate her – decides that “he would waste his seed on the ground, so as to give no seed to his brother” (Gen. 38:9). The incident gives us “onanism” for *coitus interruptus*, which, though not much recommended by high school counsellors today, has apparently long been practiced. Robert Alter notes that the King James Version repeatedly renders this term as offspring, descendants, heirs, progeny, posterity, thus diluting its earthy, expansive force.⁷³ In this usage, seed is linked with semen, and through metaphoric extension to what it produces, progeny. *Seed* is an extremely productive genealogical metaphor in that it conjoins into a single succinct term the two main concerns of God’s Covenant – the needs of an agricultural people for land, hence their motive for dispersion, and the basic requirement of hands to till the soil; and the biological matters of reproduction, continuity, and procreation, a range of

abstract chronology. Time was not linear, but multiple, subjective, and specific to particular situations.” Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs Throughout the Ages*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1999, 7.

⁷⁰ The echo is from Italo Calvino, in “Why Read the Classics,” *Why Read the Classics?* Martin McLaughlin, trans. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999, pp. 3-10.

⁷¹ Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Werker*, Vol. 2. *Schriften zur Bibel*. Munich, 1964, 1131. Robert Alter, trans. 1981, 93.

⁷² Shimon Bar-Effrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*. London: T & T Clark International 2004, 213.

⁷³ Alter 1996, xiii.

concerns which extends to encompass cultural continuity, tradition, and survival. The manifold significance of this term does not go unnoticed by generic writers, as when Mr. Compson explains the past as “the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting” (80), or when the seventeen sons of Colonel Aureliano Buendía leave behind “la impresión de que la estirpe de los Buendía tenía semillas para muchos siglos” (an impression that the Buendía line had enough seed for many centuries; 332/205), or when we are told of Esternome in *Texaco* “That he took such great care of his seeds (or his fertility) allowed him to reach an age of great peace with great vitality” (141).

The keyword at the centre of this study, *toledot*, etymologically “begettings,” derives from the Hebrew root *yld*, which is used for mothers (*yaldah*, “she gave birth,”) fathers (*bolid*, “he begot”), and children (*Nolda*, “he was born”).⁷⁴ In E.A. Speiser’s commentary, *l* *led* *t* means “genealogy, line, family tree (v 1, vi 9, x 1, etc.), and by extension also story, history.”⁷⁵ Alter describes *toledot* as a “flexible term” that can “equally refer to genealogical list and to story,” so that, for example, the phrase “This is the lineage of Jacob—” (Gen. 37:2), translated as “These are the generations of Jacob” (KJV), or more literally “This is the *toledot* of Jacob,” in the fullest sense means “These are the incidents that happened to him and the incidents that befell him.”⁷⁶

The term appears five times in Genesis to introduce the five great genealogical registries, the formal representations of the *toledot*: Adam (5:1), Noah (The Table of Nations; 10:1), Shem (Noah’s son; 11:10), Abraham and Isaac (25:12), and Esau (36:1). This distribution and frequency of begettings is of primary structural importance in Genesis, in that it provides an entrance to episodes and summaries of them, a moment of narrative calm and accounting before moving forward. For J.P. Fokkelman, who has most closely examined this aspect of the text, these repetitions demarcate self-contained envelopes of structure, forming “a framework that supports and meticulously articulates the various sections” of Genesis. This imbrication of form and theme constitutes “the *toledot* as a genre in its own right” – the genealogical genre.⁷⁷

The Bible’s close attention to patrilineal descent keeps track of who bears the covenantal promise, and accounts for various regional historical and political configurations. The question of – and quest for – primogeniture becomes the central narrative agent, generating a bevy of typological plotlines that form the bulk of the Patriarchal Tales.⁷⁸ The stakes are not insignificant, in that this manoeuvring for position determines the recipient of God’s covenant, hence who will be the standard-bearer for His chosen people. “The patriarchal blessing is, therefore, not just a family matter, but one on which the future of a

⁷⁴ Fokkelman, 1987, 41.

⁷⁵ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964, xxiv.

⁷⁶ Robert Alter, 1996, 8.

⁷⁷ Fokkelman 1987, 41.

⁷⁸ Such as: the betrothal scene at a foreign well; the brother-sister-husband combination; the scheming for or usurpation of primogeniture; rape, murder, concubinage; the questions of fertility and the plight of the barren woman (a recurring plot in which the woman takes centre stage). A rising river of sexualized violence perpetually threatens the maintenance and security of the Covenant, as indeed it threatens to overwhelm both house and line in generic texts.

nation was to depend.”⁷⁹ Thus “the overriding concern of the entire book of Genesis: life-survival-offspring-fertility-continuity.”⁸⁰

This convergence – of beginnings and begettings, of genealogy and genesis – is the persuasive metaphor at the heart of this study. The concerns of genealogy link space and time in lineage and language, thereby coalescing the broadest concerns of territory and history, blood and seed, family, tradition, continuity and cultural survival into a single on-going motif capable of bearing the entire symbolic freight of genre. In these American *incunabula* – early scenes of textuality, primal scenes of writing⁸¹ – a complex regional history is schematized as genealogical concatenation, and the concern remains with the people who were there at the beginning, the line they engender, the fate of their seed, the questions of primogeniture and continuation which surround it. But generation also unfailingly calls to mind degeneration, and the metaphors of genealogy encompass births and deaths, beginnings and ends, genesis and apocalypse. The figures are profoundly temporal, and betray a perpetual “anxiety about legitimation. ... In a general sense, the return to origins implies a concern for ends.”⁸²

It is also well known that the dynastic, patriarchal impulse manifests an anxiety to maintain rights and title to the distribution of wealth and land, and thus to maintain the purity of the line. An insular energy is created, a movement towards sameness and degeneration. As Gian Balsamo has noted, “the paradigm for consanguineous descent involves a drive toward incest and endogamy.”⁸³ The turn is inward, toward solipsism, solitude, and a solidarity based upon cultural, linguistic, ethnic and territorial singularities. Here are the familiar threats facing the Sutpens, Buendías, and Thomas Keneally’s unruly brood. It is this template of a foundational purity, based upon an unbroken line of genealogical filiation, and traced to a quasi-sacred and supposedly unitary source, that subsequent American originary narratives have absorbed, transformed, disseminated, and moved to disperse. The original is neither transcendent referent nor something wilfully transgressed in the generic relationship, which is something more unstable than this, dynamic, indeterminate and paradoxical, a complex rewriting that is both mischievous homage and transmuting swipe.

In short, it is this entire *toledot* ensemble – an anxiety of origins and the search for a unitary origin; the demands of patrilineal descent, and a patriarchal imagination intent on historical and genealogical filiation, concatenation, and purity, and resistant therefore to miscegenation, both cultural and biological, to transformation as to change – that organizes and orients generic texts. These stories of these founding families – Conselheiro and his flock, the Sutpens, Buendías, Donal Keneally and his crew, Esternome and Ninon in *Texaco* – correspond to the profounder historicities of their respective regions. In each – *Os Sertões*, a masterwork of non-fiction, albeit written with all the power and coherency of a novel, is in terms of genre a case apart – genealogy provides a framework, an articulation of structure and an enactment of content, a means to organize their polyphony of voices.

⁷⁹ Jasper, David, and Prickett, Stephen, eds. *The Bible and Literature: a Reader*. Assisted by Andrew Hass. Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999, 125.

⁸⁰ Fokkelman 1987, 41.

⁸¹ Kadir 1986, 22.

⁸² Carla Freccero, *Father Figures: Genealogy and Narrative Structure in Rabelais*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 199, 1-2.

⁸³ Gian Balsamo, *Pruning the Genealogical Tree: Procreation and Lineage in Literature, Law, and Religion*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999, 228.

And yet things are rarely if ever simple, or this linear, in generic texts. Some form of genealogical elision or deceit inevitably motivates these narratives, such that the patriarchal turn towards homogenization and linearity is consistently dispelled by both hybridized lineages *and* narrative forms. The sanctioned, “official” genealogies put forth by authoritative and prestigious founders are in an important sense all “false” genealogies, explicit and deceitful fictions, discursive masks thrown over the entanglements, deviant desires, and careful elisions that define the “actual” path of blood and seed in these generic families. In these texts it is as if the flow of blood and language itself covertly resists the homogenizing, dynastic trope – the familiar figure – of the family tree. Faulkner’s writing, to take a familiar example, incessantly post-pones discovery of a crucial, secret bit of knowledge, some drop of blood or obfuscated relation, persuading the reader to search for a meaning perpetually deferred, contingent, uncertain. It is this sense of genealogy, not the familiar, “official” associations of linear, consanguineous, patriarchal legitimation, that characterizes the genealogical genre.

Given this, it should be reasonably clear that the concept or theme of miscegenation, a mixing in the demographic sphere, and hybridization or creolization, a mixing of languages and cultural terms, an aesthetic as well as a philosophy in the realm of culture, becomes a useful ground for generic readings – the necessary leap or wager by which to conceptually interconnect a diverse grouping of languages, cultures, texts and traditions.⁸⁴ As a corollary, attitudes towards homogeneity and difference, from Genesis to da Cunha to Chamoiseau, determine to a large extent the valence of the grotesque in a writer’s work.

Radical mixing – the grotesque – in Genesis is not associated with the positive, rejuvenant aspects of hybrid forms (Bakhtin’s version), but rather with the sinister, demonic valencies of terror, horror, debasement and decay (as envisioned by Kayser). Such are the hegemonic racial and historical imaginaries which Euclides da Cunha inherits, grapples with, and fails to transform. *Os Sertões* is a polyglot bricoleur’s masterpiece, a narrative record and account of Antônio Conselheiro, a charismatic and mystical preacher who founded a millennial community in northeastern Brazil in the last decade of the nineteenth century, which after four armed conflicts the armies of the state razed to the ground. Da Cunha traces the rise of Canudos from its inception as a founding village with communitarian promise to its fall as a city of guerrilla warriors destroyed in absolute apocalypse – the revelation of Brazil’s racial and cultural composition to itself. The text begins where time begins, quite literally, with a geological exposition of the history of the earth, and ends where time ends, at least for O Conselheiro and his followers, in what da Cunha calls this “city of ruins to begin with.”⁸⁵ It is a synoptic effort to provide an overarching social law or principle that will describe and explain the Canudos conflict and its history in its entirety; that it fails is entirely the point.

In da Cunha’s, view, evolution was inevitable, hence the inherent inequality – the hierarchical stratification or division into superior and inferior – of peoples and races. For

⁸⁴ *Mestiçaje*, from the Spanish, meaning “racial mixing,” as in the French *métis*, or the English miscegenation, is by now an archaic sense of the term. The meanings privileged here derive from cultural and not biological associations, that is, to cultural and discursive spaces of multiplicity and variability, to translational sites of complexity, diversity, and hybridity.

⁸⁵ Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões*. 1902. Edição crítica Walnice Nogueira Galvão. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1985. *Rebellion in the Backlands*. Samuel Putnam, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944, 144. Subsequent references to this and other principal texts will be made in the body of the essay.

him, “the history of Brazil is an evolutionary movement towards perfection itself,”⁸⁶ and large-scale movements – of history, evolution, race and science – are the patterns perpetually sought. His theories are entirely pessimistic with regard to the social and economic capacities of mixed races: the *sertanejo*, or backlander, like *os sertões*, the backlands, is for him retrograde, atavistic, deviant. With the purified stock of a common national origin the ideal to be pursued, miscegenation becomes a profoundly negative term; in da Cunha’s words, “Miscegenation carried to an extreme means retrogression. [...] The mestizo—mulatto, mameluco, or cafuso—rather than an intermediary type, is a degenerate one” (85). The tragic irony is that da Cunha, like Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!*, was himself a mestizo, yet he was firmly against miscegenation.

Euclides possesses the rigid, ruthless fatalism of a social evolutionism grounded in explicit biological analogy, “the belief that social entities grow and evolve in the same manner as do biological organisms.”⁸⁷ The book’s tripartite structure – “Land” (*A terra*), “Man” (*O homem*), the “Assault” (*A luta*) – is organized according to this positivist paradigm, and in a sequence of causal order, deploying the evolutionary and environmental determinisms – the primitive and racist historicisms – of the late nineteenth-century natural sciences. For da Cunha it is simply a matter of reading the end into the beginning, thereby establishing the ideal concordance or the text. There is nothing (or very little) that is flexible or transformative in this aesthetic, nothing equivocal, transcultural or transitive in his method. It is the attempt at a full appropriation, a complete superposition of a taxonomic grid, such that each natural or social element is not only captured but comes to stand for the other, becoming implicated in the “total metaphor” of a highly-ordered whole. It is a classic evocation of the apocalyptic principle in narrative, defined by Frye as a “world already explained, a world of total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body.”⁸⁸ The result is a remarkably closed, over-determined work, in which the land has shaped the climate, the land and climate have shaped the people, the people are unknown, retrograde members of “tradições evanescentes, ou extintas” (85), who must be explained, before they become extinct.

The conclusion of *Canudos*, the revelation of its end as both town and text, is entirely foregone – until suddenly, even surprisingly, it is not. It is this final failure to taxonomize that signals the lasting accomplishment of the work. Overwhelmed by American diversity, the tome, for all its accomplishment, ends sadly, in the intellectual catastrophe of ellipses: national self-understanding is not yet possible; there are no theories available to characterize the complexity of the Brazilian dilemma; the country’s citizens remain phantoms to those who would govern them. These ellipses, which figure the inadequation of language to the task of comprehension and description, and signal an undefined or undefinable condition at the boundaries of language, are directly in keeping with grotesque representation.

It may seem anomalous that this text – not a novel, and not *genetically* or causally related to other generic authors and texts, and only peripherally concerned with genealogy

⁸⁶ Sara Castro-Klarén, “Santos and Cangaceiros: Inscription without Discourse in *Os Sertões* and *La guerra del fin del mundo*,” *MLN* 101 (1986): 366-88, 372.

⁸⁷ Marshall C. Eakin, “Race and Identity: Sílvio Romero, Science, and Social Thought in Late 19th Century Brazil,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 22.2 (1985): 151-174, 152.

⁸⁸ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism; Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1957, 136.

(da Cunha's is taken up, and considered suitably monstrous⁸⁹) – is taken as fundamental in the genealogical series, as the point of departure for a broad, abstract notion of wide applicability. It is precisely this acausal relationship that is valuable, in fact, as a means to transcend any notion of a narrow nationalist, linguistic, or influence-oriented poetics, and to ground the imaginative structures of a literary genre in concrete historical specificities. In *Os Sertões* the entire historical and cultural ensemble of foundational American fictions is taken up and, through Euclides' anguished introspection, transmuted into literary form.

Kinship is the language to be mastered and uncoded in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Cien años de soledad*, by both reader and character alike. The linear (though elaborately digressive) forms of these novels eccentrically iterate what Cree and Canadian playwright Tomson Highway calls "the-Book-of-Genesis-to-the-Book-of-Revelation straight line" superstructure of the Bible.⁹⁰ Faulkner's imbricated genealogies and incessantly interrogated foundings bound and define the elements of the generic discourse – a set of discursive laws, and the conditions and terms proper to their relations. All subsequent authors in the series explicitly acknowledge Faulkner's presence, and lie downstream from him not in a smooth flow (a coherent body of stable knowledge, customs, and usages), but in a turbulent passage marked by displacements, discontinuities, and heterogeneous disturbances.⁹¹ These are the signs, as in Faulkner's narratives, of an intimate, necessary, and apparently intractable family quarrel. Any vestigial fantasies of an originary purity, concatenicity, fertility, and even survival, as sanctified and legitimated in Genesis, are degraded and disseminated in Faulkner's grotesque breviaries of bigamy, fratricide, incest, caste, bodily corruption, and tragic miscegenation.

In a Southern society whose stability, continuity, foundation, and legitimacy is measured against the myth of racial purity and patrilineal concatenation as authorized by Genesis, purity of bloodline became both ultimate concern and source of recurrent pathology. Under these terms, miscegenation is a radical prohibition, while incest, paradoxically enough, may be permitted. (Such at least is a chief argument of both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*.) The law of miscegenation in the Old South meant that one drop of "black" blood made one Black. Mulatto offspring were property and could be bought and sold by the White father / master / proprietor. Thus Charles Etienne is the "complete chattel of him who, begetting him, owned him body and soul to sell (if he chose) like a calf or puppy or sheep."⁹² Despite the best and often violent intentions of the

⁸⁹ According to da Cunha, Antônio Conselheiro is a "striking example of atavism" (117), "a monstrous being" (129) whose "ideational retrogression" and "intellectual degenerescence" must be catalogued, understood, and properly inserted into the ordered grids of national progression and evolutionary science, before they disappear.

⁹⁰ Tomson Highway, *Comparing Mythologies*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2003. Charles R. Bronfman Lecture in Canadian Studies, 30.

⁹¹ "Faulkner, who was and is my great hero," says Jack Hodgins (1980 51), while García Márquez addressed him as "mi maestro" in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. As Parkinson Zamora observes, "Faulkner is universally acknowledged as an important precursor of contemporary Latin American fiction" (1989 4). Chris Bongie writes of "the many Latin American, Afro-American, and Caribbean novelists who have looked to the work of William Faulkner for inspiration in their attempts at coming to terms with the hybrid complexities of their New World heritage." (And here again we add *Canadian* to these lists.) Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/ Colonial Literature*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998, 189.

⁹² Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* 1936. Corrected Text (Noel Polk, 1986). New York: Vintage International, 114.

founding patriarch and his male heirs to assure a consanguineous descent, hybridization, both in terms of *métissage* (racial mixing: an archaic term) and Creolization (a cross-cultural process) are ever-present in Faulkner's genealogies, invalidating (from the dominant patriarchal perspective) all that is mixed, corrupting Thomas Sutpen's dream of an impossible founding purity.

Charles Bon and his grandson, Jim Bond, like Sutpen's first wife in Haiti, like the twenty slaves Sutpen brings over from Haiti, are all Creoles: they are cross-cultural, composite peoples, of mixed races and mixed languages: French, English, Creole, African. Sutpen does not appear to have recognized the thoroughly hybridized aspect of plantation life in Haiti. His Haitian Creole son, Charles Bon, flamboyant and seductive, worldly and cultured (or so Mr. Compson tells it), pulls both Henry and Judith into his orbit; the force of this attraction undoes Sutpen's careful plans. Bon is at home, according to Shreve and Quentin, in New Orleans' "labyrinthine mass of oleander and jasmine lantana and mimosa" (90); Mr. Compson calls New Orleans "a place created for and by voluptuousness, the abashless and unabashed senses" (14). The force of this creolized desire invades the text, destabilizing it. Creolization is a force (perhaps the only force) stronger than Sutpen; it infiltrates his "design," and as a result of his pathological prohibition against it, it destroys his house and his line. Haiti thus becomes site of diversity and a racial dispersion in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Sutpen and his foundational story move away from an obsession with the purity of origins and into the greater racial and cultural mixing of the Americas.

The Buendías, as Michael Wood rightly notes, "are a family of monsters," with massive appetites, ambitions, and tyrannical vocations.⁹³ And yet something joyous lingers in their rambunctious proclivities, "a patina of tender beauty" emanates from their inflated, hyperbolic forms.⁹⁴ What more often goes unnoticed, however, is the almost totalitarian determinism that reduces the Buendía line to a slim repertoire of stock responses and characteristic types; the compendium of plagues, horrors, endogamous drives and unremitting violence that invades the text and overwhelms the family; the relentless entropy of a terminal nightmare that sweeps in to destroy both house and line. The Buendías see their reality degenerate into a "hermeneutical delirium" that is also "the most intricate labyrinths of kinship," as the text tends toward the fusion of differential categories that very nearly overwhelms interpretation. One result is that countless readers have become lost in the labyrinth of "*espejos / espejismos*" (mirrors and mirages) that the text explicitly – but again speciously – constructs. The text, deceptively transparent *and* deliriously complex, can easily mislead. If one pulls at the meticulously-ordered structure via the string of genealogy, however, the delirium lucidly unravels. Genealogy insistently links the biological sense of procreation and the metaphorical sense of culture and history in this novel, such that the challenge to interpretation is to keep separate (at the level of analytical discourse), but intertwined (as they are at the level of the text), the doubly-encoded significance of the *toledot* genre: "por una parte, una tradición mítico-simbólica de rancia estirpe arquetípa; por otra, la historia, la cultura y la situación misma de Colombia y de Latinoamérica, a las que se refiere explícita e implícitamente."⁹⁵

⁹³ Wood, Michael. *Gabriel García Márquez: One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 36.

⁹⁴ Romero, Armando. "Gabriel García Márquez, Alvaro Mutis, Fernando Botero: tres personas distintas, un objetivo verdadero." *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispanica* 16 (1982): 135-146, 142.

⁹⁵ Cristo Figueroa, "Cien años de soledad: Reescritura Bíblica y posibilidades del texto Sagrado," in *Memorias: XX Congreso Nacional de Literatura, Lingüística y Semiótica*: "Cien años de soledad", *treinta años*

As a *toledot* reading, linking the story of the family to a complex regional history, makes clear, the apparently pleasurable baubles that limn the surface of the text are the signs of bent, misshapen, deformed characters, and the social realities they abstract. To laugh at the Buendías, keeping the grotesque at a pleasurable distance, reading only the thin surface of the family saga, is to dehumanize them; to screen their social-historical condition through the lens of a *toledot* reading works to restore the political to the poetic.

Consider the exogamous others the Buendías are drawn to: the house-cleaner Pilar Ternera, with “the tan of her skin” and her “smell of smoke”⁹⁶; Petra Cotes, the “clean young mulatto woman,” the perpetual concubine (180); the compassionate lover Nigromanta, “a large black woman with solid bones” (354), whom Aureliano Babilonia uses as a surrogate – he needed “to involve her, debase her, prostitute her in his adventure in some way” (355) – until the more desirable Amaranta Úrsula becomes available: none, for reasons of race and class, are suitable for stable, long-term inclusion in the family. The same goes for Meme with the mechanic Mauricio Babilonia, with “his smell of grease, and his halo of butterflies” (319). There is a subtle, pervasive, altogether systemic racism and classicism at work here. The Buendías are aristocratic founders, perpetually anxious about the regulation of difference, and their patriarchal, nationalistic founding model, based upon a homogeneous originary purity and maintained with strict diligence by the founding matriarch Úrsula, will not admit the newness, diversity and difference – the “syncretic constructions of hybridity”⁹⁷ – that it needs in order to survive. As Ariel Dorfman has observed, “To have crossed and transgressed the invisible, almost unstated, frontiers of their class and race prejudices, indicates a possible direction that the family never allowed itself.”⁹⁸ In Adelaida López Mejía’s reading, this “suggests a complicit distancing from anything black or African, a gesture typical of hegemonic social classes in Latin America and most particularly in the Caribbean.”⁹⁹

With Jack Hodgins’ hyperbolic amplification not only of O’Gorman, but also of Faulkner and García Márquez, generic concerns grow more expansive, ex-centric, and perhaps even less familiar. *The Invention of the World* – a creation story on what Hodgins has called “the ragged green edge of the world,” Vancouver Island – is a type that contains its own antitype, an opposite and contradictory saga.¹⁰⁰ This is a tale of two *toledots* – two genealogies, two founders, two beginnings and two ends. Neither family is “traditionally” affiliated: one is bonded in fear and blind faith, the other is functional, if non-biological. The parallel genealogies unfold some sixty to eighty years apart, but converge in space, in this novel’s Big House, “The House of Revelations.” This is the headquarters of Keneally’s utopian, millennial, Eden-seeking commune, which is later bought by Maggie Kyle – matriarch of the second line – and renamed “Revelations Trailer Park,” in a clear – and

después. Santafé de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1998, 113-122, 113.

⁹⁶ Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*. 1967. Edición de Jacques Joset. Madrid: Cátedra, 1996. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Gregory Rabassa, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 79.

⁹⁷ Adelaida López Mejía, “Women Who Bleed to Death: Gabriel García Márquez’s ‘Sense of an Ending.’” *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 52 (1999): 135-50, 143.

⁹⁸ Ariel Dorfman, “Someone Writes to the Future: Meditations on Hope and Violence in García Márquez.” *Some Write to the Future: Essays on Contemporary Latin American Fiction*. Trans. George Shivers with the author. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991, 208.

⁹⁹ López Mejía 1999, 141.

¹⁰⁰ Jack Hodgins, *The Invention of the World*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977.

clearly parodic – index of the second line’s fall from quasi-sacred to quotidian, or profaned, narration.

“Keneally had been particularly careful to design the settlement in the shape of a perfect circle on top of the swell of land above the sea. ... The final house to be built, which was to be called The House of Revelations and to become the home of The Father and The Mother, would be on the sea edge of the circle, facing the rising sun” (157). When Maggie moves into the House some sixty years later and founds the Revelations Trailer Park, surrounding herself with an odd assortment of misfits and underachievers – “They were called Kyle’s Krazies, sometimes. And the Revelations Colony of Kooks” (27) – she allows the trees to grow again, the outlying *sencillas* to disintegrate, the circle to dissemble. Her governing image comes in the title of the book’s penultimate section, “Second Growth,” as she burns the remnants of the past. “Keneally and his crazy colony were erased when she set a match to the furniture; the flames reminded her of a slash fire, burning off the nuisance debris to make room for newer growth” (63). Linking the regional motif of Vancouver Island’s ubiquitous logging practices to the novel’s higher concerns of regeneration and change, it is a characteristic formulation in the novel, overtly concerned with the *invention* – the necessary, tangible forgery, an absolute artifice that is also as strong as steel – of a regional world, an “Island mind.”

The novel is not simply bifurcated in two, however, but is broken down further, at the structural level of greater units. These parts don’t necessarily interact on the basic level of plot, and most could stand alone as distinct units. After a short Prologue, which introduces the figure of the narrator, Strabo Becker, and the “gathered horde” of his archive, three individually-titled sections (“Maggie,” “Wade,” Julius”: set in Maggie’s time, though not necessarily dealing with her) alternate sequentially with three sections which treat Keneally (from various narrative distances and perspectives). A clean, rhythmic movement is generated, which creates an expectation of difference, and yet remains open and unpredictable. The two lines interact through this hybrid structure, in recurrent or typological situations typified by similar factors, motives, and effects, such that the memory (or disturbance) of each preceding section clouds or colours the reading of the next. And so Highway’s “Book-of-Genesis-to-the-Book-of-Revelation straight line” superstructure is doubled, displaced, distorted, “monkey’d with” – to borrow a characteristic phrase from Hodgins. The pattern is significantly subverted in the last two sections, both of which treat Maggie Kyle, setting the novel, and the newly married matriarch, on her way to new life.

Whereas *Cien años de soledad* is hardly a linear text, nor for that matter is *Absalom, Absalom!*, Hodgins takes the rupture of *toledot* form to a further level of development, segregating the text into discrete units of time, geography, and narrative mode. This is a fiction about connections and linkages, in which the separate sections, each representing a distinct voice or narrative point of view, must be cobbled by the reader into coherent meaning. These narrative fragments suggest a vision of irreducible diversity and plurality, as horizontal relationships of pattern and eccentricity replace vertical relationships of filiation and legitimacy. The structure proposes a concept of identity not as root, racinated, telluric, vertical, patriarchal, but as branching, extended, sideways, rhizomatic. To deploy Edward Said’s terms, this structural doubling entails emphasis on amplification, reverberation, radiation, eccentricity, irregularity, adjacency, and play. These concepts in turn imply a set of governing notions with respect to genre that are opposed to the traditional, linear notions of filiation, and “completely modify a linear (vulgar) idea of ‘influence’ into an open field of

possibility.”¹⁰¹ The notion of filiation as categorical imperative collapses irreparably in this book, in terms of both genealogy *and* genre, as Maggie Kyle’s “family” comes to a genealogy that refuses origin, as well as biological affiliation, and that “speaks instead, and anxiously, and with a generous reticence, the nightmare and welcome dream of Babel.”¹⁰²

In *Invention*’s doubling of the toledot, perhaps we can sense the simplified, schematic construct of the genealogical genre loosening and becoming less formulaic as its moves through time. Its mythological crises are dissipating, the “anxiety of origins” is growing less pronounced, greater variation and exception is permitted within the overdetermined, centripetal logic of toledot form. The notion of curses, an insistence on patriarchal founders and genealogy-as-inheritance-as-identity (as in *Cien años de soledad*), the bonds of blood and house, the incessant, anguished genealogical record-keeping – in short, the entire toledot ensemble – is beginning to fade from the repertoire of American foundational fictions. Metamorphoses have replaced the radical ordering of a totalized, teleological end; identity has become *more* fluid, less pre-determined. As Becker comes to realize the vanity of his quest, that his quest for a totalizing, comprehensive knowledge is bound to fail, he gains the knowledge that eluded Euclides da Cunha, that anguished Quentin Compson, and that brought an end to Macondo. In the end Becker releases Keneally’s story into the air, declaiming even the possibility of ownership. This liberation of the archive signals that a “usable past” – regional traditions and histories to connect to, the paradoxical acceptance and rejection of an inherited European corpus – has at long last been secured.

It is well worth noting that Patrick Chamoiseau, in *Texaco* (1992), no doubt acting independently, offered up a similarly doubled toledot form to tell his tale of Creole beginnings in Martinique. As did Toni Morrison, in crafting her tale of African-American concatenation in *Song of Solomon* (1977). One can trace a similar form in all three novels: a version of a quasi-mythic origin brought to an abrupt, apocalyptic end; a new, quotidian, communal beginning instituted in its place; a heterogeneous, bifurcated chronology; a sense of redemptive healing overwhelming the exclusion and pain of the past. The presence of the Bible, the book behind the book, becomes a more distant echo with each reiteration. This is to say that the genre has its own logic, its own pacing, and its own sense of time, and that various American writers have apparently made similar formal and thematic discoveries, and have done so independently of one another. Hodgins’ text, as with Morrison’s and Chamoiseau’s, amounts to a creative misreading of its notable models, an absorption, transformation, and re-organization of the genealogical genre, a reworking of inherited traditions in the sense of rewriting, reinscribing, and recontextualizing. As Hodgins says, “I’m not content with the inherited patterns. I want to monkey with them.”¹⁰³

Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* posits a thoroughly hybridized, polyglot, multilingual, Creolized founding epic, told through the vehicle of a charismatic founding matriarch, Marie-Sophie Laborieux. Hers is a decidedly Creole genealogy and history, rhizomatic and precariously proliferating, a radical antitype to linear, filial, officially-sanctioned descent. Marie-Sophie’s struggle to establish the shantytown of Texaco, the centre of the text and its central symbol of Creole identity, is subject to violent raids and its own haphazard sprawl. In *Texaco*, concatenation is never assured, violence perpetually threatens, and the founding matriarch, despite – and because of – all forms of folk remedy, will not bear young. The novel’s self-

¹⁰¹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. New York: Basic Books, 1975, 15.

¹⁰² Robert Kroetsch, “Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue,” 1989, 64-72, 71. Kroetsch is speaking of Canadian literature more generally – and not of Hodgins specifically – in this citation.

¹⁰³ Hodgins 1990, 184.

reflexive narrator surveys the form of his text in its last paragraph, and states, clearly and carefully enough: “Je réorganisai la foisonnante parole de l’Informatrice, autour de l’idée messianique d’un Christ; cette idée respectait bien la déréliction de cette communauté face à cet urbaniste qui sut la decoder.”¹⁰⁴

“Le Christ” is in this case the *urbaniste*, an urban planner sent to raze the town, but who ends up being its saviour. The Christ moves from the metropolitan ideal of spatial planning and language (linear, ordered, powerful, “all lined up” and “strong like the French language”), to “the Creole’s open profusion according to Texaco’s logic.” “La ville créole restitue à l’urbaniste qui voudrait l’oublier les souches d’une identité neuve: multilingue multiraciale, multihistorique, ouverte, sensible à la diversité du monde. Tout a changé.” (The Creole city returns to the urban planner, who would like to ignore it, the roots of a new identity: multilingual, multiracial, multihistorical, open, sensible to the world’s diversity. Everything has changed” 243/220). In this text the trope of the family tree is transformed into a mangrove: complex, impenetrable, open-ended, indeterminate. The mangrove incorporates a scene of excess and plenitude in genealogical, historical, linguistic, and cultural terms, and signifies a proliferating, thriving unboundedness, a self-organizing, multiply-racinated whole. It is the symbolic triumph of miscegenation, hybridization, Creolization; from da Cunha and Faulkner to Hodgins and Chamoiseau, “Tout a changé,” indeed.

As these readings suggest, the question of genre becomes not so much the genealogical tradition itself but how it is read, how the reading and rewriting practiced within the genre mobilizes elements in Genesis that were “previously inert, beyond the reach of criticism and theory.”¹⁰⁵ The texts in the genealogical series transform the source text into a site of metamorphosis, a locus that can be productively tapped – deformed, disparaged, disseminated, dispersed. In so doing, Faulkner, García Márquez, Hodgins, and Chamoiseau force the main body of the originary tradition to assimilate – to make room for, to normalize – the destructive and monstrous excretions, as well as the positive and recuperative deformations, that characterize the grotesque as a literary mode.

The presence of the grotesque in a written text marks a zone of ambiguity and uncertainty, of transformation and distortion, and brings about a suspension of the traditional notions of beauty as unity, symmetry, harmony and order, and of the established hierarchies of property and truth. These American incunabula deploy hyperbolic, comically exaggerated grotesques, as well as alienated, isolated, solitudinous types, in order to force the toledot tradition to substitute, destroy and replace itself, to make room for the “abnormal,” that is, for newness and change. Engaged in uncovering the obscurity of an impossible memory, they narrate not so much the clarity of truth but the sheer vertigo of an endless unveiling. Strategies of delay, digression, peripeteia, displacement and falsification are consistently employed, as an exhaustive and deceptive verbal self-sufficiency is erected, in order to disguise an absence which is at the same time accentuated, as if only to delay an ever-approaching end. The stable, secure covenant of toledot meaning is thus disrupted, and supplemented or replaced with errancy and dislocation, reversion and diversion, in which no ultimate state or stable, unitary origin can be defined or fixed. With this, the perpetual

¹⁰⁴ “I reorganized my Source’s burgeoning word around the messianic idea of Christ; this idea respected the community’s dereliction prior to the urban planner who managed to decipher it.” Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. *Texaco*. Translated from the French and Creole by Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov. Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997, 426 / 390.

¹⁰⁵ González Echevarría 1997, 57.

rewriting of the strong poem at the symbolic founding, the originary tradition transforms itself through incorporation of non-canonical elements, as the 'same' turns endlessly different. It may be useful in this context to think of the grotesque as a verb, and to consider these texts as "grotesquing the toledot." Rather than a stable, unitary, enunciatory origin, narratives of excessive irregularity and complexity are produced.

The genealogical genre – the simplified, schematic, but hopefully representative series of texts assembled here – has never been offered as a neat diachronic model; there is no genetic relationship between Chamoiseau and Hodgins, say, nor between da Cunha and Faulkner. But through the construct or conceit of a generic reading we encounter various shifts in American social imaginaries over time: from a patrilineal to a matrilineal imagination; from families founded on destined blood ties to those based on relationships of non-biological free choice; the relaxation of patriarchal mastery and the tyranny of kinship systems; the diffusion of the power of the authoritarian word, logos, or light from above; the diminishment of an anxiety of origins and the uncertainties of a nonexistent tradition, as an aesthetic emerges that is at last able to process and assimilate a "usable past." From da Cunha and Faulkner to Hodgins and Chamoiseau one finds the relaxation of a founding curse; the transformation from an apocalypse of absolute destruction to a rebirth with regenerative potential; and an increasingly positive valence assigned to cultural and biological mixing, that is, to the related but distinct terms of miscegenation, creolization, hybridization, and the grotesque.