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Quare Menard: An Untimely Love Letter

Hola profe,
Estimado profesor,
Dear Professor,
Dear Professor Shumway,
Dearest Professor Shumway,
Prezado Nic,
Hola querido,
Dearest Nic,
Mi querido Nic,
Mi querido Nicolas,
Muy querido Profesor Shumway,
Mi querido profesor,
Prezado,
Querido,

The other day I was rereading *Historia personal de una pasión argentina*. I know, right? This is what I do with my free time now. Anyways, I was just thinking of how awfully prescient that text is. I mean, who could have imagined—I guess you could have—this (new?) social reality of fake news, un-truthiness, selective and dangerous historicization? Who could have imagined this unbridled menardismo?

What do you mean by that, Joseph?

Well I'll tell you. Or rather, you'll tell me. As you say, *menardismo* is characterized by two essential things: 1) a deliberately anachronistic interpretive frame, that is 2) applied to a thing—idea, phrase, concept, text—to which it does not originally belong. Menardismos, what is more, are not confined to the dusty stacks of university libraries, but rather—insidiously—are quite common in every day speech (Shumway 220).

I was wondering, though, if there is something like a scale of menardismo? For example, it's not the same to paint with the same brush George Bush calling Saddam Hussein Hitler and Taylor Swift claiming to be relevant. Both these things are false. Both distort history. But only one of them serves the interests of power grubbing miscreants invested in destroying the world. Maybe they both do. Who can say?

My point is that over the past couple years we've seen an intensification of *menardista* thought, particularly in the US. Like when white supremacists in Charlottesville dress up as Christian crusaders, as Vikings, as the Knights Templar, don symbols of the Holy Roman Empire. When they hearken a pure white medieval past—a past that never existed—and apply that past and its symbols in a way that fetishizes (once again) a simulacrum of superiority meant to justify their explicit racism. It's everywhere. I would venture to say we are in an era of *hipermenardismo*.

I guess you were asking yourself that same question when you wrote: “cabe preguntar si podemos pensar sin menardismos porque, obviamente, siempre abordamos cualquier fenómeno desde nuestro conocimiento previo, nuestra forma de pensar, nuestra experiencia y, en última instancia, desde lo que somos” (Shumway 228). *Lo que somos*. I was really struck by this. By how the experience of history, of course, depends on its relationship to our lives and our bodies, but also, *our being*.

I guess this is the hard part. Menardismos are comfortable because not only do they confirm our beliefs and our wishful thinking, but our being. Our existence. What to do?

I have an idea. We need to queer *menardismo*. Actually, we need to quare it.¹ I know what you're thinking: *not everything is queer, Pepe*; I have an overactive imagination. Ok, maybe. *And what the hell is quare?* I'm glad you asked.

(1) Choir (*pronounced queer*)

Etymology: Middle English *quer, quere*, < Old French *cuor* choir of a church (modern French *chœur*) < Latin *chorus* company of dancers, dance; company, band; (in medieval Latin) body of singers in church, place for singers in church; < Greek *χορός* dance, company of dancers or singers: compare [chorus n.](#) The change from Middle English *quēre*, to *quyer, quire*, goes exactly with that of *brere* and *frere* to *brier, friar*. The spoken word is still *quire*, though since the close of the 17th cent. this has been fictitiously spelt *choir*, apparently as a partial assimilation to Greek-Latin *chorus*, or French *chœur*. (OED)

Choir is queer. But I don't have to tell you that. Though really, etymologically, it is. Or at least in the 14th century what would later become choir was spelled queer. But it is also, and this is the real point here, about the production not just of sound, but of relationships in space. It is about proximity and movement, dancers and singers. A company, not an individual; or perhaps, a collective acting—through its difference—as one.

So that's definition 1, from the OED. Definition 2 comes from E. Patrick Johnson.

(2) Quare

Quare (Kwâr), n. 1. meaning *queer*; also, opp. of *straight*; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*;

¹ In addition to the etymological histories I detail below, it is worth thinking about “quare” from the Latin: *how; why*. See, for example, the 1998 collection *Quare Joyce* (ed. Joseph Valente).

curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes “Black” Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan’s famous play, *The Quare Fellow*.

(Johnson 2).

Quare is about excess, an excess of both discursive and epistemological meanings (Johnson 2).

Quare theory, according to Johnson, is a theory of practice, of embodied knowledge that emerges from, at times in spite of, the material conditions and consequences of black and brown flesh.

Quare theory must not only approach “race” as a social and cultural construction, but also as producing material effects in a white supremacist society (Johnson 9). Quare theory does not only critique performativity of gender, sexuality, even race—that is, how the body emerges as and through discursive accumulation—, but also historicizes what the body does, what it effects, what air it moves in the room.

My sense is that the material resonances of our bodies in relation link both the concept of *choir* as embodied practice and *quare* as the embodied critique of/as practice. So perhaps instead of asking how history confirms *what we are*, we should interrogate how it impacts *what we could be*. *What we are becoming*.

Let me backtrack. It would seem that menardismo engages in a type of negative Butlerian performativity in which the deliberate and strategic anachronism of politicized discourse renders immaterial the repercussions of its untimeliness. However, it seems to me, that menardismo is also, rather, if not essentially, a vernacular quaring of materiality.

You want me to clarify. I know.

One way of reading “Pierre Menard, autor del Quixote” is through the effect that his production of discourse has on how that discourse is understood by others. This is an effect that impinges on the critical reception of his work.

Another way of reading Menard—a quare way—would be to treat the act of writing not as producing discourse but as performance. Crucially, as a performance *of being and becoming*. This reading would treat that performance as an assertion of the corporeal realities—the bodily contingencies—of the acts that produce discourse, rather than discourse itself. To be clear, this is not a performativity of self—but a performative ontology of self-production. Menard does not want to approximate, but rather *be* Miguel de Cervantes (Borges 55). In writing his *Quixote*, Pierre Menard calls into being a self that is cognizant of his own place in the socially constructed world. What is more, not only does he set out to transform how he is perceived by that world, but what that world is. If Menard can write his *Quixote*, if he can change the epistemological and ontological meanings of discourse, then he also calls into question the division between performativity and performance.

This brings me back to the queer possibilities of menardismo. Over the past decade, queer studies has begun to reevaluate the bodily implication of its politics. In particular, queer of color scholars like Mel Y. Chen and E. Patrick Johnson have advocated for a menard-esque revitalization of queer studies by eschewing the normative linear temporality with which it is typically described *as a field*, that is as a linear development from queerly dissident to homonormative, from referential unfixity to identitarian standardization. Queer of color critique has been particularly adroit at warning against the banalization of the term *queer*; against what is lost—productively or otherwise—when we forget its multivalent, fricative, embodied past. By this I mean, what gets whitened. (Everything gets whitened). New theorizations propose, in contrast, to excavate queer’s alternative histories, histories that move the term in multiple directions, that harness its “stickiness” (i.e. Sara Ahmed), its accumulation of affective value (Amin 184).

As Kadji Amin puts it in his 2017 monograph *Disturbing Attachments*, “*queer* has gone from being *of the ‘now’* to being *a rejection of the ‘now’* (185). Indeed, many scholars of queerness exhibit a disaffection, indeed *disidentification* with the present normalization, institutionalization, and assimilationism of queer politics (185).

But what Amin points out by returning to the visionary work of José Muñoz is that queer was never about one place and one time, even if its inscription within the US academe in the 1990s would have us believe so. Rather, an expansive, utopian queerness must attend to its historical development within and as part of the US academe, and also realize how it adheres, how it sticks to other places and to other times in complex, but not unintelligible ways. A way forward as a way backward. And sideways. And across. And through.

Quare-Menardismo is not about fixing identity, but rather mobilizing experience, vernacular knowledge and practice, seeking out the liminal space between discourse and materiality; between high and low; top and bottom.

In other words, Menardian temporality questions the attachment of meaning to bodies and discourse. To quare Menard, then, is to seek the minor thirds, the urgent longings, the parabolas that uncouple the then from the now, the here from the there, the you from the me. This expansiveness rejects the linear, processional temporality that marks the present as inevitably subject to the intense normalization of neoliberal regimes of representation, circulation, and commodification, all the while questioning the political efficacy of nostalgia and longing. To quare Menard is to shift how we understand historical truth, but also to imbue that truth with the capacity of self-reflection, indeed self-(re)invention.

Sure, history is messy. The past shapes the present, but the present also doubles back and impinges on the past. But rather than pretend that we can select the past—that we can live in a

revisionist wonderland, quare menardismo imagines as possible a tremulous undoing of the categorical fixity with which discourse produces “bodies”, while at the same time, harnessing the material weight, the presence, the thirst, for bodies in relation.

Isn't it funny how both Menard and Cervantes write, “...la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo porvenir” (Borges 60).

Quare menardismo would take as its mother, not history, not Borges, not Cervantes, not even you. But the body itself. The body in relation. The body. Its song. Its dance. The body as it was and as it will be.

Let me know what you think.

Besos,

JP

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