Exploring Indian Modernities
Ideas and Practices
Chapter 14
Latin American Travellers in Modern India

Minni Sawhney

1 Introduction

The task of this chapter is to analyse the writings of two Latin American writers—Octavio Paz and Severo Sarduy—and their encounter with Indian modernity. Though India had been under imperial sway since 1857, its modernity was not in tandem with that of Latin America where early independence had led to a positivist model of development by the turn of the century and modernization programmes were underway. Modernity cannot be considered as congruent with modernization. Both modernity and modernization are ongoing processes in India where the first pioneers of modernity like Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the 19th century welcomed modernity to reform Hindu tradition. The Indian version of modernity was different and yet not completely alien as certain indigenous residues persisted in Latin America and their intellectuals established connections with Indian traditions keeping in mind their own pre-Hispanic civilizations. Their choices over what traditions and places to privilege in their writing were often guided by the subtext of their own cultures and hence their writings offer uncommon glimpses of contemporary India. The writings of these authors bring into sharper relief the hybrid nature of Indian society where tradition uniquely adapts to modernity. In Latin America, the uprooting of indigenous customs started with Spanish colonialism in its early modern period in the 15th century. Alberto Moreiras has studied the disjunction of Latin American culture with modernity and the paths taken to resolve it. Commenting on Charles Taylor's 'Two Theories of Modernity', he writes:

M. Sawhney (✉)
Department of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
e-mail: minnisawhney@yahoo.com

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1.1 Framing Western Knowledge

Latin American writers attempting transcultural negotiations fell squarely within the western framework even though their situation was problematic as the history of capital had affected them differently. Being integrally western, the ideas in Latin America were of European vintage. Within this context however, some writers looked for extra disciplinary heterogeneity.¹

The reception of these texts has had to pass inevitably through the sieve of the influential theories of Edward Said and Ronald Inden, the dominant paradigm of evaluation for writers who wrote about the East and the discourse that came to be termed Orientalism. In Sect. 3, I discuss the Orientalist perspective and its (in) adequacy for any appraisal of this work. Octavio Paz has been possibly the most famous Latin American intellectual who engaged with India. As a cultural attaché in 1952 and then ambassador from 1962–1968 in India, Paz’s oeuvre became a landmark reference in western scholarship on India. Though his writings often generated acrimonious debate in India and Mexico, he steadfastly maintained that he offered a transcendent criticism or global explanations of phenomena and did not want to get mired in partisan politics. His works involved the study of Hinduism and Buddhism and included discussions on caste, while the Cuban Severo Sarduy residing in Paris, his friend and close intellectual associate, sprinkled his prose poems and interviews with references to millenarian Indian deities as well as sacred Indian cities. This has tempted Indian scholars to view them from the Orientalist rather than subaltern or post-colonial prism since they did not classify the Indian themes and subjects in their works on the basis of marginality and deprivation. On the other hand, it has to be stated Hispanic Orientalism had a tradition of plurality and openness and an inclusive past with antecedents in the Arab cultures of North Africa and our writers were seeped in these traditions. Their own continent and its modernity had been subject to the racist interpretations of European thinkers in the half century before their independence and it had made Latin American writers sensitive to the disjunctions of other modernities. Their inspiration and methodology consisting of comparisons, analogies, fusions, and repetitions came from the European movement of Surrealism studied in Sect. 4. In this way they tried to build bridges between Indian modernity and that of their own countries finding in the latter viable points of reference for contemporary life. In Sect. 5 ‘Octavio Paz and

¹These ideas have been explored by Julia Kushigian in writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, and Severo Sarduy. See Kushigian (1991).
India’, I have tried to detail the methodology Paz used in his analysis of India and its imagery to show his very personal connections to this land. As I elucidate in this section and in the next on Severo Sarduy, the analyses of Latin Americans did not form part of a discourse. Millenarian cultures attracted them because, unlike the Orientalists, they found similarities and not dichotomies to their own cultures. They saw themselves in the light of the other (Kushigian 2016: 100).

2 The Latin American Gaze: Antecedents

The fascination of Latin American literati with the Orient began with the Modernist movement at the dawn of the 20th century and its most well-known pioneer Rubén Darío who tried to transcend the prosaic world view of 19th century Realism. This cosmopolitan desire made him fill his works with images taken from the cultures of an East considered exotic. The stylistics of Darío’s texts owe much to the tendencies of French literary movements like Paranism that thrived on inspiration from overseas. Darío never came to India, the Orient of his texts was imaginary, populated with idyllic scenes of princesses, Bengal tigers, and fantasy flora and fauna. Other Latin American diplomats posted to the subcontinent imbibed these tendencies and the Chilean consul to British India in 1907, Augusto D’Halmor wrote the suggestive travelogue *Nirvana* in 1918. The Chilean ambassador Miguel Serrano posted to India during 1953–1962 would delve deep into Hindu mysticism. He had been the follower of an esoteric cult group that claimed allegiance to a ‘Brahmin elite’ in the Himalayas. Though his search for the Holy Grail would be thwarted by the inaccessibility of Mount Kailash in Chinese occupied Tibet, he nevertheless attempted a synthesis based on the alleged affinities between Tantrism and Nazism. His writings may smack of fascism but as a diplomat he befriended Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. In the predilections of these writers we can sense the influence of the European literary movement Surrealism. A disgust with materialism and dehumanizing mass technocracy, the valourisation of cultures considered outside the pale of western civilization underlay the writing of these travelling intellectuals who doubled their bureaucratic duties with philosophy.

3 The Orientalist Paradigm and Writings on India

According to Edward Said, western engagement with knowledge of the Orient can never be considered as shorn of imperial power domination. In *Orientalism* (1978) Said deconstructs western scholarship of the Arab world along the power/
knowledge axis laying bare the biases that elevate Europe at the cost of the Middle East. In *Imagining India*, in line with the Saidian framework, Ronald Inden focuses specifically on western writing on the subcontinent. Inden has pointed out three kinds of texts on South Asia: the descriptive, commentative, and the explanatory. Retracing Indology to William Jones and the Asiatic Society and then analyzing seminal texts on India such as those of J. S. Mill, Percival Spear, and A. L. Basham, Inden declared that the propensity of these writers to reduce exuberant reality to stereotypes was a constant. Human agency amongst the Indologists is transferred onto caste, which is responsible for all the particularities of Indians. Political institutions find no place in this typology as texts filled with ‘inexplicable’ descriptions are interspersed with commentary and explanations which have the function of distorting Indian reality. According to Inden, Indologists distort reality in much the same way as it is distorted in dreams (*a la* Freud) through the processes of displacement and condensation. In his words:

The Indian classification of rituals as Renou construes it is not a scientific, rational one. The product of a mind that leaps between the extremes of an occult mysticism and a finicky scholasticism, it is characterized by both of the forms of distortion described by Freud. (Inden 1986: 414)

Inden concludes that:

The result of the discursive work within Indology and the affiliated human sciences is first to present the reader in a descriptive passage with some ‘facts’ on the Other. The account then (or concurrently) represent the Other in commentative terms as radically different from the Self. (...) But these threatening differences are not allowed to remain. The Indological text also goes on to provide (or evoke) an explanation for the differences. These explanations or interpretations are almost always naturalistic (...) It is necessary for the Other to be the way he/she is because of its environment, its racial composition, or its (inferior) place on the evolutionary scale. (Inden 1986: 416)

These nativist ideas would have been familiar to our writers as they formed the stuff of debates in Europe in the late 18th century on the unsuitability of Latin America for independence due its climate, the simplicity of the indigenous Indian population, and the laziness of Spanish Americans born in America. In his three-volume *The History of America* (1799) Henry Robertson wrote about ‘the enervating influence of a suffocating climate and the desperation of their cause for nationalism had totally destroyed their minds’.3 For this reason I contend that although Orientalist writers might have been read by Paz, they would not have found the latter’s methodology viable or attractive as these ideas had been notorious in America.

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3Brading writes. Robertson escribió de los criollos: [...] por la influencia enervante de un clima sofocante, por el rigor de un gobierno celoso y por la desesperación de alcanzar esa distinción a la que aspira naturalmente la humanidad, el vigor de su mente está tan totalmente destruido que gran parte de ellos pasa la vida en satisfacciones injuriosas mezcladas dentro de una superstición vulgar todavía más degradante" (Brading 1973).
3.1 Paz and Orientalism

Paz's categories of analysis differed considerably from the authors of the Orientalist rubric that Said or Inden had studied. Unlike the Indologists, he did not study only ancient India and when he did there was no rushed idealization. Nor did he concentrate only on Hinduism but also on Buddhism and when he contemplated modern India the outward sheen of cosmopolitanism did not distract him. He never positioned the East as directly opposed to the West and neither did he view the Orient as a homogenous mass. His interest in cultures like the Japanese is well known. There was no reification of the national character in Mexico or in India as he always emphasized that the Mexican character was a result of his history and circumstances. India attracted him because he immediately recognized its singularity because Mexico was also like that. In his words:

The fact of being Mexican helped me to see the difference of being Indian—from the difference of being Mexican (...) To a certain extent, I can understand what it means to be Indian because I am Mexican. (Paz 1995)

In The Labyrinth of Solitude (1950) Paz dwelt on the subject of Mexican reserve and dissimulation and the masks people used to hide their real self. He attributed these traits to the alienation which was characteristic of a society that had entered modernity with too much haste. The remedy he had suggested was a dialogue with the world in order to recover the past.

In In Light of India (1997) Paz drew an analogy with this reserve and the caste system that also acted as a defence mechanism to keep away the outside world. According to Paz, India had devised a homegrown ingenious method that was based on nature. It revolved around purity and food habits. In Hindi the word meant jati or species that originated in the natural world. Each species fit into a structure and labour was accordingly divided. What was sought was not a melting pot of races as in the United States, but the integration of each species in a wider system. One of the unfortunate consequences, however, was the superiority of one over the other. It was also a way of fitting the flow of life in an atemporal structure. In the Indian caste system, Paz found a reflection of the Oedipus myth because the need to search for difference in the external world was nullified. There was no need for diversity because everything remained within the family. The caste system was like the mother's womb because it offered protection against change. On the other hand, contemporary western societies valourized change and the individual. However, in this context Paz also added that though he was far from being a defender of the caste system yet it was hypocritical for capitalist societies to judge this system as they had created uniformity but not equality. He also blamed modern societies and capitalism for the lack of equality (Paz 1995). Paz's ideas on caste and nationalism in India and his assertion that caste stratification was not conducive to nationalism raised hackles in certain circles. His assessment, however, was based on the idea
that the ideology of nationalism, at least in its European avatar, was exclusivist and the Hindu religion absorbed communities and tribes.\(^4\)

4 Surrealism and Latin America

Many Latin Americanists considered surrealism with its emphasis on automatism, privileging of anarchy, valourization of dream images and, of course, its anti-imperialism in literature and the arts, as a movement after their own hearts. Indeed, the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez’s magical realism was initially considered a kind of native surrealism by critics till he averred that his language was not beyond realism but part of Latin American reality. Techniques of displacement, metonymy, and collage are endemic to Latin American art and literature and we have only to recall expressions like ‘banana republics’ and the United Fruit Company which became a metonym of imperialism etc. Surrealists were guided by unconscious motives beyond rationality. If the tendencies enumerated above are characteristic of the writings of Paz and Sarduy, we can see how the critics of Orientalism found in them the same condensation and displacement techniques that Freud had identified in dreams. However, the Latin Americans never attempted to appear factual or empirical or offer authoritative commentary on India as they saw or read it. They allighted on the phenomena that caught their attention in order to find common ground with the real or onirical in their own countries.

4.1 Surrealism and Octavio Paz

In *The Bow and Lyre, (El arco y la lira)* Paz lays down his ideas about poets and how poetry, through its use of cyclical time and myths, does not ignore history or politics but transcends it. Though written in historical time, poetry transcends history because it connects with a mythic time. With his capacity to investigate and discover the roots of language, the poet finds archetypes hidden in the collective consciousness and with his intuitive knowledge he perceives the correspondences and irregular time of history. As Hugo J. Verani has pointed out, this was a way of connecting with other times and circumstances and of enhancing perceptions of

\(^4\)According to Paz: “The opposition between history and caste turns into open hostility when history takes the form of progress and modernity. I am referring not only to democratic liberalism and socialism, but also to their rival nationalism. Castes constitute a reality that is indifferent to the idea of the nation. Modern Hindu nationalism, as we will see, is a threat to caste because it replaces the specific differences of each caste with an ideological reality that encompasses all. Nationalism erodes the differences among the castes, which are their essential reason for being, as democracy erodes the hierarchical system. Modernity, in its two directions, is incompatible with the caste system (Paz 1995).
Otherness. Paz was the poet–flâneur, the wandering observer of modernity disenchanted with capitalism and its attendant greed, who through his travels connected with different consciousness (Verani 2009: 38–68). Paz never reneged in his commitment to history or politics when he wrote poetry. Surrealism would be one of the pillars he would rely on to sustain his thesis that there was no contradiction for him between his political beliefs and poetry. As he wrote:

La diferencia con las otras tendencias o, más bien, la superioridad del surrealismo sobre ellas, es de orden espiritual (...) el surrealismo guardó intactos sus poderes de indignación moral. Fue un foco secreto de pasión poética en nuestra época vil.

The difference with other tendencies, or, actually the superiority of surrealism over them, is of a spiritual nature (...) surrealism kept intact their powers of moral indignation. It was a secret focus of poetic passion in our vile era.5

The influence of Surrealism is evident in Paz’s writings: curious juxtapositions, unusual images, and artistic confabulations that he would draw to compare phenomena in Mexico and India or Hinduism and Christianity.6 Paz had in mind a ‘universal syntax of civilizations’ a la Levi Strauss. The pairs he made in India he structured under body and non-body. He thus began a series of comparisons. In Tantric Buddhism and Protestantism, he found similarities as both were reform movements but while Buddhism was a compromise with Hinduism, Protestantism was a break with Christianity. While Tantric Buddhism signified fusion, Protestantism was a break and signified separatism and nowhere was this reflected as clearly as in food habits. The Tantric banquet was marked by excess, while the Protestant meal was frugal. In Figures and Figurations, a compilation of poems, sketches and photographs by Paz and his wife Marie Jose we come across the poem ‘India’. Paz refers to ‘the thousands of candles, burning and shining, that the faithful launch each night’ (Paz and Paz 1999: 34).

To those familiar with the imagery of India, the candles on the river hearken to the holy city of Varanasi. In The Monkey Grammarian, a book of 29 chapters, often considered a long poem, the hamlet of Gaila is the setting for this work but the narrative veers from Churchill College, Cambridge to Aztec markets in historical Mexico City and back to the crumbling ruins of an old fort in a village on a side road from Agra to Jaipur.

In a poem like ‘Himachal Pradesh’ various historical periods, places, and situations coexist. The tone is mildly critical of the world order: ‘The legal johnnie from Nagpur hooks the foreigner on the verandah of the dak bungalow and offers him, in a honeyed English, a tiff, a basket of plums from his garden, a map a bite of

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5These lines have been quoted from the work of Hugo Verani by Enrico Mario Santi in Stanton Anthony (2009).
6In Letras Libres the Mexican poet and critic Adolfo Castañon has compared a passage on women from Sundarakunda in the Ramayana (translated into Spanish by Juan B. Bergua) with a passage from Octavio Paz’ The Monkey Grammarian on the same subject. Castañon’s objective is to illustrate the poetic reworking that Paz effected in his readings of Indian life and classical literature (Castañon 2014: 43).
curry, reliable news of the region, (...) his wife observes him obliquely muttering insults in Hindustani’ (Paz: 1935–1955).

4.2 The Discontents of Surrealism

Paz was heavily influenced by the writings of the French sociologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and as can be seen through their intellectual and life trajectories, the two intellectuals never had it easy. They were friends of André Breton, the author of the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto. Breton had travelled to Mexico which he called the most surrealist country in the world and though he met Paz in France only after the World War II, he considered him to be the poet who most embodied the spirit of Surrealism in Mexico. At the time and in its afterlife, Surrealism faced much flak especially because it reached out to the Other, to Oceania and Africa in search of inspiration. French ethnographers like Lévi-Strauss were also targeted. Both had a belief in cultural relativism and Paz had been interested in other cultures since his visit to Japan in 1952. (Paz was also profoundly interested in modern art. His work on Marcel Duchamp reveals his inclination for ideas that questioned the premises of the western world and resulted in the invention of an experimental poetry without rules) Lévi-Strauss’s refusal to rank cultures hierarchically had come in for serious criticism among his contemporaries in France. The attack was veiled and Roger Caillois brought in the question of methodology in the work of ethnographers that, he alleged, sprang from a personal unscientific and arbitrary eccentricity. According to these critics, scholars like Lévi-Strauss were not just anti-Europe, but their work displayed a reverse Eurocentrism because they elevated other cultures in order to degrade Europe, that is, they did not study cultures for their own sake but in order to find unfavourable points of comparison against Europe. The ethnographers of the 1950s like Lévi-Strauss, Michel Leiris, Alfred Métraux Georges-Henri Rivière had been surrealists in the 1930s and their work according to their detractors, more than a study of other cultures, was in fact an experimentation and relied on anti-western prejudice. In Caillois’ words,

Those whose names I have just given did not love the masks from the New Hebrides, the Negro rhythms, and the trances of voodoo because their professional activities led them to recognize their cultural worth; on the contrary, they chose ethnography because a relentless need for defiance drove them to prefer primitive sculpture over the portal of Chartres, jazz over Mozart, and the spasm of possession by spirits in which they do not believe over the cult of a God in which they probably believe even less. But one who is guilty of being the God of their father and which they are ashamed of having once believed in.

I have cited these critics not to revisit an essentially European debate but to underscore the value of the work of ethnographers and scholars who had ventured

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7Qtd. in Charles Tomlinson (1979).
to write about other countries and had drawn them into the field of discourse. They were taken seriously in their time as intellectuals who were too pro-East and were endangering the western sense of self. Ruben Dario’s use of eastern imagery had been theoretically subsumed by the Modernist movement but Paz, Lévi-Strauss and others did try an epistemic solidarity with the cultures they studied. They sought to draw other cultures into the orbit of global discourse.

The attacks demonstrate the non-mainstream character of Surrealism as a movement and the vagaries in the life of a scholar of other cultures and modernities. After 9/11, the attack on Surrealism was resuscitated. Jean Clair director of the Paris Picasso Museum wrote on the 21 September 2001 in the French newspaper Le Monde, ‘Le surréalisme et la démoralisation de l’Occident’, (Surrealism and the demoralization of the West) that the surrealist ideology had never stopped longing for the death of an America seen as materialist and sterile and for the triumph of an East which was seen as the depository of the values of the spirit. For the surrealists the fight would only end when the Orient emerged the victor. But three generations of French intellectuals had been milked on the surrealists according to Clair. The last lines of Surrealism and demoralization are:

Nous avons tous appris à lire chez Eluard et chez Aragon. Comment tuer nos pères? Héritiers du surréalisme, comment le condamner? Nous restons donc sans voix quand nous voyons prendre corps sous nos yeux – et de quelle horrible façon! – les textes que nous avons vénérés dans notre adolescence. (Clair 2001)

(We have learned to read with Eluard and Aragon. How can we kill our fathers? Inheritors of Surrealism how can we condemn it? We are left speechless then when we see before our eyes and in such horrible fashion, the texts that we venerated in our adolescence.)

The deeper narrative in these haunting and words would undo, if heeded, a whole generation of bridges across cultures. Paz and Sarduy, adherents of Surrealism, had gone beyond mere negativity as writers against the dominant logic of the West, instead they had tried to carve out a space for a possibility of singular thought and alternative presents.

5 Octavio Paz and India

Paz’s primary goal was always the investigation of Mexican identity and he looked to India for ideas to understand it better. As can be seen from his works such as El ogro filantropico (1979) and Posdata (1970), Paz was disappointed and apprehensive about the bureaucratic state in Mexico as well as in the USSR. But significantly he also lamented the abduction of European powers during the Cold War when they had let the United States take all the decisions as concerned their security. The paranoia in the diatribes against him by the critics of Surrealism as well as within Mexico, India, and France were misdirected as what Lévi-Strauss and Paz had tried to do was open up a space for other ideas and actors within the western framework. ‘Dreamed alternative singularizations of thinking; a different
kind of global dream but not an alternative to it, just micro discourses that challenged homogeneities.\footnote{Dreamed alternative singularizations of thinking: a different kind of "global dream", to mimic Richard Barnett's expression, but not an alternative to it. Those singularizing dreams today orchestrate the panoply of antiglobal discourses within global discourse. They are more and more thought of as microdiscourses, places where a singularity is enacted and an intensity is affirmed, sites of a resistance that is also a withdrawal, a monadic pulsion, a punctual, discardable identity, or a customized difference: in any case, whatever can be salvaged as the sheer possibility of an alternative articulation of experience outside global homogenization (Moreiras 2001, p. 69).}

In his writing on Mexico starting with *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), Paz had harked back to the pre-Colombian era to find the answers to contemporary Mexican conundrums. In his encounter with Indian modernity, Paz used the same methodology.

His interest in Hinduism and Buddhism led him to write *Alternating Current* (1967), *The Monkey Grammarian* (1974), *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* (1969) and *In Light of India* (1995). He became a comparativist looking for clues in ancient Hinduism and relating them to the Iberian and Aztec civilizations. His work was sociological and literary and relied heavily on that of Lévi-Strauss whose *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) formed the basis of the study for Paz's *Claude Lévi-Strauss o el nuevo festín de Esopo* (1967). In the latter, Paz had laid down the methodology he used to make these transfers and analogies between one culture and another. Like his mentor Lévi-Strauss, Paz used myths from different cultures and by applying the anthropologist's theories, Paz formed a corpus of ideas, an interpretative grid through which truth became mutually convertible from one civilization to another and thus a universal structure is discerned. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss had confessed to something similar.

In proposing the study of mankind, anthropology frees me from doubt, since it examines those differences and changes in mankind which have a meaning for all men, and excludes those peculiar to a single civilization, which dissolve into nothingness under the gaze of the outside observer. (Lévi-Strauss 1955/1992: 58)

In his book on the French thinker, Paz explains the ideas of various anthropologists that he had found particularly useful. Dwelling at length on Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked* but also referring to *Elementary Structures of Kinship* and *The Present* by Marcel Mauss, Paz described how Lévi-Strauss, through his use of geology, Marxism, and Freud, had viewed a landscape as being made up of a variety of elements: rocks, valleys, trees, ravines that seemed disordered but possessed a hidden structure. It was a meeting place of different times and spaces. Like language, a landscape was also diachronic and synchronic, the condensed history of different ages and a network of relations (Paz 1967: 11). The invisible layers gave sense to the visible structure. Similarly, each culture and each language had an internal coherence made up of forms of kinship and myths, and every system possessed its own rationality which could be compared to other systems. Myths across cultures had certain common features and were also universal.
In this manner, the anthropologist showed the way from the visible to the hidden layers and the relation between feelings and rationality. The myths of a culture were also diachronic and synchronic: myths were speech they referred to past times but they lived anew each time they were told (Paz 1967: 28). The language of myths was nevertheless a para language because it said something other than what its words said.

The permutations and combinations of words from the myths of one civilization to another is done through mediation between oppositions. A word like agriculture in one civilization becomes life force in another. Through mediation, the word ‘war’ a synonym for death becomes hunting. The work of the mediator is to resolve contradictions which he manages by transcending oppositions. No element has a meaning by itself. Meaning comes through the context and a symbol only becomes a symbol through its translation into another context. The social group that elaborates a myth is unaware of the reason of its existence, he merely repeats a fragment of a discourse like repeating a verse of a poem whose beginning and end he does not know (Paz 1967: 37). The same happens to the listeners. No one knows that the story is part of an immense poem. Myths pass from person to person though they might be unaware of it. One has to be far from this orchestra and symphony to gauge the nature of the myths. Thus, civilizations communicate with each other without it being known by those who are entrenched in these civilizations. The mediator between civilizations can be an anthropologist, a diplomat or even the flâneur, the itinerant writer and observer, an emblematic figure of modernity. They were the representatives of a particular culture who converted oppositions into reconciliations through permutations and combinations. Like Lévi-Strauss, Paz would also use analogies in order to compare civilizations and his essays and poems are sprinkled with references to India.

Paz’s affinities with the models of Lévi-Strauss would be in line with the poet’s own choice of later themes because Lévi-Strauss with his study of Bororo and Ge myths had overcome the estrangement of non-western societies and had brought them at par with the West by maintaining that primitive societies also classified and made connections. As Lévi-Strauss says in the chapter, ‘A little glass of rum’ in *Tristes Tropiques*,

We must accept the fact that each society has made a certain choice within the range of existing human possibilities and that the various choices cannot be compared with each other: they are all equally valid. (Lévi-Strauss 1955/1992: 385)

Summarizing Lévi-Strauss, Paz affirmed that the thinking of the societies of the past or non-western societies might be atemporal yet they were not outside history, the history of yesterday flowed into that of today. The end was like the beginning. Myths thus offered a solution by doing away with single causal explanations. Like poetry they also offered the idea of a future past. Paz referred his readers to the chapter “Taxila” in *Tristes Tropiques*, where three of the greatest spiritual traditions according to Lévi-Strauss—Hellenism, Hinduism, and Buddhism lived side by side:
Distant springs have mingled in their waters. I myself a European visitor meditating on the ruins represent the missing tradition. Where better than on this site, which offers him a microcosm of his culture, could an inhabitant of the Old World, renewing the links with his past, meditate on his destiny. (Lévi-Strauss 1955/1992: 396)

Paz drew analogies between myths and poems and myths and music. Both music and poems transcended the historical epochs they were written in and both were intelligible though not translatable because their translation created other poems (Paz 1967/1993: 54–55).

Paradox and metaphor were Paz’s twin instruments that he used in his comparison of different civilizations. In Conjunctions and Disjunctions (1969), he explained pairs of contrasting concepts the repressive versus the explosive and eroticism versus indifference that were manifested in different civilizations at different times. In his words:

Cyclic time is another way toward absorption, transformation, and sublimation. The date that recurrs is a return to previous time, an immersion in a past which is at once that of each individual and that of the group. As the wheel of time revolves, it allows the society to recover buried, or repressed, psychic structures so as to reincorporate them in a present that is also a past. (Paz 1969/1990: 10)

Lévi-Strauss had said something similar when contemplating Asia:

It is tempting to imagine that after four or five thousand years of history, the wheel has come full circle—that the urban industrial bourgeois civilization first begun in the towns of the Indus valley was not so very different in its underlying inspiration from that which was destined to reach its peak on the other side of the Atlantic, after a prolonged period of involution in the European chrysalis. When the Old world was still young it was already anticipating the features of the New. I therefore mistrust superficial contrasts or the apparently picturesque; they may not be lasting. (Lévi-Strauss 1955/1992: 130)

However, in Conjunctions... Paz also made clear that he was far from positing a time lag suffered by the East as concerned its progress and evolution.

For the moment we can merely repeat that soul and body, face and sex organs, life and death are different realities that have different names in each civilization, and therefore, different meanings. This is not all: it is impossible to translate the central terms of culture into those of another: makti is not really liberation, nor is nirvana extinction. The moment we examine this difficulty carefully, we see that we are faced not so much with a diversity of realities as a plurality of meanings. (Paz 1969/1990: 34)

As we can see Paz’s analytical categories were not Orientalist: he did not think that India was at an earlier stage of development, rather he felt that the past always impinged on the present in Mexico and India. Significantly, he always looked for analogies between Christianity and Hinduism and Buddhism and offered penetrating comparisons of Hinduism and Islam.
6 Severo Sarduy and India

The Cuban, Severo Sarduy, who maintained a lifelong conversation with Paz both in person and through his work is also a figure associated with India. Nurtured in the Paris of the late 1960s and a member of the Tel Quel group he travelled to India in 1971 and 1978 spending time in places that ranged from Mysore during the first trip, to Kulu in the Himalayas in the second, as well as Varanasi and Kolkata. He felt especially attracted to Mahayana Buddhism. Like the early Paz, the Indian experience for Sarduy was also a means to better understand his own culture. The critic Francois Wahl has remarked on how the asphyxiation Sarduy felt in the West was cured with the overwhelming vitality of India where no homogenization ever seemed possible (Wahl 2008: 94). His eclectic interests ranged from masks, disguises, paintings in museums architecture and landscapes with an emphasis always on alterity. France was his adoptive land and he soaked up the reigning hippie ambience, an atmosphere that ranged from being openly anti-western and Judeo Christian to a reflection on the possible role that the East could play during this crisis of values in the West.

Much before his journeys into South Asia, Sarduy had been a seeker of hybridization and mestizaje in his own country and had researched the Chinese presence in Cuba. Familiar with the writings of Juan Goytisolo, he had investigated Turkey and the Maghreb and was immersed in the history of Al Andalus and the Arabic language. As in Paz, the notion of ‘immigrant imaginary’ in Latin Americanism, can be seen in his work and trajectory. His writings of different locales and experiences within his own country was a counter imagining of Latin America in which the Iberian and European population played centre stage (See Masiello 2001: 144–145).

Unsurprisingly, he then moved on towards the rest of the world. In his discovery of India, Sarduy fled from stereotypes. Instead he approached it in a ludic fashion with the sense of play that had also characterized his earlier work even though he had been acquiring knowledge of Buddhism through his journeys in the countries where it had been disseminated, like Indonesia and Sri Lanka. He began an intense study of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism after his journeys to Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. Gustavo Guerrero avers that Sarduy’s love for Buddhism is palpable in the red colour of his paintings, in the theme of some of his poems and also his fascination for the repetitive quality of mantras (Guerrero 2008: 26). The ludic element though never faltered even amidst the serenity of the appropriation of Buddhist philosophy. In El Cristo de la Rue Jacob we read his self-confessed admiration for the mantra in these terms: he is purported to have said that his life was structured by four kinds of repetitions: writing, beer drinking, flirting, and painting (Gallo 2008: 61).

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10His interests were different from those of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes or Julia Kristeva who looked to China and Maoism as an antidote for the disappointment they felt after what had happened in the Soviet Union. See Ruben Gallo (2008: 99) "Notas sobre el Oriente de Severo Sarduy".
From my vantage point in India I think his amalgamation of Buddhist and Baroque thought can be traced to an early text, ‘El barroco y el neobarroco’ where there is a glimmer of his later evaluations of the Orient. The Baroque in his view was destined from the beginning to be ambiguous and semantically dispersed with an uncontrollable economy of expression. The Latin American Neo Baroque was its progeny and referring to its ‘proliferation’ he wrote:

Otro mecanismo de artificialización del barroco es el que consiste en obliterar el significante de un significado dado pero no remplazándolo por otro, por distante que éste se encuentre del primero, sino por una cadena de significantes que progresa metonimicamente y que termina circunscribiendo al significante ausente, trazando una órbita alrededor de él (...) (Sarduy 1972: 170)

Another mechanism of the Baroque consists in obliterating the signifier of a given signified but not by replacing it with another, however distant it might be from the first, but through a chain of signifiers that progresses metonymically and ends up circumscribing the absent signifier, tracing an orbit around it. (…)

(...) lenguaje que, por demasiado abundante, no designa ya cosas, sino otros designantes de cosas, significantes que envuelven otros significantes en un mecanismo de significación que termina designándose a sí mismo, mostrando su propia gramática, los modelos de esa gramática y su generación en el universo de las palabras. (Sarduy 1972: 176)

(...) language that howsoever abundant, does not designate things but other indicators of things, signifiers that envelop other signifiers in a mechanism of signification that ends up designating itself, showing its own grammar, the models of this grammar and its generation in the universe of words.

When writing about the Latin American Baroque he talked about its break with homogeneity its stridency and chaos, its repulsion of logocentrism and its metaphorization of the Order or any order under discussion. This was the real revolutionary Baroque he concluded.

The excess and overflow of signification and the dissolution of oppositions was what Sarduy had admitted Paz had opened his eyes to. This was conjoined with a critique of the subject and the idea of impermanence. In the poem, ‘Palabras del Buda en Sarnath’ (1991) (‘Buddha’s words at Sarnath’) we can read these ideas.

No hay nada permanente ni veraz (There is nothing permanent nor true)

(...)El sujeto no es uno, sino un haz (The subject is not one but a mesh of dispersed fragments) (Translations mine)

The ephemeral and tenuous idea of the subject in this poem is in line with Sarduy’s earlier ideas of the Neobaroque and ‘the obliterating of the signified’ and the ‘disappearance of a single centre’. Transposing these ideas on to Buddhism he would write:

En Occidente escribe todo el que tiene – o cree tener – algo que comunicar y que de cierto modo esgrime esa experiencia y la considera como un modelo; en el Tibet, junto al techo azul y nevado del mundo, el sujeto que escribe, escritor de la tinta y del vacío, sólo pretende borrarse, desaparecer en la noche de las enormes letras, llegar a través de la paciente escritura a esa disolución del yo que es uno de los posibles rostros del budismo. (Sarduy 1989: 236)
(In the West, he who writes has—or feels he has something to communicate and in a certain way he uses this experience and considers it a model; in Tibet, under the blue snowy roof of the world, the subject who writes, searcher of ink and emptiness, only tries to erase himself, disappear in the night of the enormous letters, arrive through patient writing to the dissolution of the I which is one of the possible faces of Buddhism. Translations author’s)

Sarduy’s novel Cobra analysed from a plethora of perspectives has been described as post-modern, a term used probably to account for its centredness, the numerous scattered allusions to India in the fabric and life of the ‘double’ transvestite principal protagonist and the playfulness associated with the lack of a central idea and fixed agenda. The bricolage, the bits and pieces of lives, texts, dispersed objects, as well as the transvestism is another attempt to break binaries. Cobra is originally a doll in a house of pleasure girls or courtesans who have suggestive names like Sontag, Cadillac, and Dior. She becomes human with the administrations of an Indian discovered by the Madam of the house in the steam of a Turkish bath in a Marseille suburb.

She was so amazed when, despite the prevailing vapor, she distinguished the proportions with which Vishnu had graced him—all those hieroglyphs inscribed there, used by destiny to astonish us without revealing their nature—that, without knowing why, she thought of Ganesa, the elephant god. (Sarduy 1972/1995: 9)

This ‘geographical—historical’ fantasy devised by Sarduy culminates in Cobra changing her sex in the middle of the novel and joining a teddy boy gang in Amsterdam. A realist reading of this kind of literature seems impossible so perhaps it is more reasonable to follow Sarduy’s own injunctions at the beginning of each paragraph that introduce us to these characters and their origins.

Writing is the art of digression. Let us speak then of a smell of hashish and of curry of a stumbling basic English and of a tingling trinket music. (Sarduy 1972/1995: 6)

And a paragraph later, ‘Writing is the art of recreating reality’. ‘No. Writing is the art of restoring History’.

I realize how a novel like this could lend itself to charges of being a purveyor of Orientalist images a la Said. Cobra has been described by James McCourt who introduces the text as the narrative of the Latin American subconscious. (James McCourt, ‘Introduction’: xiv) In the latter there existed no negative or opposites and according to him writing is ‘shriveled when drenched in politics’. The differential power equation theory of Orientalism, of writing from the West inevitably relying on stereotypical images to bolster the western sense of self is inapplicable to Sarduy and Paz. Instead all landscapes are prone to change. The ‘pleasure dome of the Orient’ can exist in Marseille in a Turkish bath as well as in Amsterdam where Cobra transforms into a man.

Throughout the novel, however, there is a parody of the New Age spiritualism of the credulous West as well as its consumerism and narcissism. Cobra’s guru travels in a jet and after seducing a lover who is the most blonde amongst all his followers, he pronounces ‘Barbarism your name is the Western World’ (Sarduy 1972: 101).
The Madam of the house of dolls returns after a trip to India laden with the usual trinkets and goodies. Her trip is thus described by the narrator:

There wasn’t an inflatable Buddha, nor a life-sized celluloid elephant with two archers on its back, no silk, sari, satin, wash and wear Indian silk that the Madam, (…) did not haggle, pillage and carry off at auctions, (…) For the Féerie Orientale, the dream of every doll in the Theater, she returned to the West bent under a mound of Indian junk where each piece of tripe claimed fantastical adjective which the diligent metteur en scène pronounced with ornamental phonetic relish, spattering it with sickening Brahminic references. (Sarduy 1972/1995: 31)

In a recent study, Julia Kushigian has differentiated the Orientalism described by Said from that of Sarduy and others by stating that the latter ‘elects to self-Orientalize through critical self-reflection’. As she says, ‘My theory of self-Orientalism is not, primarily, a marker of difference or essentialisms, but is a reflection of the self in light of the Other (Kushigian 2016: 99, 100). In her view Hispanic Orientalists like Paz and Sarduy have opened up a liberatory space from which they contest the static discursive framework of the West. Through the above examples from Cobra, we can see how Sarduy deconstructs the melodramatic and false consciousness and the almost caricaturesque mode in which the West understood India in the Paris of the 1970s.

Francois Wahl, Sarduy’s lifelong companion, has commented that the writer was nothing more than a tourist in India, who joyfully found confirmation of all the readings he had made about the subcontinent. In an interview Sarduy also averted the following:

We are not talking about a transcendental, metaphysical or profound India but on the contrary, about an exaltation of the surface and I would say costume jewelry India. I believe [and I would have liked it if Octavio Paz agreed—and I think he does] that the only decoding Westerners can do, that the only unadulterated reading that is possible from our logocentric point of view, is that which India’s surface offers. The rest is Christianizing translation, syncretism, real superficiality. (Sarduy 1972/1995: ix)

In Cobra, the Buddhist religion in which all the oppositions dissolved, is privileged. Here sin and grace coexisted, the yin reception and negativity lived with the yang or negative energy.

7 Conclusion: Latin American Interest in Indian Modernity

Despite his assertions on the ‘imperial agents’ of Orientalism, Said never really discounted the movement of ideas and intellectuals. In The World, the Text, and the Critic (1981), he lauded Raymond Schwab’s The Oriental Renaissance (1950) describing him as an orienteur rather than orientaliste in these words, ‘Dualities, opposition, polarities—as between Orient and Occident, one writer and another, one time and another—are converted in his writings into lines that are crisscrossing, it is true, but also drawing a vast human portrait’ (Said 1983: 251).
Indeed, a blanket rejection of all Orientalists would gratuitously forestall the possibility of dialogues and bridges with the West in Indian modernity. The premises of Orientalism were in any case a western critique of itself, no less fascinating for us as onlookers in the East. But since it continues to be an influential method of appraisal for western writing on ancient India, I have been compelled to include my reasons for discarding notions of Orientalist prejudice in Paz and Sarduy. Their surrealist techniques of condensation and displacement were sometimes used by Orientalists but as I have tried to show the surrealist approach is irreverent, spontaneous, and ironic. Surrealism privileged the recondite as opposed to the mainstream and since the whole world was its arena, it was accused in Europe for valorizing the enemies of the West.

This was so because alternative realities long represented in the European or western imagination were being investigated and so the writer’s gaze could not be innocent, it was socially interpellated—shot through by the hierarchies and conflicts of the culture of the representing subject but in India the objective of Latin American writers was a desire to transcend the hermeneutic circle of their own cultures that were imbricated with the nation state and widen their own discursive space. Transcultural exchange took place because two systems of thought came together leaving open the possibility of the emergence of a new mutant from this encounter.

Both Paz and Sarduy perceived that their forays into Indian modernity were a counter to the hegemonic perspective of their own spaces. They had stepped out of traditional Latin Americanism in which they felt discomfited because though it had been born of difference, it had homogenized difference. Entrenched in Latin American modernity like their continental forebears they had branched out to India in the throes of its own multi-faceted modernity. With their incongruous surrealist approach they threw light on hidden facets of Indian culture, history, and archaeology. Their images of Varanasi, Galtu, Samath, Madurai, and the Humayun’s tomb in their poems and essays had the effect of creating new myths of Indian sites rather like those of Paris in France. In effect, through unequal comparisons (Tantric Buddhism and Protestantism, Eve and Prajnaparamita the Mother in Buddhism) Paz gave arcane rituals the status of the universal when he compared them to those in Europe and America. They punctured Orientalist discourse by discarding dichotomies and always aiming for common ground. India’s modernity attracted them because Paz saw therein a millennia of history, and Sarduy the reconciliation of binaries he so missed in the West.

References