

## Memorializing the Past and Future in Central America:

**Gioconda Belli's *Waslala***

By

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In two of her novels, *La mujer habitada* (1989)<sup>1</sup> and *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* (1996),<sup>2</sup> the Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli chronicles the story of Faguas, the City-State-Nation that serves as the location of both novels, although in different epochs. In 1989, at the end of the Sandinista period, Belli published *La mujer habitada*, where she traced the foundation of Faguas, the habitus of Anew@ revolutionary men and women. Her 1996 post-revolutionary futuristic novel *Waslala* returns to a radically changed Faguas in the third millennium. Faguas, Belli tells us in *Waslala*, has Ainvolutionized,@ or internally deteriorated, into a state of social abandonment and lies quarantined from the rest of the world. Fagüenses have only the slightest memory of their revolutionary past, and an even more ambivalent idea of their future. It will be the role of Melisandra, the novel's protagonist, to recuperate the memory of Faguas and to (re)write a new Amemorial del futuro@ for the Fagüenses, as suggested by the subtitle of the novel.

A Amemorial,@ it would be helpful to recall here, is a text or object whose function is to preserve and perpetuate remembrance of key events, places and people. Museums, parks, libraries, monuments, dedication plaques, and a range of written texts serve as *memoriales*. According to the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española de la Real Academia Española* (1992)<sup>3</sup>, *memoriales* are texts written with the explicit purpose to register noteworthy information and to record the aspirations, petitions and narratives of a collective group for future reference. As such, *memoriales* serve as material receptacles of collective memory. In *Waslala*, Melisandra will become the chronicler of the utopian dream and the dystopic future of the Fagüenses. As we will see, she will travel to the illusive city of Waslala, somewhere in Faguas where the revolutionary leaders retreated with their utopic society. Her mission will be to rescue the lost ideals of the Fagüenses, which are preserved in Waslala and which are guarded by her own mother, the last surviving citizen of Waslala. Melisandra will return to Faguas with Alos anales de Waslala.@ In the last paragraph of the novel, Melisandra's mother entrusts her daughter not only with the lessons of the past but with the key to the future. The mother tells her daughter,

-- Aquí tenés, Melisandra, los anales de Waslala. Los poetas, tu padre y yo los escribimos. Aquí hay un recuento pormenorizado de qué hicimos, cómo lo hicimos. Nuestros errores, nuestros aciertos, lo que fue esta experiencia. Hay planos de lo que construimos; hay cuentos, poemas, novelas, ensayos escritos aquí, dibujos . . . . Son tuyos, de Faguas. (376)

Melisandra will take her mother's texts and will heed Ernesto Cardenal's words in his epic narrative poem *El estrecho dudoso* (1966): ATHE CHRONICLER MUST NOT FAIL TO DO HIS [HER] DUTY.@ Melisandra, in Belli's magnum futuristic epic, will not fail to do her duty.

She will recuperate the story of Central America in the third millennium as a *memorial* that tells of past and future struggles in the region. She will bear the records (chronicles and memorials) of the dreams, myths, and political agendas of a post-revolutionary Central America beyond the 1980s.

### **The Dawn of Post-Revolutionary Literature in Central America**

Produced in the aftermath of regional conflicts and losses suffered during the *Lost Decade* of the 1980s,<sup>4</sup> Gioconda Belli's novel *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* and other such texts are part of a post-revolutionary movement literature in Central America. With the end of the civil wars, many fundamental ideologies and revolutionary practices fell into question. Situated within this quandary, post-revolutionary movement literature is concerned with cultural reconstruction and the writing of alternative narratives of development for the isthmus in the next millennium.<sup>5</sup> In texts produced after the armed conflicts of the 1980s, the (re)building of Central America is a common concern, even in countries like Costa Rica, Honduras and Panama which may have engaged only indirectly in the wars, yet experienced its radiating effects nonetheless. The titles of recently published texts from various disciplines attest to a degree of self-reflexivity in the widespread discourses of reconstruction in Central America. Texts such as *América Central hacia el 2000: Desafíos y opciones* (1989), *Forjando la paz: El desafío de América Central* (1988), *De la locura a la esperanza: La guerra de 12 años en El Salvador* (1993), *Esquipulas, diez años después: ¿Hacia dónde va Centroamérica?* (1997), and *Traspatio Florecido: Tendencias de la dinámica de la cultura en Centroamérica (1979-1990)* (1993).<sup>6</sup> These texts and others published after the late 1980s suggest that Central Americans are attempting to move forward into the twenty-first century, toward the third millennium as Gioconda Belli puts it, despite the extended hardships of the recent past. These texts invoke a past that is not easily obliterated, but upon which Central Americans must build their landscape of peace. For Central Americans, as these texts would imply, there is no starting from scratch, since the deep economic, political and social structures of Central America were permanently altered by the recent wars and their effects, and continue to be defaced by the current onslaught of neoliberal programs throughout the region.

Up to now, however, the tendency has been to study the economy, politics and history of Central America during the war period, as Rafael Cuevas Molina states in his book *Traspatio Florecido: Tendencias de la dinámica de la cultura en Centroamérica (1979-1990)*. Attention, however, is now necessarily focused on Central American cultures in a post-revolutionary movement period. Today, Central American cultures are not the national cultures *imagined* by nineteenth century liberals, nor are they the revolutionary cultures projected in the last decades. Contemporary Central American literature, following the noted apex of the *testimonio* and the rupture of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary narrative in the 1980s,<sup>7</sup> is located at this cross-roads of discourses on Central American cultures. As Cuevas Molina has argued, Central American cultural production was transformed during the recent decades. The case might be made that post-revolutionary movement literature shows the signs of recent impacts and transformations. This literature today seems to engage with issues carried over from the past, and to search for much needed narratives to enlighten Central America in the ambivalent peacetime of the twenty-first century. Major strategies of this literature include, as Cuevas Molina's model suggests, the invention of a Central American imaginary across texts which propose visions, both utopic and dystopic, of the future and which seek to disrupt the official histories of the region. Many recent

literary texts also interrogate the effects of neoliberal politics and economies on the specific and diverse populations of the isthmus, and offer meditations on the devastation of the *South*, to which Central America belongs.

Under neoliberal regimes, all of the countries of Central America show the wears and tears of similar economic, political, social, and cultural programs, to which their literatures in the 1990s respond in dialogical fashion. These are cultural expressions produced in the North/South *divide*, in the partition of economically induced contexts, out of which the imaginary of the region as the *South* emanates and extends across texts from various Central America countries. The imaginary of Central America as the South is not limited to the confines of individual nation-states, but covers a wide expanse of sites across the world currently ruled by neoliberal regimes which generate violent policies and reforms: in this construction of a southern Central American imaginary, individual countries identify themselves as part of a larger Central American entity, and as part of the even larger composite of the South. Jonathan R. Barton, in *A Political Geography of Latin America* (1997), notes that "Within the globalised context of neocolonialism, the manipulation of armed forces is being replaced gradually by the manipulation of market force."<sup>8</sup> In the 1990s, the South, including Central America, has a common enemy and engages in a common struggle against the violent (economic) forces of the North. In the arena of the globalized state, as Barton points out, it is the firms, banks, agencies, and other organizations that determine domestic policies in specific countries. Under such conditions of disproportionate distribution and flow of capital, Central America has gained a place among the impoverished states of the South, of which Latin America is a "key region" (Barton 3).

In much of the current literature and visual representations (film and photography), Central America is imagined as a site suffering from great socio-economic and ecological devastation (the general condition of the South). The image of *garbage* or *waste* surfaces as the metaphor of Central American communities attempting to pick up the pieces of past armed conflict, while at the same time confronting the disruptive fallout of global capital and their own entrenched neoliberal regimes. Communities living in inhospitable conditions and in the virtual *wasted land* of Central America are represented in Gioconda Belli's *Waslala*.

### **In *Waslala*: Going Beyond the Narrative of Waste in Central America**

In *Waslala*, the Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli returns to Faguas, the location of her first novel *La mujer habitada* (1989).<sup>9</sup> Faguas, in *La mujer habitada*, represents a contemporary Central American country where a revolution is fought by leftist guerrillas and the military forces of the dictator. A developing country showing the signs of superficial progress, Faguas's landscape is a distorted pastiche of elements reflecting the struggle between the forces of nature and modernization: "volcanic, seismic, opulent nature, the lust of the trees piercing the asphalt"; "artifices to convey modernity" punctuating the city; department stores and shopping centers displacing poor residents; and shanty towns overflowing with slum dwellers (14). In the late twentieth century, Faguas "was trying at all costs to become modern, using any outlandish method possible" (14), but, as Belli's later novel will show, Faguas will lose its struggle to enter modernity.

In *Waslala*, Belli returns to Faguas in the third millennium, after all revolutions have been

fought and lost, and Faguas lies in fantastic, futuristic abandonment. Quarantined from the rest of the world, Faguas festers in the corruption of warring internal factions and the external contamination that is deposited there by the North. The region is ruled by Los Espadas, two brother dictators who oversee the trafficking of armaments, and the exporting of *filina*, a genetically mutated drug combination of marijuana and cocaine that sells at a high price in the world market. Faguas's economy runs on the exchange of contrabands, the production of air (trees are not cut to produce air for the world), and the reception and incineration of global waste, which is shipped in on highly toxic barges. Cut off from the rest of the world, no one visits Faguas except the *contrabandistas*, occasional journalists, and individuals doing illegal or clandestine business there. No one leaves Faguas either, for immigration to the North has been completely shut down: "Ahora era muy peligroso emigrar. Era muy difícil. Casi nadie lograba cruzar la muralla" [Now it was very dangerous to emigrate. It was very difficult. Almost no one could cross the wall.] (44).

Isolated from the rest of the world, Faguas has reached a maximum state of de-evolution or what the novel calls *involution*, an in-growth and decline so abject that Faguas has lost all touch with time and other parts of the world. Sometime in its history,

Faguas empezó a involucionar y el país inició su retorno a la Edad Media, perdiendo sus contornos de nación y pasando a ser, en los mapas, una simple masa geográfica como lo eran antes las selvas del Amazonas y ahora vastas regiones en África, Asia, la América del Sur, el Caribe: manchas verdes sin rasgos, sin indicación de ciudades: regiones aisladas, cortadas del desarrollo, la civilización, la técnica; reducidas a selvas, reservas forestales, a función de pulmón y basurero del mundo desarrollado que las explotó para sumirlas después en el olvido, en la miseria, condenándolas al ostracismo, a la categoría de *terras incognitas*, malditas, tierras de guerra y epidemias donde nadie llegaba más que los contrabandistas. (Belli 18)

Fagüenses live in amazonian-like jungle overgrowths, or in wasted cities like Cineria, which receives the garbage from the North. Once Faguas had been on the path to development and progress, but now it is a place abandoned to the forces of nature and the most powerful in the natural, social and economic Darwinist ladder: war, epidemics and garbage are all that remain of the competitive socio-economic forces introduced early on its history. Along with Africa, Asia, South America and other former developing nations, Faguas has become a great green blotch on the map, an extended, undifferentiated region (of the South) whose cities and civilizations have declined into oblivion.

By the time the novel begins, Faguas has fallen out of the circuit of progress, development and history of the world, and has very few ties to the outside world, except for the illegal and informal economies controlled by a few powerful *caudillos*, who rule over local populations, regions, and private industries: Los Espadas control the drug and arms trade, while the *general* Engracia controls the canal zone through which pass barges filled with garbage. Engracia also rules Cineria, the seat of her garbage empire and the dumpsite of modernity, where the discarded items of the civilized world ("descarte del mundo civilizado" 58) are deposited. In Cineria, Engracia and her recyclers repair and rehabilitate, for Faguas, "el desperdicio cotidiano de las sociedades de la abundancia" (143): radios, irons, toasters, mixers, lawnmowers, micro-ovens, and other strange and obsolete objects are brought to Cineria, along with dirty diapers, bottles

and castaway toxic waste, all of which are remains of consumer societies in the North, which are driven by the desire "por lo nuevo, por lo último" (159). Transported to the South, these waste products allow Cineria to read its own anachronistic position in world: "una ciudad del pasado, habitada por seres del presente" (103). One of the few characters visiting from the North claims, Cinerians know very well "en qué época estaban, sólo que no lograban que sus vidas se entendieran con el tiempo" (103). Lacking the technology to enter the world market as an equal producer of capital, Cineria and the rest of Faguas have been reduced to recipients and recyclers of cast-off consumer goods.

Overtaken by its own nature, contamination and violence, Faguas, in its dystopic future, is the site and symbol of the complete devastation of the South. But for every dystopia there is a utopia, and somewhere within the interior of Faguas lies the illusive and enigmatic city of Waslala -- "un sitio fantástico, la última utopía: Waslala" (33). Waslala, hidden in the folds of Faguas, has a referent on the maps of Faguas (also in north-central Nicaragua) but in the novel, "no se trata de buscar un punto en el mapa . . . Es mucho más complicado," for Waslala is the southern myth of Utopia (34). The desire to reach Waslala represents the Fagüenses' desire for everything that Faguas is not: Fagüenses want an end to the garbage, drug trafficking, wars, and there are none of these in Waslala; they want peace, and in Waslala there is harmony and tranquillity; they want a return to purity, and Waslala represents a prelapsarian state. Indeed, Waslala represents for the Fagüenses, "la ubicación del paraíso perdido, del tiempo perdido, de todo lo que la humanidad había perdido aún antes de aprender a nombrarlo" (167). Melisandra, the granddaughter of don José, one of the poet-founders of Waslala, wants to find the enchanted city, where her mother and father are said to have retreated. Waslala, then, signifies the lost ideals of the Fagüenses.

In the beginning, even before the first scenes in the novel, a group of visionaries sought to build a communitarian society where there would be peace, justice, an equal distribution of goods, and an equitable division of labor among its inhabitants, as an alternative to declining Faguas. Based on Thomas More's *utopian experiment*,<sup>10</sup> the visionaries, who were poets and people with various specialties possessing the knowledge to generate a self-sustaining and sustainable community, looked for an ideal site that could be isolated and protected from the rest of Faguas, and where a new generation of Fagüenses could be produced. Don José, one of two characters who has been to Waslala and back (Engracia is the other), tells of the construction of Waslala, based for the most part on the "literatura utopista":

Por ese entonces Faguas existía en los mapas como una nación con perspectiva. Las guerras no eran aún endémicas. Los tiranos eran sucedidos por gobernantes blandengues auspiciados por militares. Bajo estas administraciones benignas e intrascendentes se abrían espacios propios para que se juntaran intelectuales y políticos iluminados que, ni cortos, ni perezosos anunciaban poseer la fórmula mágica que daría estabilidad y progreso al país. Considerándolos deleznable y oportunistas, me uní a un grupo de poetas que, a partir de un método distinto; recurriendo a las posibilidades de la imaginación, de la mitología acumulada, de la experiencia colectiva, encontrado en la literatura humanista y en la poesía de todos los tiempos, se proponían crear un modelo de sociedad totalmente nuevo y revolucionario, basado en una ética que repudiaba el poder, la dominación y concedía a cada individuo la responsabilidad por la comunidad. (61)

The project of Waslala is a near replica of More's Utopia: the ideal state, governed by wise elders and equally worked by all its citizens according to her/his capacities. Everyone in Utopia/Waslala contributes to the welfare and well-being of the community at large, sharing the work and the fruits of common labor. Like in Utopia, capitalism (the source of much conflict among nations and peoples), violence, and war would be eradicated from Waslala, and everyone would live in peace and harmony. The founders of Waslala, like the Utopian leaders, firmly believed that "the one essential condition for a healthy society was equal distribution of goods -- . . . impossible under capitalism" (More 66).

Unlike More's Utopia, Waslala would not participate in slavery, colonialism, and surrogate armed conflict. (The Utopians employed mercenaries to fight wars where enemies would kill each off; by a process of elimination of the enemy, the Utopians hoped to conquer the rest of the world.) Waslala, after all, is a replica of Utopia but with a *difference*, rejecting all structures associated with their southern legacy of imperialism, neocolonialism, and armed conflict. The Waslalans sought to erase the structures of colonialism and capitalism from their project in order to change the face of Faguas. In Waslala, there would be a regeneration of the values, ideals and principles among the Waslalans who would then transform the rest of Faguas. The original visionaries felt that Fagüenses had lost the virtues of living in self-less *communitarianism*, which translates into a complete disavowal of private property in favor of a practice of "communal ownership" (More 66). A subtext to Waslala, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) presents the blueprint for "wise social planning" (More 40) of Waslala, and the epilogue for its early demise, for Waslala like Utopia is "el lugar que no es" [the place that does not exist] (*Waslala* 40). Waslala becomes the place that Fagüenses imagine in their desire for alternatives to their contaminated and deteriorating social reality, as signified by filth and garbage that arrives from the North: "Cómo no va a querer la gente creer en un lugar encantado, sin conflictos, sin contradicciones" (200).

At the end of the novel, Melisandra, whose mission had been to find Waslala, arrives in the fabled city only to discover that Waslala has also fallen into decline because, as the novel makes clear in the words of Engracia, ideas and ideals cannot be isolated and separated from social practice. The failure of the visionaries of Waslala/Utopia was to build a dream state cut off from the well-being of the rest of the Fagüenses ("el bienestar del más humilde de los seres humanos," 324). With this realization, Melisandra's own grandfather had abandoned Waslala to return to the world he had left behind, Engracia had returned to Cineria in order to provide an alternative economy for the Fagüenses who were at the mercy of Los Espadas, and Melisandra, herself, forgoes her mother's invitation to stay in Waslala. Melisandra, along with the others who return to the *social realities* of Faguas, opts to take up her role in the reconstruction of Faguas. Waslala, as Melisandra perceives it, has an important function in the imaginary of "lo que puede ser" [what could be] (376). Waslala is the signifier of alternatives that must be put into effect in some far reaching context and capacity. As Belli's novel makes explicit,

la razón de ser de Waslala era ser Waslala, a Utopía, el lugar que no era, que no podía ser el tiempo y el espacio habitual, sino otra cosa, el laboratorio, quizás, la luz tal vez, el ideal constantemente en movimiento, poblado, abandonado y vuelto a repoblar; creído, descreído y vuelto a creer. (372)

At the end of the novel, the only person left in Waslala is Melisandra's mother; all the others have

abandoned the utopian experiment, perished in the ingrown isolation of Waslala, or returned to work the ideal into some practice in Faguas. Melisandra, herself, returns to Faguas carrying the manuscripts of the visionaries of Waslala, hoping to make some use of the *Waslalan Experiment* in the reconstruction of Faguas, which lies in the divide of between what can be and what is ("entre lo que puede ser y lo que es," 376). In that interim, there is work to be done and dreams to be forged in the South. Gioconda Belli, who participated in the construction of the revolutionary ideal of Sandinismo in Nicaragua during the 1970s and 1980s, would seem to suggest, in *Waslala*, that the reconstruction of Faguas (Central America) is still an inconclusive project. A post-revolutionary reconstruction of the region requires a common imaginary (a Waslalan dream), a common ground (the Cinerian garbage cities that need to be cleaned up), and communitarian social relations to build Central America into *lo que puede ser*.

### Conclusions: Narratives Beyond Waste

*Waslala* and reconstruction narratives use waste as a metaphor for the uncertain future of the region, and as a moment of reflection on the devastation of region throughout its long history of imperialism, (neo)colonialism, and *tropicalization*.<sup>11</sup> At various points in Central American history, these structures of power and their attendant systems of thought have converted the region into raw material and terrain for the (mis)use of the North. In an act of reification, the same devastating effects produced in the South by the North come to represent Central America as a natural(ized) site of decomposition (underdevelopment), which requires regeneration by outside forces: regeneration from the North comes to Central America in the form of imperialism, (neo)colonialism, and now neoliberal programs. In its tropicalized state, Central America is imagined as a "deadly, diseased, disorderly, dissolute, and decadent" place, which must be brought to order and must be cleaned up by outside forces (Benz 69). As Stephen Benz implies in "Through the Tropical Looking Glass: The Motif of Resistance in U.S. Literature on Central America," *tropicalism* is the underlying logic that informs many projects of imperialism, (neo)colonialism, and neoliberalism that take root in Central America.

Responding to this legacy of decomposition, Belli's novel *Waslala* offers a narrative of reconstruction for the region. Out of the remains, *Waslala* traces the source of Faguas's devastation and degradation directly to the North. In *Waslala*, the city of garbage receives barges filled with toxic waste from the North. The inhabitants of *Cineria*, the garbage city and the incinerator of the South, reclaim and recycle the throwaway goods they find in the garbage, and in those discarded signs of the North they come to know directly and intimately "the underside of consumer capitalism."<sup>12</sup> In the garbage, they interpret the excesses of the North, and come to some understanding of the widespread effects of the globalization of capital on the South. One of the garbage pickers in Belli's novel, explains the logic of garbage in *Cineria*: "esa acumulación de objetos, eran como las huellas que un asesino deja tras de sí . . . Así es el sistema; cobra su precio. No hay desarrollo sin desperdicio." [That accumulation of objects was like the traces left behind by an assassin . . . That is how the system is; it has a price. There is no development without waste.] (165-166). In *Waslala* and the other Central American narratives, waste thus circulates as the floating signifier of development and progress, which never quite settle in these locations, except in cruelly degraded and degrading forms such as the dumping of waste, cheap products, stock-piled armaments, and other contrabands and goods.

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- <sup>1</sup> Gioconda Belli, *La mujer habitada* (Managua: Vanguardia, 1989). All quotes are from the English translation, *The Inhabited Woman* (NY: Warner Books, 1995).
- <sup>2</sup> Gioconda Belli, *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* (Managua: anamá Ediciones Centroamericanas, 1996). All translations into English are mine.
- <sup>3</sup> Biblioteca virtual, Diccionario de la Lengua Española, Real Academia Española. 11 March 2000 <<http://www.rae.es/nivel1/buscon/AUTORIDAD2.HTM>>
- <sup>4</sup> Arturo Escobar and Sonia Alvarez identify the "Lost Decade of Latin America" in their *Preface to The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview P, 1992) ix.
- <sup>5</sup> See Arturo Escobar, "Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development and Social Movements," *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 20-56. In this essay, Escobar offers a debunking of the myth of modernity and development in Latin America, and a discussion of the role of new social movements in the construction of alternative imaginaries, subjectivities, and quotidian politics that respond to the local needs of people in Latin America.
- <sup>6</sup> See *América Central Hacia el 2000: Desafíos y opciones*, coord. Edelberto Torres-Rivas (Caracas: Editorial Nueva Sociedad, 1989); Richard Fagen, *Forjando la paz: El desafío de América Central* (San José: DEI, 1988); Comisión de la Verdad 1992-1993, *De la locura a la esperanza: La guerra de 12 años en El Salvador* (San José: DEI, 1993); *Esquipulas, diez años después )Hacia dónde va Centroamérica?*, eds. Jaime Ordoñez and Nuria Gamboa (San José: EDUCA / CSUCA / Asociación Hombres de Maíz, 1997); Rafael Cuevas Molina, *Trapatio Florecido: Tendencias de la dinámica de la cultura en Centroamérica (1979-1990)* (Heredia, CR: EUNA, 1993).
- <sup>7</sup> Daniel Camacho, "Latin America: A Society in Motion," *New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People*, ed. Ponna Wignaraja (London: Zed Books, 1993) 39.
- <sup>8</sup> Jonathan R. Barton, *A Political Geography of Latin America* (NY: Routledge, 1997) 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Gioconda Belli, *La mujer habitada* (Managua: Vanguardia, 1989). All quotes are from the English translation, *The Inhabited Woman* (NY: Warner Books, 1995).
- <sup>10</sup> See Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. and introduction by Paul Turner (NY: Viking Penguin, 1985).
- <sup>11</sup> Stephen Benz, "Through the Tropical Looking Glass: The Motif of Resistance in U.S. Literature on Central America," *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, eds. Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (Hanover: U P of New England).
- <sup>12</sup> Cynthia Deitering, "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Conscisousness in Fiction of the 1980s," *The Ecocriticism Reader*, eds. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia P, 1996) 197.