About fifteen years ago, it seemed novel to suggest that a literature of the Americas was emerging out of the corpuses maintained in distinct national literatures—such as the colonial and baroque literatures of New England, Spanish America, and Brazil, or the modernisms of the 1920s in the United States and Latin America. With this transnational canon, the argument went, we gained new ways of addressing movements, careers, and works in both national and hemispheric settings. A swath of literary history and criticism explored this premise, bringing new light to both historical and present-day writers and works.[1] Still, poetry often remains oblique to this approach, for reasons that were envisioned by Charles Bernstein ten years ago and revisited by Jahan Ramazani in 2006: the stubbornness of the boundary around national poetries, and the difficulty of observing affinities across cultures without imposing unities, not to mention the ways that particular poems resist being drawn into such an order.[2]

In hemispheric terms, the richest accounts of poetry have often been the most provisional. I admire the essay of twenty years ago by the historian Richard Morse, in which he sets two contemporaries, William Carlos Williams and Oswald de Andrade, alongside one another, exposing divergences as much as similarities, and finally arrives at a reading of “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “A Roça” (“The Farm”) in which neither of the two farms indirectly seen in these poems “can we mistake for a European one.”[3] This article’s agenda—to address these figures as considerably different from each other, and to explore how they are distinctly American in their aesthetic programs and especially the knowledge their poems contain—tells us more about a poetics of the Americas than a wide-ranging or totalizing approach can manage. With the present essay for Ernesto Livon-Grosman’s 5 + 5 (itself the result of a transnational vista), I aim both to emulate Morse’s approach and to think past it, claiming such a reading as an occasion to speculate on the future of a hemispheric approach. Bernstein offers one version of such an approach here when he imagines a “multiplicity” that is not a “comparison.” If the sporadic work of the last two decades has been in a sense preliminary, undertaking a new program for imagining inter-american poetries, what comes next?

Consider how the protocols of reading and interpretation conduct toward an interpretation of poetry that keeps works apart, or authorizes comparisons that reinforce national and linguistic rather than other, more provisional categories. In the early 1990s the comparatist Claudio Guillén articulated three kinds of comparison available to literary theory and criticism, namely that among works with "genetic contacts or other relations" across "distinct national spheres" within a single common culture; that among works with no genetic contacts and from different civilizations but under "common sociohistorical conditions"; and that among "genetically independent phenomena" brought together under a theoretical premise.[4] This orderly division tells us several things about how to approach inter-
American literatures, starting from the observation that they may have, oddly, too many points of contact. One can imagine groups of works—such as the aforementioned hemispheric modernist canon, or the Beat poets of the middle twentieth century alongside the contemporaneous Noigandres school of Brazil—for which from certain angles all of Guillén’s conditions of comparison apply, but no one success. In contrast to many of the classic objects of comparison such as the European novel, the baroque, or the picaresque, a hemispheric body of poetry involves genetic contacts but also comes into being despite the lack of them; allows for common social and historical conditions, sometimes within a single civilization such as that of Spanish-speaking readers and writers, but at other times across the boundaries between creole and indigenous societies; and demands the application of theoretical principles that will put these already deeply implicated corpuses into less obvious conjunctions. Where many points of contact are available, there is perhaps an inclination toward either a totalized approach, a critical narrative that will gather all these points together into a specious unity, or no synopsis at all. The hemispheric canon presents this particular challenge to a conventional comparative literature: too many standpoints, with too many strands of relation and zones of difference between them, make for arguments that struggle to find a balance. In how many ways might we speak of the contemporaneity, the correspondences, the coincidences, the obliquities, and the insensibilities between such events of the 1980s as the Language movement in the United States and XUL in Argentina?

What is wanted is neither an essential inter-American literature nor a map of irreducible particularities. The condition of the poetries of the Americas demands, in one of Bernstein’s phrases, a poetics of “inconsolable coexistences.”[5] We make our way through such a condition by naming a vivid counterpoise between the knowledges such poetries contain—how do the poetries, with all their differences, know as American poetries rather than as something else?—and this proposition must always come down to particular poems, their dictions, rhythms, and figures. Or to say it otherwise, Morse demonstrates inductively that we can read from a poem to a society on the basis of social fact in relation to aesthetic disposition, recovering from this relation some atom of Americanness.

The alternative approach, which turns up in many accounts of inter-American literatures, might be considered fatally deductive. In the mid-1980s, a much remarked conversation of a sort took place between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad over the question of how to account for what some readers think of as the structural differences between works from the developed and developing worlds, or along some like axis. Jameson’s argument—Gayatri Spivak rightly calls it “notorious”—was that “all third-world texts” are necessarily “to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel.”[7] Unfortunately the deductive and totalizing character of Jameson’s argument, atypical of his late work, is self-negating. As Ahmad deftly observes, no such account of a “cognitive aesthetics” can or should explain the spheres of cultural production, whether developed and developing Worlds, hemispheres, or even countries.[8] I wonder at the “particularly” clause of Jameson’s statement, as though the novel were merely a good example of this mode of reading and not the only remotely feasible example—in other words, as though one could imagine drama, memoir, or poetry supporting such a reading. Whatever explanatory value might be found in comparing metropolitan and emerging novels for their redactions of the public and the private, one supposes that to approach poetry’s “ratio of the political to the personal” as an allegory for social or geopolitical conditions is not only a questionable but an unworkable project.[9] At the same time, I recognize the urge that underlies Jameson’s essay, to find a productive way of reading works of different societies alongside each other, articulating how each one develops an interlocution of the subjective and the social as well as a fluid relation between these works, without allegorizing or rendering either one into a reversal or distortion of the other.

Where poetry is concerned, we might adapt Jameson’s terms and declare that our project is to disclose how the poetries of the Americas converse with one another across the registers of the political and the personal; how what is common and what is different between hemispheric poetries may be accounted for; and especially how we may identify the points of contact—of concepts, inlaid cultural patterns, motifs, charged words—that put the subjective and the public dimensions of such poems into relation. Even laying aside proposals to read the works of one part of the world according to a unifying logic, the claims of language, region, history, race, and class, among other factors, seem to unsettle any possibility of a common literary history. And yet, above the din of such factors, the elements held in relation still make themselves heard. In idioms, tropes, and registers, the poetries of the Americas recognize an obverse history rather than a common outlook, the power of which should be neither exaggerated nor dismissed. Such a history, refracted in poetry, involves two or more obverses—faces or surfaces, like the face of a coin—that are not opposites or reversals of each other but alternative versions of a common question of knowledge. This is what Morse saw in Williams and Andrade: the problem of seeing an American society in its agriculture, a georigic read askance. This is perhaps what Jameson gestured after in his overly prescriptive theory of the novel in the developing world. And this is perhaps also a workable redaction of Guillén’s criteria for comparison into something that makes sense of the poetries of the New World, a mode of reading that acknowledges that “there is no one America.”[10]

As an experiment in obversal, consider two sets of poems that are roughly contemporaneous but seem to offer little foundation for a cross-reading: these are Allen Ginsberg’s poems of 1959 through 1961, first collected in Kaddish (1961) and later augmented in the Collected Poems 1947-1980—especially the run from “Lysergic Acid” through “To an Old Poet in Peru”—and Haroldo de Campos’ Galáxias of 1963 and after, especially the incantatory poem known as “circuladódé fuló.” The Brazilian Campos, along with his brother Augusto de Campos and their collaborator Décio Pignatari, formed the group Noigandres, named after a stray remark by the scholar of Occitan poetry Emil Lévy in Ezra Pound’s Canto XX.[11] Ginsberg and Campos share a precursor in Pound, but otherwise diverge in their models. Campos treats Pound essentially as a European poet reaching back first to symbolism and to the troubadours, while Ginsberg augments this tradition with the prophetic and hortatory poeties of Walt Whitman and William Blake. Oblivious to one another, Ginsberg and Campos represent alternative poetries of the Americas at a single moment. Perhaps their balance of likenesses and differences makes them hard to discuss together; perhaps even they cannot look at each other too closely. Whitman, rebaptizing and polarizing, is the invisible factor between them; I once asked Campos (even though I knew the answer) whether Whitman was important to him, and he replied with a curt dismissal of the question—a clue, I have always believed, to the poetics of the Noigandres circle. In fact Whitman is not entirely absent from the cabinet of models and objects associated with these far-ranging Brazilian poets, translators, and critics. His program for a prophetic poetry of the greater Americas survives for them, but they attribute it to a poet fourteen years
In part, of course, the rejection of Whitman by the Noigandres poets is a statement of cultural affinity as well as poetic principles. Whitman's program belongs to the era of creole self-consciousness across the Americas, beginning with the career of Simón Bolívar in the early nineteenth century and continuing until the end of the original *modernismo* in the early twentieth, for which the capacious voice of *Leaves of Grass* became a kind of standard. During this era, distinctive elements of a creole outlook were transmuted into statements of an essential American identity: for instance, where the creole desideratum of American birth (in contrast to colonists from Spain or Portugal) is idealized in the terms of autochthony, a rootedness in the soil of the Americas held in common by all native-born citizens. Within a few years of the death of the original *modernista* poet Rubén Darío in 1916, a different modernism, more conversant with the contemporaneous European avant-gardes as well as with a broader specimen of American races and classes, had arisen to challenge many of the cultural ideals founded on creole experience: thus in Brazil, the modernist poet and polemicist Oswald de Andrade, Haroldo de Campos' avowed model, articulated a program for strategic and ironic mimesis of indigenous cultures that explicitly countered the fantasy of autochthony with the fact of importation—that what mattered in this society was what came from elsewhere, to be answered only by a poetry "for export." Seen through the filter of this kind of modernism, the poetics of Whitman and his refractors among the creole elites come to seem a temporizing maneuver, not to mention a self-absorbed projection of one segment of society, rather than something radically new.

In strictly poetic terms, the early work of the Noigandres poets depends on a semantic concentration within a morphology of lines and paragraphs that seems the antithesis of Whitman's approach to these elements. In semantic and formal dispensations, nothing could resemble "Song of Myself" less than Campos' densely textured poems, where the first person is often hidden rather than extravagantly unfurled; no poem could be less like Campos' "Servidão de passagem" ("Transient Servitude") than "The Sleepers," where lines accumulate not with exactitude but with abandon, and irony is all but absent. And yet something other than semantics and forms—something better called knowledge, a mode of coming to terms with the world—is involved in this contrast. Campos' orientation to a Pound whose antecedents lie in Europe rather than the United States is obviously a highly motivated redaction. Overlooking Pound's acknowledgment to Whitman that "it was you that broke the new wood," it aligns Noigandres with the deep past of Propertius and the troubadours, and speaks to a making of a poetry of the Americas from the outside in. For such a program, the knowledge that activates poetic power tends to be bibliophagic and historically remote, if not antiquarian. While in certain senses Campos' intellectual style is very much of its time—he is often embedded in information theory of the 1950s, and the manifesti of Noigandres such as the "Plano-Piloto para Poesia Concreta" ("Pilot-Plan for Concrete Poetry" [1958]) are stamped by the era of President Juscelino Kubitschek and the building of Brasilia—the dynamic factor is knowledge: what, and how, does the poem know? While Campos frames his poetics with reference to "information" and "language," knowledge, or thinking made manifest, inscribes a distinctive pattern in his poems, and enables us to stand apart from his moment, exactly as Morse does with Williams and Andrade.

In contrast, Ginsberg's embrace of the other Pound—the poet of "I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman"—represents a poetry that draws on experiences of the social and political world of the present, foreshortening the cultural past in favor of a poetry that starts from the speaking subject and sprawls outward. His poems devour experience rather than books; his cultivation of Buddhism ensures a centrifugal, presentist, observational procedure. Seen this way, there is a difference in what each kind of poem knows: Campos' compressed poems perceive and think by collapsing eras, cultures, and languages together for the sake of historical continuity, while Ginsberg's intuitive lyrics find an alternative sort of diversity—of social identities, voices, politics—by expanding the present. Of course this account oversimplifies, but it captures something of Campos' and Ginsberg's two ways of operating as poets of the Americas circa 1960.

Further, the differences of poetic style between the Beat and Noigandres programs correspond closely to this contrast of intellectual agendas. From its first appearance in the early 1950s, the work of the Noigandres group, who were critics as well as poets, came packaged with its own literary history, its own announced canon of precursors, and its own style of interpretation. The group's North American (and to some extent, even their Brazilian) interpreters and acolytes have generally declined to challenge this order of things with fresh approaches and hard questions, with the result that this work exists in a kind of critical limbo, in which the poets' own promotional statements still have the status of interpretations and conclusions. What we recognize as Brazilian concrete poetry of the 1960s might be better seen as a poetic technology that is well adapted to Campos' agency as cultural filter—a poet who makes his kind of knowledge according to exquisite conjunctions and overlays of several periods and languages, in a poetic idiom where no extraneous information should draw the mind away from the central conceit. The poetry, the criticism, and the literary history are inseparable elements of a single program, each element disposed to foreground the relevant aspects of the others. A poetry fashioned for such a program—unlike a poetry conceived to stand apart from the poet's criticism and other writings, such as that of Wallace Stevens or Pablo Neruda—must turn out very much like the concrete poetry of Noigandres and the early Campos.

Again in contrast, Ginsberg's poetry exhibits a purchase on knowledge that accommodates quotidian experience to several metaphysical outlooks, and abjures the strict filters that inform concrete poetry in favor of an inclusiveness that depends on spontaneous organization ("first thought, best thought"). Perhaps no bodies of poetry of the late 1950s could resemble each other less than Ginsberg's mercurial, obsessive rants and Campos' finely wrought logograms. And yet they are strikingly homologous, if not superficially similar: moving apart but in different directions from the gyres and vortices of modernism, they come to occupy distinctive but cognate positions. Moreover, the extremity of their positions has encouraged critics and readers to treat them as specimens, making for a kind of tacit silence around their work. Is there a poem by Campos or Ginsberg that is read very differently now from when it first appeared? Is there a poem that is understood in ways other than how the poet characterizes it? Due to the fairly low energy of the critical enterprise around their work, I think the answer to such questions is no. The relation between these two contemporaneous programs, one might observe,
is between alternative construals of the European and American modernist tradition that draw out different agendas for a postmodernist poetics, each with its own cast of forebears, a particular vantage on past and present, and its own approach to knowledge. Campos and Ginsberg, and beyond them the Beat and Noigandres poets, are not unrelated or irrelevant to each other, but alternatives and often obverses. They are much more mutually relevant than they would allow, enabling us to put them into a reciprocal commentary—and not incidentally, to use their alternative vantages to revive the critical discussion that has stalled over them as singular figures.

I choose the moments of Ginsberg’s *Kaddish* and Campos’ *Galáxias* because they find both poets at a second stage or transition: expanding the cultural and intellectual resources available to them, getting past the protocols and styles that served for their early work, and traveling, both literally and figuratively. This phase of Ginsberg’s work was provoked by his travel to Europe and Latin America, where he began to develop what one biographer has called “a global consciousness”; Campos’ turn toward *Galáxias* was catalyzed by his first trip to Europe, including a return through the Brazilian northeast during which he “rediscover[ed] Brazil via the world. The hybrid and the ecumenical.” In each case, the second stage is activated by a new awareness of a particular American vantage or location installed in the world; in each case the transition involves a poetry differently oriented—speaking within a broader circumscription, addressing the world as a concept in metaphysical as well as geopolitical terms—and a struggle to produce poems that acknowledge, include, capture the world. On these terms two poets who built alternative versions of a postmodern poetics move closer to each other, and the poems of these moments sometimes dissolve into voices that make Ginsberg sound like Campos and vice versa. And in their transitions, Ginsberg and Campos produce poems that might be treated as obverses, or alternative engagements with problems of history and knowledge.

To me, the most revealing episodes in their work of the late 1950s and early sixties are those poems in which they seem to reach an impasse within their established poetics, and to struggle with the impulse toward each other’s poetic program. In Ginsberg’s case, this juncture is part of a long search for a visionary poetics that dates back to “Psalm I” (1949) and continues through “Angkor Wat” (1963). The late fifties see a deepening sense of the stakes involved in his writing, and an agitated inventory of lyric and prophetic possibilities. In this set of poems, the deeply moving verbal overcharge of “Kaddish” is followed by a return to the elegiac concerns of that poem (“o mother / what have I left out / o mother / what have I forgotten”) and then a struggle to emplace those concerns in a wider setting of metaphysical speculation:

> I cry out where I am in the music, to the room, to whomever near, you, Are you God?
> No, do you want me to be God?
> Is there no Answer?
> Must there always be an Answer? you reply,
> and were it up to me to say Yes or No—
> Thank God I am not God! Thank God I am not God!
> But that I long for a Yes of Harmony to penetrate
to every corner of the universe, under every condition whatsoever
a Yes there Is . . . a Yes I Am . . . a Yes You Are . . . a We

It seems that the balance of forces of Ginsberg’s early poetry, from "The Green Automobile" through *Reality Sandwiches*, has been displaced by something more searching and volatile—an explicit search for God as presence—that makes his usual volatility seem legible and obvious. The poetic style that Marjorie Perloff, Charles Molesworth, and others have described authoritatively is firmly in place by the writing of “Kaddish,” but this is something else, a register (as James Scully has it) like Henry Vaughan more than William Blake. The open questioning of these poems, I think, is an improvised response (and not always an especially convincing one) to this newly opened prospect.

Into this setting, following on the anaphoric and manically idealist "Lysergic Acid," comes "I Beg You Come Back & Be Cheerful," an understated and ironic essay at the same questions:

> Radiant clouds, I have heard God's voice in
> my sleep, or Blake's awake, or my own or
> the dream of a delicatessen of snorting cows
> and bellowing pigs—
> The chop of a knife
> a finger severed in my brain—
> a few deaths I know—
> O brothers of the Laurel
> Is the world real?
> Is the Laurel
> a joke or a crown of thorns?

Then appears a quatrain that stands apart from the poem, and from nearly everything Ginsberg has written from "Howl" (1956) to this point. In the first instance its power is in its unlikeness to his usual mode of perception, in that the quatrain parodies his entire corpus, including his mode of composition and his sex life, in four short lines:

> Fast, pass
> up the ass
> Down I go
> Cometh woe
When Ginsberg's characteristic verbal order is in place—"a swirling, flashing registry of states of consciousness in which perceptions are constantly disarranged, even deranged"—there is no room for this kind of unsparing, minimalist observation. For that matter, short lines stitched together by rhymes instead of anaphora, gathered at their ends rather than their beginnings, make for a low-key but startling interruption in his outlook. End-rhymed lines—of which there is none in Ginsberg's poetry since before "Howl"—make a different thoughtprint than anaphoric lines. More than a stylistic departure, they belie the spontaneous ethic of Ginsberg's work and represent a distance from immediate experience, a coming to conclusions, that he seldom entertains. Later on, this kind of short end-rhymed line will become the mode of ironic reflection on sex, a post-coital ruefulness. But here, where a fit of questioning gives way to answers, Ginsberg is trying to change frequencies. This urge becomes manifest in an especially striking moment. After four lines of observation of the Manhattan cityscape, there follows this calligram:

Calligram

I take it that what matters here is a poet of one well-defined sensibility not only speaking in an unaccustomed voice but exploding voice altogether to reach after something that counts as almost inexpressible to his poetics: a metaphysical order that makes his poem into an epistemological challenge, a sketch of something beyond words, a child's drawing. Where Ginsberg began this set of poems by posing questions—what and where is God? how can we conceive of this world within other worlds?—he now arrives at provisional answers in a hushed tone, about himself and about the world. For a mind accustomed to launching questions and observations paratactically from the same perch, these conclusions unsettle the poetry. Changing his vantage on reality and substituting the shape of "worlds," in the imprecise form of the calligram, for the shape of his own thinking, Ginsberg's speaker turns his poem inside out. He suspends the observation of nature as it presents itself, and resorts instead to an end-driven recording of rhythms and patterns. He tries to get the world and what is beyond the world, rather than the usual subjective self, into his poem. The striking moment is not the calligram, however, but the concluding lines in which a speaker who started from a pose of self-absorption ("Tonite I got hi in the window of my apartment") gestures toward something infinitely remote: "These Galaxies cross like pinwheels & they pass / like gas." The key term "galaxies" reveals the metaphysical object out of reach of this poet of excess and indiscipline; it names the invisible horizon that has exerted pressure on this poem since the transitional quatrain, to which these lines return ("they pass like gas" revisits "fast, pass / up the ass"), the outer limit of this poem's thinking. It says: this poet can evoke the world, and worlds beyond the world. He is writing to an enlarged horizon.

"I Beg You Come Back & Be Cheerful" leaves us in a place uncharacteristic of Ginsberg's early poetry but necessary to the turn his work takes after about 1960, where the aspects of his outlook—confessional, political, and metaphysical—are recombined and (in Joseph Lease's nice phrase) braided together again. The term "galaxies" encodes a sense of heightened stakes, as if the charter of the poems has come to include the representation of worlds, and worlds within worlds, around the confessional first person. When we read in the poem "Aether":

Stop conceiving worlds!
says Philip Whalen
(My Savior!) (oh what snobbery!)

We should understand that these poems of 1959 represent a seeking after a new mode of thinking as well as a new descriptive protocol. On these poems depends the achievement of Ginsberg's finest poem of the 1960s, "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966), in which he speaks from the vantage of a prophet who straddles worlds ("in Kansas or other universe") and declares the end of the Vietnam War. The
Way to lines that do not end at all but recommence again and again; the short, highly concentrated lines of the concrete poetry and of the concrete poems of the collection 

"Lost in the Cities" (1957) is the first item in the series: Where Ginsberg's expansive effort at rhyme and a redrawn horizon. The short, highly concentrated lines of the concrete poetry and of the semantic variations in *Fome de Forma* give way to lines that do not end at all but recommence again and again; the stance and tone are like that of a Whitman reached by a back-
formation through modernism, especially Joyce and Stein. And as in Popper’s account of constellations, Campos imagines, as Ginsberg did in his reverie, a poetry whose “fully determined” structure reflects that of the universe, whose past and future is nothing but its movements. Suppose there were a poetry that fused the personal and the metaphysical without the mediation of the social, which would obviate ceremonialism; suppose there were a poetry whose shape traced the shape of the world and the universe.

The program piece of Galáxias is the prose poem “circuladô de fulô”:

circuladô de fulô ao deus ao demodará que deus te guie porque eu não
posso guiá eviva quem já me deu circuladô de fulô e ainda quem falta me
dá soando um shamisen e feito apenas com um arame tenso um cabo e
uma lata velha num fim de festaferia no pino do sol a pino mas para
outros não existia aquela música não podia porque não podia popular
aquela música se não canta não é popular se não afina não tintiná não
tarantina e no entanto puxada na tripa da miséria na tripa tensa da mais
megera miséria física e doendo doendo como um prego na palma da mão um
ferrugem prego cego na palma espalma da mão coração exposto como um nervo
tenso retensão um renegado prego cego durando na palma polpa da mão ao sol

(‘rounded by flowers under god’s under devil’s mercy god shall guide you for I myself
can’t guide godless those who give ‘rounded by flowers and those who are still
to give sounding like a samisen made of a tensed wire a stick
and an old tin can at the end of the partyfair at highnoonhigh but for
many that music did not exist it could not because it could not popplay
if not sung that music is not popular if not in tune it does not atone nor
tarantina and yet struck in the gut of misery in the tensed gut of the meagerest
physical misery aching aching like a nail in the handpalm a
rusty blind nail in the palm clasping palm of the handheart exposed as a tensed nerve
retensed a renigrated blind nail everlasting in the palm pulp of the hand in the sun) [35]

For readers acquainted with Campos’ earlier work, the most arresting dimension of this collection is likely to be its verbal profusion. A poetics of strict economy—with a minimalist attention to morphemes, phonemes, and lineation—has been replaced by a no less attentive repetition of indelible words and phrases. “Circuladô de fulô”—the phrase is ambiguous, but means something like “surrounded by flowers” (the translator A. S. Bessa’s rendering) or “circulator of flowers”—adapts language of long derivation in the Brazilian and Portuguese lyric traditions, but directly evokes the minstrelsy of northeastern Brazil. The opening phrase, in which “fulô” seems to be “flor” (flower) with a vowel added by epenthesis and the final consonant elided, is probably an epithet for the minstrel himself: he who makes and is made by the flowers of rhetoric. What is distinctive to the moment of Galáxias, however, is the metaphysical perspective of this poem: “under god’s under the devil’s mercy god shall guide you for I myself can’t guide godless those who give me” stands out from Campos’ work for its remarkable concatenation of the ethical and the divine. While some of the earlier poetry implies a similar perspective, as in some of the semantic variations in Forma de Fome:

homen senhor
homen servo
homen sobre
homen sob[36]

(man sir
man servant
man over
man under)

Little in Campos’ program to this point allows him to think his way directly from the experimental to the divine, from semantics to metaphysics. From the first poem’s envisioning of a textual space “where the end is the beginning,” Galáxias involves a number of such efforts to explode the boundaries of the earlier poetry—none more thoroughly than “Circuladô de fulô,” with its positing of a modern, provincial trobar clus that claims some of the wrenching force of a crucifixion and realizes through that power a moral renewal (“if not in tune it does not atone”).

At a threshold for their poetries, then, Ginsberg and Campos cross paths, one tending toward the gnomic and the concrete, and the other pulling away from these modes—but both in search of a poetry of greater knowledge. The Ginsberg and Campos suites are obverses in that they represent alternative constructions of a single problem—how to expand a poetic horizon to galactic dimensions, and how to embed specifically American language and experience within that new horizon—delivered contemporaneously, even as other artists of the Americas were examining a galactic or constellative horizon for what it could offer them. For Ginsberg this adjustment opened a new galaxy that remained intermittently available, inflecting but not quite transforming his poetries, while for Campos it represented a decisive shift toward a new kind of writing. While this turn in their work can be understood as an episode in their particular careers, I think it makes a different sort of sense in an inter-american setting, where two considerably different premises for poetry came to discover a common space adjacent to both of them. The modes of the Beats and the Noigandres poets still do not touch one another, but in Ginsberg and Campos circa 1960 they have an imaginable relation.
Finally, I would like to reflect on the future of a hemispheric approach to poetry by briefly considering the possible third term in the relation between Ginsberg and Campos: namely, the poet whom Ginsberg addresses in "To an Old Poet in Peru," the elderly modernist Martin Adán (1908-1985). Adán was one of the leading figures in Peruvian modernism but almost unknown outside his country; his experiments with sonnets that overturned the unacknowledged political conventions of the form were celebrated by the political philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui in a classic essay called "The Anti-Sonnet" (1928). [37]

To Ginsberg, Adán is an intriguing but finally unassimilable figure, whose formally rigorous lyrics seem to have little to say to his own volatile poems. Campos for his part seems to have had little awareness of Adán, even though La Casa de Cartón (The Cardboard House, 1928), Adán's experimental narrative that appeared at the same time as several modernist works of Brazil, participates (though not by name) in the "cultural cannibalism" that Campos ostentatiously adapts from that generation. [38] Adán's relevance is that, where Ginsberg and Campos seek the capacious voices and access to metaphysics represented by their poems circa 1960, he had already cultivated such a poetry for about thirty years when his sequence La Mano Desasida (The Hand Let Go) appeared in 1960. One might observe that, while the Brazilian and the American poets cross each other, the Peruvian poet is between them but illegible to both. Ginsberg's "To an Old Poet in Peru" is about crossed trajectories that yield no illumination. While Adán has explored the potential of a metaphysical poetry of the Americas, his work hardly matters to Ginsberg, who sees their encounter as fruitless:

Your indifference! my enthusiasm!
I insist! You cough!
Lost in the wave of Gold that
flows thru the Cosmos.
Agh I'm tired of insisting! Goodbye,
I'm going to Pucallpa
to have Visions.
Your clean sonnets?
I want to read your dirtiest
secret scribblings,
your Hope,
in His most Obscene Magnificence. My God! [39]

The poem ends with both poets walking off to their own metaphysical experiments, stuck in mutual incomprehension.

A parable of the poetries of the Americas, Ginsberg's poem reminds us that the hemispheric canon, if such a thing exists, is held together by misapprehensions and resistances as much as by affinities and recognitions, and that mutual ignorance—with its reckless experiments, inadvertent conversations, and obversals—often has more power than understanding. Quests after knowledge like those of Ginsberg and Campos become all the more moving, I believe, when they are both compromised and empowered by the versions of ignorance and insensibility we have seen (Campos toward Whitman; Ginsberg toward Adán; Campos and Ginsberg toward one another). In answer to Guillén and Jameson, where is the comparative agenda that will show us how to read for these omissions? How will we write the history of a hemispheric poetry in these terms? The relation between obverses that I draft here is only a start toward explaining the poetries of the Americas as a set of relations and the problems around them. In the inter-american setting, we are always discovering that the problems are as compelling as the relations.

[1] For example, to cite only books, overviews such as Earl E. Fitz, Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literatures in a Comparative Context (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991); monographic books on particular authors like Julio Marzán, The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); and outward-looking revisions of the United States' literary and cultural history such as Kirsten Silva Gruesz, Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).


This remark from a biographical sketch of the 1980s is quoted in A. S. Bessa's introduction to Galáxias: <http://www.ubu.com/ethno/poems/decampos_galaxias.html>.


Molesworth, The Fierce Embrace, 38.


Ginsberg, Collected Poems, 249.


Olson, Human Universe, 4.

Haroldo de Campos, Galáxias (São Paulo: Editora Ex Libris, 1984), n.p. The translation is mine. In the version of "e começo aqui" published in Campos’ Xadrez de Estrelas: Percuro Textual 1949-1974 (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1976), 200, this poem like the others in the series is printed in roman rather than italic type. In the edition of Galáxias from which I quote, "e começo aqui" is the only poem in italic.