

## The Complications of Resistance in Márcio-André's *Ensaaios Radioativos*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the possibilities and limits of resistance in *Ensaaios Radioativos* (2008), Brazilian poet Márcio-André's account of his 2007 visit to Chernobyl. I consider the book's various displays of resistance in service of a poetics of radical surrender. In particular, I examine how the essays and the performances they document rely on a notion of global ecology in order to upend the longstanding binary opposition of center/periphery that weighs on Brazilian literature. For all its dependence on interconnectedness, however, the work does not accord smoothly with current ideas of environmentality (Morton) or ecocosmopolitanism (Heise), therefore complicating its acceptance as an eco-poetical text. Ultimately, while the project's global focus suggests a resistance to *brasilidade* and national insularity, the *ensaaios* are preoccupied above all with reinforcing the importance of national language and rewriting Brazilian avant-garde tradition.

**KEYWORDS:** Márcio-André, Chernobyl

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa as possibilidades e os limites de resistência em *Ensaaios Radioativos* (2008) de Márcio-André, em que o poeta brasileiro relata sua visita a Chernobyl em 2007. Considero que as várias maneiras de registrar a resistência no livro estão a serviço de uma poética de rendição radical. Examinado especialmente como os ensaios e as performances que eles documentam dependem de uma noção de ecologia global, a fim de derrubar a antiga oposição binária entre centro e periferia que oprime a literatura brasileira. Porém, apesar de toda a sua dependência na interconexão, a obra não está de acordo com as ideias atuais de "environmentality" (Morton) ou "ecocosmopolitanism" (Heise), complicando, portanto, a sua recepção como um texto eco-poético. Enfim, enquanto o foco global do projeto sugere uma resistência à brasilidade e à insularidade nacional, os *ensaaios* estão preocupados sobretudo com o reforço da importância da língua nacional e com o ato de reescrever a tradição vanguardista brasileira.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Márcio-André, Chernobyl

Not everyone desires to become Brazil's first radioactive poet. But in 2007, Márcio-André made it his task. Leaving his home in Rio de Janeiro, he set out on a short tour of Europe, hopping from poetry conference to poetry conference, culminating finally in Chernobyl, where he staged, alone, "a 1ª Conferência poético-radioativa de Pripyat" [The 1<sup>st</sup> Poetic-Radioactive Conference of Pripyat] (Márcio-André 2008: 203). Márcio-André documents this performance in a series of essays collected along with his other writings on poetry, philosophy, and contemporary culture in his 2008 book, *Ensaio Radioativos* [*Radioactive Essays*]. The work explores contamination as a metaphor for poetry, artistic creation, and ultimately, existence.

Because Márcio-André's "radioactive poetry" or "contamination poetics" engages with the contemporary idea of a global environment, and of global environmental crisis, it may be read as a work of ecopoetics. Yet although *Ensaio Radioativos* takes as its theme the radioactive contamination at Chernobyl, it resists engaging the fact of environmental crisis. This resistance is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the book.

More often than not, the idea of resistance in poetry is positive. Poetry acts as resistance to repression, or resistance to the ordinary. Powerful poetic language shows a "resistance to communicate in received ways", as U.S. poet Joshua Marie Wilkinson has noted (Wilkinson 2011). In resistance lies freedom.

What then to make of a statement, vis-à-vis Chernobyl, such as "nunca havia me comovido a tragédia de 1986 e os milhares de mortos e desterrados" [I was never moved by the tragedy of 1986 and the thousands of dead and displaced] (*idem*: 206)? What of resistance to siding with those affected by tragedy? What of resistance, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a text about radioactivity and contamination, to environmental consciousness?

And what, moreover, to make of the book's various displays of resistance in service of its poetics of radical surrender?

In the book's opening essay, "Contaminações" [Contaminations], Márcio-André presents contamination as his metaphor for artistic production, and indeed, the state of the world. He writes,

Para mim, tudo se resume a uma única complexidade, bem simples: tudo é parte de tudo [...]

Ao meu ver (e ao ver dos Antigos), nunca houve separação entre música, poesia, teatro,

dança e pensamento. Todas são uma única coisa que pode se apresentar com diversas formas materiais. (*idem*: 14)

[For me, everything can be summed up in a single, simple complexity: everything is part of everything...In my view (and the view of the Ancients), there was never a separation between music, poetry, dance and thought. All these are one thing that can present itself in various material forms].

As a multimedia poet who often performs playing violin—or playing a bicycle tire with a violin bow—the mixing of forms *is* Márcio-André's work.

With contamination as his metaphor for art, as well as for global circulation—of icons, of human culture, of radiation—the body *in situ* at Chernobyl becomes essential to the “concretiza[ção]” [concretization] of a poetics of contamination (*idem*: 150). Márcio-André claims to have been contaminated first by an unshakable desire to visit Pripjat, and stage the town's first literary conference (*apud idem*: 149). The iconicity of Chernobyl draws him to the site. At the beginning of “Crônicas de uma viagem ao fim do mundo” [Chronicles of a journey to the end of the world], the centerpiece cycle of essays in *Ensaaios Radioativos*, he writes, “Fascinava-me, antes de tudo, o fato de em Pripjat [...] tal emanção vir a concretizar-se” [I was fascinated above all with the fact that in Pripjat... that emanation became concrete] (*idem*: 150). A global icon of nuclear disaster thus becomes his object of pursuit.

The poet, however, has no interest in the nuclear disaster or its effects *per se*. As he writes, “nunca havia me comovido a tragédia de 1986 e os milhares de mortos e desterrados” [I was never moved by the tragedy of 1986 and the thousands of dead and displaced] (*idem*: 206). Not only disinterested in the victims, he expressly is interested in risking radiation exposure himself. What might seem grave risk is, for him, an act of radical surrender:

Escrever um poema, executar uma música, fazer uma performance em uma cidade fantasma é um ato corporal por inteiro—isto é, reivindicar no corpo de outra coisa o seu próprio corpo—, e se for, pois, para desenvolver um tumor, que se desenvolva, ele não é nada mais que o fruto sincero dessa contaminação. Não há poesia desvencilhada da vida, nem vida desvencilhada da poesia—tudo o que sonhamos é real. (*idem*: 15)

[To write a poem, play a song, enact a performance in a ghost town is a fully corporeal act—it is to claim in the body of another thing one's own body—and if it were to lead to the development of a tumor, which develops itself, that would be nothing more than the sincere fruit of this contamination. There is no poetry disentangled from life, nor life disentangled from poetry—all that we dream is real.]

The writing of a poem, the creation of art, is bodily work. This particular passage calls to mind Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropófago" (1928) in its reversal of the anthropophagist idea. Rather than incorporating other influences into the self in a process of creative assimilation and production, Márcio-André proposes "reivindicar no corpo de outra coisa o seu próprio corpo" [claim[ing] in the body of another thing one's own body], that is, giving oneself over to one's environment, acknowledging the state of exchange in which all matter exists (*ibidem*). Márcio-André does not necessarily intend to rewrite anthropophagy; rather, he earnestly proposes an artistic idea based on post-nuclear knowledge and global events. The radical risk inherent in his destination speaks to the poet's taking advantage of contemporary globalization and a world in which "environment" is understood in global, boundary-crossing terms. At the same time, his approach to the potential development of a tumor—blasé, if not glorifying—speaks to his project's sensationalist and eyebrow-raising "aestheticization of risk" (Heise 2008: 202).

Márcio-André at once acknowledges risk and brushes it off, as "o fruto sincero" [the sincere fruit] of contamination, as a natural growth (*ibidem*). His approach to the risk of radioactive contamination draws on several discourses. Historically, it echoes the rhetoric with which nuclear reactors were dissociated from the nuclear bomb in the cultural imagination after 1945. United States historian Natasha Zaretsky wrote earlier this year, in the wake of Fukushima, that even as fear of nuclear war persisted after 1945, "proponents of civilian nuclear energy attempted to dissociate nuclear reactors from weapons [...] At the heart of this transformation was the claim that radiation was a part of—rather than a threat to—the natural world" (Zaretsky 2011).<sup>1</sup> Even if only for the sake of an aesthetics, Márcio-André appears to believe this claim. His acceptance of it, however, is also his artistic use of it. Following yet another Brazilian Modernist dictate, he takes full creative advantage of the abundant natural resource of his age: radioactivity.

In visiting Pripjat, Márcio-André incorporates and concretizes risk (just as he sees Pripjat itself as the concretization of otherwise imperceptible radiation). He literalizes the risk paradigm offered by Augusto de Campos's 1995 slogan, "Poesia é risco" [Poetry is risk], from de Campos's multimedia performance of the same name. At the same time, he insists on a world where risk is always already present. In this way, risk, in the form of radiation, is already a part of popular culture. Márcio-André's journey is a kind of "extreme poetry" that utilizes the elements of popular culture and the banal and ordinary. The text and the project engage and profit from an icon of global environmental disaster. His stunt is self-indulgent and suggests a high sense of personal security; at the same time, he surely knows the humor of it. He is attempting something at once strange and sanctioned, since Pripjat opened for tourism in 2002. Constructed as they are of artifacts of popular culture, Márcio-André's visit to Chernobyl and his *Ensaaios radioativos* are 21<sup>st</sup>-century Pop Art.

The pop aesthetics of the project may help account for the fact that the text confesses multiple wishes of resistance and at the same time capitulates to the very things it purports to want to resist. For example, the author states that he deplores confessionalism, yet he writes a self-indulgent text. (He is not specific about why he dislikes confessional poetry.) He claims never to have thought about the destruction at Chernobyl, but through this confession acknowledges that clearly he has thought about it. Finally, in what appears to be a globally engaged project, the text takes care to reinforce national boundaries and the importance of national language. The poet litters Pripjat with books written in or translated into Portuguese; he leaves a letter in Portuguese for a future lusophone visitor. The other essays that make up "Crônicas de uma viagem ao fim do mundo" repeatedly underscore the poet's linguistic alienation from people who are not Brazilian or Portuguese. Márcio-André's choice to visit a global, non-Brazilian icon of technological disaster (as opposed to, say, a home-based global environmental icon such as the Amazon rainforest) in one sense supports the idea, cited by Charles Perrone, that "the previous common preoccupation with *brasilidade*, or Brazilianness, in national letters has passed, in deed and idea, to a 'transnacionalidade comportamental'—behaviorial transnationality" (Perrone 2010: 34).<sup>2</sup> *Ensaaios Radioativos* certainly seems to reflect "behaviorial transnationality," and yet the

essays also repeatedly underscore the poet's place within a Brazilian poetic lineage and language.

The text, then, though relying on a notion of global ecology to upend artificial divisions and boundaries, including the traditional literary debate between center and periphery, strongly resists displaying any global ecological vision or sentiment. It has all the potential makings of what critic Ursula Heise calls an “ecocosmopolitan” text—a text that acknowledges and grapples with global ecology and environmental risk, a text that aesthetically accounts for complex interconnectedness on earth (*apud* Heise 2008). And yet, in spite of initial statements about “uma única complexidade, bem simples” and an overriding message that “tudo é parte de tudo”, the work falls short of ecocosmopolitan success (Márcio-André 2008: 14). Similarly, it acknowledges global interconnectedness outright, in language and in the poet's performance of surrendering his own body to radioactive contamination, and yet the text seems to resist what Timothy Morton has dubbed “environmentality”, or ecological thinking (*apud* Morton 2010).

Instead, the project's global focus betrays its preoccupation with reinforcing the importance of national language and rewriting Brazilian avant-garde tradition. Márcio-André reverses anthropophagy. He subverts the Noigandres Concrete Poets' practice of making a poem-object that is universally readable despite being written in Portuguese. At the same time, his insistence on the importance of Brazilian identity and literature refuses to put such literature in the place of “periphery.” The notion of contamination, of everything being everything, erases the center and converts all into periphery or margin.

“Chernobyl”, the final essay in the book, concludes with an image of the sun radiating down its orange face. Pripyat

já era um bloco de prédios ociosos à distância quando o sol reapareceu pintando sua face de laranja. [...] Ninguém conversou durante a viagem de retorno e eu, olhando a paisagem, experimentava o estranho sentimento de que havia esse tempo todo enganado deus e vivido num outro corpo — eu já não retornava, nem ia embora. Nada era casa, pois nada era centro — mas sempre margem, da qual estávamos sempre partindo. Foi em meio a esse sentimento que vi, à distância, uma manada de cavalos atravessar a estrada. (Márcio-André 2008: 207)

[was already a block of hollow buildings in the distance when the sun reappeared in its orange face. [...] No one spoke during the drive out, and I, looking at the landscape, experienced the strange sensation of having fooled god the whole time by living in another body — I still hadn't returned, nor ever left. Nothing was home, since nothing was center — but always margin, from which we were always parting. And in the midst of this feeling, I saw in the distance a group of horses crossing the highway.]

At the end of the journey comes the work of purification, as well as the invocation of center and margin, the poet's literary preoccupation ever present. He has discovered that in the globally connected, contaminated world, nowhere is definitively home. There is, paradoxically, no center then, only ever margin—the margin that refers back to Brazil—"da qual estávamos sempre partindo" [from which we were always parting]. *Partir*—"always parting," always splitting like atoms, always departing like the poet from place to place.

The most successful resistance in *Ensaaios Radioativos* is thus the resistance to the old center/margin binary. The poet's final vision on leaving Pripjat reverses the traditional position: his tropics are in disarray, but here in the ruins of development, nature and human vision/ fantasy, indistinguishable from each other, run free. What persists is the incoherence of reality, the contamination of art with art, of everything with everything, and the importance of Brazilian language, whose "partir" evokes so many meanings at once.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Age of the World Target*, Rey Chow underscores that after the bomb, war technology persists into peacetime technology, and that the state of “peace” is in fact undergirded and infiltrated permanently by the presence of war. Humans are left “to confront the terror that is the basis of our everyday life” (Chow 2006: 208). Nuclear reactors are one example of the transition of wartime technology into peacetime use. Zaretsky points out the historical root of such transition and erasure.

<sup>2</sup> See Perrone 2010: 34 and n6. Perrone cites a personal interview with poet Moacir Amâncio in 1999.