

IMBRICATIONS BETWEEN MEMORY AND IDENTITY
IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE:
THE CASE OF PEDRO NAVA AND HIS CHEST OF BONES*

Gilberto Alves ARAÚJO[√]
Gizélia Maria da Silva FREITAS^{√√}

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly analyzes *Baú de Ossos* [*Chest of Bones*¹], by Pedro Nava, to discuss the construction of the Brazilian imaginary, emphasizing the concepts of memory and identity. Preliminary findings indicate that the novel goes much beyond the modernist features commonly assigned to it, allowing us to explore fluidity and mobility contexts, loss, absence, melancholy, and uncertainty. Resorting to a cathartic journey through the continuum of space and time, Nava seems to reduce the incompleteness and poverty of humankind. On the one hand, his writing, following patterns of an autobiographic pact, makes him a protagonist in his own narrative and promotes an acute consciousness of himself, his fragmented and held-responsible being. On the other hand, his occupation as an anatomist makes him see himself as a result of a much bigger collectivity, which, in a certain way, explains him, involves him, and provides him with reasons to be and exist.

Keywords: Autobiography. Brazilian literature. Identity. Latin American literature. Memory.

1 INTRODUCTION

By articulating the memory of a group (genealogical memory) with individual memory, we analyze in this article the autobiographical novel by Pedro Nava (1974), **Baú de Ossos** [**Chest of Bones**]. In this sense, we intend to relate here both a private memory (memory of childhood, for example) and semantic-historical

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[√] PhD in Media Studies and Associate Researcher at The University of the Witwatersrand. Assistant Professor at Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA). E-mail: <gilbertoa.araujo@yahoo.com.br>.

^{√√} Master's Degree in Applied Linguistics and Associate Professor at Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA). E-mail: <gizelia.freitas@gmail.com>.

¹ Our translation.

memories, in which accounts of the ancestors are retold by the family and/or archives such as letters, official documents, photos, and other particular objects. Accordingly, we should be able to analyze and discuss the construction of the Brazilian imaginary and the projection of Brazilian identities through this particular literary work. To do that, we take into consideration the concepts of memory and identity according to Artières (1998) and Candau (2012). We also explore the notions of autobiography and national identity, following Candido (2006; 1989) and Lejeune (2008), Pollak (1992), and Hall (2005), among other theoreticians.

Although such references may sound slightly outdated to some readers, they epitomize the most relevant body of theoretical works about the topics we set ourselves to explore in this paper, which revolves around the ideas of memory, identity, and nation. Additionally, the selection of the abovementioned theoreticians is likewise an effect of an epistemological program focused on diversity, groundbreaking significance, and representativeness, not to mention that their names are widely renowned in the field they work in; therefore, their pivotal ideas are more easily recognized by readers.

Regarding the memorialist work in question, its author, Pedro Nava, presents a narrative about his ancestors and childhood ranging from events that take place in the 18th century to those at the end of the 1960s. In this trajectory, the narrator emphasizes the relations between Nava's ancestors and the city of Juiz de Fora's configuration, alongside Minas Gerais', Ceará's, and Rio de Janeiro's – states in Northeastern and Southeastern Brazil. In addition to that, his work approaches the family's relation with Brazilian politics, as well as quite private memories of many of the characters in that narrative.

In the first pages, we can already notice a clear attempt to reconstruct a past trajectory. Bringing in an epigraph from the poem **Profundamente [Profoundly]**, by Manuel Bandeira (1980, p. 37) – an icon of the Brazilian Modernist Movement –, Nava deals mainly with the ancestors that no longer inhabit the same time as the narrator's work, since "All of them are asleep / All of them are lying down / Sleeping / Profoundly" ["Estão todos dormindo / Estão todos deitados / Dormindo / Profundamente"].

With a wealth of details about the stories of relatives that lived during the 18th and 19th centuries, the narrative leads the reader to immerse in a memory involved by an atmosphere of fiction. Resorting heavily to the artifacts that are archived by several family branches, Nava makes present those memories that his own family inhabits, and he is able to do it not only through a profusion of minutia but also by infusing them with a very subtle, yet sarcastic/mocking kind of humor.

An interesting example of the narrator's ability to operate those detailed recollections is one passage about his maternal grandaunt, Mrs. Irifila, who remained in the family annals through oral history, besides being retrievable from the family archives (crystal and silver objects inherited by her descendants). In this particular episode, the grandaunt decides to teach her husband a lesson because her spouse used to enjoy gambling at the couple's home, something Mrs. Irifila detested:

Her serving trays, coffeepots, and sugar bowls had never received such fine polishing. She had never taken so many lace tablecloths out of the chests and dressers, perfumed with fragrant spike-sedge. Her linen napkins had never received such fine polishing. [...] And in the middle of the biggest serving tray, the tallest compote with the dessert of the day – showing up all dark and glossy, through the facets of a thick crystal, looking dusky and delicious as a floppy banana, as a cashew paste, as a cushion of raisins with black plums, as a bark of guava with panela. The commendator, glowing, uncapped the compote: it was full, up to the brim, of lively shit. [...] I didn't get to know the Iclairérico-Irifila couple except by hearing people talk about them. [...] From Irifila only her shadow remained in the family's collection of anecdotes (NAVA 1974, p. 30-31) [our translation²].

As we shall see, Nava's work is replete with meticulous memories that receive extra attention through his often calculated and, at times, poetical descriptions. These memories deal with specific moments that define both the identity of the recollected subjects and the culture of which they are part, exactly as it happens to Mrs. Irifila above, who is always remembered as a woman with a strong and controlling personality, yet a common female archetype from Brazilian society.

² “Nunca suas bandejas, seus bules e seus açucareiros de prata tinham tido tal polimento. Nunca tirara tanta toalha de renda das arcas e das cômodas perfumadas a capim-cheiroso. Nunca seus guardanapos de linho tinham recebido tal polimento. [...] E no meio da maior bandeja, a mais alta compoteira com o doce do dia - aparecendo todo escuro e lustroso, através das facetas do cristal grosso, de um pardo saboroso como o da banana mole, da pasta de caju, do colchão de passas com ameixas pretas, do cascão de goiaba com rapadura. O comendador resplandecente destampou a compoteira: estava cheia, até as bordas, de merda viva. [...] Não conheci o casal Iclairérico-Irifila senão de ouvir dizer. [...] Da Irifila ficou apenas a sombra no anedatório familiar” (Nava 1974, p. 30-31).

2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Considering the theoretical references abovementioned and employed throughout this paper, we commit ourselves to a qualitative analysis from a discursive perspective, as the following sections of this work evince. Inspired by Azungah (2018) and Paesani (2005), we discuss the novel's ultimate meaning effects and semantic construction processes by resorting to two types of general procedures, deductive and inductive, respectively.

At times, following overall principles by Azungah (2018), we approach theoretical assumptions first, exploring/altering and/or supporting such conceptions with evidence from the actual literary text. At the same time, it is not just about observing and explaining conceptual instantiation in the literature but also about understanding multiple aspects of its functioning in an actual literary work, with all its intrinsicality.

In other cases, we resort to a more inductive enterprise, as suggested by Paesani (2005); that is, we approach key literary passages to analyze the operationalization of relevant concepts regarding memory and identity from them. In this situation, conceptions are metaphorically drawn out of the literary material and then confronted with previous definitions provided by theoreticians, particularly selected for the discussions in this paper.

3 PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MEMORY AND IDENTITY

There are many meanings assigned to experiences that generally constitute human identities. Evidently, these meanings are built not only from concrete events in the everyday world, such as social interactions but also from the positions or roles a particular subject plays within social structures of a certain space and point in time. Consequently, saying 'who I am' is necessarily inserted in a narrative about the past (recollected); that is, it implies an understanding of who 'I' was or have been, about what relations with the past and ancestors are employed in the configuration of that subject. In this case, identity is obviously comprised of memory as well: a memory

from a larger social group, from family (genealogical memory), from a collectiveness, and/or, in other instances, from the subject that characterizes themselves through an individualized form – as one might notice from **self-made man** narratives³, for example.

Under these circumstances, identity formation becomes inevitably related to memory, to an experienced past. This means that memory helps define identity but does not characterize itself as a determiner of the latter. Candau (2012) discusses memory precisely within this framework. Making some considerations about how memory configures identity, the French theoretician problematizes the degrees through which a collective memory, which defines the subject incorporated into a certain group, interferes with the transformational movements of identity⁴. In addition, he argues that the collective memory should not be taken as a generalizing sampling of recollections of a social group. This sampling would reduce the memory of the subject and its specificities by considering, therefore, only what comes from the collectivized/shared dimension: “every attempt to describe a memory, common to all members of a group, based on their recollections in a given moment of their lives, is reductionist because it leaves out what is not shared” (CANDAU, 2012, p. 34).

Even though there are recurrences, each memory is particular; it passes through the private or individual experiences of a subject. Put differently, we could say that private memory is related to recollections about a past that, inside a group, have just been retained by a subject. Notwithstanding, this particular memory is also shared within a group or closely related to more collectivized versions of it.

As Halbwachs (1990, p. 51) argues, memory is always located within a group; it is always organized from a relation with the other, that is, “individual memory is a

³ Bauman (2008) argues that a coherent narrative about the past goes through a process of articulation, that is, a process of assigning meaningfulness to the story of our lives. It is within this process of articulation that we can try to disregard the other’s role, virtually considering the self only in the construction of the past. It is within this “irresistible [process of] individualization” (BAUMAN, 2008, p. 16) that the narrative of the self-made man emerges – the individual that supposedly builds himself/herself up.

⁴ This interference refers to the determination of the identity formation. For example, a person that lives in a racist community can understand, through a socialization process, the fact that a subject may be discriminated against because of his/her skin color, religious creed or culture associated with a certain race-ethnicity. Evidently, this movement occurs after one’s filiation to other identities.

point of view about collective memory, so much so that this standpoint changes according to the position one occupies in the group, and this very position also changes according to the relations one maintains with other means”.

4 MEMORY IN ARCHIVES: FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

As discussed above, the constitution of identity is undeniably connected to memory (CANDAU, 2012). In this sense, we reiterate that this memory does not always or necessarily refers to lived experiences, but it is mainly related to socially shared recollections. Furthermore, not only what a subject lives is part of their memory, but also events that are shared within a community become incorporated into what one can call ‘private memory’.

In Nava’s work, this is quite evident in several passages, especially when the narrator recollects facts archived in official documents, besides those transmitted within his family throughout the years. Through a very abundant language, these (re)signified events integrate into the memory of the ‘relayers’, that is, into the memories of those who share such recollections, even though these subjects-locutors have not experienced, in fact, such happenings. This is precisely the case of a narrative about a slave-owner lady, for example, known for her cruelty and who had been murdered by her female slave. Besides being recorded in the “annals of the judiciary in Minas Gerais state”, the event is also part of the (traumatic) memory of Nava’s grandmother, Maria Luísa, and of her brother, Júlio, when the two of them, fleeing from their mother’s care, watched the female slave being hanged for this particular crime:

It should be said in praise of my maternal grandmother and my granduncle Júlio that the two lost their senses and only became aware of themselves at home. Afterward, there were days of high fever and weeks of night terrors until the emotional burden, as in an explosion movie twisted and played backward, returned to its potential state of a simple recollection, a recollection susceptible to being re-exploded and to making happen again all that had been witnessed (NAVA 1974, p. 118) [our translation⁵].

⁵ “Seja dito em louvor de minha avó materna e de meu tio Júlio que os dois perderam os sentidos e só deram por si em casa. Depois foram dias de febre alta, semanas de terrores noturnos até que a carga emocional, como no filme de uma explosão, turcado e passado às avessas, voltasse ao seu

The vivacity through which the episode is narrated causes the impression that the narrator himself had been there during the event. Accordingly, it is as if that(those) event(s), seeming to him so natural and veridical, is(are) already incorporated into the memory of whoever verbally reproduces it(them). These private recollections and especially the shared memories are brought to the present time through an attentive narration, which is based on both the archives maintained by Nava's family and official documents that involve his relatives.

On that note, we must keep in mind that Nava's memory operates from the perspective of someone who lives in the 1960s; that is, this is about the reconstitution of the past from the viewpoint of the present. It is the present moment that organizes and selects the memories in order to make a coherent narrative in relation to both the preterit and, especially, the present time: "The memories are [...] fractured; the narratives, on their turn, are questioned; anew, they have to be elaborated to encompass the most recent reality" (RAMOS & ERTZOGUE, 2012, p. 492).

The recognition of events and places left in the past is (re)located in the light of the present, in relation to the Other: "If today's recollections had to find a place within the framework of our old recollections, inversely those recollections would adapt to the set of our current perceptions" (HALBWACHS, 1990, p. 25). Cases such as the one about the son of a freed female slave (Laura), also treated as a slave – although the law had already granted freedom to enslaved subjects under such circumstances –, exemplify quite well a particular attitude by the narrator. This is when he describes with a certain irony his family's behavior, evaluating some of his ancestors' demeanors negatively from, again, a perspective of the present:

He [Luís da Cunha] used to tolerate Laura's seasoning only and the greasy dishes by that female nigger, and he only accepted to be served by a son of hers as well, a houseboy known as *Free Birth*, because he had been born during the validity of the Viscount Rio Branco's Law. He was not a slave but lived as such in my grandparents' house since he was so attached to his mother. He didn't have any salary. He used to eat, dress, and be beaten for free (NAVA, 1974, p. 195) [our translation⁶].

estado potencial de simples lembrança, lembrança suscetível de reexplodir e tornar a fazer acontecer tudo que fora testemunhado" (NAVA, 1974, p. 118).

⁶ "Ele [Luís da Cunha] só tolerava o tempero da Laura e as gorduradas dessa negra, como também

We observe that this axiological positioning above results from the narrator's *hic et nunc* and does not necessarily represent the position of the agents involved in each narrated episode.

Besides the narrator's positioning in terms of evaluating the events, there are other actions by this locutor that might likewise establish and reveal the functioning/nature of memory. Noticing several types of documents and objects, repeatedly referenced throughout the novel as means of reconstituting the past, we are led to seriously consider what Artières (1998) indicates as 'archiving the memory', that is, selecting, classifying and maintaining artifacts that serve as subsidies to memory. In this sense, memory could be characterized as the classification process that we carry out about our (past) lifetime in accordance with a shared ideological formation. What is archived can also be regarded as a "relevant" memory, which we want to keep as evidence (NAVA, 1974, p. 184). This process is a constant movement since as we retrieve memorialist records, we also make new selections, disposing of some documents and considering other archives that rescue a memory we wish to maintain.

The classifications of the memorialist's archives point out a seemingly coherent narrative, with effects towards a supposedly univocal reading or, at least, a reading that appears to have no gaps. Based on the notion of coherence of the archived artifacts, on the narratives that are built, memory is, therefore, a configuration of an ethos by the subject who archives, not only for the self to "understand a little bit better who we are", but also for our society (ARTIÈRES, 1998, p. 10). "We spend the time like this, archiving our lives, we organize, disorganize, reclassify [...], and through these practices, we build an image, for ourselves and others" (ARTIÈRES, 1998, p. 10).

At the same time, we should highlight the fact that memory also constitutes itself into 'materiality', that is, registered memories, such as photos, documents, letters, official records, and objects in general. These archives are brought into

só admitia ser copeirado por um filho dela, moleque conhecido como o *Ventre Livre*, pois nascera já na vigência da Lei Rio Branco. Não era escravo, mas vivia como tal na casa dos meus avós, preso que era à mãe. Não tinha salário. Comia, vestia e apanhava de graça" (NAVA, 1974, p. 195).

almost all the narratives about Nava's past. Sometimes they might represent a point of contention between different versions or means to find 'the truth' about the past. In one of these instances in Nava's work, which involves disputes over a more valid version, there is the case of a particular date mentioned by his ancestors through oral stories. Although these many relatives had verbally confirmed the date, the narrator decides to challenge it anyways by resorting to a document that contradicts that specific information. This episode refers to the arrival of his maternal grandmother's first husband, German Henrique Guilherme Fernando Halfeld, in Brazil:

His biographies say that he came to Brazil in 1835. This shouldn't be true. I have in my hands a transfer document of the inventory owned by Mrs. Dorotéia Augusta Filipina, his first wife, in which it is said that in 1839, the year when she probably died, his children were at the following ages: Pedro Maria, 13 years old, Ana Antônia, 11; Francisco Mariano, 9; Josefina Antônia, 8; Fernando Feliciano, 6; Guilherme Justino, 4; and Dorotéia Ana, months. The names of Antônio Amálio and Carlos Oto are not mentioned, also from this marriage. If the oldest son was 13 years old, Halfeld's wedding must have taken place around 1825 or 1826. Therefore, his coming to Brazil (in addition to the hypothesis that he came married) coincides with the arrival of the first foreign mercenaries imported by the rising Empire (NAVA, 1974, p. 131) [our translation⁷].

Nava opposes the veracity of such a date, recorded in this German's biographies, basing his claims on a document that is under his care. Considering the inventory of Halfeld's first wife, the narrator concludes that 1835 is not the most probable date for the foreigner's arrival in Brazil because, according to the relations Nava establishes, in that year, the mentioned German was already living on Brazilian soil.

By paying careful attention to passages such as this one, we can confirm that the memorialist movement made in relation to the archived events truly organizes

⁷ "Suas biografias dizem que ele veio para o Brasil em 1835. Isto não deve ser a verdade. Tenho em mãos o traslado do inventário de Dona Dorotéia Augusta Filipina, sua primeira mulher, onde se diz que em 1839, ano provável do falecimento da mesma, seus filhos tinham as seguintes idades: Pedro Maria, 13 anos; Ana Antônia, 11; Francisco Mariano, 9; Josefina Antônia, 8; Fernando Feliciano, 6; Guilherme Justino, 4; e Dorotéia Ana, meses. Não são citados os nomes de Antônio Amálio e Carlos Oto, também desse leito. Se o filho mais velho tinha 13 anos, o casamento do Halfeld deve ter se dado aí por 1825 ou 1826. Portanto, sua vinda para o Brasil (mais a hipótese de ele ter vindo casado) coincide com a dos primeiros mercenários estrangeiros importados pelo nascente Império" (Nava, 1974, p. 131).

the whole narrative. In fact, in *Baú de Ossos* (Chest of Bones), memories are substantially based or justified with documents, which operate as starting or final points not only for recollections but also for speculations and elucubrations about the past. By talking about a specific time and the characters that move around in it, Nava ponders how recollections are performed:

Finally, genealogies serve vanity. Just a little, because thinking straight, the family trees never present themselves just in canopies but show from the past the one branch that wasn't forgotten, which was documented, the one that can appear. Because there are no families that don't come at once from both the throne and the mud (NAVA, 1974, p. 184) [our translation⁸].

This retrieving movement, contrary to what it may seem, entails not just the Nava clan but, in the political and sociocultural dimension, encompasses the discursive and identity constitution of Minas Gerais state, of Northeastern region, of Rio de Janeiro and ultimately of the Brazilian nation as an 'imagined community' (ANDERSON, 2008). Through this exhaustive memorialist work, in retrieving the past, we notice, as we have already said, an intense articulation between memory and identity, subject and society-world, since humans do not conceive themselves out of a collectivity. We notice how the narrator presents himself as a 'witness of history', the one who takes direction and organizes things (such as archives) according to a particular and individual perspective (GUSDORF apud VILLAÇA, 2008), although never out of a larger picture or a social framework for memory. Accordingly, as an inevitable refraction of the social environment, he also provides us with a cosmo-representation instead of only a self-representation.

⁸ "Finalmente, as genealogias servem à vaidade. Pouco, porque pensando bem, as árvores de família nunca se apresentam copadas, mas mostrando no passado o galho único que não ficou esquecido, que foi documentado, o que pode aparecer. Porque não existem famílias que não venham, a um só tempo, do trono e da lama" (NAVA, 1974, p. 184).

5 AUTOBIOGRAPHY, NARRATIVIZATION, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: WORKS OF FICTION

To a certain extent, the autobiography genre enables the development of all these articulations and representations abovementioned. Namely, autobiography can be understood as a “narrative in prose that a concrete person makes about their own existence when focalizing their individual story, particularly the story of their personality” (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 14). Therefore, although the narrative focuses on the self, the autobiography enables the exercise of relations between the (subject’s) self’s private life and his/her insertion into a sociocultural framework, as we have already suggested. Besides, autobiography is also able to go through the real (historical discourse) with some characteristics from the fictional text (literature) (PANICHELLI-BATALHA, 2011). This implies that, by retrieving the past through memory, the subject seeks to build himself/herself whole and cohesive inside the different contexts, situations, times, and places as he/she narrates the story. In this trajectory of auto and alter-discursivization subjects are characterized by a desire to recognize themselves in every passage. This means they try to maintain certain discursive traits to see themselves in the story, connect themselves to the social body, and simultaneously stand out in the crowd to build their ‘self’ (KEHL, 2012). From another perspective, we could say that it is the autobiographical narrative that allows us to notice, on the one hand, how these subjects keep on creating and maintaining identities under the simulacrum of unicity and originality; and on the other hand, it helps us understand how memory constitutes itself in terms of individual capability that operationalizes a set of collective representations (CANDAU, 2012).

The whole narrative of the work in question tends to revolve around one character-narrator, Pedro Nava. Through processes of association and imbrication, each object, speech, gesture, and fragment of the past converge into the construction of his identity, which can be: (i) a given set of traits through which the apparent unity and stability of a subject’s representations, or his collectivity’s, are reiterated; (ii) certain psychic and social state that is articulated or, somehow,

manifested in discourse (CANDAU, 2012).

The retrieval of the past through the autobiographical narrative by Nava, besides assigning meaning to the flowing and moving chaos that life is, generates anchors of identification, naturalizes an imagined community, and makes its transformation more difficult. In Nava's writing we can realize that memory offers historical foundations to the filiation of certain identities. This process contributes to the formation of subjects' identities and guarantees the identity structure of a group.

We reaffirm that in Nava's novel, the pursuit of identity takes place not only in relation to people, as peculiar or individual beings, but mainly in relation to a group of people, with a special focus on this congregation of subjects denominated Brazil. Resorting to borrowing and re-reading of social psychology (POLLAK, 1992), we can say that in Baú de Ossos [*Chest of Bones*], three essential elements cooperate in the exercise of national identity construction: physical unity, that is, a sentiment that there are tangible and definite borders, in this case, the Brazilian territory, or the limits of mutual belonging among the members of the group that lives in this place; a consciousness of continuity within the time fluidity; and, at last, a sentiment of coherence, of effective unification between being and existing.

The insertion of the characters into the detailed reconstitution of cities, streets, houses, clothing, weather, and national landscapes, as well as the constant comparison between Brazilian territoriality and those of other countries, point out the search for a physical unity and a collective-territorial belonging:

I have kept [in my mind], as if it was today still, the magnificent day when the embodied [bus] 106 came to the city to enjoy French perspectives on the new artery [avenue]; its palaces which were under construction or had already been finished, in their audacity of four, five or six floors; the art-nouveau streetlamps, with several arms, identical to the ones on Parisian boulevards; the white Monroe palace – as if it has been covered in cream, well molded as a bride's cake; the obelisk, by the seashore, exactly as Louqsor from Concordia Square; the comfort of the tilburies line which has been parked at the center of the public pathway, with the beasts filling the asphalt with crap; at last, the family's consternation when I, outgoing, wanting to show how well I could read, bleated loudly what was on that gigantic poster which was overwhelming the construction fencing: sandalwood middy cures gonorrhoea! (NAVA, 1974, p. 317-318) [our translation⁹].

⁹ "Guardei, como se fosse ainda hoje, o dia magno em que o 106 veio à cidade incorporado, para

The chronological organization of time, the extreme precision of dates, the fluidity of the events sequence, and the chaining of facts suggest some consciousness about passage and continuity:

They left Ceará [state] on March 23rd, 1874, toward Recife [city]. They arrived on the 27th in order to board, on the 29th, the English packet boat Potosi towards Lisbon. They dock there on April 9th. They stay two months in the Portuguese capital, and in June, they go to Caldas da Rainha [town], where my aunt Dinorá was born, on July 2nd. Around the end of this month, again to Lisbon, on their way to Havre and Paris. In September, to Basel and Zurich afterward. In this city, the Portuguese daughter is baptized by a Catholic cleric, reverend Lachbrunner. This baptism happened on May 30th, 1875, and Eugênia and Antônio Ennes de Souza served as witnesses, coming from Freiburg, Saxony, where the latter was studying mining engineering, metallurgy, and refining his taste for joyful beers and sparkling white wines – which he has always been faithful to (NAVA, 1974, 60-61) [our translation¹⁰].

The sentiment of coherence makes itself present, in its turn, through the manifestation, organization, articulation, and treatment of the recollections, even though these are profuse, therefore, susceptible to confusion and contradiction:

That house I have come to know in 1919, immobilized in the stability of the Belle Époque and still in the same shape and form as it had been in baron Aratanha's hands, a house which I hypothesize as the one that used to belong to my grandfather. And certainly his businesses were going well, because in February or March 1872 he made a business trip to Europe. He goes by himself and the interests of this journey must have been relevant

deleitar-se com as perspectivas francesas da nova artéria; seus palácios em construção ou já prontos, na audácia de seus quatro, cinco, seis andares; os lampiões art nouveau, de vários braços, iguais aos dos bulevares de Paris; o palácio Monroe branco — como coberto de creme, bem enformado como um bolo de noiva; o obelisco, rente ao mar, tal e qual o Louqsor da praça da Concórdia; o conforto da fila de tílburis estacionada no centro do logradouro, com as bestas enchendo o asfalto de bosta; por fim, a consternação da família quando eu, saliente, querendo mostrar que já lia, berrei alto o que estava no cartaz enorme que sobrepujava o tapume de construção: o sândalo midy cura a gonorrhoea!" (NAVA, 1974, p. 317-318).

¹⁰ "Saíram do Ceará a 23 de março de 1874, para Recife. Chegaram a 27, para embarcaram a 29, no paquete inglês Potosi, com destino a Lisboa. Aí aportam a 9 de abril. Ficam dois meses na capital portuguesa e em junho vão para as Caldas da Rainha, onde nasce minha tia Dinorá, a 2 de julho. Em fins desse mês, novamente Lisboa, a caminho do Havre e Paris. Em setembro, Basileia e depois Zurique. Nesta cidade a filha portuguesa é batizada por um cura católico, o reverendo Lachbrunner. Esse batismo foi a 30 de maio de 1875 e serviram de padrinhos os primos Eugênia e Antônio Ennes de Souza, chegados de Freiberg, na Saxônia, onde este estudava engenharia de minas, metalurgia e apurava seu paladar para as alegres cervejas e os vinhos brancos faiscentes — a que sempre foi fiel" (NAVA, 1974, p. 60-61).

because he leaves my grandmother in Ceará [state], [and she was] still not fully recovered from the disappointment of losing her first daughter. She was called Maria José, she had been born on November 17th, 1871, and had died on the 29th of the same month with only twelve days of existence. My grandfather must have arrived in Europe through [Port of] Leixões and in a letter, sent from Paris, provides news about his crossing through Northern Portugal, Spain, and Southern France, up to Germany, in less than a week, not to mention three days of rest in Madrid and many other days in Paris (NAVA, 1974, p. 60) [our translation¹¹].

Through such recollections, we notice identity in action, the traces of an ability to maintain the self and the other characters conscious through so many transformations, relations, and trajectories. It seems evident that this ability is strengthened by the work of a genealogical memory, which we mentioned at the beginning of this article, considering that this specific memory can generate or establish relations between subjects themselves, between their trajectories themselves, through mutuality dynamics. This perception also allows us to reiterate that in Nava's work, the memory and identity are reciprocally imbricated, comparable to what happens in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* [In search of lost time] (cf. ZELECHOW, 2004) and *Du côté de chez Swann* [Swan's Way] (cf. HEMBROUGH, 2018), as well as in William Faulkner's **The Sound and the Fury** and **Absalom, Absalom!** (cf. LAROSE, 2000). Once more, we can see how identity, although not exclusively determined by memory, is largely constructed by the latter's power, whereas it can also guide this element.

Another thing to remember is that, though it may not seem when we mention recollection and memory, we do not intend to operate a synonymy since we admit that there is a relevant distinction between them. Memory (in a broad and global sense) works in the conservation of impressions and through a driving force of coherence and meaning. In contrast, recollection functions as an antithetical faculty

¹¹ "Por essa casa que conheci em 1919, imobilizada na estabilidade da belle époque e ainda tal e qual fora nas mãos do barão de Aratanha, conjeturo o que havia de ter sido a de meu avô. E certamente seus negócios deviam correr muito bem, pois em fevereiro ou março de 1872, ele faz uma viagem de negócios à Europa. Vai só e os interesses dessa jornada devem ter sido relevantes, porque deixa no Ceará minha avó, ainda mal refeita da decepção de ter perdido sua primeira filha. Chamou-se Maria José, tinha nascido a 17 de novembro de 1871 e morrido no dia 29 do mesmo mês, com apenas doze dias de existência. Meu avô deve ter chegado à Europa por Leixões e numa carta, mandada de Paris, dá notícias de sua travessia pelo Norte de Portugal, pela Espanha e pelo Sul da França, até a Alemanha, em menos de uma semana, fora o descanso de três dias em Madrid e outros tantos em Paris" (NAVA, 1974, p. 60).

of the memory and tends to disintegrate these impressions (CANDAU, 2012). Recollection is essentially evocation, complexity, fragmentation, volatile and contextual anchoring.

Consequently, we can affirm that, in order to construct the identity of his country, Nava bases his narrative on recollections and incompleteness; that is, what is left from the lived experiences, indices of time and space, preserved traces in the memory, **Chest of Bones** [Baú de Ossos]. The narrator draws each time nearer to the work of an anatomist, a paleontologist, or an archaeologist: “[...] starting from a tooth in order to build an inevitable mandible, the mandatory cranium, the deriving vertebral column and, bone by bone, the skeleton of the beast [...]; from the curve of a piece of the jug in order to conclude its original form” (NAVA, 1974, p. 41) [our translation¹²].

In light of the above, we can assume that, in the novel in question, the construction of a Brazilian identity requires imagination or a fictional work able to assign flesh and tissue to this motionless skeleton. However, it is not exactly what we apprehend from Nava’s *autobiographical pact*¹³, in which there is a desire for his work not to be read as fiction but as a veridical memorialist account.

In this sense, Baú de Ossos [**Chest of Bones**] presents itself as a **homodiegetic discourse** (cf. BARROS, 2012), supposedly non-fictional, in which the author, character, and narrator blend with one another, and the three make a great effort to corroborate the things and characters described, providing the narrative with a sense of authenticity. Thus, the events are narrated as if they had been experienced/lived, reconstituted genealogically and archeologically as an expression of truth. Under such circumstances, it is not purposeless the effort the author makes in assigning to his narrative not only a verisimilitude but also a veracity: “bring together the truth and the verisimilitude, which is nothing but a skeleton of

¹² “[...] partindo de um dente para construir a mandíbula inevitável, o crânio obrigatório, a coluna vertebral decorrente e, osso por osso, o esqueleto da besta [...] que da curva de um pedaço de jarro conclui de sua forma restante” (NAVA, p. 1974, p. 41).

¹³ “A biographical pact is a type of proposal by the author, a discourse directed to the reader that intends to establish a reading contract. This contract is based, above all, on the affirmation of identification between author, narrator, and character. This identification is made using the author’s own name and can be established in different forms” (LEJEUNE apud FAULHABER, 2012, p. 2).

truth embodied by poetry” (NAVA, 1974, p. 67) [our translation¹⁴].

Through this diligence by the author, we see how a politically troubled country – also **tropical, blessed by God, and beautiful in its nature** (cf. CHAVES, 2010) – is consolidated. The identity representation that dwells in the social imaginary takes shape and place and assumes a voice in the words of Nava; a representation that is drenched in much sarcasm, irony, and mocking humor, which might cause a certain sense of displacement of this Brazilian identity. That is how the process of belonging and mutual articulation between the characters, and between the three essential elements of identity – which Pollak (1992) alludes to – are interwoven in each paragraph, peripeteia, in each mortal remain that emerges from the **Chest of Bones** [Baú de Ossos]. In such a way, it becomes impossible to dissociate the Nava family’s identity from the one attributed to Brazil. He naturalizes the identity of the nation by constantly and intrinsically affiliating it with the history of private life, anchoring it to artifacts, accounts, that is, to the trajectory of his family:

All of his children are from Santa Bárbara, which places him in this city, at least from October 18th, 1835, date when his oldest son is born, Luís, until the beginning of 1850, since his youngest, Júlio César, was born at December 31st, 1849, same month and year in which yellow fever came to the Empire of Brazil (NAVA, 1974, p. 102) [our translation¹⁵].

Additionally, as suggested before, fiction perhaps plays a very relevant role in this work of anchoring, filling the gaps and vacua, or the forgetting, in order to operate the conservation of the self and Brazil’s identity throughout time (cf. RICOEUR, 2007). Even though experiences, testimonies, and material/symbolic traces are quite abundant in Nava’s novel – “I don’t need to recreate Joaquim Feijó de Melo’s two-story house, because this property I got a chance to know, remembering is enough” (NAVA, 1974, 43) [our translation¹⁶]. However, they are not always sufficiently

¹⁴ “Juntar à verdade o verossímil que não é senão um esqueleto de verdade encarnado pela poesia” (NAVA, 1974, p. 67).

¹⁵ “Seus filhos são todos de Santa Bárbara, o que o põe nessa cidade, pelo menos de 18 de outubro de 1835, data do nascimento de seu filho mais velho, Luís, até princípios de 1850, pois seu caçula Júlio César era de 31 de dezembro de 1849, mesmo mês e mesmo ano em que a febre amarela chegou ao Império do Brasil” (NAVA, 1974, p. 102).

¹⁶ “Não preciso recriar o sobrado de Joaquim Feijó de Melo porque este eu conheci. Basta recordar” (NAVA, 1974, p. 43)

profuse to facilitate a recreation – “a fact allows me to glimpse a life; a word, a personality” (NAVA, 1974, p. 41) [our translation¹⁷]. That is why interference with fiction is necessary, which is nothing more than a projection of the most likely hypothesis, perhaps the only one worthy of credibility.

In fact, outside of literature or more ‘pure’ fiction and inside everyday life, we know that even the simplest act of remembering, streets, houses, faces, historical events, unknown and remarkable facts, or whole cities require an atmosphere of fiction, of semantic representation and not just factual (CANDAU, 2012), because the narrative also demands an effort towards (re)signification in order to assign meaning to life. Based on this assumption, we could not only give some credit to the popular saying ‘to remember is to relive’, but likewise, we could suggest that this task is beyond ‘reliving’ (to live again and in the same way), it is linked to constructing the self and the world in slightly different forms each time. In Candau’s words (2012, p. 74): “[...] all of those who remember also domesticate the past and, above all, appropriate it, incorporate it and put on a type of memorialist seal their own distinction, which works as a signifying element of identity”.

Remembering a simple selection of certain events, spaces, and people, and not others, which appears in Nava’s discourse, is a process of identity construction/performance and Brazilian memory (re)construction. This is possible to justify if we consider that different articulations or sequencings of these choices are already able to configure, on their own, sensitive displacements in the national identity image or in the possibilities of this identity’s representation. Despite that, we still maintain that the common social imaginary about the Brazilian identity takes shape in *Baú de Ossos* [**Chest of Bones**] because this selection, notwithstanding the deep action of humor and mockery which might slightly displace national identity, works canonically in the novel, with the incorporation of the most emblematic episodes and characters from Brazilian history. It seems that from Nava’s point of view, even so, fiction goes through this set of choices only to the necessary and sufficient extent in which the ‘naturalized’ national identity is renaturalized and not subverted, as long as it presents itself intriguing and interesting:

¹⁷ “Um fato deixa entrever uma vida; uma palavra, um caráter” (NAVA, 1974, p. 41).

Caminho Novo das Minas [*New Pathway to the Mines*], besides being a commercial, economic, strategic, political route, it is the violent and felonious road of the gold, the royal fifth, the capitation, the records, the revenue service, the fake coins dealers, the illegal miners, the smugglers who travel with swallowed gold, stuck up into their asses, encrusted in their skin and filling up hollow-bodied wood-carved saints; the social and gregarious road that faces the land grants, the sales, ranches, plantations which brought in the first settlers; the bloody and rough road of crime and repression, ambushes, Mantiqueira's bandits and The King's dragoons; the concealing and twisty road of conspirators and snitches; the road that saw when the inconfidentes were brought down in shackles when alferes Joaquim José da Silva Xavier went down to Rio – exactly as he was! –, the road which saw when Tiradentes' salted head and quartered body came up to his homeland. The miner's glorious via, via Dolorosa – with the stations of its passion (NAVA, 1974, 112) [our translation¹⁸].

6 FACTS AND MORE FICTION: ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN THE NARRATOR AND THE PAST

Considering what is argued above, we reiterate that Nava combines quite skillfully historical facts, memory and fiction (cf. FRANZEN, 2012), and ends up, to a certain degree and from a macro-structural viewpoint, reconstructing this community that we call Brazil. Certainly, this task is an art beyond description; it implies reading, interpretation, transubstantiation, emotion and imagination that interweaves every object and every living being.

The meeting between the narrator and the past brings out places, characters, and a time infused with poetry. This energy leads him to catharsis, to a therapeutic narrative (as suggested by himself) that searches for a lost paradise in memory, perhaps similar to the one Marcel Proust tries to find (see DELACOUR, 2001; ZELECHOW, 2004). Through imagination and artistic, political, and sociological

¹⁸ O Caminho Novo das Minas, além de caminho comercial, econômico, estratégico e político, é a estrada violenta e dolosa do ouro, do quinto, da capitação, dos registros, do fisco, dos moedeiros falsos, dos cunhadores ilegais, dos contrabandistas que passavam ouro engolido, enfiado no rabo, incrustado na pele e enchendo os santos de pau oco; a estrada social e gregária da testada das sesmarias, das vendas, dos sítios, das roças que fixaram no solo seus primeiros proprietários; a estrada sangrenta e bruta do crime e da repressão, das tocaias, dos bandidos da Mantiqueira e dos Dragões d'El-Rey; a estrada conciliabular e tortuosa dos conspiradores e dos denunciante; a que viu descender os inconfidentes em ferros, passar para o Rio o alferes Joaquim José da Silva Xavier — como ele era! —, a que viu subirem para sua terra a cabeça e os quartos salgados do Tiradentes. Via gloriosa, via dolorosa do mineiro — com as estações da sua paixão (NAVA, 1974, p. 112).

readings, Nava restores a past that remains, even so, a Frankenstein, a patchwork quilt, an illusionary coherence. A country of multiple origins and a multiethnic, historically troubled, but incredibly rich and intriguing Brazil emerges from these accounts. Outside of this imagination/fiction, however, the words, people, places, the nation, and the mentioned periods would be more ordinary, more or less complex, and possibly they would not be worthy of enough attention. In the literary dimension, though, those elements solely own the new possible realities or parallel universes, that is, by characters with their spaces, times, and psyches (cf. CANDIDO, 1989).

Notwithstanding the singularity that fiction might construct, it can also make way for the representation of more stable types or archetypes. In this sense, although characters such as Ennes de Souza, Iclirérico Pamplona, Luís da Cunha, Mrs. Luiza, and Mrs. Irifila present several unique features – this reality is a recurrent characteristic of the modernist novel. Additionally, Nava seems to assign to such characters some existentialist mood as in Franz Kafka’s **The Trial** (BOAG, 2009), **Metamorphosis** (GOLOMB, 1985), or **The Hunger Artist** (ROBERTS, 2009). There is this persistent desire to introduce them as great characters in their complexity and quality as samples of a given species. Maybe owing to this interchange between the particular/unique and the universal/general, and certainly due to a fictional treatment of the narrative that “assigns an atmosphere of the invention to reality” (CANDIDO, 1989, p. 61), those characters become so striking, strong, and expressive.

Another point is that there is a simulacrum between the characters’ and the nation’s identity, an interplay of projection and reciprocal representation. We notice that the country is more than a political institution; it is a system of cultural representation or a symbolic macro-institution. People whom Nava reconstructs integrate a notion of Brazil based on what he understands as culture. They are part of a symbolic community with an intro and retroactive power to produce an identity sentiment. This community generates meanings one wishes to identify with (HALL, 2005; SCHWARZ apud HALL, 2005).

Alongside the symbolic dimension, a physical/material world (beyond the archives) occupies a pivotal space in the construction of memory and Brazilian identity, insomuch that it is reproduced even though the structure of Nava’s novel

itself. The chapters of *Baú de Ossos* [**Chest of Bones**] are named after real geographical spaces, metonymically used to rebuild a national unity in diversity and through territoriality. Namely, the chapters are **Setentrião** [**Septentrion**], a reference to Northern and Northeastern Brazil; **Caminho Novo** [**New Pathway**], a narrow coastal plain in Brazilian Highlands; **Rio Paraibuna**, an affluent of Paraíba do Sul river, on whose banks Juiz de Fora city is located; and **Rio Comprido**, a traditional neighborhood in the Northern Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Even though these allusions might limit the possibilities of resignification or they might be merely used to obtain effects of truth, Nava employs their tangibility to play a game between veridical and fictional, recollection and memory, personal and collective memory, concrete presence, and symbolic value.

Much beyond landscapes and historical personalities, the political-administrative conflicts and governments are the ones that often occupy a more meaningful space in the narrative, considering the timeframe from the Empire to the rise of the Republic. Through these elements, as well as the objects of art and history, we can glimpse a desire for (ironic) equivalence between Brazil, Europe, and other parts of the world:

[Ennes] had an air of plain-clothes military man about him, and he used to put a bowler hat on, all the way over his right eye and uncovering his whole scruff, the same way French generals from the 1870's war and our marshals from the Proclamation of the Republic and the Naval Revolt used to wear their caps. [...] Sometimes we used to go out in our European elegance, just like Solomon in his glory, in order to show ourselves off at Central avenue, at Ouvidor street, at Alberto Amaral, at Zeca Moura, at Coelho (NAVA, 1974, p. 274 e 298) [our translation¹⁹].

In this quest, we also notice a search for distinction – somehow, this might be a refraction of literary modernism which seems to have had some influence over Nava (cf. ARRIGUCCI JÚNIOR, 1987; BOTELHO, 2013; CANÇADO, 2003; VALLE,

¹⁹ [Ennes] tinha um ar de militar à paisana e punha o chapéu-coco todo puxado sobre o olho direito e descobrindo o toutiço repleto, ao jeito dos bonés dos generais franceses do tempo da guerra de 70 e dos nossos marechais da Proclamação da República e da Revolta da Armada. [...] Às vezes saíamos todos nessa elegância de Europa, como Salomão na sua glória, para irmos nos mostrar na avenida Central, na rua do Ouvidor, no Alberto Amaral, no Zeca Moura, no Coelho (NAVA, 1974, p. 274, 298).

2011). Perhaps that is why there is such an exhaustive account, in a profusion of archives, as an attempt to effortfully integrate and simultaneously separate Brazil from European/other nations. Differently from Monteiro Lobato, who values authentic Brazilian ethnic-racial features and mocks those who mix with Europeans (cf. BROOKSHAW, 2011; ARAÚJO, 2020), Nava, in his own ways, tries to equate Brazil to Europe's 'superiority' and sometimes ironizes/satirizes autochthone or particular identity traces in the episodes of Brazilian history. Be as it may, when retelling Brazil's unique history Nava still manages to introduce episodes with such a 'translucidity' that it is possible to see vestiges of a universal character that dwells in all things.

7 FINAL REMARKS

Despite some suggestions and implicit conclusions noted above, it is common to notice that readers, in general, tend to emphasize Pedro Nava's works mainly as fruits of remarkable or late modernism (cf. BOTELHO, 2013; VALLE, 2011; CANÇADO, 2003; ARRIGUCCI JÚNIOR, 1987), which would be ultimately guided by a desire for constituting an 'authentic' national identity. In this sense, such identity would be strong enough to resist the might of European prescriptions. From this viewpoint, therefore, his works would be artistic productions that partially break off from a past of styles and philosophies considered foreign and infertile in order to search for a new perspective about life and the world which they integrate with.

Nevertheless, an approach to *Baú de Ossos* [**Chest of Bones**] (as an exemplar of Pedro Nava's first work within this theme) from a perspective of memory, Brazilian identity, and autobiography allows us to affirm that the novel in question exceeds those perceptions, which one might build about the ordinary modernist style. While the novel might be interwoven in this specific aesthetic language, it also keeps projecting itself toward post-modernity. This means that it is patent in his literary creation, in his memorialist account (however it may be), the context of fluidity and mobility, the loss, the **saudade** [**missing/melancholy/longing for**], the uncertainty and absence.

In a cathartic journey through the space-time continuum, Nava appears to

lessen the incompleteness and the lack, the poverty of a man who thinks to be walking a new pathway, when in truth, he is just trying to rebuild what he imagines as his life trajectory, his course within this world, his autobiography. Consequently, retrieving the past requires much more than material aids or memory crutches coming from the narrator, it demands an acute genealogical work, in which memory carries out affiliations between the narrator and himself, others, and the past.

As he explores the past, Nava keeps exercising the representation of Brazilian identity, that is, the ability to maintain the nation and its citizens (members of an imagined community) recognizable. Concomitantly, the time and events slip away. From this exercise, we learn that Brazilian cultural and social systems, whose traits are truly holders of this recognition, are fertile symbolic elements that constitute meaningfulness to nationality as they interweave the history of social subjects.

On the one hand, Nava's writing, by means of an autobiographic pact, makes him a protagonist of his own (hi)story and promotes in him an acute consciousness of himself, of his split, detached and held-accountable being; which causes him to feel even more *saudade* and melancholy. On the other hand, his spirit of a physician, his work of an anatomist, as well as his almost positivist historiographic aspiration enable him to see himself as the fruit of a greater collectiveness, which somehow explains him, encompasses him, provides him with reasons to be and exist. It is like that, across these so complementary and apparently opposite sides, that the writer's and the social group's memory articulate. Within this framework, the emersion of recollections destabilizes the impressions that the memory, inevitably collective, seeks to preserve through an integrative driving force or a link conducive to signification.

Suppose the uncertainty and insecurity insist on breaking the spirit of the characters. In that case, the narrator/protagonist acts in order to find means of making their life trajectories (including his own) meaningful and whole again. And if, in its turn, the chronological/positivist time is cruel, devouring the 'bones' in the melancholic 'chest' and making them sparser, poetry and imagination are sufficient to revitalize them with all sorts of flesh, veins, vessels, blood and everything else that Nava's ingeniousness is able to create.

IMBRICAÇÕES ENTRE MEMÓRIA E IDENTIDADE NA LITERATURA LATINO-AMERICANA: O CASO DE PEDRO NAVA E SEU BAÚ DE OSSOS

Este artigo analisa brevemente *Baú de Ossos*, de Pedro Nava, no intuito de discutir a construção do imaginário brasileiro, enfatizando os conceitos de memória e identidade. Os resultados preliminares indicam que o romance vai muito além das características modernistas comumente atribuídas a ele, de modo que nos permite explorar contextos de fluidez e mobilidade, perda, ausência, melancolia e incerteza. Recorrendo a uma viagem catártica pelo continuum do espaço e do tempo, Nava parece reduzir a incompletude e a pobreza da humanidade. Por um lado, sua escrita, seguindo padrões de um pacto autobiográfico, faz dele um protagonista de sua própria narrativa e promove uma consciência aguda de si mesmo, de seu ser fragmentado e responsabilizado. Por outro lado, sua ocupação como anatomista faz com que ele se veja enquanto resultado de uma coletividade muito maior, que, de certa forma, o explica, o envolve e lhe fornece razões de ser e existir.

Palavras-chave: Autobiografia. Identidade. Memória. Literatura Brasileira. Literatura Latino-Americana.

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