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## Cultural Techniques and Founding Fictions

If one wants to take part in the current discussion about cultural techniques from the standpoint of literary criticism, an approach that deals with writing itself as a cultural technique would seem most suitable. This line of inquiry has certainly proven its relevance over the past few years, especially with regard to the operationality of writing,<sup>1</sup> which also unfolds in literary nexuses.<sup>2</sup> However, such an approach cleaves to the widespread exclusion of what have been called “primitive” cultural techniques from the field of inquiry of the humanities: while operations of writing would be counted among the reflexive “second-order” cultural techniques, “first-order” techniques – especially agricultural cultural techniques – would lack this reflexive potential.<sup>3</sup>

If the Cultural Techniques Working Group has set itself the goal of questioning this exclusion, and especially of assessing the agricultural sources of the concept of cultural techniques,<sup>4</sup> an undertaking of this kind poses special challenges to literary studies, as it even more decidedly transcends the borders of semiotic difference as the foundation of literary criticism than does the question of the operationality of writing. To the extent that literary analyses do not aim to limit themselves to understanding how cultural techniques can be described in literature on the level of content, the path from agricultural operations to literary techniques initially seems to be relatively long. This apparent incompatibility between literary studies and research into cultural techniques takes on a different appearance, however, as soon as one gives up the limit of applying findings about cultural techniques to literary texts and instead, conversely, begins to consider how research on cultural techniques invokes operations that, for their part, have literary character, or that can be regarded, alternatively, in a new light with an eye trained for reading literature in order to constitute objects of research.

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1 For example, see Sybille Krämer, “Operationsraum Schrift: Über einen Perspektivenwechsel in der Betrachtung der Schrift,” in *Schrift: Kulturtechnik zwischen Auge, Hand und Maschine*, ed. Gernot Grube, Werner Kogge, and S.K. (Munich: Fink, 2005), 23–57.

2 See Rüdiger Campe, *Spiel der Wahrscheinlichkeit: Literatur und Berechnung zwischen Pascal und Kleist* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002).

3 Thomas Macho, “Second-Order Animals: Cultural Techniques of Identity and Identification,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 30, 6 (2013): 30–47.

4 See Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 9.

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Translated by Reed McConnell, with Michael Thomas Taylor

More specifically, what follows will start from the assumption that in order to be able to describe “primitive” cultural techniques at all, one must imagine primal scenes that are necessary for setting into motion operational chains of cultural techniques, and that are fundamentally related to what are often called “founding fictions” in literary studies. By putting into play a connection of this type between research into cultural techniques and literary studies that questions the constitution of space through cultural techniques and literary operations of fictionalization, I would like to initiate a movement of double transfer: on the one hand, this approach will deal with the way that literary founding fictions can be more precisely described by means of research into cultural techniques; and on the other hand, I would also like to pursue the question of which implications of “primitive” cultural techniques become clear when placed in the context of literary research that would otherwise remain hidden.

## 1 “Ground-Laying” Techniques and Geopolitical Naturalizations of the Ground

Among the spatialization processes<sup>5</sup> constitutive of cultural techniques, the paradigm of the agricultural is especially well-suited to describe fundamental operations like the drawing of lines.<sup>6</sup> The “ground-laying” aspect implied in these operations should absolutely be understood in a literal sense: cultural techniques – such is the conjecture that I would like to pursue here – are not preceded by a naturally predetermined “ground” upon which they can develop a specific cultural technique; instead, such a ground is only constituted concomitantly through these operations. Giving primacy to practices over and against the orders that are constituted through them<sup>7</sup> raises the question of how the distinction between “ground” and “figure” is constituted in the first place: the differentiation of the terms of this pair of opposites, which originally stem from gestalt psychology, can, from a genealogical perspective, be traced back to specific cultural techniques such as dealings with textiles,<sup>8</sup> but also to the tools for cultivating land.

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5 On this point, see the introduction of this volume, especially, 8f.

6 See Cornelia Vismann, “Kulturtechniken und Souveränität,” *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 1, 1 (2010): *Kulturtechnik*: 171–182, here 171.

7 See Erhard Schüttpelz, “Die medienanthropologische Kehre der Kulturtechniken,” *Archiv für Mediengeschichte* 6 (2006): *Kulturgeschichte als Mediengeschichte (oder vice versa?)*: 87–110.

8 See Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert, “Editorial,” *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 6, 1 (2015): *Textil*: 5–10.

Hence, “ground” and “figure” proceed from a primordial contact zone founded via specific operations, in which the two terms are not separated from the outset in the sense of a passive material, on the one hand, and an active form, on the other.

Such differentiations between “ground” and “figure” are of special pragmatic relevance wherever the “ground” is identified with the soil, or accordingly the earth in a geospatial sense. Although not nearly all operations of cultural techniques are based upon this construction, geospatially “earthed” ground-layings are of paramount importance for a history of the global consequences of “primitive” cultural techniques: from the perspective of the historical *longue durée*, one can surely say that linking cultural technique operability to diverse manifestations of the “terrestrial” ensured the genesis of decisive thrusts in the powerful implementation of specific human forms of living and ruling, from the Neolithic Revolution with the origins of agriculture to colonial occupation in the time of terrestrial globalization.

Especially in the context of terrestrial globalization and colonization, these historically momentous founding figures are based upon the articulation of “paperwork” and the manipulation of the material world “out there,” which Bruno Latour describes as the “making flat” of reality in his well-known remarks on the “immutable mobiles.”<sup>9</sup> This occurs through forms of inscription, in which the two-dimensionality of a medial space of inscription is put in an operational relationship with the inscribed space. In Latour, the effect of “making flat” is especially conceived of with regards to the space of inscriptions and the scholarly practices associated with it, which allow the cartographer, for instance, to gain control on a two-dimensional surface over the places and operations the map represents; from a cultural history perspective there is, however, a reversal effect on the mapped space itself that must be considered, to the extent that this becomes the epitome of exactly the phenomena that are visible in its mapping: in this way, especially colonial maps<sup>10</sup> form potent apparatuses of perception and also generate political operations that foster the adjustment of geophysical space based upon the stipulations of space’s cartographical controllability. One name for this adjustment is “geopolitics.”

Carl Schmitt’s remarks in *The Nomos of the Earth*,<sup>11</sup> have made clear – *inter alia* in the example of the famous Tordesillas Line – how intensely colonial international law regimes are predicated upon map-based colonization. There is

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9 Bruno Latour, “Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things together,” *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture and Present* 6 (1986): 1–40, here 19.

10 See William Boelhower, “Inventing America: A Model of Cartographic Semiosis,” *Word & Image* 4, 2 (1988): 475–497.

11 Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1997 [1950]); *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2006).

however an important difference between Schmitt's position and an approach concerned with cultural techniques. In regarding the earth as "mother of law,"<sup>12</sup> Schmitt hypostatizes the ground as always-already existing and legitimizes colonial settlement as a simple acceptance of this natural "motherly" offer. From the perspective of cultural techniques, on the contrary, it is only in the act of inscribing that the ground first begins to detach itself from what is inscribed.

As one can see in Schmitt, the geopolitical assumption of a pre-existing "ground" for operational inscription is also regularly tied to the adoption of a "primal state" from which the inscriptions of cultural techniques proceed. My thesis is that such thinking in "primal scenes," which act as "founding" regulative fictions,<sup>13</sup> is still a given in most approaches to cultural techniques that deal with the operability of "primitive" cultures, even where these approaches eschew the adoption of a predefined territoriality as passive matter, which is the prerequisite for the active inscription of a form.<sup>14</sup> In the following, I would like to examine a historical example from Argentinian cultural and literary history – namely, the writings of Argentinian writer and politician Domingo Faustino Sarmiento – in order to show that such primal scenes are intensely literarized.

## 2 The Pampa and the River Delta: Sarmiento's Double Founding Fiction of the Argentinian Nation

The naturalization of the "ground" that develops through cultural techniques and results in geopolitically occupiable earth is not only the prerequisite for

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<sup>12</sup> Schmitt, *Nomos*, 13 (German), 42 (trans.).

<sup>13</sup> On the significance of "regulative fictions" in political connections, see especially Albrecht Koschorke, "Macht und Fiktion," in *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft*, ed. Thomas Frank et al. (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 73–84. My intention here is to more precisely articulate and further develop the considerations developed in these works, insofar as such fictions, at least in (geo)political connections, are related to a figure of territorial "founding." For this reason, I will hereinafter speak of founding fictions with a somewhat different, i.e. more strongly space-related accentuation of the term than Doris Sommer in her study *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) on the Latin American novel of the nineteenth century, she investigates the allegorical relationship between the (nuclear) family and the nation in the fictional plots of novels.

<sup>14</sup> For a critique of the hylemorphism implied in the requirement for a natural "earthy" ground, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

early modern colonial conquests but is also constitutive of the nation building in countries that arose from colonial regimes (for instance, in Latin America in the nineteenth century). In this context, the geopolitical formation of the Argentinian nation is a textbook case for the reversal effects that a medially constituted “flat” space of inscription has on material geopolitical operations with the territory constituted in this way: as counterpart to the flat space of medial inscription of the Argentinian nation, the pampa in the southwest of the capital city Buenos Aires was rendered an empty “desert” without positively describable characteristics.<sup>15</sup>

Such an overwriting of the geomorphology of the grassy landscape, which was admittedly actually generally flat, but was entirely manifold and above all fertile, and which is today mostly described as “pampa húmeda,” via the imagining of a desert-like empty expanse, hinges not only upon cartographic, but also upon literary operations: this is evident in the work of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who was undisputedly the most important writer and politician of nineteenth-century Argentinian history and who, not least in his role as president from 1868 to 1874, had a decisive influence on the political fate of his country. As is characteristic for Latin American literature of this epoch, it is hardly possible to separate out literariness and political intervention in Sarmiento’s texts, which also makes clear that an analysis of founding fictions does not require fictionality in a stricter sense.

In the following, I will begin with a short discussion of Sarmiento’s well-known and oft-analyzed essay, in which the model of the desert unfolds in an exemplary fashion. I will then go into greater detail and aim to show that Sarmiento also designed founding fictions in his extensive work that are surely interesting from a cultural techniques perspective and that are different from those based upon the operation of “making flat” *qua* “desertization.”

## The Pampa and the Opposition between *civilización* and *barbarie*

The best-known model of a founding fiction for the Argentinian nation conceptualized by Sarmiento is familiar and will be presented here only in broad strokes: it has to do with the essay *Facundo*<sup>16</sup> written in 1845 in exile in Chile, a polemic against the dictatorship of Manuel Rosas in which Sarmiento establishes a momentous distinction, in the form of a sharp dichotomy, between urban

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<sup>15</sup> See Fermín Rodríguez, *Un desierto para la nación* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo* (Buenos Aires: Agebe, 2004 [1845]).

*civilización* after the European and North American models and indigenous or rural *barbárie*.<sup>17</sup> In doing so he locates not only the political opponent but the entire reach of the Argentinian nation south of the capital city of Buenos Aires on the degraded side of this oppositional relationship.

In *Facundo*, the pampa thus becomes, at least in the introductory reflections on the physical nature of the Argentinian republic,<sup>18</sup> an empty space whose only positive quality consists in its enormous expansiveness (“*extensión*”<sup>19</sup>). The figures of civilization that should be inscribed into this seemingly neutral ground include, for Sarmiento, not least a modern transportation infrastructure and especially a highly developed railroad network to connect the desolate spaces that it makes arable with the capital and metropole Buenos Aires.<sup>20</sup> The prerequisite for this is, however, a naturalization of the geospatial “surfaces of operation” into an empty, inert territory in which the organizing hand of the civilizer can act undisturbed. What is above all misappropriated in this situation is, as critical research on the history of the Argentinian nation has shown,<sup>21</sup> the fact that the emptying out of the desert results in the genocide of the indigenous population actually living in this “empty” space, which, toward the end of the 1870s, ultimately culminated in the military ventures of the so-called *conquista del desierto*.

It is not, however, this sharp geopolitical dichotomy of *Facundo*, which is nevertheless deconstructed in the text in many ways, that primarily interests me here. Rather, I am interested in an alternative model stemming from Sarmiento himself, with another geospatial setting that for its part has a great deal of similarity with research into cultural techniques and especially with the assumption of recursive chains of operations that proceed from the differentiation between figure and ground. As later on in Carl Schmitt, in Sarmiento aquatic spaces

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**17** Of course, this literary stylization of Sarmiento’s also has prototypes, among them Esteban Echeverría’s epic poem *La Cautiva* (1837). On the literary archaeology of the pampa as “desert,” see *inter alia* Jens Andermann, *Mapas de poder: Una arqueología literaria del espacio argentino* (Rosario and Berlin: Beatriz Viterbo and tranvía/Frey, 2000).

**18** See Sarmiento, *Facundo*, 22–35. A detailed reading, however, would show that over the course of the text, this empty space is consistently filled with different actors like the *gaucho*, who have a distinctly more complex relationship to their environment than that of simply moving through an “empty,” purely passive space.

**19** Sarmiento, *Facundo*, 23.

**20** See Wolfram Nitsch, “La Argentina a finales de la época del caballo: Imaginaciones literarias de los medios modernos de transporte y de sus efectos culturales,” in *Actas del VII Congreso Internacional Orbis Tertius de Teoría y Crítica Literaria*, ed. José Amícola (La Plata: UNLP/FAHCE, 2009), [http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/trab\\_eventos/ev.3579/ev.3579.pdf](http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/trab_eventos/ev.3579/ev.3579.pdf) (visited on December 10, 2018).

**21** See especially David Viñas, *Indios, ejército y frontera* (México, D.F.: Siglo veintiuno, 1982).

already constitute the starting point of his alternative model. That said, Sarmiento's interest does not relate to the "model of the maritime," as with Schmitt and, building on Schmitt, with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.<sup>22</sup> This interest much rather relates to the transition zone between water and land in the delta of the Paraná river.

## ***Carapachay* and the Specter of Autopoietic Productivity**

In comparison with his essay *Facundo*, Sarmiento's writings on the river delta collected under the title *Carapachay*,<sup>23</sup> which appeared starting in 1855 as scattered chronicles but above all in the national newspaper *El Nacional*, are relatively unknown. These texts are, however, especially worthy of attention insofar as they do not perpetrate the opposition between *civilización* and *barbarie* and the accompanying desertification of the *pampa*, but instead, from the perspective of cultural techniques, describe many more interesting forms of mediation between nature and culture, which, as will become clear, can be understood as an alternative founding fiction of the Argentinian nation.

Sarmiento's literary engagement with the Delta of the Paraná river, not far from Buenos Aires, is related not least to his house there, which he inhabited, with breaks, until shortly before his death. For him, however, the delta is above all a political space for the future of America: as early as 1850 he already imagines, in his essay with the title *Argirópolis*,<sup>24</sup> a confederation of the neighboring states of the Río de La Plata with a common capital city on the small river-island Martín García, with explicit similarities to the category of the island utopia that has circulated since Thomas More.

In his writings collected under the title of *Carapachay*, Sarmiento's report from his first trip into the river delta, which was described in a longer essay from 1857,<sup>25</sup> at first follows the most well-known model of the colonial occupation: together with General Mitre, who had just lost an important battle in the "desert" south of Buenos Aires against the Mapuche leader Calfucurá,<sup>26</sup> Sarmiento undertakes a "compensatory" replacement expedition into the Paraná Delta in 1855,

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<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie II* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 597–602.

<sup>23</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Carapachay* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba e-book, 2012 [1855–1883]). In the following, all paragraph numbers refer to this edition.

<sup>24</sup> Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Argirópolis* (Buenos Aires: El Aleph, 2000 [1850]).

<sup>25</sup> Sarmiento, *Carapachay*, 557ff.

<sup>26</sup> See Liborio Justo's illuminating introduction to Sarmiento, *Carapachay*, 372.

which makes him in a certain sense into the conqueror, or more precisely, “inventor” of a new territory, in which case he compares himself explicitly with Amerigo Vespucci.<sup>27</sup> Like Vespucci, Sarmiento sees himself as inventor with regards to the river delta primarily because he gives the area the new name, “Carapachay,” the origins of which I will discuss later.

However, the aforementioned repetition of the primal scene of the conquest of the Americas leads to several deferrals and reshufflings. Here, the clearly gendered model of a male/active “inscription” in the inert female/passive materiality of a territory is transformed into a distinctly more complex description of an extensive autopoietic cultural scenario of emergence. The river landscape, namely, possesses in Sarmiento’s description a specific active materiality that has the entire world arise from the sediment of the river delta, without outward effect. This scenario is presented in the form of a report on creation.

The starting point, or, as Sarmiento puts it, the “first day”<sup>28</sup> of the creation story, which is faithful to the Old Testament model, is constituted by the moment when the sediment deposits appear on the water’s surface and the vegetation begins with reeds (“junco”). This initial vegetation is complemented on the second day by bushes and trees that stabilize the process of silting up, before, on the morning of the third day, fruit trees appear that did not have to be planted by human hands according to Sarmiento. After briefly dealing with the fauna of these insular worlds on the fourth and fifth days, the sixth day of Sarmiento’s history of creation introduces the first human being by describing him as follows:

El sexto día de la creación de las islas, después de toda ánima viviente, apareció el carapachayo, bípedo parecido en todo a los que habitamos el continente, sólo que es anfibio, come pescado, naranjas y duraznos, y en lugar de andar a caballo como el gaucho, boga en chalanas en canales misteriosos, ignotos y apenas explorados, que dividen y subdividen el Carapachay en laberinto veneciano, nombre lógico que presta[n] al país los hombres que lo habitan, al revés de los otros países que dan su nombre al habitante, como de Francia francés, de España español. Aquí existía el carapachayo, sin que hubiera Carapachay, que nosotros hemos tenido que inventar, ya que nos ha cabido el honor de ser el primer Herodoto que describe estas afortunadas comarcas.

On the sixth day of creation of the islands, once every soul was living, the *carapachayo* appeared, a biped looking in all ways like those of us inhabiting the continent, except

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<sup>27</sup> Sarmiento, *Carapachay*, 1280f. The comparison with Vespucci is of consequence here insofar as Sarmiento does not claim to be the first conqueror to have set foot on this fluctuating territory, but instead to have recognized its true significance as a later visitor, and to have given the land a new name. In this way he ascribes himself a similar function to that which the historian Edmundo O’Gorman ascribes to Vespucci with regard to America in his *La invención de América* (México: FCE, 1958).

<sup>28</sup> Sarmiento, *Carapachay*, 591f.



that it is amphibious, eats fish, oranges, and peaches, and instead of riding a horse like a *gaucho* it rows atop barges in mysterious, unknown, and barely explored canals, which divide and subdivide Carapachay into a Venetian labyrinth, a name that is logically given to the country by those who inhabit it, the reverse of the other countries that give their name to the people inhabiting them, like the French from France, the Spanish from Spain. Here, there the Carapachayan used to exist, without there ever having been Carapachay, which we had to invent, which afforded us the honor of being the first Herodotus to describe these lucky regions.<sup>29</sup>

In this passage, the narrator takes on the role of Herodotus, the “father of history,” who wants to create a bridge between mythic transmission and historical truth based on witness accounts by renaming a country with the name Carapachay. The primary focus of the passage, however, lies in the amphibious mixed being that bears the name “carapachayo.”<sup>30</sup> For Sarmiento, the word “carapachayo” clearly embodies a primitive state of human history that is, however, distinctly different from the “barbaric” state of nature seen in the aforementioned essay *Facundo*. Unlike the *gaucho* as a representative of *barbarie* who rides on horseback, the *carapachayo* use barges as a means of transportation. In comparison to what Sarmiento elsewhere presents as the desolate environment of the pampa, the fluvial topography of *Carapachay* thus appears as a more heavily engineered and simultaneously more “primordial” form of civilization – an impression that Sarmiento strengthens even further by means of the connection of comparative references to numerous other aquatic locations of civilized life, from the Nile to Venice to the Mississippi and the Hudson River.

From a standpoint concerned with cultural techniques, however, the most notable feature of Sarmiento’s description in this passage is the relationship between the name of the country and that of its inhabitants: for Sarmiento, the existence of the *carapachayo* precedes the country of “Carapachay”; in contrast to inhabitants of nation states with fixed boundaries, the inhabitants of this land are not, according to his depiction, named after the country. Conversely, Carapachay comes into being gradually where the *carapachayo* stops and creates new land through its activity of cultivation. In his account of creation, Sarmiento thus seems to anticipate a central feature of cultural techniques that was mentioned above, namely the precedence of practices over the orders that result from them: in this way, the space of Carapachay proceeds above all from the natural operations and the interwoven human operations of *land-making* in the river delta,

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<sup>29</sup> Sarmiento, *Carapachay*, 617–623 (all translations from Spanish to English by Reed McConnell).

<sup>30</sup> Sarmiento remarks that the term comes from the *Guarani* and refers to a man who is fatigued in his actions from the lasting effects of hard work. Whether his *carapachayo* actually bears indigenous traits remains open.

instead of constituting a mere surface for the projection of an active human *nation-building*, like the pampa.

To bring my engagement with Sarmiento's *Carapachay* to a close, I would like to explore the history of the land a bit further: Sarmiento quickly connects the invented origin myth of the river delta with the modern world in his later essays;<sup>31</sup> and in this way, the creation story unexpectedly becomes a story of proto-capitalist production of economic added value through fruit growing. The river delta, as I have argued, is characterized by a remarkable fecundity that not only follows the tradition of specific biblical or mythological models but is instead connected very concretely to the present. The specific economic capital of the river delta consists in peaches ("duraznos"), which in Sarmiento's origin story take the place of the apple associated with the fall of humankind.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the product of the delta also must be delivered to the site of its consumption, meaning that the peach must initially be able to get to Buenos Aires and from there, to reach other port cities. Here, Sarmiento's interest in transport infrastructure is evident once more. Yet in his opinion, its establishment in the case of the river delta derives from nature itself, as one reads in his claim: "La naturaleza ha hecho del Carapachay el bello ideal de la viabilidad" ("Nature has made of Carapachay the beautiful ideal of viability").<sup>33</sup> In this context, one can once again view the amphibious nature of the *carapachayo* with his boat as a transitional figure between nature and culture: he constitutes the first link in a long chain of operations that open the river delta to economic circulation with Buenos Aires and beyond.

I cannot elaborate on the problems and aporias of this linkage of supposedly archaic forms of mobility on the river to modern engineered transportation infrastructure,<sup>34</sup> or on the logistics of peach transport – described in detail by Sarmiento – in baskets woven out of the reeds that grow at the river itself. All I can say here is that the baskets with which the peaches are transported become the starting point, in Sarmiento's mind, for an economically liberal fantasy of globalization that allows these and other fruits of the river delta to circulate through the entire world:

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31 See especially Sarmiento, *Carapachay*, 1481ff.

32 Sarmiento intentionally withholds the fact that the peach is not an autochthonous plant of the Americas, but was instead imported from China via Europe with the first missionaries and settlers to America starting in the sixteenth century.

33 Sarmiento, *Carapachay*, 694f.

34 On this topic, see Wolfram Nitsch, "Insondables vías navegables: El Delta del Tigre en la literatura argentina" [forthcoming].

A este humilde instrumento de locomoción se debe hoy un comercio de millones de pesos, que no sólo provee a Buenos Aires de frutas exquisitas, sino que llega hoy a Río de Janeiro, donde, entre mangos, abacates, ananás, granadillas y extrañas frutas tropicales, se ostenta el durazno amarillo de las islas que derrota a todos los productos tórridos, salvo honorables excepciones, y se ha introducido en las costumbres fluminenses, no faltando el durazno, las peras y las manzanas de las islas en el postre de las familias menos acomodadas. Estas conquistas las ha hecho el canasto sacramental de las islas.

Due to this humble means of transport there exists today a trade worth millions of pesos that not only provides Buenos Aires with exquisite fruits, but that also reaches Río de Janeiro, where the yellow peach of the islands, which defeats all of the torrid products, save honorable exceptions, shows off among mangos, avocados, pineapple, passion fruit, and strange tropical fruits, and it has entered the customs of Río, where the peach, the pears, and the apples of the islands now do not lack in the dessert of families of lesser means. These victories have been won by the sacramental basket of the islands.<sup>35</sup>

In my short analysis of Sarmiento's *Carapachay* I hope to have shown that the river delta – in contrast to the empty “desert” of the pampa, which is in need of a firm intervention by a heroic initiator of civilization – is depicted in Sarmiento's work as quasi “autopoietic” space of fecundity and productivity, where the first act of creation consists not in the occupation of existing land, but in the development of a fruitful “ground” in the bottomland of the river. In *Carapachay*, with a quite remarkable sensitivity for geohistorical processes, Sarmiento replaces the geopolitical operation of *founding* on a desert-like mainland, which goes hand in hand with the dichotomous division of a territory into a subspace of *civilización* and one of *barbarie*, with a different form of ground-laying, which in a spatial sense also takes into account the vertical level of sedimentation and in a temporal sense takes into account the *longue durée* of geological land formation processes. However, by ultimately subordinating his primal scene of the co-emergence of ground and figure from the fertile river mud of Paraná entirely to his protocapitalist understanding of civilization, he ultimately once again sets the deep-historical opening of his version of the history of civilization that I have indicated into a much narrower spatiotemporal frame:<sup>36</sup> he functionalizes the primal scene, or the creation story that he tells, into a narrative of accretion through expanded market economy.<sup>37</sup>

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35 Sarmiento, *Caparachay*, 1490–1494.

36 On “scale framing” as a way of dealing with differing forms of temporality in literary texts, see Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 71–96; on scale framing in Argentinian literature see also my essay “Escribiendo el tiempo profundo: Ficciones fundacionales y el Antropoceno,” *Orbis tertius* [forthcoming].

37 Other primal scenes of fluvial creation in Argentinian literature refer, for their part, to Sarmiento but ascribe, in these cases, a much more pessimistic scenario of founding violence

### 3 Founding Fictions and Research into Cultural Techniques

In closing I would like to return once again to the double transfer between research into cultural and literary studies, mentioned at the start, that is afforded by a reading of the essays of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. In a certain sense, one can designate Sarmiento as a precursor of current research into cultural techniques: at least in his writings on the delta of Paraná under the title of *Carapachay*, he does not simply take the terrestrial “ground” of operations of cultural technique as a given, but instead observes its coming into being and the gradual differentiation of the relationship between ground and figure via “land-forming” chains of operations that cannot be traced back to an ur-act of the human will. Even when he seems to adopt a quasi “autopoietic” power of nature itself for the original dynamic of this differentiation, he emphasizes above all the constitutive importance of the agricultural paradigm for the further development of the river delta – and in any case he proceeds from the start from an excessive productivity that indicates that he *de facto* thinks in terms of the accumulative logic of commodities management in the age of industrialization and not in terms of an agricultural logic of sustainable land use. And related to this thought, Sarmiento develops a highly detailed scenario of transportation infrastructure connecting water and land in his further remarks on *Carapachay*, where he connects primitive forms of locomotion in the river delta with modern transportation techniques.

Hence, the model of a founding fiction in an insular delta-landscape that is based on fruit cultivation is set out much less dichotomously than the military model of the conquest of the pampa (which ultimately serves that of the creation of pastureland and consequently another form of agricultural use). Yet, it is in no way less laden with preconditions with regard to the founding fictions and the symbolic orders into which it inscribes itself: it propagates, in place of colonial settlement, an expansive model of economic growth.

Beyond this analogy between Sarmiento’s *Carapachay* and current research into cultural techniques, a common principle can be found in the many different founding fictions of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento that provides information about semiotic operations of “founding” which are necessarily implied whenever research is dealing with “primitive” cultural techniques. What Sarmiento’s imagining of the river delta has in common with scenarios of cultural techniques that mean to describe the differentiation between ground and figure is the fact that

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to the specter of economic productivity characterizing the experience of the Argentinian military dictatorship. I think above all of Juan José Saer’s *Nadie, nada, nunca* (1980).

in both cases, an original state must be imagined in which this differentiation is not yet a given. In this sense, research into cultural techniques that ventures to address fundamental questions is always, to a certain extent, also a history of creation, or at least it contributes to the invention of primal scenes of civilization.<sup>38</sup> However, the unavoidability of thinking in primal scenes or founding fictions does not in any way devalue the project of researching cultural techniques as such, insofar as this unavoidability inspires one to consider *alternative* founding scenarios and chains of operations, which contrast with the naturalization of the ground in the form of the colonial geopolitical way of thinking, while also contrasting with economically liberal specters of unceasing growth. In this sense, the remarkable versatility of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento with regard to the design of founding fictions can serve as a stimulus for research into cultural techniques. The task of creating alternative founding fictions based in a different set of cultural techniques could especially consist in clarifying whether – or to what extent – cultural techniques might be taken as a basis to conceptualize other founding discourses, not geopolitical in the conventional sense,<sup>39</sup> or whether non-accumulative chains of operations could be described as alternatives to economic logics of increase.<sup>40</sup> The extent to which contemporary literary founding fictions might do their part with regard to these questions deserve to be pursued further at the intersection of research into cultural techniques and literary studies.

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**38** On the link between foundations of culture and cultural techniques in island fictions, see also Gloria Meynen, “Die Insel als Kulturtechnik,” *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 2, 1 (2010): 79–91.

**39** For an alternative conception of geopolitics, see concept of the “terrestrial” in Bruno Latour, *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017).

**40** See Erhard Schüttpelz, “Körpertechniken,” *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 1, 1 (2010): *Kulturtechnik*: 101–120, here 114f.

