

CRIMES, FRONTIERS, AND STORIES
OF EXTERMINATION
Violence in Argentine Literature

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THE CORPUS DELICTI: A MANUAL OF ARGENTINE FICTIONS. By Josefina Ludmer. Translated by Glen S. Close. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004. Pp. 400. \$39.95 cloth.)

LA VIOLENCIA DEL AZAR: ENSAYOS SOBRE LITERATURA ARGENTINA. By Cristina Iglesia. (Buenos Aires: Fondo Cultural Económica, 2003. Pp. 200.)

SUEÑOS DE EXTERMINIO: HOMOSEXUALIDAD Y REPRESENTACIÓN EN LA LITERATURA ARGENTINA CONTEMPORÁNEA. By Gabriel Giorgi. (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo, 2004. Pp. 204.)

In recent years, the study of violence has occupied scholars who specialize in Latin American literature: they have either examined works that deal with the topic of political, class, ethnic, and sexual aggression, or they have scrutinized the creation and propagation of discourses that used violence as a technique, muffling or censoring certain groups. In other words, literary critics have looked at the ways in which power is exercised within societies dividing its members, and the silencing of dissident and/or minority voices as reflected in literary works. In addition, the study of borders or lines that separate or make contact possible between opposing groups has also been addressed. For the specific case of Argentine literature, I have in mind *Letrados Illetrados* (1999), a collection of essays compiled by Ana María Zubieta. Parallel to this interest in violence, attention has also focused on the formation of national communities, commonly taken as political bodies. This metaphor of countries as political bodies has allowed the representation of national communities as targets where violence can be inflicted, or as perpetrators prone to generate internal and external aggression. These two ideas, violence as a physical and/or mental form of aggression inflicted on certain groups and the exclusions and omissions that take place during the process of national self-definition, are analytical concerns prevalent in the three books reviewed.

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A common focus of these books dealing with nineteenth and twentieth-century Argentine literature is the examination of literary works that not only purport to mirror the conventional culture of the nation, but also of texts that transgress those dominant discourses. Therefore, these authors aim to shed light on the ways violence has shaped Argentine society as well as its literature. The first two books reviewed in this essay concentrate primarily on nineteenth-century literary works that intended to found both the nation and a national literary tradition. Because of the foundational role of nineteenth-century literature, twentieth-century literary works are constantly in dialogue with their precursors, and the tracing of those discussions is tackled—albeit in different degrees—in these three books.

The first book examined here, *The Corpus Delicti: A Manual of Argentine Fictions*, is the long-awaited translation of Josefina Ludmer's *El cuerpo del delito* (1999). Displaying her broad knowledge of Argentine intellectual history and literary criticism, Ludmer begins her study by identifying the central place of crime as a tool to found a culture within the framework of a capitalist economy. Because crimes generate a web of relationships between victims and criminals, Ludmer holds that they articulate beliefs, words, and bodies and also allow an examination of the validity and implementation of laws. Her analysis starts with fictional novels published after 1880, when Argentina was organized by liberal authorities and entered into the world market as an import economy. In the first chapter "From Transgression to Crime," Ludmer argues that because of the passing of education and civil registry laws, fictional and autobiographical works of this period consisted predominantly of stories of education and marriage. To illustrate her argument, Ludmer examines Miguel Cané's *Juvenilia* (1884) and *La gran aldea* (1884) by Lucio V. López and concludes that "the patricians of the cultural coalition define their national identity as at once political and familial" (24). Ludmer aptly clarifies that the stories of education by Cané and López represent the two political positions of the ruling elite, namely, the *porteñista* and the provincial viewpoints. She reads the gesture of peaceful coexistence of these contrasting perspectives among members of the liberal elite—an original development in Argentine politics that up to that moment had been plagued by civil strife and bloodshed—as an attempt to depoliticize cultural life.

Ludmer also discusses Eugenio Cambaceres's *Pot pourri* (1882), which depicts liberal authorities as artificial by using the metaphor of the government as theater, in stark contrast with Cané's and López's texts, which she considers to be fictions that validate the emerging federal state, albeit representing competing positions. In addition, Ludmer notes that it is not a marriage story, where familial ties were crucial, that is developed in Cambaceres's novel. Quite on the contrary, *Pot pourri* is a tale of adultery that challenges the contractual bases of legal marriage and thus offers

a critique of modernity and the liberal state that made this modernity possible. Nonetheless, Ludmer sees Cambaceres's novel as sharing with Cané's and López's narratives the strategy of taste-setting. These liberal writers clearly portrayed what was tasteful and, therefore, deserving of belonging to the sphere of the nation and what was false, needing to be exposed and expelled. The line of demarcation between what pertained to the nation and what did not was traced during physics exams. Ludmer successfully argues that these exams constituted a rite of passage, which for the scientific-leaning intellectuals of the liberal state served to differentiate subjects in an irrefutable way. Consequently, those who knew physics laws were admitted to the elite's inner circle, while those who ignored those laws were marked as prone to become criminals and to lead anarchic lives.

An examination of the thin line that separates criminality from legality informs chapter two, "The Frontier of a Crime," in which Ludmer considers texts written in the 1890–1914 period. These are stories about "transmutation operations" where crimes committed by members of the liberal state on new subjects—mainly poor urban folks—corroborate both the scientific-legal bond among the elite as well as their racism, xenophobia, and sexism. Ludmer maintains that these stories penned by professional writers announced the divisions and debates between men of letters and men of science. Science made possible the identification, separation, and classification of new individuals or ideologies that could break the stability of the liberal state and its scientific discourses. These transmutation stories of the *modernista* period also reflect new aspects of modernization, such as scientific and occultist practices common among the upper classes as well as the emergence of mass culture destined for the consumption of popular groups.

The coexistence of a state-sponsored legality with its less-than-perfect justice and criminality is exemplified in the character of Juan Moreira, whom Ludmer characterizes as "a national hero of violence and popular justice" (83). Backtracking to the final decades of the nineteenth century, in chapter three, "The Moreiras," Ludmer explores the political and cultural contradictions that this character has embodied since its creation. She relates the emergence of this character to a number of cultural manifestations. First, because of its serial publication in a journal, Ludmer highlights the modernity of technologies of truth—investigation, witness, exact facts, experts' opinions—made possible by journalism. Second, Moreira's story gives form to the first national popular drama, and thus it is linked with the appearance of popular theater in Argentina. Third, Ruben Darío's endorsement of Moreira in an article published in Spain turned this character into the hero of the first Argentine novel for export. Finally, Ludmer asserts that Moreira was a product of mass consumption due to the publication of Juan José Soiza Reilly's *La ciudad de los locos*:

Aventuras de Tartarín Moreira, which appeared in *Caras y Caretas*. Reilly not only “frenchified” this character but also used satire to narrate his violent exploits. Due to all these reasons and to Moreira’s dual role as victim and perpetrator, Ludmer traces the different reappearances of this character in more contemporary cultural works, such as Leonardo Favio’s movie (1972), a scene of *La historia oficial* (1985), and Néstor Perlongher’s poem “Moreira” (1987).

Chapter four, “The History of a Best-seller: From Anarchism to Peronism,” addresses the fundamental role of Soiza Reilly as a mentor of Roberto Arlt and as the writer of *La vida de los perros*, a modernist-anarchist work composed of chronicles and fragments inspired by hatred and social exclusion. Ludmer interprets Soiza Reilly’s novel to be a transitional work leading from the *modernista* aesthetic to the emergence of Peronism.

In Chapter five, “Women Who Kill,” Ludmer concentrates on female criminals found in fictional works, starting with Eduardo Holmberg’s *The Bag of Bones* (1896) and from there moving to the murderesses in Robert Arlt’s *Saverio the Cruel* (1936), Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “Emma Zunz,” Manuel Puig’s novel *Heartbreak Tango* (*Boquitas pintadas*, 1969) and Cesar Aira’s *La prueba* (1992). Here she raises two arguments. First, she posits a division of characters and criminals according to their roles/professions: male characters kill prostitutes and adulteresses, and those who kill men are female characters depicted as mothers and virgins. Second, connecting literary characters to sociopolitical developments, Ludmer makes a case that female criminals appeared in literature as they first entered society’s public sphere, for example when they were first admitted to the university or when they joined the *guerrilla*.

The last chapter addresses how fictions by Borges and Arlt discuss characters that killed Jews and were absolved by the state when confessing their crimes. Ludmer maintains that these criminal stories are linked by money and truth and that the economic motive allows for the falsification of truth. Of special consideration are the narrators who relived these stories by telling them. Ludmer’s ideas about truth, criminality, and the presence of others are summarized in the conclusions, where Ludmer clearly defines the two types of Argentine culture since 1880: one, the aristocratic culture of the elite, and the other populated by prostitutes, farm workers, and Peronists. Ludmer’s argument highlights that while one type of culture presents the criminal politics of the state, the other denounces this state of affairs. For this author, criminal stories are not only important as literary works; they also allude to Argentine society and can be included in either one of the two types of culture. Coinciding with some of these views, the next book follows a similar line in analyzing a wide array of literary works.

La violencia del azar gathers previously-published essays written by Cristina Iglesia. In the prologue, the author indicates that the criteria for the selection of the essays were based on the “intención de poseer la textualidad ajena y la voluntad de no traspasar los límites de la literatura argentina” (12). Indeed, one of the contributions of this collection is its close readings of a variety of texts spanning from colonial to contemporary times. Unfortunately, *La violencia del azar* lacks a theoretical framework to approach the chosen texts.

This collection is divided into three sections. The first one, entitled “El terror delicado,” centers on fictional works that “reelaboran antiguas y nuevas relaciones de sometimiento” (11). In this section we find four essays, the first of which explores the relationship of Sergio Escalante and Delicia in Juan José Saer’s novel *Cicatrices* (1969). According to Iglesia, Sergio and Delicia are “una de las parejas más inquietantes de la literatura argentina contemporánea” (16). Delicia experiences a series of humiliating initiations at Sergio’s hands that mirror his own degradation. Here the attention to the historical context—the tumultuous decade of the 1960s—could have perhaps helped explain why Sergio chooses to share his life with a maid with whom he cannot communicate. The second and third essays are devoted to analyzing the figures and symbolic meaning of captives as presented in several colonial texts. While these essays complement each other (the second essay focuses on a white captive martyred at the hands of the Indians and the third article reflects on the status of indigenous women taken as booty by the Spanish conquistadors) by showing that women were victims of the violence unleashed by the Spanish colonization, it is surprising that Iglesia’s reading does not enter into dialogue with any of the numerous monographs about captives that were published in the 1990s. The last essay of this section discusses the role of narration in Ricardo Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente*. The author argues that narration in Piglia’s novel can serve either as a form of punishment or resistance; Iglesia identifies the character of Elena as the one voicing defiance, which she lucidly links to the role and activism of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo.

The second section, “Tierra Adentro,” analyzes nineteenth and twentieth-century texts, which Iglesia defines as “relatos de vida en movimiento” (12). The first essay of this section focuses on the “biografías de pasaje,” a term coined by the author to refer to the short biographies that Domingo Sarmiento included in his *Facundo*. These *biografías de pasaje* highlight the lives of men who moved from one side of the barbaric/civilized border to the other. The following three essays center on the examination of *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* by Lucio V. Mansilla. This is the best-conceived section of the book, as Iglesia offers an insightful reading of Mansilla’s adventures in which the narrator had *Facundo* as a constant reference but did not directly challenge the dichotomy of civilization versus barbarism

that Sarmiento proposed in his essay. The first of these essays presents the causes and consequences of Mansilla's trip. Iglesia argues that the career of this general was jeopardized by his undertaking of this military operation; consequently, as a narrator, Mansilla vindicated himself in his own depiction during the expedition. This contextualization of Mansilla's motives helps the reader understand how the general constructed his literary persona and successfully links the literary text with the political developments of the 1870s. In the following essay, "Mejor se duerme en la pampa," Iglesia details how Mansilla, as a general in charge of a nineteenth-century fort on the frontier line, cannot be described as a civilized man who traveled to the heart of the barbarism, but rather as a man used to the frontier's mixed way of life. Mansilla's own portrayal as a frontier man further complicated his crossing into Indian territory, because he had to grapple with the issue of how to narrate the difference that he encountered. This leads Iglesia to assert that although Mansilla preferred the frontier over the civilization, thus distancing himself ideologically from Sarmiento, as a writer Mansilla shared with Sarmiento the use of biographies to regulate the rhythm of his account. To illustrate this point, the author highlights the description of the first Indian Mansilla found, who forced the general to simultaneously assert and deny his difference. In the last essay, devoted to *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*, Iglesia builds on her previous analysis to further develop Mansilla's role as a translator on both sides of the frontier line. To achieve this, Iglesia bases her reading on Homi Bhabha's concepts about colonial imagination and mimicry that allow her to show how Mansilla strove to blur and explain the contrasting viewpoints of the Indians and the statesmen representing the modern nation-state. This section also includes an article about Juan Jose Saer's *El entenado*, which the author classifies as a novel of discovery. Iglesia argues that the discovery of writing serves as a way to narrate the horror of captivity.

Section three, "Resplandores urbanos," reunites articles about literary works that had Buenos Aires as their setting. The first essay analyzes the introduction of *el silbido* in Eugenio Cambaceres's *Pot pourri*. Agreeing with Ludmer's appreciation of this novel, Iglesia also emphasizes *Pot pourri's* avant-garde techniques and the introduction of orality in the written text. In addition, the author stresses that *el silbido* complements the transgressive themes of Cambaceres's novels, which challenged the aesthetic postulates of the Generation of 1880. The originality of this essay resides in the fact that Iglesia argues that Julio Cortázar used techniques and words similar to those of Cambaceres to define national identity in his famous novel *Hopscotch*. Transgression and parody are also strategies that Iglesia explores, this time in relation to *Historia funambulesca del profesor Landormy o Novela porteña* (1944) written by Arturo Cancela. The author offers a historical analysis of the culture of lectures given by

foreign intellectuals in the 1920s in Argentina, which is perhaps the most original dimension of this essay. In addition, Iglesia reads Cancela's novel as a parody of the formulaic pattern that informed these lectures. Here it would have been useful to complement this essay with Zubieta's *Humor, nación y diferencias: Arturo Cancela y Leopoldo Marechal* (1995) perspective on humor in Cancela's novel.

The next two essays present a different tone. In "Notas sobre Holmberg" the author situates Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg as a Darwinist in the intellectual debates taking place in Buenos Aires during the last decades of the nineteenth century and examines two of his scientific texts to show the moralizing message of Holmberg's short stories. The following essay, "Waldo and Victoria en el paraíso americano," evokes the relationship between the American writer Waldo Frank and Victoria Ocampo in the creation of the literary review *Sur*. Here Iglesia explains the concept of *americanismo*, developed by Frank in his work *Nuestra América* and later included in his letters to Ocampo, as a crucial notion used to mentor Victoria in her choice of the collaborations, topics, and authors that were to be a part of *Sur*. The final essay of this section is devoted to Eduardo Wilde's contributions to *La Prensa* during his first trip to Europe. For Iglesia, Wilde's letters and travel impressions are guided by the intent of narrating, without describing the places visited by the traveler.

This book provides some original readings of non-canonical literary texts. At the same time, the alternation of nineteenth and twentieth-century texts requires the reader to move mentally between these centuries, rendering difficult the tracing of continuities and reflection about the historical context. In contrast to Iglesia's random organization, the next book begins with a clear demarcation of its scope.

Gabriel Giorgi's *Sueños de exterminio: Homosexualidad y representación en la literatura argentina contemporánea* examines literary works published from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. The first premise that the author advances is that homosexuality has been defined as a concept grouping terminal bodies, where family trees and lineages come to an end. Closely linked to the first premise, the second one centers on the cultural and linguistic wars waged on homosexual bodies, in the sense that as terminal—and thus disposable—objects they are subjected to violence. To examine how the national psyche deals with homosexual bodies and difference, Giorgi chooses to focus on narratives and poems published from the 1960s to the present, a period when dominant discourses set off a witch-hunt of homosexuals in order to cleanse society and purify the nation. Consequently, the author selects fictional works by Ricardo Piglia, David Viñas, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Néstor Perlongher, Osvaldo Lamborghini, and Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill. Rather than following a chronological order, the different chapters are organized

around the works of a given writer and his thematic approach to homosexuals and annihilation.

In *Sueños de exterminio* we find an introductory section in which Giorgi traces the relationship between homosexuality and extermination since biblical times. He builds a theoretical framework based on Michel Foucault and his writings about the place of sexuality in culture. Giorgi also draws on Anthony Giddens and his concept of the homosexual as a crucial figure of modernity in the sense that it marks the separation of biological reproduction from sexuality. Finally, Giorgio Agamben's ideas about how nation-states define their citizens serve to highlight the exclusions that take place during this process. Giorgi also argues that because male domination featuring homosociability and heterosexuality has been dominant in Argentine culture since the nineteenth century, homosexuality has traditionally been kept as a secret that contravenes the normativity of society.

The first part, entitled "Desertores y fascistas: Historias de la homosexualidad en el ejército argentino," is perhaps the most engaging, as it examines works by Ricardo Piglia and David Viñas, focusing on the historical developments in Argentina during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The first chapter begins with an analysis of Piglia's short story "La invasión" (1967). Giorgi reads this short story as an instance of the sexualization of bodies. As deserters, the homosexual characters of the story are placed outside the legal framework and economy of the modern nation-state. These characters are seen through the perspective of a student who is also jailed with them because of his disagreement with a military officer. Giorgi aptly identifies the student as a leftist representative who opposes the right-wing Army in the Argentina of the late 1960s. What is problematic is his conflation of homosexuals with Peronist sympathizers; here more elaboration on what led Giorgi to this comparison would have perhaps helped clarify the connection that he attempts to make between Peronism, desertion, and homosexuals.

Giorgi goes on to analyze Piglia's *Plata quemada* (1997) to evaluate the implications of the discourse about hygiene, voiced this time by a police officer. This discourse shapes the dreams of extermination, which circulated after the revolution of 1955 and especially during the most recent military dictatorship. Giorgi traces parallelisms between *Plata quemada* and "La invasión" that allow him to map the relationship between homosociability and homosexuality. Here he makes the case that the characters in these works resist the normality sought by the nation-state, and as such they can be construed as figures who reflect on their difference.

The following chapter of this section focuses on *Cuerpo a cuerpo* (1979) by David Viñas. Giorgi sees in this novel (written during Viñas's exile) an example of a text that contests one of the key institutions of modern Argentina, namely the Army. Basing his analysis on Andrea Slane's

concept of “psychobiographies,” Giorgi holds that the main character, general Mendiburu, exposes the juxtaposition of sexual and national life. To be able to advance his argument about the biopolitical interests of the nation-state, Giorgi also includes concepts such as “racial homicide” from Viñas’s *Indios, ejército y fronteras* (1982), which entails the disappearance of certain groups of bodies as a necessary step during the nation-building process. The notion of racial homicide is transposed in *Cuerpo a cuerpo*, in which the main character rejects blood ties with Argentina’s “others”—immigrants and Indians—to embrace cultural and political *masculinismo*, defined as close ties among men. Through Giorgi’s lucid linking of *masculinismo* to fascism and other forms of authoritarianism, he points to a constant in Argentine literary history.

Part 2, “Tierra de nadie,” is less integrated than the first section. To demonstrate the biopolitical logic of extermination, Giorgi analyzes Bioy Casares’s *Diario de la guerra del cerdo* (1969). Giorgi shows how in this fiction the labeling of people according to age constituted a first step towards their elimination. While the author convincingly argues that the homicide of old people carried out by younger generations derives from a desire to re-found the nation, there is no mention of the political atmosphere of either Argentina in the late 1960s, in particular, nor of other parts of the world—such as the tensions that erupted in France in May 1968 or in Tlatelolco that same year—when younger generations sought to accelerate social change, in opposition to the more conciliatory approach of their elders.

The next chapter examines Osvaldo Lamborghini’s short stories and his novel *Tadeys* (1994) to analyze the symbolic meaning of children’s bodies, where authorities traditionally exert their power. Giorgi sees the suffering children that populate Lamborghini’s narratives as victims of a discourse voiced by medical personnel, which sought to enforce eugenic dreams of identity transformation based on the manipulation of bodies. Following this line of analysis, the third chapter examines Néstor Perlongher’s poems, which enunciate the emptiness and disappearance of homosexual bodies as a consequence of policies of sexual violence and political elimination. The last chapter centers on Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill’s *Vivir afuera* (1998), in which AIDS threatens the worldwide disappearance of homosexual populations, blurring class, ethnic, and national distinctions as a global form of extermination.

Taken as a group, these three books represent a much-needed examination of the prevalence—in Argentine literature and by extension in its culture—of discourses that either encourage or resist violence. The contributions of these critics lie in reading both canonical texts and less known literary works as equally involved in exposing the occurrence of violence towards the poor, Jews, elders, homosexuals, and children in Argentine letters. The analysis of other fictions that focus on the violence

inflicted on other segments of Argentine society—women, immigrants, political militants, and members of the lower classes, to name a few—will undoubtedly expand this line of research in the future.

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