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WRITING FOR DISTINCTION?
A READING OF CORTAZAR’S FINAL SHORT STORY, “DIARIO PARA UN CUENTO”

SILVIA TANDECIARZ

[T]he logic of identity-formation involves distinctive associations and switching between location, class and the body, and these are not imposed upon subject-identity from the outside, they are core terms of an exchange network, an economy of signs, in which individuals, writers and authors are sometimes but perplexed agencies. A fundamental rule seems to be that what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire.

—Peter Stallybrass and Allon White.
The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.

If Julio Cortázar is so widely read today, it is because his fictions—short, long, and “testimonial”—raise issues that are very much at the center of cultural debates currently raging in diverse academic circles, particularly those touched by cultural studies. As an intellectual, Cortázar’s “ethics of writing” (González) and efforts to elicit a “politics of reading” (Sorensen) prefigured the kinds of shifts in discourse analysis that consume critics writing today. What I propose to do here is to read the last short story he published, “Diario para un cuento” (1983), as a touchstone for exploring some of the issues that obsessed Cortázar in the early 1980s and that continue to drive many critical interventions almost two decades later: the relationship between symbolic representation and socio-political repression; the cultivation of distinction and taste through reading and writing; the continued viability of “high art” and the impact of mass culture in this “age of mechanical reproduction” (Benjamin). In so doing, I intend to show that Cortázar’s trajectory was determined, as Jean Franco most recently has noted (“Comic Stripping” 38), by his experiences in Peronist Argentina. But I would like to go a step beyond Franco to suggest that the reorganization
of culture that Peronism effected mid-century in Argentina anticipated the global reorganization of culture—driven by the spread of mass, audio-visual, and information technologies—that literary and cultural studies currently engage. If, as Jon Beaseley-Murray suggests, the emergence of cultural studies is genealogically linked to Peronism, it follows that the lessons Cortázar derived from the time he spent in Peronist Argentina, filtered through his later political awakening via the Cuban Revolution, would speak to the kinds of questions recent shifts in intellectual production and reception have generated in our (more and more interdisciplinary) fields. As prisms for studying the shifts in cultural production that destabilize hegemonic assumptions of what constitutes cultural capital at any given time, Cortázar’s and Peronism’s texts offer us an exceptional opportunity to disentangle the fantasies of consumption driving both the political allegiance to and/or repudiation of Perón, and the strong fear-attraction generated by cultural studies work today.

I. The Crime

First and foremost, “Diario para un cuento” is the story of a crime.² It is not only the story of a murder, but rather of a series of crimes determined by efforts to achieve some form of social distinction through repression, the acquisition of valued goods, and the elimination of competition. This desire for distinction, achieved in part through the cultivation of taste, is not only constitutive of identity; it further serves to re-inscribe the paradigm of repression that defines the socio-symbolic order and drives the need for consumption in the first place. It verifies to the actors caught up in this cycle, and the readers who identify with them, “the deep divisions which bar the constitution of an integrated civil sphere” (Sorensen 364). But contrary to what a cursory overview of the story might suggest, this dynamic describes both the “lumpen de puerto y pieza de mala muerte” (324) Cortázar evokes, and those who already occupy “higher” ground (far from “las chicas del bajo,” privileged by the “high-low” cultural divide).³ In his own desire for distinction, the narrator of the story is as guilty of violence resulting from unethical modes of consumption as the “lumpen de puerto” about whom he writes. And if he finds himself trapped at the end of the narrative in a closed Derridean circuit that denies him access to the object he desires—“no (me) queda casi nada: ni la cosa, ni su existencia, ni la mía, ni el puro objeto ni el puro sujeto, ningún interés de ninguna naturaleza por nada” (342)—it is because he is trapped in a paradigm of consumption based on exploitation, colonization, and uneven exchange with which he has been unable to break (in the end he still traffics in women’s bodies and words, even if now this process is mediated by high theory).

Structured as a diary—a text that substitutes for the short story our
narrator really wants to write—“Diario para un cuento” resists the narrative order its writer would impose. It inscribes the narrator’s efforts to approximate an event that happened “many and many years ago” (317) in Peronist Argentina while refusing the conventional narrative forms in which its author attempts to clothe it. Hence, it defies generic categorization, straddling the fictional realm of the short story and the non-fictional genres of diary and testimonio. Given the multiple autobiographical coincidences, one is tempted to take Cortázar at his word when he claims to speak in the first person: “yo que hablo en mi nombre (error que no hubiera cometido nunca Bioy), sé penosamente que jamás tuve y jamás tendré acceso a Anabel como Anabel....” (319). But the question of how to read the diary is complicated by his choice to include it in his last published collection of short stories, Deshoras (1983). In what follows, for the sake of clarity among other reasons, I will refer to its author as the narrator or translator. By safeguarding the distance between writer and narrator the diary’s claim to fictionality demands, I am not proposing the text be read as pure fiction; rather, I am attempting to respect the struggle between fictionality and memory it inscribes, an issue to which I will return at the end of the article. Before moving on to examine this question, however, a brief overview of the diary’s contents seems necessary. The story that emerges in the diary is not only the story of the narrator’s relationship with Anabel Flores, a prostitute from el bajo, and the murder he helped to commit; it is also the story of Peronism, and of the violent rending of Argentina that, as an intellectual more concerned with personal distinction than justice and mass representation, he failed to prevent.

II. The Story

Once stripped of its self-indulgent reflection and theoretical angst, the story at the heart of the diary is rather simple, more a melodramatic “radionovela” (340) than the finished work of fiction à la Bioy Casares its author so desires. The narrator inherits a translation practice and its clientele; among those requesting his services are four prostitutes who pay a token fee for their translations (so they won’t become a bunch of Madame de Sevignés, he argues, 323). One day Anabel appears, disrupting the structure the translator has inherited and maintained “dentro de las mismas líneas por inercia” (323). She needs him to translate her correspondence with an American sailor named William, letters in which the mundane and the cosmic are juxtaposed, in which consumption functions as the subtext for romance, in which words of love and plans of death are mixed with requests for material goods she cannot access in Argentina: “ropas de nilón” (325), “medias cristal y blusas color tango” (325), size thirty-six silver sandals and a little poison (334). Although up to then he has limited his services to the
“mercadería” (323) he inherited from his old partner, he agrees to help Anabel and quickly becomes involved with her. He explains this choice stating that “Anabel fue como la entrada trastornante de una gata siamesa en una sala de computadoras” (322); she introduces life and passion to what had been mechanized, stultifying work, the formulaic task of translating patents. If before her he already trafficked in women’s words and stories, his connection with Anabel revitalizes his creative writing and storytelling potential. As his muse, she opens a back door, leads him into a marginalized world he has rejected for the sake of professional appearances, a rejection upon which his identity as “un traductor público con oficina y chapa de bronce en la puerta” (324) has been based. He will become sexually involved with Anabel (“una relación tarifada entre cliente regular y mujer de la vida”, 329) while maintaining his socially sanctioned relationship with his girlfriend Susana intact.

In this arrangement, Anabel satisfies his “urgencia de sumersión, una vuelta a tiempos adolescentes con caminatas solitarias por los barrios del sur, copas y elecciones caprichosas, breves interludios quizá más estéticos que eróticos, un poco como la escritura de este párrafo…” (326). She enables a crossover that revitalizes him but that he must keep secret, separate from the world that legitimizes him as a member of a certain class with certain tastes: “puesto que Susana, puesto que T.S. Eliot, puesto que Wilhelm Backhaus” (326). His aesthetic (writerly) and erotic (gendered) choices years later continue to be confused in his narration of them because, in their interdependence, they sub tend a process constitutive of his bourgeois identity: he still writes like he makes love, always seeking to preserve that distance, “guardando esa distancia” (316) his place in the social register and his aesthetic sensibility demand. And he never quite manages it: “me falta el juego de piernas y la noción de distancia de Bioy para mantenerme lejos y marcar puntos sin dar demasiado la cara” (317). Threatening to “invadirlo de entrada,” his memory of Anabel continues to destabilize a system of social relationships in which the erotic encounter functions as a vehicle for thinking the self and (his) art as aesthetic creations separate from the dangerous flood of feeling. She denies him the distance so necessary to his craft, and to his sense of self, as he has tried to construct and understand them. Thus, while providing him with that certain something “other” he lacked (still lacks) in his everyday life—“ese mundo […] demasiado pequeño y demasiado confortable” (326)—she also surfaces through his telling as a dangerous addiction, a necessary and forbidden passion that, as such, must be kept at arm’s length if it is not to shatter the foundation upon which his life is built.

It is, appropriately, the doorman, Fermín, who polices this shifting identity for him. The translator projects onto Fermín how an alliance with a woman like Anabel would be read, resisting the risk public exposure would
Hence, he resists taking Anabel to the comfort of his own apartment, explaining: “me contuvo la idea de que Fermín el portero con más ojos que Argos la viería entrar o salir del ascensor y mi crédito con él se viniese abajo, él que saludaba casi conmovido a Susana cuando nos veía salir o llegar juntos, él que sabía distinguir en materia de maquillajes, tacos de zapatos y carteras” (327). He chooses discretion, not to protect Susana, or the doorman from his disappointment, but to protect the distinction he has cultivated and the privilege status confers. In a world propelled by appearances, his alliance with Susana situates him in a class above, separate from the doorman, commanding his respect; it assures him a measure of social power, the price of which seems to be the rigorous exclusion of those “elementos” (332) not deemed worthy by the social class to which he aspires, but who thereby become all the more invested with desire.

While translating Anabel’s correspondence, he becomes aware of a plan to kill another prostitute named Dolly, who is stealing clients from one of Anabel’s friends, Marucha. On his next visit, William has promised to bring a lethal poison that they can slip undetected into Dolly’s drink, thereby eliminating the competition that is increasingly endangering Marucha’s survival. The translator tries to dissuade Anabel, and when that fails, unbeknownst to her slips a note into her next letter asking the sailor to meet with him in private the next time he’s in port. He tries to convince William—who he reads from the start as “primario y sensiblero y peligroso” (335)—that giving Anabel the poison would be folly, that it would jeopardize all their lives. Instead, he suggests William trick Anabel by giving her something that looks like poison but is benign. His motives are not, however, as noble as he would make them appear. If he assesses William as “dangerous,” it is due to more than a gut reaction; it is because he threatens to take Anabel away from him: “en el segundo whisky supe que estaba enamorado de veras de Anabel y que quería sacarla de la vida, llevársela a los States en un par de años cuando arreglaría, dijo, unos asuntos pendientes” (335). In the symbolic battle that ensues between William and the translator, what is at stake is literally the translator’s access to Anabel, to a way of living and, by extension, to “la vida,” itself—an access that Anabel has mediated for him. In order to defend this way of life, the translator will engage in a range of unethical conduct, first by violating one of the cardinal rules of translation—he inserts himself into Anabel’s correspondence, thereby disrespecting the original and its author—and later by taking advantage of the almost confessional prestige his role as translator grants him in order to manipulate his clients (335). For him what is at stake is the breakdown of a structure of power from which he has benefited and outside of which, figuratively and literally, his life as he has known it would cease.

Following their encounter, the translator believes he has succeeded in foiling the murder plan and leaves on a short vacation with Susana. While
away, he reads about Dolly’s murder in the paper, La Razón, and realizes he’s been left out of the loop: William has chosen to help Anabel despite the translator’s machinations. He later deduces that William changes his mind when he discovers that the translator has been sleeping with Anabel, that despite his proclaimed allegiance and purity of purpose he is, in fact, an interested player, a rival: “Enterado de que yo hacía algo más que traducirle las cartas a Anabel, ¿por qué no había subido a decírmelo, de buenas o de malas? No me podía olvidar que me había tenido confianza y hasta admiración, que de alguna manera se había confesado con alguien que entre tanto se meaba de risa de tanta ingenuidad, y eso William tenía que haberlo sentido y cómo…” (338). From the translator’s perspective, helping Marucha commit the murder consists of William’s revenge: he trusted and admired the translator, who, it turns out, was thinking of no one but himself. “Se vengó, pensaba […] sintiendo el calambre que me subía de las ingles hasta el estómago, se vengó el muy hijo de puta, lo que estará gozando en su barco, otra que té o coca-cola, y esa imbécil de Marucha que va a cantar todo en diez minutos” (339). The American sailor gets the last laugh, and thus also establishes his clear allegiance to Anabel and the rules that organize her world. The translator, on the other hand, worried about being held responsible for Dolly’s murder, essentially shuts down his practice, opts to “colgar un cartel de ausente y cerrar con llave la oficina” (335), stops seeing Anabel, and eventually relocates to Europe. Although Marucha never implicates any of them, the translator loses Anabel to William, and ends up feeling the fool.

On the surface we have here a love triangle, one that could be understood as a battle between two men for the love of a woman (Anabel). But there are various layers to this worth exploring—we have an American sailor courting an Argentine prostitute; we have an Argentine professional desiring that same woman, while simultaneously hanging on to a more properly bourgeois alliance (another triangle). We have a translator straddling several languages, a split world ruled by different laws, and a persistent desire to cross over. We have a translator who fails to understand the worlds he serves, the languages these others speak, and hence, who fails to communicate across borders that remain intact. In short, he fails to meet the potential of his professional task, instead feeding from the divisions and differences that grant him a place, give him power, define his role in that social structure.

We also have a narrator returning to a point in his life that is constitutive of his identity, a time when ritualized crossovers into the world of el bajo were still possible, the boundaries still fluid. The diary describes a dynamic akin to that Peter Stallybrass and Allon White map, in their groundbreaking study of eighteenth century England, as integral to the formation of middle class identity:
A recurrent pattern emerges: the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other (in the classic way that Hegel describes in the master-slave section of the Phenomenology), but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflicted fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central (like long hair in the 1960s). The low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture. (5-6)

Anabel remains, in this account, “a primary eroticized constituent of [the narrator’s] fantasy life,” proving “symbolically central” precisely because she has been “rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level.” By returning to a point that proved definitive, not only for the translator, but for the country he chose to leave behind, the narrator forces a re-examination of the social and political interests that led to the betrayal of those “low-Others,” the multiple Anabels/Dollys/Maruchas, that Peronism hailed. The diary forces the question of responsibility for their systematic repression, a repression finally institutionalized, in its most grisly manifestation, by the military junta that assumed power shortly after Perón’s death.

It’s curious, in light of this, however, that the more obvious crime that emerges at the plot level—murder, disappearance—turns out to be the least interesting. Dolly’s death is almost a foregone conclusion in this dynamic, and the narrator is more upset about being made to look a fool and a coward than about the part he has played in the murder plot. He does not know or love Dolly, but he desires Anabel; hence, his real crime consists of betraying Anabel, going behind her back, trying to establish, through a male-bonding he takes for granted, an allegiance with the sailor he assumes will reason as he has. His crime is one of hubris: he assumes he knows more than Anabel or Marucha or William; he believes himself of superior intellectual faculties. But his reason and his self-interest lead him astray. He has misunderstood the codes—male-bonding does not function as a guarantee in this other world. Other codes, other allegiances, take precedence: “Lo jurado jurado, ponela la firma” (339). In the end, he’s proven wrong, the murder is committed, Anabel and William survive unscathed while Marucha receives
what most likely will prove a very light sentence. And why? Probably because Dolly is as invisible and as insignificant within the social and legal structures that will prosecute her murderer, as she is to the translator. He has failed to understand what Marucha, Anabel, and William already know: that Dolly is sacrificeable and replaceable and hardly worth the investigation (within the world professionals, intellectuals, and cops share—the dominant order) that could link her death to him. In the same way that he fails to understand that bourgeois, male-bonding laws do not apply, he fails to understand that Dolly can disappear because she is already invisible—due to her gender, class, and socio-cultural markers—both to him and to the laws that rule his world. She represents the “lumpen,” another cabeceita negra that had a chance to become visible under Perón, and whose fate—in which the translator and his petit bourgeois world are implicated—was to disappear. This is the mechanism of repression constitutive of identity: the translator collaborates in this murder and in its silencing as but a “perplexed agency,” simultaneously ensuring for himself a higher rung in the social hierarchy and maintaining the socio-symbolic order intact.

Before moving on to more carefully consider Peronism as the text’s point of departure, it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the story’s gender and class features as they have been revealed thus far. The Argentines are split into two camps: in one we find (masses of) female “sobras marginales” (324) by and large; the translator lives with his woman on the other side. Mention is made of some peripheral men who interact with the women as “merchandise,” the crossover in some ways “cleaned up” and legitimized by the monetary exchange that takes place. The bulk of the diary is concerned with uncovering and narrating this largely feminized world, the eroticized center of this symbolic economy. Within that world, a death to restore “justice” (economic equilibrium, status quo) and eliminate competition is planned; but, the narrative tells us, the women are dependent on outsiders—men—to bring about their brand of “justice” or death, to restore a balance they claim Dolly has disrupted. Two men marked by their respective cultural, political, and economic contexts—the Argentine translator and the American sailor—stand between these women and Dolly’s disappearance, two men who suggest diverging alliances and forms of engagement. Dolly’s disappearance is effected through an international alliance, unwittingly bolstered by national cooperation. The translator—representative of a professional middle class and an intellectual elite—fails to intervene, to help, in an adequate way; he thus leaves the door open for the American sailor—a man of working class extraction—to resolve things in a way that suits him (but not necessarily the Argentine world of el bajo). The sailor’s actions preclude the possibility of an internal national/Argentine alliance, the coming together of these two worlds coexisting in the same territory. But the stage for his entry is already set by the dynamic of
exploitation the Argentine translator enjoys: by failing these women who are struggling to survive in a world that has given them nothing; by accepting the structure of power and privilege that marks their possible interactions, the translator seals their and his own fate. Given the translator’s ethical lapse, his refusal to become engaged, the only viable solution presented to this feminized nation—a certain sector—is to accept foreign intervention and to resolve conflict through murder. The dominant order is restored, new/old borders get reinscribed, and violence (fascism) proves the only answer.

The translator feels himself excluded from the “happily ever after” ending that finds Anabel and William dancing a milonga and abandons ship—an option that, in contrast to the girls of el bajo, is open to him. In the forty-year period that transpires, he metamorphoses into the narrator of this story, a man bewildered by the position he assumed in his youth: “Como con tantas otras cosas en ese tiempo, me manejé entre abstracciones, y ahora al final del camino me pregunto cómo pude vivir en esa superficie bajo la cual resbalaban y se mordían las criaturas de la noche porteña, los grandes peces de ese río turbio que yo y tantos otros ignorábamos” (324). As our guide into the world of el bajo, the narrator points to other possible responses, ones that might have led to a “happily ever after” for all. And he serves as a guide for the reader in the eighties, suggesting what kind of human being that reader must be when confronted with a similar choice, the kind of choice an Argentina defined by human rights violations, torture and disappearances presents. While the positions, the kinds of involvement imagined, are still gender-coded—we all must become male heroes (or “lectores machos”) to save the feminized victims of a very macho (now military) regime—the way is open to every reader, regardless of gender, to become a “lector comprometido,” to assume this male-coded role and change history.4

III: Peronism

“Is it high culture’s representation of Argentina that has left it in fragments?”

—Jean Franco

Narrated from Europe in February 1982, as the dictatorship that has ravaged Argentina for six years embarks on a final, bloody attempt to remain in power by recovering the Malvinas from the British, the diary makes no direct reference to the Proceso (1976-1982). Instead, the story at its center is set in a Buenos Aires that, “al final de los años cuarenta” (316), has been transformed by the rise of Perón. Although mentioned only peripherally in this article thus far, and directly in the diary only once, Peronism is key to decoding the crimes and desires the diary inscribes. First and foremost, as
I have begun to argue above, the diary can be read as a metaphor of the middle class Argentine intellectual’s reaction to and struggle with Peronism: it reassesses the binary that the relationship between an oligarchic, Europeanizing, liberal vision of Argentina (the translator’s) and a Peronist, nationalist and populist “other” (Anabel) set up. If on one level it interrogates a moment that defines its narrator, on another it signals his complicity—as a professional and intellectual—in the silencing of a popular subject (the working classes, Perón’s “cabecitas”), in the suppression of the masses for the sake of reactionary economic, political, and social structures. It underlines as it questions the failure of those “on high” to grant representation and interpretive power to another world with another ethic; and it signals a libidinal investment in this world that remains deep, even as, for the sake of power, distinction, and increased cultural capital, on a political and structural level it must be denied. The repression of Anabel, re-coded as the repression of Peronism (in its most expansive, promising phase, the Peronato), thus prefigures the murder at the plot level.5 And along these lines, the diary lays some of the responsibility for the violence that increasingly erupts, culminating with the Proceso, on the shortsightedness of intellectuals who, while engaged in their fantastic literary games, consistently ignored “una humanidad humillada, ofendida, alienada” (Cortázar cited by Gonzalez Bermejo, 120) coexisting with them in the same national territory.

Indeed, Cortázar, himself, like his narrator, would come to see more than a decade after the Peronato (1945-1955) that, despite its limits, Peronism represented “la primera gran sacudida de masas en el país” (Gonzalez Bermejo, 119-120), a chance for wider cultural and political representation, for a reorganization of power. In his own words, “había empezado una nueva historia argentina. Esto es hoy clarísimo, pero entonces no supimos verlo” (Gonzalez Bermejo, 119). Cortázar’s position as an intellectual more interested in listening to Alban Berg than to the roar of the multitudes and Peronist propaganda outside his window echoed a reaction that the majority of established Argentine intellectuals shared at the time. As Angel Rama noted, Cortázar was among those who, having rejected Peronism in its earliest manifestations later returned to the movement to affirm its renewing potential:

Un escritor como Julio Cortázar, que se fue de la Argentina a comienzos de los 50 por no poder soportar al peronismo, volvió a Buenos Aires para decir su esperanza en la acción renovadora de la juventud peronista. Tal comportamiento define la actitud asumida por escritores más jóvenes, pertenecientes a doctrinas de izquierda (como David Viñas) que si no se incorporaron al peronismo, se situaron a su lado
This “vieja culpa” is precisely what Cortázar’s return (as narrator) through Anabel might exorcise. In this renewed attempt to access Anabel and understand the period she embodies, his narrator owns up both to his complicity in the murder, and to the crime his lack of engagement constituted. In both cases, the consequences are the death of a popular subject: the disappearance of that subject and her story from his (story). By returning, moreover, he is also owning up to the central role Anabel—and the Peronist masses she embodies—has played in the constitution of not only his identity, but the “shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture” (Stallybrass and White, 6). By writing about her directly, by making her central to his story, and by assuming responsibility for her marginalization, his return has the potential to intervene and disrupt those dominant repertoires that have persisted through ritual exclusions.

But Peronism is present as more than mere referent in this extended metaphor. Beyond describing one intellectual’s love-hate relationship with the low-Others Peronism brought to the fore and his complicity in their systematic repression, the diary links the very model for achieving the plenitude associated with social distinction to the dizzying ascent of Juan Perón and Eva Duarte. It is a model disseminated by the Peronist state and eagerly consumed by the masses, from which the translator distances himself (since ostensibly, he already has the kind of distinction class extraction, diplomas, and “cultured” taste afford): “Esos tiempos: el peronismo ensordeciéndome a puro altoparlante en el centro, el gallego portero llegando a mi oficina con una foto de Evita y pidiéndome de manera nada amable que tuviera la amabilidad de fijarla en la pared (traía las cuatro chinches para que no hubiera pretextos)” (323) While the Peróns’ ubiquity helps explain (as “pretexto”) the translator’s disgust with a State that intrudes in his private sanctum and denies him the right to exercise his own good taste in choosing what to display on his walls, Evita’s exemplar social mobility clearly underlies the desires expressed through the practices of consumption in which the “chicas del bajo” engage. The tension these two positions reveal has to do with the upper classes’ desire to maintain their distinction in light of the menace the masses—and mass reproduction—represent; and with the desire of those from el bajo to acquire the very commodities that might place them in a class above. As Sorensen comments, “every choice depends on what is construed to be of value in the upper
classes’ eyes; social anxiety marks these options because the desire to belong is foreclosed” (370).

Anabel’s requests for material goods, her preoccupation with fashion and appearances take on a deeper significance read in this light. On the one hand, Peronist culture has given her both a figure to emulate—Evita—and a reason to believe appearances, careful self-representation, can alter seemingly intractable material/economic circumstances. On the other, as the narrator notes, there are always those like Fermín, “el portero con más ojos que Argos,” who will be able to distinguish between the “real” thing and the copy, blocking the kind of upward mobility scripted by the Peróns, at least within Argentina.

But whatever the limits of the script, it is clearly Evita’s life story that precedes Anabel’s. Beyond the hate or adoration with which accounts of her life are inflected, they all emphasize the upward mobility she embodied, the rags to riches fairy tale she cultivated. Whether rendered as a prostitute who slept her way to power (Alan Parker’s recent cinematic adventure, “Evita,” comes to mind), or a saint who worked tirelessly to transform the lives of the disenfranchised, the image of Evita marketed by the Peronist state is that of a taste-full, well-coifed, lusciously dressed young woman in full control of her domain. In the words of Tomás Eloy Martínez:

El pueblo la imaginaba rubia y de ojos celestes pero Evita Duarte no era como la pulpera de Santa Lucía cuando llegó a Buenos Aires en 1935: no cantaba como una calandria, no reflejaba la gloria del día. Era (dicen) nada, o menos que nada: un gorrión de lavadero, un caramelo mordido, tan delgadita que daba lástima. Se fue volviendo hermosa con la pasión, con la memoria y con la muerte. Se tejió a sí misma una crisálida de belleza, fue empollándose reina, quién lo hubiera creído. (256)

Her ascent to the center of power proved that even a bastard daughter could become a princess. And it is the interpretation with which she laced her “crisálida de belleza” that determined her transcendence: by presenting herself in this national melodrama as Perón’s creation, she helped people believe that even if their own lives were not exemplary, by following her lead, with Perón and Peronism, they could become so. If she was useful to Peronism, still mobilizing its militant Left (“Si Evita viviera, sería Montonera”) years after her untimely death, and hateful to the aristocracy, it is because by making her own life and body exemplary, she managed to script a model for the masses to follow: she gave birth to a new social body, and helped discipline it within a Peronist frame.

Evita’s prominence within Peronism—she was so important, key
foundational moments in the movement were rewritten to make her present—also helps explain the feminization of Peronism within the diary. That the two worlds presented are gendered, that Peronism is coded female via Anabel, makes sense not only given Evita’s protagonism in Perón’s success, but also that of the masses of working class women who joined men and children in the physical take over of the city’s symbolic center during the October 1945 manifestations that brought Perón to power. The case of Argentina during the Peronato represents another stage on which the dynamics explored by Andreas Huyssen in a European context once again played themselves out:

> [W]hen the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conjured up the threat of the masses ‘rattling at the gate,’ to quote Hall, and lamented the concomitant decline of culture and civilization (which mass culture was invariably accused of causing), there was yet another hidden subject. In the age of nascent socialism and the first major women’s movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male dominated culture. (191)

Because the rise of Perón coincided with the much increased participation of women in the public sector—a phenomenon brought on by accelerated industrialization, import substitution, and rural migration into Buenos Aires—and because Peronism proved instrumental to female suffrage, its associations in the Argentine imagination with the feminine, working class, and subaltern have since loomed large.

But if Evita’s story captivated the masses, it was able to do so in part because of the real economic changes Perón’s administration staged. As Catalina Wainerman has noted:

> [F]or several years, at least until approximately 1949… the working classes enjoyed unprecedented privileges, with increases in their real wages that extended from 10 to 50 percent. During those first years, on the other hand, ceilings were placed on food and transport prices, and the government began building low-income housing projects. The worker thus had access to the purchase of a bicycle, a radio, a refrigerator or washing machine, manufactured in Argentina. (32, my translation)

Félix Luna’s impression echoes this view of the early Peronist years as a grand “fiesta” marked by the “new, magical purchasing power” salary
increases from 1944 to 1947 made possible (466). The impact of increased consumer capacities among all sectors, but particularly working class sectors, is worth underscoring because it, too, left its mark on Peronist mythology and nurtured a belief in modernization, increased consumer freedom, and “progress” that, for better and worse, came to be embodied by Evita and associated with Perón. For many, these years suggested how far Argentina and all Argentines, with Peronism, could go.

It is in the context of this Peronist fiesta, then, that we must understand the gifts scattered like red flags throughout the story. If Anabel must prostitute herself to receive gifts, it is because she only has her body to offer in trade; but she nevertheless can exercise discriminatory taste in selecting those gifts to craft an appearance that can maximize her social mobility, enable her to travel, to empower herself, to find legitimacy elsewhere. Consequently, what we must read as ciphered in Peronism is the advent of a mass culture industry and a re-distribution of capital that potentially turned every hard working Argentine into a discriminating consumer. And if Peronism threatened to erase distinction through the consumption of mass cultural products, it also forced those invested in preserving traditional power structures to redefine themselves in the face of this challenge.

Jean Franco argues that this is precisely what Cortázar does when he becomes a discriminating consumer of mass culture; her observations about Cortázar’s “epic of consumption” (Piglia quoted by Franco, 39) become intelligible in this context, underlining “what will afterwards constitute, for Cortázar, the grounds for sociability and identity—namely, taste” (38). She goes on to explain:

Because, in the contemporary world, taste can no longer be grounded in firmly established values or universal criteria, it becomes a matter either of market classification or of elective affinities. The arbitrariness of these affinities in Cortázar’s work—the bond may be forged just as effectively through the mediation of Louis Armstrong, or of Gesualdo, or a shared project such as traveling slowly along the freeway from Paris to Marseille—destroys “distinctions” on the grounds of nationality, class, or gender [...] [G]roup cohesion also depends on the exclusion of those who do not understand, of those who are bound by routine, are lacking in imagination and emotionally crippled. [...] Because Cortázar repeatedly constitutes ephemeral groups on the basis of arbitrary and unmarketable taste, it follows that value, once thought to be intrinsic in the work of art, has migrated to the aesthetic experience itself. (38-39)
Franco also points out that Peronism was instrumental in shaping this aesthetic (39). Cortázar’s shift from an appreciation of high culture to an identity based on the discriminating consumption of all culture (mass included) can be read in the diary as a response to the democratization of culture driven by Peronism’s inversion of cultural hierarchies. Although this link is never made explicit, it is this context that provides the explanatory framework for the narrator’s emphasis on taste. His preoccupation with protecting the distinction he has cultivated prompts his recurring observations regarding Anabel’s choice in dress, for example: “me acuerdo más de la cartera de hule y los zapatos con plataforma de corcho que de su cara ese día” (322); and earlier, “lo que más se veía de ella era la cartera de hule brillante y unos zapatos que no tenían nada que ver con las once de la mañana de un día hábil en Buenos Aires” (320). His memory of Anabel is constantly associated with the purses and shoes she wore to their meetings, accessories he finds flashy and inappropriate, out of context. He does not read her fashion statements as part of her charm or as evidence of a newfound financial freedom; rather he uses them to distance himself from her, underlining the differences between the two of them, differences now confirmed not by access to consumer goods, but by the tasteful vs. uncultured/low-class consumption of (cheap imitations of) them.

But if Franco is correct in mapping this aesthetic, it seems that by the end of his life, Cortázar himself was attempting to deconstruct it, signaling the kind of damage such “short-lived heterotopias” (Franco, 39) could cause. By returning to Peronism, he returns to a moment that propelled this shift through an unprecedented economic and cultural revolution; but he also returns to re-examine and critique the positions he adopted as a response. While tracing its genesis, the diary thus also problematizes this mode of engagement/representation. Seen from the perspective of its narrator, the problem is that this aesthetic of consumption (possession) to establish distinction/taste (through distance) cannot deliver the kind of plenitude access to the desired object represents. Integral to its very functioning is the distance/separation that prefigures it as primary condition of possibility: because writing in Cortázar, as Franco so eloquently has argued, as process of identity formation has to do with the elaboration of taste, it cannot function simultaneously as a vehicle for solidarity (or “access” in the diary’s vocabulary), no matter how much that solidarity may be desired. All it can do is prove the intractability of a symbolic system predicated on structures of exclusion, an aesthetic of consumption, the defense of distinction. No matter how rigorously he searches for that access/solidarity, the critical and creative languages he has at his disposal will fail him because they preempt, through their very modus operandi, the erasure of difference that dispossession, true solidarity entail.

This becomes particularly clear in another story the diary contains. It
is the story of a rape, of routine violations that occurred in pre-Peronist Argentina and that Peronism promised to change. The story of Anabel’s rape, told through the story of “la Chola” (332), is helpful both because it sheds light on a symbolic economy based on uneven exchange and violence, and on the difference in this triangulation of desire the Peronato might have made. It underscores Peronism’s challenge to entrenched structures of domination while suggesting, simultaneously, that if this challenge in the end proved cosmetic at best, its failure was due, at least in part, to the elitist and intellectual resistance with which it was met.

IV: Rape as Paradigm

The story of the rape emerges two-thirds of the way into “Diario,” after a brief commentary on a patriotism located in a “pampa” that Anabel rejects: “Tanto lío que arma ése por la pampa, Anabel despectiva encendiendo un cigarrillo, tanto joder por una mierda llena de vacas. Pero Anabel, yo te creía más patriótica, hijita. Una pura mierda aburrida, che, yo creo que si no vengo a Buenos Aires me tiro a un zanjón” (331). Her experience of that pampa has not been one to inspire loyalty, a longing to return; her memory of “la pampa” does not occasion any nostalgia; in fact, her survival, her sense of self, depends on the distance she has managed to establish between her urban present and her pampa past. The myth of “la pampa” as the seat of Argentine identity does not ring true for her—a sign, among others, that patriotism and national identity for her (and those like her) diverge from popular and commercial constructions, urban versions created by those located far from a pampa they therefore desire. It is not clear from this exchange where Anabel would fix her own sense of national pride, if, indeed, she has any—except perhaps in the economic opportunity the city offers her, as it offers her access to the translator-narrator, access to voice, access to his world and its interpretive power.

In contrast to this mythological pampa, the story of Anabel’s rape reveals an eroticized world constructed through violations enacted on the bodies of women. The story, told here through the rape of another woman by another rapist, disrupts what might otherwise have been conceived of as a failed romance, an uncomplicated longing for the lost body of the nation. It signals the incongruity of a nationalism defined through the rape, torture, and disappearance of (women’s) bodies, Anabel’s among them. It signals the incongruity of a heterosexist, patriarchal and classist national identity that destroys the objects it simultaneously desires and denies. And it signals the incongruity of an economic system that transforms repression into profit. The translator’s attempts to access through Anabel an Argentina he lost—perhaps Alberto Castillo’s Argentina—thus are disrupted on all these levels by Anabel’s uneasy fit in that Argentina, and by the impossibility of
embracing and loving Anabel as she deserves to be loved.

We encounter the story of the rape in bits and pieces:

Poco a poco los recuerdos confirmatorios y de golpe, como si le hiciese falta contármelo, la historia del viajante de comercio, casi no había empezado cuando sentí que eso yo ya lo sabía, que eso ya me lo habían contado. La fui dejando hablar como a ella le hacía falta hablarme (a veces el frasquito, ahora el viajante), pero de alguna manera yo no estaba ahí con ella, lo que me estaba contando me venía de otras voces y otros ámbitos con perdón de Capote, me venía de un comedor en el hotel del polvoriento Bolívar, ese pueblo pampeano donde había vivido dos años ya tan lejanos, de esa tertulia de amigos y gente de paso donde se hablaba de todo pero sobre todo de mujeres, de eso que entonces los muchachos llamábamos los elementos y que tanto escaseaban en la vida de los solteros pueblerinos. (331-332)

Anabel brings the narrator-translator back to this past he has left behind; he hears her story through this other one, in which he has participated on slightly different terms. The narrator classifies this story of rape in the same way he will classify the story of the murder Anabel (and he) will later help commit: “a veces el frasquito, ahora el viajante” (331). They are both stories, he argues, Anabel feels she must tell him, both entailing crimes of passion that conclude with female victims. The story of the rape illuminates a dynamic that later repeats with the murder—one that, in turn, illuminates larger crimes, a pattern that defines their common Argentine history, albeit one they inhabit differently.

In the diary, the narrator writes the story as he heard it from a friend, “el pelado Rosatti,” (332) not Anabel. By telling the story from his perspective, he resists counterfeiting Anabel’s experience, he resists an easy ventriloquism that would pretend to deliver Anabel to us—her readers—but ultimately would prove a lie. Although he does not explicitly say so here, the story’s semi-confessional frame sets up this preferred reading, whereby he resists violating Anabel all over again, this time with words that, not being her own, would only falsify her story. He believes that the only way he can tell the story of her rape, the story she tells him, is as he has heard it from the perspective of the rapist, Rosatti. What we read, then, is Chola’s rape, not Anabel’s, becoming with the narrator its passive witnesses, a new audience consuming the violation: Rosatti is a traveling car salesman who visits a widow when it proves convenient for his route, brings her presents and sleeps with her. The widow has a daughter for whom he also brings gifts.
They are satisfied with this arrangement for a while, until one day he shows up with bigger gifts than usual:

[H]abía vendido un Plymouth y estaba contento, la viuda agarró por el hombro a la Chola y le dijo que aprendiera a darle bien las gracias a don Carlos, que no fuera tan chúcara. Rosatti, riéndose, la disculpó porque le conocía el carácter, pero en ese segundo de confusión de la chica la vio por primera vez, le vio los ojos renegridos y los catorce años que empezaban a levantarle la blusita de algodón. (332)

Later, in bed, he feels different with the widow: “y la viuda debió sentirlas [diferencias] también porque lloró y le dijo que él ya no la quería como antes, que seguro iba a olvidarse de ella que ya no le rendía como al principio” (332). Because, we are led to believe, the widow is afraid he will abandon them—cease to come by the ranch bearing gifts—she presents him with her daughter instead. We are told that they—the narrator and his friends—never knew the details of the arrangement, how it came about. But the end result is the complicit rape of la Chola by the widow and her traveling car salesman: “en algún momento la viuda fue a buscar a la Chola y la trajo al rancho a los tirones. Ella misma le arrancó la ropa mientras Rosatti la esperaba en la cama, y como la chica gritaba y se debatía desesperada, la madre le sujetó las piernas y la mantuvo así hasta el final” (332-332).

The story, when Rosatti tells it, is met with silence. Years later, when Anabel tells her own, the narrator again remains silent, resists telling her that he has heard it all before:

¿Qué le podía decir? ¿Que ya conocía cada detalle, salvo que había por lo menos veinte años entre las dos historias, y que el viajante de comercio de Trenque Lauquen no había sido el mismo hombre, ni Anabel la misma mujer? ¿Que todo era siempre más o menos así con las Anabel de este mundo, salvo que a veces se llamaban Chola? (333).

The questions with which he ends this story are basically a reflection on the power relations involved, on how crimes get perpetrated, repeated over and over again within certain symbolic, political, and economic systems. The rape of la Chola/Anabel marks the erasure of their selves in ritual acts of violation—acts that become necessary, it seems, through poverty and become possible because men like Rosatti, and men who have been conditioned to treat women like “mercadería” will not be called upon to assume the monstrosity of their crimes. But they are also possible because women become accomplices of power in their search for economic security;
in this case, a mother turns against her own child in an act of ultimate betrayal. As with Marucha and Dolly, this is an instance of a woman, as a member of a subaltern group, turning against another in a desperate battle for capital and basic, material survival. Economic motives determined by patriarchal, capitalist structures thus shape the possible interactions between women and men, the violence by which they are defined.

In the rape of la Chola, all the issues raised by the diary implode: we have a crime that reveals power dynamics constructed through gender, race, and class privilege; we have the impossibility of accessing the victim of that crime, of reading the story in her voice, because we stand on the side of those who write the stories, on the side of men, on the side of power. Their privilege and desire, constructed through rigid exclusions (I am not that: not poor, not racially mixed, not illiterate, not a woman whose role in life is to service men), coupled with their sense of entitlement, thus make possible a spectrum of violations—rape, death, neo-colonial impulses. And women, in ultimately self-destructive, desperate efforts, become their accomplices, seeking satisfaction through the very structures that ensure their submission, through those structures that keep them subject.

The narrator’s inability to recount Anabel’s rape directly—like the difficulty he encounters when he tries to write the short story that generates the diary—has to do with his refusal to speak for Anabel: “¿Cómo hablar de Anabel sin imitarla, es decir sin falsearla?” (317). But it also reflects his resistance to narrate the story from a perspective of power, and the difficulty of finding another way to tell it, in the absence of Anabel’s own testimonio. Telling Anabel’s story through the rape of la Chola, as narrated by Rosatti, is as close as he can come to narrating what happened to her before her move to Buenos Aires. In so doing, at least he can expose the power dynamic the episode encodes, the fact that “todo era siempre más o menos así con las Anabel de este mundo, salvo que a veces se llamaban Chola” (333). His mistake, however, is to believe that its meaningfulness is limited to the structural level on which the rapes repeat, and does not include the specificity of each story. Anabel’s rape might echo Chola’s rape as seen from a site of privilege; but if we are able, finally, only to see that structural dimension we run the risk of losing Anabel, of erasing her, the specificity of her experience, of her history, from the realm of representation. We run the risk of losing the details that make the crime possible, differently, each time. Because the story remains one of power, told from the perspective of those in power—the rapist, his accomplices—it fails to suggest how the outcome might change could it be written differently, from another perspective, in a different voice.

The elements of this story echo the other stories captured by the diary: the same poverty, the same sort of exploitation by one who has recourse to gifts, the same betrayal by trusted ones, the same silent spectator who
collects stories failing to change them, believing he is simply an innocent bystander receiving them because others—Rosatti, Anabel—need to tell them. What repeats in the case of this story of rape is not only the first instance of violation, but the complicity of silence that does not hold the perpetrators of violence accountable. The men who hear Rosatti’s stories from their desert of women, aching for “the elements,” voyeuristically participate in Chola’s rape, united at once in pleasure and shame, a bond their shared silence seals: “Ninguno de nosotros hizo el menor comentario, el silencio espeso duró hasta que el pesado Salas soltó una de las suyas y todos, y sobre todo Rosatti, empezamos a hablar de otras cosas” (333). It is a bond the narrator breaks years later in the privacy of his diary, to ruminate, through Anabel, on what happened to Rosatti and la Chola; but it is also a bond that has constituted him as historical subject, as part of a brotherhood (a not so “short-lived heterotopia”) that has shaped his sense of identity, his choices, his future. His failure to respond or intervene as an “actor comprometido” then and again, with Anabel, make him a silent accomplice, a criminal. It is a silence, a complicity, which has determined the outlines of history, permitting the crime to be committed again because the perpetrators are not denounced by the male fraternity that constitutes the nation to which they belong.

If the translator misreads William when he makes his appearance years later, it is because he assumes William subscribes to the same fraternal code that bound him to Rosatti in their vow of silence. Hence he responds to Anabel’s request for help by deciding to ignore the problem she’s signaling, and by trying to make her American lover complicit in that denial through trickery, another form of silence. But William, as interested outsider, disrupts this system, chooses Anabel over the translator, and thus also disrupts the triangulation of desire off of which the translator feeds. He disrupts the commercial circuit into which the translator, another “viajante de comercio,” has inserted himself and from which he profits (Frölicher, 340). William chooses to see and love Anabel as more than “mercadería” to be used, kept, or put aside according to one’s whims. By recognizing her, privileging her needs, he repeats a classic Peronist gesture, legitimizes her story and substitutes the language of propriety with the language of love. And his rejection of the translator’s codes—echoing the melodramatic, Peronist emphasis on loyalty and love—threatens not only the translator’s livelihood, his writing economy, but the fraternal, social and political institutions erected precisely to police such dangerous allegiances.

V: On Writing: in search of an alternative “economy of signs”

So what are we to make of all this? In the dizzying structure of concentric circles through which the diary weaves its stories of violation—
the innermost being Chola’s rape, the outermost, the rape of Latin America through the demands of globalization—a continuum of criminality emerges, a continuum predicated on a desire for power, capital and distinction. If Peronism attempted to alter the configuration of the national in Argentina, it did so by giving voice to those masses marginalized in liberal, traditional histories, the same masses the military would later re-discipline through their own systematic, state organized repression. But despite the new alliances Peronism forged, despite the revolutionary momentum that created new historical subjects and for the first time gave them a voice, in the end traditional structures of power remained intact. What it nevertheless managed to do, however, was expose intellectual work that trafficked in signs, codes, languages, spaces, bodies in order to achieve distinction, cultural capital, social status, dominance. If it also eventually revealed itself as fabrication, more spectacle and fireworks than true revolutionary transformation, it nevertheless conveyed an important lesson when it helped expose the links between repression, (disciplinary) consumption, and representation. All three proved integral to the construction of (national/personal) identity, itself a mobile, fluid thing.

Given the struggles for interpretive power the Peronato foregrounded, literature’s ability to represent (in the literary and political senses of the word) and its ethical responsibility to do so become all the more urgent. The diary links the failure of Peronism encoded in Dolly’s murder to the narrator’s failure to prevent it; and these failures in turn substandard his “failure” to change history, write the story he wishes he could write—that story of access, of solidarity, that “cuento capaz de mostrár(se)la de nuevo” (324). The diary ultimately reveals, as Aníbal González puts it, “The writer’s craft [as] a sublimated version of the mechanisms of aggression used by those in power and those who wish to have power” (250); that is, the complicity of language—as a symbolic system constructed through processes of differentiation and exclusion—in socio-political violence, in the reproduction of identities predicated on repression. This is why the absence of Anabel’s/Chola’s versions, their testimonios, produce a cognitive irritability in the narrator’s account, begging the question of whether the task of writing—of fixing stories, through inscriptions, in history—is a task always necessarily allied with the dominant sectors in fields of power. In other words, can a writer disaffiliate with power (Mohanty)?

It is this cognitive irritability that drives Cortázar’s formal experimentation in the diary, his appeals to high theory (through Jacques Derrida) and to literary fathers (Adolfo Bioy Casares, Edgar Allan Poe, Aldous Huxley) who might help him carve out a different path to follow. But each of his appeals proves futile because each of them entails repression, ellision, sublimation in the name of “good taste” and intellectual sophistication (González, 242), “el juego de piernas y la noción de distancia […] sin dar
demasiado la cara” (317). It is Derrida who best articulates the futility of his attempt to capture Anabel in a short story when he cites him at diary’s end: “Ahora que lo pienso, cuánta razón tiene Derrida cuando dice, cuando me dice: No (me) queda casi nada: ni la cosa, ni su existencia, ni la mía, ni el puro objeto ni el puro sujeto, ningún interés de ninguna naturaleza por nada. Ningún interés, de veras, porque buscar a Anabel en el fondo del tiempo es siempre caerme de nuevo en mí mismo, y es tan triste escribir sobre mí mismo aunque quiera seguir imaginándome que escribo sobre Anabel” (342). In other words, the lesson to which Derrida and the others lead is that access, “real” representation is impossible—that in our attempts to represent the other, all we accomplish is self-representation, all we do is expose ourselves. The act of writing condemns the writer to solitude, distance, because it is predicated on separation from one’s subject; it is this separation that enables the writer to see, to tell. And it is also this separation that guarantees the distinction the literary work confers.

Derrida also alludes, in the passage Cortázar quotes, to a second problem this writer faces. When he refers to “el puro objeto” and “el puro sujeto,” concluding “no tengo jamás acceso a lo bello en tanto que tal.” (318) he is elaborating a theory of representation in which all representation is perceived as copy: that is, all representation—high, middle, and lowbrow—necessarily lacks the aura of the original. Following this line of thinking to its logical conclusion would lead one to believe that only through solidarity with the original, through political action, might one recover the lost aura. If in Jean Franco’s estimation Cortázar has reoriented his search for distinction by focussing not on the product, but the process, a shift that enables incorporating into his discriminating taste mass culture objects (i.e. reproductions), what this reading of “Diario” suggests is his final disenchantment with literature, itself, with representation. “Diario” suggests that in the age of mechanical reproduction, all that is possible in search of the auratic is solidarity, collaboration, allegiance with those low-Others, the subaltern, previously relegated to the printed page. Plenitude can only be accessed beyond the literary, beyond representation.

Aníbal González’s powerful question à propos Cortázar’s story “Press Clippings,” “But is a literary reply ethical?” (252) follows this same line of thought. He argues that: “In ‘Press Clippings,’ Cortázar addresses the question of how to react ethically as a writer to acts of violence and evil, only to discover that literature itself is violent. […] The best literature can do, it seems, is to ‘graft’ the Argentine mother’s clipping onto its own textual body and pass it on to the reader, along with the ethical dilemma it poses” (252-3). That is, to borrow from Diana Taylor’s language in another context, to act as witness: “to make visible again, not the invisible or imagined, but that which is clearly there but not allowed to be seen” (27). In González’s formulation, certain literary genres are less violent and lend themselves
more to producing this desired response, like melodrama and testimonio, the combination of which produces the press clipping Cortázar grafts. He writes: “Despite their frequent claims to objectivity, moralism is pervasive in testimonial narratives, since, like melodrama (to which many of these texts recur), they always deal with fundamental polar oppositions: truth versus falsehood, justice versus injustice, society versus the individual […] Testimonial narratives impose upon the reader the burden of making a moral choice, partly because they make ethically unacceptable the option of reading them as fiction” (251-252). But this moral choice usually results from the manipulation of the readers’ emotions (252), a method that in the end also makes them suspect; they remain complicit in a system that “is not innocent” (253), that is founded upon the violence it ostensibly writes against.

And yet, “Diario para un cuento” suggests a more nuanced argument and response to the question of ethical representation. Because it shifts the emphasis from the act of writing, as something objectifiable and disinterested, to the writer’s loci of enunciation, his positionality, it foregrounds the issue of engagement, of method as well as product and intent. It articulates not what literature can do, as if it were an animate object with a will of its own, but what writers can and cannot do within this signifying system. It suggests that while Derrida’s postmodern observations about écriture may be provocative and alluring, they are also potentially misleading. Hence the statement Cortázar’s narrator makes just before re-telling the story of Anabel’s/Chola’s rapes: “no siempre hay invención o copia” (331). I read this to mean that there may be some forms of writing that are up to the ethical challenges representations of the subaltern pose. Some forms of writing might prove equivalent to other gestures of solidarity—among these, those forms that tend more to the historical/real than to the fictional, and that demand of its authors the kind of engagement “good” translation models.

This is why preserving the distinction between translator/narrator and writer/Cortázar, mentioned at the outset, proves so important. While the diary-as-genre presents itself as historical and subjective “truth,” Cortázar’s decision to include it in a collection of short stories (fiction) enables him to add a critical layer to his narrator’s observations, and particularly to the sense of failure with which the diary concludes. Its publication transforms that theoretical failure into a kind of triumph: something has been accomplished here, even if it is not what this translator/narrator intended. Its publication demands that we read the diary as another construction subject to interpretation, that nevertheless alludes to a reality that its witnesses no longer can ignore: not everything is invention, fabrication, copy. Because the violence the diary represents is real, it “impose[s] upon the reader the burden of making a moral choice” (González, 252); but because it is also reconstructed, it is able to direct an interpretation that underscores the role
of story tellers and readers in the *interested* manipulation of those realities. It demands an active engagement with the testimonios offered within it, while simultaneously stressing the role of the reader in reproducing or changing the stories these subjects tell.

What is more, it signals a particular writerly/readerly posture as deeply imbricated with the violence it describes. The auto-critique it contains refers to a translator who traffics in the world of *el bajo* “sin dar la cara,” as though this were a game and the goal were to “marcar puntos” rather than achieve economic and social justice. It critiques a writer so preoccupied with personal distinction, he willingly plays a game predicated on the absence of justice—without an underclass, the search for and preservation of distinction would be impossible. And it condemns intellectual interventions that make writing complicit with other socio-political mechanisms of repression.

But it also opens a door to a different form of engagement. If Cortázar’s translator is a “bad” translator, in that he violates translation’s most sacred codes, “Diario para un cuento” does not for this reason proclaim an end to all translation. In fact, translation surfaces as the very model to follow if it is an “ethics of writing” or a “politics of reading” that we seek. Walter Benjamin describes good translation by invoking the work of Rudolf Pannwitz. He writes, “The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language” (81, my emphasis). In other words, as readers and writers we must allow ourselves to be transformed by the other, thereby enabling the other to speak through our texts (also the task of testimonio). By critiquing the translator he was, Cortázar thus opts to privilege a different kind of writing, one that can minimize Ego (despite Derrida’s proclamations) for the sake of solidarity, and the material transformation of those social, political, economic conditions that silence the subaltern and sustain violent hierarchies of power. With this last story, he suggests that while writing can be used to secure social privilege, it also can be used to upset and transform a social contract predicated on the search for distinction. Instead of renouncing literature (as essentially violent), it is up to us, its practitioners, writers, readers, critics, to expose the interested nature of writing and begin to dismantle the hierarchies of power that continue to structure our institutional practices.

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NOTES

1 While many critics have addressed Cortázar’s contributions to current debates through provocative, theoretically informed readings of his fiction—the collection Julio Cortázar: New Readings (1998) edited by Carlos Alonso is particularly noteworthy in this respect—the role of Peronism in shaping this fiction remains largely unexplored.

2 All citations are from the 1985 edition published by Alianza, and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

3 El bajo refers to the lowest-lying part of the city, geographically speaking, that closest to the river. In the Buenos Aires of the forties, el bajo referred to the port area full of brothels and generally associated with prostitution, tango, and criminality. El bajo is, in short, literally the margin, the city’s dark underside, and it is inhabited by what Stallybrass and White denominate “low-Others”.

4 By now infamous, the reference to the “lector-hembra” and “lector macho” dates back to Rayuela. Cortázar differentiates between passive and active readers along gender lines: the “lector-hembra”—as opposed to the “lector macho” presumably—is a passive reader who likes the author to fill in the gaps so as to make the reading experience approximate the cinematic. Everything is neatly resolved for her. The other kind of reader (macho, by default) enters the text fully, like an adventurer, helping to shape the characters’ destinies through his reading. The “lector macho” hence anticipates Cortázar’s later formulation of the “lector comprometido.” For Cortázar’s own detailed description of these various kinds of readers, see chapter 109 of Rayuela.

5 The Peronato refers to Perón’s first two terms as president, the period extending from 1945 to 1955. This period is generally recognized as the most promising in terms of political and social reorganization/representation.

6 The film version of the story, also titled “Diario para un cuento” (1997) makes this association explicit when it adds an exchange between the translator and Anabel not part of the original text. In this exchange, Anabel, while gazing in the mirror and tying her hair back in a knot, asks the translator if he sees her resemblance with Evita. The film by Jana Bokova was screened at the 15th Annual Chicago Latino Film Festival (April 1999).
The diary does suggest, despite itself, perhaps, that entry into the United States can effect the erasure of difference, the blurring of class/race/gender attributes that lead to marginalization in the national sphere. As such, it suggests not that the United States is a non-racist, non-classist, non-sexist place, but rather that the category of the foreign and/or immigrant can supersede other discriminatory categories that limit individual possibilities. In this sense, it is “the land of opportunity,” as long as it remains far from the discriminating vision of those (compatriots) in the know.

As John Kraniauskas articulates it: “On the one hand, Eva Perón appears to mobilise an increasingly powerful working class whilst, on the other, her image and words disseminate a love story that pedagogically matches subjects—newly enfranchised women and men—to an authoritarian order headed and organized from the state by General Perón” (128).


John Kraniauskas’ reading of Evita is particularly rich in this respect. As he puts it, “Peronism was a politics of intensities and emotions, and love figured large in the discourse of Eva as it was circulated, accompanying her image as both propaganda in newspapers and newsreels and pedagogy in schools” (127).
WORKS CITED


