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The Borgesian Monad Contaminated and  
Buenos Aires Photobombed:  
Pablo Katchadjian's *El aleph engordado* and Pola  
Oloixarac's *Las teorías salvajes*

JUAN CABALLERO

I would like to indulge in a slow and close reading of a thematic and formal tendency in contemporary Argentine letters, without much in the way of predetermined finality or theoretical stakes beyond the topical and the historiographical. Namely, I'd like to show how parodic tropes of informational and topographical contamination are being used by some contemporary writers to undermine and obliquely critique increasingly ossifying historical narratives and ideological precepts. It is difficult to name or theorize something as fleeting as a family of recurring tropes in works, and easy to lose sight of what is interesting or inexplicable in the present and the local in light of the past and of the universal. For this reason, I will err on the side of writing descriptively about the particular rather than writing overconfidently and transhistorically about the general in terms programmatically applied from, say, Henri Lefebvre or Michel de Certeau. While analogies might readily be made to other authors and other traditions, within Latin America or internationally, I will limit myself to two parallel developments in recent works by two young authors that seem, as far as I can tell, to have few readings and literary predecessors in common. These are the poet Pablo Katchadjian and the novelist Pola Oloixarac (an unpronounceable pen-name for Caraxiolo), both of whom position themselves as iconoclastic and irreverent experimentalists, and whose works have received some amount of attention in the literary press. I will treat their works separately, and afterwards offer a tentative theoretical coda sketching out some theses about the contemporary moment these two authors reflect.

**Pablo Katchadjian's *El aleph engordado*: The Canonical Text Contaminated**

Katchadjian's novella, released in 2009 as part of a chapbook series<sup>1</sup> that mostly publishes poets of an intellectual and experimental orientation, deliberately performs for its high-literary

public a playful new permutation in the history of literary contaminations, knowing plagiarisms, and textual infiltrations of which Jorge Luis Borges was a Promethean founder. It takes one of Jorge Luis Borges's most famous stories, "El Aleph" from 1943, and "engorges" it, taking care not to modify the original even in punctuation except to lengthen it by insertions that slightly more than double the length of the piece and add 5 pictorial illustrations. This is particularly ironic given that the story about an alchemical microcosm of the universe hidden in the basement of a hackneyed neighborhood poet is both a self-contained narrative kernel and a meditation on literature's simultaneously universal and interior scales. At first glance, it might seem merely a kind of flippant and self-indulgent formalist homage to tinker with this canonical story, particularly given the dubious (and properly Borgesian) claim made in the epilogue that "El aleph" was the first Borges story that Katchadjian ever read as a boy. This interpretation of Borges is lent credence by Katchadjian's more famous earlier work, *El Martín Fierro ordenado alfabéticamente* (2008), which delivers what its title promises: a senseless and algorithmic re-writing, without changing one word, of Argentina's foundational epic of law and order.

I would argue, however, that the engorged Aleph is allegorically and polemically richer than the reordered Martín Fierro for the subtler intersubjective and polemic side-effects of its playful intervention, which vandalizes and sullies Borges's pristine classic in various unforeseen ways. I translate "engordar" as "engorge" rather than the more literal "fattening" because various additions to the text trope the intervention as a kind of virus or uncanny bodily parasitism, in stark contrast to how Borges' story positions itself (i.e., genteel, tasteful, and self-contained, like a parable or a short story by Edgar Allen Poe). Borges's story is both an early example and a fictionalized manifesto of the austere aesthetics of intellectualism and minimalism definitive of Borges's mature work. Katchadjian's "engorging" of the text all but ridicules the literary idealism of the original story, reveling in its own linguistic commonplaces, its narrative banality, its tawdry sexuality, and its chatty excesses. Katchadjian inserts a more slapstick sense of humor, fills in all the realist banalities markedly absent from Borges's pared-down narrative voice, infuses the narration with self-doubt and internal dialogue, and inserts frankness about sex and the body that would be painfully unspeakable for Borges.

Katchadjian's additions, interspersed evenly throughout the text, can be classed into four categories. In the first category, he adds trains of thoughts to Borges's narrator and lengthens existing ones,

often turning a mere adjective or adverb into a two-sentence parenthetical aside, or even inserting whole internal monologues of self-doubt that question one of Borges's word choices. Secondly, he adds pictorial illustrations, all of which (except for a generic drawing of a Fibonacci spiral) are plates from antiquarian books referenced by Borges in works from the 1930s and '40s. Thirdly, he adds dialogue to the conversations with Juan Argentino Daneri, the narrator's only living interlocutor in the story, which includes adding a metric foot to the end of each line of Daneri's poetry reproduced within the text and thus altering all the quatrains' rhyme schemes. Fourthly, he lengthens the story's impersonal concatenated lists by qualifying existing terms and adding in his own, skewing and distorting the encyclopedic gesture by which the original narrator listed the photos of his beloved or the images contained in the magical Aleph. I would like to address each of these tactical modifications in this order to show how Katchadjian's contamination of Borges's text not only structurally recasts but also polemically rebuts Borges's monadic and sexless utopia of artistic creation.

Firstly, the narrator is established from the first page as being more self-conscious, and in particular more self-doubting, than the narrator that Borges named Borges. (Katchadjian's Daneri, coincidentally, refers to him by various affectionate variations on his first and middle names, unlike the original Daneri.) From the first page, he second-guesses his "own" word choice and is stymied by the reference to a certain brand of cigarettes, then lingers nervously debating the impulse to discard Beatriz's favorite tie. In this nervousness, manifested physically as sweating and pacing, throwing away the tie then retrieving it, the consciousness of the narrator is already split from the first page, in ways Borges's original isn't until the last few pages, after experiencing the inenarrable Aleph. By turning the original's unreliable narrator into a kind of self-doubting and explicitly problematic one, Katchadjian submits Borges's self-portrait as an obsessive young Dante to a kind of auto-critique:

«Cambiará el universo infinito pero yo no», pensé con melancólica vanidad autoindulgente, una vanidad autoindulgente que también me generaba una vergüenza doble cuando la descubría responsable de actos como el que acababa de realizar. Alguna vez, lo sé, mi vana devoción la había exasperado a Beatriz hasta el punto del vituperio; muerta, yo podía consagrarme a su memoria, sin esperanza pero también sin humillación. Los insultos y burlas que

tanto me habían dolido desaparecían con ella ... (8, Katchadjian's additions underlined from here forward).

This opening up of the character to a kind of doubled self-doubt also allows Katchadjian to make the narrator less sympathetically judgmental of the pretentious Daneri, whose excesses of enthusiasm

are submitted to their own kind of revision. Whereas in the minimalist original, Borges's neighborhood poet is a kind of irredeemable whipping-boy, Katchadjian's oddly maximalist text almost recuperates him as the real hero of the text by making *his* consciousness double as well. After Borges's introduction of his facial features and mental character in an ironically pseudo-Lombrosian, deterministic way, Katchadjian tacks on a new description of a totally different, "inflated" face, one which he assumes in his literally and figuratively "engorged" state of mental excitement. The second face which Katchadjian bestows

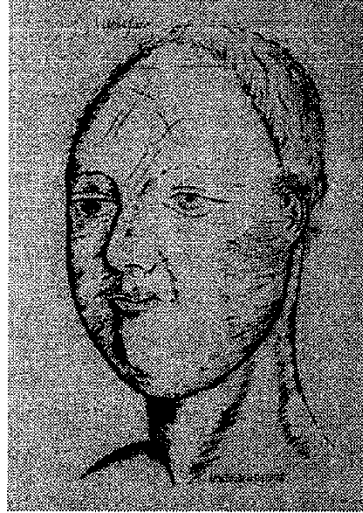


Figure 1: From Peruchio's *La chiromance, la physionomie et la geomance* (Paris, 1663)

on Daneri is illustrated by an etching taken from a rare 17<sup>th</sup> century manual of physiognomy, where it illustrates the type of the "extravagant" face, inserted into the course of the story without warning or comment, a jarring gesture I'll here repeat for emphasis and to illustrate my discussion of the character thus depicted. This second category of changes (followed by four other illustrations, three from other antiquarian books) destabilizes the bookish text and leaves behind Borges's conceit of oral storytelling.

The third category of changes contaminating the text that I'd like to address is the added dialogue with Daneri, which is, as one would expect from the preceding exegesis, less one-sided and farcical than Borges' original. Even as the narrator continues to think of himself as absolutely superior to Daneri in matters of taste and culture, and to justifiably deride his literal-minded project of writing an epic poem coextensive with the world, Katchadjian's Daneri is a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, alternating between schizophrenic genius

and pedantic small-mindedness. (In this aesthetic of generative madness and digression, as in much else, Katchadjian's work resembles the rewrites and fugues of his predecessor<sup>2</sup> and critical champion,<sup>3</sup> César Aira, where rewriting serves as an organic springboard for jumping off into one's own philosophical tangents and pre-existing interests.)

Throughout all the exchanges between Daneri and the narrator, the former is not, as in Borges's original, unaware of the latter's barbs and indirect insults. On the contrary, Katchadjian's Daneri, particularly when "engorged," fights back extravagantly, even viciously, often by reminding the melancholic lover of the fickle fancy (and sexual exploits) of his immortal beloved. The most interesting battleground on which they skirmish, however, is not psychosexual or personal but aesthetic, and stands as a kind of rebuttal to Borges' minimalism and lexical refinement:

Si todos los lugares de la tierra están en el Aleph, ahí estarán todas las luminarias, las lámparas, todos los veneros de luz. Y ahí está: tu lámpara y tu luz, juntas, pueden convivir más allá de tus juicios e interpretaciones. Yo no reemplazo: propongo, amontoño, apilo. Lo mío es moderno; tu interpretación anacrónica se esfuerza en verme anterior a sí misma. (32-33)

This *lámpara/luz* minimal pair refers back to an example inserted into the narrator's litany of superfluous and high-flown ("inflated") diction in Daneri's poem: while Borges's narrator only cites two examples, Katchadjian adds a whole string of others, many of which have obvious ideological subtexts both in 1943 and in 2009:<sup>4</sup> "¿Y de amigo por *contertulio*?... ¿libro por *vademécum*? ¿Lugar por *sitio*?...¿*Lámpara* por *luz*?" (23). At this point it might be fair to ask who is really speaking, Daneri or Katchadjian himself? At the very least, Daneri seems to have intuited (or, we might conjecture, interpreted from facial reactions to his allocution) the narrator's reaction to his use of "lámpara" where "luz" would be more natural, and defends his choice to use both. The tastemaking and stylistic dogma that came to define Borges's career (and Argentine poetry ever since) is here challenged from within, by ventriloquizing Borges's literary whipping boy from within the story, in a kind of satirical *mise-en-abîme*.

The last example I'd like to mention from Katchadjian's piece is the only one that could be called overtly political, unless one wants to qualify as such the many winking nods to Borges's infamous sexual prudery and apocryphal glimpses of his sex life. The most

consequential (and the almost contrapuntally unfunny) of Katchadjian's interventions is his elaboration of the climactic narrative of the infinite sights within the Aleph. Here his additions make a world of difference, given that they contaminate the very image of the world that gives the story its name:

... vi el alba y la tarde en Budapest, vi un serrucho, vi las muchedumbres indígenas de América sometidas a la explotación y el hambre, vi una plateada telaraña en el centro de una negra pirámide que no pude identificar, vi un laberinto roto a martillazos (supe que era Londres), vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo deformante y multiplicador, vi en un pozo los restos de la corbata favorita de Beatriz rodeados de miles de bolsas de basura negras, [...]vi mosquitos portadores de enfermedades cruzando el océano en el fondo de un barco, vi racimos de uva todavía verdes, nieve manchada con petróleo, tabaco, ron, [...]vi en un museo un astrolabio persa robado en una guerra, [...] vi un levantamiento popular en Oriente... (41)

Here Katchadjian is insisting on replacing what Borges has painstakingly removed from his universalized and apolitical Buenos Aires: colonial history, class struggle, genocide, violence, exploitation, chaos, and all the dirty business of humans. The "muchedumbres de América" (an evocative and vague image much commented on by critics) is perversely expanded to form a Socialist historical master narrative in the terminology of '70s internationalism; the Persian astrolabe is embroiled in the international power struggles that arise every so often between European museums and the governments of its former colonies; the timeless and exotic Asia of Borges's many orientalist fantasias is globalized and besmirched by a run-of-the-mill labor struggle. This, perhaps, is the biggest vandalism, the biggest defacement of Borges's monad-like story about a monad: the universality and purity which Borges ascribed to literature, in all his idealism, is the most outdated and untenable aspect of his aesthetic project. If nothing else, Katchadjian has insisted on an anti-aesthetic, an engorged and infected form of literature as ugly and banal as the violence of history it can never hope to escape. In this, Katchadjian's story exacts a kind of pettyrevenge, bringing the less noble half of the world, and of literature, back into Borges's tightly-edited version of both.

**Oloixarac's *Teorías salvajes*: The Contaminated Geographical Imaginary**

Oloixarac's novel, concerned as it is with the geographical and technological imaginaries, includes more than one such polemic infiltration of the lived and romanticized image of Buenos Aires. Cheeky references to local geography throughout the novel undercut the novelistic tradition of anchoring sentiment and verisimilitude in a central character's variously self-conscious and historically legible relation to place. Focalizing all of these playful inversions and disappointments is the "aleph"-like microcosm described in the novel's climactic scene, which defines Buenos Aires by a systematic, non-narrative, and "cyclical" violence that it tropes as so many sedimented layers of scarring and senseless bloodshed superimposed on the city. This presentation of a specific kind of stupid violence at the core of the city and of its culture doesn't just attempt to short-circuit the historical narratives of "transition" and "post-dictatorship" (such an attempt would hardly be novel or noteworthy in the contemporary literary scene of Buenos Aires). It also subtly contaminates the sentimental novel form predicated on that sense of place and its concomitant historical legibility, making the novel's titular savage theories less the product of an individual psyche than of a kind of unconscious inheritance from the city itself.

My basic contention with the majority of critical accounts of the book is that they largely treat it as a straightforward *Bildungsroman*, as a performative or even self-congratulatory autofiction, or as a character study, insisting on a reading that puts interiority and psychology at center stage when the text insistently lampoons any such reading. As she explains at length in various interviews, Oloixarac intended the novel to be an almost impersonal and ethnographic treatment of the cultural life of a very specific place. To this end, the canon of twentieth-century ethnography is almost as important to the novel as that of twentieth-century literature (what's more, she alludes explicitly to that ethnographic canon and mimics its narrative conventions throughout). The titular "theories" refer to the tenets in a shared intellectual field being ethnographized; that field is depicted as contested by a generational conflict troped variously as a seduction, an exploitation, a corruption, and a contamination. One could even say that the characters aren't what matter in this narrative, so much as the landmarks, the reference points, the clichés parodied, and the cultural hierarchies collapsed and contaminated.



But before turning to that map whose corrupted and vandalized description occupies narrative center stage like the Aleph in Katchadjian's story, I'd first like to establish a reading of the novel as a whole predicated on what I see as a good-faith attempt, if not an entirely successful one, to trigger substantive debate with controversy and satire. The sharpest satirical barbs are the generational ones, but insofar as the novel has been widely misread, one has to wonder to what degree the novel assumes a reader on its side of that generational divide who can read impersonally for humor and cultural geography, and how that satire breaks down for the more conservative and allegorical reader conditioned to read for character development, expression, and interiority. After establishing a framework within which the disjointed parts cohere into an impersonal and ethnographic whole, I'd like to zoom in for a close-reading of three scenes linked by the image of a bridge, all three of which spatialize the author's critique of history and trope the novel's critique as a kind of computer virus or Trojan horse, a parasitic ideological process transmitted in the host of an insidious narrative voice.

The novel affects a certain nonchalance as it traces different trajectories in the life of a precocious and independent college student: episodes from Kamtchowsky's intellectual, sexual, and artistic development are intercut with chapters that estrange and/or ethnographize her eccentric social milieu, the intellectual currents of the Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina's most prestigious, Left-leaning and intellectual public university), and with glosses and commentaries on her readings in political thought and anthropology. In many ways, the novel is structured by a pedagogical love story in which the main character, of Oloixarac's generation, seduces a professor of the Dirty War generation, which renders the generational conflict into a sexual power struggle. Much of the criticism of the novel has taken quite seriously the vitriol and spite that imbue this murderous romantic emplotment, or the often problematic gendering of knowledge and thought.

I would, however, like to largely bracket this sensational sexual allegory that has so derailed the public and critical reception of the novel and instead take in good faith Oloixarac's stated intentions for the novel. In an interview with Diego Rojas for *Veintitrés*, she succinctly explains the generational conflict at the root of the novel's at times ruthless parody of the generation of intellectuals largely enshrined by the culture and hierarchy of the U.B.A.:

DR: Algunos personajes setentistas en su novela son objeto de crítica...

PO: Existe una recuperación del discurso setentista que es el discurso oficial, del oficialismo. No me interesa derribarlo o darle un golpe violento, sino empezar a pensarlo desde otro lugar. ¿Qué se halaga en estos intelectuales de izquierda setentista para que sólo se los pueda colocar en el lugar del héroe? El personaje de la novela es hoy un burgués perfecto. Militó, ahora vive en un lugar superpaquete a cuadras de Libertador, va en su lancha por el Tigre. A estos esplendores burgueses les suma el glamour de un veterano de aquella guerra sucia. Quería ver cómo convive el registro del *dandy* superburgués con el héroe del setentismo.

Foregrounding this generational way in which the novel asks to be read, I'd like to turn to some of the minor subplots and storylines largely neglected in critical appraisals of the novel. The sections that focus on the main character's intellectual development, certain historical allusions and insinuations mentioned in the course of the characters' pedagogical eros, and the treatment of family history all stage this historiographical problem on different scales. One of the central questions of the novel becomes exactly this: how is the Dirty War misremembered and misunderstood by the overenthusiastic conformation to a pattern of martyrdom and valorization?

That said, I would not suggest reducing this novel to just another "post-memory" novel by a young writer that ridicules the officialist clichés of the post-dictatorship *testimonio*, the revisionist allegory, and the wave of *desaparecido* family melodramas that had largely outlived their topicality and usefulness by the time Oloixarac wrote her novel. The chapters in which Kamtchowsky reads her aunt Vivi's journals from the militarist years are, however, some of the most peculiar of the novel, and the most obliquely related to the central narrative. The last of these ends abruptly for reasons that have everything to do with urban geography and the spatialization of these historiographical problematics. Kamtchowsky is described reading an entry in which the violence and legitimacy of her aunt's *personal* life is reflected on inconclusively, in comically revolutionary language that brings up the gendered hypocrisies and paradoxes of a revolutionary movement that never knew exactly what role to offer women intellectuals and actors.<sup>5</sup> Interrupting these reflections, however, is a seemingly more banal set of questions: how to get to the marginal Southern suburb of Avellaneda, and once there, how to confront a romantic rival, engaged there in community outreach work? The reader has already been told that this is her journal's final

entry and that she died in an ambush crossing a bridge on foot, but the last two sentences that the reader reads along with her are ones in which Vivi wonders which bus will take her near enough to which bridge, and then return to the question of whether the "violence" of confronting her rival is justified.

The paragraph that follows, which, if read quickly, might seem a mere red herring or feigned irreverence, is worth quoting in its entirety:

Kamtchowsky interrumpió la lectura; se sorprendió al notar que la sola mención del puente había producido en su mente la imagen de Vivi recibiendo una ráfaga de balazos, desplomándose *en* el puente. El puente que imaginaba Kamtchowsky se parecía al Puente Alsina, que había sido reparado hace poco y vuelto a pintar de amarillo. De hecho, jamás lo había visto en su vida; la imagen que recordaba correspondía al video de la banda *punkie* Dos Minutos, álbum homónimo. Pero eso no podía haber ocurrido nunca. (208)

Now, the reader familiar with the narrative conventions of what's sometimes called the "post-post-dictatorship" period or the "post-memory novel" will recognize here a parodic and playful example of a "false memory" (compare it, for instance, to the titular falsehood of Albertina Carri's by-now canonical film, *Los rubios*, 2003). More interesting for my purposes here, however, is the bridge itself—a bridge never seen, only imagined, from the other side of town, far from the southern suburbs which are less familiar to the novel-reading middle-class than they have been at any time since the Dirty War. I can't say how many of Oloixarac's readers would share in her narrator's never having crossed that bridge, but I'd be willing to guess that the portion would be larger among readers of her narrator's age than among those of the fictional aunt Vivi's age. Given that Oloixarac devotes two pages to a statistical study (and playful ideological analysis) of anonymous user data culled from the users of a video game Kamchatsky et al. launch called "Dirty War 1975," this caveat about generational sympathies and generational geographies seems justified. What's more, there's something of a generational in-joke in having her character's family history and historical memory contaminated by a false memory from, of all places, the music video of a pop-punk band.

After Kamtchowsky's reflections on family history and memory are interrupted, twenty pages pass before any bridges are mentioned, and the novel will end having never mentioned again Vivi's bridge to Avellaneda. The next bridge is used only as a geographical referent

to position a "roving" eye, that aesthetic construct so central to a modernist project like that of Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The chapter in which this occurs radically refigures the city and the novel's heroine by way of a seeming digression into Google Maps, which the heroine's hacker posse plans to hack, an operation they code-name "Pornography of Space and Time." The first sentence of this chapter about space and time reads, "[u]n pasajero sentado mirando por la ventanilla de un colectivo que fuera de Plaza de Mayo a Puente La Noria los hubiera visto caminar, gesticulando por Avenida Rivadavia; luego habría mirado para otra parte" (228). It's a different bridge, connecting the citizen to a less marginal Southern suburb, and it's a very long bus ride on which our hypothetical roving eye gets bored; it is, however, a bus ride towards a bridge the reader is more likely to know, on a major bus route with that bridge's name listed as its terminus. It is, more precisely, a roving eye on a bus ride to a bridge that the reader can *picture*, as opposed to one that neither the narrator nor its reader are assumed to be able to see clearly from the page of the novel.

The Dalloway-esque roving eye is not just included to gesture back to a *leitmotif* of bridges marking the city's entrances and exits, but also to serve as high-modernist foil to Google Earth, a nefarious and unadorned Aleph for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Google Earth and Google Maps services both debuted in Argentina the year before Oloixarac's novel did. Google's perceived belatedness in providing and verifying data for such a populous and economically important nation years after having done so for the rest of the world's middle class was something of a minor scandal and a lingering mystery in the press. (Rumors among Oloixarac's generation conjectured that the 100-employee Argentine branch was being shaken down by the far-from-technocratic Kirchner regime for not having made the right political bedfellows; rumors among the Dirty War generation attributed the delay to a decades-old antagonism between the military's tightly-guarded cartography division and their peers in the private sector.) Whatever caused Argentina's and Buenos Aires' self-consciously belated admittance to the 21<sup>st</sup> century geographical archive, it was for much of the middle-class (not just technophiles and bloggers like Oloixarac) an index of a more generalized belatedness stemming from national traditions of isolationism and exceptionalism.

The novel's climactic final scenes, then, are devoted to a kind of contamination and corruption of this globalized Aleph in the form of a coordinated "DNS cache poisoning" attack to contaminate Google's database of Buenos Aires with doctored historical

photographs, literary landmarks, and imaginative routes. The novel's register turns pedagogical (less ironically than when it does so elsewhere) to explain, in detailed footnotes, exactly how DNS cache "poisoning" works to intercept and redirect data packets and how DNS spoofing can erase the traces of such an operation, and then lists the uploaded photocollages made by one of Kamtchowsky's photoshop-skilled collaborators. What's more, the whole chapter is narrated (like the chapters about video games or anthropology) with little reference to Kamtchowksy as an individual: it is a collective expression and a public intervention, celebrated by a party. The massive compilation of forgeries and anachronisms takes the form of a marathon paragraph clearly modeled on Borges's perfect microcosm described concatenatively in "The Aleph," most of which I'll include here, rendering in italics some of the more politically-charged contaminations which I'd like to analyze:

El dispositivo funcionaba a la perfección. Al acariciar con el dedo el mapa de Buenos Aires, podían verse los mataderos rojos de Liniers, el río Maldonado desbordando sobre la línea que solía ser Juan B. Justo y las líneas punteadas de la cuarentena de viruela y peste amarilla durante 1871. Podía verse la Isla Maciel, cercana a La Boca, incendiada durante los carnavales de 1905, la Plaza de Mayo arrasada por un huracán, los edificios alrededor destruidos, y las marcas divisorias de la Guerra del Agua, el fenómeno de acumular durante las inundaciones el agua en una jurisdicción poderosa dejando automáticamente desprotegida y ahogada a otra. En la lomita de la Biblioteca Nacional podía verse la casa que compartían Perón y su esposa y la actual estatua de Juan Pablo II abalanzándose sobre la de Evita. *Los itinerarios del Adán Buenosayres cartografiados por Marechal podían seguirse con azul; los de Arlt con líneas borroneadas; en la casa de Carlos Argentino Daneri se adivinaba un extraño resplandor.* Había fotos del antiguo Itaipark, de niños electrocutados en el interior del tren fantasma. Más al norte, bordeando el río, *estaba el árbol que sangra rojo en la ESMA* y los restos de los navíos enterrados bajo las tierras robadas al Plata. Hacia el centro del dibujo, *había un chino llorando durante un saqueo,* estaba el Mercado Central donde seducía Tita Morello, con Borges en su puesto como inspector de conejos, y más abajo los recorridos de Gombrowicz buscando faunos en Constitución, los troteos de Juan B. Justo y Santa Fe durante el levantamiento carapintada; en Schiaffino, una tapa de El incendio y las vísperas de Beatriz Guido y un gif de Silvina haciendo el amor con Alejandra mientras Adolfo no está; *esparcidos, los lugares de las citas donde emboscaron a los que desaparecieron,* la dama Ocampo encerrada con las

prostitutas en el asilo del Buen Pastor, orgias juveniles de la Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios en Olivos, orgias en Palermo, en el anillo perdido de Villa Cariño, el cuerpo de una niña muerta entre los botes de alquiler. Perón motorizado en su "pochoneta" por la avenida Centenario, seguido por un rosario de rubias. Podían verse las calles destrozadas de las celebraciones del aniversario de la muerte de Evita en el '75; el Jockey Club incendiado; el Sheraton convertido en el Hospital de Niños, el violento choque de colectivos que tuviera lugar en marzo de 2006 cerca de Plaza de Mayo, las cintitas celestes y blancas pisoteadas durante los festejos católicos del Primer Centenario, del Mundial '86, la canción estilo marcha militar del Mundial '78, [...] Jorge Luis sentadito junto al río tratando de levantarse una mina, *collage* de las diversas multitudes agolpadas frente a la casa de gobierno a lo largo del siglo—a favor de Yrigoyen, a favor de su caída, acompañando la irrupción de las masas, llenando la plaza de peronistas, de antiperonistas, de tanques, carpas, papelitos, trabajadores, abuelas y travestis, los desfiles de féretros de los mártires anarquistas por Avenida de Mayo, los desfiles militares por la misma calle, el color rojo, el negro de otras banderas, *los carros de asalto (siempre el mismo modelo)* en la misma Plaza de Mayo, el Hospital Naval convertido en una fachada de un edificio en Sarajevo. La capas geológicas del habla rioplatense que fueron superponiéndose desde los días de la Organización: la sangre desbordando en el Matadero (*La ciudad circunvalada del Norte al Este por una cintura de agua y barro*), los cuerpos dormidos hundiéndose en el río, los paraguas de la primera multitud reunida frente al Cabildo y *los límites para el malón que no eran ellos*. (245-247, emphases mine)

While there is much to analyze here, I think the novel in many ways analyzes itself. (See, for instance, a sentence from the next paragraph: "La yuxtaposición de los tiempos definía una sintaxis especializada. Al abandonarse las determinaciones temporales que separan los hechos en intervalos distintos, lo que emergía era la relación sintáctica, pura, entre el mundo y aquello que tuvo *lugar* en el mundo.") The past is conjured up in an emphatically contemporary form of irreverence, namely reduced to a consumable forgery of "user data," and disseminated via the web. Argentina's modernist *flânerie*, in the form of Leopoldo Marechal's *Ulysses*-like urban "Who's Who," the slum-trade cruising of Witold Gombrowicz, and Arlt's angsty roving of the streets of the same city are all overlaid onto the map of the city as "route" layers, with the house containing Daneri's Aleph designated a landmark for literary tourists. Also juxtaposed to dramatic effect are the routine butcherings required by the city's massive intake of red meat and the

political violence so often metaphorized as butchery, literalizing a metaphor central to Argentine letters. (The longest verbatim citation from Argentine literary history comes from Echeverría's "Matadero," famously the initiator of this metaphor and, since the '70s, often called the initiator of Argentine prose itself.<sup>6</sup>) Juan Domingo Perón's presence is undercut by that of Evita, whose long-demolished likeness shares its pedestal in front of the national library with the statue of a pope that replaced it during proscription (and stands there to this day, to the consternation of many a tourist). Juan Domingo is depicted as a lady's man riding his trademark Vespa as if through an Italian A-movie, Borges lurches as a sad loser, and Silvina Ocampo as a closet-case (with a webcam thrust into that closet for the tackiest and most topical of all titillations, an animated .gif made from a secret sex video).

The most vivid image in the list, however, and the one described in the most detail, is that of various assemblies and masses spliced together into a multicolored and chaotic "collage" that juxtaposes revolutions and outrages from throughout Argentine political history. The by-now photogenic and archetypical martyrdom of aunt Vivi returns here in the image of the dictatorship period's surveillance patrol cars. To the layer of literary wanderings and routes is added a new Google infographic layer in which reside all the sites of disappearance of Dirty War dissents and combatants, the sites where mass graves were later discovered, and the locations of "ambushes" staged by the secret police. The ongoing catastrophe of Argentine history (like the ongoing catastrophe of world history in Katchadjian's *Aleph* of universal history) is writ large across the city in its purest synoptic form, which one would expect to result in its scarring, vandalizing, and befouling. Yet, Kamtchowsky opines, "la ciudad parecía un mamarracho completo. Sin embargo, lucía preciosa" (247).

### **Coda: Books About The World Instead of About Characters**

While a cynic might say that these two books share little besides experimental aspirations and a canonical intertext, I would argue that, on the contrary, there is a kinship between the gestures made in these two works that justifies a bit of historical reflection. Both are books that are more about a city's imagination of itself than about the characters imbued with a satirical minimum of readerly sympathy. Oloixarac's novel might seem at first glance a fairly conventional *Bildungsroman* or, as Beatriz Sarlo quipped,<sup>7</sup> an

"unsentimental education," but I would argue that the chapters about Google Maps, the collective venture of the dirty-war video game and its subsequent, collaborative social-scientific analysis, and various other impersonal sections of the second section of the novel effectively unravel the protagonism of the first. Similarly, while Katchadjian's largest change to Borges' story might seem to be his redemption of the caricature of Daneri as the more interesting character of the two, I'd argue that what he's really done is inflect both characters with a kind of second life and infect them with a kind of parasite that renders them excessive, baroque, and "engorged." Katchadjian's book is really about recuperating what Borges's view of the world excluded (politically) and what his view of poetry excluded (aesthetically): it is about marking the time that has passed since Borges's modernist moment, what is no longer possible and what is now possible. It is a personal and heartfelt homage at the same time that it is a manifesto and a satirical open letter. Oloixarac's novel, on the other hand, puts a generational divide front and center, but is ultimately more interesting as an expression and exploration of its own generation after the fratricidal section of the book has run its course. Once the novel opens up onto that collective horizon of meaning, what it posits there is less negative than one might expect: the hijacked Google Map is utopian in its beauty and its promise of collective catharsis and mass appropriation.

Both works represent a kind of contamination of the national and international imaginary at the level of content and form, yet they are also interventions at a moment when the international position of Argentina is unstable and, for its contemporary reader, entirely topical. They both make their historiographical gestures less in terms of overt politics or ideologies than in the terms of the geographical imaginary, by which I mean that density of meaning that accumulated in social spaces by the layering of historical sediments. Perhaps these texts mark a qualitative shift in Buenos Aires' role as a world city, from a kind of inward-looking or exceptionalist identity to one increasingly written in internationally intelligible terms. They both deploy Borges's canonical story about the impossibility of narrating (in linear language) the experience of the infinite as a way to narrate the collective and ineffably unconscious dimension of social space and history's presence in the present through an urban sense of place and a changing sense of Argentina's identity. They also celebrate a kind of contamination as liberatory and as a kind of corrective of the individual, if not as a means of transcendence. While they might seem nostalgic or



## LUCERO

negative relative to Borges' idealism, history might prove they were entirely positive and generous in their experiments with contaminated and viral forms.

## NOTES

1. Imprenta Argentina de Poesía, Buenos Aires <<http://www.imprentaargentinade.com.ar>>.

2. See his psychedelic 1975 breakthrough, *Moreira*, for instance, or more recent rewritten-homages like the anthropological parody of Mansilla, *La liebre* (1991), or the meditative Barthian *Fragmentos de un diario en los Alpes* (2002), etc.

3. In *Otra Parte*, No. 19, Summer 2009-2010.

4. "Contertulio" refers, of course, to the "tertulias" of 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina's literary salons; "*vademécum*," where "libro" would have sufficed, is actually deployed in footnote (credited to a fictitious reader) in Borges' 1941 story, "La biblioteca de Babel;" "sitio" y "lugar" are of course the key terms of urban geography as practiced by Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, and Saskia Sassen, to which we'll turn shortly in discussing Oloixarac's novel.

5. In the same interview with Diego Rojas, Oloixarac is recorded as saying, "No hago una parodia con ese diario, sino que me apropio del género de las 'memorias de la lucha armada,' tan en boga últimamente, y lo aplico a una chica. Estos diarios de lucha muestran a las mujeres como chicas buenas, no pueden verlas como soldados. [...] No se tolera a una mujer soldado, ni que sea intelectual ni que haga jactancia al respecto ni que disfrute de su vanidad intelectual" (*ibid*).

6. See, for instance, Ricardo Piglia's *Argentina en pedazos*, Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones de la Urraca, 1993.

7. In *Perfil*, Sunday, Feb 15, 2009.

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