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Queering Bodies: Aliens, Cyborgs, and
Spacemen in Mexican and Argentine Science Fiction

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Spanish

by

Alexander Phillip Shafer

June 2017

Dissertation Committee:

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The Dissertation of Alexander Phillip Shafer is approved:

Committee Chairperson

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Queering Bodies: Aliens, Cyborgs, and
Spacemen in Mexican and Argentine Science Fiction

by

Alexander Shafer

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Spanish
University of California, Riverside, June 2017
Dr. Freya Schiwy Chairperson

This dissertation analyzes a number of science fiction novels and short stories from Mexico and Argentina. These include texts that are frequently read as science fiction as well as a few that aren't. These texts are: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" by Jorge Luis Borges, *Mejicanos en el espacio* by Carlos Olvera, "Los embriones del violeta" by Angélica Gorodischer, *La ciudad ausente* by Ricardo Piglia, "Ruido gris" by Pepe Rojo, and *Mantra* by Rodrigo Fresán. These texts portray alien invasions and encounters, or cyborgs, exploring in intricate ways the relation of gender, race, and sexuality to colonial expansion, coloniality, and neoliberalism. By exploring both texts from Mexico and Argentina I am able to compare and contrast the ways that race and sexuality manifest themselves in science fiction.

My theoretical approach includes various queer theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, and J. Halberstam. It also includes scholars of science fiction such as J. Andrew Brown, John Rieder and Sherryl Vint. The queer possibilities of the texts I

analyze have been, with few exceptions, largely overlooked or underrepresented by scholars. I have found that this approach brings to light the way science fiction creates new worlds, bodies, and spaces goes hand in hand with representations of queer space and time. Cyborgs, aliens, and space men have various queer encounters in the texts I examine. Though different, each text represents queer lives through the homosocial bonds of characters who find themselves in outer space or even just the changing of life on earth due to technology. The encounter between peoples and customs in outer space and alien planets abstracts actual cross cultural and colonial encounters and manifest the way that gender, race, and sexuality are intricately connected and important to consider in such encounters. Science fiction provides a vehicle to understand historical and present differences and the way that gender, sexuality, and race are constructed across time and space.

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Introduction

In the 1980 movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, the Empire goes in search of the rebel forces following the destruction of their base on Hoth. Darth Vader leads the charge, hunting for Luke Skywalker, the only known remaining Jedi in the universe. When they encounter each other on Bespin, the major reveal of the second Star Wars movie is that Darth Vader is actually the father of Luke Skywalker. This leads to a light saber fight between father and son, with Luke protesting: “That’s impossible!” when he learns the truth. How could this cyborg and incarnation of evil be the father of, Luke, the last remaining hope for the rebels?

This example shows an interesting connection between colonialism and mythology at the heart of the cyborg figure. As Donna Haraway states, the female cyborgs are the “renegade daughters of the military industrial complex and patriarchal capitalism.” But what of male cyborgs? As J. Andrew Brown notes, Darth Vader is “popular culture’s best known cyborg” (151). The fact that his name is listed among conquerors of empires in the Argentine novel *Mantra* is explored by Brown. The novel lists Vader as one of a series of famous people who conquer by looking at maps, such as Julius Caesar and Hernán Cortés. The fact that Darth Vader uses a mask also makes him part of the “mythology” of the cyborg that populates *Mantra* (151). This mythology is to embody the effects of, as Haraway states, patriarchal capitalism and the military industrial complex, while also showing a sign of resistance. Thought of a different way, cyborgs then represent the culmination of empire and technology, and thus must be thought of in line with colonialism. The juxtaposition of historical and fictional

characters (including cyborgs) points to the complex relationship between science fiction in Latin America, colonialism, the cyborg body, and mythologies of the posthuman.

This dissertation takes an inclusive approach to queer subjectivities, taking into account the configuration of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in both an actual space as well as theoretical and fictional spaces. Using theories of queer space and time to understand the representation of queer subjectivity in a science fictional context, I analyze what it means to be queer in places in outer space, as a cyborg, alien, or superhero. I have chosen to primarily focus on science fiction in Mexico and Argentina. While science fiction exists in all Latin American countries, these two countries are especially important places of production of science fiction. By selecting texts from both Mexico and Argentina, two of the major hubs of science fiction, I am able to explore race, gender, and sexuality from a comparative perspective. In Argentina, science fiction forms part of the major literary traditions with figures such as Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, and Ricardo Piglia writing about and writing science fiction. In Mexico, though much less part of the main literary tradition, science fiction nonetheless has a following both within an autochthonous science fiction as well as a relation to science fiction from the US and Europe. The Mexican tradition spans from the nineteenth century onward and explores the relationship of science and technology to questions of statehood, race, gender, and class. Throughout the dissertation both countries play prominent roles in the intersection of gender and race in particular. The last chapter of this dissertation analyzes an Argentine novel about Mexico City, *Mantra*, and explores the relationship of

science fiction tropes and figures to questions of colonialism, race, gender, class, and sexuality.

What Brown doesn't mention in this analysis is the queer nature of Darth Vader and how it relates to cyborg mythology. Darth Vader has a queer ontology, being born of the force to a mother in a type of virgin birth. He has a mother but no father, thus breaking with an oedipal triangle. And yet the absent father, mythically read, leads him to betray to light side and turn toward a father-son like relationship with the Emperor. Vader represents the fusion of man and machine, and demonstrates the queer nature of fatherhood and family that enshrouds the cyborg figure. In this example, Vader is a very binary figure; he represents the evil of the machine and the good of the flesh. When Vader kills the emperor, and reclaims his humanity by taking off his mask, he shows the triumph of organic over inorganic. He also represents a pattern of fall and redemption, the fall being to the mechanical and the redemption the human.

Cyborgs are not always so straightforward. They are polyvalent figures, encompassing both the evils of a military industrial complex and the potential to reground the way the human body is perceived. Not all cyborgs can divest themselves of the machine or become liberatory figures. Latin American cyborgs, as Andrew Brown notes, embody both the realities of neoliberalism and/or scars of torture at the hands of the State (*Cyborgs in Latin America 2*). As such, Latin American cyborgs show the restrictions to the cyborg myth as an emancipatory figure. I maintain, however, that in the face of such restrictions and atrocities the cyborg represents at least a glimpse of resistance to hegemonic discourses, particularly through its queer ontology. As a

representation of life outside of heterosexual myths, cyborgs help us to view things differently. What we take for granted as human or non-human is placed into question, as well are methods of reproduction.

Cyborgs are not the only figures in science fiction that get us to question heteronormativity and other regulatory means; aliens, and other posthuman figures also abstract notions of the self and Other, the importance of the body, and queer relationships, particularly through the homosocial bonds these figures form with humans and non-humans alike. In this dissertation, the major questions I will address are: How does science fiction provide spaces and temporalities that allow us to relate to and understand diverse queer subjectivities? How does Latin American science fiction use colonial narratives of space travel to make evident the connection between gender, race, sexuality, and coloniality? How does the construction of non-human and quasi-human subjects in science fiction represent the intersection of categories of race, class, and sexual orientation? In order to understand these question, it is necessary to understand the study of Latin American science fiction, my use of queer theory to approach these questions, as well as the study of race, gender, and sexuality in science fiction criticism in general. I rely heavily on queer theorists' work on space and time, and their connection to science fiction.

One way to understand queer lives is in terms of “sexual orientation.” Sara Ahmed explores the spatial component to orientation, as the word orientation implies direction, the creation of space, and the relationship of people and objects in that space (1). In phenomenology, it involves “intentional consciousness,” the direction of attention

towards certain objects and away from others (27). Queer phenomenology, an idea I will return to in Chapter 1, offers one lens to see queer space and time; it seeks to view the way the world is oriented to privilege certain groups and exclude others. Sexual orientation affects the way we inhabit and experience a world already set before us, and thus understanding queer space can offer a glimpse of how to configure the world to be more inclusive.

By analyzing queer spaces, we think outside the normative spaces created for and by gender and sexuality. Halberstam seeks to modify “postmodern geographies” to account for queer spaces and temporalities:

Queer work on sexuality has to respond to canonical work on postmodern geography by Edward Soja, Frederic Jameson, and David Harvey and others that has actively excluded sexuality as a category for analysis precisely because desire has been cast by neo-Marxists as part of a ludic body politics that obstructs the ‘real’ work of activism (6).¹

Halberstam makes queer lives central to questions about the creation of social space and class. Halberstam asks us to think beyond epistemologies that exclude gender and sexual orientation. By looking at these spaces, Halberstam and Ahmed construct a discourse that includes queer lives in ways that are sometimes overlooked. Doing so illuminates the presence of subjectivities often ignored in hegemonic discourse, such as rural queers or queer people of color. Opening up the category of queer to be that which goes against the norm in more general terms, Ahmed specifically allows us to think outside of the given spaces for things. In terms of queer phenomenology, this means carving a space in

phenomenology for queer lives as well as queering the way we think about inhabiting spaces already set before us. In other words, the world privileges certain groups by creating patterns and social and physical spaces that are more easily inhabited by some than others.

Another dimension to understand queer lives is in terms of time. Queer temporality creates not only space but time for queer lives. Halberstam explains that there are “queer” subjectivities, such as HIV positive subjects or even the unemployed if we use the term queer more broadly, that go against heterosexual logics of reproductive and family time (6). These lives exist outside the “normal” capitalist schema of marriage, children, labor, and longevity, and acquire value based on other temporalities. Thus, time and space can be analyzed from a queer perspective. Queer includes that which goes against the norm, but also the sexual orientations associated with the word queer. As an inclusive not simply one but the other, looking at queer subjectivities rather than simply identities allows us to view queer lives from a multifaceted perspective within restricting what does or does not constitute the category such as a term like gay.

Analysis of science fiction texts goes hand in hand with an analysis of queer space and time. Science fiction texts help us to get a better view of the structures of power that are frequently invisible; by creating new worlds, new alien races, and alternate histories, the familiar is rendered unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar becomes familiar. Darko Suvin theorizes that there is a relation between the world of the reader and the science fictional setting that is “estranged” to the reader in a process he calls “cognitive estrangement” (12). Borrowing from Bertolt Brecht’s examination of vanguard theatre, the idea is that

science fiction estranges the familiar world of the reader through a far-off time or place (or differing future or past). Science fiction, rather than estranging the world of the reader to the point of non-recognition, like surrealism, relies on tools of cognition to understand the unfamiliar. This frequently requires the reader to engage with scientific principles that render the story possible to the mind of the reader.² Science fiction then, through means of cognitive estrangement, forces us to reckon with the norms of society, such as gender, race, social hierarchies, and economic inequalities. Science fiction allows us to consider the reconstruction of gender as something one does rather than something one has; Like the ideas articulated by Ahmed and Halberstam, science fictional time and space is often queer time and space; alien bodies abstract notions of gender to the reader. The fictional space of science fiction allows writers to test the limits of the body and particularly gender.³ Judith Butler asks us in *Undoing Gender* to imagine a world beyond a gender binary: "fantasy is essential to an experience of one's own body or that of another, as gendered" (15). Thus, gender itself is created in space and time, and in the imagination as much as being something one performs or does. Science fiction is a privileged site for imaginary worlds and spaces, and can be for the reconceptualization of gender and sexuality as well.

Up until what is called the New Wave of the 1960s, science fiction was generally more conservative in its approach to this terrain. This is not to say that all pre-1960s fiction was absent of feminist critiques or ideas that challenged gender norms. Rob Latham, Wendy Gay Pearson, and other prominent SF critics detail the ways the pre-New Wave fiction also engaged sexuality, although generally in more oblique ways. Latham

challenges the dominant view that science fiction was always such a conservative and puritan genre.⁴ As science fiction has become more explicitly involved with politics in the post-1960s era, both feminist perspectives and queer subjectivities have become more present. Joanna Russ and other science fiction authors and critics questioned why science fiction was so imaginative in the construction of aliens and alien places, but so unimaginative in kinship patterns (Lefanu). Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* are two examples of science fiction that advances feminist and queer politics: by creating an all-female world in the case of Russ, or a genderless race in the case of Le Guin, the world of the reader is estranged in a way that allows the reader to reevaluate their own views of race, sexuality, and gender, and the manners in which society constructs those ideas.

After the New Wave, the connection between race and sexuality has been explored in science fiction by both critics and authors alike. Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delaney are some of the science fiction authors who engage the issue of race and gender in their fiction. By focusing on the differences between alien peoples and humans, they analyze both queerness and race. *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand* for example examines the love relationship between a former slave and a nobleman; they form a nearly perfect erotic match according to a scale that exist and yet experience complications based on race and class. The story places a same sex relationship in outer space and abstracts some of the issues the Delaney writes about in his own critical studies of race and sexuality such as *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*.

Though the ways that alien others represent a racialized and sexualized Other have been articulated in North American science fiction criticism, scholarship on Latin American has, until recently, focused primarily on creating a bibliography of science fiction texts. Much of this scholarship works to create an operational definition of what constitutes science fiction and what does not. It seeks to contextualize Latin American SF in relation to an Anglo-American tradition and to situate it in the context of Latin American literary history.⁵ Though much of this bibliographic work is vital, very little has been done to theorize the importance of Latin American science fiction to gender, sexuality, and race.

Only recently have scholars begun to explore the particular configuration of race, gender, and sexuality in Mexican and Argentine science fiction. J. Andrew Brown's *Latin American Cyborgs* was one of the first works to explore the concepts of gender and sexuality in Latin American science fiction. Brown's work traces the cyborg as a metaphor through media, text, and advertising. Following on Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," he tests the limits and applications of her theory of the cyborg as a site of resistance against patriarchy in Latin America. Although Brown's work explores queer themes in relation to the female cyborg, he mostly frames his discussion in terms of feminism and when queer themes are discussed it is in the context of lesbian desire.

Latin American Science Fiction: Theory and Practice, edited by J. Andrew Brown, and M. Elizabeth Ginway is another work that thinks critically about the collection of science fiction texts in Latin America. It is a collection of essays, from Cuban cyberpunk, to science fiction in Bolaño, to zombies. More than a specific way of

doing science fiction, it offers several analyses that point to the way science fiction criticism can be done in Latin America, relying on critical theory as well as knowledge of Hispanic Letters. The introduction is an excellent resource for getting an overview of Latin American science fiction criticism. According to Brown and Ginway:

Most of the extant scholarly work in Latin American SF belongs to the recovery phase, as academics, writers, and fans have been intensely engaged in identifying texts, compiling bibliographies, and translating seminal works in order to establish a literary history. The aim of this anthology of critical essays is to initiate a more theoretical phase, applying a range of literary and cultural theories to the Latin American SF corpus (2).

This dissertation moves beyond the recovery phase to examine some of the texts that have been recovered and documented from previous scholarship in addition to those that are often studied by scholars. It includes a mix of major literary figures such as Borges with more contemporary authors such as Pepe Rojo. My dissertation articulates the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in science fiction together with both the history of colonialism, both internal and external, in Mexico and Argentina.

Virtually all critics of Latin American science fiction make a distinction between magical realism and science fiction.⁶ I agree that science fiction is not the same as magical realism. Whereas magical realism involves the introduction of magical elements into an otherwise normal narrative, it is more aligned with fantasy than science fiction (although I would not equate the two either); science fiction is explained by science, whether real principles (hard science fiction) or soft science fiction, which deals with

scientific concepts and principles without entering into the mathematical or scientific details. The suspension of disbelief required for magical realism requires an abandonment of the possible, even if only for a moment. And yet within the world of the text, it is believable and normal.

The power of magical realism to make Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez world known and attain both commercial and critical success unfortunately lead to a frenzy to label texts that are better designated as fantastic and or science fiction as magical realist (such as some of Borges's texts). Traditional scholarship has often overlooked or underrepresented science fiction in Latin America in part because of an overemphasis on labeling texts magical realism. Though a useful designation, lumping together a bunch of texts as magical realism creates false relationships between texts that don't bear up under scrutiny (such as labeling Borges or anything post Borges magical realist). Further complicating the matter is the affinity between science fiction and the fantastic, fantasy, and horror. Teasing out science fiction and the fantastic is a more complicated endeavor, as the fantastic vacillates between a definition of explanation by scientific principles and one that is magical of some kind, at least in the Latin American tradition and in the definition of Tvetzan Todorov who influenced this tradition. Science fiction differs from the fantastic in that it tends to have a clear answer for the strange phenomenon, at least according to the rules of what is deemed possible in the text. This is because science fiction, for however loosely it may at times be connected to science, is connected to modernizing projects, even when it can at times be critical of them. The fantastic and science fiction are terms that, although not

interchangeable are not always mutually exclusive. There can be a religious or magical element to science fiction texts, or a scientific component to a fantastic text. While it is not my purpose to police the boundaries of the genre, it can be useful to label texts as science fiction to see the text within the development of both scholarship on global science fiction and the genre itself, a genre that tends to be self-referential and attracts certain kinds of readers.⁷ By labeling a text as science fiction that might not otherwise be read as such (in the case of this dissertation “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*”) it allows readers to draw connections to other alien invasion stories and genre specific conventions such as alien encounters, colonization fantasies and tropes, and discussions surrounding technology and its relation to humans.

In addition to understanding science fiction in a Latin American context, it is important to understand how masculinity is constructed and performed in Latin America. Mexico has a long heritage of *mestizaje* culminating in the essay by José Vasconcelos, “*La raza cósmica*,” where the future world consists of a bronze race that is the union of indigenous, Afro-Hispanic, and other immigrants with the “*criollos*” who were descendants of the Spaniards but born in the Americas. This race would challenge the white European nations and more importantly, the neighbors to the North, the United States. It is a reaction to other nationalist discourses and white supremacist/segregationist arguments that were prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century. Octavio Paz also views *mestizaje* as the founding myth of Mexico, particularly in his idea of “*hijos de la chingada*.” For him, rape, violence, and treason are at the heart of the Mexican identity. Robert McKee Irwin, however, disagrees with Paz’s vision. He has theorized that male

homosociality is the actual founding myth of Mexico, particularly through the “lettered city” of Mexico’s elite (xii) Throughout Mexican literature, it is frequently the homosocial bonds between men that forms national consciousness and identity. Thus, *mestizaje* is an incomplete model for the nation, and looking to the construction of masculinity helps to understand the character of the Mexican nation as represented in literature.

In Argentine literature, while it may seem similar to Mexico in that national consciousness is cemented through homosocial relations, there are in fact many differences to the construction of national identity. The conception of the *pampas* as a contrast to urban life as well as the fictional construction of masculinity is most clearly represented by the figure of the *gaucho*. According to Eduardo Archetti, the *gaucho* represents a particular construction of masculinity that is tied up with the dominance over vast areas of land, the death and expulsion of indigenous groups (212). It is also tied in with the conception of nation, especially Argentina as having a national character of an independent, masculine fighter, living in a peripheral space. *Las Pampas* are a space for the *gaucho* to dominate, and control, ignoring the presence of indigenous peoples that were massacred so that the government could order the space according to the creole needs. They stole land and resources from the indigenous groups as a way to build the nation. This is reflected in Sarmiento’s notion of *civilización y barbarie* which called for the regulation and administration of Latin American’s natural resources at the expense of their use by the indigenous peoples. The gaucho itself is a queer figure; he operates on the margin of society. Long times alone on the plains with other men point to a

homosociality that always borders on homosexuality (as in *Brokeback Mountain*).

Looking at conceptions of both masculinity and homosociality within these spaces (and the version in science fiction that appears on distant lands and planets) is one way to understand the intersection of race, colonialism, gender, and sexuality.⁸

In the first chapter, I examine the idea of queer orientation in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” by Jorge Luis Borges. This story has often been read in terms of its connection to Idealism, as well as by Beatriz Sarlo as a story about Borges own preoccupation with change and immigration in Argentina. By analyzing the story as both a queer story and a science fiction text, I show that the story highlights the way the world is oriented to privilege certain groups (white, male, cisgender, heterosexual). As a metatext about the process of creating science fiction through the fictional world of Tlön, the story shows the process of reorienting the world and thus the potential to change the world away from set patterns and constructs such as compulsory heterosexuality. As a queer text, the narrator and his friend through a homosocial bond engage theoretical questions about reproduction that touch on the erotic but never become so. The story also demonstrates the anxieties surrounding change and immigration as the narrator encounters foreign objects and sees the world change. It brings to light questions surrounding race in addition to sexual orientation.

The second chapter analyzes two texts that deal with space exploration and travel, *Mejicanos en el espacio* by Carlos Olvera and “Los embriones del violeta” by Angélica Gorodischer. Though relatively few scholars have studied these texts, *Mejicanos en el espacio* has been read as a political satire. David Dalton has explored the treatment of

Martians in the text is similar to a history of using indigenous people's for labor as well as a critique of modernizing policies in Mexico that seek to make indigenous bodies part of the State. My reading focuses on queer reading of the text. By analyzing the text in terms of the homosocial bonds of the characters it subverts nationalistic projects. "Los embriones del violeta" has been read by Yolanda Molina-Gavilán as a feminist text in line with New Wave science fiction. I build on the feminist reading of the text by analyzing the way that masculinity and femininity are performed. In both texts, encounters between men of earth and an alien other represent a nexus between coloniality, sexuality, and race. In the case of *Mejicanos en el espacio*, the queer friendship between Private Nope and the Martian Lobelto serves as an example of a tradition of male homosocial relations in Mexico and particularly in Mexican letters. It becomes a parody of state power. In the case of "Los embriones del violeta," a colonial encounter is recreated as the men of the *Fuerza* encounter Lord Vantedour and his men. In this story, the relationship between male sociality and sex is more explicit as the men from earth do not recognize the modified bodies of the Vantedour's men that look female without ever becoming such. This leads to confusion, homophobia and back lash and the eventual expulsion of the earth men from the planet. The story explores desire, race, and sexuality through means of the recreation of a colonial scenario, even if Vantedour and his men are also non-indigenous to the planet. It thus engages an Argentine tradition of exploration and domination of the *Pampas* as well as the constructions of masculinity and femininity in relation to military and government structures.

Chapter 3 explores the construction of cyborg body in terms of both state power and corporate takeover in *La ciudad ausente* by Ricardo Piglia and “Ruido gris” by Pepe Rojo. The female cyborg at the center of Piglia’s novel, Elena, is referred to as a machine/woman, and occupies a space between androids and humans, as she has consciousness and is purported to be the transfer of consciousness from a human to a machine. As such, she doesn’t fall in line with Haraway’s cyborg myth and as Andrew Brown has stated, although not possessing flesh, through the use of testimonial type stories she creates bears witness of State torture. Pepe Rojo’s male cyborg also differs from Haraway’s conception of the cyborg as he is not empowered by the neoliberal apparatus but bound and restricted by it. His body also bears the scars of the father and of the corporate body; though not a victim of torture the marks on the flesh are evidence of the absence of the father being very much made present through the prosthesis of the eye of the cyborg reporter.

Chapter 4 explores Rodrigo Fresán’s complex novel *Mantra*. As a novel about Mexico City written from the perspective of foreign narrators, it self-consciously reflects upon the idea of a foreign gaze. Various narrators are queer cyborgs in their own right; Martin and the narrator of Part 1, Letra X, form a friendship that while not consummated sexually nevertheless straddles the line between eroticism and friendship. The narrator of Part 2 represents a dead cyborg, hooked in the underworld of Mictlán to a television and forced to repeat scenes of his life over again and unsuccessfully transmit messages to his love, Martin Mantra’s cousin Maria-Marie. The novel explores the homoerotic, underground space of the wrestling ring as a metaphor for the homoerotic underpinnings

of Mexico City. The final part of the novel, with an android in search of his father, recalls Pedro Páramo and thus relates the national literature of Mexico to science fiction. It also takes up cyborg debates and issues, such as resistance to capitalist and military regimes as well as the issues surrounding consciousness.

Taken as a whole this dissertation aim to bring together various critical threads concerning both Science fiction and cultural studies surrounding gender, race, and sexuality. Through the use of cyborgs, alien bodies, and colonial encounters science fiction abstracts (or estranges in Suvin's terms) the very real social consequences of these types of encounters in an everyday world. By using various strands of queer theory from queer phenomenology to the idea of queer failure, this dissertation seeks to make queer lives both more visible in both fiction and criticism.

Chapter 1

Queer Phenomenology in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”

In the introduction to “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the first story in Jorge Luis Borges’ *Ficciones*, the fictional Bioy Casares and the unnamed protagonist are spending time in a country home when the discussion suddenly turns to the topic of sex.⁹ Bioy Casares recalls a quote from an Uqbar heresiarch which states that: “Copulation and mirrors are abominable” (*Ficciones* 6). This quote, in English in the Borges text, comes from a knock-off version of the Encyclopedia Britannica on the entry for the country Uqbar. Two male friends in a country home are having a discussion when Bioy Casares shares this quote; the contents of what they are talking about before are not revealed by the text. There is something queer about the setting; two men in an intimate setting are talking about, among other things, the abomination of copulation. The friendship they have can best be thought of in terms of male homosocial desire, a term Eve Sedgwick coined to capture the range of male homosocial relations from friendship to the erotic (*Between Men* 5). Sedgwick’s *Between Men* asks what makes the sexual aspect of male homosocial relationships so taboo, where there seems to be a wider continuum of acceptance between friendship, affection, and even the erotic allowed within female homosocial behavior. The discussion the narrator and Bioy are having points to the taboo subject of sex without ever becoming sexual, an indication of the tenuous border that exists in homosocial relations between friendship and the erotic. This is not the only text in Borges to invoke a male homosocial space. Herbert Brant has written about the queer

character Vincent Moon in “La forma de la espada.” In the introduction to his article, he establishes that:

There is no doubt, in my opinion, that there is something fundamentally queer about Borges’ writing. The literary universe that Borges has projected is essentially homosocial space, populated almost exclusively by men who love each other, betray each other, sacrifice for each other; is it also a place where men interact passionately with other men through art and culture, intellectual games, battles, and duels (26).

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is no exception; it is also a homosocial space where two men share an intellectual game about the invented country Uqbar. Couched in this game is a discussion about sex, and the prohibition of certain types of sex. This particular prohibition against both copulation and mirrors suggests that it is the reproduction possible in sex (and mirrors) that is abominable and not the act itself. Other forms of sex might be acceptable, for in the encyclopedia entry for Uqbar the text of the story switches between English and Spanish and states that: “los espejos y la paternidad son abominables (mirrors and fatherhood are hateful) porque lo multiplican y lo divulgan” (*Ficciones* 7). This particular matrix of prohibitions against copulation, mirrors, and then fatherhood suggests that it is the reproduction possible in sex (and mirrors) that is abominable rather than the act itself. Other forms of sex might be acceptable (including same-sex interactions), though this is never clarified. The word abominable/hateful. If there is sex without fatherhood, or reproduction, is it still hateful (or abominable)?

Uqbar at this point in the story is a supposed country of earth. The narrator begins a textual investigation of the existence of Uqbar. He can only find one reference in one edition of the encyclopedia about this country, and in the official version of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, it doesn't exist at all. The entry of the encyclopedia the narrator and Bioy Casares discuss mentions "el carácter fantástico" of Uqbar's literature. Uqbar's legends refer to two imaginary regions, Mlejina and Tlön (*Ficciones* 8). The protagonist is skeptical of Uqbar's existence since he can find no other sources to confirm its existence. As the story progresses and the narrator learns more information, he later refers to it as "un país falso" (11)

The word abomination recalls Leviticus 18:22 which states that, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." It also recalls Borges' own use of the word abominación to refer to homosexuality in his 1931 essay entitled "Nuestras imposibilidades."¹⁰ This quote sets off a chain of events in the story where the protagonist becomes fascinated with Uqbar and later discovers an Encyclopedia dedicated to its imaginary region (and later the planet), Tlön. He then finds objects with a Tlönian origin and eventually begins to see his world transformed into Tlön. The translation occurring in the introduction to "Tlön" foreshadows the denouement of the story where the protagonist translates *Urn Burial* by Sir Thomas Brown as an act of resistance to the changes occurring in the world because of the discovery of Tlön.

I would like to offer a queer reading of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" that begins with the friendship between Bioy Casares and the protagonist and extends to the queering of the protagonist's world through the discovery of Tlönian objects and ideologies.

“Tlön” asks the reader to identify with the process of disorientation that the protagonist undergoes as he is first fascinated with a fictional Tlön and then terrified by its potential to change his world. The text details the way that first words (an encyclopedia) and then objects that are discovered. By doing so, it asks us as readers to examine our own world, and the changes occurring with a multitude of ideas and technologies in a globalized age. By looking at how spaces, objects, and people are oriented to the world, we can begin to see how world can be reoriented. This reorientation is a queering of the narrator’s world. Tlön is a reorienting force that has the potential to upend categories and hierarchies such as class, gender, and race. The narrator’s resistance is a complex act which on the one hand reflects fear of change but on the other hand shows resists to the normative force that Tlön eventually becomes.

The science fiction elements of the story help to understand the process of change and resistance. Science fiction narratives, as much fiction does, ask us to reimagine the world we live in. “Tlön” challenges the reader to examine their own world, and the changes occurring in it due to technology. As I discuss the story, I will consider the following questions: How does the process by which the narrator’s world is transformed and reoriented to Tlön indicate the way our world is oriented in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality? How can looking to the background of the objects, people, and places in the story point to the way that the world is oriented and show the potential to be reoriented? What are the limits of reorientation to challenging white heterosexist capitalism? How do the science fiction elements of the story help to understand the possible orientations of the world around gender and sexual imaginaries?

Before continuing my analysis of the story, I'll explore the concept of orientation itself. According to Sara Ahmed, the word orientation implies direction, the creation of space, and the relationship of people and objects in that space (1). Sexual orientation then involves an examination of spatial and object relations, as well as personal relations. The world is also orientated to privilege certain groups (white, heterosexual, cisgender, male) by placing certain objects within reach or within easier reach and other objects out of reach (117). Our orientation to objects involves "intentional consciousness," the direction of attention towards certain objects and away from others (27). Intentional consciousness focuses on the perception of objects and the way attention is given to them. Sara Ahmed explains that to analyze the orientation of the world, we need to look to the background of spaces and objects. She proposes that such an approach could be called a queer phenomenology (28). Queer phenomenology, is a way to bring queer theory and phenomenology together, and in Ahmed's reading, to interrogate philosophies such as Marxism and Psychoanalysis as well as phenomenology for the way they do or do not include queer lives. It involves thinking about the ways that spaces are created by heteronormativity and to then think outside these normative spaces. In order to understand these non-normative spaces, it is necessary to consider the objects within those spaces, how they gather people around them, and how they are orientated towards people and people are orientated towards them. To queer phenomenology is also to think of things as "out of place." It requires that we think "outside of the box," so to speak, or if we are to use a metaphor common to both Marxism and Phenomenology, behind the table. A table can be thought of not only in terms of its use value or the means of

production, the approach of Marx, or its value in relation to the philosopher, the approach of Husserl, but in terms of who has access to the table, what space it is in, and what is in the background; for a phenomenologist, such as Husserl, by orienting himself to the writing table, the philosopher must ignore other objects. Sara Ahmed suggests that we “look behind” the table of philosophy to get at the background. “The family home provides, as it were, the background against which an object (the writing table) appears in the present, in front of Husserl. The family home is thus only ever *co-perceived*, and allows the philosopher to do his work” (Ahmed 30). That is, the philosopher relegates certain things within the family home, both people and objects, to the background in order to do his work. Ahmed goes on to explain that Husserl only partially views the construction of the background, of the children at play, of the domestic labor necessary for him to have his privilege of writing at the table (30). The word background includes both a conception of an event that has occurred as well as a space. If we look to the background of something, we look towards its situation in history and within its place in relation to other things. To look at the background is to look at the way the table has come into being, its history, and the way it is situated in a domestic space in relation to others besides the philosopher (38). This includes the circumstances in the background that allow the philosopher to write, namely, his economic and social privilege. By looking behind the table, Sara Ahmed “queers” phenomenology and offers a model with which to queer other spaces.¹¹ It is to focus on that which is frequently ignored or passed over. By looking behind and to the background is one way to “queer” our reading of both

philosophy and literature, and to discover spaces that are absent from a heterocentric discourse.

It is interesting to juxtapose Ahmed's ideas of orientation with science fiction theory about "cognitive estrangement." Science fiction, through what Darko Suvin terms "Cognitive estrangement" is a means to disorient the reader to the world they live in. Carl Freedman, drawing on Suvin's theory, argues that science fiction brings the world of the text into contact with the world of the reader, estranging the realities they live in. Though all fiction does this, according to Freedman, cognitive estrangement is the dominant mode of science fiction, and thus is a privileged site for critical theory (21). Thus gender, race, and sexuality are abstracted in a science fiction text, and a privileged site to understand critically the way these categories are oriented in the world. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" both as science fiction, and as a "queer" text, highlights the process of disorientation, and thus has the potential to reorient the reader to the world in which they live.¹² As science fiction, it presents an alternate reality to the one we live in, even though it is actually a reflection of our reality.

Borges was himself fascinated with science fiction. In his introduction to *La invención de Morel* he states:

En español, son infrecuentes y aun rarísimas las obras de imaginación razonada. Los clásicos ejercieron la alegoría, las exageraciones de la sátira y, alguna vez, la mera incoherencia verbal ... La invención de Morel (cuyo título alude filialmente a otro inventor isleño, a Moreau) traslada a nuestras tierras y a nuestro idioma un género nuevo.

He discutido con su autor los pormenores de su trama, la he releído; no me parece una imprecisión o una hipérbole calificarla de perfecta (Prólogo de *La invención de Morell*).

Although he doesn't use the word science fiction, the use of a novel that harks back to Wells (Moreau) and includes holograms certainly shows his fascination with the genre. Additionally, Borges writes in his prologue to the Spanish translation of the *Martian Chronicles*:

Por su carácter de anticipación de un porvenir posible o probable, el *Somnium Astronomicum* prefigura, si no me equivoco, el nuevo género narrativo que los americanos del Norte denominan science-fiction o scientifiction y del que son admirable ejemplo las *Crónicas* (Prologo de *Las crónicas marcianas* 8).

Borges is thinking about a definition of science fiction here, choosing to be more inclusive by including Kepler. He then continues to, similar to what both Jameson and Freedman will both do, create a definition of science fiction not as opposed to critical theory or realism.

¿Cómo pueden tocarme estas fantasías, y de una manera tan íntima? Toda literatura (me atrevo a contestar) es simbólica: hay unas pocas experiencias fundamentales y es indiferente que un escritor, para transmitir las, recurra a lo “fantástico” o a lo “real”, a Macbeth o a Raskolnikov, a la invasión de Bélgica en agosto de 1914 o a una invasión del Marte. ¿Qué importa la novedad, o novelaría de la science fiction? En este libro de apariencia fantasmagoría, Bradbury ha

puesto sus largos domingos vacíos, su tedio americano, su soledad, como los puso Sinclair Lewis en *Main Street* (9).

Science fiction, according to Borges, is just as important as realism. Neither Borges nor science fiction is apolitical, and reflects the preoccupation of the writer towards social and cultural themes. Borges's definition is, however, problematic. If the "novedad" of science fiction is not important, then what difference does it have to realism? Darko Suvin has posited that is the "novum" of science fiction that makes it unique. That is, events such as alien invasion, time travel, etc. create novelty for the reader that is different from their world. Together with cognitive estrangement, Suvin theorizes that science fiction is a distinct genre.

To analyze "Tlön" from the perspective of a queer phenomenology is to look to the background of the story, to piece together how the world is oriented and how people and objects are oriented/reoriented within space and time. Looking to the objects in the background of the discussion between the protagonist and Bioy demonstrates how the country inn is queerly oriented. The story begins with a description of spaces and the objects in them: "Debo a la conjunción de un espejo y de una enciclopedia el descubrimiento de Uqbar. El espejo inquietaba el fondo de un corredor en una quinta de la calle Gaona" (5). The mirror's placement is a cause for anxiety, as the word "inquietaba" indicates. Thus, the mirror's placement in the hall brings to mind phenomenological questions of perception, of the self and others. The mirror as object relates to the discussion the narrator and his friend Bioy are having about sex and mirrors. Mirrors orient us to the world in a certain way, showing us a reflection of how we inhabit

spaces, but in reverse. They place us in contact with a vision of ourselves, but also create ourselves as Other. The mirror brings forth questions of identification, how the protagonist is situated in the world, and to others in the world. It is also important that the mirror is described as “monstruoso” and that it observed them (“nos acechaba”) (6). This fear of the Other, and the self as Other, is at the heart of the story. Throughout the story, the protagonist undergoes a series of encounters with an alternate world (Tlön) that disorient the way he perceives and inhabits the world. This includes disorientation toward himself, the objects in the world, and others in the world. This disruption could be said to be a queering of his world, and more specifically, of the time and space he inhabits. The personification of the mirror echoes the tenuous border between the self and others; if an object can be imbued with life, the distance between object and subject is considerably reduced.

The idea of orientation can help us understand the relationship of the two men and their relation to the space they are in (the intimate setting of a country home). It also helps us understand their relation to objects and to others in the world. The way that the world is orientated to privilege certain groups is evident from their discussion. We can begin to see how certain objects, both physical and mental, are in reach for some but out of reach for others. The narrator and his friend Bioy have the privilege of speaking in a country home about philosophy, geography, even of a “false country.” This game between men mimics nineteenth century English innuendos, such as the ones that Sedgwick analyzes. The world is orientated in a certain way to make these intellectual pursuits in reach of them (and out of reach of others). Even as the story reflects on queer

orientations, and thus challenges normativity on some level, it fails to account for differences of class and race.

As the story unfolds, we can look to the background, to objects and orientations, to understand the process of transforming the world into Tlön. The transformation of the world as Tlön is couched in a queer relationship. Queer however, meaning that which is twisted or not straight, can also apply to phenomenological questions of orientation in space and time. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* gives the example of a man looking into a mirror that reflects the room at a 45-degree angle, and how the man eventually straightens his perception to make the room straight. Sarah Ahmed speaks of the way that a slant, or what is queer, is “straightened” by our sense perception. In reading into this example, Ahmed seeks to explain how bodies are straightened to inhabit a world set before them, and how the queer subject is “out of line”. (66). This relates to how bodies are subjected to what Adrienne Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality”: queer subjects and bodies are frequently subjected to heteronormativity which seeks to “straighten” them to dominant paradigms of sex and gender (Ahmed 87).¹³ That is, people attempt to fit them into an order of the world that conforms to rigid male-female sexual norms and a binary gender system.¹⁴ Queer phenomenology seeks to understand the ways that sexual orientations and other orientations are “straightened” in the perception of others. “Queer” can become synonymous with that which goes against the norm, or in Ahmed’s terms, that which resists being straightened. But it also retains its meaning as a sexual orientation (or orientations) that work against heteronormativity. The polyvalent nature of the term queer makes it especially useful for grounding our

understanding both of the particularities of queer subjectivities and the ways that philosophy overlooks them

It is curious how the protagonist's orientation to the room, and to the mirror and encyclopedia, relates to the eventual reorientation of the world as Tlön. The "conjunción" of mirror and encyclopedia suggests that the encyclopedia serves as a mirror, and the mirror as a sort of encyclopedia. The narrator's relation to both objects helps him "discover" Uqbar. Here it is a textual discovery, but the word "descubrimiento" implies historically the "discovery" and conquest of the Americas. Uqbar is a country to be "discovered", alluding to the fact that countries are constructed in an imaginary that is largely based upon textual evidence. America was constituted in the mind of Europeans as a "discovered" land through the writings of Columbus and then later through the writings of the *Conquistadores*. Even if Uqbar is fictional, it highlights the process of constituting a country in the imaginary of people (especially since it was found in an encyclopedia). The queer nature of the encounter with Tlön, in a country home, with a mirror, and couched in a discussion about sex opens the way for a queer retelling of the conquest. A creole subject looking into a mirror so to speak reflects on the creation of his nation (Argentina) while looking into the entry on Uqbar and his own constitution within the framework of a nation as a queer subject. This relation between the contemporary world of the reader and text is even more pronounced as he looks into the planet Tlön.

The story continues to articulate the differences between Tlön and the world of the protagonist. The protagonist discovers *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön: Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. He begins to identify with Tlön, and thus identify with a potential reorientation of

the world. The protagonist states that, “me deparaba el azar algo más precioso y más arduo. Ahora tenía en las manos un vasto fragmento metódico de la historia total de un planeta desconocido” (11). The *Encyclopedia of Tlön* discusses the Tlönian language, their customs, religion, metaphysics, minerals, and their “pájaros y sus peces, su álgebra y su fuego” (11). Tlön thus represents a world that is differently orientated, by algebra, metaphysics, and even animal life. The Encyclopedia describes the metaphysics of Tlön and their language. All metaphysics belong to a branch of psychology. On Tlön there are no nouns, only adjectives. Materialism is seen as heresy. All works of literature are attributed to a single author. It is in some ways an Idealist dream, where the material ceases to matter and all that is important is perception. Unique to Tlön are the hrönir, which are objects of thought.

This section of the story is in effect a meditation of the process of writing science fiction. It discusses the creation of a fictional world, with its metaphysics, religion, and animal life, and of that world taking over the Earth. It also points to the way that fictions can transform our world. Science fiction through cognitive estrangement places the reader in a dialectical relationship between their world and the world of the text. The narrator here becomes a reader of science fiction (Tlön) and thus compares his world with the world of the text.

This metafictional take on science fiction also estranges the reader; it brings the reader of “Tlön” into relation with their own world. All of these ways of ordering the world correspond to orders of science or knowledge that don’t correspond to earth’s systems. For the protagonist, they point to the way the world is orientated in terms of

knowledge, biology, and classifications. They are thus markers of civilization (and difference) that fascinate the protagonist. When he discovers the encyclopedia of Tlön, it also serves as a mirror, not as a citizen of a country but as a subject in what Walter Mignolo terms, “the modern/colonial world system” (37). Such a system subalternizes knowledge, and gives economic privilege to Europe. Though Tlön fascinates the narrator, the narrator still views himself and his culture as superior, thus subalternizing the knowledge that stems from another culture, Tlön. It is important to note that the narrator does not know at this point whether or not Tlön is real, although the reality of Tlön turns out to be irrelevant of the power of the idea of Tlön to change the world. The reorientation of the world as Tlön is important because it constitutes a global imaginary. Borges demonstrates the globalization; though Uqbar turns out to be false, and Tlön the result of conspiracy, the world is still transformed by such a powerful ideology, by the “vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado” (Borges 26).

In the Postscript to the story, the narrator relates that he has found evidence to support his theory that Tlön is an invention of a group of conspirators when he comes across a letter. Soon thereafter, however, the protagonist begins to find objects that appear to come from an alien origin: a compass and a metal cone. The compass has Tlönian letters and the cone appears to be an idol of the Tlönian religion. The discovery of the Tlönian objects threatens to destroy the evidence of the conspiracy. He describes this discovery in the following way: “Tal fue la primera intrusión del mundo fantástico en el mundo real... [L]as letras de la esfera correspondían a uno de los alfabetos de Tlön” (*Ficciones* 24). The compass is physical evidence of what has been up to now merely a

written account of the world of Tlön. Though the compass is written in the language of Tlön, the needle of the compass “*anhelaba el norte magnético*” (24). The compass brings up symbolically the idea of orientation. It has the potential to point to and orient the protagonist to the world as Tlön. How the protagonist relates to the compass and the other objects in his world is a phenomenological question. He directs his consciousness towards the compass, an already defamiliarized object because of the Tlönian language, and begins to see it as beyond its normal function. It is familiar because of its function, but its language is Tlönian. Attached to this object is a history of invention, a history of use, a history of its place in the Tlönian culture. The compass can be read, however, as a symbol of colonial history, of reorientation and remapping of lands and peoples. It points to the way that Tlön will reorient the world.

Within the text, the compass is a symbol of otherness of an alien world, one that alarms the protagonist. But it can also be read as pointing to the world as it is already constituted. The compass symbolizes the orientation of the world, “around,” as Ahmed calls it, certain races, genders, and sexual orientations. The orientation of the world already inherited puts certain objects within reach. The arrival of the foreign object destabilizes the hierarchies in the world of the narrator. The narrator states that, “*Tal fue la primera intrusión del mundo fantástico en el mundo real. Un azar que me inquieta hizo que yo también fuera testigo de la segunda*” (*Ficciones* 24). The words “intrusión” and “inquieta” reveal his anxiety towards these foreign objects. They are invasive, destabilizing, and threatening. We might say that the orientation of the narrator to Tlönian objects also affects his relation to the world and to others in the world.

The discovery of the metal cone brings to focus most clearly the relationship between an orientation towards objects and towards others. When the protagonist finds it, he states that: “El peso era intolerable y después de retirado el cono, la opresión perduró. También recuerdo el círculo preciso que me grabó en la carne” (*Ficciones* 24-25). Here the physiological mark on the protagonist’s flesh is a sign of the invasiveness of Tlön, of its otherness. The invasion of a foreign object to the body challenges ideas of embodiment, of the self and other. Bodily invasion is a site of considerable anxiety, and changes to the body represent a destabilization of a sense of self:

The human body, like the human subject, is a product of both culture and nature. Both body and subject must maintain a sense of natural and stable boundaries by continually marking out the distance between what is self and what is not. The natural body is maintained through a number of boundary lines: that between male and female bodies, that between my body and the rest of the world, that between the natural body and artificial supplements to this body. These boundaries have always been unstable, and the recent abilities of technology to modify the body in radical ways make anxiety about these boundaries all the more apparent (Vint 17).

Thus, the mark from the metal cone challenges his sense of self and embodiment, particularly with the mark it leaves on his flesh. It brings to mind an anxiety over borders, between self and other, between man and object, and between the protagonist and others.

The cone itself is marked as other. We are only told that it’s “hecho de un metal que no es de este mundo:” we do not know what it is made of but since it cannot be easily

classified it is a sign of its otherness (25). The cone is no bigger than a playing die, yet its weight is “oppressive.” He tries to “straighten” the eruption of the fantastic into his world, but fails to reconcile the material of the cone with his knowledge of the universe. The cone gives the protagonist a feeling “de asco y de miedo” (25). The feeling is in part concern over the foreignness of the object. It is also a feeling toward the dead young man who had the object, a young man “que venía de la frontera” (25). Here again, borders are important, not only because the cone marks the protagonist’s flesh, but because it comes either from a man in the border region and possibly Tlön itself. The fact that the man is from the border hints at a geopolitical orientation of countries and nationalities. In the context of Argentina, this is particularly important, since immigration has been so important to the development of nation, as well as national projects to create a state out of various immigrant groups. Thus, the man being from the border alludes to such a tradition, and to the discrimination immigrants faced in relation to a tradition of “Argentineness” that included a desire for a mythic past. The border calls into question such a national tradition, and for the protagonist, is part of the threat that Tlön as another world represents to him. Thus, the narrator reflects the attitude towards outsiders prominent in Argentina towards foreigners and immigrants. There is racism or nationalism implicit in his concern over the man from the border, whose object gives him “disgust and fear.”

The object is imbued with the narrator’s feelings towards it. As Ahmed explains, when we perceive something we not only intend our consciousness toward that thing but we, “take different directions toward objects: [we] might like them, admire them, hate

them, and so on” (27). To take a different direction is to become oriented toward an object. It is also to be oriented towards others, connected to the object. For the narrator, this “asco y miedo” is attached to the object, and to where it came from. This orientation includes a particularly violent reaction towards the indigenous past, of “blanqueamiento” and a tension between “civilización y barbarie.” The attitude of the protagonist is similar to the attitude of what Angel Rama calls the “lettered city.” The attitude of the narrator is an attempt to defend a sense of “Argentineness” from foreign threats particularly from Europe and its attendant ideologies as well as from the United States.

The method of inheritance of the cone could be considered queer. Inheritance is a family matter, by which traits and objects are passed down. Ahmed states: “If the conditions in which we live are inherited from the past, then they are “passed down” not only in blood or in genes, but also through the work or labor of a generation” (125). In Latin America, political and economic dominance has largely belonged to a creole rule. The world is oriented around certain racial groups, and sexual identities (particularly mestizo/white and heterosexual). This is particularly true of Argentina, where a history of machismo exists through the gaucho figure. Thus, inheriting the cone threatens the narrator because the man is from the Border, and not from his family lines. It threatens the way he has inherited the world from his family. Receiving the cone goes against the heterosexual logics of inheritance, of objects being passed down from one generation to another.

Apart from objects from a Tlönian origin, it is the narrator’s contact with media that disorients him and others around him. In other words, it is the way messages and

patterns are transmitted and repeated that has the potential to reorient his world as Tlön. The Earth's philosophy, religion, and economic systems are all threatened by the invasion which will take over the world and make earth into Tlön:

[La] prensa internacional voceó infinitamente el <<hallazgo>>... Casi inmediatamente la realidad cedió en más de un punto. Lo cierto es que anhelaba ceder. Hace diez años bastaba cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden—el materialismo dialéctico, el antisemitismo, el nazismo—para embelesar a los hombres. ¿Cómo no someterse a Tlön, a la minuciosa y vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado? (*Ficciones* 26)

It is the international press, an abstract foreign body that brings about the plot of the Tlönian invasion. Again, the narrator fears the otherness of the press, its foreignness.

The narrator states that a fundamental part of this change of the world into Tlön will come through language: “Ya han penetrado en las escuelas el (conjetural) <<idioma primitivo>> de Tlön... Han sido reformadas la numismática, la farmacología y la arqueología.... Entonces desaparecerán del mundo el inglés y el francés y el mero español. El mundo será Tlön (*Ficciones* 26-27). His concern that “el mero español” will disappear reflects again the protagonist's preoccupation with the other and the foreign. Language is one of the first signs of foreignness. If language can change archaeology and other fields of study, it can also change all socio-economic systems. This statement could be read as either xenophobic, or evidence of resistance to the “straightening” force of ideology (as opposed to queer). The protagonist offers resistance to the “straightening” of the world, or the “vast evidence of an ordered planet” (my translation). Tlön has lost

its emancipatory potential and become just another way of ordering the world. The narrator is reflecting on the danger of Utopia to become a present place, preferring instead a world that is not ordered by human systems.

The idea of translation is also important to understanding the way that ideas are straightened and ordered (as opposed to queer). The narrator's final act is to translate *Urn Burial* by Browne. *Urn Burial* by Sir Thomas Browne sought to account for artifacts found that represent Roman, Danish, and other ancient cultures in Britain. Archaeology orients past objects to the present. Thus, Browne's account is one of orientation as well. Browne seeks to recover a lost orientation. There are various interpretations of this final act among Borges scholars. Mercedes Blanco investigates the relation of *Urn Burial* to "Tlön," stating that for the narrator, "Solo cabe ensimismarse, ausentarse, y hacer como si la amenaza no existiera" (77). According to Blanco, the protagonist's act is one of escapism. Faced with the invasion and disorientation of his world, his only choice is then to ground it in world culture and elitism.

For Beatriz Sarlo, the story suggests that the protagonist represents, in some sense, an Argentine identity on the *orillas*. Borges' writing, and particularly this story, can be seen as a site of *criollo* identity:

Su invención literaria de "las orillas" y de un Buenos Aires intocado por la modernización y la heterogeneidad, su relectura de la gauchesca y del siglo XIX representan un programa de 'política literaria' para una sociedad caótica en su mezcla. Aunque la respuesta central a esta cuestión se dio en sus primeros libros

de poesía y de ensayo, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" muestra otra estrategia para establecer un orden allí donde todo orden es evanescente (Sarlo).

There is some merit to this claim, as on the one hand, the protagonist is fearful of others, representing a type of xenophobia and even homophobia. While it is true that the protagonist reflects the cultural milieu of Argentina and the radical transformations occurring with immigration, Sarlo's claim that Borges himself defended a mythic image of Argentina is not supported by the text or by the rest of his work. Rather than establishing a firm *criollo* identity, as Sarlo suggests, the text puts into question then the very creation of identity. This is the interpretation Kate Jenckes gives to Borges oeuvre, positing that from Borges' early poetry on, Borges has not sought to establish a firm Argentine identity, but explore the fluid and shifting nature of the past:

For Sarlo, Borges's early writings are based on the figure of a return, through which he represents his sense of belonging to a *criollista* cultural space that has its roots in the past. I want to argue, however, that Borges was aware from the outset that no such return is possible, both in the sense that it is impossible to return in time, but also in terms of representation; that is, the fact that there can be no return or recuperation possible in language, which would be the condition of possibility of a *criollista* cultural project (4).

Mourning is a temporal distortion, as an object already gone brings pain to the present. There is, however, another interpretation of the narrator and his final act of translation. As Kate Jenckes has emphasized, Alberto Moreiras views the translation as not an escape or a turn back to the past, but as an act of resistance: "This reaction is not,

as it might seem at first, an escapist reaction to a world in crisis. Moreiras describes this turn toward translation as a form of mourning whereby the character of Borges resists the burial of the world into a single metaphor or idealist order” (*Tercer Espacio* 76).

The narrator’s resistance to the logic of Tlön is a queer resistance to a straightening of the world into a “planeta ordenado.” The narrator is mourning the way that this reorientation has taken place. In a sense, he resists the straightening of a Tlönian order, just as he resists Nazism or Anti-Semitism. He catalogs the process by which change has happened, through objects, through language, and through the “prensa internacional.” The act of resistance, the act of not reorienting, shows the potential for change.

The text calls into question the changing of ideas from a foreign order or foreign body, and the way that discourses produce realities. The world is oriented in a certain way where the border, the compass, the invasion of outside ideas, all change the man’s perception to the world. Our identification with the resistance is in part to get us to contemplate otherness. It returns us to the idea of a mirror, and the text as a mirror of our world. The orientation of the world is called into question as the narrator encounters objects which destabilize his understanding of the world as *not* Tlön. According to Ahmed, we inherit a world that is already set before us. “We inherit what we receive as the condition of our arrival into the world, an arrival that leaves and makes an impression” (125). This world we inherit is oriented around certain racial and sexual hierarchies that put certain objects within reach and others out of reach. This world is oriented predominantly around white and heterosexual subjects. The queer or racialized

body interrupts this orientation, either choosing to pass, or challenging hierarchies and heteronormativity (Ahmed 127, 133). In “Tlön”, it is the dead young man from the border and the metal cone he had that interrupts the protagonist’s sense of reality. The body of the foreign young man, his status as from the border, marks him as other, both in terms of racial and sexual orientations. It disorients the narrator and thus has the possibility to reorient him to a new conception of nation, race, and sexuality.

The disorientation that occurs is a process that can potentially lead to a regrounding of values. It exposes the way institutions and practices have oriented the world around whiteness and around heterosexuality. In highlighting the way the world is disoriented, it points to how it can become reoriented. Sara Ahmed says this about the potential for reorientation:

It is not that disorientation is always radical. Bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and reoriented their relation to the world. So, too, the forms of politics that proceed from disorientation can be conservative, depending on the “aims” of their gestures, depending on how they seek to (re) ground themselves (158)

Thus, disorientation leads to a possible reorientation of the world, though it is not always a progressive change. As the narrator states, Nazism, anti-Semitism, and other “-ismos” threaten to disrupt the world and reorient it a certain way. Why not Tlön then? Whereas Borges might be seen as a reactionary for resisting change, here his political leanings appear to be more anarchic, resisting the imposition of totalitarian and communist regimes. As Jaime Alazraki has said,

“En los innumerables sistemas teológicos y proposiciones metafísicas, Borges ve un infatigable esfuerzo del espíritu humano por comprender e interpretar el universo. La sola pluralidad de estos sistemas, a través de siglos y milenios de historia, es indicativa de su fracaso” (20). In *Tlön*, Borges doesn't propose a new society, or question specifically the ideology of gender norms, it is nonetheless interesting how he critiques the process by which ideology itself is formed and transformative. Orientation is never a given thing. Orientations can change over time. People react to their spaces and environments based on past experience, and even inherited experience. The narrator's disgust at the changing world shows the reaction of many toward reorientations. It also, however, points to their inherent power.

By exploring queer phenomenology in the “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*,” we can trace the way the world is oriented around objects and people, and reoriented with the intrusion of *Tlön*. The world of the narrator in the story privileges certain hierarchies, or certain orientations of the world. *Tlön* has the potential to queer the heteronormative world he lives in, but ends up being another straightening force that works against queer interests. *Tlön*, though it has the potential to change the world and upset these hierarchies, represents in the end just another order of things. The narrator's act of translation is a resistance to the idealist order, preferring as it were to leave things *unstraightened*.

Chapter 2

Queer Spacemen in *Mejicanos en el espacio* and “Los embriones del violeta”

A man walks into a Martian bar known as the Muñeca Loca del Cosmos and gets a drink. Martians aren't welcome into the brothel as patrons, although they are allowed to be exotic dancers. The dancers, however, are not what this man is interested in. It's the “protismático,” a machine that allows the man, Private Nope, to experience unheard of pleasure that a “real” woman can't provide. Nope actually prefers sex with a machine to sex with humans or Martians. On the frontier space of a colonized Mars, this Mexican military man, part of the *Liga* or space league, is able to fulfill his sexual desires away from the banalities of earth life. His life and actions are *queer*; they fall outside the realm of normal heterosexual patterns and timetables such as marriage, family, and sex for reproduction. This scene, from the 1968 novel *Mejicanos en el espacio* asks us to consider how race and sexuality are intertwined with the conceptions of space and time. That is, it asks us to consider how sexual desire is oriented in spaces that are outside the realm of a heterosexual matrix. It challenges us to analyze the way science fiction represents both a racial and sexual Other in a space far away, but not so different from our own.

Science fiction narratives frequently feature contact between different cultures, customs, languages, and bodies. Theorists have considered the way that this encounter between different peoples is an abstraction of historical colonial encounters. John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* asks us to think about how colonialism forms the background to science fiction narratives. According to Rieder:

It is as if science fiction itself were a kind of palimpsest, bearing the persistent traces of a stubbornly visible colonial scenario beneath its fantastic script ... science fiction exposes something that colonialism imposes... [Colonialism] is part of the genre's texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable (15).

These narratives represent the colonial encounter between new and old worlds, between peoples, and between competing worldviews. Rieder focuses on Anglo science fiction traditions, and the way colonialism forms the background to these stories. How might the history of colonialism present itself differently within science fiction narratives in Latin America?

If we accept science fiction as a palimpsest of coloniality, how are the layers of such a disruption to gender and sexuality present in these narratives? The example of Raul Nope and the Martian Bar demands that we look at race and gender hierarchies, as well as sexual orientation to understand the interplay of coloniality and the way it is abstracted in the science fiction text. Sara Ahmed's analysis of orientation offers a possible lens to view such structures of dominance. She posits that the world is oriented around certain objects and positions of privilege. These hierarchies put certain objects within reach of some and out of reach of others (101). Ahmed's theory of orientation denaturalizes racist, homophobic, and patriarchal discourses.

In this chapter, I analyze Carlos Olvera's *Mejicanos en el espacio* and Angélica Gorodischer's "Los embriones del violeta." Both narratives display the intersection

between race, gender, sexuality, and coloniality through the encounter between different peoples. The queer space of science fiction, if we take queer to mean not straight, or against the norm, provides a space to critique gender together with patriarchal authoritarianism, and to some extent coloniality. They represent this encounter differently, as the first is an encounter between Martian and human and the second is an encounter between a group of settlers and the colonial order of Earth, both of whom are human. The major questions I address are: How do colonial narratives of space travel address racial and sexual hierarchies in Latin America? How do these texts represent the colonial Other, especially racial and sexual minorities? How is masculinity performed in the relation of colonizer and colonized, as well as among the colonizers themselves?

It is important to make distinctions between the history of colonialism in Latin America and elsewhere in the world. Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo distinguish Latin America from other postcolonial nations, especially since the history of colonization occurred earlier, and, from the perspective of indigenous movements, colonialism continues to the present day. The coloniality of power, as explained by Anibal Quijano, is the structures of dominance, especially structures of racial dominance, that persist from the conquest of America to the present. These racial hierarchies, which led to the enslavement of both the indigenous Americans and the African peoples, are the basis of modern capitalism (536). Walter Mignolo articulates that the coloniality of power constitutes the following elements:

The logic of coloniality can be understood as working through four wide domains of human experience: (1) the economic: appropriation of land, exploitation of

labor, and control of finance; (2) the political: control of authority; (3) the civic: control of gender and sexuality; (4) the epistemic and the subjective/personal: control of knowledge and subjectivity (*The idea of Latin America* 11).

While Mignolo acknowledges that the control of gender and sexuality is part of our understanding of coloniality, he does not make it a central point of his analysis. Freya Schiwy, on the other hand, explains how race has been the primary focus of analysis of coloniality, to the exclusion of gender:

How gender imaginaries themselves have entered colonial constructs and their aftermath, however, has not received the same attention. Instead, the invention of race—through discourse and practices—has been privileged as a marker of the coloniality of power, precisely as part of what distinguishes this globalization (1492 to present) from other forms of imperial rule and expansion (Schiwy 274).

Gender, however, and the control of gender norms by the Spanish in colonial Latin America paralleled the racial subordination of indigenous and African peoples. The coloniality of power, as it relates to sexual and gender domination, persists to the present day, through *machismo* and homophobia. Science fiction, as a palimpsest of coloniality, allows us to unwind tropes of gender and sexuality together with discourses of race.

Various theorists have looked at how gender and coloniality are linked. Ella Shohat discusses these “tropes” of gender that occur both in the historical colonial narrative and in film (50). For example, a map of the Americas by Amerigo Vespucci has the phallic symbol of the cross together with a picture of the naked sirens (Shohat 54). The colonizer penetrates the land, thinking of it as virgin territory to be conquered, as a

sexual as well as imperial conquest. Shohat, however, largely assumes heterosexuality on the part of the colonizing subject. The prohibition against sodomy in colonial laws and the description of sodomy in colonial narratives is evidence of both its practice among Spaniards and the indigenous peoples. Though there is some debate as to what exactly the role of so called third gendered subjects among the indigenous people was, scholars agree that there was a disruption to the system of gender and sexuality when the Spaniards came that varied according to the differences of various indigenous groups.¹⁵

Mejicanos en el espacio

Carlos Olvera's *Mejicanos en el espacio* is the story of an earth man, Raul Nope, who travels to Mars and the moons of Jupiter as part of a mining operation. Together with the United States, Mexico is working to extract resources; to do so they subjugate the indigenous population of Mars. His captain, however, has a top-secret mission to sabotage the United States and prove Mexico a valuable player in the space race. In order to carry out the operation, Raul Nope enlists the aid of a Martian named Lobelto who knows Mars better than they do. They are captured in the process, and Nope must then escape and free Lobelto. In the end, he returns Lobelto back to Mars but is himself sent to prison for his act of heroism/treason. It is Olvera's first and only science fiction novel, and was written as part of a contest for young writers. It was published in 1968, within a historical context of the space race and the cold war conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. As such, the text reflects a time where countries divide up the planets and resources of our solar system.

Latin American science fiction represents the “background” of colonialism differently from Anglo science fiction. Colonization narratives from Latin America, present the position of nations that are both colonizer and colonized. These narratives often reflect a desire for empire, similarly to Anglo science fiction, even while they demonstrate the impact of being former colonies. This is evident in *Mejicanos en el espacio*. As David Dalton states, “Centromexican activities in space underscore how the country both feels greater power as it exploits other lands and how this behavior of necessity requires that it acquiesce to the desires of other, more powerful nations” (188). For example, they conduct an exploration mission of one of Jupiter’s moons, only to find that it is barren of resources. The fact that Mexico (called Centroméjico in the narrative as it encompasses both Mexico and Central America) feels compelled to assert its modernity even in the year 2145 is indicative of Olvera’s critical attitude toward modernizing policies in 1960s Mexico. Olvera uses the science fiction novel as a satire of the ruling PRI and of the modernizing policies carried out in the name of progress. Carlos Olvera’s *Mejicanos en el espacio* challenges us to rethink the way the world is oriented to privilege certain groups. By questioning the legitimacy of “el partido,” it questions a patriarchal structure of dominance in Mexico by the PRI.

The novel is written in the tradition of the male masculine hero of the Mexican revolution. Robert Irwin analyzes the ways that Mexican masculinity has been constructed in Mexican literature. The homosociality between men, for Irwin, is the founding myth of national unity in Mexico, starting with Periquillo and continuing through Artemio Cruz: “Mexico is protagonized by young men, and national unity is

allegorized by male homosocial bonding” (xiii). This national myth, though, is fraught with contradicting statements surrounding gender, sexuality, and a national revolutionary project. Irwin states that literature, especially non-canonical literature, can be analyzed “to present a variety of alternatives to the hegemonic visions of masculinity of Mexico’s *letrados*, a Foucauldian web of gender discourses, that complicate and contradict each other and themselves and represent a broader view of Mexicanness than could the canon by itself” (Irwin xv). Science fiction makes plain some of these contradictions. These discourses surrounding male homosexual desire and homosociality in *Mejicanos en el espacio* reveal a national as well as a colonial project that also continually finds itself in contradiction.

The protagonist, Private Nope is a picaresque figure who fights against superiors, tries to smuggle on the side, and makes his way to the local brothels on Mars while stationed there. Jose Manuel García sees the protagonist as the key to understanding the satire of the text towards the political establishment. For him, Raul Nope is a quixotic character who begins as an instructor of party doctrine and slowly starts to understand the extent of the political corruption of the Party (56-57). He is queer (though not gay); he rejects a heteronormative life of marriage and family and subverts traditional masculine roles of husband and father. Though he has a girlfriend, he leaves Earth in search of adventure. When his friend Gus gets married, he shares his view of the institution of marriage:

Yo siempre he dicho que todas esas antiguas doctrinas prohogar son altamente subversivas; lástima que todavía tengan vigencia legal en nuestra patria chica. Y

lo peor lo constituye ese contagio que se está extendiendo como reguero de pólvora y que estamos exportando al planeta vecino (Olvera 15).

He compares the ancient doctrines of family and home to a disease that is spreading. Disguised behind a *machista* façade, the protagonist's complaints about marriage also question heteronormativity. It is a bit of an oxymoron, a subversive doctrine, since ancient doctrine implies orthodoxy. Subversive implies among other things that which turns one away from the path they are on. If heteronormativity would be "subversive" to him, it implies queer desire on the part of Nope. It is interesting that he also questions the logics of colonialism that export that normativity of gender and sexuality to another planet, Mars. He is concerned not only with his own path, but that of another planet, where it is assumed there is a different ordering of gender and sexuality.

It is useful to turn to J. Halberstam's analysis of heteronormative time and space to understand the difference between Nope and his heterosexual counterparts. Halberstam analyzes the connection between queer time and space, and their "difference" from a heteronormative time and space:

Reproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/space constructs. But while Harvey hints at the gender politics of these forms of time/space, he does not mention the possibility that all kinds of people, especially in postmodernity, will and do opt to live outside of reproductive as well as familial time as well as the logics of labor and production. By doing so, they live outside the logic of capital accumulation (8).

Nope lives outside of the logics of familial time and space, although he does find himself within the system of labor of an international space order. Still, he lives outside the logics of reproduction, choosing the *protismático* over sex with another living being. Outer space is one of these spaces outside of the heteronormative. And Nope's schedule includes him in the more inclusive category of "queer" that Halberstam describes: those who live outside of reproductive and family time. Questioning the typical path to marriage and family through heterosexual reproduction is one way that the novel is queer. Thus the "orientation" of Raul Nope is to turn away from a heterosexual path and the economic and social patterns that are implied with this, a life as a consumer in a bourgeois society. Instead he goes to outer space, where he is free from the same constraints (although he eventually ends up in prison for his defiance to these restrictions). His resistance to the normativity is temporarily made possible by the spaces he inhabits away from Earth life.

The anxiety towards this non-heteronormative lifestyle is reflected by the concerns of Nope's mother. The mother of the protagonist writes in a letter to her son: "Te digo que te vas a llenar de malas costumbres, todos esos hombres de las fuerzas espaciales o como se llame tienen muy mala fama" (27). This "mala fama" or bad reputation is a reference to the spaces Nope will visit off planet such as the Martian brothel; it could also refer, however, to the potential for homosexual behavior between the members of the *Liga*. Since homosociality exists in these typical all-male spaces, there is also the possibility for the erotic. This is in keeping with a tradition of sailors, including the Spaniards who came to the Americas, who shared both physical and

emotional intimacy with each other. The mother represents family and thus the reproduction of nation and family. By turning away from the advice of his mother, he goes against the pattern of heterosexual family life to enter a homosocial environment. There is tremendous anxiety on the part of the society and others in the fleet that the homosociality will turn into homosexuality. The mother's anxiety for her son is telling of the fear of this sexual "deviance" occurring.

In addition to the homophobia demonstrated by Nope's mother, the narrative demonstrates the racism that exists towards the Other. The protagonist, who is also the narrator of the novel, at times shares this attitude, and at times works against it. This is highlighted by the way Nope describes the cultural differences between Martians and Humans. He states that: "Hasta aguantábamos el ritual de bienvenida de las marcianas, que consiste en embadurnar la cara del visitante con una especie de jalea, que no es otra cosa que la caca de sus mascotas, los leluyos" (14). This satirical passage about different customs nonetheless reveals the way coloniality works; by exoticizing another people and their customs, it imposes a cultural superiority. The Martians are a radical Other, whose customs are strange and even disgusting to Nope. The novel also remarks on the racism towards the Mexicans. Nope states: "En bares y protismáticos se nos conocía como los japi yumpins (por aquello del arcaico 'Jumpin beans,' terminito que no hemos podido desterrar de los diccionarios" (14). This is not to say the novel is racist, but rather it reproduces the structures of coloniality surrounding race and gender/sexual identity present in Mexico in order to carry out a social critique of them. Nope is the narrator, and invites the reader to identify with his experience. The satirical, picaresque nature of

his comments and actions creates distance and allows the reader to think about his attitudes and actions towards United States expansionism and towards an indigenous other. He represents the contradiction that many Mexicans feel toward an indigenous Other, even while they themselves are also considered the Other.

The brothel is a space where these contradictory discourses of race, sexuality, and gender come together. According to Irwin “Manhood is often achieved through certain competitive or ritual acts; men who do not perform these acts properly are seen as immature at best, or, more often effeminate” (xxi). When Nope enters La Muñeca Loca del Cosmos he enters under the pretense of a masculine ritual. One of the main rituals of manhood that represents one isn’t “queer” is to sleep with a female prostitute (Irwin xxi). In the case of Nope, it immediately becomes clear that this is a queer space; people have sex with machines, Martians, and other non-human entities. By queering sexuality, the narrative shows how masculine bravado towards sexual conquests masks a queer desire. He enters with his crewmates, a fact that bespeaks the camaraderie between them. The homosocial desire between them is manifested as they enter a bar looking at different erotic objects; they can’t express homosexual desire for each other but through shared erotic objects form a triangular relationship. Nope, however, isn’t interested in the exotic Martian dancers like most of his comrades. While on the one hand it demonstrates racism, it is a turning away from the fetishizing of the alien other that his comrades take part in. Thus, he is different from his group, partaking in the ritual of going to the bar without going to the bar for the same reasons. This parallels his resistance to supporting the colonial project of the Mexican and US companies in Space. Instead, he turns toward

the “protismático” a machine that gives him pleasure. This queering of sexuality subverts a colonial narrative that is only intent on taking the resources of the people of the planet and appropriating the local inhabitants. The masculine bravado is tempered and channeled to an object rather than the Other. This turn away from heterosexual reproduction to a machine is the subject of sermons and other religious proscriptions:

Yo francamente no sé gran cosa de ellos, nomás lo necesario. Como que han sido proscritos por todas las religiones, catalogados como invenciones diabólicas y también como ‘señal segura de la desaparición de la civilización a través del degenerere’, pero creo que es demasiado exagerado el juzgar así a esos juguetes; aunque muy ingeniosos, eso sí (34).

While not alone among the vices that Catholicism decries, “sodomy” is often the one that is associated with degeneration and the destruction of society, such as viewing Sodom and Gomorrah as an explicit result of the homosexuality that existed there. The protismático is associated with queer behavior, as is the association of the device with both *prostíbulo* and the “prostate.” Thus, an ostensibly heterosexual desire reveals a latent homosexuality. Nope defies a narrative logic to “multiply and replenish the earth” that Genesis calls for and which forms part of a national consciousness of reproduction. This founding myth contains in it the prototypical heterosexual pair that must reproduce, thereby linking sex and reproduction. His act of defiance to both religion and to the heterocentric logic is queer; by not reproducing he refuses to partake in a heteronormative world view.

The homosociality that the mother warns against is seen in the camaraderie between Nope and the crew. They bond over radio programs, such as el “Ermitaño del espacio.” In this narrative, the hero always rescues a distressed person on another planet. This contrasts with the banalities of mining, fixing machinery, and doing other not so adventurous things off in another place. Nope and his crewmen share a common object of affection, the protagonist of the radio program, el Ermitaño del espacio. They both identify with him and see their own life as different from him. The captain, however, prohibits them from listening to the program. He almost expels Nope from the crew to a far off moon for allowing the men to listen. In this act of prohibition, there exists a normative gesture against homosexuality. The captain can’t allow the homosociality to become something more, for the bond between the men to become homosexual. The Space Hermit is not a heterosexual hero, but a hero that lives alone. Thus, his hero is also a queer figure, who lives in the spaces outside the normal heterosexual logics of family and reproduction. Though outer space is a free from some restrictions, they still exist prohibitions to certain acts; they can go to a brothel, they can have sex with machines, but they cannot express their desire for each other in an open and overt way.

This homosociality in the novel is most strongly represented by the rescue of Lobelto. If the founding myth of Mexico is homosocial bonding, the example of the Martian Lobelto and the human Raul Nope demonstrates the way this bonding can occur across cultural and racial lines. After conspiring to sabotage the *yanqui* project on a secret moon, the Captain and Nope hire a Martian, Lobelto, to aid them in the operation. After the operation turns sour, the Captain orders Nope to kill Lobelto to cover up their

mistake. Nope refuses, however, and instead rescues him, even at the cost of his own freedom. He does so, in part, because he wants to be like “el Ermitaño del espacio,” who rescues people in need of help and goes off throughout the galaxy on adventures. He idealizes this hero and tries to be like him.

After escaping from prison, he takes Lobelto back to Mars. The rescue motif is a common trope in colonization narratives. Here however, it operates differently. It is a parody of the supposed national founding myth of *mestizaje*, where a male and female of different races or classes marry and thus provide national unity. It is also a parody of the idea that in the end, the man and woman, creole and indigenous, can resolve tensions and create a happy union. As Irwin has stated, homosocial bonding is the myth most frequently aligned with the lettered space of Mexico. National unity then is not a byproduct of rape or biological *mestizaje* as Octavio Paz argues in his essay “Los hijos de la Malinche;” it is instead conferred through male homosocial bonding. The founding myth of the novel is between the renegade Nope and the colonial other both repudiating the system. This homosocial bond as parody rejects a national allegory of homosocial bonding between different racial groups; it is a decolonial project to return power to the colonized. The whole of the story is to show the interference of the State towards the pairing of two men.

Mejicanos en el espacio demonstrates how many of the mechanisms of coloniality, race, gender, and sexual identity coexist in both fictional and actual spaces. Spaces and bodies are subjected to normalizing behaviors that prevent the expression of queer desire. Nonetheless, the latent erotic desire at times bubbles up through the surface

of the homosocial bonds of crewmembers. It is also the reason that Nope's mother writes a letter warning her son of the dangers of being a spaceman.

“Los embriones del violeta”

“Los embriones del violeta” by Angélica Gorodischer demonstrates the intersection between race, gender, sexuality, and coloniality in science fiction. The story is set on Salari II, a planet far from Earth and the orbit of the intergalactic government. Lord Vantedour (also known as Commander Tardon) and a group of marooned military men from the shipwrecked *Luz Dormida Tres* have made a home on the planet Salari II. They have transformed the planet using devices/beings known as violets, which grant them whatever they desire. Dr. Leo Stessler and the crew of the *Niní Paume Uno* arrive as part of an exploratory mission to search the planet for any resources or survivors of shipwrecks. The crew belongs to a star fleet called *La Fuerza* that seeks to colonize the universe. When they arrive, they realize that their notion of the land as a barren space is wrong; instead, they find horses, waterfalls, and roads. The story narrates the encounter between the two groups.

“Los embriones del violeta” retells the conquest in abstraction, removing itself from the immediate historical moment, but nonetheless allowing for interpretations of the fictional land for both colonial history and history that is contemporary to the text. As Beatriz Urraca has stated, “Los embriones del violeta” as well as another story from the collection, “Bajo las jubeas en flor,” problematizes the colonial narrative and history of Latin America (86). Urraca states that the scribe of the journey, Leo Stessler acts like Columbus, describing a strange new world, the flora and fauna, and later the inhabitants

of the planet (93) Urraca conceptualizes a feminization of the men in both “Bajo las jubeas en flor” and “Los embriones del violeta.” Though the feminine aspect of the men is important and is part of what makes them queer, Urraca does not explore other ways in which the characters are queer. In this chapter, I theorize the performance of masculinity, the orientation and disorientation that occurs with the crew, and the homosociality among the crew members. This is related to a decolonial project in the text.

Like a historical novel, a science fiction story can engage the concerns of two periods at once, estranging the present even when writing about the past, or, in the case of science fiction, a different history, planet, or space. Science fiction frequently juxtaposes different time periods in this case, a fictional time and place with an actual time and place. It is an estrangement of the contemporary period of the writer, bearing the mark of both the fictional and historical place (Freedman 17).¹⁶ “Los embriones del violeta” can be seen both as a recreation of the colonial encounter and a recreation of the military order of a 1970s Argentina. The use of the term *Fuerza* is evidence of a military, social, and economic order that is similar to the historical colonizers of Latin America as well as the military order of a 1960s and 1970s Argentina. The cognitive estrangement in the text engages both periods through its setting on a distant planet and use of a military crew.

When the Commander and crew arrive, the way they interpret and configure the planet and its people can be thought of in terms of a “colonial gaze.” The idea of a gaze comes from Laura Mulvey's, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” but has been transformed from the idea of a male gaze to one that includes postcolonial thinking. E. Ann Kaplan describes this as an “Imperial gaze;” using Mulvey's framework, she

questions the difference between a look and a gaze, and the possibility of returning the gaze for the non-white subject (xix). Ella Shohat details the way that film and imperialism go hand and hand; other cultures are seen as objects to be studied and apprehended in a scientific matter, thus constituting them as subjects of empire (42). John Rieder succinctly states the various ways that colonial gaze is described in this scholarship:

We can call the cognitive framework establishing the different positions of the one who looks and the one who is looked at the structure of the colonial gaze, borrowing and adapting Laura Mulvey's influential analysis of the cinematic gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The colonial gaze distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at (7).

The colonial gaze of the Commander and crew is to both the planet and its people. The Commander seeks to reconfigure the space of the planet according to their cognitive framework, transforming it into a place to be settled, colonized, and placed within the grasp of their political, economic, and social order. This colonial gaze of the commander is also a gendered gaze that seeks to appropriate land, people, and resources for the colonizer. To the Commander, the planet is virgin territory that is uncharted, unmapped, and in need of exploration. This stands in stark contrast to the reality of a planet inhabited by people with their own political, economic, and cultural systems intact.

Another type of gaze occurs that seeks to constitute land, resources, and people according to scientific means. The ethnographer and geographer are all colonial tropes

that are prevalent in the conquest narrative of the Americas. Leo Stessler, the voyage's scientist, has a different gaze than the military-minded Commander. Nonetheless, he too displays a colonial gaze: the gaze of the natural sciences. As Shohat has stated, the ethnographer and geographer lend a scientific credence to colonial expedition: "Colonial narratives legitimized the search for treasure islands by lending a scientific aura to those quests, an aura encapsulated especially by maps and globes" (44). The importance of mapping for a colonial project is paramount, as it makes possible the representation of a new land as part of an empire according to lines and coordinates, ordering space and enabling integration into the dominant economic order of the empire. The planet is already mapped out by the *Fuerza*, but what they find contradicts the information they've been given. They see a horse, and realize that something is wrong with the notions they had of the land:

Un caballo-dijo uno de los tripulantes--, un caballo mi Comandante, señor, pero no era que no íbamos a encontrar animales.

Ya sé. Nos hemos equivocado en otra parte.

Cállese Savan, no diga estupideces. Hemos bajado exactamente donde debíamos (124).

They then find cultivation and roads, both signs of civilization. They realize that the map they have is wrong. That is, their orientation to the planet is off; there is a setting askew or queering of preconceived notions. This planet has been off the radar of the colonial powers because it was seen as having no important land or resources. The map is an object that orients the colonizer to the area he is going. But the orientation is more than

simply a matter of direction, but purpose. The disorientation that occurs in seeing that the map doesn't correspond to reality confuses the commander, and is part of his feeling of panic and fear in the new land. This is one of many examples of how the story subverts the colonial encounter, here rendering powerless one of the tools of the colonizer.

When the Commander and crew meet Lord Vantedour and his men, things are at first very hospitable. Lord Vantedour, the leader of the planet, invites them into his castle, gives them food and drink, and tells them the story of how he was shipwrecked.

Vantedour resists the colonial gaze of the Commander that would place him as an object to be appropriated. The Commander sees himself as morally superior and tries to force Lord Vantedour to let him return with evidence and people from the planet to Earth.

Vantedour says to the Commander:

Quando lleguen los colonizadores, ustedes estarán ocupando ilegalmente las tierras, y tendrán que volver.

Me atrevo a anunciarle, Comandante—dijo el Señor de Vantedour—que no habrá colonizadores, y que no volveremos (147).

The Commander speaks as if Earth's laws were in place on this planet, as if all the land already belonged to Earth. Lord Vantedour is able to control the terms of the encounter, however, because he has both technological power over the Commander of the *Fuerza* as well as superior insight as to the workings of the planet, specifically the violets.

Theophilus, Vantedour's assistant, can use the violets to create devices to spy on the Commander. Vantedour speaks of "Las ventajas de ser experto en electrónica superior" (128). Clearly, the technological advantage is here on the side of the potentially

“colonized.” This is one of many ways that Lord Vantedour and his men resist the colonial gaze of the Commander and crew. We as readers take the side of Lord Vantedour, hoping that they will resist the attempts of the Commander to interpellate Lord Vantedour and the other inhabitants of the planet as colonial subjects. Hence it is a reversal of typical colonial power relations; through technological insight, the inhabitants of Vantedour (Salari II) retain power.

By setting the story as an encounter between all male crews, Gorodischer brings to light the taboo topic of homosexuality. “Los embriones del violeta” queers the colonial encounter and thus defies a heterosexual logic of appropriation. One might rethink the traditional colonial history, and how predominantly male colonial expeditions certainly included homosexual behavior in the absence of women. Gender is a focal point of understanding the colonization of Latin America, as a patriarchal Spanish order replaced or at least interfered with the gender and customs of indigenous people, replacing them with the baggage of a European mythology that demonized women as bearing original sin and taught that sex between men was evil. Michael Horswell has written extensively of the way that third gender Incas were labeled as “sodomites” (4). In the conquest of America, the difference in priests, for example, taught the indigenous people the “correct” manner to have sex (the infamous missionary position). The Inquisition actively sought to root out the “peccatum nefandum” or “the sin that cannot be named,” or in other words homosexuality. The colonizing Europeans disrupted a system of gender relations and sexual orientations, which in many ways was more open than their European counterparts. Horswell states that “From the beginning of the ”Encounter” and

Conquest of the Americas, indigenous gender and sexual difference, like that embodied in the third-gender ritual specialists, challenged Spanish concepts of masculinity and femininity” (4). The fear of sodomy for the colonizing Europeans was paramount, and repressed the homosocial bonds that perhaps were at times sexual between members of the crews themselves.

If we return to Sara Ahmed’s idea of orientation and object relations, it is interesting to note how disorienting the colonial encounter is to both the reader and of the Commander and crew. For Ahmed, the world is oriented around and toward certain genders and social relations and away from others. In her anti-racist and anti-homophobic discourse, she seeks to understand the way that the world is oriented around races and sexual orientation. Whiteness and heterosexuality become norms that “straighten out” subjects (norms to which they should conform) and those that deviate from this norm “disrupt” or disorient those around them (133). Thus, the Commander and crew are disoriented by a world that is oriented differently in terms of heterosexuality. The reorientation of the Lord Vantedour’s men to the planet towards new genders and spaces has the effect of “cognitive estrangement” causing the reader to be disoriented and question the construction of gender and sexual orientation in their own world.

Among the crews, the threat of homosociality turning to homosexuality is always present. This is highlighted by the different constructions of masculinity between the members of the *Fuerza* and the inhabitants of the planet. The difference is too much for some of the crewmembers to handle. When the young crewmember from Earth, Reidt, discovers there are no women, that he has desired and had sex with women who were

once men, he turns openly hostile and has to be restrained. His homophobia shows because of the fear and resistance he feels towards accepting the non-normative gender being performed by Lord Vantedour's men. It also exists, in part, because of the homosociality that exists between him and his crew, which borders on homosexual desire. Only Stessler, who represents the viewpoint of the ethnographer and official narrator of the expedition (and of parts of the story), seems to understand the importance of sexual difference. Reidt's homophobia is shown when he calls them names such as "basura" and "putos asquerosos" (149). The homophobic outburst is evidence of the taboo of homosexuality and of Reidt's own internalized homophobia as a member of an all-male *Fuerza*. He is consistently referred to as the young Reidt, a hierarchy that shows him as weak. Stessler warns him at the beginning of the story that he will be damaged by the two suns, implying sensitivity and feminizing him (123). Thus, his reaction in front of transgender subjects is an attempt to fight against this categorization as weak. As a military man, Reidt must conform to the tradition of masculinity of Argentina and in Latin America. Such a tradition is full of men that are bound by homosocial bonds (and thus the potential for the erotic) but must conform to very rigid gender norms. Reidt and the Commander feel the need to impose their sexual morals on the society of Salari II. This demonstrates the way the colonial gaze attempts moral authority on the colonized and discounts their customs. In this case, this imposition of external morals fails and the power again is retained by the colonized. Stessler punches him in the mouth, and Reidt is placed under arrest by the crew.

The border of the homosocial/homosexual is exemplified by Leo Stessler himself as a queer figure. He tends to be outside the traditional group of military men as the scientist among them. When he talks with Lord Vantedour towards the end of the story, he explains why he didn't react like his crewmember Reidt:

¿Le molesta no poder tener una mujer?

Francamente, no. Nunca me acosté con un hombre, nunca tuve amores homosexuales, si se exceptúa una amistad fronteriza a los trece años, con un compañero de colegio, pero eso está dentro de la normalidad, como diría nuestro Comandante. No voy a retroceder espantado, como Reidt el joven (157).

This relationship Stessler had at thirteen, which bordered on the erotic, represents the way that homosociality and homosexuality are connected. His relationship stayed within norms; it is nonetheless queer. Stessler doesn't react in a homophobic manner because he accepts to a degree the fluid nature of the homosocial and homosexual. Though he has never had sex with a man, there is no mention of his having sex with a woman either. Stessler admires the "military man," (127) he has wistful thinking about speaking only in music (121) (for which he gets teased), and he worries about "young" Reidt. He also seems himself superior to both the Commander and the military men because of his intelligence. "Hasta un militar de profesión podía tener rasgos admirables, y lo cierto es que esos rasgos admirables podían muy bien formar parte precisamente del conjunto de inclinaciones y cualidades que llevan a un hombre a elegir esa profesión abominable" (127). There is a respect and disgust for the military men that comes from him projecting superiority but feeling inferior. Their performance of masculinity threatens his sense of

self. The story then is a critique of the rising military culture in Argentina which will eventually lead to a coup and military dictatorship; like *Mejicanos en el espacio* a culture of bureaucracy and force is mocked, criticizing notions of state and national projects.

As for the violets mentioned in the story, they themselves are inherently queer. They produce, but not according to a normal heterosexual logic of capital accumulation or heterosexual reproduction. The resources of the planet, which abounds in fertile lands and treasures, are unable to be taken from the planet. All the resources they produce, from food to clothing, that are on the planet, are creations of desire. Vantedour and his men are able to stand on devices/beings called violets and reproduce objects that they want. By being able to reproduce whatever you want by standing on the violet, the economy of desire, and particularly heterosexual desire, is subverted. There is no scarcity, no exchange. These violets allow the men to reproduce, but there is no indication that they are female or gendered at all. The crew of the *Nini Paume Uno* cannot reproduce with them, suggesting that reproduction is uncoupled from a heterosexual paradigm. At the end of the story, Vantedour reveals the mystery of how the violets operate:

Le voy a decir otra cosa. Nadie puede obtener nada del violeta si no se siente lo que quiere obtener. Se da cuenta por eso es imposible crear una mujer. Cuando la primera vez Theophilus deseó un cigarrillo tenía tantas ganas de fumar, que se identificó (158).

The person must identify with the object to reproduce it. They can identify with objects, but they cannot identify or reproduce a female. Vantedour's reasoning, however, is

problematic; the men are able to “become female,” or at least feminine. The males perform femininity by surgery and by transformation. According to Butler, gender is done and performed, both by repetition and by improvisation (*Undoing Gender* 1). The males undergo surgery to create breasts and live out masochistic fantasies of torture. Carita Dulce chooses to live inside the womb and be cared for by *los matronas*. By using males who become female-like, called *Efebos*, Gorodischer questions gender normativity. The men performing gender cause the crewmen from Earth to question sexual norms and anxiety but by denying them the ability to simply transform into females, Gorodischer, in effect, creates a third gender. This inversion of male and female introduced by *los matronas*, male mothers carrying embryos, demonstrates that the queering of the subjects extends to the level of biology and reproduction, and divorces sex from reproduction. Men are able to perform roles assumed natural for woman. The performance of gender questions a gender binary, taking away sex from reproduction. It allows for both a queer performance of female, but also transgender subjectivity.

All of these “men,” desire to have different objects and to be different things. Their bodies are transformed by their desire. The Commander, for who one path, that of obedience, is key, argues with Lord Vantedour over the meaning of pleasure and happiness:

¿La felicidad! ¿Estar encerrado chupando las paredes de la propia cárcel? ¿Pasar de las aclamaciones a un sótano donde lo azotan a uno y le ponen hierros al rojo en las ingles? ¿Vivir inconsciente en una borrachera continua?

Y sí, Comandante, eso también puede ser la felicidad. ¿Cuál es la diferencia entre encerrarse en un útero artificial y sentarse a la orilla del río a pescar dorados?

(155)

The men desire different objects, from whips to hot irons, to fulfill masochistic desires. They also desire to be different things. Their pleasure is individual, even if it collectively represents different masculine fantasies that fall outside the realm of a normative heterosexual pattern of sex for reproduction. The Commander has a particular vision of happiness which conflicts with such free and open desire, and is grounded in obedience to regulations and order. The queer lives of Lord Vantedour and his men threaten that vision of happiness, of obedience to a higher colonial order. The text sets up continuity between a colonial patriarchal order and dictatorship; the military order of the crew of the *Niní Paume Uno* is full of men, for whom obedience is the most important characteristic. The inflexibility that the Commander shows is reminiscent of both a colonial order and a military dictatorship. Thus, queerness challenges patriarchy and the construction of a masculine economy and political order.

The story creates an economy of desire that is free from the constraints of history, production, and heteronormativity. People are free to choose their spaces, be it the womb, or the space of their own bodies. Whereas Sara Ahmed posits that orientation and affect require that we orient desire towards some objects and away from others, the free-floating space of the imagination on *Salari II* allows for virtually unrestrained pleasure. The orientation nonetheless, seems to be mostly permanent, as bodies take the relatively permanent forms of men inside wombs, men in perpetual torture, or the form of women

with breasts. Orientations come about by repeated action, what Ahmed relates to as a RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury) (57). It is not that orientations are natural or even given, but inherited and the result of tending toward certain objects more than to others. The fact that the objects that the inhabitants of Vantedour tend toward are psychoanalytic objects such as a womb, or a torture chamber is evidence of the power of inherited orientations; they do not break free from the constraints of Earth life so easily.

Although Lord Vantedour represents a resistance to a colonial gaze, he himself represents European ideas. In a sense, he stands in for the creole settlers, who gained independence. Nothing is said of the indigenous population that may or may not have lived on the planet before he arrived. The only mention of life on the planet is the mysterious violets. Thus, Vantedour represents a European immigrant coming to rural Argentina and adopting a new identity in space. Vantedour's dream of Ulysses in the opening paragraph of the story is evidence of his European heritage. "Se dio vuelta bajo las mantas, rugieron los torrentes. Alcanzó a detener la punta de un sueño que hablaba de Ulises: escuchó la respiración de la noche en Vantedour" (119).¹⁷ He dreams of Ulysses, the prototypical wanderer/explorer and heteronormative hero. Later references to medieval castles and his title as Señor (Lord) place the story in relation with other Western traditions such as chivalry. This dream sequence invokes Eurocentric tropes even though it is set in a distant land. Thus, a distant planet becomes a not so unfamiliar world to the mind of the creole reader in Argentina. This geographic gaze in part is what contributed to the creation of "the idea of Latin America" as Mignolo refers to it, a geographical space placed within Latinity and European terms (2). The allusion to

Ulysses (rather than Odysseus) also invokes this geographic heritage of the Roman Empire and the potential “latinization” of the planet. Thus, it displays a Creole or hybrid identity, as the “natives” here are not so much indigenous people as settlers themselves. The text then asks us to simultaneously look through the eyes of the Commander at Vantedour as a potential imperial subject (thus constituting him as colonized) and from the subject position of Vantedour as the possessor of greater knowledge.

Although the story provides a critique of gender, sexuality, and coloniality, the story is mostly silent on issues of race. Although gender is estranged, bodies remain unmarked as compared to the one racially marked character, Tuk-o-Tut. Tuk-o-Tut is described as the only “negro” who is also a slave to Lord Vantedour. Stessler refers to him as an “animal” (136). The story then invites us to criticize the colonizers and the inhabitants of Salari II/Vantedour. Vantedour and his men use the violets, possibly in an exploitive manner, to get what they want. As such, it is a critique of Argentina, a land where native populations were decimated and the “native” Argentines are themselves immigrants. The other so called natives on the planet (the shipwrecked crews) are fulfilling their desires; one man Lesvanoos is even tortured. But only the black slave’s thoughts and desires are never recognized or heard. It can easily be assumed that this is a criticism to the seemingly utopic space of the planet, where gender norms, but not racial norms, are challenged. Lord Vantedour desires to rule over others, to have servants, and to have a black slave. Thus, the text again hints at the coloniality of power that persists on Salari II, even if it is not the rigid structure of *La Fuerza* (and by abstraction, Latin

America). The power structure of the planet is built on the backs of slaves, here not indigenous, but still racially marked.

In “Los embriones del violeta,” Lord Vantedour and his council ultimately decide to erase the memories of the potential conquerors to avoid colonization. Vantedour erases the memory of the crew, although Stessler is allowed to retain the memories. By erasing traces of his people in memory, mapping, and other tools of the colonizer, he successfully protects himself from colonization. He resists the colonial gaze by making it impossible for him to be represented as a subject of the gaze. This parodies the “actual” colonial history, where accounts of new lands from Columbus and other colonizers made their way back to Europe and recounted their adventures. This created in the popular imagination a space to be inhabited, mapped, and dominated; a mythical Eden for the Europeans to control. Removing themselves both from writing and a colonial imaginary, they resist colonization and allow for their own structures of power to continue. This is not to say that hierarchies cease to exist after the Commander and the *Niní Paume Uno* leave: the story, written from Argentina, reflects a Latin American experience of coloniality which resists international control, but continues to perpetuate internal colonialism towards an indigenous Other.

Both “Los embriones del violeta” and *Mejicanos en el espacio* demonstrate how many of the mechanisms of coloniality, race, gender, and sexual identity coexist in both fictional and actual spaces. In each story spaces and bodies are subjected to normalizing behaviors that prevent the expression of queer desire. Nonetheless, the latent erotic desire at times bubbles up through the surface of the homosocial bonds of crewmembers. The

homosocial bonds between the crewmembers border on the erotic; it is the threat to this carefully constructed boundary that causes the young Reidt to react violently to the revelation that the “females” are actually males. It is also the reason that Nope’s mother writes a letter warning her son of the dangers of being a spaceman. Homophobia exists, as shown by these texts, as a violent reaction to such revelations of the tenuous border between friendship and the erotic.

In both stories, masculinities are performed by the crewmembers. In “Los embriones del violeta,” femininity is also performed by the males, questioning on a deeper level the normative sexuality and creation of gender that occurs in society. The cognitive estrangement (which extends beyond the level of the cognitive) in science fiction allows the reader to question normativity. Science fiction also creates a space to question race. The black slave in "Los embriones de violeta" is a jarring example of the inequality that persists even in a supposedly free society. The structures of coloniality exist off planet and in different conditions. Race is immutable according to the text, even while gender is not. *Mejicanos en el espacio* is much clearer about its critique of racial inequality. Through Nope, the reader estranges their one conceptions of race into the encounter with the Martians. In the end, Nope returns the Martian Lobelto to his home Planet of Mars, thus returning power to the colonized people rather than absorbing them into a dominant structure. The project of nation in *Mejicanos en el espacio* has failed, and the state is shown to restrict freedom rather than ensure well-being

Chapter 3

Queer Cyborgs in Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente* and Pepe Rojo's "Ruido gris"

The relationship between humans and technology is frequently problematized in science fiction narratives, particularly through the figure of artificial humans and cyborgs. Part human, part machine, cyborgs call into question what it means to be human. Cyborgs also bring to the foreground questions about the materiality of the body; if the body can be altered and changed, what are the boundaries of the self? If our consciousness can be transferred or altered, it upends our notions of the soul, of the ego, and of the idea that we are individuals with the possession of consciousness (Vint 6). As Vint states: "We are inclined to identify ourselves with the voice inside our heads, abstract essences which might be called souls in a religious context, but which also persist in a non-religious context. This is the persistence of Cartesian dualism" (6). The mind/body split, as presented by Descartes "cogito ergo sum" is problematized by the existence of the cyborg. If what I think and the way I think is able to be altered by medical technology, then who am I? Thus the cyborg fundamentally alters and challenges our notions of the self.

Critics have long been interested in the powerful image of the cyborg as a way of questioning dominant categories and hierarchies. In terms of scholarship, Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" laid the groundwork for the cyborg as a queer figure. Queer, in this case, indicates something or someone that is outside the normal patterns and paradigms. For Haraway the cyborg is free from both Oedipal constraints or Judeo-Christian (or other) religious myths (151). Haraway elaborates a theory of the female

cyborg as the renegade daughter of the military industrial complex, rebelling against white patriarchal capitalism (151). Focusing on the possibilities of feminism for the cyborg, however, Haraway misses the opportunity to truly queer the cyborg. To perceive something as queer is to go against the established patterns, whether temporal or spatial, that heteronormativity creates. In J. Halberstam's definition, "'Queer' refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (5). If we insist only on the femininity of cyborg figures, we reify the category 'woman' as something stable and essential rather than something enforced by society.¹⁸ We create a new line to which the cyborg must align. If the cyborg is inherently female, this places limits on the queer potentiality of an otherwise transgressive being. At the same time, it excludes the male cyborgs as also queer.

The contemporary cyborg scholar J. Andrew Brown has sought to fill in some of the gaps in Haraway's critical examination of the cyborg, although he also does not explore the queer potential of male cyborgs. Haraway's cyborgs are the "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (151). Brown's work traces the cyborg as a metaphor through media, text, and advertising. He tests the limits and applications of Haraway's theory of the cyborg in a Latin American context. For example, Haraway's assertion that the fathers "are inessential" does not hold weight in Argentine narratives. According to Brown, Argentine cyborgs are:

cyborg[s] whose existence stems from the moment in which the technology of torture is applied to the organic flesh of the victim, converting the surviving body into a living robot. In this case, Donna Haraway's cyborg that forgets and erases its capitalist father is replaced by one that cannot help but remember the father whose prosthetic phallus engendered the mechanical appendages that constitute its existence (*Cyborgs in Latin America* 4).

Brown goes on to say that these cyborgs are nevertheless subversive as "their inability to forget their provenance is shared with all who see them and their mechanical scars" (4). The role of the Argentine cyborg, according to Brown, is to bear corporeal witness as a site of trauma in contrast to the idea of erasure by the state. Therefore, the Argentine cyborg fulfills an important site as witness/resistance to state power. They are sites of resistance, not because they are outside the system, but because they are victims of it. Though a victim, the cyborg is not a voiceless subaltern, but a figure that uses the state's weapons against it.

Whereas Brown states that the cyborg represents a witness of state inflicted torture, it is important to emphasize that there is also a defining absence to Latin American cyborgs. While Haraway views the father as inessential and Brown as absolutely essential (they leave their mark on the body through torture), there also exists the absent father to the cyborg in Latin America. Thus, the mark of the phallus is shown to be instead a giant absence whose lack opens up a space for queer readings of the cyborg.

In this chapter I analyze *La ciudad ausente* by Ricardo Piglia and “Ruido gris” by Pepe Rojo. In both stories, the queer cyborg figures challenge dominant heteronormative paradigms. In *La ciudad ausente* it is the storytelling machine (sometimes called Elena) who forms a queer presence at the center of the text. The novel is very much about state control, and thus has some resonance with Haraway’s theory, but is not a traditional cyborg given that she is a machine. She does, however, have the thoughts and memories of a flesh-and-bone woman and is therefore not entirely machine, but something in between. In “Ruido gris,” the use of a male cyborg who has an ocular implant and records the news by logging what he sees, points to an interaction with the cyborg myth and cyborg scholarship even as it makes present the limits of emancipatory cyborg scholarship, and the regulation not by the state, but by media corporations. As I will show, this cyborg is also born of absence, particularly an absent father and in an era where state power has declined. The story captures a neoliberal transition where the means of control on the body are ultimately not regulated by the state but by corporations. This includes control over race and gender, and is made much more evident with Rojo’s cyborg than with the bodiless cyborg of Piglia. He thus differs greatly from both Haraway’s vision of the cyborg and Piglia’s treatment of the machine/Elena. The questions I address in this chapter are: How does Haraway’s cyborg theory hold up in relation both to more contemporary texts and to the context of Mexico and Argentina? How does the construction of both male and female cyborgs and machines reveal the absence at the center of a constitutive, essential gender binary? How is the transition from state dictatorship to other forms of control represented in and through the cyborg figures?

La ciudad ausente, is the story of an Anglo-Argentine journalist who investigates a machine that narrates stories to the populace. The machine, known to some as Elena, is initially given stories to translate. The result is not a translation in the usual sense but a new story altogether. For example, she takes *William Wilson* by Edgar Allen Poe and turns it into the story of *Stephen Stevensen* (39). As the novel progresses, her stories become increasingly complex. The narratives provided by the state are repurposed and reveal the horrors of violence that the dictatorship carries out; they contradict the state narrative of the Malvinas War and shine a light on the more gruesome elements of what happened to the '*detenidos desaparecidos*'. Junior (also known as Miguel Mac Kensey) is a journalist who investigates the variations that begin to occur within these stories. He initially works with Emilio Renzi, an important journalist found throughout Piglia's novels, and is sent on a quest to discover the nature of the mysterious machine. The machine is housed in a museum and is guarded from public scrutiny. It is an enigma both to the reader and the public, and yet its stories are disseminated through various means.

Eventually the stories begin to show a reflection on the part of the machine of her own nature. One of them, titled "Los nudos blancos" concerns a woman named Elena (who bears the machine's name as well as her creator's last name Fernández) who is trapped in a mental hospital where numerous doctors interrogate her. Given the historical context, there are many parallels between the story of Elena and the use of torture by the military governments of Argentina, particularly the use of electroshock therapy, which is reminiscent of the *picana* (Brown 27). The placement in a psychiatric hospital is also

important, as it represents a system of oppression and state control. This mirrors Russo's words later in the novel:

El Estado conoce todas las historias de todos los ciudadanos y retraduce esas historias en nuevas historias que narran el Presidente de la República y sus ministros. La tortura es la culminación de esa aspiración al saber, el grado máximo de la inteligencia institucional (Piglia 128).

Thus the state uses torture and narrative not only to control bodies but also consciousness in a way that recalls the common science fiction trope of mind control by state organizations.¹⁹

La ciudad ausente is a collection of fragmentary narratives, some from Elena, others from Renzi, and some from Junior. Common themes such as humans and technology, the repetition and translation of stories, and the nature of language unify these narratives. The central narrative is the investigation into the origin and nature of the machine. There is considerable consensus that the novel is postmodern because of its fragmentary nature. Luis Castañeda for example argues that the central narrative of the machine would seem to go against a postmodern reading; nevertheless, because the nature of the machine is never fully determined he argues that it creates an absence at the center of the text. It is interesting that there is a unity of center to the narrative, even if the project of the novel is ultimately to question narratives. Horacio Legrás states that while he is not interested in finding a centrality to the text, the novel represents a culmination of a national literary tradition (69). Thus there are themes that unify the fragments; the central narrative concerns the nature of what it means to be human, or a machine that is

imbued with human characteristics. This mirrors the basic structure of the text as both a detective story and as science fiction. Though ultimately left unanswered, the question of what constitutes the nature of the machine is central to the meaning of the novel and the fragments, thus providing a degree of unity.

Though technically a self-aware machine and not a cyborg in the strictest sense (since there is no biological component), there are many reasons to view the machine/Elena in line with cyborg scholarship rather than AI. Brown views Elena as a cyborg figure since she resists the State and, as is common of Argentine cyborgs, is representative of a victim of state torture (27). In addition to the fact that the machine/Elena can learn, can dream, and has memories, the reader is meant to identify the machine as possessing human characteristics such as consciousness and human like movements. For example, the text states that “la máquina, quieta, parpadea con un ritmo irregular. En la noche, el ojo brilla, solo, y se refleja en el cristal de la ventana” (140). This personifies the inorganic machine, making it more human.

Though the machine constitutes an important presence, disseminating stories throughout the city, it is the fact that she is a simulacrum of a cyborg that gives Elena her true power. In this way, she cannot be killed or destroyed. She was created from the memory of Macedonio Fernández’s dead wife, Elena de Obieta. Since Elena is not a technically a cyborg she is also not a corporeal victim of torture but rather a collective representation of it. As Sanchez Prado states, “la maquina de narrar”/Elena is a collective voice for the people (191). The forms of resistance this cyborg takes are subtler and more complex than what Brown states; as an absent cyborg in an absent city, she is a collective

voice that cannot be subalternized and who works against the State's means to control her.

The State's attempt to nullify or control the machine by placing it in a museum is a parallel for the systems of oppression employed by State apparatuses (Cisneros 106). The museum is a place of nostalgia, a place to keep the old order of the past present. The machine/Elena must be contained, rendered again an object and less human. This is a means to control both the narratives the machine produces and the collective memory she represents. A parallel could easily be drawn with the so-called national literary figures of Argentina. By creating José Hernández, Leopoldo Lugones, Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Arlt and Macedonio Fernández as "national figures," the hegemonic discourse tries to place their narratives in a project of national identity and unification. Though beyond the scope of this dissertation, there are ways in which each resists the State's desire to control them, to make them as if in a museum, rather than a living voice that bears witness of torture and atrocities. Elena as a storytelling machine thus represents resistance of narrative to be the narrative of the State; even as Borges becomes complicit with military dictatorship in his own life his narratives point to forms of resistance from within the system as is the case of his short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" analyzed in chapter one of this dissertation.

One of the key national figures mentioned in *La ciudad ausente* is Leopoldo Lugones. His biography represents an absent father to his family and the nation. He died by suicide (therefore literally becoming an absent father) and is father to his namesake, the chief of police and inventor of the *picana*, a fact alluded to by the novel itself. The

picana is a phallic symbol that represents the power of the father. Within the novel, there is a room dedicated to the story of Lugones in el Museo de la Policía that tells the story of Leopoldo Lugones and his son, the torturer (143). Thus absent and torturing fathers and literature are placed together in juxtaposition to represent the ontology of the cyborg and of the modern day State of Argentina. This is in many ways an Oedipal story since the son's actions (blackmailing the father for his extramarital affair) lead to the death of the father. Patricide then becomes a founding myth for nature, which stands in contrast to the cyborg figure that aligns differently to oedipal constraints. The cyborg is born of the absent father, and thus represents a lack and a hollow symbol of the phallus. Elena in the story "Los nudos blancos" is a representation of torture by the state but is done so by symbolic means.

La ciudad ausente explores the relationship between human and machine, language and narration, is explored. Thus "la máquina/Elena" serves as a focal point for understanding the relationship of humans to technology. There are other examples of humans interacting with technology that go beyond Elena. For example, the text highlights Junior moving through the subway "a ochenta kilometros por hora" (Piglia 17). Trains are important throughout the story, as they represent Junior's journey from the city and to the periphery and also the development of the nation along a centralized power vs. periphery. From the same chapter, Renzi discusses tapes of Perón, which his father received, that were out of time with the events at hand (12). This also represents absence, things out of sync, the failure of technology to bring about the emancipatory possibilities it promises. It is representative of the failure of the father to pass on an

inheritance, and the failure of both the self and the nation to self-actualize (Williams 136).

Though relatively destabilizing figures, Piglia's cyborgs appear on the surface to be fairly conservative regarding gender and sexuality. Male and female are relatively stable categories, and the cyborg represents a sort of eternal feminine both for the protagonist and for the inventor of the machine, Macedonio Fernández. There are explicit references to Dante and Beatriz, creating a sort of divine love between Macedonio and his invention. "Muerta Elena, él ya no podía vivir y sin embargo seguía vivo. (Io non mori e non rimasi vivo, así lloraba el Dante¹³⁶). The novel undercuts such a heteronormative construct through its insistence on absence. Since he is in love with a machine, there is a queer element to the love, something outside the norm. The fact that the machine represents the absence of Elena rather than her presence poses a challenge to an essentialist view of the eternal feminine. It is interesting that the machine is not his wife, but made using memories of her. Though technically inorganic, building the machine out of human memories makes it more in line with a cyborg than AI. That both readers and the novel's characters assign a feminine gender to a machine is important. This is more easily accomplished in Spanish since it is "la máquina" though this in no way takes away from the fact that assigning gender to a mechanical apparatus is arbitrary. It renders visible that which we take for granted: the construction of gender and the way it must be performed and enforced, both by the State and by society.

Both Butler and Ahmed consider gender a performative act where the process of doing gender must be repeated in order to stabilize itself as a category. Ahmed compares

compulsory heterosexuality to a “RSI” or a repeated stress injury (91). For Butler, “Gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed... Moreover, one does not do one’s gender alone” (*Undoing Gender* 1). Both Ahmed and Butler focus on the fact that gender is not natural, but constructed through repetitive action. Elena, by becoming female, points to the ways both the machine is read as female and the way that the feminine is read in literature (the comparison to Beatrice). What truly makes the cyborg queer in *La ciudad ausente*, however, is not simply that it does not fit dominant heteronormative paradigms. As is the case with Elena, the investment of libidinal energy into a machine itself (since after all the machine is made from a sense of grief and mourning) becomes the new object of love for Macedonio. This itself “perverts’ or turns heteronormative desire into something queer.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the text is centered around absence. As the title states, the idea of an “absent city” is a place where national projects of unity fail, and is a clear reference to the disappeared, as well as to the reduction in the amount of art and literature during the dictatorship (Rojas 4; Foster 98). The title itself however alludes to presence and absence, and the text itself is unified by the absence of Elena, the wife of Macedonio, who eventually becomes the machine that tells stories. Russo, in describing the death of Elena to Junior states near the end of the novel that, “la ausencia es una realidad material, como un pozo en el pasto” (136). This materiality of absence plays with the Derridean idea of presence and absence; Elena is able to transcend traditional views of presence and absence because she is not confined within the parameters of a traditional cyborg. Because we are meant to identify the machine/Elena as possessing

consciousness and other “human” characteristics it places into question the privileging of the organic over the inorganic.

Other absences also prevail throughout the text: Junior mourns the absence of his daughter in the first pages of the book, after she was taken away by his wife who abandoned him. His own father was killed and thus the story's protagonist is constituted by both the absence of father and of being an absent father. In many ways, this represents the inability to transmit narratives and traditions, going against a national literary project. This is the repeated story of national literary figures of Argentina, Horacio Quiroga, Leopoldo Lugones, especially in relation to the absence of women. If Lugones' suicide was caused, as the story goes, by the loss of his paramour due to his son's blackmail and if Quiroga's story is being abandoned twice by women once he moved to the jungle (which in addition to his illness contributing to his suicide), it makes sense that both Junior's loss of his wife and daughter through abandonment and Macedonio's loss of his wife Elena to death structure the narrative. They are central absences that give meaning to the fragmentary text.

Elena stands as a collective voice and represents the act of storytelling itself (Sánchez-Prado 191). Elena then is a testimony of the atrocities of the dictatorship, not as a univocal or mediated voice but as a collective. Since “she” does not exist outside of a machine and only partially represents the consciousness of Macedonio Fernandez's deceased wife Elena (either through the fact that she has learned it or because she is made in imitation of that consciousness) she also cannot simply be ignored or narrated away. Horacio Legrás says the fundamental gesture of the novel is not to “entender pero des-

entender. Su gesto fundamental no es constructivo, en el sentido testimonial, sino destructivo en el sentido en que la vanguardia literaria pretende mantener viva la llama de lenguaje” (75). The fragmentary narrative serves as a counterpoint to *testimonio*, especially important given the fact that work began on the novel in 1982 as well as a contemporary witness against the *indulto* contemporary to the time it was published which shows the desire of the Argentine State to erase the past, a project that proves impossible.

Absence is a queer failure in that it continually reminds the reader of the inability to inherit, to pass on, and to create heteronormative spaces. Queer failure is the refusal to succeed on the terms of a heteronormative society, whether it be in forms of knowledge, heteronormative family structures, or living up to standards of prosperity and success (Halberstam *The Queer Art of Failure* 3). The use of absence in the novel is a queer failure in that it continually reminds the reader of the inability to inherit, to pass on, and to create heteronormative spaces. Failure in this case is queer because it refuses to concede to a norm. In a broader sense, the trauma of torture and the inability to represent this trauma is also a central absence; it represents the failure of national traditions and a national project of unity. Though Gareth Williams doesn't refer to this as queer, he does state that the text ultimately represents the failure of a post hegemonic state to silence narratives that go against its desire to reconstitute itself under President Carlos Menem after the traumas of the dictatorship (142).

The male Mexican cyborg that is the protagonist in Pepe Rojo's short story "Ruido gris" differs greatly from both Piglia's cyborg figures and other cyborgs. This

cyborg is less a product of state repression and militarism and more a product of neoliberalism. Yet he is also the product of absence, particularly an absent father. The parallels drawn between the SECLE, the disease of the cyborgs, and AIDS makes this cyborg a queer figure. The fact that the story is about a male cyborg renders it different from the cyborg in Piglia's novel as well as from Haraway's mythic female cyborgs. Rather than an eternal feminine or renegade daughter, this cyborg is very much part of the dominant apparatus of neoliberalism, though he also resists in his own right at times. In addition to Brown's analysis of cyborgs born of military dictatorship and not simply a military industrial complex, the presence of multinational corporations also marks the cybernetic body.

"Ruido gris" was written in 1996 just after the ratification of NAFTA. It is the story of a cyborg reporter who has an ocular implant, as well as a control button implanted in his thigh, that transmits the news. He records suicides, murders, explosions, and other newsworthy events for mass consumption. Using money sent to him from the father who abandoned him, he undergoes an operation to become a cyborg as a way of supporting himself financially. The corporation, legally obligated to pay half the operation, becomes owner of everything he sees. As the story progresses, the narrator becomes more and more cynical of his role as a reporter because of the suicides and other tragedies he records. His attempt to stop someone from committing suicide by stating that "lo único para lo que iba a servir su suicidio era para darme de comer unos dos días" fails. He then resolves to not intervene in suicides or other events. As he arrives at various crime scenes he then witnesses the murder of police officers, the death of a fellow

cyborg reporter due to a mysterious illness known as SECLE (a disease that cyborgs and non-cyborgs alike contract due to continuous exposure to electronic devices), and a terrorist takeover and bombing of a department store. During this bombing he fails to intervene to save two mall security personnel and is knocked backwards in the blast himself, injured but not killed. Though death is what drives both the ratings and his bank account balance up, he realizes after the bombing that he has crossed an ethical line. Throughout the story, he spends great amounts of time contemplating suicide as a means to escape his state of existence. The story depicts a dystopian future where media and corporations have taken over both the popular imagination and the control of everyday lives.

Like other Latin American cyborg stories, “Ruido gris” challenges Haraway’s emancipatory take on cybernetic life. The narrator is an abandoned child, unable to make ends meet without literally selling his body to a corporation. Unlike cyborgs in the US or Europe, the narrator’s existence is not framed in terms of an evolution of humanity or posthuman life. Rather, he is a cyborg that serves the needs of the market, a literal embodiment of a service-oriented economy whose sole function is to provide entertainment. M. Elizabeth Ginway has stated:

These cyborgs embody the crisis of the Mexican body politic, and as expressions of technological culture are used for work and then discarded. There is often no true hope of integration of worker and machine in Haraway’s sense. Like Fuch’s Robocop, these characters live in a masculine world, where, as cyborgs, they become another commodity. Their bodies can be replaced, as technology enters

their bodies to restrain and subjugate, re-colonizing them in ways that remind readers of everyday trauma along the borderlands (168).

The narrator's existence is framed in terms of economic and social disadvantage, which ultimately leads him to make the decision to become a cyborg. The cyborg body personifies this absolute control by neoliberal interests.

The narrator forces the reader to view the cyborg figure as still human and yet dehumanized by neoliberal technologies and apparatuses. The story elaborates the existence of being a walking camera, unable to react normally in crisis situations. For example, after he witnesses the murder of a policeman and the wounding of a child, he states as he interviews the child's mother that, "Mi primer reflejo es asentir con la cabeza, pero me acuerdo que es un movimiento desagradable para los televidentes, que yo no debo tener más que personalidad verbal, y le contesto afirmativamente" (Rojo). The inability to allow the body its own reflexes is dehumanizing. It is important to note that it is not the technology per se that dehumanizes the narrator, but the neoliberal apparatus that employs such technology for mass consumption. The way that his body can move is controlled by norms imposed by a corporation.

The reporters are not the only cyborgs in the story, however. Most of the people in the city have undergone surgical enhancements to their appearance. Haraway's assertion that cyborgs challenge capitalism fails in this story. The novel nonetheless serves as a critique to capitalism through its use of dystopian themes. The cyborg embodies not a heroic stand against capitalism but the victim of the excesses of it. Rather than challenging class differences, they accentuate them:

Los pobres son los únicos feos. Los pobres y los adolescentes. Todo el mundo que tiene un poco de dinero ya cambió su rostro, ya tiene un rostro más agradable. Ya puso su cara, su identidad, a la moda. No se permite realizar este tipo de operaciones en los adolescentes porque su estructura ósea todavía está cambiando. Así que uno puede saber la posición económica o la edad observando la calidad del trabajo quirúrgico en los rostros.

Appearance has always been associated with class privilege; the ability to buy clothes, make-up, and other products and fashions is integral to the identity of middle and upper-class citizens. In the story however, the practice of plastic surgery has become ubiquitous and exaggerated. The narration continues:

Vivimos en una época en la que todo el mundo, todos aquellos que se sienten bien de estar en este mundo, son perfectos. Cuerpo perfecto, rostro perfecto y miradas que te hablan de éxito, de optimismo, como si su mente también fuera perfecta y sólo pudiera pensar los pensamientos correctos. Hoy en día, la fealdad es un problema que la humanidad parece haber dejado atrás. Hoy en día, como siempre, los problemas de la humanidad se solucionan con un buen crédito.

Thus the story establishes an explicit link between neoliberalism (having “buen crédito”) and appearance. This façade is false however as it makes it seem like those plastic bodies with enhancements have “correct thoughts.” There is something empty in regards to the relation between sight and thought, and this contradiction is made clear by the narrator’s statements. It also alludes to the idea that corporations project an image that they can make not only bodies but also minds to be perfected. Here the dualism between body and

mind, which is often inherent in the cyborg figure, is highlighted. If bodies affect minds, then vacuous minds are reflected by the utter perfection of the body.

If all the people in the world are cyborgs to some degree, then the binary human/machine starts to erode. The story sets up a tension between the dehumanization of the cyborgs and their desire to maintain their humanity. The narrator struggles with the impulse to act human, while also being confined by the constraints of capitalism. After seeing people fleeing the scene in panic from the store, and a man writhing on the ground he states:

Trato de sostenerlo en mis brazos, trato de tocarlo para calmarlo, pero no tiene ningún efecto. Veo en su ojo izquierdo un foco rojo. El tipo está transmitiendo. Lo suelto y su cabeza golpea el piso fuertemente. De la nada, el tipo parece ahogarse. Se estremece dos veces y se queda quieto, mirándome. Escucho en mi cabeza: Di algo, menciona algo sobre el SECLE, habla, carajo, es tu trabajo.

There is initially a connection between the two cyborgs, although he doesn't identify him immediately as such. He feels a connection when he feels he is human. He tries to calm him to no avail. The moment of recognition when he sees the red light causes him to recall the trauma of being made a cyborg, which is so strong he drops the other man to the ground. The voice in his head, not his own but of his producer, reminds him that a corporation owns him. He has a function to fulfill, and if he does not he will not be fulfilling his contractual obligations.

Shortly thereafter, the story draws an explicit link between the cyborg as queer figure and the cyborg as a product of capitalism. After all, the people ran in fear from the ill cyborg in the pharmacy. The narrator states:

Dos días después, mi noticia ya no es noticia. Parece que cada día se están reportando más ataques del síndrome. 40% de las víctimas son reporteros. Recuerdo el SIDA y la homofobia que despertó. Al parecer, nos toca a los reporteros vivir en temor. No sólo de morir, sino el temor a los demás.
¿Mediafobia?, ¿cómo nombrarán a este efecto?

It is important that SECLE does not only happen to the reporter cyborgs, but it is heavily concentrated among them. As he states, this recalls the AIDS epidemic and the “mediafobia” that both those with and without the disease must endure. In the 1980s, those with AIDS and those gay men who were thought to have AIDS were either vilified by society or ignored by government policy, effectively worsening the epidemic. As Eve Sedgwick notes, during the 1980s it was years before the US president said the word AIDS much less dealt with the crisis (*Epistemology of the Closet* xv). That “Ruido gris” makes such an explicit comparison between AIDS and SECLE is important, and highlights the status of cyborgs as both queer and somehow less human.

Although the story exemplifies a dystopian future, there are moments of resistance by the narrator to the condition he is in. He goes days without doing his job, unmotivated by money. At one point he becomes drunk to the degree that he falls and scars himself. These episodes make him more sympathetic, more human to the reader. The corporation records the episode as a reminder to not do it again; his body, a valuable

asset to them, must be preserved. His mind must be controlled, and his actions carefully contained. This incident highlights the connection between his perpetual search for a father figure and the replacement, not by the state, but by a corporation. The narrator receives communication in his head from a man who he has never met, and prefers to know little about, whose codename is Rud. The text states:

Sólo hay un director de programación que me conoce un poco más íntimamente.

Su clave es Rud, no sé cómo se llama.

Because they are owned by a corporation, the cyborgs are discouraged from drinking alcohol. “El alcohol y mi profesión no son buenos amigos. En mi cuerpo tengo equipo que es también propiedad de una corporación, así que me pueden demandar si daño voluntariamente la maquinaria In other words, harming himself can be seen as a damage to the corporation, which would therefore have legal repercussions.

He does, however, give in to the desire to drink once. Remembering that night of drinking he states:

Quería olvidarme de todo, así que cada vez la bebida era distinta. No quiero ni acordarme de todas las estupideces que dije. Si alguien tuviera un poco de sentido del humor podría llamar a esa noche Oda al padre, porque me la pasé hablando de él. Incluso hubo un buen rato en el que le pedí a Rud que actuara como si fuera mi padre y yo le reclamaba cosas, le gritaba y le escupía.

His drunken state humanizes him, and demonstrates he is not simply a corporate machine. Rud is a stand in for the father here, to whom he shouts and spits. He continues:

Mi padre estaba dentro de mi cabeza. Llegó un momento en que empecé a golpear mi cabeza contra una pared. De eso no tengo memorias reales. Resulta que Rud reconoció la calle donde estaba y llamó a los paramédicos para que me llevaran a mi casa. Me tuvieron que dar ocho puntadas en la frente. Ni la cirugía moderna evitó que me quedara una cicatriz.

The scar he receives is of no matter to the corporation; though it affects his human form, it is of no consequence to his functionality.²⁰ The mark that the protagonist has is the mark of the absent father, an outward sign of the abandonment he experienced. It also marks him not as a cyborg, but as human, an inverse of the idea of Brown that the cyborg body is marked by torture.

The text continues: “A los cinco días me llegó un paquete sin remitente. Había una tarjeta que decía Saludos, Rud. Ahí estaba la nota de los paramédicos. También había un videocassette. Rud grabó toda mi borrachera.” His ability to be human, however, is taken away by the systems of control the corporation exerts over him. They record the entire incident, forcing him to live within the standards they have set. The fact that Rud is a voice in his head is important. His own consciousness is not determined by some sense of individuality but by the machinations of a corporation. Though the corporation technically owns the ocular implant and the apparatus on his leg that activates the transmission, his mind also increasingly belongs only to the media corporation.

Latin American cyborgs do not have the privilege of their European and Anglo counterparts. They frequently are cast as victims of either dictatorships or neoliberal policies (or both). It is interesting how “Ruido gris” relates the cyborg to both its queer

possibilities as a figure as well as capitalism. Queer bodies are subjected to normative means to regulate them. The narrator, as a queer cyborg, is made to fit into the norms set by a corporation. The text does not stop, however, at an exploration of the economic normativity of capitalism. It draws an explicit link between neoliberalism and the queer hybridity of the cyborg in the form of the disease SECLE (which as previously mentioned represents in many ways the AIDS epidemic of the 80s). The text constantly shifts between a humanization and dehumanization of the cyborg figure, as well as the dehumanization of the population at large. By creating this tension, the story asks us to consider what makes us human, and the boundaries of the mind/body and male/female heteronormative split that persists in the popular imagination.

In the case of *La ciudad ausente*, it is absence that is the ontology of the machine/Elena and not simply torture; by vacating the subject of cyborg scholarship of its presence and placing it into a machine rather than a literal cyborg, the text creates an absence at the center of the text that structures its witness against the state's crimes. The use of a machine (identified as female but not anatomically as such) places a queer presence at the center of an absent city that becomes a focal point to critique the patriarchal capitalistic order of both a past military dictatorship and the efforts to rebuild in a posthegemonic, postdictatorial state. In the case of "Ruido gris" by Pepe Rojo, it is neoliberalism and the complicity of the state rather than the state itself that marks the cyborg body. As such, the cyborg body bears the mark not of torture by the state but of the trauma of neoliberalism-the necessity of selling one's body to a corporation to survive. In "Ruido gris" the protagonist becomes implanted with a cybernetic eye and

everything he sees becomes the property of the corporation for which he works. The father is absolutely essential, unlike Haraway's assertion to the contrary. It is however the absent father that creates a haunting specter that serves as an origin story for the protagonist/cyborg. This cyborg bears scars not from the torture of the state, but from the absence of the father.

Chapter 4

Cyborgs and the Queer Apocalypse: Rodrigo Fresán's Queer Cyborgs in a Globalized Digital Age

In previous chapters, I analyzed various science fiction tropes such as aliens, space travelers, and cyborgs. These posthuman and nonhuman figures allow us to think of the human body differently by abstracting notions of the self and Other and the limits between human/machine and human/nonhuman.²¹ The cyborg body represents a dual ontology; as a fusion of human and machine, it represents both the history of humanity as well as the objects of human creation through technology. The cyborg frequently exaggerates natural possibilities and incorporates bodily enhancements. The mix of emancipatory and constricting features makes the cyborg an intriguing queer symbol. It is not that cyborgs or aliens are automatically queer, but rather they abstract categories and hierarchies we take for granted as natural. As such, they can easily be read in line with strains of queer theory that challenge normativity. Queer in this sense includes but is not limited to sexual orientations and gender norms. Queer cyborgs can be read as indebted or controlled, at least in part, by global, political and economic structures such as the military or corporations even as they rebel against them. Such was the case with the cyborgs from the previous chapter in “Ruido gris” and *La ciudad ausente*. As victims of trauma from government or from corporations, they embody resistance but also the difficulty of escaping systems of control.

This chapter examines what happens in a late 20th and early 21st century when cyborg citizenship has become more common and being queer has taken on new

meaning. Cyborg citizenship, according to Chris Gray, is a result of an enhanced dependence on technology (2). Even if the human body remains unmodified Gray states that “we live in a cyborg society” (2). The novel *Mantra* by Rodrigo Fresán registers a shift in the queer cyborg figure by exploring cyborgs in a world that is heavily influenced by global media and technology. Even the underworld is represented by cyborgs connected to television sets replaying episodes of their lives, thus showing the way that the mythology of the cyborg affects religious myths as well.

Mantra is a complex novel written as part of a series on large world cities that includes Beijing, Rome, Moscow and Paris and Mexico City. The series is called Año 0 and includes writers such as Roberto Bolaño, Rodrigo Fresán, and Santiago Gamboa. *Mantra* has three parts. First, the story of the unnamed narrator (whose pen name is Letra X), a man with a brain tumor, who remembers only the time spent with his childhood friend Martín Mantra. Second, is the vision of a dead French wrestler hooked to a television in the underworld. As he recounts in encyclopedic form the history of his personal relationship with Martín Mantra’s cousin María-Marie Mantra, he interweaves various media representations of Mexico City from both a mass cultural and high culture view; these descriptions include foreign writings, filmic representations, and musical lyrics. The third part is a cybernetic homage to *Pedro Páramo*, where an android follows the mother computer’s directions to search for his father Mantrax.

Some see the novel, precisely because of the fragmentary nature, as being more in line with Boom novels or the idea of the total novel. Gustavo Llarul takes this position, stating that the novel, though innovative, is not that different from what he calls the

modern novel: “Mantra presents an original development of the procedures born in the modern novel, blended with elements of technology and mass media as discussed by most critics.” (49). I agree with Llarul to a point. There are formal elements of the novel such as the encyclopedia, the fragmentary nature of the narrative, and the use of various (unreliable) narrators, that are similar to a modern novel. I would argue, however, that the novel incorporates these elements as satire and parody. The use of *pastiche* to incorporate both literary references and mass culture is evidence of the novel’s project of understanding the effects of the information age. The novel resists the attempt to establish memory, identity, or geography in any essentialist way. According to Edmundo Paz Soldán, *Mantra* is a postmodern novel and while it, for example, has much in common with *Rayuela*, to make too close a comparison would be misleading (100). The difference, according to Paz Soldán, is that in *Rayuela*, consciousness can take in the information while in *Mantra* “la información excede la capacidad de la conciencia para abarcarla” (100).

Mantra explores queer spaces and temporalities together with new meanings of cybernetic life. The human cyborg remains queer in a globalized digital age when same-sex romantic relationships have become more normalized and posthuman figures more common. The cyborg retains both its destructive and constructive potentiality. The questions I pursue in this chapter are: How do the cyborgs in *Mantra* represent changes in queerness and in cybernetic life? How does the use of death and apocalypse render the cyborg figure as an agent of creative destruction?

One way to begin to answer these questions is through the idea of queer failure. For J. Halberstam, failure is an opportunity to be outside of logics of capitalism and heteronormativity. “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more surprising, more cooperative ways of being in the world. Failure is something queers do and have done exceptionally well (3).” In other words, failure to conform is seen in a more positive light, showing resistance to preset ways of being and doing. As being queer is already to be at odds with normativity, one must then choose to succeed and conform or fail but succeed in creative new ways.

The cyborgs in *Mantra* are all in some way queer. They are failures, saboteurs, and monsters. They fall outside of heteronormative and capitalist models of success and are thus examples of queer failure. According to J. Halberstam:

What kinds of rewards can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods (3).

The cyborgs in *Mantra* all fail to conform to rigid familial or societal norms. As such they fall outside of heteronormative and capitalist patterns that would make them productive or successful citizens according to the standards set by society. They succeed however in that sense that they operate outside of predictable patterns.

Halberstam analyzes animation and film in order to create spaces for queer lives that do not meet a heteronormative gauge of success. This includes a critique of

capitalism; though the link between queer projects alternatives to capitalism is not automatic, there exists several points of intersection. Historically the gay liberation movement and the cause for social justice have been aligned. The shift in focus of gay rights groups to recognition through marriage has started a discussion of “homonormativity.” That is, there are new norms that call for the queer community to conform to hegemonic structures and institutions.

According to J. Andrew Brown, *Mantra* shows cyborgs that are “not within a history of dictatorship or a present of political and economic abuses but as a reality that requires new mythologies and different ways of remembering individual experience” (146). In *Mantra*, mostly about Mexican cyborgs, the cyborg body has become ubiquitous. For Brown, the characters live in a world where being posthuman is a reality and not a novelty; thus, a boy walking around with a video camera on his head or a man who calls his tumor a sea monkey are both living within a world already populated by technology and are not as far removed from the machines and media representations of the posthuman that permeate the public sphere. According to Brown, “they are posthuman because there is not another way to be” (145). The new cyborg mythology is one where cyborgs have not been emancipated by technology but unified and bound to it (and the corporations that bring it about).

Edmundo Paz Soldán states that the novel is oversaturated with media and technology (99). As such it causes the reader to reflect on the way we process information and it’s meaning in late capitalism (100). Both Brown’s and Paz Soldán’s analyses of the novel center on the way new technologies affect cybernetic life. What is

missing from both analyses of *Mantra* is the way new subjectivities and ways of processing information affect the cyborg as a queer figure. The queerness of cyborgs takes on new meaning in the early 21st century when *Mantra* was written. Whereas the Haraway's cyborgs represent a rebellion to the military industrial complex, and later cyborgs show the limits of rebellion (such as those we saw in Piglia and Rojo), cybernetic life has begun to influence everyday existence due to the information age and the increasing reliance on technology. At the same time, certain queer lives have become normalized, and while gay marriage reflects a radical transformation, it is not the only example of queer subjectivities. The queerness of the characters in *Mantra* is reflected in the way they bond, the way that the *Mantra* family is organized, and the way the novel represents success and failure.

Both the narrator and Martín Mantra are cyborg figures. Letra X has a brain tumor which causes him to remember life in a fragmented way. Towards the end of his life, he can only remember conversations with his doctor by using a tape recorder; his use of this prosthesis for memory makes him a cyborg. Martín Mantra often wears a video camera for a helmet, aligning him with the wrestlers in the novel as well as the posthuman figures. The use of prosthesis to see or record or remember is part of what makes the cyborg body ubiquitous in the present day.

Part one of the novel describes the relationship between the narrator, Letra X, and Martín Mantra. The bond between the narrator in part one and Martín Mantra is best understood through the lens of homosociality. That is, there is a continuum of feelings, emotions, and behaviors, that range between friendship and the erotic between the two

adolescents. Their relationship is mediated by technology, first a revolver, and later, media objects. The narrator's most cherished object is a photograph of his days in school in which Martín Mantra is absent. He does not remember the names of the other children, but the photograph, especially with the absence of Martín, reminds him of his time in school. For him, Martín Mantra can't be represented photographically. He is mysterious, unknowable, other. Edmundo Paz Soldán states that the photograph is a "talismán" and that "la imagen fotográfica es, así, un documento que da testimonio de la realidad y sus alteraciones. Es un documento inevitable, sin el cual no se sabe si ocurrieron los hechos que ocurrieron" (98). The photograph appears to give certainty and verisimilitude to the past, but actually plays with the ideas of presence, absence, and the instability of the self. Sara Ahmed explains the ways that photographs structure the myth of a happy family life:

And then, covering the walls, are photographs. The wedding photograph.

Underneath are family pictures, some formal (taken by photographers) and others more casual. The photographs are objects on the wall. These objects are on display make visible a fantasy of a good life (90)

Photographs are placed in lines to encourage reproduction, as are many objects in the family home. The fact that the narrator uses a photograph to remember the past creates a familial type connection between the narrator and Martín. His absence, however, indicates the inability to create lasting family, certainty, or order.

When Martín comes to school, the teacher asks Martín Mantra, a Mexican immigrant to Argentina and the child of telenovela stars, to get up in front of the class to introduce himself. The school is named for General Gervasio Vicario Cabrera, an

(invented) Mexican hero. It is an elitist private Argentine school, which, it might be noted, is traditionally a place for both sexual development and homosocial male bonding. After the teacher steps out, Martín Mantra pulls out a gun, sticks it in his mouth, and pulls the trigger. He has initiated a game of Russian roulette, as well as quite literally beginning the plot of the novel. Martín Mantra then asks who is next. The narrator bravely steps up, grabs the revolver, sticks it in his mouth, and pulls the trigger. Like his friend, no bullet goes off. The act of sticking a revolver in the mouth and then passing it to another on the one hand shows a masculine bravado, but is also a sexual gesture which symbolizes oral sex and a homoerotic desire. It is not simply a social nor simply a sexual desire, but both.

The setting of the school places this queer act as one of resistance; they are failing to conform to state ideological institutions. The school is transnational space where there are both Mexican and Argentine. It is also an important symbol for the transnational context of the novel in not only Argentine literature but Latin American novels in general. There are clear parodies to canonic texts in Latin American literature such as *Cien años de soledad*. It is interesting that the story involving the namesake of the school is itself a parody of magical realism and of the homosocial space of the army. The army is another male-dominant space, and one which is frequently alluded to in both Mexican and Latin American literature (*Los de abajo*, *Cien años de soledad*). The story goes that while he was facing execution for being marked as a traitor (erroneously), Gervasio was hit by a cannon explosion and flew through the air and took out a large chunk of the opposing army. He was posthumously awarded for his bravery. There is a clear reference

to *Cien años de soledad* in that he, like Coronel José Arcadio Buendía, was “frente al pelón de fusilamiento” when the events unfolded, and thus it serves as a form of parody of the novel. It also recalls some of the central themes of *Cien años de soledad* such as memory, the use of a town (Macondo) to represent the country and Latin America, and the destruction of family at the end. Though *Mantra* takes up all of these, there are significant differences. As a counterpoint to the novel, the Mantra family is eventually destroyed (several times and several ways), memory is faulty, and Mexico City is a globalized place.

The novel incorporates references to Boom novels and other literary allusions as well as references to mass culture. Comic books, movies, science fiction, and other pop culture icons help create the narrative but several of these icons also serve as shared objects of affection between the two boys and a common space to explore adolescent development. The comics represent in complex ways the homosociality between Martín Mantra and his friend, the narrator. The shared interest of the narrator and Martín in superheroes is another signal of their queerness; Batman and Robin especially are part of a homoerotic buddy tradition in comics. When DC comics received criticism of Batman and Robin as homosexual icons, they introduced female characters such as Batgirl to convince readers they were not lovers (Mills 33). Even so, when the comic features feminine figures, it still serves as a triangle between the two male characters. One such example is the *Vampirella* comic; though a tribute to the male gaze, as a shared object of affection it also signals desire and eroticism between Martín and the narrator. The comic that Letra X eventually writes, *Guadalajara Smith*, is based on María-Marie, Martín’s

cousin, whom they both gaze at sexually in a family video of Martin's family. María-Marie also ties the narration of the first part to the second part. Though outwardly reflecting a desire for a woman, the fact that they both gaze at her and share her as an object of desire is a triangular desire between them, showing an erotic energy between Martin and the narrator.

According to Anthony Mills, comic book heroes such as Superman and other members of the Justice League, though eventually coopted by the dominant media corporations, started in the pulp tradition (19).²² Halberstam asks us to investigate just such alternative histories: "dominant history teems with the remnants of alternative possibilities, and the job of the subversive intellectual is to trace the lines of the worlds they conjured and left behind" (19). Comics provide an alternative history to the dominant narratives of their time. Comic book super heroes represent both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, involving a complex identification on the part of readers. Superman, for example, embodies the American monomyth of individualism, saving the community but not becoming a part of it (Mills 31). He is a Christological and religious figure who dies and comes back to life. Over time however, super heroes become more human and relatable, such as the characters of Stan Lee in the Marvel universe. The reference to the Justice League in *Mantra* breaks with a tradition of individualism since it is a band of superheroes, rather than the individual heroes themselves. It thus shows the interest of the narrator and Martín for collectivity, homosocial spaces, and the human aspect of the superheroes.

The narrator also becomes interested with Mexico and pop icons in Mexico such as El Santo. David Dalton analyzes the Santo films as both a representation of hegemonic state discourses of the PRI and as a means of subversion. Such films justified internal colonialism through a mestizo project, even where they were a narrow resistance to the ban of televised wrestling (Dalton 162-169). Their use in *Mantra* is complex since they are engaged transnationally. In *Mantra*, they are superhero/mythic figures and prefigure the large section on luchadores in Part 2 of the novel. With this complex identification, he begins to eschew some of his Argentine identity and identify with Mexican figures.

By adopting, through film and through his relationship with Martín, a transnational Mexican identity, the narrator begins to identify with a heterogeneous Mexican masculinity that both affirms state projects and subverts traditional conceptions of *machismo* and heterosexual family life. Robert Irwin states that Mexican literature, especially non-canonical literature can be analyzed, “to present a variety of alternatives to the hegemonic visions of masculinity of Mexico’s *letrados*, a Foucauldian web of gender discourses, that complicate and contradict each other and themselves and represent a broader view of Mexicanness than could the canon by itself” (Irwin xv). Comics and El Santo movies are no exception; they represent a complex masculinity that at times affirms and at times subverts hegemonic state discourse. Part of what the narrator is attracted to is Martín’s Mexicanness. Robert Irwin explains the tradition of homosociality in Mexico, as well as the contradictions inherent in the construction of Mexican masculinity. The superheroes and comics are of foreign origin, but they are engaged from here in a transnational context. The narrator states that Mexico was for him:

La patria traducida de Superman, Batman, y no tardaría en saberlo—héroes nacionales mexicanos como el lascivo y purulento Aniceto y sus chicas de pechos fulminantes, el místico mentalista Kalimán o el musculoso luchador enmascarado El Santo. Así México y Ciudad de México eran, también ciudades del planeta Kriptón y barrios suburbanos de Ciudad Gótica (54).

Here, comic book geography has been mapped simultaneously upon the country and city of Mexico. In a similar fashion, he sees people around him as if they were comic book heroes. Jesús Nazareno y de Todos los Santos Mártires en la Tierra Fernández, bodyguard to the Mantra family, (who is the mentor of the French wrestler in Part 2 and central to the story) is described as looking like a superhero from Marvel (40). Martín Mantra is also larger than life, and becomes an object of hero worship.

The use of the *Twilight Zone* is especially important to the text. The narrator explains how Rod Serling's voice gives meaning to the narration of the *Twilight Zone*:

La importancia histórica de Rod Serling- al final de cada uno de los episodios de *Dimensión desconocida*—residía, me explicó Martín Mantra, en que <<todos buscamos a alguien hábilmente rodserlingforme que nos narre y nos ordene nuestras existencias (60).

The 'voice of God' voice-over technique from *The Twilight Zone* demonstrates the way we bring order to our lives, narrating and attaching meaning to objects. It is a normalizing voice. By highlighting the process by which this happens, the novel seeks to challenge the normative effects of such a voice. It also foreshadows the use of the

encyclopedia in Part 2 which tells the story through fragments and attempts to bring order to the chaotic world of Mexico City.

The homosocial bond between them is rendered in more literal ways as well. They eventually make the pact of blood brothers:

La letra x era mi favorita, que me encantaba la letra x porque me recordaba a las bandoleras con balas cruzadas sobre el pecho, a los uniformes de superhéroes, a la firma de asesinos, a todo aquello que era desconocido y sin nombre pero que sin embargo ahí estaba, como ese doble tajo que nos hicimos en la palma de las manos a la hora de convertirnos en hermanos de sangre.....mi brazo en alto...no ha vuelto a bajar desde aquella mañana inolvidable en que, con el caño de un revolver plateado y mexicano adentro de mi boca, sentí que hay pocas cosas más vivas que el sabor de la muerte (43).

Here we see the association of the revolver, blood brothers, super heroes, and the beginning of the novel with a revolver first in the hand, then the mouth. It is impossible to ignore the sexual connotation of the act, and its association of sex and death. If Martín and the narrator were to actually become sexual and be found out, it would risk social death as well as the real threat of violence. Though they are outsiders, they must symbolize this precarious masculinity through symbolic means. They form a queer community; both are estranged from family, Martín from his parents as telenovela stars and Letra X from his parents as political dissidents who he sees as failures. It is a bond between the two boys that creates an alternative family, an alternative space to question the logics of statehood through use of globalized media images.

The film *El cumpleaños de Martín Mantra/Nueve años* is an insight into the Mantra family for the narrator. He watches the film together with his friend, who narrates the events in person instead of through the film. He states that it is significant that it is not a baptism, wedding, or funeral, i.e., the normal life events that seem significant to a Mexican life, but a birthday. The film itself is outside of a normal narrative time frame. It isn't a 30-minute segment or a two-hour segment, but a 24-hour film of his party and birthday. Mantra is orienting his friend to the family, which is large and strange. When his aunt decides to shut her eyes for the rest of her life to avoid seeing her gay son (she finds him dressing in her clothes) the family paints over her eyes to make it look like she's still seeing them. Thus, queerness is alluded to in the family but hidden or looked away from as it is a threat to the family. The narrator states that his gaze doubled not only on the film but on Martín Mantra himself:

Entonces Martín Mantra se paró frente a mí al haz de luz de su película y se levantó la camisa para que viera una cicatriz con forma de x y -en la película y en la pantalla que era su piel- contemplé la visión terrible de un Martín Mantra en blanco y negro, filmándose a sí mismo frente a un espejo alto (Fresán 79).

The relationship of skin/screen renders the gaze of the narrator not simply as an erotic voyeurism toward a filmic object but toward the actual object of the gaze, Martín Mantra. It recalls the moment when they became blood brothers by making an x in their skin. This doubling emphasizes the queer desire on the part of the narrator, whose fascination with Martín has always bordered on the erotic. And though there is never any actual sexual

encounter between them, the queer desire is expressed through the symbolism of the revolver at the beginning, and later through an erotic gaze at his life and body.

In his later years, the novel states that because of the brain tumor, the narrator, Letra X, cannot remember if he even had a wife or kids. He only remembers his childhood friend Mantra. He is a queer cyborg, and a failed member of society. He doesn't take things seriously, but refers to his tumor as a Sea Monkey. His only measure of success that we learn is in drawing a comic, *Guadalajara Smith* based roughly on Maria-Marie, Martin's cousin. After meeting with his doctor and learning that the tumor, which he refers to as a Sea Monkey, won't go away, the narrator decides to go to el DF (Mexico City), steal a revolver from a policeman in the airport, and stick it in his mouth. He pulls the trigger and his blood spatters on the coffin of the dead French wrestler who narrates Part 2. The coffin is being accompanied by María-Marie, Martin's cousin and the former girlfriend of the French Wrestler. The act of shooting a gun connects the two parts of the novel; as a phallic symbol it represents sex and death, a big bang, and the beginning and end of things.

The second and most challenging part of the novel is an encyclopedia of Mexico City told from the perspective of a dead French wrestler named Estrellito as a child and El Extranjero as an adult. He is in the underworld of Mictlán beneath Mexico City in part because he murders his mentor Mano Muerta, which lead to him being torn to pieces by an angry mob. The wrestler is connected by cables to a TV where episodes and memories of his life are replayed. He addresses María-Marie, Martin's cousin, although there is no assurance or explanation as to how his messages reach her. There is a deliberate use of a

woman as object of a foreign gaze to understand Mexico and the Mantra family.

Through the eyes of the French wrestler, we see the Mantra family from the perspective of the feminine side of the family. Again, the theme of memory arises; Maria-Marie has amnesia. His encyclopedia of Mexico City largely includes foreign accounts of travelers (such as the story of the death of Joan Vollmer), media representations, interwoven with personal events such as the relationship with Maria-Marie, wrestlers, *Snob* magazine, and his mentor Black Hole aka Mano Muerta aka Jesus Nazareno, Martín's bodyguard in Part 1.

One of the structuring elements to the seemingly chaotic and at times random entries in the encyclopedia is the making of the film *La vida existencial de un luchador enmascarado* being made by Jesus Nazareno. On the second day of filming in France an elephant crushes his hand, which earns him the name Mano Muerta. While he is recovering, he meets the narrator of Part 2 as a child in a hospital and introduces him to the world of *lucha libre*. This leads the narrator eventually to Mexico City to enter the world of wrestlers and masks.

Homoeroticism permeates throughout the discussions of monsters and science fiction and the narrator's ostensibly heterosexual relationship with Martín Mantra's cousin, María-Marie. The use of wrestling is also a homoerotic space which mixes sex with violence and death. In Greco-Roman times, men wrestled naked and thus portrayed a more obvious tie to homoeroticism. The *pancracio* is an underground ring and a space referencing both a popular resistance to the state, a mythic identification with Mictlán, as well as a space to escape the traditional roles of husband and father. It is a queer space

where both violence and sexual symbolism are allowed to coexist one with the other. In *lucha libre* masks and costumes are worn, covering up in part the underlying homoeroticism of the sport but not able to escape it fully. This is pointed to when in part 1 Jesús Nazareno states that the wrestlers on the Argentine TV program *Colosos del cuadrilátero* are “maricones” (41). He tries to set up a contrast with the underground world of *lucha libre* where things are not transmitted to the whole world.

The masks they wear represent a secret identity, much like traditional superheroes. There is also a religious origin to the mask; as the French wrestler states:

La máscara como parte fundamental de antiguos ritos aztecas. Ponerse una máscara es convertirse en otro. Una máscara de sumo sacerdote o una máscara de guerrero o una de esas máscaras que se colocan sobre el rostro de los muertos posibilita una mejor comunicación con los dioses (369).

He continues to explain how the mask is also used in the Christian tradition. It is thus a syncretic symbol that represents ancient indigenous traditions, Christian iconography, and the modern tradition of *lucha libre*. It is also a queer symbol in that it allows the luchador to exist outside of patterns of home and family, if only temporarily. Mark Best says of the super hero identity that “male homosociality in the superhero genre is represented in the form of male companionship and camaraderie in the career of crime-fighting, but cemented through the currency of the secret identity.” And just like revealing the secret identity of a superhero, unmasking the wrestler is seen as the ultimate form of degradation. The act of unmasking also symbolizes the revealing of the underlying homoeroticism.

When the French wrestler kills and unmask his mentor Black Hole (aka Jesus Nazareno) it is a queer act of failure. Unmasking a luchador means that they have to reveal their origin, their name, their identity. It humanizes him, tearing him away from his mythic, larger than life status. Killing his mentor could be seen as an oedipal gesture to get to the Mother (symbolically María-Marie) by killing the Father. But reading in line with the rest of the novel, this could be a symbolic killing of the father that defies oedipal logics. It can be seen as a queer gesture or rebellion and failure. Murdering Jesús Nazareno and unmasking him is a colonizing act by a French foreigner in Mexico to uncover the myth of the luchador, tear down his superhero status, and destroy the father. Spanish conquistadores destroyed indigenous symbols as a form of control. Unlike the narrator in part one, he chooses to commit suicide through murder, ending up in Mictlán (a Mexican hell) for his crimes.

It is interesting that it is not a gun, as in the suicide of the narrator of part 1, but swords that El Extranjero uses; he buys katanas in Tepito and carries out his plan to kill his mentor. The swords are a phallic symbol, much as the revolver is, he penetrates in order to kill. Again, the novel creates a link between sex and death. He can't be the actual father or lover of Estrellito (The French wrestler), and according to his logic, must actually die to alleviate the homoerotic tension on the French wrestler. With his death, Jesús Nazareno y de Todos los Santos Mártires en la Tierra Fernández becomes a martyr for the people. This leads the people in the ring to seek revenge and eventually tear El Extranjero (the French wrestler) to pieces in the wrestling ring. Much like Frankenstein's monster, it is an angry mob which chases and threatens him.

In addition to films by characters in the novel about themselves, filmic, media, and literary representation of both Mexico City and the country as a whole, the encyclopedia is made up of references to media about Mexico such as Bob Dylan lyrics, literary references such as the Beat authors, Speedy Gonzalez, Darth Vader, Westerns, and Frankenstein's monster. The use of media objects as part of a discursive space about Mexico City is deliberate. These mass media examples, while reflecting a cosmopolitan and globalized city, also reflect values of globalization. As we saw earlier with the comics in part one, these monsters and animated figures form part of a global hegemony; they also reflect counterhegemonic discourses of race, gender, and sexuality that resignify them as both identifications with US media and resistance to the messages presented therein.

Frankenstein is a key reference in the novel and an example of a complex literary and film example that changes meaning over time. Frankenstein has a queer ontology since he was created by a man without sex. he was not born. As both a monster and a queer figure, Frankenstein serves as an example of a failure to be human. Like the cyborgs and superheroes, he cannot reproduce, he cannot fit in, and he cannot conform to society. Even though he doesn't have sex with his master, the monster does interfere with the sexual life of his creator when he kills Dr. Frankenstein's bride on the night of their wedding. As important as that intertextual reference is, it is the filmic representations of Frankenstein's monster (and not the novel) that captures the narrator's attention.

There is an entire section of the encyclopedia dedicated to Boris Karloff, the actor who most famously played Frankenstein in the 1930s. Jesús Nazareno finds the actor

himself in a wax museum and asks him to be in a movie of *luchadores existencialistas* that he is making. While in the hotel, news footage of the massacre of Tlatelolco plays and Jesús Nazareno starts crying. Boris Karloff mistakes the news for a movie and does not understand Jesús' reaction. The juxtaposition of wrestling, Tlatelolco, and Frankenstein, along with the blurring between fiction and news documentary, shows that the novel interweaves Mexican history with science fiction and pop culture references. It points to the violence all three of them share and the fragmentary nature of both Mexican identity and the Frankenstein monster, as well as the ruptured identity of wrestlers who are body guards, mentors and have various aliases attached to their name.

The third and final part of the novel represents an android in search of his father. Though not a cyborg in the strictest sense, the humanization of the android leads us to view him in line with other human and posthuman figures. This is a parody of the journey of Juan Preciado in *Pedro Páramo* to Comala. There are important differences however. One, androids are not typically thought of as having fathers but creators. The fact that his mother computer sent him is a science fictionalization of the archetypal journey. This narrator searches for his father Mantrax, and feels disappointment when he finds him dead, with a revolver in his hand. Yet it is precisely our desire to see the human in the mechanical that makes the cyborg a queer figure. The narrator's absence of a father relates him to other Mexican cyborgs such as the cyborg narrator of "Ruido gris."

When he shoots a gun into the air instead of ending the world, it represents a failure to fulfill the mission or wish of the father. This android, like the other posthuman figures such as Martín and Letra X, fails to conform to familial bonds or traditions. This

action also alludes to the previous gunshots and bangs in the novel, this time leading not to a bond or to death but to nowhere. The act of shooting the gun in the air is, ironically, an act of creation, like the big bang. Though it appears to be empty, it saves the world. Thus, the robot savior disobeying the instructions of the mythic 'robot savior' Mantrax brings the novel to a close and represents the creative aspect of queer failure.

All three parts of the novel have queer cyborg, superhuman, or posthuman figures. The three unreliable narrators in the text point to a destabilization of the self because of technology and contradict an optimistic reading of the cyborg as an emancipatory figure. Though not the same, they represent exaggerations of humanity or extensions of it. As Brown states, the novel represents an attempt to create a new mythology of the cyborg. The novel attacks the mythology of luchadores, cyborgs, and other posthuman or superhuman figures, opting towards failure rather than models of success. By relating these figures together, it makes the cyborg larger than life. The cyborg's symbolism continues to be queer in the context of a late 20th/early 21st century novel. Queer, however, has taken on new meanings. Through homosocial bonding, a transnational cyborg myth is created that interacts with the novel's references to superheroes and filmic representations of the post human. Such a move mythologizes the cyborg as mimicry of a superhero. At the same time, the novel undercuts the attempts to mythologize its characters and cyborgs, especially in part 2. The ultimate failure of these larger than life icons is indicative of the novel's strategy toward queer failure. The novel uses apocalypse, death, and destruction to demonstrate a "queer failure," to use Halberstam's term. It is a failure to conform, progress, succeed, and reproduce, at least

according to traditional means. The characters refuse to conform to established patterns and engage media transnationally. The disobedience to parental figures is indicative of queer community and gesture of the novel away from heteronormativity. The other narrators also engage media, whether a recording of Mantrax (the final narrator) or the television in Mictlán as a means of representing the spectacle of society and the failure of heterosexual patterns to reproduce themselves. The narrators form a complex resistance to a heterosexual and patriarchal system. They also defy a Judeo-Christian mythos and in general the mythologization of Mexico or of media objects. The way the French wrestler unmask and kills Jesús Nazareno, the body guard, and the way that the novel ends with a bang to nowhere represents the failure of myth.

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Endnotes

Introduction

¹ The AIDS activism by groups like ACT UP is one example of the “real” activism that these postmodern geographies tend to ignore.

² Fantasy, on the other hand, requires estrangement but with “weak cognition.” Fantasy requires no scientific or philosophical explanation, since it is accepted that magic or some supernatural means allows the events of the narrative to transpire.

China Miéville theorizes that “cognition” has been overemphasized in relation to science fiction criticism, to the detriment of fantasy and other genres. See “Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory”, in Mark Bould and China Miéville (eds.), *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (London: Pluto Press), 2009.

³ See Wendy Gay Pearson’s *Queer Universes*, for various essays that deal with the subject.

⁴ Rob Latham, “Sextrapolation in New Wave Science Fiction.” *Queer Universes: Sexualities and Science Fiction*, 52-71). See also Patricia Melzer *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*, 2006.

⁵ Rachel Ferreira Haywood’s *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*, which traces the history of Latin American Science fiction from the 19th Century to the early 20th century. There is also the collaboration published in science fiction studies “A Chronology of Latin-American Science Fiction, 1775-2005.” *Science Fiction Studies* 34.3 (Nov 2007). Darrel Lockhart’s *Latin American Science Fiction Writers: An A-Z Guide* also has a bibliography of science fiction texts from Latin American authors. Still, some of this bibliographic information is incomplete, and some texts which many consider to be science fiction (such as Borges) are excluded from the bibliography. This work has shown that science fiction in Latin America has a roughly coetaneous development with European and North American traditions. Rachel Haywood Ferreira in *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction* states that early writers are indebted to the French tradition, especially in terms of journeys to new lands such as Holmberg’s *El viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic Nac*, which models itself on Verne’s novels (15). Latin America, however, has its own science fiction writers that both precede Verne and differ vastly from the kind of fiction that Verne wrote. One example of the independent tradition of Latin American SF is the 1775 “Sizigias y cuadraturas lunares ajustadas al meridiano de Mérida de Yucatán por un ancitona o habitador de la luna” by Manuel Antonio de Rivas. The presence of this text, as well as nineteenth century science fiction, shows a vibrant tradition of Spanish language science fiction written at the same time or before Anglo science fiction. Thus, it is written in dialogue with other science fiction

traditions and should not be simply seen as a copy of United States or British science fiction.

⁶ See for example Rachel Haywood Ferreira's *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*. Also see the introduction to the anthology *Cosmos Latinos: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain*

⁷ Many people consider any text that is written pre-twentieth century to be proto science fiction or "retrolabeled." The term scientifiction, which later became science fiction, was first used in the 1920s by Hugo Gernsback to loosely refer to the stories from pulp magazines such as his own *Amazing Stories*, that were influenced by "Poe, Verne, and Flammarion" (Gernsback 3). But this definition made by a magazine editor does not mean that science fiction is limited either to these specific authors prior to the 1920s or to any precise chronology or geography. His efforts can be seen as an attempt to designate an already emerging tendency in texts toward the literary and the scientific. While there are various conventions and tropes such as space travel, time travel, alien encounters, and the discovery of new places that characterize much of science fiction, it is not limited to these conventions. It often engages science critically and philosophically rather than spelling out actual or imagined scientific possibility.

⁸ Daniel Balderston's "The Fecal Dialectic: Homosexual Panic and the Origin of Writing in Borges" analyzes homophobia in Borges writing, and the conception of active and passive roles and masculinity in Argentina. *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*. See also Eduardo P. Archetti's "Masculinity, Primitivism, Power: Gaucho, Tango, and the Shaping of Argentine National Identity in *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Latin America since Independence*.

Chapter 1

⁹ This protagonist is often equated with Borges.

¹⁰ See Daniel Balderston's "The "Fecal Dialectic": Homosexual Panic and the Origin of Writing in Borges." He quotes Borges saying, "Añadiré otro ejemplo curioso: el de la sodomía. En todos los países de la tierra, una indivisible reprobación recae sobre los dos ejecutores del inimaginable contacto. *Abominación hicieron los dos; su sangre sobre ellos*, dice el Levítico. No así entre el malevaje de Buenos Aires, que reclama una especie de veneración para el agente activo--porque lo embromó al compañero. Entrego esa dialéctica fecal a los apologistas de la *viveza*, del *alacraneo* y de la *cachada*, que tanto infierno encubren." Balderston goes on to argue that Borges' disgust at fecal matters is actually a fascination with anal intercourse.

¹¹ Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* also queers psychoanalysis in terms of Freud. Though the title refers to queer phenomenology, her work seeks to understand the relationship of various strains of critical thought including

phenomenology, Marxism, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, feminism, and queer theory. Queer phenomenology is a starting place to engage other philosophical and critical traditions to form an anti-racist and anti-homophobic discourse.

¹² Borges is not always read as a science fiction writer. Darrell Lockhart doesn't include him in his dictionary of Science Fiction writers. Neither does Molina Gavilán. Nonetheless, Piglia claims him as an example of Speculative Fiction (YouTube). Others claim Borges as a science fiction writer because of his influence on later generations while also showing anti-scientific tendencies, as Andrew Brown has detailed (*Test Tube Envy*). Indeed, this anti-scientific stance lead Ilan Stavans to declare that Borges is most definitely not a science fiction writer, citing *El Sur* (his translation).

I suspect that a general scrutiny of fantastic literature will reveal that it is not very fantastic. I have visited many utopias—from the eponymous one of More to *A Brave New World*—and I have not found a single one that exceeds the cozy limits of satire or sermon and describes in detail an imaginary country, with geography, its history, its religion, its language, its literature, its music, its government, its metaphysical and theological controversy; all of it organically coherent, of course and (I know I'm very demanding) with no reference whatsoever to the horrible injustices suffered by artillery Captain Alfred Dreyfus." *El Sur* 1936 (quoted in Stavans 77).

Stavans then concludes "If by definition, SF makes use of or refers to scientific and technological discoveries of the writer's time, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' is as foreign to the genre as any narrative can be" (78). Stavans however fails to understand science fiction as a genre as not merely using and referencing technological discovery. Borges was very aware of scientific trends although perhaps not to the extent that some give him.¹² Borges is not the only science fiction writer to think about the effect of science and knowledge to transform the world. In fact, it is central to writers such as Neal Stephenson, Phillip K. Dick, and various authors to show what might be called a dystopic view of science and scientific progress.

Chapter 2

¹³ See also Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* 1999. Butler, in her work, seeks to create social space for more than two genders. For Butler, gender is a performance; one does gender and creates gender rather than simply having an assigned gender (*Undoing Gender* 1). Thus, various genders are performed, even if normative means seek to contain that performance within a binary system. Science fiction allows us to consider the reconstruction of gender as a performance; alien bodies abstract notions of gender to the reader. The fictional space of science fiction allows writers to test the limits of gender. For Butler, many possible genders exist beyond the binary terms male/female or masculine/feminine. Butler tries to imagine a world with more than two genders: "fantasy is essential to an experience of one's own body or that of another, as gendered" (15).

¹⁴ Ahmed uses the example of a neighbor who thought that she and her partner were sisters. This is their attempt to “straighten” their relationship into an existing paradigm of heterosexual relationships (95).

¹⁵ See the introduction to Peter Sigal’s *Infamous Desire: Male Homosexuality in Colonial Latin America* for an excellent analysis of the debate between Trexler and Horswell surrounding the role of third gender indigenous people. Horswell argues that the Andes is different from other regions in that there was more respect afforded the third gender people; Trexler argues that for the most part it was a sign of shame.

¹⁶ Freedman is basing his idea on Darko Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 1979.

¹⁷ Lord Vantedour’s dream invokes Occidentalism (a term Mignolo uses to speak of Eurocentrism and European epistemology) even though it is set on a distant planet. See Walter Mignolo *Local Histories, Global Designs*.

Chapter 3

¹⁸ Judith Butler’s critique from chapter 2 of *Gender Trouble* shows that taking “woman” as the subject of feminism is problematic as it creates an essential idea of woman. As such, the idea of a female cyborg as the subject of cyborg feminism is equally problematic.

¹⁹ One example is *1984* by George Orwell, as Mónica Quijano points out (95).

²⁰ Recall that scars and marks are frequently associated with homosexuality, as is seen in the analysis of Herbert J. Brant in “The Mark of the Phallus: Homoerotic Desire in Borges’ “La forma de la espada.” *Chasqui* (25) 1 (1996): 25-38.

Chapter 4

²¹ By posthuman I mean both artificial intelligence as well as genetically or prothetically modified humans.

²² Science fiction also has a major connection to the pulp tradition, with many stories coming out of the *Amazing Stories* or other pulp magazines of the 20s. There are examples of science fiction to predate this, but the 20s mark the time when the term science fiction was first used.