

Ricardo Piglia's *Plata quemada*: The Queer *Pietà*

Herbert J. Brant

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)

ABSTRACT: This study explores Piglia's fictionalization of the "real" 1965 crime story that serves as the base for his 1997 novel, *Plata quemada*, and in particular, the author's choice to invent a homoerotic relationship between the two main characters, Dorda and Brignone. Piglia's decision can be viewed as a daring attempt at "fake news" inspired by historic events. But more significantly, the invention of an emotional and physical relationship between the two protagonists serves a powerful structural function in the novel. By means of this relationship, Piglia is able to elaborate a modern-day Argentine tragedy that elicits a cathartic reaction in the reader. And while the title of the novel may highlight the climactic act of rebellious socio-economic nihilism, the novel as a whole demands a co-equal high point that culminates in the radically subversive, emotionally charged image of Dorda cradling the dying Brignone, Piglia's queer *pietà*.

KEYWORDS: Argentine novel, Ricardo Piglia, Queer Studies, tragedy.

In 2014, Uruguayan journalist Leonardo Haberkorn's published his book, *Liberaj: La verdadera historia del caso Plata quemada*, with the declared intention to reveal the "truth" of the historical incidents that serve as the basis of Ricardo Piglia's extraordinary 1997 novel. Haberkorn states, "No quería *inventarles* a los pistoleros de San Fernando un pasado, como había hecho Piglia. No quería *crearles* una historia familiar, una manera de hablar, *imaginarles* un carácter, *transformarlos* en arquetipos de delinquentes, hacerlos putos, drogadictos, malhablados. Quería acercarme a la verdad" (*Liberaj* 17; emphasis added). Ironically, instead of discrediting the Argentine author's novelization of the events by revealing the historical facts of both the case and its actors, Haberkorn's book may have had a paradoxical effect, one that inspires greater admiration for Piglia's widely acclaimed work of fiction. In *Plata quemada*, Piglia once again reveals the magic behind post-modern literary texts when he, as Gutiérrez González puts it, "levanta el telón para un nuevo enfrentamiento entre el texto novelesco y la realidad externa" (116). My goal in this study is to explore the implications of one of Piglia's principal fictionalizations (or *falsificaciones* in the Borgesian sense) of the real-world story, focusing specifically on the author's decision to construct a modern-day Latin-American tragedy that spotlights a fictionalized homoerotic relationship between two of the main characters—a decision that I view as key to understanding this highly complex and artistically daring version of "fake news" which has its origin in a shocking sequence of events that took place in 1965.¹

At the start, it is important to emphasize that any discussion of *Plata quemada* is more complicated than it might seem, and consequently, some clarification is in order. In addition to the novelized version of events, there is also a highly successful film based on the novel, and given the fundamental differences between the genres,

critical analysis is somewhat neatly divided between studies that examine Piglia's written text, and those that scrutinize Piñeyro's 2000 film. Of course, as Haberkorn's book illustrates, the existence of artefacts that document the historical events compounds the issue, creating a complicated layering of versions: media reports > novel > film. The names of characters alone can cause enormous confusion, and scholars must take note of the source text(s) under consideration. To be clear, then, this study focuses principally on Piglia's 1997 published work of fiction, and references to other textual forms will be explicitly noted.

Given Ricardo Piglia's stature as one of Argentina's most significant 20th-century writers, the bibliography of published critical studies is understandably rich, but few scholars have made the sensational homoerotic content in the novel their central object of attention. A few early studies, however, explore at length the queer relationship of Dorda ("el Gaucho Rubio") and Brignone ("el Nene"), the main characters.² Foster, who specifically analyzes the cinematic version of the novel, notes that the historical and cultural context of the fictionalized events depicted situates the story at a time when such relationships were not commonly visible nor rarely openly acknowledged, and that the sexual nature of the outlaws' relationship in Piglia's novel stands out all the more for its unusual prominence in the story. Archbold examines the specific links in the novel between masculinity, (homo)sexuality, and violence in the novel and how these links demonstrate the deeply-rooted dominance of hetero-patriarchal norms in Argentine society. Premat, in his recent study on the novel, also explores the sexuality of the main characters, situating it within the larger trope of the "mirroring" or, more precisely stated, the *inversion* that he sees as functioning as an organizing principle in Piglia's retelling of the events. But

it seems to me that there is a basic element regarding the queer relationship between the protagonists that still needs more careful elucidation: what happens when, in Piglia's version of the story, the author manufactures a tale of homoerotic desire and sexuality as the emotional anchor for a story inspired by historical facts? Why might he invent a relationship that may or may not have any basis in reality, when the characters in the work of fiction are based on real people? What purposes would that invention serve?

Were the novel written earlier in the 20th Century, one might respond that Piglia uses the homoerotic relationship as a tool to reinforce the negative stereotype that men who love other men are violently anti-social, culturally poisonous, and essentially criminal. But considering the tone of the narration, the sympathy inspired by the background story of childhood sexual abuse, and the affecting images of heroic devotion between the two men, it is clear that the narration of their emotional and physical relationship should be perceived as a compelling deconstruction of the culturally potent image of homosexuals as cowardly, weak, effeminate, and untrustworthy. I find that the invention of a queer relationship—and specifically the deep psychological and intense emotional attachment between the two main characters—, serves a powerful structural and thematic purpose.³ By means of the same-sex relationship, Piglia is able to join together the two fundamental themes of the novel into a satisfyingly coherent whole: his radical political message, illustrated by the robbery and the episode in which the characters burn what remains of the stolen money, and his socially revolutionary message that the passion between two men may be imagined as having an equal emotional intensity and spiritual significance as the love between a man and a woman. And while the title of the novel may highlight the climactic act of socio-economic nihilism, the novel's trajectory demands a finale that culminates in what Balderston calls the "ravishing tenderness" (407) in the subversive, emotionally devastating image of Dorda cradling the dying Brignone, Piglia's literary sculpting of a queer *pietà*.

The Planeta edition of Piglia's *Plata quemada* prominently places a statement on the back cover of the book that appears in the novel's epilogue: "Esta novela cuenta una historia real" (*Plata* 245). It is worth noting that the author does not use the word "true", but rather he affirms that it is a "real story." Nonetheless, this sentence—and the spellbinding power it has over readers when they believe that they have voyeuristic access to the lives of real people and real events—forms one of the bases of a series of legal problems for its author. Piglia had been taken to court on more than one occasion because of this novel, due principally to its clever blurring of the line between fact and fiction, and the essentially different purposes and structures that form the foundation for the journalistic reporting of facts, on the one hand, and the creation of literary texts on the other. The most problematic issues for Piglia have stemmed from lawsuits by living people connected to the historical case, and their claims are based on the legal question of a person's right to privacy against an artist's creative freedom of expression.

The first complainant is a surviving person on whom one of the fictional characters is based, Blanca Galeano, who sued "por daños y perjuicios, por violación al derecho a la intimidad, honor, privacidad, daño moral y usurpación de nombre" (Abraham 123); the second is Claudia Dorda, the daughter of Roberto Dorda, the man on whom the character of Dorda ("el Gaucho Rubio") is based. As may be easily imagined, one aspect of the legal problems for Piglia stems from his choice either to use the real names of the people involved or to change them only slightly when he incorporated them into his fictional text. In the case of the two main protagonists, Piglia did, in fact, change the first names of the fictional characters from those of the real people who inspired them: Roberto Dorda was changed to Marcos or Marquitos Dorda (*Plata* 218), and Marcelo Brignone became Franco Brignone (*Plata* 91) in the novel. Blanca Galeano, however, was singled out as one of the few people whose fictional character retains the real person's unaltered name.

Although the lawsuits failed in court (see Ferrari), Piglia's cunning blend of fact and fiction still continues to frustrate and confuse various sectors of the reading public. Haberkorn's caustic response to Piglia's novel—in print, in recorded interviews, and on his website blog—combines clarification of the events depicted in the novel as elucidated by news stories published at the time, along with information on his research into the "truth" about the characters by means of interviews conducted with members of the families of the real-life people portrayed in Piglia's novel. In spite of Haberkorn's suggestions of plagiarism, and what he views as ethical violations of journalistic integrity, i.e., the novelist's failure to report "the truth" with precision, Piglia's masterly skill at writing from the fertile borderline between fiction and history has successfully confounded Haberkorn, and has ultimately led him to view the novel as a sort of "hoax": a novel that takes the technique of Capote's modernist *In Cold Blood* and amplifies the effect to create a post-modern, "post-truth" manifesto. Significantly, Haberkorn is careful not to accuse Piglia directly, but he does make his point clear when he says, "Cuando leo una obra de ficción me gusta que la haya escrito el escritor. Y, en uno y otro caso, cuando hay citas me gusta que se sepa de quién son, de dónde fueron tomadas, dónde empiezan y dónde terminan. Y que vengan con comillas. Por favor" ("Piglia"). Simply put, Haberkorn's indignation betrays his ignorance of Piglia's sophisticated and elaborate use of a classic Brechtian estrangement effect ("Verfremdungseffekt") that distances his novel from mere reportage of historical facts: the novel's constantly shifting narrative voice, best described as a "narración coral" (Unda Henríquez 110). The author decenters and defamiliarizes the narrative voice as a way to create the effect of a "tensión entre voces distintas, relatos dispares, que se repiten, difieren entre sí, se contradicen, cuentan fragmentos de sus historias, introducen modos de pensar..." (Premat 319). The result is a text with a "proliferación de historias y perspectivas de la realidad dentro del texto" (Gutiérrez González 118). Again, paradoxically, Haberkorn actually strengthens the critical appraisal that although Piglia's richly textured fiction may indeed

fail as journalism (see Calero), it succeeds admirably as a superb work of fiction. Piglia stretches the boundaries and expands the possibilities of narrative point of view by incorporating snippets of journalistic reports as one part of the "selva de voces" that make up the novel's narration.

Following the model of Bertold Brecht, one of the most impactful influences on Piglia's writing, the author constructs a fiction that succeeds in producing an estranged experience for the reader. Piglia makes it abundantly clear that the reality of the supposed "real story" has been altered, even distorted, as a way to draw attention to the act of narration, and to invite a more critical experience of the text on the part of the reader. As Page insightfully remarks, Piglia's novel "moves beyond the immediate scandal of the events it relates to investigate the politics of crime and of narrative in general," thereby establishing an "explicit link between aesthetic organization and ethical judgement..." and revealing the "possible social dimensions of narrativity" (30). As a result, the ethical quality of Piglia's text supersedes Haberkorn's demands that the novel attempt to recreate the reality of the known facts at the expense of illuminating the socio-political situation that underlies the remarkable events of 1965: the tortured relationship between crime and capitalism, crime and "bourgeois legality", crime and the power of the state (Page 36).

In order to jolt readers out of their complacency and to foreground the social critique that forms the heart of Piglia's novel, startling embellishments become essential in the telling of this story. The coverage supplied by the mass media does not shed light on what modern capitalist societies must keep concealed at all costs—the integrated system that maintains its supremacy—, and so Piglia's fictional version of the "real story" highlights two elaborations on the known facts in the case, and they serve as the two most significant literary fabrications in the novel: the spectacular scene referenced by the book's title, the burning of several million Argentine pesos, and the development of a highly complex homoerotic relationship between the two principle male characters.⁴ And while there exists a number of critical studies devoted to both of these contrived fictional elements, it appears that many critics seem reluctant to question the veracity of Piglia's concocted plot devices, or even to suspect that they are merely contrivances that enrich the narrative. As a result, Piglia has succeeded in creating the surprisingly credible illusion that both devices are part of the historical evidence (they are not), when it is far more probable that the author needed to conjure them in order to enhance his literary rendering of the story, elevating it to epic stature. With that in mind, I want to focus on the non-normative sexuality of the two main characters, to explore Piglia's decision to invent a homoerotic relationship between them, and to evaluate how this particular plot element functions in the novel.

According to Haberkorn's interviews with Claudia Dorda, the Dorda family agrees that there was never the least hint of homosexual-

ity or mental illness in the life of her father. Haberkorn affirms that "[e]n *Plata quemada* Piglia lo describe como un psicópata, muy loco, esquizofrénico, 'con tendencia a la afasia', homosexual, de gran inteligencia, supersticioso, huérfano de madre, que podía permanecer un mes callado, que oía voces en el interior de su cabeza, [...] *Todo es un invento*" (*Liberaij* 53-54; emphasis added). In addition to Piglia's fictional invention of a sexuality for which Haberkorn can find no evidence in real life, he seems to be deeply troubled by the incongruity that a married man with a young child might also be attracted to other men. In pursuit of a resolution to the apparent contradiction, he explores possible explanations for Piglia's falsification. He notes with irony that the one character in the novel that may have been suspected of homosexuality, as reported in the press of the time, was Carlos "El Cuervo" Mereles, the driver of the getaway car and the third person killed in the Montevideo apartment. Haberkorn cites a newspaper source—whose reliability is never questioned—to back up his confirmation: "[s]e sabe también que Mereles es adicto a las drogas y para completar el inquietante cuadro, tiene inclinaciones homosexuales", sostuvo *La Razón*." The Uruguayan journalist finally engages in what appears to be a bit of mind-reading when he asserts unequivocally, "De allí seguramente sacó Piglia la idea de crear una pareja gay entre dos integrantes de la banda, Dorda y Brignone..." (*Liberaij* 72; emphasis added). Notwithstanding Haberkorn's decisive assertion, it appears more likely that Piglia chose to invent the homoerotic relationship between Dorda and Brignone to support a structural and thematic construct for his novel, one that allows him to employ a technique that heightens the impact of the tragedy, and raises the characters from mere deviants and delinquents to a classical heroic stature.

As much as it may seem incompatible to connect the notion of the tragic hero with murderers and thieves, there is no question that issues of marginality, homosociality, and an exaggerated masculinity are fundamental themes that run through Piglia's fiction. Balderston, for example, notes that "the importance of the homoerotic in the construction of masculinity" (405) is evident in his early stories, "La invasión" and "El Laucha Benítez," and that his writing is "fraught with tension concerning the homoerotic, especially in relation to violent male bonding" (408). Piglia has commented on this particular fascination for him as a writer, and in a 1998 conversation, published in a later edition of his *Crítica y ficción*, the author speaks of his interest in the promising fictional possibilities of exploring the various "worlds" in which men interact exclusively with other men, including those that are characterized by violence and danger: "...un mundo sólo de hombres..., digamos el ejército, el mundo del box, el mundo del deporte, las pensiones, ciertos ámbitos donde funcionan redes masculinas han sido siempre para mí muy atractivos por el tipo de pasiones que circulan ahí, la competencia extrema, los desafíos, los sentimientos desplazados..." (*Crítica* 224). Later in the same published conversation, he explicitly mentions the world of criminals and prisons, the latter being "un espacio de circulación entre cuerpos sin que nadie se quede fijo a un tipo de conducta es-

tablecida que la sociedad considera normal, anormal o desviada" (*Crítica* 226).⁵ The stunning irony of a prison as a place where there is greater freedom of sexual desire and its expression than in the society at large may have originally attracted Piglia's keen sense of paradox and incongruity to the story of a gang of ex-convicts who carry out a daring robbery of several million pesos.

But rather than a violent "world of men" populated by a group of individuals who are connected only by their participation in the criminal events that occur in Buenos Aires and Montevideo in 1965, Piglia has chosen to create a central dyad, an emotionally and sexually conjoined pair as the protagonist. Dorda and Brignone form a "couple" that integrates two complementary halves of a divided whole. Queer Studies scholars have found the concept of the Platonic "missing half" a highly productive notion for reimagining modern homoerotic desire, and for moving past Freud's troubled conception of narcissism and the theory of attraction to one's own self as it is projected onto a person of the same sex.⁶ Bersani, for example, explores the power of Aristophanes' fable in which human beings were originally created in three forms: male, female, and a spherically-shaped combination of the two. The humans were punished by Zeus because of their "powerful and ambitious [...] attempts to vanquish the gods" by splitting them into two halves, with the result that "every human being is longing for his or her lost other half. 'Love' [...] 'is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature'" (364). Consequently, the ancient Greek notion defines erotic attraction as a search for what has been lost, for what is missing, and for some it is the search for a person of the same sex, and for others, a person of a different sex. Piglia seems to allude to the mythological story when he has Brignone describe the impulse for his public cruising for sex with men in very nearly the same terms: "Es como buscar algo que se ha perdido y que de pronto aparece bajo una luz blanca, en medio de la calle. Es irresistible" (*Plata* 105).

Piglia's creation of a reunited wholeness and plentitude in the conjoined dyad of Dorda and Brignone solidifies their role as protagonist in the story, and gives them an exceptional power that they would lack as individuals. In the text, it is evident that the two characters function most efficiently as two complementary halves of an intensified whole, similar to the exceptionally strong connection between twins. The first lines of the novel explain that "[l]os llaman los mellizos porque son inseparables. Pero no son hermanos, ni son parecidos" (*Plata* 11). Still on the first page, the narrator continues to speak of them as a functional unit by emphasizing the word "pareja": "[e]ran llamativos, extravagantes, parecían una *pareja* de boxeadores o una *pareja* de empleados de una empresa de pompas fúnebres" (*Plata* 11-12; emphasis added). Later on, we read of Dorda's sense of wholeness with Brignone: "...el Gaucho y el Nene, eran, para el Gaucho, uno solo. Hermanos mellizos, gemelos, los hermanos corsos, es decir (trataba de explicar Dorda) se entendían a ciegas, actuaban de memoria. Le parecía así, a él, que sentía lo

mismo que el Nene Brignone" (*Plata* 68-69). And further, the prison psychiatrist, Dr. Amadeo Bunge, notes that it is "[U]n caso muy interesante de simbiosis gestáltica. Son dos pero actúan como una unidad. El cuerpo es el Gaucho, el ejecutor pleno, un asesino psicótico; el Nene es el cerebro y piensa por él" (*Plata* 69).⁷ The fictional psychiatrist's assessment of the relationship between Brignone and Dorda as a symbiotic unit reinforces the classical theme underlying this work, elevating the two characters to mythic status, deserving of a story that is worth repeating for future generations, and rescued from the oblivion of forgetting and disappearance — a fate that likely would have occurred had Piglia not published his novel thirty years after the historical events.

The mythic status of the characters emphasizes a structure that Piglia finds powerfully "attractive" to him as a writer, *tragedy*. In *Plata quemada*, Piglia takes a sequence of historical events and converts them into a work of narrative art in the form of "una versión argentina de una tragedia griega" (*Plata* 250). Piglia has explained his concept of tragedy in these terms:

Yo defino la tragedia como la llegada de un mensaje enigmático, sobrenatural, que a veces el héroe no alcanza a comprender. La tragedia es un diálogo con una voz que habitualmente aparece ligada a los dioses o a la sombra de los muertos [...], es decir, hay una frase hermética, escrita en una lengua a la vez familiar y sobrenatural, y hay un problema de desciframiento; pero el que tiene que descifrar tiene la vida puesta en juego en ese desciframiento. [...] Habitualmente el héroe no comprende o comprende mal y por eso termina como termina. La tragedia dramatiza una interpretación... [*Crítica* 204]

Later in the conversation, Piglia suggests that the tragic heroes (officially plural, but functionally singular) are haunted by a destiny that demands that they obey a conviction, a "ley propia" and they accept the impossible option demanded by their "sistema de valores propios" (*Crítica* 205). Without using the word, Piglia implies that the tragic *flaw* of these heroes is their deadly determination either to live outside of the norms of the capitalist, bourgeois society that has abused and poisoned them, or die in the attempt.

The marginality of the protagonists who live outside of civilized society in a world made up almost exclusively of men may help explain Piglia's choice for Dorda's criminal nickname, "el Gaucho Rubio" — a nickname that Roberto Dorda's daughter insists was totally unknown to any of her family members. Dieleke, for example, makes explicit the link between Dorda and Martín Fierro, the most famous "gaucho rebelde." And in a footnote, Premat clarifies that because "el contexto pampeano (delirios sobre indios ranqueles, elementos espaciales como lagunas, tacuaras, totoras), aparece en el pasado del Gaucho Dorda, y por lo tanto en su definición ficcional" (323), the reader cannot help but connect Piglia's character to the gauchesque genre and to Hernández's Martín Fierro. The intertext-

tual parallels between Dorda and Martín Fierro and their "fraternity of the marginal" (Geirola 187) further enrich Piglia's text as a commentary on *argentinidad* and national identity.

For me, what makes *Plata quemada* so appealing to readers is the manner in which Piglia magnifies and amplifies the marginality of the main characters—their value as outsiders or underdogs—by connecting their criminality with the abuse that they suffered as children and adolescents in the Argentine penal system. In this way, the author is able to link Otherness with sexual violence, with the functional common element between them being toxic masculinity and culturally sanctioned homophobia. In order to accomplish this, Piglia invents believable, but completely fictional backstories for both Dorda and Brignone as a way to allow the reader to understand better their particular situations, and how they came to find their missing other half in the other person. Chapter 3, for example, is devoted to Dorda's troubled mental state and his long history of psycho-sexual abuse, and Chapter 4 has a long interior monologue in which Brignone speaks of how he had been "poisoned" throughout his young life, and the lessons he learned in prison about the evils of humanity. It must be noted, however, that Piglia does not offer these passages in the novel as some type of explanation of criminality and delinquency in general, but instead they provide the necessary background for understanding the sense of tragedy he sets up in the novel. And in order for the tragedy to be truly effective, the reader must understand what Piglia calls the tragic heroes' "convictions" or their "personal value systems," and how the fateful messages to be deciphered lead them to their final destiny in Montevideo. But the reader must understand that Piglia, of course, does not condone their actions: "[e]n el caso de *Plata quemada*, esta ley por supuesto no era la que yo sostengo; no es que yo esté de acuerdo con que haya que matar gente por la calle como hacen estos personajes, pero sí estoy de acuerdo con que ellos son fieles a una ley propia y la llevan hasta el fin" (*Crítica* 205). In other words, the novel functions on the foundational principle that what is heroic in these characters is not the value system itself, but their decision to remain faithful to it.

In a sense, the outlaws who serve as protagonists in the novel earn a certain compassion from the reader once their personal histories become known. Piglia sets up the devastating ending of the novel by providing what was disappointingly lacking in the "true" version of the historical events of 1965, and what Haber Korn's book highlights so starkly: a robbery turns deadly, and when trapped, the criminals make the almost inexplicable decision to die rather than be sent back to jail. What is known (or *may* be known) about the real events cannot adequately explain the motive, the reason for the final bloodbath in the Liberaj apartment building—but Piglia's fiction can. By magnifying the tortured situation of these stigmatized outcasts, and by providing a story to explain their explosive rage and brutally destructive anti-social behavior, the author is able to satisfy the reader's need to understand the *why* behind the historical facts, as his characters lash out at capitalist society by attacking

both the highly cherished values of heteronormativity as well as the materialistic desire for an ever-increasing accumulation of wealth.⁸

Clearly, one of the most skillful and unsettling features of Piglia's novel is how the author is able to build empathy for characters whose actions can only be described as despicable or barbaric as they rage against "civilized society" from their savage, marginalized environment.⁹ Their rebellion against society, and their hatred of mid-20th-century Argentine norms that come as a result of suffering at the hands of that society, is tempered by their passionate devotion to each other. From the very first page, the novel sets in motion a cumulative effect that humanizes them and inspires empathy for them—in spite of their reprehensible acts. Again, Piglia's choice to create a homoerotic relationship between the men becomes key to understanding the ultimate tragedy of the narration. Were the protagonists of the story merely associates in a gang of criminals—without any deeper connection than their greed or their lust for revenge against a society that they view as having victimized them—the novel could not possibly have made the same affective impact on the reader. The love relationship between Dorda and Brignone is fundamental in creating the emotionally-charged finale and the resulting experience of *catharsis*.¹⁰ But unlike the typical catharsis in the classics of the Western canon, Piglia brilliantly sets up a voluptuously *queer*, turn-of-the-21st-century cathartic moment—the tragic scene in which Dorda cradles the dying Brignone in his arms. Dorda does not merely hold the man that he loves in their final moments together, but rather he experiences the feeling of life emptying out of his own being as it slowly drains away from his Platonic complementary half.

The richly detailed and vivid narration of the catastrophic events of the 5th and 6th of November in 1965 provide a spectacularly dramatic climax to the novel. And while the fictional burning of the money might be considered the culminating apex of the narrative trajectory, I would argue that the death of Brignone in Dorda's final embrace must be understood as more than merely an emotional closure to diminish the tension after the scene when spectators shriek in horror, anger, and disgust at the destruction of the money. In my view, the burning of the money does form the climax of the one plot line that focuses on the socio-economic themes explored by Piglia, most probably as a way to comment on the neo-liberal capitalist excesses of late 20th-century Argentina when the novel was written, but the death of Brignone creates a co-equal climax for the plot devoted to the queering of the dual protagonists as a construct to elevate readers' emotions as they view the spectacle of the tragic heroes' end. While the burning of the money may cause the reader to be appalled, even traumatized, by the incineration of such an enormous amount of cash—and all that it represents—I contend that the action of the novel concludes when Piglia forces the reader into the position of voyeur—to witness, to be engaged sensorially and sentimentally in the intimate exaltation of the main characters as they are raised to heroic stature by the tenderness and poignancy of their final embrace:

Por fin Dorda llegó junto al Nene y lo arrastró contra la pared, a cubierto, y lo levantó contra su cuerpo, lo tendió sobre él, abrazado, semidesnudo.

Se miraron; el Nene se moría. El Gaucho Rubio le limpió la cara y trató de no llorar. [...]

El Nene le sonrió y el Gaucho Rubio lo mantuvo en sus brazos como quien sostiene a un Cristo. [...] —No aflojes, Marquitos —dijo el Nene. Lo había llamado por el nombre, por primera vez en mucho tiempo, en diminutivo, como si fuera el Gaucho quien precisara consuelo.

Y después se alzó un poco, el Nene, se apoyó en un codo y le dijo algo al oído que nadie pudo oír, una frase de amor, seguramente, dicha a medias o no dicha tal vez pero sentida por el Gaucho que lo besó mientras el Nene se iba. (Plata 217-218)

At this point, in my view, the novel fully realizes its artistic ambition. Piglia's queer *pietà* provides a transcendence to the events that occurred in Montevideo so many years ago, and allows for the cathartic release of emotion for readers who are permitted to witness the affectively charged final moments of these flawed tragic characters. While the burning of the money may provide a moment of dramatic flair of astounding intensity for its pure nihilistic destructiveness, the agonizing death of el Nene Brignone and the hopeless grief of el Gaucho Rubio furnish a superb countermeasure that places their and our humanity at the center of the tragedy. Piglia's novel reminds the reader that the seemingly useless immolation of the money pales in comparison to the significance of the obliteration of the person who provides wholeness, completion, and fullness to his beloved other half.

NOTES

¹ The Borgesian *falsificación* has served as a potent inspiration for Piglia. In general terms, Borges makes use of what appears to be a purely intellectual game of false references, attributions, and quotes from invented texts and apocryphal authors as a way to give the illusion of truth and reality underlying his fictions. But beyond the playful tricks, the game's effects undermine the idea of authority and authorship, they blur the distinctions we draw between fact and fiction, and they reveal the inherent limitations of language and the myth of "truth" as a discoverable entity. In *Plata quemada*, Piglia picks up where Borges leaves off, and takes literary falsification to a new level. For a succinct analysis of the influence of Borges and Arlt on Piglia, see Garabano.

² I am using terminology to avoid fixing an identity marker to the characters. Rather than a gay relationship or a gay identity—which would be anachronistic in the 1965 time period—I prefer *homoerotic* or *queer* to describe the physical and emotional passion between men, one which may or may not express a self-defined identity position that we understand currently as "gay." The non-heteronormative fluidity of sexual desire is something that Piglia himself views as an element of fascination, and as I will indicate later, one that appears with some frequency in his fiction. See his *Crítica y ficción* 224-226.

³ Kokalov sees the homoerotic relationship in Piglia's novel as less significant. In comparing the novel to the film, he asserts that "la novela contiene elementos indiscutiblemente queer ... mas la representación de dichos elementos es secundaria a la crónica policial narrada por el autor." He praises Piñeyro's film version, in contrast, stating that "el centro del film está indudablemente ocupado por la historia de amor entre El Nene y Ángel (el Gaucho) mientras que en este caso el crimen es el trasfondo trágico a lo largo del cual se desarrolla la acción" (38). While I agree that the film visually portrays the relationship between El Nene and Ángel in a more explicit manner, I contend that the homoerotic union of the two protagonists in the novel cannot reasonably be considered secondary to the story of the crime and its devastating aftermath.

⁴ In the novel, Piglia gives the exact amount stolen from the armored

car: 7,203,960 Argentine pesos. In October of 1965, the amount would be equivalent to approximately \$32,000 (A\$225 = US\$1), but adjusted for inflation, that amount would have the approximate value of over \$265,000 in 2020, according to online inflation calculators. The enduring questions surrounding the disappearance of the money—as well as the personal effects of the criminals (e.g., clothing, drugs, guns, etc.)—is not very mysterious: it is most likely the result of all-too-common official corruption. By the time that journalists were allowed into the apartment, the Argentine and Uruguayan police had "cleaned up" the entire crime scene, leaving only the naked bodies of the criminals on the kitchen floor. See Calero and Haberkorn (176-178).

⁵ While Foster's analysis focuses on the film version of the novel, he insightfully connects the nature of the marginalized, criminal characters to those in Jean Genet's work, in which "homosexuality and antisocial criminality have in common the radical Otherness of the individual who chooses to subvert conventional morality on all fronts possible" (133-34).

⁶ The suggestive power of the mirror as a reverse likeness or a duplication of sameness and self, is certainly an image that has long been associated with same-sex desire. Freud codified that link for most of the 20th Century, but in recent years, scholars have made important gains in breaking down the association between narcissism and homoerotic attraction (e.g., Bersani, Dean, and Reeser). See Brant (pp. 110-111) for a fuller discussion of this issue.

⁷ The psychiatrist's name is a fairly transparent reference to the early 20th-century Argentine social scientist, Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875-1918), known for his racially-focused views on the degenerative quality of Native American and African influences on Spanish-American societies, and the civilizing value of white European immigration to Argentina, as well as his social-Darwinist studies of crowd psychology. It seems very likely that Piglia's use of the name is intended to discredit the character, and to suggest malpractice or even abuse of Dorda while in prison.

⁸ It is interesting to note that Haberkorn's book consistently emphasizes how the family members he interviews are totally mystified by the

tragedy that occurred, and it reinforces his point that, based on the available evidence, no coherent motive will ever be found to explain why the band of criminals comes to its violent end. Haberkorn's criticism of Piglia, in fact, centers precisely on the novelist's use of fiction to fill in gaps where information is missing from the historical record of the case, including the reasons why it happened the way it did. It appears that he does not understand that Piglia's fictional version of the events offers an artistic means to satisfy the intensely-felt human desire for an explanation of seemingly incomprehensible events.

⁹ It is often assumed that Brecht's conceptualization of epic theater rejects emotional responses to the action on the stage, and that empathy and catharsis obscure the desired critical (rational) response on the part of the audience. Squiers and other scholars note that Brecht's journals and letters

indicate that emotion has an important place in epic theater, but that identification and sympathy with the characters should be prevented by use of estrangement effects (Squires 244).

¹⁰ The concept of catharsis has a highly complex history, and the metaphor used by Aristotle to liken the emotional purification inspired by tragedy to the physical purging of substances from the human body has been applied to a wide variety of contexts. Given Piglia's insistence on the story of Dorda and Brignone as a modern-day tragedy, my use of the term catharsis refers to the classical view that the fall from grace and the suffering of the tragic hero(es) that the reader witnesses at the end of the novel unleashes a strong sense of pity which could serve to inspire the reader to view the events from a heightened perspective, one that goes beyond the traditional bourgeois view of criminality (bad) vs law-and-order (good).

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