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Edna Aizenberg

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Ethnos Meets Eros on the River Plate: Marcelo Birmajer, Sylvia Molloy, Anna Kazumi Stahl

Abstract

This article deals with three contemporary novelists, Marcelo Birmajer, Anna Kazumi Stahl and Sylvia Molly in the context of a new understanding of ethnicity, sexuality and literature in Argentina. In contrast to previous eras when writing reflected a melting pot philosophy which saw Eros as a means of fusing ethnicities and eliminating particularities, today's fiction often celebrates these differences, uncovering layers of secrecy and demanding a place for various languages, sexualities and geographies.

Keywords

Marcelo Birmajer, Anna Kazumi Stahl, Sylvia Molly, ethnicity, sexuality, literature in Argentina, Argentinian Literature, melting pot, melting pot philosophy, Eros, language, geography

Ethnos Meets Eros on the River Plate: Marcelo
Birmajer, Sylvia Molloy, Anna Kazumi Stahl

Edna Aizenberg
Marymount Manhattan College

Beyond the Crucible of Love

A mute Japanese woman, paramour of an Irish sailor, sits in a Buenos Aires apartment practicing the ancient art of ikebana. A gay American comes to Buenos Aires to scatter his Anglo-Argentine mother's ashes and perhaps to find her long-lost lover. An Israeli arrives in Argentina to pray for his two murdered friends and reconnect with a Hebrew-speaking Catholic aristocrat's future wife. Diverse? Complex? Welcome to Argentina's new "ethnic" literature, where *Ethnos* and *Eros* aren't what they used to be.

Once upon a time the formula was simple: it was the turn of the twentieth century and thankful immigrants were pouring into Buenos Aires—Europe's great unwashed yearning to breath free, to make America, to populate port and pampas, tenements and farms. Old World quirks were to be left behind, as all became true and free Argentines. In the words of the Argentine anthem: "Oíd mortales el grito sagrado, libertad, libertad, libertad!" "Hear O ye mortals the sacred cry, liberty, liberty, liberty!" Ethnos and Eros literally went hand in hand throughout the literature that the great migration begat since the bedroom—or the haystack—was the place where homogenized Argentines were to be engendered out of the babble.¹

Deftly combining images of the melting pot and the procreating body, the prominent nativist writer Martiniano Leguizamón euphemistically labeled the process the "crucible of love," *crisol de amor*, writing in his introduction to Alberto Gerchunoff's *Los gau-*

chos judíos (1910; *The Jewish Gauchos*), a saga of Jewish farming immigrants to the pampas and one of the significant works of the great migration era.

The “fusion of bloods,” Leguizamón huffs, as comely Russo-Jewish maidens run off with gallant gaucho cowboys, would forge a new breed of men and women unmoored from foreign heritages, embracing local customs and dress, and, importantly, no longer interested in literature “encumbered” by ethnic considerations. A hundred years later—in our days—everyone, properly bred into uniformity, would join together in a grand *Te Deum* to the prosperous and joyous Argentine land (see Aizenberg *Parricide*, 34-35; 37).

It didn’t quite work out that way, although the *fusión de sangres* ideal continues to resonate: witness such movies as Eduardo Mignogna’s *Sol de otoño* (1996; *Autumn Sun*), where Eros and Ethnos, peppered with the taste of *varenikes*—Polish-Jewish stuffed dumplings—couple the Italian frame maker, Raúl Ferrari, and the Jewish bookkeeper, Clara Goldstein. Why marry an in-group candidate from the film’s obnoxious or invented suitors? That would only reinforce exotic tics and linguistic disorder—Ferrari can’t for the life of him learn to say the Yiddish word *varenikes*. But follow the crucible of love path and you’ll melt down differences and nation build, even if now the harmonized aren’t grateful greenhorns brimming with carnal vigor but their sexually hesitant middle-aged children, survivors of Argentina’s multiple twentieth-century catastrophes and dictatorships (so says the film’s opening voice over). Their bodies may be injured and creaky just like the body politic—Ferrari has cancer—yet there still might be some kick left in the good old *crisol de razas*.

And the kick persists in Argentine scholarship as well, although a fierce debate is now going on. Social critic Dedier Marquiegui bluntly expresses it this way: the word *etnicidad*, with its intimations of heterogeneity, “irritates” many theoretical circles, which often cling to the fusion ideal even in the face of empirical evidence—for instance, the existence of ethnic neighborhoods, mutual aid societies, or cultural networks (10; see also, Quijada, Bernard and Schneider, and the extensive discussion in Devoto 343-52 and 424-32). So great is the weight of the melting pot that literary critics

of “immigration” or “national identity,” and mirroring the work of influential historians and social scientists such as José Luis Romero and Gino Germani, for whom amalgamation was the desired goal (see Onega and Battistozzi).²

But for all the melting pot’s bandaged persistence, something else more innovative is going on in Argentine culture, pertinent to a new understanding of literature and ethnicity in other places. Concepts of ethnicity prevalent in the United States and Canada cannot be indiscriminately applied to Argentina, Eduardo Domenech pointedly reminds us, yet he and other scholars, Fernando Devoto famously among them, have mounted an assault on homogenization, championing culturally pluralistic models of “nation,” messy salads, if you will, rather than blended mush (see Domenech, Devoto, and for a retort, Sábato).

Fictional creation, with its sensitive antennas, has captured—or anticipated—the shift. Very different recent works refuse the fusion formula (or farce), and relate Ethnos and Eros in novel ways that reflect the search for these non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian, pluralistic modes. These books could care less about achieving bland homogeneity, suggesting instead a knotty, kaleidoscopic Argentine-ness—if there is such a thing—at the crossroads of sexuality and stock. Anna Kazumi Stahl’s *Flores de un solo día* (2002; *Flowers for a Single Day*), Sylvia Molloy’s *El común olvido* (2002; *Ordinary Forgetfulness*), and Marcelo Birmajer’s *Tres Mosqueteros* (2001; *The Three Musketeers*) all challenge well-worn definitions by rubbing together “forbidden” forms of Eros—gay, voyeuristic, adulterous—and Ethnos—Japanese, Irish, Jewish. Each book slowly unfolds a family secret, a sexual secret that peels away hidden layers of being “Argentine.” Each book, using coded languages made up of non-verbal gestures or foreign words interrupts and enriches Spanish. Each book complicates ethnicity, relishing the cacophonous brew of backgrounds and turning thumbs down on thoughtless amalgamation.

The Language of Ikebana

Anna Kazumi Stahl presents a radical revision of “the Argentine,” inserting the Japanese into a culture that muffling its Native

American and African roots has deemed itself lily white and lovingly western. The Orient as another other, frighteningly similar and happily distinct from Argentina, has long been alluring to River Plate intellectuals—see Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's, Jorge Luis Borges's, Juan Gelman's or Luisa Futuransky's outsider's captivation with the East, be it Arabia, Judeo-Muslim Spain, China or Japan. But these writers' gaze contrasts vehemently with Kazumi Stahl's insider's look—albeit a look tinted by her own poly-ethnic roots: Japanese mother, German father, American birth.³ By choosing to live in Buenos Aires and to write in Argentine Spanish, Kazumi Stahl muddles Argentine-ness through an already muddled lens. In her *Flores de un solo día* there are no impurities to purge but multiple and occult crisscrosses that once revealed bloom into a rich and new sense of home, like the delicate flowers in an Ikebana arrangement, perfectly balanced yet retaining their own shape, color and perfume.

Ikebana means to make flowers fresh or alive. But it's also a Way of Flowers, a form of meditation on time's passing and a symbolic language that expresses human relationships (Norman 6). Kazumi Stahl puts it this way:

Y las flores, a través de un sistema milenario de significados, se presentan en la vida mundana como una vía (y lamentablemente hay tan pocas) que permite al ser humano sentir en carne propia y con los ojos, con su pequeña sensibilidad individual, el tremendo pulso de ese gran todo. Pero es tan inasible. Dificilísimo de captar, aun por una fracción de segundo. Por eso mismo es menester aprovechar la flor, aborlarla y disfrutar ese instante de saber, ese soplo tan fugaz de la vida. (*Flores* 44)

And flowers, through an age-old system of meaning, come into our daily lives and offer each one of us with our own individual sensibility, a way (there are so few, unfortunately) to sense and see the great pulse of that all-encompassing oneness. But it's so elusive, so hard to hold on to even for a second. That's why you have to take advantage of the flower, you have to approach it and enjoy that moment of illumination, that fleeting whiff of life.

Interestingly, in this book of intricate nationalities a la Borges's garden of forking paths, based on another form of oriental nature arranging a West/center 2005/21e

amused and annoyed Japanese-Argentine colleague, who immediately deflates what he considers high-blown philosophical bombast (on Japanese in Argentina, see Laumanier). Yet deflated or not, ikebana does unlock the novel's hovering secret and does lead to that elusive instant of self-knowledge when identity finally seems to make sense.

Aimée Levrier is a young woman of Japanese and apparently American ancestry living in present-day Buenos Aires, where she owns flower shop, "Hanako—Floral Arrangements—Traditional and Ikebana." Her coming to Argentina at age eight—twenty five years earlier, together with her mother Hanako, was sudden and wounding—shortly after her father died in a car accident the two women were summarily put on a plane from their home in New Orleans by one Francisco Oleary, aka *El Argentino*, and dispatched to his spinster sister, who greeted them (in English) with the less than enthusiastic, "All right then, come in" (10).

Deprived of father, home and language, Aimée gradually learns to swim in the turbulent waters of the strange city and tongue. Her mother complicates her task, since Hanako is agoraphobic and mute, and a victim of childhood meningitis aggravated by the horrors of World War II in Japan. It isn't clear what she understands or doesn't, yet a special love binds mother and daughter, who despite Hanako's condition communicate through the daily ikebana arrangement that following Japanese tradition Hanako creates for their apartment, which they now share with Aimée's husband, Fernando Marconi, an Argentine doctor of Italian origin.

The relative placidity of a life arduously pieced out of displacement and trauma comes to a crashing halt when Aimée receives a letter from a lawyer in New Orleans, informing her that she has inherited the family mansion on historic Saint Charles Avenue. Forced to journey back to the place from which she was so abruptly torn, Aimée confronts her past, guided—surprisingly—by the mother who allegedly cannot think, speak, or write, by the "primitive" whose millennial system of communication, ikebana, escapes the perception of western science and sign systems (116).

At each step, through the language of flowers and related objects, the speechless mother tells Aimée what to do and where to look: On the day the letter arrives, the empty lacquer ikebana tray warns

of danger; an arrangement of twisted black pyracantha branches illuminated by white paper bows with letter-like scribbles says the painful past contains instants of happiness that you can bring back (131); aromatic honeysuckle floating on a branch structure and a drawing of a house suspended on water points to another home, not the mansion that Aimée has inherited (254-55).

The secret then begins to spill out. Ethnos and Eros are turned topsy-turvy as Aimée discovers that Henri Levrier, her Southern gentleman father isn't her father; Hanako, the Japanese war orphan he adopted during the Occupation, isn't fully his wife, and the grand Saint Charles Avenue mansion where she grew up isn't really her home. An alternate family comes out of the shadows: her father, the Irish-Argentine Francisco Oleary, Hanako's hidden lover; her mother, transformed from ward to wife only after she mysteriously became pregnant; and her home, *El Argentino* and *La Japonesa's* love nest in Delacroix, a working-class Spanish-speaking enclave on the bayou, the only such enclave in French-inflected Louisiana. It was Oleary who sent them to Argentina to save them from the official family's wrath, Oleary who provided for them, Oleary who died before he could rejoin them in the austral exile, which ultimately becomes *casa*, home.

Because when Aimée, the love(d) child returns to Buenos Aires, "Se da cuenta que ha llegado a casa, a sentirse en casa, pareciera que puso por fin los pies sobre la tierra" 'she realizes that she has come home, to feel at home, as if she finally put her feet on the ground' (332).⁴ Solely after unearthing and possessing her quirkily "Hispanic" heritage, basted out of the wanderings of an Irish sailor who became *El Argentino* after he left Argentina and of his unblessed union in an exilic Hispanic hideaway with a Japanese war orphan who "speaks" ikebana, does the ambiguous welcome reluctantly uttered in English twenty five years earlier, "All right then, come in," become *Se da cuenta que ha llegado a casa*. In *Flores de un solo día* sex and stock dance their dance, let's say their tango, intertwining, loving and leaving and loving again, without surrendering pieces of self, without ethnic or erotic meltdowns.

What is Hidden Beyond the Frame?

Sylvia Molloy's *El común olvido* dances the same tango with different footwork. Here, too, Argentina and the United States form the shuttle pace in which ethnic and erotic remembering are sought, sifted, lost, and found. Here, too, a traumatic breaking away from the birthplace marks the protagonist, Daniel. Born in Buenos Aires to Anglo-Irish-Argentine parents, at age twelve he is hastily taken away by his mother Julia to the United States after his father threatens to hurl him down from the balcony as punishment, and he doesn't know for what. Shorn of father, language, and home—his aberrant colonial British English mixed with River Plate Spanish marks him as foreign—Daniel never completely learns to swim in the uncomfortable New York waters, stymied by his bohemian artist mother's immersion in the wildness of the anti-Vietnam War 1960s, his growing awareness of his homosexuality, and the gnawing question, "por qué nos habíamos ido de la Argentina." "why did we leave Argentina?" (24) Like his biblical precursor Daniel must divine the enigmatic handwriting on the wall.

His precarious adjustment receives a jolt when he is forced to travel back to Argentina to fulfill Julia's dying wish to have her ashes scattered in the River Plate, a last irksome request that he cannot carry out in a land where the ashes of the murdered and disappeared were routinely disposed of in exactly that macabre manner by the henchmen of the xenophobic, anti-Semitic 1970s dictatorships. Through another macabre twist, his own mother's remains disappear after he buries them illegally in the highfalutin Recoleta cemetery not far from where Eva Perón's legendary body itself disappeared for many long years after her husband's overthrow (see Foster, "Evita Perón"). Daniel finds a jar of paint where he left the urn, an uncannily fitting replacement for an artist who expressed what couldn't be named, her identity and Daniel's, through the language of painting—just as Hanako revealed her identity and Aimée's through the language of ikebana. In Sylvia Molloy's novel there is literally a bag of bones rattling in the closet, and private and politic bodies travel restlessly.

The family secret then begins to spill out. Eros and Ethnos are turned topsy-turvy as Daniel finds out that his father Charlie isn't his mother's only partner and his childhood apartment in Buenos Aires's upper-middle class Belgrano neighborhood isn't his only

home. A subterranean family surfaces: Charlotte Haas, a Belgian-Jewish refugee photographer and his mother's lesbian lover; Julia who, defying not merely sexual convention but ingrained anti-Semitism, loved Charlotte (not Charlie) more than anyone; and "home," Julia and Charlotte's love nest by the River Plate, a shed turned house in San Isidro, a posh Buenos Aires suburb.⁵ As in Kazumi Stahl, *Ethnos and Eros* shatter molds in a parallel aqueous world of ravines and rivers where sensuality flows to other rules, other rhythms (*Común olvido* 198). Julia's affair sent Charlie over the edge—the edge from which he precipitously dangled Daniel—and triggered the hasty flight to the U.S.; Julia's death without ever divulging the truth kept her son dangling from that edge, hovering between country and country, language and language, sexuality and sexuality, memory and memory.

The most disconcerting clue to Julia's secret is a doubled scene of hiding and seeking, a pair of paintings, one squirreled away in Julia's U.S. studio, the other in her Argentine love nest. The U.S. version shows a naked, red headed boy like Daniel, standing in the lower left-hand corner, the hint of a wing coming out of his right shoulder. He is spying into a room with an unmade bed in the center, a bed infinitely repeated in a three-faceted rose decorated Venetian mirror; one of the facets reflects the fuzzy image of a woman's face from somewhere outside the frame. And on the back Julia had written: "This is Daniel's picture" 'Este es el cuadro de Daniel.' (320). Its Argentine twin that Daniel sees only at the end of his perplexing search contains a slightly open door with the same boy's head and naked torso sticking in and staring straight out at the spectator. On the back of this picture, Julia had scribbled: "Did you like to watch us, Daniel?" '¿Te gustaba mirarnos Daniel?' But the boy's face is barely sketched out; his eyes are blank like a blind man's (331).

What was hidden behind the mirror, beyond the frame, Daniel asks? What was that *other* scene, both wonderful and horrible, forever forbidden to the onlooker? (271). His anguished question embraces *Ethnos* and *Eros*, the personal and the public. What remains outside the frame of "accepted" sexuality, outside the picture of the "accepted" nationhood? As the crucible of love model demonstrated, "relations between nationalities and sexualities are

downright problematic, even downright dangerous” (Molloy and Irwin, *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* xii). In an Argentina with a macho military tradition a brutal policeman hounds Daniel: “Gringo encima de puto resultaste, salí antes que me arrepienta y volvete a Disneylandia, maricón” “So on top of a fag you’re also a gringo, get the hell out of here and go back to Disneyland before I change my mind, you faggot” (*Común olvido* 52; see also, Bergmann and Smith, and Foster 2).

Queer means alien, like Jews queers are *esa gente*—not our kind of people (*Común olvido* 332; see also, Molly, “Politics of Posing,” and Ríos Avila). That is why Jewish identity plays a significant role in the novel, as Molly probes the limits of an often sexually and religiously intolerant society, where with the compliance of local policemen and military, the Israeli embassy and the AMIA Jewish center were blown to smithereens by terrorist bombs in the 1990s (see Aizenberg, *Books and Bombs*; *Común olvido* 42). “Todo el mundo era bastante antisemita, así, con toda naturalidad” “Everyone was quite anti-Semitic, that’s just how it was,” his cousin says to Daniel, recalling the hotbed atmosphere in the post-World War Two Buenos Aires when Julia met Charlotte, an escapee from Nazism who was only allowed into Argentina after convincing the immigration official that she wasn’t Jewish. (How can a Hebrew have the name Charlotte?)

In this book of mirrored identities, Daniel too has a Jewish lover in New York, the Venezuelan Simón, who acts as a telephone help line, proffering advice honed on what Borges called three thousand years of pogroms and oppression (“Death and the Compass”). Like a latter day rabbinic sage, Simón disburses oral wisdom to help his wayward disciple, the lessons of engaging incessant wandering, multiple identities and languages, and finely tuned memory. There are advantages to exile, he tells Daniel, because you leave one context without fully entering into another, you have portable homelands, you are your own man, you overflow classifications—Jewish, Hispanic, Anglo, gay (163-65).

And as for memory, you have to learn what to remember and what to forget. There’s a character in Jewish folklore by the name of Shass Pollak, Simon explains, who knew the six tractates of the Talmud, or Shas, by heart. Mr. Know the Entire Talmud would triumph

phantly exhibit his mnemonic skills—you could ask him any word from the vast holy work, and he would immediately cite you chapter and verse, or rather line and page. (An obvious analogy is Funes the Memorious, whom Simón doesn't mention.) But alas, no Shass Pollak ever became an eminent sage, since he couldn't interpret the text, he couldn't comprehend the sense of the infinite commentary bites he was remembering. That's what you're like, Daniel, Simón chides, because your fact finding is leading you nowhere because all you want are precise but trivial facts, you don't want to accept, even to provoke the shadows and gaps, the zones of forgetfulness. Only when you do that will you remember and understand (224-25).

Armed with Simón's framework, Daniel's opaque information bits do start to fall into place. By book's end, he has "solved" the mystery—to the extent that there is a solution—and met some of the players in the family drama, including Charlotte Haas. He has also reclaimed the Argentine (and gay) piece of himself that he so abruptly left behind, promising his recovered friends in that peculiarly pungent River Plate Spanglish, "let's be in touch, che," (353). When he flies back to New York, the cabbie who picks him up talks to him about the weather (What else?) in Spanish, even though Daniel has given him his address in English, flipping the bilingual coin once again, extending Argentine-ness or Hispanic-ness even more, refusing to let identity rest.

The expletive *apátrida*, person without a *single* fatherland, long a negative code word for anti-Argentine, takes on new meaning in Molloy's novel. Home isn't here *or* there, it's *both* here *and* there, *or neither* here *nor* there. Homelands and homebodies are portable, you can't pin them down ethnically or erotically. Who wouldn't want to be an *apátrida* in this richer sense, dancing the sex and stock tango, loving and leaving and loving again without surrendering pieces of self, without civil or corporal crucibles?

Three Musketeers on the Goy Corner

Marcelo Birmajer's troubled characters in *Tres mosqueteros* pick up the rhythm with yet other variations. Here Argentina and Israel, Spanish and Hebrew, form the shuttle space in which Ethnos and

ing away from the birthplace marks one of the protagonists, Elías Traúm. Born in Buenos Aires to Eastern European Jewish parents, he suddenly escapes to Israel in his early twenties after his two closest buddies, Guidi and Benjamín, leftist Montonero guerrillas, are brutally disappeared and killed (on the Montoneros, see Gillespie). Tormented by his companions' horrific deaths and the explosive secret that they shared, Elías resolves to utterly eradicate the past—no one would ever know anything about the three musketeers' life during the savage 1970s, just as if they had never existed, as if they had been a dream, *traum* in German-Yiddish.

The unresolved past exacts a toll, however, as in Aimée and Daniel's. Elías cannot find peace, and Prophet Elijah-like he must wander back to Argentina to lay his dead and his secret to rest (149). His grudging ally in this agonizing endeavor is Javier Mossen, an erotically and ethnically conflicted Argentine-Jewish journalist, a kind of younger alter-ego who operates under the "encouraging" motto: *Nadie sabe quién es*. No one knows who he is (10). Against Mossen's wishes, his editor assigns him to interview Traúm about the urban guerrillas of the seventies and about Judaism. How did three promising scholarly young men immersed in the Jewish community get entrapped in the web of radical left, urban guerrilla warfare only to be crushed and exterminated by right wing repression?⁶

Of course, Mossen agrees—he had to get the assignment. After all, he was the token Jew on staff trapped behind the bars of his literary and journalistic ghetto, the window-dressing Star of David displayed on the pages of tolerant gentile newspaper (13). But when both he and Traúm are assaulted and left bleeding shortly after Elías's arrival at Ezeiza Airport, Javier is drawn into the older man's network of remembrance and atonement, becoming his wary partner and confidante: he will help Traúm to exorcise his ghosts, supposedly for the article, and Traúm will help him to banish his own dybbuks, the fretful shades that in ways reenact the stinging dramas of the 1970s.

The secret then begins to spill out. Ethnos and Eros are turned topsy-turvy as Javier learns that Elías, Benjamín, and Guidi's Montonero "family" included one other member; that Elías wasn't a Montonero at all; and that "home" wasn't the three's modest immi-

grant apartments in Buenos Aires' heavily-Jewish Once neighborhood. A truly underground *ménage à quatre* emerges: Elías, Benja, Guidi, and Cristina Sobremonte, aka Cristina Torchinsky, loved, penetrated, and voyeuristically devoured by all three, as Elías crudely and wistfully puts it. Cristina, now about to become the wife of the rancher and businessman, Ignacio Ruiz Reches, owner of an aristocratic double surname and half the country, is clandestinely Jewish and a former guerrilla, two no noes for her non-too-Jew-loving future husband who sent his goons to take care of Traúm.

Cristina's mother had married a similarly genteel drunkard and swindler, only to seek help and eventually love from a Jewish psychologist, Dr. Torchinsky; the biological daughter of Argentina's traditional upper classes was transformed into the adoptive daughter of an Israelite, ritual bath and all, one of the requirements for formal conversion to Judaism. Just as her soon to be spouse didn't know of her Judaism, her Jewish friends didn't know of her Christianity.

And in this sometimes-hazardous game of shifting partners and mutating identities, the three musketeers had their own "conversion" ritual—the goy corner, a plaza in the fancy Barrio Norte part of town, where the trio would go and play at being goys, non-Jews with the stereotypically Hispanic surnames, Pérez, González, and López. "We tried to act like what we thought non-Jews acted," Elías confesses to Javier. "We sometimes told anti-Semitic jokes. We talked about circumcision as if we weren't circumcised...about cars and horses...and how we would call our children Antonio, Jesús, and María. We congratulated ourselves on being part of the country's religious majority. We were goys. On that corner" (89-90).

This painful sense of not belonging, of playing the goy game to the nth degree, in part drove the boys into the Montoneros—what more young and Argentine in those years than the radical left? It drove them into the concealed safe houses and backrooms, where they sought solace in each other and in Cristina's body, and where Elías, in another identity turn, played double agent, pretending to be one of them and protecting them while passing information on the Montoneros to Israel, concerned about the deadly alliance between the far-left and Arab terrorists (on this alliance, see Gillespie

Elías, about to vanish once more, says *kaddish*, the memorial prayer for his dead friends, and he meets Cristina again, wrestling his demons to a truce. As he does so, Javier finds that his own alienating motto, *Nadie sabe quién es* “No one knows who he is,” slowly morphs into Traúm’s more affirming if slightly ironic *Ha col yehudim tovim*, Hebrew for “We are all good Jews” (35).⁷ Seeing a proud and knowledgeable Jew (Elías openly wears a *kipa*, a skullcap) jogs Javier’s ignorant and anguished identity, expressed self-destructively through an unbridled, sodomizing sexuality. Every woman is fair game for his brutalizing fantasies and demeaning fornication as Eros and Ethnos act out his angst, a repetition in minor (and somewhat burlesque) tone of the musketeers’ sex and violence-laden auto-annihilation.

Ha col yehudim tovim: We are all good Jews. To which one can counter: *Ha col (o kulanu) argentinaim tovim*: We are all good Argentines. Unafraid to blur the lines of Eros and Ethnos, to pepper his book with Hebrew words and Jewish humor, to contest the anti-Semitism of the left and the right, to make Israel part of diasporic Argentina, to suggest that there are more productive ways of being Jewish and Argentine than guerrilla warfare or self-hatred, Marcelo Birmajer argues that *Ha col (o kulanu) argentinaim tovim*: We are all good Argentines—to the extent that there is such a thing. He also argues that if we are all good Argentines, there’s nothing wrong with returning to the fold, however grudgingly; there’s no knee-jerking need for insipid amalgamation, for unmooring from “foreign” heritages. We can return, all the while questioning what constitutes Jewishness, goyishness, and nationality.

Javier goes back to Esther, the strongly Jewish spouse, who threw him out because of his dillydallying, “I love you...you’re the only woman in the world with whom I want to have children” (203). And the ideal place for a reconciliation is (Where else?) by the waters of Mar del Plata, the seaside resort where before his transforming experience with Traúm, he had gone to date rape one of his honeys.

I’ll Put the Proof in Your Hands

This article began with Alberto Gerchunoff and it will end with him. One of Sylvia Molloy’s characters recounts the following inci-

dent to Daniel: Tota, the right wing social columnist on the paper where Gerchunoff worked, once asked him with malice if he was Jewish. Without missing a step, the writer, known for his Groucho Marx-like wit, reportedly answered—and here is his answer verbatim: “Yes, I am, and whenever you want, I’ll put the proof in your hands, Tota” (140). Despite Leguizamón’s huffing, Gerchunoff, deftly combining images of sex and stock, was not entirely the apostle of ethnic blurring (see *Parricide?*).

Molloy, Kazumi Stahl, and Birmajer want to “put the proof in your hands,” uninterested in euphemisms or uniformities; reflecting a post-dictatorship Argentina, finally more willing to celebrate diversity, Ethnos, and Eros on the River Plate.

Notes

1 On nation building and amalgamating fictions in Latin America, see Sommer: “Romantic novels go hand in hand with patriotic history in Latin America. The books fueled a desire for domestic happiness that runs over into dreams of national prosperity; and nation-building projects invested private passions with public purpose” (7). Throughout the article, unless otherwise indicated, translations from Spanish are my own.

2 For Germani, see *Política y sociedad*; for Romero, who spoke of an “alluvial society,” see, *Las ideas políticas* and *Las ideologías de la cultura nacional*.

3 Masiello provides a wonderful summary of River Plate orientalism in her *The Art of Transition*, 144-56; Kazumi Stahl gently digs it as *un amor afrancesado por lo japonés*. A Frenchified love for the Japanese (14) See also, Kushigian.

4 For a meditation on home/casa in relation to exile, see Kaminsky 3-8.

5 For the historical aspects of novel, see Haydu. Charlotte is partly based on the famous German-Jewish photographer, Giselle Freund, who was exiled in Buenos Aires during World War Two and was a close friend of renowned writer and intellectual Victoria Ocampo, a celebrated resident of San Isidro.

6 The novel focuses on the period beginning 1974 when the Montoneros established themselves as the mightiest urban guerrilla force ever seen in
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the whole on Latin America” (Gillespie 163). Despite the organization’s originally Catholic and anti-Semitic roots, many Jews were involved in this and other guerrilla groups and suffered disproportionately when they were captured by right wing security forces (see Timerman 69 and Feitlowitz 90).

7 More grammatically, the Hebrew phrase should be, *Kulanu yehudim tovim*.

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