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Carnality in "El matadero"

Leído y releído incesantemente, *El matadero* sigue produciendo de entrada la misma confusa sensación.

Noé Jitrik (63)

Esteban Echeverría's short story "El matadero" is generally acknowledged as a literary masterpiece in miniature. It is widely anthologized and has been called the inaugural work of Argentine short fiction, if not the first Latin American short story. Seymour Menton positions it as the first story in his influential anthology *El cuento hispanoamericano* and calls it "una verdadera obra de arte" (34); David William Foster refers to it as "the founding text of Argentine fiction" (*Sexual Textualities* 135). Although the story has been popularly and critically acclaimed, it also presents certain problems for its readers. Written by an avowed Romantic, "El matadero" with its graphic, to some readers even disgusting descriptions of the slaughter of cattle, the scrupulous reproduction of lower-class Buenos Aires speech patterns, and its scathing attacks on the "chusma" or underclass of Argentina, complete with racial stereotypes, does not seem to fit within the standard critical definitions of Romanticism. But given that Realism is generally considered to have "arrived" in Latin American literature with the publication of the Chilean Alberto Blest Gana's *La aritmética en el amor* in 1860, critics have resisted calling "El matadero" a Realist story. Indeed, the text even appears to defy generic definitions; while it is usually referred to as a short story, the lengthy description of the slaughterhouse that occupies the first half of the narrative has led some readers to see it as a *costumbrista* hybrid (Gutiérrez, Ghiano).¹ In short, "El matadero" presents its readers with a variety of conceptual puzzles, from literary movement to genre to date of production. Moreover, the content of the story—the brutal and graphic retelling of the slaughter of fifty head of cattle and the torture and death of a young man—has also created interpretive difficulties for critics. It is this aspect of the story that I will examine here.

Probably written in 1839, "El matadero" did not appear in print until 1871, when Juan María Gutiérrez published it in *Revista del Río de la Plata*. To Gutiérrez also falls the distinction of being the first to anthologize the story when he included it in volume five of Echeverría's *Obras completas*, published in 1874. "El matadero" describes a meat shortage in Buenos Aires during the 1830s. Although Echeverría does not specify the year, internal evidence shows that the action takes place in 1839 (Knowlton 79–80). On the sixteenth day of the meat shortage, fifty head of cattle are brought to the slaughterhouse of El Alto. One animal escapes; a young boy is accidentally decapitated; and the runaway is captured, slaughtered, and found to be a bull. At this point a young man rides by on his horse. The butchers see that he is a Unitarian, capture him, and carry him before the Judge of the slaughterhouse, who orders him shaved, stripped naked, and whipped. Before they can finish stripping the Unitarian, however, the young man dies.

Echeverría himself announces at the end of "El matadero" that his story is meant to be read as a political allegory of life in Argentina under the dictatorship of the Federalist Juan Manuel Rosas. While the Unitarians advocated a strong centralized government based in Buenos Aires and believed that only under their direction would Argentina become a civilized, Europeanized nation, the Federalists supported a decentralized grouping of provinces, none more powerful than the rest. The Federalists also rejected the elitist, European pretensions of the Unitarians in favor of the popular culture symbolized by the gauchos. The Unitarians ruled Argentina after independence was consolidated in 1821. In 1829, however, the Federalist Rosas took power and ruled Argentina until he was overthrown in 1852. In the late 1830s, the time when Echeverría wrote "El matadero," Rosas implemented his reign of terror, designed to eliminate systematically any and all opposition to his rule.²

The significant elements of the story are as follows: a description of the slaughterhouse as the *locus* of pro-Rosas activity; the narrative of the steer of undetermined sex that escapes, is captured, killed, and castrated; and the narrative of the Unitarian who is captured, stripped, threatened with a beating while naked, and finally his death. In this essay I will discuss the ways in which Echeverría sets up the story to lead us to the rape of the Unitarian. Despite the fact that the story insistently points to the rape of the Unitarian by the butchers,

this act of sexual violence is elided in the text. I will propose some reasons for this textual secrecy and conclude by examining the ramifications of the story for the political project Echeverría supposedly advances.

Some critics see "El matadero" as a disjointed assemblage of disparate sections: the lengthy description of the meat shortage during Lent in Buenos Aires; the vivid, shocking description of the slaughter of the cattle; the escape and killing of the bull; and the torture and murder of the Unitarian. Such readings attribute the story's apparent fragmentation to the idea that Echeverría never intended it for publication and that it was meant to serve instead as a dry run for his epic poem *La cautiva*. Erik Camayd-Freixas points out instead that the final scene of the story pulls the different narrative threads together and creates "una lograda cohesión que sólo puede ser producto de la lucidez y no del descuido y la precipitación" (29). "El matadero" contains various elements that link the different narrative segments together and help sustain a reading of the story as a unified whole, not a fragmentary hybrid of different genres. Such thematic threads include images of liquidity, such as the floods and the spurting blood of the bull and the young man, and the incorporation of Catholic discourse and religious imagery.³ Those elements lead inexorably towards the final section and help prepare us for a reading of the story that focuses on the explicitly physical and sexual.

One of the most striking unifying themes in the story is the ever-present "carne" and the accretion of meanings and references that word acquires over the course of the narrative. The first mention of "carne" seems straightforward: Echeverría writes, "Estábamos, a más, en cuaresma, época en que escasea la carne en Buenos Aires" (123), adding that "la Iglesia . . . ordena vigilia y abstinencia a los estómagos de los fieles, a causa de que la carne es pecaminosa, y, como dice el proverbio, busca a la carne" (123). After the apparently innocent explanation that the meat shortage is caused by the Church's Lenten proscriptions, Echeverría connects the first meaning of "carne"—meat—with its other signification—"flesh" and all its connotations of fleshly, sexual desire. The Church, then, forbids meat-eating during the holy period of Lent because it would stimulate sexual desire and distinctly unsacred thoughts and perhaps even actions. From the first paragraph of the story, Echeverría explicitly links the meat of cattle with the sexualized bodies of human beings. While most subsequent references to

"carne" seem related strictly to the idea of meat and diet, the connection between meat and desire, the emphasis on flesh, lurks in the background to be resuscitated at the appropriate moments.

References in the description of the slaughter of the fifty cattle also emphasize the double-barreled signification of "carne." The narrator comments in a pointed aside, "el diablo con la carne suele meterse en el cuerpo" (129), connecting meat with sin and with bodily expressions. In the description that follows we see a vivid evocation of the near-demonic possession that overtakes the slaughterhouse when the cattle are butchered. The butchers themselves are half-naked and covered with blood; they are surrounded by young boys, black and mulatto women, dogs and seagulls, all attracted by the scent of death and fighting over the offal. In a loaded fragment of dialogue, two of the hangers-on shriek accusations at one another: "—Ahí se mete el sebo en las tetas, la tía—gritaba uno. —Aquél lo escondió en el alzapón—replicaba la negra" (131). As they compete for scraps of meat, the impoverished inhabitants hide strips of fat between their breasts or in their pants. It is important that Echeverría specifies body parts ("las tetas") or clothing parts that remit to specific body parts ("el alzapón"). The "carne"/meat is thus being secreted next to the "carne"/body (flesh), collapsing the two significations once again. "Carne" both stimulates desire in the form of physical hunger and sexual appetite, and satisfies those desires. The frequent references throughout the opening sections of the story to "carne" and the insistent linkage of the two types of desire represented by the word create a textual atmosphere of anticipation of the satisfaction of those desires.

The next narrative unit in "El matadero" involves the slaughter of the last animal, who first appears in the story described in the following way: "Un animal había quedado en los corrales, de corta y ancha cerviz, de mirar fiero, sobre cuyos órganos genitales no estaban conformes los pareceres porque tenía apariencias de toro y de novillo" (132). Here is another type of explicit reference to sexuality, in this case a confused sexuality. Moreover, this is the first direct reference to the problem of defining masculinity and establishing sexual identity through an examination of the sexual organs. This last animal is distinguished by its unusual resistance to the butchers, and its struggle provokes "exclamaciones chistosas y obscenas" as the spectators are "excitado[s] por el espectáculo" (132). One of Echeverría's most shocking and racy dialogues follows as the spectators debate whether the animal is a bull or a steer:

—Como toro le ha de quedar. Muéstrame los c[ojones] si le parece, ¡c[ojonud]o!

—Ahí los tiene entre las piernas. ¿No los ve, amigo, más grandes que la cabeza de su castaño? ¿O se ha quedado ciego en el camino?

[. . .]

—Para el tuerro los h[uevos]. (133)

Both the length of this conversation and its graphic language are striking. For Echeverría to place so much emphasis on this dialogue and to phrase it in such explicit terms shows that this is a crucial moment in the story.⁴ I believe that the question being posed here has to do with the apparent problem of establishing sexual identity. But just as masculinity is defined ("Ahí los tiene entre las piernas") through an examination of the genitalia, the claim to male status is denied as another voice responds, "todo ese bulto es barro" (133). It is possible that the question of what constitutes masculinity is only raised when masculinity is in doubt—it is present only in its supposed absence. This whole episode is violently resolved when the bull is recaptured after its murderous run through the city. Upon its escape, interestingly, the narrator and the characters begin calling it "el toro," as if all doubt about its maleness has already been erased. Granting the animal "masculine" status seems to be contingent upon its ability to inflict violence, for in the moment that it breaks free its tautened rope decapitates a young boy. Finally the bull is recaptured and the head butcher, Matasiete, kills it.⁵

Once the bull has been killed, the butchers turn their attention once more to the question of its male status, now definitively resolved when "una voz ruda exclamó: Aquí están los huevos, sacando de la barriga del animal y mostrando a los espectadores dos enormes testículos, signo inequívoco de su dignidad de toro" (135). The animal's "dignity" is removed, but at the same time that removal is the sign that shows that it is worthy of being called a bull. That is, the castration is the proof that the animal was a bull, not a steer, in the first place. Once again, attention is drawn to masculinity (defined as the presence of testicles here) in its absence, not its presence; but it is the absence of the testicles that retroactively prove the bull's status after all. Masculinity is called into doubt so that it may be reestablished unequivocally later on, and castration is the paradoxical means of proving the presence of testicles/maleness. This episode paves the way for the story of the Unitarian and allows us to read it with attention to

the questions that have already been raised: the presence of sexuality (flesh/desire/"carne"), the question of masculinity, and the linkage between violence and sexuality.

The whole episode of the bull leads into and prefigures the episode of the Unitarian, so we can read it as a lengthy foreshadowing of the torture and death of the Unitarian. They are not disconnected episodes whose only effect is a cumulative one of horror and grotesquery, but parts of a whole.⁶ When the Unitarian appears, the butchers attempt to "read" him as they attempted to "read" the bull. Just as they debated over the bull's status, pointing out anatomical features and interpreting their significance, so too they examine the Unitarian and determine his status through his appearance: "—¿No le ven la patilla en forma de U? No trae divisa en el frac ni luto en el sombrero. . . — Monta en silla como los gringos" (135). Matasiete is on the verge of cutting the Unitarian's throat just as he slaughtered the bull when the Judge orders him to stop. They drag the Unitarian to the "casilla" of the Judge as the bull was dragged back to the slaughterhouse. The comparisons become explicit: "Está furioso como toro montaraz" (136), comments one of the butchers. The episode of the bull prefigures that of the Unitarian by establishing a pattern of behavior, so that when the Unitarian appears and is attacked by the butchers, we expect that he will meet the same fate as that of the bull, that is, castration or sexual torture and death. Anomalies in the slaughterhouse—a bull among steers, a Unitarian among Federalists—are dealt with similarly in the narrative. Moreover, the lengthy debate over the bull's masculine status or lack thereof also creates the expectation that there will be a sexual element in the episode of the Unitarian. The explicit comparisons between the bull and the Unitarian cement the idea that there are parallels between the two narrative segments.

Once in the Judge's hut, the butchers describe the means of subjugating the captive Unitarian:

- Ya le amansará el palo.
- Es preciso sobarlo.
- Por ahora, verga y tijera.
- Si no, la vela.
- Mejor será la mazorca. (137)

Given the context of sexual inquiry and general carnality/fleshliness already established in the story, we can read these threats of violence as threats of specifically sexual violence. The implements the Federalists plan to use on the Unitarian are all phallic symbols: the cudgel, the candle, the ear of corn, and, most interestingly, the "verga" or slang term for stick, also a reference to the penis. Doris Sommer uses this dialogue to comment that "a gang of butchers attack and—with a *mazorca* or ear of corn—'rape' a Unitarian who passes by" (105–6). The "mazorca," of course, was the symbol Rosas used to signify Argentine unity, but it was also the grisly pun ("más-horca") given to Rosas's death squads. Here, we see that it is one of a series of phallic substitutes with which the Unitarian is threatened. Indeed, Jorge Salessi points out that according to contemporaries of Echeverría's, Federalists were known to sodomize their enemies with corncobs (61). After a series of exchanges between the Unitarian and the Judge, the final scene unfolds when the Judge orders, "Abajo los calzones a ese mentecato cajetilla y a nalga pelada denle verga, bien atado sobre la mesa" (138). The Unitarian's nakedness is emphasized and repeated: after the Judge tells his men to pull the Unitarian's pants down, he specifies, "a nalga pelada denle verga." They are to give him the stick/the penis on his bare buttocks, clearly a reference to anal rape. The young man then struggles ferociously against his would-be rapists in terms ever more reminiscent of the escape, capture and slaughter of the bull: "Encogíase el joven, pateaba, hacía rechinar los dientes" (138). Finally with one last spurt of energy he manages to kneel upright but almost instantly collapses. As the butchers begin to strip him, blood gushes from his mouth and nose, and he dies.

It may be instructive to see how other critics have reacted to this apparently bizarre scene of torture and seemingly spontaneous death of the Unitarian. The death in particular seems problematic, because it appears to be unprovoked; the butchers do not commit a specific act of violence that would result in the Unitarian's death, a point to which I will return later. Many critics turn a blind eye to the sexual implications of the scene. For example, although Edgar C. Knowlton notes the interest in determining the bull's sexual status ("coarse discussion follows dealing with the evidence provided by the animal's genitalia. At last it is ascertained that the animal was in fact a bull" [83]), his description of the torture scene avoids any references to sexual mat-

ters: "events lead up to the preparation of the young man to be stripped and beaten" (83), he writes. Similarly, Juan Carlos Ghiano briefly describes the events of the final scene as consisting of "las vejaciones de que se lo hace víctima [the Unitarian], y su muerte accidental, que evita la última torpeza de los sayones" (62). The insults suffered by the young man are left unspecified.

Leonor Fleming says, "el joven unitario, que encarna la urbanidad civilizada, es maltratado y muerto por la 'chusma' mataderil, representativa de la brutalidad rural que invade la ciudad y sofoca su desarrollo" (71). Again, she leaves open the question of what constitutes the Unitarian's "mistreatment." She then goes on to claim that Echeverría identified with the Unitarian, that it was a semi-autobiographical portrait, and that he chose for his hero "la muerte heroica que [hubiese] deseado" (76). This belief would seem to preclude a reading of the final scene as an attempt at anal rape, as one can hardly imagine a nineteenth-century author conceiving of male rape as a "heroic" death. Similarly Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano call the Unitarian's death a "sacrificio *sublime*" (xxvi) and claim that "la muerte del joven es una equivocación: sus ocasionales enemigos deseaban su humillación y no su muerte" (xxvii), but they never specify what humiliations the Federalists intend to inflict upon the Unitarian. David William Foster tells us, "the youth is subjected to the peculiar deviate tortures cultivated by the *mashorqueros*. At the moment in which his tormentors are to satisfy their lust for blood and vengeance, the youth resists to such an extreme degree that he dies of internal hemorrhaging" ("Paschal Symbology" 258). Although Foster does not specify the nature of the "peculiar deviate tortures," the word "deviate" is generally used of specifically homosexual "deviations" from the heterosexual norm. In a book written some 25 years later, Foster does acknowledge the nature of sexual "deviance" in "El matadero" when he mentions that the story's theme is "the rape of man by man" (*Sexual Textualities* 135).

Three critics who have noted the sexual connotations of "El matadero" and commented upon them extensively are Noé Jitrik, Erik Camayd-Freixas, and Jorge Salessi.⁷ Jitrik's lengthy essay on "El matadero" includes a structuralist interpretation of the story, a discussion of the different genres of the story, and a critique of Echeverría's binarisms, but I will focus my attention on the section in which Jitrik

writes of the sexual elements in the text. Jitrik says bluntly, "Lo quieren humillar, lo quieren desnudar. Es evidente: lo quieren violar" (96). However, he goes on, the narrator censors the references to rape and substitutes a generalized repugnance on the part of the victim that he should be touched by the Federalists. Jitrik argues that Echeverría creates an associative chain of references: meat, slaughter, sexual abuse, all aligned with the Federalists and opposed to the purity and civilized nature of the victimized Unitarian, so that the text functions as a critique of the Rosas regime. He concludes that "Echeverría proponía una reunión de grupos o de clases, una nueva burguesía que no excluyera a nadie, una composición en la que predominara una actitud, cierta racionalidad de la cual el grupo de intelectuales encabezados por él tendría que haber sido vocero" (98). As we shall see, however, such a vision is not actively advanced by the text.

Like Jitrik, Erik Camayd-Freixas calls attention to the sexual elements in "El matadero." Interestingly, although he instructs his reader, "obsérvese aquí la connotación sexual en la narración" (32), and points out that a crucial action is omitted in the death scene, he reads that omission as the stabbing of the Unitarian: "cabe suponer que en el lapso omitido ocurrió la tortura más cruel y el remate probablemente a puñal que causó la hemorragia del joven" (32-33). Camayd-Freixas mentions the links in the story between violence and sexuality that are navigated by the frequent use of the word "carne," and, as does Jitrik, claims that the narrative deliberately occludes the rape of the Unitarian: "Claro está que Echeverría no podía asistir a tal punto a la degradación de su ennoblecido personaje. Tampoco podía frustrar la sensibilidad del lector con semejante narración de hechos" (35). But Camayd-Freixas does not clearly state that the "degradation" to which he refers is the specifically sexual humiliation of the Unitarian. Finally, he discusses the message of the story as a critique of the repeated "violations" of Unitarian cultural beliefs by the Federalists. Despite the fact that he sees the connections between sexuality and violence as references to violation/metaphorical rape, he explicitly discards a reading that would associate such a violation with the death of the Unitarian when he refers to "la muerte del unitario (no violado o acuchillado, al menos al nivel de la literalidad, sino de su propia furia)" (35). Moreover, this is the only place where he mentions the rape of the main character, and he does so only to reject that possibility.

Jorge Salessi's provocative reading of "El matadero" sets the story in the context of debates in the latter half of the nineteenth century over public health in Buenos Aires; he emphasizes the moment in which the story was first published and read rather than that in which it was written. Salessi argues that the story associates barbarism with confusion and indiscriminate mixtures—of races in the slaughterhouse, of genre in the form of the story, and of ambivalent genders in the problem of defining the bull and in the rape of the young man. This indiscriminate mixing, according to Salessi, made it possible for the story to be linked upon its publication in 1871 to late nineteenth-century public discourses about unhealthy spaces and threats of epidemics: "esa confusión o mezcla que en el texto de Echeverría significaba barbarie, en 1871 significó también insalubridad. Al ser publicado en 1871 *El Matadero* permitió articular y separar dos grandes paradigmas de análisis de la cultura argentina de la segunda mitad del siglo diecinueve: civilización/barbarie y salubre/insalubre" (56). Salessi's analysis of "El matadero" focuses on the slaughterhouse as a site where races mix, floods occur, and gender is subverted through the feminizing action of sodomy in order to show that the story's publication in 1871 contributed to a growing discussion of public health issues. This interpretation emphasizes the role of Echeverría's editor and publisher, Juan María Gutiérrez, and his decision to bring the story to the attention of the Argentine public at a moment when spaces such as the slaughterhouse were increasingly being seen as threats to public health. While Salessi's reading of the story serves to illuminate Argentine attitudes about public spaces and illnesses in the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, his focus on the moment in which "El matadero" was first published tends to elide the importance of the historical context in which the story was written.

In short, there seem to be two basic critical reactions to "El matadero." On the one hand, critics ignore the sexual elements of the final scene. Even when, like Knowlton, they comment upon the butchers' interest in determining the presence or absence of the bull's testicles, they do not read that scene as having any repercussions for the final episode in which the Unitarian is threatened with being stripped and beaten. Such readers tend to gloss over the final scene, commenting upon it in general terms. On the other hand, critics who do note the specifically sexual elements in the torture of the Unitarian tend to engage in a series of rhetorical gestures that discount the importance

of the threatened male rape. Camayd-Freixas asserts, "Al examinar la escena en su secuencia nos parece que se omite un hecho capital" (32), but instead of a rape, this omission is, he says, the murder of the Unitarian by stabbing. When he writes of "la tortura más cruel" (33) suffered by the Unitarian, he means his stabbing, not his rape. As we have seen, Jitrik too turns away from an analysis of the sexual implications of the scene, arguing that "el hecho de que haya reprimido u ocultado o derivado el carácter sexual de esa última escena es menos importante que el haber arreglado las cosas de modo que haya tenido que hacerlo" (96). The rape itself falls into third place on the list of important aspects, according to Jitrik: first is Echeverría's purposeful arranging of the story to force the rape into textual hiding; second is the fact that the rape is repressed within the text; and finally comes the rape itself. While Salessi sees the rape as a crucial element of the story, he subordinates the rape to his reading of the story as centering on the health/sickness binarism, itself displaced onto the civilization/barbarism duality, saying that in "El matadero" "la metáfora última de esa mezcla o disrupción de flujos, líquidos, cuerpos y razas o categorías de personas y animales era la del género confuso del hombre hecho 'femenino' al ser sodomizado por los torturadores bárbaros" (57). The raped Unitarian is thus a symbol for the "unhealthy" mixture of liquids and people that leads to epidemics.

But I believe that the sexual component of the final scene is crucial for an understanding of the entire story. The pattern of references throughout "El matadero" to "carne" carefully establishes an atmosphere of unbridled license. The Lenten setting of the story points to fleshly desire by emphasizing abstinence and the forbidden nature of appetite in both senses—appetite for meat and sexual appetite. The beggars of the slaughterhouse scabble for scraps of meat that they then stuff into their clothes, specifically in their blouses between their breasts and down the front of their pants. As we have seen, the major feature of the episode of the escaped bull, which prefigures that of the Unitarian, concerns questions of sexual identity and sexual brutality as the animal is castrated in order simultaneously to prove and disprove its masculinity. The castration is equivalent to the rape of the Unitarian because both are actions that simultaneously de-masculinize the victims and re-establish their sexual identities; through losing masculine status, they are retroactively defined as having been masculine. These features point towards an interpretation of the final scene of the story as a thinly-veiled description of an attempted rape.

Whether the rape actually takes place or not is debatable. The key moment occurs in this paragraph: "Sus fuerzas [las del Unitario] se habían agotado. Inmediatamente quedó atado en cruz y empezaron la obra de desnudarlo. Entonces, un torrente de sangre brotó bolloneando de la boca y las narices del joven" (138). On the one hand, the Unitarian seems to die before they manage to strip him, thus fulfilling his own repeated desire: "—primero degollarme que desnudarme" (138). Moreover, the use of the imperfect in the Judge's ensuing comment that "Queríamos únicamente divertirnos con él y tomó la cosa demasiado a lo serio" (138) implies that although the butchers wanted to "have fun" with the young man, they were unable to; that is, the rape was not carried out. On the other hand, Camayd-Freixas claims that in the narrative lapse signalled by the word "entonces" is the stabbing of the Unitarian; "en la escena final, este indicio de deseo rapaz, de violencia y sexualidad, debía hallar su plena realización en el suceso omitido" (33). The omitted deed is, in his reading, the death by stabbing of the Unitarian; he argues that such a deed is too horrific to be narrated and must be glossed over in the narrative. But given that Echeverría has not shied away from describing all kinds of cruelties previously in the story, including the accidental decapitation of a young boy and the castration of the bull, it seems unlikely that he would refuse to describe as well the murder of the Unitarian. If the purpose of "El matadero" is to dramatize the horrors of life under Rosas, omitting the murder of the Unitarian would be counterproductive. Instead, it makes much more sense to read into that narrative lapse the truly unspeakable, indescribable and unscriptable, illegible: the rape of the Unitarian.⁸

To think about how rape functions in "El matadero," it will be helpful first to think about what the act of rape means. Rape forcefully and violently reinscribes a hierarchy of dominance and subordination. Rape is bodily invasion; it is the means by which one person asserts physical control in the most personal way possible over another person. Feminists such as Susan Brownmiller have shown that rape is the outward and explicit manifestation of a series of unequal power relationships in society; that is, rape is irreducible to a mere interpersonal problem of miscommunication or misplaced sexual desire. In this way, Wendy E. Stock writes, "sexual coercion [is] power motivated, upholding a system of male dominance" (61) and adds, "the class in power will use all means available to control the less powerful class—force,

coercion, intimidation, propaganda, and institutional and ideological control—to maintain its advantage” (61). Rape and the threat of rape constitute one of the main methods of control that men—the class in power—employ over women—the less powerful class. According to Stock, moreover, “rape and other forms of sexual control can be viewed as both the expression and confirmation of male power, dominance, and control of women” (62). Stock also refers to Beneke, who found four basic concepts at play in rapists’ thinking: “status, hostility, control, and dominance. Status involves performing, triumphing, conquering, and acquiring status relative to other males by acquiring the woman as a sexual possession. Hostility is expressed as regarding sex as war and triumph as theft. Control is established by controlling the woman’s behavior and one’s own performance. Dominance includes components of all of these factors” (64). By applying these definitions to “El matadero,” it becomes clear that rape functions to express and confirm power, dominance, and control by the dominant class, the Federalists, over the subordinate class, the Unitarians or, by extension, all non-Federalists. Moreover, the act of rape itself creates the subordinate class by enacting the hierarchies upon the body of the Unitarian. By raping or threatening to rape the Unitarian, the Federalists forcibly assert their dominance over him and compel him to occupy a literally and metaphorically subjugated position.

Male-on-male rape also contains these essential elements of dominance, control, and subjugation. Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* devotes a brief segment of one chapter to prison rape or male rape (terms that are not interchangeable, but Brownmiller uses them so). She refers to the findings of a 1968 study of the Philadelphia prison system conducted by Alan J. Davis. Davis concluded that “homosexual rape in prison could not be primarily motivated by the need for sexual release. But conquest and degradation did appear to be a primary goal” (266). He also “found that prison rape was a product of the violent subculture’s definition of masculinity through physical triumph, and those who emerged as ‘women’ were those who were subjugated by real or threatened force” (267). Brownmiller glosses Davis’s findings by talking about “the ideology of rape in the prison experience: that is, the need of some men to prove their mastery through physical and sexual assault, and to establish, most strikingly within the special crucible of the male-violent, a coercive hierarchy of the strong on top of the weak” (267). The issues of power

and control omnipresent in all rapes are brought to the forefront in male-on-male rape.

Those critics who have commented upon the sexual elements in "El matadero" do not recognize the use of rape as the ultimate weapon in enforcing hierarchies of dominance and submission. Instead, authors such as Jitrik see the rape as an insult or a humiliating gesture. Thus Jitrik writes, "el vejamen es mayor porque es sexual, los brutos del matadero y por consecuencia los federales y el federalismo son más feroces todavía porque se manifiestan a través de sacrificios sexuales" (96), and Ghiano refers to "las vejaciones de que se lo hace víctima [el unitario]" (62). Such readings see the victim's last statement, repeated twice, ("—primero degollarme que desnudarme; ¡infame canalla!" [138]) as a protest against the humiliation of having his naked body displayed to the butchers, not as a fight against having his body subjected to the inscription of power by the pen/penis of the Judge. But the Unitarian's experience is not merely insulting nor humiliating.⁹ The rape or threatened rape shows the complete subjugation of the Unitarian by the Federalists. It is the most dramatic and forceful way of demonstrating the hierarchy in place. A male survivor of rape has written, "Most people find it difficult to understand why a straight man would rape another straight man. But if you see rape as a way of exerting control, of confirming your own power by disempowering others, then it makes perfect sense. If it makes you feel powerful and macho to force sex on a woman or child, think of how much more powerful you feel raping another man" (Pelka 251–52). Men rape other men in order to (re)establish a hierarchy of power threatened by external forces. In the case of "El matadero," the entrance of the Unitarian signifies the appearance of an alternate code of masculinity as well as a threat to the order enforced by the Federalists. By raping the Unitarian, the Federalists reassert their control.

The dynamic of domination and subjugation is made even more explicit because this is a gang rape. The Unitarian is overwhelmingly outnumbered; both the narrator and the reader—and the Unitarian himself—know that his struggles are futile; "ya lo domaremos," comments one of the Federalists as the Unitarian protests. As Brownmiller points out, "It is within the phenomenon of group rape, stripped of the possibility of equal combat, that the male ideology of rape is most strikingly evident. Numerical odds are proof of brutal intention. They are proof, too, of a desire to humiliate the victim *be-*

eyond the act of rape through the process of anonymous mass assault" (187). Gang rape makes the victim subject to assault by multiple attackers, underlines his helplessness, and exponentially increases the unequal power equation already at work in the assault.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, "El matadero" has been enshrined as the founding text of Argentine literature and as the first fictional expression of Argentine nationalism. If "El matadero" is a foundational text of Argentine nationalism, and if Echeverría wanted to advance a political agenda through the story, what does it mean that nationalism is predicated upon sexual violence and victimization? The last paragraph of "El matadero" clearly shows that Echeverría did indeed mean to enforce an explicitly political reading of the story as an allegory for life under Rosas:

En aquel tiempo, los carniceros degolladores del Matadero eran apóstoles que propagaban a verga y puñal la federación rosina, y no es difícil imaginarse qué federación saldría de sus cabezas y cuchillas. Llamaban ellos salvaje unitario, conforme a la jerga inventada por el Restaurador, patrón de la cofradía, a todo el que no era degollador, carnicero, ni salvaje, ni ladrón; a todo hombre decente y de corazón bien puesto, a todo patriota amigo de las luces y de la libertad; y por el suceso anterior puede verse a las claras que el foco de la federación estaba en el Matadero. (139)

However, while this conclusion clearly attacks the cruelty, brutality, and barbarism of the Federation, it does not necessarily follow that Echeverría is advancing the Unitarian cause. Many critics have read Echeverría as advocating Unitarianism through the story and accept the characterization of the young stranger as a Unitarian.¹⁰ Readers tend to assume that the condemnation of the Federalists in the final paragraph of the story necessarily expresses an exaltation of the Unitarians and that when Echeverría writes about "todo patriota amigo de las luces y de la libertad" (139), he is referring to the Unitarians (Knowlton 81). However, Echeverría instead tells us that the Federalists call any democratic, morally decent man "salvaje unitario" (139), something very different than an assertion by the narrator that the Unitarians are the guardians of democracy and civilization. Indeed, the young man in the story is primarily identified as a Unitarian by the butchers, who exclaim upon seeing him "¡Allí viene un unitario!" (135). After the butchers discuss the physical characteristics that mark the approach-

ing horseman as a Unitarian, including his U-shaped beard, his English saddle, and his failure to wear Rosas's red insignia, they urge Matasiete to go after him. Next appears the only moment in the story when the narrator, not the characters, calls the stranger a Unitarian: "[Matasiete] prendió la espuela a su caballo y se lanzó a brida suelta al encuentro del unitario" (135). Here the term seems to be used ironically to emphasize the rapid decision the Federalists have arrived at on the basis of a cursory examination of the man's clothing and riding habits, chiefly notable for being different from their own. By having the characters in his story refer to anyone different from themselves as a "salvaje unitario," Echeverría is critiquing the deliberate tendency of the Federalists to collapse opposition groups together so as to make them easier to attack.

Contrary to what many critics assume when they affirm that "El matadero" advances Unitarian beliefs, Echeverría did not identify himself or his political project with the Unitarians. He was one of the founding members of the "Joven Generación Argentina" or the Generation of '37. This political group defined itself in opposition both to the Federalists, the party of the ignorant masses who were not ready to participate in democratic life, and to the Unitarians, whom Echeverría and his cohorts criticized for their blind application of European political ideals to the Argentine reality. The Generation of '37 argued that the Federalists were too closely linked with the "native" Argentines, or *gauchos* and other members of the lower classes, but they also criticized the Unitarians for being too removed from Argentine social reality.¹¹ While the Generation of '37 had closer ideological connections with the Unitarians, the two political movements were not identical.

Echeverría formulated a platform for the Generation of '37 in his "Dogma socialista" of 1838. In 1846 he revised it slightly and published it with a much longer essay, "Ojeada retrospectiva sobre el movimiento intelectual en el Plata desde el año 37," which expresses his ideas about the two parties in reaction to which he and his cohorts formed the "Joven Generación Argentina." The "Dogma socialista," written in August of 1838, calls for democratic reforms and condemns tyranny and the failures of the previous generation. Echeverría calls upon Argentine youth to emulate the spirit of the heroes of the Wars of Independence with the stirring exclamation, "Gloria a la juventud argentina que ambiciona emular las virtudes y realizar el

gran pensamiento de los heroicos padres de la patria" (216). In the "Dogma socialista" we see clearly envisioned the belief that the transition to a truly democratic society can be accomplished peacefully and that this peaceful solution will resolve political conflicts between the Federalists and Unitarians: "La confraternidad de principios producirá la unión y fraternidad de todos los miembros de la familia argentina y concentrará sus anhelos en el solo objeto de la libertad y engrandecimiento de la Patria" (252).

At the same time that Echeverría was writing the "Dogma socialista," Rosas's campaign against his opposition intensified. He had already closed the bookstore where Echeverría's "Joven Generación Argentina" met; the last of its stock was auctioned off in May 1838 (Mercado 68). Now persecution of political dissidents became even more overt, creating a climate of terror in Buenos Aires. Many of the Generation of '37 were forced into exile in Santiago or Montevideo. Echeverría went to his ranch in the province of Luján, where he wrote "El matadero" sometime in 1839. He finally fled to Montevideo at the end of 1840. This chronology connects external political events not only to Echeverría's nonfictional political tracts and treatises, but to his fictional work "El matadero." The apparent disjuncture between the hopeful, almost celebratory tone of the "Dogma socialista" written in 1838 and the grim violence of "El matadero" written only a year later makes more sense when we take into account the political turmoil that sent Echeverría's fellow intellectuals to prison or to exile, while he was compelled to take refuge in the country—a move that was obviously the prelude to foreign exile.

Echeverría's 1846 "Ojeada retrospectiva" recreates the beliefs he held about the Unitarians and the Federalists at the end of the 1830s. This text traces his growing disillusion with the state of Argentine politics and the possibility for nonviolent political reform. While the "Dogma socialista" was optimistic and visionary, the "Ojeada retrospectiva" written after Echeverría had been forced into exile in Montevideo, expresses his older-and-wiser view of the actual political situation when the "Dogma socialista" was written. In the "Ojeada retrospectiva" Echeverría describes Argentine society in 1837 as divided into two factions: "la facción federal vencedora, que se apoyaba en las masas populares y era la expresión genuina de sus instintos semibárbaros, y la facción unitaria, minoría vencida, con buenas tendencias, pero sin bases locales de *criterio* socialista y algo antipática

por sus arranques soberbios de exclusivismo y supremacía" (163). Echeverría praises the Unitarians for their progressive beliefs and efforts to help Argentina's educational system in the past, but critiques them because "fraguando intrigas oscuras, se alimentaban con esperanzas de una restauración imposible" (164). Such a return to power is impossible precisely because the Unitarians are out of touch with Argentine reality. Finally, the increasingly doctrinaire attitudes of both Federalists and Unitarians resulted ultimately in the same outcome, "*el aniquilamiento de la actividad nacional: los unitarios sacándola de quicio y malgastando su energía en el vacío: los federales sofocándola bajo el peso de un despotismo brutal*" (171). Instead of arriving at national reconciliation, the Unitarians and Federalists polarized Argentine politics and their failure to resolve their differences peacefully led inevitably to Rosas's dictatorship.

In this light "El matadero" critiques the utter failure of nationalist discourse. Doris Sommer claims that "Echeverría's work retains a rigidly binary logic" (105) and that "El matadero" was written "after Echeverría had lost hope of getting beyond traditional dichotomies" (106). Rather than merely reinscribe those binarisms, however, Echeverría refuses to succumb to them. In "El matadero" political dichotomies are displaced onto a gender split that is enacted through the rape; the Federalists assert masculinity and power as they deprive the young man of his sexual autonomy, just as they did to the bull in the earlier scene. After the violent conclusion Echeverría then uses the coda to remind his readers of the political division that the rape represents. Just as the story collapses the dual meanings of "carne" (hunger and sexual desire), so too it unites the political and sexual binarisms that run throughout the story. The Federalists have both political and sexual power; the young man is robbed of any potential strength through the mechanism of the rape, in turn surrounded by political discourse. Echeverría insistently writes and rewrites both political and sexual dualities into his text, but he does so in order to critique the polarization that has led to a situation in which political disagreements can only be expressed through violence.

As we have seen, rape functions as a forceful assertion of masculinity that is exacerbated when the victim, too, is male. If the rapists/Federalists are hyper-male, then their victim/supposed Unitarian is by extension "feminized," placed into a position of utter powerlessness. The Federalists are also more powerful because they can manipu-

late gender codes to enforce the hierarchy of dominance and submission; they are able to compel their political opposition to assume the subordinate, "feminine" position. Their opponents, instead of assigning and controlling gender codes, have fallen victim to the excessive enactment of those codes, to the explosion of hypermasculinity. There seems to be no cure for this confluence of masculinity and domination, as victims (the bull, the young man) are forced into submissive postures through castration and rape and then killed.

"El matadero" is a ferocious critique of what happens when political dichotomies are systematically and brutally applied to enforce hierarchies of dominance and subjugation. Neither side is immune to Echeverría's attack. The Federalists are criticized for their cruelty and brutality; they destroy civilization as they do the young man and "todo patriota amigo de las luces y de la libertad" (139). On the other hand, their victim is incapable of posing any meaningful struggle, neither verbally nor physically. Echeverría emphasizes the youth's inability or unwillingness to communicate with his captors: he berates, lectures, and harangues them, but never engages in conversation with them. Nor is he able to present a statement of political beliefs or an ideological agenda beyond calling the Federalists "esclavos" (137). Finally he is completely deprived of speech and responds not with words but with body language, struggling furiously yet futilely against his bonds and lastly dying in an explosion of rage and blood. This is the Federalists' last victory: they are able to reduce him to a body, and their brute force triumphs over his supposedly superior intellect.

Echeverría wrote "El matadero" at a time when Rosas's power seemed infinite, capable of reaching even into the provinces and sending Echeverría into exile. He had already seen most of his contemporaries in the Generation of '37 imprisoned or exiled; resistance to Rosas's dictatorship from within Argentina appeared impossible. At the same time Echeverría recognized that the Unitarians, the ideological predecessors to the Generation of '37, were also to blame for creating an atmosphere of political strife and contention that paved the way for Rosas and his platform of law and order. "El matadero" uses the rape of the young man to dramatize the consequences of antithetical political discourses at work. The rape is a grotesque parody of Echeverría's own earlier calls for national reconciliation; rather than a marriage of the two parties, "El matadero" presents the violent, sexual abuse of the liberals by the Federalists. There is no mutuality, no free

association, no "confraternidad de principios [que] producirá la unión y fraternidad de todos los miembros de la familia argentina" ("Dogma socialista" 252). The rape in "El matadero" signifies the complete breakdown of normal political conversation and interchange. Nationalist discourse is now constituted by the violent inscription of the hierarchy of dominance and subjugation, vividly embodied in the image of the young man, stripped naked and tied to a table in the slaughterhouse, while a gang of bloodied butchers threatens to assault him anally. In short, "El matadero" presents a world in which national discourse cannot take place; the only possible exchanges between political opponents are based on the repeated gesture of domination and subordination, dramatically incarnated in the metaphor turned horribly real of gang rape.

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NOTES

¹ For a detailed discussion of the uses of Romanticism and different genres in "El matadero," see Cabañas.

² See Williamson (274–76) and Shumway (47–80).

³ See Foster, "Paschal Symbology," for an analysis of the religious references in the story.

⁴ Echeverría's first editor, Juan María Gutiérrez, excused the crudity of the story when he published it in 1871 by saying, "estas páginas no fueron escritas para darse a la prensa tal cual salieron de la pluma que las trazó, como lo prueban la precipitación y el desnudo realismo con que están redactadas" (124).

⁵ Echeverría describes the scene in the following manner: "gambeteando en torno de él con su enorme daga en mano, [Matasiete] se la hundió al cabo hasta el puño en la garganta. Brotó un torrente de la herida, exhaló algunos bramidos roncós, vaciló y cayó el soberbio animal" (134). Other critics have commented upon the ways that this episode prefigures that of the Unitarian's death, down to similarities in language (Knowlton 84).

⁶ For discussions of the connections in "El matadero" between the episode of the bull and that of the young man, see Knowlton (86); Foster, "Paschal Symbology" (263); Ghiano (59); Jitrik (80).

⁷ Several other readers note the rape scene in passing. As we have seen, Doris Sommer says that the Unitarian is raped by an ear of corn, and Gustavo Geirola refers to "the rape of the young Unitarian by the robust slaughterhouse captain Matasiete in *El matadero*" (328).

⁸ For other discussions of texts in which rape is silenced, see Winnett and Silver, among others.

⁹ Salessi is the exception in that he avoids calling the rape an insult or a humiliating gesture, instead consistently referring to the action as torture or sodomy.

¹⁰ For criticism that sees Echeverría as using "El matadero" to advance the Unitarian cause against that of the Federalists, see Fleming, Foster "Paschal Symbology," Jitrik (especially 92), and Sarlo and Altamirano.

¹¹ See Mercado (72-76); Shumway (117-27); and Williamson (275-76).

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