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# Walking on the Wild Side: Indigeneity, Passion, and Nation in Guillermo Saccomanno's *La lengua del malón*

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### Article abstract

Although the historical novel produced in Argentina after the fall of the last dictatorship has been characterized by the principle of inclusion, the representation of Indigenous peoples in the re-imagining of national narratives has contributed, ironically, to their marginalization. This article focuses on the ways *La lengua del malón* (2003) by Guillermo Saccomanno engages critically with national narratives from a peripheral position in order to escape the genre's colonial limitations and proposes narrative strategies that allow the author not only to recognize the country's Indigenous heritage, but also to acknowledge the continuous presence of Indigeneity in contemporary Argentinean culture.

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## Walking on the Wild Side: Indigeneity, Passion, and Nation in Guillermo Saccomanno's *La lengua del malón*

*Las transformaciones democráticas en Argentina después de la última dictadura militar llevaron en el campo de la novela histórica a reformulaciones del pasado nacional caracterizadas por la inclusión de grupos tradicionalmente excluidos. Sin embargo, la representación de los pueblos originarios en este género literario encontró desafíos que, irónicamente, siguen contribuyendo a la continua marginación de este grupo. El siguiente artículo analiza la exploración de la otredad en La lengua del malón (2003) de Guillermo Saccomanno, que no solamente escapa las limitaciones coloniales del género, sino que también reconoce el pasado indígena incluyéndolo en el presente del país.*

Palabras clave: Guillermo Saccomanno, literatura argentina, posdictadura, novela histórica, pueblos originarios

*Although the historical novel produced in Argentina after the fall of the last dictatorship has been characterized by the principle of inclusion, the representation of Indigenous peoples in the re-imagining of national narratives has contributed, ironically, to their marginalization. This article focuses on the ways La lengua del malón (2003) by Guillermo Saccomanno engages critically with national narratives from a peripheral position in order to escape the genre's colonial limitations and proposes narrative strategies that allow the author not only to recognize the country's Indigenous heritage, but also to acknowledge the continuous presence of Indigeneity in contemporary Argentinean culture.*

Keywords: Guillermo Saccomanno, Argentinean literature, post-dictatorship, historical novel, Indigenous peoples

Indigeneity re-entered the Argentinean national imaginary when the process of re-democratization following the fall of the last dictatorship (1976-83) created a space for debates that challenged traditionally exclusionary narratives, promoted politically and socially more inclusive

reformulations of the nation, and questioned Eurocentric points of view. In the field of literature, Indigenous peoples reappeared almost exclusively in the historical novel,<sup>1</sup> a genre that experienced transformations fuelled by both local and regional political reshaping, the narrative turn in historiography, and formal innovations that converted it into a vehicle used to critically examine the past (Wesselling; Menton; Pons; Perkowska; Garramuño; Lefere). While the genre has been praised by María Cristina Pons and Magdalena Perkowska as a reflection of a democratic reorganization of the region and a step towards a more just and participatory society, the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the re-imagining of national narratives in the historical novel in Argentina also presented limitations, which stemmed from colonial perspectives imposed by the genre and, ironically, contributed to the further marginalization of this group.

In this context, *La lengua del malón* (2003) by Guillermo Saccomanno offers an interesting alternative to the way historical novels depict Indigeneity in a culture historically uncomfortable with the concept of miscegenation, let alone with the participation of “the other” in the national project. Saccomanno proposes a thoroughly new approach to the question of the representation of Indigenous heritage, not only by avoiding colonial traps inherent in literary practices of historical fiction, but also by linking Indigeneity with the present of Argentina. Saccomanno re-interprets the national past, but, unlike other writers, he re-tells it from the point of view of literary theory and, more precisely, the politics of representation. This perspective allows him to denounce the participation of the literary canon in the process of silencing different social and/or ethnic groups, but also to reclaim Indigeneity.

In order to escape from colonial structures, Saccomanno imposes narrative strategies in *La lengua del malón* that Ángel Tuninetti calls the poetics of “desvío” and “desmadre” (147-48). By “desvío” he means the distortion of the way texts should be narrated and interpreted, and how Saccomanno is expanding the limits of literary genres. As for “desmadre,” the notion requires a more elaborate explanation: its first meaning refers to chaos, understood as a lack of order, but Tuninetti emphasizes another meaning of the word that originates from its etymology, “salirse de madre” (147): to be born, to emancipate, to become independent. There is also another translation into English of the term “desmadre” that I intend to explore in this article. When used in the expression “¡Qué desmadre!”, it can be translated both as “what a mess!” and “it was wild!” This translation seems particularly attractive, as it makes a connection with both the animal and the savage worlds with which Indigenous peoples were often identified, but at the same time, to a sexuality beyond conventionally accepted social

norms. Both types of wildness are represented in the novel by the central character, Professor Gómez, who is at the same time a *cabecita negra* and a gay man. Keeping the novel in the Latin American tradition of exploring and constructing nationhood through fictions that focus on passion and love (Sommer), Saccomanno invites the reader to step into the “wild side,” creating a parallel between the intimacy and intensity of a sexuality that is placed beyond the socially permitted norms of the 1950s, and the condition of miscegenation of the Argentine culture. Therefore, the title of the novel, *La lengua del malón*, has to be understood in, at least, two senses, which stem from the meaning of the word “lengua”: it refers to the tongue as a vehicle of erotic pleasure and to language, as the means of expression of Indigeneity.

In *La lengua del malón*, Saccomanno recognizes the complacent role of literature in the continuous colonization and marginalization of Indigenous heritage in Argentina. He proposes to re-examine the representation of Indigeneity through a narrative structure that explores the formulation of exclusionary national narratives in the nineteenth century, their opening to groups of Indigenous heritage under the Peronist regime, and the reformulations of the nation in the aftermath of the fall of the dictatorship. The novel is mainly set in Buenos Aires in the 1950s, during the second term of the Peronist regime. It is centred around the love affair of two female protagonists, Lía and Delia, narrated by Professor Gómez, who intertwines his own biography with the story. Embedded in Professor Gómez’s narration is the novel written by Delia, titled, like the novel by Saccomanno, “La lengua del malón.”<sup>2</sup> It tells the story of a white woman who becomes the captive of an Indigenous leader in the nineteenth century. A side plot to the Delia-Lía story is found in the love affair between De Franco, a divorced poet and colleague of Gómez, with Azucena, a beautiful student half his age attracted to the bohemian artist world. After the romance with De Franco, she eventually becomes Lía’s lover and then, rather unexpectedly, accepts a marriage proposal from a male co-worker. After “walking on the wild side,” Azucena decides to step back into a role determined by a heteronormative society that guarantees her survival. The last, but vital, narrative level is created by the addressee of professor Gómez’s story, an always silent narrator who listens to Gómez in the early 2000s.

The difficulty in integrating Indigenous peoples into a narrative that rewrites national history in Argentina originates, in the first place, from the impossibility of portraying the subaltern without imposing epistemological structures that, even in an emancipatory effort, keep him/her in a subordinate position (Spivak; Mignolo). But the question of representation is further complicated by the fact that Indigeneity constitutes a part of Argentinean identity that has never been a fundamental element of the

national myth. The national romance that characterized foundational narratives in other Latin American countries (Sommer) did not cross ethnic or even social lines in Argentina, with the exception of the works by non-canonical women writers (Lojo 44-46). Instead, Indigenous peoples were represented as a threat to the nation, and despite projects of cohabitation verbalized by both Indigenous leaders and sectors of the Argentinean political elite (Martínez Sarasola), the plan to shape a white nation prevailed, leading to the decimation of Indigenous communities, immigration-based policies that encouraged European settlements, and the rise of the military in the process of nation-building (Viñas).

Argentina was formulated in the nineteenth century in opposition to *el desierto*, a term that can be translated as “desert,” “wilderness,” or “wasteland” and implies that the lands to which the nation would eventually expand were uninhabited and therefore ready for colonization (Kaminsky; Halperin Donghi). The arts, and literature in particular, actively participated in the imagination of that space: they erased Indigenous groups from foundational narratives and/or represented them as blood-thirsty savages (Rodríguez) associated with *malones*, Indigenous raids that terrorized the frontier towns, to which Saccomanno’s *La lengua del malón* makes a direct reference. Indigeneity was therefore identified as the negative side of Argentina and considered in national narratives only within Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s dichotomy of “civilización y barbarie,” which Amy Kaminsky explains as follows:

The liberal Argentine elite of the nineteenth century exerted a mighty effort to manufacture a national self that would extinguish the barbarism it found so distressing. *Barbarie*, perhaps better translated as savagery than as its cognate, barbarism, is at the heart of liberal Argentina’s notion of itself, the repressed that insists on returning. For Europe, the wilds of Patagonia, the Indians of Tierra del Fuego, and the vast pampas, that is to say Argentina in its “wild” and “natural” state, all suggest a fearsome and rather seductive savagery. But the *barbarie* that Argentinean liberals opposed, that is, the barbarie named by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in his germinal text, *Facundo*, had, on the surface, little to do with Argentina in a state of nature. It was, rather, the state of illegitimacy and political immaturity they associated with the rough-and-ready rural social and political economy that distressed the liberal proponents of a strong central government based in Buenos Aires. The locally based regional leaders, the *caudillos* who challenged the political hegemony of a Europeanized capital, and the gaucho, symbol of miscegenation (metaphorically, at least, the son of an Indian mother and Spanish father), represented a symbolic danger of their own vulnerability to the partially conquered frontier in a way that pure nature, utterly “other,” did not. The *barbarie* that was Sarmiento’s despair, and the even deeper savagery of the Argentine

wilderness that underlies it, is, ironically but not surprisingly, part of what attracts Europe to Argentina. (5-6)

While the nineteenth-century Argentinean intellectual elites created a sharp opposition between the Indigenous world and the new nation, the twentieth century brought populism and with it, the recognition and incorporation of social sectors previously marginalized. The Peronist regime (1946-1955) was the turning point that transformed not only the country's economy, but also its political and cultural structures by mobilizing, on an unprecedented scale, the nation's growing working class, radically redefining the relations between social groups (Karush and Chamosa 1-2). Revolutionary as they may seem, the re-formulations of national identity that included non-European heritage and miscegenation had to follow very specific lines that simultaneously recognized and silenced Indigeneity as part of the Argentinean ethos:

Peronism toppled class hierarchies, yet often upheld bourgeois respectability and aesthetics. Its heretical message aimed to mobilize the masses, yet its efforts to institutionalize itself led to an official ideology that emphasized discipline and good manners. It embraced the *cabecitas negras* from the interior and promoted folk music as an alternative to the white nation envisioned by Argentine liberals. Yet Peronists, like the conservative nationalists before them, stressed the Spanish roots of Argentine folk music, thereby re-inscribing whiteness. (16-17)

As Natalia Milanesio notes, thousands of Indigenous and mestizo workers flooded the cities, especially Buenos Aires, and brought with them provincial customs, which, combined with the financial empowerment of lower classes, drove a feeling of insecurity into a traditionally white culture (53-55). The white middle and upper classes were terrified that the long-feared *malón*, a dominating image in the representation of Indigeneity, had finally reached the cities. Called *cabecitas negras* by the opposition, Peronists were quickly associated with a specific social group that was easily identifiable through racial features, black hair, and dark skin, and were represented as violent, uneducated, vulgar, and even criminal. Stereotyping was more than a consequence of the political divide and channeled established racial prejudices. It is important to stress that Peronism embraced the concept of *cabecita negra*, but the term became homogenizing as far as ethnicity was concerned:<sup>3</sup> no one seemed interested in the cultural particularities of the criollos nor the composition of diverse Indigenous groups (Milanesio 56). The regime focused on class consciousness and its support of the Peronist cause, rather than on ethnic specificity (Lenton, *The Malón* 85). Consequently, the Indigenous peoples as

an entity disappeared from national formulations and dissolved into the notion of the worker and *descamisado*, a term used to describe the lower-class supporters of Juan Domingo Perón. In fact, any deviation from the efforts to create a hegemonic understanding of Indigeneity was brutally repressed by the regime (Valko; Lenton, *Pueblos*).

The simultaneous erasure and inclusion of Indigenous heritage under the Peronist regime shows certain similarities to the practices under post-dictatorship governments. At the policy level, both periods were characterized by a legal betterment of the situation of Indigenous peoples. Yet, the discursive acknowledgements did not translate into actual socio-economic improvements for Indigenous communities, their representation in the mainstream media, or policy changes, especially at the provincial level (Francia; Aranda; García).

The disconnect between the inclusive political discourse and the reality of Indigenous peoples is reflected also in post-dictatorship literature. If the transformation of the historical fiction played a part in the re-democratization of the country and created a new space for many political and social groups previously excluded, ironically, it also contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. By representing the Indigenous heritage in a historical environment that did not seem to have a continuity with contemporary Argentina, the genre was suggesting that Indigenous peoples crumbled under the weight of civilization and were irretrievably lost under the pressure of progress (Tokarz, "The Accommodating"). Moreover, the historical novel, being entrenched in Western epistemology, promulgated and reinforced colonial structures in describing Indigeneity (Kerr). Finally, rather than representing Indigenous peoples in their diversity, the historical novel transformed them into a mere metaphor symbolizing the first *desaparecidos* in a cautionary tale about the dangers of totalitarian regimes and exclusionist narratives that post-dictatorship Argentina presumably has overcome (Tokarz, "Concepto"). These limitations of the historical novel are not observed only by literary critics. In fact, the historical novel dealing with the incorporation of Indigenous peoples in the national project lived to have its own parody. *El placer de la cautiva* (2000) by Leopoldo Brizuela denounces the disconnect between the official and seemingly inclusionary discourse, and the realities of the Indigenous condition in contemporary Argentinean society (Tokarz, "Cautivos").

By focusing on times of political aperture, Peronism and post-dictatorship democracy, Saccomanno's novel aims to shed new light on the history of the country, considering critically the way its elites imagined it through literature and how they included Indigenous peoples in it. *La lengua del malón*, therefore, defies literary conventions, mixes genres, ridicules

Argentinean literary icons, paraphrases and plays with foundational texts, refuses to comply with any kind of political correctness or traditionally understood social norms, and irrevocably denounces the participation of literature in silencing otherness and supporting political violence. The prologue to the novel, starting with “Aquí me pongo a contar” (9),<sup>4</sup> paraphrases the opening verses of two epic poems by José Hernández: *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879). *La lengua del malón* abounds also with references to the literary canon, such as *El matadero* by Esteban Echeverría (64), and the works and figures of Enrique Martínez Estrada (18) and Victoria Ocampo (Saccomanno, 64, 18, 66-76). Saccomanno alludes to the history of literature mostly, while his character professor Gómez contextualizes Delia’s “La lengua del malón” and reflects on both the process of writing and the politics of representation in Argentina. On a formal level, the novel combines elements characteristic of the historical novel, literary analysis, and melodrama. This strategy creates a parallel with nineteenth-century foundational narratives, such as *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1845) by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, known for blending different genres as well. Additionally, Saccomanno bases his entire narrative structure, as Marta Cichocka notes (135), on a never-ending academic lecture on Argentinean literature with no other audience but the model reader, a narrative device that can be interpreted as a parody of the technique used by the most recognizable representative of the Argentinean literary establishment, Jorge Luis Borges, to whom professor Gómez refers irreverently throughout the novel as “Georgie” (Saccomanno 21, 26).

The constant allusions to the literary canon link Gómez’s story with the modes of representation in Argentinean literature which Saccomanno associates with political violence. *La lengua del malón* is dominated by Gómez’s vividly described memory of the massacre of the Plaza de Mayo on June 16, 1955. While the square was filled with thousands of Perón’s supporters, the military bombed it with 10 tons of explosives, killing over 300 people and wounding hundreds more. Although the event itself was acknowledged as an unsuccessful coup against the regime, the official historical discourse silenced the assassination of Peronist militants and bystanders until approximately the time of the publication of the novel (Cichocka 140-47). Instead, historians gave prominence to the burning and pillaging of churches by an enraged mob in the aftermath of the event. The shift in focus was aimed at protecting the interests of the elite and legitimize the coup by reinforcing the association of a racially marked Peronist crowd with the image of a plundering “Indian raid,” “el malón,” forged in the Argentinean imaginary by literature and the fine arts.



Saccomanno does not stop at accusing the literary establishment of merely influencing politics and propaganda through fiction. In the novel, he imagines a secret meeting of military officers who organized the coup in Victoria Ocampo's house (198). Professor Gómez synthesizes her place in culture by stating that the history of Argentinean literature could be limited to the history of her own family:

Allí, en Viamonte y San Martín, frente a la iglesia y el convento de Santa Catalina de Siena, había nacido Victoria. Ése era tanto su barrio como la historia del país era la historia de sus parientes. López y Planes, el compositor del Himno Nacional, había sido un tío suyo. Prilidiano Pueyrredón, ese pintor de postales camperas, también pariente. José Hernández, el autor del poema patrio, también. Como se escribió más tarde, la historia de la patria, para esa mujer, era una historia de familia. Y esa historia se compiló según su conveniencia y antojo. Acaso la casa de la calle México dónde funcionaba la somnifera Sociedad Argentina de Escritores no había sido de su madre. (49-50)

The undocumented involvement of a prominent representative of the literary elite serves to dissipate any doubts about the compliant character of Argentinean fiction in a politicized vision of the country. It is clear for Saccomanno that not only the discourse of history imposed a certain model on the way the nation imagined itself as a continuation of the European tradition, but literature did as well. He repeated this view explicitly in an interview with Ana Wajszczuk: "Nuestra historia oficial es una historia de 'como si.' Como si fuéramos occidentales, como si fuéramos europeos, como si fuéramos rubios ... Esto también es la historia de nuestra literatura" (qtd. in Cichocka 138). His attempts to tell history "as it was" rather than "as if it were" seems very much in line with the ambitions of the Latin American historical novel of the last forty years: his novel re-interprets the past, critically approaches the historical discourse in which literature actively participated, and proposes a new version from a marginalized perspective in order to incorporate the part of society identified with the "malón" into the national imaginary. But since the traditional means of expression reinforce the social order that consequently silences otherness, Saccomanno and his characters venture into the "wild side" that violently disturbs the ways of representation through sexuality and defies the conventions of the historical novel.

Professor Gómez, the main protagonist and narrator of *La lengua del malón*, re-tells history from a peripheral position as a homosexual and a *cabecita negra*. Hence the reference in the prologue to Martín Fierro, who, although canonical, symbolizes the marginalized character par excellence in Argentinean tradition: a gaucho, a criollo, a deserter, and an outlaw. Wild as

he might have been, however, Fierro ends up being tamed by civilization, and rejoins it after killing an Indigenous warrior representing the undesirable element in the national project. It is a sacrifice that eventually grants him the pardon of Buenos Aires, and an eternal place in the literary canon. Although Saccomanno's character participates in mainstream culture despite his racial and social status, his sexuality cannot be reconciled with the official discourse, pushing him perpetually into the margins. Gómez, unlike Fierro, however, will not kill "the other" in order to buy his way into civilization, a decision that will ostracize him, but also give him the freedom to question national literature and the values embedded in it.

Similarly to Fierro, Gómez is a man of the frontier, in the cultural sense of the word: he is an erudite academic and interpreter, captivated by British literature and culture but also a *cabecita negra* and a gay man. Too *cabecita* for the elites, too intellectual for Peronists, and definitely too gay for either group, he does not seem to belong to any formulations of nationhood. He cannot overcome racial prejudice in order to fully participate in the intellectual life of the nation's cultural elite epitomised by Borges and Ocampo, illustrated in the novel by his failed attempt to submit an article to the literary journal *Sur* (Sacomanno 42-50). At the same time, he does not identify with the criollo or, even less, Indigenous cultures. He ostentatiously prefers tea, considered an English beverage, to *mate*, associated traditionally with Argentinean popular culture (25). He is drawn to Peronism, but does not actively support the regime, whose intolerance towards sexual minorities (194) and repression against the opposition he condemns (58-61, 65).

Gómez's relationship to the Peronist mass movement is based on an attraction that should be understood beyond its political dimension. The opposition compared the working masses to the "zoological alluvion," a term that "portrayed the popular sector as both caged racial inferiors and mindless, uneducated creatures driven by their primary needs, basic instincts, and predatory appetites" (Milanesio 73). They were unquestionably rejected by the elites as lacking of any intellectual depth. Yet, the same masses and their unlettered character seduce the well-read professor Gómez in a way that combines passion, race, and politics:

No hay nada tan emocionante como confundirse entre esos cuerpos pujantes. Con el torso desnudo, un muchacho cetrino le daba al bombo sin parar. Había que ver su cuello ancho y grueso, los hombros brillantes de sudor y sus brazos musculosos, esos bíceps contraídos en el ejercicio sistemático, maquinal y rabioso a un tiempo. Ese muchacho, las venas del cuello hinchadas en el clamor de las consignas, observado de perfil, era un ejemplar obrero y criollo que bien podría haber sido el símbolo del héroe justicialista. Tuve un arrebato de ternura y deseo. Los bombos retumbando,

las voces convertidas en una sola, atronadora, clamando Perón, Perón, Perón. (Saccomanno 35)

The description of the Peronist crowd is obviously homoerotic, but Gómez's fascination with the organization should not be limited to his infatuations with individual members of the group. Although he cannot embrace the system, his drive towards the social justice is based on a promise of freedom that corresponds to his deeply hidden desires: to be fully recognized as a gay man in a homophobic society, as an illegitimate son in a culture obsessed by lineage, and as a criollo whose Indigenous legacy is crippling his career and status. These longings find their natural expression in the various non-verbal forms of Peronism: the marches, the energy of the crowds, the *esprit de corps*, and, last but not least, the destructive force with which infuriated masses of Peronist supporters ransacked the streets in the aftermath of a bomb attack against the movement. The burning of the Jockey Club (Saccomanno 38-41), difficult for Gómez to reconcile with his intellectual allegiances, has a cathartic dimension for him. He sees in the devastating destruction of both the building and the art inside it an act of justified vindication and revenge. Therefore, the wild side from which Gómez re-tells history is not his sexual orientation per se, but rather a part of his identity that he is able to fully access through a sexuality that does not conform to the socially accepted norms, rather than through a reflection structured along lines that continuously place him in an inferior position. Despite his intellectual interests and professional path, his racial features and sexuality form an inseparable and undeniable part of his sense of self, locating him outside the world of civilization to which he aspires.

Ángel Tuninetti, Marta Cichocka, Camila Roccatagliata and Elisa Calabrese contextualize the novel within Sarmiento's concept of "civilización y barbarie." As explained earlier, barbarism is a concept rooted in Indigeneity, and is habitually reinterpreted in the contemporary historical novel through the reincorporation of Indigenous peoples in national history and the reconsideration of the values of the so-called civilization. But Saccomanno, instead of directly representing Indigenous groups in the nineteenth century in an attempt to recover a primal spirit lost under the yoke of progress, approaches Indigeneity as an inherent, albeit negated, part of Argentinean culture, lingering in the making of the society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In order to reconnect with this spirit, Saccomanno focuses on the ways the Indigenous past is being rescued from oblivion by literary forms deployed from marginalized positions in times of political aperture that allowed room for otherness. Hence the importance of the connection in Professor Gómez's narrative between his story about Lía and Delia, the manuscript of the novel the latter wrote,

political violence, sexuality, and the final narrative presented to the silent narrator listening at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Gómez's testimony acknowledges the importance of savagery, with which he connects on a non-verbal level but whose complexity he is unable to express. Entangled in narratives that consequently dismiss an important part of his identity, he decides to approach it indirectly and explain it through a parallel established between Lía and Delia's passionate relationship and the history of his country.

Delia's character is developed along lines that echo national narratives: she has unspecified Indigenous origins reflected in her racial features (Saccomanno 75); she is married to Captain Ulrich, an officer of the Argentine Army who is clearly of European descent (76); she is a daughter of a landowner (106-08); and she is part of the upper middle class. Her son is destined to follow in his father's military steps, and his name, Martín, evokes General José de San Martín, Argentina's hero of the Independence Wars. When she becomes pregnant, her husband proposes that they name their unborn daughter Marina (204), a female name that also means "Navy" in Spanish. The text implies, therefore, that Delia and her life make her a character who cannot escape her destiny, determined not by the will of gods, as in the Greek tragedy, or by history, as in the traditional historical novel, but rather by national foundational narratives.

The unexpected affair with her perfect opposite, Lía, a daughter of Jewish immigrants, a feminist, a lesbian, and a journalist whom she seemed fated to meet (her name, Delia, is the homophone of "de Lía," "belonging to Lía"), violently takes her away from the social structures which she inhabited. Lía, in a way, kidnaps her, but at the same time liberates her from the constraints imposed by heteronormative and patriarchal society. Although Delia enjoys her new situation and finds sexual fulfillment and freedom, she tries to resist it. She spectacularly and violently breaks up with Lía (171-73) and tries unsuccessfully to go back to her role as a mother and wife. Contaminated by the wild side, however, she loses interest in her previous obligations, and especially in her husband (140), to finally give in into her passion and plan an escape from Argentina with Lía. Like the captive women in the Argentinean literary tradition, once Delia crosses the line to the wild side, she is unable to come back to the world of civilization, and, eventually, she is bound to perish.

Delia unleashed her desire for freedom in the writing of her novel "La lengua del malón" which, according to Gómez (120), challenged the Argentinean literary canon and conventions by reinterpreting and rewriting the myth of the captive woman, in particular, *La cautiva* (1837) by Esteban Echeverría. This epic poem recounts the story of María and Brian, a white couple abducted in a raid by Indigenous peoples. María, the captive

woman referred to in the title, heroically defeats her guard and frees her husband with whom she escapes into the wilderness. Their success, however, is short-lived, as Brian eventually perishes from exhaustion and María from sorrow. *La cautiva* focuses on the destructive forces of the *desierto* that the female protagonist despises and desperately tries to escape to return to civilization. The price of freedom, however, depends on her ability to eliminate her Indigenous captor, whom she kills with a dagger. Since murder constitutes an act of savagery, it makes her return to civilization impossible. Hopelessly corrupted, she must die in the desert.

Delia's novel, on the other hand, revisits the story of the captive woman, but presents a female protagonist who enjoys her captivity and finds in savagery a freedom denied to her by civilization:

Lo que me importa subrayar, acota el profesor, es que D está jugada. Al desprenderse del crucifijo no deja atrás solamente la fe. D siente que al fundirse con el viento es otra, más real. Si en la civilización era una víctima complaciente, paridora sumisa, su condición de cautiva no le inquieta. Ya no tiene nada que perder: la virtud, el buen nombre, una posición. Ahora se tiene solo a sí misma. Y lo poca cosa que se siente, librada al capricho de la suerte y del indio, la transforma en una fuerza desafiante. Si D, esposa de military conquistador del desierto, es una vagina civilizada, ahora cambiará de condición.

Es cierto: Delia adopta en estas páginas cierta grandilocuencia al escribir los pensamientos de su heroína. Es que, de pronto, parece descubrir, casi naif, que ese relato que está escribiendo es una épica del garche. Llamemos las cosas por su nombre. (Saccomanno 119)

The protagonist of Delia's novel is a white woman identified only by her initial "D." Stationed with her military husband on the nineteenth-century frontier, D is taken captive by Pichimán, the Indigenous leader, as a result of a *malón*. Unlike the women depicted in similar circumstances by Argentine literature but in sync with Delia's experiences, D first eagerly anticipates and then thoroughly enjoys her new situation. After a failed attack on the caravan with which she travels to the fort where her husband awaits her, she fantasizes about Pichimán (98), and when eventually she is captured, she engages in a passionate relationship with him. Unlike Echevarría's María, who killed her captor with a dagger, D uses the weapon to force Pichimán to satisfy her with a cunnilingus (128). His tongue becomes the source of pleasure and the foundation of a non-verbal language between D, representing civilization, and savagery embodied by Pichimán. Consequently, they both engage in an exploration of sexual expressions that challenge their pre-assigned roles by Argentinean canonical literature: he as the violent penetrator and she as the victim and recipient of his destructive

force. If *La cautiva* by Echeverría constituted the national epic based on the impossibility of reconciliation between civilization and barbarism, Delia's "La lengua del malón" proposes a communion of the two worlds through erotic pleasure.

By questioning foundational narratives, "La lengua del malón" seems to exhibit, *avant la lettre*, the characteristics of historical fiction written after the fall of the dictatorship, but the reader never has a direct access to the original text written by Delia. Instead, the novel is presented to the silent narrator by Professor Gómez, who simultaneously summarizes and contextualizes it within Argentinean literary tradition:

Hay que fijarse en cómo estructura Delia sus capítulos, dice el profesor. Cada uno con un título alusivo al universo campero, se organizan alrededor del mismo y, a la vez, este elemento resulta significativo. "Yegua", titula Delia, y alude al deseo copioso de su heroína. "Galope", titula, y alude a una montada a cuatro patas ... Cada uno de esos títulos responde a la nomenclatura de un territorio que es más subjetivo que geografía de lo pampeano. La inclusión del desierto, salta a la vista, expresa sin vacilaciones su deseo reprimido, la urgencia de vastedad.

Una característica del texto es su hibridez. Como los libros fundacionales de nuestra literatura, se define por la dificultad de ceñirse a un género. *La lengua del malón* es, como dije, una novela libertina construida por acumulación de estampas ... La fantasía de Delia se desboca, se ramifica, pero el texto converge, caprichoso, hacia una ontología de lo reprimido atravesando esa frontera que es también la línea de frontera que separa la civilización de la barbarie. Al atravesar esa frontera, la zanja que mandó cavar la cristiandad para separarse de lo otro, *La lengua del malón* resignifica la zanja, y no se me escapa la polivalencia del término, al cargarla con un erotismo desaforado. En ese aspecto, la obra de Delia también participa del ensayo. (88-89)

His analysis not only serves to denounce the politics of representation that reinforce a concept of white Argentina, but also provides an interpretive key guiding the reader in the understanding of other narrative plots: Delia and Lía's story, Gómez's life, and the bombing of the Plaza de Mayo. The eroticization of the frontier in Delia's novel creates a parallel between a denied but secretly desired contact with the Indigenous, and a sexuality restricted by the Argentinean society of the 1950s. This, in turn, makes a connection with Gómez's experience of savagery and the attraction he feels towards it despite an ethical and intellectual conflict with Peronism. Moreover, the use in "La lengua del malón" of the initial "D" creates a link with Delia, the author, but also with a similar narrative strategy employed by Franz Kafka, a feature on which Gómez comments (Saccomanno 94). The references to the Czech author indicate that Delia writes from a literary

tradition rooted in Europe, which projected onto the image of the Indigenous person longings for freedom. The allusion to Kafka indicates the unresolvable entanglement of Delia, Gómez, and Saccomanno with European aesthetics, but neither the protagonists nor the author of the novel fully identifies with this imaginary. This perspective is pronounced by Gómez who states that Delia's novel constitutes a "direct action" (210), a function that the reader must consider also in the reading of *La lengua del malón*. Both Delia's and Saccomanno's novels are meant to be a violent deed of civil disobedience.

Regardless of the revolutionary character of Delia's novel, the status quo prevails in the novel on all narrative levels. The actual otherness that constitutes the identity of the protagonists of *La lengua del malón* is systematically and unceremoniously destroyed on literal and metaphorical levels that intertwine passion, nationhood, and denial. In a homophobic society, Gómez cannot find love and is sentenced to eternal solitude and the futility of casual encounters because his partners are not willing to fully embrace their sexuality (223). Peronism and its promises are overthrown and Perón flees the country abandoning his followers (226). Lía and Delia tragically die in the bombing of June 16<sup>th</sup> (220-21). They perish without any recognition as victims of political violence nor as lovers. The nature of their demise is kept from official records, and Delia's husband, Captain Ulrich, who participated in the staging of the coup, rejects the information about his wife's secret passion, throwing away the letters offered by Gómez that documented the affair (232-35). The novel written by Delia, "La lengua del malón," mirrors the violence, silence, and denial present in the real life. Pichimán is brutally killed during an Argentine army raid, and D, who indulged in the enjoyment and sexual fulfillment of her new situation, cuts her own tongue off, destroying the source of sexual pleasure through which she connected with Pichimán and denying any possibility of relating her experience. Assumed to be mad, and obviously infected by savagery, she is shot dead by the military forces who re-establish this way the order she threatened (214-16). Finally, Delia's novel is never disseminated in any official form either. After her death, Professor Gómez holds on to the manuscript that, despite its obvious literary brilliance, cannot be published due to its unruly nature as it both crosses genre and race lines in an unacceptable fashion for the period. What's more, Gómez does not publish the novel in contemporary times (the early 2000s), seemingly marked by the inclusion and pluralism of the post-dictatorial regimes, as well as an explosion of historical narratives that re-interpret the national past and expand the definition of the historical novel in every possible direction through innovative narrative strategies. Instead, he relates it to the silent narrator in an indirect speech mixed with comments about literature, its

history and theory. The original text by Delia remains forever silent: it does not provoke a reaction from the narrator, and the reader never accesses it. In all cases, the order established by national narratives that silenced Otherness prevails.

For aesthetic, political or social reasons, the “wild side” may be unpronounceable in the formulations of nationhood, which does not mean it is inexistent or that the denial of space for otherness is ethically acceptable. In fact, Gómez keeps Delia’s manuscript in a sky-blue folder (225) in a private library that constitutes a complete history of the country’s literature (11). By wrapping the story in the national colors of Argentina, he symbolically reinforces its importance. The absence of the actual text of Delia’s “La lengua del malón” in Saccomanno’s novel insinuates that Indigeneity in Argentinean culture cannot be discovered through simple reformulations of historically and aesthetically inaccessible Indigenous past. In fact, there may not even be an interest in doing so. As a result of politics of the state, Indigeneity often cannot be traced to particular Indigenous groups, which, of course does not imply that it is absent. What is left, then, is the interpretation that critically reads history and denounces the politics of representation that tried to silence an undeniable part of Argentinean culture. The silence in which the victims of both political and literary violence are swallowed is not a passive one, and alternative identities remain present underneath the thin layer of respectability covering Argentinean culture.

Saccomanno rejects, therefore, the notion that Indigeneity is lost in the fog of the past or that it is unpronounceable within the contemporary Argentinean cultural circumstances. Instead of producing a historical fiction in line with politically correct principles of the historical novel, he links Indigeneity with sexuality, proposing a love story written from the margins of official discourse and which is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Latin American national romances that shaped the region. The only true survivor of the entire misadventure related by Gómez seems to be Azucena, De Franco’s and Lía’s ex-lover, who, after accepting the marriage proposal from her male suitor, embraces family life and becomes a respectable mother. However, when Gómez accidentally meets her in the aftermath of the bombing (236-37), it becomes obvious that her existence is shallow, boring, and definitely deprived of passion and, consequently, of a deeper meaning. Azucena conformed with the norms imposed to her by the society. Her remarkable beauty (she was referred to as *flor de piba*) from the times she was involved with De Franco and Lía faded away forever. Gómez, in contrast, refuses to conform. Broken by the loss of his friends and the fall of the Peronist regime, he persists in his marginalized existence assuming his identity full of irresolvable contrasts as a well-educated, *cabecita negra* gay



man. Saccomanno, on the other hand, rejects the restrictions of the historical novel, and produces a novel that pulls together all the conflicted shades and colours of Argentinean culture, including the long-negated Indigeneity, in a novel that his characters desperately longed for: a new version of Martín Fierro who, as it turns out, keeps walking on the wild side.

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## NOTES

- 1 The following novels included Indigenous peoples in their reinterpretations of Argentinean history after the fall of the dictatorship: *El entenado* (1983) by Juan José Saer; *Portal del paraíso* (1983), *Territorio final* (1987), and *Karái, el héroe* (1988) by Adolfo Colombres; *Historias imaginarias de la Argentina* (1986) by Pedro Orgambide; *La liebre* (1991), *Un episodio en la vida de un pintor viajero* (2000), and *Entre los indios* (2012) by César Aira; *La pasión de los nómades* (1994) and *Finisterre* (2005) by María Rosa Lojo de Beuter; *Los perros del paraíso* (1982) and *El largo atardecer del caminante* (1992) by Abel Posse; *Señales del cielo* (1994) and *Las orillas del fuego* (2006) by María Angélica Scotti; *Fuegia* (1997) by Eduardo Belgrano Rawson; *La tierra del fuego* (1999) by Sylvia Iparraguirre; *El placer de la cautiva* (2000) by Leopoldo Brizuela; *El revés de las lágrimas* (2005) by Cristina Loza; and *Indias blancas* (2005) and *Indias blancas: la vuelta del ranquel* (2005) by Florencia Bonelli.
- 2 In order to differentiate Saccomanno's novel *La lengua del malón* from Delia's novel "La lengua del malón," I will use italics for the former and quotation marks for the latter.
- 3 McAleer notes that ethnic homogenization proposed by the regime was a two-way process. This dynamic was manifested, for example, in the popularity of the comic book *Patoruzú* (1936-1950) and the multiple functions of criollo, gaucho and Indigenous symbolism that it integrated. The protagonist, Patoruzú, was a caudillo of a Tehuelche tribe, but his characterization (clothing, customs, territory) was full of inconsistencies in relation to the actual Tehuelche people (McAleer 261). Patoruzú projected many stereotypical characteristics designated to Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous writers, such as naivety, natural goodness, relationship with the earth (259), but also combined features of the gaucho and criollo culture. Regardless of the lack of authenticity, many rural migrants, who may not have associated with a specific ethnic group, when confronted with the challenges and adjustments in the transition to modernity identified with Patoruzú or rather with an array of values he projected.

- 4 The opening line of *El gaucho Martín Fierro* starts with: "Aquí me pongo a cantar ..."

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