

Rape & The Unintelligible Life

in Juana Manuela Gorriti's "Si haces mal no esperes bien"

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This paper examines regimens of violence in relation to the national project in "Si haces mal no esperes bien", a short story that centers on the rape of an indigenous woman by a Peruvian Colonel, and the Colonel's eventual abduction of the indigenous woman's daughter, Amelia, the product of the aforementioned rape. Abandoned by the Colonel, Amelia is discovered by a Parisian naturalist in a field. The gentleman raises her as his daughter

and takes her to Paris, where she meets and marries the Colonel's son (her own half brother). The young bride and groom return to Peru, where, after Amelia mysteriously falls ill, the Colonel's violent past is revealed.

Gorriti's work reflects larger, state-sanctioned forms of structural violence that exclude indigenous actors from the national political body, reducing them to a form of "bare life". However, Gorriti suggests that violence and systematic exclusion are not without consequence. While state

sanctioned violence may be normative, it is auto-destructive; it impedes the very progress that the nation seeks to facilitate. This paper proposes that the reunion of mother and daughter at the end of the work functions as a messianic moment in which the homogeneous, linear time of the nation is interrupted and an oppressed, violent past is redeemed. This emotionally intense rupture retrospectively gives the Colonel's rape of the indigenous woman new meaning and calls the viability of the national project into question.

**1. TEMPORAL TENSIONS:
MASCULINITY,
MODERNITY &
GOVERNANCE**

In Peru, the second half of the 19th century was marked by an attempt to transition from colonial society to modern nation. As Francesca Denegri explains, “el gobierno de Castilla realizó algo más importante que el hecho de abolir las instituciones coloniales, esto fue la creación de una intensa ilusión de que el Perú pisaba los umbrales de ese mundo moderno que hasta entonces había parecido lejano y elusivo” (70). However, this project was not without tension. The rape of the indigenous woman, and institutional or structural forms of violence in general, both reflect and exacerbate larger temporal tensions embedded within this national project.

I propose that the Colonel pertains to what Walter Benjamin terms “homogenous, empty time”, defined as forward-moving, linear time made up of identifiable, interchangeable units (seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, etc.) that essentially reproduces the old in a forward-moving trajectory of infinite, structurally identical moments. It is what Benjamin calls, echoing Nietzsche, the eternal return of the same. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson expounds upon Benjamin’s concept, arguing that this homogenous, empty time is an integral component of the national project, facilitating national simultaneity and continuity. Julia Kristeva further explores this model of linear, homogenous time laid out by both Benjamin and Anderson in “Woman’s Time”. Labeling this ontological temporal

model the “time of history”, Kristeva argues that it constitutes “time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival . . . inherent in the logical and ontological values of any given civilization” (Kristeva 17). Perhaps more importantly, she links this aforementioned linear temporality to masculine subjectivities, arguing “this conception of linear temporality . . . is readily labeled masculine” (Kristeva 7).



Juana Manuela Gorriti.

It should be noted that both the public and private spheres of the Colonel’s life pertain to this kind of forward-moving, linear trajectory characteristic of homogenous time and the national temporal entity. A high-ranking public official, the Colonel is described as “profusamente decorado”. His daughter is highly educated and sophisticated, and his son studies in Paris. Key to this proposed reading of the text is the fact that the Colonel’s son, Guillermo, marries a Parisian woman (or more precisely a woman who is believed to be Parisian), the

daughter of “un sabio viajero que consagró a la ciencia su fortuna y su vida” who is described as having “un alma rica de poesía y sentimiento” (Gorriti 167). She is “delicada y cenceña,” and “tenía en sus morenas mejillas esa palidez aterciopelada que se adora en Francia” (Gorriti 166). Thus Guillermo not only studies in Paris (indicative of a forward-moving, progressive familial trajectory), he also marries a European who is absolutely emblematic of modernity, linked to science and art. As Denegri explains: “La elite modernizadora imaginaba al Perú contemporáneo como un territorio inscrito dentro de las esferas de la nación europeas blancas, cristianas y capitalistas” (105). A link to the European, then, facilitates a link to modernity, to national progress, and to linear, ontological time. As Denegri contends, this image of the Colonel and his family presents an image of the family as “núcleo generador de ‘paz’ y ‘civilización’ y preservadora de lo blanco y europeo” (105).

Within “Si haces mal no esperes bien” structural violence, homogenous empty time, and masculine subjectivities intricately intertwine.

Violence is exerted by representatives of the nation, specifically the military, as a means of systematic subjugation. And this violence goes well beyond sexual violence. Gender and racialized power hierarchies operating in conjunction facilitated a brutal and violent oppression of the indigenous subject.

Gorriti depicts continuity in the violence perpetrated upon those groups seen as marginal to the Peruvian nation, localizing its origin regimens of colonial violence. Towards the end of the work, the indigenous woman laments:

Dicen que nuestros padres, poderosos en otro tiempo, reinaron en este suelo que nosotros pagamos tan caro; y que los blancos viniendo de una tierra lejana, les robaron su oro y su poder. No sé si eso es cierto, pero ahora que somos pobres, ahora que nada pueden ya quitarnos, nos roban nuestros hijos para hacerlos, esclavos en sus ciudades. (179)

Violence is not the exception; rather it is normative, structural, and state sanctioned. Gorriti alludes to the institutionalized structures of violence that erode the social fabric of indigenous communities, including the kidnapping of young indigenous girls for purposes of forced domestic servitude in Lima, and the systematic rape of indigenous women by representatives of the state. It is precisely “this continuity of violence, erupting into physical violence with certain regularity, that may be framed as normative violence” (Boesten, “Inequality, Normative Violence, & Livable Life” 12).

By depicting institutionalized, structural forms of violence and establishing violence as the norm not the exception, I propose that Gorriti establishes a link between violence and governance. This normative structural violence is employed as an instrument of state. It is not employed arbitrarily, but exerted by a profusely decorated military colonel, an obvious representative of the state, for very specific purposes. He rapes to demonstrate his own dominance, while he kidnaps to bring an “obsequio” to his wife in Lima (Gorriti 157). Violence within “Si haces mal no esperes bien” can subsequently be conceptualized as a kind of biopolitical control, the term Foucault uses to refer to “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 140).

It should also be noted that violence appears to be integral in establishing and affirming a masculine subjectivity for state actors, further linking and intertwining the nation, linear time and masculine subjectivities. A conflict ensues during the abduction of Amelia, as Amelia’s mother attempts to kill her daughter’s abductor by hurling a stone at his head:

La india había corrido en auxilio de su hija, y teniendo la cabeza del soldado bajo su rodilla buscaba con ojos feroces una piedra para acabar de matarlo. Arrancó, en fin, un grueso guijarro, mas en el momento que lo alzaba sobre el soldado, sintióse asida por los cabellos. El oficial que había ordenado el rapto, arrastrándola sin piedad, la arrojó al fondo de un barranco. (156)

The aforementioned passage clearly suggests that the soldier’s masculinity is undermined by the woman’s assault. The Colonel expresses his vehement disapproval, yelling, “¡Vaya un maricón ¡Dejarse acogotar por una mujer! Felizmente llegué yo a tiempo” (Gorriti 157). Exerting violence against a woman becomes a way of acting out manhood. As Boesten explains, “a racial hierarchy that established ‘rape-ability’ of women based on class and race... provided an opportunity to act out aggressive and sexualized masculinities” (Boesten “Inequality, Normative Violence, & Livable Life” 12). A failure to successfully execute such violence successfully would threaten a soldier’s perceived masculinity in front of his peers.

While Kristeva contends that masculine subjectivities pertain to linear temporalities, “time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival,” she argues that feminine subjectivities are linked to two distinct temporal modalities:

clinical time and monumental time (17). She explains:

As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extra subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and *unnameable jouissance*. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time. (16)

This link between the biological rhythm of clinical time and feminine subjectivities is evident in “Si haces mal no esperes bien”. At the opening of the text Gorriti writes:

Era la última hora de un día primaveral. El sol trasponía majestuosamente la montaña, nacarando con su postrer rayo las nieves de la opuesta cordillera, y dibujando en largas sombras la silueta fugaz de las cabras que ramoneaban aquí y allí entre las sinuosidades de los peñascos las hojas de los arbustos y la espinosa corteza de los cardos... Las torcaces solas, ocultas en los agujeros de las peñas, mezclaban su triste arrullo al rumor de la cascada, que como un lejano trueno se elevaba del profundo valle donde el Rímac precipita sus aguas. (155)

The indigenous woman and her daughter pertain to a scenario that is atemporal. The opening passage is devoid of any kind of temporal markers. Rather, the passage alludes to natural rhythms—to the sun, the seasons, and the hydraulic cycle. While the Colonel is firmly associated with the masculine, linear temporality of the nation, Amelia and her mother are linked to a feminine, cyclical temporality that Kristeva describes.

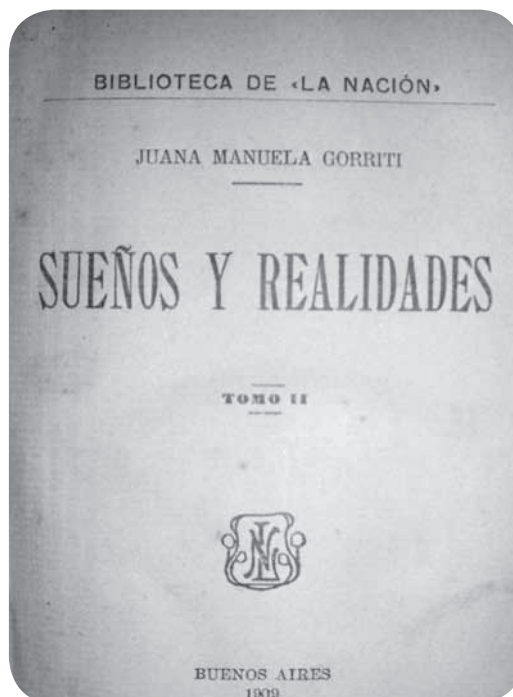
Gorriti makes it quite clear that the indigenous woman of “Si haces mal no esperes bien” is excluded from the temporality of the nation. Of course, it should be noted that this temporal division juxtaposes a number of other pertinent divisions, including those of race, those of gender, and those of geography. By presenting these two conflicting temporalities Gorriti effectively undermines the coherence of the nation, “subvirtiéndolo los supuestos básicos sobre los cuales se producía el discurso del nacionalismo cultural” (Denegri 111). The nation is not a unified, singular entity. Rather, it is fragmented, composed of competing and conflicting temporalities.

2. REGIMENS OF VIOLENCE: POWER, GENDER AND RACE

Gorriti’s work suggests that the through normative violence the state creates a class of people that can be abducted without notice, violated without consequence, and killed with impunity. The descriptions of both the indigenous woman’s rape and Amelia’s abduction reflect a clearly delineated sociopolitical hierarchy, directly influenced by both gender and race, that facilitate systematic and normative abuse. Testifying of her rape, the indigenous woman recounts, “salió la voz del militar que

me llamaba. Yo tuve miedo, y huí; pero él montaba un caballo veloz y me persiguió, me alcanzó, echó pie a tierra, luchó conmigo, y me ultrajó” (Gorriti 177). It is crucial to note that the description of Amelia’s abduction almost perfectly mirrors the description of her mother’s rape:

De una de las últimas compañías se había separado un oficial, y llamando a un ordenanza



Sueños y realidades de Juana Manuela Gorriti. Buenos Aires, 1909.

habíale dicho algunas palabras señalando a la niña... el soldado se dirigió hacia ella a galope, y llegando a su lado, inclinóse sobre el estribo, y la arrebató en sus brazos. Mas al momento de enderezarse sobre la silla para colocar a la niña en el arzón, sintió dos manos de acero, que aferrándose a su garganta lo derribaron en tierra. (156)

The Colonel’s arrival on horseback in both instances of violence is key to our understanding of these events, as the horse functions as a symbol of

colonial power. It invokes the original conquest of Peru as well as contemporary power dynamics and sociopolitical hierarchies that leave the Colonel situated in a position of power far above that of Amelia and her mother.

The Colonel’s violent entrance into the Andean pasture reminds us that sexual violence in “Si haces mal no esperes bien”, is not only a product of gender power hierarchies but also of racial power hierarchies. As Boesten explains, “perceptions of gender are embedded in understandings of race and class, undermining the idea that violence against women is ‘solely’ based on the oppression of women” (Inequality, Normative Violence, & Livable Life 12). Even in a postcolonial context sexual violence is very often “facilitated by the idea of racial otherness, by the ingrained belief that indigenous women are ‘lesser’ human beings” (Boesten, “Analyzing Rape Regimes” 115). The Colonel’s treatment of the young girl that he has just captured only further serves to highlight the lesser status of indigenous woman. “Un lindo obsequio para mi hermosa Pepa,” he exclaims, “esa malvada que se divierte en dar tortura a las almas” (Gorriti 157).

Violence only further serves to degrade the human value of the indigenous subject, stripping her of social and economic agency. It should be noted that the socioeconomic ramifications of the indigenous woman’s violation are severe; she is thrown out of her community, losing access to all social and economic resources. Jelke Boesten contends that in order to evade the traumatic and socially damaging stigma of rape victims must somehow incorporate sexual violence according to pre-existing social norms. She explains, “the victim, the victim’s community, and society more

broadly can perceive and frame such violence within existing norms and legislation that incorporate the rape and subordination of women as part of daily life” (Boesten, “Marrying Your Rapist” 8). Marriage between the rapist and the victim was the most obvious and convenient means of socially incorporating sexual violence.

However, this is not an option that the indigenous woman is afforded. Her rapist has fled and there is no one to marry. Unable to normalize sexual violation through marriage or any other viable social option the indigenous woman finds herself violently expelled from her community. Her father curses her and evicts her from her home, insisting “Tú eres una mujer infame; has deshonrado mis canas, y machando la casa de tu padre” (Gorriti 177). Not only is she unable to marry her rapist, she is unable to marry anyone at all. She deems herself unworthy of marriage to her betrothed, Esteban, lamenting “Desde ese día ya no quise verte y huía de ti... y te dije: Esteban, no puedo ya ser tu mujer. Y entonces te amaba más que nunca. Pero debíais creerme inconstante y liviana; y al despedirte de mi me arrojaste llorando una maldición” (Gorriti 177).

The indigenous woman is subsequently marginalized and pushed, quite literally, to the fringes of the nation, “huyendo como una fiera, de valle en valle, de montaña en montaña, desnuda, hambrienta, miserable” (Gorriti 178), until she eventually seeks refuge with a group of shepherds.

Yet without any kind of social or economic capital her prospects are tremendously limited and this limitation creates, in Butlerian philosophical terms, unintelligible life. As Boesten explains, echoing Butler, “One lives when intelligible by others, when recognized by wider society; we exist in a relational capacity. The relationality of life is the basis of any normative

framework through which the parameters within which our life becomes intelligible are defined.” (Boesten, “Inequality, Normative Violence, & Livable Life” 13). Without any kind of prospect of social incorporation the indigenous woman faces violent exclusion, only able to survive thanks to the generosity of the shepherds.

Thus normative structural violence reduces the life of the indigenous woman to an unintelligible state. In relation to the Foucauldian concept of biopolitical power and Butler’s concept of unintelligible life we might also consider the indigenous woman as representative of Agamben’s figure of homo sacer, the point at which bare life is concentrated. Reworking distinctions that both Aristotle and Hannah Arendt previously made between biological existence (zoe) and the political life of speech and action (bios), conceptualized as the difference between mere life and a good life, Agamben proposes the concept of bare life: life that cannot be sacrificed but can be killed (Agamben 12). The homo sacer is situated outside of law, or beyond it, outside the recognized terrain of valuable life. He is deprived of rights and the ability to participate in civil society. Agamben argues, “Bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (Agamben 12).

It can be argued that the indigenous woman functions as the homo sacer figure of “Si haces mal no esperes bien”, in that she exists outside the limits of the state and can be violated without impunity. Gorriti’s work however points out that this kind of structural exclusion does indeed have national consequences, though they might go unpunished in a legal realm. Ultimately, it is normative violence and the subsequent rendering of lives as meaningless that Gorriti takes issue with.

3. THE MESSIANIC MOMENT: THE INTERRUPTION OF HOMOGENOUS TIME & REDEMPTION

While a regime of violence is firmly established in “Si haces mal no esperes bien”, Gorriti implies that such a regime is inherently unsustainable, toxic to both the health and progress of the nation. Amelia’s arrival to Lima corresponds to an immediate sense of disorientation. She insists that her surroundings are familiar, that she has seen the mountains before. When Matilde, Guillermo’s sister, suggests that perhaps she is remembering the Alps or the Pyrenees Amelia insists, “No, no son tan puros sus perfiles... Sin embargo, mis pies han caminado por senderos agrestes como esos que serpentean en aquellas fragosas vertientes” (Gorriti 169).

Mental disorientation gives way to physical illness. The entire family (Amelia, Guillermo, Matilde, and the Coronel) leaves the city so that Amelia might rest and recuperate. In the Andes this disorientation only intensifies and Amelia eventually begins hallucinate. Following “una cadena interminable de alucinaciones” (Gorriti 172), figments of a repressed past begin to emerge. Gorriti writes:

Allá en el horizonte de sus recuerdos, veía alzarse un mundo fantástico, imposible; y al fijarse en él su mirada, desaparecía para mostrarse de nuevo. Otras veces eran extrañas intuiciones que le hacían decirse: Detrás de aquella colina hay un gran caserío entre dos establos. Y subía la colina con el corazón palpitante, y al llegar a su cima, quedábase yerta de asombro, encontrando el caserío y los establos, tales como los había soñado su imaginación. (172).

This physical illness and mental disorientation, however, is interrupted by a moment of clarity, in which Amelia and her mother are united. I propose that this reunion functions as a messianic moment, an emotionally intense moment of rupture in which past events are retrospectively given their historical meaning. Benjamin argues that the transformation of history does not occur in homogenous, empty time. Rather, it occurs in moments of *jetztzeit*, what Benjamin describes as moments of interruption. He writes, “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*jetztzeit*] (Benjamin 261). This messianic moment functions as the revolutionary moment in which linear, homogenous time is disrupted. It is fully immediate, “filled with the presence of the now,” as opposed to part of a flow running from past to present (Benjamin 261). It can be likened to an abrupt halt, such as pulling the emergency stop chord to halt its forward, linear motion.

This messianic reunion between mother and daughter ignites a resignifying of the text’s fundamental relationships: the young Frenchwoman is not French but a Peruvian *mestiza* from the Andean countryside, the loving and tender father is also a violent Colonel capable of atrocious abuse, and perhaps most significantly the young bride and groom are not only husband and wife but also brother and sister, a revelation which transforms their seemingly idyllic romantic relationship into one of perversity and incest. It is only with the messianic rupturing of lineal time that we understand the full significance of the significance of the Colonel’s violent past, and the true role of all of the characters involved.

Redemption is the second integral aspect of this messianic moment, in which the oppressed past is freed. The messianic moment cancels out past debts and complicities by “destroying the ability to enforce hierarchical exclusions and binary laws” (Benjamin 260). This reencounter between Amelia and her mother makes visible the Colonel’s legacy of violence and is accompanied by an inversion of normative power dynamics. The indigenous woman moves from a place of repression to one of visibility. After being raped by the Colonel the indigenous woman finds

incestuous union destroys the notion of the family as a “núcleo protector de la raza blanca” (Denegri 105). The Colonel’s actions not only end up destroying his own life, but also the life of his only male offspring, Guillermo. His son’s marriage is invalid and will not produce viable offspring. Cecilia exclaims, “Desventurado!... huye lejos de mí. ¿No comprendes? ¡Soy tu hermana!” (Gorriti 177). The Colonel has threatened the continuation of his lineage; he has disrupted, perhaps even destroyed, his son’s ability to continue the lineal progression of the family name. Progress has been halted in every possible way.

4. CONCLUSION: THE ETHICS OF THE NATION

The Colonel’s violence comes back to haunt him, quite literally. The Colonel not only jeopardizes his own status, success, and future but that of his son, of his familial lineage. His violent rape of an indigenous woman leads to an incestuous marriage, which of course will not lead to viable offspring and subsequently gravely threatens the natural, lineal progression of his lineage. As Mary Louise Pratt explains: “The legacy of colonial rape and abduction returns to haunt them all... Gorriti chooses to dramatize the intertwining of racial and cultural histories, not their polarization” (192). Of course, familial disruption juxtaposes national disruption. Gorriti’s point is clear: the normative violent behavior of the state is not only ethically condemnable it is also profoundly toxic. The violence the state exerts threatens and undermines the viability and stability of the nation, essentially rendering state violence auto destructive. Normative violence inhibits the progress the nation is supposed to facilitate.



Juana Manuela Gorriti immortalizada en una estampilla de la Argentina.

herself hidden and silenced, literally pushed to the fringes of the nation. Yet it is the indigenous woman’s voice that narrates this final section of the text, while the Colonel fades to the margins. At the end of the work it is the Colonel who finds himself pushed to the farthest fringes of nation; he is found dead in a ditch by a group of shepherds, crows feasting on his rotting body.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Amelia and Guillermo’s



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