"Fantasies of Catastrophe."

Politics and Race in the Early Novels of Julio Cortázar.

Introduction.

In the 1980s and 1990s a number of books emerged that the Argentine author Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) had either failed to publish or avoided publishing during his life.[i] They included two novels (*Divertimento* and *El examen*), a hybrid fiction purporting to be the diary of a character in the latter work (*Diario de Andrés Fava*) and a series of short stories (collated as *La otra orilla*). These works have offered fertile ground for readings of the development of his politics, and in particular for examinations of his relationship to the most important political movement of twentieth-century Argentina, Peronism. Carolina Orloff (2013) argues that Cortázar was always a political writer, and that his bourgeois anti-Peronism of the 1940s and 50s morphs into a later commitment to the revolutionary left. It is such readings that this paper intends to interrogate and develop.

Later in his career, Cortázar would downplay his engagement with politics in these early fictional works. He refused to take credit for the political acuity of *El examen* (Cortázar 2010b: 98), and insisted that the short story "Casa tomada," frequently read as allegory for Peronism, was based on a nightmare that pre-dated the political movement (2013: 64). And yet, it is the analytical acumen that can be found in realist aspects of these often fantastical works, rather than a particular commitment to a given stance or any deliberate political message, that ensures their continued potency as political fictions. Furthermore, recent research on race and racism in Argentina allow us to deepen our understanding of the author's politics with reference to these questions. Here it is our aim to explore and develop Ericka Beckman's recent assertion that Cortázar displays "racist […] assumptions embedded within his vision of universality" (2018).[ii] An examination of Cortázar's earlier work and his later reflections on it gives a strong insight into the relationship between class and race, how these elide and overlap, and how apparent class prejudice possesses racist underpinnings, in Argentine culture and politics.

Here some background on race and racism in Argentina is required. As Ignacio Aguiló notes, "race has historically shaped Argentina's discourses of national belonging and difference" (2018: loc. 30.4). Through a historical process of "whitening," as much discursive as real, Argentina at once presents itself as "race-less" while racial inequalities have "contributed to the longevity of social hierarchies" (loc. 32.9). From the mid-twentieth century onwards, "middle-class *Porteño* [i.e. from Buenos Aires] racism was perceived mainly as a comment on workers' alleged vulgarity, unsophistication and lack of civility" (loc. 35.3). In this context, the term "*negro,*" found throughout Cortázar's early work, is especially thorny – note how the previous citation refers to *workers* rather than a particular racial group. In Argentina, *negro* "does not imply an African background but, like *cabecita negra* [a term of abuse and occasionally endearment for working class Peronists], unacceptable social behaviour linked to a provincial background and, implicitly, racial miscegenation" (loc. 36.5). A paradox exists, then, whereby race, class, gender and culture all form part of the social hierarchy, but race is erased while the "nation needs to be presented as homogeneous and cohesive.[…] The invisibility of race was combined with silence" (loc. 129.1). This situation becomes particularly acute under Perón, and with the growth of rural-urban migration: "racial and class anxieties [were] exacerbated […] especially amongst those *Porteños* who, to their horror, had to share the public space with the empowered popular sector" (loc. 130.3). This is especially apparent, as we shall see, in Cortázar's early fictions.

As Eduardo Elena and Paulina Alberto state in the introduction to their 2018 edited volume, "the idea that race is irrelevant or even foreign to Argentina has made it difficult for members of groups who feel targeted by racism or who claim ethnic or racial difference to have their concerns heard, respected, and addressed" (2018: 3). They ask, "What does it mean that Argentines refer to [a person] colloquially as *el negro*, even though his 'blackness' is not obvious to [non-Argentines]" (4-5). The authors note "the transformation of the word *negro*, in the early twentieth century, from an explicitly racial referent to a term used primarily to mark social class within the broad field of Argentine whiteness" (9). Two parallel processes occurred: "'negro' was unmoored from biological

references to African descent and extended more broadly onto working-class sectors and certain provincial populations"; and this drew upon "the longstanding association in Argentina between dark skin and low socioeconomic status" (9). As a result, "Commonly used Argentine epithets like 'negro' defy easy categorization as either terms of class or racial prejudice, nor do these local terminologies map neatly onto white-black (or white-indigenous) color lines and spectrums" (16).

In the same volume, Ezequiel Adamovsky observes that, in politics, "both President Hipólito Yrigoyen and Juan Perón's followers were discredited for being *negros*" (155-6). He notes that "people of African descent acquired a prominent place in Peronist visual culture" – belying their absence in official discourse (168); while "from Peronism's earliest days, critics set out to discredit this new political movement by means of racist explanation" (178). And thus,

> Perhaps one of the reasons for the extraordinary vitality of Peronism is precisely that (in spite of some of its leaders) it became a political channel for [the] desire for equality not just in terms of class but also of race and ethnicity. (180).[iii]

In Elena's contribution to the volume edited with Alberto, he notes that "race helped significantly to define Peronist/anti-Peronist oppositions over decades of intense political conflict" (Elena 2018: 185). Race, "decoupled from […] notions of biological descent […] acquired newfound power as a mass political category" (186). Elena notes that "expressions like 'negros peronistas' strike many non-Argentines as odd, while for Argentines they are perhaps too obvious" (205). Race in Argentina can thus be said to be "fundamentally political" (206), and "by the mid-1940s, skin and hair color and other supposed markers of race quickly took on a powerful political meaning" (189). In sum, there are genetic and biological aspects to class in Argentina, often masked by what seem or purport to be aesthetic judgments or acts of cultural discernment.

It is worth drawing on other literary examples, some contemporary to Cortázar, others more recent, to offer further context. In José Bianco's 1941 novel, *Sombras suele vestir*, we read a reference to a "negro tucumano" servant (2013: 75), apparently of Afro-Argentine heritage.[iv] In Manuel Mujica

Láinez's tale of slavery and revenge, "La pulsera de cascabeles" (from the 1964 collection *Misteriosa Buenos Aires*), the narrator describes a black slave – in Spanish, "negro" – as "ágil como un simio" (2017: 109); in a curious echo of Cortázar's story of the same name, there is also a reference to a "perseguidor" (see below). Elsewhere in the collection, terms such as "negro" and "negrito" apply explicitly to Afro-Argentines, often enslaved persons and their immediate descendants. In contrast, Jorge Asís writes in his 1981 novel *Carne picada* of "Indalecio Martínez Real, un negro guapo y violentamente servil que hasta podía acceder con sus negritos [i.e. his children] a la pileta" (2016: 292) – with no implication of obvious Afro-Argentine connections. As these examples demonstrate, class prejudice and racism work together, thoroughly intermingled. Cortázar offers us a highly revealing case study of this intermingling, this interaction, as it emerges in the mid-century.

Divertimento, La otra orilla, and "El perseguidor": Class and Race in Argentina.

Divertimento was Cortázar's first fully-fledged long prose fiction, written in his mid-30s, when he was still a mostly unrecognized author, and is dated "Buenos Aires, Carnaval de 1949." It offers a clear way into the racial and class-outlook of Cortázar's earliest stage as an author: in short, that forms of political rebellion are marked by overlapping class and racial prejudices. Its completion coincides with something like the height of Peronist hegemony in Argentina. The novel captures a particular milieu, that of bohemian Buenos Aires in the 1940s, though it clearly bears witness to the author's time as a university lecturer in Mendoza, a city mentioned on more than one occasion in the novel. The characters are a set of artists, students, and young people, who spend their time in intellectual conversations, trivial pastimes, and the occasional adventure in the supernatural. We see here a prototype of the "Club de la serpiente" from *Rayuela* (1963), "la zona" in *62/Modelo para armar* (1968), or later "la joda," its politicized version in *Libro de Manuel* (1973): pseudo- or artificial families, with all their sexual tension and artistic rivalries, which Cortázar created throughout his career.

Yet the backdrop to *Divertimento* includes also a strong sense of political – rather than emotional or artistic – failure. The group were together during the struggles of 1945, against the military and

political right wing who had dominated the national scene after the fall of liberalism at the end of the 1920s, with the coup against *Radical* president Hipólito Yrigoyen. These were also battles against nascent Peronism, which emerged from within the military but began to incorporate unions and the working class, whom Perón had courted as Minister of Labour. The narrator speaks of "nuestro antifarrelismo" (1988: 59), a reference to the right-wing military dictator of the early 1940s, General Edelmiro Farrell; his fist fights with members of the ultra-right wing (later Peronist-sympathising) Alianza Nacionalista (122); and the "derrota posterior y la servil decadencia que se siguió [que] nos mantuvo juntos pero entregados solamente a nosotros" (59). The narrator laments his subsequent passivity, something he thinks that will be justly punished when communism, "inevitably," comes to take over (104). His "renuncia a la acción," and more broadly the "cobardía de la Generación del 40" will be rightly condemned, just as the "romanos viendo pasar los bárbaros" are derided by history.[v] That term – "barbarians" – nods to a defining text of Argentine letters, Domingo F. Sarmiento's *Civilización y barbarie. Vida de Facundo Quiroga* (1845) and, thus, seems to translate the rise of Peronism into terms inherited from Sarmiento: Juan Manuel de Rosas, the dictator of the 1840s, is reborn in Perón a century later. In Mendoza Cortázar had been one of the main speakers at an homage to Sarmiento at the University (as recorded by Jaime Correas). It is telling that Narciso, the spiritualist medium and the narrator's antagonist in *Divertimento*, is known to call up the ghost of Facundo Quiroga during séances (Cortázar 1988: 66-7). The intellectuals and the bohemians of the novel are like a degraded version of the *unitarios* of the 1830s and 40s, while the Peronist masses are the uncultured *federales*, *gauchos* and *mazorqueros* who supported the dictator.

The reference to "barbarians" – with its etymology rooted in ethnic and linguistic otherness – also draws attention to the mostly unspoken question of race in the novel. There are, though, a number of telling references. Many of these are musical: the Black US singers Lena Horne (Cortázar 1988: 32) and Ethel Waters (49) both appear, the latter referred to in terms of her "voz negra" by the character Laura.[vi] There is a reference to a Brazilian song featuring a "mulato" (and another character is obsessed with Brazilian stamps), while the narrator is a fan of "boogie woogie."

Blackness, at least in terms of African heritage, is mostly seen as existing elsewhere, where it is often exoticised. At the same time, unspoken class prejudices exist: a casual reference to "una sirvienta" – who remains anonymous (95); or the faceless and nameless "patota" who insult the narrator, calling him a "pituco" (96). Most notable, however, is the throwaway remark from the narrator, disgruntled after an unsatisfactory phone conversation, that "Me fui puteando como un negro a mi mesa" (1988: 96). In the later novel *El examen*, characters reflect on the link between swearing/cursing and national character; here there is simply an association between bad language and being "negro"; the crossing of class (cultural) prejudice and racism – in this case towards a non-specified and likely darker-skinned other – is clear.

A number of Cortázar's earliest works – like these novels, also not published at the time of their completion – portray problematic or troubling attitudes towards racial difference, a racial difference mixed up with questions of class, culture and aesthetics. In the early collection of short fiction, *La otra orilla*, the story "Las manos que crecen" includes a sequence in which the protagonist, suffering from mysteriously growing hands, hails a taxi. "Había un negro en el volante" (2008: 31), the narrator tells us, *apropos* of nothing. Later, the narrator describes the driver as "el servicial negro." Another story in the collection, "Bruja," includes a reference to "la negrita servienta" (87), perhaps adding the detail that was missing in *Divertimento* (see above) but which repeats in *Los premios* (see below). In both cases, there is a vague air of contempt in the narration, but it is not clear precisely what we are to understand by the racial epithet. For the term "*negro,*" as we have seen above, takes on very specific yet often rather slippery meanings in Argentina; these are often linked to class-prejudice that, curiously, elides its own racial aspects – the combination of "invisibility […] silence [and] horror" described by Aguiló (loc. 129.1) and examined above.

In this regard it is enlightening to examine the character of Bruno, the narrator of Cortázar's important 1958 short story "El perseguidor" (2010a: 141-206), not least because of what this reveals about music in Cortázar, in particular music by US artists of colour, along similar lines to what we

find in the novels.[vii] Bruno, loosely based on the writer and jazz critic Boris Vian (Moran 2017: 1610, n.21), discusses his biography of the brilliant but self-destructive jazz saxophonist Johnny Carter, a clear cipher for the real-life Charlie Parker. Bruno, whose self-interest and conceitedness become ever more apparent over the course of the tale, dedicates a series of insulting epithets to the subject of his work – whom ostensibly he admires greatly in musical terms – based on Carter's race (like Parker, he is US African-American). More specifically, it is Carter's resemblance to one or another non-human primate that catches Bruno's eye. Carter is described as appearing "como un chimpancé" (2010a: 150); "como un mono en el zoo" (155); as "ese chimpancé enloquecido" (179) – whose music makes Bruno sick at times; "el chimpancé que quiere aprender a leer" (182); a "mono salvaje" (191); and later as possessing a "pobre inteligencia" (165) or a low "edad mental" (192).[viii] At the same time, there is obvious overlap between Bruno's ideas about jazz as a form of permanent, ever-frustrated search – "Incapaz de satisfacerse, […] un acicate continuo" (167) and Cortázar's own aesthetic theory, his hybrid of romanticism and surrealism, as examined in his long study *Examen de John Keats*, a theory that he referred to as "poetismo" (see also *Cartas I*, 322).

While one cannot simply and neatly ascribe Bruno's odious prejudice to Cortázar the man, what is striking is the author's willingness to explore his own contradictory, even unpalatable, feelings around race in this and other works – evidence for which we find away from his fiction. Cortázar was not always as politically correct as he would come to be in later years; a scan through his letters finds the odd racist joke (e.g. *Cartas IV,* 57, 1969); or the remark in another letter from 1964 that "el box ha muerto" with Cassius Clay's capture of the world heavyweight title (*Cartas II*), as he compared the African-American champion unfavourably to the Argentine defensive master, "the untouchable" Nicolino Locche.[ix] While ostensibly Cortázar's fundamental political problem, which one sees in most pronounced fashion in his epistolary exchanges with representatives of the Cuban revolution like Roberto Fernández Retamar, was with the idea of party discipline, at odds with the perception of the writer as instinctively a rebel, aesthetically he was repelled by the art and culture of Peronism, as well as forms of cultural nationalism that it came to espouse. This manifests itself in

a certain distaste or even snobbery in the early novels, no matter how much we might like to distance Cortázar from his characters and creations – a distance that later in life he was quite happy to close, acknowledging that these fictional racial and class prejudices came from deep within himself, as we shall see below.

Thus a combination of class-derived and race-based unease and prejudice might in part help to explain the downbeat ending of *Divertimento*. The narrator, el Insecto, seeming to despair of the society around him, abandons the gang and sends the head of a dead cat in a box as a memento to two of its members, in a sequence that recalls both the hellish ending of *Brighton Rock* by Graham Greene (an author mentioned elsewhere in the novel [1988: 59]) and a later, more humorous reworking in Cortázar's own *62/Modelo para armar* (1968). In Francis Mulhern's terms (2016), we would see culture – the literary and artistic culture informed by Romanticism and the avant-gardes, as espoused by members of the gang (and Cortázar himself in his non-fiction writings from the period) – overthrown or turned obsolete by political circumstances and social change. Race, we might add, is an unacknowledged motive here.

Race and Politics in *El examen*.

El examen (1950/1986) tells the story of another group of mostly bohemian friends, on the eve of the titular exam, wandering the streets of a Buenos Aires that is at once wholly recognisable and utterly strange. Firstly, the recognisable: cafés, buildings, transport systems, language, are all as one might expect from a 1940s Argentine realist novel. But at the same time the city is made alien: there is a mysterious fog and strange mushrooms or fungi are appearing; pieces of lint, or possibly dust mites, hover in the air; and there are outbreaks of fire, explosions, and irruptions of violence. All this is linked to a political backdrop, only hinted at, with echoes of contemporary real life, in which characters reveal their own class and racial prejudices.

Juan and Clara, a middle-class student couple, are due to sit their final university exam (a situation Cortázar knew well himself, as a lecturer, as outlined in Correas [2004]) and are avoiding last minute

revision by hanging out in cafés, drinking, chatting, and attending a concert at the Teatro Colón. When they finally make it to the University, there are only porters ("bedeles") present, and groups of seemingly uneducated young *porteños* milling around. The exam, in the end, is cancelled and diplomas are handed out to all and sundry while the cowardly lecturer hides in a café across the road: a complete farce, and one which echoes Cortázar's own travails teaching at Cuyo University in Mendoza. On the street, a riot breaks out, with a number of deaths. Much of this takes place while Juan carries around a very large cauliflower, of which he is especially and inexplicably proud. The city, meanwhile, is sinking, and it seems that some sort of disaster is set to ensue.

Here we have a typical Cortázar group – of bohemians, students, frustrated rebels, as seen throughout his novels, from the early posthumously published works through to *Libro de Manuel* and beyond – in a setting that is at once highly realistic and thoroughly strange, passing through a series of set-pieces, many of which are quite bizarre, but all of which have a connection to the real Argentina of the late 1940s, with references to contemporary politics, education, and culture. There are moments of violence and horror along the way: the group witnesses some "paisanos" apparently torturing a child in a strange exorcism; towards the end of the novel, a railway worker sweeps a stray dog under a moving train, to the shock and disgust of Clara. Critics have linked the novel's formal features to the Peronist political backdrop. Patrick O'Connor, in his analysis of *El examen*, highlights the use of fragments in the novel, in the disconnected incidents that make up the night's peregrinations, the cross-cutting dialogue, and the use of "words out of context" (1995: 23). The intellectuals and bohemians are thus shown as radically disconnected from their environment, and at times genuinely fearful – not just paranoid. O'Connor opines that Cortázar "will not redeem Peronist Buenos Aires […] he concludes in a tradition that feels that History happens only in Europe" (28). This is why the characters seem stuck, doomed, or obliged to leave. But as we shall see below, there are aspects to this existential malaise that go beyond just intellectual concerns.

In the foreword, written several years after the initial composition of the novel, Cortázar talks of the work as a "fábula sin moraleja" and of its "melancolía porteña" (1996: 13). He notes that "la pesadilla de donde nació sigue despierta y anda por las calles" (13). There are in the novel several telling references to history, some more cryptic than others. As the group are about to enter the shrine that is central to the cult of popular religiosity that seems to have overwhelmed Buenos Aires, they are warned that the floor is slippery; the term used is "refaloso" (Cortázar 1996: 77). "La refalosa," or "Slippery Dance," was an infamous form of torture practiced under the Rosas regime; it was immortalised in verse in Hilario Ascasubi's composition of the same name, in which a gloating *mazorquero* (one of Rosas's enforcers) mocks his captured enemy, stretched out and "played" like a violin, only with a blade not a bow, slipping around in their own blood. It is hard to believe that Cortázar's choice of adjective is pure chance. At the same time, Ascasubi's poem marks the *mazorquero* (thug or torturer) as radically other in linguistic, cultural, class and, implicitly, racial terms – a barbarian, in short.

In Cortázar's foreword to the novel he also acknowledged a certain prophetic quality that it possessed; written in the late 1940s, it seemed to foretell the great public outpouring of grief on the death of Evita Perón in 1952 – indeed in a letter from 1952, Cortázar noted that several correspondents had labelled him a "profeta" (2010b: 98) for this very reason. In the shape of the mystical bone that the masses come to worship in the novel, we find *in nuce* the bizarre peregrinations of Evita's embalmed corpse. But Cortázar refused to take credit for making predictions about Argentina; the future was too clearly imprinted on the present already.

Orloff dedicates a chapter to these early novels as part of a wider argument about the development of politics in Cortázar's work. She takes issue with those who regard politics as a later addition to his writing; these critics see his trips to Cuba in the early 1960s, in the wake of the triumph of the revolution, as something of a damascene conversation. As a result they separate his work into two halves: the apolitical texts of the 40s, 50s, and early 1960s, in particular his imaginative short stories,

culminating, one might suggest, in *Rayuela*, a novel almost wholly devoid of political content and whose protagonist, Horacio Oliveira, expressly refuses an invitation to activism; and the political material after his Cuban conversion, in particular those stories, articles and even poems that support the revolutions in Cuba, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, while condemning right-wing dictatorships in particular in the Southern Cone. At the heart of this work would be stories such as "Recortes de prensa" (about dictatorial torture) or "Apocalipsis de Solantiname" (about military violence in Nicaragua) and, above all, Cortázar's attempt at a political novel, *Libro de Manuel* (1973), about activism and armed struggle among Latin American exiles in Paris. Mario Goloboff, for example, claims that Cuba was his "bisagra fundamental" (1999: 298); Peter Standish (1997) also recounts this conversion narrative.

Orloff, on the contrary, argues that "politics was present in Cortázar's fiction from his very first writings" (iii). She sees the idea of a pre-/post-Cuba split as something promoted by Cortázar himself, in interviews and other texts (his letters and open letters, for example, to members of the Cuban revolutionary establishment). To give one example, in conversation with González Bermejo, he said, "La revolución cubana me despertó a la realidad de América Latina; fue cuando, de una indignación meramente intelectual, pasé a decirme: 'hay que hacer algo'" (1978: 117); a similar version can be found in his Berkeley lectures from 1980 (2013: 23). Such comments have the effect of downplaying his early anti-Peronism. In contrast, Orloff highlights "his continuous evolution from the anti-Peronist petit bourgeois to the committed socialist intellectual" (2013: 3).

To give some detail, in 1945, from 4 October to the early morning of 10 October, Cortázar, with his fellow lecturers and students, took part in a protest occupation at the Universidad de Cuyo, Mendoza, against the government of the day and in particular against the ongoing intervention of the University, alongside the failure to normalise senior appointments through elections.[x] The latter had been a tenet of the university reforms of 1918, but these had not been put into place at the Universidad de Cuyo. During the protest, the University was in effect under siege from the police for

five days (Correas 2004: 83). Eventually, notice was served, the doors were battered down, and Cortázar and his fellow protestors were arrested and jailed. With the arrest of Perón himself, on 12 October 1945, Cortázar and his colleagues were released. Mass protests – the famous 17 October rallies, today commemorated by Peronists as Loyalty Day – saw Perón freed, and he swept to power in elections the following year.

Cortázar resigned his post, refusing, as he said, "to take his jacket off," a way of saying that he would not accept proposed reforms and what he saw as the victimization of non-Peronists in the university establishment. Correas sketches Cortázar's curious political position. Despite his participation in the strike, Cortázar was re-elected to his post and had managed to gain both friends and enemies on both sides of Unión Democrática/Peronist debate; "La irrupción del peronismo había partido la sociedad en dos y él no encajaba con comodidad en ninguno de los sectores" (2004: 112). Correas records that Cortázar even approved of some of the sackings in subsequent Peronist purges, as they removed poor-quality academics who had benefitted from patronage under the old system (2004: 88). One might argue that Cortázar's eventual resignation was as much to do with the chaotic state of the University, and also with the possibility of a job in Buenos Aires running the Argentine Book Chamber, as it was to do with a particular political stance.

Nevertheless, Peronism was always problematic for Cortázar. Orloff writes, "this temporary subversion of the existing social order, which saw public space in the hands of the working classes, is at the centre of Cortázar's *El examen*" (15); what we can now add to Orloff's assessment is the racial aspect of this subversion and Cortázar's characters – and likely his own – reaction to it. Perón's abolition of tuition fees, his democratization of higher education, running hand in hand with the resignation or removal of many anti-Peronist lecturers, is the implicit background to the exam that Juan, Carla, and the others are sitting in the novel. Orloff writes of the "nationalization" of culture that took place under Peronism (34), as the middle and upper-classes were displaced from traditional environments such as the Teatro Colón, portrayed in riotously comic fashion in *El*

examen, with a fight breaking out over the use of a shared comb. We see the intellectuals' "physical revulsion" (47) at the masses – another example of the refusal to "share the public space with the empowered popular sector" (Aguiló 2018: loc. 130.3). As Rodolfo Borello notes, "varios cuentos suyos son excelentes testimonios de la actitud de los liberales frente al peronismo" (1991: 151), marked by "la pintura racista y denigrativa" of darker-skinned Argentines (151), but at the same time also by "la peculiar ambigüedad cortazariana" (152). Orloff talks of the "sense of invasion [of the university] from the point of view of the middle-class protagonists" (20). Should we not also add *white* in that description? In a letter from July 1945, Cortázar wrote of "la invasión de nuevos seres que forzosamente van ingresando en nuestra vida" (*Cartas I*, 227).

In *El examen*, there are a number of racial remarks and comments. One character is referred to by another, "el cronista," as a "chino mental" (1996: 86). The "puteadas" mouthed by the working classes chosen for analysis include "negro e'mierda ([*sic*] 86). Charlie Parker, fictionalised in "El perseguidor" as we have seen, receives a passing mention (99). Most notably, the narrator refers to a "negro enorme" (194) seen whistling on the street – one character, Clara, is particular shocked as the tune is from a ballet by Igor Stravinsky (*Petrushka*). There is no further clarification of what the epithet means here in racial terms, but it is revealing of a casual and unexamined prejudice held by characters. The linked text, *Diario de Andrés Fava* (1995), includes references both to a "negro" (43) boxer and to a "*negro spiritual*" [*sic*, in English] (81), repeating the pattern identified, above, in *Divertimento*, of distance and exoticisation.

It is not, Orloff argues, that Cuba made Cortázar into a political writer; it is rather that Cuba changed the focus of his already political writings. Cortázar, though, was suspicious of Peronism throughout his career. In a letter from 1955, the year of the coup against Perón, he wrote about "los negros Peronachos" (*Cartas* II, 70); part of his reluctance to return to Argentina in the 1970s was down to his fear of Peronist reprisals, as we see in a number of letters to friends and family from the period. Problematic feelings about class and race cross in this statement, alongside Cortázar's political

concerns. In a letter from 1964, Cortázar put his differing attitudes to the two mass movements, Peronism and the Cuban revolution, down to intellectual, if not aesthetic, questions: "Los mejores, los más lúcidos escritores y artistas cubanos apoyan la revolución [cubana], y basta ir a Cuba para verificarlo. Si en 1945 el peronismo hubiera contado con un apoyo análogo, yo hubiera sido peronista" (Cartas 2: 628-9). As Plotkin and others have sketched, Peronism itself tried to change the role of the intellectual. It also attempted to democratize or at least open up those spaces associated with high culture and art, actions mocked in *El examen* (for example in the laughable scenes of confused literary declamation that take place in "la Casa") and elsewhere in Cortázar's *oeuvre*, as in "La banda" – texts notable for their aesthetic repulsion towards the masses, what Borello calls a "resentimiento clasista" (1991: 181, n.10). Furthermore, we must entertain the possibility that Cortázar's intellectual disdain for Peronism finds a corollary in his works in both class-based and racial wariness towards the Argentine masses.

In his assessment of Cortázar's relationship to Peronism, Carlos Gamerro argues that we find two versions of the opposition between "them and us" in his novels: the first is "más que social, metafísica," between the middle classes and the proletariat, the second of which is, in some cases, (as in the story "Casa tomada") un-representable; the second is between the intellectual-artist and the bourgeois philistine. The vanguard group in his novels is one that invites the reader to join it, to become part of the "us" against the "them." Elsewhere, Gamerro also notes the extent to which the anti-Peronist sentiment expressed in Cortázar's work, for example in both *El examen* and the short story "Las puertas del cielo," is in effect a form of visceral racism (2015: 174-5); he cites in particular what can only really be called Juan's rant about his hatred, based on "piel" and "sangre," towards the members of the working class he sees around him in Buenos Aires (Cortázar 1996: 110). Those terms are key in a society that fashions itself, as we have seen, as racially homogenous and non-racist. Although Gamerro condemns the attitude expressed in the fictions (and is far from flattering about *El examen* in literary terms), he praises Cortázar's later willingness to admit that these stories vocalised his own troubled and troubling feelings, his self-confessed "actitud realmente de

antiperonista blanco" (Cortázar, cited in Gamerro 2015: 173) as "valiente" (Gamerro 2015: 175). What is striking, as Gamerro notes, is that in later years Cortázar would not ascribe these racist attitudes to fictional characters – the easy way out for a writer, one might argue – but instead accepted that they were the products of his own prejudices, which he expressed and explored in fiction.

Los premios: Allegory and Analysis.

Cortázar's proper first novel, published in 1960, is *Los premios*. There is no need here to rehash the plot, other than to say that it tells the story of a randomly chosen yet socially representative group of Argentines aboard a seemingly un-captained boat, a section of which, suspiciously, is closed to passengers. It has been read by many commentators as a political allegory for the nation as a whole. In his epilogue, though, Cortázar denied that the novel was allegorical. Chapman sees this disavowal as disingenuous (32) – one should not read the novel innocently, he insists. Some (e.g. Goloboff 1999) read the novel as an allegory for the "developmentalism" of President Frondizi in the late 1950s. The latter became president in elections in which Peronism was banned from standing, a compromise agreement by which the military ceded power to politicians, but without risking the very likely triumph of Peronism.[xi] The captain-less ship in which something unspeakable and monstrous is hidden away in the stern would be Argentina, run by a president no one particularly supports, and in which the major political party is locked away, like the mysterious forces the passengers are forbidden from seeing.

Part of the problem with Goloboff and others' reading is that the dates do not work: Frondizi was elected in 1958, the same year the book was completed. No doubt the book evinces wider disillusionment with Argentine politics – one character describes Buenos Aires as having been "tierra de nadie" for years (360). But we could also point to the seemingly all-controlling government, the prohibition of communism and anarchism, the presence of security services, secret police, and other state agents, and the distribution of luxurious prizes without apparent reference to merit or need, as alluding to the supposed totalitarian nature either of Peronism or the dictatorship that succeeded it

after the military coup of 1955, perhaps depending on the political affiliations of the reader in question.

Orloff insists that *Los premios*, despite being written almost ten years after *El examen* and the other "anti-peronist" works, "like them – allegorizes the Argentina of the first government of Perón" (4). She argues that the novel focuses on Peronism's "detrimental effects" on Argentina (197). She talks of the importance of solidarity and "responsabilidad humana" as themes in the novel (56); the world of *Los premios* is less starkly divided, less them-and-us (57). Many of the passengers have revolutionary instincts, yet the only character who proclaims himself a socialist, Lucio, is one of the least rebellious, and most willing to believe the stories the passengers are told so as not, figuratively, to rock the boat. Lucio, in a way, stands in direct contrast to the worldly-wise dentist Medrano, who is apolitical, bored, and drifts through life, yet is willing to risk everything to save a friend's child. Orloff sees Medrano, the reader of Miguel Ángel Asturias' novel *Hombres de maiz* (1949), as a potential "hombre nuevo." In one of his interior monologues, Medrano talks of abandoning the "hombre viejo" that walked out on his girlfriend Bettina (2007: 450). However, in its context in the passage, this feels like more of an emotional or relational change than a political one. It would be extraordinarily proleptic, even for Cortázar, to hit upon this phrase more than half a decade before the publication of Che Guevara's writings on the "hombre nuevo," and indeed before Guevara had won anything like the public renown that he would enjoy in the 1960s. Cortázar does display in this novel a more generous outlook, or in Orloff's phrase "humanistic understanding of the collective" (66) than in the earlier novels, perhaps given the distance with which one can view Peronism after its fall and prohibition in 1955 – and with Cortázar's move to France. We find, rather than the divisions of *El examen*, the "descubrimiento de mi prójimo" (Cortázar cited in Orloff 2013: 68).

Diana Sorensen discusses the author's attempts to reconcile "his desire to produce cultural forms of accessible consumption with his almost messianic conception of the intellectual as the outsider who can approach the revelation of transcendence from the privileged locus of distance and isolation"

(2007: 79). Many of his texts, she argues, deal with "the impossibility of belonging" (85). But *Los premios* is, in her opinion, about "the possibilities of social formations" and the "alliances" that characters form (86). Sorensen reads the novel in allegorical key: the ship without its captain is "Argentina as the ship of state with no one at the helm" (87). There is a sort of chess game taking place on board, as outlined in Persio's first monologue, and the rules "are structured along the divisions of class" (87). Sorensen argues that the lower classes act in the novel, at least initially, "as a foil, a negative reference point" (87). The portrayal of the *señoras* and *doñas*, with their social mores, gossip, and nicknames, shows them operating as antagonists to the freewheeling Paula and her freethinking friends. In Sorensen's assessment, we thus have one educated, engaging, attractive group of characters, and another rather less so. "Yet," she continues, "as the action unfolds, it becomes clear that as a social formation, the group on board is ineffective" (91). For Sorensen, Atilio (El Pelusa), the most developed working-class character, "is a noble savage of sorts, quite oblivious to the social anxieties that mark the rest of his class" (88). That term – savage – has important links to racial questions in the novel.

In her study of the novel, Punte (2007) also sees *Los premios* as an allegorical work, in particular given the presence of representatives of so many sectors of Argentine society aboard the boat. She regards the novel as part of "un giro hacia una imagen más risueña, es decir, sin la virulencia de otros textos como 'Las puertas del cielo' o 'La banda'" – and one might add *El examen* to that list. It is worth mentioning that the novel is often light-hearted, even funny; one thinks of the sequence in which, after a particularly torrid night alone, the sex-hungry teenager Felipe finds the next evening that his mother has rather knowingly laid out for him a new pair of pyjamas and some clean handkerchiefs. Punte goes so far as to see a certain "autocrítica" in the novel, via the portrayal of the intellectual characters, and also in the "transformación espiritual" that seems to affect the likes of Medrano and Atilio. The novel shows a lack of trust in "las autoridades estatales" – the agents, the crew, and the inspector at the end. The state, at the conclusion of the novel, falsifies events and covers up the scandal. The set-up is, one should recall, quite bizarre, relying as it does on there being

an almost miraculously all-powerful government. In the novel there is a contrast between the society we see and, "una aspiración a una sociedad de 'puertas abiertas'." But the important ambivalence, one not mentioned by Punte, is whether the allegory is for Peronism, post-Peronism, or something else. As the critic concedes, the novel has no direct reference to the political situation on land, other than there being a powerful, munificent, bureaucratic and somewhat threatening government in power. Faced with faceless authority, as it were, an ethical demand is made of characters, in particular when the weak – the child Jorge – are at risk.

So is the novel an allegory? As Gamerro notes, Peronism lends itself to allegorization, as a law passed in March 1956 made it illegal to mention the deposed President or his dead wife (Gamerro 2010: 84). But one might argue, instead, that *Los premios* is more analytical than allegorical. Here it is productive to look at the character of El Pelusa, and his transformation from a figure of fun, a sort of neo-*costumbrista* oik, a comic embodiment of the crudity, ignorance and slangy speech of the working classes, into a dynamic, even heroic man of action, one who is in the end gladly welcomed into the hip crowd of López *et al*. El Pelusa is framed as a comic character, not least because of his strong accent and the similarly relaxed speech of his circle: "¡Che, a ver si atienden un poco! Mama mía, este local es propiamente la escomúnica" (2007: 52), with the educated López commenting ironically on the "Soltura envidiable de esa gente" (53). Later, one of El Pelusa's friends remarks, "Que se tenemo de ir" (55) – another ultra-colloquial phrase, redolent of the uneducated speech heard – and often mocked – in the earlier novel, *El examen*. Conversely, an observation in free indirect style emerging from El Pelusa's circle mocks the "pitucos" who frequent a certain café, a reference seen earlier in *Divertimento* (above).

It is interesting to note the racial categorization of El Pelusa – despite his mop of red hair – in that there is no little overlap with Bruno's classification of Johnny Carter in "El perseguidor," for example when he appears at the ship's fancy dress party wearing a gorilla mask. Apes have a negative connotation throughout the novel: the burly sailor on board is imagined by Raúl as "el gorila con el

tatuaje en el brazo" (2007: 308); and there is a further reference by López to the threatening possibility of a cargo of "gorilas" being found in the stern (2007: 257). Atilio's at times absurd, at times bestial appearance, and clear lack of education, are what makes his conversion into an heroic figure, accepted by the middle-class characters, all the more noteworthy. The links to racial questions in the novel echo, but develop, Cortázar's earlier work. The Trejo family, for example, employ a maid, who does not join them on board, referred to by all as "La Negrita" (e.g. p50); this was the detail perhaps missing in *Divertimento.* Her precise heritage is not specified, illustrative of Aguiló and others' analysis, above.

The political shifts in Cortázar's novel, one might argue, reflect a realization that there can be no revolution – and not least in Argentina, after Peronism – or even a revolt, without the working classes. Alongside this appears an often-damning portrait of the middle classes. Restelli, the pretentious and snobby teacher, is negatively framed because of his antisemitism, or rather his denial that his obvious prejudice is anti-Semitic: "El *Gelria* [a tourism scam] era cosa de agencias, probablemente judías […]. No es que yo sea antisemita, le hago notar enfáticamente, pero hace años que vengo notando la infiltración de esa raza tan meritoria, si usted quiere, por otros conceptos." (15).[xii] What attracts Cortázar is precisely rebellion, for politics across the board has become disreputable; the schoolteacher López recalls the comment from one of his history students: if a century ago everyone was so noble, "¿Qué carajo pasa hoy?" (354). In this sense, one might descry a foreshadowing of the cries of "¡Que se vayan todos!" that sound-tracked protests in the run-up to the political collapse of 2001, and in which Argentina anticipated other global uprisings against the status quo.[xiii]

Los premios ends in death and disappointment, and a rather downbeat conclusion to the cruise. But in the wake of the cross-class rebellion by Medrano, López, El Pelusa and others, the conservative sectors on the boat bare their teeth. Perhaps most strikingly, we hear the opinion of the ever-so correct Señora de Trejo, who in the wake of Medrano's death, announces that the rebels should all

have been killed: "¡Deberían haberlos matado a todos!" she cries (470). Here, digging down into petit-bourgeois conservatism, Cortázar detects the ability of ordinary citizens to support the violence of the state and its representatives. The author identifies, almost twenty years ahead of history, what Guillermo O'Donnell called the "vulgata procesista"(Lorenz 2005; Vezzetti 2003): those upstanding middle-class citizens who were only too happy to ignore, tacitly approve of, and even cheer on the violence unleashed against the youthful rebels of the 1970s by the civic-military dictatorship. To rework Karl Marx's famous formula (1983: 287), the farce of Cortázar's novel was to play out in real life as tragedy.[xiv]

Conclusion.

In these early novels, Cortázar writes acutely perceptive studies of Argentine urban society in the 1940s and 50s. It is not evident that Cortázar ever quite gets to the heart of Peronism, yet he is less prejudiced than, for example, Borges or other members of the *Sur* group, or even Rodolfo Walsh, in his early writings, pre-*Operación Masacre*. His willingness to self-analyse via fiction is revealing of the mind-set of an important section of the Argentine middle class. As Arturo Jauretche writes,

> [L]a conmoción que produjo [la revolución de 1943] en la sociedad porteña polarizó la mayoría de la clase media alta, parte de la burguesía y la casi totalidad de la "intelligentzia" situada económica y socialmente en la clase media […]. Porque allí se quebraron las tablas de valores culturales que aquellos sectores consideraban inamovibles e identificadas con la naturaleza del país. (1984: 297)

Cortázar's early novels emerge from this crisis of values. Returning to Orloff's analysis, we can add the following: to say that Cortázar's anti-Peronism is simply another way of being political is too general; an analysis of the portrayal of race in these early works adds important detail to our understanding both of Cortázar's work and the wider cultural context in Argentina. To shift from anti-Peronism to left-wing revolution, as Cortázar did, is still a migration on the political spectrum, not least given that even as Peronism – or at least parts of it, and not least the youth and intellectual sectors – migrated to the political left, Cortázar remained suspicious of it, even if it simply could not be avoided (as his characters discuss in his 1973 novel, *Libro de Manuel*). And his error is productive,

given his attention to the rest of society, and in particular the bourgeois and intellectual circles he knew so well.

It is Cortázar's ability to pose questions and to challenge received wisdom that lend particular value to his political writings, rather than the position that they might espouse, even if it is marked by "a pessimism mounting to fantasies of catastrophe" (Mulhern 2016: 156). Here we see his lasting ambivalence, with its class-based and racist facets, towards Peronism, alongside his constant willingness to explore and interrogate his own prejudices, including his problematic and revealing early attitudes to race in Argentina. These provide a further insight into the thorny and often overlooked link between race and politics in Argentina in the twentieth-century and beyond.

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Notes.

[i] A much earlier version of this paper was presented at Christ Church, Oxford, in November 2014, as part of the event "Cortázar at 100," organised by Dominic Moran. I am grateful to Dr Moran for the invitation to speak, as well as to members of the public and other participants, in particular Stephen Boldy and Peter Standish, for their questions and comments. Carlos Gamerro has been an indispensable interlocutor for the development of my ideas about Cortázar's work. Analía Gerbaudo read an earlier draft and was more than generous with her comments and suggestions. I am also grateful for anonymous reviewer comments on an earlier draft. All errors are my own.

[ii] Beckman is referring to the polemic between José María Arguedas and Cortázar over the position of exiles and exilic writing in Latin America, and the latter's assumption that "Greek myth is 'universal' while the Andean *quena* (a clear jab at Arguedas) is folkloric and self-enclosed."

[iii] One might add that, alongside its "vitality," Peronism also continues to inspire intense animus from its opponents and detractors – or "odio," to use the word that gave the title to Arturo Jauretche's near-legendary 1957 study, *Los profetas del odio*. For a more recent insight into the politics of hate, see Giorgi and Kiffer (2020).

[iv] One must remember that the racial composition of Buenos Aires and the Argentine south is very different from that of the north, in particular the Andean north-west.

[v] In his *Clases de literatura* (2013: 17), a lecture course Cortázar delivered at Berkeley, California, in 1980, he gives a version of his early political convictions that very much echoes the trajectory described by the narrator in *Divertimento*.

[vi] Horne is an interesting figure in this regard: an African-American civil rights activist, married to a white man, early in her career Horne was encouraged to downplay her Blackness. Moran (2017) includes a reflection on *albayalde*, or white lead – an infamous skin-whitener – in Cortázar's "El perseguidor." See also Roberts (2019) for a detailed exploration of the significance of jazz and other musical styles in Cortázar's work.

[vii] On the importance of this story, and critical assessment thereof, see Moran (2017).
[viii] A zoological note: strictly, a chimpanzee is an ape rather than a monkey. This distinction is lost on Bruno.
[ix] A similar boxing reference, to the "negro" thrashing the "ario puro" can be found in *Diario de Andrés Fava* (1995: 43).
[x] It was worth noting that the university has a long-standing reputation for conservatism as well as the strong presence of members of the Opus Dei on its campus.
[xi] In 1958 blank votes had "won" the presidential election (Halperín Donghi 1964: 88) and in the 1960s and early 70s spoilt or blank ballot papers, cast in protest at the prohibition of Peronist candidates, would often outperform the permitted political parties and their candidates in elections in Argentina; there is a reference to "voting in blank" in the 1966 short story "El otro cielo." The story also makes reference to the celebrations in Buenos Aires in 1945 to mark the German surrender; for the narrator-protagonist, a young member of the Argentine middle-classes (he works in finance and lives with his mother), "el pueblo se echó a la calle en Buenos Aires" (2004: 173). A somewhat different "pueblo" would sweep Perón to power the following year.
[xii] Here Cortázar could be seen to echo the work of the sociologist Arturo Jauretche, and his acute – and often very funny – analysis and critique of middle-class attitudes in Argentina, *El medio pelo en la sociedad argentina* (1966).
[xiii] And to take a step further, one might argue that Cortázar's exploration of the interface between race and class stereotypes is precisely the territory explored – in a very different fashion, and from a very different point of view – in the work of Washington Cucurto, not least in his reworking of Cortázar's short story "Casa tomada" as "Dama tocada" (in Cucurto 2009).
[xiv] Marx claims to be quoting Hegel but more likely was echoing Engels.