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Cutting off Cardiologists: The Disappeared in “Puro corazón” by Luisa Valenzuela

Abstract

Luisa Valenzuela’s neglected short story “Puro corazón” (‘All Heart’) uses surreal imagery and plot to write about the increasing violence in Buenos Aires during the time immediately prior to the Dirty War (*la Guerra Sucia*). By mimicking a police report, Valenzuela’s story manages to reproduce the experience of censorship and repression that denied the fate of the disappeared. This article shows how the story forges ludic connections between the human body (especially hearts, blood, and cardiologists), the censorship and repression in the early 1970s in Argentina, and the discourse that marked the official response to *los desaparecidos*, the disappeared.

Keywords

Luisa Valenzuela, “Puro corazón”, surrealism, Argentina, Dirty War, Guerra Sucia, Strange Things Happen Here, Aquí pasan cosas raras, the Disappeared, desaparecidos

Cutting off Cardiologists:
The Disappeared in “Puro corazón” by Luisa Valenzuela¹

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Argentine writer Luisa Valenzuela is well known for commenting critically in her fiction on the Dirty War (*Guerra Sucia*) in her country. During this time (approximately from 1974-1983), political violence rose steadily, with assassinations by armed radicals destabilizing the country and the government turning a blind eye to military, police, and paramilitary counteroffensives that inflicted a heavy toll of innocent victims.² Many of Valenzuela’s most read and studied works have treated this period and these themes; two prominent examples are *Cambio de armas* (1982; *Other Weapons*) and *Cola de lagartija* (1983; *The Lizard’s Tail*). In 2012, Valenzuela published *La máscara sarda: el profundo secreto de Perón* (‘The Sardinian Mask: the Profound Secret of Perón’). Although the articles analyzing the topic in Valenzuela’s novels and stories are too numerous to mention here, some critics have focused their multiple studies of Valenzuela on this theme.³ Previous critics have emphasized the novels dedicated to this decade of Argentine history; in addition to *Cola de lagartija*, there is *Realidad nacional desde la cama* (1990; *Bedside Manners*) and *Novela negra con argentinos* (1990; *Black Novel with Argentines*). Critics who do speak of her short stories in this regard have focused on themes of censorship, sexuality, and violence.

This article is the first to treat “Puro corazón” (‘All Heart’), a major short story. “Puro corazón” is from an early short story volume called *Aquí pasan cosas raras* (1975; *Strange Things Happen Here*, 1979). One of the longer stories in the volume, it irreverently represents this time of escalating disappearances in Buenos Aires from a critical point of view. In this article, I show how this neglected story playfully takes us down an Argentine rabbit-hole where eating hallucinogenic Argentine sausages stops torture in the country and around the world. More ludic than allegorical, “Puro corazón” shines an inverted light on the beginnings of the Dirty War in Buenos Aires. Its dark humor masks the seriousness of its political commentary and probably allowed it to pass the censors of the time.

Aquí pasan cosas raras was written in one month (September 1975) when Valenzuela and her daughter had returned to Argentina after periods abroad (“Legacy” 3). In many ways, the volume resembles satiric, surreal journalism about the violence growing daily in 1974-75. In a 1981 interview, in the context of a question about censorship, the author said that in a sense the book had been censored by the critics, though not the government, because: “they never mentioned what the book is really about. They saw the humor. It is a very

political book, but nothing of that was mentioned. Of course, they cannot mention that. . . ." ("Censorship" 206). In addition to humor, intellectual references and bizarre plots contribute to disguising the volume's political commentary. As Sharon Magnarelli notes of the collection, "Strange things are indeed happening when discourse is used to distract attention from or deny the existence of torture and persecution, to mask reality, and to invalidate what our senses perceive" (49).

Luisa Valenzuela has said in interviews that many of the stories in this volume are testimonials to the political, sociological, and ethical situation of Argentina in 1975. In the interview with Fernando Burgos and M. J. Fenwick, "Literatura y represión" (2001; 'Literature and Repression'), the author responds to Burgos's question, declaring: "En *Aquí pasan cosas raras* está narrada esa experiencia, mi visión personal y social de lo que estaba ocurriendo en un país lleno de tragedia, de persecución, de dolor" (207) 'In *Strange Things Happen Here* I narrate that experience: my personal and social vision of what was happening in a country full of tragedy, of persecution, and of pain.'⁴ Valenzuela stresses the distinct nature of the repression during this period, and why ultimately there was little dissident literature written during these years. One never knew what was permitted, what was prohibited, and who would be affected by one's writing: "Se trata de una intimidación en la que no se pueden reconocer parámetros, toda escala de valores se torna difusa" ("Literatura y represión" 209) 'It was an intimidation in which no one could recognize the parameters, all scales of value became diffuse.' This ambiguous repressive machine worked most strongly against the media, but it affected fiction writers along with everyone else. One of the more unusual aspects of "Puro corazón" is its parody of this slipperiness of the military and paramilitary repression of ideas and facts. The several narrators are diffusely connected to the state, the media, and a collective "we." Despite being funny, chaotic, and often nonsensical, this story creates meaning by bearing witness for society. Even when the humor or other strategies surprise us with their playfulness on dark subjects, the testimonial function of revealing the secret underbelly of repression remains. Medical discourse, love clichés, local references, nationalist propaganda, allegorical fantasy, all these languages—in Bakhtin's sense of the word—say what could not be said directly about Buenos Aires in 1975.

Writing during such disorienting censorship, and especially writing about the disappearances, when no body is found and life or death is not officially confirmed or denied, is many things; it is writing about implicit knowledge that can never be put into words, writing about unsupported certainties, and writing about discourse that says nothing. When such writing is combined with real places, the image of the city cannot quite be brought into focus. In "Puro corazón," writing about bodies interacts in surreal ways, fleetingly, and as oneiric associations with specificities in Buenos Aires. In her article "Cities-Bodies,"

Elizabeth Grosz provides a model of the political sphere and notions of the real that can help readers to take into account the realism supporting the surreal treatment of imagery for disappeared bodies in a concrete city. Writing about architecture, Grosz explains the uneven association between urban spaces and human bodies:

What I am suggesting is a model of the relations between bodies and cities which sees them, not as megalithic total entities, distinct identities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or microgroupings. This model is a practical one, based on the practical productivity bodies and cities have in defining and establishing each other. It is not a holistic view, one that stresses the unity and integration of city and body, their “ecological balance.” Instead I am suggesting a fundamentally disunified series of systems and interconnections, a series of disparate flows, energies, events or entities, and spaces, brought together or drawn apart in more or less temporary alignments. (248)

This “disconnected connection” between cities and bodies is mirrored in the diffuse and irrational nature of what could be said about the disappeared in Buenos Aires. The intense experience of writing something that may get one killed forced meanings into short-circuited passageways and “disparate flows.” In this story, there are allegories attempted, then dropped, and allusions addressed to the knowing and baffling to all others.

Another constituent concept in Grosz’s article is that “the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into the constitution of corporeality and/as subjectivity” (248-49). Grosz’s fragmented, dis-unified model allows us to recognize the censorship and the violence that shaped Valenzuela’s fiction. The subjectivity of fiction became a mechanism for translating national and international experiences of the chaos of 1970s Argentina into a local politics of blood. “Puro corazón” is the story of the bodies of Buenos Aires, in a narrative of heart specialists in culturally important locales who affect the way *porteños* (residents of Buenos Aires) think and act. The story offers an alternative to the imposed pretense of state discourse, writing an open surgery of the heart, aligned with and rebounding onto urban coordinates in Buenos Aires: the Plaza San Martín, Palermo, and other locales. By playing with literal readings of names—for example, Villa Cariño ‘Affection-ville’—and displacing values for famous neighborhoods, Valenzuela uses irony to highlight meanings about bodies other than what the story literally reports.

The story begins with an epigraph from some posters in the city: “El amor es un león que come corazón” (99) ‘Love is a lion that eats hearts,’ emphasizing the violence of its themes. Surprisingly, it tells of healers, doctors; a group of cardiologists has arrived in Buenos Aires for an international meeting: “Cinco mil cardiólogos en esta ciudad del sur, tan lejos del mundo que avanza, oh tan lejos y por ende tan incontaminada” (91) ‘Five thousand cardiologists in this city of the south, so far from the world that advances, oh so far and as a result so uncontaminated.’⁵ After the conference, the cardiologists “operate” when they renounce their actual surgeries and heal broken hearts in advice booths for the lovelorn or redirect their agile fingers to pickpocketing. In the midst of the breathless ungrammaticality of the narrative, there is humor in wordplay about wounds, blood, flow, and circulation—all related to affairs of the heart. Buenos Aires is “puro corazón” ‘all heart’ because the *porteños* are kind and hide the missing heart doctors: “El mundo en suspenso con los latidos puestos en esta Buenos Aires donde se ve fluir a los cardiólogos por las arterias céntricas hasta llegar a una parrillada” (91) ‘The world in suspense with its heartbeats placed in this Buenos Aires where one sees cardiologists flow down the central arteries toward a steakhouse.’ The *porteños*’ charitable actions result in a city that is ‘all heart’ and that is filled with hearts, the metonymical figure for the cardiologists.

The Argentine conference of heart specialists greatly affects the world outside the nation’s borders, exemplifying the interconnectedness across geographical boundaries in “Puro corazón” and the connections between the heart and the local. The international brain drain from other countries to Argentina caused by the conference reveals that the cardiologists once attended, exclusively, to the wealthy and powerful:

[L]os grandes potentados de las grandes potencias deben de estar cuidando sus excesos y midiendo no sólo el número de sus cigarrillos diarios sino también el de sus actos de amor y el de sus ansiedades. Ansiedades calibradas para los importantes del mundo y decisiones pospuestas porque los cardiólogos más notables (*sus* cardiólogos) están todos en la ciudad del sur y no es cuestión de permitirse ni la menor extrasístole así, desprotegida. (91, emphasis in original)

The great magnates of the great powers must be carefully watching their excesses and measuring not only the number of their daily cigarettes but also that of their acts of love and their anxieties. Calibrated anxieties for the important people of the world and postponed decisions because the most notable cardiologists (*their* cardiologists) are all in the city of the South and there is no question of allowing themselves the least extrasystole in that way, unprotected. (emphasis in original)

The world's powerful do not dare indulge in their normal unhealthy routines for fear their heart attacks will occur while their caretakers are attending the international meeting in Argentina. One implication is that the countries with which Argentina has relationships are those controlled by potentates and dictators. Although the cardiologists are medical professionals and not politicians, they perturb world politics by congregating in Buenos Aires. The locations around the globe outside Argentina mentioned in the story mostly correspond to the places of the cardiologists' origin. References inside Argentina are embellished with greater detail than the international ones. The local Buenos Aires associations add gender characterizations and—ironically—a distanced, almost anthropological turn to the narrator commentary.

The bond between the populace and the foreign visitors grows due to the cardiologists' crazy activities. The techniques by which the other nations' cardiologists gain support among the people of Buenos Aires are humorous and illogical, yet 'strangely' true to national clichés, while reminding the reader of the violent times:

[E]l pueblo mientras tanto ampara y oculta a estos sabios que les abren nuevas vías al corazón, pasando a veces por el sexo (el cardiólogo austríaco, vg., que inventó la máquina de amar para reducir al mínimo la actividad cardiovascular en el orgasmo). La vía brasileña al corazón ha sido forjada sobre el cuerpo de víctimas inocentes y lleva ritmo de samba, el modelo peruano es más bien gastronómico con cocción de anticuchos, el imperialismo yanqui se manifiesta a pesar suyo intentando colonizar los corazones tiernos, [y] los rusos han logrado unificar el número de sístoles y diástoles entre aquellos que residen en su zona de influencia. . . . (95)

[T]he people, meanwhile, shelter and hide these wise men who are opening new routes to the heart, passing at times through the sexual organs (the Austrian cardiologist, for instance, invented a machine for loving in order to reduce to the minimum the cardiovascular activity in an orgasm). The Brazilian route to the heart has been forged over the bodies of innocent victims and uses a samba rhythm, the Peruvian model has been more gastronomical with the cooking of kebabs, Yankee imperialism manifests itself, in spite of itself, by trying to colonize tender hearts, [and] the Russians have managed to unify the systoles and diastoles among those who reside in their zone of influence. . . .⁶

These absurdities improvise ironic connections between nation and body through cultural icons, national symbols, and international images. They introduce the

idea of connectivity so that the impact of the cardiologists on Buenos Aires and Argentina can be explored.

After this list of the nationalities of the cardiologists who affect the *porteños*, the Argentine government is named as an actor in the war for its citizens' hearts. In response to the creation of the new transnational pathways to the hearts of Buenos Aires, the government "ha nacionalizado las heridas" (95) 'has nationalized the people's wounds.' The government must manage the damage suffered in the capital city's bodies, "para que al menos las bocas de expendio queden bajo su control" (95) 'so that at least the sources of expenses remain under its control.' The idea that "heridas" 'wounds' could change ownership from private individuals to a government means that wounds are a domestic enterprise important to the State. Wounds made by the cardiologists became part of Argentina's economy of violence. Nationalizing the products of the surgeons' new and subversive work parodies the way in which Isabel Perón's regime attempted to gain control of the economy and to justify antidemocratic and authoritarian practices.⁷

In 1973 Argentina enjoyed a brief economic boom, but then in July of 1974, General Juan Perón died suddenly in office, having been reelected for a third time after a lengthy exile. His third wife, Vice President Isabel Perón, became President. Most historians agree, "Isabel was no Evita, as her insecurity and indecision had already made clear" (Skidmore and Smith 102). Influenced by bad advisors and confused about the situation and how she should react to it, Isabel Perón attempted to govern at a time when the economy dramatically worsened. She gave the military and the Right a free hand, with disastrous consequences for the population; the number of civilian disappearances began to climb during this period of the composition of *Aquí pasan cosas raras* and before the military coup. While the greatest number of disappearances occurred after Isabel Perón was removed from office in 1976, nevertheless, Valenzuela was composing her stories while the stage was being set for Argentina's Dirty War.

In the story, while the world's powerful wait for the return of their physicians, the effects within Argentina of the international meeting are no less momentous than they had been for the cardiologists' home countries: "con cada operación en el anfiteatro de la Facultad de Medicina se cortan por analogía las arterias de comunicación aérea con el resto del orbe. Ya estamos cortados de la mitad del planeta, y la vida prosigue en forma casi artificial, como en un pulmón" (92) 'With every operation in the amphitheater of the Medical School the arteries of air communication with the rest of the globe are by analogy cut off. We are already cut off from half of the planet, and life continues in an almost artificial way, as if in an iron lung.' The mechanisms for cutting off Argentina from air travel are unexplained and serendipitous in this globalized, medico-technological system. Communicating together are science and business, the

domestic politics of foreign countries, international diplomacy, Peronist dynamics, and global air transportation. The main message of this first part of the story is that the heart experts are themselves cut off: cut off from returning home, cut off from practicing their previous profession, and cut off from visibility.

The cause of these blockages is that “La Célula” ‘The Cell’ has given the cardiologists “la morcilla criolla” (92) ‘the local blood sausage’ laced with hallucinogens, impelling them to disperse and hide rather than return to their home countries.⁸ In this section of the story, the idea of terrorist cells at work is suggested, playing on the pun with “cell” as the biological building block of hearts and blood. Valenzuela alludes verbally to the persecution of intellectuals, journalists and other citizens when she says the cardiologists were “disappeared” by the Célula. The narrator(s) report(s) on the State’s response: “A gran velocidad se organizaron las mentadas patrullas para descubrir el paradero de los cardiólogos *desaparecidos*, . . . las incansables patrullas despliegan una operación rastrillo. . . .” (94, emphasis mine) ‘At a great speed the aforementioned patrols were organized to discover the whereabouts of the *disappeared* cardiologists . . . the untiring patrols are spreading out in a search operation. . . .’ (emphasis mine). By evoking the disappeared, the story directs its message to those readers aware and critical of the violence, because they knew the government did not organize search parties for the disappeared, many of whom were in clandestine detention centers. This kind of double-voicedness, one which provides enough information for those in the know to identify the political critique, but one which eludes those looking for direct statements, characterizes much of the volume, but especially the political allusions, as I have pointed out regarding a different story (“Alleging”). In the case of “Puro corazón,” the political allegory emphasizes the networks of interconnectivity to people and power outside Argentina because foreigners are “operating” on the heart of Argentina. There was government rhetoric about outside agitators. In the story, the police are searching for the “cell” that drugged the foreigners and thus caused their disappearance.

It should be noted that “Puro corazón” is told by an unnamed narrator that floats between third person and first-person, singular and plural, and between objectivity and personal commentary.⁹ The narrator(s) call(s) the text a “report” and inform(s) about the search for the sickened and truant doctors and the consequences of their insertion into the city.¹⁰ In one of the few critical reactions to the story, Z. Nelly Martínez recognizes the importance of the narrating voices: “Tanto la persecución que sufren los facultativos como el discurso que los denigra evocan la caza de subversivos y *el discurso represor* con que se impuso, aun antes de establecerse oficialmente, el régimen dictatorial en Argentina (129, emphasis mine) ‘Both the persecution/chase that the doctors suffer and the discourse that denigrates them evoke the hunt for subversives and *the repressive discourse* that the dictatorial regime imposed on Argentina, even before it was officially

established' (translation and emphasis mine). By mimicking the official camouflaging of reality, the story questions institutional writings about the government repression of its citizens. In addition to raising awareness of citizen disappearances, "Puro corazón" criticizes the discourse about the disappeared. It targets the misprisions and manipulations of public discourse by simulating such reporting.

The search for the missing doctors, called *Operativo Estetoscopio* (95) 'Operation Stethoscope,' comprises another important element of the allegory about this violent time in "Puro corazón," one that parodies the persecution of intellectuals, students and radicals. This part of the story is one of the darkest parodies of the events of Argentine political reality in the story collection. Yet even the comparison of the cardiologists to those hunted by the government or by paramilitary groups results in laughable irony. For example, some residents of Buenos Aires believe the cardiologists have become invisible because they have discovered the secret of lymph, the transparent component of blood, and the doctors have used their discovery on themselves. Such silly twists of plot, as well as serious political analogies, spring from linguistic play as much as from the parody of a report on violence. Valenzuela's *double entendre* is everywhere evident and, as often as not, ties the body to spatial elements in and around the city.

When the medical experts disappear into Buenos Aires neighborhoods instead of returning to their countries after their conference, they become entangled in webs of political intrigue, violence, urban mythology, ordinary criminality, popular culture, and women's economic, religious, and familial duties. The first half of "Puro corazón," narrating the disappearances and the hunt for the cardiologists, is followed in the latter part by an exploration of the effect of these events on the populace. The link between the beginning and ending of the story is a series of brief radio interviews about the disappeared cardiologists with three housewives leaving the Dorrego market. The women speculate wildly on the dangers presented by the missing cardiologists, generally reiterating government suggestions that the lack of consumer goods and other mysterious and nefarious acts have at their root the foreigners' subversive rerouting of the normal flow. Woman #1 attributes to the doctors the shortage of "corazón de ternera" (95-6) 'fresh veal hearts' that she feeds her cats, and she wonders what the doctors "estarán guisando" (96) 'are cooking up.' Woman #2 believes they use the hearts for "cierta ceremonia de resurrección" (96) 'a certain resurrection ceremony' and other horrible things. Woman #3 confides that her son, a medical student, has told her that the cardiologists have transformed blood to pure lymph and thereby achieved invisibility. These radio interviews with female shoppers metaphorically translate some people's acceptance of the official line on disappearances and acquiescence with the status quo.

The successive retransmissions of this radio program of the women's ideas, by word of mouth and by radio, lead to mishearing "ninfa" 'nymph' instead of "linfa" (100) 'lymph.' The local women have understood the foreigners in Buenos Aires differently from the government, differently from men, and they do not seem to be in agreement with each other either. In this way, the housewives may stand in for the unarticulated voices in Buenos Aires, part of a not yet understood political force in potentia.¹¹

In contrast to the three female reactions to the disappearances, three male cults develop from this misunderstanding of the women's radio interviews. All three male reactions to the events that cut off the cardiologists and the city speculatively connect men to the city's symbolic geography. In Grosz's terminology, the male cults are "microgroupings" of place, corporality and subjectivity.

One male cult, called the Lolamoristas, worships a Buenos Aires landmark, La Fuente de las Nereidas 'the Fountain of Sea Nymphs,' designed by a famous Argentine architect, Lola Mora. The cult members believe the nymphs of the fountain have given the cardiologists the power to make themselves invisible (to disappear). It is reported in all seriousness that the Lolamoristas are very difficult to control due to the invisibility that they have gained from the cardiologists. This may be reference to those who believed or convinced themselves that the disappeared had simply gone into exile of their own volition, making themselves "invisible" in Argentina. A second male cult meets at night in Tigre (a neighborhood whose name literally means 'Tiger') and believes the doctors have become invisible vampires who make "transfusiones sin intermediarios" (97) 'transfusions without intermediaries.' Members of this second cult sing in cemeteries and call upon the vampire doctors to appear to them. Could this cult refer to those who hoped the disappeared were alive, had gone into hiding and were acting behind the scenes? These two male responses to the disappeared cardiologists, those who adore the nymph of the fountain and the lymph of the vampires, reflect schisms in Argentina's society at the time, especially the disagreements regarding the cause and meaning of the disappeared. They suggest an increasingly divided Argentine society, with sectors blinded by fanaticism, intent on violence, and beleaguered by ideas of traditionally gendered political action.

Finally, a third cult forms, based more on the "morcilla" 'blood sausage' that led the doctors astray than on their situations or actions. These believers establish a monument to "la inefable morcilla filosofal" (98) 'the ineffable philosopher's sausage' at the Plaza de la República. This square is the site of the famous obelisk, the symbol of the city built for its four-hundredth birthday. According to the story, this plaza is significant for the men who identify with the *morcilla*, the obelisk, and other phallic elements of Buenos Aires culture.

The phallic shape of the *morcilla* adds to the humor, while the importance of blood to the sausage's color and consistency reinforces the themes of hearts and violence in the story. Like Lazarillo's *longaniza*, the *morcilla*—a Buenos Aires favorite—has a rich literary tradition harking back to Rabelais and others. The French writer employed blood sausages (*andouilles*) hilariously in the Fourth Book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* for a battle symbolizing theological battles with Lutheranism.¹² Valenzuela could have easily found Rabelais in Spanish translation at this time in Argentina, or she could have read it in French or English. Whether she was inspired by Rabelais or entirely by her return home to Argentina and its local food is ultimately a false dichotomy, however, when foreign influences and local elements are so closely bound together as the cardiologists and the *morcilla*.

Like Rabelais's pseudo-history, Valenzuela's story functions discursively as a documentary: "este informe debe ser una pieza de absoluta objetividad, una cámara oscura" (93) 'this report should be a piece of absolute objectivity, a dark chamber.' The *camera obscura* was first referred to by Aristotle, but its meaning today is normally a lightproof box or container with a small hole on one side in which "An inverted image of a scene [is] . . . formed on an interior screen" (*Columbia Encyclopedia*). According to *A Dictionary of Art and Artists*, a *camera obscura* is: "a mechanical means of securing accuracy in drawing, particularly of topographical detail. The *camera obscura* was invented in the 16th century and consists of an arrangement of lenses and mirrors in a darkened tent or box." The reporting official voice in "Puro corazón," in other words, aspires to reproduce exactly what it has seen, as in a *camera obscura*. However, read ironically together with the allusions to persecutions and disappearances, the hyper-literality of the text intimates "dark rooms" of torture and death when the *camera obscura* is mentioned.

Readers of texts like Valenzuela's are likely to recognize the claims for photographic or topographic accuracy as illusory, thus making the narrator(s) unreliable. The narrator(s) themselves, however, are blind to the quixotic nature of their goal of exact reproduction or 'absolute objectivity' in verbal discourse. Even more important than the voice's frustrated intent to document what is happening, though, is that while a *camera obscura* creates an image with the same colors and structure as the real scene, the image in the dark box is inverted. As a metaphor for the story's narrative strategies, this suggests "Puro corazón" shows things as they are, but reversed. Due to the malevolence in Argentina to which the story refers, the secrecy with which the acts of kidnapping and murder were carried out, and the double-voicedness of this particular fiction, this inversion is crucial. The values promoted by "Puro corazón" are distinct from what the narrator(s) express(es)—distinct in a particular topsy-turvy way.

An example of this inversion is the report's discussion of the "Célula," the group that placed hallucinogens in the cardiologists' *morcillas*. One meaning for the 'Cell' could be that of a terrorist cell with diabolic plans, as suggested by the narrator(s): the doctors "podrían haber sido víctimas del secuestro terrorista" (94) 'could have been victims of terrorist kidnappings.' However, the capitalization of 'Célula' is strange for this referent. Furthermore, the use of 'cell' as part and parcel of the overwhelming body imagery gives the name an extra vehemence. A clue to the ironic meanings may be found in the second operation of the group, an operation that the report claims was never carried out by the "Célula": the formation of a special Argentine blood bank for international use. The proposed bank will export blood to "los países supercivilizados, exangües, que piden a gritos una transfusión gaucha" (93) 'the anemic, super-civilized countries who are yelling for a gaucho transfusion.' Gaucho virility, exportable in contraband blood, fetches a high price among those debilitated by hyper-civilization outside Argentina. Contraband machismo bottled in blood and exported through transnational networks was the Célula's plan, as well as thwarting the cardiologists' return to their homelands. Latin American culture evidently converts the blood of the (long-disappeared) gaucho into an elixir capable of revitalizing the neurasthenic First World. To invert this meaning from the *camera obscura* of the story may mean, among other things, that the gender separation and exaggeration evident in the story (and prominent in Peronist Argentina) is not as salutary for Argentines as the report implies. Additionally, the implication may be that the obsessive gendering of Argentina as gauchos exists today merely for consumption by the outside world.

This description of the Cell's accomplishment (drugging cardiologists) and plan (exporting gaucho blood) further begs the question: who is in the Cell? Are radical kidnappers outside the government the only possibility? In fact, there is an old meaning in Peronism for the phrase "la célula mínima" 'the minimal cell' current from the time of Evita. According to Mariano Ben Plotkin in *Mañana es San Perón*, the Eva Perón Foundation employed this name for each of its groups of social workers, a cell leader and a secretary, who assessed the situation of the needy (147-48). The idea was not only to help the population but also to wrestle such social assistance from the unions and receive the people's loyalty. In 1947, minimal cells "collected information on the needs of 25,000 families in six months. The concrete work of social assistance done by cells was soon matched by well-orchestrated symbolic gestures [to assuage people's needs], such as the declaration of the rights of the aged, among others" (148).¹³ These cells espoused conservative family values. At the same time, they worked for female suffrage and against poverty and hunger.

But this meaning does not jibe exactly with the *persona* of the narrative voice(s) in "Puro corazón." Wouldn't the writer(s) of an official report already

know about the activities of minimal cells, instead of needing to investigate their activities? Would such Peronist cells condone drugging foreign cardiologists? It seems “la Célula” could better signify the opposite of social workers: renegade, unsanctioned groups not under Peronist control. Or, could the Cell be the radical splinters on the right and the left, Peronist or not, who were plotting change through clandestine and violent means? It seems likely that Valenzuela was playing with sundry meanings for the group, and for why the government would write a report on it. But at the very least, a binary view of a Peronist/radical cell does seem to be in play. The political significance of the story is enhanced by the binary possibility of the “Célula” alluding to a small group of either patriarchal, Peronist government workers or secretive, anti-government radicals.

In conclusion, the unusual body imagery in “Puro corazón” represents a strategy of connecting bodies to places in order to critique politics in a censored society. The humor about death and murder is grotesque, because the disappearances of innocent civilians clearly are not funny. Yet precisely because the story’s cryptic jokes and puns allude to grisly atrocities, they tend to confirm Valenzuela’s role as an intellectual witness to the unraveling of civil society in the first half of the 1970s. Even though the story purports to be a *camera obscura* that shows things as they are, by inverting the story and rectifying its directionality, readers make it more comprehensible and more meaningful.

“Puro corazón”—the “report”—describes covertly the experience of these dark times, especially Valenzuela’s refusal to accept publicly available versions about the causes of the violence. She ends her tale of isolated and invisible cardiologists with the wistful remark that almost no one speaks of the disappeared doctors anymore. But the concluding lines of the story predict that tragic consequences for Argentina have been set in motion. Either a time bomb will explode in a blood bank or a civil war will break out between the various male cults, all due to the disappearances of the cardiologists.¹⁴ Unfortunately, Valenzuela’s prediction in “Puro corazón” of future bombings and civil strife came true in the expansion of state violence in the years of dictatorship and the Dirty War that immediately followed its publication.

Notes

1. “Puro corazón” was not included in the English translation of the rest of the volume (*Strange Things Happen Here*, 1979) and to my knowledge is not available in English. In a conversation on March 10, 2003, Helen Lane did not recall why she did not translate the story, but assured me she would not have left it out except at the publisher’s request. Her editor, Drenka Willen, at Harcourt, responded via a phone message that she had nothing to do with it, and that Luisa

herself must not have wanted the story translated. I have asked the author about this, but she has not responded to my inquiry at this time.

2. See for example: Panizo; Buchenhorst, Daniello, and Bozal; and Feierstein.

3. For examples of criticism that treats these elements of *Cambio de armas* and *Cola de lagartija*, see Sharon Magnarelli (1988) and Juanamaría Cordones-Cook (1991), among others.

4. All translations from the interview are my own.

5. All translations from the story are my own.

6. In referring to Brazil, perhaps Valenzuela means the government repression there in the 1960s, and/or perhaps she was reacting to the local Buenos Aires persecutions while designating them otherwise.

7. Ricardo Piglia has spoken of a medical metaphor circulating in Argentina soon afterward, during the dictatorship: “El poder también se sostiene en la ficción. El Estado es también una máquina de hacer creer. En la época de la dictadura, circulaba un tipo de relato ‘médico’: el país estaba enfermo, un virus lo había corrompido, era necesario realizar una intervención drástica. El Estado militar se autodefinía como el único cirujano capaz de operar, sin postergaciones y sin demagogia. Para sobrevivir, la sociedad tenía que soportar esa cirugía mayor. Algunas zonas debían ser operadas sin anestesia. Ése era el núcleo del relato: país desahuciado y un equipo de médicos dispuestos a todo para salvarle la vida. En verdad, ese relato venía a encubrir una realidad criminal, de cuerpos mutilados y operaciones sangrientas. Pero al mismo tiempo la aludía explícitamente. Decía todo y no decía nada: la estructura del relato de terror” (113-14). ‘Power is sustained in fiction, too. The State is also a machine for making people believe. In the time of the dictatorship, there circulated a type of ‘medical’ story: the country was sick, a virus had contaminated it, it was necessary to make a drastic intervention. The Military State defined itself as the only surgeon capable of operating, without postponements and without demagoguery. In order to survive, the society needed to put up with major surgery. Some zones needed to be operated on without anesthesia. That was the nucleus of the story: a terminally ill country and a team of doctors ready for anything to save its life. In truth, this story came to hide the criminal reality of mutilated corpses and bloody operations. But at the same time it alluded to it explicitly. It said everything and said nothing: the structure of the tale of terror’ (my translation).

8. *La morcilla* appears in the story largely as a reference to the sausage, hence my translation. However, secondary meanings can be coaxed to the surface at times, such as an expression of disgust or disregard (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*). *WordReference.com* gives the English definition of *morcilla* as “Black pudding; blood sausage.”

9. For this article, I will reflect this ambiguity and instability by speaking of “narrator(s).”

10. “Puro corazón” at one point admits it is an official report. Written for an unnamed narratee, the text appears to be intended for the Perón government, the compromised media, or the renegade military. The narrator(s) want(s) it to be complete and exhaustive: “Queríamos dar un informe completo y exhaustivo” (93) ‘We would like to give a complete and exhaustive report.’ But, as is common in these stories, what the narrator states is often contradicted by the story itself; what is said is the opposite of what is done. The report is fragmentary and improvised.

11. The women at the market might be seen as a prefiguration of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo began to work together in 1976, at least a year after this story was written, and it was another year before their first public appearance on the Plaza on April 30, 1977 (“Historia”). So rather than a direct reference to the women activists who would come later, the women in Valenzuela’s story refer to something quite different: women who are unorganized, uncommitted, and uninformed. They form a comic foil to the narration about serious events.

12. According to Florence Weinberg’s article on Rabelais’s sausages, “The Andouilles of the *Quart Livre* are emblematic, signifying on at least five levels.” Some of these levels are relevant here: “(1) Andouilles are literally, tripe sausages; (2) visually, they resemble phalluses, eels, small sinuous animals; (3) politically and historically, they are a metaphor for the Protestant allies during the Schmalkaldic War—the Andouilles specifically are Lutherans; . . . (5) on the religious level, Pantagruel’s banquet (= mass) offends the Andouilles, who attack” (367-77).

13. Plotkin’s source is *Democracia*, 21 December 1947.

14. In *Argentina & Perón, 1970-1975*, Leslie Sobel wrote: “Meanwhile, intra-Peronist murders continued with the assassination of JP [Juventud Peronista] member Jorge Gallardo in Buenos Aires February 6, 1974. A right-wing Peronist

Alejandro Giovenco of the Peronist Youth of the Argentine Republic (JPRA), was killed Feb. 18th [1974] when a bomb exploded in his briefcase” (104).

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