

ENCUENTROS



Contemporary Paraguayan Narrative: Two Currents

Lecture by

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CONTEMPORARY PARAGUAYAN NARRATIVE: TWO CURRENTS

Renée Ferrer

Little is really known about contemporary Paraguayan narrative, except for the works of writers in exile, who endured an existence which profoundly affected their lives, and resulted in works as dense as they are brilliant and confident.

Our fiction has evolved along two well-defined currents: one, which emerged abroad, was the child of the diaspora that resulted from the political convulsions, fratricidal struggles, and "the thirty year night" of the Stroessner dictatorship; and another, which flowed from a closing inward at home, behind bolted doors, in fear of persecution.

Paraguay's isolation, due to unfortunate political circumstances and its geography as a land-locked country, has condemned the rest of the world to ignorance about all that has been accomplished in this land called "the cultural well" in the words

of the poet Carlos Villagra Marsal, or "the island without a sea" according to Juan Bautista Rivarola Matto, or "this small island surrounded by land" in the words of Augusto Roa Bastos.

Despite adverse conditions that led Paraguay to fall out of step with the principal centers of culture, notwithstanding the censorship or, in the best of cases, the indifference to which artists were subjected under the disgraceful totalitarian regime, narrative managed to flourish in Paraguay in the hands of some thirty writers, not including the well-known authors working abroad.

Narrative produced by writers in exile, who bore the burden of estrangement, benefited from wide dissemination abroad, while our other narrative, forged within the suffocating borders of a country where dissent brought torment, ostracism, or even

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imprisonment, endured the stigma of being unknown, and worked in the shadow of non-existence.

It is true that our narrative developed late, and that it does not have a century-long tradition like other countries in Latin America; there was, however, a group of writers known as "the generation of the 900" that flourished in Paraguay in the early years of this century. The members, while devoted to studying history, were possessed by a nationalist ethos as a result of Paraguay's defeat in the War of the Triple Alliance in the 1860s. They wrote works which, in view of their high aesthetic quality, and tendency to mix fact with fable, may be considered a prestigious antecedent to our fictional prose.

There is another element that adds complexity to Paraguayan literature: Spanish-Guaraní bilingualism. It has affected almost all of the literary production of the last fifty years, leading narrators to pursue various solutions in an effort to integrate the hidden tongue into the narrative discourse in Spanish. This fidelity to the predominant linguistic code is observed both in the writers in exile and in those who were confined within the country's borders.¹

The books written outside the country, long before our Paraguayan *essence* was defined, bear the marks of *Paraguayidad* (Paraguayness); they ushered in not only modernism, but also a critical orientation which questioned reality. This was the opposite of the *costumbrista* trend, which focused our earliest writers on the folklore, traditions, and myths of the Guaraní.

This injection of modern thinking came from abroad through the first books by Gabriel Casaccia: *Hombres, mujeres y*

fantoches (*Men, Women, and Puppets*) (1930), *El Guajhu* (1938), *Mario Pareda* (1939), and *El pozo* (*The Well*) (1947). But it was with his novel *La babosa* (*Lovesick*), which appeared in 1952, and with *El trueno entre las hojas* (*The Thunder in the Leaves*) by Augusto Roa Bastos the same year, that Paraguayan narrative made its way into the contemporary period.

Considering his stylistic and structural resources, the novel *Hijo de hombre* (*Son of Man*) (1960) by Roa Bastos, marked the frontier between realism and the Paraguayan vanguard. Roa Bastos continued his work with *El baldío* (*The Waste Land*) (1966), *Los pies sobre el agua* (*Feet on the Water*) (1967), *Madera quemada* (*Burnt Wood*) (1969), and *Moriencia* (*Death*) (1969), insisting on the marginality of Paraguayan man, with whom he felt solidarity. In 1974, he published his original novel *Yo el supremo* (*I, the Supreme*) which constituted a "masterly mosaic of the paths of renewal undertaken by experimentalist Latin American narrative writers in recent years."² After a long silence, this 1989 Cervantes Award winner gave us *La vigilia del Almirante* (*The Admiral's Vigil*) (1992) which explores the personality of Christopher Columbus, making generous use of original texts with his splendid prose. Later he published *El fiscal* (*The Prosecutor*) (1993) where he followed the penitential itinerary of an exile.

At the same time, Gabriel Casaccia added more titles to his already long list of works. Characteristically combining psychological and social insight, he wrote *La llaga* (*The Wound*) (1964), and later *Los exiliados* (*The Exiled*) (1966) which addresses the desperation of the impossibility of returning home. Later he

published *Los herederos* (The Heirs) (1975), and finally *Los Huerta* (*The Huertas*) (1981) where "the characters symbolize objects" and the protagonists are clearly time, solitude, and death. Casaccia's production ends with *Cuentos completos* (*Complete Short Stories*) (1984) which brings all the stories together.

Another exiled, tortured poet, Rubén Bareiro Saguier, took the path of poetic magic and denial of reality. He won the Casa de las Americas Award in 1971 with his book of stories, *Ojo por diente* (*An Eye for an Eye*), which first appeared in French under the title *Pacte de sang*. Bareiro Saguier combines an arduous poetic exercise with a brilliant economy of words, so as to penetrate the core suffering of others with whom he feels an agonizing empathy. His narrative is another example of insertion of covert language in the narrative discourse, in the style of Juan Rulfo and José María Argueda. The use of this Paraguayan Spanish is evident in the adaptation of his story, *Parecido a mi finado* (*Salmón y dorado*) (*Like My Deceased, Coral and Gold*), in which he explores the linguistic roots of our community, rescuing the marginalized themes, and taking charge of the collective memory of a people "who bear the scars of a tragic history and a similarly painful present."³

Bareiro Saguier's narrative work continues with *El séptimo pétalo del viento* (*The Seventh Petal of the Wind*) (1984) where he reveals the misfortunes of his community and his own estrangement, flipping sporadically into a more cosmopolitan vein. In these stories it is impossible to miss "the delicate and evocative tension between social realism and

the poetic imagination peculiar to vanguard Latin American narrative,"⁴ which makes him one of our more substantive writers.

He wrote a story called *La sequia* (*The Drought*) which inspired a scene from the one-woman play *Mujeres de mi tierra* (*Women from My Homeland*). This play testifies to the tragedy of the Paraguayan nation; it is characterized by a young woman who becomes the victim of outrage and despair when her beloved disappears. Cases like this have left indelible scars on many Paraguayan families, and with this denunciation of atrocities, the author steps to the fore of those writers who have drawn the curtain back to show the oppression to which we were subjected.

In the story *Solo un momentito* (*Just a Moment*), one perceives how the author maximizes this disgrace through the use of poetic language, in the manner of Juan Rulfo.

I will now read you an excerpt from that story, in which an adolescent is condemned to death, and the order is to be carried out by his uncle:

"The sun intensified the drumming in his ears; it sounded like the echo of a thundering stampede, and it echoed what they had been told early that morning. Standing in the burning sun, he felt the quiet undulating waves of heavy air passing through his baking bones. At times it was impossible for him to keep his eyes open; then he would see those lines, those flashing dots and rays, those red, green, blue and yellow spots that appeared on the black screen in his head.

"The government official read the execution order in a voice so relaxed he

could have been telling them he was going to have a dip in the stream, or that they should saddle his horse for a ride in the country. But he knew this ride was going to be a long one, a deeper plunge. It was then that he again felt the long buzzing in his ears and the piercing pain of memories...

"When he suddenly saw the young man, he stopped and moved away from the squad. He approached him slowly with a frown on his face. The boy stepped aside, took off an imaginary hat, and brought his hands together in front of him.

"So be it...," he extended his hands to receive his uncle's blessing.

"May God...," the blessing trailed off into a murmur. He had passed his weapon to the other hand so he could sketch a rough cross in the air with the two raised fingers of his right hand. Having done that he extended his right hand to the boy. Their handshake was brief, rough and polite. The worried expression on the man's forehead disappeared.

"Fall in!" he shouted in a firm voice. Hurried steps were heard, followed by the clang of bolts as weapons were loaded and locked.

"The man rolled his eyes back in his head, and gazed for a moment into the imprecise darkness, where the boy would soon go. He opened his eyes to look at the boy, and as their eyes met, they merged into one.

"Now Uncle?"

"My son... don't worry... death just takes a few seconds."

Another interesting writer is Rodrigo Díaz Pérez (1924), who added several books of short stories to his poetry, all written in the United States where he lives. Besides

rescuing his childhood memories, he uses the opportunity to condemn the dictatorship. After his first book, *Entrevista (Interview)* (1978) came *Ruidos y leyendas (Noises and Legends)* (1981), *Incunables (Incunabula)* (1987), *Ingavi y otros cuentos (Ingavi and Other Stories)* (1985), and *Hace tiempo... mañana (It's Been a While... Tomorrow)* (1983), where he shows the confusion of "a man from the north" who finds himself involved in the absurd situation where violence and plunder transgress and deny the most fundamental human rights.

Roa Bastos tells us that "Díaz Pérez does not endeavor to give his fiction any literary emphasis. His language, his writing tends rather to the simplicity of the spoken voice in the best sense of the oral tradition. At times his stories seem to deliberately try to appear austere until they find the tone and meaning of a simple sketch that breathes naturally and is completely depersonalized. It is at that moment in the story when the storyteller's voice modulates beyond the written word, the mysterious enchantment of deeds, of things, of animate and inanimate beings: their truth is audible, visible, palpable to the senses, infused with a tranquil desperation." Villagra Marsal sees two currents coming together in Díaz Pérez: one that is cosmopolitan as the result of his experiences abroad; and another that "reverberates beyond the text: the trail of blood and the delusion of writing in exile have left him with his passions both protected and violated by his absence."⁶

In *La sequía*, a one-character story that I alluded to earlier in *Mujeres de mi tierra*, Díaz Pérez refers to the great bloodletting in Paraguay during the Chaco War in the early 1930s. I will read you a few

fragments from that story:

"Not even a leaf moved. The trees in the yard were suspended in the glaring silence of a brutal sticky summer. With their beaks hanging open, the birds scanned the earth below, searching in vain for some vestige of moisture. The top layer of red soil broke into enormous cracks that seemed to get bigger every day, and sketched a whimsical map of some exotic and dusty region. This war-time drought is as interminable as the war itself!

"The old woman staggered from her many infirmities and the weight of her countless years. With great effort and pain, she dragged herself along carrying a chipped wash basin full of water for the few plants that had not yet perished. The struggle of the task seemed to exhaust her more and more. But she enjoyed seeing that little bit of green left in the yard.

"They had brought her as a little girl from the distant Villa de Curuguaty, which earlier had served as a refuge for Artigas. But like many other villages in the interior, it succumbed to the war and was razed to the ground by the Brazilians.

"With the help of her grandson, Colá, she was able to set up a small farm in Villa Aurelia, and between the two of them they planted a garden with tomatoes, cabbage, and lettuce. Later she was left alone, and continued caring for her garden, which became smaller and smaller as her energies diminished.

"It must have been about four o'clock in the afternoon when several soldiers with grim and indifferent expressions knocked on the front gate.

"'A deserter lives here. We have orders to arrest him.' The old woman had no

idea what they were saying or the reason for their appearance. She quietly lifted the coiled wire latch that fastened the gate.

"'Come in,' she said, as if she understood she was obligated to cede to the authorities.

"'We are going to search the whole house. The local police told us that you are harboring a fugitive here.'

"The old woman said nothing. She looked at the soldiers in their olive-drab uniforms, and at their chief with a trace of bewilderment. But she did not lose her calm.

"'Pasen che karai kuéra (Come on in, gentlemen),' she told them, 'and look around as much as you want.'"

In this story, the author leads the reader in one direction: the search for deserters of the Chaco War. In the unexpected conclusion, we learn that the dispassionate grandmother is still waiting for her dead grandson to come home.

We complete the list of writers in exile with Lincoln Silva (1945) and his two novels, *Rebelión después* (*Rebellion Afterwards*) (1970) and *General, general* (1975).

Parallel to these authors who brought prestige to Paraguayan literature from abroad, and whose work is well-known thanks to its aesthetic virtues and the access they have to major publishers, there exists a series of writers who were confined to Paraguay, condemned to the sad world of anonymity.

One of the first to become known inside Paraguay was the poet, playwright, and essayist Josefina Plá (1909), with her collection of stories *La mano en la tierra* (*The Hand in the Earth*) (1963), followed twenty years later by *El espejo y el canasto*

(*The Mirror and the Basket*) (1981), *La pierna de Severina* (*Severina's Leg*) (1983), *Muralla robada* (*Stolen Wall*) (1989), and *Alguien muere en San Onofre de Guarumi* (*Someone is Dying in San Onofre de Guarumi*) (1984) in which the author denounces the chronic state of helplessness in which the characters live, in both the rural and urban areas.

Following are the first paragraphs of her story *El espejo* (*The Mirror*):

"I asked that they place my arm chair before this mirror, the mirror of the old wardrobe that occupies practically an entire wall of the room. It is an imposing wardrobe of fine and dense wood, which in better times seemed old-fashioned to my wife; it was her grandmother's, and she exchanged it for another less solid-looking piece, one more modern and attractive.

"Both the wardrobe and I have been abandoned. The wardrobe is full of odds and ends, all those things that don't match, that you don't get rid of because they are still hanging by a thread of sentiment, or a vague hope they'll one day prove useful; things you can't decide whether or not to throw in the garbage, things you would never look for until you need them. Just like me.

"The wardrobe is a few feet away from my sofa; it faces me vertically, and is unmoveable, framed in its dark wood panel that has never lost its natural luster. The mirror is as wide as my chair, and stands as tall as I did when I could still stand. They don't make them like this anymore. I've been sitting in front of it for a long time: since that winter when the newlyweds wanted it moved so they could get a smaller one. They finally moved out, but not me, and I was left more alone than ever. That was

when I lived in the room in front of the hall, and felt the daily life of the house pulsating and circulating around me. This room has no windows.

"Do you mind if you don't have a view?' my wife asked when she moved me in here.

"I shook my head, no, I didn't mind."

In 1966, three new writers emerged as the result of a short story competition. Poet Carlos Villagra Marsal (1932) gained national fame as a narrative writer with his novel *Mancuello y la perdiz* (*Mancuello and the Partridge*) (1966), a profoundly Paraguayan book in terms of its language, popular imagery, and the idiosyncracies of the protagonist, where "the folkloric interweaves its magical elements with reality, with a keen poetic sense, recreating its own atmosphere."⁷ According to Bareiro Saguier, Villagra Marsal "with this novel becomes one of the first, after Roa Bastos, to tackle the problem of literary expression in the context of Paraguay's bilingualism." He makes "a clear effort to think in Guaraní and write in Spanish, without sacrificing the precision and elegance of the language, exhibiting more than a few features of experimentalism, such as the mythical universe, the inquiry into language from language itself, or the expansion of the narrator's role years before the publication of *La casa verde* (*The Green House*), *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), and *Yo el supremo*."⁸

In a fragment from this novel, you will see how the author, by using Paraguayan Spanish and direct translation of Guaraní expressions and syntactical forms, goes to the root of what is Paraguayan with fresh insights.

"Once they came into the light, the spirited clapping of hooves approaching the house from the night was transformed into a man on horseback who, galloping full-speed, clippity-clop, clippity-clop, burst through the portico with the speed of thought, stopped and took hold of a corner pole of the arbor.

"Abruptly reined before it ran into a wide post, the animal made a half turn on two legs with a twist of its neck. Then the rider dismounted or, one could say, let himself drop down, still holding the reins with his left hand.

"It was Mancuello. He got up with difficulty, and stumbling stepped onto the patio. Without having moved from where it had stopped, his dapple-grey horse was overcome with the shivers, as if it had a fever, its body all wet with foam and gleaming with sweat.

"Once they realized who had arrived at the party so unexpectedly, there was a great commotion; even with the sheriff among them, chaos ensued at the sound of the cry, 'Chake!, Watch Out! Mancuello's coming!'; everyone scattered into the woods or sought refuge in the house. They gathered in the rafters, they entered and exited every room, they dove into the pigsty with the sows and piglets who awoke with deafening squeals, or they slipped into the kitchen, hoping that perhaps the smoke would hide them.

"Even the small armed soldier brought by the sheriff (in case he had to break up any fistfights, though the guests were fairly reliable), fled and was utterly terrified when he opened the door to a small room where, in addition to the noise of musicians playing, he found the old senile aunt of Ña Candelaria sitting there.

"Tossing his rifle under her cot and hurriedly leaving the room, the soldier screamed that he was quitting, as if there was a revolution going on outside. She didn't pay any attention to him, she just stared at him and kept delousing herself with a fine comb made of deer antlers, in the dimly lit little room.

"Meanwhile Mancuello, standing in the courtyard all by himself, looked in one direction and then the other with his blurry eyes, and then staggered forward.

"His shirt-tail out and unbuttoned to the navel, overcome by exhaustion and soaked with an unbearable stench after such a long journey, he was foaming at the mouth just like his horse.

"He was, as was his custom, stone drunk, and more pale than usual under the merciless yellow street lights. He looked like a beggar in rags, with sores encrusted on his ugly viscous face."

Also appearing in 1966 were *Imágenes sin tierra (Images from Exile)* by poet José Luis Appleyard, *Crónica de una familia (Story of a Family)* by Ana Iris Chaves de Ferreiro, and *La quema de Judas (Burning Judas)* by playwright Mario Halley Mora (1928), who went on to produce several more works.

Paraguyan writers like Juan Bautista Rivarola Matto (1933-1991) drew repeatedly from the quarries of Paraguayan history. His three novels *Ybypora* (1969), *Diagonal de sangre (Streak of Blood)* (1986), and *La isla sin mar (The Island Without a Sea)* (1987) comprise a "historical novel trilogy...that treats the issues of a small nation...isolated by geography and often forgotten by history"⁹ which were subsequently included in his all-

encompassing *Bandera sobre las tumbas* (*Flag Over the Tombs*) (1991).

Jesús Ruiz Nestosa (1941) wrote *Las musarañas* (*The Little Creatures*) (1973), *El contador de cuentos* (*The Story Teller*) (1982), and *Los ensayos* (*The Essays*) (1982), questioning the vices of a rigid and repressive society, in a style of writing that represents a departure from pre-established aesthetic schemes.

Although there is presently an interesting proliferation of women's voices, other writers have appeared on the scene such as Ovidio Benítez Pereira, Santiago Dimas Aranda, Carlos Garcete, and Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá, who published *Relatos de Norte y Sur* (*Stories from the North and South*) in 1983, and later *El ojo del bosque* (*The Eye of the Forest*) (1992); some are parochial, like Alcibiades González del Valle or Helio Vera; others are more universal, like Osvaldo González Real who, following in the footsteps of H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Ray Bradbury, rides the wave of science fiction to depict a technocratic and alienating society which denounces the dehumanization of man.

From his story *Epístola para ser dejada en la tierra* (*Letter to Be Left on Earth*), I read the following:

"From looking at the sky so much, seeking some indication from the stars (something to guide us in these desperate times), we have caught glimpses of strange premonitory signs. We are not alone. Other intelligent beings have come before us.

"I am a crew member on a giant spaceship cruising through the galaxy. For some time I have wanted to relate, in writing, the difficult times we are going through and

the crisis that is affecting our expedition. We are following the mother ship, even larger than our own, which provides us with fuel, and we are towing a smaller one, which could provide us shelter in case of a catastrophe. We have been traveling for a very long time (some believe millions of years), and it is estimated that it will take millions more to reach our destination (the galaxy that we are crossing is enormous). The most skeptical among us doubt we'll ever reach our long-awaited final objective.

"Apparently, at some point in the course of our immense journey, the ship's logbook was lost (for unknown reasons), and with it all of the knowledge of our past, and the purpose of our trip. It is also believed that we have always been traveling, and that we will never stop.

"I've reached the end of my story. Magicians, philosophers, artists, and prophets have appeared here at different times to console the unfortunate travelers, and make the endless voyage more bearable.

"I am one of those prophets. I have warned them. I have spoken to them. That is why they condemn me.

"My name is Juan. I was a crew member on the spaceship Earth.'

"P.S. This manuscript was found beside a lifeless body in a drifting spacecraft, by a ship crossing the galaxy, near the Sun. An expedition has been sent to Earth. Four black spaceships, under the command of the Angel of Death. Their slogan is JUSTICE."

In *Angola y otros cuentos* (*Angola and Other Stories*) (1984) Helio Vera displays his mastery of the "lexicon and syntax of popular discourse, as well as a profound knowledge of the psychology of the

peasantry...and the imagery of our folklore,"¹⁰ using history as the starting point for some of his fiction. This is the case of his story *Angola*, which testifies to the existence of African blood in Paraguay, which was reinvigorated by the invasion of Brazilian troops to "a country burned to the ground by the war" (of the Triple Alliance), according to the author. A fragment of the story will give you an idea of the agility of his prose, which maintains a dizzying pace, a rhythm that could well be the echo of African drums.

"Angola, Black woman with kinky hair, charcoal skin. Granddaughter of Black sires. Flesh of drums, bell-shaped crinolines and baggy red trousers. Angola without bongos, without a woman drummer, without a *candombe*. Tonight Pajarillo will not sleep, out of pure fear. He will hear your coarse voice, your depraved laugh drowning out the murmurs of the *Our Father*.

"Angola, wrapped in a white shroud, passing on to the verdant clouds of Olorum. To rub elbows with resplendent *orishas*. Your life ended without *macumba*, without candles suffocating in rolled cigar smoke. Without the sacrifice of black cocks at midnight. Without soiled papers covered with cabalistic scrawls.

"Angola, Black woman with white teeth and a reliable laugh. Your mother a whore, your father unknown. Your life of senseless events has come to an end. Pajarillo cries through the night without Angola. His night without the mulatta. He will wait in vain for your bronze back and smooth buttocks.

"Pajarillo, poor muleteer. Half Indian, half gypsy. You move about in a cunning way, with steps like a young hen. Peck here, peck there. Reluctant to work,

but eager to flatter, a connoisseur of honeyed words. Nights wasted in stormy billiard rooms and cheap brothels outside the city.

"Angola, crazy woman, jug of rum. Initiation ceremonies along the weed-covered banks of Bobo Creek. Impassioned cries, exhausting siestas astride kids who come from the most distant neighborhoods. Still smelling of the musty rustic sugar mill by the quebracho tree, or cheap cane juice. At least she is what everyone says. What they told poor Pajarillo, as if they didn't want to overwhelm his sleep with nightmares."

Guido Rodríguez Alcalá (1946), considered an iconoclast in our literature, began his narrative work with the novel *Caballero (Gentleman)* (1986), based on a historical character who he desanctifies through his own discourse, which is followed by *Caballero Rey (Gentleman King)* (1988), *El rector (The Rector)* (1991), and several collections of stories. The following is a passage from his novel *Caballero*:

"And that is more or less what happened at the beginning. I want to tell you about when the war ended, because the Brazilians didn't even want to hear talk of Paraguayans armed with swords; they didn't even want to let us have an army... They didn't trust us, that's why they stayed until 1876, occupying the country... In those days any Paraguayan soldier who left the barracks and went out into the streets might be grabbed right there by four or five Brazilians. There was no security, there was no respect, no police, nothing... Well, police yes, but that meant four guys armed with clubs, and that wasn't enough to keep the peace. Then they realized they needed an army to ensure everyone's safety, and also to keep the Liberals from giving away the

whole Chaco to Argentina. You understand that Paraguay did not want to part with its Chaco, nor did Brazil want a whole territory like that to become part of Argentina, for then the Curepi would extend into the Matto Grosso, and that could have posed a threat to the Brazilians. And that's when we reached agreement with the Brazilians, and we, the two of us, joined together against Argentina. Who would have thought that after fighting with each other for so long! Who would have thought that I would have been selected to serve after all the regiments I slaughtered! But that was precisely the advantage of my trip to Rio: the Provisional Government asked the Brazilians to hold me as a prisoner of war because I might stir things up in Paraguay, it was said, but I took advantage of the trip to forge good relations that would prove useful later..."

In 1987 Juan Manuel Marcos (1950) published the novel *El invierno de Gunter* (*Gunter's Winter*), which was clearly post-modernist, from which I'll read the following:

"Verónica spent almost the whole day on a blanket spread on the concrete slab that was the roof of the kitchen at the police station. Nearby slept a medical student, two dealers of pornographic magazines, and a thief, probably a plant. They were prohibited from speaking with each other. Verónica had been kicked in the ribs several times for exchanging smiles with the university student. At night it would be somewhat cool, and the concrete warmed by the kitchen below was almost hospitable. That night, wrapped in her poncho, Verónica recalled that it was her grandfather's birthday. She remembered that the colonel had an almost atavistic aversion to the law of

indefinite progress, and would repeat with a heavy Spanish accent: 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awaken.' Verónica proudly suspected that her grandfather was the only man in his eighties who had read Ulysses. One of the colonel's greatest achievements had been to capture some water wells in the enemy's rearguard. After days of making their way on foot through the thick forest, under the desiccating sun and the December moonlight, at the head of a tattered battalion, the colonel, much older than his exhausted young soldiers, had guided them with perseverance to sacrifice and victory... Verónica smiled, despite the intense pain in her abdomen, badly abused by rape and torture with cattle prods, remembering that an American historian had attributed that kind of strategic thinking to the Guaraní, who, he said, could plan how to win a battle 'as if it were a math problem.'"

Luis Hernández (1947) won the Premio Municipal the first time it was awarded in 1992, with his work *El destino, el barro y la coneja* (*Destiny, Mud and the Rabbit*) (1989). Jorge Canese (1947) developed his social critique by demolishing aesthetics, and Moncho Azuaga (1953) made his indictment in *Celda 12* (*Cell #12*) (1991), a novel that explores the labyrinths of torture and terror.

In the story *Machu*, by Moncho Azuaga, one can appreciate the mix of the Spanish and Guaraní linguistic codes commonly used by a large part of the Paraguayan population.

"I told you to stop acting like a fool. I don't know what you're trying to accomplish with this.

"*India*, you must be an Indian! Get up, you lazy bones. You act like you can't speak. You've got the devil in you! You're still an animal. Your place is out there, in the wild! There with your Indian folk, there you'll be happy.

"Get out of that pit right now.

"Stop pretending you are dumb. Get out already, you stinking Indian. Stop hiding in every hole in the ground. Look, look where you are.

"All night long, I thought I heard you. More than one has probably been with you, and you don't even have your period yet. That's all we need. They will line up to be with you.

"If the boss weren't so good and Christian, he would have kicked you out by now.

"And you don't speak, and you don't look me straight in the eyes. That's how you all are. Traitors. All of you should have died. We'd all be doing much better if that had happened.

"It is your fault that we live in backwardness.

"That's what the boss says.

"Unemployed good-for-nothing bums!

"Get out, I tell you! Look around. What's this? You threw your clothes everywhere. No doubt that dog Madá has already made a big mess of it. But that's understandable, he did it because the clothes are red. They aren't right for you. Red tempts all men.

"In addition to being Indian, to make matters worse, you had to be horny. Lustful little bitch!...

"Dear God, Virgin Mary, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Close those eyes of yours and say something to me. You look like a

stiff ghost lying there. And you pretend you can't speak, you mute!

"Madá, out! Out dog!

"Look, she's eating all your crap.

"Get out of that hole down there.

"Listen! It sounds like the boss is leaving now.

"And he's leaving without even having his tea. He must be in a hurry. It's so early. It's not even dawn."

Our narrative becomes testimonial at times, as in the case of the Spaniard Santiago Trias Coll (1946), who described the deplorable situations experienced during the dictatorship with journalistic style.

In the 1980s Paraguayan narrative written from inside the country underwent a rare blossoming. First, new authors or authors who had had difficulties publishing, began to publish their work, boosted by encouragement given by NAPA Publishers. In addition, the emergence of female voices was powerful and constant.

Three women wrote novels at this time. The first to appear, in what we call the boom of female narrative, was Neida de Mendonça (1933), with *Golpe de luz* (*Sudden Light*) (1983), an introspective novel, a search for an identity of her own, which was followed by several collections of stories, where the author exercises the right of a woman to tell about herself from her own perspective, using suggestive and poetic language. I will read a passage from her story *Que la muerte nos separe* (*Let Death Do Us Part*), from the book *De polvo y de viento* (*Of Dust and Wind*) (1986), written in the form of correspondence, in which you can see just how far she goes to defend women's freedom.

"I was eighteen years old and already

married, and I was barely twenty when I showed up at my parents' house saying: 'I don't have anywhere to go and I don't love my husband any more.' I can still feel the cold reproachful silence of Mamá, while my father handed down the judgment: 'A decent woman loves her husband until death.'

"With time your letters became notes, then brief notes until finally, you stopped writing. My efforts to build up our relationship also got smaller. The materials and excavations became cheaper. I didn't even use bricks. Our love was made of adobe. It was of clay. It was of dust! (We haven't recognized each other in the silence, we haven't recognized each other in the howls, nor in our caves, nor in the gestures of foreigners.) But a decent woman loves her husband until death. And I feel myself dying...

"Yes, I know that an architect designed the small Grecian mausoleum of pink marble. I know that the golden brass epitaph of the González family is polished and shining in the sun. But I also know that even after death, after the nothing, we'll still be scratching at each other. I am terrified by the idea that the dust of our bones could eventually sift down through the cracks and mingle, and so continue to irritate and cause each other pain.

"That's why I bought a small burial plot in Ytorotó with the pesos that you forgot in the pockets of your pants (you know very well that money only belongs to men). You'll find the plot's title in the dresser drawer. I hope to be returned, purified and with decency, to the wind and the earth.

"Today I turn 78 years old, seated in an unseemly wheel chair, still complicating

my life with words. I don't know how I got myself into this mess, since what I need to ask of you is very simple: I don't want to be buried at your side after I die. Lucía."

Raquel Saguier (1940) became known with *La niña que perdi en el circo* (*The Little Girl I Lost at the Circus*) (1987) (also translated to French and Portuguese), revisiting the terrain of her childhood with the help of poetry. Two years later her second novel appeared, *La vera historia de Purificación* (*The True History of Purification*) (1989) where, with a dazzling baroque prose, she analyzes "the harsh job of being a woman in a patriarchal society infested with hypocrisy and authoritarianism."¹¹ *The Little Girl I Lost at the Circus* is a trip into lost time, magically recaptured by the author. I'll now read from the first chapter:

"The girl and I are different. She remains just as I left her some time ago, obstinately girlish, blond, calm, and seemingly fragmented at times. In contrast I have been slightly bored by the walking, my soles have worn through, but I'm still alive and in one piece, it seems.

"We are different, the girl and I, and yet so similar. There is much of her gaze in my eyes, and I have brought with me some of her sorrows. They're sorrows that were tremendously big, that hung from her like borrowed clothes, that's why I brought them.

"Now I know they are stubborn sorrows; I later tried in vain to exchange them for joy, but they didn't accept my offer. They preferred to remain as they always have been, not demanding anything more from me than a place where they can hide. I gave

them the last room at the end of the hall, and from time to time they take advantage of the tiny opening which I leave open for them to go out. They get away from me in long processions, and that's when the rain or the twilight hurts me, ruining an afternoon or a Sunday downtown.

"Fortunately I also had time to bring myself some of her happiness, her lively spirit, her easy laugh provoked by the slightest silliness. It is very healthy for me to hear that girl laugh, it cleanses me.

"It was she who taught me to laugh just with my eyes, without the mouth joining in the game, and thanks to her I learned that by going through the successive stages of gasping, coughing, and asthma, one could indeed die of laughter.

"I still have many of her escapades in my knees, and her clumsiness for climbing trees in my legs, and even a terrible scar from smallpox hidden in my curls. When I discovered it on my forehead, it was too late to remove it, and it has remained and grown old with me."

I can round out the list of novelists who appeared in the 1980s by referring to my own work. Speaking off one's own work always entails a serious commitment. Suffice it to say that I began publishing prose with *La seca y otros cuentos (The Drought and Other Stories)* (1986), impelled by the need to denounce situations which seemed more apt for narrative discourse than for poetry. This book was followed by the novel *Los nudos del silencio (The Knots of Silence)* (1988), which appeared in the final years of the dictatorship; it defends a woman's right to her vocation, denounces

the subjection of women in a macho society, and pursues the violation of human rights through torture and oppression during that fateful period. *Por el ojo de la cerradura (Through the Keyhole)* (1993) seeks to unveil the other realities that hide behind appearances. *Desde el encendido corazón del monte (From the Burning Heart of the Mountain)* (1994) is a series of ecological stories, with illustrations by the Chamacoco Indian, Ogwa-Flores Balbuena.

The Paraguayan actress, Ana María Imizcoz, has honored me by including two of my stories in her one-woman play, *Mujeres de mi tierra*. These are *La visita (The Visit)*, which sets forth a situation that occurs time and again among rural women, i.e. the single mother left to fend for herself, and *Hay que matar un chancho (A Pig Must be Killed)*, which bears witness to how passions, an essential part of the human condition, can drag us to the most sinister of destinies.

I will read a few paragraphs from my novel, *Los nudos del silencio*:

"It wasn't the first time they had called him, but it was the first time after the interrogation that had long been under way. The blood, dry on one side, tepid and flowing on the other, marked the straight corners of her mouth. As soon as he came in they told him: 'They say she knows a lot sir, that she knows who received the calls, and that she has the whole guerrilla network in her head. Be tough with her. No one undermines the peace and order of the republic with impunity. They say she is a key player, that she knows about everything, more than anyone else. We'll see about that. Be tough with her...'

"The clock struck three times and resonated through the night. Try it again. The fingernails ooze blood in a soft flow that coagulates before it hits the bed. Four strikes of the clock are heard in the night. Try it again. And again and again, and once more. But the mouth only opens to scream. They kept insisting, but it was for the last time. When the clock struck five, they finally understood that she wouldn't talk; at that moment she became their toy. There were three of them, one after the other, several times, under the passive gaze of the supervisor. When the clock struck six, they left.

"Manuel waited, his glassy eyes fixed on her blood-stained body. Her dark crevices seeped blood. In the relief of total exhaustion, her muscles distended, relaxing into the ease of abandon. Then he, with his dim gaze and racing pulse, softly stepped to the door, locked it, and let go...

"He ran to get dressed. He rushed so fast he forgot to tie the ropes back up properly. He had just arrived home and was already in the bathroom. Why would they be calling him again? What could be happening to that girl that they're calling me in again? He had left her sleeping when he lowered her skirt. Had he lowered her skirt? My God, I can't remember if I lowered her skirt or not. She was a lax, flexible, destitute mass, almost helpless, obedient, with the complacency of abandon, a total void, a parody of death. And it's almost here. Death.

"Death? No, she couldn't die. It can't be true. The cathedral clock was a witness. They would have told him by now. No, they wouldn't have told him by telephone.

"I don't want her to die. I don't want

anyone to die. I don't want to be the last to have had her. No, not with a dead, an almost dead woman. With mathematical precision he turned the corner. His brakes screeched to a stop at the main gate. The guards are indifferent; one salutes him, the other steps out of his way. The guard's salute kept playing over and over again in his head. Everything is a lie. Nothing has happened to her. In a dark corridor his impatience resounds. They've probably rounded up some more rebels. That's it, that's why they called me in. There are so many dissidents struggling against order and peace and progress these days. A soldier stood at attention, waiting for him. He looked for answers in his eyes. 'What's happening?' he almost shouts. 'The prisoner has died, sir.'

"A steel net descends and immobilizes everything: the voices, the protests, the various expressions of disgrace. 'Bury her in the yard like the others, but at night, of course.'"

It is in the difficult genre of the short story that the most recent voices have been heard, such as Sarah Karlik, who became known with her *La oscuridad de afuera* (*The Darkness Outside*) (1987), followed with several other works that describe the internal reality of the characters, adopting a psychological approach, which is very much in vogue among the contemporary female narrative writers. Carlos Villagra Marsal affirms that Karlik "enters the new narrative of the subconscious via biased yet necessary paths," infusing her fiction with "the continuous eruption of the poetic function in the narrative discourse."¹² Lucy Mendonça de Spinci (1932) is another highly expressive writer who makes skillful use of colloquial Paraguayan Spanish to give her

work a vigorous authenticity, as can be noted in *Tierra mansa y otros cuentos* (*Gentle Earth and Other Stories*) (1987).

Poet Ester de Izaguirre (1924) revealed herself as a writer of extraordinary verbal economy and force with *Ultimo domicilio conocido* (*Last Known Address*) (1990). She was followed by Milia Gayoso (1962), Chiquita Barreto (1947), Margot Ayala de Michilagnoli (who records the slang of the marginal urban areas), Nidia Sanabria de Romero, Luisa Bosio, and others.

Short fiction dominates contemporary Paraguayan writing. In 1992, three story writers from the Taller Cuento Breve (Short Story Workshop) directed by Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá, became known for the first time. They are Luisa Moreno de Gabaglio (1949) who, in her book *Echoes de monte y de arena* (*Echos from the Mountain and from the Sand*), touches on ecological issues, coming out in defense of the environment and endangered species; Maybel Lebrón (1923) who Villagra Marsal says has achieved a balance within the thematic diversity in her book *Memoria sin tiempo* (*Timeless Memory*)¹³; and Dirma Pardo de Carugatti (1933) whose direct style and marked impassivity “strengthen the dramatic quality of her fiction,” which is collected in *La víspera y el día* (*The Dawn and the Day*).¹⁴

To conclude this brief overview of Paraguayan narrative, I wish to underscore this duality in terms of whether the literature is coming from abroad or from within, and the writers’ persistent concerns with our linguistic roots. The adoption of “Paraguayan” Spanish is a common occurrence today, as is the determination to delve into

the minds of protagonists. In my view, they have captured and rescued the verbal expression in Spanish from the mental discourse in Guaraní. To me, this is the challenge and mark of authenticity of our literature.

In addition, I am pleased to highlight the proliferation of women’s voices as a result of women coming to value their own experiences, and having realized their right to describe their own lives from a completely female perspective. The potential in the voices of women, who are now taking charge of their sexuality, can only enhance literature any place in the world, Paraguay being no exception.

While Paraguayan narrative has been limited by a distinct immaturity, lacking as it has a century-long literary tradition like other Latin American countries, the current group of writers of both sexes, the pace of their production, the diversity of themes, and their persistence in embracing the secluded language as a guarantee of unique cultural identity, make it possible to affirm that in Paraguay a narrative of substance is emerging of which only time can be the judge.

(The lecture was followed by a dramatic presentation of two scenes from *Mujeres de mi tierra* performed by the Paraguayan actress Ana María Imíscoz.)

The Same

by Renée Ferrer, 1980.

Entwined in silence,
we must understand;
we are all the same,
created for an incandescent sky
of the same clay of the ages.
Different, perhaps
in the shadows that show the defects
or the different color of our bodies.

To feel rocklike and unbreakable
the torrential gusts of winds.
Oh transcendental error that belittles us.
How sadly distant from the aurora
navigates this our boat toward the shadows.

We must understand, little soul
we are destined to wrench from ourselves
this clinging painful imperfection,
lose it on astral roads,
drown it in ancestral torrents
until we bury rancor
in the dark wells that separate
life from nothing.

In the intimate quietness of being,
I recognize from other crowds
harsh solitude,
distinct only
in the sad vigilance of destiny,
the same at the end as in the beginning
of one single pilgrimage route.

Renée Ferrer 1980

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Paraguayan writer and poet **Renée Ferrer de Arréllaga** has published *Los nudos del silencio* (1988) (novel); *Peregrino de la eternidad* (1985), *Sobreviviente* (1988), *El acantilado y el mar* (1992), and *Viaje a destiempo* (1989) (poetry); *La seca* (1986) and *Por el ojo de la cerradura* (1993) (stories). In 1986 her story *La seca* won first prize in the Pola de Lena Awards in Spain, and in 1989 she was a finalist in the II Ana María Matute competition in Spain. In 1992, her book *Cascarita de nuez* was chosen as the support text for the bilingual program for San Diego County, California. She has written theatrical adaptations and books for children such as *La mariposa azul* (1987). Her work is included in several anthologies of Paraguayan narrative and poetry. Her themes encompass freedom, women, and the cultural universe of Paraguay. Her theatrical adaptations of the story *La sequía* by Rodrigo Díaz Pérez, and *Hay que matar un chanco* form part of the one-woman show *Mujeres de mi tierra*, performed in France, Spain, and Colombia in 1993 by Paraguayan actress Ana María Imizcoz.

Published works:

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Desde el encendido corazón del monte (1994). Environmental stories illustrated by the Chamacoco Indian, Ogwa-Flores Balbuena.

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