

## HUNGER GAMES IN “VACÍO ERA EL DE ANTES” BY LUISA VALENZUELA

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### Abstract

While the title stories of Luisa Valenzuela’s collections (“Aquí pasan cosas raras”; “Cambio de armas”) and a few other of her short fictions have been subject to analysis multiple times, the majority of her very short stories have not yet been studied in published form. In this article, I analyze “Vacío era el de antes” (*Aquí pasan cosas raras*, 1975), in which the author uses an ironic and comic mode to narrate the theme of hunger in Buenos Aires before and during the year of 1974. I treat social, political, and economic context as ‘affordances,’ discourses and objects in discourse, that can be fruitfully disentangled to highlight some of the story’s many meanings. In the story, the narrator peers through a hole in a fence of a construction site and sees an empty grill. Found in many Argentine restaurants and outside many homes, the typical grill (*parrilla*) and the *asado* cooked on it, are the architectural and food objects around which the story is constructed. Next, I compare thematically and rhetorically Valenzuela’s story with a forerunner in the literary line of satiric commentaries on Argentine culture, Esteban Echeverría’s “El matadero.” Finally, I bring into the light connections between Peronist ideology and ideas within “Vacío.” In this analysis, I explore some of the consequences, both comical and dire, of the lack of meat at lunchtime on construction sites in “Vacío era el de antes,” revealing trenchant sarcasm and mordant satire as discursive weapons, criticizing state corruption and the downward spiral of the economy.

**Keywords:** Hunger games, “Vacío era el de antes,” Luisa Valenzuela, Esteban Echeverría, “El matadero,” food culture, Peronism

Lack of food has long been a theme of satire in Western literature. In Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729), for instance, the author proposes that poor Irish parents, when they cannot pay rent, sell their children to their landlords for the upper classes to dine on them. *Hunger* (1890), a novel by Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, gave starvation by a writer psychological treatment with humorous moments. Franz Kafka, whose father when young was a ritual slaughterer in the Jewish tradition, wrote "A Hunger Artist" (1922), a story about a man who never found any food to his taste and who made a living by fasting publicly, caged, in circuses and fairs. The hunger artist did not entertain the public most of the time, in contrast to the panther, whose cage replaces that of the hunger artist when he dies. His death becomes meaningless due to others' inability to really see him for who he was or to recognize his art. My title uses the phrase "hunger games" from Suzanne Collins's trilogy of that name, because her work references both the theme of hunger and that of resistance to class discrimination, while being rife with criticism of a corrupt political regime<sup>1</sup>.

In the Argentine canon, mentions of hunger abound. In *La hora de los hornos* (directed by Pino Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968), for instance, one of the intertitles of Part 1, "Introduction," is "Geografía del Hambre." A primordial reference to hunger in Argentine literary classics prior to Valenzuela's story is the opening section of Esteban Echeverría's "El matadero" (written 1838-1840, published 1871), which portrays with remarkable irony a vast hunger in the populace of Buenos Aires in the 1830s. As in Valenzuela's story, the hunger in Echeverría is essentially a lack of meat. The resonances of "El matadero" with "Vacío" are greater than with the non-Argentine works and make manifest additional qualities of the shorter and more recent work. The contrasts between the two Argentine texts highlight Valenzuela's relatively playful tone and lack of realism.

"Vacío era el de antes" appeared in Luisa Valenzuela's second short fiction collection, *Aquí pasan cosas raras* (henceforth *APCR*). This volume was written in Buenos Aires in 1974 during a period of one month and would be published the following year (Valenzuela 20). Critics, like Z. Nelly Martínez and María Claudia André, have focused on the incorporation of the discourse of the military and the paramilitary in Valenzuela's *APCR* and later works. Sharon Magnarelli's book and articles have covered a greater diversity of themes and established the ground work for others. But the theme of hunger during the pre-dictatorship years in Valenzuela has not yet been treated<sup>2</sup>. My goal is to rescue the story from its present status as unnoticed in the critical literature, and to contribute to understanding it as a literary text worthy of even further scrutiny beyond what I have space for here<sup>3</sup>.

Hunger and poverty are the main manifestations of the economy for those characters who are working-class in *APCR*. In the title story, "Aquí pasan cosas raras," a pair of unemployed men are not sure how they will pay for the coffee and snacks they consume in the cafés where they pass the time. In "Los zombis," the frightening characters act like zombies because they have no money for food. The Mascapios (celery-eaters) in the eponymous story receive celery as part of their pay because it is such a valuable and costly commodity. "El don de la palabra" features a Leader who speaks for hours and days on end from a balcony; there is a general worry among pessimists and dissidents that the extreme length of the speeches will cause famine in the city because everyone is listening, and no one is working crops or herding cattle in the countryside. Also, in the plaza below where the *Líder* addresses his followers, all the pigeons are already gone and presumably eaten. There is a playful spirit regarding hunger in many stories, despite the sad and unrelenting suffering described therein. For example, "Pequeña historia obvia" is a cute and funny love tale about a man and a woman who work in a meat-processing plant, a modern slaughterhouse. The mother wrongly fears her future daughter-in-law is only interested in her son for the organ meat he passes to her 'under the table'; she doubts her son's attractiveness because he is cross-eyed and must commute long distances to the plant where the couple works (75-76). This lack of food hurts

1. Collins was inspired by reality television for her 'hunger games,' but here I am merely referring to the ludic qualities of Valenzuela's theme of hunger in general and in this short story in particular.

2. Online bibliographies such as MLA, HAPI, Google Scholar, [LuisaValenzuela.com](http://LuisaValenzuela.com), among other indexes and bibliographies, have not returned any citations of criticism on this particular story. My research on the economic context for "Vacío" has taken place during the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. Print books have rarely been available unless they were in my personal library, a kind librarian scanned chapters for me, or I could request inter-library loan, since my university library stacks have been closed.

3. This article is part of a larger project of examining some of the short and neglected stories in *APCR*.

Unemployed and essential workers alike; nevertheless, Valenzuela's short stories incorporate humor in a high stakes game of providing testimony at the same time as the pleasure of reading.

Although not a story about working-class poverty, "Camino al ministerio" portrays a protagonist given food by neighbors for he is thought to be sacrificing himself for political gain by walking on nails and performing other painful activities. When his supporters stop feeding him, however, the candidate suffers hunger for a long time: "A los pocos días el hambre le hace chillar las tripas pero no aplaca el ardor de las ansias de poder" (23). This comment satirizes the 'saintly sacrifices' made by those in power. He eventually dies of starvation abandoned by his public, much like Kafka's hunger artist<sup>4</sup>. Despite the seriousness of these themes, the mood or tone of the volume is predominantly ludic, humorous, and ironic. As I show in "Sympathizing with Monsters," the narrators of many stories in *APCR* often display empathy with the victims of social and economic misfortunes that escalate progressively. These stories play 'hunger games' in the sense that they shock with the revelation of horrible truths at the same time that they make a reader laugh at imaginative jokes and unlikely puns. In this article, I show how the four paragraphs of the very short story "Vacío era el de antes" (henceforth "Vacío") riff on the theme of hunger in compassionate yet comical ways.

According to Valenzuela, the stories in *APCR* constitute an effort to understand her surroundings after having spent time abroad: "[U]pon my return to Buenos Aires in 1974, when the paramilitary violence was already being unleashed [,] I realized then that it was necessary for me to write in order to achieve an understanding of that reality which was so foreign to what I had left behind two years earlier" ("Memories of the Past" 20). The years of 1974-1975 were a time of multiple crises in Argentina, described concisely by Pamela Bacarisse in the context of Manuel Puig, another writer of the period:

Isabel [Perón] is on the throne, the government is at best inept, at worst corrupt, the country's economy is on the rocks, inflation is soaring, the unions are demanding higher wages, harvests are bad, beef production is in decline, and civil revolution and urban violence make up the order of the day. (155)

The games Valenzuela plays in this volume can become more meaningful if one understands her allusions to the 'strange things' occurring during this ferocious time: bombings, tortures, kidnappings, disappearances, and killings. While those forms of violence are not explicit in "Vacío," chronic hunger is also violently oppressive and appears as deprivation, scarcity, injustice, and competition for resources.

Of course, Valenzuela never provides a guide or translation key to the allusions within the stories themselves, perhaps to protect herself or, more probably, to use the ridiculous, the absurd, and strange as floating signifiers of resistance<sup>5</sup>. She explains the role she assigns to herself: "I think a writer is there just to pick up like an antenna, just to pick up the problems, the discomforts, the horror. And then to point them out" (Martínez 103). Her method was to be alert especially in public areas: "en los cafés porteños, adonde inevitablemente le llegaban frases expresivas de la confusión reinante, [donde] la escritora recoge la materia prima con que elaborará su mundo de ficción" (Martínez 120). Valenzuela, then, concocts new connections between the socially available expressions and objects in order to expose wrongdoings. The political and the economic often do overlap in her fictions as she herself noted. In 1981 Valenzuela stated she is very concerned with both: "[s]on los problemas políticos que nos aquejan, y los problemas económicos, y la conjunción de ambos y de tantos más problemas que tienen al porteño al filo de la crisis nerviosa" ("Los porteños" 25-26). The tropes in "Vacío" signifying narratorial opposition to the status quo involve elements of Argentine culinary practices such as *la Parrilla*, *el asado*, *vacío* and *matambre*; Esteban Echevarría's writings;

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4. See Magnarelli (49-51), for a discussion of this story as a bridge to Valenzuela's previous collection of short stories.

5. Martínez explains further the factor of self-protection: "[e]s digno de notar que algunas de las herramientas de trabajo que utiliza, tales como la exageración, el grotesco, la parodia y el humor negro, también le ayudan a Valenzuela a eludir la auto-censura, problema de capital importancia para una escritora/un escritor en el seno de una dictadura" (120).

the Argentine economic problems of the 1970s: inflation, the import-export market; and resurgent Peronism<sup>6</sup>.

The first-person narrator in “Vacío,” typical of *APCR*, remains nameless throughout the story, appearing as a *flâneuse*, viewing and remarking upon the urban landscape. A wanderer through the city, the narrator smells meat grilling: “Lo bueno de los mediodías grises es el olor a asadito que se escapa de las obras en construcción” (103). Upon looking where the smell emanates from, however, she spies an empty grill: “es bien triste entrever por algún hueco de la tapia las brasas ardiendo bajo las parrillas y sobre las parrillas, nada” (105). The empty grill is a figure of loss: things both pleasant and essential have disappeared. The political and economic themes correspond to and grow from this scene.

The word *vacío* of the story’s title is a pun on the deficit of meat on the grill and a popular cut of meat of the same name<sup>7</sup>. (The word was also associated with the regime of Isabel Perón, as will be discussed later.) The title of the English translation of the story, “Void and Vacuum,” loses the pun on the cut of meat and emphasizes the emptiness theme. Attention to these names *vacío* and *matambre*, the popular dish made using the *vacío* cut of meat, reveals some of the echoes and ironies with which Valenzuela plays her verbal games about hunger. Construction workers do not labor like before “por culpa de la mala nutrición y de las huelgas” (103)<sup>8</sup>. Combining labor strikes and poor nutrition reinforces the hunger theme in “Vacío” as interconnected social, economic, and political forms of injustice. A prohibition on meat (“veda de carne” 103) provokes a variety of attempts by workers and management to compensate for the loss of meat and bones normally grilled at lunchtime on construction sites<sup>9</sup>. The history of these cuts of meat and dishes reinforces the association between the working-class identity and Argentine food culture in the story, while the names of the dishes remind the reader of the hunger the meats were meant to assuage.

Beef and pork are scarce, construction jobs are few, and pay in the construction industry is insufficient. The narrator notes, “[l]a ausencia del olor a asado y el bajo índice de productividad de los obreros por falta de proteínas son tema obligado en toda reunión de directorio” (104-105)<sup>10</sup>. The odor is a non-visual aftereffect, still noticeable to the narrator, indicating that the space had previously been employed by workers to cook: “Ahora bien, me pregunto qué pondrán los obreros sobre sus parrillas” (103), and establishing a necessity to speculate on how to solve the mystery of the missing *asado*. Indeed, the narrative cooks together the hunger of construction workers with the fate of the buildings they work on, as we shall see, and adds a side portion of commentary on the suffering of the working class in Buenos Aires in its no-fun hunger games.

### The Empty Grill: Malnutrition and Constructing Buildings in Buenos Aires

Negative changes in the Argentine economy such as out-of-control inflation and the need to import products like beef and oil—which Argentina had previously exported—whipped through the capital in the early 1970s. But many Argentine intellectuals and artists tended to experience these years differently than the politicians or businessmen. They felt an excitement and confidence in social change during these years. In “Strategies of the Literary Imagination,” for instance, Beatriz Sarlo speaks of a feeling of the real possibility of a better future in the early to mid-1970s among Argentine intellectuals and artists; they saw the future as a “certain socialism”

6. The city is the locus for “Vacío,” a city which has been affected by a brutal economic situation in the countryside that forces agricultural workers to migrate to urban areas.

7. *Vacío* “is a not very well-known cut of beef in the US” and “is often called flap meat or sirloin tips” (“Learn How to Cook Vacío Steak or Bavette Steak”). The word “Asado” is difficult to translate exactly into English because ‘barbecue’ implies using a sauce, whereas a ‘roast’ implies cooking in an oven. ‘Grilled meat’ could mean hot dogs or rotisserie chicken. ‘Grilled steak’ is perhaps an option, but I prefer using the Spanish for clarity. I am grateful to my colleague Veronica Menaldi for pointing out this cut of meat. Menaldi also remarks that the *vacío* cut is used in the dish *matambre* (Nov. 2020, personal communication).

8. See Gambini for a discussion of labor negotiations and government’s inability to control prices (especially p. 334). There is a complicated history in the twentieth century both of the country’s unions and of the rural-urban divide concerning its effect on the meat-producing sector.

9. Previously, bones were used to make ash in construction but it has largely fallen out of fashion (“Bone ash”).

10. The low production levels of workers can be understood in the story as their physical weakness due to the lack of meat. The lower productivity of workers during the years in reality could have a variety of explanations, but a major one is that it was a reaction to government actions. According to Liliana de Riz, the measures used by the government in 1974 weakened the unions’ ability to control their workers and consequently, the importance of negotiating with these leaders to find a solution to the recession (120-124). Workers instead began not showing up for the job: “Frente a una oposición sindical diezmada, la protesta obrera comenzó a expresarse por nuevos canales. La ley de contratos de trabajo, al asegurar la estabilidad laboral y dificultar los despidos en el sector privado, les proporcionó un nuevo instrumento. el ausentismo” (121-22).

belonging to the Left (236-38; see also Marcelo Rougier<sup>11</sup>). While Valenzuela likely shared this enthusiasm with Julio Cortázar and others, her stories from *APCR* rather than portraying a vision of this future or projecting how to achieve it, show an encrypted record of the reasons why that utopia never came to be. Her texts in this 1974 volume put on display the fissures already visible in the pillars of economic justice in Buenos Aires. José López Rega and Juan Domingo Perón, for instance, became lifetime interests of Valenzuela. She wrote a long novel about each of the men: *Cola de lagartija* (1983) and *La máscara sarda* (2012), respectively.

“Vacío era lo de antes” is no exception to Valenzuela’s muckraking tendency in this volume. Instead of promises of a new future, in “Vacío” the ghost of Argentina’s better past haunts Buenos Aires: “Antes la cosa era simple: asado de tira... ¿Y ahora?” and “las cosas ya no vienen como antes” (103). Additionally, if Valenzuela’s story contains a veiled reference to the clandestine activities of José López Rega – Juan Domingo Perón’s secretary and, later, a Minister in his cabinet– and to the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Triple A), it would be contained within the idea that something good has disappeared, leaving an emptiness behind. People were disappearing already in 1973 and 1974 and many others knew it<sup>12</sup>. Given the violence in other stories of the collection, “vacío” can be seen as a concept and an image not far afield from ones of the disappearance of people without notice or redress. In the narrative itself the experience of better times in the recent past made the deteriorating economy feel even worse than it was and harder to accept than it otherwise would have been. The grilling of meat at lunchtime by construction workers previously had contributed “para hacer con los huesitos el acabado fino de palier” (103) but now problems in constructing buildings have become dire due to the lack of the mealtime ritual of the *asado* and the *vacío*.

The narrator affirms the difficulty that building workers endure in finding employment that pays well enough for them to eat *asado* during the workday: “[P]ocos pueden ser los elegidos. Cada vez menos, si se tiene en cuenta además la escasez no sólo de bifés de costilla, sino también de construcciones de superlujo a partir de los tres últimos desmoronamientos” (104). The scarcity of meat and the subsequent price gouging for cuts like *vacío* have become so endemic that buildings can no longer remain standing. The buildings themselves suffer from malnutrition<sup>13</sup>. Workers and the construction sector of the economy are bundled together in the fiction. Both the elites and the working classes are affected when buildings collapse. Although tragic, the building failures become part of an extended joke about the current lack of bones and its relation to construction workers: “No puede decirse que la falla [the building collapses] sea imputable a los ángulos de hueso en el hall de entrada o en los salones. El hueso es, como se sabe, el material de construcción más resistente que se encuentra en plaza, si es que se encuentra” (104).

As the story continues, the narrator continues questioning what is happening to the workers and what they must do, now that they live in the world of missing *asado*. Apropos of solutions to the scarcity of meat for the grill, we learn that the current substitution of plastic, especially plastic bones for real building materials, has too many limitations. Importantly, plastic bones do not have the desired and necessary smell of grilled meat. Class inequalities in “Vacío” are inherent to the political critique: “En los barrios menos aristocráticos la parálisis de la construcción es imputable más a la falta del olor a asado que el desabastecimiento de huesitos, reemplazables ... por sucedáneos plásticos” (104). This putative ‘answer’ to the difficulty of missing meat is put into effect in the poorest areas of town, emphasizing the economic disparities fundamental to the themes.

Other possible resolutions to the crisis of beef for the workers’ grills are sought in meetings of the “Cámara de la Construcción” at the highest levels. To use meats from other animals is the main proposal — the

11. Rougier reports that “Entre 1973 y 1976, la Argentina recorrió uno de los períodos más vertiginosos, controvertidos y complejos de su historia contemporánea. En poco menos de tres años, las enormes expectativas en torno a la implantación de un sistema democrático —acumuladas durante lustros de autoritarismo y exclusión política— fueron dilapadas...” (9). The hopes and dreams of intellectuals during this period ceded “su espacio a la desarticulación, la crisis social, y la violencia política...” (9).

12. Gambini continues speaking about Perón in mid and late 1974: “La actividad terrorista estaba absolutamente consolidada durante la presidencia de Perón, quien la creó y autorizó todos sus movimientos” (329). He contends that the Triple A did not wait for Isabel’s presidency to become very active.

13. Much of the story’s sarcasm comes from the idea that the hunger of construction workers alone may had not been enough to warrant concern, but the failure of buildings, that certainly must be worrying.

discussion of which extends to nearly a third of this very short story. Dogs are first considered, but the elite workers who take the meat off bones refuse to clean the bones of any animal but cattle (*ganado vacuno*) (104). The mere idea of using other meats provokes the formation of “una liga de protección al mejor amigo del hombre,” led as often as not by construction workers themselves. Kennel Club International becomes involved, as well as a miscellanea of local and foreign canine protection societies. Other new organizations spring up to protect dogs, even rabid ones, from being chosen as substitute meats on the grill. From the high-level negotiations involving people from several countries, it becomes clear that the disappearance of meat from the grill on construction sites has an importance one might not otherwise attribute to it.

Another consequence of the deficit in meat is the construction workers’ hunger. They search for jobs where meat might be supplied as a benefit (103-4)<sup>14</sup>. Workers seek out jobs in wealthy neighborhoods because the fashion in those places is “ángulos adornados con huesos de bife de costilla,” *bifes* which the workers presume they would be able to grill and consume prior to using the bones in the building, “y eso vale más que un doble aguinaldo” (103), the traditional Christmas bonus. Those seeking work on sites where luxurious buildings are being built are frequently disappointed, however, because the eating of steak when cleaning off of bones for buildings is the job of particular recruits hired precisely for that task. This “legión de peladores de bife de costilla” is specialized and professional. In order to belong to the guild, a worker must possess “una dentadura ... perfecta y filosa” (104). Average construction workers who want to eat *asado* fail to land the better job, even “después de paciente espera y de uno que otro empujoncito” (103), that is, despite waiting and recurring to petitions involving favoritism and corruption, longstanding but harmful alternatives to fairness in hiring. No adequate path to eating meat on the grill at work can be found by most applicants because the normal systems for the just and open circulation of jobs has been damaged. Workers have to possess what one might call ‘gifts,’ such as a perfect set of teeth, to experience the grilling privileges once accorded to construction workers in general.

The workers’ endeavors to put *asado* back on the grill are so necessary that they will be continued for quasi-religious reasons: “no hay edificio que adelante si no se lo consagra con los vahos de la parrilla” (103). The verb *consagrar* in particular marks the meat ‘perfume’ as a devotional element, an incense of sorts purifying the construction space. The olfactory trace left by meat grilling is the imperative element in the scene and the one that must endure if buildings are to be built. On the other hand, the word *vaho* carries a therapeutic or curative sense, very much applicable to the insalubrious and unacceptable situation of an empty grill. Although mere vapors, a religious significance has been attached to the olfactory vestiges of grilling meat. The religious vocabulary implies that hunger points toward a state of sin from which the construction worker can be saved by the ritual of adding a meat ‘incense.’ This fragrance exists as a simulacrum or reminder of the culinary cultural ‘sacrament’ once available to the construction worker.

The grill itself, the *parrilla*, also deserves to be mentioned as a constituent element of the hunger theme, one that symbolizes a possible resolution to hunger. The grill has a structure of walls, bars, and empty spaces. It represents the promise of a *parillada*, a celebration and a meal. It is a constructed space and an object built by workers. *La parrilla* has a readiness for meat, when or if it arrives. Like empty buildings awaiting inhabitants, the empty grill awaits its pairings of fire and food. The grill ‘affords’ the possibility of satiety, of satisfying the workers’ hunger, through its possible use, in its functionality as an object. “Affordance” is a term that “offers a helpful way of thinking about the properties of a substance in relation to those who make use of them (thus a knee-high surface, for example affords the possibility of ‘sitting-on’)” (Felski 164)<sup>15</sup>. For the reader, the grill as an object contributes to refusing the meat aroma as an

14. “Ahora todos los cucharas y los media cucharas desprecian las obras en barrios populares y tratan de conchabarse por Palermo Chico o en la zona aldeaña a Callao y Quintana,” where meat could still be had (“Vacío” 103).

15. “Coined by the psychologist James J. Gibson to explain how animals interact with their environment,” affordances are fruitfully discussed in Felski as ways to discuss objects in literature (164).

answer to the problem of deprivation, since the grill was not made to add scents to a place, though that may happen. The empty grill constitutes a visual image that begs the question of absent meat at the same time it 'affords' the possibility of cooking.

### The Empty *Abattoir*: "aquella pequeña república"

As in "Vacío," a religious element combines with the theme of hunger at the beginning of "El matadero" by Esteban Echeverría (1805-1851). A classic of Argentine literature, this work of fiction portrays a crushing meat eating prohibition during Lent, suffered by the working population:

Estábamos, a más, en cuaresma, época en que escasea la carne en Buenos Aires, porque la Iglesia, adoptando el precepto de Epicteto, *sustine, abstine* (sufre, abstente), ordena vigilia y abstinencia a los estómagos de los fieles, a causa de que la carne es pecaminosa, y, como dice el proverbio, busca a la carne. Y como la Iglesia tiene *ab initio* y por delegación directa de Dios, el imperio inmaterial sobre las conciencias y estómagos, que en manera alguna pertenecen al individuo, nada más justo y racional que vede lo malo. (2)

Inscribed with great irony, in Echeverría's text the proscription of meat becomes a ferocious act of political and religious domination imposed by the elite. In an important study, María Luisa Lojo finds the "registro religioso" in "El matadero" as a primary location for the work's hybridity (42)<sup>16</sup>. In a literary chamber of perpetually echoing reverberations, early 1970s Argentina would be like Rosas' Argentina: a place that needs its *asado, matambre, and vacío* to feed its workers. Echeverría's narrator occasionally uses the first-person, as does Valenzuela. The most important contrast in the architectural spaces (the slaughterhouse versus the grill and construction site) and 'sacred' objects between the two works is that the *matadero* comprises a space affording the possibility of killing animals, but also of killing *tout court* within the fiction, whereas the grill is an object made for ending hunger. Despite this great difference, as works about architectural spaces, the two texts share the importance of buildings, food, and religion<sup>17</sup>.

In addition to the theme of hunger, "Vacío" shares with "El Matadero" a second trait: its allegorical tendency. When describing the slaughterhouse early in the story, the narrator speaks of the slaughterhouse's 'judge' as a stand-in for the infamous dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877): "el juez del matadero, personaje importante, [es] caudillo de los carniceros [el que] ejerce la suma del poder en *aquella pequeña república* por delegación del Restaurador" (10, italics added). Already a space of blood, guts, and butchery, the slaughterhouse is portrayed as a microcosm of the country. Echeverría's description emphasizes the allegorical way his fictional slaughterhouse should be understood: "Simulacro en pequeño era este del modo bárbaro con que se ventilan en nuestro país las cuestiones y los derechos individuales y sociales" (14; differences in spelling in the original). In "Vacío," a much shorter text, the narrator says that the 'answer' to the problem of hunger —distributing the aroma of meat to construction sites instead of beef itself —constitutes "una solución bien argentina" (105). That which is placed on the grill, like Echeverría's slaughterhouse, represents the city and the nation.

The imagery is often visual in both Echeverría's and Valenzuela's texts, and in both cases there is an interplay between the scene as described visually and that which is left to the readers' imagination. In these two stories, this visual-verbal back-and-forth has thematic justification. Echeverría refuses to report the cursing in the slaughterhouse: "En fin, la escena que se representaba en el matadero era para vista no para escrita" (14)<sup>18</sup>. Valenzuela's narrator remarks it is better to look at the grill on days "de mucha niebla" in order not to see the emptiness of the grill. If one only looks at the grill on those foggy days, the smell and the flames might be able to

16. Lojo further explains that "la ironía descuella en el ridículo" (44) in important moments in the critique of religious practices and federalist barbarisms, which also compares well with Valenzuela's frequent use of humor and ridicule. A different brief prose work by Echeverría, "Apología del matambre," is as comic as "El matadero" is tragic in its relation to cuts of meat. Subtitled "cuadro de costumbres argentinas," "Apología" discusses the word "matambre" and tells a childhood memory of asking for this favorite dish.

17. According to Bataille (1929): "The slaughterhouse is linked to religion insofar as the temples of by-gone eras [...] served two purposes: they were used both for prayer and for killing. The result [...] was certainly a disturbing convergence of the mysteries of myth and the ominous grandeur typical of those places in which blood flows" ("Slaughterhouse").

18. For further discussion of the visual versus the auditory in "El matadero," see Lojo pp. 56-60.

fool one into the warm feeling of thinking the grill's culinary purpose was being fulfilled.

More than a century after Echeverría's "El matadero," historical fictions treated the Rosas period as a mask under which one could hide a critique of state terror. During the dangerous time of 1975-1985, it was not safe for writers to attack state terrorism directly. Instead Rosas' violent actions were the subject of their critiques. For example, *Camila*, a film by María Luisa Bemberg (1984) and *Una sombra donde sueña Camila O'Gorman*, a novel by Enrique Molina (1982), were set in the Rosas period, masking their critique of the 1970s dictatorship. According to Déborah Cinthia Balé, "Samuel Zaidman, en un análisis [...] propone ligar el relato de la tortura del unitario a la tortura de los detenidos-desaparecidos durante la última dictadura militar" (145). It is not impossible that allusions, even veiled ones, to such a famous work as "El matadero" could include an allegorizing of the violence of Rosas's time as well, hidden behind the tragicomic tale of missing meat. The Triple A was already active when Valenzuela was writing in 1974. Without exaggerating this reminiscence in "Vacío," one can safely conclude that the description of the slaughterhouse in section 1 in Echeverría's text has similarities. But the sectarian violence in Echeverría's story is found more strongly in stories other than "Vacío" in *APCR*<sup>19</sup>.

Additional elements of "Vacío" come into view through the perspective of mirroring Rosas' critique as resistance in Valenzuela's story. In an interesting article by Adriana Novoa, the space of the slaughterhouse is analyzed in relation to building construction: "According to [Juan Domingo] Sarmiento, Rosas forbade the construction of vertical structures, identified with reason in his [Sarmiento's] text, and let stand the old colonial homes dominated by horizontal single storey spaces with windows covered by bars" (98)<sup>20</sup>. Novoa is referring to an article that Sarmiento published in 1879 in *Revista de Ciencias, Artes y Letras*, "Arquitectura Doméstica." Importantly, Sarmiento writes that during the Rosas dictatorship "[n]o hay arquitectos sino albañiles" (98), making construction workers important in Rosas's Argentina, as in Perón's vision of the nation, and as in "Vacío"<sup>21</sup>.

Novoa juxtaposes the opposite attitudes of Sarmiento and Peronism: "the founding declaration of Peronism on October 17 of 1945, called for a 'reappropriation of public space' against the design of the dominant class" (48). She continues: "Peronism's use of public space intended [...] new opposition to the bourgeois elites" (49). Laura Podalsky agrees that the symbolism of Echeverría's slaughterhouse resurfaced, gaining new attributes in Peronism: "Rather than representing liberal forces overcome by the unruly urban masses, the livestock serve as metaphors for the working classes (the 'true' representatives of Argentina) sacrificed to the voracious appetite of capitalist expansion" (222). Valenzuela inscribes the construction worker as suffering from multiple forces of oppression: capitalism, globalization, bureaucracy, and corruption.

Valenzuela's hunger games are less bitter than Echeverría's deadly ideological combat and her diversions show Argentina and Argentine workers in a better light. The suffering construction workers in "Vacío" have moral principles (they will not eat dogs), whereas in "El matadero" the slaughterhouse workers and hangers-on are like dogs, rivals seeking to assuage their hunger with meat. Valenzuela's citizens organize themselves in unions and other groups to try to better their situation, while in Echeverría the hypocrisy of the clergy is a main point: "Se originó de aquí una especie de guerra intestina entre los estómagos y las conciencias, atizada por el inexorable apetito y las no menos inexorables vociferaciones de los ministros de la Iglesia" (6). In Valenzuela, the laborers are victims who seek both the *asado* and self-respect. They want ethical choices as well as better working conditions. While the economic factors keeping meat off the grill are not named in "Vacío," they are resisted. There is sufficient information to attribute fault both to the government (the useless *Cámara de Construcción*) and to social factors (the refusal to eat dog meat, the desire for better wages).

19. Those participants in the nineteenth-century slaughterhouse murder of the *unitario*, as images of *La Mazorca*, could suggest to viewers and readers the Triple A's ultraconservative supporters. *La Mazorca* was famous for its violence, especially breaking and entering, torture and beheadings of those perceived to be disloyal to Rosas.

20. Sarmiento adds: "Hay otro efecto de la tiranía [...] cuando la existencia está amenazada, los hombres no hacen las casas" (98).

21. "¿Hay una arquitectura de Rosas? Durante su largo gobierno la arquitectura doméstica toma formas determinadas, cristaliza y detiene. La cuadra entera de casa de Gobierno y Palermo repiten misma construcción, la azotea, con la reja de hierro por coronación en defecto de balaustres. La ciudad se uniforma insensiblemente á la orden del día" (Sarmiento 97).



Therein lies the main contrast with Valenzuela: Echeverría emphasizes the brutality and slavish tractability of the *chusma* who follow Rosas, whereas Valenzuela's workers contest their degradation and hunger. They are up-in-arms when dog meat is proposed for their grill, suggesting a willingness to sacrifice eating just any meat in order to save their canine companions. When corruption and favoritism occur in the republic of the slaughterhouse, it is a critique of Rosas the Restorer himself: "El primer novillo que se mató fué todo entero de regalo al Restaurador, hombre muy amigo del asado" (8; spelling in original). In "Vacío," the corruption mentioned transpires at a level above that of the individual worker, but below that of the top levels of government (Perón), because it lies in the difficulty of acquiring a new job where one might be able to eat meat, even after trying in covert ways of qualifying for one. Workers fall for the trick of 'meat incense' and persist in their construction jobs even when they only get to experience the aromatic trace of meat. Ultimately, Valenzuela's story is less ideological than the texts of Echeverría, Sarmiento, or Perón, when it comes to public spaces, *asado* or *matambre* on the grill, or construction workers.

Notwithstanding the differences in style, time period, length, tone, and purpose, the similarities between her micro story and the nineteenth-century critiques of Rosas do place Valenzuela within a genealogical line of ironic, sarcastic, and critical intellectuals and writers in Argentina. The idea of the slaughterhouse as a metaphor for Argentina is crucial for understanding Echeverría's work of fiction. Adding smell to the empty grill seen on a construction site in Valenzuela's "Vacío" similarly locates a specific object, the grill, as crucial to Argentina. "Vacío" has in common with "El matadero" a connection between eating meat and the spiritual life, the importance of politics in the hunger suffered by the poor, and the portrait of hunger as a critique of a national regime.

The main differences between the images of Argentina in Echeverría and Valenzuela lie in the former's racist and deadly serious portrayal of Rosas' supporters among the workers at the slaughter yard. Additionally, the former makes a condemnation of the corrupt church, while the latter expresses sympathy with construction workers who seek to maintain their humanity. Valenzuela's narrator accepts as a positive element the spiritual 'incense' from the sacred *parrilla*. Additionally, the plastic substitutes are insulting to those who receive them and represent differential treatment of poor neighborhoods —something like what the US banking industry calls 'redlining.' Moreover, the disparities in neighborhoods and job opportunities depicted in Valenzuela are told with a brevity and a sarcasm that tend towards a grotesque dark humor rather than towards horror, as in Echeverría.

#### **Empty Promises: The Return of Perón**

The story's final proposal to solve the problem of lack of beef is to consecrate buildings without it: "engañar el estómago de la masa obrera y sahumar los futuros rascacielos" (105). Mere smell is proposed in "Vacío" by "técnicos extranjeros" and, especially, by "el técnico más imaginativo e informado" (105) because the scarcity of meat is affecting the construction industry, and even the passersby. The proposal to substitute the smell for the meat itself reminds readers of corporate and agricultural failures as well as the impotence of the state facing a failing economy.

The smell of *asado* grilling only appears to pacify construction workers in this fictional world because they have no other option. The plastic replacements for meat in low-priced buildings only works in poor areas and even there the results are not optimal. The skyscrapers are not Peronist architecture, but rather buildings made for the elites where none of these workers will live. The false 'solution' of providing only the smell of meat, like that of placing plastic bones in buildings, creates painful images of the state's inability to resolve the worsening economic fate of its workers, even with (or perhaps due to) the return of Perón and *peronismo*.

The foreign technicians in the story's final paragraph present under a sarcastic light the international interventions performed in Argentina by entities such as the World Bank, caused by the country's economic crisis and financial debts<sup>22</sup>. Perón's return in the summer of 1973 made the nationalist promises of his economic platform come to the fore. "Vacío" follows "Escaleran," a microstory like "Vacío," that, as I have shown, plays with *justicialista* (Peronist) slogans and ideas ("Alleging Allegory"). The backlash against interference in the economy by non-Argentines became prominent in political discourse in the 1970s due to the nationalism of Perón, Isabel Perón, and Peronism as a movement.

One of Perón's decrees delivered in a speech in 1950 –and reaffirmed repeatedly– proves relevant to an understanding of "Vacío": "Queremos una Argentina socialmente justa, económicamente libre y políticamente soberana" ("Movimiento Peronista"). These three ideas –social justice, economic freedom, and political sovereignty– are the thematic 'meat and bones' of "Vacío era el de antes." Social justice is the need for good pay for workers so that they can eat meat; the right to organize and strike constitutes economic freedom; and political sovereignty would avoid the mistakes made by foreign experts who allowed for a failed and fake proposal to be deployed. Perón spoke about the "desabastecimiento de productos" in his speech of June 12<sup>th</sup> of 1974, where he "atacó a los empresarios" for causing the empty shelves because they could not earn a profit (Gambini 328). In addition to various other contraindicators, Gambini mentions an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (*la fiebre aftosa*) in 1974, which caused Europe to stop importing Argentine beef<sup>23</sup>. Agreements quickly fell apart and each party blamed the other in their failure to keep the economy functioning. One more indicator of this decline, instability, and lack of direction in the Argentine economy in 1974 is that "María Estela Martínez de Perón [President from 1974 to 1976] holds the sad record of having six Ministers of Economics in only twenty months in office" (Veigel 11). With the death of Juan Perón, there was also a discussion in Peronist political circles about "un vacío de poder," a phrase to describe Isabel Perón's Vice Presidency. Disputing parties were encouraged to allow her to stay in power because they felt it was better to have some stability. In a slightly different manner, Rougier speaks of a "vacío político-institucional" when he summarizes this period (217)<sup>24</sup>.

Valenzuela's brief fiction observes hunger on a construction site in Buenos Aires and through innuendo and irony, blames the government and the elites for the suffering of the workers. For the purpose of understanding "Vacío," it is less important why Argentina's economy declined than the fact that it did. The impact of a declining economy was likely to have been felt strongly among the working-class, including construction workers, because they were (and are) more vulnerable than their bosses to shifts in the economy outside their control. The labor strikes mentioned in "Vacío" are an example of an economic disturbance of the social fabric at the time, just as the bombs and arrests of students serve a similar function in "Aquí pasan cosas raras."

In any creative work, meaning is created by throwing wide the door to readers' associations –verbal, visual, even olfactory and intellectual ones. If a view of an empty grill is the main dish, the various cuts of meat, the love of dogs, and Echeverría's "El matadero" are the seasonings that contribute to the flavor of the story. Valenzuela's image of the missing *asadito* communicates to readers in a unique way the economic catastrophe of Buenos Aires in 1974, along with a hope that comprehending readers will question why so many workers were left hungry.

Fiction does not live for its readers only in the moment when it was written (1974 for "Vacío"), nor only when it is published (1871 for Echeverría), but continues in culture and is activated each time it is read by someone with different experiences. As Rita Felski reminds us, "Cross-networks mess up the tidiness of our periodizing schemes; they force us to acknowledge affinity and proximity as well as difference, to grapple with the coevalness and connectedness of past and present" (159). Felski explains that "Reading [...] is a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling —of forging

22. For more information on this subject, see Kedar.

23. One might think that fewer exports of beef to Europe would mean more meat at home but the destruction of herds due to disease and possible disease would have had the opposite effect.

24. Less than two years later, the term "vacío de poder" was also used by the military to excuse their violent removal of Isabel Perón from the Presidency and López Rega from control, but that occurred after the writing of this story.

links between things that were previously unconnected” (173). Valenzuela’s writing, and especially this story, forms a puzzle that provides aesthetic pleasure to those who find her easter eggs of meaning and jabs of irony regarding the conditions she observes.

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