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**LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

# Unoriginal Opinions of an Original Man: Jorge Luis Borges's Views on Race and Brazilian People in His Conversations with Adolfo Bioy Casares and His Literary Works

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This article analyzes Jorge Luis Borges's views on race, as he expressed them in personal conversations with Adolfo Bioy Casares and vis-à-vis his fiction. In the conversations recorded by Bioy Casares, Borges emerges as a man of his time and his social class in the worst sense possible: racism, bigotry, and his self-constructed whiteness inform almost all of his controversial statements on blackness and on Brazilian people. The article aims to expose a cohesive racial discourse underlying not only Borges's private conversations but also his narratives. The goal is to challenge the enduring views of Borges as a "universal" author, dissociated from history and society.

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Este artículo analiza la mirada sobre el concepto de raza que Jorge Luis Borges expresa en sus conversaciones personales con Adolfo Bioy Casares frente a lo manifestado por este autor en su obra de ficción. En las conversaciones grabadas por Bioy Casares, Borges manifiesta los prejuicios propios de un hombre de su tiempo y de su estrato social. Así, el racismo, la intolerancia y la posición de superioridad desde una auto-concebida albura atraviesa casi todas sus controversiales declaraciones sobre negritud y el pueblo brasileiro. Este ensayo expone un cohesionado discurso racial que subyace, no solo en las conversaciones privadas de Borges, sino también en su narrativa. El propósito es desafiar las perdurables descripciones de Borges como autor 'universal' disociado de la historia y de lo social.

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This article focuses on Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges's personal views on race and on Brazilian people as recorded in the diary of Adolfo Bioy Casares covering almost forty years of their friendship ([2006] 2010). It aims to establish a cohesive discourse on the issue of race that underlies Borges's personal conversations and, most importantly, his works. For this purpose, it will analyze selected excerpts from Bioy Casares's diary and relate them to Borges's literary works. To establish the flow of this private discourse into his fiction, the focus will be on Borges's initial literary output, as collected in the first volume of his complete works (1974). Borges's negative views on black and Brazilian people will be compared and contrasted with selected poems and articles, as well as occasional black and Brazilian background characters in his most famous prose, in order to establish these views as a relevant part of his ever-changing critical reception. The goal is to challenge enduring views of Borges as a "universal" author, dissociated from his own time and place. It also intends to highlight the complexities and contradictions around the issue of race perceived by other Latin American intellectuals and authors of the early twentieth century.

Critics tend to read Borges as an abstract, almost nihilistic author. This general assessment derives from the fact that the author refused to take any unambiguous moral stand in his writings, instead choosing a more nihilistic and playful approach to his fiction. Critics such as Daniel Balderston (1993) and Emir Rodríguez Monegal (1978), for example, define Borges as a metafictional ironist, sometimes even disconnected from reality. While he was alive, he fashioned his public figure along the same lines, as that of a writer above his own time and place. During his career, in particular after he was awarded the 1961 Prix Formentor

International in literature, Borges became an international "oracle" who would only speak on, and in the name of, literature. He also consistently evoked this image of an author removed beyond history and society in interviews and public appearances around the world.

Critics, particularly Euro-American critics, followed Borges's lead, many times considering him part of the Western canon. For example, in 1965 John Updike (1965, 235, 223), one of the first critics to write about Borges's works in English translation, highlighted the "sense of timelessness" of Borges's fiction and also saw in it one way out for what he then considered as "the dead end ... of present American fiction." French intellectuals such as Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault also saw in Borges's fiction support for "their assertions about the conventional patterns human beings use to organize information" (Lindstrom 1990, 83). These critics clearly saw Borges as part of a wider European tradition, frequently overlooking his connections to early twentieth-century Buenos Aires.

However, there was a challenge to this depiction of Borges as a universal writer in a book published in 2006. Adolfo Bioy Casares kept a diary in which he recorded his intimate conversations with Borges from 1947 until one year before Borges's death in 1986. In many ways, Bioy Casares's diary consolidates that image of Borges as a pure man of letters. However, what comes through from the publication of this diary is another image of Borges. In the notes taken by his friend, Borges often appears as a man of his time in the worst sense possible; surprisingly, racism and sexism abound in his discourse, among other unfortunate opinions typical of early twentieth-century Buenos Aires. Many of these unfortunate opinions also appear scattered throughout the numerous interviews and conversations with Borges published throughout the years. For example, the conversation between Borges and Eduardo Gudiño Kieffer in 1972, organized and published by Maria Esther Vazquez (1977, 180–181): "Black people are just like children ... are more rudimentary ... have always been enraged!" ("Los negros son como chicos ... son más rudimentarios ... siempre fueron bravos!") Other examples can be found in Borges's extensive conversations with Osvaldo Ferrari, starting in 1984; for example, Borges reporting with disdain the fact that "in the United States, black people are certain that the black race is superior" ("nos Estados Unidos, os negros estão convictos de que a raça negra é superior") (O'Kuinghttos 2009, 83).

In interviews, Borges's voice mostly functioned as "a lovable, 'human' version of his literature" ("una versión amable, 'humana', de su literatura"); however, it was also inescapably historic (Pauls 2007, 58). In Bioy Casares's diary, Borges's voice and also his opinions are more personal, therefore even more human and reflective of the historical moment. Moreover, the way in which Borges's opinions are collected and organized by Bioy Casares gives them greater significance and an opportunity to rethink the historical Borges, as well as to "refute a good part of the stereotypes we are used to, mistakenly, associating with him" ("refutar buena parte de los estereotipos con que estamos acostumbrados a confundirlo") (Pauls 2007, 9).

### The Changing Reception of Borges's Works

In contrast to the international reception of Borges as primarily an intellectual writer, there is currently "a critical trend of discovering a Borges whose most 'universal' and 'abstract' fiction is not removed from a socio-historical context" (Carvalho 2008, 80). In effect, there is a changing arc to the reception of Borges's work that started with his contemporary critics and that has endured posthumously. Argentinean critics of his time viewed him as a foreigner, "an outcast because in their view he had contributed to an 'international' literature or because he symbolized the cosmopolitan taste of a small circle of Buenos Aires intellectuals" (Stabb 1991, 11).

In parallel to the evolving local reception, French and North American critics were among those who recast Borges as a transnational writer in a positive light, particularly after the 1960s, when his work started to be widely translated into French and English. According to Jaime Alazraki (1986, 12), "the perspective of European and North American criticism ... sees Borges as 'a modern master' and defines him, in John Barth's words, as one of 'the old masters of twentieth-century narrative'" ("la perspectiva de la crítica europea y norteamericana ... ve a Borges como 'un maestro moderno' y lo define, en las palabras de John Barth, como uno de 'los viejos maestros de la narrativa del siglo XX'").

From the 1990s onward, that is, after Borges's death, there was a major shift in the critical reception of his work, as scholars such as Beatriz Sarlo and Daniel Balderston started to emphasize the local dimensions of Borges's narratives. In *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, Sarlo (1993, 2) states that Borges's "reputation in the world has cleansed him of nationality." Sarlo highlights certain themes present in Borges's fiction that were considered "universal" by Western culture. Nonetheless, she boldly states "there is no writer in Argentine literature more Argentine than Borges" (Sarlo 1993, 2, 3). In *Out of Context: Historical Reference*

and the Representation of Reality in Borges (1993, 5), Balderston argues that “the interest of the stories [by Borges] is considerably heightened by attention to the historical and political elements.” These critics identify and establish Borges’s Argentinian perspective as central to his literary value. Sarlo (1993, 28) emphasizes the importance of Borges’s original context by affirming that the “marginal situation” of Argentina is “the source of our true originality.”

However, if this view of Borges as an Argentinian man of his own time is to be fully explored, one also has to account for the other side of this connection. Borges’s cultural displacement in relation to European culture can be portrayed as a source of his originality and literary cachet; however, his central position inside his own Argentinian society of origin can provide an alternative critical framework. In other words, in reconnecting Borges to early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, one also has to reestablish his close association with what Fernández Retamar named the author’s “lack of sympathy for the lower classes” and which Hernández Arregui described as his relation to the “cosmopolitan taste of a small circle of Buenos Aires intellectuals” (Stabb 1991, 111–112).

### White Man in a White Man’s Country

The connection between Borges and the intellectual elite of his time and place is the source of both his literary force and his parochial social views. As unique as his stances on literature may have been, they were grounded in the cosmopolitan taste of his peers. Regarding Borges’s societal stances and, according to Estela Canto, when talking about his views on women, feminism, and femininity, he was almost certain to have had unoriginal or conventional opinions, despite being such an original man (Canto 1989, 27). For Canto (1989, 17), Borges “was not a conventional man, but a prisoner to convention” (“no era un hombre convencional, pero sí un prisionero de las convenciones”).

Borges’s opinions of himself and of his peers clearly reflected the common views of his time and his social class. For example, according to Bioy Casares’s diary, Borges saw himself as a white man in “*a white man’s country*, un país de hombres blancos.” Borges would also proudly defined himself as racist, even as he exoticized others: “Brazil is an exotic place; it is close to us, but we don’t want to visit it ... it seems to us like a country of monkeys” (“El Brasil es exótico, está cerca y no queremos ir allí ... nos parece un país de macacos”) (Bioy Casares 2010, 516).

Nevertheless, Borges does not seem to be more racist than his peers, and his recorded interactions with Bioy Casares should be judged in their own context, not necessarily by current standards. Borges’s private conversations serve to demonstrate, as the author himself stated in his 1953 essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” the inevitability (for him) of being a man of his time and place. According to this essay, “to be Argentinian is a matter of fate, and in this sense we will be Argentinian in any case, otherwise to be Argentinian is a mere affectation, a mask” (“ser argentino es una fatalidad y en ese caso lo seremos de cualquier modo, o ser argentino es una mera afectación, una máscara”) (Borges 1974, 274). Looking closely at Bioy Casares’s records allows a thorough evaluation of the extent to which Borges is a product of his Argentine upbringing and environment.

Bioy Casares’s comprehensive records started in 1947 and cover almost forty years of their friendship and of his frequent conversations with Borges. One contentious point in Bioy Casares’s book is that these conversations took place mostly at dinners and other casual meetings among friends. That is to say, Borges is here caught off guard, when he might have expected to be off the record. In some sections of the book, Borges’s very deliberate public persona appears, as expected; the other version of Borges, the controversial one, almost certainly comes from a place of intimacy. Some of his most outrageous opinions could surely only be discussed with like-minded friends. Thus, some of the passages that are analyzed in this article have to be read with this awareness. In such a personal book as a diary, one has to consider that the circumstances, the context, and even the tone of Borges’s actual utterances are not given; furthermore, Borges’s discourse passes through the filter of Bioy Casares’s perspective and memory. Yet Borges expresses opinions that, even if they were not conventional at the time, were common enough to be repeated by Borges and by his peers.

Even if Bioy Casares has actually paraphrased them, it is highly plausible that Borges voiced the opinions this article will examine. The diarist had no reason to put words in Borges’s mouth, despite the fact that certain critics refuse to take Bioy Casares’s book seriously. According to María Kodama, Borges’s widow, the publication of the diary was “cowardly [una cobardía]” (Quilodrán 2006). For her, the book is unfair because it misquotes a man who cannot defend himself—including statements that put Kodama in a bad light. For example, in the book, Bioy Casares (2010, 592) portrays Kodama as a strange woman who “accused Borges for no reason, and punished him with silences” (“acusaba a Borges por cualquier motivo, lo castigaba con

silencios"). Another common criticism against the book is related to Bioy Casares's status in comparison to Borges. According to Álvaro Monge Arístegui (2015, 35), "the subordinate nature of Bioy Casares's works in relation to Borges's added to the little appreciation of this book" ("el carácter subordinado que la obra de Bioy tiene respecto a Borges acrecentó a la poca valoración que hubo de este libro"). Ricardo Piglia also perceived a certain resentment behind Bioy Casares's diary; Piglia even considered the publication of it in book form as Bioy Casares's revenge against the "absolutely extraordinary" ("absolutamente extraordinario") writer that Borges was (Arístegui 2015, 35).

Nonetheless, Bioy Casares's diary is an important document. The critic Daniel Balderston (2010, 160) corroborates this position: "this book is perhaps the most poignant homage in Spanish to a literary friendship; it is a monumental and touching work that is already essential to studies on Borges and it may be Bioy's most important book" ("este libro es quizá el más emotivo homenaje en español a una amistad literaria, un trabajo monumental y emocionante que es ya una fuente esencial para los estudios sobre Borges, y hasta podría ser el libro más importante de Bioy"). For Balderston (2010, 144), the book is also "awkward, outrageous, fascinating, repugnant, embarrassing" ("poco manejable, indignante, fascinante, repugnante, desconcertante"). This partially explains the negative critical response to the diary in published form; however, it also highlights its importance, despite its many contradictions and disconcerting moments.

Turning the focus back to the issue of race, a central question is Borges's self-perception. The writer saw himself as a white man, which usually comes with a refusal to accept a Latin American identity. This establishes Borges's position in relation to the issue of race in Latin America and at the same time illustrates how negotiable the perception of race is among Latin Americans. The idea of a coherent Latin-Americanness (or of a Latino identity) is constantly challenged from within. Internal schisms generate many differences, most of them directly associated with social status. Roughly speaking, being rich—or, in the case of Borges, being part of the intellectual elite—becomes being white (or European); being poor equates to being black or mestizo (or local). In effect, part of Borges's literary project, that of a literature to which "heritage is the universe" ("patrimonio es el universo") (Borges 1974, 274), is related to his personal belief that he, and most of the criollo elite of Buenos Aires, were in fact Europeans in exile. This is the place from which Borges produces otherness.

If Argentina was populated by displaced Europeans, Brazil, for example, with its substantial African-descendant population, would be inhabited by "others." When Brazil celebrated its multiethnic background (after Brazilian Modernismo in the 1920s, the publication of Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and The Slaves* in the 1930s, and Getúlio Vargas's populist government in the 1950s), Borges pointed to this Brazilian otherness by saying, "there is something evidently upsetting for us in black people. That is why we Argentines see Brazilians as apes" ("hay algo evidente en los negros que nos rechaza. Por eso los argentinos vemos los brasileños como monos") (Bioy Casares 2010, 346). In this formulation, "us" clearly means both Argentines and white.

### **Borges's Views on Race and Commonly Held Views on Race in Latin America**

According to Bioy Casares's notes, Borges's main statements on the issue of race range from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. They can be divided into Borges's negative reaction to how views on race were radically changing in the United States, and Borges's production of otherness in his comparison of other Latin American countries, especially Brazil, to Argentina.

In May 1957, Borges disapproves of African Americans' display of pride through consumerism. Comparing them to poor Argentinean people during Peronism, Borges says they "threw everything they had" ("se echaban encima todo lo que tenían") at Cadillacs and convertibles (Bioy Casares 2010, 102–103). In 1959, he questions the legitimacy of African American art: "Have the blacks been able to justify what defines black art?" ("Los negros, ¿hubieran sido capaces de dar las razones con que se define al arte negro?") (206). In these two instances, Borges was commenting ironically, and definitely looking down at the cultural, political, and economic ascension of African Americans in the United States at that time. Later, in 1963, he would refine this same fact as an explicit problem: "the blacks in the United States are a real problem, not a fictional one" ("los negros de los Estados Unidos son un problema real y no ficticio") (346). In the same conversation, he dismisses one of his interlocutors as "completely idiotic" ("completamente idiota") for complaining about the absence of black people in Buenos Aires (346). In 1965, the conversation recurs. Once again, Borges mentions the issue of African Americans in the United States, where according to Bioy Casares's euphemism, "now, where there are blacks and whites, disagreeable situations arise" ("donde hay negros y blancos ahora se suscitan situaciones desagradables") (445).

A conversation that takes place in January 1969 is particularly relevant when it comes to Borges's view on shifting racial politics in the United States. Talking to Thomas Di Giovanni, his North American translator

at the time, Borges teasingly states, "in the United States, people don't make fun of blacks." ("En los Estados Unidos no hacen bromas contra los negros") (508). Di Giovanni proceeds to explain that there is an ongoing racial war in his country and that whites do not make fun of black people because they are afraid and want to preserve themselves from any harm. Borges replies, "I am racist. I would take the floor from them and we'd see who emerged the winner. I would clear the United States of blacks, and, if nobody stopped me, I would even do the same in Brazil. If they do not get rid of blacks, they will make the country another Africa." ("Yo soy racista. Les tomaría la palabra y veríamos quién gana. Limpiaría los Estados Unidos de negros y si se descuidan me correría hasta el Brasil. Si no acaban con los negros, les van a convertir el país en África") (508).

In the same year, returning from a short trip to the United States, Borges states that Americans are too sentimental in relation to black people. To his interlocutor's passionate denouncement of white people's cruelty toward enslaved people, Borges says: "the disapproval of cruelty is a white man's sentiment. I do not believe that cruelty appears bad to black people." ("La desaprobación de la crueldad es un sentimiento de los blancos. No creo que la crueldad les parezca mal a los negros") (516). In 1971, Borges returned to the subject by complaining that in the United States, "you cannot say anything against blacks" ("no puedes decir nada contra los negros") (534–535). In another conversation in the same year, Borges added that "the only merit they [the blacks] have is that of being mistreated and that, as Bernard Shaw once said, is no merit" ("el único mérito que tienen [los negros] es el de haber sido maltratados y eso, como observó Bernard Shaw, no es un mérito") (546).

As for Borges's production of otherness in relation to his surroundings, particularly in relation to Brazil, in 1959, in the face of Bioy Casares's assertion that black people in Brazil were real, Borges added, "indeed, and they are professionals, not *amateurs*, like ours" ("sí, profesionales, no *amateurs*, como los nuestros") (193). In 1969, Borges blamed the downfall of Latin America on Bartolomé de Las Casas, a priest who in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saved indigenous people from slavery by suggesting that people from Africa should be primarily enslaved. For Borges, Las Casas was "well-intended but obtuse" ("bien intencionado, pero obtuso"), as the result of his endeavor was a substantial increase in the black population in countries such as Mexico and Uruguay (472). In 1971, Borges tells the story about the time he was asked why he did not like Brazil; his answer was simply that it was a country of black people. He goes on, surprised at people's reaction to his statement, "they didn't like it at all" ("eso no les gustó nada") (456). Here, Borges was making the same point, of a certain censure toward "white men," just as he did in relation to the issue of race in the United States.

Adding to the idea of backwardness related to race, and so to Brazil, Borges contrasts Colombia with other, less "civilized" Latin American countries. For him, Colombians "do not have this national superstition that one can find in Uruguay and, I believe, in Brazil. Quite the opposite, Colombians are highly civilized. They know *Martín Fierro*; they know Lugones; they don't know Güiraldes: as you can see, they have good taste" ("no tienen esa superstición nacional que se encuentra en el Uruguay y, según creo, en el Brasil. No, los colombianos son muy civilizados. Conocen el *Martín Fierro*; conocen a Lugones; a Güiraldes, no: como ves, tienen tino") (405–406). Finally, and specifically about Brazil, Borges said, "it would be better to erase it from the map" ("mejor sería borrarlo del mapa") (439).

There are other passages that do not necessarily fit the topic this article is proposing. Good examples would be Borges's recounting of a meeting of black poets in Berlin in which he talked about equality while at the same time perceiving the whole event as a form of "nazismo *upside down*" (472). Or again, Borges setting Jewish people apart when it came to minorities; someone compared black people and homosexuals to Jewish people, to which he responded, "the sentence is unfair to Jews—in it, they are in bad company" ("la frase es injusta con los judíos—en ella van en mala compañía") (508). Nevertheless, these selected passages will suffice to demonstrate Borges's coherent discourse on black people, first, and Brazil and Brazilians, second.

The main threads are disavowing positive discourse toward blackness and condescension toward people of color; ultimately, Borges equates blackness to backwardness. If taken to its logical conclusion, Borges's argument would run as follows: Brazil is a country of black people; Brazil is not a civilized country; thus blackness is equal to backwardness. The argument is circular, that is, it would also work the other way around (backwardness equals blackness). These threads also reinforce Borges's view of himself as a white person and Argentina as a "white man's country." In fact, Buenos Aires was once like every other major city in Latin America in colonial times, with a sizeable African community. According to George Reid Andrews (1980, 4), "the 1778 census of the city [of Buenos Aires] showed that black people constituted 30 percent of the population, 7,256 out of 24,363." The process of vanishing "was a rather abrupt one, not really starting to take effect until the 1850s" (Andrews 1980, 4). This process occurred under the popular "scientific" idea of the time that connected whiteness to civilization and progress.

Again, these are not original ideas. At the beginning of the twentieth century, eugenic biological ideas entered the realm of morality and behavior, becoming normalized in Latin American culture. In her book *The Hour of Eugenics*, Nancy Leys Stepan (1996, 9) points out how in Latin America, scientific discourse on race "provided a framework for cultural prescription and medical-moral investigation." In *Diploma of Whiteness*, Jerry Dávila (2003, 6) describes the characteristics that were at the time identified with whiteness: virtue, strength of character, and physical health. In opposition to this definition, blackness was identified with backwardness, and consequently with the antithesis of what whiteness meant: maliciousness, weakness, and sickness. Borges's personal opinions are actually framed within the cultural background to which Stepan and Dávila are referring.

### Race in Borges's Literary Works

A quick search for the Spanish word *negro* in the first volume of Borges's complete works demonstrates how peripheral the issue of race is in Borges literary works. However, an analysis of the characters and the traits associated with the word "black" in Borges's writings points to his personal view of blackness, in particular after a close reading of Bioy Casares's diary. In Borges's initial works as a poet and essayist, one can find just a couple noticeable mentions to African Americans and blackness. (Notice that Borges's oeuvre is extensive, and this article focuses exclusively on his initial texts collected in his complete works; for example, his articles in *El Hogar*, from 1935 to 1958, mention black people and the issue of race in a way that would reinforce the point of this article, but are outside its scope.)

Most of his early literary writings were directly about Buenos Aires and its suburbs. Books such as *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929), and *Evaristo Carriego* (1930) presented the idealized, whitened twentieth-century city in which Borges lived: "Las calles de Buenos Aires/ya son mi entraña" (The streets of Buenos Aires/Are now my essence) (Borges 1974, 17). Borges's collection of essays *Discusión* is the first piece of work in the first volume of his complete works that makes direct reference to "los hombres negros del Sur" (black men of the South) (179). In "La poesía gauchesca," Borges calculates that black men are more prominently portrayed in US literature than cowboys are. Despite the fact that the expression "black men of the South" could be seen as a euphemism referring to slavery in the United States, this is a simple observation: this ethnic group is an important part of a certain literary tradition of the United States of America.

Nonetheless, the second mention of blackness in *Discusión* carries a stronger bias tied directly to Borges's personal views on race as shown in his conversations with Bioy Casares. In "El Dr. Jekyll y Edward Hyde transformados," Borges writes about the 1941 film version of Robert Louis Stevenson's book, directed by Victor Fleming. In it, Borges addresses what he considers Fleming's "aesthetic and moral mistakes" ("errores estéticos y morales") in the making of the movie (285). For Borges, the film fails to surprise or to reproduce the moral dichotomy of the original book because the main character has not one subtle change in look but two completely different appearances clearly marked by their colors. "More civilized than me, Victor Fleming evades all surprise and mystery: in the first scene of the movie, Spencer Tracy fearlessly drinks the transformational concoction and becomes Spencer Tracy with an obvious wig and negroid features." ("Más civilizado que yo, Victor Fleming elude todo asombro y todo misterio: en las escenas iniciales del filme, Spencer Tracy apura sin miedo el versátil brebaje y se transforma en Spencer Tracy con distinta peluca y rasgos negroides") (286). Attributing civility to the American filmmaker is clearly ironic, as Borges is making the argument for what he sees as Fleming's lack of finesse. More importantly, Borges sees in the "negroid features" of Dr. Jekyll's double an unequivocal statement of his lack of civility, his moral decay.

Moving to Borges's first collection of narratives, *Historia universal de la infamia*, one can find more black characters and a more solid indication of Borges's views on race. In line with Borges's personal views on the issue of race, the subject of infamy can only apply to black characters. In this book, three stories directly mention issues related to black characters, history, and blackness: "El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell," "El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro," and "El asesino desinteresado Bill Harrigans." Each one of these stories deserves close attention; however, I will focus on "El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell" and briefly comment on the other two stories.

"El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell" is about a nineteenth-century American criminal, John Andrews Murrell, who stole, among other things, enslaved people—in Borges's version, only to free them: that is, in Borges's narrative the criminal becomes a white savior character. At the beginning of Borges's retelling, he mentions his view of Bartolomé de Las Casas reiterated in his 1969 conversation with Bioy Casares: to protect indigenous populations in Latin America from slavery, Las Casas suggested that Africans should be used as a workforce, a fact that brought to America "infinitos hechos" (an infinite number of facts), some of

which he enumerates: the musical styling of blues, the verb “to lynch,” and African American religions (295). Borges proceeds to describe the life of enslaved people in the United States from a clearly removed, if not a completely ill informed, position. For him, kinship among Black people was “conventional and obscure” (“convencionales y turbios”); they did not have surnames, were illiterate, and had a high pitched and slow oral expression (296). Moreover, Borges considered their beliefs to be “a deposit of bestial hopes and African fears” (“un sedimento de esperanzas bestiales y miedos africanos”) loosely associated with the Holy Bible (296). However, the cruelest description of slavery comes in Borges’s understatement, “a good slave cost a thousand dollars and would not last long. Some were ungrateful enough to get sick and die” (“un buen esclavo les costaba mil dólares y no duraba mucho. Algunos cometían la ingratitud de enfermarse y morir”) (296).

This seemingly ironic statement brings to mind one of the funniest lines in Brazilian writer Machado de Assis’s oeuvre. In “Pai contra mãe” (Machado de Assis 2008), a short story about runaway enslaved people and those hunting for them in Brazil, Machado’s narrator states: “[slaves] were plenty and not all of them liked slavery” (“[escravos] eram muitos, e nem todos gostavam da escravidão”). The indifferent tone of the narrator is close to Borges’s tone in “El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell.” However, considering Borges’s personal comments on race and his identification as a white man, in contrast to Machado’s famous ironic view on Brazilian elites and his own African ancestry, there is no comparison in terms of intentionality. Contextually, Machado’s irony through understatement is much more powerful, as it aims to expose the cruelty and indifference of slave owners and of Brazilian society of that era. More importantly, it comes from an outsider, given his ethnic and social background, who was daily confronted with the reality of slavery in Brazil until 1888. Borges’s irony, in turn, comes from a comfortable distance from the reality of slavery, as its history was systematically erased from Argentinean culture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In short, what in Machado can be seen as dark humor and satire, in Borges is just a detached, unsympathetic, and superficial assessment of a very complex issue. I have further compared Machado to Borges in relation to their use of irony (Mendes de Souza 2014). For more on Machado and the issue of race, and also on “Pai contra mãe,” see Flynn, Calvo-González, and Mendes de Souza (2013).

As for the other two stories in *Historia universal de la infamia*, “El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro” and “El asesino desinteresado Bill Harrigans,” the first is about an impostor who happens to be a man of color and the second is about another famous US bandit, Billy the Kid. The first story points to the fact that the character named Bogle was a black man whose main qualities were being ugly but commanding, and also having “a second condition that certain ethnographic manuals had denied to his race: the incident of being brilliant” (“una segunda condición, que determinados manuales de etnografía han negado a su raza: la ocurrencia genial”) (Borges 1974, 299). Borges insists on the fact that, despite certain backward religious beliefs, Bogle was “normal” (emphasis added). Here, Borges clearly equates Bogle’s decency and intelligence to whiteness, hence the use of the word *normal* to describe him (the concealed reasoning here is: despite being black, he acted as “one of us”).

The second story highlights the fact that Billy the Kid was raised among black people, where “in this chaos of smell and smears, he enjoyed the importance that accrues to freckles and red hair” (“en ese caos de catinga y de motas gozó el primado que conceden las pecas y una crencha rojiza”) (301). Because of Billy’s upbringing, he “practiced white pride” (“practicaba el orgullo de ser blanco”) (301). In this story, the neutral tone of the narrator makes it sound like an impartial character study, making it difficult to infer any of Borges’s or the narrator’s opinions on the issue of race; that is, “white pride” is here a practical result of Billy’s upbringing, not necessarily of Borges’s views. Nevertheless, the idea of an African American community living “in this chaos of smell and smears” seems to resonate with Borges’s beliefs that ultimately connect blackness to backwardness.

In Borges’s most accomplished fiction, in particular in his first collections of proper short stories organized in *Ficciones* (1944), there are only a few mentions of black characters. For example, in “El Fin” the black character does not have agency, he is just part of the scenery. Another character makes it clear by saying, “the black man did not count” (“el negro no contaba”) (519). This story is a version of the story of Martín Fierro, in which the black man is no more than Fierro’s redeemer, a silent replacement for death itself. The narrator here joins death while it patiently waits for Fierro, that is, the black man is nothing here but a motif.

Another noticeable mention of a black character in Borges’s fiction brings together the issue of race and Borges’s opinions on Brazilian people. In “El muerto,” the story is set in “the equestrian deserts of Brazil’s frontier” (“los desiertos ecuestres de la frontera de Brasil”) (545), a place of mystery. In this setting, the boss of the smugglers is a man named Azevedo Bandeira, two very common Brazilian-Portuguese surnames (Azevedo is the Spanish version of this Portuguese surname and another of Borges’s family names, from his mother’s side). The character is described as a grotesque creature; his portrayal carries Borges’s prejudice

not only against black people but also against other minorities, and can also be associated with a certain prejudice against miscegenation. The narrator says that in Azevedo Bandeira's face, "the Jew, the black and the Indian are always too close" ("siempre demasiado cercano, están en el judío, el negro y el indio") (545). Brazil here is not only a place of mystery but also a place of "chaos."

Before turning the focus to Brazil and Brazilian people, there is another literary work worth examining, the poem "Milonga de los Morenos" from the book *Para las seis cuerdas* (1965). It is introduced as a song to "people of color," and it portrays the slave trade in the neighborhood of Retiro, in Buenos Aires, from a detached point of view. It also describes the deployment of Africans in what was called the "Regimiento de pardos y morenos" (Division of colored and brown people) in the Argentinean Army. The poem is filled with understatement, mirroring the unpleasant description of slavery in the United States presented in "El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell." For example, it defines the slave market of Retiro as a place from where "many left angry" ("muchos salieron bravos") (965). Moreover, it infantilizes black people:

De su tierra de leones  
Se olvidaron como niños  
Y aquí los aquerenciaron  
La costumbre y los cariños  
(About their land of lions  
They forgot, like children  
And from here they acquired  
The costumes and the affections) (965).

The poem finishes by poetically describing the disappearance of this community of black people in Buenos Aires: "Se los ha llevado el tiempo,/El tiempo que es el olvido" (They were taken by time/Time that is forgetfulness) (966).

On other words, Borges was well aware of the presence of slavery in Buenos Aires but preferred to romanticize it, attributing the deliberate process of erasing black history in Argentina to his recurrent literary concepts of time and memory, rather than to his peers and contemporaries and their objective actions, such as the constant deployment of African Argentinean soldiers in wars ("against the Indians, the Brazilians, and the Paraguayans, as well as in the country's interminable civil wars"; Andrews 1980, 4); public policies facilitating the arrival of male European migrants, associated with eugenics; poverty in general, as the black population moved from slavery to scarcity; and finally the decline of the slave trade (Andrews 1980, 4–5).

### Brazil and Brazilian People in Borges's Fiction

As for mapping Brazil in Borges's fiction, Bruno Carvalho's "Charting Brazil in Borges" (2008) identifies the instances that Brazil appears as a fictional entity and surveys the existing critical assessment on the subject (mentioning previous critics that touched on the subject, such as Raúl Antelo, Davi Arrigucci Jr., and Jorge Schwartz, among others). In Carvalho's (2008, 81) study, the "region between Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina appears as a significant space in at least six of the stories published in *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949)." These stories are "La forma de la espada," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "El Muerto," "Emma Zunz," "La otra muerte," and "El otro duelo." For Carvalho, the pattern established by these stories is clear: "the frontier region is characterized as a space of shifting or blurry identities, of archetypal *orillero* figures, and of lawlessness or violence ... magnified when associated to the Brazilian side of the border." In sum, Brazil is seen as "a mysterious and primitive land" (Carvalho 2008, 81). Carvalho (2008) also lists critics, such as Daniel Balderstone, Ana María Barrenechea, and Pablo Rocca, who described Brazil in Borges's fiction as a "different, enormous, mysterious place" ("lugar diferente, enorme, misterioso"); "the mythical place of courage" ("el mítico lugar del coraje"); and "the scenery of violence, the unknown margin of barbarism untouched by civilization" ("el escenario de la violencia, el ignoto margen de la barbarie intocada por la civilización") (in Carvalho 2008, 81–82).

Carvalho's conclusion points to a comparison between Brazil and Argentina that only stresses Borges's romantic view of his own country (which in his fiction, as in his interviews and personal conversations with Bioy Casares, is almost exclusively defined by his memory of the city of Buenos Aires). In Carvalho's words (2008, 87), "Brazil constitutes an understanding of what Argentina is, by representing in part what Argentina is not, or in Borges's imagination, what it once was." Carvalho goes further by stating that the presence of these frontier spaces in Borges's fiction places Buenos Aires at the center. In other words, if Brazil is a place of savagery and backwardness, Borges's Buenos Aires is a place of civility and progress.



Nevertheless, Carvalho stops his argument there, emphasizing the construction of an imaginary Buenos Aires in comparison to the Brazilian frontier. He does not add Borges's moral and racial judgment of Brazil, and consequently, he leaves out Borges's production of otherness from his whitened Buenos Aires. However, it is a small leap from Carvalho's overall conclusion about Brazil as a mere counter-parameter for Borges's notion of the Argentinean, to the present article's proposal that a cohesive discourse on the issue of race underlies both his personal opinions and his literary works.

The focus of Carvalho's article is on the construction of Brazil and Argentina as imaginary spaces in Borges's fictions. Adding Borges's personal views to Carvalho's arguments helps to identify Borges's coherent discourse on Brazil as an "exotic" place, and, at the same time, on Brazilians as black and backward people. Carvalho clearly demonstrates how in Borges's fiction Brazil is characterized as a place associated with chaos and irrationality; a place of shifting, multiple identities; a strange place just across the border from Argentina. This estimation is clearly connected to Borges's statement to Bioy Casares that "el Brasil es exótico." When put into context, what seems to be simple commentary, that is, the fact that Brazil seems exotic from Borges's perspective, becomes part of Borges's misguided opinion toward black people and Brazilians alike. Borges's full statement was "Brazil is an exotic place; it is close to us, but we don't want to visit it ... it seems to us like a country of monkeys" ("el Brasil es exótico, está cerca y no queremos ir allí ... nos parece un país de macacos") (Bioy Casares 2010, 516). Brazil is exotic, undesired, and a place of "monkeys." This is not an innocent remark; it is clearly a moral-behavioral judgement that unfortunately was common in Borges's era and among his peers.

### Borges as a Universal or Local Writer

The reception of Borges as a "universal" writer is not at all wrong. However, it clearly has another side that is brought to light through the analysis of his personal views vis-à-vis his literary work. That is, rather than contradicting the view of Borges as an abstract, nihilistic author, his social biases and racial prejudices are the results of this so-called universal perspective, constructed within the context of early twentieth-century Latin America. In some senses, Borges's close connections with the elites of Buenos Aires at that time replicate the connections of other Latin American writers not only to their own local elites but also to contemporary European trends and ways of thinking.

Borges was not alone. Apart from his interlocutors, such as Bioy Casares and other personalities that appear in Bioy Casares's diary, a whole generation of Argentinean and Latin American authors held similar views on the subject of race. Carlos Gamerro (2015) traces racism in Argentinean literature from Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, in the nineteenth century, to Julio Cortázar, in the twentieth century. He notes a change in attitude, from "a triumphant and coarse form of racism, like Sarmiento's" ("un racismo triunfante y ramplón como el de Sarmiento") to "one that is humble and contrived, like that of Cortázar" ("uno humilde y contrito como el de Cortázar") (176). However, Gamerro also establishes what he considers the matrix of Argentinean racism: mainly racism against indigenous people, but also against "our 'blacks' and those from neighboring countries" ("nuestros 'negros' y los de los países vecinos") (176). According to Gamerro, Sarmiento's proposed dichotomy between "civilización y barbarie" took the racialized form of "blanco/no blanco" in his last book, *Conflicto y armonías de las razas en América* (166). As for Cortázar, a contemporary of Borges, Gamerro analyzes his short story "Las puertas del cielo," where he describes the black population of Buenos Aires under Péron as "the monsters" ("los monstruos") (171); and also Cortázar's posthumous novel *El examen*, where the main character describes his ultimate repulsion for black people. Cortázar would eventually admit to his own racism in writing his short story (173); Gamerro himself admits to his internalized Argentinean racism, when writing about everyday forms of racism in present-day Buenos Aires (169–170).

Changing the focus to the literary sphere of twentieth-century Latin America, for example, in Brazil Euclides da Cunha "made use of racial and climatic categories in his interpretations of the Brazilian people" in his famous 1902 books *Os sertões* (Bashford and Levine 2010, 497). For him, isolation and miscegenation in the hinterlands of Brazil created a "strong 'sub-race' where human and nature are conflicted." The Brazilian literary critic Sílvio Romero and the physician and writer Nina Rodrigues also based their views on "scientific" ideas of the time. For Romero, "every Brazilian is mestiço, when not in blood, then in ideas" (496). Rodrigues, in turn, "interpreted mixing with 'inferior' races as a tragedy that not even long-scale miscegenation with whites could alleviate" (497). Another Brazilian writer who was directly associated with eugenics was Monteiro Lobato, who even in his collection of books for children leaned heavily on racial prejudice. In his 1918 book *O problema vital*, the character Jeca Tatu becomes a synonym for miscegenation; for the author, the character's racial constitution explained "his dirty, sick, and lazy condition" ("sua condição de sujo, doente e preguiçoso") (Miskolci 2006, 232). Lobato started as a realist but soon abandoned this

literary concept to embrace the pseudo-scientific sanitizing ideas in vogue at the beginning of the twentieth century (Souza 2018, 325). His novel *O presidente negro* (*The Black President*, 1926) is still the epitome of eugenics as it is expressed in Brazilian literature. In it, Lobato imagines a future for racial conflict in the United States that ends up with the extermination of African descendants in that country (much as Borges suggests in his conversations with Bioy Casares; 2010, 508).

Considered in many ways a very original writer, Borges could also be as unoriginal or conventional as any other person of his time. His shortsightedness when dealing with his sociocultural context and also with issues related to race appears also in his literary work, even if in a very subtle, almost oblique way. Two things are made visible through Bioy Casares's diary: first, Borges's personal views on the subject of race, and second and more important, the way these opinions relate, even if marginally, to his literary production and, in a more complex way, to his whole literary project. Of course, black characters and themes are few relative to Borges's vast body of work. However, as in the case of Carvalho, when writing on Brazil as an imaginary space in Borges's fiction, they are enough to make the point about Borges being a man of his time and place in terms of prejudice toward minorities, namely black and Brazilian people, and in terms of self-identification.

The moral and behavioral ideas based on eugenics that circulated in twentieth-century Latin America, and that also informed Borges's personal opinions, appear in his fiction under the guise of grotesque background characters. Examples include the enslaved people that were redeemed by Lazarus Morell or Bogle, the clever impostor. These characters and themes are described from a removed point of view that could easily be mistaken for Borges's own judgement, considering his personal opinions on black and Brazilian people. Borges's understatement when dealing with the subject of slavery would be ironic if stated by someone like Machado de Assis, who was not only descended from Africans but who also famously satirized Brazilian slave owners of his time; however, they ultimately emerge as thoughtless opinions from a "white man." Examples are Borges's description of slavery in both "El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell" and "Milonga de los morenos." This bias is evident when Borges describes Brazilian people as "monkeys," that is, as black, backwards, and "exotic" people. His views on Brazilian people reinforce his misguided moral opinions on black people, completing that reasoning that equates blackness to backwardness, close to the pseudo-scientific discourse of early twentieth-century eugenics.

Being Argentinean was not a mere affectation for Borges. Both his highly original oeuvre and his insensitively unoriginal or conventional ideas came from the same place. This article deepens Borges's connection with early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, and deepens the internal contradictions of this important author. Ironically, these fundamental contradictions, along with the tangible biases and prejudices, can be seen as among the reasons why Borges is accepted by a number of international critics as a "universal" writer.

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