

**Piglia's Diaries: Recovering the Gestation of *Plata quemada***

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for John Kraniauskas

One of the many pleasures of reading Ricardo Piglia's *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi* is the chance to watch some of Piglia's projects emerge. The published diaries are but a small sample from Piglia's hundreds of notebooks (themselves the subject of a brilliant film by Andrés di Tella) but Piglia, aided by assistants during the last years of his life, when he was increasingly immobilized by Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and needed to work with assistants and with a specially designed computer, was himself involved in the selection, obviously with the intention of providing his many readers with insights into the early and middle stages of his career as a writer. The first volume, *Años de formación*, published in 2015, covers the period from 1957 (when Piglia was still a teenager) to 1967 (when he published his first book of stories, *La invasión*). The second volume, *Los años felices*, published in 2016, goes from 1968 to 1975, when Piglia was about to publish his second book, *Nombre falso*, which includes the masterful "Homenaje a Roberto Arlt." The third volume, *Un día de la vida*, appeared in 2017, and there are said to be various other publications of selections from the diary in the works.

Piglia's novel *Plata quemada* came out in 1997, having won the Premio Plata that year. (There were lawsuits about the prize and it was withdrawn, though I think from a distance of twenty years it is clear that this great novel deserved the recognition it was awarded.) The novel concerns a robbery of a bank vehicle in San Fernando, a suburb of Buenos Aires, in 1965 and the subsequent flight of some of the criminal group to Montevideo, where the last three were eventually surrounded by police in a deadly firefight. It has always been known that the novel was based on real events, but the extent to which Piglia conducted research at the time was not clear until the publication of the diaries. In this article I will examine the relations between the young diarist and the writer who published a novel based on his research more than thirty years later. I should add that the Uruguayan journalist Leonardo Haberkorn has done a lot of research on the crime and the criminals, and has published a book, *Liberaij: La verdadera historia del caso Plata quemada*, as well as a lot of the raw material for it that he has made available on the web; this article will focus more on the diary material than on the sources that Haberkorn consulted. Almost all of the preparatory work for *Plata quemada* is in the first of the three volumes, the one that ends in 1967; the novel was published three decades later. This unusually long gestation is my subject here. Earlier work situated the novel in relation to the genres of crime fiction and the thriller (Rodríguez Pésico), commented on the "forma cuasi periodística" of the novel (Clayton 136), and wondered about the incorporation of the research into the novel (Premat); this article is I believe the first that takes the published diaries into account.

The robbery of the armored vehicle occurred in San Fernando on 28 September 1965. On 5 November 1965 more than 350 policemen surrounded the surviving criminals, Marcelo Brignone, Carlos Alberto Mereles and Roberto Dorda in their temporary refuge in the Edificio Liberaij in Montevideo, on Julio Herrera y Obes between Canelones and Maldonado and, according to Piglia, after sixteen hours of gunshots the survivor, Dorda, was arrested and eventually extradited to Buenos Aires (where he was killed in prison a year later).<sup>1</sup> On Tuesday November 9<sup>th</sup>, four days later, Piglia writes in his diary: "Acaso el final de mi novela sobre Cacho está en el departamento de Montevideo en esos tres pistoleros atrapados allí, aguantando dieciséis horas y resistiendo contra cuatrocientos policías y soportando gases, fuego, balas, agua,

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<sup>1</sup>This differs from Haberkorn's account.

bombas hasta que al fin queman el dinero y gritan: ‘Vengan a buscarnos, guanacos’” (1: 203).<sup>2</sup> This is just the first of many diary entries as Piglia follows the case.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout 1966 and 1967 there are frequent diary entries that relate to Piglia's research on the case and his attempts to write a novel about it. The project of writing a novel about the “camión pagador,” the bank vehicle, was intertwined with Piglia's intention to write a novel about a close friend, Cacho, who made a living as a thief; much of the first volume of the published diaries focus not so much on Cacho's adventures as on his manner of narrating them, something that the young Piglia finds fascinating. Thus, for instance, on January 27, 1966, Piglia writes:

Quizá en la novela pueda construir a Cacho a partir de mi propia adolescencia; darle a él la experiencia de mi vida en esos años, extraerla de mis diarios. Además es necesario encontrar una anécdota casi policial (y que todos ya conozcan y no haya que explicar, como sucede con los hechos de la tragedia griega: todos conocían los mitos y el argumento en el que se basaban las obras). Por ejemplo, el robo al camión pagador y la fuga a Uruguay de los maleantes. Usar entonces el pretexto de la no ficción para escaparle al verosímil y al costumbrismo. Escribir, digamos, así, un drama épico, o mejor, una tragedia. (1: 221)

The publication in December 2016 of *Escritores norteamericanos*, Piglia's prefaces and short essays on a series of US writers, initially published around this time (1967), confirms this reference to his fascination with “la no ficción,” a genre that of course was also being cultivated in Argentina at the time by his friend Rodolfo Walsh (who makes frequent appearances in the first two published volumes of the diaries). It is interesting here to see how Piglia hopes to intertwine three separate elements in the projected novel: his own experiences as a teenager (moving from Adrogué to Mar del Plata because of his father's political problems, his studies in La Plata, the writing of his first short stories) with Cacho's experiences as a thief and with the robbery and flight of the criminals: this last plot line is so immediate and so well known when he writes these lines that it would seem unnecessary to explain it (something that is not true when he publishes the novel thirty years later, as he explains in the epilogue to *Plata quemada*).

The next entry on this project in the published diary is from nine months later, on October 12, 1966. Piglia is correcting the proofs of his first book of stories

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<sup>2</sup> For simplicity's sake I will refer to *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi* with volume numbers: 1 is *Los años de formación* (2015), 2 is *Los años felices* (2016), 3 is *Un día en la vida* (2017).

<sup>3</sup> I should note, though, that Piglia and his assistants selected, and perhaps rewrote, portions of the diary; until the notebooks are available for direct research, the published diary is all we have. I cannot attest, then, directly to whether these are the actual words that Piglia wrote in November 1965.

(published as *Jaulario* in Cuba and as *La invasión* in Argentina), and thinking again about a new project:

Me resisto a corregir los cuentos, tengo la certidumbre de que están bien escritos en la primera redacción. Como si el estilo se fijara de una vez y cualquier “mejora” (convencional) destruyera el efecto del conjunto. Igual tengo que cerrar el libro y olvidarme de él para poder empezar a escribir la historia de los maleantes que huyen a Uruguay. Tan cercana a mí que necesito escribirla como si estuviera sucediendo ahora. (1: 261)

The name associated with the project has changed from “el camión pagador” to “los maleantes que huyen a Uruguay,” while the closeness that Piglia feels to the story is still intense. This would have been the period when he conducted research and interviews, if we are to believe the epilogue to the novel; this would explain that sense of immediacy.

In the first entry for 1967 in the published diary, dated January 2<sup>nd</sup>, Piglia writes: “Hoy empecé las notas preliminares para la novela de los malandras que escapan a Montevideo” (1: 281).<sup>4</sup> Two days later Piglia writes: “Anoche trabajé hasta las tres de la mañana anotando algunas situaciones. Alguien entrega el golpe al banco de San Fernando. Establece un contrato por el que, a cambio de la información, recibirá una parte del dinero robado. Esa situación no va a ser contada directamente, sólo se ven los efectos” (1: 282).

This annotation shows that Piglia has gone from collecting information and reflecting on it to thinking about the literary form that he wants his novel to take. Thirty years later the published novel will indeed work with the idea of oblique narration, though the form chosen in the final work, a third person narration with gradual change of focalization from character to character to character, is still beyond the horizon of the writer of the diaries. The two next pages of the diary concern De Quincey’s *On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts*, Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (both concerned with how to narrate a crime) and Oscar Lewis’s *Los hijos de Sánchez* (a key text in the development of the “testimonio” genre, but not one associated with crime fiction in the way that the other two texts are). After that, Piglia writes on January 10<sup>th</sup>: “La anécdota central de la novela es la encerrona, pasan tres días sin salir del departamento en Montevideo. De pronto llega la policía y empieza el asedio y la batalla que dura toda la noche” (1: 285). And then, a week later on January 17<sup>th</sup>:

*La novela.* El pistolero y la muchacha, una historia de amor. Pero atrás, en secreto, ella se acostaba con otros empujada por él. En el final ella muere con

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that he uses the slang word “malandra,” associated with a key term that Antonio Candido used in a famous essay on Manuel Antonio de Almeida’s *Memórias de un sargento de milícias*, “Dialética da malandragem,” published shortly thereafter in 1970.

un tiro en la espalda. Casi por casualidad, una bala que rebota y la mata en el baño. El amor, entonces, romántico, y a la vez, por supuesto, como siempre muy perverso, entre el Inglés y Moira, la muerte de ella al final, cuando casi se odian y sólo queda el remordimiento. (1: 287)

This note shows the huge gap between the initial project and the published novel thirty years later, which readers will remember focuses on a different sort of romantic relationship, the homosexual relationship between Dorda and Brignone. As I discussed some years ago in an article on the novel, that relationship is strangely mediated by references to Hernández's *Martín Fierro*, which is taken (perhaps because of Martínez Estrada's reading of the poem) as an Ur-text of Argentine homoerotic literature; none of that is present here. Habenkorn quotes Judge Molteri, who ruled against Dorda's daughter's lawsuit against Piglia:

Comprendo que no deja de ser desagradable que de un ascendiente se diga innecesariamente que era homosexual y drogadicto, como que se relaten numerosos episodios donde el personajes desempeña descaradamente esos roles. Pero cuando ese mismo protagonista desarrolló conductas reales de maleante y frío asesino, esos aspectos de su vida, en rigor, resultan desproporcionadamente minúsculos y hasta anecdóticos, como para agravar el sentimiento de deshonor o la carga infamante que debieron sentir sus descendientes por la desdorosa conducta de aquel. (Habenkorn 212)

It is interesting to see how the judge distinguishes between different varieties of infamy here. Also of interest, is the fact that Piglia decides here, as in "La invasión," to emphasize the homosexual relationship.<sup>5</sup>

On 17 April 1967, Piglia notes that he has rented a room away from the center of Buenos Aires to focus on the writing of the novel, thanks to the generosity of his publisher Jorge Álvarez, who among other things was paying him to compile a series of anthologies (and some of the prefaces that are collected in *Escritores norteamericanos* were published there): "Asegurado económicamente, instalado ya en un lugar en el sur de la ciudad, puedo empezar por fin a escribir la novela sobre el robo al camión pagador en San Fernando" (305). Several months later, on 17 September 1967, he writes, now with a new tentative title for the novel: "*El robo* es, digamos, una historia sucia, porque en la fuga todo se altera. Narrada en plural, en coro, pero sin nadie que decida sobre el sentido de los hechos. Ellos planean el atraco al camión pagador en complicidad con la policía y luego se escapan rompiendo el pacto" (1: 326).

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<sup>5</sup> Rodríguez Pérsico quotes Piglia's ideas about homosexual relations, or what he prefers to call "circulaciones del deseo, que se dan entre hombres a veces y se dan entre hombres y mujeres o entre mujeres". He adds: "Me parece que en mundo popular, en las clases bajas, este juego de las identidades sexuales, como quiera que sean[,] son menos fijas" (116n3).

And a bit less than two weeks later, on September 29<sup>th</sup>: “La novela del atraco se va a llamar *Entre hombres*” (1: 329). This suggests perhaps that Piglia is thinking in terms of the homosexual romance that will be an important element of the published novel years later, an idea that had already been the subject of his story “La invasión,” set in a prison cell, and that gave him the title of the Argentine edition of the book of short stories that he had just published.

On December 12<sup>th</sup>, in the longest of the diary entries on this project, Piglia writes:

*Entre hombres*. Éstos son los primeros resultados de una investigación más vasta que he comenzado a partir de las experiencias de Oscar Lewis (*Los hijos de Sánchez*, *La vida*). Como se sabe, Lewis ha renovado el campo de la antropología a partir del empleo del grabador de cinta con la intención de grabar historias de vida, hechos reales, y, a la vez, narrados con la voz y el estilo de los protagonistas. Me interesa sobre todo plantear aquí algunas consideraciones. Como se sabe, el uso del grabador modifica el nivel de las exploraciones de la experiencia y genera una distancia con el que está contando los acontecimientos. Tratamos [¿Tratando?] de fortalecer ese criterio, yo he reconstruido en este libro los hechos que han sucedido a partir del asalto al camión pagador de un banco de San Fernando, y la posterior huida a Montevideo de los maleantes, que fueron por fin rodeados por la policía en una encerrona producida por una delación. Mi primer contacto con los protagonistas de esta historia sucedió el 11 de enero de 1965, al leer en el diario *La Razón* la noticia del asalto. A partir de ahí entrevisté a todos los testigos y participantes en los acontecimientos y pude acceder a las grabaciones realizadas por un radioaficionado de las conversaciones que mantuvieron los malvivientes mientras resistían el ataque de la policía. No hace falta que fatigüe al lector con la narración de las dificultades que tuve que afrontar para realizar las grabaciones y lograr un acercamiento personal con los protagonistas. Fueron necesarias varias entrevistas para lograr conocer con algún detalle los hechos. Por fin conseguí unirme a un grupo de cinco testigos con los que inicié las primeras conversaciones sin grabador, de esta manera establecí con ellos una relación de confianza, y cuando por fin comenzamos a trabajar con el registro de su relato ya estábamos en una relación muy fluida. (1: 332-33)

This note has more or less the same tone as the epilogue to the 1997 novel: it focuses both on Piglia’s research on the case, which is said to have included interviews with various witnesses and protagonists (including Dorda, he states in the 1997 epilogue [*Plata quemada*, 247]) but also on his concerns with how to escape from the distance that the tape recorder established between him and his interviewees. What the 1967 diary entry reveals, though, that is not in the 1997 epilogue is the importance for the young Piglia of Oscar Lewis: the mode in which Lewis, in his anthropological works that used the tape recorder as a research tool, managed to erase himself from the narrative and let his characters speak in their own voices. Lewis—and Capote, who of course denied

using a tape recorder or even a notebook in the interviews that led up to *In Cold Blood*—is invoked as a model for how to narrate this story. That model is discarded thirty years later in the published novel, but knowing that initially Piglia thought of how to let the novel go forward “con la voz y el estilo de los protagonistas” is important.

This is the last of the annotations on the project that eventually became *Plata quemada* in the first volume of the diary, the one that goes from 1957 to 1967. Five years later, though, Piglia is still interested in the case, and his notes on June 14, 1970 reveal that he is still working on the novel:

Sigo trabajando una novela que interiormente considero frustrada, la cuento aquí para que quede algo de todos esos meses de trabajo: un relato de cien páginas basado en el robo a un camión pagador en San Fernando, que está centrado en el encierro y el acoso al que son sometidos los maleantes, que resisten en un departamento asediado por la policía, en Montevideo. Escrito en tercera persona clásica, combina la situación de clausura (resisten toda la noche y mueren al alba luego de quemar la plata) con la biografía del rehén a quien capturan al entrar al edificio. Toda la novela respeta la unidad de tiempo y de lugar y está cruzada por el monólogo del que ha sido capturado (un jugador de fútbol uruguayo). (2: 193-94)

Some of the comments on the writing of the novel on the Liberaj case are interspersed with notes on what became “Homenaje a Roberto Arlt” and *Respiración artificial*. Obviously, the project was put aside, and only picked up again many years, after the second big novel, *La ciudad ausente* (1992) and the short fiction of *Prisión perpetua* (1988).

The third volume, which goes from 1976 until 1982, with some additional writings from then until Piglia's death, contains just three notes on *Plata quemada*. On 25 June 1979, when *Respiración artificial* is in press, Piglia writes:

He tratado de escribir sin éxito, pero no sin dedicación, las siguientes novelas fracasadas. La novela “verdadera”, la historia del asalto al camión pagador, la fuga y el encierro de cuatro maleantes en un departamento de Montevideo en el que resisten toda la noche a la policía y, antes de morir, queman el dinero. Uso del grabador y una técnica que transmite la oralidad de los personajes como un documento real. Una novela corta centrada en Pavese, que transcurre en Italia y gira sobre los diarios personales. (3: 101)

Here he is again mulling over questions of narrative technique, and reflecting on the use of a tape recorder (or the simulation of one) to give the impression of orality (see Premat 125-27). Another, undated, entry in the second part of the book (the one which leaves behind the diary structure per se), reads:

Bajó por Callao, caminando por la vereda del sol, la librería en la esquina de la Universidad del Salvador, y al cruzar Córdoba, la funeraria. Una tarde en el 67, cuando vivía en un departamento en la cortada Del Carmen, había encontrado el comienzo de la novela en la que trabajaba desde hacía meses, los malandras

secuestraban a un periodista, y durante el asedio él grababa sus historias en un grabador portátil, buscaba registrar los ritmos del habla, recordaba de memoria el primer párrafo, había tardado dos meses en escribir esas veinte líneas y se mantuvo fiel al tono, los personajes se alternaban en esa novela, tenía los periódicos de la época, el asalto al camión recaudador, la fuga al Uruguay, el cerco policial, la resistencia suicida hasta el final, cuando deciden quemar la plata, pero antes dejan libre al periodista para que cuente la historia. Había visto ese día, como una aparición, nítida, la imagen del hombre alto, lívido, ahogado por el humo y los gases, que salía del departamento en ruinas y cruzaba entre las cenizas y los cadáveres con el grabador en alto, como un soldado que lleva su fusil sobre la cabeza al cruzar un río. (3: 179)

Here he is remembering a false start: the 1997 novel does not include this journalist character, and Haberkorn does not mention such an incident in his book. There is a fascinating displacement, then, of the “tape recorder” theme from the earlier reflections on Oscar Lewis and early *testimonio* to the framing of the novel, though ultimately this frame will be discarded. (It will be interesting to see if the first paragraph described here is in the working papers that will eventually be open to researchers.) The final reference to the novel is in a letter to the composer Gerardo Gandini (with whom he had worked on the opera version of *La ciudad ausente*, which premiered at the Teatro Colón in 1995), which concerns a projected visit by Gandini to Princeton. In it, Piglia refers to his state of mind during the lawsuits about *Plata quemada* and the subsequent lawsuits: “Estoy desanimado y furioso (extraña mezcla que algún efecto va a producir), trato de no hacerme la víctima, porque los tipos que me atacan y quieren mandarme preso cultivan la poética de la víctima, de los canallas que se hacen los mártires” (3: 227). This is the only reference in the third volume of the diary to the novel after its publication.

Piglia explains in the 1997 epilogue that “Esta novela cuenta una historia real” (*Plata quemada* 245).<sup>6</sup> He explains that he has tried to respect the language of the protagonists and witnesses (an echo of his diary entry from December 1967 about Oscar Lewis) and that he used interviews, published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *El Mundo* (and here Piglia is playing with the reader, since that was the newspaper that Roberto Arlt wrote for many years before) with Dorda, various judges and witnesses in Montevideo, a lawyer, a policeman and various other witnesses in Buenos Aires, and various published newspaper articles: he mentions *Crónica*, *Clarín*, *La Nación* and *La Razón* in Buenos Aires and *El Día*, *Acción*, *El País* and *Debate* in Montevideo (248). He winks at his reader with the declaration: “Fueron de especial utilidad las crónicas y las

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<sup>6</sup> Premat reflects on this phrase and its implications for the novel (124), and on the epilogue (127-30).



notas de quien firmaba E. R., que cubrió el asalto y fue el enviado especial del diario argentino *El Mundo* al lugar de los hechos” (248), since Emilio Renzi is his frequent alter ego and the “author” of *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi*, a name derived from his own given name Ricardo Emilio Piglia Renzi. He says that he had a long conversation on a train to Bolivia in March or April 1966 with Blanca Galeano—“la Nena” in the novel—, who had had a relationship with the “pistolero Mereles” (249) and who told him “una primera y confusa versión de los hechos que yo recordaba vagamente haber leído en los diarios meses atrás” (249-50). He adds:

Después la chica siguió sola el viaje a La Paz y nunca más la vi. Recuerdo que en el tren y en la estación y luego en el hotel tomé algunas notas de lo que me contó (porque en aquel tiempo yo consideraba que un escritor debía ir a todos lados con una libreta de notas) y poco después (en 1968 o 1969) inicié la investigación y escribí una primera versión de este libro.

Siempre serán misteriosas para mí las razones por las que algunas historias se resisten durante años a ser contadas y exigen un tiempo propio. Abandoné el proyecto en 1970 y mandé los borradores y los materiales a la casa de mi hermano. Hace un tiempo, en medio de una mudanza, encontré la caja con los manuscritos y los documentos en los que estaban los resultados principales de la investigación y la primera redacción del libro. En el verano de 1995 comencé a escribir de nuevo por completo la novela, tratando de ser absolutamente fiel a la verdad de los hechos. Los acontecimientos estaban ahora tan distantes y tan cerrados, que parecían el recuerdo perdido de una experiencia vivida. Casi los había olvidado ya y eran nuevos y casi desconocidos para mí luego de más de treinta años. Esa lejanía me ha ayudado a trabajar la historia como si se tratara del relato de un sueño. (250-51)

The 1997 epilogue—which like some of the diary notes compares the story he hears to a Greek tragedy (“yo la escuché como si me encontrara frente a una versión argentina de una tragedia griega” [250])—slightly changes the chronology of the project, situating the research and writing in 1968 and 1969. The diary suggests instead that the crucial period went from January 1966 to December 1967, but until we have access to the diaries themselves—which I believe will end up being accessible at the Princeton library—it is impossible to establish with certainty what was written in the 1960s and what was rewritten, under circumstances so difficult that they almost defy the imagination—in the several years between Piglia’s coming down with ALS in 2013-2014 and his death in January 2017. What impresses this reader, however, is the fundamental consistency between the diary entries and the account of the writing of the novel in the 1997 epilogue: it seems that the epilogue to the novel, like the novel itself, “cuenta una historia real” (245). The non-fiction novel, the new kind of writing that had roots in Oscar Lewis (and an important local practitioner, Rodolfo Walsh, whose *Operación masacre* in 1957 is considered a significant antecedent), and was

cultivated famously in the 1960s by Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Hunter Thompson and Tom Wolfe, marks the early stages of the project. Piglia's 1997 novel bears homage to that genre, however different the final product was from what is suggested in the diary entries. As Piglia writes in his 1967 introduction to Capote that is collected in *Escritores norteamericanos*, "fiel a sí mismo, Capote ha revolucionado la novela moderna, ha inaugurado la *non-fiction* pero, sobre todo, ha rescatado lo mejor del universo de sus primeras narraciones: lo ha endurecido y concentrado, pero sin traicionarlo" (49). When he writes these words about Capote he is also compiling the materials that will become *Plata quemada* thirty years later; his eventual "non-fiction novel" will draw away from that model but, interestingly, develop the homoerotic strain that is so important in Capote, not only in an explicitly homosexual-themed novel like *Other Voices, Other Rooms* but also in the underlying tensions in *In Cold Blood*. Piglia's novel, a brilliant rethinking of the genre, explores how a true story can be retold obliquely, with subtle changes of focalization that undermine the certainty of any of the accounts. As he already anticipates in the diary entries from 1966 and 1967, the central problem in the novel—successively called *La novela*, *El robo* and *Entre hombres* in the diary, and *Plata quemada* in its later published version—will be how to tell the story. That is, the central question will be the same one that the narrator poses at the beginning of *Respiración artificial* in 1980: "¿Hay una historia? Si hay una historia empieza hace tres años" (13).

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