

## The Universally Recurring Patterns of “El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell”

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In the prologue to the first edition of *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), Borges indicates that the “exercises of narrative prose” contained in the collection “[a]busan de algunos procedimientos,” one of these being “la reducción de la vida entera de un hombre a dos o tres escenas” (OC 289). In addition, it is acknowledged that these works, in part, derive from “cierta biografía de Evaristo Carriego” (OC 289). In this sense, the reader is inclined to consider the texts as concise biographies.<sup>1</sup> It appears that Borges collects source material concerning notorious figures from around the world—such as John Murrell, Arthur Orton and Ching Shih—and creates a global catalogue in the process: an encyclopedia of infamous outlaws.<sup>2</sup> This impression of *Historia universal* is supported by the fact that most of

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1 Daniel Balderston regards these accounts as short biographies in the article “Biografías infames: reflexiones sobre cuatro manuscritos de los cuentos de *Historia universal de la infamia*” (2016).

2 Throughout this essay, the words “infamous” and “notorious” will be used according to Borges’s point of view and based on the title of the series. The members of Murrell’s gang, for example, may just as well think of their leader as “famous” rather than “infamous.”

the narratives (before the section *Etcetera*) are based on real-life individuals, for which a bibliography is provided at the end of the collection.<sup>3</sup>

However, after an analysis of the first account, “El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell,”<sup>4</sup> in which I examine multiple versions of the work and conceived of it as a text in process,<sup>5</sup> I have come to question what exactly is being assembled and historicized in the series. In the essay “El pudor de la historia” (1952), Borges notes that recent history has often been fabricated or simulated, rendering it propaganda with “menos relación con la historia que con el periodismo: yo he sospechado que la historia, la verdadera historia, es más pudorosa y que sus fechas esenciales pueden ser, asimismo, durante largo tiempo, secretas” (OC 754). After reading this passage, one has to question to what could these essential dates or events, “la verdadera historia,” refer?

In the case of “El atroz redentor,” when considering several variations of the story,<sup>6</sup> important word choice and revisions to the text emerge that reveal a number of incidents belonging to the history of John A. Murrell and the American South of the 1830s that are somehow also connected to the world at large. That is, the reader is confronted with an array of universal patterns. Thus, in search of a history that is “más pudorosa” it will be proposed that the principal intention of the story is not to serve as one more account in an encyclopedic catalogue of nefarious *figures* from history, but rather to present the reader with a case study that illustrates common *patterns* of notoriety. The reason why Borges allows himself to

3 As noted in Balderston’s “Biografías infames,” the only account not to have a bibliography is “Hombre de la esquina rosada” although it is based on Borges’s previous stories “Leyenda policial” (1927) and “Hombres pelearon” (1928).

4 The manuscript available to me, which contains no title, is the same one found in “Biografías infames.” The text was published on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 1933 in the supplement *Revista Multicolor de los Sábados* (of the daily newspaper *Crítica*) as “El Espantoso Redentor Lázarus Morell.”

5 Sally Bushell considers the process a literary work undergoes before it becomes a completed work of art. She is concerned with draft materials and the manuscripts that constitute the text in a state of flux.

6 These versions include the original sources mentioned in the bibliography (Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* [1883] and Bernard DeVoto’s *Mark Twain’s America* [1932]), the manuscript first draft, the first published version in *Crítica* in 1933, the minor alterations in subsequent editions and the later translated editions into English by Norman Thomas di Giovanni and Andrew Hurley.

shorten the life of Murrell into two or three scenes is because that is all the space required to display the real and more modest protagonists of the text: the universally recurring patterns of infamy. The outlaw himself and his story are used as mere pawns. In the current study, the patterns of the cruel savior, the infamy of slavery, the expression “sleeping with the fishes,” mosquito-borne diseases, and distorted historiography will be illuminated as central figures of “El atroz rendentor Lazarus Morell.”

To begin, it is necessary to clarify what is meant here by the concept of a *universally recurring pattern*. The best example, perhaps, can be found in a much later story, “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva” (1949). In this short narrative, the narrator compares the situations of two individuals from distinct locations and time periods: both the similarities and the differences. The first figure, Droctulft, is described as a Lombard barbarian who, in awe of the architecture and orderliness of the Byzantines, abandons his people and joins the ranks to defend the city of Ravenna. The second half of the story relates how the narrator’s grandmother once, in the 1870s, met a fellow Englishwoman in rural Argentina who had been taken captive many years before by a tribe of Amerindians. With time she had married the chief and borne two children. After being offered a way out of this condition, the Englishwoman responds that she is content to remain with her indigenous captors.

Thus, on the surface, the two brief accounts of the text, appear very different from each other, yet contain fundamental similarities. The narrator urges the reader early on to imagine not the individual Droctulft but rather one that is *sub specie aeternitatis*, to think of “al tipo genérico que de él y de otros muchos como él ha hecho la tradición, que es obra del olvido y de la memoria” (OC 557). In that sense, these two characters are alike. Both leave the cultures to which they were born, forget about them and embrace a new one as if it were their own. Droctulft leaves the “barbarism” of the Lombards for the “civilization” of Ravenna. The Englishwoman leaves the “civilization” of England for the “barbarism” of the Amerindian tribe. Both have participated in “la tradición, que es obra del olvido y de la memoria” (OC 557). For this reason, the narrator closes the story with:

Los dos, ahora, son igualmente irrecuperables. La figura del bárbaro que abraza la causa de Ravena, la figura de la mujer europea que opta por el desierto, pueden parecer antagónicos. Sin embargo, a los dos los arrebató

un ímpetu secreto, un ímpetu más hondo que la razón, y los dos acataron ese ímpetu que no hubieran sabido justificar. Acaso las historias que he referido son una sola historia. El anverso y el reverso de esta moneda son, para Dios, iguales. (OC 560)

“Historia del guerrero,” therefore, portrays the universally recurring pattern (“la tradición,” “un ímpetu”) of adopting a culture different from one’s own and forgetting about the original. It is important to note here that this is not merely a literary trope employed by the author, but rather individuals and actions that belong to reality. Daniel Balderston describes this story as having “two distinct chains of *historical* references” (*Out of Context* 81, emphasis added). The narrator mentions that the tale of Droctulft is written about by Paul the Deacon in “un texto latino” (OC 557). That text is *History of the Lombards*. Furthermore, the narrator cites Croce and Gibbon, who both refer to Droctulft in *Poetry* (1936) and *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) respectively.<sup>7</sup> The English woman is derived from a purported real-life anecdote from Borges’s grandmother, Fanny Haslam.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the story portrays a genuine pattern, true to reality, that is repeated on a different continent and in a distinct period.

Upon tracing the Gibbon reference in the story, Balderston identifies a footnote made by the English historian who observes that Droctulft’s situation “may be applied to many of his countrymen” (*Out of Context* 83). In other words, Droctulft is just an example of a commonly recurring pattern. This idea of one individual standing as an example for many strikes a resemblance to a passage in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), a book Borges read in the same year as the composition of “Historia del guerrero.” In *Borges, libros y lecturas* (2010), Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez examine Borges’s copy of *The Portable Thoreau* (1947), which is signed “Adrogué, 1949,” and uncover multiple handwritten memos on the end sheet. One of the notes reads: “Basta haber leído la noticia de un robo o de un asesinato

7 In *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (1993), Daniel Balderston traces the sources for “Historia del guerrero” and discovers that Borges most likely does not read *History of the Lombards* here, but rather comes to it second hand through Croce and Gibbon.

8 In Chapter 6 of *Out of Context*, Balderston traces this anecdote and builds a solid case for the grandmother of the story being Fanny Haslam.

o de un accidente... 347” (Rosato and Álvarez 332). This turns out to be a translated snippet of a paragraph in *Walden* that reads:

And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter—we never need read of another. One is enough. (*The Portable Thoreau* 347)

Rosato and Álvarez subsequently provide us with Borges’s annotations regarding this passage: “En el apartado ‘Transcendentalismo’ de *Introducción a la literatura norteamericana* (1967), encontramos: ‘Creía que la lectura de los diarios era superflua, ya que basta leer la noticia de un sólo incendio, un solo crimen, para conocerlos todos. Le parecía inútil la acumulación de casos esencialmente idénticos’” (332).

According to Rosato and Álvarez, to conceive of reality in this manner approaches Platonism, to see the universe as one of eternal forms. The authors offer their own commentary on Borges’s note to *Walden* by adding the following:

Confronta con el platonismo, derivación plotiniana de la tesis platónica que Borges define así: “*Los individuos y las cosas existen en cuanto participan de la especie que los incluye, que es su realidad permanente.*” “Historia de la eternidad”, *Historia de la eternidad* (1936). O, de otra manera, en nota a pie de página del mismo ensayo: “No quiero despedirme del platonismo (que parece glacial) sin comunicar esta observación, con esperanza de que la prosigan y justifiquen: *Lo genérico puede ser más intenso que lo concreto*”. (Rosato and Álvarez 332)

Thus, the idea of a universally recurring pattern (lo genérico) used in “Historia del guerrero” (which is linked to his reading of *Walden*) goes further back in Borges’s career, at the very least to the 1930s and the time of “El atroz redentor Lazarus Morrell.”

Having now established Borges’s understanding of Platonism<sup>9</sup> and universally recurring patterns, in what remains of the essay, I will identify the infamous ones enclosed in “El atroz redentor.” It would be useful to recall a brief summary. The text begins with a reminder that it was Bar-

9 In Chapter I of *Mark Twain’s America* (1932) by Bernard DeVoto (a primary source for “El atroz redentor”), the author begins by referencing Thomas Taylor, the Platonist.

tolomé de las Casas who requested from Carlos V that the Amerindian slaves used in the colonial mines be replaced by slaves brought in from Africa. From this recap, the narrator then presents a long list of consequences of this action which include figures and events involving the African diaspora in the Americas.<sup>10</sup> One of these consequences, Lazarus Morell and his slave stealing scam along the Mississippi river in the 1830s, forms the bulk of the story. In the narrative, Morell and his gang develop an elaborate scheme to trick slaves into running away from their plantations, to then be voluntarily “caught” by the gang and sold back to the owners for the reward money. While waiting for the reward announcement to be posted, however, the slave is sold to another plantation. The slave must then run away a second time, upon which, Morell and his men would help them escape to a free state and compensate them. Of course, the freedom of the slave is never obtained, Morell tricks them into having to repeat the process before eventually killing them and leaving the bodies in the Mississippi. I will begin by discussing some of the more apparent universally recurring patterns found in the story.

#### THE CRUEL REDEEMER AND SLAVERY

The first example begins with the reference in the very first line to Bartolomé de las Casas. Jeff Lawrence makes a good case for a pattern of cruel redeemers by assessing the similarity between Morell and Las Casas. The words used in the title to describe Morell (“atroz” or “espantoso” and “redentor”) are appropriate given the fact that the notorious outlaw, on the one hand, helps the African American slaves to escape and is seen as a redeemer,<sup>11</sup> but on the other hand betrays them, making him “atrocious.” Lawrence notes in Morell a parallel with Las Casas, who has had “a long-standing tradition among *americanistas*, stretching back to Bolívar and beyond, of viewing [him] as a savior among the slaughterers of the Conquest” (167) yet “seems anything but a philanthropist on the subject of black slaves” (167). Thus, in this instance, Borges appears to provide the

10 These consequences include figures and events from both *reality* and *fiction* such as Toussaint Louverture and the black man killed by Martín Fierro.

11 Especially by those slaves still on a plantation who never see their comrades return and assume that Morell has kept his word.

reader with a precursor for the actions of Morell. He furnishes the account with archetypal behavior (“una tradición,” “un ímpetu”) of a cruel individual thought of as a savior, such as the case of Las Casas, and how this has repeated itself more than three hundred years later in the other half of the continent with Morell. Lawrence continues: “In Borges’s truly panoramic scheme, the atrocious acts of the ‘cruel redeemer’ Murrell are the distant echoes of a history of hemispheric infamy, radiating outward from Las Casas’s ‘Memorial de remedios’ in all directions, from the Caribbean to the United States to the Argentina of Borges’s day” (168).<sup>12</sup> It is also noteworthy to remember that both Las Casas and the Morell of the story are preachers; the former a Dominican friar and the latter able to move the listeners of his sermons to tears.

The second pattern, which is strongly connected to the first, is that of slavery. In *Cosas de negros* (1926), one of the “infinitos hechos” included in the list of consequences of Las Casas’s actions, Vicente Rossi considers the effects of the importation of Christianity and African Slaves to the Americas during the colonial period:

Esta religión [sic] sufre un desdoblamiento y se descompone en dos: Catolicismo y Protestantismo, que fieles a sus programas de ser agradables a la divinidad, se dedican con furor y singular barbarie a la trata del hombre negro, para la que se había abierto un inmenso Mercado: las Américas. El Protestantismo surge el Norte; el Catolicismo el Sud, y los dos juntos el Centro y las Antillas. (42)

Thus, Rossi identifies a commonality that connects the Americas, a notion that is also suggested by Bryan David Green when discussing the long list in the story: “la gran mayoría [de los hechos] viene o de la historia de Argentina o de la historia de los Estados Unidos. Es decir, son las huellas que vinculan a ambas naciones con una misma causa remota: la infamia de la esclavitud africana” (31).

Lawrence and Green are not incorrect to suggest that Borges makes these connections between North, South and Central America (as we can see in Rossi). I would go one further, however, and propose that for Borges these are not only patterns recurring continentally, but globally.

<sup>12</sup> In a more general sense, the pattern of a figure seen on the surface as “heroic” when in reality it is prone to acts of betrayal is resuscitated in the story “Tema del traidor y del héroe” (1944), only this time set in Ireland.

The narrator of “El atroz redentor” not only links the colonial slavery in the western hemisphere, but also incorporates a correlation between the African American slaves of the antebellum South and the Israelites of Egypt as depicted in the Bible. The first subtle reference to this comparison arises in the vignette “El lugar,” when the narrator refers to how the Mississippi River ejects mud into the Gulf of Mexico and forms new land in the process. Balderston notes in this passage that Borges underlines a racial theme (“Biografías” 224). The river is used as a metaphor for the Afro population by naming the Mississippi the “oscuro hermano” (OC 295) of the other rivers in the Americas as well as referring to the muddy waters as “aguas mulatas” (OC 296). It is then described how “[t]anta basura venerable y antigua ha construido un delta” (OC 296). On the one hand, this passage refers to the mud literally expanding the land mass, but on the other, it metaphorically refers to how the slaves (who are described here as “honorable”<sup>13</sup> and “ancient,” slightly odd descriptions for mud) have built the continent. This is the first similarity with the Israelites, an ancient race, who are responsible in part for the construction of Egypt, at least according to the Bible:

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. (*New International Version*, Exo. 1.11-14)

Furthermore, in a separate connection to the Jewish slaves of Egypt, the Afro slaves in the story sing the Negro spiritual “Go Down Moses.” According to Steven Cornelius: “African American spirituals were based on biblical verses. But often imbedded within those ancient images were new ones of contemporary freedom. The spiritual ‘Go Down Moses,’ for example, invited comparisons between the fate of the ancient people of Israel and the modern oppression of the African American slaves” (118).

This is also why in “El atroz redentor” the Mississippi River serves as a “magnífica imagen del sórdido Jordán” (OC 296) for the slaves. By

<sup>13</sup> This description aligns with Vicente Rossi who describes the African race as “honrado y fiel; de ejemplar moralidad” (41).



comparing the African American slaves in the United States to the Jewish slaves in Egypt, while also referencing the slavery of his homeland (through Vicente Rossi), Borges again demonstrates an example of a universally recurring pattern. Here, just as in “Historia del guerrero,” one could add: “[a]caso las historias que he referido son una sola historia. El anverso y el reverso de esta moneda son, para Dios, iguales” (OC 560).

### SLEEPING WITH THE FISHES

For the third pattern, the common expression in English, “sleeping with the fishes,”<sup>14</sup> will be the focal point. In “El atroz redentor,” there are at least five different mentions of a river serving as the final resting place for the dead. For one, the runaway slaves are described on two occasions as being disposed of in the river: “arrojados al río [corrientoso] de aguas pesadas, con una segura piedra a los pies” (OC 298) and “[u]n balazo, una puñalada baja o un golpe, y las tortugas y los barbos del Mississippi recibían la última información” (OC 299). Secondly, when Morell attacks a man on a horse, he steals all his belongings and “lo hundí en el riachuelo” (OC 300). Thirdly, this pattern is mentioned for Morell’s own death, when the narrator declares “tampoco el río de sus crímenes fue su tumba” (OC 300), meaning that one would think Morell would repeat this common action, and it is surprising that this does not occur. Finally, when discussing the history of the Mississippi River and how Hernando de Soto was the first European to explore it, the narrator adds: “Murió y le dieron sepultura sus aguas” (OC 295). These actions on their own, although numerous, cannot be considered universal patterns, however, as they all occur in the American South and specifically in the Mississippi River. They would merely be treated as common occurrences for the region. The problem with that conclusion, though, is twofold. First, it is well known that the bodies of many dead captives (and crew members) were often thrown overboard during the Atlantic Slave Trade;<sup>15</sup> second, Borges deliberately writes one of these river burials in the story in an ambiguous fashion.

14 My research has led me to believe this expression only surfaces after Borges when it appears in Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* (1969).

15 In *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), Marcus Rediker chronicles life onboard the ships in the Atlantic Slave Trade, including the common occurrence of throwing

In the last example mentioned, by omitting the subject of the sentence, the narrator does not clarify that it is indeed Hernando de Soto who is buried in the Mississippi. The full quote reads: “Álvarez de Piñeda lo descubrió [el Mississippi] y su primer explorador fue el capitán Hernando de Soto, antiguo conquistador del Perú, que distrajo los meses de prisión del Inca Atahualpa enseñándole el juego del ajedrez. Murió y le dieron por sepultura sus aguas” (OC 295-96). By beginning the second sentence with the verb “murió,” it is unclear who died and was given the waters as a grave: de Soto or Inca Atahualpa.<sup>16</sup> This is especially problematized by the possessive adjective “sus” leading the reader to question whether it is de Soto buried in “sus aguas” the Mississippi, because he is the first European to explore them, or if it is Atahualpa buried in “sus aguas” in a river in Latin America, because he is indigenous to the region. It is in this ambiguity that Borges generalizes the action, makes a connection between North and South America and establishes a universally recurring pattern, the infamy now commonly referred to as “sleeping with the fishes.”

#### MOSQUITO-BORNE DISEASES

For the next universally recurring pattern in the story, multiple versions of the text are required in order to identify it with accuracy. Immediately after describing the Mississippi River in the vignette “El lugar,” the reader finds reference to “una estirpe amarillenta” of people who live in the lowlands near the Arkansas and the Ohio Rivers. The passage reads thus: “Más arriba, a la altura del Arkansas y del Ohio, se alargan tierras bajas también. Las habita una estirpe amarillenta de hombres escualidos, propensos a la fiebre, que miran con avidez las piedras y el hierro, porque entre ellos no hay otra cosa que arena y leña y agua turbia” (OC 296). This is one of the most intriguing passages of the story, especially since Borges initially wrote “raza” in the manuscript before changing the word to “estirpe.”<sup>17</sup> To begin with, it is unclear to which group of people the narrator is referring. The Andrew Hurley translation of the story into English interprets this group

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dead bodies overboard into the sea.

16 In their translations, both di Giovanni and Hurley feel the need to clarify this sentence when they write “When De Soto died...”

17 A third option Borges considers in the manuscript is “clase.”

as “jaundiced” (*Collected Fictions* 7) while Di Giovanni translates them as a “sallow race” (*A Universal History* 21). Thus, both translators modify “amarillenta” to consolidate the association with illness that follows in “propensos a la fiebre.” It is proposed here that the sicknesses most likely to have caused this “estirpe” to be “amarillenta” are the mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria and yellow fever.

Mark Twain in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), a primary source Borges uses for the story, recalls the tribulations of yellow fever in the Mississippi River Valley in the early nineteenth century. A passage regarding the town of Memphis in chapter XXIX, the very one in which Twain relates the story of John Murrell, reads:

No, the admiration must be reserved for the town’s sewerage system, which is called perfect; a recent reform, however, for it was just the other way, up to a few years ago a reform resulting from the lesson taught by a desolating visitation of the yellow-fever. In those awful days the people were swept off by hundreds, by thousands; and so great was the reduction caused by the flight and by death together, that the population was diminished three-fourths, and so remained for a time. (321)

Furthermore, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1911 notes how New Orleans experienced multiple outbreaks of the disease in the nineteenth century (“Yellow Fever”). The most compelling evidence, however, comes from the second source mentioned in the bibliography for “El atroz redentor,” Bernard DeVoto’s *Mark Twain’s America* (1932). In Chapter III, the author reports on a group of people in the “low-lying land” (56) of the Appalachian Mountains known as the “mountain whites,” “river rats” or more generically, “squatters” (54). DeVoto describes these people as follows: “Their skin is pasty, between the color of jaundice and the pallor of a corpse. This hue results, perhaps, from a habit they have of sucking pellets of clay between the upper lip and the gums, or it may be the stigma of malaria” (54). DeVoto proceeds to classify the mosquito as a great evildoer of the region when he explains: “no historian has yet done research in the life and times of the archvillain of the frontier, *Anopheles*” (56). In the same chapter, however, DeVoto acknowledges the spread of different epidemics across the valley such as cholera, dysentery, and yellow fever. Thus, when Borges describes the “hombres escuálidos” as an “estirpe amarillenta” and “propensos a la fiebre” it is unclear whether it is malaria or yellow

fever, that is the cause of their illness. But whether the villain is *Anopheles*, the malaria carrier, or *Aedes aegypti*, the yellow fever carrying mosquito, is beside the point. What is most important here for Borges is to include an additional universally recurring pattern of infamy: the mosquito and its related epidemics.

Of course, the aforementioned sources refer only to the antebellum South's struggles with malaria and yellow fever, but Borges would have been acutely aware of them and their international reach (particularly that of yellow fever) for at least two reasons. Firstly, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1911 records the global impact of yellow fever when it is stated: "The area of distribution includes the West Indies, Mexico, part of Central America, the W. Coast of Africa and Brazil" ("Yellow Fever"). Furthermore, the same article mentions outbreaks in European port cities such as Málaga, Lisbon, Cadiz, Seville and Barcelona. Secondly, yellow fever affected Buenos Aires multiple times during the nineteenth century. James Scobie relates these events in *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburbs. 1870-1910* (1974):

Then, in early 1871, yellow fever returned. Several cases occurred at the end of January in a house close to the San Telmo church. As the disease reached epidemic proportions in February, the newspapers lashed out at a number of presumed causes: the wastes discharged by the meat-salting plants along the Riachuelo; the crowded, often dirty conventillos, where the recently arrived immigrants congregated; the filthy conditions of barracks and hospitals close to the downtown area. Not until a decade later, in Cuba, would anyone seriously suggest the mosquito as the carrier of yellow fever, and only in 1900 did scientists prove how the virus spread. (123)

#### DISTORTED HISTORIOGRAPHY

The final pattern to be examined is the recording of history itself. In *Cosas de negros*, Rossi explains how "[l]os negros africanos que vivieron en el Río de la Plata, ignoraban cuándo y cómo llegaron a estos países" (39) due to "el olvido del propio lenguaje" (39). Upon studying the manuscript of "El atroz redentor," it is almost certain that in the creation of the story Borges is mindful of history, who records it and how it can be distorted. In the manuscript first draft, it appears that the semiliterate condition of

the African American slaves is a point that Borges would absolutely like to emphasize. A highly reworked portion of the draft is produced in *Figure A*.

The word choice of this fraction of the manuscript demonstrates a writer grappling to find the most precise words for the sentiment he would like to portray: the image of a mostly oral culture amongst the slaves. Firstly, the slaves “deletreaban la fe de Cristo” (or “el cristianismo”) implying that they only possess very basic levels of literacy. The narrator then uses a clear statement to reinforce this idea when it is mentioned, “[n]o sabían leer.” As seen in *Figure A* (sixth line), this sentence was originally written as: “Eran analfabetos,” a more educated way to say the same thing. The most powerful reminders of this oral culture, however, emerge in the two sentences at the end of this paragraph (lines 11-14 of *Figure A*).

A mediados del siglo diecinueve (l. fecha q. nos interesa),  
 Hacia 1850 (l. fecha de l. historia q. contaré), { negros esclavos laboraban de a miles ls plantaciones de algodón

las el cristianismo  
 de ambas márgenes. + hombres negros deletreaban la fe de Cristo y cultivaban con sus cuerpos esclavos

las orillas  
 vastas ls. plantaciones de algodón de esas tierras. + ls. grandes plantaciones de algodón q. habia en las dos

eran cabañas  
 márgenes eran} trabajadas por negros, de sol a sol.} Dormían en ranchos de madera, sobre el piso de tierra.

Sus inextricables y vagos podían prescindir de apellidos.  
 Fuera de la relación X Los parentescos eran indeterminados y oscuros. Nombres tenían, pero en general no alcanzaban a tener madre-hijo, los p. convencionales y turbios.

Se alimentaban de No sabían leer.  
 apellidos. (Comían batatas y tocino y pan de maíz.) Eran analfabetos. (Ya no se acordaban del Africa.) Ha-

de <puras + lentas> vocales con su voz de falseta. Su  
 de ociosas X blaban un inglés ablandado con u. sobresaltada voz en falseta. Trabajaban en filas, encorvados bajo entermecida voz de falseta canturreaba un inglés de lentas vocales.

entera  
 el rebenque del capataz. [(Si trataban de huir, + Huían, y} hombres fuertes de barba corrida saltaban

los rastreaban perros de presa, y hombres de  
 sobre hermosos caballos y los rastreaban perros de presa. + Huían a los turbios cañaverales, y hombres de

barba entera saltaban sobre <hermosos caballos + caballos perseguidores.> fuertes  
 Huían, y hombres X barba entera saltaban sobre hermosos caballos y los rastreaban grandes perros de presa.] (Morían en los

bestias y miedos  
 densos cañaverales y en los lodazales abyectos.) A un sedimento de esperanzas brutas y de temores afri-

las palabras su fe por consiguiente era la de Cristo.  
 ls. palabras el vocabulario de X canos habían agregado unas imágenes tomadas de la Biblia: eran lo q. se llama cristianos. Cantaban la Escritura: su

ilustre imagen del }  
 (, hondos y) en montón: Go down Moses. <sup>2</sup>El Mississippi les servía de metáfora espléndida del }  
<sup>1</sup>Ilustremente el M. les servía de metáfora del

sórdido Jordán.

FIGURE A: DEPICTING A HIGHLY REWORKED PORTION OF THE MANUSCRIPT CONTAINED IN THE VIGNETTE TITLED “LOS HOMBRES”<sup>18</sup>

18 In the original manuscript, the line spacing is not as large as depicted here. The lines have been spaced here for convenience’s sake.

On top of “un sedimento de esperanzas brutas y de temores africanos” the slave owners aggregated: option 1) “unas imágenes,” option 2) “las palabras,” or option 3 [in the margin]) “el vocabulario.” Furthermore, these “imágenes” or “palabras” or “vocabulario” are taken from: option 1) “la Biblia” or option 2) “la Escritura.” This is a clear example of Borges writing many options to see which would fit correctly with the overall image he is attempting to solidify for the reader. The published versions in both *Crítica* (1933), and subsequent editions read: “palabras de la Escritura.” “Images” is perhaps not the right choice as most Bibles are not illustrated, and “vocabulary” gives one the impression that the slaves would then only be familiar with words without the knowledge of how to string them together. Borges remembers here that “words” can also be spoken and do not necessarily have to be written. Instead of “Biblia,” he chooses “Escritura” to reinforce the idea that in the same manner that the Bible would be a foreign object for many slaves from Africa, “escritura” or the act of alphabetic writing would also be during this period, once again reinforcing the oral culture.

The final example to discuss is the last sentence of this fragment. When deciding to compare the Mississippi to the River Jordan, Borges comes up with three options: 1) “les servía de metáfora espléndida del sórdido Jordán,” 2) “les servía de ilustre imagen del sórdido Jordán” or 3) “Ilustremente el [Mississippi] les servía de metáfora del sórdido Jordán.” Again, this is a clear battle for Borges to get it just right in terms of literate versus oral culture. In the end, he chooses and publishes: “El Mississippi les servía de magnífica imagen del sórdido Jordán” (OC 297). The choice of the word “imagen” over “metáfora,” which would require a more formally educated slave, once again solidifies the semiliterate state of the majority of African American slaves of the time.

This oral culture plays an important role later on in the story when the runaway slaves are murdered, and their bodies disposed of in the Mississippi. Twain notes how the lack of writing amongst the African American slaves means that the only way for the law to catch up with Murrell is to talk to one of the slaves in person. In Twain’s words, “they can never graze [Murrell] unless they find the negro; and that they cannot do, for his carcass has fed many a tortoise and catfish before this time, and the frogs have sung this many a long day to the silent repose of his skeleton”

(320). Borges lifts this passage from *Life on the Mississippi* and renders it into his own words as: “Un balazo, una puñalada baja o un golpe, y las tortugas y los barbos del Mississippi recibían la última información” (OC 299). Balderston proposes from this that:

Borges traduce lo de las tortugas y los barbos, pero agrega el detalle de la “última información”: los primeros cuentos de Borges, escritos para un diario de gran circulación, juegan de modo pícaro con la idea del periódico como fuente de información o de educación como juegan con la utopía de una “historia universal”. (“Biografías” 230)

The African American slaves in this context do not have a say in the writing of that history. All of the evidence built up inside the mind of a slave gets lost once he or she dies; the catfish “reciben la última información.” This becomes an exceptionally powerful scene, then, as it contains many of the aforementioned patterns: a slave, betrayed by a cruel redeemer, who will now “sleep with the fishes” and whose history will be distorted or lost forever more.

It is argued in this essay that in “El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell” portraying the life and events of the title character is not the most important aspect of the story. For Borges, it is more significant to exhibit an array of what appear to be universally recurring and infamous patterns, or at least “infamous” from his own perspective. Upon close reading, these patterns such as the cruel redeemer, slavery, “sleeping with the fishes,” mosquito-borne diseases and the distortion of history become the modest protagonists (or antagonists) of the account.

After a brief review of the other stories in the series, I suspect that additional patterns of infamy are bound to arise upon further investigation. In “El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro” (1933), for example, the vignette labelled “El carruaje” has Bogle assassinated while riding in a carriage. For an Argentine readership, this moment draws immediate comparisons to the death of General Facundo Quiroga, immortalized by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in *Facundo* (1845) and later by Borges in the poem “El general Quiroga va en coche al muere” (1925). In “El proveedor de iniquidades Monk Eastman” (1933), the pattern of “los hombres de pelea” emerges in the first two vignettes titled “Los de esta América” and “Los de la otra.” This archetype is also used for “Hombre de la esquina rosada” set in Buenos Aires.

Thus, it can be hypothesized for future studies that one of the primary purposes of *Historia universal de la infamia* is not to present the reader with a collection of criminal biographies, but rather to use these individual histories to paint a picture of infamous patterns. Similar to the lead story, “El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell,” this means to view the accounts *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity, and not in the individual case studies presented. It is for this reason that Borges does not require much room, nor many characters to create this universal history of infamy. For Borges, as for Thoreau: “Basta haber leído la noticia de un robo o de un asesinato o de un accidente...” (Rosato and Álvarez 332).

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