
A Space Odyssey: Decoding the Reality of Dictatorship in Carolina de Robertis's *Cantoras*

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Abstract: By turns brutal and beautiful, Carolina de Robertis's 2019 novel *Cantoras* explores twelve years of violent Uruguayan dictatorship where five women of different ages, social, economic, and familial circumstances are yet all equally affected by misogyny, homophobia, and political repression. The women come together to create a haven of freedom wherein to navigate their sexuality without being criminalized, in the middle of a place where freedom for a better future seems to belong to "another bohemian era of dreams." Pieced together from the real-life oral narratives and testimonies of hundreds, lost or silenced in the mainstream din, the novel brings to life a portrait of queer love and forgotten history unlike any other. This essay aims a close reading of the socio-political environment of the novel from dictatorship to the revolution which makes the journey that these women take from social isolation to widespread acceptance, their achievements, losses, and resilience shine all the more.

Keywords: historical fiction, queer Latina fiction, coming-of-age, military dictatorship, feminist, human rights

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All freedom is relative—you know too well—and sometimes it's no freedom at all, but simply the cage widening far away from you, the bars abstracted with distance but still there, as when they "free" wild animals into nature preserves only to contain them yet again by larger borders. But I took it anyway, that widening. Because sometimes not seeing the bars is enough.

(Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 157)

In 1973, the Uruguayan president Juan Maria Bordaberry authored a coup d'état with the military, an action that forever altered the social fabric of the nation and the history of its democratic landscape. The Southern Cone, from the sixties to the eighties, has suffered from a lack of rule of law, violation of rights, and dictatorial governments. The model of repression and prevention employed throughout these nations was founded on the philosophy of the Doctrine of National Security which claimed to protect democracy and the nation's best interests from Communism and leftist liberal forces that sought to destabilize the nation, the forces in question being, in actuality, forces of social change: those who voiced their discontent with the current political, social, and economic condition in the nation

and demanded change. The constant violation of human rights under these dictatorships was legally justified and explained through silencing, exclusion, and manipulated evaluation of historical events. The narrative that was constantly pushed was that the “Patria” was in danger from the threats posed by the Marxists and their internal allies, and in this light, the military was envisioned as guardians of the “Patria,” who were simply acting in defence of the democratically established government and the constitution. The so-called ideological fight against growing Marxism translated into warfare where the “Other,” the deviant guerrilla forces, are represented as having infiltrated the nation and breaking laws and hence have to be brought to military justice.

It is in this rising plume of political unrest, indiscriminate oppression, genocides, internment, and forced exile, camouflaged as constitutionalism, in the military’s historic almost utopian mission of cleansing the society of Communist subversives that de Robertis sets this novel. *Cantoras* follows the friendship, love, and sisterhood of five queer women: 16-year-old schoolgirl Paz, 21-year-old butcher’s daughter Flaca, 22-year-old university student Romina, 25-year-old perceptive office-worker Malena, and 27-year-old unhappy housewife La Venus (Anita) as they experience authoritarian dictatorships and revolution, estrangements, heartbreaks, and losses through three decades of changing political landscape.

Uruguay, while much smaller in size than other Latin American nations like Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, suffered greatly in contrast to the rest in terms of the kind of tactics and security policies implemented by the government to control the population. The very first thing that the military did after the coup was limiting constitutional rights, curtailing the freedom of speech, freedom to congregate, and imposing laws that imprisoned citizens without trial, enacted in consonance with the dictatorship’s counterparts across South America under the notorious Operation Condor. Uruguay became a world of lowered gazes, hunched backs, and forgotten dreams where people silently went about their day like “walking corpses,” trusting nobody and living in the fear of the unknown. Residents constantly felt on edge, living in trauma and silence, under continued surveillance by the government, with the arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial, searches without warrants, kidnappings, censorship, interrogation, torture in prisons, and forced disappearances. The strict curfew limitations in place made women particularly vulnerable to the men in uniform at night which is expressed in the very first page of the novel through the fear and anticipation of the women as they travel to Cabo Polonio alone without any male companion at night. The Uruguayans were categorized into three groups, A, B, and C, in the records of the Joint Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces depending on the degree of danger they presented. Employment, too, could be obtained only when one had the Certificate of Democratic Faith, a document delivered by the upholders of democracy, the police force. Any sort of gathering of five or more people required police authorization including even birthday parties. The educational policies were altered to ensure that what was being taught had been approved by the government and aligned with their doctrines. In a country with less than 3 million in population, the government had managed to transform every social space into a concentration camp.

The mass arrests, political imprisonment, and custodial torture are the most significant features of the Uruguayan civil-military dictatorship. According to a report by Amnesty International, during the height of the dictatorship, Uruguay was the nation with the most political prisoners per capita anywhere in the world. The culture of fear created with these innumerable imprisoned, exiled, and disappeared under the disguise of the phantom “national malady” of guerrilla threat had been

successfully utilized to dismember and detongue the nation breaking it into complete obedience. Trapped in this gray world where there was no private life owing to the bureaucratic colonization of the individual's life, people shut down and kept to themselves. Everybody bore wounds, physical or mental, "all part of the same bruised body in the shape of the nation" (de Robertis 74).

The novel also shows how dictatorship is not uniform in inflicting terrorism and affects the privileged differently than the masses when La Venus moves in with the affluent singer, Ariella Ocampo in her mansion, El Prado, after leaving Arnoldo and breaking up with Flaca. Ariella rightly complains of Uruguay as a constraining place and although the dictatorship undoubtedly affected her too, such as having to seek approval from the police for her performances due to her social position, she still seemed to enjoy a degree of freedom greater than those around her. The surveillance of the regime appeared less harsh on the rich as Ariella held parties, getting permission for which was a long and troublesome process, and could criticize the regime without fear of being overheard. In contrast, at La Venus's house, people spoke in lowered voices, felt unsafe even in their own homes, and lived in the danger of being reported by their neighbors.

The dictatorship imposed a highly gendered regime where women could only grow up to become teachers or a secretaries, "a dream of modest size" (de Robertis 37). There was huge emphasis on the gendered division of duties and rights and the subordination of women to men. In such a society, it was highly dangerous for the protagonists to travel or go on holiday alone, or to buy a house with the deed in a woman's name. While men were victims as well, the dictatorship with its policy of gendered violence came down heavily on women, in particular, as evinced by the widespread use of sexual assault as a tactic for politically repressing female leftist militants like Romina.

Under the junta, where people were being imprisoned for the slightest perceived infraction, there was a process of deliberate unerasing of homosexuality at work. While there were no official laws against it, homosexuality, socially seen as a threat and an aberration, an "affront to decency," amounted to nothing less than a crime for the ultra-right-wing fascist forces in power and if discovered, could land people in jails like the Tupamaros, Communists, social workers, and journalists. Uruguay is the third country in the America(s) after Canada and Argentina to legalize gay marriage, ahead of the United States, in 2013, and has been generally very progressive in its policy of same-sex adoption and anti-discriminatory attitude towards queer people. The novel highlights this journey of the nation to the beacon of progressive reforms that it is today and the real cost of such progress.

Cantoras, first and foremost, is a novel of homosexuality but it is more than a simple queer liberation story: it is a historical fiction that represents the traumatic autobiographical experiences of people, specifically women and more specifically queer women during the dictatorship. The novel deftly explores a multitude of topics from the position of women under dictatorship, shackled as they are by societal expectations and obligations to be the good daughter and wife. Topics include sexism, sexual assault (at the hands of the husband, "doctor" and soldiers) to closeted homosexuality, homophobia, electroshock conversion therapy, sexuality spectrum (inclusion of both lesbian and bisexual women), prostitution, post-traumatic stress, suicide, and Nazi medical experiments. In a nation where the personal is at all times political, we see how most of these injustices against women are twofold: the misogyny both in the family where Arnold, the failed musician reduced to a disgruntled, shrinking bureaucrat expects to "be rewarded with sex at home" by Anita for following the regime and as a consolation for his unsuccessful ambitions, with or without her consent. The

misogyny in the larger society intrudes into the progressive politics of which Romina is a part. We realize the subtle but deliberate sidelining of politically active women, with or perhaps despite its goals of participatory democracy and women's emancipation. The homophobia in Malena's family is so strong that her parents have her admitted to a clinic that 'cures' homosexuality wherein she is raped. As another example of the society's rampant misogyny, Romina's brother appears to treat her gay rights advocacy in a Communist context as a distraction from "the cause" which reinforces the state-sanctioned homophobia. The presence or absence of freedom, and the longing for it, are the main thread of the novel: freedom from "El Proceso," family pressure, sociopolitical perceptions, and the limitations to selfhood.

How does one find a home in a country that does not want you? They create one. De Robertis beautifully utilizes language to demonstrate the operatic journey of these women through life into life and self. The novel gets its title from the word "cantor" meaning women who "sing," a codeword (and slang) in the 70s and 80s for women who romantically love other women. Cantora is the expression with which women like them identified themselves before terms like "lesbian," "bisexual," "homosexual," and "queer" came into being. There is a great deal of emphasis on the mutability and reclamation of language at Cabo Polonio. La Proa, the tiny fisherman's shack on the isolated beach of Cabo Polonio seems not only far from Montevideo but indeed the known world itself for the almost alien sense of freedom, solace, and comfort that it provided amid a dictatorship, indeed the only place where the women can speak in this otherwise reign of the deaf-mute. The five women initially travel there expecting a weeklong trip of happiness and escape from the oppressive air of Montevideo but find an alternative family amongst themselves that results from the fact that they have all been scissored off from the fabric of acceptance. The week of healing by the sea that was expected to provide them with the strength to go back to their old lives, however, internally transforms them into something that could no longer fit in the society and silently witness the "horrors of normalcy." It becomes a lair of their vacations, love-making, and most importantly, resistance against the bastions of repression. Cabo Polonio thus serves as this site of budding womanhood, a geographical location that nevertheless lies at the crux of the self-discovery and revolution for this chosen family over meals of flame-cooked fish and mate, a circle of women who only feel alive and authentic here where they are free to reveal their queerness at a time when even families could not be trusted enough to reveal their true selves.

Cabo Polonio is the only place they can vocalize their hatred of the dictatorship openly which is forbidden and unthinkable elsewhere. They can speak directly instead of using euphemisms, such as calling the dictatorship "El Proceso" (The Process) and the military coup as "a transfer of power." Through signals of transformation, we see these women reclaiming the agency that was denied to them under a dictatorship. They begin to use sexual metaphors and imagery (the ocean, music), and invent terms for each other ("Caballeras"). Flaca is nicknamed "La Pilota." She is the column of strength who initially brought and kept these women together, and guided them to accept their true selves by unapologetically embracing her own identity. Anita was nicknamed "La Venus," as the almost-human form of the goddess's beauty and love. In contrast to this freer use of language, we find only silence in Montevideo, the enforced silence of the dictatorship that ruthlessly muffles the dissenting voice, the silence of those traumatized by it. After being raped by "Only Three," Romina finds herself too stunned to speak to anybody or share her constant fear of getting pregnant "because language could not hold it." Chauvinistic, patriarchal silence mutes the dreams, ambition, and the voice of Anita, trapped in a

loveless marriage. The toxic silence of the closet dictates the lives of the queer characters in the novel and eventually kills Malena (de Robertis 32).

It is not just the individual militant Romina who is the subject of revolutionary politics but the collective struggle enacted by all of the cantoras who rise against the dictatorship in their own ways upon realizing that conformity and compliance do not guarantee security. While Romina rises quite literally by joining the Communist movement, Flaca, Malena, La Venus, and Paz fight the state indirectly by rebelling against the patriarchal and heteronormative constraints of the society, held in check by the junta, through the unabashed display of their love; through their defiance of familial and social expectations; through Flaca's bold refusal of gender conformity; through La Venus's decision to leave her husband and the seeming stability of a middle class secure position under the state, through being her own muse instead of waiting for inspiration to strike and making nude art; through Paz who is aware of her true desires since the age of fourteen, through her defiance of the order of the Minister of Interior's wife, her cultivation of poetry and freedom by deciding to work in the seal skin trade; through Malena who even while bearing the traumatic experiences of family-sanctioned corrective rape at a clinic in hopes of "curing" her, unrelentingly continues to lend silent selfless support while assisting Romina in mobilizing the resistance; through their purchase of La Proa in Cabo Polonio; through their decision to open a gay bar; through coming out to their families after leading double lives for so long; through their very unruly bodies that becomes the site of political resistance and most of all through their will to live their lives unapologetically.

The Communist and social activist Romina with all her political knowledge becomes the character who traces the military coup and the revolution most closely. When her brother Felipe disappears soon after the coup because of his involvement in politics, the fearful anticipation of her and her parents about her arrest, given all that her grandmother has endured being a Ukrainian Jew who barely survived the Russian Pogrom, encompasses every moment of her every day until finally four years later she is arrested on her way home from the library, interrogated and raped by three soldiers for her activism. Romina repeatedly mentally refers to these rapists as "Only Three" because other women have faced larger numbers. She, at times, sounds almost racked with guilt for having been lucky enough to survive, making the violence she suffered secondary compared to that suffered by other women, most of whom either died or disappeared.

The arrest and rape while it unquestionably traumatized and devastated her, however, fails to break her resilient spirit and instead of immobilizing her into terror and subservience only strengthens her resolve to rejoin her political work, which she had abandoned due to familial considerations following the coup, especially after she had a taste of freedom in Cabo Polonio because what good is obedience if it "did not protect you?" (de Robertis 76). We get the first glimpse of this newly rejuvenated social activist when Paz is arrested for talking back to the Minister of the Interior's wife about her unfeminine sitting posture in Cabo Polonio. Romina's ingenious lies and her numerous calls to the secret network to trace her eventually save Paz as she is released from prison five days later. Following this, Romina returns to political activities and also becomes involved with a secret group of dissidents who smuggle into the nation seditious printed materials like letters, essays, and newspaper clippings of Uruguayan exiles speaking out abroad about the human rights abuses so that the resistance could learn that the dictatorship was being decried internationally. The whimsicality of the regime becomes apparent when Romina and her parents are finally allowed to meet their son in

prison after so many refusals even though nothing had changed in the meantime. Meeting her brother who has now been reduced to a mere shell of himself following years of unspeakable torture makes her more determined than ever to dedicate all her energies to the removal of the militant government.

Between 1978 and 1980, as the resistance was increasingly gaining ground, the regime felt compelled to legitimize its unconstitutional governance owing to the mounting international criticism by holding a constitutional plebiscite, hoping now to officialize the persecution of subversives and give the National Security Council (COSENA) total power over the government: in other words, validating all that they had been doing all along. Though still in the grip of fear, the opposition and the public that had been silent for so long in fear of persecution found strength in unity as a strong 57% of the population voted NO in the plebiscite, openly displaying their disagreement with the government. With this, the nation was emboldened and in the next few years, the blanket of terror seemed to have loosened somewhat as people behaved in a freer manner, greeting each other on the streets. There were more and more secret meetings now but the boldest sign of resistance came in the form of people beating their pots in the kitchens across the previously fear-riddled Montevideo every night once a month at exactly 8 pm. The government in turn, instead of cracking down on the backlash with harsher authoritarian laws, did not respond, busy as it was in resolving its own mess after losing some political legitimacy and fending off international pressure. There were fewer arrests and less vigilant night patrols. This increased laxness of the government finally allows Romina to work as a teacher and though she couldn't teach in a public school because she was categorized as a B citizen (owing to her involvement in politics and arrest), she starts giving history lessons to 11- and 12-year-olds at a private school. Her guilt for teaching students a history distorted and rewritten to suit the needs of the rulers was somewhat assuaged by the secret work she did.

The failure of the plebiscite was the first indication of the downfall of the dictatorship. Following this, with the Pacto Del Naval Agreement in 1984, the military announced a primary election to be held between political parties to select leaders, the powers of whom were still unknown. However, the government had only allowed the participation of the Colorados and the Blancos as the Frente Amplio was still illegal (Frente Amplio, founded in 1971, was an institutionalized coalition composed of the center-left and leftist parties and movements formed in response to the Uruguayan dictatorship with its right-wing ideology). This led to an internal struggle within the coalition with leftists like Romina torn between either supporting "the antidictatorship leaders of a moderate party because they were legally allowed to run, and because this gave them the small chance of one day toppling the regime" or submitting blank ballots in protest of their exclusion and remaining true to their ideals (de Robertis 172). Romina's response to Frente Amplio's dilemma embodies the grassroots level of disengaged response to politics. Having experienced and witnessed the harrowing dictatorship firsthand, despite being a party member, she does not care enough about the values of Communism to think about not voting for any of the parties allowed to participate in the election because she has realized that political values matter little before social needs. The next month with the support of the leftists, in the first election held since 1973, Julio Maria Sanguinetti of the Colorado Party won and eventually set up the first democratic government in Uruguay in 1985 after more than twelve years of civil-military dictatorship.

From the beginning, the idea is repeatedly invoked in the novel that things won't end with the end of the dictatorship and return of democracy and free speech, that people won't miraculously heal

with the return of exiles and release of political prisoners, and there is no going back for the country to its previous state before the dictatorship, no happily ever after as it would take decades to rebuild the nation and overcome individual and cultural wounds. Felipe, though released from the prison, appears to be “Like ghosts hurled back into the realm of the living” stuck in limbo with nowhere to go, nothing to do (de Robertis 198). He is thirty-three, has neither finished his University education nor has any work experience, and is tormented by nightmares daily. So much has been destroyed, disrupted, dislocated, and deformed by the dictatorship, including the citizens themselves many of whom have spent most of their adult lives in the shadows of “The Process,” as the junta has left the nation with a severe economic crisis, endless human rights abuses, and families torn apart by exile. Redemocratized Uruguay still has a long and strenuous journey ahead as immense efforts need to be made for years to integrate the livelihoods of these political prisoners and other citizens and reconstruct the nation for social and economic development.

Romina later turns to collect the stories of former political prisoners, stories that found neither social recognition nor justice in the new democracy that gave cultural and legal impunity to the military officials. While most other nations have been quick in attempting to resolve the human rights violations that took place during dictatorship such as Argentina that set up a truth commission, in Uruguay the investigation of abuses perpetrated in the past was silenced by the government’s policy of historical amnesia in the name of reconciliation. Uruguay is the only nation in Latin America where no trials against the military have taken place owing to the passage of the Amnesty Law (and later the Expiry Law of 1986) through which the state gave up its right to prosecute the military for their crimes during the dictatorship as it occurred during a “special” period. Instead of delivering justice, the military and the subsequent post-dictatorship governments have all emphasized “forgetting” as an indispensable condition for building a better future, thereby further burdening the victim, silenced without any reparation, with both the responsibilities of post-conflict peacebuilding and psychological healing.

The one question that arises over and over in the minds of the women is what changes for them. Romina fights for human rights with the reappearance of democracy. Although the coup blanketed the nation with terror, women like them were languishing in the “cage of not being,” living as outcasts and objects of humiliation overwritten by the heterosexist discourse. Transitions to democracy have been generally beneficial in providing political opportunities for activists to advocate for minority rights since one of the hallmarks of any democratic ethos is the prevalence of equity, justice, and inclusion. Julie Moreau in the book *LGBTQ Politics* states that “In Latin America, the region-wide left turn in ‘elected governments’ has produced connections between leftist parties and LGBT activists, helping activists advance their causes through state institutions” (494). This proved especially true with the presidency of the Frente Amplio candidate José Mujica, a former MLN-Tupamaro, who had been jailed for 12 years during the dictatorship, legalizing same-sex marriages in 2013 with Uruguay thereby becoming the first Latin American nation to enact a national civil union law. Following a time skip of 25 years at the end of the novel, Romina, now a Congresswoman who helped the law pass in the parliament herself, becomes part of the first legally married same-sex couple as she marries her longtime girlfriend, the Paraguyan native, Diana.

In an anti-gay repressive state and amidst strict cultural proscriptions, Flaca, Romina, Malena, Paz, and La Venus perform path-breaking acts of exceptional courage by resisting dictatorship in the face of extreme state terrorism. They discover Cabo Polonio, the sparsely populated coastal spot where

they grow into themselves and embrace who they are, which eventually becomes a gay-friendly tourist destination in Uruguay. They establish one of the earliest gay bars, La Piedrita, as a sociopolitical space legitimizing the sexual identities of queer people and providing an outlet for their emotional and sexual satisfaction. They advocate for LGBTQ rights, while representing a sexual minority in the Senate. This novel, akin to the genres of testimonio and protest art, bears testimony to the impact of political injustice on the emotional and psychological lives of individuals and the undocumented daily struggles waged in the realm of interiority. It is a testament to these women and unnamed others who were victimized, disinherited, and marginalized for years under a repressive regime whose engulfing fear crept into every nook and cranny of the society and mind. It is a record of an unnerving but often overlooked time and place in history. The novel reminds us of the long past of suffering and loss from which emerges queer history and the modern queer figure and the inherently revolutionary nature of their existence, love, and community through its depiction of the queer individual's anguished negotiations of self with the family, community, state, and history under a dictatorial regime. Indeed, as de Robertis writes, the oppressive world of the cantoras is ultimately remade when women serve as each other's heroes and comrades, "one woman holds another woman, and she, in turn, lifts the world" (169).

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