

Review: Bishop, Karen Elizabeth. *The Space of Disappearance: A Narrative Commons in the Ruins of Argentine State Terror.*

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Bishop, Karen Elizabeth. *The Space of Disappearance: A Narrative Commons in the Ruins of Argentine State Terror.* Albany: SUNY P, 2020. Pp. 244. ISBN 978-1-4384-7851-7.

Argentina's last military dictatorship disappeared an estimated 30,000 people from 1976 to 1983, eliminating political dissidents through a dedicated campaign of state-sponsored political terror. In the decades since the return to democracy, the country has struggled to contend with the judicial, political, and cultural consequences of these crimes against humanity. As such, it is unsurprising that disappearance haunts a significant portion of Argentine post-dictatorial literature and has attracted the attention of many critics seeking to understand this legacy of absence.

Karen Elizabeth Bishop's first monograph, *The Space of Disappearance*, advances the existing scholarship by thinking beyond disappearance as subject matter, instead focusing on narrative form. Bishop investigates and traces the shapes of the empty spaces left behind by violence and power: the epistemological gaps, the negations of death, the suspensions of human rights. In fact, none of the texts that Bishop examines center around the story of someone disappeared under the last dictatorship. Rather than tempt us too much with disappearance as an event, she repeatedly draws our attention to "the forms that disappearance acquires, the spaces it takes up, and the oblique reading practices it compels" (2). Disappearance as narrative form, she further theorizes, arises in concurrence with both the increasing use of disappearance as a strategy of state terror and the "disappearance of literature" in the late-twentieth century as predicted by Maurice Blanchot. On the one hand, disappearance operates as a strategy to disguise or displace our attention from political violence; on the other, in the aftermath of World War II, art finds itself unable to represent the real or communicate its essential meaning, and so "slips out of grasp," an unending attempt to communicate that is never actualized (194). However, as Bishop argues, disappearance can help us learn to look obliquely and perceive this gap in what literature is able to do—what she refers to as the "most literary"—and allow forms of political disappearance to come into focus as well (195). Moreover, Bishop asserts that knowledge of these forms of disappearance allows us to join in a "narrative common place defined by new forms of cognitive and imaginative engagement itself transferable to other spheres of aesthetic, political, and judicial action" (192).

Bishop identifies four formal modes of disappearance that structure her close readings: dissimulation, doubling and displacement, suspension, and embodiments. In chapter one, dissimulation, defined as “the attempt to hide, mask, or deflect presence” (41), appears in Rodolfo Walsh’s *Variaciones en rojo* as a strategy for covering up the evidence of violence. By demonstrating the use of deductive logic and spatial reasoning as ways to look (and read) obliquely, Walsh helps us to identify and understand what has been made to appear absent. Bishop argues that *Variaciones en rojo* serves as an early blueprint for both later literature dealing with disappearance and “the logical deconstruction of the legal and political defense of disappearance as a tool of state repression” by demonstrating the ways that art can be used both to conceal and decode the truth of violence (67).

Chapter two is dedicated to the techniques of doubling and displacement at work in Julio Cortázar’s *Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales* and the role of historical consciousness in fighting against and preventing human rights violations. In Cortázar’s graphic novel, a plague of disappearing books is used to displace the world’s attention from crimes against humanity, demonstrating how “disappearance as a fundamental tool of state repression performs and propagates its own cover-up in the interest of protecting a larger, more entrenched system of ongoing violence” (71). The aesthetic project of the graphic novel serves the political purpose of helping instruct readers in taking on a “double vision that allows for a focus on the past and the future at the same time” in order to displace our attention back to the historical catastrophe at hand so that we might intervene (95).

Chapters three and four both examine novels by Tomás Eloy Martínez, the former addressing suspension in *La novela de Perón* and the latter discussing embodiment in *Santa Evita*. In the former, Bishop argues that Martínez challenges dominant historical narratives of Perón’s life and political legacy by suspending his protagonist on a flight across the Atlantic and withholding the narration of key events in his life. In this way, Martínez seeks to explore the gaps in his personal biography and highlight what is missing from the historical record. Martínez’s use of suspension both recalls the Argentine military government’s suspensions of Congress and habeas corpus and serves to reveal “that the historical center is void and covered over with narrative invention” and we must learn other ways to know, understand, and build the world (148). Following this examination of *La novela de Perón*, Bishop reviews the role of Evita’s embalmed corpse in *Santa Evita* “as a dynamic and ethically charged metonym for what has been absented or left out of Argentine history, most pointedly the dictatorship’s disappeared” (36). The cadaver, Bishop explains, operates as a “null intersection” which, as an embodied receptacle for what has been disappeared, becomes a site of feminized excess that actively shapes the novel and our ideas of this history (166).

Bishop's interest in disappearance as narrative form is novel and useful. She insists upon finding a way to give space and shape—even if only in a narrative sense—to that which is normally defined so ambiguously by its absence or the traces it leaves behind. Her meticulous readings of primary texts are contextualized with apt explorations of their authors' biographical, political, and aesthetic contexts. Moreover, they shed new light on the ways that Argentine literature has both been shaped by state-sponsored disappearance and impacted subsequent political, ethical, and aesthetic visions of how to contend with this legacy. Perhaps most notably, she seeks to marry the aesthetic and the literary with the political and the ethical, teasing out how lessons of narrative structure can inform approaches to human rights and aid in dismantling systems of violence.

Occasionally, the monograph's vast theoretical scope—encompassing aesthetics and form, the disappearance of literature, postmodern concerns about representability, epistemology, human rights, visions of historical catastrophe, feminist visions of embodiment, and the creation of a narrative commons—can become repetitive in some instances and unclear in others, with the relationships between these approaches not always being explicitly stated. Despite the wide range of theoretical lenses that enter the discussion, some key concepts that have otherwise played a significant role in the scholarship of disappearance go nearly unmentioned, most notably spectralities studies and memory studies. Similarly, the emphasis on literary form leaves some key historical and political considerations underexplored. For example, Bishop neglects to take into account the role of fear, which has the potential to undermine the use of deductive logic as a means of resisting disappearance as a tool of state terror. Moreover, Bishop's formal modes of disappearance are not always clearly delineated, having some areas of overlap that could be better defined.

Overall, *The Space of Disappearance* is a welcome addition to the fields of literary criticism and Latin American studies. The monograph's complex theoretical and formal focus makes it apt for scholars of Argentine literature particularly and literary form and human rights more generally. Bishop also tasks future scholars with expanding this study of the forms of disappearance to other national, political, and literary contexts, with the hope that her work “reveals disappearance to be a defining feature of a more expansive, more complicated modern condition that is not yet exhausted” (38). *The Space of Disappearance* demonstrates the importance of learning to look otherwise at what has been absented—from our histories, our lives, our cultures—in order to find common ground and dismantle systems and legacies of violence that would otherwise lead to catastrophe.