

UC Merced

UC Merced Previously Published Works

Title

And What Have You Done?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7sf217j8>

Journal

CHASQUI-REVISTA DE LITERATURA LATINOAMERICANA, 38(2)

ISSN

0145-8973

Author

Lopez-Calvo, Ignacio

Publication Date

2009

Peer reviewed

**Review of the novel *And What Have You Done?* Trans. Enrica J. Argemagni.
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Latin American Literary Review Press, 2008. 109 pp.**

Ignacio López-Calvo
University of California, Merced

“She touched my tongue eternally with each one of her fingers. Three and a half, she told me, yeah, your tongue measures three and a half fingers” (21). This apparently inconsequential scene in a bathroom triggers the plot of the novel *¿Y tú qué has hecho?* (*And What Have You Done?*), by Peruvian author José Castro Urioste (1961-), who has also published the plays *A la orilla del mundo* and *Ceviche in Pittsburgh*, the nouvelle *Aún viven las manos de Santiago Berrios*, and several short stories. *And What Have You Done?* is both a nostalgic *Bildungsroman* and a love story with the overtones of a confession. The first chapters recall a carefree childhood time in the Southern Peruvian town of Tacna, when innocence and happiness ruled the protagonist’s world. Castro Urioste’s humorous and lively prose walks us through different anecdotes involving family life, friendship, girls, school days, and popular culture, including soccer, television advertisement, folk religiosity, and local drinks and cuisine (*pisco*, purple *chicha*, *marraqueta* bread, and *picante de mondongo*). This simple life, however, will soon cease to exist when political turmoil at a national level brings failed and successful military coups d’état and guerrilla warfare into the life of the young Ernesto (“Tito”), the semiautobiographical Peruvian protagonist. Eventually, he becomes both pursuer (he goes on a long pilgrimage—hence Juan Rulfo’s epigraph—following Adriana, the love of his life, all the way from Tacna to Pittsburgh, going through Canada) and pursued (he becomes a political refugee after his renters in Lima turn out to be terrorists).

Ernesto witnesses how political extremism not only interrupts what could have been his first kiss with Adriana but also pits his grade-school friends against one another: while two of them, Ortega son and Mañuco, join the military, another one, Tank, becomes a terrorist (presumably a member of the Lightning Path). Later, after Ortega son is shot during an attempt to control a prisoner insurrection on an island, his friend Mañuco kills several prisoners. When Mañuco finds out that one of the prisoners killed is Tank, he feels extremely guilty at the possibility it he was the one who shot him in the back.

Concomitantly, the protagonist, who was aware that Tank was involved with a terrorist group, also feels guilty for not having rescued his friend when the latter was incarcerated.

But above his numerous adventures and love affairs (including one with a woman seventeen years his senior when he was only seventeen years old), only one thing dominates Tito's dreams: he must find the girl that once measured his tongue in a bathroom thinking he was mute. With this goal in mind, he does not hesitate to take any job to make a living, including working as a gigolo for elderly ladies in Canada or even subjecting himself to medical experiments in Pittsburgh, after having crossed the international border in an Amish horsecart. When Ernesto finally finds Adriana for a third time, she is too depressed and scarred by her failed marriage and her inability to have children.

Consequently, she decides not to follow him to Peru, where he can now return thanks to an amnesty. In the end, the long search for Adriana turns into a journey of self-discovery that is recovered as a memoir, hence the title of the novel and the author's paraphrasing of Pablo Neruda in the first line of the novel: "I confess that I, too, have lived" (13). The story can also be read as a letter to Adriana, the narratee, as we can noticed in several paragraphs in which the first-person narrator addresses her directly: "he thought he had seen her, he

had seen Adriana, he had seen you” (27); or later: “and I didn’t know if she was going to remember my three and a half fingers’ (sic) tongue while I had spent all these years thinking about those minutes in the bathroom with you” (29).

As to the English translation of the novel, while Enrica J. Ardemagni occasionally manages to mirror some of the localisms, the children’s vocabulary, and the freshness of the prose in the original (including the free indirect style and the changes in narrative points of view within the same phrase mentioned in the previous paragraph), it is not free from flaws. There are numerous errors throughout the chapters that make the reading difficult, such as translating *decepción* as “deception” or the literal translation of idiomatic expressions (such as “De todo hay en la viña del Señor”) and slang (such as “slim” for *flaco*). The persistence of this kind of mistakes ultimately rarify the flow of a narrative that is otherwise rich and entertaining.