

Ashley Hope Pérez. *Deformative Fictions. Cruelty and Narrative Ethics in Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature*. The Ohio State University Press, 2024. xiv+241 pp.

Deformative Fictions. Cruelty and Narrative Ethics in Twentieth-Century Latin American Literature by Ashley Hope Pérez is a pedagogical approach and defense of difficulty in reading literature. Its stated goal is to make a case for the value of engaging with certain type of narratives that the author calls “deformative” and describes as “unsatisfying,” and for what readers can learn from that. In contrast to critic Joshua Landy’s “formative fictions”—narratives that challenge readers to later reward them—Pérez defines “deformative fictions” as those where authors mobilize narrative resources with the intent of disrupting the satisfactions of reading. Such narratives challenge the reader but don’t seem to reward them. As an expected corollary of this proposition, one of the main arguments of the book is directed at convincing American students—she expressly talks about them—to still read “deformative” and other difficult fictions.

Contrary to what the terms may suggest, the idea in Pérez’s book is that the unfamiliar syntax, disruptive narrative approaches, and thematic intensity that characterize “deformative fictions” render those fictions, in fact, formative. They “deform” reading expectations, practices, and experiences and produce new capacities and a different type of reader. Despite this torsion, there remains an underlying implication that this type of narrative is a deviation from some other type of “normal” literature. Pérez explains that “deformative fictions” frustrate, disappoint, complicate, and otherwise disrupt prevailing notions of what a text “should” do and how it “should” satisfy readers. They are intentionally difficult fictional narratives, whose authors deliberately undercut understanding and connection and favor challenge. Because in doing so they thwart “positive takeaways,” Pérez says that “deformative fictions” confront rhetorical readers (the active analytical readers who read the text as communication, the readers Pérez hopes students will become) with a subtractive experience. Building on this, she maintains that “deformative fictions” offer few pleasures, but one of them is that readers expand their ability to find value in displeasure, that through their difficulty these texts improve “readers’ listening.”

That Pérez chooses to focus on cruelty as an alternative to the attention to violence prevalent in scholarship about Latin American literature, seems a timely decision, sadly. She distances herself, however, from Jean Franco’s foundational book *Cruel Modernity*, arguing that Franco employs literature primarily to illustrate historical realities rather than attending to the distinctiveness of fictional treatments of cruelty. Pérez, instead, considers fictional cruelty as a narrative resource, and highlights three ways in which it can appear: cruelty in what she calls “the told” (plot), “the telling” (style), and “the reading” (reader’s response). The expectation is that this focus will

help illuminate how “deformative fictions” raise ethical and moral questions about the practice of reading: authors of “deformative fictions” tactically (cruelly) leave readers’ expectations unfulfilled and this unsettling of reading practices reacquaints readers with a supposed ethical weight of reading. “Deformative fictions” would “reform,” then, American students’ reading practices as they “deform” expectations and satisfactions in reading.

To show how this works, Pérez presents three case studies. She first addresses the work of Argentine writer Silvina Ocampo, close-reading five short stories from *La furia y otros cuentos* (‘The fury and other stories,’ 1959). Her argument is that during the time Ocampo was most active as a writer (1930s to the 1960s), literature from Latin American women was valued primarily for its emotional expressivity and intimate portrayals of domestic experiences. To resist these gendered expectations of access to “character interiority and emotional depth,” Ocampo’s stories offered instead flatness, opacity, affective estrangement, obfuscation of causality, and narrative ambiguity. Cruelty in her stories would, thus, be a defensive measure.

Then Pérez looks into Fernando Vallejo’s *La virgen de los sicarios* (*Our Lady of the Assassins*, 1994). Although the novel provides what Luz Horne and Daniel Noemi Voionmaa call a “spectacle of marginality,” Pérez considers that what makes it an “assaultive deformative fiction” is not as much in the “told” as it is in the “telling.” She suggests that, using what Peter Rabinowitz calls “rhetorical passing,” Vallejo misguides and ideologically entraps his readers. While some may mistakenly assume that he disagrees with the cruel narrator, he seeks that some engage in a conspiratorial readership, recognizing this intention and taking pleasure in the entrapment.

Finally, Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* would configure a use of cruelty as anti-elegy, activating and then disrupting the elegy’s triad of lamentation, confrontation, and consolation. Mainly focusing on “La parte de los crímenes” (“The part of the crimes”), one out of five parts of the novel, Pérez examines how the chapter gives more than one hundred accounts of murdered women whose bodies appear in abandoned buildings and desert wastelands while it also denies any possibility of consolation, even expressing outright suspicion toward the longing for relief. Seeing the possibility of mourning as complicity with the *status quo*, *2666* would thus problematize the morality and ethics of readers’ very desire for consolation.

The last chapter situates “deformative fictions” as one end of a range of possible reading experiences. At the other end Pérez places “hospitable narratives,” and in between them the aforementioned “formative” texts (challenging but rewarding, they are outside the scope of the book). Opposed to “deformative fictions”, the defining feature of “hospitable narratives” is that they accommodate English-speaking readers in the United States, asking for little reckoning with cultural difference. They reward without challenging. Pérez considers hospitality a strategy that minoritized authors use in order to make the translation of their book more likely and thus be read by privileged readers in other parts of the globe. Given that US-based readers approach “world

literature”—“where ‘world’ is all that is foreign” (188)—with a certain degree of privilege, she thinks they have a responsibility to resist complacency and consider the cultural, literary, and economic factors that influenced the choices of the authors. As an example of this type of reading she analyzes *Daytripper* (2011)—a graphic novel by the Brazilian comics creators Gabriel Bá and Fábio Moon—and calls attention to the fact that there is no mention of the repressive military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, with local realities confined to the background, and histories of enslavement, colonialism, and deliberate racial whitening in Brazil unaddressed. She argues that this reading shows how skills and dispositions developed through involvement with “deformative fictions” can help readers (students) meet these other texts with attention to the signs of asymmetrical relationships.

Pérez's examination of “deformative fictions” expresses a conviction that readers become more sensitive readers by approaching books whose value they do not recognize immediately. *Deformative Fictions* promotes an ethics of reading grounded in the belief that it matters beyond the literary domain. By advocating for the engagement with challenging narratives that disrupt traditional expectations, Ashley Hope Pérez puts forward a potential of difficult texts to shape reading practices, form critical readers better equipped to embrace cultural differences, and foster ethical awareness among them.

Daniela Dorfman
CONICET-LICH/UNSAM