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I, Sandro Rodrigo de Barros

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This work and its defense approved by:

Chair: Dr. Luciano Picano
       Dr. Connie Scarborough
       Dr. Maria Paz Moreno
FRINGING VISIBILITY: OTHERNESS, MARGINALITY AND THE
QUESTION OF SUBALTERN TRUTH IN ANTES QUE ANOchezCA, LA
VIRGEN DE LOS SICARIOS AND CIDADE DE DEUS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of
the University of Cincinnati

By
Sandro Rodrigo de Barros, M.A.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how otherness and marginality are articulated in three literary works: Reinaldo Arenas' *Antes que anochezca* (1992), Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994) and Paulo Lins' *Cidade de Deus* (1997). Furthermore, this study investigates whether the representation of subjects historically viewed as peripheral, both inside and outside the borders of the nation, perpetuates or undermines the conceptualization of the Latin American continental identity as "Other" in relation to dominant Eurocentric and North American perspectives.

The choice of the texts of Arenas, Vallejo and Lins as paradigms of representation of otherness and marginality in the Latin American context is not fortuitous. *Antes*, *La virgen* and *Cidade de Deus* are works that underscore renewed perspectives on the significance of the nation inasmuch as they challenge the conventionality of historical discourses through the articulation of marginal subjectivities as prevailing accounts of reality. Arenas' autobiography constitutes a narrative in which the exilic Self subverts the hegemony of the Cuban socialist state by contesting history and its truth through the account of a homosexual and political dissident who witnesses and personally
contributes to one of the most defining moments of the nation's past; Vallejo's representation of the formerly exiled intellectual in La virgen, in complicity with the sicariato class with which he associates himself, inscribes the marginal elements of Colombian society onto the present narrative of the nation; and Lins' re-imagination of the favelado space in Cidade de Deus dismantles the conventional perception of Brazil as a racial paradise by denouncing the poverty found in the slums of Rio de Janeiro as a social condition intrinsically tied to the country's racial "invisibility."
Para a Alexis e Antonia.
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On this glorious occasion, of the splendid defeat

(Anthony Newly)

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INTRODUCTION

To write is to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader. It is to have a recourse to the consciousness of others in order to make one’s self be recognized as essential to the totality of being.

(Jean Paul Sartre, “What is Literature”)

So here it came: the collapse of harmony, the demolition of the spheres...

(Salman Rushdie, East, West)

The Text, The Self and the Other

This dissertation examines how otherness and marginality are articulated in three contemporary literary works: Reinaldo Arenas' Antes que anochezca (1992), Fernando Vallejo's La virgen de los sicarios (1994) and Paulo Lins' Cidade de Deus (1997). This study also investigates whether the representation of subjects historically viewed as peripheral, both inside and outside the borders of the nation, perpetuates or undermines the
conceptualization of the Latin American continental identity as "Other" in relation to dominant Eurocentric and North American perspectives.

The choice of the texts of Arenas, Vallejo and Lins as paradigms of representation of otherness and marginality in the Latin American context is not fortuitous. Antes, La virgen and Cidade de Deus are works that underscore renewed perspectives on the significance of the nation inasmuch as they challenge the conventionality of historical discourses through the articulation of marginal subjectivities as prevailing accounts of reality. Arenas' autobiography constitutes a narrative in which the exilic Self subverts the hegemony of the Cuban socialist state by contesting history and its truth through the account of a homosexual and political dissident who witnesses and personally contributes to one of the most defining moments of the nation's past; Vallejo's representation of the formerly exiled intellectual in La virgen, in complicity with the sicariato class with which he associates himself, inscribes the marginal elements of Colombian society onto the present narrative of the nation; and Lins' re-imaginação of the favelado space in Cidade de Deus dismantles the conventional perception of Brazil as a racial paradise by denouncing the poverty found in the slums of Rio de Janeiro.
as a social condition intrinsically tied to the country’s racial "invisibility."

As shall be seen in the chapters that follow, the presence of the authorial signature within the borders of the text is a common feature in the works selected for this study. The literary articulation of Arenas’, Vallejo’s and Lins’ Selves and the subaltern Others for whom they openly speak is intrinsically tied to the quest of contesting the meaning of periphery while indirectly asserting the authorial figure as a powerful symbolist, someone who is capable of advancing a particular representation of reality as the truth by authenticating its value on the premises of empiricism and testimony.

In this sense, it could be argued that the works to be studied in this dissertation reach beyond the frontiers of entertainment literature; they correspond to a type of post-colonial perspective that does not merely refute tradition but rather attempts to “rewrite a dominant ideology from within” (Fee 244). ¹ Such a perspective generates a version of reality that marginally imposes

¹ It is well to note here that the term “post-colonial” is utilized to amply characterize all cultural production that presents particular strategies of representation derived from the advent of colonialism. As Fernando de Toro remarks, “the concrete space which opens Post-Modernism and deconstruction is one which makes it possible for Post-Colonial counter-discourses to locate themselves inside rather than outside the theory machine that placed them in the margins. This is exactly the change that differentiates the Post-Colonial discourse that preceded Post-Modernity from contemporary debates” (26).
itself in a contest for the very meaning of the “postmodern truth”.

In the works of Arenas, Vallejo and Lins, the “periphery,” the globalized ex-colony, is observed writing back to its former Center by presenting to a pluralist/global audience that which has been conventionally expected from the Third World space in terms of representation. Poverty, chaos and authoritarian corruption are but a few of the themes coinciding in the writings of the aforementioned authors that reaffirm the imagery of the Latin American territory as economically and socially marginalized. Nevertheless, the process of allegorically or literally reclaiming the negative signs of the nation as that which is undeniably part of its constitution ultimately corresponds to a subversive act of re-appropriation, for the question of national representation becomes tied to the authorial struggle to expose tradition as a form of subjugation and difference as a necessary move towards self-determinacy.

The representation of otherness in Antes, La virgen and Cidade de Deus does not signify an attempt to introduce and inscribe difference for the sake of difference. To the contrary, as the chapters of this study will demonstrate, the dissident homosexual, the marginal intellectual and the
black *favelado* correspond to representations that promote the reassessment of entities traditionally deemed subaltern as “Subjects in their own right,” displaced from the marginal to the centric narrative of the post-modern nation (de Toro, *New Intersections* 25).

**Pos-Modernism, Post-Colonialism and Beyond**

Although it is not the objective of this introduction to open a debate on postmodernist and post-colonial cultural ideologies, a brief discussion of these designations in terms of aesthetics is in order to contextually situate the works analyzed in this dissertation as well as to underscore the nature of the politicized messages they articulate.

Critics have often employed the terms post-modern and post-colonial in contemporary history and literary criticism with the assumption of a plethora of referential meanings that have contributed significantly to the obfuscation of their meanings and, for many, the repudiation of their theorizations. Terms such as *bricolage*, *pastiche* and *fragmentation* have been incorporated into the universal lexicon as expressions of a

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2 See Dei 155-8.
post-modern ideology that undermines the centric position of “grand narratives” of European post-enlightenment rationalism.  

However, it is necessary to emphasize, for the purposes of this study, that neither post-colonial nor post-modern terminologies indicate a difference in practices of representation, since their respective strategies of subverting the authority of traditional western narratives are similar. As Bill Aschcroft notes, postmodernism’s displacement of the binary Center/Margin is analogous to the post-colonial practice of decentralization of “master” narratives, for both aesthetics, in their respective approaches to tradition, focus on “the significance of language and writing in the construction of experience, the use of the subversive strategies of mimicry, parody and irony” (117). While post-modern narratives tend to focus on the marginal as an article of luxury of a dominant order that can afford to challenge what it already securely possesses, post-colonial aesthetics involve the specificity of the historical homogenizing influence of the Center (the metropolis) in the processes of cultural formation of former colonial societies (Hutcheon “Circling the Downspout of the Empire,”

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3 See, for instance, Jameson 63 and Lyotard 40.
Thus, the fundamental difference between post-colonial and post-modern in terms of identifying and representing otherness does not correspond exclusively to the recourse of decentralizing that which has traditionally been considered the Center but rather the ideological direction given to the object of representation (the Other) and its cultural location.

The designation of a post-colonial aesthetics in favor of a post-modern one requires one’s awareness of the fundamental question of the intellectual position from which one actually speaks. As Fernando de Toro suggests, in order to attentively answer such a question, it is necessary first to identify the motivations behind the strategic appropriation of a “canonical knowledge” intentionally used to produce another type of knowledge that is resultantly subversive in terms of tradition (New Intersections, 20).

Antes, La virgen and Cidade de Deus unquestionably point toward the rupture of the present-day culture with the conventional Eurocentric-bourgeois definition of the national space as a homogeneous “imagined community.”

As Homi K. Bhabha notes, the significance of the postmodern condition: “lies in the awareness of the epistemological limits of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, the bearers of policed sexualities” (4-5).
nearly inscribe the subaltern Other in the narrative of the nation, advancing the notion that hegemony is no longer that which holds the ideal of the homeland together. Rather, in the portrayal of Arenas’ exile, Vallejo’s sicarios’ religious syncretism and the comportment of Lins’ favelados, the negotiation of identity is seen as intrinsically tied to the global ideology of consumption as a determining factor in one’s inclusion and identification with a particular social group. As Néstor García Canclini observes, questions of identity and citizenship are currently being answered “in the private realm of commodity consumption and the mass media more than in the abstract rules of democracy or collective participation in public spaces” (Consumers and Citizens, 15).

Remapping Identities

Indeed, the works examined in this dissertation clearly address those questions concerning citizenship and the nation taking into consideration the immediate and often detrimental influence of consumption and the media on marginalized classes.\(^5\) In the case of Arenas’ autobiography,

\(^5\) It is well to note that all he works in question have rendered commercially successful cinematic adaptations which further boosted the sales of the original texts.
the United States is initially viewed as an ideal space advertised as a site in which the most basic human materialistic needs can be ultimately fulfilled. Certainly, Arenas comes to realize that this constructed idea of the United States corresponds to a projected utopia, a consumerist fantasy, since his pursuit of the American dream is revealed to be a frustrated enterprise. The author recognizes that the universe he encounters in exile is devoid of individuality, a world completely guided by the existential desire of partaking in massive consumption as means to achieve inclusion in the privileged social strata:

Mi nuevo mundo no estaba dominado por el poder político, pero sí por ese otro poder también siniestro: el poder del dinero. Después de vivir en este país por algunos años he comprendido que es un país sin alma porque todo está condicionado al dinero (332).

This same idea can be seen reflected in Vallejo’s novel, where the young sicarios are depicted as entities transiting in an idiosyncratic universe in which the possession of foreign goods such as branded jeans, T-shirts, refrigerators and machineguns blends with the colonial specificity of the nation’s religious tradition. The individual’s ability to acquire particular commodities...
and socially negotiate their meaning ultimately indicates not only one’s pertinence to a specific location in society but also signifies the very performance of being: “Caritativamente le expliqué que la ropa más le quitaba que le ponía a su belleza. Que la moto le daba status de sicario y el jeep de narcotraficante o Mafioso, gentuza inmunda” (91). As Vallejo’s narrator critically affirms, the media has come to constitute a social agent that gives fundamental direction to one’s existence in the very propagation of ideals and identities to be “consumed:” “Impulsado por su vacío esencial Alexis agarra en el televisor cualquier cosa: telenovelas, partidos de fútbol, una puta declarando, el presidente” (33).

Lins’ favelados, also deeply influenced by the agency of mass media, are shown consuming an image of the outside realms of the favela that includes whiteness as a model of citizenship as well as clothes and accessories that define citizenry. The author postulates that such an action of mimicking the outside culture affords certain residents of the favela the admiration of others precisely on the merits of the appropriation of the images that proceed from a cultural establishment other than the favelados’ own. As Lins notes through one of the characters of Cidade de Deus, the outside, whether represented by the cultural agency of
the United States or the white Brazilian cultural establishment, constitutes an ideal on which notions of respectability and identity in the favela are formed. Simultaneously, the outside is postulated as a dominant culture that both influences the favelados’ sense of selfhood while reaffirming their self-image as excluded and subaltern subjects:

Dizia que nos Estados Unidos tudo que era jovem fumava e cheirava, e os Estados Unidos mandavam geral: - Tu pode ver que a maior nação do mundo é lá e é o país que tem mais doidão. Porra, qualquer coisa americana é melhor que a nossa, calça, patins, skate, relógio e o caralho. (205)

Any process of representing the subaltern Other to the world involves a necessary awareness of power, who has it and who does not (Beverley Subalternity and Representation, 1). As Ania Loomba notes, “the desire to articulate the standpoint of the downtrodden is of course not new – Marxists, feminists and even liberal historians have all attempted to amplify the voices of the oppressed” (232). Nevertheless, if the academic representation of oppressed groups tends to bring visibility to those who were traditionally “made” invisible, conversely, the intellectual articulation of marginalized classes
unavoidably risks the translation of their existential condition as stationary rather than as a circumstance that can be eventually transcended, given the appropriate historical and sociopolitical opportunities. Gayatri Spivak warns us of such a pitfall in her canonic essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” when proposing the question of legitimacy of oppressed discourses (which she calls “texts of insurgency”) as one that is connected to the nature of the authority of those agents that intercede on behalf of the subaltern:

The ‘subject’ implied in the texts of insurgency can only serve as a counterpossibility for the narrative sanctions granted to the colonial subject in the dominant groups. The postcolonial learn that their privilege is their loss. In this they are a paradigm of the intellectuals. (28)

The discussion on authority and authenticity in the articulation of peripheral voices and the truth they convey constitutes, indeed, one of the most persistent debates surrounding subaltern/post-colonial studies (Dei 155, Mignolo 51, Aschcroft et al. 3). However, taking into account the nature and strategies of representation utilized by Arenas, Vallejo and Lins, the question of the subaltern account assumes a different dimension.
As David Lloyd and Paul Thomas argue, traditionally, intellectuals have had no single class origin and have often imagined themselves “to be above or beyond the usual class divisions” (25). According to Lloyd and Thomas, the traditional detachment of intellectuals from any particular social class has translated into aloofness or even antagonism against that which is contrary to the intellectual class’ own interests (25). Although such a statement may be initially regarded as a common observance in the attempts to represent subalternity, the academic effort to communicate the marginal experience to the world, specifically in the so-called area of subaltern studies, has recently advocated the necessity of maintaining the location from where one speaks as a conscious enterprise in the process of representing marginalized cultures.\(^6\)

According to John Beverley, the project of the intellectual representation of the subaltern and that of the subaltern who attempts to speak on his own behalf corresponds, indeed, to two distinct actions:

The assumption that the project of representing the subaltern from the academy and the

\(^6\) This passage refers in particular to the notion of the “organic intellectual” as the individual who is actively involved in the changing of the status of the oppressed without persisting in their representation as “the shadow of the Self” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak” 24).
subaltern’s project of representing itself are commensurable is simply … an assumption. In truth, it would be more accurate to say that these are different, even antagonistic projects. (Beverley, Subalternity and Representation 38)

Beverley further stipulates that the solidarity between the academic and the subject of any intellectual representation is vital for the legitimacy of the intermediated subaltern discourse. However, it could be argued that even though a spirit of solidarity between the representative and the oppressed represented may exist, this relationship often does not prevent the communication of the marginal experience from resulting in the unintentional fixation of the subaltern actor into a subjugated condition. In the testimonial genre, considered by many as an example in which the voice of the oppressed can be directly accessed, text editing by the intellectual mediator is an inevitable action. The effect of ventriloquism that is pertinent to testimonies – that is, the intellectual allowing him/herself to become the conduit for the subaltern message – contributes to the reception of

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7 John Beverley develops a similar argument to that established in Sartre’s essay “Black Orpheus,” in which the philosopher states the position of historical minorities in relation to the experience of black French writers.
8 See, for instance, Sklodovska 81.
the marginal discourse being within the parameters of a relationship of dependence, as if the very action of the subaltern’s speech exclusively necessitates the intellectual agent for its gestation.

On this subject, Fernando Corosil observes that subalternity constitutes, in fact, a relative perception that is not to be treated as an inherent quality but rather a relational characterization that defines a particular subjected state of being and not the being itself (37). Certainly, because enduring subjection eventually fixes individuals into restrictive positions, any perspective on subalternity requires one to assume a double vision that “recognizes at one level a common ground among diverse forms of subjection and, at another, the intractable identity of subjects formed within uniquely constraining social worlds” (Corosil 37).

While the authors selected for this dissertation clearly articulate viewpoints of traditionally oppressed groups in their works, they do so by directly or indirectly representing their own Selves as testimonial actors. In Arenas’ autobiography, the articulation of the author’s homosexuality and political dissidence within the context of Castro’s regime openly affirms the Self as an identity deemed subaltern in the context of the Cuban socialist
ideology. Although ambiguously fictional, the characterizations of the authorial figure in the texts of Vallejo and Lins emphasize the author as an individual who, if not a subaltern, corresponds to an entity with experiences clearly akin to those of the oppressed classes.

The discussion postulated here is not that of attributing the designation subaltern to the authors selected for this study, since the very position of the subaltern is compromised once he speaks on his own behalf. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to consider the illusion of subalternity and marginality as identities articulated in conjunction with the authors’ own. Credibility is certainly at stake, for it is up to the reader to negotiate the meaning of the text as the product of a legitimate subaltern experience or an authentic representation of its truth.

The Re-historicizing of the Nation as a Dystopia

It is precisely the pursuit to tell the truth from a marginal position what fundamentally unites the messages of the texts to be analyzed in this study. The difference of
perspectives in the retelling of the history of the nation from an outsider point of view constitutes that which ultimately vouches for the subjectivity of any historical account, or as Derek Walcott has suggested, the “moralization of history” (371). The revisionist impetus of Antes, La virgen and Cidade de Deus in their respective approaches to the telling of the nation does not correspond, at least in principle, to an attempt at “officiality”; after all, Vallejo’s and Lins’ novels are advanced as fictional texts. Nor do these works claim to be taxonomically historical, in spite of their strategies of representation and noticeable ambiguity suggesting the contrary.

The disrespect for tradition, the very social articulation of difference within the context of authorized power, creates in the works of Arenas, Vallejo and Lins the illusion of the writing as a historical discourse, in spite of the level of subjectivity and deliberate fictionalization with which they are constructed. The awareness of history as an imagined project, which has come to signify the paradigm of post-modernity, corresponds to the premise of the literary representation of the nation. This does not signify, necessarily, that the dominant character of historical narratives is completely
disregarded. As Bhabha explains, “the right to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege” does not depend on the persistence of tradition per se but is rather “resourced by its power … to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are ‘in the minority’” (2). The authors studied here reconstruct the nation from a clearly antagonistic perspective by directly contesting the cultural establishment, or the “lettered city,” on its own terms. The affirmation of the Self, or the illusion of its presence in the text, underscores the authorial figure as he who turns tradition against itself. Thus experiences and testimony ultimately correspond to elements that validate the legitimacy of the writing while promoting its own distinction.

As Arenas’, Vallejo’s and Lins’ texts seek to reconstruct the nation through the inclusion of the marginalized Other as that which is inextricably part of any national experience, the reaffirmation of otherness is translated, conversely, as a consummated dystopia. What may initially appear to be a positivist project of giving voice to the reality of particular excluded minorities constitutes the articulation of a message of spiritual and material destitution.
The recurrent topos in Arenas’ body of works, coined by the phrase “no hay escapatorias” (there is no way out), can be equally observed in the texts of Vallejo and Lins as the existentialist rhetoric of the Other. If on the one hand Arenas’ suicide could be interpreted as the desperate act of a marginalized individual unable to escape the ghosts of an exclusivist patriarchal dogma, on the other hand, Vallejo’s sicarios and Lins’ favelados are also presented under a nihilist paradigm in which the oppressed being is unable to reach its existential plenitude in society.

The subjugation of impoverished classes is advanced in Antes, La virgen and Cidade de Deus as a regenerative condition which forces the being into a perennial state of exile that is at once physical and metaphysical. In the respective representations of marginalized classes found in these works, the urban scenario appears as the space in which the global dystopia and the condition of the marginalized Other’s “exile within” is fully disclosed. This occurs, in part, because the city corresponds not only to a space that has traditionally fostered the intellectual Establishment of the nation, but also its very accumulation of differences under the ideal of cosmopolitanism has been
unable to equally negotiate with heterogeneity in a non-exclusive manner.⁹

Indeed, the city has been, by tradition, founded in the very notion of utopia, a “depository of humanity’s hopes and anxieties” amidst a conglomerate of “harmonious differences” (Bridge and Watson 9). However, its complex arrangement lends itself to the possibility of multiple perspectives on what constitutes difference. The imaginary totalizations produced by the eye that gazes upon the domains of the urban landscape denote the existence of the city as a “gigantic instant, a metaphor akin to that of the Borgean Aleph” (Canclini, Consumers and Citizens 83). By utilizing the space of the global metropolis, Arenas, Vallejo and Lins materialize the existential condition of the Other within the context of that which conventionally has officiated the very narrative of the nation, postulating, therefore, dystopia as a subversive action against the ideals expressed in the conventional idealization of the urban space as a site of differences in agreement.

Taking into account the urban landscape of the works presented here as the place from which the discourse of the Other challenges tradition, this dissertation examines the

particularities of the textual performance of the authorial identity contesting the truth of the nation.

Chapter 1 examines how the ambivalence to truth and fiction in Reinaldo Arenas’ *Antes que anochezca* reconfigures the Cuban nation between the lines of the autobiographical account and the historical discourse. This chapter also analyzes the autobiography as a strategy of representation in which the articulation of otherness corresponds to a desacralizing carnivalesque act against the sanctimony of History and the nationalist-bourgeois concept of homeland.

Chapter 2 approaches Fernando Vallejo’s homonymous character in *La virgen de los sicarios* as a type of intellectual in solidarity with the margins of the nation. Vallejo’s novel configures a representational message of otherness in which the protagonist-narrator’s return from exile articulates identity and the post-colonial space of the nation as a consummated dystopia. Furthermore, this chapter verifies how the literary translation of an “epistemics” of violence and social decay, in complicity with the hybrid character of the Colombian sicarios’ sense of religiosity, revises certain Latin American paradigms of faith, poverty and exclusion.
In Chapter 3, Paulo Lins’ Cidade de Deus is examined as a text in which the Brazilian favela is rearticulated as a location that is intrinsically tied to the historical racist practices of the nation. By depicting the favela as a predominantly black environment, Lins not only denounces the condition of racial invisibility as a false identity forged within the biased principles of the Brazilian modernist discourse but the author also advances blackness outside its customary cultural referentiality. Rather than focusing exclusively on aspects of assimilation of Afro-Brazilian culture, Lins’ text questions the extent of the participation of blacks in productive sectors of society. The author reclaims the favelado milieu as a racist paradox where Afro-Brazilian cultural hybridity has not signified the acceptance of blacks as equals.

\[10\] An example of such discourses can be found in the writings of sociologist Gilberto Freyre. See, in particular, this author’s fundamental text Casa-grande e senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime de economia patriarcal.
CHAPTER 1

ANTES QUE ANOCHEZCA

Gradually the stars’ faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves – or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality

(Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children)

Lifewriting with a Vengeance

In seeking refuge in memory as a means to supplement the sense of loss and displacement caused by exile, Reinaldo Arenas’ autobiography Antes que anochezca symbolically manifests the post-colonial Other’s attempt to revise the historical nation from a marginal perspective. Articulated with an incontrovertible sense of property and authority, Arenas’ autobiography challenges the traditional discourse on Cuban history by presenting the Other’s accountability in its formation. In pursuing the negotiation of meaning between the poles of fiction and fact, as well as the personal account and the collective,
Antes denunciates the role of hegemonic ideologies in the struggle to maintain a sense of individual identity. As a homosexual, exile, and political dissident, Arenas is ominously conscious of his location on the margins of society. The celebration of his literary persona throughout the pages of Antes places in evidence an ideological construction of otherness that is ultimately used as a rhetorical strategy of self-affirmation and authority over the historical account.

Divided into sixty-nine micro-narratives and a postscript consisting of a suicide note, Antes can be viewed as a paradoxical text. Firstly, the work’s notably excessive characterization of its author’s persecution under Castro’s regime presents particular episodes that border on the ridiculous and the absurd, tampering with the very fabric of reality. Secondly, Arenas often contradicts communal experiences of real occurrences, which consequentially denotes the fictive stylishness with which the author crafts the autobiographical genre. An example of this contradiction can be seen in the episode where Arenas narrates the burial of his friend and mentor, the Cuban poet Virgilio Piñera. As the author recounts, the funeral of Piñera was attended by a multitude of individuals who
followed the funerary vehicle on bicycles and skates.\(^1\)

However, as Abilio Estévez’s critical appreciation of *Antes*
observes, Arenas’ version of the facts is rather imprecise,
for the critic, who himself was at Piñera’s funeral, notes
that no such conglomeration of friends and admirers was
present at the event (863).\(^2\)

Similar contestations are abundant throughout the
pages of *Antes*, which in principle could discredit Arenas’
autobiographical truth and interfere with what Philippe
Lejeunne has stipulated as “the autobiographical pact;”
that is, the reader’s acceptance of the authorial
subjectivity as a sincere communicative enterprise (126).\(^3\)

Nonetheless, the result of Arenas’ lifewriting is sincere
in spite of inaccuracies, not exclusively because of the
premises of the genre through which the author expresses

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\(^1\) “El coche fúnebre de Virgilio marchaba a enorme velocidad; era prácticamente imposible seguirlo. La Seguridad del Estado trató por todos los medios de evitar que se formara una aglomeración con motivo de aquella muerte, pero una multitud de persona e incluso muchachos jóvenes, montados en patines y bicicletas, persiguió el cadáver” (294).

\(^2\) Abilio Estévez deems irrelevant the hyperbolic statements made in the overall discourse of *Antes*, for the critic realizes that what one discovers in the process of scrutinizing the truth and the falsity in an author’s lifewriting is the impossibility of uncovering the subject’s true Self. As Estévez notes: “No book reveals the mystery that man is. At most, we can only try to discover him in the truth/falsity of writing. And what we discover from it, in the end, will not be the man as he is or was, but as we imagine him” (863).

\(^3\) For Lejeunne, the autobiography functions primarily as an act of communication. The author, “making an agreement with the ‘narratee’ whose image he constructs, … incites the real reader to enter into the game [of self-representation] and gives the impression that an agreement has been signed by the two parties.” However, as Lejeunne further adverts, “it is evident that the real reader can adopt modes of reading different from the one that is suggested to him.” (126)
his own story but also due to the universal principles of freedom articulated in the chapters of his autobiography.

The deviation from communally experienced accounts of the truth does not compromise the effective sincerity of Arenas’ autobiographical message; nor does it correspond to a complete fictionalization of facts. What Arenas’ discourse obtrusively denotes is the autobiography’s power to contest common precepts through its self-authorizing testimonial subjectivity, its power to speak and constitute a form of metaphysical presence that is capable of outlasting the author’s very existence. Because the autobiographical genre is effectively enunciated as a continuous form of the present, the ideological content of its message becomes a perennial projection of the autobiographer’s Self and his/her ideological bearings (Gunn 42-43).

As Jacques Derrida observes, the substitution of speech by writing inevitably replaces presence with value (142). When a particular text evokes the direct enunciation of the author as a presence – as with autobiographies – one

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4 As Paul de Man’s suggests in his article on the effects of the autobiography as a form of authorial disfiguration, prosopopeia is the figure of speech that best characterizes the autobiographical text in its metaphysical qualities of “speaking” on behalf on an immaterial presence (113-18). Departing from this affirmation, Angel Loureiro underscores that the current critical assessment of the genre tends to apprehend its significance not as the reproduction of one’s life but rather as “a performative act, … the creation or re-creation of the self at the time of writing” (1).
risks losing sight of its fundamental characteristic as a form of representation that is ideologically and personally motivated. The autobiographical text, in its multifaceted projection of authorial identities and intentions, becomes the author, or the “dangerous supplement” as Derrida would have it, for it functions as an accumulated presence that transcends the truth in the text’s claim of being the author.⁵

In Arenas’ case, the autobiography functions as a medium through which the author can validate his presence and message, whereas in his novels the authorial signature is dismissed within the connotations of fiction. The same mechanisms Arenas employs in his fictional works where presence and the ambiguity of lifewriting infiltrating the fictional realm are concerned can be seen throughout the narrative episodes of Antes. To demonstrate this, it would suffice to bring to attention the intertextuality of Arenas’ novels, poetry and essayistic production as variations of the same account. These texts’ constant permutations of characters that share with the author unmistakable biographical features, the deconstructive attitude towards history and its familiar agents, and above all, the subversive posture in approaching tradition denote

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⁵ See Derrida 144.
the enterprise of literature as a carrier of socio-political messages. As Arenas’ critics commonly note, his writings oscillate between the “search for the truth” and the despise for the concept of absolute reality (Negrín 31, Bejel “Antes que Anochezca,” 40, Machover 133).

This seemingly incongruent struggle to conciliate antagonistic actions – the eagerness to tell the truth while discrediting it as an absolute concept – is certainly what contributes to Antes’ strangeness as a text that is ultimately credible despite many episodes that are deceitful in their presentation of the facts. However, it is the obsessive convergence of testimony, fiction and history, easily observed in the totality of Arenas’ works, that affords the author’s writing the necessary verisimilitude, thus confirming the text’s ability to be truthful without necessarily accounting for the precision of truth. The inseparability of truth and falsehood is a

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6 As Eduardo C. Béjar observes, the multiple approaches utilized by Arenas in the configuration of his literary praxis concerning the fusion of discourses of history, autobiography and politics represent a method of resistance to the reductive violation of the European logos. According to Béjar: “las paralógicas furcaciones con que se escribe el discurso novelístico areniano espejea nuestra [Latinoamérica] contradictoria y paradojal condición, y nos entrega a una realidad abierta a su más plena definición … a la plural ficcionalización que cada lectura hermenéutica implica” (11).

7 “Constantemente lo autobiográfico en Arenas se entrecruza con la fantasía. El testimonio acoge a la ficción porque la verdad que proclaman sus libros no depende de la fidelidad al dato historiográfico. La historia se nutre de poesía y la poesía transgrede el espacio y el tiempo para acoplar en una misma página experiencias múltiples que dan constancia del compromiso ideológico del autor con su circunstancia histórica” (Myares and Rosencvaig viii).
common attribute of Arenas’ literature, and the author consciously manipulating the borders of the fictional, the real, the collective and the personal constitutes the basis of his literary praxis.⁸

In situating himself between the lines that separate truth from falsehood and undermining both concepts according to contextual and personal convictions, Arenas approaches the autobiographical space as a strategic construction of Self that serves the double purpose of negotiating the meaning of his own existence while seeking to defy the status quo of Cuba’s political arena. What one notices from reading Arenas’ Antes is that the autobiography’s true face is revealed as a biased multi-purposed literary project that can confound one’s appreciation of its subject’s life story inasmuch as it gives the illusion of literary knowledge over the author’s identity and his history as an authentic experience.

The successful construction of the authorial Self as a credible entity is vital to the process of the autobiographical truth, for the act of self-

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⁸ In an interview with Francisco Soto, Arenas comments that the fusion of the autobiographical and the “official” historical account in his novels constitute a means to interpret and validate history from the individual’s perspective: “A mí me interesan fundamentalmente dos cosas en el mundo de la narrativa. Uno, es la exploración de mi vida personal, de las experiencias personales, de mis sufrimientos, de mis propias tragedias. Y dos, el mundo histórico. Llevar esa historia a un plano completamente de ficción. Interpretar la historia como quizás la vio la gente que la padeció” (47).
characterization allows the value of the autobiographical message to surpass textual contradictions and intentional or unintentional ambiguities. Authenticity, therefore, relies on the ability of the self-depiction to effectively dismiss narrative imperfections on the basis of the illusory sincerity of the authorial perspective.

Arenas’ insistent characterization of his persona as a marginal subject justifies the incoherencies that the text presents. The value of the authorial message subsumes the materiality of the historical circumstances related based on the emphasis given to the author’s dissident and persecuted condition. The emotional turmoil experienced by Arenas while being victimized by Castro’s regime is textually imposed as something more important than the historical accuracies surrounding the Cuban Revolution. Emotions eventually prevail over history, which release the autobiographical subject to reorganize facts according to his/her own point of view. Life writing is advanced as a testimony, which in turn implies the text as a valid type of historical document:

Yo me sentía perseguido y con toda razón. A veces cuando escribía, la policía parqueaba su auto en los bajos de mi cuarto y permanecía allí durante
horas; era como una advertencia o una manera de intimidarlo a uno aun más. (179)

In the section entitled “Adiós a Virgilio,” one can clearly see Arenas’ rhetoric of victimization in favor of a corrective measure against history. In this episode, the author refutes the causes of the death of Piñera by openly claiming the State’s involvement:

El cadáver había sido retirado por la Seguridad del Estado, con el pretexto de que tenían que hacerle una autopsia, cosa ésta completamente insólita, ya que la autopsia se le hace al cadáver antes de llevarlo a la funeraria ... sospeché que aquella muerte repentina podía haber sido un asesinato. (294)

Arenas’ arguments center on the causes of Piñera’s death, which the author infers from the State’s suspicious proceedings regarding the poet’s dead body. The claim of Piñera’s death by natural causes, introduced as that officially purported by the government, is directly disputed. The author ties Piñera’s death to Castro’s alleged personal hatred for leftist writers and homosexuals in general, which consequentially turns the suspicion of governmental involvement into a probable cause:
Fidel Castro ha odiado siempre a los escritores, incluso a los que están de parte del Gobierno, como Guillén o Retamar, pero en el caso de Virgilio el odio era aún más enconado; quizá porque era homosexual y también porque su ironía era corrosiva y anticommunista y anticatólica. Representaba al eterno disidente, al inconforme constante, al rebelde incesante. (294)

In the aforementioned passage and throughout the narrative accounts of *Antes*, Arenas manipulates to his favor the rhetoric of persecution that has been commonly associated with dictatorial regimes. His description of Piñera is obviously mythic and could be viewed as a projection of the qualities the author sought to manifest about himself throughout his works - one’s freedom to be what one desires. The mythic portrayal of Piñera, however, does not discredit Arenas’ charges of the State’s involvement in his friend’s death. To the contrary, it reinforces the emotive quality of the act of remembrance, which appeals to the reader and reinforces Arenas’ conspiracy theory as a plausible hypothesis.

As sincerity in Arenas’ autobiography is evoked under the sigma of oppression, the author’s constant portrayal of his own victimization under Fidel Castro’s regime
emphasizes his autobiography as a type of evidence to be used against the system. As a testimony intended to expose the atrocities committed against political dissidents, Antes functions as a political instrument of activism. Arenas’ call to arms is by no means a subtle attempt to mobilize resistance against the oppressive system from which he managed to escape. As the author notes in his suicide letter: “Mi mensaje no es un mensaje de derrota, sino de lucha y esperanza. Cuba será libre. Yo ya lo soy” (343).

The politically charged message of oppression present in Antes’ narrative denotes the author’s awareness that the ownership of discourse – in terms of political and intellectual power – corresponds to the Other’s ability to convincingly enunciate his own truth. The many passages in

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9 The message of political dissidence and persecution in Arenas’ Antes corresponds to a category of discourse that Gayatri Spivak defines as testimony within the postcolonial theoretical perspective. According to the critic: “Testimony is a genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other. Editorial control varies in degree but is never absent. Indeed, a more-self-consciously subalternist anthropology comes generically closer to the production of testimony, with again, a variable degree of transcoding for an academic readership” (“Three Women’s Texts and Circumfession,” 7).

10 Foucault draws attention to the position of the modern intellectual as a threat to the Establishment on the basis of his/her accumulated knowledge. In one of the critics many interviews, he cites the discovery of nuclear energy as an example of how knowledge and the specific agents who possess it are able to affect the status quo of historical discourses. As Foucault observes: “since the nuclear threat affected the whole human race and the fate of the world, his discourse [the intellectual] could at the same time be the discourse of the universal … And for the first time … the intellectual was hounded by political powers, no longer on account of a general discourse which he
which Arenas expresses his obsession with saving manuscripts at the risk of his own life imply the characterization of his persona as a threat to Castro’s regime, inasmuch as they present the author as an equal to the revolutionary Establishment. As Arenas recounts, the Cuban government’s recognition of the subversive qualities of his literature acknowledges the fact that his existence is a hazard to the truth purported by the Cuban socialist ideology: “había cometido la osadía de sacar, clandestinamente, aquellas obras, y publicarlas sin el permiso, naturalmente, de Nicolás Guillen que era el presidente de la UNEAC” (143).

Literature as an act of subversion and as a form of personal revenge is not restricted to Arenas’ autobiography but is, in fact, a constant feature of the author’s entire literary production. In the novel El color del verano, for instance, the character of Virgilio Piñera, before burning the manuscripts of his poems in the fear that Fijo’s (Fidel Castro) regime could deem them antirevolutionary, states that all literature unavoidably corresponds to a vindictive action: “Uno escribe para los demás. Eso es indiscutible. Y toda escritura es una venganza ... Escribo mi venganza y

conducted, but because of knowledge at his disposal: it was at this level that he constituted a political threat” (“Truth and Power,” 69).
tengo que leerla” (129). Following this same precept of writing as a form of vengeance, Arenas writes in Otra vez el mar:

Supone él que aún pueda expresar
lo que se le antoja o pugna,
que aún puede transmitir su venganza, su desesperación,
su verdad.
que alguien recogerá sus palabras,
que nadie lo persigue,
que no es aún un instrumento. (271)

These are but a few examples of the provocative tone that Arenas employs throughout his body of works. In El color, perhaps the most orgiastic and profane of Arenas’ works, the concept of writing with a vengeance is clearly realized through the satirical descriptions of the characters. Among the many figures who do not escape Arenas’ vengeful fury, one encounters personal acquaintances, the Pope, Adam and Eve, the president of the United States, famous literary personalities such as Gabriel García Márquez (who is Ironically referred to as “la Marquesa de Macondo”) and other iconographic figures whose presences in the Establishment have come to
constitute myths in their own right, following Roland Barthes’ appreciation of the term.\textsuperscript{11}

The burlesque and defamatory criticism Arenas employs when depicting the characters of \textit{El color} not only underscores the inversion of their positive attributes but also apparently seeks to destroy tradition in itself: “Adán y Eva eran dos hombres (dicen que uno disfrazado de mujer) o dos locas, o dos mujeres que rompieron la norma celeste, porque buscaban su propio cielo” (390). The same could be observed in \textit{Otra vez}, a work that, in spite of being far less humorous than Arenas’ other novels, still maintains a hypercritical stance that forms a direct defiance of the Establishment:

\begin{quote}
¿Representa? ¿Está representando? ¿Estamos siempre representando? ¿No existe para ustedes más que una perpetua escena donde la verdad se esconde, donde la ansiedad se esconde, donde el deseo y la furia se esconden pero acercan? (118)
\end{quote}

If vengeance is diffused in Arenas’ novels amidst a hypothetical experience of reality – novelistic fictional truths\textsuperscript{12} – the testimonial aspect of the claims of \textit{Antes}

\textsuperscript{11} “Since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters its message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones” (Barthes 109).

\textsuperscript{12} See Riffaterre, \textit{Fictional Truth}. 
reveals vengeance as a powerful ideological force within the autobiographical project. As a rhetorical weapon, Arenas’ vindictive articulation of his truth establishes a form of subversion that attempts to implode meanings from within.

Constantly on the attack, representing his Self as an offensive entity, Arenas does not disguise the writing as an active form of vengeance. Nor does the author undermine Antes’ literary merits by using it as the realization of a malicious project that denounces those individuals who contributed to his self-proclaimed marginality and persecution. The multiple vicious attacks and defamatory anecdotes that permeate the autobiographical space of Antes are denotative of an interweaving of discourses of power, desire, dissidence and transgression that Arenas aligns within the autobiographical message with an explicit deconstructive intention. Arenas’ writing with a vengeance presupposes the discrediting and de-authorization of traditional sources of discourse – whether gendered or politically centered – in order to propose the subaltern agent as the prevailing enunciator of the truth.

One of the most noticeable ways in which Arenas utilizes vengeance as a subversive force in the autobiographical writing is found in the de-moralization of
characters through acts of sexual perversion as well as in
the author’s representation of his persona as a sexually
deviant entity. The appropriation of diffused rhetorical
discourses, which mitigates the homosexual existence to a
marginal condition, is reversed by the author as he
transfers attributes often conferred to homosexuals to the
heterosexual Other. Common victims of this process in
Arenas autobiography are the military police and similar
authorities whose double-life Arenas attempts to demystify:

Casi todos aquellos jóvenes que desfilaban ante
la Plaza de la Revolución aplaudiendo a Fidel
Castro, con aquellas caras marciales, después de
delos desfiles, iban a acurrucarse en nuestros
cuartos y, allí, desnudos, mostraban su
autenticidad (131).

As the author challenges the Establishment by
denunciating its hypocrisies, he also appropriates the
stigmas of homosexual behavior imposed by the patriarchal
order. The carnivalesque rhetoric of Antes displays an
authorial ambivalence towards the traditional homosexual
discourse, for Arenas reverts to the center the same image
that the center has projected onto the Other. This rhetoric
certainly exposes the act of autobiographical self-
determination to be the repossess of one’s life and not
merely the repetition of what has been imposed upon the excluded Other as identity.

The conjuring of imageries commonly diffused as truths regarding homosexual comportment – such as the search for pleasure, moral corruption, the excesses of the flesh, etc. – directly attack any homogeneous polarizations of gender identity in Arenas’ lifewriting. Arenas’ descriptions tend to demoralize and emasculate the sources of power that authorize the myth of the homosexual as a moral decadent.\textsuperscript{13} The author’s literary victimization of the Cuban military, in particular, translates such a subversive attitude.

As Arenas narrates in one episode of \textit{Antes}, while riding the bus with one of his friends – Tomasito La Goyesca – the author encounters an individual to whom Tomasito makes sexual advances, not knowing that he is a governmental official. The young officer reacts violently to Tomasito’s advances and accuses both Arenas and his friend, amidst a crowd of bystanders, of being \textit{pájaros}.

\textsuperscript{13} Arenas’ vengeful writing in \textit{Antes}, besides obviously targeting the military as a symbol of oppression, also openly criticizes recognizable literary figures who supported the Cuban revolutionary regime. As the author writes in his autobiography: "Los dictadores y los regímenes autoritarios pueden destruir a los escritores de dos modos: persiguiéndolos o colmándolos de prebendas oficiales ... gente de indiscutible talento, una vez que se acogieron a la nueva dictadura, jamás volvieron a escribir nada de valor. ¿Qué fue de la obra de Alejo Carpentier después de haber escrito \textit{El Siglo de las Luces}? Churros espantosos, imposibles de leer hasta el final. ¿Qué fue de la poesía de Nicolás Guillén? A partir de los sesenta toda esa obra es prescindible; es más, absolutamente lamentable" (116).
(homosexuals). Arenas and Tomasito are forced to exit the bus while a multitude of chaste individuals hurls insults towards them, intending to physically harm Arenas and Tomasito for their alleged immorality. Arenas defends his friend’s innocence by asserting in the autobiography that the young officer had, in fact, made several obvious sexual advances to Tomasito: “y se había tocado el sexo, el cual tenía, evidentemente, erecto” (120). In the midst of the commotion, while the eroticized officer of the Ministerio del Interior assaults Tomasito, they accidentally exchange wallets.

When later Tomasito and Arenas proceed to the officer’s house in order to exchange their respective wallets, the young official behaves in a rather unusual fashion. He demands that Arenas and his friend sign a document in which they state the purpose of their visit. The military official then proceeds to masturbate while insulting the author and his companion for their alleged immorality:

Se estaba bañando y salió desnudo, secándose con una toalla, que después se amarró a la cintura. Mientras nos hacía firmar y leer aquel extraño documento, se tocaba el sexo, que otra vez se
levantaba erotizado y, al mismo tiempo, nos insultaba llamándonos de inmorales. (121)

Arenas’ not only portrays this incident as an absurd sexual adventure of picaresque and homoerotic qualities but also manipulatively describes the young officer’s comportment as an incongruous manifestation within a regime of institutionalized masculinity. Arenas adversely inscribes the representation of his homosexual body as a force capable of perverting the dominant Other. Not only is the officer represented as a macho entity attracted to the maricones he earlier persecuted, but he is also portrayed as a figure of authority weakened by the homosexual presence, who is able to arouse one’s desire at will.

In the unmasking of authority as an entity capable of expressing homoerotic behaviors, Arenas explicitly enunciates the homosexual subaltern as an agent able to bring dominant forces to his own level. The author advances the idea that macho revolutionaries are not free from homosexual desire, which consequentially portray the Cuban military as weakened presence when confronting their supposedly inherent homosexual tendencies:

Aquél hombre que nos había perseguido por maricones, lo que quería era que nosotros nos lanzásemos a su sexo y se lo hubiésemos frotado y
mamado allí mismo. Tal vez eran aberraciones de todo sistema represivo. (121)

It could be argued here that the fantastic quality of this passage – as well as many others – may represent a crisis within the autobiographical truth Arenas intends to articulate. After all, the fact that the wallets were exchanged while Tomasito made sexual advances towards the young officer is hardly credible. The narrative insufficiency of this episode does not explain the workings of how the exchange actually took place; Arenas merely states it in the text without detailing the nature of the farce which he recounts: “Tomasito … descubrió que tenía una cartera que no le pertenecía. En el estruendo de la batalla había cogido aquella cartera pensando que era la suya y no lo era” (120).

However, the obvious picaresque tonality present in this episode enunciates the sort of truth Arenas intends to articulate. The implausibility of this episode is overwritten by the workings of an allegorical truth that functions as praxis in the author’s vengeful desacralization of authority. In spite of the fact that Tomasito’s incident contains a picaresque parodic connotation that reveals the authorial imagination at work – and even a deliberate act of fictionalization within the
autobiographical ground – the appeal of this episode’s message in its apparent absurdity resides in Arenas’ caricaturization. The textual artifice of an exaggerated type of humor exposes Castro’s regime as a disjointed political system in discord with its own principles and creeds. The initial distrust one experienced in the reading Tomasito’s roguish account is thus counterbalanced by the oppositional force of a message that redeems the implausibility of the narrative in its approach to caricature.

The appreciation of Tomasito’s episode beyond the boundaries of literality is made possible as the truth emerges at the precise moment in which one identifies the caricaturized depiction of Arenas’ implausible adventure as part of a communally shared sense of reality. Therefore, the articulation of truth in an allegorical state satisfies the reader, for it is admitted as a partially recognizable form of reality. As Emilio Bejel notes, such an action constitutes a threat because Arenas:

14 See Bahktin, Rabelais and His World esp. 275.
15 As Mikhail Bahktin explains, the literary caricaturization provokes in the reader a feeling of dissatisfaction towards the recognition of the truth. As the critic notes: “el sentimiento de insatisfacción proviene de que la imagen es imposible e inverosímil ... Y es esta imposibilidad, este aspecto inconcebible, lo que crea un vivo sentimiento de insatisfacción. No obstante, este último es vencido por una doble satisfacción: primero, porque reconocemos en esta imagen exagerada la depravación y la inmoralidad ... reubicamos esta imagen exagerada en la realidad, y segundo, porque experimentamos una
Undermines not only conventional morals but also the foundation that sustains such morality: “the truth,” which is the epistemological legitimization of “the real.” Reality, [...] devalued and demystified by the loss of the true, is forced to imitate art, which is rhetorically associated with appearance, style, and falsehood. ("Arenas’ Antes que anochezca," 313)

The extent of the logic of recognizing the marginal Other as a disruption and potential threat to what is to be authorized as truth can be clearly observed in another narrative instance in which Arenas reports to have been arrested by a man with whom he maintains sexual relations. After consensually having sex with Arenas, the author’s lover displays a military identification, arresting Arenas for being a maricón. When both men arrive at the police station, the recruit states as evidence of Arenas’ misconduct the fact that the author had showed him his penis. Arenas contradicts the young man by affirming that they had actually engaged in a consensual sexual relationship and, as evidence, the author claims to still carry inside of him the young recruit’s semen:

satisfacción moral, pues esta inmoralidad y esta depravación son fustigadas por medio de la caricatura y de la ridiculización (La cultura popular en la edad media y renacimiento, 275).
Yo expliqué la realidad y les dije que aún tenía semen suyo dentro de mi cuerpo. Se produjo un careo. Quizá, como él era el activo, creía que no había cometido ningún delito, o tal vez se veía como una joven desvirgada por algún ser depravado. (121)

Here Arenas reorders the traditional notion that machismo pardons the homosexual male who performs the active role.\textsuperscript{16} As Arenas reports on the authorities’ reactions against the charges imposed on him by punishing the young recruit, he subverts the apparent impunity of the homosexual active role. Arenas re-conceptualization of homosexuality, in this case, connotatively implies the possibility of the homosexual entity to act as the victimizer rather than the victim by reversing the charges in the premises of confession and testimony:

Terminaron diciendo que era una vergüenza que un miembro de la policía hiciese esas cosas, porque yo, después de todo, tenía mi debilidad, pero que en él, que era un macho, eso de enredarse con un maricón era realmente imperdonable. Creo que se levantó una acta y a él lo expulsaron de la

\textsuperscript{16} See Alvarez 25-48.
policía, o por lo menos lo trasladaron para otra estación. (122)

With rhetorical strategies similar to those expressed in Tomasito’s and the aforementioned account, Arenas postulates that it is ideologically possible for the marginal entity to undermine the normative fixities of the Establishment by re-appropriating and refracting the patriarchal order’s long-established discourse. In the realms of Arenas’ autobiographical writing, the articulation of homosexual desire promotes such refraction when stipulating the Other as a subaltern force capable of disturbing and reckoning with the order of things. Arenas expands on the notion of the subaltern autobiography as a contested space whose function is to propose an ontological crisis to the topos of oppression.

The vindictive principle that moves Arenas’ writing effectively finds in the allegorical character of the autobiographical truth a powerful and subversive subterfuge of self-articulation, capable of communicating biased messages without necessarily losing sight of the writing’s purpose of making the stigma of oppression visible. On the one hand, one might consider Arenas’ autobiography to be manipulative, misleading and deliberately untruthful, which
in actuality it is. On the other hand, no system of representation escapes such a paradigm of manipulation—especially writing, which relies on the insufficiency of signs to convey the meaning of things. Nonetheless, Arenas’ depiction of the universal necessity of individuals to be able to speak of and on behalf of their own truths bypasses the caricaturesque addresses and hyperbolic accounts of his autobiography. The text thus unveils itself not as literality but as the symbolic account of one man’s journey to repossess the right to self-representation.  

**The Self as an Act of Message**

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17 The issue concerning the deliberate authorial mishandling of historical facts in Arenas’ autobiography is treated in both Abilio Estévez critical appreciation of *Antes* and in Manuel Pereira’s article “Reinaldo antes del alba.” However, while Estévez emphasizes the value of Arenas’ autobiographical message above historical inaccuracies, Pereira sees it as a deliberate manipulation from the part of the author to intentionally reclaim attention to the body of his works, which Arenas deems unfairly rejected in the Cuban literary milieu. Supporting his argument on the self-centered and manipulative character of Arenas’ literature as a reflection of his Self, Pereira affirms: “A Arenas le gustaba meterse con la gente, buscarse problemas, invocando a cada paso los demonios de la desgracia, como si no le bastase la calidad de su prosa para llamar la atención ... Lo que perjudica [a *Antes*] es esa rabia desenfrenada que ya empezó a lastimar sus textos desde que salió de Cuba” (55).

18 Although Arenas’ collection of essays published under the title **Necesidad de libertad** deals with a variety of themes that span critical appraisals on literature, politics and various themes interconnected with the subject of lifewriting, the topos of freedom appears as a constant them. Essentially, as Soren Triff suggests, it could be argued that Arenas’ entire literary praxis is dedicated to resist the ideological uniformity of Cuba’s hegemonic discourse (183-4).
Arenas’ rhetorical homosexualization of the revolutionary macho as an entity subject to desire’s vulnerability denotes sexuality as the vengeful tonic of the autobiographical narrative. However, beyond the denunciation of the Cuban Establishment’s hypocrisies concerning the nuevo hombre19 and his alleged masculinity, Arenas’ self-articulation as an unleashed sexual force also suggests the precepts of the Revolution to be restrictive and normative constructions of identity that are founded within the fixities imposed by the very bourgeois social order it wished to eradicate.20 Arenas’ “homosexualization” of the macho revolutionary writes otherness as normalcy, inscribes difference into sameness.

In the proposition of authority as a potential homosexual, Arenas explores gender identity as a social construct while seeking to reveal the artist’s existence as a struggle to overcome the engendered definitions of

19 In his essay “El hombre nuevo,” Ernesto Guevara delineates an antithetical image for the bourgeois intellectual by purporting the individual’s sense of civic duty and responsibility as fundamental qualities of the “revolutionary man.” Additionally, Guevara projects the true revolutionary identity as being a characteristically masculine authority whose search for knowledge and intellect should be unmistakably altruistic (http://www.ensayistas.org/antologia/XXA/Che).

20 As Suzanne Kaebnick affirms, “Cuban nationalism celebrates male virility as the emblem of national strength, but, like many other modern ideologies of the nation, denigrates sexual intercourse between men and constructs abject personalities supposedly pertaining to these bodies” (102).
“being” dictated by tradition. Homosexual desire is amply diffused in Antes as shameless and natural, released from its customary patriarchal guilt. Early on in the autobiography, the reader encounters such an ideological tenet as the author describes his sexual voracity as a campesino child. As Arenas states, the manifestation of sexuality in the countryside — whether zoophillic, heterosexual or homosexual — does not fully conform to the same generic fixities employed by urban milieu in its bourgeois normative conduct: “Siempre tuve una gran voracidad sexual. No solamente las yeguas, las puercas, las gallinas o las granjas, sino casi todos los animales fueron objetos de mi pasión sexual, incluyendo los perros” (39).

From the beginning of his life account, Arenas imposes on the reader a definition of sexuality that justifies the transgressive act of homoerotic activity as an innocuous and primal occurrence. The author sees within the “primitivism” of the country the full manifestation of Self

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21 Arenas’ construction of maleness in Antes stands as an alternative to the pre-established patriarchal image of masculinity. Kaebnick notes that: “As an alternative to machismo, Arenas does not endorse a “gay” politics, not if that is understood to mean a politics of shared, identical gender roles as he interprets “gay.” Instead, [he] presents a more democratic gender politics in which erotic relations between “masculine” and “feminine” males are a cause for celebration” (102-3).

22 George L. Mosse postulates that nationalism and sexuality are jointly defined by a bourgeois aesthetics. As Mosse argues, “just as modern nationalism emerged in the eighteenth century, so the ideal of respectability and its definition of sexuality fell into place at the same time” (1).
outside convention, and also the closest one could actually come to sexual plenitude.\(^{23}\)

> En los medios campesinos hay una fuerza erótica que, generalmente, supera todos los prejuicios ... la fuerza de la naturaleza, se impone. Creo que en el campo son pocos los hombres que no han tenido relaciones con otros hombres; en ellos los deseos del cuerpo están por encima de todos los sentimientos machistas que nuestros padres se encargaron de inculcarnos. (40)

The natural domain of one’s sexuality – namely the rural environment where the desires of the flesh are above patriarchal inculcations of maleness – is not removed from its own context of violence. The instinctive manifestation of sexual desire occurs, as Arenas reports, against a background of incessant brutality that mirrors the universe he later experiences under Castro’s dictatorship.

> El medio campesino en el cual pasé mi infancia no era solamente el mundo de las relaciones sexuales, era también un mundo conminado por una incesante violencia. Las ovejas se colgaban vivas

\(^{23}\) According to Arenas, the country represents a locale where nature’s primitivism places the individual in contact to a raw and androgynous type of eroticism: “hay que tener en cuenta que, cuando se vive en el campo, se está en contacto directo con el mundo de la naturaleza y, por lo tanto, con el mundo erótico” (39).
por las patas y se degollaban; luego se les desangraba y, medio vivas todavía, se descuartizaban (41).

If on the one hand, in his earlier years as a campesino Arenas reports being relatively free to express his homoerotic feelings, and the violence he experiences is restricted to the background of nature, on the other hand, during Castro’s regime, violence and desire meet as oppositional forces in the context of the city. Even though Arenas proposes in the pages of Antes the enjoyment of sex as a form of escape from authoritarianism, the libidinal manifestation of one’s Self is purported by the author to be corrupted by the physical and spiritual violence of Castro’s regime. Violence is articulated in Arenas’ autobiographical message as a mechanism of repression that, besides attempting to conceal homoerotic desire, is intended to operate in the redefinition of one’s sexual identity.

The presence of accounts in Antes in which Arenas asserts his identity as an early revolutionary indicates the inclusive attitude towards validating his homosexual identity as a part of the first stages of the revolutionary movement. Although the author voices his discontent with many incidents that occur within the revolutionary milieu –
such as the practice of unfair executions of alleged traitors – he still takes pride in looking back and asserting himself as a rebel who believed in the promises of the Revolution: “Bajamos las lomas y nos recibieron como héroes; en mi barrio en Holguín, me dieron una bandera del 26 de julio y yo recorrí la cuadra con aquella enorme bandera en la mano” (68).

Nevertheless, in his recollections, the author does not obscure homoerotic desire as a part of the aura created around the Revolution, specifically in the depiction of its masculine agents:

Los rebeldes eran, por lo demás, guapos, jóvenes y viriles; al menos aparentemente. Toda la prensa mundial quedó fascinada con aquellos hermosos barbudos, muchos de los cuales, además, tenían una espléndida melena (68).

Further reinforcing the sexual appeal that the image of the revolutionary exerted on the nation, Arenas reports: “en general las mujeres y también muchos hombres de la ciudad se volvían locos por aquellos peludos; todos querían llevarse algún barbudo a su casa” (68).

Indeed, the definition of the revolutionary individual as the prototypical nuevo hombre confined the individual to modes of behavior that were limiting not only in terms of
conforming one’s mind to specific political ideals but also in its restrictive generic attributes. As is often perceived in totalitarian regimes, the very sustainability of the Establishment requires the elimination of any type of representational ambiguity that deviates from uniform and hegemonic models of social order. The myth of the revolutionary, in particular, played an integral part in Castro’s government, for it not only circulated an ideal image to be attained by all of those who subscribed to the propositions of the Revolution but also leveled differences within the regime at the cost of exclusion.

The paradox of the Revolution’s attempted unification of difference occurred as the Cuban socialist regime, opposing the bourgeois patriarchal norm, founded a rhetoric of respectability similar to that of the socio-political and economic system that it vehemently contested. If the bourgeois context of the nineteenth-century capitalism already deemed homosexuality a form of parasitism, the homosexual worker, in the perspective of the social

25 As Richard Ellis affirms, “the gay male is integral to Cuban revolutionary discourse, since it is in opposition to him, as the designated incarnation of bourgeois degeneracy, that the identity of the socialist “new man” is forged” (125). Although such a statement is rather restrictive of concurrent factors that have contributed to the exclusion of the practice of homosexuality as a permissive act within the patriarchal order, it is significant to note that Castro’s regime, indeed, utilized the bourgeois mythology of the homosexual as a social parasite to the benefit of the Revolution’s own representational uniformity.
Revolution, became stigmatized as anti-revolutionary for his confusing sexual conduct (Ellis 125).\textsuperscript{26} The homosexual identity posed, therefore, an effective threat to the revolutionary Cuban regime, for its very contradiction of the heterosexist order imposed by the State became an act of defiance. The spread of the nuevo hombre ideology connotatively carried within its articulation an idea of masculine performance as a signifier of inclusion and citizenship within the social strata.

Whether consciously or not, the institutionalization of machismo through the nuevo hombre identity became a synonym for opposing homosexual behavior viewed as a byproduct of the bourgeois mentality. As José B. Alvarez notes, the most obvious demonstrations of the behavioral institutionalization of machismo in the context of the Revolution can be observed in the hypermasculinization of the body. As Alvarez states, the very appearance of the revolutionaries, whose Prussian style haircuts replace the long-haired rebel image, place in evidence a new typological construction of identity. Women, who begin to enlist in the armed forces, are dressed in the characteristic olive-green military uniform, which suggests

\textsuperscript{26} According to Mosse, “manliness was invoked to safeguard the existing order against the perils of modernity, which threatened the clear distinction between what was considered normal and abnormality” (23).
that Cuban socialism rearranges itself by accommodating its new ideals to well-regimented patriarchal values (30).\textsuperscript{27}

Arenas denounces Castro’s patriarchal fundamentalism as an intentional project within the processes of forming the post-Revolution Cuban identity. As the author retells, the Revolution ideology was fueled by inflammatory discourses in which its symbolic intelligentsia, Fidel Castro, dictated what was to be seen as revolutionary: \textsuperscript{28}

Recuerdo un discurso de Fidel Castro en el cual se tomaba la potestad de informar cómo debían vestir los varones. De la misma forma criticaba a los jovencitos que tenían melena y que iban por las calles tocando la guitarra” (119).

The author exposes the constructionist aspect of Castro’s regime’s “new man” by asserting its incoherence and

\textsuperscript{27} On the grounds of the homosexual exclusion in the process of the Revolution, José B. Alvarez affirms that: “La persecución del homosexual tiene que ver con la persecución del disidente; un homosexual es un disidente de la norma burguesa de vida conyugal, en pareja. Cuando los roles “Mujer-Hombre revolucionario/a,” los cuales has sido dictaminados autocráticamente, se transgreden [sic.], el poder, que la hegemonía heterosexual se autoatribuye, es violado; violación que lleva a que la hegemonía contrataque [sic.] con una fuerza reaccacionaria que, además de contener, arremete violentamente al percibir que el orden sexual está siendo desafiado” (25).

\textsuperscript{28} Castro often spoke of machismo as a historical tradition, dismissing its institutionalization as a conscious practice employed by his regime and, conversely, dismissing the persecution and imprisonment of those who deviated from the norms of conduct imposed by the regime. As he affirms in an interview to Ann Louise Badach in 1994, “el machismo es una tradición histórica y cultural … Debo decirle que nunca he compartido de esos sentimientos … Pienso que pudo haber habido una época en la que el machismo fue muy poderoso, pero no fue un producto de la revolución, sino del medio social en que vivíamos … nunca ha habido aquí una persecución de homosexuales” (50).
aleatory articulation, for it condemns, among other things, the very haircut that rebels displayed during revolutionary conflicts. The Revolution’s suppression of spontaneous behavior, which for Arenas corresponds to the limiting of one’s ability to freely manifest desire, translates in the autobiographical space into an individual struggle to reject imposed and unnatural codes of conduct. The innumerous sexual experiences narrated in Antes are thus justified through the prism of a rebellion within a rebellion. The homoerotic sexual act becomes not only a form of escape from authoritarianism but also is converted into an act of message that expresses a direct confrontation against what the system stipulates as proper behavior:

Clandestinamente, seguíamos reuniéndonos en las playas o en las casas o, sencillamente, disfrutábamos de una noche de amor con algún recluta pasajero, con una becada o con algún adolescente desesperado que busca la forma de escapar la represión. (117)

Arenas’ rhetorical use of sexuality in Antes is reportedly personal and political, since the very presentation of desire is framed within the subversive homosexual act of reclaiming the body as private property.
The various sexual episodes that populate Arenas’ autobiography claim not only desire and pleasure as synonyms of individual freedom but also symbolically come to represent the rejection of the State’s effective control over one’s body.\textsuperscript{29} These transgressive attitudes towards authority can be further noted in the very aspect of the depiction of sex as a public performance. The visibility of the homosexual body in the open space suggests the materiality of its presence amidst the context of its repression.

While blatantly depicting his homosexuality, Arenas unavoidably represents a contradiction where visibility is concerned. As the author reports to have acted out his homosexual Self in the public space during his years in Cuba, he indicates that he also opened himself to persecution. However, the narrative paradox created by Arenas’ choice of representing his Self as a visible loca in the pages of his autobiography is resolved when the performance of his sexuality is rhetorically used against the victimizer, reportedly either to arouse in the persecutor desire for the homosexual or to deceive

\textsuperscript{29} The notion of communal sex as a subversive act that contests the socialist/communist principles of Castro’s regime as well as bourgeois parameters of behavior is taken up by Adolfo Cacheiro in his Marxist analysis of \textit{Antes} (125-30).
authority on the grounds of generic performance, as argued elsewhere in this chapter.\textsuperscript{30}

One example of how Arenas resolves this dichotomy can be observed in the episode in which the author narrates his departure from Cuba. Acting upon the government’s encouragement of homosexuals to leave the country, Arenas goes to the police in order to request a permit that would allow him to leave the island. When the author arrives at the police station, he is asked to prove his homosexuality: “Me preguntaron si yo era homosexual y les dije que sí; me preguntaron entonces si era activo o pasivo, y tuve la precaución de decir que era pasivo” (301). As Arenas continues, the police requests that he walk around the room so that women psychologists could verify if he, in fact, was a legitimate loca. Passing the police identity test, Arenas is finally granted the permit on the condition he remains underground until the time of his exit.

Arenas’ very pragmatic view on gender identity as a relative essentiality is fully manifested in the anecdote of his exile. As the narrative recounts, the author is only granted the immigration permit after he fulfills the

\textsuperscript{30} As Hall argues: “questions of identity are always questions about representation. They are always questions about the invention, not simply the discovery of tradition. They are always exercises in selective memory and they must always involve the silencing of something in order to allow something else to speak” (283).
expectations of what the system considers a homosexual to be. Conscious of what the Establishment projects as a homosexual identity, Arenas is able to re-enact a comportment that is not necessarily his:

A un amigo mío que dijo ser activo le negaron la salida; él no dijo más que la verdad, pero el gobierno cubano no consideraba que los homosexuales activos fueran, en realidad, homosexuales. (301)

This same stance on the contextual relativity of one’s behavior as a defining characteristic of gender identity is also verifiable in one of Arenas’ sexual accounts in which the author is forced into confessing to have performed the passive role, even though in actuality he had not. While engaging in sex with a young man that the author reports to have picked up during a bus ride, Arenas is requested to assume the active position: “Al llegar a la casa me sorprendió porque en vez de él hacer el papel de hombre, me pidió a mí que lo hiciera. Yo en realidad también disfrutaba haciendo esos papeles” (128). After both the

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31 It could be argued that within the premises of patriarchal societies, homosexuality has come to be fundamentally associated with the “passive” role, the characteristic “feminine” stereotypification of one’s body (Kaebnick 104, Mosse 30-7). Nonetheless, there seems to be a limitation to this idea in terms of how one, in fact, is excused or stigmatized as a male who has had sex with a gay person. In support of this hypothesis, it would suffice to mention the accounts in Antes in which soldiers are emasculated and reportedly humiliated on the account of having sexual relations with the author.
author and his partner reach orgasm, the young man asks that if the police arrive, which would be the one to confess to have performed the female role. Arenas replies that he had been the male, for he was the one to penetrate the young man, which causes the adolescent to react violently:

Eso enfureció a aquel hombre, que también practicaba judo, y empezó a tirarme contra el techo; me tiraba y, por suerte, me recibía otra vez en sus brazos, pero me estaba dando unos golpes horribles ... Quién es el hombre?, me repetía. Y yo, que temía perder la vida en aquello, le respondí: “Tú, porque sabes judo.”

(129).

Arenas’ ironic remark at the end of the episode (“tú porque sabes judo”) reinforces the arbitrariness of sexual identity inasmuch as the author indicates that, in the case of the young judo fighter, brute force established one’s definition of a homosexual identity.\(^{32}\) Because the young man knew judo, he was able to “force” upon the author an

\(^{32}\) As Kaebnick notes, “because macho masculinity must be infallible, it is easy to throw into question. It does not matter how many times the tough guy has won fights, once he loses, he is liable to be seen as “weak” or “sissy.” Desire, affection, and especially the desire for erotic intimacy with other men may also put masculinity in question. (102)
admission of submissiveness, suggested to be the passive feminine role.

In this sense, Arenas’ construction of homosexuality could be viewed as guided by patriarchal principles, since the terms male/female still operate under the understanding of force as a defining factor of sexual attributes (male/strength, female/weakness). Collaborating this hypothesis, it could be argued that Arenas’ frequent references to passive homosexuals (locas) in Antes by using the Spanish feminine personal pronoun ella still rely on heterosexual matrixes to understand the homosexual body.\textsuperscript{33} Such a paradigm of generic representation is commonly seen throughout the pages of Arenas’ autobiography. The linguistic insufficiency to define the homosexual outside the male/female/strong/weak parameters forces Arenas to adopt signs that suggest the inescapability of the traditional patriarchal understanding of gender identities.

\textsuperscript{33} This can be noticed in Arenas’ typological assessment of locas in both Antes and his novel El color del verano. In the sections dedicated to "explain" the various homosexual constitutions, the author’s satirical tone in the feminized description of the homosexual being observes an inconsistence where the number of gay personalities is concerned (there are four in the autobiography and more than twenty in El color). Thus, one observes that the utilization of pre-established gender matrixes to identify the homosexual individual in Arenas’ writings is utilized as a textual artifice that ironically approaches homosexuality as an expected performance and not necessarily as an authorial attempt to seriously categorize homosexual behavior. For further reference, see Villaseca 146.
However, it is precisely in the author’s denunciation of the patriarchal incongruities found in male behavior that the message of identity and gender as fluid constructs emerges. When reporting on married and masculine-acting individuals who seek pleasure in the company of other men, the author underscores the deficiency of language to characterize certain behavioral idiosyncrasies when stating: “No sé cómo llamar aquellos jóvenes cubanos de entonces … Lo cierto es que tenían sus novias y sus mujeres, y cuando iban con nosotros gozaban extraordinariamente” (132)

In the precept of identity as a performance, Arenas seizes the autobiographical genre as a space suitable for articulating the multiple aspects of his Self. Under the tenet of the autobiography as a strategic construction of selfhood, the identities Arenas chooses to articulate in Antes ultimately function as combative statements against a repressive regime. The author’s enunciation of his identity as a homosexual exiled dissident, who close to his death reconstructs from afar the history of the homeland, creates a subjectivity that is intended to correspond to the image of the nation both in its past and present stages.

34 See Butler, Gender trouble esp. 16-34.
Certainly, the psychological effects occasioned by the process of deterritorialization exerted a vital influence in Arenas’ writings, which are visibly erected as memorial projects that revise and propagate the concept of nation from the exile’s perspective. As Edward Said argues, the exiled author often reveals in his/her craft the constant need to reconstitute a broken life, for much of his/her existence is taken up with “compensating disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule” (Reflections on Exile, 177). Joseph Brodsky assumes a similar position by arguing that deterritorialization manifests itself aesthetically as a fight to conspire and restore the exiled individual’s significance, his/her leading role and authority in society (26). This sense of Self and restoration is a line of argument also taken up by Domnica Radulesco when observing that spatial discourses, such as exile, inherently translate both a necessity of self-preservation and a need to continually reintegrate and reposition the self within the world in ways that are not solely metaphoric but largely physical (188).

Arenas’ literature observes such paradigms of self-preservation through the re-creation of the original space
as a form of continued existence. However, Arenas’ autobiographical message proposes the appreciation of exile as a human predicament not necessarily tied to geographical displacements. If anything, the pages of _Antes_ express the exiled otherness as a condition emphasized by the stigma of socially unacceptable difference, whether this difference is marked by homosexuality, political dissidence, or even literary aesthetics. For Arenas, exile corresponded to a lasting form of pilgrimage in which the individual never encounters the object desired, for it resides exclusively in the imaginary:

> Para un desterrado no hay ningún sitio donde se pueda vivir; que no existe sitio, porque aquél donde soñamos, donde descubrimos un paisaje, leímos el primer libro, tuvimos la primera aventura amorosa, sigue siendo el lugar soñado; en el exilio uno no es más que un fantasma, una sombra de alguien que nunca llega a alcanzar su completa realidad. (314)

Arenas’ exile experience as reported in his autobiography reveals the author as a homeless body who

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35 _Celestino antes del alba_ is Arenas’ only novel to be published in Cuba. His following works were either clandestinely published abroad or written/rewritten in exile (Hasson 60-1, Soto 35).
writes “from and within exile” (Avila 110).\textsuperscript{36} The melancholy expressed for the homeland is exposed as an act of abjection. The national space and its history are configured both as an utopian project – the longing for a past that is unavoidably better than the actual original experience – and a dystopic reality – the subject’s realization of the impossibility of the full experience of return. Oscillating between memory and present, Arenas’ autobiography discloses the Self under the perennial stigma of difference, a lasting form of otherness that is as metaphysical as the very act of evoking one’s presence through writing.

If on the one hand difference marks Arenas’ existence in the homeland, on the other hand, while in the United States, rejection, solitude and inconformity continue to testify to the author’s permanent experience of otherness. This is particularly noticeable through Arenas’ criticism of the Cuban community in Miami that, in his words,\textsuperscript{36} In Strangers to Ourselves, Julia Kristeva postulates the exilic Self as a form of identity that is independent from geographical constraints. As Kristeva observes: “The foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode … By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns “we” into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible, The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamendable [sic.] to bonds and communities” (264).
corresponded to an appalling caricature of the island.\textsuperscript{37} The author observes the same oppressive codes stipulated by the patriarchal \textit{machismo} that he experienced in Cuba to be widely diffused in the behavior of expatriates such as himself. When describing his arrival at an uncle’s house in Miami, Arenas says that the first thing suggested to him is to assume a manly behavior and conform to social norms stipulated by traditional conventions of respectability: “Ahora te compras un saco, una corbata, te pelas bien corto y caminas de una manera correcta, derecha, firme; te haces además una tarjeta que diga tu nombre y que eres escritor” (313).

Thus, the abject tone with which the latter sections dedicated to Arenas’ exile are narrated is justified not only by the premise of the author’s realization of his eminent death due to AIDS but also by the recognition of the impossibility of escaping his own otherness as a perennial condition. In exile, the rejection of all forms of hegemonic definition, which constitutes the struggle for artistic freedom and for the artist to exist as he is, comes to be realized as something unviable. Although Arenas emphasizes, at the end of his life account, his apolitical

\textsuperscript{37} As Arenas states in Antes: “La típica tradición machista cubana en Miami ha logrado una especie de erupción verdaderamente alarmante. Yo no quise estar mucho tiempo en aquel lugar que era como estar en la caricatura de Cuba; lo peor de Cuba” (313).
stance towards any form of imposed ideology, the author’s suicide apparently contradicts the message of resistance he articulates throughout the pages of his autobiography.\(^{38}\) Nevertheless, Arenas’ suicide may also represent the confirmation of his apolitical position more than an act of despair.\(^{39}\) The act of suicide vouches for the very truth Arenas attempts to communicate in the text; it transcends the materiality of its action and becomes transported to a space of ideological expression. Arenas’ final letter, submitted for publication jointly with his autobiography, supports the argumentative aspect of his death as a strident ideological statement:

> Al pueblo cubano tanto en el exilio como en la Isla los exhorto a que sigan luchando por la libertad. Mi mensaje no es un mensaje de derrota, sino de lucha y esperanza. Cuba será libre. Yo ya lo soy” (343).

It is possible, therefore, to interpret Arenas’ self-inflicted death as an act that reverses the roles of

\(^{38}\) In reinstating his apolitical and marginal position in any form of organized political thought, Arenas states his autobiography: “Nunca me he considerado un ser ni de izquierda ni de derecha; ni quiero que se me catalogue bajo una etiqueta oportunista y política” (322).

\(^{39}\) As Arenas relates in his autobiography, he attempts to commit suicide in at least three occasions prior to his departure from Cuba. It is well to note that suicide is also a common topos of his literature, appearing under various pretexts that express the ideology of inescapability from the repressive reality in which the author lived. See Bejar 249-56.
accuser/accused that marks the autobiographical space of *Antes*, specifically where the author emphasizes the responsible agent for his death, namely Fidel Castro and his regime. The last instances of Arenas’ textual existence are spent reaffirming his own identity as a victimized subject and that of Castro as the representation of totalitarianism. In this process, the author subversively appropriates the very fragility of his emotional and physical condition and rhetorically uses it against he who once persecuted him:

Pongo fin a mi vida voluntariamente … Ninguna de las personas que me rodean están comprometidas con esta decisión. Sólo hay un responsable: Fidel Castro. Los sufrimientos del exilio, las penas del destierro, la soledad y las enfermedades que haya podido contraer en el destierro seguramente no las hubiera sufrido de haber vivido libre en mi país. (343)

In the very space of marginal exclusion – exile – the solitary and dejected last words pronounced by Arenas vouch for his ability to defy authority by reversing the gaze of the persecutor. In this subversive rhetorical maneuver, the authorial marginal Self poses his own suicide as a discursive deliverance, which can be easily aligned with
any other type of organized system of beliefs that reclaims the being liberated from physical or spiritual oppression. Arenas strategically proclaims his personal life account and his Self as the reflection of a condition that is characteristic not only of the Cuban context but that is universal in its very libertarian principles: “Yo digo mi verdad, lo mismo que un judío que haya sufrido el racismo o un ruso que haya estado en un gulag, o cualquier ser humano que haya tenido ojos para ver las cosas tal como son” (322).

The author’s existence becomes, therefore, a presence to the reader in the very resonance of the autobiography as a text in which the subject’s identity is capable of proclaiming the Self beyond its own mortality: “grito, luego existo” (322). Life and work are jointly manifested in the symbolic connotation of Arenas’ death, since the politically articulated act of suicide opens the autobiographical genre to the possibility of contemplating writing as life and the writer as the text.40

40 This tenet can be observed in Arenas’ own stipulation of his literature and his body as a single manifestation of being. Arenas refers in his autobiography to his persecutory existence as a parallel to that of his character Fray Servando in El mundo alucinante: “En El mundo alucinante yo hablaba de un fraile que había pasado por varias prisiones sórdidas … Yo al entrar allí (El Morro), decidí que en lo adelante tendría más cuidado con lo que escribiera, porque parecía estar condenado a vivir en mi propio cuerpo lo que escribía” (222).
Historical Revisionism

The autobiographical space as a valid form of historical discourse has been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent years (Aschcroft et al 355-83, Bjorklund 8, Ashley et al. 5). The current emphasis on the role of the individual subjectivity in the retelling of the historical nation has drawn attention to the necessity of comprehending the past as an imagined narrative, for the characterization of what is to be considered truth is not immune to forces that play a decisive role in the establishment of meaning (Chakrabarty 386). As Edward Said observes, there has been a gathering awareness of the lines existing between cultures that not only allows us to discriminate one nation from another but also:

enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote” (Culture and Imperialism, 15).

This apparent crisis in recent historiography, characterized here by Said as amply arbitrary, is tied to the development of Post-modernism as the logic of late
capitalism, for the same economic agency of the bourgeoisie that once advanced the definition of history and the nation as immutable subjects now requires that their significance be adaptable to the principles of a new socioeconomic order. Suffice to say that the very implications of nationality within the current global setting support this hypothesis. Terms such as “border,” “citizenship,” and “ethnicity” have been propelled into a predicament precisely in order to accommodate the systematic needs of capitalism in a process of constant and irreversible internationalization of consumption and culture (Jameson 64).

However, the recent narratives that directly or indirectly question truth and history as absolute concepts, such as Arenas’ own, do not represent a total abandonment of the acceptance of traditional historicity; neither do they indicate the end of known history (Day 156). If anything, contemporary discourses that candidly deviate from the historical norm, whether or not they are fashioned under the emblem of fiction, suggest the postmodern

41 The understanding of Post-Modernity here departs from Alfonso de Toro’s remarks of its conceptualization as “un fenómeno que parte en particular de la cultura estadounidense a fines de los años 50 y que luego se expande en diversos periodos y etapas por Europa, Latinoamérica y otros continentes y países ... una concepción histórico-epistemológica [que evita] una concepción meramente tipológica que retrospectiva y arbitrariamente tiende a leer y comprender toda la cultura como ‘postmoderna’” (11).
tendency of projecting the being into universality, of making his/her reality accessible to others.\textsuperscript{42} In this sense, peripheral historicity pierces the rhetorical contestation of meanings, as the decentralization of conventional narratives in the Post-modern context offers an “opening” through which the Other, whether speaking for his or being spoken for, engages in the struggle to find his significance within the realms of exclusion.\textsuperscript{43}

In Arenas’ \textit{Antes}, one observes that the articulation of the autobiographical Self comes to represent the nation through the act of reading the authorial identity as a category of historical discourse. Combining the collective and the personal experience within the autobiographical space, Arenas promotes his Self and his testimony as a supplementary history. Whether or not the discourse results in being metaphorical, the claims contained in \textit{Antes} seek to contradict convention. Consequentially, the text is marked not only as a site of representation but also of contestation of disseminated truths.

\textsuperscript{42} As Walcott observes: “we [have grown] aware that history is written [and] that [it] is a kind of literature without morality [where] everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of the hero or of the victim” (371).

\textsuperscript{43} This theme is amply treated by Hommi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture, specifically in the chapter entitled “Dissemination” where the critic attempts to review the historical constitution of the post-colonial nation by reading its conventional discourse as an ambivalent project of nation-building (139-70).
The narrative episodes presented in Antes overwrite history inasmuch as they attempt to persuasively demystify and re-mystify what is credited as authority, thus promoting the marginal testimony as a substitutive document of historical realities. When scrutinizing the significance of the Cuban past, Arenas’ revisionist textual practice directly confronts tradition by vigorously denouncing the process of historical articulation as an oppressive enterprise. As the author argues, hegemonic historicity is trapped within an inexorable pattern of sameness, whose repetitiveness occurs on the account of one’s subjugation to forceful models of authority:

Nuestra historia es una historia de traiciones, alzamientos, conspiraciones, motines, golpes de estado … Esas actitudes se han repetido a lo largo del tiempo: el general Tacón contra Heredia, Martínez Campos contra José Martí, Fidel Castro contra Lezama Lima o Virgilio Piñera; siempre la misma retórica, siempre los mismos discursos, siempre el estruendo militar. (116)

Under the pragmatism of Arenas’ self-characterization as a persecuted subaltern, the marginal perspective contradicts the sovereignty of history by stressing exclusion as a tenet in the process of nation-building. By
the carnivalesque exposition of the military as an oppressive agency responsible for the repudiation of counter-revolutionary discourses, the author intends to reveal the discourse of the revolutionary regime as an incomplete and biased project of national representation.  

Teleology, in this sense, becomes displaced to the marginal gaze as Arenas’ discursive posture proposes that the position of the marginal subject in relation to the narrative of his/her past be taken into consideration as a “sanctioned” account of the truth.  

Indeed, the subversive nature of Arenas’ characterizations in Antes reveals the carnivalesque ideology to be both a method of representation and a critical stance that is capable of demystifying historical narratives by creating its own system of myths. However, the author’s postulation that the marginal gaze reversing the structures of power within the Establishment of the Revolution, acting from the position of persecuted to that

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44 It could be argued that the very stance of post-colonial historicity lies in the conscious awareness that events are indiscriminately bound, as Walcott suggests, to “the exertion of memory [and] subject to invention” (Walcott 370).

45 As Fernando de Toro explains: “there has been an attempt to reject the marginal position to which Post-Colonial discourse has been delegated. This will only transpire ... in Post-Modernism, where the Center is fractured and where universal categories are questioned and are, in fact, dismantled by the Center itself. This is where a new articulation can be produced, a new space linking both Post-modernity and the Post-Colonialism in a new epistemology, which prohibits the production of essentialist master narratives, whether they be from the Center or from the Margin” (27).
of persecutor in Castro’s regime, does not altogether dismiss the incongruities that occur when the marginalized entity attempts to nullify well regimented and communally accepted historical narratives. As Arenas promotes his own textual carnival, he does not prevent, for instance, the hyperbolical affirmations and constant caricatures in the text from generating a type of tension in the contradictions they create.

Nonetheless, factual incongruities are accordingly dismissed in the implications of carnival as a cathartic and communal celebration where the patriarchal order is humorously inverted, thus becoming the circumstantial norm. Arenas’ desacralizing tone allows contradictory historical affirmations to be taken seriously without necessarily being so. The material signifiers one encounters in Antes—such as the author’s sexual deviance and its celebration through detailed accounts—promote an “aesthetic of survival” in the text that overwrites authority by upholding its discrediting on the grounds of an ideology of reversal (Mehuron 47):

46 When referring to humor as an intrinsic aspect of his writing, Arenas states: “El sentido de humor es fundamental, es una de las cosas que nosotros tenemos. O sea, si perdemos la sonrisa no nos queda nada. Y yo creo que es uno de nuestros rasgos autóctonos. Ese sentido del humor, esa ironía, esa burla. Se evoca la realidad de una manera más irrespetuosa y por lo tanto te acerces al mundo sin ese distanciamiento que lleva todo tipo de seriedad. Toda retórica implica un formulismo mientras el sentido del humor irrumpen contra el formalismo y nos da una realidad más humana” (57).
Llegó un momento en que la policía cogía aquellos enormes urinarios de madera y los volteaba, cubriendo a cientos de hombres desnudos poseyéndose unos a otros en medio del carnaval, en medio de miles de personas que, súbitamente, veían asombrados aquella cantidad de hombres erotizados. (159)

If in its celebratory connotations carnival’s ideology of a “world turned upside down” is characterized by a strict temporal logic, in Arenas’ testimony its recursive practice suggests the contrary. The traditional implication of carnival as a subversion of the social order that is temporally limited is contradicted in Arenas’ autobiographical space as the author endorses the carnivalesque attitude against the narrative authority as a constant method of action. Since Antes’ discursive effects attempt to cause a rupture with any agencies of political and social dominance, the autobiography’s message consequentially endorses the rhetoric of carnival as a literary instrument of historical revisionism.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ As Umberto Ecco explains, carnival can exist only as an authorized form of transgression that reminds us of the existence of rule” (Carnival, 6). In this sense, carnival unequivocally constitutes a form of illusionary liberation and not an un-ruled celebration, as commonly thought.
The Zafra de los Diez Millones account corresponds to one of the processes through which Arenas installs the carnivalesque as a revisionist practice. In the chapter entitled “El central,” the author retells the story of the so-called Zafra de los Diez Millones, an episode in which the government, under the pretext of military service, compulsorily sent youngsters to labor in sugarcane fields. Stipulating an incongruous quota to be reached, Castro’s initiative of sugarcane production proved to be a failure that left the centrales (sugarcane mills) devastated. As Arenas explains:

Los centrales, por haber intentado doblar su productividad, estaban también destruidos; se necesitaba también una fortuna para reparar toda aquella maquinaria y para volver a iniciar la producción agrícola. El país, absolutamente arruinado, era ahora la provincia más pobre de la Unión Soviética” (158).

As the author further exposes, Castro’s regime reversed the culpability for the zafras’s fiasco to Nixon’s presidency in order to divert the population’s attention from the regime’s disastrous enterprise. Arenas states that, during the same period of La zafra’s collapse, Cuban agencies deliberately fabricated a story in which the CIA
kidnapped Cuban fishermen on a nearby Caribbean island. This action manipulated public opinion into a reprehensive activist position against the United States:

De repente, toda aquella muchedumbre, que había cortado caña durante un año, ahora tenía que concentrarse en La Plaza de la Revolución o frente a la que había sido la embajada norteamericana en la Habana para protestar el rapto supuesto de aquellos pescadores. Era grotesco ver aquellos jóvenes desfilando y gritando horrores contra los Estados Unidos, donde quizá no se sabía cuál era el motivo de aquellos. (158)

The narrative concludes with Arenas reporting on the alleged victims’ safe return to Cuba and the population’s rejoicing in a carnivalesque festivity that celebrated the supremacy of the Cuban State. The author critically observes the event as a customary act within the Establishment, often carried out as a method of inducing forgetfulness of particular historical instances:

Aquello terminó como terminan casi todas las tragedias en Cuba, en una especie de rumba; muñecos con la imagen del presidente Nixon eran quemados al son de tambores. Allí se daban comidas y cervezas, que eran cosas inexistentes
As can be noted in the account of the victimized fishermen, the authorial attitude towards dominant history is both critically denunciative and demystifying. By noting that the diversionist tactics of Castro’s government were able to forge a type of false historical account that was seemingly accepted by the Cuban people, the author also reveals his own awareness that history is often elaborated as a theatrical play by the dominant agencies of power:

Fidel pronunció un discurso heroico donde decía que había logrado intimidar a Estados Unidos que le había devuelto a los pescadores ... el efecto teatral ha sido siempre uno de los juegos que Castro ha puesto en práctica” (159).

The verdict enunciated by Arenas, when affirming that carnival was one of Castro’s mechanisms of ideological control, suggests the double-edginess of its celebration as an instrument of alienation and temporary relief:

Había que olvidar a toda costa que se había hecho el ridículo, que todo el esfuerzo de aquellos años había sido inútil y que éramos un país absolutamente subdesarrollado y cada día más esclavizado. (159)
In counter-attacking what he deems to be the incorrect representation of history, the author seizes the autobiographical form as a space that is capable of challenging the validity of official discourses on the premises of its intertextual relationship with various forms of official narratives. Arenas’ carnivalesque style manipulates resemblance and difference in a clearly parodic fashion. Emerging as the Other’s account of history, parody in Arenas’ Antes signifies a subversive method of representation because it ultimately stands as a substitution for originality. Presupposing both a “law and its transgression,” “repetition and difference” (Hutcheon 68, 101), the parodic artifice allows Arenas to maintain the essence of past events while transforming their characteristics; it mystifies while simultaneously criticizing them.\(^4\)

Because parody requires one’s awareness of similarity, it possibly risks confusion. The parody’s essence as a hybrid text can be often obfuscated by the transposition of the values of the parodied styles, the highlighting of certain elements while “leaving others in the shade” (Bakhtin The Dialogical Imagination, 75). Seizing the confusion generated by the gesture of simulating the

\(^4\) See Hutcheon, A Theory of Parody 69.
historical nation through writing, Arenas resists conventional historicity by its denunciation as a prejudiced project. The authorial voice does so by invoking the disorienting properties of parody, which in itself constitutes a fundamentally biased project of representation.49

The articulation of Arenas’ life story as a type of picaresque novel suggests its parody to be one of the predominant textual artifices in Antes. Themes such as marginalization, hunger, the circularity of spatial representations, the anti-hero’s constant evasion of authority, poverty, the absence of the paternal figure, as well as the division of the autobiography into small narrative segments, suggest the influence of the picaresque tradition (Negrín 31, Foster 23).50 The chapter entitled “El arresto” offers a convincing example of the picaresque parodic act in service of the articulation of the

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49 According to Bakhtin, “parody is always biased in some direction, and this bias is dictated by the distinctive features of the parodying language, its accentual system, its structure - we feel its presence in the parody and we can recognize that presence, just as we at other times recognize clearly the accentual system, the syntactic construction, tempi and rhythm of a specific language” (75-6).
50 Appearing as a commonality throughout Arenas’ novels, the picaresque formula can be seen most notably in El mundo alucinante and El color del verano. When comparing the autobiography with the literary figure of the pícaro María Luisa Negrín observes: “El pícaro ofrece como Arenas, desde la visión del marginado, toda la sociedad en que su vida se desarrolla. Su punto de vista es el del marginado que vive en exilio interior, y se siente rodeado por un mundo que lo acosa, lo rechaza o que no le ofrece posibilidades a su existencia. Antes que anochezca muestra el padecer colectivo de un pueblo bajo la injusticia y la opresión” (32).
autobiographical truth. This section not only elevates the picaresque presence to self-evidence but also validates its occurrence as a recursive method of invoking “truthfulness” through the author’s marginal self-affirmation.

As Arenas recounts, after having had sex with two young delinquents, he and his friend Coco Salá are robbed. With the aid of the police, they are finally able to find the two young men. However, upon denouncing the criminals in the presence of the authorities, the young thieves accuse the author and Salá of being homosexuals. At this point, Arenas reminds the reader of a law stating that in the case of the accusation of a homosexual exhibiting any form of erotic demeanor, the mere act of pressing charges would guarantee the presumed perpetrator’s incarceration. Managing to reverse the roles of accuser/accused on the premises of a partially false accusation, the two young delinquents ultimately precipitate the author’s arrest.

As the narrative further evolves, Arenas succeeds in escaping military custody through an open door that leads him directly to the nearby sea, where he miraculously swims to freedom. The subsequent accounts that antecipate the author’s final imprisonment are articulated in humorous segments where Arenas reports being persecuted by the police, being involved in a conspiracy charge by members of
the UNEAC,\footnote{Unión Nacional de los Escritores y Artistas de Cuba.} spending three nights hiding in a tree and several other fantastic narratives, interspersed with the numerous sexual adventures that mark the autobiography.

Nevertheless, in spite of the obvious roguish tone with which “El arresto” is articulated, its most prominent feature Arenas’ proposition of his body as a referential for the circumstances of persecution and oppression in which he was immersed.\footnote{According to Sidonie Smith, “the autobiographer’s specific body is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple makings, multiple invocations of subject positions. It is not one culturally charged body, unified, stable, finite, or final. Nor can it be identified along one consuming and unchanging axis. It is the site of heterogeneous axes of signification that become constitutive of the subject of autobiography. Bearing multiple marks of location, bodies position the autobiographical subject at the nexus of culturally specific experiences, of health, gender, race … ” (271)} The detailed descriptions of the author’s sufferings at the hands of the authorities, as well as the sordid imagery of his imprisonment and persecution metaphorically inscribe in the text the authorial experience as a mirror of the political turmoil experienced by the nation. As the Self is purported in Antes to be the representation of difference – the homosexual, dissident and exiled person – the autobiographical subject, in its material depiction, becomes the sole referential for what constitutes reality, representing, therefore, the official source of all discursive activity.
The observation Arenas makes upon arriving in El Morro, a prison built as a fortress by Spaniards during Cuba’s early colonial period, illustrates the figurative principle of bodily referentiality in the autobiography: “cientos y cientos de presos desfilaban hacia el comedor; parecían extraños monstruos; se gritaban entre sí y se saludaban, formando una especie de bramido unánime” (203).

The grotesque representation of Arenas’ Self and his surroundings while imprisoned emphasize the parallel relationship that the author establishes between his situation and Cuba’s political reality. Symbolizing the culmination of his dissident marginality under the pragmatism of the Revolution, Arenas’ grotesque discursive approach to the depiction of his confinement in El morro enables the author to “embody” the abstract concept of the Revolution – or for that matter the very nation it purports to be – as a circumstantial materiality (Bakhtin The Dialogic Imagination, 177). As can be noted in the sequence of events that follow Arenas’ arrest, the narrative exits the predominantly active mode of his earlier accounts in Havana to posit, through the textual

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53 When referring to the Rabelaisian imagery, Bakhtin observes that the context of the writing as a subversive postulation gives the grotesque a definite direction, which is “to ‘embody’ the world, to materialize it, to tie everything in to spatial and temporal series, to measure everything on the scale of the human body, to construct – on the space of the destroyed picture of the world has been – a new picture” (177).
imageries, the effects of the Castro regime’s ideology of “inside the revolution, everything, outside, nothing” over the marginal body:\(^5\) “Ir al baño era ya una odisea; aquel baño no era sino un hueco donde todo el mundo defecaba; era imposible llegar allí sin llenarse de mierda los pies, los tobillos, y después, no había agua para limpiarse” (205).

Since freedom is advocated throughout the pages of Antes as the most essential human necessity, it is not surprising that the grotesque style of representation in the episodes associated with Arenas’ captivity articulate an ideological stance that reaffirms the authorial Self and his body as an extension of the terrors of the nation. If on the one hand Arenas’ sexual experiences in the outside world constituted orgiastic celebrations intended to release the body from the social constraints imposed by the patriarchal order – namely the Stalinization of the Revolution in its behavioral codes – on the other hand, in prison, the representation of the body indicates inescapability from a sense of subjective loss forced upon the individual by the revolutionary tenet of surrendering the Self in order to be stronger in the collective (Ocasio 7–9). As the author states, under the penitentiary context,

\(^5\) See Quirk 384–85.
the body constitutes a material possession that can be indiscriminately taken by force:

Entre ellos había bugarrones que se fijaban en los muchachos que tenían buen cuerpo … En una ocasión [un] muchacho pidió que lo trasladaran, y habló con un combatiente … pero el combatiente no le hizo caso; así que tuvo que seguir dándole el culo sin deseos a toda aquella gente. (210)

In the aforementioned excerpt, Arenas not only reinstates violence as a topos of the narrative but also suggests that sex no longer retains the same spontaneity it did in the repressive context outside prison. This consequentially mitigates the sexual act, previously seen by Arenas as the purest form of one’s Self manifestation under repression, to an understanding of its practice as a corrupted expression of being. As Arenas explains in Antes, he chooses to abstain from maintaining sexual relationships in El morro, even though he manifests the desire and the opportunity to do so on several occasions.55 For Arenas, being incarcerated signified a form of submission to authority that restricted the unbound manifestation of his sexuality inasmuch as the violence and possession of the

55 “Me negaba a hacer el amor con los presidiarios, aunque algunos, a pesar del hambre y del maltrato, eran bastante apetecibles” (205).
individual’s body he witnessed constituted the normative conducts from which he so frantically attempted to escape.\textsuperscript{56}

Esos delincuentes, después de que poseían a un preso, se sentían dueños de esa persona y de sus pocas propiedades. Las relaciones sexuales se convierten, en una cárcel, en algo sórdido que se realiza bajo el signo de la sumisión y el sometimiento, del chantaje y de la violencia.

(205)

From the moment of his imprisonment, abandoning the accounts of his libertine Self that characterize the earlier chapters of \textit{Antes}, Arenas’ discourse turns to the description of the excesses of bodily functions in order to supplement the “liberating” value of his previous narratives. The grotesque depictive mode becomes centered on scatological imageries that suggest the idea of the body’s continuity and resistance when confronting circumstantial oppression. However, signs such as excrement, violence and flatulence also inscribe in Arenas’ autobiography, in the bahktinian sense, the notion of the body’s finitude, for the insistence on the topos of corporeal matter unavoidably evokes the idea of one’s

\textsuperscript{56} See Machover 127 and Blanco 222.
vulnerability to nature and its course (Bakhtin Cultura popular, 200-01):  

En ocasiones, y con intención, le ponían a la comida no sé qué condimento para que la gente se fuese en diarreas; era horrible sentir desde mi cama aquellos vientres desovándose furiosamente, aquellos pedos incesantes, aquel excremento cayendo sobre el excremento al lado de mi galera llena de moscas. (210)

Thus, Arenas’ inscription of the sordid conditions he endures while incarcerated can be viewed as a celebration of life as well as an act of denouncement. The excesses of the flesh and the imagery proposed in the author’s descriptions of decomposing matter remind the reader of the necessity of enjoyment in the idea of existence as a temporality. In this sense, the Dionysian principle of pleasure that Arenas attempted to follow under the oppressive stigma of the Revolution becomes justified through the writing of the body and its sufferings: “La peste ya se había impregnado en nuestros cuerpos como parte

57 As Bakhtin notices on the traditional significance of scatological imageries: “estaban considerados como un elemento esencial en la vida del cuerpo y de la tierra, en la lucha entre la vida y la muerte, contribuían a agudizar la sensación que tenía el hombre de su materialidad, de su carácter corporal, indisolublemente ligado a la vida de la tierra” (201).
de nosotros mismos porque el acto de bañarse era otra cosa
casi teórica” (210).

At the descriptive center of Arenas’ autobiographical
discourse, the carnivalesque body emerges as a signifier
aimed at both presenting the authorial Self as a witness to
a particular historical predicament and as the evidence of
its truth. Thus, the carnivalesque narrative of Antes
attempts to nullify the regime of truth that has come to
define the significance of the Cuban Revolution insofar as
it promotes the connotative allegorical and grotesque
stance of carnivalesque logic as a valid and necessary
implement of historical revisionism. The use of the
grotesque as a message of carnivalesque freedom, which in
Arenas’ writing often carries a humorous and ironic
overtone, does not lose sight, however, of the
autobiography’s tendency to critically demonize authority.
Neither does it mask the actions of governmental agencies’
vioence in controlling the individual’s body during the
course of its incarceration.

Arenas’ outrageous descriptions of the Cuban
penitentiary system underscore the historical connotations
of Castro’s Revolution as a regime that sought to maintain
absolute control over one’s individuality under
confinement. As Arenas describes, agents of the national
security commonly infiltrated El morro, spending a considerable amount of time living as prisoners with the sole purpose of reporting the spread of counter-revolutionary ideology. As prisoners, these agents often received the same category of treatment as other inmates:

A veces se pasaban un año recibiendo golpes y viviendo en medio del excremento, como nosotros, y lego resultaban ser oficiales de la Seguridad que estaban allí para informar sobre cualquier actividad política que tuviéramos los presos en la cárcel. (215).

Arenas’ exile ultimately works in his favor, for the memory of the homeland presented to the outside reader by a de-territorialized marginal subject, who reconstructs his past’s reality, stands as a referential testimony from the inside of history itself. The validity and authority of Arenas’ autobiographical project is reaffirmed in the exile identity the author articulates. Whether or not the exiled imagination in Antes is motivated by self-glorification – which is, after all, a common feature of the autobiographical genre – the author’s self-portrayed marginality purports the Other as an entity who is capable of transgressing the Western mode of historical imagination; that is, the unidimensionality of both truth
and reality as uniform experiences that deem Alterity a subaltern inadequacy (de Toro New Intersections, 104-5).

To sympathize with Arenas’ account of history is, therefore, to acknowledge the Other’s discourse as officiality, as allegorical as it may be. Escaping from exile’s “fetishistic attraction,” which could constitute the objectification of otherness as an article of luxury, Arenas proposes lifewriting as a form of contestation that sees in the carnivalesque not only a subversive attitude of transgression but also an insurgence against carnival’s message of temporality. Ultimately, the text is reclaimed as a perennial method of action against any form of censorial authority. The autobiographical prosopopeia reaffirms Arenas’ historicity in the enunciation of the text in a continuum where the author is brought back to life in the lifewriting’s ability to function as the supplement of the authorial Self and (his)story.59

58 According to Said: “there is a sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish out of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments” (Reflections on Exiles, 183).

59 Venturing on a similar perspective to that of Derrida’s conceptualization of presence, Sylvia Molloy begins her study on the Spanish American autobiography affirming that: “Protopopeia ... is the trope informing autobiography. Self-writing would be that attempt, ever renewed and ever failing, to give voice to that which does not speak, to bring what is dead to life by endowing it with a (textual) mask” (1).
Chapter 2

La virgen de los sicarios

*What grows best in the heat: fantasy; unreason; lust.*

(Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*)

**Otherness as a Commonality**

Like Reinaldo Arenas’ *Antes que anochezca*, Fernando Vallejo’s *La virgen de los sicarios* can be understood as an ambiguous project of (self)representation. Firstly, the presence of a narrator/protagonist whose name is a homonym of the author’s and who shares with him a substantial number of biographical similarities problematizes the reception of the novel as an entirely fictional work. Secondly, Vallejo’s fulminating and desacralizing tone does not hinder the authorial intention of reorganizing the present of the Colombian nation from a marginal perspective by demolishing its conventionalities, whether these be founded on social, political or religious traditions.

Not unlike Arenas’ autobiography, Vallejo’s novel presents otherness and marginality as a discursive rhetoric.
that challenges what the Establishment has come to define as the Other. The distinctive self-determinism one encounters in *La virgen’s* narrative and the revisionist impetus of the work regarding the fate of the nation rely heavily on the characterization of the narrator as an individual whose authority emanates from the very position he occupies in the fringes of society. By relating his experience of material and spiritual exile to that of Colombia’s *sicarios,* Vallejo’s protagonist-narrator articulates a message that is not only sympathetic to the reality of a particular subaltern class but also implies a form of marginal discourse by association.

By inscribing his Self in the text through the device of a homonymous signature, thus performing the double-role of witness and protagonist of his own story (Bernal 64), Vallejo, the writer, recreates his Self in a representative

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1 As María Jimenez Duzán explains, *sicarios* are: “Children who kill ... The sicarios were first used to settle accounts in the drug Mafia’s vendettas, killing people who didn’t meet payments or who failed to come through with a delivery. But when the drug traffickers increased their terrorist attacks on the state, the sicarios ended up killing judges, police, cabinet ministers, four presidential candidates, leftist leaders, unionists and journalists” (195).

2 Elaborating on the commonality of the autobiographical recourse in Vallejo’s works, Alvaro Bernal states that: “el recurso autobiográfico permite [a vallejo] darle vida a esa realidad tan cercana para el escritor con nombres propios, evocarla, pensarla, sentirla, habitilarla y ser definitivamente testigo y protagonista de su propia historia” (64). Also, vouching for the ambiguity of Vallejo’s narrative as an autobiography, one can find in the recent publication of *El desbarrancadero* (2001) the authorial signature present at the cover of the novel, which bears a picture of Vallejo and his brother Darío, whose real life death from AIDS constitutes the central motif of the narrative.
image that brings the fictive stance of his novel to an ontological crisis. This occurs because the authorial presence within the borders of the text paradoxically postulates his own life and writing as a singular form of articulation. Furthermore, when Vallejo’s identity as a homosexual and exile is placed in parallel to that of his narrator-protagonist, who shares these biographical characteristics, the text risks confusion on the grounds of its proximity to what is diffusely acknowledged as the truth about the origins of the authorial figure.

The textual artifice of self-inscription, common to all of Vallejo’s novels, reveals the authorial presence to be not only he who is responsible for the content of the writing but also the object of the narrative. This consequentially underscores that the principle of representation of La virgen is governed by a conscious initiative that poses the authorial life as a point of departure for the writing.

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3 This could be read as Vallejo’s very own postmodern paradigm concerning the displacement of the subject in favor of its fragmentation, or as Jameson has noted, “the ‘death’ of the subject itself” equating with “the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual” (71).

4 The name “Fernando” confirms the authorial presence in La virgen’s narrative only on page 78, when Alexis warns the narrator about the bullets coming from other assassins in charged with exterminating the young sicario. From the beginning of the novel to the account of Alexis’ death, Vallejo’s signature is ambiguously implied in the text through the autobiographical tone of the narrative as well as the commonality of Vallejo’s use of a homonymous narrator throughout his works.
It could be argued that any act of textual representation is intrinsically dependent on the authorial knowledge and his/her experience in translating a particular understanding of life to the textual form.\(^5\) However, as the Barthean postmodern paradigm of the “birth of the reader” in the “death of the author” suggests, the truth of the authorial Self in the deciphering of a particular text may constitute an illusion, for the experience of the reader in his/her particular historical context and knowledge is what ultimately gives direction to a text (Barthes “The Death of the Author,” 145).\(^6\) Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the illusion of an author’s existence within a given text can still persuade the reader to come to a particular understanding of the writing.

In spite of La virgen’s ambiguous position on fiction and factuality in reference to the narrative “I,” the authorial identity still emerges as a force capable of promoting the textual Self as a reality derived from the experience of the writing. Consistently verisimilar to

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\(^5\) See, for instance, Aristotle’s Poetics.

\(^6\) As Barthes notes, the “text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (“The Death of the author,” 146).
certain aspects of its author’s life and yet connotatively hyperbolical, Vallejo’s novel promotes the authorial “I” beyond any fictional boundaries, as the author’s signature evokes a type of autobiographical sincerity that effectively promotes the novel as a personal account. As the materiality of Vallejo’s figure is emphasized, fiction loses its opacity and becomes a threat to the reality outside the text inasmuch as the author’s self-referentiality reaffirms the novel as an imitation of what is commonly apprehended as life. Invention becomes mitigated as La virgen is advanced as a biographical account that is ambivalent to both the truth of one’s Self and the falsehoods implied in one’s strategies for articulating identity.

This is not to say that the implications of the authorial signature within the margins of La virgen’s narrative should lead one to a strict autobiographical appreciation of the work. Nor does the affirmed fictional nature of Vallejo’s novel implies the complete dismissal of the work as a type of memorial project. Vallejo’s signature in the text, if anything, reaffirms the paradigm of self-representation as a variable process of identity articulation that is intimately tied with contextual necessities. The strength of the author’s poetics resides
precisely in the ability of the authorial signature to endow the textual message with a type of authenticity that is often dismissed under the emblem of fiction but is nonetheless frequently embraced within the premises of the autobiography. The autobiographical artifice, therefore, functions both as a textual façade and an excusatory mode of enunciation that utilizes ambiguity as a rhetorical principle for validating the subjectivity of the Self and its message within the fictional milieu.

To approach Vallejo’s homonymous narrator as the authorial figure himself would constitute the dangerous act of allowing the supplement – in this case La virgen’s signature – to become the complete presence of the author (Derrida 144). Surely, a certain level of skepticism is often necessary when considering the textual Self a faithful and unbiased project of representation, for the mystification generated from the proposition of one’s being in the form of a text unavoidably leads to literality, which in itself is always restrictive of meaning.\(^7\)

\(^7\) Commenting during an interview on the artifice of the homonymous protagonist of his novels, Vallejo affirms: “Cuando uno empieza a pasarse al papel, se empieza a traicionar. La palabra es superior a la imagen, pero es también inmensamente limitada para captar lo complejo que es uno y lo compleja que es la realidad. Uno no escribe lo que quiere sino lo que puede. Por razones literarias, yo construí un personaje lleno de manías, de mañas, de animadversiones, de fobias y de amores, sacándolo en parte de mi mismo. Pero no, no soy yo. De mí tiene más bien poco” (Ortuño www.puntog.com.mx/2003/200030124/ENB240103.htm).
Thus, in order to comprehend the functionality of the authorial signature in the context of La virgen, one must not adhere to Vallejo’s presence as a definite reality. Nor should one dismiss it entirely. However, the consideration of the effects of the authorial signature on the reception of La virgen’s message causes Vallejo’s self-inscription to evoke the illusion of truthfulness and sincerity based on the premise that the author is someone who “performs a certain role with regard to the narrative discourse, and appropriately gives surety to the purpose of its message” (Foucault “What is an author,” 107).

Hence, the autobiographical artifice, whether or not partially truthful, releases Vallejo’s novel from the conventionality of the traditional untruthfulness of novelistic omniscience while simultaneously authenticating the discourse of the subjective Self in the stance of the author-protagonist in relation to the society he represents. Vallejo’s self-textuality operates as a

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8 As Foucault notes, “the author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author’s name, that one can say ‘this was written by so-and-so’ or ‘so-and-so is its author,’ shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status” (“What’s an Author?,” 107).

9 While criticizing the novelistic artifice of the omniscient narrator, Vallejo affirms: “Yo resolví hablar en nombre propio porque no me puedo meter en las mentes ajenas, al no haberse inventado todavía el lector de pensamientos; ni ando con una grabadora por los cafés y las calles y
narrative aimed at nullifying tradition by emphasizing the subjectivity of the marginal Self. The visceral circumstances of the \textit{sicario} otherness are purported in \textit{La virgen} as a simulacrum for the nation, which inevitably reinstates the contesting nature of Vallejo’s text as marginal discourse.

From the opening pages of \textit{La virgen}, one recognizes the essence of Fernando, the narrator-protagonist, as an outsider, an exiled entity whose story of return to the homeland is configured as a declaredly bitter reunion: “yo volví después, años y años, décadas, vuelto un viejo a morir” (8). As the narrative progresses, Fernando oscillates between memory and the present, as he is forced to confront a reality where violence and death are presented to him as banalities, quotidian eventualities with which he must come to terms. Upon meeting a young \textit{sicario} named Alexis, Vallejo’s alter-ego decides to embark on a pilgrimage to Sabaneta in the company of his lover, whose devotion for the local Virgin is purported to be conventional within the \textit{sicario} culture.

\textsuperscript{1} los cuartos grabando lo que dice el prójimo y metiéndome en las camas y en las conciencias ajenas para contarlo de chismoso en un libro. Balzac y Flaubert eran comadres. Todo lo que escribieron me suena a chisme. A chisme en prosa cocinera” (Villooro www.trazegnies.arrakis.es/fvallejo.html).
The processional to the church of Maria Auxiliadora in Sabaneta marks the beginning of the novel as a succession of journeys around the urban spaces of Medellín, through which the author voices his caustic criticism of the Colombian reality. The memory of the returned exiled writer governs the narrative in a non-linear fashion, as he constantly seeks to convey an explicative synthesis that is able to conciliate the homeland of his youth with the space he encounters in later years:

Entre los nuevos barrios de casas uniformes seguían en pie, idénticas, algunas de las viejas casitas campesinas de mi infancia, y el sitio más mágico del Universo, la cantina Bombay ... era la misma como yo siempre he sido yo: niño, joven, hombre, viejo, el mismo rencor cansado que olvida todos los agravios. (13)

Upon following Alexis around the city of Medellín, the narrator Fernando gradually acknowledges the transformation of his past into a different reality that is strangely unknown to him. Utilizing the perspective of his lover as a guiding light for apprehending the present, Fernando realizes that the sicario universe he infiltrates possesses its own particular codes and modes of behavior. Empathizing with the sicario’s exclusion on the basis of his recognized
marginality as an exile and homosexual, Vallejo’s narrator also confronts his own misconstrued ideas about the sicario Other.

This is evident early on in the narrative when the protagonist meets his young lover for the first time in the apartment of a friend. After Fernando and Alexis have sexual relations, the narrator deliberately leaves his wallet on a stand in the anticipation of being robbed by his companion. To the surprise of Fernando, Alexis does not take the wallet. Fernando then realizes that Alexis’ sense of morality did not correspond to the commonly diffused stereotype of the sicario class present in the collective imaginary of society. By expecting a pre-defined form of behavior from his lover, and subsequently being frustrated when the marginal entity’s bad conduct is not exhibited, Vallejo’s narrator becomes aware of his own conventional perceptions in relation to the Other: “Entonces entendí que Alexis no respondía a las leyes de este mundo; y yo que desde hacía tiempos no creía en Dios dejé de creer en la ley de la gravedad” (17).

The nuances and idiosyncrasies of the sicariato\textsuperscript{10} world that begins as a curious attraction for Fernando progressively materialize in the text as the re-arrangement

\textsuperscript{10} Sicariato is meant here as a class description.
of symbolic codes that are revised in the Other’s own terms. When affirming that Alexis “did not respond to the laws of this world,” the narrator re-emphasizes that there is, indeed, a separation between his exiled and homosexual otherness and the universe inhabited by his sicario lover. This is not to say that Vallejo denies his narrator a representability of his own that is alien to any form of social exclusion. The representation of the old Colombian writer supposes a rather convincing form of solidarity and complicity with the marginal existence as a homosexual and exiled person himself.

However, the conscious enunciation of difference within difference, marginality within marginality, denotes the possibility of contemplating otherness as an existential condition that always carries obvious levels and degrees of individual subordination (Coronil 37). As the narrator-protagonist begins to understand the sicariato reality, he also progressively modulates his own perception of the world according to this class perspective. Fernando’s entrance into his young lover’s territory occurs within the premises of sameness when otherness is instated
in the text as a reciprocal form of solidarity between different levels of marginality.¹¹

Such an act of reciprocity between Fernando and Alexis can be symbolically observed through a particular episode in which the young sicario feeds his lover alcohol directly from his mouth: “Se tomó un trago y me lo dio en la boca. Así, tomando yo en su boca, él en la mía, en el delirio de una vida idiota, de un amor imposible, de un odio ajeno nos empacamos el garrafón” (28). In a combination of homoeroticism and humanist existentialism, Fernando conveys this occurrence as the reflection of an impossible union that can truly take place only in the imaginary, for the “idiocy of reality” cannot sustain the type of love he reportedly feels for Alexis. The subsequent account of both characters awakening from a night of drinking reinforces such a tenet through the grotesque description of the lovers’ conditions:

Amanecimos en un charco de vómito: eran los demonios de Medellín, la ciudad maldita, que habíamos agarrado al andar por sus calles y se nos habían adentrado por los ojos, por los oídos, por la nariz, y por la boca. (28)

As can be noted, Medellín is held accountable for the discouraging circumstances in which both Fernando and Alexis live. Standing as an allegory for that which restricts the individual from his/her plenitude of being, the city symbolizes constriction, the ties that bind the marginal Other to its fixity. Both the object of hate and the source of all calamities, the urban realm comes to represent hopelessness, a degenerative site that is purported to be an authentic dystopia. Nevertheless, in Fernando’s negative revision of the Colombian reality, one perceives that the narrator’s true affection is ultimately for that which he despises the most: his Colombia. Through his hatred for the homeland, Fernando ironically reveals an even greater fondness than that he reportedly expresses for his sicario companion. The narrator’s contemptuous tone and caustic criticism reveal indignation through irony, thus exposing the ambivalence of his hateful “truth” for the present as a declaration of love, in disguise, for the nation in and its lost past.\footnote{As the author states in an interview: “Yo he vivido siempre enfermo de nostalgia, pero una nostalgia incurable, porque la Colombia que yo dejé no es la ahora. La Colombia que yo añoro es la de mi niñez y de mi juventud. Esa ya no existe, y la gran mayoría de los que me acompañaron en la vida ya se han muerto. Esa desapareció” (Delgado www.clubedelibros.com/archifernandovallejo2.html).}

Los treinta y cinco mil taxis señalados ... llevan indefectiblemente los radios prendidos
transmitiendo … noticias optimistas sobre los treinta y cinco que mataron ayer, quince por debajo del record, aunque un soldado … me aseguró que día hubo en Medellín que mataron ciento setenta y tantos, y trescientos este fin de semana. (22)

The narrator’s constant reinstatement of his perspective on Colombia as a harsh and deteriorated space does not lose sight, however, of the fact that his is not the exclusive viewpoint in the reexamination of the nation. Fernando also recognizes the sicario enunciation as a sincere manifestation of Self that ought to be appreciated as a discursive authority. This becomes particularly apparent during an episode in which Vallejo’s protagonists relate to each other their previous sexual experiences.

After throwing from the window of his apartment a stereo that he had bought as gift for Alexis, Fernando engages in a discussion with him that culminates with the sicario asking the narrator if he had ever enjoyed women as well as men. Vallejo’s protagonist answers that that depended on whether the supposed women had attractive young brothers. This amuses the sicario as he continues to listen to Fernando who states that although he had slept with other women in the past and had taken pleasure in doing so,
their bodies seemed to “lack a soul” with which he could identify. Defiantly, Fernando, in return, poses the same question to the young sicario, who categorically denies ever engaging in a relationship with the opposite sex:

“No,” contestó, con un “no” tan rotundo, tan inesperado que me dejó perplejo. Y era un “no” para siempre: para el presente, para el pasado, para el futuro y para toda la eternidad de Dios: ni se había acostado con ninguna ni se pensaba acostar … Conque eso era pues lo que había detrás de esos ojos verdes, una pureza incontaminada de mujeres. Y la verdad más absoluta, sin atenuantes ni importarle un carajo lo que piense usted que es lo que sostengo yo. De eso era de lo que me había enamorado. De su verdad. (19)

By legitimizing Alexis’ answer beyond its immediate lexical connotations, Fernando goes so far as to reveal to the reader that his love for Alexis derived precisely from the sicario enunciation of the truth, his Self exposed through speech. The representation of the narrator’s affections towards the marginal entity in La virgen is asserted by Vallejo as the recognition of the Other’s truth in solidarity with the marginal intellectual into whom the author fashions his Self. The nature of this solidarity,
however, should not be understood as an authorial intent that is overtly political in nature. After all, Vallejo’s narrative does not present any direct apologies for the sicario class’ reported violent actions. Rather, the author presents to his readers the sicariato symbolic realm as normalcy, as a part of the Colombian reality that is ignored by many but is as essential as any other form of collective expression within the nation’s constitution.

Therefore, the function of Vallejo’s narrator within the novel is not only a source of marginal utterance but also translates the sicariato class’ ability to produce its own discourse. The legitimization of the Other’s testimony is shown as a transcription of the marginally oppressed existence distinctively from the ethnographic process of representation, which claims authorial invisibility when allowing the marginal voice to speak (Bellenger 44, Slodowska 81). Vallejo’s intellectual narrator mediates the discourse of the sicario Other and that of the lettered city by synthesizing both linguistic universes into a single narrative that departs from Vallejo’s alter-ego’s self-styled marginality as a homosexual and exile. Thus, Vallejo’s narrator symbolically assumes the position of a “signified Third World informant,” a type of intellectual that re-inscribes the excluded marginal presence by
representing its existence to be read by a pluralist audience (Spivak *The Postcolonial Critic*, 57).

This tendency to represent the *sicariato* class “to the world” can be verified through the signaling presence of the novel’s narratees – its implied audience – to whom the exiled writer relates his story.¹³ Such narratees attribute to the text a confessional quality that further emphasizes the novel’s effect as a personal form of testimony. Vallejo is seemingly aware of the pluralistic readership of *La virgen*, as the narrator Fernando directly communicates his story to an audience that is both aware and unaware of certain facts concerning the present Colombian reality:¹⁴

> Ustedes no necesitan, por supuesto, que les explique qué es un sicario. Mi abuelo sí, necesitaría, pero mi abuelo murió hace años y años. Se murió mi pobre abuelo sin conocer el tren elevado ni los sicarios, fumando cigarrillos Victoria que usted, apuesto, no ha oído siquiera mencionar. (9)

¹³ See Prince 7-25.

¹⁴ Another example of the narratee function can also be found in the following example: “En Manrique (y lo digo por mis lectores japoneses y servo-croatas) es donde acaba Medellín y comienzan las comunas o viceversa” (129). Thus, as can be noted, Vallejo’s *La virgen* certainly denotes a level of authorial consciousness of its contemporary inscription – whether ironically intended or not – as a product intended for “global” consumption. The novel’s implied pluralistic audience (national and international) and the explicatory tone employed by Vallejo on the particularities of the nation can vouch for such a statement.
As Vallejo’s narrator constantly explains the terminologies and lexicons that are present within the sicario universe, the reader also becomes aware of the writing as a form of oral transcription, whose effects underscore the narrative – and by default the authorial signature – as a live presence in the text (Sánchez 50). This is evident when the narrator reports on Alexis’ wishes to exterminate a punk neighbor whose drum set noise prevents him from sleeping at night. Stating that he “poorly transcribed” the exact words of his lover, the narrator immediately corrects himself: “Ah, transcribí mal las amadas palabras de mi niño. No dijo ‘yo te lo mato,’ dijo ‘Yo te lo quiebro’” (28).

The implication of a self-correctional act at the moment of writing emphasizes the novelistic account as type of autobiographical narrative inasmuch as the “pretense” of truth-telling comes to the fore in the alleged illusion of the text as a type of oral articulation. Furthermore, by attempting to relate to an audience the exact words of his lover, Vallejo’s narrator underscores the very site from which he attempts to communicate the representational image of the sicario; that is, from within its own marginal lexicography.
The language appropriated by the author, which is in effect as much the represented narrator’s as it is his lover’s, thus functions as an ideological weapon in the process of deconstructing traditional perceptions on marginality. As the conventional syntax of the Spanish language is purported to be inadequate to describe the subaltern alterity of the sicarios, the destruction and re-composition of semantic value from within the Other’s reality becomes not only a form of contestation of authority over the object represented but is also imposed on the text to combat stereotyping. Vallejo’s process of re-imagining the Colombian nation from its margins is revealed as a philosophical quest in which language is articulated as a universe for grabs, to be rearranged and reordered according to the subjectivity of either a particular individual or a social group: “Anfiteatro llaman aquí a la morgue, y no hay taxista en Medellín ni cristiano que no sepa dónde está porque aquí los vivos sabemos bien adónde tenemos que ir a buscar a los muertos” (116-17).

The logic behind Fernando’s leveling of his existence with that of his sicario lover corresponds to a subversive act that legitimizes the marginalized Other’s idiom outside of conventional rulings. The transference of discursive authority to the sicario becomes an imperative principle of
representation, for the narrator can only explain the logical functioning of the sicariato linguistics through the understanding of the rules that govern its sphere of action. Whereas crime and punishment are obviously fundamental norms of societal behavior, the sicario is proposed by Vallejo as an agent capable of speaking of and for his own truth and idiosyncrasies in matters of justice.

The narrative displacement of authority to the marginal sicario subjectivity becomes patently obvious when Fernando informs his lover of an episode in which a man is murdered during a car theft attempt. As the narrator tells Alexis, the victim runs away during the event with the keys of his vehicle, screaming out loud that he was now able to recognize the perpetrator, thus insinuating that he would later be denounced for his crime. In an act of rage, the frustrated thief begins to shoot repeatedly until one of the bullets reaches the victim. The narrator describes witnessing the assassin returning to the place where the body was located, further shooting the victim and then proceeding to escape amidst the commotion generated by the incident. Rather causally, Alexis reacts to Fernando’s account by stating that: “El pelao debió de entregar las llaves a la pinta esa” (20).
Fernando’s subsequent commentary on Alexis’ assertion reveals his lover’s perspective on the incident to be conclusively logical: “No comentó, diagnosticó: como un conocedor, al que hay que creerle. Y yo me quedé enredado en su frase, soñando, divagando, pensando” (20). The fact that the narrator qualifies what Alexis enunciates as a diagnostic adds value to the subaltern utterance in the sense that the statement made by the young sicario is placed within the grounds of knowledge. Alexis’ representation signals the marginalized entity as someone whose analytical procedure is able to identify and isolate the causes and effects of a particular event through a sense of reason that stands outside patriarchal conventions, thus purporting the notion that the marginal universe obeys a different set of rulings.\textsuperscript{15}

Further into this episode’s account, Vallejo’s narrator meticulously dissects the significance of his lover’s authoritative statement. However, instead of attempting to interpret Alexis’ enunciation through a long-established reasoning, which unavoidably would elaborate on

\textsuperscript{15} As Foucault notes in “Truth and Power: “the state, for all omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations … because [it] can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. The state is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, family, kinship, knowledge, technology, and so forth” (64).
the horrors, causes and consequences of violence perpetrated by the lower classes, Fernando centers the narrative account on the rational aspects and intricacies of Alexis’ linguistic enunciation:

Con el ‘pelao’ mi niño significaba el muchacho; con ‘la pinta esa’ el atracador; y con ‘debió de’ significaba ‘debió’ a secas: tenía que entregarle las llaves. Más de cien años hace que mi viejo amigo José Cuervo, el gramático, a quien frecuenté mi juventud, hizo ver que una cosa es “debe” solo y otra “debe de.” Lo uno es obligación, lo otro duda. (20)

By characterizing his narrator as a polyglot, an entity capable of transiting between two levels of existence - the intellectual marginality and the sicarios’ sphere of exclusion - Vallejo incorporates his interlocutory protagonist into a linguistic community that validates the Other by recognizing and integrating the sicarios’ language into the core of the narrative: “Hoy en el centro – le conté a Alexis luego hablando en jerga con mi manía políglota – dos bandas se estaban dando chumbimba” (24). As Vallejo’s narrator explains the lexical value of the language uttered by the sicarios, his self-articulation becomes that of a character who has gained access to the
marginal vocabulary by proximity and implied co-inhabitancy in its domains: “Yo te lo mato – me dijo Alexis con esta complacencia suya atenta siempre a mis más mínimos caprichos -. Déjame que la próxima vez saco el fierro.” El fierro es el revolver” (25).

It is well to reiterate here that Vallejo does not suggest a discursive posture that integrates the language of the Other as a mere employment of particular vocabularies or lexical expressions. To the contrary, the author synthesizes the Other’s language into an arbitrating form of expression that is capable of translating its marginal origin as a potential contesting force. Vallejo’s use of a hybrid type of linguistic articulation symbolizes neither the subaltern’s nor the Establishment’s essence but rather a form of discourse that is ambivalent to both, generated by both the sicario and the intellectual. The linguistic convergence of two implied forms of authority ultimately validates La virgen’s narrative as a relativist account of the truth inasmuch as the text effectively works as an ambiguous testimony in which the represented marginal intellectual speaks for a more oppressed Other (Spivak “Three Women’s Text,” 9).16

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16 For Spivak, testimony corresponds to a genre in which the subaltern gives witness to oppression to a less oppressed other, with editorial control varying in degrees but never ceasing to completely exist (7).
Nonetheless, from an intellectual perspective, Vallejo’s discourse does not patronize the representation of the subaltern sicario by exposing his linguistic constitution as superficial narrative artifice. What the author seems to suggest in La virgen is a type of literary “de-skilling” in which the unlearning of one’s privileged discourse corresponds to an imperative mandate when intellectually postulating the expression of otherness as an experience capable of being leveled (Spivak The postcolonial critic, 57). The explicatory tone employed by Vallejo’s alter-ego throughout the pages of La virgen subversively acts under the conviction that truth itself corresponds to a representation that is essentially linked to agencies of power:

Yo hablo de las comunas con la propiedad del que las conoce, pero no, sólo las he visto de lejos, palpitando sus lucecitas en la montaña y en la trémula noche. Las he visto, soñado, meditado desde las terrazas de mi apartamento, dejando que

As Vallejo unfolds into a self-representation that purports marginalization as a fundamental characteristic of the source of the enunciation, it is possible to apprehend the figurative function of the narrator Fernando as someone who simulates the “responsibility” of a marginal agent that “assumes the editorial or critical subject ‘de-centered,’ in rather an empirical way” (8). In other words, the author assumes a de-constructionist stance that not only claims the source of enunciation - the autobiographical “I”- as alterity but also proposes the representation of the sicario otherness as a testimony of the degrading effects of the present of the nation on the individual. See Said, Orientalism 272.
su alma asesina y lujuriosa se apodere de mí.

(21).

Conscious of such relativism, Vallejo’s self-described linguist becomes the authenticating force for the sicario word. The autobiographical artifice is used, therefore, as recourse that not only gives voice to a personal criticism of the present reality of the nation, but also receptively promotes the text as a type of truth representation and, as such, remains aware of both its imperfection and subjectivity. Conjuring as a prerogative for the authority of the textual message the ambiguity of his Self’s characterization and its implied proximity with the margins of the nation, Vallejo proposes the sicariato as a tradition, as shall be further discussed in this chapter. The marginalized being’s very linguistic expression is manifested, inevitably, as a historically regimented presence that is re-inscribed into the national present on the premises of the intellectual’s recognition of its significance and origin:

Sin saber ni inglés ni francés ni japonés ni nada sólo comprende el lenguaje universal del golpe. Eso hace parte de su pureza intocada. Lo demás es palabrería hueca zumbando en la cabeza. No habla español, habla en argot o jerga. En la jerga de
las comunas o argot comunero que está formado en esencia de un viejo fondo de idioma local de Antioquia, que fue el que hablé yo cuando vivo (Cristo el arameo), más una que otra supervivencia del malevo antiguo del barrio de Guayaquil. (23)

**The Sustainable Contradiction of Being**

The articulation of Fernando Vallejo’s homonymous character in relation to the *sicario* universe portrayed in *La virgen* expresses otherness both as a relative commonality and as a category of identity whose existence is marked by contradictory actions. As discussed in Chapter 1 on the analysis of Reinaldo Arenas’ *Antes que anochezca*, any considerations on the theme of identity, whether individual or collective, involve a fundamental awareness of its constitution as a partial and at times oppositional strategy of representation. Identities have always appeared historically in articulation, in constant process of formation, deformation and re-formation, being continuously crossed and re-crossed by the categories of class, gender and ethnicity (Hall “Ethnicities,” 225). As identities do not proceed from any coherent direction, that is, they may
depart from falsity to truth or vice-versa, their expression often denotes a complex interplay of positionalities that exposes the very arbitrariness of their being.

Conscious of such relativity where the statement of the Self and the Other is concerned, Vallejo’s novel emerges as a text in which the articulation of marginal identities translates the sicariato representation into a cunning process of reclaiming the Other outside patriarchal conventionalities. Sexuality, religious devotion and violence collide in the expression of the sicario way of life, thus purporting incongruity as an essential characteristic of this marginal class’ existence.

Indeed, it could be argued that incongruity and contradiction correspond to a rhetorical essentiality in the narrative stance taken by Vallejo. The unconventional nature of the homosexual identities present in Alexis’ and Fernando’s representation frustrates these characters’ expression as archetypes. Throughout the pages of La virgen, homosexuality itself is never overtly stated as a problem or placed in a persecutory context, as is generally the case in queer literatures, where the message’s intent is to expose gay marginality as a repressed existence
To the contrary, the statement of sexuality is uttered as the advocacy for freedom of self-representability, the liberty to act in accordance with one’s own moral standards.

An example of La virgen’s alternative mode of enunciating marginal identities can be seen in both the narrator’s articulation of his pilgrimages in the company of his lover and in the very constitution of the sicario Other. During the protagonists’ numerous excursions around Medellín, neither Alexis nor Fernando are ever teased or depreciated by other sicarios for being lovers. On the contrary, the marginal universe described by the narrator, Fernando, does not display any form of prejudice towards homosexuality, which certainly frustrates traditionalism in terms of behavioral anticipations, for it is often expected that machismo’s intolerance towards homosexuality is the dominating norm of conduct within the realms of any patriarchal society.

In the behavior of Fernando’s young lover, the reader observes the mutual and incongruous existence of both the dominant essence of machismo and the “feminine” fragility and innocence of youth. It is the sicario homosexual who is insistently depicted holding the phallic totem – the fierro

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18 See Foster, Queer issues 82.
(gun) - and it is Alexis who is allegedly responsible for the defense of his honor and that of his family and friends. As the narrator asserts when conveying Alexis’ profession, the sicario occupation certainly corresponds to a means of financial sustainability. However, concurrently, the sicario line of work is portrayed as a circumstance in which the gay male is responsible for the defense of his gendered masculinity:

De los muertos de Alexis, cinco fueron gratis, por culebras propias; y cinco pagados, por culebras ajenas. ¿Qué son “culebras”? Son cuentas pendientes ... Aquí se arrastran venganzas casadas desde generaciones: pasan de padres a hijos, de hijos a nietos: van cayendo los hermanos. (35)

Masculine homosexuality, whether it be manifested as a necessary act of prostitution or a genuine taste for the same sex, is approached by Vallejo as a fluid performance which varies in degree and form according to the cultural context in which the individual is immersed. Fernando’s description of an earlier lover, La Plaga, vouches for such a relative stance in the representation of gay maleness as the narrator reports on his former companion’s performance of masculinity as a class peculiarity. As the narrator recounts, when casually meeting his ex-lover, the sicario
communicates his intentions to impregnate his girlfriend so that, in the instance of his death, his son could avenge him:

La Plaga ... es un niño divino, maldoso, malo, que se quedó también sin trabajo. Tiene quince añitos con pelusita que te desarman el corazón ... lo conocí también en el cuarto de las mariposas, pero nuestro amor no prosperó: me dijo que tenía novia y que la pensaba preñar para tener un hijo que lo vengara. “Y de qué, plaguita?” No, de nada, de lo que fuera. De lo que no alcanzara él” (35).

La Plaga’s implied homosexual comportment is purported not to be interfering with the sicarios’ understanding of what defines masculinity. Rather, the narrative indicates that the sicariato universe is governed by a different set of moral codes that envisages the male figure as someone who is outside the conventionality of sexual preferences, yet still caught within a position of patriarchal hierarchy.

If on the one hand La virgen’s narrative reinstates the homosexual identity as a confounded performance of male expectations, on the other hand, Vallejo does not utilize the masculine body as a means to assert the homosexual
agency in society. Instead of emphasizing the materiality of the body to underscore the gay male as a presence – as seen previously in Arenas’ autobiographical representation – Vallejo suggests that identity be grounded in one’s verbal statement of being. In La virgen’s narrative, the value of gay representability is displaced to the sphere of self-assertion rather than to the discourse of sexual demeanor:

Alexis empezó a desvestirme y yo a él; él con una espontaneidad candorosa, como si me conociera desde siempre, como si fuera mi ángel de la guarda. Les evito toda descripción pornográfica y sigamos. (12)

Vallejo’s expression of homosexuality, which in itself could be argued as somewhat tangential to the narrative, frustrates the conventionality of gay discourses that re-inscribe homosexual marginality in the subversive properties of corporeal reference. Rather, the question of gay representation is posed within a complex array of meanings of desire and love substituting one for another. As the aforementioned excerpt shows, the narrative avoids the materiality of the sexual act to advance the representation of homosexual identity.
This same posture of economizing on bodily descriptions where the homosexual affirmation is concerned can be observed in all of Vallejo’s novels. In Los días azules, published under the collection entitled El río del tiempo, the homonymous character often euphemizes the description of sexual acts by depriving the reader from their intimate details: “Ahorro los pormenores. Lo que sí diré es que gracias a que íbamos por el agua no nos consumió el incendio” (224).

Although the expression of desire throughout Vallejo’s novel vouches for the author’s subversive stance in the representation of traditional homosexual behavior, the most conspicuous expression of the author’s re-examining of patriarchal conventions can be found in the articulation of the sicariato religiosity. Indeed, the syncretic manifestation of Catholic practices associated with the sicario culture denotes both the marginal sphere’s appropriation of what has been traditionally imposed as a safeguard against primitivism and the ambivalence of sicarios towards what is to be accepted and rejected within the premises of Catholicism. In Vallejo’s representation of Marian devotion, the sicarios are revealed as subversive entities concerning nationalist conventions, for they constitute the proof that traditionally founded mythologies
can be easily appropriated, translated, re-historicized and dangerously read anew (Bhabha 37).\textsuperscript{19} The sicario’s ability to negotiate with religious dogmas is a paradox, since those who kill are also presented in the novel as devout men who come to terms with the religious past of the nation through by own means.

However, before examining the sicariato sense of religiosity, it is necessary to explain the narrative figure’s own stance when confronting the particularities of the practice of Catholicism. It is through Fernando’s deconstructive perspective and corrosive criticism that the Catholic religion is scrutinized as a historical presence in which the very contradictions implicit in its dogmatism allows for the legitimization of the sicariato’s religious syncretism as a form of cultural contestation.

The conspicuous animosity displayed by the narrator towards any form of organized religion reflects La virgen’s...
nihilist ideology toward any type of religious belief.\textsuperscript{20}

Fernando centers his attacks on the theological principles that govern religious creed, denouncing Catholicism, in particular, as a blind exercise of faith that is disenfranchised from any principle of rationality:

Esta devoción repentina de la juventud me causaba asombro. Y yo pensando que la Iglesia andaba en más bancarrota que el comunismo ... Qué va, está viva, respira. La humanidad necesita para vivir mitos y mentiras. Si uno ve la verdad escueta se pega un tiro. (15)

The narrator openly criticizes the Church for its failure to improve individuals’ lives. The argument of the corruptibility of religious creed doubts the existence of a higher authority whose absence can be confirmed in the deterioration of Colombian religious temples:

Ha de saber Dios que todo lo ve, lo oye, y lo entiende, que en su Basílica Mayor, nuestra Catedral Metropolitana, en las bancas de atrás se venden los muchachos y los travestís, se comercia en armas y en drogas y se fuma marihuana ... ¿Y

\textsuperscript{20} In an interview with Edgar Hernández, Vallejo states: “Las religiones semíticas – esto es, el judaísmo, el cristianismo y el mahometismo – no son tales, son plagas. La Iglesia Católica es una sida de la humanidad para el que todavía no ha remedio” (www.ni.laprensa.com.ni/archivo/2003/agosto/23/literaria/pintura).
Cristo dónde está? ¿El puritano rabioso que sacó a fuete a los mercaderes del templo? (53)

As can be seen here and also throughout other similar passages, the narrator perpetually confronts ecclesiastic ideology by mocking its dogmas. The overtly ironic tone employed by Fernando when scrutinizing religious rigidity is essentially parodic and critical of the performance of one’s faith. The utilization of parody in La virgen not only revels the narrator’s profound knowledge of the Catholic belief but also denotes the parodic gesture as a mode of anti-religious enunciation:

He dejado de ser uno y somos dos: uno solo inseparable en dos personas distintas. Es mi nueva teología de la Dualidad, opuesta a la de la Trinidad: dos personas que son las que se necesitan para el amor, tres ya empieza a ser orgía. (54)

Within the precept of anti-religiosity, Vallejo’s narrator represents of the sicario as a social agent who, rather uncannily, is purported to be part of a “divine” mandate. Alexis, whom Fernando affectionately refers to as the Angel Exterminador, is articulated as an apocalyptic figure that avenges and destroys lives according to a subverted logic that holds as its imperative the disposing
of that which is useless in society; that is, its own scornful citizenry. Alexis fulfills a particular role in a place where divine intervention has failed the individual. According to Fernando, it is up to Alexis and the sicario class to rid the Earth of its perverse race, to do good by vengefully destroying that which went wrong with creation, which for the ironic narrator corresponds to civilization itself:

Sacó el Ángel exterminador su espada de fuego, su “tote”, su “fierro”, su juguete, y de un relámpago para cada uno los fulminó … Sin alias, sin apellido, con su solo nombre, Alexis era el Ángel Exterminador que había descendido sobre Medellín a acabar con su raza perversa. (55)

Although the apparent heresy professed by Fernando may suggest, at first, a consummated aversion towards religious faith, what transpires throughout the narrative of La virgen is precisely the dichotomy between the hatred of the ecclesiastical political body and the need for a personal manifestation of religion. While the protagonist’s negativist critical stance maintains a clear radical position against the institutionalization of faith, the ambiguity exposed in the narrative accounts of Vallejo’s novel reveals, in the case of religious convictions, a form
of ambivalence towards Catholic practices. To confirm this assertion, it would suffice here to call attention to Fernando’s own denunciation of the Church as deteriorated space in contraposition with his perpetual touring of Medellín’s religious temples. If on the one hand the narrator claims his authority over the object he criticizes by re-instating his lack of faith as an empiric conclusion, on the other hand, Fernando’s attachment to the Marian myth contradicts his self-declared incredulity:

Ciento cincuenta tiene Medellín, mal contadas, casi como cantinas … Las conozco todas. Todas, todas, todas … A todas he ido buscarlo. Por lo general están cerradas y tienen los relojes parados a las horas más dispares … Relojes que son como corazones muertos, sin su tic-tac. (53)

Vallejo’s discourse poses a rather intricate representation of Fernando that places the narrator’s performance of religion in an ideological crisis. Fernando’s disbelief in the ecclesiastic Establishment recognizes the Church as a broken social institution and God as an entity whose existence is based on man’s necessity for myths: “Al olor sacrosanto del incienso se mezcla el de la marihuana … La mezcla te produce cierta religiosa alucinación y ves o no ves Dios, dependiendo de
quien seas” (53-4). Nevertheless, while the narrator postulates faith as humankind’s mythological necessity, his professed adoration for the Virgin Mary brings to light a paradoxical situation in the novel. Despite the fact that Fernando denies the existence of God, he establishes a religious practice of his own that relies on a mystical being whose maternal connotations utterly embrace patriarchal values of motherhood, abnegation, unconditional love and forgiveness under the most strenuous of the circumstances:

Virgencita niña, María Auxiliadora, que te conozco desde mi infancia, desde el colegio de los Salesianos donde estudié; que eres más mía que de esta multitud novelera, hazme un favor: Que este niño que ves rezándote, ante a ti, a mi lado, que sea mi último y definitivo amor; que no lo traicione, que no me traicione, amen. (15)

However, it could also be argued that Fernando’s sense of religiosity corresponds, in fact, to a form of identity negotiation in which the emotional identification with the Marian myth derives from the protagonist’s ties with the past of the nation. Admittedly immersed in a society where the symbolic codes of the Catholic institution prevail, the association of the narrator-protagonist with the Virgin is
obviously connotative of the nostalgic condition of his faith.\textsuperscript{21} The negative social transformations that Fernando criticizes have as reference the religious experience of his past:

La Virgen de Sabaneta hoy es María Auxiliadora, pero no lo era en mi niñez: era la Virgen del Carmen, y la parroquia la de Santa Ana … ¿Cómo fue a dar María Auxiliadora allí? No sé. Cuando regresé a Colombia allí la encontré entronizada … haciendo milagros (10).

Comparable to the narrator’s own religious syncretism, the sicario performance of Catholicism is communicated as an incongruent type of identity that translates itself into a re-contextualization of tradition.\textsuperscript{22} However, while the representation of Fernando’s belief in the Virgin of Sabaneta becomes apparent both as a desacralizing parody of the Catholic creed as well as a way of symbolically reconnecting with the nation’s past, the sicariato’s petition to the Virgin Mary and other patron saints suggests a view of religion that is superstitious in nature (Muñoz 104).\textsuperscript{23} This is patently obvious in Fernando’s

\textsuperscript{21} See Acker 339.
\textsuperscript{22} See Bhabha 35.
\textsuperscript{23} Fernando emphasizes this statement in the novel when reporting on the nature of the sicariato’s admiration for the Virgin as a practice founded outside the conventional creeds of the Catholic faith, in
account of the ritualistic prayer enunciated by the sicarios during the ceremony of the balas rezadas (blessed bullets).

In the ritual of the balas rezadas, forgiveness itself is never beseeched but rather the good fortune that the bullets become infallible. Although the ceremony emulates the same conventionality of catholic rituals where one requests the intervention of a saintly entity to obtain a particular grace, the ironic effect of the prayer is apparent in the very object of its petition; that is, the death of the other:

Por la gracia de San Judas Tadeo (o el Señor Caído de Girardota o el padre Arcila o el santo de tu devoción) que estas balas de esta suerte consagradas den en el blanco sin fallar, y que no sufra el difunto. Amén.(63)

The irony of the sicarios’ “blessed bullets” ritual is utterly disconcerting, for it not only denotes a certain compassion in the sicario’s request that the future victim not suffer at the moment of his/her death, but also constitutes an evident contradiction in the prayer’s very theological statement. By breaking the doctrinal complete ignorance of religious fundaments: “Luego fui explicando a Wilmar, que era un ignorante en religión, los pasajes del Viejo y del Nuevo Testamento que estaban escenificados en el techo” (105).
commandment of “thou shall not kill,” the sicario’s ceremonial utterance proves itself to be paradoxical where Catholic dogma is concerned. The narrative does not propose, however, such a paradox to be a crisis within the sicario representation but rather it emphasizes that duality in the face of what is considered duty is simply not a part of the sicariato’s religious culture.

Fernando’s description of the scapulars that Alexis carries as amulets further emphasizes the syncretic performance of faith observed among the sicario class. At a certain point of the narrative, Fernando asks Alexis if the bullet scars he sees on his neck, arm and foot correspond to the exact places where he carried his amulets. Alexis answers affirmatively, which prompts the narrator to question the efficacy of the scapulars. Rather convictive, the sicario explains to his lover that if he had in fact not carried the scapulars with him the bullets that hit his body would have certainly reached his heart or even his brain. Satirically, the narrator states:

Contra esa lógica divina ya sí no se podía razonar. Lo que fuera. Ver a mi niño desnudo con sus tres escapularios me ponía en un delirium tremens. Ese angelito tenía la propiedad de
desencadenarme todos mis demonios interiores, que son como mis personalidades: más de mil.(26)

The passage quoted above shows that the narrator’s ironic stance does not judgmentally oppose the sicario’s observation but rather overlooks its contradiction as a manifestation of being: “whatever,” Fernando states. Indeed, the narrator realizes that there can be no reasoning with Alexis’ argument, for its transcendence relies on one’s position regarding the metaphysical nature of faith. Fernando’s implicit respect for his young lover’s sense of logic, with which he does not necessarily agree, shows that he understands that the sicario faith is a self-sustained paradox.

If on the one hand the narrator of La virgen underscores the Marian figure as an abnegated and attentive mother, on the other hand, Fernando also opposes the her veneration when critically contesting the sanctity of motherhood in the narrative. The narrator’s sardonic stance against procreation and the apparent disavowal of motherhood can be particularly noted in an episode in which his second lover, Wilmar, assassinates a mother and her two children. While touring the city of Medellín in a bus in the company of Wilmar, Fernando notes the presence of a mother who remains aloof to one of her two sons who is
profusely crying. Irritated by these circumstances, amidst the intense heat and the loud noise produced by several radios carried by other passengers, the narrator angrily observes:

Y como si fuera poco el calor y el radio, una señora con dos niños en plena libertinaje: uno, de teta, en su más enfurecido berrinche, cagado sensu strictu de la ira. Y el hermanito brincando, manoteando, jodiendo. ¿Y la mamá? Ella en la luna, como si nada, poniendo cara de Mona Lisa la delincuente, la desgraciada, convencida de que la maternidad es sagrada, en vez de aterrizar a meter en cintura sus dos engendros. (100)

The narrator proceeds to characterize the mother’s indifference towards her children’s actions as an affront to the civilized codes of public behavior:

¿No se les hace demasiada desconsideración para con el resto de los pasajeros, una verdadera falta de caridad cristiana? ¿Por qué berrea el bebé, señora? ¿Por estar vivo? Yo también lo estoy y me tengo que aguantar. (101)

As the narrative concludes, Wílmar, playing the suggestive role of Herod, finds a punitive solution for the
disengaged mother by assassinating her and her two children, thus consummating an ulterior desire expressed by the narrator at the imaginary level:

Y con la lanza llena hasta el tope, rebosada hasta el rebose, he aquí que Wilmar encarna el Rey Herodes. Y que saca el Santo Rey el tote y truena tres veces ... Una pepita para la mamá en su corazón de madre, y dos para sus angelitos en sus corazonzitos tiernos” (101).

This narrative account suggests, at the first instance, the mother figure as a negative presence, someone whose disregard for her children signifies the opposite of the presence, care and trust expressed by the Marian myth. Fernando’s commentaries effectively subvert the customary respect for the maternal role as he claims its social function to be a mundane occupation. The apparent message of maternal belittlement in this episode, however, ultimately implies irony towards motherhood, for the narrator’s nihilist critical tone throughout La virgen’s narrative presupposes the very inexcusability of humanity. In other words, the image of the mother as the origin of life symbolically represents a figure to be blamed for humankind’s existential failure and must be, therefore, silenced.
The episode of Wilmar’s assassination of the defenseless mother does represent an incongruent and irresolute instance in *La virgen*’s narrative; after all, it could be argued that the very iconographic presence of the Virgin in the *sicariato* culture constitutes an apology for motherhood. Nonetheless, as contradictory as this account may be in terms of the *sicario*’s expression of a maternal respect vis-à-vis Marian iconography, its occurrence in the novel signals the representation of the *sicario* universe as a domain where desire is one’s governing principle, where the distance between thought and action does not obey the same logic of the civilized society. Furthermore, the insistent re-inscription of the maternal figure calls attention to the obvious silence of the paternal presence in *La virgen*. This can be reviewed, in the context of Vallejo’s work, as the very denunciation of the state in which the *sicario* familiar unit is found in relation to the homeland.

Indeed, Fernando only directly alludes to the paternal figure after Alexis’ death, when the narrator reports meeting his companion’s mother for the first time. In his customary digressive expressivity, Fernando informs the reader of the precarious conditions of Alexis home: “Llamé. Me abrió ella con un niño en los brazos. Y me hizo pasar.”
Otros dos niños de pocos años se arrastraban, semidesnudos, por esta vida y el piso de tierra” (86). In spite of the brevity of Fernando’s descriptions, it becomes patently obvious that Alexis’ place of origin corresponds to a dysfunctional and corrupted familiar model. The reader is soon made aware that Alexis’ siblings are, in fact, his half brothers, that his father has been assassinated and that the mother’s current husband has abandoned her:

“Hablamos muy poco. Me contó que su actual esposo, el padre de estos niños, la había abandonado; y que al otro, el padre de Alexis, también lo habían matado” (87).

As the novel configures Alexis’ origins within a context of paternal abandonment, it is implied that it is up to the sicarios themselves to assume the fatherly function in the household. Thus, in the recognition of the mother as the only remaining figure connected with a sense of past identity and origin, the sicario adoration for the Virgin Mary is also suggested as an extension of the mother figure outside the boundaries of the home. Vallejo’s

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25 As Duzán notes on the nature of the paternal silence amidst the sicario culture: “Fathers are, for the most part, symbolic; few are there at all. “You only have one mother, but any son of a bitch can be a father,” goes the saying in La comuna” (212). A similar idea regarding the loathing for the absent father and the praising of the mother figure is also expressed in Alonso Salazar’s chronicles No nacimos pa semilla, where the sicario testimony affirms: “la madre es lo más sagrado que hay, madre no hay sino una, papá puede ser cualquier hijueputa” (199).
descriptions of the sicarios’ wishes to materially provide for their mothers vouch for this assertion.

As the narrative of La virgen goes, when attempting to please his newfound companion Wílmar after Alexis’ death, Fernando requests that the sicario write down what he would wish to receive as gifts. Among many items such as machine guns, a motorcycle, and articles of clothing, Wílmar lists a refrigerator to be given as a present to his mother (91). The expression of concern for the mother’s wellbeing receives more importance than the sicario’s fear for his life. Marked for death by a rival gang, Wílmar risks his safety when attempting to protect the delivery truck with the refrigerator from being stolen in the vicinities of his neighborhood.

There is an uncanny parallel between Wílmar’s gift to his mother and the offerings made to the Virgin of Sabaneta as similar forms of idolization. In Vallejo’s account, the gift of a household appliance reminds one of the same kind of acknowledgement and material thankfulness one expresses towards the Virgin Mary through flowers, candles and fetishist symbols. Furthermore, the irony established in

26 It is pertinent to note that the gift of a refrigerator is particularly significant in the novel for this type of offering is commonly seen in the sicario subculture. As Duzán observes: "[The sicarios] do not think about getting married of having a family - only about leaving some money to their mothers when they get killed: “I want
this episode suggests a symbolic sacrificial act that also contributes to the humanization of the sicario character, since Wilmar is ultimately assassinated while delivering the refrigerator to his home.

Through the depiction of Wilmar’s dedication to his family, Vallejo’s narrative rationalizes the sicariato as a social class whose implicit codes of conduct correspond to the sustaining of certain paradoxes. Represented both as masculine figures who fulfill the paternal role of dominance and care for the familiar unit and, at the same time, behaviorally revealed as homosexuals, the sicarios are depicted in the textual space of La virgen as oddities, for they are individuals who are capable of contradictory acts of self-determinacy and patriarchal subjugation. The characteristics of compassion and irrationality converge in Vallejo’s expression of the sicariato class and its peculiar violence, which consequentially confounds the perception of tradition where behavioral expectations are concerned.

Wilmar is not the only character in the novel who illustrates such a paradigm; Alexis is also depicted as an incongruent figure who is shown earlier in the narrative as

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\text{them to remember me for having left my mother with a refrigerator,} \quad \text{said one sicario who wasn’t even twenty years old.} \quad \text{The sicarios all pay supreme homage to their mothers} \quad (212).
\]
unable to kill a suffering wounded dog out of pity for its life. The intricacy of the sicario being is, therefore, purported by Vallejo as a sustainable contradiction inasmuch as its existence occurs at the disjunction between prejudice and humanism. The intellectual narrator into whom Vallejo unfolds questions the nature of marginalization by exposing the partiality of the truth through its stereotyping while substantiating the sicarios’ diffusion as bestial subjects. Nevertheless, what remains from the authorial identification of the marginal Other in La virgen is the conviction that, essentially, beings are universally signified as contradictions, and one’s existence constitutes a strategy of self-articulation that, in due course, determines one’s survival and adjustment in society.

**Otherness as Dystopia**

The objective revisionism of the Colombian Establishment elaborated by Fernando Vallejo through his homonymous character in *La virgen* could be argued as a literary project in which the city comes to represent a point of departure for the novel’s odious re-imagination of the national present. Fernando, in his corrosive criticism of the homeland, emphasizes Colombia’s stereotypical image
as a site dominated by violence and social decay. Nonetheless, it is also possible to contemplate the Fernando’s assertions as a concealed declaration of affection for the land of his youth. The narrator’s obsession with the national space reveals an apparent demonstration of concern and frustration derived from his disillusioned re-encounter with the city of his youth. As abstract or transcendently poetic as Fernando’s caustic prose may be when revising the status quo of the nation, the disparaging attacks against the Establishment take place precisely in the protagonist’s reconsideration of the Colombian urban milieu. In La virgen, Medellín is depicted as the locale upon which the past is enunciated as a utopia and the present, Medallo, as Vallejo’s onomatopoeic irony suggests (ametralladora), is eventually confronted and consummated as a dystopic reality. The authorial alter-ego’s fixation with the national space, clearly manifested in the numerous accounts of the sicariato violence and the corruption of the ecclesiastical

27 Indeed, the topos of violence appears as a commonality in the contemporary realm of Colombia’s literary production. For example, a search on Colombian fictional literature in the MLA Bibliography yields 32 articles that directly deal with the thematic of social violence. Laura Restrepo, Fernando Vallejo, Gabriel García Márquez, Alonso Salazar, among others, are but a few of the contemporary authors whose works are directly concerned with the historical significance of violence in the Colombian social milieu. For an analysis of current literary trends in Colombian literature, see Castillo “Colombia: violencia y narración” and Johnathan [sic] Violencia y literature en Colombia.
and political bodies, denotes a textual gesture in which the narrator’s (dis)affection for that which is contained within the urban realm serves as a sustained mirrored image of the Colombian nation as a whole.\(^{28}\)

Indeed, the notion of the city representing the entirety of the nation corresponds to an abstraction insofar as the urban reality conveys a type of fictional knowledge that inherently proposes one’s gaze upon its dense fabric as a type of totalizing experience (de Certeau 127).\(^{29}\) More than an ideal of cosmopolitanism, the universe contained in one space, the city signifies a discursive authority, for in the very realization of its optical knowledge, the very imaginary totalizations produced by the gaze of its singularities, lies the key to its self-authentication, its ability to define the state of things in the illusion of plenitude.

A powerful act of imagination in itself, the city, more specifically the lettered city, has traditionally submitted to its referentiality the process of thought, the

\(^{28}\) For the role of the city in the collective imaginary of the nation, see De Certeau, “Walking the city” esp. 127.

\(^{29}\) Vallejo’s discourse presents a “panoramic” narrative of the city, suggesting the narrator as a “voyeur” of the urban reality, according to De Certeau’s understanding of the term: “Las comunas son, como he dicho, tremendas ... casas y casas y casas, feas, feas, feas, encaramadas obscenamente las unas sobre las otras, ensordecéndose con sus radios, día y noche, noche y día a ver cuál puede más, tronando en cada casa, en cada cuarto, desgañitándose en vellenatos y partidos de fútbol, música, salsa y rock, sin parar la carraca” (56).
The reference here to the “lettered city” departs from Benedict Anderson’s analysis on the emergence of print capitalism and its role in the shaping of national identities. Anderson argues that 19th century print capitalism constituted a type of discursive power that diffusely asserted that which was to be included or excluded in the process of imagining the modern nation. See *Imagined Communities*, esp. 45.

formation of centric and peripheral modes of national being.\textsuperscript{30} By reverting the perspective of the lettered city’s account to the marginal gaze, the perambulations of Vallejo’s protagonists through the chaotic space of Medellín suggest that the sanctioning aspect of the urban discourse, be turned against itself in the definition of national identities.

The act of re-imagining Medellín – and by default the nation – vis-à-vis the periphery implies the appropriation of the city’s totalizing discourse. Thus falling prey to an outsider viewpoint, the conceptualization of the urban realm as a utopian ideal of civility, or conglomeration of differences in agreement, is dismantled in *La virgen’s* narrative in favor of the complete annihilation of the future of the city. Medellín is not only denounced as a failed project of communal existence but it is also shown to be a space where its apparent diversity is, in principle, exclusivist.

If counter-utopian literature has commonly expressed a disenchanted pessimism towards the present by fictionalizing its condition in the remoteness of a future
account (Kaplan 200), what the reader comes to realize in *La virgen* is that the author is actually pursuing the opposite of such a tenet.\(^{31}\) In Vallejo’s text, the perception of the city as a degenerate likelihood is replaced by the actuality of Medellín’s present, which consequentially places the novel in a singular position regarding the very status of dystopic narratives as prophetic visions.

As Néstor García Canclini affirms, cities are not merely a physical phenomenon, a way in which individuals occupy a certain space. Cities also constitute locales with an inherited patrimony comprised of elements such as legends, histories, images and films that speak about and on behalf of their existence (*Imaginarios urbanos*, 93). In this sense, the city itself can be considered a text to be arbitrarily interpreted, translated and recounted. Thus personified as a malignant agency capable of easily disposing of its inhabitants, treating citizenship itself as a commodity, Medellín is read by Vallejo in the narrative space of *La virgen* as a Dantesque inferno where

\(^{31}\) As Carter Kaplan observes: “Dystopia uses fiction to portray institutions based on intellectual mythology and essays prophecy and prognostication” (200).
the marginal body is constantly depicted as a nomadic existence, spiritually exiled in its own space of origin.\textsuperscript{32}

Throughout Fernando’s and his sicario companions’ pilgrimages, Medellín is frequently criticized for its exclusivist impetus, for its inhumanity, its ejection of those individuals who do not conform to the concentric and pre-established models of citizenry imposed by the lettered city. The disenfranchised sicarios are portrayed as homeless entities, rejected by the very place that has been customarily imagined as fostering difference (Bridge and Watson 11). Fernando’s visit to Medellín’s morgue in search of his second lover Wílmar vouches for the novel’s denouncement of the city’s dehumanization of marginal bodies. When seeing the multitude of nameless cadavers, victims of the random violence that has taken over the urban space of Medellín, the narrator comes to realize how analogous his experience is to that of a visit to a local butcher shop:

Los que sí están refrigerados son los N.N., o no identificados, que van a una cava o frigorífico desnudos, colgados de unos ganchos como reses por tres meses, al cabo de los cuales, si nadie los

\textsuperscript{32} For an analysis of La virgen as a parodic version of Dante’s Inferno see L’Hoeste, \textit{La virgen de los sicarios o las visiones dantescas de Fernando Vallejo” 757-67.}
reclama, el Estado los entierra por su cuenta. El Estado, esto es, Colombia, la caritativa. (120)

This ironic description of the nation “charitably” disposing of the unidentified bodies of its citizens emphasizes the extent of its disengagement as a political institution. The corpses that Fernando observes, hanging like pieces of meat in the morgue’s refrigerator, are symbolically suggestive of the Establishment’s treatment of sicarios as bestial entities. Moreover, the narrative shift from the first person to the third in this episode underscores the level of depersonalization with which Vallejo characterizes the senseless purpose of life in the urban context of Medellín. When referring to himself in the third person, the narrator reports:

Si en un principio, de entrada, el hombre invisible pensó, por su color translúcido, que los cadáveres de la sala de necropsias estaban refrigerados, después descubrió que no. No. Era la transparencia de la muerte. (119)

The proposition of the body as a disposable commodity functions in La virgen’s narrative at both the physical and metaphysical levels. While Vallejo’s narrator’s sarcastic irony criticizes the urban locale as an abject space for the sicario existence, the author seeks to textually
transcend its reality by formulating a discourse that reveals the idiosyncrasies and contradictions of the city as a poetic unreality. One example of this mode of discursive representation can be found in the narrator’s arrival at one of Medellín’s comunas. Upon reaching the top of a hill, Fernando and Alexis encounter a sign posted by local residents with the inscription “se prohíbe arrojar cadáveres” (46). Upon noticing the presence of a dead body amidst a pile of garbage nearby, the narrator, in his customary sardonic tone, notes the paradox present at the transgression of the authority implied by the posted message: “¿Se prohíbe? ¿Y esos gallinazos qué? ¿Qué era entonces ese ir y venir de aves negras, brincando, aleteando, picoteándose, patrasiándose para sacarle mejor las tripas al muerto?” (46).\(^3\)

There is a conscious intent here of manifesting Medellín as the epitome of a transcendental reality. The very presence of the sign’s inscription “it is forbidden to throw cadavers” presupposes a paradoxical account, since the image of a body lying by its side contrasts with the value of the message contained in the writing. Also,\(^3\)

\(^3\) In this passage, the narrator also underscores the notion of the city as a malignant collective upon stating that the agent responsible for the dead body was, in actuality, Medellín: “Dije arriba que no sabía quién mató al vivo, pero sí sé: un asesino omnipresente de psiquis tenebrosa y de incontables cabezas: Medellín, también conocido por los alias de Medallo y de Metrallo lo mató” (46).
Fernando’s explanation of the decomposing body being eaten by vultures implies a transgression of the inscription’s authority. This fundamentally underscores not only the comuna as a legislative organization distinct from the lettered city but also shows that Fernando’s and Alexis’ surrealist experience corresponds, in fact, to the very quotidian reality of the sicario in his locale of origin. As the narrator affirms: “Surrealistas estúpidos! Pasaron por este mundo castos y puros sin entender nada de nada, ni de la vida ni del surrealismo. El pobre surrealismo se estrella en añicos contra la realidad de Colombia” (118).

What Fernando signifies by suggesting the Colombian reality to be a surrealist paradigm is not necessarily the contemplation of the nation as an unreality but rather an ironic proposition that asserts the sicario space as an unknown territory. In other words, in the commentaries that emphasize the nation’s extraordinary nature, Fernando ultimately reaffirms the locale from which his discourse is effectively formulated. Indeed, Fernando’s observations throughout La virgen’s narrative are particularly keen on drawing attention to the geographical separations existing between the sicario marginal sphere and the lettered city. The narrator-protagonist’s assertion of Medellín as the combination of two cities under a single name scrutinizes
the urban spatiality as the severance of two distinct universes: “Podríamos decir, para simplificar las cosas, que bajo un solo nombre Medellín son dos ciudades; la de abajo, intemporal, en el valle; y la de arriba, en las montañas, rodeándola. El abrazo de Judas” (82).

However, in this explicit separation advocated by the narrative figure, the influx of bodies, that is, the dislocation of the marginal subject from the peripheral *comuna* to the lettered city — and the opposite — is purportedly unequal, for it is common to observe the *sicarios* infiltrating the space of the lettered city but not the contrary. Fernando’s description of the *sicariato’s* journey from the “espacio de arriba” to the “espacio de abajo” gives emphasis to the impertinence of this class in defying the imaginary borders of the city. Simultaneously, the author underscores the *sicario* presence as a foreign body within the confinements of the urban milieu. Hence, the *comuna* is advanced in the narrative as a space of isolation where the lettered city disposes of its own byproduct, namely the poverty and violence attributed to the *sicariato* culture:

La ciudad de abajo nunca sube a la ciudad de arriba pero lo contrario sí: los de arriba bajan, a vagar, a robar, a atracar, a matar. Quiero
decir, bajan los que quedan vivos, porque a la mayoría, allá arriba, allá mismo, tan cerquita de las nubes y del cielo, antes de que alcancen a bajar en su propio matadero los matan (82).

Exposed as an infectious locus, the sicarios’ comuna is represented as a space of containment of poverty whose growth threatens the existence of the utopian ideal of the city. As Fernando recounts, the situation of warfare between rival groups of sicarios is ultimately transferred beyond their original domain; it invades the lettered city in its most quotidian occurrences:

Se estaban dando plomo a loco estos dos combos por cuestiones “territoriales,” como decían antes los biólogos y como dices ahora los sociólogos. Dos bandas de la comuna noriental, que como su nombre indica está en el Norte, agarradas de la greña en Sabaneta, que está en el Sur, en el otro extremo? Sabaneta goza de extraterritorialidad, amigos, y aquí no me vengan a dirimir sus querellas de barrio: esto es mar abierto para todos los tiburones. (50-51)

As La virgen’s narrator asserts, the genesis of the sicariato’s Medellín, the “Meddellín de arriba,” must be understood as a site of marginalization instigated by the
very agency of its counterpart, the “Medellín de abajo.” This becomes patently obvious when Fernando briefly accounts for the so-called “La violencia” period in Colombian history – roughly from 1948 to 1958 – in which the political dispute between the Liberal and Conservative parties led the country into a perennial state of insurrection and criminality. In one of his customary digressions, Fernando retells the comunas as a developing occurrence whose foundations are settled in the country’s historical territorial disputes:

Cuánto hace que se murieron los viejos, que se mataron de jóvenes, unos con otros a machete ... A machete, con los que trajeron del campo cuando llegaron huyendo dizque de “la violencia” y fundaron estas comunas sobre terrenos ajenos, robándoselos como barrios piratas o de invasión (83).

As can be noted, the sicariato existence is reviewed in conjunction with the historical nation. The inclusion of the sicario as a subject who evolves out of the conflict of Medellin’s marginality suggests that violence be appreciated as one of the many facets that make up the

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34 For a historical analysis of bipartisan conflicts and violence in Colombian politics see Rojas, Civilization and Violence.
nation’s identity. As Vallejo explains the story of the two Medellíns, the author places in evidence a message of abandonment and exclusion that leads the reader to reflect on the responsibilities of the lettered city for the situation one encounters in the “city above:”

Y que hace Medellín por Metrallo? Nada, canchas de fútbol en terraplanes elevados, excavados en la montaña, con muy bonita vista (nosotros), panorámica, para que jueguen fútbol todo el día y se acuesten cansados y ya no piensen en matar ni en la cópula. (84-85)

Within a critical reflection that implicates the urban utopia as an elusive concept, Vallejo ratifies Medellín as a legendary city, for the author articulates the city itself as a fabulous myth, the “sum of all signs,” a global representation of the nation in its degenerative state (Barthes 144). Therefore, the re-appropriation of the topos of violence and its re-incidence throughout the novel revise the Colombian context as an emblematic territory that communicates social chaos and violence as a type of inherent identity. As Vallejo introduces human brutality as an everyday account, at times appealing to its current banality to reaffirm the city’s dystopic quality, Medellín becomes suggestively uttered, in Bakhtinian terms, as a
chronotope of the contemporary Third World city, a space marked by poverty, hybridity and heterogeneity in disparate and unequal levels. The author’s negative reiteration of Medellín as a collapsed urban project reveals a subversive mode of celebrating Colombian nationality that appropriates the very process with which the nation has been traditionally imagined.

However, instead of focusing on the positive attributes that express a cohesive form of national identity and solidarity – as Benedict Anderson has suggested regarding the consolidation of the European bourgeoisie – Vallejo’s narrative asserts a national cultural imagery that is essentially negative (Anderson 145). This becomes evident when the author links Medellín and its sicariato culture to the figure of Pablo Escobar, a name that has come to be understood as a synonym for Colombia and the drug traffic underworld:

Con la muerte del presunto traficante, aquí [Medellín] la profesión de sicario se acabó … Sin trabajo fijo, se dispersaron por la ciudad y se

\[35\] Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (The Dialogic Imagination, 84). This idea seems to somewhat coincide with Barthes’ conceptualization of myths, which are essentially “a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain” (Mythologies, 114).

\[36\] See Anderson 83-112.
pusieron a secuestrar, a atracar, a robar. Y
sicario que trabaja por su cuenta y riesgo ya nos
es sicario: es libre empresa, la iniciativa
privada. Otra institución nuestra que se nos va.
El naufragio de Colombia, en esta pérdida de
nuestra identidad ya no nos va quedando nada.

(34)

Vallejo’s reinstatement of the sicario as a subverted
type of entrepreneurship contributes to sustaining
Medellín’s identity as a site of social corruptibility,
while proposing, rather ironically, that the sicariato
lifestyle be recognized as a profession. Furthermore,
Vallejo’s implication of the sicariato activities in
conjunction with Escobar suggests the young assassins’
representation be contextually inserted in an economic
model that purports the nation’s drug-related activities as
a degenerate type of Third World capitalism. Nevertheless,
Vallejo’s ironic critical appreciation of the sicariato’s
engagement in society’s marginal economies does not lose
sight of the fact that their line of work constitutes a
last resort, since this social class is unable to engage in
licit forms of capitalism as a means to ensure its own
survival:
Muerto el gran contratador de sicarios [Pablo Escobar], mi pobre Alexis de quedó sin trabajó. Fue entonces cuando lo conocí. Por eso los acontecimientos nacionales están ligados a los personales, y las pobres, ramplonas vidas de los humildes tramadas con las de los grandes. (61)

If on the one hand Fernando affirms that national events are connected to personal and individual circumstances, on the other hand the narrator is particularly keen on stressing the arbitrariness with which the historical nation remembers and forgets its own past and sense of identity. Fernando’s critical stance on the collective imaginary of the nation predicates his exilic Self to be someone whose memory of the past is capable of acting as a supplementary force of historical representation: “Señor procurador: Yo soy la memoria de Colombia y su conciencia y después de mi no sigue nada” (21).

The former exiled narrator is advanced in the narrative of La virgen as an entity who, through his apparent distance from the nation’s reality, is able to better confront the true nature of its progress. The life-account of the protagonist is thus advanced as a corrective measure that elevates remembrance to a condition of
authenticity where history is concerned. In Fernando’s contrast between the present of the nation and his memories, the disfigured now becomes an event of historical proportions, for the narrator recognizes the past and its conventional narratives to be relative commonalities.

La fugacidad de la vida humana a mi no me inquieta; me inquieta la fugacidad de la muerte: esta prisa que tienen aquí para olvidar. El muerto más importante lo borra un partido de fútbol. Así, de partido en partido se está liquidando la memoria. (39)

Indeed, *La virgen’s* narrative trivializes the national past inasmuch as it reinforces its corruptibility in the present. Vallejo’s scrutiny of Medellín’s modernity sees globalization as a type of ideological violence in which existence is relinquished in favor of trans-national capital demands. The author also revises the contemporary global nation as a locus where the disavowal of traditional identities constitutes a mandate promoted by economic initiatives. This can be noted earlier in the narrative of *La virgen* as Fernando reports on the nature of the names of the sicarios and unprivileged individuals alike. Observing that the sicarios’ names are in their vast majority
foreign, especially Anglo-American based, the narrator states:

Con eso de que les dio a los pobres por ponerles a los hijos nombres de ricos, extravagantes, extranjeros: Tayson Alexander, por ejemplo, o Fáber o Eder o Wílfer o Rommel o Yeison o que sé yo ... Es lo único que les pueden dar para arrancar en esta misera vida a sus niños, un vano, un necio nombre extranjero o inventado, de relumbrón. (8-9)

Here a postmodern sense of hybridization is reported influencing the formation of one of the most basic forms of identity articulation, that is, one’s given name. Fernando’s account of the lower classes’ appropriation of Anglo-American names suggests internationalism to be a driving force that intrinsically affects the everyday life of the nation and the very essence of its citizens. The Anglo-American patrimony, whether or not expressed in the hybridization of proper names or material commodities, is purported in the novel as a distinguishable referential by which new global identities are devised, for it is in the consumption of the so-called First World cultural

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37 See Canclini, Culturas Híbridas esp.263-322.
production that the symbolic value of particular influences is asserted.\textsuperscript{38}

The transnational postmodern context that embraces Medellín denotes in La virgen’s narrative an “in-between”\textsuperscript{39} stage in which archaism – represented by Fernando’s memory and his self-assertion as the representative of a particular past tradition – and modernity – implied by the sicario’s incorporation into the contemporary “worldly” context of Medellín – converge in the author’s conscious representation of the reality of globalization in Latin America. The signs of contemporary consumerism are vehemently criticized in Vallejo’s revision of Medellín as the narrator Fernando comments about their effects on the behavioral attitudes of his sicario companions: “Impulsado por su vacío existencial Alexis agarra en el televisor cualquier cosa: telenovelas, partidos de fútbol, conjuntos de rock, una puta declarando, el presidente” (33).

\textsuperscript{38} In Consumers and Citizens, Canclini observes that culture has become “a process of multinational assemblage, a flexible articulation of parts, a montage of features that any citizen in any country, of whatever religion or ideology, can read and use” (17-8). Although Canclini’s remarks on the current global symbolic economy are insightful, it is necessary not to lose sight of an inherited sense of ambivalence towards cultural authenticity and “inferiority” that still lingers on the Latin American culture as a consequence of its postcolonial past, which certainly exerts a strong influence in the shaping of identities where the use of the so-called First World culture (in particular the United States) as a referential is concerned.

\textsuperscript{39} See Bhabha esp. 59-60.
If on the one hand the *sicarios’* wishes for material possessions are communicated to the reader as an existential emptiness, on the other hand Vallejo does not conceal those symbols that have come to constitute the enunciation of a global condition where market ideals and individual aspirations are manifested as an interdependent desire:

Con su letra atravesada y mi bolígrafo escribí:

Que quería unos tennis marca Reebock y unos jeans Paco Ravanne. Camisas Ocean Pacific y ropa interior Calvin Klein. Una moto Honda, un jeep Mazda, un equipo de sonido laser y una nevera para la mamá: uno de esos refrigeradores marca Whirpool que soltaban chorros de cubitos de hielo abriéndoles simplemente una llave. (91)

The textual affirmation of the current global context in *La virgen* denounces the present neo-liberal ideology as a corrosive force that is capable of consuming itself insofar as it promotes human existence as a synonym of consumption. In Fernando’s aforementioned commentary on the *sicariato’s* material culture, Vallejo reveals a critical appreciation of the Colombian reality that exposes the paradoxical idiosyncrasies of the new world order. The marginalized subject is revealed as an agent that licitly
and illicitly participates in the nation’s economy. Vallejo’s sicarios are revealed as disposable entities whose struggle for survival and sense of identity is caught between the entrance and exit from the peripheral city, the “buying” and the rejection of models of identity at a pace never previously observed.40

Since the sicarios of Vallejo’s novel are portrayed as having the same aspirations as those individuals belonging to higher social classes, the equality of their humanity is disclosed, which essentially constitutes the text’s most subversive theme: the proclamation of the Other’s sameness. In spite of the clear demarcation of the sicario’s excluded existence on the peripheries of society, the marginalized Other is normatively proposed as an agent capable of contesting with the cultural Establishment on the very terms of its exclusion. It suffices to mention here the emergence of the sicario as a profession whose conduct obeys, in principle, the same contractual and capital logic of legitimate types of businesses.

Thus the sicariato’s status as an underprivileged class comes to be revised in Vallejo’s novel as a paradox where the agency of poverty is concerned, for the reader sees through Fernando’s narrative that the sicarios’ line

40 See Bernal 65-6.
of work constitutes, in fact, an entrepreneurial initiative that is capable of contesting the lettered city’s common sense. It does so by defying the Establishment’s own rules either in terms of cultural integrity – as the sicariato’s veneration for the Virgin of Sabaneta is able to confirm – or in terms of the very models of economy the nation adopts. Vallejo’s revision of poverty through the sicarios’ perspective, more than constituting a paradox of action and alienation, social marginality and visibility, is an element of Colombian identity whose self-regenerative condition is seen as a tradition: “La pobreza se autogenera multiplicada por dichas cifras y después, cuando agarra fuerza, se propaga como un incendio en progresión geométrica” (68).

The authorial message of poverty as a tradition within the historical nation is particularly noticeable in one of La virgen’s accounts in which Fernando encounters Alexis’ mother after the sicario’s death. When the narrator sees his former companion’s mother, he is instantly reminded of a poor old maid who used to serve at his home:

Pensé en … una sirvienta de mi casa, que me la recordaba. Evidentemente, aquella lejana mujer, que por la edad podría haber sido mi madre, no era la que tenía enfrente, que podía ser mi hija
... ¿Sería que por sobre el abismo del tiempo se repetían las personas, los destinos? (86).

Fernando implicates poverty as an inherited form of identity. Pondering the possibility of Alexis’ mother to be related to his old servant, the narrator acknowledges misery as an atemporal circumstance. Furthermore, when stating that the “abyss of time” repeats destinies as well as the presence of individuals in one’s life, Fernando also emphasizes memory as a corrupted way of accounting for the past.

It is precisely in the recognition of the past as an imperfect and aleatory construction that the author asserts the story of his partially autobiographical protagonist as a type of historicity, seeking to destabilize traditional historical discourses on the premises of the novel’s ambiguity as fiction and one’s subjectivity in the account of history. This tenet is particularly evident in one of Fernando’s many digressions in which he reports on his attendance at the funeral of an old acquaintance by the name of El Nato. When he receives news of his acquaintance’s death, Fernando reacts with perplexity for, as he remembered, El Nato had been dead for thirty years, murdered in the exact same conditions of which he was now being informed: “Me despedí ... a la vez inquieto por la
perspectiva insidiosa de que El Nato, y en general al ser humano ... lo pudieron matar dos veces” (107). Upon arriving at the funeral, the narrator realizes that the defunct was, indeed, the person he judged to be deceased decades ago, which leads him to inquire: “¿No sería que la realidad de Medellín se enloqueció y se estaba repitiendo?” (109).

Fernando’s depiction of reality repeating itself could be reviewed either as a poetic instance or as a rhetorical principle of relating the past as a deficient memorial construct whose necessary repetitiveness eventually alters the characteristics of original events. In either case, what prevails in Vallejo’s text is the obsessive accountability of the present based on the introspective subjectivity of the narrator’s recollections. Through Fernando’s perspective, understood here as a leveled type of marginal account, the historical nation is contemplated in its undoing, which consequentially implies La virgen’s discourse to be a type of criticism directed towards modernity.

In its dystopic review of the present of the nation from a marginal viewpoint, Vallejo’s narrative does not invoke any form of marginal resistance or promote solutions.

41 As Fernando affirms elsewhere in the narrative: “El tiempo barre con todo y las costumbres. Así, de cambio en cambio, paso a paso, van perdiendo las sociedades la cohesión, la identidad, y quedan hechas unas colchas deshilachadas de retazos” (30).
for the de-marginalization of the sicariato existence. In effect, the sicarios’ reality is promoted as a self-destructive and self-regenerative condition that is pessimistically articulated as one of the symptoms of the nation in its very fundamental disintegration. La virgen’s contextual utterance of Medellín as a space in decay recognizes the current global milieu as the erasure of humanist principles. In this sense, Vallejo ironically postulates inexistence as the rationale for the twenty-first century: “Pobres seres innocentes, sacados sin motivo de la nada y lanzados en el vértigo del tiempo. Por unos necios, enloquecidos instantes nada más” (121).

Fernando’s last words “y que te vaya bien, que te pise un carro / o que te estripe un tren” (121) underscores such a nihilist principle of expressing the contemporary culture, which further emphasizes La virgen’s critical revision of the nation as a frail and elusive concept. The postmodern logic of centric annihilation thus defeats historical indoctrination, which inevitably purports humanity as an existence adrift: “Bueno parcero, aquí nos separamos, hasta aquí me acompaña usted, por su lado, su

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42 For a reading of Vallejo’s novel as a parody of Nietzschean nihilism, see Serra, “La virgen de los sicarios de Fernando Vallejo: testimonio paródico y discurso nietzscheano” 65-76.
camino que yo me sigo en cualquiera de estos buses para donde vaya, para donde sea” (121).
Chapter 3

Cidade de Deus

They pay you to imitate them, as long as they don’t have to look at you. Your voice becomes famous but they hide your face.

(Salman Rushdie, The Satanic Verses)

Testifying Incognito

Under the generic emblem of novel and the immediate fictive connotations of the term, Paulo Lins’ Cidade de Deus conceals a literary project that represents not only the Brazilian favela\(^1\) in its historical evolution but also provides a space in which the marginal voices of favelados

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\(^1\) The word *favela* is commonly employed in Brazil to describe areas such as shantytowns and slums. The origins of the term are generally attributed to the existence of the Morro (hillside) da Favela in Rio de Janeiro, where freed slaves first established a squatter community in the late 1890s (Pino 40-57). In their modern signification, *favelas* have come to constitute idiosyncratic communities that are paradoxically self-sufficient concerning commerce and the use of certain technologies and yet precarious in relation to common standards of living. Often mythologized as sites of poverty and criminality, *favelas* usually occupy the hillside of large cities or specific areas that facilitate the access to the urban centers. Because the Brazilian *favelas* present certain particularities concerning their disposition as historical sites of racial and class exclusion, the term has been maintained and utilized throughout this study without being translated into English. The word *favelado* is employed as a noun to signify the residents of the *favela* as well as an adjective that describes the condition of being poor.
are able to speak through the agency of the author. Thus, beyond the fictiveness implicated by the term novel, Cidade de Deus’ textuality is a literary experiment akin to that of the conventional subaltern testimony, if one understands testimony to be a mediated narrative representation of a marginalized existence directed to an intellectual intelligentsia with the purpose of inciting visibility.\(^2\)

Indeed, it could be argued that any form of textual representation can be articulated as a testimony as long as the content of the message is patently clear in reference to the intellectual mediatory presence and its role in bringing the subaltern’s factual existence to visibility. Testimonies and their effective truthfulness appear in a variety of literary forms such as autobiographies, biographical novels, diaries, life-witness reports and other factographic types of literature with a first person narrator as a real protagonist or witness to the events he or she recounts (Beverley 31).

Although testimonies instantly imply a form of truthful articulation in the communication of the first

\(^2\) Although recognizing a certain insufficiency in the ways in which testimonies can be explained, John Beverly attempts their definition as a politicized literary genre that corresponds to “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience” (Testimonio, 31).
person narrator’s life as evidence of oppression and marginalization (Beverley 47, Spivak Three Women’s Texts, 9, Sklodowska 81), the truth effect of the subaltern existence speaking for itself can be equally identified in works that are declaredly fictional. **Cidade de Deus** constitutes an example in which the third person narrative does not negate the novel’s ability to function as a testimony of the favelado condition. Nor does the purported fictionalization of the favela inhabitants’ subjectivity completely discredit the novel’s efficacy as a vehicle of marginal testimony. The ambiguity with which Lins crafts **Cidade de Deus**’s narrative is characteristically ambivalent to both the author’s experience as a mediating intellectual who utilizes testimonies of the favela residents as the basis for the narrative and his position in reference to the writing, that is, Lins’ identity as a former favelado.³

Divided into three chapters that center on the life accounts of three young criminals - Inferninho, Pardalzinho and Zé Miúdo, each representing a specific historical period of Rio de Janeiro’s favela Cidade de Deus - Lins’ novel does not favor any particular perspective. In fact, the aforementioned characters function as rhetorical marks that suggest the advancement of crime and its

³ See, for example, Gussow 1, Rohter 4.
transformations within the confinements of the favela milieu: from the initial prevalence of petty crimes, to the murder of victims during armed robberies and finally the more recent war-like environment created by the agency of drug trafficking. Interspersed with the life-stories of Inferninho, Pardalzinho and Zé Miúdo, the reader encounters numerous tangential accounts that appear in the text as digressions on the lives of those individuals who constitute the reality of one of Rio’s most notorious favelas.

Through an array of different subjectivities acting and reacting in confluence with each other, Lins configures a totalizing discourse that ultimately finds a balance between Cidade de Deus’ initial novelistic impetus and the testimonial quality of its tangential narratives. The author constantly oscillates between the story-telling and truth-telling modes of enunciation, the realist prose and the digressive subjectivity contained in the life-stories of the favelados that serve as the source of the text’s creation.4 Further contributing to the novel’s generic

4 In the form of a postscript, Lins acknowledges in Cidade de Deus that his novel is in part derived from several interviews with favelados collected during a sociological study on the favela under the supervision of the anthropologist Alba Zaluar (403). However, in the opening of the novel, Lins states the following: “os personagens e situações desta obra são reais apenas no universo da ficção; não se referem a pessoas e fatos concretos e sobre eles não emitem opinião”
ambiguity, the poetic artifice through which the author sublimes the crude reality of the favelado existence confounds any fixed categorization that would conventionally stipulate Cidade de Deus either as a novel, a testimony or a biographical project.

Therefore, to consider Lins’ novel as a hybrid text that encompasses the novelistic, the testimonial, and the poetic, is to recognize the protean quality of its writing, which denotes the negotiation of the truth, no matter how personally or subjectively recounted, as a perennial “awareness” in the text. The core message of Cidade de Deus bypasses its novelistic falsehood, for the narrative’s closeness to a type of communal experience of poverty and social exclusion implicates the reception of the multiple characters’ life-stories as generalized accounts of the truth, conventional archetypes that do not necessitate any particular explanation to be assimilated as reality (Barthes, Mythologies 109-11).

Through the presence of stories such as those that depict the favela as a site of sexual violence, crime, hunger, and misery, and as the result of mass-migrations to
the city from the impoverished regions of the nation, one observes Lins’ novel as a space of representation that fosters the stereotypes that have come to be expected from the traditionally marginalized favela. However, by giving voice to social actors whose stories are widely diffused as common knowledge, the author re-appropriates the favelado testimony by utilizing it as a means to substantiate the significance of the modern-day favela.

As with any act of representation, the testimonies that Lins articulates throughout Cidade de Deus’ narrative constitute a partial and imagined reality inasmuch as any type of representation ultimately corrupts that which gives origin to its existence. Nevertheless, Lins’ discourse cannot be relegated to the category of mere fictional representation. The testimonial character of the novel thrives precisely because of the ambiguity of its fictive stance, for the testimonies and the historical context in which they are immersed eventually frustrate the text’s taxonomy as fiction. Where the novel presents the favelado reality as overtly negative, too implausible to be true, this representation is excused by the conventions of the genre in which it is presented to the audience; where the text proposes a representation that is clearly factual, the
novel’s fictiveness is concealed by its very proximity to the sincere truth of the *favelado*’ testimony.

If *Cidade de Deus* constitutes a hybrid discourse that is partially fictional while still being able to function as a sincere form of truth-telling, it is fundamentally necessary to analyze the role of the author as the agent who brings the subaltern life to visibility. Since Lins declares in the textual space of *Cidade de Deus* that the novel is based on his experience as an ethnographer working in the realms of the *favela* (403), it is necessary to verify the extent of the author’s presence within the boundaries of the text in order to investigate whether Lins is, in fact, a traditional intermediary for the representation of the subaltern conscience or whether his origins as a poor black *favelado* place the author in a unique position regarding the content of the writing. In the analysis of Lins’ agency as an intellectual mediator, *Cidade de Deus* emerges as a distinctive type of testimonial account not solely on the basis of its ambiguous fictionalization of the marginalized voices that serve as the source of the narrative but also because of the very nature of Lins’ intermediary role.

As Gayatri Spivak argues in her canonic article “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” the marginally oppressed necessitate
the intercession of the intellectual mediator on its behalf in order to attain socio-political visibility. Conventional subaltern testimonies, such as Rigoberta Menchú’s and other similar narratives, validate Spivak’s arguments of the inevitability of an intercessory presence that effectively represents the oppressed Other to the world through the action of its own silence in the text, that is, the mediating figure’s very claim of invisibility when allowing the subaltern to verbalize its existence.⁵

The suppression of the intellectual figure is, therefore, a fundamental principle in the establishment of a testimony’s authenticity, since the apparent invisibility of the dialogue between the intellectual mediator and the subaltern subject ultimately authorizes the text to function as a testimonial account (Bellenger 41). Although editorial control can be observed as an inevitable intromission, it does not necessarily disqualify the potential of the testimonial message to be articulated as one’s personal truth, given that it is sincerity rather than literariness what the testimony envisages (Spivak, “Three Women’s Text” 9, Beverley, Testimonio 32).

⁵ This is often the case with prefaces or similar notes in conventional literary testimonies, where the author excuses himself as a mere “transcriber” of the subaltern message, thus authenticating the reception of the marginalized entity’s life-story as a form of “testimonial pact” between the reader and the author(s). See, for instance, Bellenger 37.
It is well to note, however, that there is an eminent pitfall in the intention behind the common articulation of the subaltern life to an audience. Not only can the intellectual mediating figure risk essentializing and fixing that which he/she wants to liberate from obscurity, but also the intercessory agent may influence the very direction of the testimonial message, whether motivated by personal convictions or by the sheer necessity of correcting the Other’s speech in order to appear presentable to a particular audience’s taste.⁶

Certainly, such a biased action towards the treatment of the subaltern testimony by its intermediary agent has been widely scrutinized. The intercessory subjectivity with which the testimonial medium is constructed has been revealed both as an inevitability – as is the case with any kind of representation – and as a liability, for testimonies may contribute to fixate the subaltern actor as an immutable being, discarding its position in society as a relational condition as well as the marginal subject’s ability to speak for and by itself (Spivak, “Three Women’s Text” 10, Sklodowska 89, Corosil 37).

⁶ Several critics have underscored the tension play between the real and the imaginary when one testifies on one’s behalf or/and on behalf of others. See Beverley, Testimonio 63-78, Sklodowska esp. 86-7 and Bellenger esp. 44-6.
Thus, when taking into consideration the postmodern skepticism towards literary genres, it is possible that the novel as a testimony reminds the reader of how relative fictional discourses can be when claiming to speak for the subaltern otherness. Indeed, Lins’ authorial identity as a former favelado constitutes a significant factor that influences the reception of Cidade de Deus by its contemporary audience as a sincere account. The construction of the author’s personality as an ethnographer and the mass-diffused media’s reaffirmation of his ex-favelado condition question the virtues of the testimonial genre as a narrative in which the truth must be necessarily sanctioned by an academic intelligentsia. The restatement, inside and outside of the novel’s boundaries, of the author’s affinity to the excluded favelado subjectivity signifies the Brazilian favela as a reality that appears to be too close to the author’s field of experience. This, consequentially, emphasizes subalternity as a relative state of being.

While a testimonial-like representation, Cidade de Deus problematizes the understanding of the role of the intermediary agent in the process of allowing the subaltern favelado to speak. The relationship between the marginal subject and the intercessory representative of its truth
does not conform to the idea of a cultural encounter in which alterity is translated to an audience by a distant intellectual, as Mercé Belenger has observed about conventional testimonies (41). Lins constitutes a type of mediator whose perception of the world departs from the very location from where the discourse is produced: inside the existential reality of the favela and not outside its domain.

Lins’ authority to speak on behalf of those individuals who could not evade the situation of poverty and exclusion characteristic of the favelado milieu originates in the very position the author occupies in the act of textually representing the favelados. Lins not only proposes the depiction of the favela as a symbol of a particular marginalized segment of society but he also attempts to articulate his authorial Self as an equal in the process of representation. As the author has affirmed in several interviews, the nature of Cidade de Deus corresponds to a narrative both personally motivated and conceived upon an empirical kind of knowledge: “Mostrei [em Cidade de Deus] o que eu vivi. Eu passei por tudo aquilo” (Ribeiro 130).

As can be noted in Lins’ aforementioned citation, the emphasis the author places on his identification with the
reality he portrays becomes part of the narrative inasmuch as it is through the reaffirmation of his former *favelado* status that the text’s authenticity can be ultimately validated. In the diffusion of the author’s identity in collusion with the novelistic account, Lins is no longer an invisible agent when interceding on behalf of the subjects he allows to speak in *Cidade de Deus*; he also becomes the subject of that which he represents in spite of the artifice of the third person narrative and the emblematic presentation of the novel as a partially fictional project. Given the best-seller quality that the novel has acquired due to its cinematographic transposition and the constant reference to the authorial identity as a former *favelado*, Lins’ novel assumes the qualitative function of a testimonial account that is effectively akin to what Spivak has defined as “the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other” (*Three Women’s Texts*, 7).

The question advanced here is not one related to whether or not the writer Paulo Lins should be scrutinized as a subaltern agent. Rather, what has been postulated thus far is the ability of the author to be represented – or to represent himself – as a subject whose life experiences are leveled with those of the individuals he textually
articulates. There is, indeed, a significant distance between “being” and “being represented” in order to be “read” by others, which unequivocally exposes understanding identities as performative acts that are always dependent on relationships of dominance and subjugation, whether material or spiritual.⁷

In order to understand Cidade de Deus as an authentic product of a particular subaltern sensibility, it is crucial to consider the accessibility to the authorial life as an element that directly affects the way in which the text is received.⁸ Lins’ identity is used as a form of authentication of Cidade de Deus’ factual claims. Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize that the novel is not only configured as a testimony of others but also conceals a form of personal testimonial declaration. In other words, one could recognize the very authorial presence of Lins as an entity that not only bears witness to the favelados with whom he comes in contact and whose life stories he utilizes in the narration of the novel, but also gives testimony to his own individual experience concerning race and class exclusion, in spite of doing so through the artifice of a third person narrator.

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The third person narrative of *Cidade de Deus* does not imply, necessarily, a lack of referentiality to the authorial figure. As Philippe Lejeunne argues in his *On Autobiography*, narratives in the third person may acknowledge the author as an indirect character that draws attention to itself in other provocative ways, concealing the discursive power of the first person as part of a strategy of self-representation (35-51).

As mentioned elsewhere, the autobiographical quality of *Cidade de Deus* arises mostly from the fact that the media element plays an integral part in affecting the reception of texts by revealing exterior information used by the reader in the process of decoding the literary artifact. Cidade de Deus’ extra-textual facts—such as the origins of Lins as a black person and a former *favelado*—certainly facilitate the reception of the work as a partially autobiographical project. Nonetheless, if one takes into account all of the details considered exterior to the novel, including its instatement as a fictional endeavor, the consideration of Lins’ narrative as an autobiographical testimony constitutes a somewhat artificial argument, for the absence of his affirmed Self

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initially shatters the illusory effect of presence seen in conventional first person autobiographies.

This apparent lack of an authorial signature inside the text, however, can be understood as a narrative-distancing mechanism that seeks to expose the favelado truth as an ongoing process of social exclusion instead of the author evading the favela reality as a premise of the process of representation. Therefore, the truth about the author’s presence in Cidade de Deus must be reviewed also through the third person narrator as an entity whose mode of enunciation of the favela reality does not remain impassive to the testimonies it recounts.

The ambiguity with which the discursive tone of Cidade de Deus is fashioned – its constant oscillation between the illusion of testimony, its anthropological impetus and its advancement as fiction – ultimately reveals the voice of the third person narrator as an emotive presence. Lins’ third person narrator sympathizes with the stories of the characters which it recounts in the novel, revealing itself as a constructed subjectivity that immerses into the lives of the favelados it depicts, assuming their thoughts, their perspectives, allowing itself to be dominated by their feelings and emotions:
Aquela manhã para Antunes tinha o ar mais puro, manhã em que ele deixaria de lado a loucura da vingança. O Deus todo-poderoso, [sic.] se encarregaria de castigar Miúdo, quem era ele para fazer justiça se a justiça divina é mais forte? Estava saído para procurar emprego, saindo da Cidade de Deus, saindo da guerra ... O dono do posto lhe daria um emprego, pois sabia falar bem, sabia matemática, era preto mas tinha os cabelos lisos e olhos azuis como os do irmão. (365)

The third person narrator is capable of inhabiting the marginalized favelados’ sphere of knowledge; it knows and informs the reader as much as the favela subjects know about themselves and the reality that surrounds their quotidian actions. As can be noted in the aforementioned fragment, the narrator becomes the subject it represents insofar as it assumes the character’s perspective when rationalizing about his motivations for exiting the drug wars of Cidade de Deus. The narrator expresses itself in a logic that is akin to Antunes’ understanding of the social circumstances in which he is immersed; it adopts Antunes’ conceptualization of his possible success in finding work as something related to his white-like features such as green eyes and straight hair.
As the third person narrator becomes emotively engaged with the *favelado* subjectivity, the author then begins to effectively appear in the novel as an agent responsible for the content of the writing. The text thus gives the illusion of the authorial presence both as an intermediary figure through whom the *favelado* speaks and also an active carrier of the Other’s message, for the narrator explains, dissects, and reasons while departing from the Other’s perspective as if it were its own.

A further example of this textual effect can be observed in one of Lins’ accounts in which the author describes, through the agency of the narrator, the story of a group of maids, residents of Cidade de Deus, turned thieves:

Odiavam a vida de empregada doméstica, no fundo uma vida de desprezo, trabalho pesado e dinheiro curto. Nostálgica sempre dizia que não seria a palmatoria do mundo porque não tivera as coisas que um ser humano precisa para se afirmar na vida, não fora ela quem inventara o racismo, a marginalização e nenhum outro tipo de injustiça social. (217)

The narrator here reveals the maids’ motivations to enter in a life of crime as a means of survival and as a form of
rebelling against poverty. The message is patently political, which not only underscores an ideological direction that could be attributed to Lins’ authority, but also reinforces the testimonial quality of the novel concerning the representation of the favelado as a subaltern.

If indeed, as John Beverley argues, testimonies must involve “an urgency to communicate a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival [that is] implicated in the act of narration itself” (36), it becomes apparent that the mode in which the narrator expresses itself in Cidade de Deus suggests its presence to be akin to the intermediary figure of conventional testimonies. In this sense, it could be argued that the masking artifice of the third person narrator, Lins distances himself from the positivist message that his affirmed Self could implicate. In order not to confound his story with that of the characters he represents, the author hides himself behind a narrator that adopts the perspective of those entities he textually articulates.

But eventually the authorial attitude of distancing himself from the subject matter of the writing by depersonalizing the narrative, whether conscious or not, is frustrated as the novel is commercially advanced as the
product of an ex-subaltern conscience and valued as an authentic and sincere artifact precisely on this account. The sympathetic (biased?) position of the third person narrator in relation to the subjects it portrays is characteristic of a personal testimony of social inequality, racism and class oppression that is appreciated as truthful on the premises of the author’s origins and his expertise when speaking of a social situation for which he can empirically testify. The fictitious emblem of Cidade de Deus dissolves itself in the instatement of the author’s identity outside the boundaries of the text by the media agency and inside the novel by the sympathetic position that the constructed third person narrator occupies in relation to the life-stories it tells.

Consequentially, Lins’ narrative disqualifies subalternity as immobility by indirectly promoting the agent of the writing, that is, the figure of Paulo Lins, as an example of the subaltern ascending to visibility on its own. This message is contradicted in the conclusion of the novel, for Lins ultimately postulates the favela as a dystopia and the favelado as a self-regenerative condition from which very few individuals are able to escape. Nonetheless, the concurrence of these two distinct ideas does not impinge on the novel’s truth effect, for its
authority relies on both a communally accepted mythology of the favela and the author as the authenticating principle of the process of representation.

Language, Identity and the Favelado Space

The characterization of otherness in Cidade de Deus’ narrative reassesses the favela as a site of racially and economically prejudiced exclusion. The novel’s depiction of common archetypes found within the Brazilian’s slums’ mythology of poverty, which encompasses figures such as black construction workers, servants, criminals, migrants from impoverished regions and samba artists, effectively dismantles the traditional concept of Brazil’s racial democracy\(^\text{10}\) by coloring the favela as a predominantly black environment.

\(^{10}\) The term racial democracy is usually utilized to characterize certain modernist discourses such as Gilberto Freyre’s Casa Grande e Senzala, which attribute the non-existence of a racial predominance in Brazil based on the system of patriarchal family relations between masters and slaves established during Brazil’s colonial history. However, as Pereira and White observe, the implantation of the ideal of a “multiethnic” origin in the nation’s modern period proved to be nothing shorter than an effort to expand the elite’s own influence and interests, for it relegated the predominantly black population at the turn of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century to its “inherited” lower class status (125). The constructed notion that every Brazilian carried within him/herself a certain amount of black, indigenous and European ancestry disseminated a sense of virtual inclusion of blacks and indigenous groups that directly resulted in the invisibility of racist practices that still plagues Brazilian society. While culturally African and autochthonous contributions to the development of the country’s identity were widely celebrated, race and “difference” were not.
Lins’ literary translation of the black *favelado* milieu a multifaceted discourse that is in constant fluctuation between the realist/naturalist description, the hyper-real account of violence and the sheer poetic articulacy of the brutal reality of the *favela*. Indeed, the successful communication of the novel as an illusive type of racial testimonial account owes much of its feeling of authenticity to the way in which the author crafts the novelistic discourse, for author textualizes the *favela* both as an abstraction of racial implications and as a self-conscious literary representation.

The citation of a fragment by the Concrete poet Paulo Leminski in the opening of the novel, which functions as a prologue to Lins’ text, certainly implies that the poeticism contained in the language of *Cidade de Deus* is centered on the experience of the materiality of the Brazilian *favela*, its topos and peculiarities. Lins’ predilection for the aesthetics of *Concretismo* – a poetic literary movement from the second half of the 1950s that emphasizes the objectification of the word through the

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11 As Roberto Schwarz notes, Lins’ prose “recapitula o passado ou explora o presente, no intervalo entre as ações. O gesto explicativo deve-se ao padrão da narrativa naturalista. A indicação desencarnada é um subproduto da pesquisa de campo e tem a ver com a idéia de eficiência do relatório científico” (169).

12 “Vim pelo caminho difícil,/ a linha que nunca termina,/ a linha que bate na predra,/ a palavra quebra uma esquina,/ minha linha vazia,/ a linha, uma vida inteira,/ palavra, palavra minha.”
recognition of its specificity concerning its value in time and space – underscores the author’s discursive awareness of linguistic signs that maintain a certain level of evidence regarding the objects they replace.\textsuperscript{13}

The influence of \textit{poesia concreta} in Lins’ novel is predominant in several instances in which the narrator abruptly interrupts the advancement of the story in favor of tangential poetic interludes. In the introduction of \textit{Cidade de Deus}, after briefly describing the early settlements of the favela, the narrator brings the narrative to a halt in order to beseech poetry for inspiration, longing for its presence as a guide to the writing:

\begin{quote}
Poesia, minha tia, illumine a certeza dos homens e os tons das minhas palavras” E’ que arrisco a prosa mesmo com balas atravessando os fonêmas ... A palavra nasce no pensamento, desprende-se dos lábios adquirindo alma nos ouvidos, e `as vezes essa magia sonora não salta `a boca e é engolida `a seco. Massacrada no estômago com arroz e
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} As Augusto de Campos affirms in his manifesto \textit{concretista}: “concrete poetry begins by assuming a total responsibility before language: accepting the premise of the historical idiom as the indispensable nucleus of communication, it refuses to absorb words as mere indifferent vehicles, without life, without personality without history - tabu-tombs [sic.] in which convention insist on burying the idea” (www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/conrepetpoet.htm).
As can be noted here, the playful disposition of the words “bala” (bullet), “fala” (speech) and “falha” (to fail) illustrate the common audiovisual relationships promoted by the precepts of Concretismo, which in principle rejects aleatory lyrical abstractions in favor of the specificity of lexicons that represent the reality surrounding the subject of the writing. The above citation also reveals poetry to be both a necessity and an inevitability in the configuration of Cidade de Deus’ discourse, for the narrator recognizes that the text’s presentation in prose cannot avoid the lyrical overtones that, “like bullets, cross the text’s phonemes.”

The narrator confirms that, in spite of the realist approach to the theme of the black favela, the characters represented in the novel cannot textually exist without poetry as a transcendental form of literary representation that makes reality accessible at an emotive level. The underlying aesthetics of poesia concreta in Lins’ novelistic discourse facilitates the diffusion of the text as a factual account, for the author’s recourse to metaphor and similar poetic devices does not conceal the directness

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which the text communicates concerning the environment it depicts.

The specificity of lexicons pertaining to the realms of the favela speech are ingrained in the symbolic world where the novel takes place. As noted in the aforementioned excerpt, the narrator’s poetic reference to the “word being eaten with rice and beans” and later “defecated rather than spoken” conjures an imagery that is intrinsically associated with the favelado universe and its mythological poverty. The passage utilizes “rice” and “beans” as signifiers of the economic destitution of favela residents while the violence expressed in the act of “defecating the word” rather than “uttering” it, and the text’s very mentioning of “bullets crossing phonemes” implies the spiritual and material condition of the modern-day favela.

The ambivalence that Lins’ discourse displays towards the poeticizing of the favelado universe and the realist articulation of particular lexicons pertaining to its domains constitutes an uprooted discourse that is transplanted into the literary medium and renegotiated as a form of identity. In this synthesis, the linguistic treatment given to the novel’s discourse escapes the debilitating introspectiveness found within the traditional realist narratives, for instead of romanticizing alterity,
the author acknowledges its authenticity through the validation of the Other’s speech as part of that which represents the nation.

The characters’ speech in *Cidade de Deus* constitutes the very scope of the identities articulated in the novel, for the names and expressions commonly found within the *favela* universe bestow a type of legitimacy upon the narrative and qualifies it as the product of a particular marginal sensibility. One example of how Lins utilizes the specificity of lexicons in order to characterize the peculiarities of the *favelado* realm can be found in the names of the characters. Relationships of power, subjugation and domination are expressed in the individual’s name describing his/her occupation, physical appearance or behavioral traces. For instance, the authority suggested by characters such as the police officer Cabeça-de-Nós-Todos in his organized persecution of the *favela*’s black residents is articulated through his own name, which literally means “Head-of-Us-All;” the Cearense, originally signifying the attribute conferred to a person born in the state of Ceará, becomes known through his stigmatized condition as a poor northeastern immigrant that arrives at the urban center and is forced to inhabit the space of the
favela; and the Peixeiro (fish seller) is clearly distinguished by his profession.

Names in Cidade de Deus are conditioned to the understanding of the individual based on the collective’s perception of his/her origins, class and racial taxonomy. A person’s name becomes representative of the way in which its body is marked and classified according to societal norms and expectations, which denotes in Lins’ text the resignation of the favelado entity to a conditioned stereotypification. This can be observed particularly in a passage in which the Cearense’s wife manifests her desire to have sexual relations with blacks. The Cearense’s spouse, while being battered by her husband, fantasizes about being possessed by a black man, for blacks, according to a neighbor, were notorious for their large penises and sexual voracity:

A cearense, enquanto apanhava, pensava em arrumar um homem que fizesse as tais maravilhas com ela, se vingaria do marido sentindo prazer de verdade, mas tinha de ser com um crioulo, porque a vizinha garantira que todo negão tinha pau grande. (108-9)

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15 See Fanon 149.
If on the one hand, *Cidade de Deus’* narrative appropriates certain stereotypes with the intention of communicating the particularities of the *favelado* reality, on the other hand the novel does not lose sight of its drive to substantiate the account of the subaltern truth it articulates as a universal paradigm. It is often the case that Lins’ narrator digresses into anecdotes that omit the names of their protagonists in order to promote the the *favelado* account as a generic tale commonly seen in texts such as tabloids and similar mass media artifacts.

In one of the novel’s numerous digressions, the reader is introduced to the story of a man whose wife’s extra-marital affair results in the birth of an illegitimate child who is violently murdered in an act of revenge. Throughout the account, the characters are merely referred to as “o homem” (the man) e “a mulher” (the woman). Lins’ tale of adultery begins with a reference to the protagonist as a “bicho-solto” (loose animal), a term employed in the novel to describe those individuals in the favela that are involved in a life of crime: “Lá em Cidade de Deus, um bicho solto olhava aquele ser se mexendo com dificuldade em cima da cama” (67). The linguistic specificity with which Lins depicts the *favela* milieu is clearly seen at play here, for “bicho-solto” not only qualifies the character of
the ma” as a criminal but also ascribes to his personality
the irrational and instinctive attributes of an animal,
which is later confirmed in the protagonist’s gruesome
murder of his illegitimate child:

Este ainda, no primeiro momento, reagiu como se
fosse ganhar colo. Segurou o bracinho direito com
a mão esquerda e foi cortando o antebraço. O nenê
revirava-se. Teve de colar o joelho esquerdo
sobre seu tronco. As lágrimas da criança saíam
como se quisessem lavar as retinas, num choro
sobre-humano” (68).

The explicative gesture regarding the description of
the young child’s murder exposes the scientific way in
which Lins constructs the narrative, as the detailed
account of the execution of the crime retraces step-by-step
the protagonist’s psychological motivations and the realism
of the act (Schwarz Sequências brasileiras, 169). In the
aforementioned fragment, the language utilized by the
narrator assumes an almost lyrical expressiveness when
referring to the child’s tears that “saíam como se
quisessem lavar as retinas, num choro sobre-humano.”

However, the narrator’s lyricism is substituted by a
discursive mode in which the sordid details of the crime
subdue the lyrical quality of the passage, thus creating an
effect that resembles that of a stylized tabloid. The narrator’s further elaboration on the state of the remains of the child’s body parts underscores the hyper-realistic mode that overtakes the narrative, as the horrific killing thoroughly concentrates on the visual aspects of the crime:

O braço decepado não saltou da mesa, ficou ali aos olhos de vingador ... Depois não consegui chorar alto, sua única atitude era aquela careta, a vermelhidão querendo saltar dos poros e aquele sacudir de perninhas” (69).

The violence that has come to be observed as part of the everyday-life of the favela is not solely communicated through the depiction of random acts of brutality, as in the aforementioned tale. The very linguistic signs of the favela, the characteristics of the speech of its inhabitants, mirrors the everyday life of the favelado space. By and large, Lins’ expression of the Other’s reality is associated with a type of language that is connotatively vulgar in principle. Such a proposition does not signify that the narrative tends to characterize a speech that is markedly crude as an exclusive expression of the favelado identity. The transcription of the popular speech emphasizes the proximity of the narrative to the object of its depiction:
Em sua casa o peixeiro deixava a língua escorregar, entrar e sair, birimbolar na xereca da cearense. A primeira vez que ela pediu para fazer sexo oral, ele contestou. Imaginava que havia resto de porra do marido, gotas remanescentes da última mijada. Na segunda vez caiu de língua com mais vontade, chegou até a machucar a mulher. Na terceira, esfregou o nariz, depois lambuzou o rosto todo. Daí em diante ficava ali esfomeadamente. (109)

In this fragment, the physicality of the sexual act is not, by any means, euphemistically recounted; on the contrary, Lins' employs a lexical choice that utilizes what is commonly conceived of as vulgarity to accentuate the naturalist overtones of the text. This mode of enunciation can be particularly observed to the same effect in passages that are presented in direct speech. The author does not soften the voices of the characters by transfiguring their discourse into a form of oral transcription that distances the interlocutory subject from its distinctive colloquialism. Rather, the presence of the popular discourse, which could be argued as relevant to the very understanding of the symbolic order that is in place in the favela milieu, gives the illusion of authenticity in the
text, the truth-effect of the novel as an authentic form of subaltern articulation:16

Seu marido não te chupa? Ah, minha filha... Você não conhece as coisa boa da vida. Antes do meu meter, tem que cair de língua uma meia hora. E no cu? Você não deixa ele colocar no teu não? Você não sabe o que é bom ... Você pega uma banana, esquenta ela um pouquinho, enfia na xereca e manda ele colocar atrás. Parece que você vai voar. (107)

This linguistic specificity in the representation of the favela's spatiality also shows how identities are negotiated. Terms employed in the novel to designate the numerous sections of the favelado universe such as the Apês (apartment complexes), Lá em Cima (Up There), Lá Embaixo (Down There), Lá na Frente (In Front of There) and Rua do Meio (Middle Street) calls attention to the presence of the lettered city as a fixed referential in the imagination of the favela (Alvito 192).17 “Inside” and “outside” are common

16 For Beverley, the transcription of the subaltern speech contributes to the effective reception of a testimony as a sincere and truthful account. See Testimonio, esp. 32-3.
17 In a study of the favela Acari, Marcos Alvito notes that the spatial disposition of the “micro-areas” within the favela denotes class differentiations to take place based on the proximity of one’s household to the avenues and streets that lead to the “legitimate” city (192). Thus, according to Alvito’s observations, the “city” is perceived both as a referential that adds property value to the interior areas of the favela and as an organization that excludes the
terminologies utilized in the discourse of Cidade de Deus that disclose not only the favelados’ consciousness of their situation of social exclusion, but also reveal the very relationship of subjugation in which they are implicated.

In Lins’ narrative, the favelado identity results from the tension existing in the spatial relationship between the lettered city as a societal force of value imposition and the favela’s heterogeneous constitution. On the one hand, the favelado milieu is as a site that functions as a space of containment of poverty while propagating the delusion of poverty itself as an essentially homogeneous condition. On the other hand, Lins also emphasizes the favela as an autonomous cultural space that escapes its stereotypical uniformity, which can be seen through the author’s portrayal of the different segments of the favela, each one possessing its own architectonic features and cultural identity.\(^\text{18}\)

However, in the characterization of the favela’s cultural autonomy, Lins does not lose sight of its dependence on the norms and behavioral codes stipulated by favelado milieu from its very limits. In other words, the favela becomes des-incorporated from the “legitimate” city in spite of its very locality denoting precisely the opposite.\(^\text{18}\) In reference to the multiple spatial identities within the same favela, see Alvito 192.
the urban elite that directly affect the favelados’ sense of identity. Within the favela, the cultural Establishment is exposed as a racist machine that has historically defined for the Other its essentiality. It is well to return here to the story of Antunes, for in the narrative of this character’s involvement with drug trafficking the reader realizes how the imprints of Brazil’s colonial discourse still play a significant role in the way many individuals negotiate their sense of identity based on racialist paradigms.

Antunes becomes involved in the drug wars of the favela as an act of revenge against the drug-lord Miúdo for the rape of his brother’s lover and the murder of family members. After fighting Zé Miúdo for quite some time and realizing the futility of the conflict, Antunes decides to look for a real job:

Estava saindo para procurar emprego, saindo da Cidade de Deus, saindo da Guerra ... O dono do posto lhe daria emprego, pois sabia falar bem, sabia matemática, era preto mas tinha os cabelos lisos e olhos azuis como os do irmão (365).

When Antunes arrives at a gas station to ask for work, presumably far from the favela, he is told that the owner is no longer accepting “gente da Cidade de Deus” (366). The
attendant, who openly communicates this discriminatory policy, does not offer any particular reason for not hiring Antunes besides that of his origins as a favela resident. In spite of this, the character is allowed to fill out an application. The account finally comes to an ironic conclusion as two members of Miúdo’s gang recognize Antunes, thus murdering the enemy as he exits the place where he sought employment.

The aforementioned account alludes to the favelado image as that of an outsider, one who is predominantly defined by the space he inhabits. Antunes is stereotypically “branded” as an entity that cannot be trusted because of his pertinence to a specific locality known for its criminal incidents. Certainly, the diffusion of Cidade de Deus’ violence by the media shares responsibility in the fixation of the favela’s representation as a universe in decay.¹⁹ Lins is particularly keen on incorporating the key role played by the agencies of information in the process of stereotypically marking the peripheries of the city as a site of violence and criminality:

Com tantas reportagens sobre a violência em Cidade de Deus, a Secretaria de Segurança Pública

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¹⁹ See Ribeiro 128.
Nonetheless, beyond the obvious implications of the media reinforcing the negative image of the favela, Antunes’ tale illustrates how the favelado conscience has come to accept the outside as that which socially fixes the ideal model of respectability. Antunes realizes his position of advantage in comparison with other blacks by precisely acknowledging the benefits of his “whiteness,” that is, the fact that he, unlike other blacks, possessed features such as blue eyes and straight hair. According to Antunes’ rationalization, his color afforded him a status of superiority in relation to his friends and colleagues, which makes his option of leading an honest life more feasible.

This same sense of “white” racialism present at the core of the favelados’ understanding of their Selves is expressed in the narrator’s commentaries on the nature of the friendship between the two main drug lords, Zé Miúdo and Pardalzinho. Childhood friends, both Zé Miúdo and Pardalzinho are characters whose mutual respect leads them to an alliance for their success and notorious drug-
trafficking business in Cidade de Deus. Nevertheless, in spite of their depicted camaraderie, the principle of racial hierarchism observed in Antunes’ life story can be seen in Pardalzinho’s and Zé Miúdo’s life account.

Pardalzinho, who is white, recognizes when pondering the possibility of leaving the favela that his looks afford him a position of advantage. On several occasions the narrator reports Pardalzinho’s desire to leave behind those individuals who he considers “toothless Negroes with nervous faces:” “Esse era o seu sonho: ganhar uma mina bonita, morar entre gente bonita e dançar discoteca até o fim da vida, numa boa. Nada daqueles crioulos com cara nervosa e sem dentes” (271, emphasis added). The concept of beauty is advanced here as an antithesis of blackness, therefore re-emphasizing Pardalzinho’s superior racial identity. This same tenet is further reinforced when the narrator describes Pardalzinho digressing on the significance of his white features as a an unequivocal synonym of respectability: “Ponderou porque ele também era branco, seus cabelos, claros ... O linguajar não era muito promissor – falava muitas gírias, palavrões demais –, mas isso não importava muito” (271).

As can be noted in both Antunes’ and Pardalzinho’s stories, Lins suggests the negotiation of the favelado
identity as a performance that is derived from a presupposition of being rooted in colonialism’s pathological mythologizing of whiteness as an ideal. The white *favelado*’s discriminatory attitude concerning blacks is purported as a form of internalized racism that remains unrealized, for as Pardalzinho’s tale illustrates, it is possible for a white *favelado* to maintain a close knit relationship with blacks and still think of himself as superior.  

Indeed, throughout the life stories present in *Cidade de Deus*, the black *favelado* identity associated with Brazil’s colonial past, which in itself places the novel in a zone of discordance concerning the traditional acknowledgement of the *favela* as a multi-ethnic environment. The text not only contradicts the convention of Brazil’s “racial democracy,” which conceals racism based on the miscegenation and cultural integration among the country’s main ethnicities (black, indigenous and white), but also opposes the customary artistic representation of blacks that has been traditionally linked with the remoteness of the country’s slave history.  

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20 Fanon suggests that “since the racial drama is played out in the open, the black man has no time to make it “unconscious.” The white man, on the other hand, succeeds in doing so to a certain extent, because a new element appears: guilt” (150).

21 See, for instance, Stam 329.
of several of the characters’ lineage as blacks vouches for the authorial intention to link the favelado space with a specific ethnic identity: “Pelé nasceu no morro do borel. O pai, que se dizia neto de escravos, era um homem forte, bonito, trabalhava de lixeiro, bebia somente nos fins de semana” (95).

The exposition of the color of the favela in Cidade de Deus corresponds, therefore, to a conscious authorial objective that seeks to reinstate slavery as a symbolic manifestation within the contemporary urban milieu. The very origin of the favela is constantly recounted through the cultural specificity of the Afro-Brazilian contributions, whether observed in the incorporation of samba lyrics, religious prayers or symbols as evidence of the nation’s syncretic African heritage:

Os novos moradores levaram lixo, cães vira-latas, exús e pomba-giras em guias intocáveis … orixás enroscados em pescoços, frango de despacho, samba de enredo e sincopado … jesus cristos em cordões arrebitados, lamparina de azeite para iluminar o santo” (16-17).

The advancement of the favela as a symbolic modern-day senzala is particularly noticeable in one of the sequences of Cidade de Deus in which the characters Busca-Pé and
Barbantinho, challenging each other to visit a ruined mansion deemed to be haunted, travel in time. The description of the episode is rather ambiguous, for the narrator does not stipulate whether the colonial imagery presented to the reader is, in fact, a surreal experience or reality:

Viam os negros trabalhando nos engenhos de açúcar, nas fazendas de café. O chicote repenicava no lombo... Lá na altura da Praça Principal surgiu uma fonte onde dezenas de negras lavavam roupa... Quarenta negros no transporte daquela formosura [um piano]. Enquanto vinte suportavam o peso do instrumento. (148)

After leaving the plantation site by “flying through the skies,” the characters land in the vicinities of the haunted mansion, where they witness the amputation of the legs of a slave who the narrator describes as having tried to escape his master. While watching the scene, the master becomes aware of Busca-Pé’s and Barbantinho’s presence, proceeding to hunt them down. The account finally comes to a conclusion as the characters, fleeing from their persecutor through the labyrinths of the mansion, reach the gates of the plantation and find themselves smoking a marijuana cigarette while observing, now in the present
day, bodies floating in a nearby river: “Iam perdendo terreno quando ganharam a saída principal da fazenda e saíram na Estrada do Gabinal já crescidos, secundaristas iniciantes, ali fumando maconha enquanto cadáveres boiavam no rio” (149).

There are several implications in this sequence that suggest a connection between the colonial senzala (slave quarters) and the “neofavela.” First and foremost, the narrative’s digression into Brazil’s colonial past compares the favela with the plantation. Secondly, the colonial imagery advanced as a delirious adventure is significantly tied with Barbantinho’s and Busca-Pé’s life story, for the account directly references these characters’ ancestral lineage as blacks. In the nightmarish sequence of the runaway slave, the environment of the senzala dissolves into the image of the modern-day favela and vice-versa, since the plantation’s labyrinthine corridors through which Barbantinho and Busca-Pé escape evoke the same type of spatial disposition of the contemporary favela, with its cacophonous architecture and claustrophobic environment.

Lins’ represents Cidade de Deus as a black favela, a site that is not only acknowledged by its residents as a place to which they are confined but also a space that fixes the favelado identity as a subaltern. This can be
primarily noticed in the manner in which the narrative describes the *favelados'* awareness of their position in society in relation to whites. For instance, at a certain point in the novel, the drug dealer Espada Incerta, while deciding on the best way to transport drugs to the outside of the *favela*, comments: “Esse negócio de taxi é para branco. Preto que pega taxi ou é bandido ou está doente `a beira da morte, acreditava” (281).

At a first instance, this declaration suggests a portrayal of the black *favelado* as someone who has fully surrendered to the traditional racialist discourse. Espada Incerta not only shares the conventional stereotypical image of blacks as criminals but also goes as far as admitting to his inferiority as a black person as being part of his own system of beliefs.\(^2\)

The apparent derogatory submissiveness implied in Espada Incerta’s statement, however, is further contradicted when the author introduces particular accounts that advocate the entrance of blacks into a life of crime as constituting an act of rebellion against their

\(^2\) As Bhabha suggests, referring to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, the construction of post-colonial discourses have greatly depended on fetishist tropes and forms of narcissistic and aggressive identifications available to the collective’s imaginary. For the successful signification of this negative imaginary, its “typecasting,” it was necessary to sustain stereotyped images in a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes, which consequentially marked the psychopathology of blacks as an “inherent” admission of inferiority (80).
oppression. A highly politicized discourse of “reverse racism” is conspicuously present in many descriptions of black criminals whose white victims receive a differentiated treatment based on their racial constitution:

O assaltante não gostava de branco bem arrumado. Achava que eles tomavam o lugar dos negros em tudo... quando via um branco bem arrumado, assaltava, cometia violências para vingar o negro que teve seu lugra roubado na sociedade” (131)

This same animosity displayed towards the white Establishment can be observed in the brief narrative of the drug dealer Grande, who takes great pleasure in murdering white police officers for thinking that they represent:

a raça a mais filha-da-puta de todas, essa raça que serve aos brancos, essa raça de pobres que defende os direitos dos ricos. Tinha prazer em matar branco, porque o branco tinha roubado os seus antepassados da Africa para trabalhar de graça, o branco criou a favela e botou o negro para habitá-la, o branco criou a polícia para bater, prender e matar o negro (175-76).

Grande’s recognition of his African heritage is seen in the above excerpt not as the positivist consciousness of
the black individual who is proud and communally aware of the value and history of his people, but rather as an individual position against the status quo. Grande’s consciousness of his subaltern circumstance does not develop into an organized form of resistance to racism; rather, his anger is exposed as being isolated from any type of political conviction, appearing in the text in solitude, unaligned with any particular ideological articulation. Grande’s racism against whites does not materialize into any type of activism; on the contrary, the character’s non-conformity is a disarticulated discourse that departs from the truism of the State as an almost exclusively white-ruled agency.23

Tudo, tudo que era bom era dos brancos. O presidente da República era branco, o médico era branco, os patrões eram brancos, o vovô-viu-a-uva do livro de leitura da escola era branco, os ricos eram brancos, as bonecas eram brancas e a porra desses crioulos que viravam policia ou que iam para o Exército tinha mais é que morrer igual a todos os brancos do mundo. (176)

23 In spite of this passage indicating a lack of ideological organization within the social structure of Cidade de Deus, it is well to note that the favelado milieu has, indeed, gained some access to municipal, state and national political representation through the election of candidates whose origins are found in the favela. See Zaluar 241.
Lins' exposure of racism against whites present in the *favela* is more often than not enunciated through the simultaneous acknowledgement of class and race as related matters. This ideological stance is apparent in Lins' representation of a group of women who engage in robberies in the southern districts of Rio de Janeiro. As the narrator explains, the characters' motivations for a life of crime are grounded in their limited economic and social mobility as professional maids. The narrator reviews the former maids' crimes as acts of insurgence against the patriarchal authority upon stating that they:

[o]diavam a vida de empregada doméstica, no fundo uma vida de desprezo, trabalho pesado e dinheiro curto ... As mulheres do pisa não eram mais aquelas, tinham dinheiro para levar uma vida que passava bem longe do campo da miséria, sem trabalhar em empregos que só fazem mal ao corpo e ao espírito. (217)

Noticeably here, the narrative depicts the black female individual in a nonconformist position that is similar to many of the male criminals depicted in the novel. Faced with limited options, the viability of social ascension by means of a life of crime is the only plausible solution. The narrator further reiterates the decision of the maids
to commit robberies in the markets of privileged zones of Rio de Janeiro by describing the leader of the gang’s rebellious thoughts concerning the option of a life of crime as a challenge to the status quo of the favelado:

Nostalgica sempre dizia que não seria a palmatória do mundo porque não tivera todas as coisas que um ser humano precisa para se afirmar na vida, não fora ela quem inventara o racismo, a marginalização e nenhum outro tipo de injustiça social; não tinha culpa de ter largado os estudos para dar brilho no chão de casa de madame. (217)

Within the multiple experiences of racial exclusion recounted in Cidade de Deus’s narrative, Lins does not lose sight of the discriminatory practices displayed towards northeastern migrants. The author reveals the nordestino as an entity marked by the social understanding of its peasant origins as a synonym of inferiority and primitivism. The response of the city to the presence of the northeastern immigrant falls into the same category of discrimination observed in the treatment of blacks by governmental authorities: “Até mesmo na favela, os brancos, quando não fossem nordestinos, tinham certa regalia de ser flagrados fumando maconha” (255, emphasis added).
Lins’ narrative thus confirms regional differences as grounds for exclusion, representing the nordestino as a being that is stigmatized, inclusively, by blacks, who are portrayed in the novel as perceiving the migrant northeastern as having an inferior social position to that of their own: “Tinha receio de algum paraíba o alcaguetar. Todo nordestino, alem de puxa-saco de patrão, é alcagüete. Essa raça não vale nada. São capazes de cagar o que não comeram” (140). Nevertheless, the animosity between regional immigrants and blacks is noted not only on the part of blacks but is also recounted as being reciprocal:

O cearense ... dizia sempre que não gostava de crioulo e que depois que veio para o Rio passara a sentir raiva. Argumentava com os amigos que loiro era filho de Deus, o branco Deus criou, o Moreno era filho bastardo e o preto o diabo cagou. (53)

The numerous perspectives presented in Cidade de Deus situate the favelado at a crossroads. On the one hand, the favela, un-dressed as predominantly black, is celebrated for its syncretism and exposed as one of the authentic sources from which the identity of the nation emanates. Lins re-imagines Cidade de Deus not only as a complex array of differences positioned against that which is socially
perceived as a homogeneous alterity but also as a space concurrent to that of the lettered city. The linguistic specificity with which the favela is communicated denotes the existence of the favelado milieu as a culture whose very intelligentsia exposes Brazil’s African identity. On the other hand, the incisiveness with which the narrative reports the marginal favelado in rebellious acts of violence, a violence that is manifested against “his” environment and against society in general, suggests that the favela, while being a space that supposedly fosters poverty, can no longer be effectively contained.  

In this sense, the message of Cidade de Deus could be argued both as the reiteration of the presence of the favela as a cultural commodity and as a “resource” that enables the author to bring the subaltern condition of favelados to visibility while underscoring the sensible changes in their marginally oppressed status (Yúdice 45). In both cases, the novel strives to assert the nation as being far from its traditional image of a racial paradise, portraying, therefore, Brazil’s racial invisibility as an intrinsic part of the process through which individual and collective identities have been traditionally formed. Lins’ discourse displays the neofavela both as a spiritual and

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24 See Lund and Salles, Noticias de uma guerra particular.
material condition that survives history while being denied and denying itself as a racist domain. The neofavela emerges in *Cidade de Deus* as a site that continuously echoes the drums of a distant *sanzala*, becoming this *sanzala* through the recurrence of the tragic fate of the characters represented in the novel.

**Historicizing the Favela**

Indeed, one of the most discernible features of *Cidade de Deus*’ narrative is the manner with which the author underscores the historical progression of the *favela*, from its origins as the site of popular housing settlements to its present-day depiction as a space of urban decay. Lins infuses the narrative with a historical sensibility through the specificity of particular agents that serve as temporal markings in the three sections of the novel. Also, the author describes the development of the image of the *favela* as an isolated and exclusive space, in spite of being located within the perimeters of the city. Apart from a few brief episodes that recount the tragic end of particular characters in different areas of Rio de Janeiro, the action of the novel is mostly circumscribed to the spatiality of *Cidade de Deus*. 
The transformations that take place in the favela are shown as being intrinsically tied to the ascension of drug trafficking. The vast majority of the life stories portrayed in the novel are marked, either directly or indirectly, by the agency of the traffic. However, if the author describes the development of drug trafficking as a force that is not only detrimental to the favela but also to society as a whole, Lins does not lose sight of the role that the traffic has played in the shaping of the lives of the favela residents. As the author tells, the traffic has come to constitute a presence that not only redefines the concept of law but has also occupies the referential position of authority. The influence of drug traffic as capitalist initiative represents to the neofavela a means of economic survival that is advanced in the novel as mimicking society’s legitimacy in approximating the market ideals of supply and demand:

A coisa já estava ruim para os bicheiros e ficou muito pior quando surgiu a loteria esportiva, levando mais de oitenta por cento das apostas e fazendo com que os bicheiros entrassem no ramo das drogas, que se mostrava promissor. (208)

In this context, the drug lord emerges as a figure that fully embodies the image of a savage capitalism that
is rather suppressed in the neo-liberal tendencies of contemporary economies. Subjected to the actions of drug lords in their constant dispute over expanding and territorializing markets, the historical favela is a locality that is influenced by the consequences of the traffic’s indiscriminate practice of capitalism. As the narrative of Cidade de Deus progressively underscores, drug lords became fundamental agents in the process of the imagination of the favela, for in their position as representatives of capital power, they were able to instigate changes in the very social realm where they acted, responding to essentially entrepreneurial provisions:  

Conjunto o quê? Favela! Isso mermo, isso aqui é favela, favelão brabo mermo. Só o quê mudou foi os barraco, que não tinha luz, nem água na bica, e aqui é tudo casa e apê, mas o pessoal é que nem na Macedo Sobrinho, que nem no São Carlos. Se é na favela que tem boca-de-fumo, bandido pra caralho, crioulo a vera, neguinho pobre a

25 In one of the testimonies of the favela da Maré collected by Drausio Varella, one of the residents exposes the totalitarian connotation of the traffic in regards to the alterations of the favelado space according to the necessities of the traffic. As a resident of Maré notes: “O pessoal do Movimento não deixa construir um conjunto só com ruas retas, largas, onde passa automóvel, que não tenha becos e vielas para fugir em caso de ataque” (79).
pamparra, então aqui também é favela, favela de Zé Miúdo. (209)

As can be noted in this fragment, the character Zé Miúdo is seen not only reclaiming the material ownership of the favela but also verbalizing his vision of Cidade de Deus as that which corresponds to the reality of the Brazilian slums. The drug lord substitutes the term conjunto habitacional, itself a euphemism for housing projects designed for low-income classes, for the stigmatized term favela, thus reclaiming as his own the stereotypical image the favelado milieu: the presence of crioulos (blacks), the uncontrolled demographic expansion and, above all, bocas-de-fumo (drug trafficking areas) and dealers as integral facets of the favela’s identity.

While the traficantes (drug dealers) in Cidade de Deus are agents capable of controlling and guiding the spatiality of the favela, Lins also exposes the complexity of their interaction with the community, especially regarding their role as social benefactors. Since the agency of the State is scarce in impoverished urban regions such as the favelas, drug dealers, in many instances, assume the role of the State, supplying the favelados with the most essential needs such as food and medicine. As Elizabeth Leeds notes, although the favela residents are
often forced into contributing to the traffic out of fear or constraint, at times their cooperation symbolizes a lack of respect towards the authority of the State which has failed them. As Leeds observes:

Em troca de proteção e do anonimato que a comunidade venha oferecer aos traficantes, ela pode esperar receber uma série de serviços, como segurança interna, dinheiro para ambulância ou táxi e até hospital, dinheiro para remédios, sopa dos pobres, creches, festas infantis em ocasiões especiais e outras verbas de emergência em casos de extrema privação. (243)

This symbiotic relationship is represented through several accounts that describe the relationship between the drug lord and his community. As Lins’ narrative proposes, the early years of the traffic in the favela observe a rapport between those agents in command of the traffic and the favelado population that is characteristically amicable and mutually respectful:

No dia 27 de setembro, Miúdo e Pardalzinho ganharam a admiração dos moradores dos apartamentos pela festa realizada na praça ds Apês. Envaidecidos pela lembrança da data com os festejos merecidos pela ocasião e pelo agrado `as
The term “consideration” (consideração), said by the narrator to have been acquired by the dealers when providing a service to the community, expresses the benevolent aspect of the traffic while implicating its very nature as a form of power parallel to that of the State. Indeed, the acquisition of consideração, or “to be considered” (ser do conceito, ser considerado), which in general terms signifies “to be respected and admired,” exposes the traffic in the favela as a concurrent power insofar as it communally legitimizes the authority of the drug dealer beyond his figuration as a forceful and violent criminal. The loyalty of the favelado to the traficante, despite its ambiguity in terms of being simultaneously beneficial and detrimental, is described in the novel as a unstated contract that if broken by any of the parts brings chaos to a segment of society that is otherwise stable.

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26 As Marcos Alvito explains, the search for “consideração” is a characteristically masculine pursuit within the favelado culture. “Ser considerado” constitutes an expression that “sintetiza a qualidade daquele que sabe ser amigo, companheiro e igual, que não busca elevar-se acima dos outros, mas tampouco permite qualquer arranhão ou desafio a sua reputação, que não baixa a cabeça por nada” (195).

27 Elizabeth Leeds notes that, contrary to popular belief, the favelas are relatively stable communities, with a long-term occupancy that is characteristically generational. According to Leeds, this relative stability: “produziu na maioria das favelas uma coesão social e um senso comunitário que (apesar das queixas contra as privações físicas)
However, the respect of the community for the drug lord extends beyond the commonality of throwing extravagant parties and pleasing residents with gifts as self-legitimizing acts of recognition. As Lins suggests, the drug dealer who acquires conceito becomes an agent that the population expects to supplement the function of the State regarding the establishment of order and peace.\textsuperscript{28} This co-dependence certainly underscores the social structure of the favelado universe and the Latin American city as a paradoxical and multi-temporal locality, as Néstor García Canclini has suggested, for in the relationship between the community and the “considered” drug lord, one is able to perceive a form of protectionism and territorial favoritism that has been commonly attributed to archaic systems such as feudalism (Canclini, \textit{Imaginarios urbanos} 32):\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{quote}
Nos dias recorrentes, Miúdo e Pardalzinho tiveram a impressão de que todos os moradores os olhavam com gratidão porque não foram poucas as geralmente criam um sentimento de lealdade e identidade com uma determinada comunidade e também com a condição de favelado” (241).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} The role of the drug lord as a patriarchal figure of authority parallel to that of the State and its importance as a source of economy in the comunas can also be observed in Fernando Vallejo’s \textit{La virgen de los sicarios}: “Muerto el gran contratador de sicarios [Pablo Escobar], mi pobre Alexis se quedó sin trabajo” (61). See also Duzán esp. 194-215.

\textsuperscript{29} As García Canclini notes: “[1a] sensación de vivir a la vez en varios siglos puede encontrarse en cualquier [...] país de América Latina. Basta recordar el hecho de que en la Argentina, Bolivia, Perú y muchos otros lugares del continente retorne el cólera, una peste que creíamos del siglo XIX” (32).
benefeitórias promovidas pela dupla; acabaram com os roubos, os estupros na favela, e agora davam doce. (272)

The social significance of the figure of the drug lord is framed in the three chapters of *Cidade de Deus* as a progressive account of the development of the aforementioned politics of “consideração.” The magnitude of the presence of the drug dealer in the *favela* can be particularly seen in the reaction of the community towards the deaths of the novel’s main criminals, the episodes that mark the distinct temporalities of the narrative.

Inferninho’s life story symbolizes the beginnings of *Cidade de Deus’* representation of the criminality in the *favela*. The spirit of *malandragem* (roguish behavior) draws attention to the criminal as a socially ostracized character within an already stigmatized space. In several accounts in which Inferninho is shown robbing delivery trucks and committing similar crimes, the reader observes that there is a limited rapport between the criminal and the *favelado* community.

When Inferninho is finally assassinated during one of his attempted robberies, his death is depicted as a solitary event, deprived from any expression of sympathy by the residents of Cidade de Deus. However, instead of
concentrating on the visceral descriptions of Inferninho’s violent end, which is by and large a narrative recourse used for most of the deaths recounted in the novel, the author chooses to philosophically digress on the liberating effects of the character’s death over his marginalized existence: “Um sorriso quase abstrato retratava a paz que nunca sentira, uma paz que sempre buscou naquilo que o dinheiro pode oferecer ... não percebera as coisas mais normais da vida” (170). Furthermore, the narrator emphasizes the state of happiness with which Inferninho meets his death by stating: “Aquela mudez diante das perguntas de Belzebu e a expressão de alegria melancólica que se manteve dentro do caixão” (171).

A contrasting description of the favela’s bereavement for the death of Pardalzinho can be noted in the subsequent chapter of Cidade de Deus, which describes the favela as no longer being a site of robberies and relatively small drug-related activities but rather as a space in which the agency of traffic is fully consummated as a business. The account of Pardalzinho’s life story constitutes the consolidation of the “politics of consideração,” for Lins describes the drug lord as an admired and well-respected criminal whose distaste for violence and the involvement of innocents in drug-related conflicts afford him a position
of patriarchal authority. When a rival gang finally murders Pardalzinho, the author describes the occasion of his funeral as a festivity that unites families, friends and accomplices in the drug traffic:

A bandidagem, antes de sair da favela, havia resolvido não ficar muito tempo no velório, mas a noite foi ficando boa, a cada momento chegavam mulheres, alguém com garrafa de uísque, vinhos, batida de limão. (295)

Pardalzinho’s memorial service is narrated as an episode of grotesque proportions; his funeral is turned into a libertine carnivalesque celebration in which characters flirt with each other, kiss, sing and dance, while at the center of the chapel lies the decomposing corpse of the drug lord. The surrealist imagery suggested in this passage certainly advances, in Bakhtinian terms, the carnivalesque as a regenerative force within the favelado culture, for death, in Pardalzinho’s case, is contemplated as a reminder of life’s ephemeral condition by all of those individuals present at his funeral:

Surgiram pandeiros, tamborins, agogós e cavaquinhos. Cocaína rolava e baseados passavam de boca em boca. Somente o corpo de Pardalzinho no centro da capela atrapalhava o culto.
Resolveram empurrar o caixão para o canto e, se quendo em quando, homenageavam o defunto cantando o samba de que ele mais gostava. (296)

If Pardalzinho’s story marks the apogee of the traffic’s symbiotic relationship with the community, Zé Miúdo’s life account reveals precisely the opposite. Profoundly affected by the death of his partner, Zé Miúdo engages in vengeful acts that are not necessarily directed to those criminals responsible for his friend’s death but rather to those residents that inhabit the same section of the favela as Pardalzinho’s murderers:

Pardalzinho tinha morrido havia mais de um ano. Sempre que podia Miúdo esculachava alguém Lá de Cima para desforrar a morte do amigo. Se já não gostava daquele povo de Lá de Cima, passou a detestá-lo depois que Pardalzinho morreu. (306)

In the third section of Cidade de Deus, the spatiality of the favela is associated with the very image of the drug dealer in his locale of action, that is, his place of business. As the internal struggle for the ownership of the bocas-de-fumo takes place, the residents of the favela take the side of those drug lords who could eventually restore peace and order to the community. The irrational and inconsequential politics of fear installed by Zé Miúdo,
with actions such as the raping of women and arbitrary killings, ultimately causes the population to rebel against him:

O vizinho, homem trabalhador, chefe de familia, nunca havia se envolvido com bandidos ou drogas, porém, sabedor da tragédia que Miúdo causara a Bonito, solidarizava-se com ele e torcia para que fosse o vencedor, ainda que a distancia. (330)

Through Ze Miúdo’s life, the author represents how the recent disputes among different groups of drug dealers have altered the configuration of the favelado space insofar as the traffic is shown directly affecting the sectional divisions of the community. Lins portrays the residents of the favela as individuals who are forced to constantly adapt themselves to the shifting conditions of the traffic’s dominance:30 “As duas regiões foram demarcadas; quem nunca se envolvera com a criminalidade estava sujeito a morrer sem saber, de uma hora para outra, só por morar nessa ou naquela região” (332).

The war promoted by the traffic, which in Pardalzinho’s life-account was restricted only to those agents involved in the drug business, is seen in the final chapter of Lins’ novel as a generalized form of dispute

30 See Leeds 243.
that no longer spares residents from its violent outcomes. The image of the favelado becomes inevitably coupled with that of the traffic, for either functioning as informants, silencing themselves in the presence of the authorities, or actively joining the different groups of dealers, the favelados are shown as being forced into partaking in the drug wars, whether willingly or not:31

Qualquer um poderia ter laços de parentesco ou amizade com o inimigo, por isso não era conveniente permitir o livre trânsito dos moradores de uma área à outra ... o armamento pesado adentrou na paisagem cotidiana ... Os amigos não se procuravam mais, os parentes não se podiam visitar. Cada macaco no seu galho. Era o que diziam. (332)

In the historical progression of Cidade de Deus as a site contaminated by the effects of a restricted civil war dominated by the agencies of drug trafficking, Lins also relates how the transformations of the favela directly affect one’s sense of identity. The author historicizes these changes in the comportment of the favela by underscoring the alterations brought about by the traffic.

31 When referring to the impact of the traffic in the diffusion of the Cidade de Deus as a site of exclusive drug related activities, Alba Zaluar notes that: “apenas 2% da população [...] está envolvida com o crime” (Góis www.ims.verj.br).
The motives that traditionally led the individual to associate himself with the traffic have lost, in the contemporary context of the drug war, their original stimulus.

The causes for one’s association with a life of crime, whether they be the avenging of a family member’s death or even the financial status afforded by the traffic, are replaced in Zé Miúdo’s story by the sheer fascination of some with the culture of the traffic itself. This purported attraction is described in the novel as part of the emergence of a compartmental tendency that has been characterized by Alba Zaluar as a culture of “hyper-masculinity.” According to Zaluar, “alguns se deixam seduzir por uma imagem de masculinidade que está associada ao uso da arma de fogo e à disposição de matar, ter dinheiro no bolso e se exibir para algumas mulheres” (Góis www.ims.verj.br).³² As the narrator recounts on the pages of Cidade de Deus:

Antigamente, comentavam pasmados os moradores, somente os miseráveis, compelidos por seus

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³² Zaluar affirms that the diffusion of a culture of hyper-masculinity among many of the young favelado males concerns their difficulty in constructing a positive image of themselves. It is necessary for many youngsters to obtain the respect and admiration by the means of instilling fear in the other. Crime becomes thus tied to an act of performance that is intrinsically related to the construction of a type of masculine identity (Góis www.ims.verj.br).
infortúnios, se tornavam bandidos. Agora estava tudo diferente, até os mais providos da favela, os jovens estudantes de famílias estáveis … caíram no fascínio da guerra. (350)

The evolution of the traffic’s institutionalization of masculinity can be seen in Cidade de Deus’ narrative through the intensification of the imagery associated with the description of drug dealers holding guns and displaying money as part of an exhibitionist act for the opposite sex. The traffic gradually attracts young males who are seduced by a false sense of security and power while identifying drug trafficking activities as synonyms of an idealized masculine behavior. The performance of masculinity is suggested in the novel, therefore, not only as that which affords inclusion in the dominant economy of the favela but also as an act that reinstates the historical position of the traffic as a model for the construction of a particular favelado identity:33

Também houve casos em que futuros quadrilheiros não tinham crime algum para vingar, contudo entravam na guerra porque a coragem aliada à disposição para matar exibida pelos bandidos,

33 This idea can be also observed in the testimonies of the favelados of Maré. See Varella esp. 78-82 and 108.
The culture of hyper-masculinity, which Lins describes here as being tied to the agency of the traffic, is particularly evident in the account of the life story of Filé com Fritas, a child of eight years of age who asks the drug lord Bonito for a gun in order to kill Zé Miúdo and his gang. Attempting to discourage Filé com Fritas from following through with a life in the *movimento* (drug business), Bonito initially refuses the young boy’s participation in his band by insisting that he is merely a child. This provokes an angry response from Filé com Fritas, who affirms: “Meu irmão, eu fumo, eu cheiro, desde nenenzim que eu peço esmola, já limpei vidro de carro, já trabalhei de engraxate, já matei, já roubei ... Não sou criança não. Sou sujeito homem!” (318).

Filé com Fritas referential for masculinity resides on a superimposed view of society’s patriarchal responsibilities designated to the male, such as the honest work outside the home, and those codes suggested by the traffic as defining characteristics of manhood, such as the act of stealing and killing. As Filé com Fritas’ statement suggests, the very act of crime constitutes the proof of
one’s masculinity, which consequentially promotes the individual who perpetrates it as an agent of power. The masculine becomes defined, therefore, through a deformed version of society’s symbolic order that accentuates male dominance as a referential for the mapping of identities. Furthermore, in Filé com Fritas’ assertions, it is possible to perceive that honor and masculinity are converted into synonyms, as the culture of machismo is reemphasized through the diffusion of the image of the drug dealer as a fearless individual. This idea is fully disclosed in the description of Filé com Fritas’ reactions at the moment of his death:

O menino disse que morreria em pé, porque sujeito homem more é em pé. Somente uma lágrima escorreu-lhe pelo rosto liso. E’ assim que choram os sujeitos homem de pouca idade: apenas uma lágrima muda na hora da morte. (324)

The definition of masculinity and honor, however, is not only asserted through fearless behavior in the face of death. The animalistic nature of one’s action against the enemy, the liberation of aggressiveness and the display of violence are also suggested in Lins’ narrative as defining features of the traffic’s hyper-masculine culture. As the account of Filé com Fritas’ murder comes to a conclusion,
the character is assassinated by two young men, one who shoots Filé com Fritas eight times in the mouth and another who stabs him for having insulted his mother.

The violence displayed by the criminals towards Filé com Fritas’ lifeless body suggests the act of killing to be a symbolic ritual that proposes masculinity as a regressive type of animalistic behavior. For the criminals who murder Filé com Fritas, the body of the enemy becomes a fetishist object that serves as a vehicle on which to assert maleness through ruthless and merciless behavior. The pleasure with which the murderers deal with the lifeless body of their victim corresponds to a performance that socially confirms one’s virility: “Biscoitinho pediu o fuzil a Miúdo, colocou o cano dentro da boca do menino e disparou oito vezes … Depois Toco Preto esfaqueou seu corpo para ele também nunca mais deixar de obedecer a ordem sua” (324).

In the aforementioned episode, the historicizing of the evolution of violence in the favela implicates the visibility of brute force and hyper-masculinity as a means to ensure the sustenance of the traffic’s authority. Lins postulates throughout the account of the three main drug lords’ stories the gradual ascension and decline of the politics of consideração observed in the earlier phases of the traffic. The maintenance of the image of the dealer as
an authority figure shifts from the respectability acquired through the exchange of favors with the community to the establishment of sheer violence as a means of intimidation.

In its concurrence with the authority of the State, the traffic is portrayed in *Cidade de Deus* as acquiring a mythological totalitarian status in comparison to the relative democracy and order depicted in the earlier life stories of Inferninho and Pardalzinho. In the description of this particular transformation, which has certainly accentuated the stigmatization of the favela as site dominated by the agencies of drug trafficking, the narrative transmits a nostalgic sense of loss and displacement that indicates the favela *Cidade de Deus* as the epitome of the Third World nation’s dystopia.

The historical account of the favela promoted as a dystopia can be particularly noted in the contrast between the messages present in the opening and the conclusion of the novel. As the narrative of *Cidade de Deus* begins, the reader encounters the characters Busca-Pé and Barbantinho contemplatively smoking a marijuana cigarette while dreaming of their future. Busca-Pé wishes to be a photographer while Barbantinho expresses his desire to become a lifeguard. When the novel comes to an end following the death of Zé Miúdo, Lins digresses once again
into childhood, describing several characters at play on the streets of the favela. Immediately departing from the graphic violence suggested by Miúdo’s death, Lins brings the novel to a close with the following statement: “era tempo de pipa na Cidade de Deus” (401).

In the apparent simplicity of this conclusion, the authorial eye gazes at youth as a beginning and as an end. The representative intricacies of the neofavela are fully summarized in the paradox of the novel’s ending: otherness is proposed as a stasis, a presence whose self-destructive tendencies are facilitated by its poverty and exclusion. In this sense, Lins unmakes Rio de Janeiro’s postcard image by denying the existence of the lettered city; its silence in the narrative emphasize the depiction of the favela as an ostracized locale in which favelados are trapped between the illegal violence promoted by drug trafficking and the legal violence of the State as a prejudiced mechanism of repression (Leeds 235). In the closing remarks of the novel, the author enunciates the past both as hope and impossibility, for the nostalgic connotations implicated by the narrative’s return to childhood indicate the utopian favela to be present only in the imagination.
CONCLUSION

... the privilege and the curse ... to be both masters and victims of ... times, to forsake privacy and to be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace.

(Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children)

One of the primary goals of this dissertation has been to examine how the representation of traditionally deemed marginal identities is currently articulated in the context of Latin America literature. However, the manner through which Arenas, Vallejo and Lins materialize their respective Selves as well as the characters they represent as marginal entities has revealed the concept of identity as a relatively political and non-monolithic negotiation of selfhood. Indeed, throughout the chapters of this study, the significance of the term “identity” has been seen as a variable set of attributes that are highly dependent on the context, the site of enunciation and the referentiality of the project of representation.
The appreciation of the texts of the aforementioned authors as products of a particular marginal sensibility is fundamentally derived from a strategy of identity articulation in which the illusion of textual authenticity is negotiated through the advancement of the authorial Self as an individual who is not only sympathetic to those subjects he represents, but also inhabits the same domains of the excluded Other. For instance, Reinaldo Arenas’ “self-homotextualization” in Antes que anochezca functions both as the author’s idealization of his own sexual identity as well as a subversive rhetoric against the oppressive hegemony of Castro’s regime; Vallejo’s homonymous protagonist-narrator in La virgen de los sicarios is not solely suggested as a double of the author but is also portrayed as an intellectual in solidarity with the margins of the nation; and Lins’ position in Cidade de Deus, while concealed under a third-person narrative, ultimately becomes a mediatory figure, for the author’s experience as a former favela resident and anthropologist inevitably enhances the truth-value of the life stories and identities he represents.

While truthfulness and sincerity could be taken for granted in Arenas’ autobiography due to the biased and
ambiguous nature of the genre,¹ Vallejo’s and Lins’ novels are, nonetheless, able to induce an autobiographical response from the reader. Firstly, the authorial signature, directly present in Vallejo’s work and implied in Lins’, promotes the writing as a “supplement” of the author, as Derrida would have it. Secondly, the novels’ depiction of the Colombian and Brazilian contemporary social contexts stands in close proximity to sources of information that meditatively represent historical realities as the truth, namely mass communication media such as newspapers, magazines and television news.² Thus, in spite of their fictional label, Vallejo’s and Lins’ novels generate a characterization of their respective Selves and the excluded Others they represent that imposes itself in the text as a type of fictionalized truth.

The eagerness to tell the truth about the nation from a marginal perspective constitutes a common objective in the works selected for this dissertation. The nation and its past are deconstructed, re-historicized and read anew, directly contesting that which has been fundamentally established as tradition.³ The denunciative character of

¹ See Chapter 1 and also Lejeunne 3-6.
² For the role of the media in the organization of meaning as well as its agency as an authenticating source of “realities,” see Grossberg et al 177-84.
³ See Bhabha 139-70.
Arenas’ *Antes* is a clear example of how the testimonial Self imposes its perspective as a valid historical account. The declared struggle for freedom reported in Arenas autobiographical testimony can be translated as the individual’s effort to own the right to signify history, since the articulation of the truth comes to directly challenge what has been long recognized as normalcy.

Certainly, Arenas’ as well as Vallejo’s and Lins’ caustic criticism of the status quo of the nation vouches for the authorial intention to compete with traditional histories. Vallejo’s re-telling of the nation as a site in which violence constitutes both a tradition and its present identity symbolize the articulation of a message in which the former exiled character attempts to assert his experience as a valid historical perspective. Lins’ re-telling of the nation through the description of the evolution of the favelado space constitutes an answer to hegemonic histories. *Cidade de Deus*’s discourse overwrites the officialism of Brazilian history, which has allocated the problems associated with the nation’s colonial slavery to the remoteness of a distant past.

Significantly, while the texts of Arenas, Vallejo and Lins deny the conventionalities of history, their respective strategies of representation — whether or not
rooted in the carnivalesque, the grotesque or the hyper-real – do not disavow the idiosyncrasies occasioned by tradition. These authors’ works draw attention to the idiosyncratic differences within the bourgeois project of national consolidation as part of what constitutes the contradictory essence of the nation. This is evident in Arenas’ exposition of homosexual desire within the hyper-masculine context of the Cuban revolution, Vallejo’s depiction of the sicariato’s syncretic and subversive manifestation of traditional Catholicism, and Lins’ political articulation of the Afro-Brazilian identity of the favela.

It is precisely in the ambivalence to tradition and modernity, the simultaneous embrace and rejection of the present and the past of the nation, that the works studied in this dissertation are able to function as “histories” without necessarily affirming themselves as such. As examined in the previous chapters, the ambiguity of the authorial presence within or alongside the margins of the text vouches for the illusive effect of the truth in the deliberately manipulative act of representing the Self and the Other through writing. Moreover, the ambiguous assertion of the authorial identity and its ambivalence to fact and fiction jeopardizes the taxonomical reception of
Arenas’, Vallejo’s and Lins’ narratives, for their meaning can only be fully negotiated between the realms of the fictional and the real, or as Homi Bhabha suggests, through the understanding of their discourses as “Third Spaces” of enunciation that:

Properly [challenge] our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary [sic.] Past, kept alive in the national traditions of the People” (37).

If writing to others, as Jean Paul Sartre proposes, is a way in which authors often escape their own condition as historical beings by “leaping into eternity” through the creation of literature, the historicity of the works examined in this study must be reassessed in relation to the query of to whom Arenas’, Vallejo’s and Lins’ texts are addressed and with what intent these authors approach the themes of otherness and exclusion. The answer to the first question is certainly more attainable than the second, for only the authors themselves are capable of knowing their true motivations for writing. Nevertheless, given the aspect of the authorial presence and its marginal characterization as a ubiquitous aura surrounding the

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4 Sartre, “What is Literature” 72.
narrative, it is possible to advance certain conclusions regarding the intentionality behind the act of self-textualization.

Arenas’ autobiography is clearly identifiable as a counter-revolutionary discourse. His struggle to survive in resistance to the behavioral and moral principles established by the Cuban revolutionary regime is underscored by the adversary quality of his self-representation. The mentioning of the names of those individuals that were directly and indirectly responsible for the author’s persecution further reiterates Arenas’ autobiographical space as a vengeful and politically biased project.

The articulation of the Self as a marginal and oppressed identity in Antes draws attention to the character of ideological “resistance” of the text, for the representation of the author’s life seeks primarily to deprecate the corrupted ideals of the Cuban revolution while searching to compensate for a “broken life” in exile, whether or not manifested as a condition within and without the borders of the nation. In this sense, Arenas’ autobiography emerges as “a [testimonial] fight to conspire and restore the author’s significance, his leading role and
authority in society” while presumably speaking on behalf of a more oppressed group of individuals, whether they be homosexuals, political dissidents or minorities alike.

In Vallejo’s *La virgen*, the solidarity between the marginal intellectual and the *sicariato* class negatively re-imagines the nation to both a domestic and foreign audience. Vallejo’s corresponds to a social commentary that is as disruptive in terms of conventionalisms – religious, social and political – as it is uncomfortable in its articulation of the excluded Other. The mordant observations emitted by the narrator-protagonist, nonetheless, do not present any viable solutions for the social predicaments of the nation. On the contrary, Vallejo’s narrative reaffirms the Latin American dystopia as an inescapable circumstance in which the homogenizing presence of tradition is simultaneously cast as an essential contradiction and that which is responsible for the deterioration of the nation.

The articulation of the favelado subject in Lins’ work could also be viewed, like Vallejo’s novel, as a dystopic project. In particular, in Lins’ case, the representation of the marginalized Other to the world constitutes both the

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5 Brodsky 26.
author’s personal assessment of racial exclusion in a country traditionally imagined as racially democratic as well as a political stance in favor of the subaltern *favelado*.

However, there is an apparent contradiction to the author’s positivist re-examination of the status quo of racism that is exposed at the conclusion of *Cidade de Deus*. While the practice of a politics of racial invisibility is brought to the attention of the reader through the depiction of the black *favelado* as a subaltern, the advancement of a message that postulates no solutions for the empowerment of the *favelado* class emphasizes otherness and exclusion as irresolute predicaments. As argued in Chapter 3, the omission of the authorial voice affirming its Self in the narrative of *Cidade de Deus* – although reinstated in the postscript of the novel – distances Lins’ positive experience as a former *favelado* from that of the subjects he represents. The inconclusiveness of the novel, which proposes the return to childhood as a nostalgic and impossible ideal, thus further reasserts the present of the nation as a nihilist paradigm of loss, displacement and disillusionment.

There is, without a doubt, an accentuated pessimism concerning the representation of marginality as the focal
point for the retelling of the historical nation in all of the works selected for this dissertation. This pessimism ultimately signifies the reinstatement of the Latin American continent as a site marked by violence, poverty and oppression. Nonetheless, while the texts of Arenas, Vallejo and Lins epitomize a partial reality of the Latin American territory that is as exotic as it is unkind, they also present a positivist message in their respective textualization of the excluded Other by: 1) promoting the intellectual Self as an individual in solidarity with the oppressed classes it represents; 2) advancing the notion of otherness as threat inasmuch as it corresponds to an adversary equal; 3) placing in evidence the concept of identity as “theater and politics, performance and action,” which intentionally postulates the performance of identity as a means to resist the hegemony of tradition (Canclini, Consumers and Citizens 96).

If “literature establishes a historical contact among [those] who are steeped in the same history and who likewise contribute to its making,” (Sartre, “What is Literature 72), the works examined here certainly confirm such a paradigm of the literary space as a zone of contact between the author and history. As politicized texts, Antes, La virgen and Cidade de Deus postulate the
contestation of the Truth as a rhetorical act of self-determination and historical revisionism. Their ambivalence to fact and fiction questions the fixity of tradition in the advancement of the truths of the Other, so that the nation can, once again, be born; not under the pragmatism of its elusive homogeneity, but rather in the legitimization of its difference.


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