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TITLE: Towards a Poetics of the Automobile in Contemporary Central American Fiction

AUTHOR: Vinodh Venkatesh

AFFILIATION: Virginia Tech

ABSTRACT: The study analyzes the impact of the automobile vis-à-vis the institution of neoliberal policies in the region. Taking into account Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Baile con serpientes* (1996) and Franz Galich's *Managua salsa city: ¡Devórame otra vez!* (2000), I examine how and to what effect the automobile is written into the urban fictions produced in the postwar period. Touching on other works and relevant novels by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Rafael Menjívar Ochoa, and Maurice Echeverría I argue that the automobile is a fundamental component in the poetics of contemporary Central American fiction as writers use its history, makes, and models as important referents in the authorial critique of open-market systems. The car is both a tool in the characterization of the urban subjects, and a critical mode of how the reader receives and processes the urban space.

KEYWORDS: Automobile, Horacio Castellanos Moya, Franz Galich, Central American narrative, Noir novel

RESUMEN: El presente trabajo analiza la importancia del automóvil en relación a las políticas neoliberales en Centroamérica. El corpus de textos se centra en *Baile con serpientes* (1996) de Horacio Castellanos Moya y *Managua salsa city: ¡Devórame otra vez!* (2000) de Franz Galich, pero también recopila ejemplos de obras de escritores como Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Rafael Menjívar Ochoa y Maurice Echeverría. Propongo que el automóvil es un componente fundamental a la poética de la Centroamérica contemporánea y que los escritores de la región hacen uso de sus modelos y marcas para deslumbrar los vínculos entre la narrativa y la política. El ensayo plantea la idea de que el coche no sólo funciona como referente material en la caracterización de los personajes de estas obras policíacas sino que también afecta la recepción que el lector tiene de las zonas urbanas que componen el espacio narrado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: automóvil, Horacio Castellanos Moya, Franz Galich, narrativa centroamericana, novela negra

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BIOGRAPHY: Vinodh Venkatesh (Ph.D. UNC-Chapel Hill) is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Virginia Tech. His research is centered on questions of gender, subjectivity, and space in a neoliberal climate. His recent articles have appeared in *Hispanic Review*, *Chasqui*, and *Revista de Literatura Mexicana Contemporánea*.

Towards a Poetics of the Automobile in Contemporary Central American Fiction

Vinodh Venkatesh, Virginia Tech

No narrative produced in Latin America in the past thirty years has been as reactive to its social milieu and maladies as that which begins to emerge from Central America in the 1990s. Though lacking a recent narrative genealogy excised from political movements or an aesthetic and poetic antecedent that rallies together a corpus of texts, contemporary Central American fiction is best known for its unabashed portrayal of a violent, degenerative, and infested society that remains in the aftermath of the civil and military strife of previous decades. In terms of genres, there is preponderance in this era of what Misha Kokotovic terms “neoliberal noir” (15), further studied by Dante Liano as “la novela neopoliciaca centroamericana actual” (6). Whether representative of Nicaragua, El Salvador, or Guatemala, these works share a

noir sensibility characterized by a pervasive sense of corruption, decay, and disillusionment, in which the social order itself, and particularly the state, is the ultimate source of criminality, rather than of justice. (Kokotovic 15)

These texts, importantly, reflect on the growing economic problems in the region and the products of US-bred neoliberalism in Central America, namely through the implementation of free market systems that leave unprotected the socially disadvantaged and engender a deeper divide between rich and poor.

The economic inequities portrayed in these fictions call to mind the importance of the market and fiscal policy in dictating the future of the region in the 21st century. The open market system allows for the free

movement of resources and products across national lines, best exemplified by the plethora of “made in Guatemala” or “fabriqué au Nicaragua” tags placed on clothing sold in North American and European clothing stores. The converse, however, is equally important in understanding the economics of the region, as the import of goods harkens back to the prominence of foreign influences in the age of neoliberalism. The existence of an imported product in the region’s contemporary fiction is most evident, I argue, in the shape of the automobile, as it empowers the often displaced urban subject to trace the devastated landscapes of Managua, San Salvador, Tegucigalpa and Guatemala City, following Matthew Paterson’s notion that “even for those who do not use a car, the conditions under which we move around are shaped fundamentally by car-led development strategies” (9). The role of the car, however, goes beyond a simple means to an end as these writers chronicle violence, drug-addiction, and poverty, but instead serves an important literary role in the writing of Central American noir. The car, I argue, is a fundamental character of neoliberal noir, as it is subjectified and mobilized very much like the criminals, detectives, and journalists that populate the genre. Taking into account Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Baile con serpientes* (1996) and Franz Galich’s *Managua salsa city: ¡Devórame otra vez!* (2000), the following pages attempt a reading of the automobile in contemporary Central American noir that focuses on the origins of the vehicle and its ramifications within the depicted societies. My arguments, in essence, follow a line of thinking opened by Simon Maxwell when he posits that

meanings of car use are embedded in social and cultural relations, yet the intricate ways in which these meanings are created and maintained through interactions with others and negotiations with the self in everyday life are often neglected. (203)

The following pages, therefore, focus on the social, vis-à-vis textual, meanings of the automobile in an attempt to understand the poetics of the car in contemporary Central American fiction. I further discuss that while also a diegetic crutch to allow the textual exploration of neoliberal urban spaces, the genesis, nature, form, and physics of the automobile are intrinsic to the characterization and development of these noir narrative worlds and their subjects.

Mostly written by males and centered in urban centers, contemporary Central American fiction/noir lacks the idealism of wartime literature, and instead focuses on themes such as corruption, cynicism, and society-wide violence. Unlike other Latin American noir, Central American noir “generally expresses a deep disillusionment with the outcome of revolutionary struggles and marks its distance from the Left more categorically” (Kokotovic 16). These texts take on a strikingly apolitical tone, as they critique all sides of the political spectrum. Keeping with this notion, Werner Mackenbach argues that “la representación de la violencia en la novelística se distancia de [un] sentido político-ideológico,” suggesting that the cities written by Castellanos Moya, Galich, Maurice Echeverría, Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Rafael Menjívar Ochoa and others lack an ideological compass. These texts emblemize, in turn, what Ignacio Sánchez Prado affirms as

una tendencia en la cual los escritores centroamericanos reclaman para sí el derecho a la escritura literaria como una forma de superar tanto el imperativo revolucionario como el imperativo testimonial. (82)

I want to pause appropriately in setting the stage for the subsequent pages as the over-arching poetics of these texts cultivates a

diegesis that operates under a physics of violence and simple progressions of actions and murders that leave the reader at times lost, and at times gasping for breath. Unlike traditional detective fiction there are no determined good and bad guys here. The protagonist in Castellanos Moya’s *Baile con serpientes* oscillates between being a caring paterfamilias to his brood of snakes and a maniacal serial killer intent on causing havoc whilst smoking, drinking, and snorting a variety of drugs. Though lacking a poetic demarcation of role, the protagonist, however, does react to the Chevrolet he drives, as the make and model of the automobile suggests a reading of the text that necessitates a meshing of history, economics, and the socio-cultural matrix of Central America.

This matrix lies at the heart of Horacio Castellanos Moya’s fictive world, which begins with the collection of stories published as *¿Qué signo es usted, niña Berta?* (1981). Born in Honduras but then living in El Salvador, Canada, Spain, Germany, Mexico, and the United States, Castellanos Moya first finds success with a collection titled *Con la congoja de la pasada tormenta* (1995), and is labeled as an up-and-coming writer with *Baile con serpientes* (1996), *El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador* (1997), and *La diabla en el espejo* (2000). He gains must-read status in the field of Central American fiction with the publication of *Insensatez* (2004), which chronicles the mass assassinations of villagers and natives during the years of war in an unnamed Central American country that strongly alludes to Guatemala, but which is equally representative of any society in the aftermath of conflict. Focusing on issues of violence, authority, responsibility, and poverty, the author’s novels underline a broader concern with unearthing a Central America that is tenuous in its daily survival.

The status quo, we cannot ignore, is a product on the one hand of war and systematized aggression, and on the other, the legacy of neoliberal economic policy. For the purpose of this analysis I will focus on *Baile con serpientes* as representative of the

importance of the automobile vis-à-vis neoliberalism in Castellanos Moya's fiction, given the structural importance of the old yellow Chevrolet to the narrative. Before embarking on a chaotic journey through the streets of Macrópolis, the protagonist, Eduardo Sosa, is an unemployed sociologist who sleeps on his sister's couch while futilely looking for gainful employment. The city is a veiled allusion to San Salvador, following Gioconda Belli's lead of half-heartedly obscuring the name of the urban setting in *La mujer habitada* (1988); a tactic later utilized by Maurice Echeverría in *Diccionario Esotérico* (2006), where Guatemala City is jokingly referred to as "Playground." This detail is important in the development of a regional literature, as part of a broader trend that evidences writers from distinct countries choosing to write beyond their borders, thereby outlining a common regional corpus of texts. Following this notion, Belli's latest piece, *El país de las mujeres* (2010), *Insensatez*, and Galich's *Y te diré quién eres: (Mariposa traicionera)* (2006), all illustrate how local writers spread their wings to cover the geographic terrain of Central America, asserting an authorial vision and exercise over its volcanoes, jungles, and devastated urban spaces, unrestrained by arcane notions of the Nation and "national literature."

Returning to Castellanos Moya's novel, the narrative kicks into speed when Eduardo's neighborhood realizes that a homeless man is living amongst them in an old Chevrolet. The police are called to evict Jacinto Bustillo from the area but surprisingly allow him to stay, arguing that they have no legal reasons to force his move, symbolic of the genre's lack of faith in juridical and legislative bodies. Fueled by the boredom of being unemployed, as his "estudios de sociología (una carrera que a esa altura ya había sido borrada en varias universidades) no [le] servían para nada en lo relativo a la consecución de un empleo" (10), Eduardo befriends Jacinto momentarily, only to stab him to death at the first opportunity and steal the keys to the Chevy.

Though his actions may at first appear to be a random act of violence, one of many that Castellanos Moya plants along the trajectory of his narratives, it can be argued that Eduardo's commandeering of the American vessel has everything to do with the realities of neoliberal Central America, of being "desempleado, sin posibilidades reales de conseguir un trabajo decente en estos nuevos tiempos" (10). The importance of owning an automobile is first underlined in *El asco*, when the protagonist, Edgardo Vega, relates to a metaliterary Castellanos Moya his impressions of disgust upon returning to his native land. The novel is told through the perspective of a fictive Moya Castellanos, who claims to have softened Vega's original words, providing what can be interpreted as a testimony by proxy. After criticizing the local beer and lack of overall hygiene in the city, Vega comments that

la gente en esta ciudad se divide entre los que tienen carro y los que viajan en autobús, ésta es la división más tajante, más radical [...] no importa tanto tu nivel de ingresos o la zona donde vivís, lo que importa es si tenés carro o viajás en autobús. (49)

This important distinction between the haves and the have-nots provides the fulcrum for all other inclusions of the automobile as a textuality of composition in Castellanos Moya, as the car becomes more than an assemblage of metallic and plastic parts. The car and car ownership, Catherine Lutz and Anne Lutz Fernández argue, "is helping to make the poor poorer and the rich richer" (101), echoing the importance placed on the automobile as a narrative marker of neoliberalism in Central American noir.

This distinction is particularly poignant in a regional market that is characterized by the import of finished automobile goods and the export of cheap parts as North American manufacturers shift production to factories in Costa Rica and El Salvador where the average salary is a fraction of that paid to US workers.

The observation made by Vega is even more relevant when we consider the relative lack of efficient public transportation in the region and the shrinkage of the auto industry after the global financial crisis of 2008, leading to the entry of cheaper Chinese-made scooters—which importantly consume less gasoline as petroleum prices soared—into the market as an alternative to the one-time car owners who abstain from taking the bus (Reynolds n. pag.) This caveat provides a further piece to the puzzle of theorizing the role of the motor engine in post-war Central America: speed and dependability outweigh all other factors in traversing the urban landscape, as inhabitants and workers must routinely move from changing points and loci for their most immediate needs in an unplanned and chaotically sprawling city.

Returning to *Baile con serpientes*, then, the importance of owning a car and of belonging to the empowered group lies at the center of Eduardo's usurpation of Jacinto as the rightful owner of the Chevy. Jacinto, for his part, once exemplified the social class that Eduardo hopes to attain, as prior to becoming a homeless person and abandoning his worldly possessions, he was a respected accountant who lost his job after having an affair with the wife of a Special Forces officer. Echoing Edgardo Vega's impression of the neoliberal class in San Salvador, Jacinto affirms that his reason for leaving everything behind was "el asco" (18). His break from belonging to the neoliberal middle-class occurs when he buys the old American car,

ese cacharro que compró en el preciso momento en que decidía tirar todo por la borda y dedicarse a la mera subsistencia, con el auto como sola pertenencia, durmiendo por temporadas en distintas zonas de la ciudad, lejos de la mugre que los demás llamábamos familia, prestigio, trabajo. (18)

There is a distinct rejection of the neoliberal lifestyle and what it affords in *Baile*, akin to Vega's moment of panic upon realizing that

he was slowly acclimatizing himself to his brother's money-grubbing lifestyle.

By buying the old Chevrolet, Jacinto emancipates himself from the *asco* of the neoliberal class system that Edgardo Vega so strongly opposes. The automobile is again at the center of the social hierarchy, but this time the make and model play a role in the narrative process of characterization. Embodying all things that produce a sense of *asco*, Edgardo's brother poses as a product of what the neoliberal economy has come to achieve. As part of a culturally homogenous middle class that has no appreciation for history, art, literature, and education, he owns a Toyota Corolla "último modelo, que [...] cuida más que a sí mismo" (106). In the climax of the narrative Edgardo recounts how he spends a night out on the town with his brother and a friend, only to be left alone in the car when he refuses to go to a local whorehouse. All his criticisms and feelings of disgust reach a boiling point when seated in the Toyota as he waits to be taken home:

los cinco minutos en el interior del carro de mi hermano se me hicieron eternos [...] y esos últimos tres minutos en que el pánico hizo presa de mí fueron horriblos, una experiencia desgastante, algo que no le deseo a nadie, permanecer encerrado en un Toyota Corolla. (107)

This scene at the end of Castellanos Moya's earlier piece underlines the shift towards the focus on the branding of the automobile as a marker in the region's fiction, as the author goes beyond simply assigning importance to the motorized vehicle in the urban environment: it is now *what* you drive, and not so much *if* you drive, that defines the subject.

The feeling of being entrapped in the banal middle class leads Jacinto to instinctively react "como animal acorralado" (14) when the police ask him to first leave the neighborhood. Jacinto's refusal to belong to the world of the Toyota Corollas is parodied

when, with Eduardo, he visits a local hole-in-the-wall bar known as “La Prosperidad” (19) to refill his flask of rum. The locale is anything but prosperous as the pair leave with another toothless miscreant, Coco, who proceeds to fellate a drunken Jacinto. This esperpentic moment, reflective of the random violence of Central American noir that Kokotovic calls to attention, reaches an apex when Jacinto’s penis is viciously bitten, and he subsequently kills Coco with a broken bottle. A quiet Eduardo then claims to be fearful of his own life and unsheathes a blade, cutting Jacinto’s neck from ear to ear. His true intentions, however, are revealed when he immediately seizes the keys to the yellow American car and traverses the city “a toda prisa, ansioso por llegar al auto, por descubrir esa intimidad que don Jacinto guardaba con tanto recelo” (22), and to ultimately belong to “los que tienen carro” and not to “los que viajan en autobús” (*El asco*, 49).

Eduardo’s rush to “descubrir esa intimidad” (22) reaffirms the notion that the automobile is a prosthetic attachment to the literary character and that it is more than a mere possession in these Central American fictions. It is essential to identity and to the narrative function of each character, a point that I will explore in the pages that follow. The Chevrolet, as an example, is evocative of Jacinto’s rejection of neoliberal capitalism as its Spartan interior is “extraordinariamente ordenado, sin asientos, con solo un pequeño taburete” (23). Being inside the/a car is primordial to gaining subjectivity in *Baile con serpientes*, akin to Edgardo Vega’s breakdown upon sitting inside the Toyota Corolla in *El asco*, as Eduardo now feels “una alegría inédita, abrumadora, porque ese espacio ahora [le] pertenecía, era sólo [suyo], para siempre” (23). The need for ownership on the part of the protagonist, furthermore, stresses the mandate placed on individual and not communal property in the micro-politics of neoliberalism.

Once in the Chevrolet, Eduardo realizes that he is not alone as a group of four snakes slither out from the orifices of the automobile

to greet him. He names them Beti, Valentina, Loli, and Carmela and proceeds to have conversations with them as he drives the old car, “ganosos de llegar a otras zonas de la ciudad, donde iniciaría[n] la aventura de una nueva vida” (25). Their first stop is at a large shopping complex in the city, a commercial center representative of capitalist economies of centralized amassment and deployment. The shopping center, furthermore, represents an acute shift in the Latin American city towards nodal development, that is, it mimics the North American model of town centers and localized hubs of residential and commercial locales. The role of transportation, or owning a quick and efficient means of getting around the city, therefore becomes essential to the urban subject’s ability to reach these centers that are no longer pedestrian-friendly. When a pair of security guards chide Eduardo for coming to the complex, as “una mugre de esa calaña desentonaba con los reglamentos del centro comercial” (28), the narrative takes a turn towards the fantastic as the snakes viciously attack and leave the security guards lifeless in a matter of seconds. The subjectification of the snakes as accomplices is similar to the confluence between the monstrous-natural and the decaying-urban evidenced in Echeverría’s *Diccionario Esotérico*, where natural elements become grotesque characters within the tableau of post-war Central America. Mayhem ensues in *Baile con serpientes* as Eduardo and the snakes enter the shopping mall and leave a slew of bodies in their wake, a murder spree which shows no signs of dissipating, as they later visit Jacinto’s old house and kill his wife and maid.

Random violence, which is characteristic of much of the prose of Castellanos Moya, Menjívar Ochoa, Galich, and Echeverría, shifts the narrative into gear as Eduardo drives the old Chevrolet haphazardly through the city. Reactive to the chaos that is instigated by the snakes, Eduardo comments that “no era posible que lo que había sido el centro histórico de la ciudad estuviera sumido en semejante caos” (34). This break

with the colonial structure, that is, a model of development based on concentric circles that maintained an ordered sense of development, astounds the protagonist, as the new pattern of growth is jarring for an urban environment that lacked the earlier movements of sectorial and polarized growth that come as byproducts of rapid industrialization that characterized much of Latin America during the period of import substitution industrialization (ISI). The cities of Central America are unlike their mainland counterparts, however, and lack that historical urban vestige that comes with large tracts of industrialization in the direction of peripheral factories or a developed port system. The city described by the mobilized Eduardo, as a space that lacks the genealogical cues of socio-spatial morphology, cements the overall tone of discord and insanity that permeates *Baile con serpientes*:

Me acerqué al centro de la ciudad: los edificios derruidos por el terremoto, las aceras atestadas de vendedores ambulantes, en las esquinas pilas de ropa usada recién traída de Estados Unidos, centenares de grabadoras sonando al mismo tiempo, y la gente a borbotones caminando enloquecida por las calles. El Chevrolet amarillo avanzaba a vuelta de rueda entre aquella marea humana. (34)

The importance of the Chevy moving through the remnants of the city calls to mind North American involvement in the region during the better part of the twentieth century. Beginning with the US government's involvement in Panama's drive towards independence and aid against the communists in El Salvador in 1932, to the support of the Guatemalan coup d'état in 1921 and 1954, amongst a plethora of examples, the United States has held a geopolitical stronghold in the region. Discussion of US influence in Central America is not complete without an overview of military installations in Nicaragua, beginning with the occupation of Managua by Marines in 1910 and the establishment of a

training academy in 1929, an antecedent to the School of the Americas that opens in Panama as a transatlantic military academy in 1946 to protect American interests. More recent involvement during a heightening of the Cold War includes support of the Nicaraguan Contras and the right-wing in El Salvador in the 1980s that was responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians that a generation of writers in the 1990s chooses to focus on.

In terms of economic influence the Washington Consensus of the 1980s set forth an ideology of neoliberalism that opened trade barriers under the guises of NAFTA, CAFTA and ALCA, which only succeeded in polarizing domestic wealth distributions. Other tenets of neoliberalism such as the privatization of state enterprises, austerity measures, and deregulation of markets entry only added to the problem as foreign companies were given the green light to outsource production to places like Guatemala where minimum wages and their regulation were vastly below foreign levels. A further factor to consider is the economic blockade instituted by the US against the Sandinista government in the 1980s, forcing a complete realignment of import strategies, best illustrated in Galich's use of the Russian-made Lada in *Managua salsa city*. In fact, we do not have to limit ourselves to recent US forays in the region; the hulking, yellow Chevy incites the reader to remember the characteristic hue of the United Fruit Company that was so influential in domestic and transnational politics.

Returning to *Baile con serpientes*, we can see how the old Chevrolet functions as an ominous reminder of US involvement in Central America as the car makes its way through the metonymic streets of Macrópolis. The car, for its part, does not appear in official records when the police begin a search for the owner after the first reported murders, emblematic of the at-times phantom hand the United States had in domestic political and military affairs. Like so many of the coups, botched elections, and civil wars that were silently fueled by North American policies

of hemispheric control, the Chevrolet's presence reminds the reader that (undocumented) foreign factors are responsible for, and are very present in, contemporary Central American societies. Aside from being a metaphoric allusion to the politics of the region in the past decades, the Chevrolet also reminds the reader that the chaos that is set in motion in *Baile con serpientes*, and which makes an intertextual reappearance in *La diabla en el espejo*, springs forth from the character intimately associated with the American car, suggesting that the violence and anarchy that constitutes Castellanos Moya's diegesis is not as random as it may first seem.

The violence enacted by Eduardo and the serpents culminates in the attack on the family of Abraham Ferracuti, a well-connected political aspirant who lives in a gated compound in the outskirts of the city, as the Chevrolet attempts to flee from increased police supervision in the capital. Ferracuti for his part is representative of the other pole of neoliberalism, which is to say those who became richer with the opening of markets, and is identified with a late-model Mercedes Benz sedan. The imported, high-end German automobile, whether a Mercedes or a BMW, characterizes all those of the same social class as Ferracuti in Castellanos Moya's work and also appears as a textual identifier in Franz Galich's *Y te diré quién eres: (Mariposa traicionera)*, Ronald Flores's *Último silencio* (2004), and Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El cojo bueno* (2001). Its purveyors manipulate the congested streets of post-war Central America through tinted windshields and (un)official police escorts, emphasizing the demographic divide between classes. Like Ferracuti, the owners of these German imports usually live in gated communities and villas in the outskirts of the decaying center, urging the reader to address how powerfully spatio-social relations of class have changed places such as Macrópolis and the Playground. To note is the fact that we, as readers, are never afforded the intimacy of the automobile shrouded in tinted glass, and are always caught on the outside as it bids its

own will through the urban landscape. Perhaps it is only within the Mercedes and the BMW that we can find answers to the quandaries posed by Kokotovic when he suggests that post-war Central America lacks discursive and civil logic.

Upon entering Ferracuti's compound and realizing the magnitude of his actions, Eduardo decides to go into hiding and parks the Chevrolet in "un cementerio de autos" (51) to wait out the police searches. At this juncture the novel splits into two subsequent chapters that chronicle the events created by the Chevrolet from the perspectives of the deputy commissioner of the police, Lito Handal, and that of a reporter for the newspaper *Ocho Columnas*, Rita Mena, both of whom appear in several of Castellanos Moya's novels as secondary characters. The break from Eduardo's narrative underlines the author's commitment to examine the veracity of history and the importance of point-of-view in writing and rewriting the past, which is a topic that is central to *Insensatez*.

The exercise of interpreting Eduardo's actions is left to Handal as he leads an investigation of the epidemic of murders in the city. With his assistants, Flores and Villalta, he goes from site to site to investigate the consequences of the snakebites. The process of piecing together the events is flawed from the outset as Handal relies on testimony and reports which are incomplete and incorrect, evocative of the author's critique of historical documentation in his latter works. The first report the deputy commissioner reads, for example, attests that "un hombre como de cincuenta años, con fachas de pordiosero, había llegado en un viejo auto destartado, tipo americano al centro comercial" (54). It comes as no surprise, then, that the authorities' efforts to catch the Chevrolet are futile as a series of bad leads and misinformed assumptions handicap the chase.

The chase itself is permitted by Handal's late-model Nissan, another Japanese import signaling his belonging to the neoliberal economies that permit a rising, "disgusting"

middle class. But unlike the Toyota Corolla that suffocated Edgardo Vega, the Nissan is a reminder of the chaotic consequences of the tentacles of economic imperialism. The deputy commissioner, as an example, does not eat pupusas, which are termed the national food in *El asco*, but instead devours “hamburguesa[s], papas fritas, y [...] coca cola” (57). Though not belonging to the urban oligarchy that is central to *La diablo en el espejo*, Handal enjoys the economic benefits of fast food, fast cars, and faster lines of credit that ensure his enslavement to an economic model that perpetuates consumerism in the face of increasing poverty. The Nissan, for its part, does not represent the American-controlled past, but a neoliberal present of free-trade as markets open for cheaper economic cars like the Japanese imports.

The author’s inclusion of the make of the car signals a concerted inquiry into the role of the automobile in defining contemporary Central American society, as the ineffective, overpaid and inefficient police force metonymizes the societal impact of late twentieth century economic policy. If the Toyota and Nissan are evocative of a decadent and decaying middle class, and the German import substitutes for those entities that profit greatest from the economic and political innuendos of the Washington Consensus, then where does the layperson stand?

The answer resides with the second class of person that is alluded to in *El asco*, which makes its appearance in *Baile con serpientes* in the form of Rita Mena, a curvaceous journalist of the proletariat who takes the reins of the narrative in the third chapter. Unlike Handal and Ferracuti, she takes the bus to work and first hears of the snake-killings “en el autobús, cuando interrumpieron la emisión musical para difundir un boletín de última hora” (98). By only hearing about the adventures of the yellow Chevrolet on the radio, we can see how her status as a user of public transportation occludes her from the principal channels of information regarding the investigation and the state of the city.

Though she doesn’t own a Nissan, Mercedes, or Chevrolet, she does partake in Castellanos Moya’s poetics of the automobile in *Baile con serpientes* through her job as a journalist investigating local crime. With a band of mismatched photographers and journalists, evocative of the urban and auto-mobilized band of reporters in Alberto Fuguet’s *Tinta roja* (1996), Rita embarks on a tracing of Macrópolis to follow the damage done by Eduardo and the band of snakes. Their journey is facilitated by a “cucarachita Volkswagen” (98), the iconic “auto für Jedermann” first developed by Ferdinand Porsche and the German motorcycle manufacturer Zündapp in 1931, which gains massive middle-class popularity throughout Latin America due to its cheap price and local production.

The development of the Beetle is antithetical to the capitalist production of the other automobiles in Castellanos Moya’s universe as it begins as a government project sponsored by Hitler in 1933 immediately following the collapse of the Weimar Republic. The German leader specifically commissioned a car to be named “Volkswagen,” representative of the populist aim of the party. The car would become a central component in the National Socialist’s restructuring of Germany in the inter-war years, allowing for common citizens to purchase the car through a federally sponsored lending program. The Beetle, however, never truly gained momentum until after the defeat of the Nazis, when in 1945 the British reanimated the factories to produce what would become the most popular and longest-running vehicle produced from a single design platform. Given its production history, the Beetle poses an opposing position within the geopolitics of the car in *Baile con serpientes*, as it negotiates an urban landscape that is occluded by the bright lights and flashy engines of the Toyotas and BMWs. The Beetle, whether due to its layman’s prestige or inefficient aerodynamics, forces us to slowdown and to take note of the lifestyle of Rita and many like her, and to document the increasing degradation of living standards

amongst the poor—a detail left on the dark side of the tracks by the newer, foreign imports. The Beetle does not speed from point A to B, but instead fulfills its journalistic role by carefully reconstituting the disjunctive elements that the Nissan and Toyota take for granted in their neoliberal *jouissance*.

The association made between Rita and the Beetle is cemented by the popularity of the car in Central and Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century, as even when global demand decreased, operations continued in Mexico and Brazil. The date of publication of *Baile con serpientes*, 1996, coincides with the final decline of the *cucarachita* as Volkswagen closed the Brazilian factory, only to end all production of the model in 2003. Though persisting till the 21st century, the decline of the Beetle truly begins in the 1960s, coinciding with the shift towards neoliberal policies as part of American affront to the purported spread of communism. Unable to compete with small, efficient Japanese models and well-marketed American products like the Ford Pinto, the Volkswagen Beetle declined in sales due to the pressures created by the free market.

It is not surprising, then, that the Beetle occupies a central role in the narrative of Rita's attempts to piece together the events occurring immediately after the murder of Jacinto Bustillos. Her position as a journalist asserts a societal necessity to be informed and to know the truth regarding the violence that plagues Macrópolis. For her part, Rita asserts that the crime spree "tiene que [tener] una lógica, una ligazón" (108). Her approach to the crimes underscores the futility of neoliberal noir in assigning culpability and consequence in the postwar era. Part of her detective work, in fact, leads to the involvement of the president in the mayhem. Keeping with the importance of the automobile in the narrative, it is no accident then that the Beetle plays a central role as the capital is thrown into greater chaos:

Y entonces, cuando el guardia ya ha abierto el portón de tela metálica, y

Victor hace avanzar despacio el Volkswagen, ella percibe por el rabillo del ojo un destello amarillo que llama su atención, y se vuelve para distinguir nítidamente un viejo auto tipo americano que en ese preciso instante pasa de largo frente al portón de Casa Presidencial. (110)

The car that Rita spies is ultimately not the famed Chevrolet but nevertheless alerts the city into a high state of alarm as the palace is locked-down. After the dust settles her boss asks her to write a first-person testimony of what she experienced during the emergency, but in a knowing wink to the critique of testimony and political narratives, Rita is unable to write a single paragraph chronicling her experiences, suggesting a societal inability to novelize the illogic of the postwar period in Central America.

Rita's section of *Baile con serpientes* terminates with Eduardo calling-in to the newspaper and taking responsibility for the mayhem, claiming that "no hay plan, no hay conspiración" (122), laying to rest her haphazard theories of the crimes yet at the same time exacerbating the city's worst fears. The conversation ends with Eduardo ominously warning Rita that "solo el azar y la lógica [...] [le] permite profundizar [su] mutación" (122), which is evocative of a myriad of Hollywood serial killers who delusionally promise to become a monstrous Other. Yet just as how *Baile con serpientes*, like other works by Menjívar Ochoa such as *Cualquier forma de morir* (2006) and *De vez en cuando la muerte* (2002), never fully becomes a detective novel or a thriller, Eduardo is unable to become more than an unemployed sociologist joyriding with a group of snakes, as the fourth chapter returns with him as the principal character.

The novel ends with a military assault on the automobile scrap yard where the yellow Chevrolet is parked, as Eduardo makes an escape to his sister's house, returning to his previous life of unemployment and nights on her couch as if nothing had changed. The armed forces, for their part, "estaban incendiando

todos los autos, indiscriminadamente” (157) in an attempt to destroy all vestiges of the series of murders. Their attempts to solve the crime and to arrest the true villain are left aside as the focus becomes on destroying the automobile, as by setting aflame its metallic body they manage to cleanse Macrópolis of the random, illogical terror that plagued its streets. More importantly, the massacre in the scrap yard epitomizes the poetics of the automobile that Castellanos Moya ferments in his narrative, as it is the car, as avatar of the character, that holds a sense of agency and subjectivity in the face of a neoliberal society left to decay.

The importance of the automobile vis-à-vis subjectivity in an increasingly disjunctive and alienating space can be further traced in Franz Galich's *Managua salsa city: ¡Devórame otra vez!*, a prequel to *Y te diré quién eres: (Mariposa traicionera)* where the themes of violence, chaos, and economic disparity are explored in a hellish Managua that is reeling from the aftermath of the Contra wars. Like Castellanos Moya, Galich does not perfectly fit into the mold of a national writer, as he moves from his native Guatemala to Nicaragua at a young age. He furthermore asserts that

de alguna forma ya me he integrado al proceso productivo nicaragüense pero prefiero hablar en términos generales de un proyecto centroamericano, es decir una literatura centroamericana. (Martínez Sánchez n. pag.)

Aside from placing himself within a regional literature vis-à-vis the process of cultural production, Galich affirms that his novels are located within “tiempos de la cólera neoliberal” (“Tandas,” n. pag.), as the economic effects of free markets and lessened entry restrictions create greater wealth gaps across the region. These changes are reflected in the author's novelistic production, which echoes Elizabeth Ugarte's observation that:

El consumismo es presentado como fenómeno devorador de la identidad

que se acrecienta en Nicaragua en la década de los noventa con el fracaso del proyecto socialista impulsado por la revolución de 1979. Y la violencia como la expresión simbólica de la alienación y marginación, producto de la desocupación y pobreza extrema, uno de los grandes problemas que enfrenta el espacio social urbano de Managua ante la falta de alternativas. (n. pag.)

The social conditions described by Ugarte can be reflective of any of the countries of the region, and serve as a pivot for Galich's novel, which recounts the meeting of a prostitute, La Guajira, and a lower-class, ex-military soldier Pancho Rana. The latter is evocative of any number of male characters who populate Central American fiction, characterized by idleness and insecurity with the end of armed conflict as they have only been trained and nurtured to fight. A prime example of this trope resides in Castellanos Moya's *El arma en el hombre* (2001), which chronicles the postwar life of Robocop, an ex-soldier who is left unemployed after a civil war. This trope is deeply enmeshed in the author's universe, reappearing in *La diabla en el espejo*, and sharing storylines with Handal and the murder of natives in *Insensatez*.

Returning to *Managua salsa city*, we see how a Robocop-like Rana now works as a chauffeur and houseboy for a rich couple that is spending some time abroad in Miami. They unsurprisingly drive a BMW, which is only revealed in *Y te diré quién eres*, when it is further divulged that they are involved in a transnational band of smugglers. Their expensive German import situates them within the spheres of power that are extraneous to the negative impacts of neoliberalism, akin to Abraham Ferracuti's posh mansion and lifestyle away from the detritus and decay of the urban centers of Macrópolis. The novel begins with Rana courting La Guajira in a local bar as they begin a game of seduction and wits with each wanting something different from the carnal adventure.

The importance of the automobile in this courtship is exemplified by Rana commenting on the allure of his car to the sinuous Guajira who is sure to fall trap to his charms upon seeing the car he drives: “Vamos a ver si la maje soca, si aguanta el ácido y no se gasea antes de tiempo porque en cuanto mire la nave que cargo no se va a aguantar las ganas” (3). Again, the distinction between the haves and the have-nots in relation to motorized transportation dictates the social hierarchies of the novel, following through with the protagonist’s assertion in *El asco*. The *asco* felt by Edgardo in Castellano Moya’s work is further evoked when Rana leaves the bar with La Guajira and they step into a Toyota Tercel, “color verde botella, el mismo que usaba la señora para hacer sus mandados” (8). Though belonging to a rich family that only drives a German import, the Toyota is Rana’s work car that is used to go from shop to shop as the lady of the house engages in local capitalism, permitted by the Japanese model that is metonymic of the mindlessly consumerist middle class that is vilified in *Baile con serpientes*.

The connection made between the Toyota and neoliberalism is further affirmed by Rana as he opens the passenger door for La Guajira when he comments: “¡Pase la reina de Estados Unidos!” (8). The automobile permits them to imagine an existence away from the chaos of the Nicaraguan capital as they make their way to another bar: “al llegar a la rotonda y ver que la fuente, como cosa rara, estaba encendida, no pudo evitar el ¡qué bonita que es! [...] pareciera que estamos en Estados Unidos” (9). Aside from providing a means of transportation through the city, the Toyota allows for a metaphorical move away from the nation following the influences of economic imperialism that has as its center the powerful North. The Toyota allows the characters to develop a true spatial imagination of not being in the global South, as its slick design and solid build evoke a belonging to the industrialized global North, which is not necessarily the United States but an amalgamation of the first world. Such an

imagination is in part permitted by neoliberal policies, which, as result, allows a Japanese model to represent modernity. Contradictorily, however, any possibility of social mobility is only imagined in another space, that is, within the celluloid streets of the United States, as the neoliberal market only exacerbates conditions of inequality.

The Toyota, furthermore, improves Rana’s standing in the eyes of La Guajira’s henchmen who lie in wait to rob the unsuspecting prey. They and La Guajira form a band of urban miscreants who blatantly seduce and then rob men in the underprivileged areas of Managua. Their actions go unperceived by the police, since they target the poor, thereby fomenting the cannibalistic impressions of the postwar Central American city that we see in other narratives. The head of the group, Perrarenca, drives an old taxi that doubles as their escape car. Unlike the Toyota, BMW, and Volkswagen that play representative roles in *Managua salsa city* and *Baile con serpientes*, the band traverses the spaces of urban decay in an old Russian Lada. The automobile is one of the few vestiges of the USSR in the region and gained popularity in the 1970s as the Soviet Union attempted to earn foreign currency through exports. The presence of the Lada suggests two important qualifiers to the term “neoliberal noir.” On the one hand, the Lada in *Managua salsa city* underlines the historicity of all politico-economic models, as the obsolete vestiges of the past share lanes with modern metonymies of neoliberalism. On the other hand, the Russian model emphasizes the controversial and convoluted pathways that lead to the status quo, as the Lada is evocative of the US blockade against the Sandinista government. The car, therefore, exists as a textual device that stresses the triangle between discourse, economics, and society around which neoliberal noir is erected.

The Lada’s history in Latin America dates to the first years of the company’s existence with exports to Costa Rica and Ecuador, which soon tapered off with the inability of the Soviets to keep production levels viable.

The usage of the brand in *Managua salsa city* is not fortuitous, as Galich reminds us of a political past that was created in part by the fear of Soviet influence in the Western hemisphere. The United States, as outlined earlier, embarked on a politics of intervention that supported right-wing governments, juntas, and guerrilla forces that were favorable to the spread of capitalism in the face of an impending communist revolution throughout Latin America. By situating La Guajira's band of criminals in the Lada, the narrative juxtaposes competing systems of production and economies of consumption that reenact a historic affront that concludes with the victory of neoliberal policies in Nicaragua, even with the political victories of the Sandinistas.

The Lada and Perrarenca's men are intimately connected in their characterization, as just as the car needs gasoline, they need more alcohol to keep them fueled in the chase of Rana's Tercel through the streets of the capital. During a break in the car chase through the city, they chastise La Guajira for not completing the plan and demand "gasolina, del carro y de [ellos]" (42). They are further linked by the name given to the Lada, Perromochó, as it becomes another member of the gang, but is unable to catch the Toyota as it "estaba bastante viejito, bien bacanaleado" (21).

The Toyota and its occupants, for their part, continue on a high-speed joyride through the rotting streets that serve as background to poverty, drugs, and crime. Just as how the Lada becomes intrinsically connected to Perrarenca, the Tercel is organically intermixed with Rana's subjectivity within the text when he decides to execute a series of high-risk maneuvers that are choreographed to the increasing desire he feels for La Guajira, reflective of Sarah Redshaw's assertion that automobiles are

driven in ways that express the particularity of both the car and the driver. Car cultures intersect with driving cultures within car networks that includes how cars are embedded in socialization. (1)

Keeping this thesis in mind, we can hypothesize that the car holds an erotic value within socialization, which accentuates its phallic prowess in terms of speed and aesthetics, enabling the public assertion of an internal libidinal drive. The narrative goes into technical detail describing the maneuvers performed by Rana:

mediante un leve giro del timón hidráulico inicia la vuelta, las llantas rechinan, el motor bufa de la compresión [...] la máquina revoluciona rápido, compresiona al máximo, reduciendo la velocidad, la inercia lo lleva, las llantas chillan, el carro se la-dea e inmediatamente se desliza sobre el asfalto, amenazando con salirse de la cinta asfáltica, pero responde bien. Al iniciar el giro prácticamente en noventa grados y completar la vuelta, manipula rápidamente, mete el closh, toca levemente el pedal de la gasolina, lo suficiente para no deja que los pistones dejen de trabajar a causa de la compresión, vuelve a closhar, mete primera y acelera a fondo. (19-20)

The result is a frightened Guajira who falls into Rana's lap, "quien ni corto ni perezoso, después de efectuar los cambios con la sincronización de un experto, le metió la mano entre las piernas" (20). In a later moment of intimacy

él sintió el calorcito y la descarga eléctrica no se hizo esperar. Aceleró y enrumbó por el bulevard que conduce a la embajada de los Estados Unidos, pasó a toda velocidad, ciento veinte por hora. El carro respondía. (52)

Keeping these examples in mind, we can see how Galich critically intertwines Rana and the Toyota, postwar Robocop and neoliberal automobile, triangulating them with the source of neoliberalism from abroad, that is, the foreign embassy as a tangible spatial marker. Quite fittingly, then, Rana's dexterity with the automobile translates into

the impression that Rana is “un hombre que estaba acostumbrado a hacer lo que quería” (20), evocative on the other hand of the status the Toyota permits within an economy of capitalism.

With the Lada in pursuit, Rana and La Guajira make it to the mansion of his employers in the outskirts of the city, but pick up on the way another pair of street criminals who spy La Guajira and the potential bounties of her body. The two criminals are returnees from the United States and speak a mangled brand of Spanglish that mixes Nicaraguan slang with anglicized expressions picked up from the streets of Miami. They follow the Tercel on its way to the mansion, surprised at the speed of the Toyota but asserting that their nameless vehicle is just as fast. The omission of a make here signals a non-belonging of the pair to the social milieu of *Managua salsa city*, as expatriates who come to post-war Nicaragua as part of the free market to prey on whatever they can get their hands on, which in this case is La Guajira. They are not guided by the promises of wealth or the allure of a middle class car as they have already lived in the United States and have seen firsthand what capitalism is. Their car, therefore, is not indicative of a social class or economic system, but instead runs through the arteries of the city as an incarnation of a neoliberal identity in its unadulterated form.

With two groups of scoundrels behind them, Rana and La Guajira enter the affluent compound of the Towsand family and proceed inside to finish what they started in their earlier game of seduction. Their affair, however, is truncated by the two bands of intruders who engage in a free-for-all gunfight that strongly resembles the chaos of civil conflict in Nicaragua, albeit in an urbanized, domestic setting. With casualties amongst all groups, La Guajira is taken by one of the Miami “latin lover[s]” (61), Cara de Ratón, who wastes no time in leaving the scene of the crime with his prize in hand. His personal philosophy hints at the legacies lived by those men displaced by war in Central America: “hay que estar con el que

tiene el poder [...] y cuando no se sabe quién lo tiene, uno se espera para ver, pa mientras, hay que saber aprovechar toda las situaciones” (80), and his vehicle as he flees, “un carrito diesel, viejito, pero bueno” (91), is indicative of Galich’s lack of faith in a system directed by neoliberal physics, as the text gestures towards a different critique that is not tied down by notions of cultural and economic heterogeneity.

The deviance from the poetics of the automobile that characterizes *Baile con serpientes*, *Managua salsa city*, and other works by Rey Rosa and Echeverría is continued in the sequel, *Y te diré quién eres*, where a miraculously resuscitated Rana drives around a nameless “carro” (47) in search of his lost love. By moving away from a poetics of designation and characterization vis-à-vis the automobile, which by definition sheds light on the characters of the diegesis within an economy created and perpetuated by neoliberal policies, Galich changes the focus of his critique to a broader context of cultural imperialism, focusing on the ramifications of music as a means of entering foreign markets. The author does, however, continue a pattern followed by Castellanos Moya and Menjívar Ochoa of narrating within a self-populated universe in *Y te diré quién eres*, an exercise that is cut short as Galich dies shortly after the publication of the novel in 2007.

Returning, however, to *Managua salsa city*, it is telling that the usage of the car as a social marker and as a narrative aide in characterization follows a broader trend of fixating on the commercial as part of an examination of the role of neoliberalism in contemporary Central America. Whether as a strong social critique, as is the case of the Toyotas and Nissans that go from mall to mall in *Baile con serpientes* and Galich’s *Managua*, or the Mercedes and BMWs that escape the minutiae of capitalist everyday life, the automobile poses a central structure in creating a prose that provides a litmus to a society that has lost its bearings in the wake of military, economic, and political wars. The preponderance of a narrative focus on the car

accentuates the changing urban landscapes that Central American writers must contend with in detailing their noir sensibilities. The fast imports and German symbols of political and economic stature speed the reader through the metonymic streets of Castellanos Moya and Galich without necessarily stopping and pausing, thereby assimilating the morphosyntactic changes evidenced in the neoliberal age. It is only through the ramshackled Chevy and the once-ubiquitous Beetle can the narrative return to the pace of the *flâneur*, albeit in a modernized and more aerodynamic fashion, allowing the reader to examine how nodal economies of agglomeration have changed the socio-spatial structure of the city. The mechanics of speed, however, are reflective of the globalized pace of culture and civilization, as once disjointed spaces are now brought together in the spirit of open markets. The specific cars and their brands, on the other hand, address Maxwell's preoccupation with the symbolic capital of the automobile. Cars in these texts are not limited to a laundry list of brands that explicitly enumerate the influence of the North in Latin American societies, as seen in the opening sentences of José Emilio Pacheco's seminal *Las batallas en el desierto* (1981); the car in contemporary Central American narratives piques our curiosity as its aesthetics, history, marketing, and market-share all contribute to an epistemological skeleton of how writers such as Castellanos Moya, Galich, Rey Rosa and Echeverría, amongst others, address and dialogue with the sociocultural matrices of disenchantment that subsist in post-civil war societies.

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