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Trans-Urban Narratives: Literary Cartographies and Global Cities in the Urban  
Imagination of Mexico and the U.S.

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines how narratives from Mexican and Mexican-American writers interconnect urban landscapes and cultures in the transnational context of the twenty-first century. This study focuses on what I call “trans-urban narratives,” a method of literary analysis by comparing the urban environment of Mexico City with three global centers in the U.S.: Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. In these narratives, Mexican writers (Valeria Luiselli and Juan Villoro) and Mexican-American writers (Sandra Cisneros and Alejandro Morales) portray the transitional experience of their protagonists within two global cities, two urban realities located in opposite sides of the U.S./Mexico border. They create bi-national and hemispheric connections through the juxtaposition of urban landscapes from both countries. While in the twentieth century urban narratives focus mainly in one specific urban environment, my project argues that in the twenty-first

century the Mexican and Mexican-American literary productions are building transnational spaces within the city that allow the cross-border communication of their cultures.

In Chapter One, I examine the intersection, interconnection and fusion of Mexico City and Chicago in post-national narratives. I analyze the short story “Chicago” (2008) by Juan Villoro, focusing on how the main character –a Mexican taxi driver who has lived in the United States– produces a mental map by overlapping the geographies of Mexico City and Chicago. I argue that this alternative cartography draws a new geopolitical space that eliminates cultural boundaries.

In Chapter Two, I continue the social, political and cultural exploration of Chicago and Mexico City but through the analysis of *Caramelo* (2002) by Sandra Cisneros. In this chapter, I argue that the multiple trips between Chicago and Mexico City portrayed in the novel reveal a historical migratory route between these two cities that dislocates the hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South.

In Chapter Three, by analyzing Mexican-American writer Alejandro Morales’s novel, *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), I introduce the intrinsic mechanisms of spatial decolonization that allow to heal processes of segregation, aberrant social practices, and technological oppression in colonial Mexico City, postmodern Los Angeles, and the dystopian LAMEX.

In Chapter Four, I analyze the material and immaterial connections between Mexico City and New York. In Valeria Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* (2011), I explore the ghostly, almost ethereal nature (*ingravidéz*) of her protagonists –a young woman living in Mexico City, and the Mexican poet Gilberto Owen in New York. I argue that these

characters or urban ghosts represent transitional subjectivities that flow between temporal, spatial and gender contexts: from past memories to present situations; from the overwhelming streets of New York to the secluded space of a house in Mexico City; from a female voice to a male narrative.

The dissertation of Alejandro Ramírez Méndez is approved.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Introductory Vignette: An Old/New City**

The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan<sup>1</sup> (*Mapa de Nuremberg*, 1524) is, perhaps, one of the oldest pictorial depictions of México-Tenochtitlan after the arrival of the Spanish conquerors. In the middle of the image, there is a square that represents the core of the ancient settlement, a longstanding city. In the square, the discreet outline of Aztec temples displays a rough plan. Miniature huts surround the center in an erratic and inconsistent way like concentric rings without a clear order. Uneven bridges, roads and labels in Latin crisscross the entire drawing: “Templum ubi sacrificant,” “Doms aimalium,” “Ex isto Fluuio Conducut Aquam in Ciuitatem.”<sup>2</sup> Water environs the whole complex, extending to lake shores where one can find more structures and arrangements. All together, the map has the irregular form of a circle that encapsulates the shape of a place that no longer exists, a round plan that encompasses assorted and foreign elements in an exotic location: Aztec shrines, Latin sentences, European iconography. I begin this dissertation with the Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan in mind because almost 500 years ago the local and global influences of its time generated an original, inconsistent, and controversial object that expresses the ambivalent reality of the anonymous artist/cartographer. Is it the work of an indigenous painter or a German cartographer reproducing Hernán Cortés’s accounts of México-Tenochtitlan?<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that this

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<sup>1</sup> The *Mapa de Nuremberg* (1524) and the *Plano de Uppsala* (1555) are the oldest maps of Mexico City. The *Sala Especial de Mapoteca* (SEM) in the *Biblioteca Nacional de México* and the *Mapoteca Germán Parra* preserve copies of the documents because the original maps are in Germany and Sweden.

<sup>2</sup> “Temple where the sacrifices take place,” “House of the Animals,” “From this river they take water to the city”

<sup>3</sup> For further information regarding this topic see: Mundy, Barbara. “Mapping the Aztec Capital: The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, Its Sources and Meanings.” *Imago Mundi*, 50 (1998): 11-33.

is not an accurate depiction of the ancient settlement, it is a peculiar cultural product that portrays the early global interchanges of a place that eventually will become a complex metropolis (first la Nueva España, then Distrito Federal, and today Ciudad de México), the remnants and the remainders of a process of becoming and transforming from a Pre-Columbian/Aztec settlement into a pseudo Spanish/European city.

For many scholars, the sequential periods of historical transitions and the geographical regeneration of the city reveal a destructive drive that lies at the core of urban Mexican culture. In his article “Mexico, City of Paper,” Gonzalo Celorio suggests that these series of sociopolitical catastrophes have shaped the different stages in the evolution of the city, from the pre-Columbian period until our present:

The history of Mexico is the story of its successive destructions. Just as the colonial city overlaid the pre-Columbian city, so did the edifications of Mexican independence supplant those of the viceroyalty, and so did the postrevolucionary capital, which continue to mushroom today, erase the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century city –as though culture were not a business of accumulation so much as of displacement. (Celorio 35)

The Nuremberg Map and Celorio’s ideas show how the destructive drive has always been a part of the process of becoming--destruction, transformation, and construction--that directs the historical development of the city. And, as it was almost 500 years ago, it is still the same conditions in the evolution of urban Mexican culture today in the twenty-first century in communication with the globalized world of its time, exchanging materials and ideas far beyond the confinements of its geography, interconnecting with other cities and exotic topographies on a world scale.

The substantial difference is that in this age of global neoliberalism, as Héctor Calderón suggests in *Narratives of Greater Mexico* (2004), a “worldwide trend of urbanization in the Third World” has reshaped the geography of transnational/bi-national relations between Mexico and the US, intertwining cultural and economic connections far beyond the confinements of national limits. And there is no better place to find and to study this phenomenon than in Mexico City today, a post-industrial/neoliberal landscape in *el valle de Anáhuac* with 20 million inhabitants where the influences of this bi-national relationship are even stronger. As Héctor Calderón has written: “The U.S.-Mexico border, once confined geographically and conceptually to the outer fringes of Mexican identity, has invaded *La Capital*” (Calderón 215). Because the Americanization of Mexican culture after NAFTA has strongly affected the urban dynamics of Mexico City, welcoming “new northern invaders from Asatlán, the Ysla de Californias, and beyond Nova Hispania” (Calderón 2016) whose customs, traditions and businesses have rewired the urban and transnational connections of *el valle de México* creating an urban Mexican and Mexican-American culture that crisscrosses the border, because we “are all valley Mexicans, speaking our valley languages, living out our local Mexican contradictions in private and public ways” (Calderón 216).

This dissertation explores the traces of this urban Mexican culture on both sides of the US-Mexico border through the concept of trans-urban narratives and trans-urbanity, a meta-narrative phenomenon of urban cultural interconnection and relation between major global centers in the Western Hemisphere--Mexico City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City--during the age of late capitalism and global neoliberalism. As in the Nuremberg Map, I want to generate an urban cartography of Mexican and

Mexican-American narratives in the historical context of the last years of the twentieth century and the first decades of the new millennium. Can the sociocultural conditions depicted in Mexican and Mexican-American narratives help to establish affective bridges and reconciliatory experiences in urban landscapes of the Global North and South? Can trans-urban cooperation heal the wounds of a damaging and enclosed nationalism in a transnational/bi-national context? By analyzing the works of Mexican writers –Juan Villoro’s “Chicago” (Chapter One) and Valeria Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* (Chapter Four), and Mexican-American writers –Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* (Chapter Two) and Alejandro Morales’s *The Rag Doll Plagues* (Chapter Three)–, this project will study the influence of trans-urban narratives as a means to understand the migratory flow of cultural products between Mexico City and US cities Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York.

### **Introducing Trans-Urbanity**

The global geography has been changing drastically, as well as the means of cultural and literary representation. In the last decades, authors on both sides of the US-Mexico border –such as Sandra Cisneros, Valeria Luiselli, Alejandro Morales, and Juan Villoro– describe, in their fictions, the transitional experience of their characters within two cities, two urban realities across the US/Mexico border as nodes to explore and reflect the socio-political conditions of neoliberalism and the transnational linkage between cultural horizons in a post-national era. The work of these Mexican and Mexican-American writers exposes that a new socio-spatial reorganization of the cultural and economic imagination of the Western market has allowed the positioning of central

urban areas as “territorial nodes” (Smith and Timberlake) within the new organizational architecture of what Saskia Sasseem calls “the global economic system” (Sasseem 2002). Their narratives portray post-industrial landscapes, contemporary metropolises nourished by the transnational interchanges that promote the mixture and transformation of social and cultural practices in the North and in the South, revealing a hyper-connectivity of material and immaterial objects taking place beyond the limitations of national boundaries (popular music, Mexican comics, spaces of nostalgia, for example). As Henri Lefebvre implies in an age of post-industrial geographies, spaces no longer "contain opacities, bodies and objects," but "sequences, sets of objects, concatenations of bodies” (Lefebvre 1993, 183). The multilevel interaction among urban centers enhances a cross-border communication that creates links within transnational spaces. From the point of view of the humanities, those inter-urban linkages, those safe spaces provide a theoretical background for the transmission of cultural products across borders; the “global urban network” (Parnreiter) opens the possibility of cultural interchanges that expand the symbolic imagination of urban communities, generating semantic constructions that interconnect two or more cities, two or more human/social realities.

Therefore, I call trans-urban narratives or trans-urbanity to the narrative phenomenon of urban cultural interconnection and fusion between Mexico City and major global centers of migration in the US, such as Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. Trans-urban narratives contribute to the study and discussion of the production of transnational culture between Mexico and the US in two major aspects. On the one hand, they represent transitional subjectivities in fiction, not only in the sociopolitical context of crisscrossing the nation-state borders (Mexico-US / US-Mexico) in the age of

neoliberal migratory policies (NAFTA), but also in the internal reality of the individuals who migrate and inhabit major global centers, such as Mexico City, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. On the other hand, it emphasizes the migratory flow of cultural products between these cities, the figurative, hermetic, and critical symbolic meanings that radicalize, deconstruct, and connect the urban dynamics in these close/distant places.

In their *Encyclopedia of Developing Regional Communities with Information and Communication Technology* (2004), Stewart Marshall, Wal Taylor and Xinghuo Yu understand “Trans-urbanity” as the interconnection and “practical relations” of the communal urban experience in the physical world and the reciprocal digital participation of society, the “dematerialization,” in the different web platforms within the extended city (708). However, for the real understanding of the phenomenon in a sociocultural framework, this study has to transcend the mere technological approach, and dig into the sociopolitical context of Aníbal Quijano’s subaltern and hegemonic structures that define urbanity in an age of global interchanges. Therefore, trans-urbanity must express the experience of mutability and connection that exists between different urban experiences in a geopolitical reality, for this study, the North and South of the US-Mexico border. In this sense, the “dematerialization” of the experience of urbanity resides not in the virtual transference through the web, but in the social exchange that occurs between the living conditions of the First and the Third Worlds: the historical conditions of late capitalism.

In order to adapt the concept into a socio-cultural environment, this analysis proposes a relocation of the prefix “trans” from its original meaning into the fields of transnational studies, urban humanities, trans-American studies, and hemispheric studies. “Trans,” then, reveals the connection and exchanges that persist in the inter-

cultural/sociopolitical discourse between two nations (bi-national communication), a series of material and immaterial conditions that transform the cultural, political, and economic practices of both nation-states. My dissertation also engages in conversation with those scholars that have also consistently tried to reveal the conflicting post-national circumstances of inequality persisting in the mechanisms of globalization. Critical (including philosophical, radical, ethnic, and gender) concepts such as Rosa María Rodríguez Magda's (1989) and Enrique Dussel's (1999) "transmodernity" that expose the systemic position that the Third World ("*el tercer mundo*") plays in the modern-world system; or José David Saldívar's "trans-Americanity" (2012) that posits—in accordance with Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein's "americanity" (1992)—the system of expression of subaltern cultures that rebuilt the conceptual physiognomy of America.

By relocating the prefix "trans" into the historical conditions of what Ernest Mandel and Frederic Jameson call late capitalism--while assuming the sociopolitical and inter-cultural conflicts existing between nations converging in the North-South border of the political equator (Teddy Cruz) or Greater Mexico (Héctor Calderón)--this analysis pretends to expose a lack in the studies of the urban experiences in an age of interconnected realities and migratory policies. Is it possible to transfer this same idea to the paradigm of the cities in a post-national era? Can urban centers be interconnected or linked in the age of mass migrations without the influence of nations? Can urban experiences on both sides of the border be similar between pair cities, or are there still radical differences that need to be exposed? Can literature make possible the understanding of trans-urbanity in a cultural, political, and social context?

One of the dilemmas that trans-urbanity tries to solve is the experience of urbanity that not only rests on the physicality or materiality of the space, but also in the socio-political context that transcends the limits of the national borders and reduces distances between urban environments. As Michael Dear and Nicholas Dahmann acknowledge, certain challenges need to be considered when analyzing the social dynamics in contemporary urban settlements: Globalization, the emergence of world centers and global cities as economic nodes where globalizing capitalism settles; Polarization, the growing gap between rich and poor that also affect ethnic, gender, racial and religious differences; and Hybridization, the “fragmentation and reconstruction” of identity and cultural life brought by a migration drive in a global and local level (Dear and Dahmann 70).

The dematerialization of urban experience in our historical moment allows the free flow of meanings across the national borders, a phenomenon of semantic transition that effects and defines the order of the social structure in urban spaces through Globalization, Polarization, and Hybridization. Arts and literature transcend the mere contingency of political frames and embrace the expression of trans-cultural dialogue. If literature, as I am trying to demonstrate in this study, shows how the experience of urbanity departs from a profound disconnection with materiality (space-time paradigms) that sets free the potentiality of an urban imaginary (timeless and symbolic), then urban narratives can surpass the basic exigencies of that isolated urban imaginary and connect it with ethnic and social conditions in different latitudes. Positioned as the place of literary speculation, the fictional work of Juan Villoro (Chapter One), Sandra Cisneros (Chapter Two), Alejandro Morales (Chapter Three), and Valeria Luiselli (Chapter Four) becomes

the space where the expression of sociopolitical and transnational conflicts can be possible. Comparative trans-urban narratives in this study provide a proportionate understanding of different urban experiences through the work of its authors and the voices of its transitional characters. Cities can interrelate with other cities in the complex realm of literary creation. Thus comparative trans-urban narratives not only make possible the contingent connections, such as Mexico City / Chicago-Los Angeles-New York, that help to comprehend the contextual or cultural relations of these cities far beyond the material experience, but also provide a critical assessment of the disproportionate reality between an urban super power and a developing city.

### **Here and There**

Thinking the limits of social, urban and national spatiality in the historical conditions of late capitalism puzzles the limits also of aesthetic representation because “here” and “there” (Mexico City / Chicago-Los Angeles-New York) are intimately defined by worldwide conventions imposed by the nation-state society. Clearly, this study employs Mexico City (“here”) as the theoretical axis around which all the narratives revolve; it is the safe space that interconnects the dissimilar perspectives (gender, social class, nationality) of Mexican (Valeria Luiselli, Juan Villoro) and Mexican-American (Sandra Cisneros, Alejandro Morales) writers in their quest for the literary representation of the American city (Chicago, Los Angeles, New York). To comprehend “here” and “there” as complementary images of the same ideological composite pushes the political boundaries of the means of cultural representation in Western society. The sociopolitical/socioeconomic borders that delimit US and Mexico cannot stop the

fictionalization of spaces where “here” and “there” converge; they cannot restrict the social impulse of cultural and spatial imaginaries crisscrossing the Mexico-US border in the age of globalization. This phenomenon sets in motion the mechanisms of transnational representation; “here” and “there” can now be interconnected beyond the limits of the nation-state paradigm (post-nationalism), making this linkage the evidence of bi-national relations.

### **Mexico City and its Historical Destructive Drive**

One of the inquiries of this dissertation is to understand how fictional narratives on both sides of the US-Mexico border recreate or reconstruct the urban experience of Mexico City. If all the urban narratives that I have chosen for this dissertation employ consistently the urban landscape of Mexico City, what kind of urban experience can be accessible through the eyes of these Mexican and Mexican-American writers?

Mexico City’s nature, as I pinpoint at the beginning of this Introduction, remains captive of the transformational and destructive forces that have allowed stages of transition and renovation. A social drive has propelled definitive actions that have transformed the city, praising on occasions the importance of the national identity, or promoting the insertion of foreign systems. No matter the situation that puts at risk the integrity of the place (political decisions, economic projections, and revolutionary ideals), culture rests as a safety space for the archiving of these significant changes; it is the minimal aspect, the most insignificant trace in the urban landscape which gains importance in the vindicatory action of the cultural endeavor: “And yet the bygone glories of the city of Mexico live on, in the voices of those who sang them with delicate

lyricism [...] In short, the voices that raised up, letter by letter, in the enduring reality of literature. Ours is a city of paper” (Celorio 35).

The diverse cultural manifestations in art, literature, music, and cinema that encompass the heritage of Mexico City’s writers provide a polychromatic and multiethnic photography of its urban life. Literature, in this context, keeps a privileged position, confining “voices” that have been silenced by the displacement or the oblivion. Vicente Quirarte in *Elogio de la Calle* proposes that urban writers of Mexico City have composed a complex “symphony of words” (*sinfonía de palabras*) and texts through the century; the result of this communal action is what he calls an “interior biography of Mexico City” (*una biografía interior de la Ciudad de México*). He suggests that this biographical approach creates a “literary geography” (*geografía literaria*) that allow us to sketch and to draw coordinates which function, at the same time, as a way to move through the physical space of the city, and a way to comprehend and remember the messages and the stories of the urban agents (Quirarte 29).

However, these traces, these textual pieces dispersed in the dislocated continuum of the history of Mexican literature are not fragments of the same unifying text. Mexico City’s narrative is the product of an effort to maintain plurality in the discontinuous action of the memory archive: “Así como no hay una sola Ciudad de México, no existe una escritura de la Ciudad de México sino una pluralidad de maneras de aproximarse para explicar sus símbolos y preservarla de la destrucción, aunque en esa común empresa parezcamos afanarnos los hombres y los elementos” (Quirarte 29).

The action of narrating the urban reality becomes a necessity of living or experiencing the Mexico City phenomenon. Urban literature fills that compulsive desire

of reflecting the dialogue between the socio-political strata and the particular spatial conditions of the urban layout. Since the nineteenth century, it is possible to trace the first manifestations and descriptions of the city landscape in narrative. Fernández de Lizardi's satirical novel *El Periquillo Sarmiento* (1821) or Ramón López Velarde's short story "La novela del tranvía" depict a multifaceted portrait of the life and practices of the growing Mexico City during the first decades of independence. Furthermore, López Velarde's works, as well as the contributions of Amado Nervo and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, permeate the first indicators of an understanding of the urban dimension and the conflict immerse in the sudden sprawling of the urban fabric before the end of the century.

In the early twentieth century, the grotesque and realistic account of Ángel de Campo's book, *La Rumba* (1890), places the "barrios bravos" into the scope of a new geographical rhetoric that reformulates the psychological dimension of the characters and the potential dangers lurking in its social space. On the other hand, Martín Luis Guzmán, Mariano Azuela, and Agustín Yáñez shape the foundations of an urban narrative that promotes the dialogue between the urban splendor of the post-Porfiriato and the aesthetics of the *Literatura de la Revolución*.

Certainly, *Los días enmascarados* (1954) and *La región más transparente* (1958) represent a turning point in the new urban literature. These influential books of Carlos Fuentes define a complete break with the *Literatura de la Revolución*, while they inaugurate a new concept of urbanity that embraces at one the historical dimension and the cultural myths, the economic and political scenario of Mexico City during the 1950s, and the dystopian panorama product of the social dilemma of inequality and the prejudices of classism (*clasismo*). Clearly, Fuentes's narratives influenced the aesthetic

production during the next decades, facilitating a revitalization of the concept of urban narratives and opening new ways of depicting the city.

From that moment until the end of the 1980s, different groups –such as *La Literatura de la Onda* or *La Literario del Barrio*–, as well as writers –such as Vicente Leñero, José Revueltas, José Ibarguengoitia, and Fernando del Paso– promoted a diversification of topics that enriched and enhanced the importance of urban literature. However, from the point of view of literary criticism, the picture is incomplete. The last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have brought transitional moments that can redefine our understanding of the urban phenomenon. Where is the literature of women? Where are the contributions of contemporary writers in the borders of our country? Where are the new perspectives of Mexican-American authors? One of the objectives of this project is to complete this cartography of the urban narratives in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the new millennium.

### **The American City: Chicago, Los Angeles, New York**

But to go beyond the mere limits of the nation-state composite, fiction has to overtake the sociopolitical/socioeconomic restrictions that force the human migration into a state of global anxiety. The transnational continuum that represents the fictional space of “here” and “there” (Mexico City / Chicago-Los Angeles-New York) cannot be envisioned if the writer and the reader cannot understand that this hypothetical space is the result of migratory experiences of the characters (transmigrants). Only in the realization of this cultural situation, only in the understanding of the constant migratory

flow between developing nations (Mexico) and super powers (US) the anxiety produced by the reinforcement of the international boundaries can be surpassed, and a real inspection of the social problems can lead to a better representation of it.

Thus a real re-understanding of margins and limits of social spaces in the age of late capitalism leads to a reevaluation of national and transnational representations as the epiphenomenon of global historical transformations; the historical transition from the economic expansion of the postwar period into the deregulation policies of neoliberalism opens a whole new area of analysis in regard to political and international boundaries, where transnational communities are re-organizing the margins and limits of social space.

This study involves a discussion around the representation of the American city (“there”) in literature, a depiction that is biased by the perspective of Mexican and Mexican-American writers whose voices involve the reader into a particular position within the materiality, dynamic and migratory influx of complex global cities: Chicago (Cisneros and Villoro), Los Angeles (Morales), and New York (Luiselli). In addition, this dissertation also engages in a dialogue with the intellectual legacy of American Urbanism, the work of Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, Kevin Lynch, Mike Davis, Edward Soja, Janet Abu-Lughod, and David Halle, as well as with the theoretical premises of the diverse schools of urban sociology, the Chicago School, L.A. School, and New York School, whose goals provide an insight to a metatheory of the American city. Comprehending how other disciplines such sociology and urbanism analyze the urban phenomenon in these global centers (Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York) is vital for the development and understanding of trans-urbanity in this dissertation.

For scholars such as Janet Abu-Lughod, David Halle, Michael Dear, Dennis Judd

and some of their colleagues in sociology and urbanism, there is a mission to provide a suitable comparative analysis of the processes of urban change happening in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York, while studying the evolution of urban theory and the American city in the twentieth century. In 1999, Janet Abu-Lughod with her text *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities* introduced one of the first comparative studies of these “three urbanized regions” through a detailed and historical account of the physical development of the three largest global cities of the United States (Abu-Lughod 1999). Despite their differences, Abu-Lughod reveals that the urbanized regions of these three metropolises are connected by “a changing geography of power” that is shaped by the “larger system” of the global market (Abu-Lughod 405).

The parallelism among the uniqueness of every urban region maintain them together, because “radical uniqueness” in an age of global interchanges, as Robert Beauregard implies, is a case of complete “theoretical conceit.” To label a city totally unique is to infer that the place is self-sufficient, and that has nothing in common with any other urban category, an enclave isolated within a larger organization, an “autarkic city” (Beauregard 186). In the end, the production of a metatheory of the city has been the dream of intellectual groups in the Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York Schools that had tried to disclose a satisfactory solution to the evolution of urban landscapes and local dynamics in a comparative scale. Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York become the objects of a profound conceptual exploration of the modes of organization of the social space in the twentieth century.

In *The City, Revisited* (2011), Dennis Judd's essay departs from the shadows left by the sociological ideas of the “Chicago School” as a means to comprehend the

evolution per se of the study of American cities today through the Concentric zone model. What Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Roderick MacKenzie achieved at the beginning of the twentieth century in their book *The City* (1925) was the configuration of a practical and applicable language that allowed scholars to interpret and decode “cities as constantly evolving organisms subject to the process of growth and decay, interdependence, competition and cooperation, health and disease” (Judd 3). The organic, almost biological view of the Chicago School grounded the phenomenon of the city into an endless discussion around the evolving character of human settlements in the twentieth century. Envisioned as a concentric circle and zones, Chicago became the model for the understanding of urban patterns and distinct human ecologies. From this point, different perspectives have tried to comprehend the legacy of these pioneer scholars.

The Los Angeles School, perhaps the stronger reaction to the Chicago School, deals with the representation of geographic postmodern landscapes and “sprawled urban agglomerations” without a center in an age of transnational interchanges. In contrast with the modernist approach of the Chicago School, the Los Angeles School formulates an account of a postmodern urbanism that recognized a considerable change in the geography of the city that no longer rests in its dense city life core, but in the dispersion of amenities and housing in the periphery. The groundbreaking work of Michael Dear (*Rethinking Los Angeles, From Chicago to L.A.*), Mike Davis (*City of Quartz, Ecology of Fear*), and Ed Soja (*Postmodern Geographies, Postmetropolis*) revolve around not only the sociocultural production of meanings in the suburban area of Greater Los Angeles (the edge city), but also the great disparities embedded in the American urban system. As Judd suggests, “What does Los Angeles reveal about the future? That the stark

inequalities of the Third World are being exported, and that these are written on urban landscapes in a patchwork of prosperity and despair” (Judd 8).

In *New York and Los Angeles* (2003), Halle theorizes an emergent school of thinking built around the intellectual approaches of Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961), Kenneth Jackson (*Crabgrass Frontier*, 1985), Sharon Sugin (*Loft Living*, 1982). Instead of embracing the decentralization and fragmentation drive that typifies the Los Angeles School, the New York School is characterized by a “strong interest in the central city,” in particular Manhattan; and by a dense city life that praises coexistence in the central city, rather than in suburbia (Halle and Beveridge 139).

The exploration of each school is unique, and their search for an “all-encompassing theory of the city” is tantalizing (Judd 17), but how different are these urban spaces represented through the scope of Mexican and Mexican-American eyes? How different these urban landscapes appear through the perspective of people who have migrated and who have experienced first-hand this geography? How different is the literary reality of these spaces?

## **Chapters Layout**

I begin this dissertation with Chapter One, “Trans-Urban Intersectionality: Mexico City/Chicago,” in which I examine the narrative phenomenon of trans-urban cultural intersection, interconnection and fusion between Mexico City and Chicago, that I call trans-urbanity. The purpose of this chapter is to understand why the intersection between Chicago and Mexico City detonates a series of socio-political/socio-cultural questions in the narrative of Mexican writer Juan Villoro. In his short story “Chicago,”

Villoro's main character –a Mexican taxi driver who has lived in the United States– describes to his client the geography of Chicago by employing some landmarks of Mexico City as points of reference; by overlapping two different, and yet similar, geopolitical spaces, the taxi driver generates a mental image of his own experience of the city that pretends to be clear and approachable to his client.

In order to understand the significance of two urban experiences embedded in the story, I analyze early examples of this phenomenon in Villoro's narrative: such as the novel *Llamadas de Ámsterdam* (2003) that tells the tragic story of a young couple (Juan Jesús and Nuria) who after a failed attempt to live in Amsterdam, Netherlands, they decide to separate, just to find each other years later in Ámsterdam street in Mexico City; or the essays "El libro negro" (2005) and "Mi padre, el cartaginés" (2010), in which through the memories of his father Luis Villoro, son Juan finds a way to describe the acculturation of Mexico City to the ideological standardization of American culture and the early post-industrial globalization.

In Chapter Two, "Way Back Home: Mexico City/Chicago," I continue the socio-political/socio-cultural exploration of Chicago and Mexico City but through the analysis of Mexican-American writer Sandra Cisneros. This chapter pretends to comprehend why the peculiar cartography that she presents in her literature reveals a geopolitical reorganization of global coordinates (North-South/South-North) that challenges conventional paradigms, while presenting a point of dialogue between the cultural and social conditions in Mexico and the US. Born and raised in Chicago, Cisneros spends most of her childhood traveling between these two urban spaces, due to her father's family. By studying her second novel, *Caramelo* (2002), I pretend to express how the trip

that Celaya's (Lala) family makes every summer from Chicago to Mexico City symbolizes not only the other direction that takes this migratory flux between these two cities from North to South, but also the trans-urban mobility of the cultural and social migration between Mexico and the US.

But, to deeply understand the origins of this transnational understanding of urbanity in Cisneros, I am going to study one of her father's hobbies: *La Familia Burrón*. *La Familia Burrón*, as well as other comics and magazines like *El libro vaquero* or *ESTO*, is a Mexican comic that portrays the stereotypical and archetypal barrio family with its unique popular Mexican humor. This urban graphic culture, which was constantly read by Mexican immigrants in the US, will inspire her writing, providing important insights of the dynamics of lower class neighborhoods in Mexico City, while helping to create the fictional environment of family household in her books.

In Chapter Three of this dissertation, "Blood and Deconstruction: Mexico City/Los Angeles," I focus on the space of representation in the trans-urban narrative of Mexican-American writer Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), and how it is shaped by the material and immaterial connections between Los Angeles and Mexico City. *The Rag Doll Plagues* portrays a fictional space in which the social practices and the diseases of Mexico City in the eighteenth century, and the technological advantages of Los Angeles in the twenty-first century, intertwine in a cultural dystopia called LAMEX (Los Angeles/Mexico City). The purpose of this chapter is to understand how the mixed-urban landscape not only provides a fictional situation in which the flux of cultural practices, knowledge, people and even diseases communicates –through space and time– between these two major cities; but also the process of healing the cultural

identity of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans on both sides of the US-Mexico border. By employing the urban perspective of the L.A. School (Mike Davis, Ed Soja), cultural studies (Carlos Monsiváis, Achille Mbembe) and decolonial studies (María Lugones, Emma Pérez), this chapter reconsiders most of the fears and problems that carry NAFTA (1994) into the urban landscape, and will generate a thorough understanding of the affective links and the body practices (biopolitics and necropolitics) between the cultural traditions of the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

In Chapter Four of this dissertation, “Trans-Urban Ghosts,” I analyze the space of representation in the trans-urban narrative of Valeria Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* (2011), and how it is shaped by the material and immaterial connections between Mexico City and New York. The purpose of this chapter is to understand how Luiselli’s writing depicts the unstable and ghostly nature (*ingravidéz*) of the characters whose lives and actions transition (trans-urban/translocal subjectivity) from one reality into another (past/present, outdoor/indoor, male/female, New York/ Mexico City). In *Los ingravidos*, her first novel, the transcendence writing in a bi-national/trans-urban context becomes essential for the two protagonists in the book: a young woman living in Mexico City, and the Mexican poet Gilberto Owen in New York. Living in a little apartment in Mexico City, the young protagonist begins to sketch a novel that recounts her early life as an editor in New York, where she was obsessed by the marginal figure of Gilberto Owen. Isolated in her apartment, she uses her writing as a way to escape from her present (married and with two children), while drawing an intimate image of her memories in Manhattan. Confronted as in a mirror, the dialectical position of the Luiselli’s female protagonist and Owen open binary spaces in the narrative that are codependent; the

cohabitation of instances such as male and female discourse, present and past, Mexico City and New York, reality and fiction, provides a totality to the writing phenomenon of Luiselli's narrative. By employing the theoretical framework of the New York School, I will also explore the writer's fascination with urban ghosts (ethereal essences, urban memories, and *genius loci*) that cohabit her trans-urban landscapes and whose side effects--their influence and importance in the story--reveal the mechanisms behind her poetics of writing.

In sum, these chapters comprise four interconnected visions of literature and urbanity on both sides of the US-Mexico border; four comparative perspectives in which Mexican and Mexican-American writers construct literary relationships between urban landscapes in Mexico (Mexico City) and the US (Chicago Los Angeles and New York). Together, these chapters generate, through the analysis of short stories and novels in Spanish and English, a bi-national/transnational cartography that redefines and reinforces cultural connections between the Mexican and the Mexican-American literary tradition. This cartography has the sole intension to create a theoretical and symmetrical structure that reduces, on the one hand, distances between the cultural representations of Mexican and Mexican-American imaginaries; and provides, on the other, a space of study of the voices of female (Sandra Cisneros and Valeria Luiselli) and male authors (Juan Villoro and Alejandro Morales) that have experienced the radical difference of urbanity in both countries during the age of globalization. Erasing these limits and differences, this dissertation can create a broader understanding of the trans-urban phenomenon in a post-national scenario that enriches the study of hemispheric literature and urban culture in a near future.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Trans-Urban Intersectionality: Mexico City / Chicago**

“[L]a ciudad, le digo, es en verdad muchos cuerpos, todos juntos, unidos y a la vez separados, que no se van a entender nunca.”

Alberto Chimal, “Ciudad imaginada”

#### **Introductory Vignette: A Tale of Two Cities**

A man raises his hand in a cold winter day in Mexico City: he could be you, he could be me, he could be anyone asking for a cab in that city. Suddenly, between the blurring masses of cars in the street, a taxi approaches the man with its skillful movements. While the man sits in the back seat, the driver starts the engine. “*¿A dónde lo llevo joven?*” could be the most predictable way to begin the conversation between them, but this time is different: because it is not about where the man wants to go, but where is going to be taken. Through the rear-mirror, the taxi driver observes his client; with his mouth open, he describes a place that is not in the South of the US/Mexico border, neither in the North, but in the in-between, in the threshold between here and there. He shows the man that the space he inhabits –and that he thinks he knows– is less Mexico City, and more Chicago that he can imagine. Outside the window, the landscape (the buildings, the street, and the people) seems distorted; he can now clearly see that he is no longer in Mexico, neither in the US. Then the driver holds the steering wheel and drives through the lonely roads of Chicago, Distrito Federal.

In his short story “Chicago,” Mexican writer Juan Villoro explores a unique form of comparing two urban experiences on both sides of the Mexico-US border in the age of

late capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Villoro's main character –a Mexican taxi driver who has lived in the United States– describes to his client the geography of Chicago by employing some landmarks of Mexico City as points of reference. By overlapping two different, and yet similar, geopolitical spaces, the taxi driver generates a mental image of his own experience of the city that pretends to be clear and approachable to his client: “¿Cómo le digo?–insistió, sumido en cavilaciones–. Mire, a ver si me agarra la onda. Chicago es más o menos del vuelo del DF” (Villoro 2014). The narrative presents gradually to the reader a blended and merged image of Chicago and Mexico City. Employing literary resources and spatial transpositions, a complex fictional cartography in which two urban landscapes separated by cultural and geographical distances collide: “Haga de cuenta que está en el Estadio Azteca. ¡Qué América ni qué nada! ¡Es la cancha de los Osos! Desde el estadio se puede ir hasta Chapultepec en un tren de poca madre. Sólo que en Chapultepec no hay bosque sino unos lagos tan grandes que no se ve la otra orilla” (*Idem*). Chicago and Mexico City coincide within the words of this fictional monologue, erasing political boundaries, producing sociocultural intersections that can only be expressed through the experience of art and literature.

In *Elogio de la Calle* (1992), Vicente Quirarte acknowledges that the limited space that constitutes the interior of a taxicab in Mexico City provides the special conditions for the most fanciful and bizarre dialogues between the taxi driver and his client: “El desempleo y los escasos salarios de los docentes conducen a que la música del

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<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I will employ Ernest Mandel's and Fredric Jameson's notion of late capitalism. Mandel's approach, in the mid 70s, proposed a critical neo-Marxist view of the historical development of the capitalist modes of production, which derived not in the historical evolution of the classic Marxist dialectics, but in the understanding of radical circumstances that exploded in the global market after the Second World War. On the other hand, Jameson's ideas reverberate as an analysis of Mandel's neo-Marxist portrait of the global industrialization; for him, the strategic movement of the transnational corporations reveals the logic of late capitalism which find new means of affecting the modes of cultural production

taxi sea clásica y que a bordo de ellos pueda desarrollarse una discusión con todas las leyes de la dialéctica” (Quirarte 621). Villoro himself acknowledges the unusual conditions that favor this dialogical environment when he writes in his tale: “Los taxis son espacios narrativos donde no se necesita otro estímulo que el silencio para que el conductor comience a hablar” (Villoro 2014). But Villoro’s story is far more than a simple dialogue inside a cab. Villoro’s story is a transnational tale of two cities, a short but intimate portrait of a silent but resilient intercultural communication between two urban centers in late capitalism, a movement that transcends political borders in a post-national scenario. The earliest examples in modern literature, such as Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), reveal certain intercultural proximity between homologous realities in a specific historical context without approaching a profound understanding of the transnational conflict between them. Dickens’s narrative places the life of his characters in London and Paris in the years before and after the French Revolution as a means to justify the development of his storytelling; however, the juxtaposition of the plot and the spaces never disclose a real exploration of the modes of cultural proximity or social integration in both urban experiences.

In the age of globalization, the modes of expression complicate the assembly of inter-cities’s relations by providing new nodes of cultural interpretation and communication (Saskia Sassen, Tim Hall). The linkage between places –especially urban centers such as Mexico City and Chicago– has always been determined by instances of power relations and hierarchies that surpass the limits of the national space (Kimberly DeFazio, Manuel Castells, David Smith, Michael Timberlake). There is still a necessity to equate and relate urban spaces as a means to define a certain transnational / trans-

continental relation that justifies the position of Mexico City in a world order. The dialectic of “here” and “there” as a way to define and share urban experiences that transcend not only the national, political, social conditions, but also the limits of space and time (Michael Peter Smith, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo). Indeed Mexican literary tradition is rich in archiving examples of cultural comparison between cities. Early colonial references in the work of Bartolomé de las Casas (1574-1566)<sup>5</sup>, Lorenzo Ugarte de los Ríos<sup>6</sup> and Bernardo de Balbuena (1562-1627)<sup>7</sup>, provide transatlantic inter-dialogues that reveal literary practices in the description of Mexico City / México-Tenochtitlan / La Nueva España with civilized centers of the Western World (Venecia, Roma, Grecia, Cairo, Alejandría). This cultural communication precedes nation-state formations in the age of Early Modernity, sending a clear message against the cultural isolation imposed by the colonizers: the heart of la Nueva España could be as complicated and modern as any other city in the world.

In late capitalism, this rhetorical resource is still active and commonly employed by Mexican intellectuals. Thus, a writer such as Juan Villoro, in his essay “El metro,” can provide a thorough analysis of the urban decadence by criticizing the subways of Moscow and of Mexico City as the “symbols of failed revolutions” (Villoro 2004 130).

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<sup>5</sup> There is a rhetorical formula or commonplace (topoi) in the colonial descriptions of Mexico City that pretended to equate the functionality and wealth of the place with the civilized centers of the Western world. The use of this resource escalated after the publication of the *Segunda Carta de Relación de Hernán Cortés al Emperador Carlos V* (1522) in Spain, and the first accounts of México-Tenochtitlan by Bartolomé de las Casas.

<sup>6</sup> In one of the six sonnets (*elogios al autor*) that introduce the Spanish poet Bernardo de Balbuena’s work *Grandeza Mexicana* (1604), Lorenzo Ugarte de los Ríos –Alguacil Mayor del Santo Oficio– provides (identifies) a list of attributes that epitomizes the structural and essential characteristics of colonial Mexico City; to each attribute corresponds a city that incarnates the moral quality that Ugarte pretends to emphasize: “Sea Venecia en planta, en levantada / arquitectura Grecia, sea segundo / Corinto en joyas, en saber profundo / París, y Roma en religión sagrada. / Sea otro nuevo Cairo en la grandeza. / Curiosa China en trato, en medicina / Alejandría, en fueros Zaragoza” (Balbuena).

<sup>7</sup> Bernardo de Balbuena himself in the *Grandeza Mexicana*’s Second Chapter (“Origen y Grandeza de Edificios”) offers a similar comparison between the colonial city and its European counterparts, presenting a hypothetical fictional genealogy that institutionalizes its ephemeral “grandeza”, and contrasts it with the cities of his time: “Una Roma también parienta suya / y una Venecia libre, y no de engaños” (70).

Or Guillermo Sheridan, in “Monuments,” can censure the proposition of the city government to relocate the Diana Cazadora from its original place in Avenida Reforma as absurd as to move the monument of Nelson in London, or Joan of Arc in Paris (Sheridan 151). These simple cases denote a socioeconomic imagination that plays with stereotypes promoted by cultural and political interchanges in modernity and late capitalism (Ernest Mandel, Fredric Jameson); certainly, they work within a cosmopolitan circle, in which they compare the city with the external progress of other cities –especially those who become the global centers of the world– seems to be positive. However, there is another different degree of narratives that provides a more complex mapping of the cultural and social interchanges between cities: the trans-urban narratives. Furthermore, the mode of expression of these narratives radicalize the form of comparison between one thing and the other, pushing the boundaries of the urban landscapes beyond the mere limits of these hierarchies. This is quite evident in Villoro’s short story, “Chicago,” in which the relation between urban landscapes is not determined by hierarchical organization instances or by position in a geopolitical setup, but by the location of a character that stands in the intersection between two parallel planes, two equivalent spaces.

Therefore, this chapter pretends to comprehend the narrative phenomenon of trans-urban cultural intersection, interconnection and fusion between Mexico City and Chicago, that I call trans-urbanity. The purpose of this chapter is to understand why the intersection between Chicago and Mexico City detonates a series of socio-political / socio-cultural questions in the narrative of writers on both sides of the US/Mexico border, such as Juan Villoro; why the peculiar cartography that he presents with their literature reveals a geopolitical reorganization of global coordinates that challenges conventional

paradigms, while presenting a point of dialogue between them despite the cultural and social distances in their lives.

### **Transposition of Spaces and Meaning-Making**

Mapping Chicago by employing the names and geography of Mexico City plays with an intricate characterization of the conceptual limits of the urban landscape and the ludic devices behind the rhetoric of the urban narratives. How that game of urban transposition or geographical substitution enriches not only the urban experience depicted in literature, but also the socio-political and socio-economic circumstances that are portrayed in the short story “Chicago”?

A semiotic approach to the taxi driver’s account in Villoro’s story reveals that Mexico City becomes the signifier of a discursive experience of urbanity, while Chicago remains the signified of a series of socio-historical / sociopolitical practices of the urban space in a time of decolonial / post-national narratives. Here, the construction of meaning is not articulated from the reciprocal double nature of the linguistic sign that is employed in a Saussurian perspective or from a series of power relations delimiting its nature in a Foucauldian viewpoint. In the taxi driver’s monologue, the original concepts that represent all the places that he experiences while he was living in the US –such as Soldier Field, Lake Michigan, and Magnificent Mile– become dislocated from their original signifiers, and replaced by new substantial names –El Estadio Azteca, Chapultepec, and Reforma.

The production of meaning-making relies on the taxi driver’s subtle desire of making the experience of Chicago approachable to a man living in Mexico City. He who

has migrated to the US (as an undocumented immigrant? a *bracero* worker?) and returned to his city is willing to provide a sensory and spatial knowledge of a place that his client probably ignores. This is not a mere translation of terms between both urban realms, but a transfer of emotions and affects that can only be experienced in the flesh. His unique social and cultural circumstances place him in the middle of both urban experiences, in the threshold of an epistemic riddle that can only be solved, or expressed through an aesthetic approach. This is a phenomenological approximation of the character's consciousness and language mediated by the historical and political instances of his social world. If the apparent non-identity of the sign and the thing –the “freeplay” as Jacques Derrida termed it–allow the unrestricted mobility of the structures in the taxi driver's discourse, it is not because chaos takes control of his ideas, deforming the spatial order that reigns over the urban reality; on the contrary, it is the instauration of an alternative perceptual logic that responds to a new possibility of cultural expression that escapes the semantic limitations of nation-state paradigms. The abstraction of urban spaces or topologies in the taxi driver's discourse reacts to the modes of cultural expression of globalization in which the solid meaning of the things exponentially decreases in relation to the social world that the characters experience. The instability of the sign rests in the fluid nature of a cultural and social world manufactured in global interchanges that fracture the permanence of meanings.

Thus, the taxi driver's discourse is far more complex than a simple game of words substitution; it is an instance of transcultural transposition that reacts to sociopolitical / socio-historical practices, an intersection of cultural meanings that reduce distances between the one and the other (topological interconnected planes). The taxi driver not

only replaces and substitutes names and places between both cities, a phenomenon that I call *homotopies*; he shows the way of perceiving the urban reality in which the transcultural and mixed contexts provide new objects of cultural experience. In the core of these places, there lies a mutual cultural and social context that gives every landmark or area its particular meaning and importance, allowing the production of a hybrid cartography, an homotopy: two experiences embedded in one image. The taxi driver plays with this singularity: the concealed knowledge of experiencing in first hand those places; as a meaning-maker or meaning-matching, he pairs both geographical circumstances despite its cultural distance: “Si usted agarra de ahí hacia el Zócalo pasa por un chingo de pizzerías de italianos. En la plaza de Santo Domingo hay una sinagoga y unos carritos que echan humo y huelen resabroso. El primer día pensé: “tortas, qué a toda madre.” Niguas. Te venden unas roscas de harina, ¡más duras las hijas de la chingada! Si sigues hacia el Zócalo y vas caminando y es invierno, ¡ya te congelaste! Hay que ir en metro. Los túneles atraviesan toda la ciudad. Una vez caminé como de la Roma a la Buenos Aires, así bajo tierra, bien padrote” (Villoro 2014).

When a place is compared with other, such as the Chicago’s Downtown and Mexico City’s Zócalo, the meaning, the experience and the importance of the space reacts against the word production and the language. The signifier is then employed as a way to embrace the meaning of the signified, to make it more approachable to the imagination of the speaker. But this is not enough for the real understanding of the cultural mechanisms employed by Villoro in his short story. There is more complexity than a simple game of meaning-making.

In an age of post-national excitement, cities communicate with other cities in the realm of informational exchanges; organized around “networks,” the “growing network of global cities” (Sassen 2002 2) or “world cities” (Friedmann 1995) reveals a hyper-connectivity of material and immaterial objects taking place beyond the limitations of national boundaries. As Henri Lefebvre implies, in an age of post-industrial geographies spaces no longer "contain opacities, bodies and objects," but "sequences, sets of objects, concatenations of bodies” (Lefebvre 183). As I have explained in the Introduction of this dissertation, the multilevel interaction among urban centers (in this case, at the South/North of the US-Mexico border) enhances a cross-border communication that creates links within transnational spaces that, as Thomas Faist suggests, help sometimes to “the adaptation of immigrants and refugees in the receiving nation-states” (Faist 2014). From the point of view of humanities, those inter-urban linkages, those safe spaces provide a theoretical background for the transmission of cultural product across borders.

Juan Villoro’s short story of the playful way in which a taxi driver describes Chicago and Mexico City portrays the fundamentals of what I call trans-urban narratives: an experience of urbanity that not only rests on the physicality or materiality of the space (geographical description), but on the socio-political context that transcend the limits of national borders and reduce distances between urban environments (sociocultural analysis). By contributing to the study and discussion around the production of transnational culture between Mexico and the US, trans-urban narratives represent transitional subjectivities in fiction (such as the taxi driver), not only in the sociopolitical context of crisscrossing the nation-state borders (Mexico-US / US-Mexico) in the age of neoliberal migratory policies, but also in the internal reality of the individuals who

inhabit major global centers, such as Mexico City and Chicago. What the taxi driver perceives, and what he can show about these centers deconstructs and radicalizes our understanding of the urban in these close/distant places: how urban centers interconnect in a post-national era (Ellie Hernández); how literature can make possible the understanding of these trans-urban linkages

### **Jameson, Villoro and the Limits of Mental Maps**

The fusion of images and meanings reconfigures the notion of limits, changing in it the semantic categories of the urban signs as well as the political implications behind the comparison between an American and a Latin American city, a metropolis in the Global North and in the Global South. Transforming the geography of the cities, the urban distances are reshaped, and the form is deconstructed (two urban experiences embedded in one image). This is not an exact map; the taxi driver is not willing to create an accurate cartography of Chicago, or to put in question his own knowledge of Mexico City. This hybrid image, this mental map (Kevin Lynch), is the product of the scratches of memories from Chicago transmuted through the everyday life experiences of Mexico City. The limits of this mental map is what seems really interesting for the understanding of these type of urban narratives; in the interstice of meaning that remain hidden in literature, in the arabesque architecture of this mental cartography, there lies a whole understanding of the socio-political / socio-cultural context of the urban experience projected in modes of representation of the work of art.

Fredric Jameson's re-appropriation of Kevin Lynch's *cognitive mapping* departs from the conviction that the modes of representation in the global systems are reframing

our skill to visualize and recall the spaces we inhabit. In *The Image of the City* (1960), Lynch exhorts the use of mental maps as a means to position the subjective perspective of the individuals in their surroundings; the sketches or personal maps, generated from memory, bring to light the particular and subjective location of the geographical world in the social imagination, making evident the human and social factor in the interpretation of the cityscape (Lynch). Jameson questions Lynch's assumption that a city that people can hardly map is an alienated and hostile city. For Jameson, the geographical disposition of the urban landscape (the streets, the landmarks, the public space) does not affect the construction of memories or recollections of that particular perceived space:

“Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place, and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the mobile, alternative trajectories” (Jameson 229). A whole transformation in the modes of cultural production in late capitalism confronts our perception of the city against the “world space of multinational capital.” The result is a dystopian assemblage in which public and private spaces of the metropolis collide against the transnational and global phantasmagoria of a distorted reality; in this scenario, the subject feels lost and incapable of determining its own location in the machinery of this urban / global montage.

Therefore, as a way to counteract this representational predicament, Jameson encourages the formation of an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping,” which pretends to educate--in a “pedagogical political culture”--the individual about its “place in the global system” (Jameson 232).

The taxi driver's map, as well as other cases of urban narratives (such as Mexican-American writer Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*), falls between these discontinuous modes of spatial representation of the cognitive mapping, an aesthetic projection of the transnational interstices between Mexico City and Chicago translated through the subjective language of the individuals. The taxi driver's language places us not only in the limits of a perceived geography, but also in the immediacy of a condition of existence in which the relocation of the urban space reveals particular historical and political circumstances of a migratory community (Mexican / Mexican-American) in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In other words, this is the perfect mapping of a subjective impulse that places the reader inside the perception of a trans-migrant who re-orientates himself in the chaos of the global system, a cartography of self-recognition that intersect urban realities within the subjectivity of the fictional characters.

### **Late Capitalism Urbanization: Alternative Spaces in the First and Third World**

Elizabeth Wilson, in her text "World Cities", implies that since the end of the Second World War "new forms of colonialism and capitalism" have contributed to the formation and establishment of "huge population centers" in the non-western world that deviate from the standards of western modernization (41); these urban centers –usually called "third-world cities" or "world cities"– differentiate substantially from the urbanization process of Europe and North America, because within these vast conurbations a series of internal problems (insecurity, poverty, underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure) seems inadequate for the elite taste of the western institutions (Wilson

46-48). In Latin American, as well as other places south of the political equator<sup>8</sup> (Teddy Cruz), cities of the Counter-modernity rely on the possibility that we can find alternative paths for the realization of urban life in a globalized world, forms that contradict the principles of progress, maintaining a certain degree of functionality and cohesion in the urban fabric.

In a global scenario, in the “external macro-sphere”, the position of the other (the “global other”) portrays the real limits of the machinery of progress (Beck). The self-limitation of classical modernity rests in the idea that progress concealed a close system that needs to be completed for the self-satisfaction of the people; any kind of disruption derives in the incompleteness of the whole cycle. The historical fact reveals that cities, such as Mexico City, have to reinvent the rules, not because the necessity to complete the process, but because alternative paths have been deployed as a means for the survival of the community. Mexico City, as well as other cities at the south of the political equator, are the global other, a certain otherness that survives the fluctuating changes in the economical and political arena. Here city operates as a counterpoint of the “national outlook.” In a classical scenario, nation-states comprehend the most “universal container” of human life (Beck 418); nonetheless, global scenarios distort those assumptions. Global cities challenge the path of modernity by demonstrating unconventional ways of reacting to historical transformations.

It is the historical conditions of late capitalism the ones that challenge our understanding of the urban phenomena at the south of the political equator. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School have already envisioned the

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<sup>8</sup> Teddy Cruz calls “political equator” an imaginary line that divides the world in two political and ideological blocks: the North and the South. This imaginary border crisscrosses and divides spaces in conflict such as the US-Mexico border (San Diego-Tijuana) or the corridor Israel/Palestine.

drastic emergence and influence of multinational and corporations into the means of production in the early twentieth century. Ernest Mandel, in the mid 1970s, proposed a critical neo-Marxist view of the historical development of the capitalist modes of production, which derived not in the historical evolution of the classic Marxist dialectics, but in the understanding of radical circumstances that exploded in the global market after the Second World War. For him, a third and late-stage in the capital development system (first stage: freely competitive capitalism, second stage: monopoly capitalism) survived the fluctuating market conditions of the first half of the twentieth century, just to reinvigorate the importance of mass consumption in the structural scenario of financial capital, and the privilege position of multinational corporations in the scheme of the international market (Mandel). This late-stage period, called late capitalism, distinguishes itself for a sense of fluidity and mobility that traps consumers into the vortex of the flow of capital; the whole consumerism experience is no longer controlled by monopolies or imperialistic drives, but by the elusive manipulations of private corporations, a pile of multinationals exploiting the free will of the customer: “an integrated unity, but [...] an integrated unity of non-homogenous parts, and it is precisely the unity that here determines their lack of homogeneity” (Mandel 102). For Mandel, late capitalism results in a complete reorganization of the geopolitical map, bringing a complete homogenization of the means of production: “Far from representing a 'post-industrial society', late capitalism thus constitutes *generalized universal industrialization* for the first time in history” (Mandel 387). The multinationals and corporations’ victory resonates as a total defeat of the standards of life for the common people.

If market production affects life style, late capitalism also involves a complete re-understanding of cultural production. Fredric Jameson's ideas on the mode of cultural production in late capitalism reverberate as an analysis of Mandel's neo-Marxist portrait of the global industrialization. In *Postmodernism* (1992), Jameson acknowledges a sudden immersion of the private interest into the sphere of the public spaces; for him, that strategic movement of the transnational corporations reveals the logic of late capitalism which find new means of affecting the modes of cultural production: "new forms of media that result in new relationships with culture and the shaping of news, the planned obsolescence of products, and American military domination" (Miller 120). The abrupt involvement of the private sector into the decision-making of the state, as well as in the cultural imagination of the people, problematizes the institutional and ethical limits of late capitalism.

What marks the development of the new concept [late capitalism] over the older one (which was still roughly consistent with Lenin's notion of a 'monopoly stage' of capitalism) is not merely an emphasis on the emergence of new forms of business organization (multinationals, transnationals) beyond the monopoly stage but, above all, the vision of a world capitalist system fundamentally distinct from the older imperialism, which was a little more than a rivalry between the various colonial powers. (Jameson XIX)

However, this massive interest of the private sector and the transformation of mode of cultural production affect the space of social interaction. The logic of late capitalism, whose cultural dominant is postmodernism, finds in the city a contested space, a place where the social moment react against the urban landscape. The image of an imposed

“First World” contradicts the real social dynamics taking place in the polis. As Santiago Colás argues, space is what remains from the “repressive social processes” that try to “homogenized the real and imaginative terrain of the ‘First World’ subject” (Colás 258). The complexity of the urban space rests in the action of the state and the private sector that try to complete the homogenization process.

But in order to impose a “First World” view into the urban landscape, a complete transformation has to be accomplished in the core of the structural foundation of the city. For Jameson, late capitalism comes into being when the “Third World” disappears. In the operational processes that follow the industrial homogenization of the world, the “Third World” appears like a pre-stage of development that has to be tamed by the cultural and material forces of capitalism. For the “transformational politics” of the cultural dominant, a “Third World” symbolizes a lost category where historical and sociopolitical conditions precede the environmental situation of the nowadays-transnational moment. Thus, for the consolidation of late capitalism, society and culture face the problem of a new colonization of Nature, and the ongoing destruction of the Third World: “thus eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way. One is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious: that is the destruction of precapitalist Third World agriculture by the Green Revolution, and the rise of the media and the advertising industry” (Jameson 36).

Jameson’s notion of First and Third World escape the traditional meaning proposed by Alfred Sauvy in 1952. This is not a non-alignment movement within established political blocs, but a way to analyze the degree of industrialization within an

economical context. First and Third World are labels or categories that help Jameson to understand the historical development of late capitalism in the Western world. For this analysis of the trans-urban condition in literature, their versatility and adaptability as theoretical indicators make them perfect for the understanding of differences within a social context. First World becomes an ideal scenario, while Third World symbolizes a real situation for most of Mexican communities, not only in Mexico, but also in the US. As Santiago Colás implies, there are multiple “First Worlds” and “Third Worlds” interacting in the cultural conditions of late capitalism; in this sense, the homogenization process of modernity seems more like a split divide between development and necessity, progress and resistance. Of course, the panorama is even more complex because, as Colás suggests, “there are also “Third Worlds” within the “ First World” and vice-versa” (Colás 259). The radical implications of this proposition show the degree of disparity and inequality that can exist in a single space. In a place such as the city, those contradicting worlds can coexist, one beside the other.

### **Urban Mexican Literature in the Age of Late Capitalism**

It is clear that a thorough analysis and deconstruction of the First and Third World in urban reality of Mexico City requires an exhaustive study of these circumstances (economical, cultural, historical, political and social) in late capitalism. Since 1994, contemporary urban Mexican culture has portrayed a sense of disruption and disenchantment in the social fabric; unpleasant scenarios that have brought a sense of fracture, chaos and turmoil, such as the financial crisis and the devaluation of the peso (*Efecto Tequila*), the uprising of the EZLN movement, the assassination of the

presidential candidacy Luis Donaldo Colosio, the burst of violence against women at the north of the country (*Las muertas de Juárez*). In addition, the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by then president Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and the instauration of neoliberal policies has generated a new cultural moment.

Some writers, intellectuals or journalists (such as Carlos Fuentes or Carlos Monsiváis) have provided new insights into the problematic of Mexico City at the end of the twentieth century. For example, the journalist John Ross, in *El Monstruo* (2009), creates, through its unique style that combines cultural reportage and social coverage, a delirious description of the city that encompasses the millenarian tradition of the “tenochas” and the globalized practices of the megalopolis. On the other hand, Francisco Goldman, in *El Circuito Interior* (2015), employs the act of driving the *circuito interior* (an important avenue in Mexico City) as a metaphor to comprehend the present-day situation of Mexico and the various social movements (*los feminicidios de Ciudad Juárez*, Atenco, #YoSoy132) that reclaim justice.

It is clear that the concepts of transition, transformation, and social inequality encapsulate some of the concerns of the Mexican academia regarding the topic of Mexico City in a geopolitical perspective. How to overcome the local reality of a Third World in a city aspire to be a global center? Writers and intellectuals, such as Carlos Monsiváis, Gonzalo Celorio, Claudio Lomnitz, Vicente Quirarte, Rafael Pérez Gay, provide extensive literature regarding these issues. As I exposed in the Introduction, Gonzalo Celorio, in his article “Mexico, City of Paper,” suggests that: “The history of Mexico City is the story of its successive destructions” (35). However, despite the obliterated

ruins and the unstable nature of its historical infrastructure, the city survives in the memory of its inhabitants and in the “enduring reality of literature” (Celorio 35). Vicente Quirarte acknowledges also the vindicating power of literature and its capability to archive experiences lost during the historical transitions; however, he demands a thorough analysis of the different modes of expressing the plurality of the urban fabric: “Así como no hay una sola Ciudad de México, no existe una escritura de la Ciudad de México sino una pluralidad de maneras de aproximarse para explicar sus símbolos y preservarla de la destrucción” (29).

But, it is perhaps the unique and imaginative quality of Mexico City’s inhabitants to transform “traumatic events” into elaborated and complex scenarios the thing that confirms how literature function as a mechanism to describe and to express the different layers of the urban environment. The action of narrating the urban reality in the age of globalization becomes a necessity of living or experiencing the Mexico City phenomenon. Here, the voice of Juan Villoro as inhabitant of this delirious metropolis resonates strongly. His urban literature shows the compulsive desire of reflecting the socio-political condition of the urban space conditions in a contemporary context.

### **Calles Circulares: Urbanity in a Loop**

In *A thousand plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that the map is an abstract reflection or reproduction of the observer’s movement, and his involvement with reality: “What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely orientated toward an experimentation in contact with the real” (Deleuze and Guattari 12). The map is a projection of the reality, never the reality itself. The map’s scale is what allows us to

potentially understand the space in a synthetic and abbreviated way. The individual alters the map with his quotidian existence (Deleuze and Guattari), finding places, amending minimal errors in the design or in the blueprint. Through all his literary production, Juan Villoro creates a map through his subjective experience of Mexican reality in late capitalism, one in which Mexico City is unable to escape from a geopolitical labyrinth. In his works –*El disparo de Argón* (1991), *Madeteria dispuesta* (1997), *El testigo* (2004), *Llamadas de Ámsterdam* (2007) –, the urban space that the Mexican writer arranges reflects the psychological and moral circumstances of the individuals while portraying its socio-historical development.

In *Tiempo transcurrido* (1986), one of his early books, he employs fictional accounts (*crónicas ficticias*) as a means to re-understand the sociopolitical conditions of a generation in Mexico City that experiences first-hand the cultural transformation of the Rock scene, and the upsetting atmosphere post-68. Following urban narratives of the counterculture, such as José Agustín's *De perfil* or Agustín Ramos's *Al cielo por asalto*, Villoro's book revolves around the agonizing changes in the city between 1968 and 1985, and the life of its inhabitants who seem lost and confused in the turbulent times between the 1968 Tlateloco massacre and the 1985 earthquake. If *Tiempo transcurrido*'s characters reveal a general sense of social disorientation that cannot find its place in the contours of the urban grid, the “Chicago's” taxi driver challenges that assumption by knowing by heart not only the geography of his city, but also the social dynamics structured within it; and no matter if he is in Chicago, Mexico City or a combination of both spaces, he can clearly find the path within a cartography of self-recognition that demands of him a language capable of translating the socio/cultural meanings within his

own subjectivity. This is vital to comprehend the instrumental communication of the trans-urban narratives that enable the correlation of references –cultural, historical, political, and social– between separated urban landscapes: who are you (subject of enunciation) between the discontinuous moments of two urban spaces, two urban realities (object of knowledge).

But Juan Villoro’s fiction is constantly spinning around the use of rhetorical/narratological features where the trans-urban cultural intersections brings once again the questioning of two urban realities through the self-assurance of language, the re-appropriation of the social space and the distinctive difference between topologies. In *Llamadas de Amsterdam* (2003), Villoro tells the tragic story of a young couple (Juan Jesús and Nuria) who after a failed attempt to live in Amsterdam (Holland), they decide to separate, just to find each other years later in a street (Ámsterdam) in Mexico City.<sup>9</sup> From this point, we can make a clear distinction between the double meanings that “Amsterdam” (Dutch city / Mexico City street) keeps in this Villoro’s narrative. On the one hand, Amsterdam is the image of a failed plan of Juan Jesús and Nuria to continue their lives together in Holland. While they prepared for the travel, the sudden illness of Nuria’s father, Felipe Benavides, leads to the cancelation of the trip, and the subsequent rupture of their relation. After the event, Nuria decides to move away to New York, restarting her life as a chief editor in a feminist magazine; Juan Jesús, on the contrary, remains in Mexico City, working for a second rate company in the airport, without ever achieving his true goals. In this perspective, Amsterdam is an incomplete life, an

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<sup>9</sup> In this section of the chapter, I will use *Amsterdam* when referring to the Dutch city; in contrast, I will employ *Ámsterdam* to talk about the street in Mexico City.

unfinished desire that hunts the aspirations of Juan Jesus and the unsuccessful result of their relationship.

On the other, *Ámsterdam* is also the name of a street in the neighborhood of La Condesa (or Hipódromo La Condesa) in Mexico City, and it will have a significant role in the second half of the plot. After ten years, Juan Jesús discovers, with the help of his old friend el Tornillo Lascuráin, that Nuria is back to Mexico, and that she is living in a renovated building in the street of *Ámsterdam*. In consequence, he calls her from a public telephone on the street's corner outside Nuria's building (8 o'clock in the afternoon in Mexico, 4 o'clock in the morning in Holland), simulating that he is abroad, trying to reestablish an affective connection with his ex-wife by fabricating an alternative life in Amsterdam.

La Condesa has always been associated with social and economic success, which is why high profile businessmen, entrepreneurs and artists inhabit its multiple art deco buildings and lofts, searching for a bohemian style of life. This is the case of Nuria whose privileged position and social boldness allow her to aspire to this environment. As Ignacio Sánchez Prado implies, the neighborhood's social and economic relevance became even greater with neoliberalism's arrival, refocusing the economic imagination and goals of its bourgeois inhabitants who aspire to emulate the unconventional lifestyle of New York; this is significant for the development of the plot, as well as the literature of the Mexican writer, because Villoro breaks with a conventional literary cartography (*cartografía cultural clásica*) of Mexico City that no longer focuses on the Centro and Coyoacán as spaces of representation of the urban narratives, but that includes alternative milieus that clearly depict the movement of the new "affective capital" (*circulación del*

*capital afectivo*) in the city (Sánchez Prado 220). La Condesa is a no-place, a space whose affective imagination and economic aspiration no longer coincide with the stereotype traditionalism of a Mexican life in the city (like other neighborhoods, residential projects or redevelopments in the city, such as La Roma or Santa Fe). The fact that the story centers in this disengaged place of neoliberalism reveals a cosmopolitan approach influenced by a global vision that flies far away the contentment of the nation-estate (local vs. global), creating an ideological desire that praises Western civilization over Mexican lifestyle.

Ámsterdam in itself is a peculiar landmark of the city. Designed during Porfirio Díaz's regime, the street is built upon the traces of a private racetrack that was property of the Sociedad del Jockey Club de México. If it is seen from above, the street shows its round perimeter emulating the path of the racecourse: "el óvalo que recorría la colonia Condesa siguiendo el trazo del antiguo hipódromo" (2007 33). That is why Villoro in his text constantly names it "la calle circular" (the round/convex/circular street); and it is exactly this round configuration, this bizarre multidimensional circuit (time/space/socioeconomics) the one that will rule the course and action of the characters in the development of the plot.

But Villoro's text also reveals that the round circuit that is Ámsterdam--the never ending cycle, the eternal return, the iconic shape of the *ouroboros* or the *Möbius* strip-- shields in its paradoxical form not only the narrative of success of the people that reside in its contour, but also the sequence of failures that has resonated since its origins as an hippodrome: "apostadores que triunfaron o se arruinaron en la carrera de caballos" (2007 34). The disclosed history of the neighborhood helps Villoro compare the ambivalent

destiny of their characters with the random fortune of the horses in the competitions. Juan Jesús trapped in this archetypical track of victories and failures survives as a postmodern Sisyphus repeating eternally his mistakes, returning always to the same point of inflection, *Ámsterdam/Amsterdam*: “Varias veces recorrió la pista del antiguo hipódromo, imaginando el cansancio de los caballos, tratando de deducir el principio y el fin de ese trayecto” (2007 60).

It is in this circular street, in the convex lines that limited the planes of reality and desire, continuity and convergence, where Juan Jesús forges his alternative life in Holland. While waiting outside Nuria’s luxurious and renovated building, he watches her arrive to her apartment and calls her from a public telephone on the street; with their first call in ten years, he clinches the beginning of his machination, by deceiving her with a life in Amsterdam, instead of telling her the truth: “Así cristalizó su viaje. Juan Jesús estaba al otro lado, en la tierra batida por el viento y la neblina. Él hablo de trenes, un ático en total desorden, las putas en vitrinas de luz morada, los bares donde el hashish era legal, una exposición en puertas. Pintaba campos. Campos metafísicos, a veces recorridos por una sombra” (2007 35). The trip that never accomplished and his bohemian life in Europe becomes a reality when he faces through the telephone the success of his ex wife; his fabrication materializes itself into a fake geography of desire, revolving around the construction of a false identity, eclipsing his own real persona. Amsterdam and *Ámsterdam* touch each other in a fragile point of convergence; the homology between topological planes (city/street, truth/fiction) is sealed with a lie, and this subtle fact will have its consequences for the couple. Only through this forgery, he is strong enough to talk with her without the prejudices of revealing his personal failure as an artist.

In this book, Villoro explores some variations of the literary resources and rhetorical motives that he will employ in his short story “Chicago.” Certainly the transposition of geographical and physical planes of two cities (Amsterdam/Mexico City) is clearly a trace of the trans-urban drive that he develops through the mental cartography of Chicago/Mexico City in the taxi driver’s dialogue: the convergence of the different planes touching each other in the liminal space that comprehend the character’s subjectivity/language. While in “Chicago” the words of the taxi driver provide a perfect environment for the communion of two urban realities that he has experienced; in *Llamadas de Ámsterdam* the geography of the desire, the cartography of Juan Jesús’s lie generates a topography of fake expectations that plays with the social reality of the couple and the imaginary plane that only has meaning within the self-contained space of Juan Jesús’s and Nuria’s aspirations. Ámsterdam/Mexico City nourishes itself from the false expectations that both deposit in the bogus fact that Juan Jesús’s lives in Amsterdam; deep within this forgery, lies a terrible secret: the inexistent reality of this paradoxical space is what gives hope to the reestablishment of their relation, the distance between them is what makes them feel closer. The tension between Juan Jesús and Nuria is magnified with each phone call, and the mystery feeds their actions:

Su vida paralela cobraba un acto irregular, intrigante. Empezó a disfrutar el misterio de estar despierto en Holanda, a las cuatro de la mañana. Hablaban poco; él debía evitar que los ruidos de la calle llegaran al aparato, y no tenía mucho que decir. Hubiera sido más sencillo hablarle de su casa, pero eso hubiera significado romper el pacto con esa esquina, lo matorrales bajos, las separecidas huellas de

los caballos, la silueta de Nuria, la verdad de estar en Ámsterdam, Distrito Federal”. (Villoro 2007 42)

Trans-urban narratives question the general assumptions toward your own geopolitical position in the late capitalism: to know your place in the world is to be able to name it, and to navigate it. The image in “Chicago” of the taxi fluently driving through the streets of Chicago/Mexico City sums up a condition of acceptance and recognition of the self within the differences of two distant realities/cultures: the protagonist’s subjectivity (agency) is the compass that guides the self through the geopolitical cartographies of globalization. On the contrary, Juan Jesús gets trapped in an urban loop, in the unexpected recoil and twisted repetition of his mistakes that brings him to this *calle circular*, this round circuit where he is absent of the world while enjoying a daydreaming stage between Amsterdam and Mexico City.

### **Becoming other/Embracing other: Liquid Identities in Mexico City**

The paradigmatic cases of “Chicago/Mexico” and “Ámsterdam, Distrito Federal” reveal how mirror cities and urban loops reshape the whole inventory of neoliberal agency: the paradoxical instance of individuals living in the threshold between two urban spaces, in-betweens where space-time iterations occur; liquid identities and extreme subjectivities that navigate the unsteady storms of geopolitical readjustments. Juan Villoro’s creative work is riddled with these unconventional approximations and playful challenges to the problem of geographical limits in a post-national age; but also his more thorough essays expose his theoretical obsession with these inquiries in relation with established and conventional national identities. In essays such as “El libro negro”

(2005) or “Mi padre, el cartaginés” (2010), Villoro explores the dynamism of liquid identities (Zygmunt Bauman) in an age of transnational interchanges through his own experiences, and also through the figure of his father, Luis Villoro. Luis Villoro was a prominent intellectual who--under the guidance of the Spanish philosopher and phenomenologist José Gaos, and his collaborators of the *Grupo Hiperión* (Jorge Portilla, Emilio Uranga, Leopoldo Zea, etc.)--rethought the concept of otherness within the limits of the social dynamics, as well as the position of indigenous population in the Mexican society. In his first book, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (1950), he materializes that historical conflict with the Other within the struggle of the indigenous communities to find recognition against the dominant and invasive culture of the non-indigenous populations (“no indígena”). This inquiry over the margins of oneself and the Other, which is also inherent to his own condition of being a Spanish refugee educated in Mexico, becomes not only an exploration of the radical borders of his father’s identity, but also the imminent ghost that will haunt his father’s critical work.

In “Mi padre, el cartaginés,” for example, he departs from the exploration of Pere Calder’s *L’ombra de l’atzvara* as a means to comprehend the personal ghosts that haunt his father and the complicated task of defining mobile and liquid identities in a historical stage of massive migrations in our current society. One night, Calder’s character, a Catalan business owner living in Mexico City, dreams that he is back in Barcelona when suddenly realizes something out of place: a group of Mexican citizens and the smell of tamales in the street of this Spanish city. As Villoro himself describes it, the protagonist’s dream embodies the symbolic and unconscious tension of his affective life oscillating between Barcelona and Mexico City; he is unable to restrain or confine the physical and

mental strain of feeling part of two places at the same time: “El sueño presenta identidades en estado líquido, capaces de fundirse. Aunque se trate de una pesadilla, sirve de borrador para entender el mundo sólido que se recuperará en la vigilia” (Villoro 2013 205). The conditions of Calder’s character helps him to understand why a Spanish refugee such as his own father, Luis Villoro, who also born in Barcelona, can embrace a national pride for the land that hosted him (Mexico), and also can make him rethink his own subjectivity and the ontological fundamentals of his nation: “La identidad parece disolverse en esa mezcla exasperante. La paradoja es que de esos incómodos contrastes surge la autodefinición: se es de un sitio en relación con otro” (*Idem*).

Villoro himself experiences in first-hand the meaning behind the dissolution of the identity, the dislocation as a result of the interaction between one place and the other. In “Juan Villoro: El escritor que no se volvió cobarde ni caníbal” (2012), Diego Enrique Osorno follows the steps of Villoro though his daily life in Barcelona. What he finds is that this place has not only kept a sacred meaning because of the influence of his father’s heritage; for many years, this Catalan city has been his second home, a substantial space from where he can have a certain critical distance to write and rethink the cultural and historical significance of Mexico City and his country. From there, he can enjoy the company of writers of his generation like Enrique Vila-Matas, Martín Caparrós, or the editor Jorge Herralde, who define this city as a certain intellectual Mecca for Spanish literature; but he can also compose his weekly column in the journal, *Reforma*, while carry on his duty as a prolific Mexican writer.<sup>10</sup> For Villoro, the inconsistency of being

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps one of the greatest characters that embodied the trans-urban drive between Mexico City and Barcelona was the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003). For Bolaño, who was also a friend of Juan Villoro, being outside of Mexico provided him the internal conditions for reimagining the exotic urban environment of his youth as an *infrarrealista* in Mexico City, despite the transatlantic distance; certainly,

from one place in relation to other (a Mexican writer in Barcelona) is what defines the core of his own narrative, the subtle changes that give complexity to this trans-urban subjectivity.

On the other hand, in “El libro negro,” Juan Villoro finds in the memories of his father a gate to comprehend his own attachment to the other great external influence in his life: American culture. The active presence of this influence in his childhood inaugurates an intricate quest to the origins itself of his own national identity, the ontological paradox of being in relation to the other. In this essay, he explores his initial approaches in his childhood to American culture as a consequence of the prohibition that his father had to enter into the US. Luis Villoro’s openly communist inclinations, and his defense of Jacobo Árbenz’s democratic government in Guatemala caused him to be part of “el Libro Negro” (the black list) and to be ban from US soil. Clearly, Villoro’s essay revolves around the figure of his father as a role model in a historical period of substantial binational contacts, but also as the protagonist of the fascinating story of intrigue and prohibition around the symbolism of the *Libro Negro* and its punitive repercussions: “En cierta forma, la política exterior de Estados Unidos me hizo entregarme a una variante del síndrome de Orestes; buscaría no al padre perdido, sino al que ocultaba en su interior” (Villoro 2005 23). The other father, the one who remained in secret during his childhood, reveals a complex world of national practices and anti-establishment exercises, which at end of the 1960s were fighting against the sudden immersion and influence of the expansive American corporations within the urban Mexican landscape.

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*Los Detectives Salvajes, Amuleto, 2666*, are the product of that process of dissociation that allowed him to frame the otherness in the complexity of trans-urban environments.

Villoro recounts how in his childhood the cultural and economic expansionism of the US in media and businesses impacted the local practices of the city. As an eleven-year-old boy, he enjoyed watching on television American cartoons and sitcoms such as *Top Cat (Don Gato y su pandilla)*, *Get Smart (El superagente 86)*, or *My Favorite Martian (Mi marciano favorito)*; he played with G.I. Joes and read comic strips like *Archie* and *Little Lulu*; and he even took part in a band that played “Happy Together” by The Turtles, and idolized Jim Morrison’s defiant attitude. The social empathy and the sudden Anglophile of Mexican society reconfigured the whole urban dynamics; pop culture reshaped, in its foundations, the everyday life practices of a city that was still trying to find its own identity: “A finales de los sesenta, la ciudad de México se llenaba de cafeterías bautizadas como templos pop (Yom-Yom, Tomboy, Bonanza) [...] La libido nacional parecía someterse al síndrome de King-Kong. La cerveza Superior se anunciaba con el eslogan ‘La rubia que todos quieren’ y sus botellas eran deliciosamente acariciadas por extranjeras como las que aguardaban consuelo en la explanada del dios Tláloc” (Villoro 2005 28).

The assimilation of the other, the acculturation process of the Mexican society to the ideological standardization of the American way of life set in motion a series of explorations and questions regarding the position of *Lo mexicano* in a binational context. It is within this cultural inconsistency, this irreverent gap where writers such as José Agustín, Gustavo Saínz, Parménides García Saldaña, and the *Literatura de la Onda* pretended to show a unique display of the emergent urban ecology of Mexico City during the 1960s, dominated by the principles of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll; it is also within this rebellious environment where Carlos Monsiváis published *Días de guardar* (1970),

his first book of *crónicas* influenced by the non-fiction approach of the New Journalism, and which provided a first glimpse of the urban mythologies that will lead this binational assemblage until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Villoro's writing, as well as the creative work of all these writers, reveals is an instance of cultural dialogue with the Other, which is not merely a moment of perplexity or trivial fascination with the US, but a rebellious answer of the Mexican subcultures to the environment of urban repression that they experience (*el PRI, el 68, el festival de Avándaro*); the appropriation of the Other as escape from the monotony and exhaustion of a cultural identity and national pride that demand them to behave in a rigorous and old-fashioned way. This instant of cultural disobedience sets the conditions that ignite the conflict against the programmatic ideology of the political establishment, which propels its stereotypes with the ideas cultivated by Grupo Hiperión and Octavio Paz. The *mexicanidad* no longer nourishes itself from the auto-consumption and self-production of its costumes, tradition and practices, but also from the exploration of foreign performances and references that expand the possibilities of a self-contained subjectivity.

Villoro's account then positions his own subjectivity in the middle of two divergent spaces; two asymmetrical topologies balanced by the childish affections of his knowledge of Mexico and the US. It is through the child gaze, through his immature cognizance of the Mexican reality in contrast with his fascination with the US what unfolds a world of conflicting binaries. Thus, within this system of childlike references – built upon the effect and simulacrum of the mass media–, the US has the liberating appeal of an enchanted land, the mirage that presents his charms to a little kid: “Estados Unidos significaba para mí el delirante territorio donde el Hombre Araña subía a los edificios,

Disneylandia tenía por alcalde un ratón de fieltro, Bob Dylan cantaba en el Filmore East, Giligan encontraba divertidas formas de no escapar de su isla y las rubias crecían para encontrarse conmigo un lunes del futuro en el Museo de Antropología” (Villoro 2005 29). In contrast, the national landscape is not only oppressive to the his eyes, but charged with an unwelcome presence: “Por el contrario, México significaba una civilización agreste y resentida, calles olorosas a cebolla y cilantro, recorridas por multitudes pre o postapocalípticas, donde los conciertos de rock estaban prohibidos y las mujeres obedecían a un principio budista de la pureza que les exigía permanecer castas por varias generaciones” (Villoro 2005 29).

Villoro’s child gaze is an allusion to the shaky position of a Mexican cultural impetus in front of the overwhelming forces of urban modernization; the restructuration of the ethical, political, and social principles in proportion to the expansive sprawling of the urban perimeters; the forces of desire in contrast with the edges of reality; the Americanization of an urban Mexicanity. This instant of cultural disobedience sets the conditions that ignite the conflict with the ideology and the programmatic stereotypes created by the Grupo Hiperión, Octavio Paz and the political establishment of the PRI. Villoro describes it: “Cuando tu padre se compromete tan en serio con las esencias nacionales, no puedes pedirle una Harley Davidson. Mi moto sería mexicana o no sería” (Villoro 2013 192). To go further in the exploration of his own subjectivity is to understand what gives his father’s subjectivity the agency to fluctuate and navigate this historical period, the “filósofo nacionalista” that accepts the conditions of the time and moves beyond the threshold of the Other.

## Urban Culture and the Post-Mexican Condition: Displacing Identities

But Villoro himself acknowledges that, in the age of globalization and post-nationalism, the solid structure that represents in the past the national identity is now collapsing and trembling. In “Retrato de Grupo: 100 millones de mexicanos” (2005), he even suggests that: “La idea de una identidad se ha vuelto obsoleta” (Villoro 2015 39). Written in 2001, and following the sociological approaches of Roger Bartra, Villoro questions the feasibility of an ontological basis for *lo mexicano* in a country that has reached the “magical number” (*cifra mágica*) of 100 million persons. For Bartra, the effect of nationalism in Mexico has generated the most exorbitant events (Mexican Revolution) and the most unreasonable monsters (national identity); that is, in a brief manner, the main thesis behind *La jaula de la melancolía* (1987). One of those endemic species in the zoological catalogue of patriotic representations is the *homo mexicanus*, an entity theorized by Octavio Paz’s *Laberinto de la soledad* (1950), and extensively studied in Academic papers by intellectuals of the Grupo Hiperión (Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Leopoldo Zea) and by his own father, Luis Villoro: “un hombre que se refugiaba en el nacionalismo para sobreponerse a su aislamiento y sus complejos” (Villoro 2015 38). But in the twenty-first century, the exhaustion of the concept of identity (national identity) and its one-dimensional representation cannot longer fulfill the multiple and diverse variations that allow the ever-growing subjectivities that appear in national, binational and transnational contexts. The mutability of times requires a reproach into the representational flexibility of subjectivities that allow the insertion of the individuals into the conceptual blocks of alternative citizenships: “Lo ‘mexicano’ es más un estado de ánimo que una denominación de origen” (Villoro 2015 39). Bartra himself acknowledges

these prerequisites when, in his essay “La condición postmexicana” (1997), he explores forms (in correlation with Jürgen Habermas’ ideas) of post-national constructs. Framed by NAFTA agreement, globalization and the political instability in the country, he calls it the post-Mexican condition (*la condición postmexicana*), a condition that puts an end to the crisis of representation of the Mexican identity and its legitimation by the political power of the estate: “formas específicamente ‘mexicanas’ de la legitimación e identidad” (Bartra 2002 306). But further than Western civilization (*occidentalización*), it is the cultural influence and political/economic interference of the US (*norteamericanización*) the one that accelerates the internal breakdown of the system of representation, opening the door to a wide range of possibilities: “EL TLC marcó el fin de este mito, que ya estaba muy erosionado, y ayudó a abrir las puertas de lo que he llamado la ‘jaula de la melancolía’ [...] Pero el modo en que fue aprobado el TLC no sólo tendió un Puente y abrió las puertas de la jaula, también destapó la caja de Pandora” (Bartra 2002 308). This same period of neoliberal reforms allows Héctor Calderón to provide a reflection around the conflicting vision of post-mexicanidad at the North of the US/Mexico border. Based on the popular Mexican expression “Como México no hay dos,” he reevaluates the one-sided and unequal perspective of limiting the Mexican condition to a problem of geographical limits, while forgetting the claim for visibility coming from communities at the North of the Río Bravo: “the upshot of recent discussions on political reform and cultural pluralism in Mexico has forced Mexicans to accept that there is more than one Mexico within and outside the international border” (Calderón 167).

Carlos Monsiváis, on the other hand, provides a similar picture of what that post-Mexican condition means in relation to the mass media and the cultural production in

Mexico during neoliberal times. In “La identidad nacional ante el espejo” (1992), he turns back into the problem of NAFTA –such as Bartra and Calderón do–, and realizes that the agreement ratifies the fears and blames of the government, who watches to tremble the safety and strong structure of the national identity in front of the overwhelming force of foreign interventionism. But Monsiváis draws the attention into the real nature of this identity construct: “¿Hasta qué punto es verdadera la ‘identidad’ desprendida del imperio de los *mass-media*?” (Monsiváis 2002 297). In a country where the cultural industry controls the means of representation, the premises of that national identity are under the control of the radical fluctuations of the market, allowing the foreign interventionism to become the pure form of a cultural syncretism: “Así vemos ahora, en la proximidad de las fiestas funerarias, la fusión del *Halloween* con el Día de Muertos. Y que nadie llame a ultraje o ‘desnacionalización’, porque más mexicano que este Halloween superanaranjado, ni Tlaquepaque” (Monsiváis 2002 296). In this sense, the real face of the movable and adjustable “national identity” has been always manipulated by the iconography produced by the mass media enterprises (Televisa, TV Azteca) that safeguard its own endurance in the popular expressions. Films (such as *Nosotros los pobres*, *Mecánica nacional*, *Amores perros*), or soap operas (*María la del barrio*, *Simplemente María*, *Cuna de lobos*), tell the survival story of a peladito/a whose adventures can only be experienced in the thresholds of the city. In other words, Monsiváis suggests that the main driving force that regulates and institutionalizes this “identity” is the commercial vision of an urban culture centered in the pathetic experience of the Mexican capital: “En pleno analfabetismo, en condiciones de máxima insalubridad, sin servicios sanitarios, en tugurios inconcebibles, las masas armaron su guía de

sentimientos, y su verdadera ‘identidad nacional’ correspondió al barrio, a la región capitalina, al gremio de la actividad ‘lícita’, para de allí expandirse e incorporar símbolos, poemas, modernizaciones” (Monsiváis 2002 298). In the era of post-national sceneries, in the open crack cleared from the abandonment of the institutions in the post-Mexican condition, it is the urban culture that faces the problem to adapt and adjust alternative modes of citizenship to the challenge of ontological fears, industrial oppression, future paranoia, and technologic transformations (“*la opresión industrial, la falta de fe en el futuro, las transformaciones tecnológicas*”, Monsiváis 2002 299). Thus, the malleability of Mexican urban culture in the face of global changes allows the ontological adjustment of a subjectivity that not only rests on the impractical veneration of traditions or in the insane appreciation of foreign practices, but in the hyper-modern hybridization, the cultural syncretism that calls for survival in the age of late capitalism: “Al fundirse crecientemente con la cultura urbana, la ‘identidad nacional’ ya no es el corpus de tradiciones, sino la manera en que el instituto colectivo mezcla realidades y mitologías, computadores y cultura oral, televisión y corridos, para orientarse animadamente en un mundo que, de otro modo, sería más incomprensible” (Monsiváis 2002 300).

### **Global Cities: Global vs. Local**

Deep within the trans-urban narratives phenomenon –such as the ruminations of Villoro, Bartra and Monsiváis– rests the predicament between the transnational question and the cosmopolitanism complex. The struggle for defining a geopolitical position in a global and interconnected reality such as Carlos Monsiváis’s *cultura urbana mexicana* complicates the modes of cultural representation and production in the Western

Hemisphere. In the age of globalization, the culture industry –as was envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s– cannot longer forget the place that global cities play in the cultural production of neoliberal societies; if global cities remain as a factor in the repositioning of the cultural map, how are we going to study them: As transnational spaces or as cosmopolitan and political sanctuaries? Or how do trans-urban narratives represent or express the urban conditions of the city in an age of globalization? How do the material and immaterial connections between Mexico City and other global centers in the US describe the historical conditions and the urban changes of late capitalism?

As I presented in the Introduction, the geography of globalization has been changing in recent decades; this socio-spatial reorganization of the cultural imagination of society and the economic flow of the market has allowed the arrival of alternative centers of action. Some cities or central urban areas function as these centers or “territorial nodes” (Smith and Timberlake) within the new organizational architecture of the global economic system (Sassem 2002); cities that are not only playing an important role because of the massive concentration of people, commodities, resources or money, but also because of the strategic place they have in the consolidation of cultural and political meanings. As Michael Keith implies: “Locally, the city does not merely curate the exotic of difference, it realizes transnational (or global) politics in its streets and neighborhoods, and reveals the contested and limited nature of the national settlement in its school rooms and town halls” (Keith 3). The position that cities have in the construction of the everyday life practices shows that, in an age of global interchanges, geographic concepts and national conceptions can be distorted, twisted and reassembled in new potential connotations; the local and the global survive within the intimate

spatiality of the urban landscape, as conflicting shades in a polychromatic painting; the coordinates of the national construct can be put upside down, granting the possibility of new identitarian landscapes.

Certainly, from the point of view of some disciplines such as sociology or urban planning, it is impossible to negate the expanding influence that these financial centers have in the consolidation of transnational networks. For example, Michael Keith poses that “globalizing” changes in our society transmute some particular urban centers into “the most intense points of transnational collision of culture and demography” (Keith 4). On the other hand, Saskia Sassen observes the “increasing important role” that a huge number of global cities –or “world cities” (Friedmann 1995)– have “in directly linking their national economies with global circuits” (Sassen 2002 2). The “growing network of global cities” reveals a hyper-connectivity of material and immaterial objects taking place beyond the limitations of national boundaries. The multilevel interaction among urban centers enhances a cross-border communication that creates links between these distant places. From the point of view of humanities, those inter-urban linkages provide a theoretical background for the transmission of cultural product across the borders; the “global urban network” (Parnreiter) opens the possibility of cultural interchanges that expand the symbolic imagination of urban communities, generating semantic constructions that interconnect two or more cities. These “multiple patterns of flows, exchange or linkages” among cities expose a network of “human”, “material” and “communication” resources (Smith and Timberlake 119), producing intercultural or multicultural meanings that transcend the mere locality of the places.

Within the discussion of global cities, the binary division of local and global poses a drastic transgression in the modes of cultural production. The drive to be part of the global economies and the effort to maintain the traditional define the dialectical struggle between global and local. As David Ley suggests, the advent of this ontological binary twists the principles of spatial production, making the “the global [...] as the space of sameness”, and “the local” as the “place of difference” (Ley 154). Inverting the poles of the same and the other (external and internal) not only fracture the cultural codes of spatial representation, it also reposition the scale of hierarchies and values implicit in the global cultural system: “Globalization theory constructs the global as a space that is dynamic, thrusting, open, rational, cosmopolitan and dominant, while the local is communitarian, authentic, closed, static, nostalgic, defensive” (Ley 155).

But reducing the problem of transnationalism’s spatiality in a dialectic struggle between local-global terms could be too naïve. For Julie Gilson, critical thinking misses so much of the “fundamental questions” of transnationalism if it categorizes the phenomenon in a simple reductionism hypothesis of "global", "international," or a mere “agglomeration of ‘national’ spaces” imbedded in a “mediation between the two ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ scales”(Gilson 292). Doreen Massey provides a similar understanding of the matter when in her essay, “Geographies of Responsibility,” she deconstructs the hierarchic positions entrenched in the local-global binomial: “In this view local places are not simply always the victims of the global; nor are they always politically defensible redoubts against the global. For places are also the moments through which the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced. They are "agents" in globalization” (Massey 11). Gilson and Massey’s view proposes a reframing of the mode of perceiving

transnational spaces; the forces of globalization or the power relations ruling the construction of transnational plateaus are not simply unidirectional, following a one-way path of cultural transfer. There is certainly a bi-conditionality that allow the interchange between both extremes; a network that is constantly updated and nourished by the interchange of cultural products in both sides of the sociopolitical spectrum. As Henri Lefebvre suggests: "Every social space ... once duly demarcated and oriented, implies a superimposition of certain relations upon networks of named places, *of lieux-dits*" (Lefebvre 1991 193). Local and global become agents of exchange in an interchanged and connected spatiality, which is constantly built and refurnished in a social spectrum.

The urban vocabulary and its complex meanings no longer rest in the strict domain of one isolated place, it can also migrate and mutate into other similar and distant spaces. Furthermore, this abstract language –embedded in reciprocal relations of material and immaterial connections– provides the means for the exchange of solutions for social problems, ethnic fears, segregation and social injustices. Not only the urban imagination and its polychromatic semantics can crisscross geographical borders, but also cultural practices and social conditions can talk and make public the setting of spatial injustices, that complicates the reality between these two cities.

### **Social Space and Complicating Sociability**

Since the publication of Henri Lefebvre's *La production de l'espace* (*The Production of Space*, 1974), scholars acknowledge that space is a social product. Even if it is physical or mental, space is socially constructed by a series of cultural, geographical and political forces that reshape and transform our representation of the places we

inhabit. As Tim Hall suggests, this process of representation produces “cultural systems of space,” which “tend to be relativist”; within the interior of these systems, “there is nothing natural or universal,” but a series of unpredictable and unstable power relations that set up the “discursive nature of the prevailing spatial language” (Hall 203). Things such as the “geographical dimensions of national space” demonstrate the artificiality and relativism of these social constructs: “Deeply embedded cultural systems of space such as these establish the dimensions from within which individual places must extricate themselves if they are to assert their own identities above those they are ascribed by virtue of their position within these systems” (Hall 203).

The fictional reshaping of the urban landscape of Mexico City and other major global centers (Chicago, Los Angeles, New York) in the trans-urban narratives makes also possible the questioning of the principles of social representation in those places. If the mental mapping radically twists the geographical symbols, then the social and ethnic dynamics inherent to them can also be distorted. Villoro’s narrative, for example, places or implants the ethnic diversity from Chicago into the urban layout of Mexico City. Spaces and neighborhoods that are commonly associated with certain types of Mexican sociability are displaced by the fictional insertion of new ethnic groups: such as Asian-American or Afro-Americans. This playful re-location, this humorous social distribution accentuates the absence of these groups in the sociopolitical layout of the city, and stresses the different multicultural views of the cities:

El cuate que conectó a mi hermano vive en un lugar pinche, allá por el norte, haga de cuenta por Ecatepec. Pero allá Ecatepec está lleno de negros y hay un chingo de tiendas que abren toda la noche, con eso de que

muchos trabajan todo el día. ¿Sabe qué me impresionó? Esas tiendas son de chinos o de coreanos. Ecatepec es negro pero las tiendas las dominan los orientales, ¿cómo la ve? Ellos viven en otra zona, haga de cuenta Ciudad Satélite. No, si le digo, usted se mete a Satélite y ve puros ojitos rasgados. Eso sí, los negros traen mejores carros. A los chinos les vale madres, no gastan en nada. Si usted entra a Plaza Satélite, todos están comprando fideos o unas chanclas que dan pena. Imagínese: ¡levantar un buen billete para andar en chanclas! (Villoro 2014)

Villoro's literary game pays homage or justice to a certain multicultural and ethnic consciousness that seems nonexistent in the political administration of the Mexican city. The same game, the same literary instance reinforces the idea that what it is missing, what it is absent from the story is what remains also proscribed as a conceptual taboo in the reality of Mexico City. What seems to be absent from this story? Where is the spatial injustices depicted in the text? What has been forgotten from narration? Are Asian communities missing in the conceptualization of Mexico City in the age of globalization? Are Afro-Mexicans displaced from this picture? What is the real ethnic distribution of Mexico City: Mestizos, Indigenous people?

In 2001, when Villoro wrote the article "Retrato de Grupo: 100 millones de mexicanos", Mexico's population was reaching the amount of 100 million. Today, that quantity has been passed for over 120 million, and it is still growing. Further than being an enigmatic number or dystrophic function in the chart of a statistical study, the 100 million Mexicans that conform the bulk of the symbolic population of the country become the point of reflection for Villoro in regard the real nature and composition of that national

body. The overwhelming demographic data with its multicultural diverse component challenges in real numbers the position of a homogeneous Mexican identity that was defended and preserved by the political power and ideological mainstream with their abstract constructs. As Roger Bartra suggests, the ideological justification of a unique, lonely and isolated subject of the national history falls within the apparatus goals to preserve the legitimate illusion of a cohesion force of the nation-state (*poderosa ilusión cohesionadora*), an evanescent unity whose primordial model is the *mestizo*, and whose side effects are domination and exploitation: “La definición de ‘el mexicano’ es más bien una descripción de la forma como es dominado y, sobre todo, de la manera como es legitimada la explotación” (Bartra 1987 22).

Today, to defend the superiority of the *homo mexicanus* as the pinnacle of ideological evolution of the nation-estate is to forget the real ethnic disposition that enriches its social biodiversity: “¿Será posible definir al país de los 100 millones, donde diez de ellos son indígenas que hablan 62 lenguas vernáculas, al menos tres millones viven como ilegales en Estados Unidos y una cantidad incalculable nace y muere en selvas y desiertos sin dejar huella en el registro civil?” (Villoro 2005 38). This is the portrait (*retrato de grupo*) of Mexico in late capitalism; these are the numbers and the conditions of globalization that reformulate the philosophical and theoretical paradigms of José Vasconcelos, Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Leopoldo Zea and Ocativio Paz. What if we place the symbolic distribution of that dynamic system into the limits and conditions of a space such as Mexico City? What if a city of 20 million inhabitants, such as el DF (la capirucha) echoes the records of that multicultural map that Villoro draws? Thinking a uniform or unchanging population of the urban landscape of Mexico City is as

naïve as to believe still in the resilience of the *homo mexicanus*. In an age of transnational and transcontinental flows, of internal migrations and social displacements, the cultural biodiversity of Mexico City is rich and complex, vast and heterogeneous.

The description that the taxi driver provides of the city rests not only on the structural or geographical knowledge of the city, but also on the social consciousness and on the distribution of wealth. An interesting turn into the economic dynamics of the city provides new understanding of the real social distribution of the city: “Las Aguilas [...] ahí viven los negros ricos” / “¿Sabe qué me impresionó? Esas tiendas son de chinos o de coreanos. Ecatepec es negro pero las tiendas las dominan los orientales” / “Si usted agarra de ahí hacia el Zócalo pasa por un chingo de pizzerías de italianos. En la plaza de Santo Domingo hay una sinagoga y unos carritos que echan humo y huelen resabroso” (Villoro 2014). The de-contextualization of the neighborhoods through the hypothetical substitution of places reframes the socio dynamics of the urban space. These speculative ethnic and economic twists reshape the urban landscape of Mexico City: this is no longer a space exclusively arranged for Mexicans, but a multicultural and conjectural sphere that encompasses Black, Asian, Italian, Jewish communities. The poetic transformation contemplates new cultural and social paradigms, while criticizing the existing socio-ethnic boundaries of the cityscape. Through the absence, the presence is even stronger.

Emergent spatial formations (such as the hierarchy center/periphery, north/south, or the complex block of nations, such as NAFTA) reveal that position within a cultural system of space determine the value of the place. Being part of a system not only determined the relevance of the place, but also which position plays within the whole dynamic of the system. Power relations cause changes (relocation) within the matrix of

the systemic structure, affecting as well the social and ethnic distribution. For instance, the “symbolic representation of cities,” as Hall implies, falls within two geographical axes that determined its cultural mobility: “within cities, or internal regionalization, and between cities and systems of space at other levels, such as the region, nation or international region” (Hall 204). Internal and external axes position cities within larger spaces of representation, transmuting the hierarchies of values imbedded in it (Hall). Trans-urban narratives clearly illustrate the shift of social and ethnic values within larger spaces of representation. The historical condition of globalization places cities within the process of cultural relocation. In this sense, cities (such as Mexico City) can be relocated from the internal framework of the nation’s limits, into external cultural systems of space (such as NAFTA). Transitional relations between Mexico City and major urban centers in the US can complicate the dynamics of sociability and the traditional layout of the social space.

### **The Migration Story (Chicago-Mexico City)**

In an age of transnational interchanges, in the door opened by urban culture and the post-Mexican condition, trans-urban narratives bring a sociopolitical / sociocultural emphasis to the story and the speech of those who live in the threshold between two realities. Such as Villoro’s taxi driver, his whole understanding of the world, his entire cultural perspective and social dimension of the American city is never limited by his Mexican identity, but enriched by his condition of *chilango* or *defeño* (Mexico City inhabitant). Because, if we look closely, the taxi driver’s speech provides not only a profound insight into the socioeconomic status of this character within the parameters of

his social space, but also the symbolic resources behind his drive of meaning-making of the urban landscape that crisscrosses cultural borders. Here, income and education, social world and cultural assimilation react as a way of legitimization of his position as a working class that has migrated to the US, and his appropriation over an urban landscape (symbolic world) that is not Mexico, neither America. His discourse emphasizes his double position as a Mexican worker that experiences Chicago as an immigrant (undocumented immigrant? bracero worker? illegal alien?), but also as a humble taxi driver in Mexico City: “¿Usted conoce Chicago? [...] Ah caray, ¿cómo le explicaré pa’ que me entienda? [...] Es una ciudad canija, de veras canija” (Villoro 2014). The bi-conditionality of his immigrant and working class experiences stresses not only his access to a certain productive vocabulary and lexicon due to his social condition, but also defines the subjective selection of landmarks that he chooses as representative of both places. Does he compare or reduce both cities based on a real qualitative judgment of the places, or is it merely arbitrary? How does this selection reflect the social reality of the taxi driver in the US and in Mexico?

Behind the ludic tone of the story, there lies a critical vision around the migratory flow that interrelates urban centers on both sides of the Mexico-US border. Mirror replications or images of the same distorted reality, Chicago and Mexico City reflect themselves in the other as imageries of the same geopolitical mirror: “Descendí en una calle cualquiera. El taxista se persignó con el billete y arrancó rumbo a los vientos de Chicago, Distrito Federal” (Villoro 2014). The transnational comparative game that Villoro’s story sketches makes evident the flux of people that emigrates constantly to these urban centers; furthermore, the radical importance of these urban landscapes in the

production of economic and social opportunities in the age of globalization stands out its relevance as point of arrival of the flow of people in search of work: “¡No sabe qué torres! Ochenta pisos de puro cristal. Se necesitan unos huevotos para trabajar de limpiavidrios. A esos cuates les dicen ‘la fuerza aérea’, ¡pura jerga de altura! Un cuñado mío apenas aguantó un día en un andamio [...] a mi cuñado se le frunció en las alturas. De pronto me dice: ‘rifarme el fisico para vivir como negro, ¡ni madres!’” (*Idem*).

In *Transnationalism from Below* (1998), Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo made a clear distinction between the multinational relations of the private companies and the nation-state, and the social activities of the cross-border communities. With the name of “transnationalism from above,” Smith and Guarnizo define transnational activities that encompass corporations and states; while “transnationalism from below” focus on international migrants and its communal linkages (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). This conceptual difference also makes a division between the macro-sphere of the geopolitical institutions that praise multinational relations in pro of economic interests, and the micro-sphere of the individuals who build cultural and social bonds across the nation as a means to maintain proximity with their community. This fundamental dichotomy of the system allows us to perceive the different level of application of the transnational phenomena. For example, the study of Villoro’s work directs our attention to the field of the “transnationalism of below,” making the “transmigrants” (transnational migrants) the most important agent of change in the narrative. The actions of the individual who is trying to build strong links between Mexico and the US in his storytelling provide an evidence of how transmigrants modify their social space in order to “maintain, build, and reinforce multiple linkages with their

countries of origins” (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc 1995, p. 52). Thomas Faist, in the other hand, pays attention to the “creation and reproduction of migrant networks” that affect the social space of the migrant communities (Faist 215). That human action is essential to comprehend how social space in trans-urban narratives can be intrinsically modify and change in regards to social and cultural factors in Chicago and Mexico City.

However, the trans-urban paradigm of this migratory flux between Mexico City and Chicago is not only a priority of the new Mexican narratives in the age of globalization, it can also be re-interpreted from the cultural perspective of the Mexican-American experience that provide us with a historic guideline of this phenomenon. In Chapter Two, I will explore the trans-urban standpoint of Sandra Cisneros, one of the most influential Mexican-American writers of recent years, and who provides an accurate vision of the affective and emotional relations that entangle both spaces in her narrative, while exposing a little glimpse into the domestic environment of transmigrant families.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Way Back Home: Mexico City / Chicago**

“I no longer make Chicago my home, but Chicago still makes its home in me. I have Chicago stories I’ve yet to write. So long as those stories kick inside me, Chicago will still be home.”

Sandra Cisneros, *A House of My Own*

#### **Introductory Vignette: Living in Transition**

She sits in the back seat of a red Chevrolet station wagon in a hot summer day. Inside, the voices of her family fill the environment with whispers of their past. Outside, the changing landscape makes evident that she is traversing bi-national geographies. She is on her way to a city that is quite similar to the city she has left, the same old travel that she and her family have been doing since she has memory. In the middle of the dusty freeway, in the intermediate gap of an intergenerational journey that crisscrosses latitudes, nations, and memories, she is on her way to a destiny that is also an origin, an end that is also a beginning, a Mexican city that is also an American metropolis. Because the equidistant space between North-South/South-North finds its route in the words of a story that takes its character far beyond the boundaries of space and time, and into the streets of Chicago and Mexico City.

In an age of transnational interchanges, in the door opened by the urban communication between Mexico City and Chicago, the Mexican-American writer, Sandra Cisneros, provides an accurate vision of the affective and emotional relations that entangle both spaces in her narrative, while exposing a little glimpse into the domestic environment of the immigrant/transmigrant families.

Born and raised in Chicago, Cisneros spends most of her childhood traveling between these two urban spaces, due to her father's family. Her father, Alfredo Cisneros, was a "fanfarrón, a dandy" who ran away from his home in Mexico City when he was young, and who arrived like any other immigrant in Chicago to an industrial city where predominant white communities, several group identities (Polish, Italians, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguan, Colombians) and positions (old immigrants vs. new immigrants) were in constant struggle. As Gabriel Arredondo suggests, for a Mexican immigrant such as Cisneros's father, topics such as Mexicanidad or nationalism in the urban American landscape became a whole reconsideration of the collective identity of the group: "In Chicago, Mexicanidad emerged as fragile but proud identity that wove together elements of postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism and nostalgic conservative histories of 'Mexico Lindo' (Beautiful Mexico) with the acknowledgement of growing anti-Mexican biases" (Arredondo 145). Inspired perhaps by the feelings of nostalgia and effervescent nationalism, he made his whole family travel every summer to La Capital in order to reproach their own roots: "We were always *amolados*, always traveling from Chicago to Mexico City and back on a shoestring. No seat belts. No credit cards. No stopping. Bologna Sandwiches for dinner" (Cisneros 2015 255-56).

Episodes of her childhood, such as the unexpected events of a Mexican-American family in its trips between Mexico and the US, provide the basis for the formation of a transnational identity in Cisneros's narrative. Books such as *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) or *Caramelo* (2002) employ the voice of kids as a means to describe the urban reality (Chicago-Mexico City) and the socioeconomic conditions of the post-war period in a transnational setup. In contrast with Villoro's narratives that

mainly focuses in the urban changes of Mexico City during neoliberalism, the affective and innocent language of Cisneros's characters erase the cultural differences embedded in the particular geographical and historical situation of the industrialization period in Mexico and the US during the 1960s. Her fixation in the recreation of the events of her past provides some clues of her own literary style. On the one hand, as Héctor Calderón suggests, her "childhood memories of La Capital" generated in the author a "little girl's identity formation in relation to a Spanish-language world" that would help her to resist and challenge the Anglo-Saxon world through her writing (117).

On the other hand, the sense of awareness of Mexico in Chicago's Mexicans (Arredondo) allowed her to have a relative cultural and geographical proximity with her roots while living in the environment of an American city that was struggling within a deteriorating industrial economy, and an intense racial conflict. After the early years of the postwar boom, Chicago (1950 -1960), as Larry Bennett suggests in *The Third City* (2010), experienced a racial crisis as the result of a second stage of urban redevelopments that affected poor, immigrants and African American communities from the near-Loop, South and West Side areas (Bennett 188). Cisneros, in *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *Woman Hollering Creek*, depicts some of the consequent effects of this social instability among ethnic neighborhoods, while maintaining a cultural proximity with her own Mexican heritage.

Since the days of Jane Addams and her social equity policies, subsequent and repetitive cases of class, gender and ethnic unrest has been the subject of most of the descriptions that we have of Chicago and its urban fabric. The methodological and scientific approximation of the Chicago School of urban sociology (Robert E. Park,

Ernest Burgess, Roderick D. MacKenzie) is one of these fantasies of the intellect that have tried to embrace a totalizing theory of the urban dynamics, while describing the racial and immigration patterns of growth expanding along “radiant lines” in the geography of the city (Simpson and Kelly). Perhaps the concentric rings of growth that epitomizes Ernest Burgess’s zone theory illustrate the theoretical caprices that surpass the limits of the physical map in order to affect the everyday life behavior of Chicago’s population. But Cisneros’s literature provides an intricate cartography that expands the limits itself of this urban settlement in the Midwest. Such as Louise Año Nuevo Kerr and her record of the Mexican-American immigration to Chicago, Cisneros’s narratives portrait a substantial episode in the history of migratory fluxes changing the cultural and social patterns in the core of the American city. The movement between here and there (Mexico-US), and the experiences derived from that trans-urban movement frame the conditions of her literature, and the plot of her books.

If I place Chicago and Mexico City side by side, both cities reveal the same intricate layout where the constant flow of material and immaterial objects complicate their internal dynamic and organization. Both cities generate a unique sociopolitical cartography of displacement, such as the taxi driver’s mental map in Villoro’s narrative (Chapter One), where the images become one and the limits between one thing and the other disappear; in Cisneros’s work, the multiple narrative nodes of her writing, where memories of the childhood reveal elaborate emotional connections between the two different cityscapes, allow the same process of trans-urban connection that generate profound roots of affection between the emblematic spaces of her childhood.

Because, the trans-urban paradigm of this migratory flux between Mexico City and Chicago that was explored in the First Chapter can also be re-interpreted from the cultural perspective of the Mexican-American experience. Sandra Cisneros, one of the most influential Mexican-American writers of the recent years, provides an accurate vision of the affective and emotional relations that entangle both spaces in her narrative, while exposing a little glimpse into the domestic environment of the immigrant families. Therefore, this chapter comprehends the narrative phenomenon of trans-urban cultural intersection, interconnection and movement between Mexico City and Chicago, that I call trans-urbanity. The purpose of this chapter is to understand why the intersection between Chicago and Mexico City releases a series of socio-political / socio-cultural questions in the narrative of Mexican-American writer Sandra Cisneros; and why the peculiar cartography (transnational/trans-urban spaces) that she presents in her literature reveals a geopolitical reorganization of global coordinates (Global North/Global South) that challenges conventional paradigms.

### **North-South / South-North y De Regreso: Trans-Urban Mobility in Sandra Cisneros**

Chicago and Mexico City play mirror images in the narrative of Cisneros, and that is probably consistent and parallel with her own experience of both spaces, as well as experience of her parents. For her, Chicago represents the city where her mother grew up; the Near West Side neighborhood and the flea market on Maxwell Street where two little girls buy damaged dolls in “Barbie-Q” in *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991); or the *barrio* where the little Esperanza Cordero grows physically and emotionally during one year in

*The House on Mango Street* (1984). This working-class neighborhood at the west of the mid-century Chicago River is an “urban heterotopic place” where, as Olga Herrera suggests, one can find the “racial, ethnic, and cultural intersections” and confluences that make it a distinctive landmark in this “heavily segregated city” (Herrera 162); a “point of global convergence” and cultural relocation where a market on Maxwell Street can easily become a “cosmopolitan” venue in which inhabitants can lose trace of their own lives in the American city, while escaping the epistemic limitations of the Global North: “Maxwell Street is different. It reminds Father of the open-air markets in Mexico” (Cisneros 2002 295). On the contrary, Mexico City is the homeland of her father; the space where three little kids play Flash Gordon vs. Ming the Merciless outside a Mexican church in “Mericans” (Cisneros 1992 19); or where a little girl visits her awful grandmother’s house on La Fortuna, number 12 in “Tepeyac” (Cisneros 1992 23). In contrast with the Near West Side, the Colonia Tepeyac Insurgentes is not a multicultural spot, but rather a traditional working-class district that is tangled within the religious practices of the city; because in this area rests the *Basílica de Guadalupe* and the *Cerro del Tepeyac*, one of the most influential Catholic shrines in Latin America. This particularity helps Cisneros to play in her short stories with the misconceptions that people can have of Mexican-American families in Mexico during the 1950’s: ““But you speak English!’ ‘Yeah,’ my brother says, ‘we’re Mericans’” (Cisneros 1992 20). In both instances –in the city of her mother, and in the homeland of her father–, it is possible to perceive the sense of cultural relocation in Cisneros’s literature that places the urban migrant in a different environment, a movement of cultural return that reposition the body back and forth into the root of a lost subjectivity. The transitional movement of Cisneros’s

characters that interrelates the urban landscape with an explosion of affective and emotional memories; the transnational interrelations and the transference of material and immaterial elements crisscrossing the borders that reveal a cycle of movement North to South and vice versa.

Community networks and their cultural representation constitute important features of the transnational space in trans-urban narratives, because as Henri Lefebvre implies in an age of post-industrial geographies spaces no longer "contain opacities, bodies and objects," but "sequences, sets of objects, concatenations of bodies" (Lefebvre 1991:183). The theoretical and productive dimension of space, as vessel of connected realities and distributive nets, distances from the merely modern image of space as container of individual objects. This same idea helps Julie Gilson to envision transnationalism in a completely different perspective. For her, "the transnational may be understood as the product of broadly shared sociocultural frames of reference, wrapped in a conceptualization of space, and mapped out as a result of the tangible experience of reiterative interaction" (Gilson 295).

For Thomas Faist, transnational spaces represent a transcendental part of the migratory process because they permit "the adaptation of immigrants and refugees in the receiving nation-states" (Faist 2014). The increasing flow of transnational activities, and the constant transfer and relocation of entire communities from both sides of the national spectrum posit "the border-crossing expansion of social space" that allow a better environment for the adaptation of the immigrant (Faist 214). In this sense, transnational social spaces are: "combinations of social and symbolic ties, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations that can be found in at least two

geographically and inter nationally distinct places” (Faist 216). These spaces are by-products of migratory systems that nourishes from cultural and geographical exchanges, and become systemic appendages of the “international space of sovereign nation-states” (Faist 217). Faist also emphasizes the close interaction that exists within these transnational spaces between institutions and communities in the “host state”, the “sending state” and the minority group (migrants and refugees) (Faist 217); these multilayer interactions promotes the development and diversification of different modalities of transnational social spaces, such as the “transnational exchange” (export-import businesses that satisfy essential needs of the immigrants communities), “transnational circuits” (circulation of goods, people, and information crisscrossing the borders), “transnational communities” (strong social and symbolic ties that impact space and networks in both countries) (Faist 220-221). Certainly, trans-urban narratives nourishes from the unique circumstances of the transnational space; however, despite this exhaustive radiography, the radical spatiality of the trans-urban landscape –the possibility of two urban experiences embedded in one transitory image – still challenges the conditions of the imagination of nation-state in literature, deforming traditional conventions or realistic representations. Unique time-space and social conditions challenge the principles of the transnational question, and place the art of aesthetic representation a little bit further in its exploration of a hybrid context; in the movement and displacement from one place into another of the geopolitical map of late capitalism.

Perhaps the work that better expresses this trans-urban mobility is Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* (2002). In *Caramelo*, the trip that Celaya’s (Lala) family makes every summer—from Chicago to Mexico City—symbolizes the other direction that takes

this migratory flux between these two cities: from North to South. The upside down route, the upturned path of a population of Mexican and Mexican-Americans communities that reveal the historical itinerary of the post-war era that sends them back to home in the Global South: “Chicago, Route 66 –Ogden Avenue past the giant Turtle Wax turtle– all the way to Saint Luis, Missouri, which Father calls by its name, San Luis. San Luis to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Dallas. Dallas to San Antonio to Laredo on 81 till we are on the other side. Monterrey. Saltillo. Matehuala. San Luis Potosí. Querétaro. México City” (Cisneros 2002 5). While in her first books, *The House on Mango Street* (1984) or *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), the natural movement of the urban characters obey the logic passage of the “family’s migratory roots and routes from the Global South to the city streets and houses of the Global North” (Saldívar 2012 157); here, in *Caramelo*, Cisneros changes this paradigm, turning upside down the unidirectional flux of migration from South to North, providing in the itinerary of the Reyes family a bi-directionality that moves freely epistemologies, languages and affections on both sides of that Global North/South boundary. As Adriana Estill suggests, this deviation within the logic of Cisneros’s narratives not only connects Chicago and Mexico City through the “migrations and settlement practices of the Reyes”, but also through the way their memories “become integrated into a narration of *historia*” (Estill 102). In other words, the duality “history and story” takes a relevant position, because it encompasses the historical movement of the migratory flux between these places – emphasized in three transmigrant generations: Narciso Reyes in the 1920s / Inocencio Reyes in the 1940s / Celaya in the 1960s–; and the personal journey (*historia personal*)

of the Reyes family (from Soledad's and Narciso's union, to Celaya's account of her family) that is fictionalized in the narration itself.

If Chicago takes part in the deconstruction of the transnational cartography of migratory routes, Mexico City, or "La capirucha", becomes the other edge of this urban binomial that changes the sociocultural itinerary of displacement; the end of a sociohistorical/sociocultural journey that comprises for First and Second generations of urban Mexican-Americans the element that reunites and reunifies the homeland; the movement of a growing lower middle class that has, in a transnational economy, acquired the income, or that has to win their right through serving in the army—such as Cisneros's dad—to legally crisscross the border in the quest of the traces of their identitarian past. In this sense, for Celaya's family, revisiting the house of the Awful Grandmother on Destiny Street represents the reestablishment of memory traces that they kept lost in the city of the father, the city of the origin: "Mexico City! La capital. El D.F. La capirucha. The center of the universe! The valley like a bowl of hot beef soup before you taste it. And a laughter in your chest when the car descends" (Cisneros 2002 25).

Because the bidirectional travel of Celaya's family in *Caramelo* (North-South/South-North) not only testify the inter-nomadic experience between opposite cities in the geopolitical map of late capitalism, it also reconsiders what does it mean to have a home, what does it mean to feel safe and comfortable in a household no matter in what side of the border you are. In "Straw into Gold," Cisneros acknowledges herself the position that her grandparent's house—on Fortuna, number 12, Mexico City—had in the configuration of the house trope in her writing: "When I was a girl we traveled to Mexico City so much I thought my grandparent's house on Fortuna, number 12, was home. It was

the only constant in our nomadic ramblings from one Chicago flat into another. The house on ‘Destiny Street’, number 12, in the Colonia Tepeyac would be the only home I knew, and the nostalgia for a home would be a theme that would obsess me” (Cisneros 2015 78). Fortuna, number 12, becomes the model for a nuclear and private space in which her family can find a safe place from the constant changes and the dislocation within their own style of live in Chicago and in Mexico City; because tracing back her own roots into the deep search of her identity bring her to this static milestone that encapsulates the mutability of the public, and the stagnation of the private in Cisneros’s creative writing: “Home? Where’s that? North? South? Mexico? San Antonio? Chicago? Where, Father?” (380).<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, the idea of urban space allows her to anchor her subjectivity and the subjectivity of her characters to a more solid structure (the city, barrioscape, Chicagoland, La Capirucha), providing them a safety space against the mutability of national identity constructs. Such as Rossi Braidotti suggests, the potentiality of the nomadic subject to trespass “fluid boundaries” allow him/her to be in constant movement, without ever been imprisoned by the limiting conditions of fixation: “a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity” (22). The trans-urban nomadic subject can go beyond the containments of national or bi-national spaces,

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<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ramón Saldívar and José David Saldívar have extensively studied the notion of home as a safe space within the limits of the urban grid (*oikos*). The contribution to their ideas relies in understanding why this archetypical space in Mexico City (Fortuna 12) becomes the basis in her narrative for further explorations of the notion of household.

relinquishing of the restricting conditions of belonging, by providing strong roots that secure the psyche in the experiences within oneself.

### **Translocalities/Translocalidades and Trans-Urbanity: Female Perspective in an Urban Context**

Certainly, part of the complexity of Cisneros's literary mobility through different geographies relies not only in the meta-literary game that portrays the split subjectivities of the characters within this trans-urban environments; but also in an extra layer of interpretation within the density of the work that reconcile the position of women's literature within the Mexican and Mexican-American canon. Certainly, female writers such as María Elvira Bermúdez with her short story "Detente, Sombra" (1961), Cristina Rivera Garza with her book, *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999), Sandra Cisneros's with *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *Caramelo* (2002), Valeria Luiselli's *Los ingravidos* (2011) provide a new approach to the alternative cartography of urban literature that not only wanders through the common grounds of the city, but that explores the deepest secrets beneath the stratifications of male perspectives in an urban setup. Perhaps, part of this intricate condition rests in the fact that women have been alienated from the production and co-creation of the urban imaginary in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: vision that has been primarily dominated by male authors. Cisneros's achievement –as well as Bermúdez, Rivera Garza, Luiselli, and other female writers– is to break with the limitations in the field, pushing urban narratives into new boundaries, hemispheric and transnational boundaries that re-conceptualize the imagination of the urban landscape; her

literature dialogues with contemporary feminist discourses that re-orientate the concept of space, geography and gender in the age of neoliberalism.

In her text, “Enacting a Translocal Feminist Politics of Translation” (2014), Sonia E. Alvarez examines the problematic of understanding how “feminist discourses and practices” crisscrosses geopolitical boundaries while creating interpretive paradigms in various instances, sites and directionalities (Alvarez). Certainly, Edward Said’s “Traveling Theory” (1983), and Mary E. John’s *Discrepant Dislocations* (1996) questioned the circulation, movement and traffic of ideas and theories as rooted within worldwide circumstances that touch larger intellectual scenarios, historical structures and power dynamics (Said 1983 226). Based on this premises, Claudia de Lima Costa finds that Feminist theories fall under the unsettled category depicted by Said and John, a context in which “the constitution of knowledge formations” through crossing territories is constantly changed and regulated by “increasingly transnationalized, yet unequal, world economy and academic markets” (Costa 20). In the travels of Feminist theories through the vast ideological formations of Latin America and the United States, Claudia de Lima Costa acknowledges that the “challenges for hemispheric dialogue” rest in the asymmetric balance between “local resignification/appropriation” and the international/transnational “theoretical tendencies” that push concepts far beyond the point of encounter / translation (Costa 30); a politic of translation impulses the dialogue that interconnects and negotiates “between multiple subject positions embodied in subject-agents, acting in a vast variety of social spaces that intersect at different scales” (Lao-Montes 397). How to translate concepts that resist appropriation or deformation within the different cultural scenarios across borders? How to mediate the feminist discourses

within geopolitical boundaries? How to involve, as Sonia E. Alvarez suggests, the perspective and exchanges of women in Latin America and Latinas in the United States across diverse localities?

“Translocalities/Translocalidades” comprehend, in words of Sonia E. Alvarez, an indispensable concept for the forging of feminist “prosocial justice, antiracist, postcolonial/decolonial, and anti-imperial political alliances” across diverse localities (Alvarez 1). In the transborder/hemispheric cultural formation that embraces the interaction between Latin America and the US, the position of Third World feminism and Decolonial feminism push the issue of justice far beyond the hierarchical legacies of “racism, sexism, capitalism and heterosexism” (Lao-Montes 382). As Agustín Lao-Montes and Mirangela Buggs proposes, a politic of translocation connects “geographies of power at various scales (local, national, regional, global) with subject positions (gender/sexual, ethnoracial, class, etc.) that constitute the self” (Lao-Montes 391). Translocal imaginary sets in motion the mechanism of liberation of the self across nations, borders and identities; the complicated task of mediating (gender, class, race) the agency of the subjects between the perilous and turbulent modes of domination (discrimination, patriarchy, imperialism) in a globalize society. In this sense, the “translocal subject” (Lao-Montes and Buggs), the transmigrant “move[s] back and forth between localities, between historically situated and culturally specific (though increasingly porous) places, across multiple borders, and not just between nations” (Alvarez 2). In our neoliberal times, where the geography of displacement is regulated by the hemispheric dialectic between North/South, the trans/dislocated position of women allows them to travel beyond the mere limitations of the bodies, the capital or the ideas:

“we travel across multiple worlds within ourselves” (Alvarez 4). This flexibility of the translocal subjects/women permit them to move and transfer between emotional, cultural, physical passages that challenge the limits of their subjectivity in intersectional scenarios, the ideological distances and boundaries in a post-national era. Such as Virginia Woolf implies in her pioneering essay, *Three Guineas* (1938): "as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world."

This transference, this condition of the travel across different geographies in the hemispheric imagination is what connects Cisneros's, Rivera Garza's and Luiselli's texts with the work of these Feminist theoreticians. The translocal impulse that allows the crisscrossing of substantial limitations such as gender, class, and nation-estate, is what joins together the creative process of these Mexican and Mexican-American writers, and the voice of Sonia E. Alvarez, Norma Klahn, Claudia de Lima Costa or Mirangela Buggs. To question the “discourse of location,” to problematize the cultural restrictions embedded in the asymmetrical relation Chicago/Mexico City (First and Third World) that “naturalize[s] boundaries and margins,” such as Caren Kaplan suggests (187), is what allow Cisneros's work to define one position of the female perspective in the urban literature of the twenty-first century. Within these theoretical circumstances, Translocalities and Trans-urbanity dialogue in the definition and representation of paradoxical and oppressive spaces within the sociopolitical/socio-historical conditions of our globalize society. The demarcation of the female speech within the substantial reality of the trans-national city is what allows trans-urbanity to bring the translocal critic into the tangible environment of the urban communities. In this sense, trans-urban narratives provide a safety space for the re-imagination of crisscrossing and fluctuating

subjectivities among collapsing nation-state boundaries, while consenting a re-mapping of the urban landscape through the lenses of the female perspective: the geography of a female voice that twists and discloses the dominance of male control in the city.

### **(Un)natural Bridges, Transitional Spaces, and Trans-Urban Narratives**

The long tradition of Mexican-American scholars has already proposed alternative spaces of enunciation for the community, third spaces (Homi Bhabha, Ed Soja) that defy the mere concept of materiality while blurring distances between the subjective and the objective, the mind and the body. For instance, Gloria Anzaldúa, in “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces” (2002), deconstructs the physical notion of “bridges” by exploring the possibilities of these “archetypical” thresholds as “symbols of shifting consciousness” (243). The theoretical project, which started with the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), re-conceptualizes bridges as “passageways” that allow transitional instances that motivate a change into one’s perspective. The physical and mental state of “crossing borders,” the transformative process that prepare the individual into a stage of transition generates and encompasses “liminal (thresholds) spaces between worlds” that Anzaldúa calls “nepantla” (*tierra en medio*) (243). These unpredictable and unstable in-between spaces are “liminal zone[s]” where the individual lives in a constant state of displacement or dislocation from the objective reality, causing an unusual feeling of being detached from the realm of the ruling power. For Anzaldúa, her position as a queer woman of color embraces nepantla as a safety place for the exercise of the difference, the implementation of practices that reposition her body and mind in a state of constant change.

Trans-urban narratives deal with the difficulty of representing transitional subjectivities in fiction, not only in the sociopolitical context of crisscrossing the nation-state borders (Mexico-US / US-Mexico), but also in the internal reality of the individuals who have to reshape their whole worldview, such as Cisneros's character in *Caramelo*, Celaya, who has to crisscross the US-Mexico border every year just to return to *La capirucha*: "Every year I cross the border, it's the same –my mind forgets. But my body always remembers" (Cisneros 202 18). It is not thorough her mind, but through her body that she perceives the effects of the constant shift from one cultural reality into another, the unconscious outcome of a physical transition from paradoxically analogous and at the same time different urban experiences. The cultural adaptation of the social space shifts the city into "your home/your space" as a means to cope with the dilemma of the change. In this sense, Anzaldúa's *nepantla* describes in conceptual terms the problem of representation of the urban landscape in the trans-urban narratives: this land in-between that not only interconnects cultural bridges that allow the transition of the individuals between social spaces, but also creates a "liminal space" of expression for this mutable experience. Because the trans-urban character lives constantly in a state of displacement and dislocation from the objective reality, but that mutable condition makes them resist the constant bombarding of the systemic power. Their identity is not consolidated in a monolithic structure that privileges one cultural perspective, but in a hybrid/transnational compound that founds the urban experience the safety space for expressing their own understanding of the world.

In Cisneros's first book, *The House on Mango Street*, the protagonist, Esperanza, starts one of the chapters ("Laughter") by talking about the subtle relation between she

and her sister Nenny, a relative affinity that seems to be not quite obvious for most people. The connection between them, which not rest in a physical resemblance such as her Mexican-American friends Rachael and Lucy, goes deeper into the root itself of their essence as siblings; they are not physically equal, but they share feelings and ideas that makes them even closer: “Nenny and I don’t look like sisters... not right away [...] But we are more alike than you would know” (Cisneros 1991 17). This sudden meditations of the links between she and her sister become even more problematic when she finds a connection that is not quite clear to the naked eye: a house that looks like Mexico: “One day we were passing a house that looked, in my mind, like houses that I seen in Mexico. I don’t know why. There was nothing about the house that looked exactly like the houses I remembered. I’m not even sure why I thought it, but it seemed to feel right” (Cisneros 1991 17-18). Such as her relation with her sister, there is something about this house that makes it closer to Mexico that what she initially thinks. What is this Mexico that Esperanza is trying to find? Why a house in the middle of Mango Street can have any connection with the Mexico that she knows?

When the little protagonist tries to express her hypothesis—that the house looks like Mexico—her friends look her awkwardly; but it is Nenny who takes a step forward by expressing ambiguously to her sister: “Yes, that’s Mexico all right” (Cisneros 1991 18). The chapter itself revolves around subtle connections that are not apparent to the naked eye, that require an extra knowledge or interpretation that can only be accomplished with filiation (such as the likeness of two sisters); in this sense, this is not an instance of misidentification, but of acceptance of certain knowledge of Esperanza’s world of

references. Not even her Texan friends can see the resemblance, and that's perhaps the urban component of the house make it closer to the experience Esperanza has of Mexico.

To be and no to be part of a place, to misidentify oneself with the urban geography seems to be a paradigm evolving through the small vignettes of the text: a house that looks like Mexico, a Mexican-American family that moved from one part of the city to another, a girl that ruminates around these sporadic changes in her life. Relocation, diaspora and adaptation play significant roles in the construction of Esperanza's subjectivity, the re-education of her senses, emotions and sociability that allow her to create profound links with Mango Street. In "Four Skinny Trees", Esperanza contemplates four elms outside her window: "Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city" (Cisneros 1991 74). Once again, the estrangement with the landscape sparks off a series of questioning around the notion of belonging despite her Mexican-American heritage: tiny skinny alien trees just like her place in the middle of the American streets, in the edge of no-man's land that could be the inner-city of Chicago, or any other "generic city" of the Global North (Rem Koolhaas). But what seems to be a tragic approach to the concept of displacement and uprooting—taking innocent lives from their original land and placing them in the middle of the urban nowhere—, becomes a cogitation of the strong links that subjectivity can forge within the unfamiliar space: "Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down [...] Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be" (Cisneros 1991 74-75). The image provides a strong message regarding not only of the mechanisms of auto-survival

in Esperanza's mind against the forces of "social control" (Suzanne Roszak) in the urban assemblage, but the construction of epistemic resilient roots that disseminate in every direction, anchoring subjectivity in its place (down the earth and up into the sky). Roots that intertwine in a social scale, linking individuals with an environment of multicultural cohabitation (*cultura de convivencia*), such as José David Saldívar suggests, allowing them to cope and manage the socioeconomic inequality and "the catastrophe of the urban, Global North" (Saldívar 2012 156). Roots that, as Paul Gilroy points out in *After Empire*, generate a sense of "conviviality" within multicultural communities that interact in urban areas of the First World (Gilroy xi). In this sense, standing still despite the cultural relocation within the city allows Esperanza to not feel alienated within her new home, but also to expand her own horizon of social possibilities as a Mexican-American girl within the social sphere of Mango Street.

In the early literary world of Sandra Cisneros, especially in *The House on Mango Street*, there is not a name to give to these urban environments. It grasps the general category of *barrio*, which gives it universality within the multiple urban experience of Latino communities and multicultural neighborhoods in the US; it becomes a trademark (point of reference) that speak for the voices of those who has lived and inhabited those contested regions. That is, Cisneros's possibility of designing a "Chicana historical *barriology*" (Saldívar 2012 159)—through the poetic voice of her protagonist, Esperanza—that intimately negotiate the cultural imaginary of the social space with other male perspectives such as José Antonio Villareal's *Pocho* (1959), or Alejandro Morales's *Barrio on the Edge* (*Caras viejas, vino nuevo*, 1975).

But when that writing process accurately touches the names of Chicago and Mexico City, such as it happens in *Caramelo*, it involves itself in the real dynamics of places that become emblematic to Cisneros's life, and communicates socio-historical / socio-cultural aspects of those particular landscapes. The neutrality and seclusion of a US barrio dynamics become entangled with the endemic interactions of the Mexican barrios and *vecindades*. That subtle difference, which seems minimal or insignificant from any of the particular points of view, becomes larger and abysmal when it involves both sides; that is the skill and the mastery of Cisneros's writing, which can manipulate cultural and urban references from both sides in a way that softly melts and flows with the narrative momentum. The iconic imaginary of these trans-urban narratives functions as a metaphor or an allegory of the bi-national migratory drive after NAFTA where the experience of immigration touches the urban reality. Granted this literary consensus, writers from both sides of the border find alternative spaces of enunciation within the social reality of geographical displacement. But how Mexico City and Chicago generate strong roots and environment of cohabitation in creative works such as *Caramelo*?

### **Father's Personal Library: An Approach to Urban Graphic Culture**

Cisneros's father, Alfredo Cisneros, has a special place in her writing. His magnetic personality makes him, in a certain way, a loud-mouthed character that could have been part of a Sunday's comic strip, or the overconfident protagonist of a soap opera. For Cisneros, he was a *fanfarrón*, a dandy, but also a *chilango* who had a strong pride for his native city. In "Tapicero's daughter," Sandra acknowledges that: "People from Mexico City always think they're better than everybody else, because in their eyes

Mexico City is the center of the universe” (Cisneros 2015 145); his father’s arrogance make him feel superior to his fellow Chicanos, because in his perspective Mexico was “civilized” in comparison to the living conditions of Latinos/as in the US. Despite these circumstances, the role that her father has in her own personal imaginary is relevant for the construction of her own writing style; in a certain way, this same consistency can be found in the relation between Juan Villoro and his father (Luis Villoro): the wandering lifestyle of these paternal figures impulse the writers into subjective formations that will allow the translation between the here and there, the one and the other.

His impossibility to read in English caused him to find external sources for entertainment: “My father’s only reading includes Mexican comic books – *La Familia Burrón*, his chocolate-ink *Esto*, a Mexican sports magazine, or *fotonovelas*, little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the character’s mouths in bubbles” (Cisneros 2015 92). In a “Fotonovelas” (*Caramelo*), Cisneros provides a similar description when the Awful Grandmother secretly takes from her walnut-wood armoire a stack of *fotonovelas* and comic books (*El libro secreto, Lágrimas, risa y amor, La Familia Burrón*) that she gives to her favorite son (Celaya’s father): “Father spends whole days indoors in bed, smoking cigarettes and reading. He doesn’t leave the room” (Cisneros 2002 63). It is going to be this graphic culture, these Mexican comic books and pocket-sized *fotonovelas* in her father’s personal library the primary contact of Cisneros with the written Spanish in her childhood: “When father was done with his little books, he’d turn them over to me, and I painted over the ladies’ chocolate-tinted mouths with a read-lead pencil dipped in spit. This is how I learned to read in Spanish” (Cisneros 2015 296-297). Far more than the acquisition of written Spanish, it seems that these pop

culture icons provided a direct communication with another language, the language of urban representation and family melodramas, the extravaganza of the slang and the cartoonish images in the comic and the *fotonovelas* that will nourish her writing. Paradoxically, her obtainment of this unique vision of the Mexican urban culture echoes Villoro's experience of the Americanization of the social space in his childhood, in both cases mass media and domestic liaisons connect writers with the other urban reality, that trans-urban perception that will define their distinctive approach to topic of intersectional spaces and interconnected topologies.

Unquestionably, this is not the only approach that Cisneros's writing has with the topic of mass media. In short stories such as "Woman Hollering Creek" or "Bien Pretty," she provides strong resilience against the world of Latin American *telenovelas*, and its tactics of women indoctrination. Jean Franco, in her study of North American and Mexican popular culture, suggests that mass-media texts, such as *fotonovelas* or *telenovelas*, reinforce the "incorporation of woman into society" by serializing the idealization (fetishism) of their image and their position as consumers: "the very factor that makes their exploitation, both as a reproducers of the labor force and as cheap labor" (Franco 137). As Héctor Calderón implies, by portraying strong and resolute feminine characters, the written production of the Mexican-American feminist Cisneros destabilized and transgressed this "literature of feminine oppression" that programs Mexican women within a twisted standardize model: "to be beautiful, find love, get married, and have children (Calderón 187). In "Only Daughter" (1989), Cisneros reveals how important was the acquisition of that popular dialect of urban culture that desacralized the mere principles of this woman fetishism, and how transcendent was for

her relation with her father, the ordinary and everyday life reader of her literature: “In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though my father can’t read English words [...] My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is uninterested in reading, and yet one whom I’m writing about and for, and privately trying to woo” (Cisneros 2015 92). The adaptation and translation of these everyday life images in regards of a specific public provides a reconsideration of Cisneros’s voice in her writing, and her gender position. How important is this urban graphic culture for the consolidation of a sense of belonging for the Mexican-American community?

In 2007, the city council and the Head of Government of Mexico City (Marcelo Ebrard) paid tribute to the Mexican cartoonist Gabriel Vargas (1915-2010). During that event, the Mexican sociologist Carlos Monsiváis gave a speech recognizing Vargas not only as a distinguished citizen, but also an important icon of urban culture in Mexico City.<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Vargas is remembered for his comic strip *La Familia Burrón*—a cartoon that he started drawing in 1937—which centers on life and the vicissitudes of the Burróns (Regino Burrón, Borola Tacuche and their sons Macuca, Regino and Fóforo Cantarranas): a lower-class family that inhabits in the fictional alley, Callejón del Cuajo, in Downtown, Mexico City. His comic strip, as Monsiváis acknowledges, provides a thorough description of the popular practices and environment of the urban barrios or *vecindades* of el Centro Histórico through a detail analysis and sardonic humor (*del registro naturalista a la fantasía satírica*) that exploits the sensible aspects of poverty (*la felicidad de la pobreza*) with a mastery of the Chilango slang: “el uso del habla popular,

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<sup>12</sup> This speech was published originally in the Mexican newspaper, *La Jornada*, in November 27 of 2007.

creativo, convincente y que causa adicción; la conversión de la vecindad típica y arquetípica del Centro o del Centro Histórico” (Monsiviás 2007).

Juan Villoro, in “El esplendor postal de Borola Burrón,” also finds in the “burronesco” attitude of this lower-class family the cheerful rebellion (*alegre rebeldía*) that allows them to cope and survive the urban demeanor of a space in decadence, while maintaining an exaggerated, inventive, and proletarian behavior, portrayed in the hyperbolic and easy-going performance of the mother, Borola Tacuche (Villoro 78). These “burronesco” attitude, this contrasting attribute acts over the social space, affecting, reshaping and reconstructing the links between the surreal and bizarre inhabitants of the Callejón del Cuajo in search for their own urban Arcadia: “la edificación de una utopía superchilanga: Burronlandia, parque temático organizado como una vecindad” (Villoro 78).

But Monsiviás, in a Brechtian act during his speech, turns his back for a moment to Vargas’s tribute and ask his public for the transcendence of *La Familia Burrón* in their own lives: “¿Qué ha pasado con los públicos de don Jilemón Metralla y Bomba, el Güen Caperuza, Cuataneta, don Regino, doña Borola, la tía Cristeta, Ruperto Tacuche, Bella Bellota, la Divina Chuy, don Susano Cantarranas [?]” (Monsiviás). Where are the fervent readers that for more than sixty years have been reading the comic strip? Where are those people that feel identity with the humorous misadventures of Regino and Borola in the Callejón del Cuajo? As Monsiviás suggests, some of them got older, some of them left the *vecindad*, but some of them took a different track: “Se fueron a los *stéits* y allí trabajaron en los campos o en el Renglón de Servicios (ya casi otro país) o de elevadoristas o de *janitors*, *gimme a break*, y se acordaban de *La familia Burrón* cuando

conversaban telepáticamente con la palomilla brava” (Monsiváis 2007). The diaspora of the Burrón’s public extends far beyond the margins of the Centro Histórico, the cityscape or the nation-estate, escaping even the confinements of the social mobility ruled by class hierarchies evolving in sixty years of economic development and transnational interchanges: “Desertaron del Centro, abandonaron el Centro Histórico, les dieron un aventón a la próxima parada del ascenso social, se burlaron módicamente de sus orígenes” (Monsiváis 2007). Leaving the origins behind, this heterogenic pack of honorary *capitalinos* took with them, even beyond the US-Mexico border, the structural basis of Mexico City’s collective imagination and the common language of urban comedy: “Se extendieron en sus camas o catres como mancha urbana y adonde fueron se llevaron su vocabulario de los domingos” (Monsiváis 2007). That *relajo* sensibility, that epistemic apparatus of the *peladito* in the 1950’s and the 1970’s, the time lapse between Alemán’s and Portillo’s presidency, define a way of perceiving the phenomenon of urbanity, despite the geographical limits or the living conditions. Because, as Monsiváis suggests, perhaps we cannot restrict or base the notion of national identity in the mythology created by a cultural icon such as La Familia Burrón (“*La nación no es un comic*”), but we can use the comic strip as a catalog in which we can unearth the origins of our own subjectivities despite on which side of the border you are.

Perhaps Cisneros’s father is one of these fervent readers of Gabriel Varga’s work that Monsiváis describes in his speech, a person who despite his migratory status, the physical and psychological distance with his home, he still carries in his mind, and in his pocket, the graphic culture of his urban socio-space. As Leticia Neria and Mark Aspinwall suggest, the rich tradition of humorous comics and visual media has been part

of long history of “visual representation” in Mexico (*Kalimán, Chanóc, El Libro Vaquero*, etc.) and also in Latin America (*Condorito, Mafalda*); but the topics framed in *La Familia Burrón* stand out for its commitment to the modern representation of a “Mexican social imaginary” that confronts the social problems of the city by “accusing the authorities directly for the poverty and marginalization” (Neria and Aspinwall 26). And perhaps all the constructive language of an urban reality is transferred to the system of representation that Cisneros acquired during her childhood, and then digested through her mature writing. What if her writing is populated all over by Reginos Burrón and Borolas Tacuche? What if her character’s paradigmatic families, such as Celaya’s or Esperanza’s lower-class households, are not more than the Familias Burrón of Chicago? How these cartoonish and peripatetic settings in her literary style reveal a profound condition of her trans-urban narrative?

### **Los Burrón de Chicago and Graphic Narrators: Towards a Graphic Understanding of Urban Humor**

In “Gabriel Vargas: La herejía violenta” (2010), Carlos Monsiváis discerns that, in a first level of interpretation, *La Familia Burrón* imitates the typical nuclear structure of the family household depicted in the American comic, but with a Mexican twist: “el padre, la madre dominante (que se presta para el esquema de una cultura masoquista-maternalista, con la mujer como el centro de la vida occidental), dos hijos adolescentes de lugar común” (Monsiváis 2010 42). While the American comic tends to privilege in small episodes the joke and the funny business over the vicissitudes of the characters (*Little Lulu, Blondie, Dennis the Menace*); the Vargas’s comic strip depicts a process that

centers its gaze over the behavior of its protagonists: “un proceso: el de la vida diaria – obviamente deformada y ofrecida *ad absurdum*, hasta sus últimas consecuencias– de la clase media pobre y del mundo de la vecindad o el multifamiliar” (Monsiváis 2010 42). These preconditions reformulate the whole sequence of events in the cartoon panels, while settling the boundaries of the reactions and the behavior of the characters. In this sense, the construction of the family household is reoriented to the possibilities of socialization within an urban Mexican setting, rather than an American way of life. The heroes or protagonist are no longer the white-collar workers (*white collar norteamericano*) or the middle class employees whose life are limited to the Suburbia they inhabit, such as Chic Young’s *Blondie*, Bill Keane’s *Family Circus* or J.R. Williams’s *Out Our Way*; but rather the common lower-class citizens (Regino Burrón or Borola Tacuche) entrapped in the middle of the inner city, trying to provide shelter and food to their family, while maintaining a sense of humor. For Monsiváis, all these thematic conditions contribute to the demystification of Vargas’s characters (*desmitificar al héroe*) through the elimination of all emblematic, even ideal qualities existing within them, and leaving only the empty shell of the human condition, dressed with the secret ingredient of humor and comedy. And that is the formation of a unique Mexican humor (*humorismo específicamente Mexicano*) that nourishes itself with the experiences and traditional challenges of a real urban life, and which serves as a mirror to the crowd that finds its self-identify in the absurdity and the nonsense. Leticia Neria and Mark Aspinwall acknowledge that “humor” not only helps to “reinforce boundaries and identities” by establishing affinities between pairs, it also “occurs in the milieu of social rules or codes”; in other words, it settles limits within a social group by building codes of

comedy that may not be understood by people outside this circle (Neria and Aspinwall 29-30). When something such as this graphic Mexican humor is settled, the codes of reference within a visual imaginary are established, creating a certain degree of correspondence within that group. What is unique of this cultural phenomenon--the transcendence and transference of human emotions within a codified language--is that not only departs from the general assumptions of criticizing the foundations of the social contract by playing with the misadventures of a Mexican family household in the big city, but also, as Monsiváis implies, the constitution of a sense of belonging through the formation of a language of representation (graphic language) and a tone of expression (urban humor) that crisscross geographical, historical, and sociocultural borders.

Cisneros's narrative tends to build its characters around this unique Mexican humor that is entrapped in the discernment of a social life within the boundaries of a city, such as Vargas did with the bizarre adventures of the Burrón family. This is especially developed in those urban narratives (*The House on Mango Street*, *Caramelo*, and some short stories from *Woman Hollering Creek*, such as "Barbi-Q", "Mericans" or "Tepeyac") in which she frames her characters in urban conditions that decentered the reactions of the typical Mexican-American family, and push them into the absurdity of everyday life. In *Caramelo*, the criticism of the social space and the practices of everyday life collide against a wall of incongruity in the Reyes's household, whose center itself is the conflict of Celaya's parents (Inocencio and Zoila) in regard to Candelaria, symbolized in the transnational identitarian engagement between the American and the Mexican culture: "For a long time I thought the eagle and the serpent on the Mexican flag were the United States and Mexico fighting. And then, for an even longer time afterward, I

thought of the eagle and the serpent as the story of Mother and Father” (Cisneros 2002 235). But far more than a problem of parenthood out of the wedlock, it is the misadventures and humorous journeys of this lower-class family through the different stages in the development of the modern city, the ones that reshape the urban landscape and its practices; and this factor can be traced directly to the origin of the love story of Soledad and Narciso (Awful Grandmother and Little Grandfather). Soledad’s and Narciso’s story embodies not only the foundation of the Reyes’s household that will extend its lineage beyond the confinements of the nation-estate, but also the frame of reference for analysis of the social changes in Mexico City: from the Porfirista city (*La ciudad de los palacios*) at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the bustling modernist city of the 1950’s. In this sense, the starting point of the genealogy of an urban Mexican-American family is closely tied to the local mythology (Mexico-Tenochtitlan foundation, Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl), tradition (El Tepeyac and the Virgen de Guadalupe), and the cultural rhythm of the metropolis that embrace them:

Once in the land of *los nopales*, before all the dogs were named after Woodrow Wilson, during that epoch when people still dance *el chotis*, *el cancán*, and *el vals* to a *violín*, *violoncello*, and *salterio*, at the nose of a hill where a goddess appeared to an Indian, in that city founded when a serpent-devouring eagle perched on a cactus, beyond the twin volcanoes that were once prince and princess, under the sky and on the earth live the woman Soledad and the man Narciso. (Cisneros 2002 91)

Such as the Buendía family and Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967) or the Burrón family and the Callejón del Cuajo in Vargas’s work, the

personal story of the Reyes family and the historical development of Mexico City (social space) run in parallel, fueling this interaction with an extensive catalogue of urban characters (Awful Grandmother, Little Grandfather, Eleuterio, Regina, Uncle Fat-Face, Uncle Baby, Exaltación Enestrosa, Aunty Light-Skin, etc.) that populates the pages of Cisneros's book with traces of personal stories that testify to the historical account of the city: for example, Narciso Reyes who loses three of his ribs during the Ten Tragic Days (Decena Trágica) in the middle of the Mexican Revolution in Mexico City (Cisneros 2002 127); Soledad Reyes who watches from her kitchen window a group of zapatistas and *soldaderas* marching through the dusty streets (Cisneros 2002 134).

But perhaps there is no better way to enjoy the personal interpretation and translation of the urban Mexican humor of Cisneros's narrative than in the metanarrative game of their narrators (second part of the book, "When I Was Dirt"): Celaya and the Awful Grandmother. The disembodied voices of Celaya and the Awful Grandmother take the reader through a series of *costumbrista* vignettes that dissect the urban practices of Mexico City into minimal units. This rhetorical device frames the action in the story into limited passages according to the tone of the narrative moment, the memories and impressions attached to that moment, or even the caprice or impulse of the storytellers while they remember. The act of telling "healthy lies" (*puro cuento*), as Cisneros's herself acknowledges in the prologue of her story, intertwines with the dissection of the narrative continuum, producing the sense of oscillatory movements between the perspectives of these voices—in Mexico City or Chicago--their own mood and their quest for the truth into the accounts; the story runs into a spiral where the little *costumbrista* vignettes anchors or fixate the gaze of the reader before it goes far away from the purpose

behind the plot: the Reyes's household. Framing the situations in specific space-time fragments, the narration becomes a collection of scenes from a *fotonovela* or a comic book that in conjunction gives fluency to the plot, but they also work independently as *estampas* (picture cards) or comic strips that retain in the limited continuity of the parts the dramatic tension of the whole:

Just trust me, will you? Let me go on with the story without your comments. Please! Now, where was I?

**You were telling *cochinadas*.**

I was not being filthy. And to tell the truth, you're getting in the way of my story.

**Your story? I thought you were telling *my* story?**

Your story is my story. Now please be quiet, Grandmother, or I'll have to ask you to leave. (Cisneros 2002 172)

The internal fight of the voices (Celaya and Awful Grandmother in bold) over the monopoly of the storytelling becomes even theatrical; the melodramatic tone of their metanarrative quarrel gives a humoristic twist to the story, alluding in their personal conflict as tellers the particular altercations they have as characters. The dilemma your story/my story pushes the retelling process not only into the axiological limits of the truth—which is certainly emphasized in the production of “healthy lies” in both cases— but also into the subjective position towards a narrative survival. The urgency of the Awful Grandmother's voice to mend and dominate the story of Celaya relies, on the one hand, on her arrogance, which diminishes Celaya's storytelling skills because of her American education; on the other hand, on her moral limitations, which prevent her from seeing the whole picture:

**You have the sensitivity of an ax murderer. You're killing me with this story you're telling. *Me maaataaas.***

Please. Quit the theatrics.

**That's what comes form being raised in the United States. *Sin memoria y sin vergüenza.***

You're mistaken. I do too have shame. That's how I know where the stories are. (Cisneros 2002 205)

But the internal fight makes you also rethink that what you see is not the whole, what the reader observes is a composite of voices coming from North and South in a quest for the ultimate description. But the graphic description (*sin vergüenza*), the depiction over saturated with details releases the act of the characters from the mere physical, ethical or axiological linearity. Celaya's graphical account from both sides of the border spectrum creates trans-national/trans-urban portraits that resemble extemporal images of the moment, photographic instances that melt the senses (the visual, the sound, the smells) with the sociocultural differences that she can perceive as a Mexican-American voice. On the contrary, the Awful Grandmother is unable to position herself in a transnational level, because her own prevent her from exploring the possibilities of a narrative drive that go beyond the limitations of national boundaries. And that is clearly emphasized in Chapter 45, "Orita Vuelvo", when Celaya narrates the decision of her father, Inocencio Reyes, to set off to Chicago and leave Mexico; and when the voice of the Awful Grandmother decides to put an end to once and for all to her interventions in the narration: "**I'm not going to tell you anything again. From here on, you're on your own**" (Cisneros 2002 205). Celaya, on the contrary, can surpass those conditions; such as Villoro's taxi driver, she can fulfill the narrative drive while presenting the encompassing accounts of two urban spaces as means to explore the internal mechanism of her own family. The subtle confines of Chicago's and Mexico City's cityscapes complete and embrace the misadventures of the Reyes family; this understanding of the tragicomic fluctuation

between one side and the other enriches Celaya's language with meanings and images that crisscross urban instances, and which gradually evolve with the protagonist itself. Then, when Celaya decided to run away with Ernesto Calderón in the third part of the book ("The Eagle and the Serpent"), the trans-urban transformation of Mexico City takes place, giving to the description a sensorial palette that fix the urban landscape into a colorful and cartoonist scene that can be easily enjoyed and interpreted on both sides of the border:

El Zócalo. The Mexico City Monte Carlo Grand Prix. *Vroom-vroom*. Cars howl, VW taxis the color of M&M's *putt-putt*, a police siren yowls, brakes squeal, motors grunt, a stalled engine whinnies but won't turn, the first few notes of "La Cucaracha" play on a fancy car horn, motorbikes bleat, horns *toot-toot* an impatient trumpet tap, motors flubber, blurt, fart, hiccup, belch, rumble in the screech of a left-hand turn. (Cisneros 2002 384)

This cartoonish ekphrasis of the Zócalo from room 606 in the Hotel Majestic with its onomatopoeias, cacophonies and phonetic rhythm resemble the panel tiers of comic strips, such as *La Familia Burrón*. The urban chaos of the Mexico City landscape from the perspective of a juvenile Celaya is transformed into a colorful collection of bizarre moments, metonymic instances (visual iconographic/ language construction) in which punctual parts of the vibrant urban whole/totality allow us to enjoy the social dynamics of this particular space. This is no longer a traditional postcard revolving around the control of veracity or truth (such as it was depicted in her childhood), but a graphic translation that pushes the social space on a collision course with the semiotic production of amusing and vibrant images, such as the technicality and editing consistency of a formalist film, or

the bright drawings and sequential panels in a comic book. This is el Zócalo through the eyes of Celaya, a mixture of Mexican and American elements that decenter the description from a fixed reality, and which pay homage to the urban language that she has been nourishing through the whole narrative process.

### **The Story of the Return: Crisscrossing to a Conclusion**

Trans-urban narratives recreate in an indirect approach the experience of the trip, of the crossing over, of the “transition” between two spaces, two urban landscapes, two cities. Here, the voice of this artist, the work of the writers (Villoro in Chapter One, Cisneros in Chapter Two) decode and expose experiences of urbanity in the age of globalization; a transition that sometimes becomes a unique image and interpretation of two cityscapes as two modalities, two instances of the cultural perspective that uncover the rhythms and cadences of the social space and the communities that inhabit it. Two spaces balanced through the creative process, which become the bridge of interconnection between both urban landscapes (Chicago / Mexico City). In this last frontier of expression, spatiotemporal borders or sociopolitical/socioeconomic limitations become erased. The cyclical journey through the geopolitical cartography of late capitalism finds in the idea of the return its destination point.

Within the complex understanding of the urban dynamics in the age of globalization, Cisneros’s point of view (as well as Villoro’s) represent the last level of interpretation: the perspective of the author in the act of comprehending or translating the social reality. Providing her characters with the voice of a Mexican-American

community, she places the situation within the limits of a transnational conflict that makes possible the inter-urban relation between Chicago and Mexico City.

Her story reflects the socio historical condition of the transnational relations that paradoxically resonates into the reality of the urban fabric. The hypothetical possibility that Mexico City and Chicago coincide in the mind of migrant workers (or a taxi driver in the First Chapter) provides a substantial example of the transnational moment in the cultural relations between Mexico and the US. This transnational moment, this time of cultural reconciliation in the age of late capitalism allows the social and material conditions for a Mexican-American writer and a Mexican writer to impersonate the voice of migrant communities that reconstruct the whole geographical limits of globalization. Certainly, Cisneros (like other Mexican-American writers such as Alejandro Morales, Michael Nava) and Villoro (like other Mexican intellectuals such as Cristina Rivera Garza, Carlos Monsiváis, Carlos Fuentes or Daniel Sada) are able to participate in the sporadic transformation of a Mexican and Mexican-American discourse that not only remain anchored in the boundaries of the national imaginary, but that explores further social and political situations in a globalized situation.

Even though the topic of migration and the border literature are not new in the Mexican and Mexican-American literature (Juan Rulfo's "Paso del Norte"/Américo Paredes's *With His Pistol in His Hand*), NAFTA and the neoliberalism provided perfect timing for the re-consideration and reexamination of the aspects of globalization in the Mexican literature; furthermore, the sociopolitical/socioeconomic situations allow a point of inflection in the understanding of that global perspective in the arena of urbanisms. Cisneros's and Villoro's narratives show that variation, that reshaping of the

global aesthetics that pose the question from within the limits of the national compound and the urban landscape.

Within this context, the notion of “return” appears as a leitmotif imbedded in the urban narratives of late capitalism. The significant recurrence to the places that symbolizes a substantial part of the life of the character (Celaya’s family, or the taxi driver in Villoro’s tale) plays an important role in the multilevel development of the plot: back to Chicago also means back to Mexico City, and vice versa. Through the cartographical discourse, through the mix (hybrid) description of the geography, characters can surpass the limits of space and time. In their mind, the immaterial return becomes tangible when sublimated through the known urban landscape; words and places of the past can be visualized when channeled through the images and references of the present. Mexico City or Chicago convert then in the façade of a distant geography, an idealized space that can only be accessed through memories of the past, the facts from the present, and the expectation of the future. For example, a reminiscence (reminiscent description) of Chicago in Villoro’s tale becomes also nostalgia (nostalgic claim) for Mexico. “–Ah, caray, como que me agarró la nostalgia / –¿De Chicago? / – N’ombre, de México. De pronto me sentí en el Zócalo de allá. Viera qué distinto es” (Villoro 2014).

The return to the “Mexico de allá” (“el Zocalo de allá”, “el otro México”) is a recurrent topic in the transnational narratives of displacement and migration. Scholars, such as Héctor Calderón in *Narratives of Greater Mexico* (2004), Américo Paredes or José David Saldívar expose not only how this trans-migrant connection between writers and Mexico persist, but also how this symbol of the “other Mexico” is extended to the literary imagination of the Mexican-American communities and their aesthetic

manifestations. However, in the age of globalization, the idea of the “return” is reinterpreted and re-assimilated on both sides of the US/Mexico border; to feel at home in a physical, emotional and cultural way reconstruct the whole production of literary symbols, creating new modes of aesthetic expression in Mexico and in the US. In the case of *Caramelo* or “Chicago,” that return to the other Mexico is an idealized trip that emerges from the feeling of nostalgia. The image of return is the appearance of a chimera that entangles two different urban landscapes. Return that also means reconstruction, transformation, and amalgamation of epistemological experiences that forge a new conceptual space: the trans-urban space of desire.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Blood and Deconstruction: Mexico City / Los Angeles**

“La ciudad, dicen ahora, es un solo cuerpo enorme. Tiene las venas repletas de automoviles, los pulmones hechos de árboles, el corazón poblado de edificios y, casi siempre, de antros que abren y cierran tarde”

Alberto Chimal, “Ciudad imaginada”

### **Introductory Vignette: Multiple Encounters in Dystopia (Mexico City/Los Angeles)**

In an obscure territory of speculative fiction, in the murky threshold between critical thinking and cultural studies, there is a place called LAMEX, a post-apocalyptic dystopia so huge that it embraces and swallows at one the region between Los Angeles and Mexico City. Arriving to this place is kind of difficult, because one has to crisscross the history of colonial occupation and exploitation in Mexico and Southern California; make a left turn in the modern urban organization of the Global North and South during the twentieth century; and then a U turn into the unsteady plains of alternative citizenships in the twenty-first century. If you reach your destination, you will probably need to speak Spanish and English at once, and leave behind all your cultural prejudices because there is no turning back from this place standing beyond a future that might never be.

But, what is LAMEX? In the third part of his book, *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), Mexican-American writer Alejandro Morales introduces his readers to LAMEX, a massive urban conglomerate—or global megacity (Manuel Castells)—that covers all the livable space in the Pacific coast from Mexico City to Los Angeles: “The house is only minutes from two computer travelways that run from Los Angeles to Mexico City. One follows the Pacific Coast and the other travels through the desert, right to the center of

Mexico directly to its heart, ancient Tenochtitlan, the name under which the Aztecs ruled nearly six hundred years ago, today Mexico City, the capital” (Morales 1992 133-4). In a post-historical future in which Mexico, the US and Canada form a unique nation-estate block called Triple Alliance, the hierarchical distribution of the population in this Gibsonian cyberpunk dystopia is regulated by strict bio-policies that divide the system of sociability in three impregnable blocks: Lower Life Existence, Middle Life Existence and Higher Life Existence residents (Morales 1992 149). Under these conditions of bio-practices and colonial distribution, the human resource that represents the life of urban dwellers and their blood becomes the new value/currency, a treasure valued in flesh, a new natural resource that maintains the well of biological economy in movement. Published in 1991, during the historical period of the 500th anniversary year of the discovery of America, the uprising of the Rodney King riots (1992), the arrival of neoliberalism and the implementation of NAFTA (1994), Morales’s book foresees the urban space of Los Angeles and Mexico City as a co-depending living organism whose massive layout dominates the geography of the West Coast. Even if the urban mutation that Morales portrays is set in a distant dystopian future,<sup>13</sup> the inquiries and questions that this multicultural (atro)city reveals show how two urban realities across the US/Mexico explore and reflect the current socio-political conditions of neoliberalism and the transnational linkage between cultural horizons in a post-national era.

In *Apocalipstick* (2009), Carlos Monsiváis, echoing the words of the American poet Wallace Stevens, suggests that one does not live in the city per se, in the physical

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Seeds of Time* (1994), Fredric Jameson makes a clear distinction between Utopian texts and dystopia. While Utopian texts are mostly “nonnarrative” and without a “subject-position”, dystopia focuses primarily in the “story of an imminent disaster – ecology, overpopulation, plague, drought, the stray comet or nuclear accident” waiting to happen (Jameson 2000 384).

manifestation of its infrastructure, but in their descriptions, the mental images generated by multiple sources engaged in the idealization and mystification of a space. In other words, one does not live in a convoluted city such as Mexico City or Los Angeles, but in paradoxical reproductions manufactured by the production of knowledge and opinions that shape our experience of it: “Si poética y sociológicamente esto es cierto, uno se domicilia en el trazo cultural y psicológico de las vivencias íntimas, el flujo de comentarios y noticias, los recuentos de viajeros, y las leyendas nacionales e internacionales a proposito de la urbe” (Monsiváis 2010 15). When this happen, when our range of experience is molded by the intricate games of speech, our discourse is conditioned by the virtues (*virtudes*) and defects (*defectos*) that revolves around that overproduction of knowledge and opinions, a tantalizing description that seduces our senses while inflicting fear to our mind. In the age of globalization, at the end itself of our civilization, Monsiváis finds the ultimate point of seduction of the cultural conflict in the final portrayal of the urban experience at the verge of collapse: “Habitamos una descripción de las ciudades caractericada por el miedo y las sensaciones de agobio, señalada por el agotamiento de los recursos básicos y el deterioro constante de la calidad de vida” (Monsiváis 2010 15). The fall and decay of the metropolis—in the case of Monsiváis’s analysis, the demographic chaos and environmental disaster of Mexico City—is just another suggestive fantasy of our cultural reservoir shaped from the ruins itself of modernity. Because the fantasies of destruction and depravation go far beyond the limits of nation-estates, as Carlos Monsiváis acknowledges, the erotic drive of total obliteration is forged itself in the DNA of the megalopolis, spreading the roots for a new urban distribution into the new millennium. With the silky and glamorous lipstick applied to its

mouth, the kiss of late capitalism tempts our imagination of the future awaiting. The “Apocalipstick” is coming and there is no turning back.

Mike Davis shares a similar perspective of the seductive power of imagination in the construction of the urban experience, especially for those who are unable to be restricted in specific limits or boundaries. In *City of Quartz* (1990), Davis’s arguments turn around the notion of Los Angeles’s mythology conditioned by the paradigms of “speculation and domination” that constraints the city into an endless spiral of reconstruction, reinvention and reinterpretation of its own image. Seduced by the glamorous freedom of action, the material and intellectual forces have been playing with the urban landscape since its humble origins as a fertile paradise in the Southwest at the end of the nineteenth century. His Marxist/environmentalist perspective of the urban phenomenon upholds that Los Angeles is “infinitely envisioned”, because its fragmentary nature is the result of an energized discourse of planation, design and redevelopment, propelled by a myriad of intellectuals (Charles Fletcher Lummis, Harrison Gray Otis, Thomas Adorno), writers (Raymond Chandler, Nathanael West, Joan Didion), engineers and physicists (William Mulholland, Robert A. Millikan), urban planners and architects (Reyner Banham) (Davis 2006 23). Such as Carlos Monsiváis, Davis proves that these multiple voices construct complex epistemologies within the rhetorical devices of capitalism that affected the experience itself of urbanity, creating and reshaping exocentric descriptions of the city that adapt to the impositions of the local and global market. Ed Soja provides a similar description of the “deconstruction/reconstitution of the urban fabric” within Greater Los Angeles when he names the phenomenon “exopolis,” a process of constant growth, development and organization that moves away from the

influence and control of the inner core of the city (Soja 1997 23-24). Within Los Angeles DNA –a genetic mark that might be traceable not only in the specific case of metropolis from Southern California, but also to every megalopolis in the boundaries of Western Civilization–rests an incongruent struggle between the deep forces of advanced capitalism and the intellectual retaliation of a culture that prevents the total banality and trivialization of its urban landscape and rituals through the affirmation of its own identity: “For if Los Angeles has become the archetypical site of massive and unprotecting subordination of industrialized intelligentsias to the programs of capital, it has also been fertile soil for some of the most acute critiques of the culture of late capitalism, and particularly, of the tendential degeneration of its middle strata” (Davis 2006 18). This “double role of utopia and dystopia” resonates as an asymmetrical condition that makes the city heaven and hell, the land of opportunities and the end of civilization.

*Apocalipstick* and *City of Quartz* speak of the same phenomenon happening in the urbanity of globalization: cities have reached a point in which its massive growing makes scholars to rethink the origins but also the future awaiting these urban chimeras. The forces of construction and destruction have built a sense of anxiety in the imagination of society in the late capitalism, leaving space for pure speculation. But in the case of Mexico City and Los Angeles, this process of rethinking the origins while speaking about the future has even further consequences, because deep in the root itself of these forces there is a strong trans-urban discourse connecting them. Far away from each other, there is a culture they share, and a language they speak.

If we examine with attention the connection between these cities, we can find early attempts of cultural dialogue between Los Angeles and Mexico City in their modern

history. The artistic and muralist work of the Mexican painters Alfredo Ramos Martínez and David Alfaro Siqueiros found in Los Angeles and in Mexico City an inventive space for the cultivation and renovation of their aesthetic production; pieces such as Ramos Martínez's *Matrimonio Indio* (1930) or Siqueiros's outdoor mural *América Tropical* in the public space of Olvera Street in Downtown Los Angeles prove the transnational interest of these artists. The Golden Age of the Mexican film industry also provides a good example of this inter-urban enthusiasm, screening simultaneous premieres in the *Million Dollar Theater* in Downtown LA, and the *Ópera, Metropolitan, Alameda* and *Olimpia* in Mexico City. The intellectual life of these artists or the manifestations of the cultural industry reveal a profound inter-urban dialogue in the post-war era. But in the age of globalization, the points of convergence between Mexico City and Los Angeles are numerous and diverse. Transportation, street vending, earthquakes, demography, political turmoil, massive sprawling are only some points of connection to consider. Certainly, as Joel Epstein implies, Mexico City has some "lessons for Los Angeles" to provide about these issues, and vice versa. Because, in this stage of late capitalism, Mexico and LA had become twin cities, mirror images in the complex geopolitical cartography of the Western world. Furthermore, in a time where political turmoil and racial segregation deform the sociopolitical panorama between Mexico and the US, the importance of these urban centers as sanctuary cities and defenders of the cultural heritage<sup>14</sup> symbolizes a new phase in trans-urban relations and post-national scenarios.

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<sup>14</sup> In 2016, after the public anxiety generated by the presidential election, Eric Garcetti (mayor of Los Angeles) and Claudia Ruíz Massieu (ex Secretary of Foreign Affairs in Mexico) reaffirmed the role of Los Angeles as a "sanctuary city", opening the door to a new chapter of cultural relations for all the Mexican and Mexican-American community.

In the sociopolitical/socio-historical threshold, the trans-urban perspective of Alejandro Morales provides a fictional space to rethink the material and immaterial interconnection across the national borders (Mexico/US) and the historical time frames (past, present, future). In the trans-urban narratives of Sandra Cisneros and Juan Villoro, Chicago and Mexico coincide in the liminal space generated by fiction; this narrative space reveals, as I have already demonstrated in my first chapter, the migratory flux of bodies and ideas crisscrossing not only the US-Mexico border, but also the limits itself of the concept of nation-state and subjectivity. Placed in the middle of this atypical landscape, the characters' subjectivity finds a safe space after the migratory journey from one city into another, an encompassing experience that erases differences between these urban centers. In the mind of the protagonists, Chicago and Mexico City become one single narrative reality, one single space of representation. Therefore, this third chapter pretends to comprehend the space of representation in the trans-urban narrative of Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), and how it is shaped by the material and immaterial connections between Los Angeles and Mexico City. The purpose of this chapter is to understand how the mixed-urban landscape not only comprehends the perspective of the subject (Villoro) or the memories of the family (Cisneros), but the process of healing the cultural identity of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. In the next pages, I will analyze how Morales's project foresees the urban space of Los Angeles and Mexico City as living organisms whose dynamism and processes are determined by their people; and how healing the cultural identity of one place benefits the restoration of the other.

### **Urbanity, Heterotopia and Fiction in Alejandro Morales**

In “Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia” (1996), Alejandro Morales categorically insinuates that “the Southwest is heterotopia” (Morales 1996 22); his strong statement, infatuated by the multiple readings of Michel Foucault’s work, exhibits his own feelings in regard the dynamic position that Southern California, Aztlán, the core of this heterotopia, is playing in the construction of a new mode of social and political organization in the urban zone. If the expansive metropolitan area of Southern California, dominated by “two super-cores” (Los Angeles and San Diego-Tijuana) as Mike Davis acknowledges in *City of Quartz*, provide a clue of the urban readjustment of the American way of life in the Southwest, then this whole border region, which extends beyond the confinements of national boundaries, predicts the natural movement of “an urban world future” that jeopardize and transcend the limitations of nation-estate (Idem). Morales not only foresees a “new urban model” that places the American city in the unnatural edges of Tijuana, Mexico; but also a cultural twist that brings the Mexican urban expectations into the periphery itself of the American dream, the misshapen face of dystopia: “The image of people desperately running, crossing the border, heading north, journeying to utopia, but discovering heterotopia” (Morales 1996 23). The North and the South meet in the unsafe zone demarcated by the heterotopia, that liminal social space outside the natural order of distribution that assemble objects and things that are not usually together: “in such a state, things are laid, placed, arranged in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them” (Foucault 1970 xviii). With this definition in mind, Morales reshapes the border relations of Mexico and Southern California in regards to an engrossing urban area with “no

center,” “no identity,” in which the encounter of the opposites becomes the rule of the self-definition.

Mexico City and the urban area of Southern California coincide in the life and the literary work of Alejandro Morales. Most of his texts revolve around instances of ethnicity, economy, demography, and politics framed within these urban spaces. His first book, *Caras Viejas y Vino Nuevo* published in Mexico in 1978, places the voice of two Mexican-American teenagers in the middle of the socio-cultural struggle of a barrio in the inner city. Novels such as *The Brick People* (1988) and *The River of Angeles* (2014) address the historical development and urban growth of Southern California, such as the multi-generational influence of Mexican/Chicano families in the evolution of the Simon Brick Factory in Pasadena, California; or the multicultural background of the workers who built the bridges over Los Angeles river in the early 1920s. Whereas *Waiting to Happen* (2002), the first part of his “heterotopian trilogy,” revolves around the culture of violence in contemporary Mexico City, and the cultural embodiment and empowerment of women in the ideological formation of the Mexican psyche, *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) embraces most of the topics and fears of his literature around the ethnic marginalization, transnational interchanges and urban development in Mexico City and Los Angeles.

*The Rag Doll Plagues* presents a fictional scenario in which disease, illness and degradation interconnect the urban reality of Mexico City and some cities of Southern California –such as Los Angeles, Santa Ana or Chula Vista. The repetitive presence of devastating plagues (La Mona, AIDS, The Rag Doll plague) that threaten the life and dynamics of these urban centers becomes the trigger of an atypical exploration of these

cities' multi-ethnic/multicultural interconnection in a blurring timeline narration (colonial Mexico, contemporary California, futuristic Mexico City-LA). Through the voice of Gregorio, a Spanish doctor in colonial Mexico, and his descendants, Morales exposes in the three parts of his book (Mexico City, Delhi, LAMEX) an invisible web of intersecting factors that condense the affinity and resemblance of these cityscapes; additionally, each period of time, from a colonial past to a dystopian future (or "fiction past, present and future perfect" as José Antonio Gurpegui implies in his book), reveals a set of specific moral and social problems that each place inherits from its historical realm. Revolving around the idea of social disease and the apparatus behind its diagnosis and prevention, these spaces reinforce a trans-urban reality that crisscrosses the limits of nation-estate conditions, and the bio-regulating practices of global colonial hygiene.

The publication of Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* in 1992 represents a crucial and radically different approach to the trans-urban relations between these two cities (Mexico / Los Angeles) during neoliberalism. As professor of Chicano/Latino Studies at UC Irvine, Morales provides in his book a creative reinterpretation of urbanity in Mexico and in the US digested and reintegrated through the critical eye of continental philosophers such as Foucault and Deleuze, while maintaining the focus into the importance of the multicultural identity of the urban landscape. The academic background of the Mexican-American writer offers a complex and imaginative answer in 1992 to the dilemma of the literary representation of the cities in an age of transnational interchanges, fluctuating markets and evanescent borders, inscribed by the implementation of NAFTA in 1994. As the Mexican-American writer suggests, the self-definition of the cross-bordering subject in this age of globalization is threatened by the

“unfinished process of continuous movement, of ceaseless change, of always becoming, of perpetual transformation” (Morales 1996 24). It is only through the reshaping and modification of his/her “survival strategies” that this cross-bordering subject can endure the urban environment of the crescent metropolitan cluster of Southern California; in a space-time gap in which literal and metaphorical borders deprive communities from the sense of belonging of their social space, Morales attempts a “re(b)ordering of the Americas,” as Manuel Martínez-Rodríguez calls it, in order to bring a hemispheric communion that breaks these conditions: “We live in a time and space in which borders, both literal and figurative, exist everywhere. Borders made of concrete, asphalt, aluminum, barbed wire, and water, which mark the dividing line of one community in relation to another and mark the demographic, racial, ethnic, economic, and political separation of people” (Morales 1996 22).

### **Urban Organisms and Decadent Spaces**

Why these urban centers (Mexico City, Los Angeles, LAMEX) seem connected by pandemics that obliterate the life of their inhabitants? What is the meaning behind these diseases (La Mona, AIDS, The Rag Doll plague) lurking within Morales’s text? Is it possible that the illness expresses, in a metaphorical way, some sort of degradation of the transnational policies taking place (Colonial system, NAFTA, Triple Alliance policies)? Is it perhaps a symbol of the end of a system that reveals itself in the flesh of the population, the trace of a systemic change that disturbs and contaminates in its path the social space?

Alejandro Morales's work departs from a simple assumption: the city is a body. Like any dynamic system, the urban fabric imitates the lifecycle and functions of organisms, elevating its mere inert and passive constitutive materials into vital and active tissues. The Mexican-American author remodels the biomechanical principles of living creatures into the operational framework behind these trans-urban assemblies. The interconnection of these urban bodies reveals a proto-organic linkage in which transnational and late capitalism conditions provide a perfect environment for the transmission and contagion of their core. Unable to function as an isolated unit, the multiple biological and spiritual points of contact—stressed not only in the plagues, but also in the affective and hereditary relation between the three narrators (the three Gregorios)—affect their stability far beyond the limits of the body or the time-space preconditions.

A central characteristic of these maladies in the entire text is the description of decadent spaces, decaying neighborhoods or dirty landscapes, and the way they affect the customs and the everyday life practices of the characters. From Gregorio's arrival to the unhealthy environment of the colonial Mexico City in 1778 (First Chapter), to the description of degrading Lower Life Existent corridors of the dystopian LAMEX (Third Chapter), the narrative stresses the presence of deteriorating environments where the underclass live, in contraposition to the paradigmatic healthy spaces where the upper classes rule and control. Certainly, one example of these decaying landscapes is his portrayal of eighteenth-century colonial Mexico City and its antique, filthy and deteriorating system of urban organization. The first part of the book tells the story of Gregorio Revueltas, a Spanish physician chosen by the king of Spain to be the director of

the *Protomedicato* of the New Spain (*La Nueva España*).<sup>15</sup> In 1778, as the new director of the royal protomedicato, he is sent to Mexico City, one of the cores itself of the Spanish colonies in America, to fight back against a terrible disease called La Mona (The Rag doll). When he arrives to the place, he discovers that the Indian population is living in dirty conditions and in unsuitable environments while the Spanish and criollo communities enjoy their good health and their wealthy privileges. Eventually, with the help of Father Jude, a mestizo priest, and Father Juan Antonio Llorente, he will improve the sanitary practices of the city, reducing the risk of contamination and saving the life of the people.

In one of his first accounts of la Nueva España, Gregorio describes in firsthand the terrible and deplorable living conditions that persist deep into the “bowels” of the city: “Only a block from my residence I was shocked by the bodies of hundreds of dead dogs in a pile covered with a blanket of flies that undulated like a black hair net on and above the decaying carcasses” (Morales 1992 25). The morbid image of the dogs’ carcasses emphasizes the unsuitable public health measures that reign over the Spanish colony at the end of the eighteenth century. It is quite impressive the way Morales depicts the inappropriate sanitary conditions and the saturated environment of the city, especially when it is compared to the image of the hygienic and healthy environments of the Pre-Columbian centers of the Aztecs as it was depicted in the first accounts of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Bernardino de Sahagún or Bartolomé de las Casas. Morales’s portrayal provides a strong critique of the colonial system that ruled the public organization two

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<sup>15</sup> The *Protomedicato de la Nueva España* was a royal Spanish tribunal established in Mexico City in 1628. By overseeing the work of healthcare practitioners (médicos, cirujanos, barberos) this organization controlled and regulated the medical system and the health care of the Spanish colony. Perhaps one of the best sources of information regarding the protomedicato is John Tate Lanning’s book, *The Royal Protomedicato: The Regulation of the Medical Professions in the Spanish Empire*.

hundred years before the fall of the Aztec Empire. By deconstructing the urban paradigm of the fictional layout of Mexico City, the Mexican-American writer criticizes the control that the Spanish Empire exercised over its colonies. If one revisits the original outline of the city, imposed by the first viceroy of *La Nueva España* Antonio de Mendoza, one will find that the original layout of the American cities favored the Renaissance concepts of “ideal city” derived from the Roman *castrum*, the aesthetic paradigms established by Vitruvius, and the Italian architecture of Leon Battista Alberti, Jacopo Barozzi Vignola or Andrea Palladio (Hardoy). In *La Ciudad Letrada* (1984), Angel Rama implies that those standards of idealization emerge from the transposition of the hierarchic social order (*orden social jerárquico*) of the Renaissance episteme over the mode of geometric distribution (*orden distributive geométrico*) of the urban layout in the American cities, which pretended to perpetuate the power of the Spanish crown (Rama 7). In other words, the world of the symbolic, the ideas, and the rational react over the domain of the material changing its shape, allowing a more efficient control over the physical manifestation of the things. Morales questions the viability of that Vitruvian perfection of the “ideal city” by choosing a fractal organization of decaying public spaces where the bodies of its inhabitants is constantly policed and monitored by a religious panopticon:

From the Main Plaza, the residential areas were organized around churches, which towered over the homes of the common population. There were about twenty-one churches of varied sizes and ornamentation in the city. Every zone has its special plaza, fountain and church where religious and secular celebrations were observed. Second to the last zone in the south was located the infamous bordello section. This section was the culmination of disgrace and filth. Father

Jude stopped there to minister to dying male and female prostitutes who suffered from the epidemic and/or venereal diseases. (Morales 1992 27-28)

The texts shows the rigorous geographical recurrence of sacred spaces and spiritual centers in the urban layout that provides a sense of fractal distribution of the colonial system in which the position of the Church and its ideology regulates the order of the landscape. The resource of Christianity as a “powerful instrument” in the transformation of normative structures in conquered territories simplified not only the “erasing of communities” or “ecological practices” (Lugones 745), but also the domestication of the space as a means to explode the colonial fantasies of the conqueror. In this system of colonial fantasies and conquest caprices, the peripheral role of the American cities obeyed the demands of a rigorous Trans-Atlantic hierarchy of power that required the complete control of the soul and the mind of the subjects through a complex pedagogical and ideological apparatus: “a las ciudades competía dominar y civilizar su contorno, lo que se llamó primero ‘evangelizar’ y después ‘educar’. Aunque el primer verbo fue conjugado por el espíritu religioso y el segundo por el laico y agnóstico, se trataba del mismo esfuerzo de transculturación a partir de la lección europea” (Rama 18). It is in the strong ideological control and physical surveillance of the colonial institutions over the layout of the city where subordination (*subordinar*) and insubordination (*insubordinar*) acquire a broader sense. Because while some spaces are placed in a lower rank under the surveillance of the religious and colonial power, there are areas that are left behind in the periphery or in the limits itself of the order, of what cannot be reconciled with the power, and which needs to be prohibited, persecuted and forbidden. Along with the “zones” guarded by the Church, Morales places the dirty slums and brothels populated by the

social outcast and the sexual mischievous. In contrast with the symmetry and direction of this “Holy City,” or City of God (*civitate Dei*) if we want to employ St. Agustin’s concept, the earthly chaos and disorder of this “*Ciudad del Pecado*” makes evident the Manichean way in which the Mexican-American writer exposes this “colonial” urbanity.

But Morales is not alone in this radical dualism of Mexico City’s landscape. Mexican writers and intellectuals during the nineteenth and twentieth century have chosen this particular morbid contrast as a means to warn people against the dangers lurking in the entrails of this underworld. In *Zozobra* (1919), the modernist poet Ramón López Velarde provides a glimpse of the cartography of transgression and red zones (“zona prostibularia”) visited by bohemians at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The same can be said of Federico Gamboa’s masterpiece, *Santa* (1903), in which the hypocrisy of the prudish Porfirian society fosters the vibrant night life in bordellos and “casas de citas.” Carlos Monsiváis insinuates that all these narratives with a certain moral or sexual fascination with the unique ecology of metropolis praise a cultural and social freedom that cannot be found in *la provincia Mexicana*, a liberal geography overflowed by the erotic drive of a society that demands space for its satisfaction: “En la geografía orgásmica, a la Ciudad del Pecado la integran [...] el centro (todavía no Histórico), la zona prostibularia, las casas de citas (tan famosas como la de Graciela Olmos, La Bandida, o tan frecuentadas como el congal de Meave), la calle del Órgano, los cabaretuchos, los alrededores del ex convento de Las Vizcaínas, la ‘viva y venenosa’ avenida San Juan de Letrán” (Monsiváis 2010 35).

Almost at the end of the twentieth century, Alejandro Morales brings back these topoi just to make emphasis into the origins itself of this literary convention, paying

special attention in the fact that the traces of this misconception are not only a cultural appropriation of Modernity, but also of the colonial system itself. Thus, in order to excavate the roots itself of this deviation, his narrative accentuates the transgressive action of these geographies of degradation and immorality, these decadent/decaying spaces in which the sexual practices surpass any taboo or restriction in the public space: “I saw a scantily garbed woman performing fellatio at the entrance to one of the bordellos. These manifestations of the devil demonstrated no shame or inhibition whatsoever. She performed more vigorously [...] the clientele of the different houses nonchalantly stopped and observed for a moment, laughed, made some ribald remark and entered the whore house” (Morales 1992 28). The exhibition of the naked bodies and the public demonstration of wicked practices stands against the regulations and the order of the colonial system and its religious ideology; furthermore, the whole existence of these twisted spaces, the transgression in the public space of hetero-normative systems and hegemonic moralities put in danger the stability, the sanity and the hygiene of the colonial city, making it vulnerable to secular contamination, environmental diseases and socio-ideological illnesses.

### **Suburban Nightmares and Barrio Sickness**

But the traces of this mode of colonial organization and segregation in the colonial city become also an inherent part of the postmodern urban distribution of suburban areas in Southern California. In the second part of the book, “Delhi,” Morales introduces Dr. Gregory Revueltas, a Mexican-American physician living the peculiar sociopolitical environment of the Mexican-American *barrios* of Santa Ana and the OC

before the neoliberal climate of the 1990s. Gregory falls in love with Sandra Spear, a Jewish-American actress whose popularity with the young Chicanos of the barrios increase when she starts performing in Federico García Lorca's play, *Bodas de Sangre*. Unfortunately, his relation with Sandra starts to crumble when she is diagnosed with AIDS. Gregory tries everything he can to save her, even flying to the village of Tepozotlán in Mexico to find a cure to the disease, but at the end she dies.

Set during the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, this chapter in Morales's book is essential to understand the urban distribution of Greater Los Angeles, and the way he perceives the cultural environment of this time period. The fractal disposition of the socio-spatial structure of the *barrios*—which falls within a traditional typology of neighborhoods of color in Southern California—provides a mixture of regional spatial motives (Southern California and LA County), and the singularity of a cultural identification (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations) that precedes its nature (Raúl Villa). If leitmotifs, such as social resistance and geographical displacement, urban sprawling, resonate within the logic of organization of the social space that Morales defines-- explored in other literary examples such as Ron Arias's *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975) or John Rechy's *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991)--its uniqueness rests within the invisible contact that keep with its urban origins; because origins permeates the basis and the establishment of tangible and recognizable symbols that interrelate and connect the American barrios with their "Indian past":

The *barrios* of Southern California, the real Aztlán, the origins of my Indian past, shared in common the kind of housing built. The well-tended flower gardens, the beautiful faces marked by the history of young and old Chicanos who worked,

studied, loved, hated and helped each other in times of need, and just as easily shot each other to watch a brother or a sister bleed to death on the pavement.

(Morales 1992 71)

Flower gardens and human faces summarize the primordial materials of the barrio's socio-spatial framework: the paradisiacal component of nature's aspiration in dialectic dialogue with the traces of human action and work. As Raúl Villa implies in his book, *Barrio-Logos* (2000), barrio residents have always employed "resistive tactics" to reaffirm their "cultural-place identity" against the "space regulation of dominant urbanism" (Villa 4); some of these "resistive tactics" or "defense mechanisms" are deeply entangled within a practical and inventive ethos of the working class community that Tomás Ybarra-Frausto describes as *rasquachismo*, an "aesthetic program" of resilience with the minimal objects possible ("hacer rendir la cosa"). But also, in shaping the dynamics and landscape of the city in Southern California, communities of color and minorities enacts spatial-cultural practices that, as Mike Davis suggests, help in the construction of a "virtually parallel urban structure" that reacts against the Anglo-dominant urbanization: "The immigrant working class [...] is not merely the collective victim of 'urban crisis'; it also strives to transform and create the city, its praxis is a material force, however unrecognized or invisible in most accounts of contemporary Los Angeles" (Davis 1987 144). In *Magical Urbanism* (2000), Davis addresses how the "redemptive energies" of Latino communities revivify places and neighborhoods that had been neglected by metropolitan areas of the Southwest. The transformation of the social environment, as well as the preservation of the public spaces and urban commons by this population reacts as an identity power against the backlash of exclusion or even

criminalization: “the Latinos are struggling to reconfigure the ‘cold’ frozen geometries of the old spatial order to accommodate a ‘hotter,’ more exuberant urbanism” (Davis 2000 54). The dialectical struggle between the “cold frozen geometries” of the Anglo protocols against the “hotter exuberant urbanism” of the Latino spatialization lives in the heart itself of the urban paradise’s mythology that Morales is trying to describe. The “real Aztlán” addressed by the Mexican-American writer, stands out as a place sketched by the oppositional conflict between the Santa Ana government and the labor of the community, its aspirations and its conflicts. But a bittersweet reality dismantles the utopic dream of the Latino barrios: the mundane logic of blood and violence nourishing the mechanism of socialization in the suburban nightmare. Then, the socio-spatial conditions of the barrio are built open the social contract of violence and anger taking place in the neighborhoods of color, a reverberation of social conflicts that constructs the historical wicked sociability of Southern California since the Sleepy Lagoon incident in 1942 and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. Even in a conservative area such as Delhi, the fratricide war between “homeboys” and “homegirls” escalates into a barrio war, a barrio sickness that discloses how the socio-historical conditions of the suburban sprawling affect the barrio’s dynamic, while propagating the hegemonic systems that privileges the violence of the gangs against its own community:

For revenge, for the reputation of my sister, for a bad drug deal, for pride, for honor to the family, for their barrio, the homeboys and homegirls would explain as they lay dying from a huge hole made by a 357 magnum bullet fired from a cruising car at eleven-thirty at night, just when the party was underway. (Morales 1992 71)

Morales' narrative reveals the postmodern instant in which the city (city vs. nature/human nature) reacts against the cultural disfranchisement of the Mexican-American community, and the constituent political right of the people (Right to the City). The anarchical and chaotic conditions of this "real Aztlán" mimic the escalating violence that precedes the Rodney King riots in 1992. Morales' text exposes the malady and the sickness lurking deep inside this suburban paradise (race violence in the heart of this postcolonial settlement), and the measures taken by the system in order to eradicate this public issue. Placed in the middle of these conditions, Gregory –a Mexican-American surgeon and the protagonist of this second part– tries to cure and to save the people that live this violent conflict, such as his ancestor (Gregorio) did with the pandemic in colonial Mexico City. But the political powers in the OC "ever fearful of being overrun and of losing their cultural spaces to the Mexicans" condition an anti-Latino environment by prohibiting and restricting any Chicano/a demonstration in the public space because: "it was dangerous to allow such a large amount of barrio homeboys to gather in one place and that the homeboys presence scared away the patrons" (Morales 92). This effect is what Mike Davis calls the "third border". Whereas international borders rely in the fortification, regulation and separation of physical second borders (such as *el muro fronterizo* between Mexico and the US), the invisible "third border" sets a considerable distance in the metropolitan area that polices and provides an "interface between affluent Anglo majorities and growing blue-collar Latino populations" (Davis 2000 60-61). The political power and the hegemonic system constrain and limit the space of action of the Mexican community by segregating the public arena; the containment of the socio-cultural epidemic or the "city-sponsored ethnic cleansing" (Davis), which in this case is

the cultural manifestation of the Mexican heritage, represents the nullification and the erasure of the group from the public view.

Marc Prieue, in his analysis of Morales's text, proposes a new concept that provides a deeper insight of the multiple points of contact that modify or corrode the original constitution of the different characters in this second part of the book, as well as certain national constructs: "ContamiNation". For Prieue, the term *contamiNation* reveals a set of cultural bio-interchanges that modify the integrity and unity of the individual and the group; in other words, it "refers not only to epidemic infections of a single body, but also connotes a process of making impure, by contact or mixture, on a collective, cultural level" (Prieue 400). By making visible the otherness within the apparent homogeneity of the body or the collective, the term offers a means to disclose the multiform complexion of the unity. To cure the pandemic of violence, the community has to accept its multi-cultural composition. However, this instance of the cultural infection that Prieue proposes is still linked to strong national stereotypes that persist within the cultural apparatus of the system. This is clearly emphasized in the radical position that takes the political power of the OC towards the homeboys. The way to eradicate this radicalism falls on the possibilities of a post-national scenario in which these labels disappear, breaking the flux of dominion from the colonial power. The impetus and consequences of *contamiNation* reverberates not in the nation-estate composite, but in the cultural bio-interchanges that plot in the interior of the urban centers. In the blink of an eye, the social space mutates, living behind the illusory safety of homogeneity; the hostile public space is now pullulated by mix race bodies, while the privacy of the enclosed space still represent a shelter for the privilege classes. The

phenotype of a sick urbanity reflects the symptoms of the abnormal condition of its population. What Morales implies in his text is that the pathogens of discrimination and segregation in the streets affect the agency of people, and this radical disorder represents the bio-political constant of the city.

Such as in the first part of the book, sickness, pain and expiation crisscross this whole second chapter. Nation-State regulations impose social containments that efface the bio-spiritual force and cultural nuances that provide cure to the urban body. Within the limits of the urban bodies, things like the radicalism of the sickness and its hazardous contamination become the common denominator. The passage of contact between colonial Mexico City and postmodern Greater Los Angeles becomes their incapability to maintain a healthy constitution within the normative preconception of the Western society; their paradigmatic illness represents their best mode of representation against the pollutant influences of external bodies. Mexico City and LA's unity rests within the bioenvironmental identification of the same malicious affliction: the colonial power that maintains segregation in motion.

### **Bio-Control and Colonial Power**

The bioenvironmental impact of the social fabric and its spatial segregation became a constant in the critique of the different urban landscapes in this trans-urban narrative. Despite the historical distance between the colonial Mexico City, the twentieth century Santa Ana/LA, and the speculative future of LAMEX, the affliction (illness, malady, sickness) of social segregation lurks within the structural fabric of the cityscape. As it has been showed, the social space is then infected by the aberrant condition of

contaminated categories and spoiled set of rules that direct the ethnic distribution of these places.

During his lectures at the Collège de France in the 1970s, Michael Foucault emphasized that the “global mass,” which comprehend the whole extension of the human race, is constantly affected by processes that vigil and control biological features (birth, death, production, illness) (Foucault 2003 243-46). These processes or biopolitical mechanisms in modern Western societies act over the organisms making the body and its vital functions “object of a political strategy” (Foucault 2007 1). The strict surveillance over living beings and its biological cycles rests upon the search of an optimization of the “state of life” of this “global mass” that became profitable for the economy of the system. As Gordon Hull suggests, “the point of biopolitical intervention is to enable the optimal productivity of the population --in other words, to push it along toward achieving what is taken as the end proper to human life” (Hull 324). Literature regarding this matter tends to express how issues such as public health or sanitation became a concern of Western states as a result of the safety and care of the body-nation. Cultural practices and discursive structures became the mode to “regularize” the minimal biological position of the individual within a larger frame or entity. Thus, as Marc Prieue implies, the defense mechanism of the immunological system of the state reacts against contaminant agents, eliminating possible dangers: “The exertion of bio-power and bio-politics entails discursive and material practices that seek to exclude impure elements that threaten to contaminate the individual body and, by extension, the (myth of) the healthy national body” (Prieue 399). Purity and Imperfection became then the dichotomy that will mold the ide of functionality behind the economy of the bio-state.

For María Lugones, the “ideological conception of conquest” executed by the “civilizing mission” of the Western hemisphere comprehended not a set of rules that pretended to educate the population in the habits and costumes of the modern civilizations, but in the brutal and cruel imposition and abuse over the body of the other: “The colonial ‘civilizing mission’ was the euphemistic mask of brutal access to people’s bodies through unimaginable exploitation, violent sexual violation, control of reproduction, and systematic terror (feeding people alive to dogs or making pouches and hats from vaginas of brutally killed indigenous, for example)” (Lugones 744). In Morales’ narrative, the double standards of the “civilizing mission” in the first part of the book creates a dialectic conflict in the cityscape between the civilized spaces policed by the Inquisition and the Church, and the earthly slums where the ideological apparatus of the conquest allow transgressor practices over the body of its residents. The fictional and ambiguous condition of colonial Mexico City, misshaped and corrupted, falls drastically into the abyss of urban depravation, dragging with it the dwellers that inhabit this modern Sodom: “After terminating their lustful deeds, a few men, women and children cleansed their genitalia with the murky water. A short distance away, the murmur of prayer came from the chapel of the prostitutes. For a moment, peace reigned over the city of debauchery” (Morales 1992 28).

Morales stresses constantly the distinctive crowd that resides in the filthy ghettos of this colonial city: the exiled, the forgotten, the outcast. Morales’s narrative efforts to provide a convincing and explicit portrayal of the heterogeneous colonial clusters that existed in the violent limits of civilization: “His flock was a diseased, infested population: the prostitutes, the lepers, the abandoned children, the demented homeless people, the

disenfranchised that survived in the filthy streets, the dungheaps and the garbage dumps of the city” (Morales 1992 29). This sketch of the unique social distribution within those ghettos reveals the structural framework of a social space that has been socially segregated and excluded by the forces and institutions of the colonial power and its capitalist system of exploitation. As Maria Herrera-Sobek suggests: “The racial inequality in the colonies is addressed through the representation of the lower *castas* and their wretched living conditions” (Herrera-Sobek 101). María Lugones, Aníbal Quijano or Nelson Maldonado Torres reframe this same idea of racial inequality through their understanding of “coloniality.” The concept itself of “coloniality” reaffirms not only the “classification of people in terms of the coloniality of power and gender,” but also in the active process of dehumanization and “reduction of people” (Lugones 745). In other words, the central dichotomy of “colonial modernity” between the human and the non-human creates a hierarchical distinction that affects at the same time the behavior toward the other and the spaces he inhabits. The circulation of power and the mechanisms of control in the colonial city reveal a geographic strategy of modern capitalism that makes even greater the differences between the human (European men) and the non-human (Indigenous people of America and African slaves).

Furthermore, the Protomedicato, like many other Spanish institutions in the Americas, was internally regulated by the “religious and racial prejudices” of the *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) (Hernández 2018 8); in other words, the racial antagonism between criollos (Nueva España) and peninsulares (España) reached also the surgical education, where the work of cirujanos *españoles* in the medical profession of the colonies was appreciated over the labor of Mexican criollos. As Luz María Hernández

suggests, this racial exclusivity or prestige had the sole intention to “safeguard the privileges of Spanish minority” over the reputation of local medicine (Hernández 2000 35). Infatuated by the prejudices of his scientific enlightened mind and the sense of superiority that his Spanish and pure lineage provide, some of Gregorio’s descriptions reinforce these diametrical oppositions carved in the urban landscape of Mexico; his Spanish eyes reveal the racial differences inscribed in the colonial landscape, but his words cannot escape from his own social privilege:

Delicate features distinguished the brown faces of the carved angels sounding trumpets from the opulent baroque doorway of the royal palace in the City of Mexico [...] The cherub’s golden wings shimmered in the afternoon sun, which passed over the center of the Main Plaza, and contrasted with the filthy central fountain where Indians, Mestizos, Negroes, Mulattoes and the other immoral racial mixtures of humanity drank and filled clay jugs with foul dark water while they socialized. (Morales 1992 11)

The social space reflects the paradigms of acceptance and rejection that persist within the limits of sociability imposed by the dichotomies inside/outside, inclusion/ exclusion, and healthy/sick. Morales’s writing provide an extra layer of dissociation within the speculative fictional scenario directly associating the features of the bi-conditionality of the living spaces (Public Spaces vs. Private Spaces) with a racial tam imposed by the hierarchy of the colonial system (Indígena/Negro/Mestizo vs. Criollo/Español).

Under these conditions, the Spanish Empire’s obsession with hygienic practices plays an important role in the urban system that Morales is trying to portrayt. The surveillance over the wellbeing and constitution of the population reflects the importance

of health as a colonial mechanism to control the decision-making and the stability of colonial Mexico City: “By improving the health and medical treatment of the common population, the King desired to avoid a spirit of separatism here [...] The people of the colonies had to be convinced that they were better off living as part of the Empire than separate from it” (Morales 1992 16). Changing the health practices becomes the first step into a biopolitical re-education that eventually will lead into a change of the cultural practices of the population in a macro-sphere: a scientific mode of transforming the urban rhythms of the city into the European standards of bio-socialization. In other words, shifting the minds and habits of the people as a means to obtain control and stability over the urban body. The decisions that Gregorio and the Protomedicato take become key components in the regulation of the biopolitical cycles of the urban machine, as well as the westernization of the whole population; each decision over the maintenance, treatment and diagnosis of the self-organizing city proves the perseverance of the regulatory system, while expanding and improving the living conditions of inhabitants in the occupied territory:

Now I waked with experience and a desire to make the world better. After three years, the city was cleaner, safer. Criminals were punished, the obscenities practiced in public places by the desperate were banned. The clogged drainage systems receive attention. More public baths were installed. Fountains were designated for drinking only. Garbage and death carts circulated through the city street more often. Doctors and surgeons were required to treat all patients; the university medical school opened its doors to treat the indigent. Botanical gardens were laid out in the suburbs of the capital for the entertainment of the

people. It seemed that these improvements helped strengthen the population.

(Morales 1992 44)

The obsession with the enlightened order and the hygiene of the city (Mexico City, Santa Ana, LAMEX) that Gregorio claims in this passage become a recurrent leitmotiv in the entire structure of the book. The danger that lurks within the living spaces of the cityscape invites the urban systems to take extreme measures with regard to the public health of the population and the exploitation of the resources. This is certainly a tendency of Western civilization and its processes of urbanization that Morales remarks in his text.

### **Bioenvironmental Disaster, Colonial Occupation and Splintering Spaces**

Giorgio Agamben, in his meditation over the sovereign power in *Homo Sacer* (1995), posits that the concentration camp, and not the city (*polis*), is the biopolitical paradigm of modernity: what if bio-economical/bio-political conditions of late capitalism transform cities and megacities into concentration camps? What if a thorough understanding of the trans-urban connections in Morales's fiction help us to comprehend the mechanism of bio-control and regulation in "state of exceptions" (*Ausnahmezustand*) such as global megacities?

Morales's narrative reveals a grim reality: the colonial occupation of the city—the hierarchical and distributive measures maintaining the urban segregation active—is immanent to the history of Mexico City and Los Angeles. Each city has to deal with the malady of the disciplinary restriction that the biopolitics over life and death impose. The great urban divide that emerges with the social and wealth distribution in the early modernity (colonial Mexico City) transfers its problems to late capitalism (Los Angeles)

and beyond. The ambivalent consternation regarding the mixture of blood and the purity of the body in the colonial system develops into an environmental crisis in the first part of the book. Even the bio-political terror of the contaminant bodies in the second part inflicts in the hygienic postmodern spaces a sense of disruption that alters the dynamics of socialization in Southern California. Indeed Morales ruminates about the biopolitic principles governing the behavior of cities in different time periods, finding that the modes of biological control and regulation crisscrosses national borders and transnational environments. In the fictional scenario posited by a future dystopia or a global megacity, such as LAMEX, the social hierarchies and distribution of population mimics previous ruling schemes in a mutated and amalgamate form. In other words, LAMEX's internal structure is a replica, a structural doppelganger of that colonial system that terrorized Mexico prior to its independence, but also of the neoliberal system active in the postmodern Greater Los Angeles: a state of exception, but also a sick environment.

In the third part of the book, "LAMEX", Morales introduces Dr. Gregory who is head of a medical team that is fighting against the polluted environment of LAMEX, a massive urban cluster that has extended so much that has reached the point of environmental decay. As I expressed in the introduction, in a post-historical future, Mexico, the US and Canada form a unique nation-estate block, called Triple Alliance, which is suddenly threaten by the danger of an unknown plague that is obliterating the population of this massive global megacity. Only Dr. Gregory and his expert team with the help of advance technological devices can find a cure to this threat.

Manuel Castells is one of the first to coin the concept of global megacity as a means to describe the phenomenon of massive urban agglomerations proliferating at the

dawn of the third millennium. The fast expansion of urban clusters is directly proportional to the large-scale integration of the global market; this promotes the discontinuous and polycentric construction of socio-spatial structures that work as economic nodes, in which rule the inconsistent singularity of “being globally connected and locally disconnected” (Castells 1996 404). But it is the distinctive feature of total fragmentation the one that strikes the most: “Megacities are discontinuous constellations of spatial fragments, functional pieces, and social segments” (Castells 1996 407). The total assimilation of heteronomous components while erasing the limits between the one and the other (a heterotopia in Morales’s terms) implies intriguing scenarios for geographical outcomes. As Ed Soja suggests, the struggle of “delineating its outer boundaries,” as well as the almost unbearable task of estimating its population size poses questions and problems that need to be consider: “How many urban centers does one include within the megacity region? How far does the regional hinterland stretch? How far does one go to recognize the increasingly global reach of the megacity?” (Soja 2000 235). But when a global megacity grows beyond the point of homeostasis, beyond containment’s limits, the system becomes unstable and unpredictable: this is the particular scenario that Morales predicts for his urban chimera.

When the dystopian bio-policies and patterns of reproduction in LAMEX restrict the conditions of citizenship and the decisions of its inhabitants, it shows the obsession of the empires and systems with control and hygiene, with hierarchical distribution and class domination: “History had not changed the patterns for reproduction in our country. Lower Life Existence had many children, Middle Life Existence folks bore barely enough to replace themselves and Higher Life Existence residents had practically none”

(Morales 1992 149). On the one hand, the hierarchical distribution of the population in three impregnable blocks affects the system of sociability in this dystopian future, making difficult the communication and interaction between them; on the other, the phrase “history had not changed the patterns for reproduction” exposes a system of bio-practices that imitates the restrictive modes of colonial distribution and modern sociability. Under these conditions, the value over the body means the stability of the ideological system or the profit that individual lives can bring into the economy of the cities. The human resource that represent the life of urban dwellers, as I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, become the new value/currency, a treasure valuated in flesh, a new natural resource that maintains the well of biological economy in movement: “A child was a long term investment, one they hoped would pay off. The Lower Life existence dwellers conceived for the pleasure of having children. Their strength was in numbers” (Morales 1992 149).

Achille Mbembe, in his study of the effect of necropolitics and the segregation of space, suggests that “colonial violence and occupation” are subsidized or supported by the “sacred terror of truth and exclusivity” (165). The “mass expulsion” of certain groups or ethnic bulks from society or the establishment of “new colonies” provides an example of the exercise of terror in the structuration of the social space. In the dystopian LAMEX, the massive sprawling of the urban fabric and its violent geography allow the advent of urban concentrations (ghettos, favelas, red-light districts) that confine and terrorize the life of people in secluded spaces (gated communities, ecumodern buildings, urban concentrations). In the core itself of “colonial occupation” resides the principle of “territorial fragmentation,” the “sealing off and expansion of settlements,” “the apartheid

state” that privilege the division of the soil and the partition of the territory as an excuse to delimit internal boundaries (Mbembe 166). This extreme division in the massive futuristic topography between the urban centers of LA and Mexico pretend not only to separate people within its social stratification, but also avoids contamination between them. Complete urban segregation avoids possible infection between classes.

The “intricate internal borders” and the “isolated cells” of the occupied territories reflect the spatial rhetoric of the colonizer’s force that project his sovereignty and hegemony over the passive space (Mbembe 166); the fractal, atypical and unnatural distribution of the occupied landscape in LAMEX (the concentration camps, the isolated gated communities, the farmland crops that explode the resources of the earth) shows the action of the colonized system of the Triple Alliance imposing spatial parameters that maintain its privilege over the natural distribution of land while dividing communities in strict social concentrations. This “planar division,” these “three-dimensional boundaries” that trespass and subdivide the land in clusters of power and control is what Eyal Weizman calls “vertical sovereignty”: the arrangement and distribution of the infrastructure and the mechanism of surveillance over the verticality of the landscape (the ground and the variation of its topography). It is within these principles of topographical variations and vertical sovereignty that Mbembe defines “splintering occupation” as the mechanism of isolation and confinement that characterizes colonial occupation: “colonial occupation is not only akin to control, surveillance and separation, it is also tantamount to seclusion. It is splintering occupation, along the lines of the splintering urbanism characteristic of late modernity (suburban enclaves or gated communities)” (Mbembe 166).

Morales's text also suggests that there are theoretical satellite cities that exist within the urban massive topography of LAMEX –such as Chula Vista, El Mar de Villas or Temecula–; these are called Lower Life Existence concentrations (LLE) and their function is to isolate and to separate part of the population. Speculative urban spaces such as the LLE concentrations reconfigure the internal vertical geography of the city, while creating extreme conditions of segregation, isolation and confinement. The splintering urban redistribution of specific ethnic groups (like Mexicans, Afro-Americans, Filipinos, Jews) and outcast in low-income gated communities become an attack against the multicultural ecology of this trans-urban region. The partition of the cityscape's layout fragments the territory in functional and hygienic corpuscles –small infrastructural bodies of people– for the control of dangerous population; this restrain system relocates the principles of mass incarceration from the prison facilities and place it into the streets of this fictional futuristic megalopolis:

Built around old prison facilities, most of the population consisted of the Lumpen, the criminals and dregs of our society. The failure of our nation's penitentiaries to rehabilitate people had created a one hundred percent recidivism... Prison towns sprang up around the isolated penitentiaries. After ten years of bloody riots and just before the formation of the Triple Alliance our country designated the prisons as self-governing LLEs. People found guilty of antisocial behavior that required separation from society were condemned to one of the nation's LLEs. (Morales 1992 137)

In Contrast, Los Cinco Cielos, a Higher Life Existence area (HLE) at the top of the organizing principle of LAMEX's urban hierarchies, represents the antithesis of the LLE

concentrations. This hyper hygienic space of “five ecumodern housing units” is an urban heaven where “ten thousand” of the richest families in LAMEX cohabit (152). Isolated from the urban reality, this self-sufficient complex seems distant from the problems that the massive sprawling and the environmental degradation of the city brought to its inhabitants. However, despite the preventive measures taken for the survival of the richest, Morales’ text injects a bit of irony when the plague and the diseases attack strongly the HLE area, killing thousands of residents:

Medical and military personal had evacuated survivors to a makeshift hospital outside the ecumodern complex. I noticed the dead quickly being dissolved in the chemical tankers brought in by the medical units. Thousands of decomposing bodies were huddled in groups in the center plaza of five buildings. Although I was accustomed to death, this was far beyond my experience. (Morales 1992 152)

The total bioenvironmental collapse of Los Cinco Cielos damages the social and biological resources at the top of the organizing economic pyramid, disrupting the order within the trans-urban fabric and its bio-policies. In this gloomy scenario, not even the richest can escape this biological and sociopolitical cataclysm that put in danger the stability of the urban landscape. In other words, Los Cinco Cielos’s outbreak functions as a metaphor of the urban collapse of LAMEX system; the fragility of the urban ecosystem within the massive futuristic conurbation between Mexico City and Los Angeles cannot stop the plague. Due to the failure, the colonial system adopts urgent measures eliminating any remain of the epidemic, exercising exhibitions of bio-power and retaking the space. The result is the “bulldozing” of the area, the obliteration of the infrastructure and the elimination of any human trace:

Bulldozers worked through the night. By the next morning, three of ecumodern buildings were pulverized. Salvageable steel and other metals were separated and airlifted out by cargo helicopters that blew the smoke and ashes of the cremated into the air and out to the polluted sea. By the third day, the putrid gases seemed to have dissipated and the black living sludge to have dried, splintered, penetrated the Earth and vanished. Beyond the shore, the surface of the ocean gleamed.

(Morales 1992 154)

The complete cleaning of the area takes seven days<sup>16</sup>, time enough to destroy, clean and replace the traces of the disaster. The sequence of the urban recycling regenerates the space while obliterating the history of what use to be there. The forces and energy of colonial occupation transform the traces of human lives into numbers and resources that can be easily replaceable. As Mbembe suggest, colonial and “splintering occupation” does not end in the seclusion of communities or in the mere construction of fences, such as the LLE or HLE concentrations; it is a complex urban “infrastructural warfare” that destabilizes the social space of the occupied groups and appropriates the “land, water and airspace resources”: “demolishing houses and cities; uprooting olive trees; riddling water tanks with bullets” (Mbembe 167). Once the biological disaster alters the physiognomy of the landscape, the action of the “infrastructural warfare” retakes the land for the colonial system. In other words, by “bulldozing” the infrastructure, and by applying disciplinary and biopolitical measures over the occupied population, Late-modern colonial occupation takes control over the urban landscape of LAMEX.

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<sup>16</sup> Seven days is a peculiar number in itself. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it takes god seven days to create the whole existence. In a certain way, Morales plays with the notion of recycling in direct connection with the cycles of creation.

## **Future Perfect: Towards a Re-understanding of History, Futurity and Speculation**

In his prologue to *City of Quartz*, “The View from Futures Past,” Mike Davis suggests that: “The best place to view Los Angeles of the next millennium is from the ruins of its alternative future” (Davis 3). This enigmatic as well as prophetic conjecture of Davis toward the scrutiny of Los Angeles’s planation history provides perhaps a clue to what Morales’s text is trying to accomplish: in order to understand how the city’s image articulates within the discourse of advanced capitalism and neoliberalism, it is necessary to excavate the remains of those possible futures as glittering reverberation of the substantial conflicts in the geopolitical present. And it is perhaps from the rubble and the debris of the mega-urban nightmare of LAMEX the best place to initiate the road of expiation of the cultural connection of these cities. And it is precisely the unsteady nature of time and space within the geopolitical present of Mexico City and Los Angeles what it is at the bottom of Morales’ text as a critical exercise of speculation in a proto post-apocalyptic era. The flexible boundaries of fiction that crisscross Mexico and the US in the three historical periods that Morales chooses become also a point of departure for rethinking the malleability itself of history and culture, the manipulability of the discourse and its consequences.

In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), Walter Benjamin posed his own understanding of the intersecting points between time and history in a moment (just few months before his escape from France) when the dangers of warfare put at risk the continuity itself of society. Beside his profound critique of historical materialism, Benjamin illuminates us about the redeeming nature of the past when it clearly “flashes up” at a moment of peril: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at

the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (255). The evanescent image of the past makes it difficult to assess and distinguish for the individuals; but if it is perceived, not only uncover a sense of historical truth in what had happened, but it also provides a warning in the things to come. That is why Benjamin found in Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* an effigy of the “angel of history,” whose face is not only “turned toward the past,” perceiving the wreckage of historical events as “one single catastrophe”; but also his whole body is propelled “into the future” by the violent “storm” which is progress (Benjamin 257-258). In this sense, from the ashes of the interbellum period in Europe, to the political bi-national struggle in the mid-1990s, the cross-genealogical continuum created by the voice of Gregorio and his descendants trace the accumulative debris of the Mexican and Mexican-American history in Mexico and in the Southwest, while driven by the coercive energies of Western civilization in a collision course to an irredeemable future. Because past, present and future are reshaped in the contorted dance of segregation and seclusion in Mexico City, Los Angeles and LAMEX, framing the inter-cultural affiliation of these urban spaces, twisting the liminal line of literary speculation in the narrative. Thus, this trans-urban narrative foresees the consequences of neoliberalism in the future, while providing a reflection of the past. But this intersectional narrative does not rely only on the historical account, nor on the scientific consensus of science fiction; this is not a realistic description of the colonial occupation in Early Modernity or the struggle for recognition of subaltern cultures (Mexican, Mexican-American, Asian-American) in a dystopian future. This is a speculative understanding of the geopolitical position of urban life in the cultural bridge of late capitalism; the narrative instant of marginalized voices in different urban scenarios that have to resist

and adapt to the environmental conditions established by the global colonial system, and the arrangement of hierarchies and practices of what Aníbal Quijano calls “coloniality of power.”

It is possible to understand that the increasing interest of Alejandro Morales in portraying colonial Mexico City and Greater Los Angeles departs from the necessity to cure the problem of a sick identity endangered by hegemonic practices of social regulation towards a speculative trans-urban future. Future, that abstract and unintelligible concept that has been the subject matter of speculative fiction, means a point of major concern in his narratives, because it provides a subtle portrait of the development of Mexican-American and Latino communities in this speculative mega urban cluster, and how that image foresees a sociocultural destiny that can be prevented or modified in our multicultural present. Ideas such as these impulse writers and scholars to reposition the transcendence of the creative process into new spheres of organization, new dominions in which time and space intervene into our understanding of society. One of these perspectives comes from Amir Eshel who in his book, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (2013), advocates for the redemptive power of literature to affect the future condition of society. Eshel suggests that contemporary literature has an ethical and political task in the redefinition of present, as well as in the scheming of the upcoming organization of human civilization. These assumptions depart from his close readings of David Grossman’s *Writing in the Dark*, in which the acknowledgement of the conditions and advancements of our modern world can allow us to redirect the path of our future (Eshel 253). In this sense, an interpretive instant of what he calls “futurity” in the development of contemporary art does not imply “a literal

*tracing* out of any given artwork's role in propagating a promise of a better future," but rather the disposition of writers and creators to address "issues of present and future responsibility, their attentiveness to the pains of others, and their ability to suggest to the beholder the possibility of addressing both of these things through action" (Eshel 255). As a means to comprehend the awareness of futurity in the reconstruction of our current social spaces in the cities, Eshel points out the drastic endeavor of Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, a massive and bulky structure that disrupts the everyday nature of the urban landscape: "By reshaping Berlin's urban space it faces up to a past the weight of which often threatens to crush us and to an uncertain future that may appear empty –just more wreckage" (Eshel 258). Futurity then reacts literally as an "insertion in space and time" of the work of art in the continuum of everyday life practices of the street, that allow us to rethink our own position in the "stormy circumstances" of our present and future conditions. How Morales addresses the sociopolitical conditions of neoliberalism with regard to the Mexican and Mexican-American communities in a speculative urban order? How *The Rag Doll Plagues* build an insight of present responsibility for these communities, while maintaining the eyes fixed in the future development of urban society itself?

Perhaps a partial answer rests in the thorough contemplation of his cultural roots as a means to channel the forces that regulate the conditions that rule our present. In other words, he turns back to Mexico, returns to Mexico through his fiction as a means to claim his heritage and a way to comprehend the socio-historical processes entangled in it. Analyzing the cultural position of Mexican-Americans in the present provides an historical understanding and healing of the Mexican culture in the past, and also in the

future. Morales's trans-urban narrative offers a speculative space for the dialogue of these urban realities, allowing a process of cultural restoration: Mexico City functioning as the source of a cultural tradition, while Los Angeles embracing its hybrid identity in a postmodern / neoliberal stage.

### **Body of Biological Desire and the Postmodern Architecture**

If the redemptive power of literature to affect the future conditions of society rests on the redefinition of the present, as Eshel suggests, how is this present (Los Angeles) portrayed in Alejandro Morales? How is this present engaged in a dialogue with its past (Mexico)? And, what kind of answer provides for the stability and reconciliation of that possible alternative future (LAMEX)?

In "Los Angeles: City of the Future?",<sup>17</sup> Ed Soja suggests that certain sites in the periphery of LA, suburban postmodern geographies such as the Noguchi garden in Costa Mesa, represents "the center of centers of a new primitive urban cosmos," a "centralized decentralized urbanization process" that tries to succeed or compete in the limits of the "outer city" or "exopolis." Soja's proposition provides a new topographical re-understanding of some cultural landscapes, such as the Noguchi garden, and "exogenous forces" shaping the geography of postmodernity (Soja 2000 250); the emergence of new "centers" in the limits itself of the blurring periphery of the city's core reformulates the process of urbanization, allowing the exercise of sociopolitical / sociocultural power in the outer limits, or suburbia. All these components introduce a new postmetropolitan urbanism in which many oppositional processes reshape the socio-spatial discourse of a

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<sup>17</sup> "Los Angeles: City of the Future?" is a documentary hosted by Ed Soja, and produced by the BBC in the early 1990s. The program explores how the postmodern venues, such as the Bonaventure Hotel, or the Noguchi Garden in Costa Mesa, foretell the future direction leading the urban growth of LA.

novel mode of sociocultural organization: “a decentering and a re-centering, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, continuing sprawl and intensified nuclear urban nucleation, increasing homogeneity and heterogeneity, socio-spatial integration and disintegration” (Soja 2000 250). The provocative idea of Soja, which decenters and re-centers the limits itself of the spatial discourse, resonates in Morales’s text; the spaces of the narration (Santa Ana) acquire a conceptual content and become the centers or axis of this fictional suburban area (Greater Los Angeles). But these new centers obtain a biological component that makes them more complex. Within its fictional description, body and city become entangled into an intricate struggle for the definition of a cultural, political, and even a gender identity. For example, Sandra Spear’s body, the girlfriend of Gregory in the second part of the book, is constantly compared with the urban landscape of Santa Ana:

The curly pubic locks of her womb clustered upward like our favorite postmodern plaza of massive glass buildings and white-walled parking structures. They formed a canvas on which the sun’s light casted forth shadows from a stone pyramid, an immense steel sun dial, a twisted iron sculpture, that demanded at least a passing thought. (Morales 1992 73)

This fragment not only reveals the biological (even metaphorical) interface between body and city, but also the sexual allusions that rest between the organism and the postmodern architecture in the exopolis. Celeste Olalquiaga implies that in the postmodern urban condition “Bodies are becoming like cities” (Olalquiaga). In her book, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (1992), the Venezuelan-born scholar expresses that, in the cultural moment of the postmodern era, the interference of the spatial boundaries

within the limits itself of the human body create a series of mental disorders that exponentially transform the behavior of the subject. Defined as psychasthenia, the trifling distance between “self and surrounding territory” suddenly dissolves, “camouflaging” itself into the space of representation: “Incapable of demarcating the limits of its own body, lost in the immense sea that circumscribes it, the psychasthenic organism proceeds to abandon its own identity to embrace the space beyond” (Olalquiaga 2). The schizophrenic drive of Olalquiaga’s psychasthenia, whose distorting self-perception questions the consistency of reality itself, echoes the “breakdown in the signifying chain” that Jameson finds in the postmodern city; in other words, the sudden failure in the relationship of Signifiers among each other in late capitalism, not only brings a linguistic malfunction, but also a perceptual adjustment as a consequence of the mutations occurring in the objects and in the subject. As Jameson suggests: “The newer architecture therefore –like many other cultural products I have evoked in the preceding remarks– stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimension” (Jameson 2000 219).

Olalquiaga’s and Jameson’s understanding of the new corporeal dimensions of the human body in late capitalism frame the sociocultural condition of the postmodern urbanity taking place in Morales’s narrative. The objectification of Sandra’s wombs detaches the female body from its organic features, replacing the soft skin with the abstract, cold and bulky layout of the plaza. In opposition, the inert and sterile plaza –which resembles the Isamu Noguchi’s garden (1982) at the Orange County Performing Art Center in Costa Mesa– acquires dynamism and vitality when compared with Sandra’s

body. The extract become even more significant when Gregory remarks that the intense fixation over her body competes with the admiration that he feels for some peculiar spaces (pop and kitsch culture): “I loved that stone plaza of artistic monoliths and our favorite Mexican restaurant the way I loved her body” (Morales 1992 73). The banality and cliché of the expression give voice to a certain colonial impetus, which reduces the female body into a mere space of contemplation. The beauty of the passive organism becomes the active dynamism of the architecture that praises the modern or postmodern progress.

The “spatialization” of the body or the humanization of the space questions the dialectics of the organic and inorganic; the threshold between the social space and the human geography permeates the instant in which the boundary of the flesh determines the concealed meanings behind the spatial dimension of the city, making possible an state of homeostasis, a state of pure equilibrium between the parts. The city is no longer organically plane, but full in biological, bio-cultural meanings. Furthermore, the unstable realm of human traces in the urban landscape opens a new universe of affective reactions that alter the socio dynamic of the people: “Our love was tempered by the glass walls of majestic postmodern buildings” (Morales 1992 81). Love appears here not at the level of the architectural desire or the banal appreciation of the nudity of the bodies in the space, but as an affection that decolonizes the instance of spatial domination and detaches the bodies in search of salvation.

Thus, this fragmentation and reconstruction of the postmodern city and the body through the words of the character finds, through the poetic reinterpretation, a point of expiation from their socio-historical moment; the reconfiguration of the language brings a

point in which their whole existence is deconstructed and decomposed in minimal unities that allow us to perceive the deep cultural roots unearthed in it. As Olalquiaga suggests, “Like the vanishing city, the body remains as the only concrete proof of existence. Yet, scattered and fragmented under the weight of technology, body and city can't be recovered by means other than those that displace them: they must be recorded or registered anew” (Olalquiaga 93). Here Celeste Olalquiaga is talking about the increasing use of new media in the postmodern culture that obliterates our traditional depiction of these two components (city/body), consenting reinterpretations that need to be register or recorded; the relocation of the image into the dominion of the written language in Morales can also portray an instance that makes possible that deconstructive drive of postmodernity, recording for the future a trace of the past. City, that cluster of “postmodern buildings” in the limits of urbanity and suburbanity, becomes not only the container of the mix race lovers (a Jewish American and a Mexican-American), but also the prison. On the one hand, it testifies to their union and makes possible their forbidden love; on the other, it encapsulates the tragedy of these souls, the everlasting love that repeat constantly through the different time-space variations of the plot: “She pushed her curly hair back and her breasts became temples where the mysteries of blood and desired reside. My gaze covered her with red flowers like a spreading bougainvillea covering the walls of a city lapped by the ocean, her body and mine: the two halves of a love” (Morales 1992 74).

The antithetical confrontation between her body and his gaze (the Jewish temple and the Indigenous city) crafts the complex designs of this anachronistic union. The “spatialization” of the body or the humanization of the space frames once again the

hermeneutic axis that places these fictional sites in the flesh itself of the characters, deconstructing the roots itself of their sociocultural origins. Their bodies transformed (topological transformation) in exotic locations express the essence of their secret heritages (Jewish and Mexican). Not human bodies, but human monuments that speak of the forbidden and lost past inherited through generations. The resemblance of their bodies with ancient and forbidden cities exposes a contextual dislocation that remains detached from the chaotic situations occurring within this conservative suburban area; the silent monolith that is their love provides the way to escape and decolonize the social conflict that a Jewish woman and a Mexican-American man can experience in their postmodern present.

This poetic transformation of their body brings stability and order to their relation thanks to the love they share, but it is still far to contain the disease of violence that it still causing so much pain to their social space. Besides, the environmental equilibrium or urban homeostasis is endangered not only by the racial violence in the *barrios*, but also by the threat that represent the AIDS in the body of Sandra. As Raúl Villa implies, the motif of “social death” and sickness persist constantly in the narratives of Mexican-Americans in contemporary California; the thread of structural oppression and dominion over the social space reemerges as a consequence of external forces threatening them: “The disparate impacts of hegemonic urban planning and its attendant social ills continue to pose real material threats to the cultural well-being” (Villa 156). Sandra, the *barrios* and the city itself are all interconnected at the semiotic level. Gregory knows that the disease that erodes the social space and the body of her girlfriend are mutually related, and the cure can save both. To cure Sandra’s illness, they travel to Mexico in order to

find a miracle treatment that cannot longer find in the United States. They finally arrived to Tepotzotlán, and in this traditional village located at the north of Mexico City they find a *curandera* that can diminish her agony, but that cannot save her life. With the help of Papá Damián and Señora Jane, Gregory understands that a deep connection with traditional practices can bring a spiritual relief to this Jewish-American girl, as well as moment of peace and amnesty for the disease of violence in the barrios. Despite that she cannot be saved from the progressive illness within her, her body becomes the space of expiation for the social body, the scapegoat of all the racial conflicts and social tensions for minority groups. In this sense, the body of Sandra does not only transform in the complex architecture of the exopolis, but also becomes a physical manifestation of the barrio. At the end of the second part of the book, the people start a process of mourning by creating a sense of community that allows them to heal their cultural well-being: “The homeboys wore their ‘Guadalupe’ jackets. Since we return their number had multiplied. Doña Rosina counseled them to continue school and to restrain from fighting. They were always present. They were Sandra’s royal guard. They were her eyes toward the future and they gave her strength. [...] They loved her when she was well and they loved her now at a high point of deterioration” (Morales 1992 127). Protecting Sandra, and eventually mourning her death will be vital for reestablishing equilibrium in a society affected by the disease of violence. The process and mechanism of healing and restoration of the body and the urban identity becomes a key element in this second part that will lead eventually to the salvation of the future society in LAMEX.

### **Bio-Decolonization, Mexican Blood and Trans-Urban Health**

Is it possible to reach a point of stability in the trans-urban relations depicted in the book? Is it possible to cure the disease that affects LAMEX? Certainly, the second part of Morales's book proposes a partial conclusion: to cure oneself rests on the possibility to cure one's social space. The death of Sandra Spear is not encouraging, but it opens the door to multiple opportunities. One relies in the construction of strong bonds among the community as a means to resist the perils and illness of dominant urbanity. Perhaps, following this path the trans-urban association between Mexico and Los Angeles can reach a point of total urban homeostasis. In the third part of Morales's text, these two urban centers (Mexico City–Los Angeles) create an interconnected domain that impacts the life and cycles of the people living in its ever-growing geography. The trans-urban stability of this massive post-national space rests in mutual actions that maintain the system in equilibrium. But the success of this sustainable future is threatened by the danger of biological and sociopolitical degradation; late modern colonial practices and bioenvironmental deceases contaminate the bio-urban core of LAMEX. Urban decay endangers the cultural manifestations of the trans-urban population. In Morales's perspective, only Mexico City and its inhabitants have the key for the socio-biological survival in this post-national future.

In the Third part of his book, Morales projects a dystopian image of Mexico City: a "Middle Life Existence" concentration of "one hundred million" people with the ambiance and infrastructure of a "Lower Life Existence" area (Morales 1992 162). For Gregory, medical director of the LAMEX Health Corridor, the city is a "prison camp," an abnormal form and transmissible agent carrying the "energies of rebellion" (*Idem*). The hostile environment and harsh atmosphere has not only affected the environmental

resources of the urban ecosystem, eliminating all traces of vegetation, causing “the herbivorous animals to become carnivorous” (Morales 1992 164); but also has damaged and mutated the social ecology of the place imposing the categorical imperative “only the stronger survive”. Even in this fictional future, the satellite position of Mexico City in the bio-economic/bio-political domain of LAMEX makes it the weakest link and the scapegoat of a falling urban system: “As the population grew, the ecological balance of the city was destroyed, its public services overwhelmed and natural resources decimated” (Morales 1992 163); the radical logic of late modern colonial policies (North/South, colonizer/colonized, strong/weak) exercised by the Triple Alliance inflicts a serious damage into the unequal means of wealth distribution, forcing the inhabitants of Mexico City to fight for their survival: “Frail humans were either confined for the rest of their life to an indoor existence or risked danger of lethal infection outside” (Morales 1992 164). The logic of bio-economic/bio-political survival pushes the urban survivors to resist and endure the hostile conditions despite the intrinsic limitations they bring into their lives: “Only people who had to be outside ventured into the streets for long periods of time. Yet millions of people worked, played, loved and died here” (*Idem*).

Despite this disadvantageous scenario, Morales provides an alternative cure to save and restore the social and cultural environment of the city from the urban sickness; and in order to do that he turns into “the repressed history of the city” as a means to decolonize the ghosts of repression that molded the sociocultural dynamics of the social space in the past, and that had reshaped the bio-cultural/bio-political practices in this future dystopia: “Ancient times and cultures issued forth from deep within the soul of the Mexican earth. It was a past ignored, but felt deeply, an ancient fervor that ran through

the mind, heart and blood of Mexico. Since the time of Tenochtitlan to today's Mexico City, the Mexicans continually carried their historical ghosts dangling from their modern ritualistic necklace" (Morales 1992 162).

For Walter Mignolo, the way of breaking the discursivity of the "modern/colonial world system" symbolizes in itself a dialogic scenario in which the "subaltern" voice of the oppressed reply and restore the "hegemonic discourse": "The transcending of the colonial difference can only be done from a perspective of subalternity, from decolonization, and, therefore, from a new epistemological terrain where border thinking works" (Mignolo 45). For the inhabitants of Mexico City, as well for all the population of the LLE concentrations in LAMEX, the rebellion against the hegemonic and colonial discourse of the Triple Alliance's system starts with the speech of the subalternity that breaks the chains of biological and ecological oppression, the act of dialogical response that brings to surface the repressed history and culture of Mexico City. The conditions of Mignolo's border thinking as a space for the "restitution of subaltern knowledge" (Mignolo ix) echoes the border theory of Anzaldúa or the "Third Space" of Homi Bhabha, in a way in which the disruption of hegemonic enunciation allow areas for alternative discourse; the "liminal space[s]" that function as bridges between the radical changes of systemic transition (Anzaldúa 243). The spatiality of the "un-silenced," as Emma Pérez suggests, that allow the conditions for the narrative act of recognition: "These interstitial gaps interrupt the linear model of time, and it is in such locations that oppositional, subaltern histories can be found"; "silences" within the mode of hegemonic expression that symbolizes and become and "the negotiating spaces for the decolonizing subject." (Pérez 5). In the fictional scenario of trans-urban narratives, the reply and

restitution of subaltern knowledge makes also possible the re-appropriation of the social space; in the post-national conditions of LAMEX, the restoration of the alternative discourse of the Mexican and Mexican-American community allows also the healing of the urban landscape through the reestablishment of a biological/dialogical order; and stranger as this can be, the key to the restoration of this biological/dialogical order is in the “blood” of its inhabitants.

While analyzing the biochemical components in the blood of the “garbage people” at El Pepenador, a fictional neighborhood located in the garbage zones of futuristic Mexico City, Gregory finds that, despite the contamination, their bodies are perfectly healthy (Morales 1992 164); a “biochemical quantum jump” has allowed them to endure the effects of the “severely polluted environment” of the city: “Something wonderful, biologically wonderful, had occurred to some of the people of Mexico City. Sometime in the recent past, a great chemical transformation had taken place” (Morales 1992 165). The bioenvironmental disaster that put in danger the stability of LAMEX produces in exchange a genetic solution that grants the people with the power to overcome the catastrophe. But ironic as it may be, only the blood from the inhabitants of Mexico City can provide the cure for this shared illness. In this point, Morales’s narrative acquires a certain degree of critical playfulness, because the cure itself that comes from the most oppressed community in the whole urban composite not only reestablishes the healthiness of the immune system of LAMEX allowing their people to subsist the plagues; but also repositions the dialogical order (strong/weak, colonizer/colonized) by allowing their blood to speak for them and to give them visibility in this polluted system. Morales deconstructs and decomposes the modern folklore –that concedes Mexico City’s

residents the extraordinary skill to survive “the most polluted conditions on earth”– in order to exhibit the restitution of the biological/dialogical order that allows them a space of expression and representation in this dystopia: “It was so obvious but so well hidden by the centuries of prejudicial attitude toward the Mexicans. [...] But it was their blood that allowed them to survive in this hyperbolically contaminated city” (Morales 1992 168).

Finally, trans-urban narratives function as a means to discover not only the intercultural connections between global cities, but also to dig and explore deeply into the similar and common backgrounds between them. What unifies both global cities is a shared past, a share feeling of identitarian belonging that can be traced in the different time-space variants of the narrative. The only possibility to save the urban space from the complete contamination of the oppressive and colonial system is to return to the origins and to heal its core. Decolonizing the origins, decolonizing the space, the urban landscape can be cured. The decolonial turn, the deconstruction of the modes of stratification in the urban landscape rest in the bio-decolonization as a way to respond the bio-politics of the urban bio-power: blood as a way to decolonize the urban space, human action over the urban landscape as a way to cure the social space. The recognition of the body as the seat and origin of the identity acts as mode of resistance against the bio-mechanism of oppression and segregation implemented by this dystrophic and abnormal system; the praise of biological and cultural origins in a post-national era saves the urban landscape from the sociopolitical abnormality of late capitalism.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Trans-Urban Ghosts: Mexico City / New York**

“Los espacios sobreviven el paso del tiempo de la misma manera que sobrevive una persona a su muerte: en esa alianza estrecha entre la memoria y la imaginación. Los lugares existen en tanto sigamos pensando en ellos, imaginando en ellos; en tanto los recordemos, nos recordemos ahí, y recordemos lo que imaginamos de ellos.”

Valeria Luiselli, “Relingos”

#### **Introductory Vignette: Finding the Unexpected**

Waiting on the platform, she observes the subway coming through the rails with its noisy movement. When the doors open, the multitude leaves the wagons, flooding the station at rush hour with its asynchronous rhythm of footsteps. Suddenly, she perceives something that defies the logic of that instant, something that seems to be out of place in that environment: a face in the crowd that only she can recognize, a ghost or a shadow of a past presence that still haunts the everyday of the living, a lonely poet that history has forgotten in the dusty streets of a buoyant city. Far beyond the contemplation of the impossible, she realizes that she is also a ghostly presence in that space, and that she is also an incongruous event happening in the crowded moment of a distant metropolis: a migrant pondering her own life between Mexico City and New York, a writer weighing the present and the past in her literature.

*Los ingrátidos* (2011) is the first novel of Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli. In most of her work—*Papeles falsos* (2010), *La historia de mis dientes* (2013), *Los niños perdidos* (2016)—Luiselli departs from the contemplation of the dynamics in big cities as a means to express the unusual and extraordinary routines happening in the core itself of

these places. She registers some of these practices in her essays (*Papeles falsos*, *Los niños perdidos*), but some of them become the extraordinary material that fuels her imagination in her fiction (*La historia de mis dientes*). In the specific case of *Los ingravidos*, the young Mexican writer presents a mystery developing in the streets and public spaces of Mexico City and New York, a cryptic secret waiting for the readers. The story is mainly narrated by two characters: the first is a young female protagonist living with her husband and two children in Mexico City, who is constantly recalling her early years as an editor in New York; the second is the Mexican poet Gilberto Owen, who recounts his experiences in the roaring environment of the Harlem at the beginning of the twentieth century, along with writers such as Federico García Lorca or Louis Zukofsky. These two narrative lines intertwine through small textual fragments, creating a mosaic of different scenes and voices mixing together the present and the past, Mexico City and New York.

In his classic book, *Delirious New York* (1978), the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas explores New York's historical transformation through theoretical projects and blueprints that have shaped the outline of the city. In his introduction, Koolhaas sketches out the premises of an urban manifesto, a "Rosetta Stone" that highlights the consequential evolution of the metropolitan area in regard the mixed dominant fantasies of their designers and inhabitants:

Not only are large parts of its surface occupied by architectural mutations (Central Park, the Skyscraper), utopian fragments (Rockefeller Center, the UN Building) and irrational phenomena (Radio City Music Hall), but in addition each block is covered with several layers of phantom architecture in the form of past

occupancies, aborted projects and popular fantasies that provide alternative images to the New York that exists. (Koolhaas 1994 9)

Koolhaas emphasizes the iconic position that the modern city has won in the global imagination as the product of a “collective experiment,” a process where “invention and testing” become the primordial components of an urban machine: “a factory of man-made experience, where the real and the natural ceased to exist” (Koolhaas 1994 10). If Reyner Banham distinguishes four different ecologies coexisting in the urban landscape of Los Angeles (surfurbia, foothills, the plains of Id, and autopia), the Dutch designer pinpoints four creative moments (Coney Island, the skyscrapers, Rockefeller Center, the European intervention) in the geography of New York that redefine the urban experience from 1890 to 1940, collective instances that pass beyond the limits itself of imagination.

Rem Koolhaas is just one of the multiple scholars that have tried to understand the forces working inside the production of the New York image, a global persona that not only challenges urbanism but also art and culture. John Freeman, in his introduction to the anthology *Tales of Two Cities* (2015), ruminates around the incongruent relation between scale and reality that haunts the mind: “the idea of imagining a city bigger than what exists in reality, so that it can properly be itself. What would it take to do this?” (Freeman xv). Freeman shows that these disproportionate magnitudes reveal the expansive nature of the metropolis: New York is not one, but many cities living, like their city dwellers, in close proximity (Freeman). Contrary to this perspective, as David Halle notes, key figures of urban studies such as Jane Jacobs, Sharon Zukin, Kenneth Jackson, or William White find an interest in the tantalizing configuration of New York: the hyper density of central city, especially Manhattan that becomes desirable for a rich city

life (Halle 2003). But sometimes that density, that vibrant thickness makes invisible the multicultural cornucopia that is the city at the expense of the idealization of a cosmopolitan life. Being a novelist and a scholar that lives and writes about Mexico City and New York, Luiselli navigates these circumstances, trying to find a lost and invisible presence lurking within American urban environments, trying to portray one of these cities that have been misplaced in the dense compactness of the New York imaginary.

Luiselli's narrative—who is clearly influenced by literary works such as John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987), or Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997)—provides the image of an incomplete and fragmented reality, a double confession (the anonymous female protagonist and Gilberto Owen) disguised through the split image of a metanarrative play that alternates time-space stages between Mexico City and New York, while drastically differentiating conceptual pairings such as “then/now,” “there/here,” “she/he”: “Todo empezó en otra ciudad y en otra vida, anterior a ésta de ahora pero posterior a aquélla. Por eso no puedo escribir esta historia como yo quisiera —como si todavía estuviera ahí y fuera sólo esa otra persona” (Luiselli 11). This same idea is revisited in the middle of the book when the point of view of the narration shifts from the female protagonist to the speculative speech of Owen: “Empezar así: todo sucedió en otra ciudad y en otra vida. Era el verano de 1928. Trabajaba como escribiente en el consulado mexicano de Nueva York” (Luiselli 64). Because the dualism between “other city” (“otra ciudad”) and the “other life” (“otra vida”) defines alternate space-time conditions that create intimate bonds of “complicity” with the present of enunciation—making the reader be part of her elaborate plan to counterfeit the translation of the work of the modernist poet Gilberto Owen, or the transformation of the female

protagonist's voice into the voice of Owen himself-; and duplicity –creating two narrative instances defined by the opposition New York and Mexico City. In this sense, duplicity (dupli/city) and complicity (compli/city) not only reveal the twofold/mirroring quality inherent to these parallel urban spaces/lives, but also the mutual involvement in the mystery/crime of fictionalizing and substituting a character's experience (forging the and giving life to the voice of Owen) that polarizes and separates “present” from “past”, “here” from “there”.

While Villoro's trans-urban narrative blends the cartographies of Chicago and Mexico City into one multilayer thick map, and while Alejandro Morales unites the sociopolitical geographies of two cities in a futuristic dystopia (LAMEX), Luiselli's text reconfigures the one and the other into pieces of an amorphous meta-literary puzzle that establishes, despite the textual resemblances, apparent dissimilarities between both urban spaces (New York/Mexico City) and lives (female protagonist/Owen). In “Mancha de Agua,” a previous essay from her book *Papeles falsos* (2010), Luiselli meditated around the intricate nature of maps as reliable reproduction of real tangible geographies. Contributing to the discussion started by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), she suggested that maps are more than abstract constructs that outline the division of the territories, but useful open tools that allow the free movement and interpretation of its users: “Necesitamos del plano abstracto, de la bondad de las dos dimensiones, para deslizarnos a nuestra conveniencia, para tejer y destejer recorridos posibles, planificar itinerarios, desdibujar rutas” (Luiselli 2015 26). The trans-urban writing of Luiselli in *Los ingravidos* is just one of these meta-literary and intertextual maps that “destejen” possible

paths within its plot (depending on who is telling the story: Luiselli or Gilberto Owen), and “desdibujan” routes within traditional literary canons.

Therefore, this fourth chapter tries to understand the space of representation in the trans-urban narrative of Valeria Luiselli’s *Los ingravidos* (2011), and how it is shaped by the material and immaterial connections between Mexico City and New York. The purpose of this chapter is to understand how Luiselli’s writing does not unify the cities in the tangible sphere of the mixed-image (Villoro) or the urban symbiosis (Morales), but in the complex process to depict the unstable and ghostly nature (*ingravidéz*) of the characters whose lives and actions transition (trans-urban/translocal subjectivity) from one reality into another (past/present, outdoor/indoor, male/female, New York/ Mexico City). In the next pages, I will also explore the writer’s fascination with urban ghosts (ethereal essences, urban memories) that co-habit her trans-urban landscapes and whose side effects (their influence and importance in the story) reveal the mechanisms behind her poetics of writing.

### **Ethereal Positions: (Mexico City) This City / (New York) The Other City**

The motif “this city and the other city” organizes the structural order of the sequences in which the Mexican female protagonist in *Los ingravidos* talks, creating a textual marker for the intertwined fragments of her life in New York, and her life in Mexico City: “En *esa ciudad* vivía sola en un departamento casi vacío [...] En **esta casa** vivimos dos adultos, una bebé y un niño mediano” (the emphasis is mine, Luiselli 11-12). The opposition and repetition of this meta-literary mantra (ese departamento, esa ciudad/esta casa, esa ciudad) create parallelisms and contrasts between the distinct styles

of life that she experiences in these two geographical landmarks, in these two chronological realms. Sonia E. Alvarez, when talking about Latinidad in the geopolitical/geo-cultural context of las Américas, suggests that the experience of the transmigrant is far more complicated than a mere crisscrossing of contrasting territories in the North/South continuum; it implies a whole reposition of the subject (in this case the female subject) within transcultural, translocal flows that modify his/her own perspective of world: “Many such crossings are emotionally, materially, and physically costly, often dangerous, and increasingly perilous. Yet cross-border passages also always reposition and transform subjectivities and worldviews” (Alvarez 2). Thus, this and the other not only strengthen the difference that determines transnational and trans-urban distances between Mexico and the US, by playing dialectical roles in the geopolitical map of late capitalism; but also stands out in the oppositional realities that materializes themselves in the everyday life experiences of the character, in the intimate space-time continuum of a woman that enjoys and appreciates New York and Mexico City in two different stages of her adulthood.

Narrative becomes not only crisscrossing maps or abstract migratory cartographies, but also trans-urban cycles that coexist within the body of the protagonist through the possibility of the writing. This is significant because it makes “this” and “the other” urban instances demarcated by the gender position of the female protagonist. New York and Mexico City are not only metaphoric instances of the nomadic cycles of life and death/change and mourning (tedium) tattooed in her memory, but also part of the changing process of her female body in the transit between two different and ethereal geographies. In other words, her experience of urbanity is not only ruled by the

contrasting chronological conditions implicated in the dialectic of present and past, but also by a series of biological and physical concerns that re-symbolizes her understanding of the social space: marriage and bachelorhood / containment and freedom / family and solitude. If New York is the past, Mexico City is the present; if New York represents freedom, youth and vitality: “Era joven, tenía las piernas fuertes y flacas” (Luiselli 20014 11); Mexico City represents isolation, maternity and the deterioration of the self-esteem: “En esta casa tan grande no tengo un lugar para escribir” (Luiselli 2014 13). They complement each other in the live cycle of the protagonist; they interact as pieces within the biological structure of the translocal/ trans-narrative voice. City is then experienced subjectively through the body (the female body) and the self, experienced through the flesh and the emotions demarcated by the transcultural contact with the urban environment; life cycles determine a social and gender identification with the urban landscape that dissolves any speck of neutrality. Such as Jude Clark suggests—following the premises of Iain Chambers’ *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience* (1986)—the politics of cultural production impose strong measures over the performativity and depiction of gender stereotypes: “our bodies themselves are social signs integrally embedded, enacted and signified in our social relations” (Clark 7). Here, the words of Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) resonate within the struggle to signify the limits of the body-battlefield in the re-signification of space: “we are painfully conscious of what it means to have a historically constructed body” (Haraway 1991).

Certain emotions dominate the behavior of Luiselli’s female character while experiencing the urbanity of both cities. In New York, those emotions are solitude and isolation; the condition of feeling completely free in this foreign place (a Mexican student

lost in the Big Apple), but at the same time isolated and distant from the dynamics of the urban communities, conditions the way she, as a female transmigrant, socialize in this massive urbanized environment. In a certain way, the same pattern of remoteness and seclusion is shared by some of the characters that she meets in this city (Dakota, Pajarote, Moby, White, Enrico, Detective Matías, Gilberto Owen); people that despite their jobs and interest in the city, they appear to be in a transitional stage in their lives, itinerant travelers in an ever changing metropolis: an editor in a small publishing company, a Latino detective in the Bronx, a Mexican poet that left his nation. The passing through the city makes her not only a stranger (a Mexican woman translating poetry in a small publishing house), but also an unfamiliar object, an incongruent event that does not match with the inherent dynamics of the location. Because the almost invisible and imperceptible nature of her presence in the streets—the condition of being a “*ingravida*” (weightless) and a Latina—reformulates her own position in the city: “Era muy fácil desaparecer. Muy fácil ponerse un abrigo rojo, apagar todas las luces, irse a otro lugar, no regresar a dormir a ningún lado. Nadie me esperaba en ninguna cama. Ahora sí” (Luiselli 27). The apparent lack of responsibility, social attachment, obligation in this alien land distances her from generating real bonds with the people or the dynamics of the city; her own everyday life practices become the actions of a ghost, an ethereal foreigner trapped in another country, in another city, in a different environment. If we add to her social remoteness, the intrinsic detachment from her own living space, then the conceptual distance with the foreign land becomes even greater, a stranger in a stranger land: “No me gustaba dormir sola en mi departamento. Estaba en un séptimo piso. Prefería prestar

mi casa a amistades lejanas y buscaba otros cuartos, sillones prestados, camas compartidas, para pasar la noche” (Luiselli 2014 17).

But even if her experience of New York is dominated by the feelings of solitude and isolation, her involvement in Mexico City’s dynamics causes a similar apprehensive mindset. Because, despite living in her homeland, she is still unable to find attachment to the ordinary things in the Mexican metropolis, and that is quite emphasized in the fact that she spends most of the time locked in her house. The rush of problems in her marriage triggers an episode of anxiety (agoraphobia) that makes her feel uneasy in regard of this urban environment: “Entro a la casa y prendo las luces. Mi marido me sigue. Abro la llave del gas y la puerta que da al patio interior. No quiero salir, no quiero ir a ninguna cena” (Luiselli 2014 60). From this point in the storyline, she is unable to put a foot outside her apartment, limiting her range of contact with the city. Thus, if the massive dimensions of New York City diminish her presence with its incommensurable weight, the unfamiliar environment of Mexico City restrains her actions. In consequence, the agoraphobic drive restricts her position in relation to the movement of the things in the street; the outside and the inside develop into two irreconcilable epistemic boundaries. Her speech also crumbles, and her discourse becomes fragments of the everyday life that the female character mentions and filters through the enclosure of her home. This is evident in the episode of “los albañiles” in Mexico City: “Desde hace unos días, hay obreros trabajando en la casas de enfrente [...] Me miran desde la azotea, alineados como reclutas, expectantes de un convite al que no estarán invitados. Cierro las persianas y me desabrocho la blusa” (Luiselli 2014 62). The lascivious eyes of the “albañiles” function here such as the lecherous eyes of the city who wants to transgress

the privacy of her intimacy; the morbid urban outdoors that lurk outside the windowpane waiting for a quick look into her private space. This creates a fundamental distinction between “this city”/esta ciudad/Mexico City that is lived from the inside of her house, and “the other city”/esa ciudad/New York that is experienced from the outside, from the streets. The intimacy of her life in Mexico City creates a minimalist cartography limited by the borders of her household, the geography of seclusion that delimits her own space: a small apartment in an unknown *vecindad* in the middle of the city; but even this limited space establishes a division between the decaying and crumbling setting of the outside: “un conjunto de casas viejas, todas un poco caídas o a punto de caerse” (Luiselli 2014 19); and the artificial and brand-new environment of the interior: “En esta casa hay un refrigerador nuevo, un mueble nuevo al lado de la cama, plantas nuevas en macetas de barro” (Luiselli 2014 19). Even in a place such as this, where she can share her life with her husband and her two kids, she feels empty and alone, a space of total introspection that carries her into the secluded abyss of her self-exiled prison cell. In this microcosm that encapsulates the transcendental facts of her life in Mexico City, she has no place, she cannot find a safety place where she can exercise her free will, or where she can continue the writing process of her own book: “En esta casa tan grande no tengo un lugar para escribir. Sobre mi mesa de trabajo hay pañales, cochecitos, transformers, biberones, sonajas, objetos que aún no termino de descifrar. Cosas minúsculas ocupan todo el espacio” (Luiselli 2014 13).

## Ghosts in the Writing Process

There is a palpable fascination in Luiselli's text with the subject of ghosts and disembodied presences that touch the fine thread of the plot, complementing the isolation and detachment that the female protagonist feels in both cities; ethereal essences that cohabit her trans-urban landscapes and whose side effects (their influence and importance in the story) reveals the mechanisms behind her poetics of writing. Certainly, Luiselli's ghosts are incorporeal, weightless, ethereal figures that inhabit and transit the urban spaces of the story. The title itself, *Los ingravidos* (the weightless) alludes to the unstable and ghostly nature (*ingravidéz*) of the characters whose lives and actions transition (trans-urban/translocal subjectivity) from one reality into another (past/present, indoor/outdoor, male/female, New York/ Mexico City); the silent inhabitants whose existence is completely obliterated by the colossal weight of the behemoth city, and whose absence within the continuum of the urban landscape is then perceived as holes of indetermination, language failures in the development of the plot: "En todas las novelas falta algo o alguien. En esa novela no hay nadie. Nadie salvo un fantasma que a veces veía en el metro" (Luiselli 2014 72). Such perception of the absence, or holes that are left in the narration as byproduct of the lost is explored by Jennifer Kabat in her interview with Valeria Luiselli in BOMB (2014) who explains that: "ghosts that are a metaphor for language that's full of holes, while the holes themselves are suggestive of abandoned places and writing that fails to describe anything accurately enough" (102).

In order to understand the meaning of ghosts and ethereal presences in Luiselli's narrative, it is necessary to explore the principle that governs her writing style. In 2010, Valeria Luiselli published her first book *Papeles falsos*, a collection of ingenious essays

that explore diverse literary topics. From searching for Joseph Brodsky's tomb in Venice, to travelling Mexico City's streets on a bicycle, the text centers on the detailed voice of Luiselli that registers the quotidian environment of the cityscape, while attaching literary and philosophical perspectives (Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Samuel Beckett, Gherasim Luca, etc.) to the ever-changing phenomenon of the city life. Thanks to her deep knowledge of high culture, her writing process decontextualizes the social spaces of the everyday life through the interstices of language, restoring and repairing cultural instances and semantic values in an urban context. In "Relingos", she writes:

Retaurar: maquillar espacios que deja en cualquier superficie el taladro del tiempo. Escibir es un proceso de restauración a la inversa. Un restaurador rellena huecos en una superficie donde ya existe una imagen más o menos acabada; el escritor, en cambio, trabaja a partir de las fisuras y los huecos. En esto se parecen el arquitecto y el escritor. Escribir: rellenar relingos. (Luiselli 2015 78)

The architect-writer compound works in the in-between, in the cracks left by diachronic moments of the language that can be refilled by new and fresh interpretations. Between these conceptual fissures, theoretical formations can easily be accommodated, such as ghosts and ethereal figures, haunting the discursive process with its clear tendency to the indetermination, as it happens in *Los ingravidos*, or in her second novel *La historia de mis dientes* (2013).

*Papeles falsos* also introduces an extensive rumination in regards of city landscape and language, which is primordial for the understanding of the writing process in Luiselli's narrative. In "Paraíso en obras," she suggests: "Wittgenstein imaginaba el lenguaje como una gran ciudad en perpetua construcción. Como las ciudades, el lenguaje

tenía barrios modernos, espacios en remodelación, zonas viejas. Había puentes, pasajes subterráneos, rascacielos, avenidas, calles estrechas y silenciosas” (Luiselli 2015 70). Her reinterpretation of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language provides a playful image of the parts of speech: language is an urban geography that, like any other city in the world, suffers the constant procedure of renewal and revitalization of its grid. In this sense, the language production is not a homogenous and standardized process, but a case of recurrent changes whose effects can be outlined in a map. Literature, in this case, is where the events of language can be traced like in a big atlas, recording the echoes of the deviations and nuances with vivid colors.

In *Los ingrátidos*, the transcendence of ghosts and writing in a bi-national context becomes essential for the two protagonists in the book: a young woman living in Mexico City, and the Mexican poet Gilberto Owen in New York. Living in a little apartment in Mexico City, the young protagonist begins to sketch a novel that recounts her early life as an editor in New York, where she was obsessed by the marginal figure of Gilberto Owen. Isolated in her apartment, she uses her writing as a way to escape from her present (married and with two children), while drawing an intimate image of her memories in Manhattan. Her writing process open some cracks in her life that are replenished by the ghostly presence of Gilberto Owen. Here, narrative becomes complicated, because Owen’s voice starts to fill the gaps left by her discontentment, drafting a unique vision of Latinos during the Harlem Renaissance, outlining an alternative story where he is also obsessed by the presence of a young woman in the New York’s subway. Confronted like in a mirror, the dialectical position of the female protagonist and Owen open binary spaces in the narrative that are codependent; the cohabitation of instances such as male

and female discourse, present and past, Mexico City and New York, reality and fiction, provides totality to the writing phenomenon of Luiselli's narrative, a trans-urban reality that fulfill the gaps between here and there.

But the aesthetic principles of Luiselli form part of Mexican literary tradition that finds interest in ethereal spaces and ghostly presences as means to express an ambivalent identity. Certainly, Juan Rulfo's work revolves around a wrecked (rural) spatiality haunted by the specters of a post-Revolución/cristeros trauma in the sociopolitical conditions delimited by the promises of progress in the *Milagro Mexicano* (Rivera Garza 2016); In *Pedro Páramo* (1955), Comala is an in-between space that allows the transit of unstable agencies, an underworld of condemned souls that still harbor the remainders of a non-resolved identity. In contrast, Carlos Fuentes carries the ghosts of the Revolución from the rural landscapes, into the modern urbanity after the 1950s. In Fuentes's texts, such as *Los días enmascarados* (1954) or in *Aura* (1962), the phantoms of the past, trapped within their own anachronistic bubble (Consuelo Llorente), confront the radical changes that are taking place in their city, due to the urban and industrial changes initiated by the stabilizing development system of the *Alemanismo*. But Luiselli is going a step further by showing that, in the age of late capitalism, the ghost still persists as an identitarian part of the Mexican spatiality; she is able to channel the memories of a lost urbanity—the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Mexico City at the beginning of the twentieth century, symbolized by Gilberto Owen's paradigm and the prominence of the literary group of *Los Contemporáneos*—and reformulates the whole metaphysics of the urban life through the mystification of the urban ghost, the real inhabitant of these multilayer spaces

(transnational/trans-urban spaces). Once the narrative focuses on ghosts, the possibility for a transnational/translocal space is open.

### **Urban Ghosts: Agency in the Urban Landscape**

Urban ghosts inhabit Luiselli's book: ethereal presences that remain anchored to the urban space, instances that remain secure as echoes of the urban memory. The paradox rests in the hollow nature of these entities that have no body, no materiality, no substance, but which manifest themselves as incongruent events or inconsistencies lapses within the logical and tangible reality of the urban landscapes. The agency of the urban ghosts persist as fragments or traces of the historical dynamics of city itself (such as the marginal position of Gilberto Owen during the Harlem Renaissance), moments and reminiscences that are preserved as the alternative history of people and places that shape the essence of the space.

Certainly, Luiselli's ghosts are not only intimately related with the communion with death, the past instance of what has gone, of what no longer exists (the absence embedded in the disjunction of the language, the holes), but whose traces can still be attached to the cityscape. In this sense, the main character feels a certain connection with the domain of the afterlife and the cultural meaning of its communal spaces that contrast and resist the restlessness dynamics of the neoliberal urban landscape: "Me gustaban los cementerios, los parques y las azoteas de los edificios, pero sobretodo los cementerios. De algún modo, vivía en un estado perpetuo de comunión con los muertos. Pero no de manera sórdida" (Luiselli 2014 19). Cemeteries, parks and rooftops become in the narrative not only spaces of communion and intimacy with the underworld, but also

thresholds and urban refuges where the tangible materiality of the quotidian urban life touches the metaphysical realm of the unexpected. This same phenomenon occurs in her small house in Mexico City. In this space, the commonness of the everyday life encounters the fantastic and the otherworldliness of the extraordinary; here, the threshold between the world of the living and the deaths is constantly crisscross by foreign presences, such as ghosts: “Nos gusta pensar que en esta casa hay un fantasma que nos acompaña y observa. No lo vemos, pero creemos que apareció a las pocas semanas de la mudanza [...] El mediano lo bautizó Consincara. El fantasma abre las puertas y las cierra. Prende la estufa” (Luiselli 2014 16).

Consincara (With-without-face) is a kindly spirit who dwells the domestic space of the female protagonist’s household in Mexico City. Such as the whole index of ethereal presences in Luiselli’s book, he is not only an immaterial presence that starts an intimate relation between the living and the death, but also a profound connection with the space of representation. As anyone can see, the inconsistency of the character rests in his name that reveals the absence/presence of human face. If the human face is the vehicle of the distinctive features of an individual, this hollow image, this ghost lacks any specific appearance; his face is an empty cover, a façade, a mask that conceals his own identity. Lacking any singular detail of who he is or who he was, his only recognizable peculiarity is his attachment to the space he inhabits, where he can move freely. Being part of a specific place or, in some cases, being part of the cityscape (such as Gilberto Owen and the case of the subway) become a way of acquiring autonomy and freedom within the internal dynamics of the story. Consincara is free to do whatever he wants, but he is indisputably attached to the house.

But cases, such as Consincara, open questions regarding the nature itself of non-physical entities, supernatural beings, or urban ghosts that dwell within transnational/transitional spaces of representation in the text. There is an old Roman concept that gathers ethereal entities with the spirit of a place: the *genius loci*. Certainly, the *genii loci* are usually described as tutelary spirits, daemons or guardian deities that accompany, protect and safeguard certain localities. Literary Western tradition (from Virgil to Wordsworth, and beyond) has constantly recurred to the belief in the spirit of place as a rhetorical device and a re-appropriation of high cultural values, such as Geoffrey Hartman's study does on Romantic poetry (Blake, Collins, Wordsworth, etc.) and the re-symbolization of the *genius loci*. But in a more modern acceptance, the concept also involves the atmosphere that determines the character or essence of particular places (Norberg-Schulz). For example, the theoretical principles of the Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz's architectural phenomenology movement rely in the environmental implications of place-making in a natural or man-made location.

In both definitions (*genius loci* as an entity or as an environment), space is imbued by something other (a being, an atmosphere, an idea) that symbolizes and embodies the meanings inherent to it: a certain identity or essence that replenish the vague landscape with sense; anthropomorphic features that re-symbolize the setting. Luiselli's ghosts, fictional spirits inhabiting the uncanny atmosphere of the urban space (such as Consincara and Gilberto Owen), also reproduce some of the inherent characteristics of the traditional *genii loci*. But Luiselli's approach to the *genius loci* re-conceptualizes the whole process of belonging to a specific place in the age of global

interchanges, portraying anthropomorphic instances and memories of the past that dwell the spaces of the livings, imaging characters that embody the essence itself of sites and territories that exists in transnational/trans-urban enclaves. Can the genius loci in both sides of the border carry also memories and recollections (*lieux de mémoire*, portable memories) of what has been lost, the echoes of urban atmospheres gone by the transitions and regeneration of pre-existing sites? Pierre Nora suggests that “a lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora xvii); can the genii loci of Luiselli inhabit also the sites of memory of the Mexican community in New York and Mexico City?

### **The Ghostly Urbanity and “Fantasmagoría” Aesthetics**

The writing process is also haunted by the transit of ghosts, urban phantasms and genii loci; the phantasmagorical aesthetics of the trans-urban narrative, which Valeria Luiselli names “Fantasmagoría,” is constantly visited by mimetic impulses and memorial episodes that reconfigure fiction: “Yo procuro emular a mis fantasmas, escribir como ellos hablaban, no hacer ruido, contar nuestra fantasmagoría” (Luiselli 2014 20-21). Clearly, in Luiselli’s book, “fantasmas” (ghosts, phantasms, spirits) is a complex allegory that makes reference to the people that the protagonist used to know in New York (being a resident or a transmigrant in the city), but also they represent reminiscences and fragments of her own life in the city. Even the niño mediano, one of the female character’s sons, asks her mother about the nature itself of her work: “¿De qué es tu libro, mamá?, me pregunta el mediano. Es una novela de fantasmas” (Luiselli 22). The innocent

question results in a speculative quest of Luiselli's poetic agenda. *Libro de Fantasmas*? A poetic (*arte poética*) of the ethereal, the weightless, *lo ingrávido*. Perhaps she employs the term *novela de fantasmas* because in a certain way this is the story of the otherness, the alternative possibilities of Luiselli and Owen lost in the cities that defined their lives; because it is not only a story of the memory, but a speculative space of intersection between these transmigrant lives in the urban landscape of these cities.

There is a question of reproduction and fidelity (mimesis) implicit in this whole idea of “fantasmagoría” as a writing process: act of remembering and recalling marginal possibilities that can only be solidified in fiction, alternative lives that acquire body in the non-space of literature. But the concept itself relapses constantly in the atmosphere of an unconventional spatiality (an evanescent environment) that has been lost and whose characters have been dragged into this abyss. The unearthly almost ghostly essence that emanates from the remembering of past memories reacts over her feeble bond to the space: “Mis recuerdos de esa vida no podrían tener mayor contenido. Son andamiajes, estructuras, casas vacías” (Luiselli 2014 14). In this sense, her past experiences in New York are assimilated not as archived memories, but as elaborated fictions, a mere reenactment or recreation of her real life that are constantly changed, transformed and manipulated by the present (Mexico City). In a trans-urban/translocal position, the present rules the past and the memories fall within the dominance of her current moment in other country, her homeland; the senses of incompleteness that can only be overcome when the creativeness sets in motion the writing process, when the memories of New York are refurnished by the re-writing in Mexico City. Such as a house that needs to be inhabited, so her voice needs to express what he left behind and what needs to be

remember: “Vuelvo a la novela cada que los niños me lo permiten. Sé que debo generar una estructura llena de huecos para que siempre sea posible llegar a la página, habitarla. Nunca meter más de la cuenta, nunca estofar, nunca amueblar ni adornar. Abrir puertas, ventanas. Levantar muros y tirarlos” (Luiselli 2014 16). Only then she feels the emptiness, the complete absence in the space that needs to be replenished with new meanings: “Dejar una vida, dinamitar todo [...] dejar sillas vacías en las mesas que se compartían con las amistades, no a modo de metáforas, sino en verdad, permitir que el círculo de silencio en torno a uno se ensanche y se llene de especulaciones. Lo que pocos entienden es que uno deja una vida para empezar otra” (Luiselli 2014 61).

In this sense, *fantasmas* / *afantasmarse* / *novela de fantasmas* are concepts closely related with the phenomenon of the trans-urban narratives, because they show an alternative space in which the possibilities and intersection of reality can be completed in the shared spatiality of urban landscapes interconnected by means of culture, community and society.

Urban narratives are the voices of the writers that find a space to show their understanding of the urban reality while reproducing the voice of their ghosts, the discourse of the ethereal experience of the transnational/trans-border crisscrossing. A ghostly spatiality—a holographic structure—that affects the aesthetic and structural principles of the narrative, by reconstructing the intrinsic relation between the writing process and the architectural design, by deceiving the eye of the reader through a series of optical riddles, convoluted plots and meta-literary fragments. An ethereal or insubstantial book that manipulates the different layers of the urban spaces through the forced perspective of two alternate lives (Luiselli and Owen), making the story and its

circumstances bigger than it is. Give meaning to the construction of the urban landscape through the use of literature, while leaving the voice of their ghost to fill the gaps; impregnate every single public space with new meanings through the action of literature and the transcultural experience: “Los espacios públicos, como las calles y las estaciones del metro, se iban volviendo habitables a medida que les asignara algún valor y se les imprimiera alguna experiencia” (Luiselli 26); transforming the urban landscape into a city of literature and ghost, a literary city (such as Angel Rama’s *Ciudad Letrada* or Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*) and a city of ghosts that engraves poetic justice into the dull infrastructure.

One of these ghosts or *genii loci* is the Mexican writer Gilberto Owen (1904-1952), a renowned Modernist writer with whom she identifies. Based on his biography, literature, and poetry, Luiselli shapes a fictional character that functions as a link between two urban realities, two spaces separated by the defiant distance of nation-state constrictions and cultural definitions. His flexible, even ethereal condition (*ingrávido*) allows him to traverse doors confined by the regulations of a fixed identity and move through fractures of spaces and times that are not necessarily Mexican, neither American. Owen is a Mexican ghost, an urban phantasm, a figment of the imagination that haunts and lurks the urban landscape of New York; he is a transnational/trans-urban presence that crisscrosses the geographical distances that separates Mexico City from New York.

### **Gilberto Owen: The Ethereal Presence of a Mexican Poet**

Knowing the literary influences of Luiselli allow us to better understand her work; in this case, knowing about Gilberto Owen, permits us to study in detail the trans-urban

kinesis of this character in the novel. But, why is Gilberto Owen so important in the aesthetic production of Valeria Luiselli?

One can ponder that the study of Owen's life helps her to justify a direct connection with the Mexican modernist group of *Los Contemporáneos*, which becomes also a topic of exploration in some of her texts, such as "Trespassers on the Rooftops" (2015). Overall, Gilberto Owen was part of a literary group that can be considered an early stage in the development of urban literature in Mexico City, a cluster of elite young poets and intellectuals (Jorge Cuesta, José Gorostiza, Salvador Novo, Jaime Torres Bodet, Xavier Villaurrutia) whose friendship and literary partnership consolidate the aesthetic principles of universal cultural expression, artistic innovation and literary progress after the avant-garde movements of the beginning of twentieth century (1909-1926).

On the other hand, one of the things that catches the attention of Gilberto Owen's life (1904-1952) is that he was a marginal figure during the cultural/cosmopolitan environment of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. Like so many Mexican artists, literati and politicians—such as Diego Rivera, Martín Luis Guzmán, Rodolfo Usigli, etc.—that lived during that period, he helped create and shape early an almost invisible transnational connections between Mexico and the US. The sign of an early transnational relation between both cities, perhaps a premature trans-urban migration can be perceived in this specific flux of transmigrants such as Owen who, in contrast with the working class groups depicted in Villoro's story or in Cisneros's memoirs, found in the pre-war period of New York the Mecca of a cultural milieu that infatuated them with the dream of cosmopolitan maturity.

Owen moved to New York in 1928 at the age of 24, where he worked with the Mexican embassy. That same year, he published his experimental text *Novela como nube*, which shows his deep connections with avant-garde movements, as well as his technical skills with poetic prose. His first impressions regarding his life in an American city can be read in the collected letters he exchanged with his friends. In a letter sent to Celestino Gorostiza<sup>18</sup> (September 7, 1928) just months after his arrival, he wrote: “New York es una teoría de ciudad construida sólo en función del tiempo, Manhattan es una hora, o un siglo, con la polilla de los *subways* barrenándola, comiéndosela segundo tras segundo” (Owen 1990 271). It is quite remarkable the concept of time that he applied to the configuration of the place; one may imagine the change he experienced from a slow and moderate rhythm in Mexico, to the turbulent and violent turmoil of the crowd in Manhattan: the rush of people moving through the streets and pouring into the engulfing entrance of the subway. Yet such an approach to the dynamic beat of this unlike urbanity seems irrelevant when compared to his first approaches to multicultural environments, his contact with multiethnic settings that reconfigure and remodel his own notion of belonging: “Y así sus hombres, que acaso hayan sido españoles, o italianos o chinos, empiezan a llegar a este muelle monstruoso, a ser otro pueblo, otra raza de sonámbulos moviéndose en la fiebre del sueño del tiempo, que es su única y su mayor marca de patria” (Owen 1990 271).

There is a directly proportional relationship between his use of the qualifying word “monstruoso” (monstrous, colossal) and his depictions of cultural diversity in the city. The hyperbolic nature of the modern metropolis refashions his own conceptions of

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<sup>18</sup> Celestino Gorostiza (1904-1967) was an emblematic Mexican theater and movie playwright. He was also the older brother of José Gorostiza, a prominent Mexican poet and part of *Los Contemporáneos* group.

social cohesion, and introduces cross-cultural relations that will eventually redirect his aesthetic production. This can be seen in a letter he sent to Clementina Otero<sup>19</sup> (August 12, 1928), where he suggests: “Es todo Nueva York. Es lo más monstruoso, lo más duro, lo más bestial. Gentes que los domingos van sin falta a sus Iglesias (católicas, judías, budistas, todas); gentes que en el *home* no son sino más bien corteses y educadas, se vuelven fieras en las estaciones del *subway*. Ni la excusa fácil, cuando bailan sobre los pies de uno. Nada.” (Owen 1990 290). In this suggestive picture, the forces of assimilation test and challenge the outsider, making a substantial division between the ethical rules of conduct at home and the immoral behavior at public spaces (subway). Owen’s words provide a suggestive portrait of a vibrant city in the early twentieth century, showing New York as multicultural landscape that places the subject into an ethical and moral transformation.

There is no doubt that his life at the US (New York, Detroit, and Philadelphia) was the starting point of a personal journey that took him from one place into another: a concrete voyage through different countries of the continent, as well as a quest for the consolidation of a cosmopolitan literature. He spent some years in South America, in places such as Perú, Ecuador or Colombia; and even when he returns to México in 1942, he just stayed for a brief time. He will die in Philadelphia in 1952, while he worked as consul for the Mexican embassy. His natural tendency to deviate from the regular course of the things (not only in his life, but also in his literature) generates a sense of errancy in his literary style. As Juan Coronado and Sigfrido Marín suggest, his poetry is imbued

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<sup>19</sup> Clementina Otero (1909-1996) was an emblematic Mexican actress that made her debut with the Teatro Ulises, an experimental theater in Mexico City established by Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Xavier Villaurrutia and Salvador Novo. Thanks to this connection, she eventually became part of *Los Contemporáneos* and a close friend of Gilberto Owen.

with the archetypal symbolism of the trip (“Toda la poesía de Owen es un viaje”), emotional associations that play with the dislocation of the poetic voice while maintaining a bond with the origins of oneself: “Los innumerables viajes ampliaron su perspectiva del mundo. El viaje le enseña una dura lección: no dejar de amar a su terruño” (Marín 55). In 1948, Owen published *Perseo Vencido*, a compendium of poems that encompasses eighteen years of his literary work, although some of these texts had been already printed in other national and international journals such as *Letras de México*, *El Hijo Pródigo* or *Revista de las Indias*. Among his most emblematic poems, such as “Madrigal por Medusa,” “Tres versiones superfluas,” or “Libro de Ruth,” Owen’s book presents the epic poem “Sinbad el varado,” a self-examination of the writer’s existence through the image of Sinbad the sailor. The legendary figure of Sinbad embodies, such as the mythical persona of Ulysses, the quintessence of the itinerant drive, the endless movement towards the unknown. Owen deconstructs the constituent features of this character by retelling an alternative storyline in which Sinbad is not the conqueror of the seas, but a man trapped in an isolated island during the month of February. In this sense, his fabulous voyage is not a heroic expedition through exotic locations, but an introspective journey of 28 days through Owen’s mind and memories, an internal monologue that, as Tomás Segovia suggests, helps him to recount his life in a ritualistic, legendary, almost mythical way (Segovia 24). If the verses recollect Owen’s memoirs in a stylish language such as in a logbook, then emblematic places in his life, such as Mexico City acquire an unnatural, almost mysterious atmosphere. This can be seen in “El Patriotero” (Día Dieciséis), where the transposition of meanings creates a fascinating and mystical representation of the city:

Para qué huir. Para llegar al tránsito  
heroico y ruin de una noche a la otra  
por los días sin nadie de una Bagdad olvidadiza  
en la que ya no encontraré mi calle;  
a andar, a andar por otras de un infame pregón en cada esquina,  
reedificando a tientas mansiones suplantadas. (Owen 2006 35)

Here Bagdad, as Tomás Segovia implies, is Mexico City (Segovia 25), and the aground and penniless Sinbad lost in the urban grid of this mythical labyrinth is the Mexican poet, who feels the effect of the long voyage that has been his life. But if we push the boundaries of the interpretation into the margins of Owen's life, this urban environment that he describes can also be New York, Philadelphia, Bogota or Lima; because Sinbad represents the free will of a poetic voice that lurks through the ever-changing face of the urbanity, the premature trans-urban narrator that justify his condition of stranger in a city made of multiple cityscapes.

### **Ghostwriter: Variations on a Theme of Gilberto Owen**

In *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas acknowledges that it is a common practice for famous celebrities and well-known persons to hire professional ghostwriters to transcribe or edit their memories or autobiographies because they are “too egocentric to find patterns, too inarticulate to express intensions, too restless to record or remember events” (Koolhaas 1994 11). If New York is as a busy character who is unable to register itself the multiple layers of changes happening within its dense spatiality, then urbanist and architects, such as Koolhaas himself, become the co-authors of an urban text that

decodes the exponential fluctuations of its urban grid: “I was Manhattan’s ghostwriter” (*Idem*). In the same way, Luiselli is a ghostwriter that has a certain degree of involvement in the fictionalization of Owen’s life and New York in the pages of *Los ingravidos*: an alternative Gilberto Owen who is closest to the feelings, emotions and perspectives of her female protagonist; an unconventional New York whose spatiality is bordering the metropolitan lifestyle of Mexico City. With the help of the remains and traces that he left scattered all over his literature and letters, she finds patterns, expresses intentions and remembers events that were never originally envisioned, co-creating instances of an urban life within her narrative. Because the fictional voice of the Mexican poet justifies her own self-identification toward the phenomenon and condition of migrant’s solitude, imagining a dead writer with whom to identify. Here, Luiselli examines her own subjectivity and her own worldview (white educated Latina), by finding a connection, an identification with this character and with the condition of their bohemian lives (Luiselli/Owen) as Mexican migrants in the US.

Leaving Mexico City and finding a new life in the New York ignite a series of radical inquiries toward her own feelings in the vastness of the city: solitude, frustration, tedium, ennui and even death anxiety. Because both characters embody the social disenchantment of the *ingravidado* (a person who has no space) in the Modern/Postmodern world, but that still enjoys their condition as outsiders in an unorthodox and unconventional environment: “En el fondo [Owen suggest] yo no creía nada de lo que escribía, pero me gustaba la idea de ser un poeta despechado en Nueva York. Llevaba una vida imbecil, pero me gustaba” (Luiselli 2014 74); the tedium that cannot find place within the limits of the urban life (nor in Owen’s New York, neither in the New York of

the female protagonist), and which it is drastically emphasized in the metamorphosis of Owen into a ghost: “Guardaba una distancia casi metafísica de las cosas y de la gente, pero me gustaba. Me sentía fantasma y eso me gustaba más que nada” (Luiselli 2014 74).

While the female protagonist is obsessed with the figure of the urban ghost and its presence in some of the emblematic spaces of the city, such as the subway, Owen is haunted by his own death and his transformation into an ethereal entity; the loss of weight and the slow dematerialization of his body emphasizes an existential anxiety that echoes his sometimes incompatibility with the places in which he used to live (Manhattan and the Harlem). But, despite the metaphorical multiple deaths that he experienced in the summer of 1928 in New York, Owen expresses a contradictory sense of frivolity and excitement when he recalls all these false memories: “Mis muertes en Manhattan eran rápidas y venían de fuera: un subway me partía los huesos del cráneo; un negro me enterraba un cuchillo a la salida de un bar; me estallaba la apéndice a medianoche; me dejaba caer a una calle desde el último piso de un edificio del Distrito Financiero” (Luiselli 2014 80). The graphical turmoil of these fictional images shows how he feels an unusual identification with the city through his death; leaving his own fictional deaths and his own fatal memories becoming part of the city, attaching his own traces in the form of tragic circumstances into the cityscape, he develops part of the intricate urban landscape. Owen becomes part of the city, and its alternative history, by dematerializing himself into a *genius loci*, by losing weight and mass and becoming the ghost that lurks the streets, the buildings, the parks, the subway.

## El Metro: A Haunted Space

One of the spaces where the visitation of ghosts, urban phantasms, *genii loci* and the insertion of the supernatural interrupt the daily nature of the everyday life is the subway. As Luiselli's character suggests in the *metro* (subway) the possibility of the encounter of the death, and the decay of the things, becomes even greater: "El metro me acercaba a las cosas muertas: a la muerte de las cosas" (Luiselli 65). In the subway, antagonistic *cosmological* planes (natural/supernatural, life/death) and alternative space-time continuums (past/present, outside/inside) join together in a singular flashpoint. Even the Mexican poet, Gilberto Owen, acknowledges the supernatural condition of this public space. In the letters that he sent to his friends, depicting his everyday life in the US, he wrote: "A New York se le empieza a ver desde el subway. Acaba ahí la perspectiva plana, horizontal. Empieza un pasaje de bulto ahí, con la doble profundidad, o eso que llaman cuarta dimension, del tiempo" (Owen 1990 271). Such as Maria Pape implies, following the resonance of Walter Benjamin's *Arcade Project* (1940): "El metro es un escenario del pase momentáneo [...] entre el mundo de la narradora y el mundo de Gilberto Owen" (Pape 175). Thus, the subway becomes a passage (*un pasaje*) in which the flexibility of the space-time continuum meets the oneiric substance of the alternative possibilities.

Since the inauguration of the underground transportation system in 1904, the New York's subway has been the place for urban contradictions, cultural ambitions, and fantastic paradox. Michael Brooks, in *Subway City* (1997), documents how the position of urban planners, government officials and city inhabitants in the first years of this public service created a series of discourses around their utopian aspirations: "But while

New Yorkers agreed that the subway would make possible the future city, they do not agree on the kind of city they expected to create. While some used the subway to support a dignified vision of the City Beautiful, others employed it to make possible the Skyscraper City of triumphant commerce” (Brooks 54). In *New York: An Outsider’s Inside View* (2004), Mario Maffi stresses a solid connection between the city above (the street and the skyscrapers), and the city below (the underground tunnels). The subway is not only the counterpart of that noisy open-air atmosphere in the street, but it is also what it lays underneath the city, below in the unconscious territory of a society that has learned to live this way:

A mythical place of the unconscious and prehistory [...] the choice place of supreme urban alienation. It is an endless source of urban folklore [...] The subway is the very underneath of New York, then, but also that underneath that each of us experiences on a more personal basis: [...] the sense of disorientation when confronted with scenes so different from those we have left, the diabolical, and unbearable noise, the sense of turmoil as trains approach the unpleasant vibrating of the long platforms (Maffi 31)

In his essay “The Subway as Utopia” (“U-Bahn als U-topie” in *Die Erfindung Russlands* 1995, 156-166), Boris Groys insinuates that any regime or any nation-estate finds certain troubles in constructing utopias because of the difficulty to locate uninhabitable sites that fulfill the fantastic requirements of the projects (such as Michael Brooks does with New York’s subway); however, in the case of Russia, the Moscow subway materializes the whimsical imagination of the October Revolution through the pragmatic insertion of the ideological symbolism into the urban life: “though the subway is part of the reality of the

metropolis, it continues to exist in the realm of the fantastic; its totality can be conceived but never experienced” (Groys 156). In this sense, the utopian condition of the Moscow subway superimposes the ideological socialist plane to the material reality, creating discontinuous spaces where anachronistic depictions of the October Revolution coexist with the everyday life dynamics of Modern Russia. In other words, the specters of the Russian Revolution haunt the luxury cavities of the Moscow subway system, through the exuberant details that hang from the ceiling and the walls, creating a sense of alienation in the mass that feels distant from the conceptual meanings inscribed in this “paradise of contemplation” (Groys).

Carlos Monsiváis, on the other hand, points out that the *metro* (subway) is not a utopian dream of ideological consequences, or a “no-place” designed to fulfill the pragmatic design of nation-state, but a mirror image, a *doppelgänger* that emulates the pulsations and rhythms of the urban surface: “El Metro es la ciudad, y en el Metro se escenifica el sentido de la ciudad” (Monsiváis 1995 111). In his essay, “El Metro: viaje hacia el fin del apretujón,” Monsiváis analyzes the principles that order the apparent chaos of the Mexico City subway system. In contrast with Groys’ depiction of the Moscow subway, and closer to Mario Maffi’s chronicle of New York subway, the Mexico City subway system inherit not only the ideological construction of the nation-state consolidated since the regime of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1969), but also reproduces the socio-political dynamics of the upper world into the instinctive movements of the flow of people in the underground. The synchrony between above and below determines the course of actions that people must take in order to succeed in the subway’s social contract, the egalitarian performance that finds in the “apretujón” (squeeze) its maximum

expression: “En el Metro, los usuarios y las legiones que los usuarios contienen (cada persona engendrará un vagón) reciben la herencia de la corrupción institucionalizada, devastación ecológica y supresión de los derechos básicos y, sin desviar la inercia del legado, lo vivifican a su manera. El ‘humanismo del apretujón.’” (Monsiváis 1995 111).

Because the “apretujón” (squeeze) embraces and comprises the paradox and absurdity of the masses surviving in the infinitesimal space of the metro wagons (or “pasaje de bulto” such as Owen suggests); the human density exposed to the limits itself of the laws of physics, while still coexisting within the lineaments of the social order. Within the limits itself of the subway’s performativity, as Monsiváis suggests, the fabric of space-time is playfully dislocated and the potential principles ruling the coherence of the material world –the fundamental constituents of the earthly substance– are corrupted: “En el Metro, la estructura molecular detiene su imperio universal, las anatomías se funden como si fuesen esencias espirituales, y las combinaciones transcorporales se imponen” (Monsivais 1995 112).

In Luiselli’s text, the playful nature of the subway that twists the fabric of space-time, and that materializes the utopian manifestation of the ideological apparatuses, provides the conditions for the intersection of narrative planes and characters. While waiting in the platform, White tells the female protagonist the encounter that Ezra Pound experience in one of the subway stations of New York with the ghost of his friend Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, who had died three months before in the trench in Neuville-Saint-Vaast: “Pound estaba apoyado contra una columna del andén, esperando, cuando por fin se aproximó el tren. Al abrirse las puertas del vagón vio aparecer entre la gente el rostro de su amigo. En unos segundos, el vagón se llenó de otros rostros, y el de Brzeska quedó

sepultado por la multitud” (Luiselli 2014 23). Such as the face of Brzeska in the crowd, the quotidian, the everyday life is suddenly hit by the presence of the supernatural. The manifestation of these urban ghosts deconstructs the public space with the fantastic appearance of the unexpected, the different; the sudden nostalgia and memories that emanates from the startling, holographic, three-dimensional figure decomposes the natural logic and the atmosphere of the urban space, in this case the New York City subway.

A parallel event occurs to Luiselli’s protagonist when she exchanges glances with Owen’s image (Mexican phantasm) in the same subway station (NY City space): “Se detuvo un tren. Detrás de Dakota me pareció ver el rostro de Owen entre las muchas caras del metro. Fue sólo un segundo. Pero estuve segura de que él me había visto también” (Luiselli 2014 44). Here, the time-space continuum of the character is suddenly interrupted by this anachronistic genius loci, a ghostly echo of the past embedded into the space, a transnational entity lost between the turmoil of the historical times, in the middle of the inescapable “apretujón” during rush hours (the infinitesimal space of the metro wagons that brings the female protagonist and Owen together). Geoffrey Hartman, in his study of Romantic poetry, suggests that one of the achievements of modern literature was to allow the communion between “the poet’s genius with the genius loci,” a scenario in which the spirit of the poet/writer combine with the spirit of place: “To invoke the ghost in the landscape is only preparatory to a deeper, ceremonial merging of the poet’s spirit and spirit of place” (Hartman 322). Even if there is an analogous component with the young Pound/Brzeska incident, the Luiselli/Owen case disrupts also the threshold

between fiction and reality, bringing together moments of New York that seems to be unapproachable in reality:

Un día, mientras regresaba a mi casa en la línea uno desde el sur de la ciudad, volvía a ver a Owen [...] Lo vi sentado, en la misma posición que yo había adoptado, con la cabeza reclinada sobre la ventana del vagón. Y después nada. Su tren aceleró y pasaron frente a mis ojos, barridos y afantasmados, muchos otros cuerpos. Cuando otra vez hubo oscuridad detrás de la ventana vi contra el vidrio mi propia imagen difusa. Pero no era mi rostro; era mi rostro superpuesto al de él.  
(Luiselli 2014 65-66)

The compound image of the face of both characters condenses the whole meta-literary game of the plot; the two voices leading the narrative of the book intertwine in a atemporal/androgynous chimera (the poet's genius with the genius loci); the two transmigrant stories collide in the deep, intimate, underground environment that provide the subway. Here, in this space of the unnatural and uncanny, in this geography where the coordinates of the surface do not function any more, both characters and storylines intersect the liminal spaces of a trans-urban narrative, interchanging subjectivities and positions within the complex structure of the text: "En el metro, camino a casa, vi por última vez a Owen. Creo que me saludó con una mano. Pero ya no me importaba, ya no sentí ningún entusiasmo. El fantasma, me quedaba claro, era yo" (Luiselli 2014 80). In the end, the narrative process folds within itself, creating a self-reflecting loop, a moment of pure consideration regarding the position of the characters within the big game of fiction: to find the other in the complexity of the urban grid is to confirm your own insubstantial subjectivity, your own *ingravidéz* (weightless).

## **Finding Owen: Mapping the Life of a Decadent Poet**

Mapping the life of Owen's vestiges becomes one of the female protagonist's obsessions. Due to the unstable and dematerialized nature of the Mexican poet –who lives in a different space-time realm–, the contemporary urban landscape becomes full of traces of Owen that the female protagonist needs to collect. In order to ground a safety space for her in the limitlessness of the American city, she gets into the quest of finding Owen, she searches the minimal remains of the Mexican poet in New York in order to create an alternative line of facts that tame the untouchable and undisclosed past of the city, as a means to reestablish the urban memory that was lost in time. By unearthing the places that Owen inhabited, she tames and domesticates the oppressive geography that surrounds her; she maps the limits itself of a crisscrossing subjectivity (Harlem, the library of Columbia University, the train station in the 116 street) that allow her to self-identify with the phenomenon of Owen's vestiges rather than taking part in the otherness of the American urban dynamics.

The quest for Owen's traces impulses the female protagonist to find the house where he lived in New York. Guided by a letter that the poet wrote to Xavier Villaurrutia, she located the address ("Morningside Av. 63") of Owen's building inside Harlem: "Caminé hasta el edificio de Owen. Lo había visto muchas veces en mi camino al metro, sin saber que había vivido ahí. Era un edificio de ladrillos rojos, similar a todos los de la cuadra, con amplias ventanas que daban al parque." (Luiselli 2014 31). Outside Owen's building, Luiselli describes the multicultural environment of the neighborhood with its "niños negros y latinos" playing in the street after school. As one can imagine, the

Harlem that Luiselli describe is not the same Harlem that Langston Hughes or James Baldwin immortalized in their literature, but a more transcultural site at the beginning of the twenty-first century, where Afro-Americans cohabit with the Latino migration from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic.

Inside Owen's building, the female protagonist searches for any clue of the poet's existence, until she finds the access to the rooftop. There, while she reads Owen's book of poems, *Perseo Vencido*, she had an epiphany, a revelation that confirms her assumptions of the place:

En un rincón de la azotea había una planta en una maceta y me acerque para enterrarlas ahí [puñado de colillas]. Me senté sobre una torre de periódicos que alguien había atado, como para posteriormente reciclarlos, y cavé un hueco. Entonces me di cuenta de que la maceta, como la que describía Owen a Villaurrutia, parecía una lámpara. La planta dentro de la maceta –tal vez un pequeño árbol– estaba seca. Era imposible que se tratara de la misma maceta que refería Owen en su carta, pero de alguna manera era una señal, la señal que había estado esperando (Luiselli 2014 32)

This long passage of the text is important for the understanding of the transnational/translocal spaces that deconstruct the whole cultural environment of the city. Such as the case of the subway, the Luiselli's narrative folds within itself, creating a self-duplicating loop; in the rooftop, Luiselli confronts herself with the possibility of finding the traces of Owen, which becomes a projection of her own self, her own subjectivity: a self-reflecting image. The "árbol de Owen," the little pot with the dried plant will be relevant for the development of the story, because in the branches she will

hang tiny notes with facts and proofs of the life of Owen in New York; furthermore, those notes will transform into the only trans-urban/ transnational object that she will take with her when she returns to Mexico City, becoming the only tangible evidence of her own time in the American city, a meta-proof of her previous New York life.

But the trans-urban threshold that opens this passage not only allows multiple levels of fiction that coexist in different planes and in dissimilar urban landscapes; it also opens the possibility of an intertextual dialogue between Luiselli's book, and her subsequent research work: "Intrusos en los cuartos de azotea" (2015). Because this azotea (rooftop) is not a New Yorker rooftop, it is not the iconic flat space that mass culture and hundreds of movies have reproduced in the silver screen. This archetypal site keeps in the literature of Luiselli a mystic and transgressive atmosphere that molds the materiality and cosmopolitanism of the American bohemia with the practices and unexpectedness of the cultural and modernist artistic scene of Mexico City. Understanding the position that the azotea has within Luiselli's work helps to comprehend the forces that dislocate this space from the mere materiality of the American city.

### **La Azotea: Bohemia and Transgression in Mexico City**

In 2015, Valeria Luiselli published in the British newspaper *The Guardian* an article concerning the importance of the rooftops (*azoteas*) and their relation with the cultural environment of Mexico City during the early 1920s: "Intrusos en los cuartos de azotea: el origen invisible de la vanguardia cultural en la Ciudad de México". The *vecindades* (or *conventillos* in some other countries of Latin America) constitute one of the most typical habitats within the urban ecology of Mexico City's *Centro Histórico*.

Transformed to accommodate the demand of low-income housing during the mid-nineteenth century, these unique dwelling spaces –whose origins date even to colonial times in the sixteenth century– became the household of working-class families and urban lumpen at the beginning of the twentieth century who lived in small rooms and precarious conditions. However, as Valeria Luiselli points out, the segregated nature of the *vecindades* became the focus of interest for the bohemian “*intelectualidad clasemediera*” (middle-class intelligentsia), which in the early 1920’s occupied the chambers constructed over the flat surface of the buildings’ rooftops (Luiselli 2015 2). People such as the painters Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl), Roberto Montenegro and Joaquín Clausell; the poet and model Nahui Ollin; the Italian photographer Tina Modotti; the American editor Frances Toor; and the avant-garde poets Xavier Villaurutia and Salvador Novo created a cutting-edge environment over the top of the city itself, where their cultural modernist program of aesthetic renovation of Mexican art and society took place.

For Luiselli, these intruders (“*intrusos*”) not only trespassed the rigid borders of the social stratification in the urban landscape by conquering and appropriating a space that belonged to the working class, but also by crossing the conventional line of the Mexican mass culture, in art and literature, through establishing the principles of a progressive modernist movement (*movimiento modernista*) (Luiselli 2015 3). Within the limits itself of the horizontal surface of the rooftops where they imagine their own position in the city (“*imaginaban su sitio en la ciudad*”), this heterogeneous group transgresses the vertical conditions of an aesthetic, gender, ideological, and moral scale grounded in the vision of a Mexican identity (*mexicanidad*) manifestly sexist (*machista*) and conservative:

Si pensamos en la Ciudad de México en términos de sus varias capas horizontales –planta baja, primer piso, segundo piso –, entonces la capa que en la década de 1920 se extendió de manera horizontal a una altura aproximada de 15 metros sobre la planta baja puede representarse como una especie de laboratorio semi-invisible, experimental, donde floreció la creatividad y donde se modificaron los parámetros morales. (Luiselli 2015 17)

In this sense, the middle-class inhabitants (*clases medias*) of this modernist utopia (“*utopía modernista*”) found in the safety space of the *azoteas* (rooftops) an ideological distance from the conventional approach of the city’s ground level; the upper position, above the viewpoint of the ordinary pedestrian, allowed them to defy gender restrictions, moral codes and literary conventions, consolidating an auto-reflexive insight in which “la ciudad podía ser vista, habitada, y en última instancia representada y plasmada estéticamente” (Luiselli 2015 17). Thus, the rebellious task of these inhabitants of the *azotea* symbolizes also, as Luiselli suggests, a process of conceptual and sociopolitical synthesis (*traducción*) that constructed the basis of the international image of Mexico in the twentieth century: “al rellenar el vacío entre el interior y el exterior, entre el mundo anglosajón y el hispanoparlante, entre la población indígena y las élite mexicanas, entre lo local y lo extranjero” (Luiselli 2015 18).

Luiselli also provides in her article a comprehensive map of the places where this artists and thinkers coexists during this period of time, such as the Dr. Atl’s address in the street of Uruguay #170, or Tina Modotti and Frances Toor’s apartment in a building called Edificio Zamora in Abraham Gonzalez street. From Luiselli’s inclusive catalog of famous rooftops in the city, the one that stands out in particular is the one located in

Mexico City's downtown in the street of Brasil #42, because of its textual relation with *Los ingravidos*, and its affinity with the work of Los Contemporáneos. In opposition to certain avant-garde movements, such as El Estridentismo (Manuel Maples Arce, Arqueles Vela, Germán List Arzubide), which also explored some urban topics through the scope of Cubist, Ultraist and Dadaist influences, Los Contemporáneos pretended an aesthetic renovation of the artistic environment in Mexico City through a cosmopolitan and sophisticated vision of the work of art, making a clear statement against the cultural productions and iconography of the Mexican Revolution (*Literatura de la Revolución*), and its nationalistic, warlike and machista perspective.

In this apartment, in the proximities of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso), Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia founded the literary magazine *ULISES* (1927-1928), which became the archetypical bases of the later called *Contemporáneos* magazine, and which depicted their unique understanding of the cosmopolitan style of life, and the corpus of works that influenced their literature (Langston Hughes' poems and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*):

Resulta que la revista tenía su sede en uno de los cuartos de azotea que sus editores rentaban desde 1924. Ahí se reunían periódicamente, junto con Gilberto Owen, e interrumpían sus sesiones para comer hot-cakes en un lugar cercano llamado Quick-lunch, un comedor estilo americano que era muy diferente a los salones afrancesados donde se reunían otros intelectuales que también era radicalmente distinto a las cantinas y pulquerías que Novo visitaba en sus excursiones nocturnas. (Luiselli 2015 11)

The place, which Novo had been renting since 1924, became the location and refuge for most of their transgressions within the field of literature, but also within the moral and political heterodoxy of their times: “sus experimentos sexuales colectivos y su incursión en las drogas” (Luiselli 2015 11). Within the rigorous ideological frame of Mexican identity during the first years of the twentieth century, the necessity of creating alternative spaces became a priority for the wellbeing of unconventional expressions that defied and shock the cultural and moral formation of the nation-estate. In this sense, the azotea of Novo and Villaurrutia, and later of the Contemporáneos, reaffirmed a position of visibility within the cultural ecology through the sublimation of a space condemned in its origin to the oblivion; the glamour and the exoticism of the prohibited—exercised by the bourgeois artists—provided the chemical spontaneity for the transformation of the clandestine heights, into a sanctuary in the middle of the city.

### **Rethinking Rooftops, Rethinking Spatiality**

The taxonomy of the Contemporáneos’ *azotea* provides us some comprehensive information to decode the passage in the rooftop of Owen’s building. Such as the Mexican *azotea*, the horizontal surface of Owen’s rooftop surpasses the verticality imposed by the stratification of the American city; here, far beyond the everyday nature of the urban landscape (with its historical *a priori*, and cultural resonance), the possibility of the encounter with a lost identity becomes a reality. The rooftop becomes an instance of cultural dislocation (such as *Los Contemporáneos*’s *azotea* becomes a dislocation from the everyday practices of Mexico City) in the middle of the urban American geography; among all the possible sites in New York, it is at the top of Owen’s building in Harlem

where she can find and reaffirm the traces of her own identity abroad: a Mexican scholar locating her roots back to her homeland, a Mexican scholar finding the traces of a lost Mexican poet.

In “Zapata Boulevard” (2014), Luiselli also explores the same cultural dislocation, the sudden irruption of the Mexican presence in the New York landscape. Written for an anthology that includes texts from Zadie Smith, Victor Lavalle, and Junot Díaz (*Tales of Two Cities*), “Zapata Boulevard” describes her everyday life in Hamilton Heights, mapping the quotidian sites and the action of the people that are reshaping the Spanish Harlem in the twenty-first century. For Luiselli, mapping is not only an activity that restores the silent presence of a person or a community within the larger picture of the cultural diversity in minority communities, but it also helps to regroup what seems to be disperse, to bring things closer than it usually seems to be: “to draw a map of a space is to include as much as to exclude. It’s also a way to make visible what is usually unseen” (Luiselli 2015b 199). That is why she fights hard in her article to trace the steps of the Mexican Harlem, in order to reestablish the silent memories of a community who is still new in the cartography of migrations in the Upper Manhattan:

I often find myself seeking out the history, the histories, of Mexican Harlem. The taciturn, silent presence of Mexicans on this side of Harlem remains uncharted. It’s relatively recent migration, compared to many others, so its invisibility is somewhat understandable. It’s also a silenced history, toned down by its own makers, who are often illegal and prefer to remain unseen and unheard. Even when summer comes and the Caribbean residents move out of their tenement

apartments and into the street [...] Mexicans stay indoors; they don't claim any right to use the street, to inhabit this, or any other place. (Luiselli 2015b 200)

The quest for visibility within the urban landscape takes a drastic position within Luiselli's words. What it tends to be forgotten by the forces of the institutionalization and the memory, it is re-appropriated in the everyday practices, in the common interaction with the people on the streets. In this way, the invisible and the silent acquire social presence in the close interaction. Therefore, by focusing in the daily experiences with her little daughter, Luiselli creates an intimate and passionate map that includes not only the history of this neighborhood that she embraces, but also of the faces and the interactions with the people that change her way to perceive the American reality, such as Alfredo, a street vender in Convent Avenue who speak all days with Valeria Luiselli and her daughter in their way to the City College: "I know that he's from the Mixteca, in Oaxaca, and he knows I'm from Mexico City, a *chilanga*. This information set us apart as it brings us together. We are somehow foreigners to each other, brought closer by a deeper sense of foreignness" (Luiselli 2015b 207). Luiselli brings out the mythical figure of Emiliano Zapata as a symbol of the national legacy that Mexicans share despite their local or class origins. The quest for equality in the use of land, which the Mexican caudillo advocated during his life, becomes the peaceful act of the retaking and reclaiming of the social space that Luiselli wants for this community. Then, she presents an unreal cartography in which all these ideals and wishes of Mexican visibility within the urban landscape of Upper Manhattan emerge in the form of a fictional street, Zapata Boulevard:

Perhaps one day there will be a Zapata Boulevard, invisible, like there is an almost invisible Martin Luther King Boulevard. It would start on Convent

Avenue, inside a house, in a kitchen, above a refrigerator, on a wall where the pictures of Malcom X and Emiliano Zapata hang next each other. Then it would meander gently at the foot of Sugar Hill toward 145<sup>th</sup> Street, where it would run down past Edgecombe Avenue and Jackie Robinson Park, past Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, across the rather empty straights before the Harlem River wetlands, and finally intersect with Malcom X Boulevard, exactly where the bridge that connects Manhattan to the Bronx begins. (Luiselli 2015b 208-209)

From the intimate space of a house, to the limits between Manhattan and the Bronx, Zapata Boulevard crisscrosses the Harlem's geography, traversing history and materiality, race and nations. With the cases of the rooftop, the subway or even this imaginary topography of Zapata Boulevard, the amorphous contradiction of a Mexican spatiality displaces, for an instance, the materiality of the American landscape, opening spaces of possibility. In *Los ingravidos*, passages that dislocate the materiality of the American city (such as the subway, the rooftop, the street or even the cemetery) become sanctuaries of lost memories that will help the female protagonist to initiate the long journey to the reencounter and rewriting of Owen's life, and consequently the details of her own life too. That is why she emphatically says that: "Tal vez me morí otra vez, como me había muerto en la azotea de Owen" (Luiselli 2014 40); because the experience in the top of Owen's building become a epiphany, a reawakening, and a long rebirth that will culminate with the composition of the text itself (*Los ingravidos*); because it will impulse the quest to the understanding of her own subjectivity (class, gender, nationality) in the urban landscape of New York and Mexico City.

## CONCLUSION

### **Trans-Urban Sanctuaries: Little L.A. and the Roar to Come**

#### **Little L.A.: A New Beginning**

Just a few steps from the *Monumento a la Revolución* in Mexico City, there is a place called Little L.A. or *el Pequeño Los Ángeles*: a bi-national zone that welcomes dreamers and deportees from the US that are creating a new community far away from their home. In this tiny and atypical neighborhood, the sound of English and Spanish rivals the roar of the traffic coming from *Avenida Reforma*; and the eyes of young people extradited during Trump's administration reveal a yearning for spaces, things and practices that they had to leave behind:

En esa zona de la colonia Tabacalera, en el centro de la Ciudad de México, conviven desde el puesto de hamburguesas que ahora también les pone tocino y salsa barbecue o prepara burritos estilo tex-mex; la barbería donde atiende un dreamer deportado que hace cortes de cabello al estilo gringo; o las pancartas donde se anuncia que tal o cual negocio apoya a la comunidad binacional”  
(Imelda García).

It is still a little spot in the immense geography of the city, but their importance in the intercommunicative game of post-national/transnational topographies is starting to grow. Located around the populous terrace that commemorates the Mexican Revolution of 1910, a new urban revolution (a transnational revolution) is taking place in the form of a social readjustment for all the people who have to reconstruct their life on Mexican soil: “Buscan un nuevo comienzo. Una nueva vida en el país que los vio nacer, pero que no

conocen y que a veces los desconoce” (Imelda García). Clearly, the notion of a “new beginning” takes here a significant path when it is experienced through the feeling of detachment, disorientation and even isolation. Not being part of a place acquires a new meaning for individuals who find themselves paradoxically on the edges of Mexican society, when they used to be part of it. Because, as Kirk Semple suggests, they are forced to dwell in the in-betweens of two national compounds, the interstices forged by the dialectics of rejection/acceptance in their immigration status: “Many must deal with feelings of loss, dislocation and confusion, adrift in a kind of transitional state between two countries: one they knew and loved but that rejected them, and another in which they have citizenship but lack a deeper sense of belonging” (Kirk Semple). The double possibility of reclaiming the space of the city for their wellbeing while also regaining a Mexican identity that was lost in the transition is what makes this case a unique episode of US-Mexico bi-national relations.

It is impossible not to find deep connections between the case of Little L.A. and most of the trans-urban topics that I have discussed in this dissertation. Some of the experiences of the deportees<sup>20</sup> echo the feeling of dislocation that one can hear in the voice of Juan Villoro’s taxi driver (Chapter One); the sense of back and forth that one can perceive in the commentaries of Sandra Cisneros’s Reyes Family (Chapter Two); the hybridization of the Mexican and American space in Alejandro Morales’s LAMEX (Chapter Three); or even the quest for the origins in the urban landscape in Valeria Luiselli’s *fantasmagoria* (Chapter Four). The necessity to express the socioeconomic conditions of their characters within the geopolitical frame of US-Mexico’s relationship

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<sup>20</sup> Deportees such as Israel Concha, who is founder of the community-based organization New Comienzos; or Francisco Hérnandez, owner of one of the most popular barbershops in Little L.A.

is what makes these narratives duplicate the historical circumstances of late capitalism, the immigration flux that took each one of these characters from one place into another, and vice versa. Trans-urban narratives deal with the commitment to expose a real migratory phenomenon in our cities that are not usually perceived or portrayed, as well as creating new dimensions to urban subjectivities that, like the dreamers of Little L.A., have to reposition themselves within larger geopolitical pictures. Even the writers and the characters that I chose for this dissertation have to position themselves in the back and forth of urban cycles between the Mexican and the American city, in the flux of migration interconnecting feelings, emotions, memories and fears beyond the limits of borders or nations. Villoro himself felt inspired to write his short story “Chicago” after a conversation he had with a real taxi driver in the streets of Mexico City. Cisneros found motivation for her books in her own family history and the city of her dad. Morales published his first two books in Mexico City: *Caras Viejas y Vino Nuevo* (1975) and *La Verdad sin Voz* (1979). And Luiselli has always been a *chilanga* lost in the middle of Manhattan. Even in a more personal level, my grandparents and my uncles (like many other returnees in Mexico) had to readapt themselves to the dynamics of a city after years in the US. But now that these returnees in Little L.A. are trying to find a life outside the US, how many of them will not see in the urban landscape of Mexico City the streets of Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Pittsburg, Detroit, etc.?

### **Ethnic Enclaves and Cultural Communities in the Global South**

Little L.A. is a safe space in the middle of the metropolitan area where migrant networks (Douglas Massey) are creating self-sufficient jobs, and community-based

organizations that welcome returnees and deportees. Places and organizations such as New Comienzos or Poch@ House start to emerge in the geography of La Capirucha as a means to help them into their process of re-adaptation to Mexican society (Kirk Semple). But the radical difference between Little L.A. and other traditional ethnic enclaves in the Western Hemisphere or in the US—such Little Tokyo, Little Armenia, Little Ethiopia, Koreatown—is its location South of the Political Equator.

Mexico City has its own history hosting larger international communities within its urban geography: like Chinese immigrants in Downtown; Lebanese immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century; Republican refugees from the Spanish Civil War; and more recently, Korean communities in the well-known Zona Rosa. But now, with the wave of returnees in Mexico, the cartography of displacement in a bi-national/transnational context will reshape not only the urban space of Mexico City, but also important urban centers in the country such as Guadalajara or Monterrey. The future cultural expressions of the returnees, with their malleable and flexible positionality between Mexican and American frameworks, will redesign our understanding of urban culture, by giving alternative parameters to the instances of national and local identity. This cultural mobility (between Anglo and Mexican contexts) has always been there in literature (*La región más transparente*, *La frontera de cristal*) and in mass media (films like *El rey del barrio* or *Pépe el Toro*; soap operas like *Dos mujeres un camino*). The figure of the returnee (*el que regresa del gabacho*, *el pocho*) has always been part of the urban ecosystem of *La Capirucha*; it is simply a matter of time before we start to perceive the effects in this twenty-first century.

But also Mexico City is extending its interdependent cooperation among cities beyond national distances. Studies such as Fernando Romero's *Hyperborder* (2008) reveal the persistent interdependent relations within the close geographic proximity of twin cities such as San Diego and Tijuana, which are creating strong links of cooperation across the buffer zone of the US-Mexico border. New points of connections are starting to materialize in larger geopolitical distances between the Global North and the Global South. This has been the purpose of this dissertation, to reveal through the humanities scope the material and immaterial connections taking place between global centers beyond the confinements of national limits. But now, the evolution of Mexico City within that unofficial inter-urban partnership has changed, growing its duty and responsibility in regards to the humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century, hosting and accommodating returnees in their own "sanctuary cities," such as Chicago, Los Angeles and New York, do with immigrants. In an age of mass migrations and territorial dislocations, what is the position of global and transnational centers in this conflict? How art and literature explore these urban changes in a post-national scenario (Smith)? Which is the position of urban art and culture toward these topics?

### **Urban Literature in the Age of Mass Migrations: A Corpus in Progress**

This dissertation started with a map, but eventually I have amended it and gave you instead a new map, a new vision of the urban narratives in the age of globalization. But also this map is threatened by the humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century, and the role that urban centers have in regard it. A future exploration of social conscious and political awareness can lead us to the study of alternative citizenships in the Mexican and

American city during a period of strong immigration policies. The goal is to comprehend the effects of this political unrest in Mexican and Mexican-American literature and art in a way it creates a new urban cartography of social resilience and cultural resistance.

In 2016, Valeria Luiselli published her latest book *Los niños perdidos*. Quite different from her first book of essays (*Papeles falsos*) or her fictional novels (*Los ingravidos* and *La historia de mis dientes*), *Los niños perdidos* is a firsthand testimony of Luiselli's work in the New York City immigration court, translating the experience of Central American children in the journey through Mexico and the US. Revolving around the 40 official questions on the immigration questionnaire, Luiselli penetrates deep in the trauma and the distress of these children from el Triángulo del Norte (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras), whose motivations and vicissitudes crisscrossing hostile and alien territories is a reality in an age of mass migrations. The sense of dislocation and disorientation that frame the style and the plot in the book is also intimately linked to the idea of disruption and interruption in the immigrant's life; the incomplete journey of their life that place them in the middle of nowhere, in the no-man's land, in the threshold between legality and illegality: "La historia de los niños perdidos son la historia de una infancia perdida. Los niños perdidos son niños a quienes les quitaron el derecho a la niñez. Sus historias no tienen final" (Luiselli 2016, 63). But also, it shows the particular job of the writers and the translators in an age of immigration policies that are trying to render and decode experiences where paradoxically their words and their incomplete accounts cannot give us the whole image. Here, in this book-length essay, a unique vision of the 2014 American immigration crisis becomes a personal account that tries to give face and voice to the real protagonist, while trying to understand the privilege position of

the writer in the middle of the big city: “Salimos de la realidad de las historias que escuchamos y tradujimos ese día, a la realidad abrumadora de la ciudad, indiferente a lo que sucede adentro del edificio Federal Plaza” (Luiselli 2016, 63).

On the other hand, David Riker’s film *La Ciudad (The City)*, 1998) provides another vision of the immigrant experience in the city through the help of cinema. Echoing Luis Buñuel’s *Los Olvidados* (1950), the film touches the same concepts of dislocation, confusion and disorientation that one can find in Luiselli’s text. Through small neo-realist vignettes, Riker dissects the uncomfortable position of immigrants that feel detached from the urban realm by using real people as their actors: day laborers moving bricks in an isolated location near the Hudson, a homeless puppeteer that cannot provide any evidence of their time living in New York, a sweatshop worker begging for money to pay the operation of her daughter. What does an alien urban landscape mean for an immigrant? What does it mean to find roots far away your own household? Such as Luiselli’s transcriptions of her encounter with the children, Riker’s vignettes become a material evidence of their participation in the urban dynamics, a timeless memorial of their presence in the city.

Valeria Luiselli’s and Riker’s contributions to the discussion around urban immigrants question the position of cities as safety spaces for individuals and communities, their role in the preservation of ethnic enclaves within the urban geographies of the American city, and perhaps in a near future in the Mexican city. The future of the study of urban and trans-urban narratives rests in the conflicting terrain of immigration policies that are jeopardizing the safeness of individuals and the role that

ethnic enclaves and cultural oasis, such as “sanctuary cities,” have in the protection of civil rights for everyone.

### **Sanctuary Cities and the Future of Trans-Urbanity**

The signing of an executive order from the US government (2017) to strip federal funding from “sanctuary jurisdiction” (Rice), reopens the ongoing immigration debate and the position that sanctuary cities have within the urban geography of the twenty-first century. The concept itself of “sanctuary,” as Harald Bauder and Darling coincide, is not only limited to the “spatially-fixed practice” of providing protection and shelter to someone within a given territory, but also as “a relational and mobile practice” whose roots date from ancient Rome, traverse mediaeval Europe, and land in our current geopolitical present (Bauder 175). Notions such as Jacques Derrida’s “city of refuge” (*On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*) rethink the future of politics in regard our approach of hospitality to refugees and undocumented immigrants in an urban setup in the Western Hemisphere (such as the US, Canada, England and other European countries).

In the US, the City of Berkeley is commonly referred as the first contemporary sanctuary city, providing in 1971 help and assistance to soldiers resisting the Vietnam War. But in 1985, the “City of Refuge” resolution in San Francisco symbolized a breakthrough in the commitment of legal protection of undocumented immigrants in an urban scale, granting asylum to Central American refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala (Lasch). The criminalization of Latino communities and “illegal aliens” in the early 1990s, and the late anti-immigration ambiance after 9/11 brought a strict vigilance

and police apparatus over non-citizens (War on Terror), providing the conditions for resurgence of the Sanctuary Movement (2015) (Jennifer Ridgley).

The discourse around the proliferation of urban sanctuaries in our current society involves, as Bauder suggests, “the transformation of political identities and subjectivities as well as the reimagining the city as a space of belonging” (Bauder 181). What Bauder implies is that the “urban sanctuary policies” allows the involvement of every resident, including non-citizens and immigrants, in the construction of the urban community and the decision toward the urban space, exercising what Henri Lefebvre calls “right to the city.” Thus this kind of alternative community membership creates a whole readjustment of the geographical imagination of cities: urban policies that go beyond the “conventional modes of belonging” (Bauder 181). A “local citizenship” that, as Rose Cuison Villazor and Yishai Blank (*Spheres of Citizenship*) identifies, negotiates “rights, privilege and obligations” for the local residents “with a sense of autonomy and control over things that would have immediate effects on their lives” (Villazor 581).

But it is, finally, in the identity-formative aspect of undocumented immigrants and refugees living under protected but delicate spaces where a trans-urban scenario becomes so important; a sociocultural circumstance in which network of cities (including Chicago, Los Angeles and New York) in the US, and pair cities in other latitudes (such as Mexico City) can share light in regard to urban community membership in the twenty-first century. But overall, it poses a question in regard how art and literature will flourish in what Holston and Appadurai call “spaces of insurgent citizenship,” and how they will portray the sociocultural/sociopolitical conditions of the years to come. It displays the necessity of a hemispherical consciousness, a transnational/bi-national awareness of

literature and art as tools to enhance the position of urban subjectivities within the larger post-national picture, a point of departure from which the urban narratives of the Mexican city and the American city coincide in the representation and protection of future cultural products and flexible subjectivities without the restrictions of race, gender, nationality, and beyond the limits of national constraints.

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