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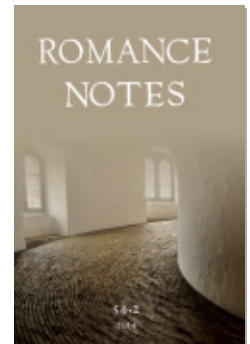
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DRIVING THE CITY: CONTESTING NEOLIBERAL SPACE IN *MANAGUA, SALSA CITY*

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THE novel *Managua, Salsa City* (*¡Devórame otra vez!*) (2000), by Guatemalan/ Nicaraguan author Franz Galich, has often been discussed as an example of a new type of late 20th-century Central American literature. Written in the aftermath of the Central American revolutionary wars, the novel became an archetype of sorts, used to discuss the disillusionment with leftist political struggles, and the transition to a more pessimistic neoliberal socio-economic order, where rampant individualism, crime, violence, and poverty seemed to reign.

In the novel, the ex-Sandinista turned security guard, Pancho Rana, meets La Guajira, an ex-prostitute and leader of a band of thieves, in a Managua dance club. The entire novel takes place during a single night, and the plot quickly evolves into a complex web of lies and deceit, where characters manipulate each other in search of their own personal gain. Rana, for example, has stolen his boss's car while they are on a trip to Miami, hoping to seduce La Guajira by making her think he is a wealthy man. In turn, La Guajira tries to seduce and rob Rana, aided in this quest by her band, which follows the couple while they roam the city's nightclubs and run-down motels. After a night of heavy drinking, drugs and sex, the plot eventually culminates in a shootout of Hollywoodesque proportions at Rana's boss's *quin-ta*, where Rana faces off against La Guajira's gang (all ex-Contras). At the end, only La Guajira and another minor character survive. The day dawns, and both are left facing the crude reality of a fatalistic and uncertain future.

The novel, therefore, can easily be discussed in relation to what Beatriz Cortéz describes as the "aesthetics of cynicism" (n.p.), a product of the profound disenchantment with the utopian projects of the guerilla wars, which instead of bringing a new, more egalitarian social order, result in a "mundo

de violencia y caos.” Several other critics, for example, have discussed the novel in this light, alternately describing it as a representation of a “violencia sin rumbo y sin propósito” (Mackenbach); an “historia de decadencia humana en la lucha por la supervivencia diaria” (Browitt); a representation of “la Managua de la violencia y el desamparo” (Barrientos Tecún); a novel that reveals “una Managua alejada de las utopías revolucionarias, en extremo pobre y violenta” (Ortiz Wallner). This same violence, although seemingly nihilistic and devoid of any ideological bearings, is still important within the context of neoliberal socio-economic reforms undergone by Nicaragua during the 1990s.¹ Misha Kokotovic, for example, has discussed the novel as part of a larger group of Central American literary works, which “do not articulate an alternative to the neoliberal present . . . [but] constitute a forceful critique of it” (24).

In this article, I would like to continue with this line of inquiry and investigate the possibilities the novel offers for neoliberal critique. Specifically, I would like to pay attention to an under-examined, yet often mentioned, aspect of the novel: the representation of the physical space of Managua. As mentioned by Kokotovic, late 20th century Central American Literature is for the most part “an urban literature” (23), and according to Werner Mackenbach, two of the most important characters in *Managua, Salsa City* are clearly its language and the city itself. This importance in part derives from the above-mentioned realist depiction of a harsh, violent, crime-driven social space, related from the onset to some idea of “hell on Earth.” This association is established from the very first line of the novel, when an omniscient narrator tells us that: “A las seis en punto de la tarde, Dios le quita el fuego a Managua y le deja mano libre al Diablo” (2). A few lines later, this same voice assures us that: “aquí en el infierno, digo Managua, todo sigue igual” (2). The novel’s pessimistic perspective, therefore, is tied to those “shut out of what few benefits the end of the war brought” (Kokotovic 25): a group made up of criminals, con-artists, prostitutes, and those just trying to get by in a world of tough dancehalls, cheap bars and seedy motels.

Although the apocalyptic night of Managua is a recurring theme in the novel, the city also becomes a space of contestation, where some of the ideological goals of the neoliberal agenda are clearly undermined. This is most

¹ William I. Robinson claims that, starting in the 1990s, a “new elite” seeks to construct a neoliberal state whose goal is to re-insert Nicaragua into the global economy. This includes the well-known neoliberal structural adjustment programs of loans, privatization, and attempts to enhance the unrestricted movement of capital and goods. The restructuring creates increases in crime, poverty, and unemployment, as well as decreases in social and educational spending (71-86).

apparent in the drives that Pancho Rana and La Guajira take throughout the city, which, although do not constitute an extensive part of the novel, are nevertheless essential to the novel's critique. It is during these drives that the novel unveils the specific relations of power at play in the very heart of Managua, revealing the city as a type of spatial palimpsest, where the different layers – and conflicts – of History are written.

During the 1990s, for example, Florence E. Babb describes how, through the re-organization of the physical space of Managua, a succession of neoliberal governments attempted to erase the historical memory of the Revolution (46-69). For Babb, this is clear in the creation of new social spaces like malls and luxury restaurants, but also in the re-naming of public places and streets. Thus the “Plaza de la Revolución” became the “Plaza de la República,” and the stadium named for the poet who assassinated the first Somoza (Rigoberto López Pérez), became the stadium “Denis Martínez,” in honor of a Nicaraguan pitcher that played in the big leagues (Babb 46-69). This re-organization of the city is specifically associated with Arnoldo Alemán (president from 1997-2000), and with a variety of “urban renewal” projects undertaken during his tenure as Managua's mayor in the early 1990s. According to Dennis Rodgers, Alemán implemented a clear neoliberal urban project, imposing a series of transformations to the city that mostly served the interests of the Managuan elites (119). Alemán's “beautification projects,” for example, included the re-paving of roads, as well as general construction work in streets and highways. These tended to take place in urban centers frequented by the urban elite, while at the same time ignoring parts of the city associated with poorer or more marginal neighborhoods (Rodgers 119-21).

In the novel, Pancho Rana and La Guajira drive by some of these “beautification works,” thanks to the mobility – and power – granted by Rana's boss's Toyota Tercel:

Al llegar a la rotonda y ver que la fuente, como cosa rara, estaba encendida, no pudo evitar el ¡qué bonito que es!, ¿verdad?, pareciera que estamos en Estados Unidos (transición). Yo conozco, concluyó, suspirando y mintiendo . . . El carro bordeó la rotonda Rubén Darío, por el costado de la gasolinera iluminada como un barco, fueron subiendo por el bulevar hasta la colonia Centroamérica. Ambos pensaron en las prostitutas que se ponen en ese sector, Pancho Rana porque más de alguna vez se llevó alguna, la Guajira porque allí había empezado su carrera. Al llegar al semáforo, doblaron y enrumbaron hacia el oriente. Pasaron por el mercado Huembes. Al llegar a la gasolinera de Rubenia (otro barco), dijo la Guajira. ¡Otro pedacito de los yunais! Así es amor, se atrevió Pancho Rana. (9)

The passage above is, first of all, evidence of the novel's “heterogeneous perspective,” and of a narrative voice that often switches between the charac-

ter's thoughts, dialogue, and third person omniscient observations that more often than not, aren't differentiated by traditional punctuation. This multiple point of view is able to represent the characters' movement through an almost cinematic "gaze" tied to the car's drifting through the city streets. This allows the fountain to become not only a strong visual cue, but also an allegorical link to the neoliberal agenda behind its construction. This was, in fact, one of the better known "beautification projects" that Alemán implemented, something that the novel immediately links to an idealized image of the United States. Clearly, there is a strong critique here of the country's political-economic reorientation toward "Miami," as well as of the social inequalities that this has created. This differentiation is apparent, for example, in the striking juxtaposition of the fountain, which was known for having music that accompanied its spouts, and the prostitutes that line the streets looking for customers.

Furthermore, the "rotonda Rubén Darío" and the "colonia Centroamérica," although clear landmarks in the Managua city landscape, could also be interpreted in an allegorical way. Even though the "colonia Centroamérica" is known as a relatively safe neighborhood in Managua, for example, it could serve here as a symbol of the unequal relations of power inherent to the new neoliberal global order. In a similar sense, the mention of Ruben Darío, one of the most famous poets in the Spanish language, juxtaposes Nicaragua's rich cultural heritage with a contemporary social environment characterized by poverty, violence and crime.² This contradiction is also heightened by the ironic use of the word "carrera" when referring to La Guajira's entry into prostitution, thus deconstructing the "business" language of neoliberalism, as well as its underlying ethos of individual hard work leading to success.

As a result, the "driving of the city" by the two main characters reveals Managua as a site of larger ideological and historical struggles. This, as mentioned before, can only result from the access gained to Rana's boss's car, a symbolic reference to the power and mobility acquired through wealth in a neoliberal socio-economic order.³ However, this stolen car, and the fact that

² Galich often characterized himself as a "subalterno letrado," and blamed neoliberal socio-economic policies for the decomposition of Nicaragua's education system. Specifically, Galich mentions that of the 43 universities and higher education centers in the country, only one offered formal studies in literature; a situation made even more shocking by the country's rich literary past ("Desde el centro").

³ In a related article, Vinodh Venkatesh explores what he describes as the "poetics of the automobile" (62) in certain contemporary Central American fiction. He claims that "the genesis, nature, form, and physics of the automobile are intrinsic to the characterization and development of these noir narrative worlds and their subjects" (63).

these two characters are in a way appropriating the social position and movement of the Managuan elites, transforms their simple “joy ride” into a subversive gesture, albeit in a very small way. Thus, although this hardly constitutes a revolutionary struggle, or even a coherent political project, it nevertheless presents the novel beyond the fatalistic, chaotic, and even apolitical perspective it is usually associated with.

In another section of the book, for example, Rana, who had been a member of an elite Sandinista unit during the war, drives by “la intersección con la pista de la Resistencia, como se llamó durante la revolución” (28). Later on, he makes a small, seemingly passing remark while they drive by the stadium: “Ahí en la entrada, estaba la estatua de Somoza, a caballo” (52). The revival of the street’s original name, as well as of Somoza’s statue, one of the first structures symbolically destroyed when the Sandinistas took power in 1979, serves as a way to revive the country’s historical memory through minimal, but very important, visual cues tied to the city’s urban space. In this way, La Guajira and Rana’s drives portray the city’s urban space against the grain of neoliberal spatial homogenization, exposing its unresolved conflicts, tensions, as well as a political project intent on historical erasure. Driving the city, in fact, becomes remembering as well, and therefore reveals that urban space can be a link to the historical memory inherent in all socio-economic change.

In Nicaragua today, the Sandinistas have returned to power. They took office in 2006, following a succession of other Latin American governments – Kirchner, Lula da Silva, Morales, Chávez – that clearly signaled, if not a return to leftist politics, at least a strong interrogation of the neoliberal agenda so strongly embraced and implemented throughout the continent during the previous decade.⁴ In 2007, president Daniel Ortega decided to rename the “Plaza de la República,” “Plaza de la Revolución.” In June of that same year, the government tore down the musical fountain, an event the newspaper *El Nuevo Diario* described as an “act of barbarism” (“Presidencia”). They applied a similar characterization to Arnoldo Alemán, who fourteen years earlier had destroyed several murals dedicated to the Revolución during the fountain’s construction. Neither the murals nor the fountain can be found anymore. They exist only in memory, or in books, where cities can carry the weight of History, and maybe some of its burden as well.

⁴ Although some social spending adjustments have been made, Arne Ruckert claims that in general the new Sandinista government hasn’t shown a significant departure from an “inclusive neoliberalism” model first formulated in 2000. To Ruckert, this has meant only a “metamorphosis” of the original neoliberal model, but not a significant departure from it.

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