

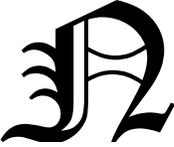
Political Marginalization in Two Colombian Novels

Beatriz L. Botero

University of Wisconsin- Madison

Abstract: This article lays out the role played by the protagonist in two contemporary Colombian novels, *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* (2004) by Nahum Montt and *Cobro de Sangre* (2004), by Mario Mendoza. Our analysis explores three related elements of importance when discussing twenty-first century Colombian novel identity: 1. The relationship between history and narration, 2. The city, the spaces occupied by fictional characters and 3. the relationships between the novel and meta-literature and how these elements explain the marginalization position of the main characters.

Keywords: History and Literature - Colombian Literature – City – Metaliterature - Identity

 novels are product of a specific time and space. Colombian novels interconnect history, space and literature explaining to the reader those elements necessarily to understand the complexity of the contemporary moment for the country. This article lays out the role played by the protagonist in two contemporary Colombian novels, *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* [2004] and *Cobro de Sangre* [2004], written by Nahum Montt and Mario Mendoza, respectively. By the time of these novels were published, the Government fiercely battled the “narcos” and the drug trafficking. It was the end of an era of big mafia names. Meanwhile, the city was absorbing the tension and the novels start talking about that war in Bogotá and the repercussions in the reconstruction of identity in the middle of violence. Our analysis explores three related elements of importance when discussing twenty-first century Colombian novel identity: 1. history-narration, 2. the city, the spaces occupied by fictional characters and 3. the relationships between the novel and meta-literature. That is to say, an identification and analysis of the protagonists’ role junctures a discussion of historical, urban space, and literature’s function. Insofar as the first aspect is concerned, we will turn our attention to the fact that Mario Mendoza and Nahum Montt intersperse their works with references to widely recognized twentieth-century Colombian historical events and actors, namely politicians. From this historically grounded perspective, these two novels narrate a revised version of this Latin American nation’s history. With regard to the second point, the two main characters are shown to

assume a double identity in the face of the brick jungle that is Bogota, a society dominated by anonymity. It is precisely this anonymity, and the characters concomitant double identity, that drives them to choose a life of homelessness. Lastly, these two characters are educated—they are writers—that contribute their own novels to the novelistic macro-structure. Writing, then, serves as the site of reflection about both societal (Montt) and individual (each writer's respective protagonist) decline. In order to elaborate the significance of investigating these three areas, we will complement our reading by drawing on psychoanalysis and literary criticism, whose insights allowing us to address these focal points from various perspectives. Colombia's history is framed such that an individual view of the facts takes center stage; geography is presented as the city's lived expression that captures the character's essence; literature is a dual process, self-reflexive and captivating, wherein text and literature create the fabric of these two novels. In other words, *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* and *Cobro de Sangre* couch the abstract in the personal to open readers up to overlooked facets of history, reveal the reality imposed by spatial formations and their subversive possibilities, as well as remind us of the nature and the magic of the literary act.

Historical Context

The twentieth century Colombian novel can be characterized by its relation to the nation's violent history. A country afflicted by myriad wars and conflicts, with causes as diverse as the analysts who have attempted to explain them, Colombia rang in the twentieth century with the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902). In 1948, violence paralyzed the country after the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, marking the beginning of a ferocious bipartisan war. The past century closed on a country mired in a tripartite conflict waged by guerrillas, paramilitaries and the official Colombian Army. These groups are notorious for arms and narcotics trafficking; their operations have given rise to a general uptick in criminal activity, pervasive extortion and an increase in administrative corruption. From 1990 to 2005, reports speak of 400,000 homicides. 2011 alone saw 993 people lose their lives due to sociopolitical violence.¹ It is incumbent upon us, then, as readers, to study this violent past in order to grasp its significance for the contemporary Colombian novelist.

During the 1950s, and especially after the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, violence caused large-scale migration from the countryside to the city. This urbanization of formerly rural Colombia is reflected in the novels of the 1980s, which critics cite as the inaugural period of urban novels.² Colombian literary critic and award-winning author Alvaro Pineda Botero defines such novels as “describ[ing] the setting with

¹ National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences, Bogotá, 2011. Within this rubric of sociopolitical violence, we find: gang-related activity, legally marginalized groups, military violence, terrorist-related actions, political assassinations, armed conflict, illegal retention (kidnapping, hostages) and violence against marginalized groups.

realistic language... the testimonial vision of the recently arrived” (134). Consequently, the city becomes the center of action and, concomitantly, entails postmodern elements such as alienation and an emphasis on the subject’s individuality. The two novels under discussion portray history as it happens to their protagonists: they live Colombian history. Thus, the language employed by these two writers articulates anger, desire and misery, often crudely, in an effort to express a failure to assimilate into their urban surroundings. In other words, they become indigents watching the city’s promise of opportunity pass them by in the midst of a historical violence that plagued Colombia in the twilight of the twentieth century.

Yet these two novels are not urban novels of the 1980s, i.e. the protagonists are no longer recently arrived rural migrants. Instead, they embody an ostracized part of the city, a part that inspires fear and produces anonymous beings. These isolated beings inhabit the margins of the urban social network, with Mendoza himself claiming that, as far as his work is concerned: “there is an aesthetic linked to marginalization; that is to say, for me the beautiful is found in the marginal. If someone asks, “Where is beauty to be found?” [I would respond] outside. Nothing happens in officialdom, in officialdom everything is repeated; I have an eye trained to spot beauty in the margins, in the periphery, in the beyond. Upon locating beauty in the margins, I also believe to have located political discourse. Political discourse is resistance to the existing structures of power, that is, the margin; it is the women on the periphery and the same goes for the male protagonists” (Personal Interview). Trough the marginal, culture finds its silence.

In the novel of the postmodern city, the Colombian reality is a chorus of incomprehensible violence wherein the actors, the causes and the political objectives are not murky at best. At the same time, we witness a literary flourishing comparable to the so-called “Boom” in that Colombian authors are awarded prestigious international literary prizes, especially in Spain, and publishing houses begin to seriously consider a group of young authors who narrate the violence that surrounds them (awards: Rómulo Gallegos, José María Arguedas, Tusquets, Alfaguara).

Given this publishing house perspective, *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* won the National Prize for City Novel of Bogotá (“Premio Nacional de Novela Ciudad de Bogotá”) in 2004 while *Cobro de Sangre* was his next book after he won the Seix Barral Brief Library Prize with his novel *Satanás* in 2002. (“Premio Biblioteca Breve de Seix Barral”). These two works jointly represent a generation of Colombian writers who delineate, according to their own perspectives, the problems engendered by Colombia’s violence. Historical events and figures are intermingled with fictional events and figures. In these novels, classification within a single literary genre is resisted. Rather, they draw on various genres, principally crime literature, but realist and urban literature as well.

1. Narrating History: An Individual Perspective

Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, then Colombian Minister of Justice, was assassinated on April 30th, 1984. Lara Bonilla has been characterized as one of the few politicians willing to openly denounce Colombian drug trafficking at the time. August 18th, 1989, presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán was assassinated during an electoral rally on the orders of Pablo Escobar, head of the Colombian drug cartels. Flash forward less than a year later to March 22nd, 1990, and Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, presidential candidate representing the Patriotic Union Party (Unión Patriótica), was assassinated. Jaramillo Ossa's case has been tied to the Colombian armed forces, as have other assassinations, "disappearances," and instances of magnicide. Shockingly, on April 26th, 1990, Carlos Pizarro, another presidential candidate, was also assassinated—one month after Jaramillo Ossa. These four Colombian politicians are secondary characters in *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* and *Cobro de Sangre*. History, in both works, plays a fundamental role in explaining the behavior exhibited by protagonists.

In Nahum Montt's novel, the assassinations are narrated in detail, especially that of Carlos Pizarro. This fact can be traced to the fact that the main character, Coyote, is a corrupt detective and a member of the DAS,² in addition to having been present as a bodyguard for three of the previously mentioned victims. Throughout the novel, readers are privy to Coyote's participation in these deaths. The novel begins with Coyote investigating the "accidental" death of an elderly woman by heroin overdose, when he discovers a semi-unconscious man, dubbed "Eskimo." Eskimo had been force-fed small doses of heroin over a period of weeks while tied down to a stretcher. As the investigation advances, Coyote's role in the assassinations of Jaramillo Ossa and Pizarro goes public. Subsequently, he hides out and assumes a different name and social condition, transforming himself into a homeless person. Thus, the protagonist descends into sickness and misery until he becomes a "ñero," Colombian slang for an indigent, the most marginal of the marginal, a situation from which he never recovers: the final days of life see him in a charity hospital bed, utterly hopeless.

Mendoza's novel *Cobro de Sangre* likewise broaches the systematic extermination of leftist leaders, the assassinations of presidential candidates and other political figures, such as Senator Manuel Cepeda Vargas and Álvaro Gómez (1994, 1995). Moreover, the text alludes to an era of domestic terrorism in Bogotá: bombs planted by Pablo Escobar aimed at preventing the signing of an extradition treaty with the United States. The story exposes events made known to the majority of Colombians through the media, but, in this novel, we hear the story from someone who lived this bloody history firsthand. Mendoza's text commences with the assassination of the parents of Samuel Sotomayor,

² Administrative Security Department (Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad). Dismantled during the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos (2011) due to numerous accusations of corruption and human rights violations.

the main character. Carried out by soldiers, this cold-blooded murder leads to Samuel's obsession with revenge. He joins a radical political group and uses a strategically placed car-bomb to kill soldiers from the Army's notorious "Special Brigade," which allegedly carried out the murder of his parents. To avoid sanguinary repercussions, Samuel changes his identity and becomes a high school literature professor. However, a spurned lover betrays him, leading to a jail stint of seventeen years. Upon his release, Samuel aligns himself with the marginal—an alcoholic who wanders the city, a homeless person. After suffering various painful personal episodes, he heads for the remote Guajira Desert to seek catharsis.

Both Coyote and Samuel experience the same arduous descent down the social ladder. Desolation and loneliness prove to be their primary resources for escaping death at the hands of their former colleagues or current enemies. During this process, the characters roam the city and display a number of strategic locations in Bogotá to readers. In effect, this aspect bestows the descriptions of Bogotá with an air of authenticity that helps blend the historical with the fictitious.

Vladimir Propp holds that every story begins with a disturbance of an initial equilibrium, an equilibrium premised on prohibition. Death as a crime occupies the role of displacing this balance in our two novels. For eminent literary critic Ángel Rama, Latin American literature reconstitutes history and puts this initial equilibrium into play. Literature, consequently, edits the past and corrects the lacunae that dot the official version of the events. For our purposes, the detailed accounts of high-profile assassinations and revelations of the duplicity of public figures reveal that which some media have kept hidden.³ Alejandro Losada, in his 1986 study "Towards a Social History of Latin-American Literature" ("Hacia una historia social de la literatura latinoamericana"), and Noé Jitrik, in 1988's *The Baroque Balcony* (*El balcón barroco*), proposes that the arts reflect the cumulative process of societal development and expose unresolved conflicts within the domain of historical misinterpretations. In other words, the writer demands explanations from history itself in order to reinterpret it on a global scale. Mendoza and Montt are driven to recount their experiences, allowing their characters to simultaneously enrich and complicate our understanding of history.

With respect to his protagonist, Mendoza states:

It interested me that in the story of one single person the entire history of the country could be recounted, that he was a witness to this history without participating in it. He is imprisoned, serving 17 years. However, the state of country affects him, and he watches its collapse. No one deserves confidence and no one is supported by an ethical pillar (Gómez Sabogal).

³ As in the case of the politician Santofimio Botero, who has been implicated in the murder of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán.

Though not a new literary strategy, the very fact that Mendoza binds the protagonist to national history is a literary justification of the Samuel Sotomayor's antisocial behavior as his attempt to avoid obscurity. In other words, Mendoza's use of the individual perspective subverts and corrects the facts presented in textbooks, where the official version of the events often goes unchallenged. Both writers in question undertook their own investigations to posit realities that history is not always able to capture.

For his part, Nahum Montt explains that in the course of his investigation to write *Eskimo and Butterfly*, he stumbled upon the story of two hit-men accused of assassinating presidential candidates, a fact not yet made public by the media. History's retelling allows readers to take a panoramic view of what happened from, interestingly enough, a more personal perspective. This perspective borders on the testimonial, yet you could not confine it to the literary genre of testimony. Each main character constructs his own vision of Colombia's reality, from viewpoints of characters such as that of Colombian assassins or representatives of corrupt governmental entities, from a personal point of view of the facts.

Not surprisingly, Coyote's character in Montt's novel can be found at the assassinations of various Colombian presidential candidates. Although Coyote was there as an agent of the DAS, he had another mission to carry out for "The Organization": killing the person hired to kill the political figure, and, in the process, eliminating all traces of evidence.⁴

It all began the night of Monday, April 30th, 1984; that night, six years ago, when Coyote killed the sicario that had gunned down Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. After a brief stay out of country, Coyote came back. He also killed on Friday, August 18th, 1989, when presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán was assassinated on a dais in Soacha, a little town just south of Bogotá. Then came the incident with The Bastards [tiznado/blackened? an attempt on Coyote's life by a

⁴ Sicario is Colombian slang for assassin. Assassin, during the Roman Empire, referred to a knife-wielding contract killer, and, in Colombia, refers to young men, almost exclusively inhabitants of marginal neighborhoods, hired to kill for drug cartels. The reputation of a sicario is predicated upon his "toughness" and "loyalty", with these two factors determining his rise in the criminal ranks. The allure of fast money and social status proves to be powerful in a society whose social circles are virtually impenetrable. Sicarios are linked to a dissociated form of religion: devout Catholics who worship the Virgin (see Fernando Vallejo's novel *La Virgen de los sicarios (Our Lady of the Assassins)*), yet they have no reservations when it comes to murder. They know they will die young, and they take their lives to the extreme in all aspects, a fact which requires that one efface any trace of fear. Additionally, the figure of the mother is quite important in the sicario familiar structure, whereas the father is not. This situation has repercussions manifest in the disregard of the law displayed by these young men. Sadly, Colombian urban youth emulate the sicario lifestyle.

criminal band] and the three months spent in Madden House, feeling like a ghost, lulled to sleep by the murmuring of words that he never quite deciphered. Upon his release from Madden House, Coyote thought about quitting his job as a bodyguard, and he concocted meticulous escape plans... it was nothing more than a matter of time until he assented to participate in the Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa plot, more out of spite than conviction. He was at the airport that morning and with the other bodyguards he shot the child sicario more than once (68).

In the novel, the kidnapping of Eskimo is indirectly linked to the assassination of the most recent presidential candidate, Carlos Pizarro León Gómez (1951-1990). Likewise, on this occasion, Coyote “takes out” the hit-man in order to erase any trace of a relationship between governmental institutions and drug money.

Thus, history is inscribed in the postmodern novel or late modernity as Marshall Berman claim “to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air” (345-6), which allows for a multiplicity of views. It would be, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, a novel with polyphonic discourse. As readers, we can access history books or the media’s discussion of the past, but we can also turn to novels. Here, we are not implying that history ought to be taught exclusively through the study of literature, nor that Mendoza and Montt would argue this point. Rather, history can be seen through many lenses, and it is precisely this proliferation of lenses that allows us to have a richer sense, a fuller sense, of what comprises history, of what must be considered in the historical discourse (Colombian historical discourse in this particular case).

2. Urban Geography: Anonymity in the City

In *El Eskimal y la Mariposa*, the city is “a living book that is transformed in my memory. The city isn’t made of brick and asphalt; rather, it is built with words and desires. If the city is book written daily by its dwellers/inhabitants, I am its best reader, for this book grows and is rewritten in my memory” (69). This is how Coyote presents a city whose map can be only deciphered via the senses. Desire and memory bestow meaning to the protagonist’s place, mentally speaking; both blur the distinctions between exterior city and interior experience. Is it not perhaps at the crossroads of desire and memory where we relate to our “familiar” cities? The corner of the next block is more than just a corner because each one of us has sewn its very existence as part of the city into our personal experiences. Czeslaw Milosz speaks to the importance of points of reference within a city. Familiar places help set objectives and creates (hi)stories within the city’s unique tapestry.

By the same token, the novel's description of different places is presented from its relation to the desire and sensory perception of the omniscient narrator, delving into the shadows, the isolations, of the very same crowded city. In the previous quotation from Montt, the protagonist describes a city that he traverses first as a detective then as a homeless person. The descriptions laid out from the policeman's point of view reveal spaces where the protagonist installs himself in a cemetery as he lies in wait for the head of a criminal organization. From there, he begins piecing the puzzle together: the dead elderly woman, Eskimo and the assassinations of the presidential candidates. If we follow the thread of the city understood as a book, this character decides to become a blank page. He decides to become someone highly marginalized in the city's text, an indigent.

Armed with a new identity, Coyote dwells in the marginal areas of the city, the tolerance zones where people become as marginal as the zone itself. As far as Montt's text is concerned, we are forced to reckon a city that is not set in stone: the city is a process insofar as people constitute it, inhabit it, narrate it. *Flâneur*, then, becomes a critical idea for interpreting the city. According to Walter Benjamin, "the street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*" (37). Although this term first referred to a specific type of nineteenth century person whose money afforded them the ability to wander the city, it may also be applied to contemporary social view of those who are, for lack of a better word, vagabonds. The relevance of the *flâneur* to these Colombian novels, then, is beyond doubt. Both characters ended as indigent, in that sense, they assume a posture of political marginalization. This notion constantly comes to the forefront of Colombian novels written in the first decade of the 21st century. Insofar as Mendoza's work is concerned, the protagonist fails as a writer, after which he undertakes an ambitious project: "The Map of Bogotá", which "consisted of transferring sensory perceptions onto a giant street plan of the city" (125). These exercises were transformative moments that resulted in his penetration of the city: "It was a basketball court in Fontibón, a lamppost in Lucero Alto, a hedge in Quiroga" (124). The mention of these three neighborhoods in Bogotá means there is no longer an "out there". The city has been interiorized, understood, digested and expressed in the form of a mental map.

Mendoza's character, like that of Montt, traverses the city as an indigent. Both novels, then, discover the city's marginal side from the point of view of a marginalized persona. The characters ensconce themselves in the "tolerance zones," and, as if it were some sort of experiment, heighten their sensitivity to capture that which escapes a detached glance or a passing smile of pity. The city speaks in the form of sensations, not words.

In light of the city's architectural duality, Coyote and Samuel assert the need to construct an alter ego⁵, another being with another name and another lifestyle. They are humans divided with the concomitant divided identity. This bifurcation, in essence, mirrors the city. While they set themselves the task of traversing the city, they suffer a form of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia, a term Sigmund Freud referred to as *dementia praecox* in 1899 and Eugen Bleuler employed in 1912, remains a term used in psychiatric nosography today. Freud employed this concept to account for how an obsession takes hold in a state of premature libidinal development, with symptoms that include a libidinal overload with respect to the narcissistic ego, language (linguistic disorders) and object representations (hallucination). Etymologically, schizophrenia comes from the Greek *schizo*, meaning split or division, and *phrenos*, meaning mind, such that one would have two identities that function alternatively within the same body. This idea is evinced in Mendoza's work: "Without realizing it, and without fear of being caught, as if Samuel were a distant cousin and not himself, Efraín established a life, feelings, a lifestyle, a personality" (106). Slowly, though, echoes of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are heard, and Samuel Sotomayor wrests back control from Efraín Espitia until obliterating the latter personality, freeing his "original self." Clearly, schizophrenia aptly describes this mental division. Likewise, the ideal ego and the ego ideal fracture, with Efraín Espitia as the ideal ego, the literature professor, the upright citizen whose literary passion bestows his persona with a lightness, but with the resurgence of Samuel Sotomayor, then neither the ideal ego or the ego ideal appear, the plunge into the depths of alcohol-induced delirium:

The first thing that Efraín Espitia noticed [...] was that his body became tense, hard, as if they had injected cement into the tops of his feet. His usual self-confidence disappeared vanished and he didn't know at first what was happening to him [...] A few seconds had gone by, and he recognizes the symptoms and got the drift: the return of Samuel Sotomayor (113).

Sotomayor's identity is that of a tough guy who seems to be a monster inhabiting the body of an unsuspecting Espitia until the latter disappears. Sotomayor returns as the glue that binds the personality together, a symptom of an unarticulated illness. It is this marginal personality that wins out in the scheme of the novelistic space.

In *El Eskimal y la Mariposa*, Coyote becomes Demetrio, a street dweller, a marginal figure in the marginal universe that he inhabits. In *Cobro de Sangre*, Samuel Sotomayor joined a guerrilla rebellion group but transforms into Efraín Espitia,

⁵ See more in Botero, B.L. "El Yo ideal y el Ideal del yo en *Cobro de Sangre* de Mario Mendoza". *Studi Ispanici*, XL, Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2015, pp. 357-68.

literature professor, in an attempt to save his own life. Shortly after, the police capture Espitia and sentence him to a lengthy prison sentence. Naturally, he falls into a state of depression, sinking “down into the depths of himself, depths he had never explored” (255). He self-medicates with alcohol and does little but wander the city.

In both texts, identity can be understood in terms of a double. There is evidence of a necessary resort to an “other” that lives in a world defined by violence, a life resulting in the loss of humanity. Moreover, the protagonists feel like animals trudging through a city that has denied them the possibility of a unified identity. To descend into the darkest depths of Bogotá, this transformation functions mechanistically, to cope. In the history of Colombian literature, the city forms the nucleus of literary action beginning around the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, we can affirm the change undergone in urban literature, with its focal point transferred away from the bourgeois/middle-class urban to the marginal with its prostitutes, criminals and those left out of the spotlight by the mass media.

These two novels exemplify contemporary Colombian urban narrative and the accompanying move toward the marginal. We see the city as on a stroll, randomly walking through a place while trying to comprehend it, to decipher what the protagonist is looking for. Benjamin argues that spatial fragmentation characterizes and, to a certain extent, fulfills, the city dweller, the *flâneur*. Seemingly inconsequential moments reveal the total historical event and the *flâneur* roams the streets as he observes the fateful destiny of the urban dweller. We can even go so far as to say that the anxiety perceived by the heroes of Jean-Paul Sartre underlies this type of literature, for they certainly exhibit the postmodern condition of fragmentation, isolation and the incapacity to understand the “complete truth” of anything (also Lyotard with his idea of metanarratives). In these discourses, Benjamin describe the elements of urban reality, they provide the reader with an insight into the plurisignification of marginalized zones in a city composed of varying social and economic strata, and they also open up the space for a description beyond the mere listing of select streets. This inclusive description brings readers into contact with the city itself, splaying its spatial characteristics before them as they relate to the character’s mental state. Seen in this light, contemporary Colombian urban literature interprets urban space as a fragment of one’s identity. Granted all urban centers have their own invisible borders, their own strategic separations, the Bogotá painted by Mendoza and Montt is truly the most marginal, situated on the edges physically and economically. What we mean to say is the stark socioeconomic contrast of Bogotá can be truly shocking, and these two authors fully exploit this contrast (like sicarios doing anything for money). In these two novels, we travel to the heart of the outside; the middle- and upper-classes fall outside the reach of the descriptions in the novels, for the areas mentioned are predominantly poorer and more dangerous neighborhoods.

We must pause to point out the juxtaposition of the seeing the marginalized side of Bogotá through the eyes of two educated characters turned indigents. Samuel and

Coyote received undergraduate education and witness not only the crumbling of the city, but the crumbling of society at large. Perhaps we can read this disparity in terms of an emphasized complicity: they actively observe this social decomposition, and they resolve their problems with violence. Instead of a critical lens of the city, we see it—in both novels—framed by a criminal mentality.

Consumerism and a strict devotion to money are associated with the city, but these two novels invert the traditional relationship. Little significance is placed on money, and work becomes a duty, not a means of economic advancement. That is not to say that financial incentives have no place, but they are certainly not the impetus for the protagonists' actions. They are not sicarios. It would be more precise to label the impetus an existential angst, a vain attempt to straighten out their personal problems. As a consequence, the reader connects the protagonists' actions to their personal freedom. In the case of Coyote, the money earned unscrupulously is donated to support a charity hospital for the homeless overseen by his friend Doctor Mandrake. Nor is money the reason for his continued delinquent lifestyle, given that he attempted to leave the vicious criminal world of which is he part: "Upon his release from Madden House [the charity hospital], Coyote thought about quitting his job as a bodyguard, and he concocted meticulous escape plans... it was nothing more than a matter of time until he assented to participate in the Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa plot, more out of spite than conviction" (68). Hence, *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* leaves no ambiguity with regard to the monetary aspect: Coyote acts out of an internal rage. Thanks to situations no less unsavory, Samuel falls into a hefty sum of money, but decides to anonymously split it with a prostitute, his former "sentimental companion." Financial motivations are thus displaced by personal ones.

The contemporary city proscribes a return to the past, a fact highlighted by Coyote's delinquent relapse and Samuel's inability to connect with his former lover apart from a secret cash drop. We can say that the protagonists are reconciled to the present. Although Mendoza narrates the murder of a young Samuel's parents, the text does not dwell on his childhood: it does not concern itself with a temporal journey into the past, like the lack of past reflection that characterizes *El Eskimal y la Mariposa*. These urban characters live in the present as a response to a world in decline. Neither longing nor nostalgia for childhood can be located in these two novels. Our characters are adults fully immersed in bitterness, in grudges that simultaneously create the conditions for alignment with the city's criminal element and a distancing from any type of childlike innocence or spontaneity. They move about the city impassively, devoid of any hint of emotion that would signify weakness. Samuel and Coyote cling to their coarseness as if it were a life jacket in the sea of dehumanized urbanity.

3. Narrated Literature and Literature as Narrated: Metanarratives

Critics such as Raymond Williams, Álvaro Pineda Botero and Augusto Escobar maintain that Colombian literature can be explained in regional terms, i.e. the region to which a writer belongs, rather than national terms. Though I believe this distinction has lost much of its validity in XXI century, many characteristics of the literature produced in the Cundiboyacense Plateau⁶ are pertinent to the present discussion: “the preponderance of Spanish heritage, the sophistication of written culture, often directed towards the literary self-conscious” (Williams 75-6). No stretch of the imagination is required to apply this concept to the majority of contemporary Colombian literature. Such characters conceive of themselves as writers and address the reader via their function as narrator; in other words, they are preoccupied with writing. “Projected is the image of the writer... [which] becomes obvious when the reader observes the creative process of the fictional character, autoconsciously creating a literary text” (Williams 93). These two novels exemplify these characteristics. Montt’s work focuses on a mediocre tabloid writer and Mendoza’s on a failed writer cum literature professor. Eskimo is nothing “more than a crazy hack, a vile, plagiarizing reporter” (45). Moreover, Eskimo professes to be a great admirer of Edgar Allan Poe, going so far as to brand himself with the author’s visage on his forearm. He eventually dedicates himself to writing the story of a bullet, Coyote’s story, but he struggles to capture the essence of the corrupt policeman who ended up an indigent prostrate on a charity hospital bed with a respirator. He frames the story, perhaps hyperbolically, and surely in stilted prose: “after there was obscurity, then oxygen, then the spoken word, then insomnia, and, finally, the novel” (254). It is worth pointing out here that Coyote’s life is twice novelized, first by Nahum Montt, the author, explicitly and second by Nahum Montt implicitly in the guise of Eskimo’s story of a bullet. On the other hand, Coyote, despite the fact that he does not write, took classes on philosophy, Greek mythology, psychology, sociology and literature in the National University of Colombia where he served as a government spy to infiltrate the politically radical university. The National University ties the protagonists of *Cobro de Sangre* and *El Eskimal y la Mariposa* together, as Samuel also attended the National University to study sociology; Samuel was “in permanent contact with literature and Greek philosophy, and he took classes where he could delve into his favorite authors” giving free rein to his passion for literature that eventually blossoms into a career as a literature teacher, albeit under a different name and identity (29). With regard to writing, Mendoza’s protagonist traverses the city in order to capture its essence in a novel he begins but never finishes, titled “*Están hablando*” (*They’re Talking*). However, he is a frustrated novelist “[who] realized that writing wasn’t enough to capture his urban adventure” (125). It is precisely this novelistic process that evolves

⁶ Cundinamarca and Boyacá comprise two of Colombia’s 32 political departments, with the capital, Bogotá, an independent administrative district located within Cundinamarca.

into the sensory map of Bogotá, part of his clandestine strategy that involves an identity change: “Samuel came to realize that he liked Efraín’s personality more and more each time, his openness to joviality and good attitude. Because Efraín was deep and happy, lucid and full of jokes, sensible and funny” (89). Embedded in this new identity, he devotes himself to teaching and develops a curriculum around three novels: *Viaje al centro de la tierra* (*Journey to the Center of the Earth*) by Jules Verne, *Corazón de las tinieblas* (*Heart of Darkness*) by Joseph Conrad and *Cuatro años abordo de mí mismo* (*Four Years aboard Myself*) by Eduardo Zalamea Borda. Each work refers to travel, but, even more tellingly, each work emphasizes an inward journey.

Mendoza’s novel concludes with Samuel Sotomayor’s rebirth in the Guajira coastal region of Colombia. Images of Zalamea Borda are conjured—a Colombian writer active in the 1930s, his work resonates with Sotomayor’s temporal and spatial journey. For Mendoza, Zalamea’s text paints an introspective trip, “a journey carried out in the knowledge and bodily appropriation”. (Mendoza, “A Trip”). While imprisoned, Samuel organizes a library and writes until he is freed and consoles himself with alcohol.

Violence, according to these two novels, becomes an artistic expression of personal experiences from a variety of spatial perspectives. Literature serves as the last resort for these characters that employ the written word to reflect on what they cannot with the spoken word. Violence is never broached by either protagonist in conversation, but it does appear in their prose. In turn, readers utilize the written word to grasp the comparative narration of experiences—of the authors and the protagonists—that the texts transmit. Literary critic Inés Mena, in her study of violence in literature, claims that writers narrate violence in hopes of “elevating to a significant literary structure the country’s sociopolitical reality” (96). Hence, the written word penetrates the sanctum, allowing for a confrontation between the notion of violence and the notion of narrated violence.

Conclusion

We have established three main points of contact between *Cobro de Sangre* and *El Eskimal y la Mariposa*. The first is the relationship between protagonists and Colombian history. Violent deaths frame the narrative from the outset. Both protagonists are detectives in pursuit of a killer, but, more importantly, they strive to change our conception of history and shed light on the shadows plaguing the official version of the facts. Luz Mary Giraldo, a Colombian literary critic, postulates that before narrating history, writers “reject it as a display of official power, they reinvent or unfold it, they parody or ridicule it, disillusioned and skeptical in the face of history’s diversity, diminishing the unique, the univocal, the true manner in which history has been recreated and transmitted” (74). Thus, in our two novels, we see history from a participant’s perspective. In some ways, we are presented with an “unfiltered” look at

the narrated events insofar as the individual lived each particular moment as part of the collective, a singular voice amidst myriad singular voices. The “unique” spectator becomes another member of the chorus. The ruthless murder of presidential candidates in Colombia in the 1980s is a matter of historical record; however, it also forms part of the personal history of each and every Colombian citizen who lived through that decade.

The second point of contact involves the protagonist’s desire to wander and reconstruct the streets of Bogotá based on their own sensory data. They haunt the edges of the city, the domain of the marginal. On one hand, violence prompts retreat, fear produces paralysis. On the other hand, Coyote and Samuel remain steadfast in their urban traversing, their urban constructing, whether it be in the form of the written word, or bullet or in the form of a map. Urban space exists only for those who pass through it defiantly. In so doing, the shared space of the city is reshuffled from the periphery. Therefore, the characters themselves must assume peripheral roles, which manifests in Coyote and Samuel as the creation of an alter ego indicative of the dual nature of the city. Changed names and identities do not permit any sort of unification. These personalities are bifurcated to cope with a world characterized by violence. Conversion into a marginal figure allows one to embody a defining quality of the postmodern city: anonymity. In *Cobro de Sangre* and *El Eskimal y la Mariposa*, this aspect is emphasized to the point where there is a complete personal transformation, and a marginal ego roams the equally marginal side of the urban scene to show the reader the power of the political marginalization inside of the silenced city.

The third point of contact is the relationship between the characters and literature. In Montt’s novel, Eskimo writes, *Cien años de soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude)* is discussed, and Colombian writers Jose Asuncion Silva, Eduardo Zalamea Borda and Alvaro Cepeda Samudio are present. It would seem that from the vantage afforded by literature, the characters regain a sense of themselves and their surroundings. Literature is the only constant, accompanying them throughout their travails and unifying the protagonist’s developmental process. The personal perspective utilized in both novels serves to highlight history’s incompleteness. The city is enveloped by fear, a fear Samuel Sotomayor confronts via his cartographically-inspired wandering. Personalities are split, with literature the avatar to which these fragments cling. In both works, those that write survive and can pass on their experiences, while it may be easily surmised what happens to those who do not.

Writing inscribes itself as a supplement for what history leaves out, it alleviates despair, and it is an art that stylizes the brutality of violence. Both writers capture the marginal figure concerned by means of literature, their way of giving a voice to the violence experienced by those on the fringes of postmodern Bogotá.

I would like to close with a quote from Joan Resina, who claimed that the essence of the crime novel is “a stylization of violence. The hermeneutic game that constitutes its development is an attempt to formally express the curiosity of life

suddenly rarified by the evocation of death” (65). In light of Resina’s “hermeneutic game,” I propose that both novels struggle to comprehend the absurdity of violence in all its manifestations, especially political violence, that blight on recent Colombian history. Mario Mendoza and Nahum Montt opt for the point of view of a marginal character, one who criticizes and attests a hidden truth. This strategy, almost an aesthetic affinity, joins literature and silence, national and personal history, madness and truth, to wield a narrative temporality of the city’s limits, of history and its actors. Face to face with the question of what history would look like from a more individual perspective, we see a subject immersed in history as he narrates it, a subject forced to change his identity to stay alive, a subject that looks from a political marginalization. Space traversed and constantly observed becomes the object of the novels written by the protagonists. Space, a lived expression of history and the site of a seemingly ubiquitous violence, is accompanied by chaos, an incessant demand of violence, of anger, of the price of survival. Montt and Mendoza approach this postmodern reality from the ephemeral *id/ego*, as Marshall Berman would say, from writing for it is a spell against obscurity. They write to preserve their lived experiences; they reflect where they live because they embody the rage, chaos and solitude clearly seen in geographical space. To speak of the past is to struggle with understanding the present. In the same vein, literature asks and answers questions of a social nature, violence, and more importantly about identity. War only brings chaos, destruction. Identity suffer mutations. History will remember the official version. Novels will bring the personal narration of the facts.

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