The Underside of History: Expressions of Medellín’s Sicario Culture in Fernando Vallejo’s La Virgen de los Sicarios

by

Emma R. Daniels
Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

Middletown, Connecticut  April 12, 2013
Gratitude

Thank you.

To my parents, who, after teaching me to read and fostering my love for writing, have subsequently endured years of me reading my work aloud to them. Who, despite not knowing a word of Spanish beyond “dónde está la biblioteca”, have always encouraged me to follow my passion for the language and literature. Who, by virtue of their own work ethic, have taught me humility and dedication.

To my mother, the smartest and most elegant woman I will ever have the honor of meeting, for showing me confidence and strength, and for being the first to tell me “the world is your oyster.”

To my Dad, for letting me borrow some of his motivation when I was running low on my own, and for reminding me to every once in a while visit the mountains and the oceans, take a breath, and look up at the stars.

To all the teachers along the way who taught me not to settle for answers, but to continue asking questions. To Robert Conn, for his willingness to share his wealth of knowledge with me, and his unwavering support as my thesis advisor. To Paul Schwaber, whose advice to “write with care” I have carried with me. To Lisa Cohen, for showing me that creative and academic writing can live in the same space.

To my friends and peers, who continue to teach me and challenge me to think differently and disruptively every day. To Eliza, for dance parties and afternoon car rides. To Kaylin, for grounding me in reality. To Justin, for honesty and late night proofreading. To Marc and Brian, for sarcasm and music. To Kyra, for sitting next to me for four years in COL, and for reminding me that it’s the intersection between reality and academia that is important in living. To Cesar, who knows how to make me smile.

Finally, to my best friend and sister. To Eliza, for always confusing my geekiness for being cool. For singing in the car with me. And for inspiring me with her ability to always find whimsy and something to laugh at in the world.

Here’s to living our own histories.
Preface

When we are children, we are first taught that lines extend forever, in two directions, without a beginning or an end. In grade school, teachers introduce us to the more complex idea that lines can indeed have an endpoint. In fact, they can even be broken into segments, indicating the existence not only of an endpoint, but also a starting point. Lines can intersect and bisect too, we soon discover. They run parallel to each other, and if they so choose, coincide in rigid perpendicularity. What a student first learns about lines are not exactly lies. There are, after all, lines that do go on forever, and lines that do not intersect. What we learned first about lines then, was not exactly the whole truth, but merely a certain part of it.

This mathematical anecdote reveals more than the progression of my arithmetic education in grammar school, but transcends to my understanding of history. When I was younger, my love of stories manifested itself through my constant requests of my parents to tell me what their lives were like as children. I wanted to know about the roan horses my Dad rode on his farm in Maryland, the skating pond in the backwoods of the shady town my mother grew up in. I loved the prospect of identifying myself through my own understanding and placement along the timeline of my parents’ lives. This fascination with a study of the past through stories and people, took root, and would not let go.

As I progressed, my understanding of history was forced out of the whimsy of my parents’ stories and into the rigidity of high school academia. History was not bedtime stories, I was taught, but rather what is contained in my textbook. It was at
this juncture that I had my first run in with a question that would, and still does, continue to plague me. What is the correct way to tell a history?

As I was instructed about the importance of primary resources for the telling of history, Homer’s and Horace’s oral recounting of history lost value and became mere collective memory in the shadow of Herodotus, and Thucydides and their efforts towards empiricism and an objective honesty. What Thucydides wrote of his methodology:

> Of the events of the war I have not ventured to speak from any chance information, nor according to any notion of my own; I have described nothing but what I either saw myself, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular enquiry.¹

David Hume in the 18th century considered the “commencement of real history.”² My concept of history continued to shift here, from a textbook organized in chronological order, to a qualified scientific method of learning about the past through the championing of empiricism, and the illusion of a lack of bias. This methodology, rather than assuaging me, prompted only more questions. What is a fact? How does it differ from a narrative, if at all? And at what point is a story told without bias in order to become history? It can’t be just because David Hume said so.

My senior year in high school left me with more questions than it did answers,

---

¹ Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, trans. Thomas Hobbes (London: Bohn, 1843), Book 1 Chapter 22.
when on the first day of European History, my new teacher who, instead of using a laser or a ruler to point to the white board, extracted from his shirt pocket a petrified banana. He grinned mischievously and pointed to a photo of a nondescript woman projected onto the white board. “Who is this?” he asked. None of us knew. “I don’t know either” he shrugged. He paused for a moment, “history is whether or not you were lucky enough to have been written about.” My conception of a scientific and thorough methodology been rattled. Did history leave things out? And if it did, who decided what was left out, and what stayed?

At Wesleyan, history professors were not the only ones who spurred my curiosity and added to my growing mountain of uncertainties and questions. I soon found historiography pertinent in philosophy, critical theory, and literature and writing classes, too. One of my first history professors asked the class one day rather offhandedly, “Do we even need history? Whose history is it anyway?” I almost jumped from my seat. “Exactly” I whispered.

I came upon two very different texts almost simultaneously. The first is Walter Benjamin’s treatise “On the Concept of History”, in which the German aesthetic theorist claims, much like Marx, that historical materialism smashes historicism’s claim as the rhetoric by which we can best interact with history. One line in particular struck me:

The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be
Benjamin’s clear distaste for historicism and teleology in his work is clear. But this quote addresses a more nuanced concern of Benjamin’s, one that is for those whose voices are silenced over the radio waves of history by their conquerors. Whether this silence is decided by the outcome of a battle in the 13th century, or the owners of large-scale industrial production plants in the 19th century, one of Benjamin’s arguments is for the un-muzzling of narratives that have been oppressed.

The second of these two texts, La Virgen de los Sicarios was written over half a century later, in 1994, by Fernando Vallejo. I was introduced to this novel through a Contemporary Latin American literature class during my sophomore year at Wesleyan. As strange as it might seem to apply Benjamin’s theory of history to a Colombian writer’s fictional narrative, I found myself intrigued by the connections between Vallejo’s novel and my quandaries regarding historiography. The narrative grounds itself in early 1990’s Medellín, Colombia, and focuses on the lives of young boys involved in the drug trade. Certainly, the setting of Vallejo’s novel exists in a historical context, but his narrative is more than a simple plot line. It privileges the voices of those who Benjamin would not consider the victors in history. Just as Benjamin wrote:

---

The chronicler, who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and small, thereby accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history.\(^4\)

So Vallejo seems the chronicler, undertaking what must have been considered by the Greek historians who aimed to retell the great deeds of their civilization to be drudgery, in choosing to tell the story of the everyday.

Vallejo’s novel tells a history. It questions whose story gets told, and highlights the illusion of a history told without bias. Vallejo’s history is not expressed through empirical data, but rather through symbolism and the juxtaposition an layering of various perspectives throughout his novel. He does not refrain from judgment, allows room for the reader’s judgment too, and in doing so establishes a strong argument for interpretation’s inextricable role in understanding and telling history. Vallejo’s history blends fiction with fact, and invites the readers to decide for themselves how to assimilate and understand his novel. Perhaps what drew me to choose this one novel to analyze and diagram, what is most captivating of all, is the feeling I was overcome with while reading: that the truth in history depends on who you talk to, and that the preservation of history does not have to lie with the privileged few, but with anyone who chooses to remember and to write. In some ways, this project has settled my fears that I will never understand how to approach history; in other ways, it has left me with more questions than I might ever dream of answering.

Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................pp. 9-20

Vallejo in the Mirror: The Shocking Narrator..............................................pp. 21-46

The Language of Violence.................................................................................pp. 47-65

Las Dos Ciudades...............................................................................................pp. 66-95

Portrait of a Sicario: Past and Present..............................................................pp. 96-109

Conclusion...........................................................................................................pp. 110-113

Bibliography.......................................................................................................pp. 114-117

Note: In taking on this novel’s analysis as a project, I felt it important to honor
Vallejo’s emphasis on the fallibility, flexibility, and integrality of language in the
novel; so even though an English translation of La Virgen de los Sicarios exists, the
translations of Vallejo’s novel as well as academic sources in this thesis are my own.
**Introduction: Medellín, 1993**

Pablo Escobar is dead. On December 3, 1993:

The crowd broke the windows of the funeral home into pieces, and spontaneously carried Escobar’s coffin on their shoulders.\(^5\)

Muerto el gran contratador de sicarios, mi pobre Alexis se quedó sin trabajo.\(^6\)

The grand contractor of sicarios died, leaving my poor Alexis without work.

Perhaps Pablo Escobar is not the person with whom we should begin. The discourse on the act of telling a history continues to grapple with the fact that it is often the most deplorable, violent, and undesirable dictators, tyrants, kings, and criminals alike who are remembered throughout the annals of time. These archives survive the ordinary rest of us. We will have died, been buried, and only actively remembered at the occasional family gathering, or through our descendants flipping open antiquated photo albums and pointing our faces out, nodding their heads and pretending they know all about us.

But Pablo Escobar will be remembered as long as the world deems his infamous deeds worthy of retelling; in history books, in scholarly articles, in newspapers, in television documentaries. One cannot discuss the drug trade and cartels, the political landscape, or even the social and cultural aspects of Medellín and

---


Colombia from the 1970s onward, without somehow implicating Pablo Escobar. Conversations about violence and drugs in Colombia all usually weave their way towards Pablo Escobar’s name.

Even today, Colombia battles against the lasting shadow history and Pablo jointly created. Some may argue that this lasting stain with which Colombia grapples is deserved. It’s true that the violence perpetuated by the drug trade from the early 1980s through the early 1990s, the very same violence described by Vallejo, won Colombia her appositional classification as the most dangerous city in the world. In a 1988 volume of *Time*, journalist John Borrell illuminates a caricature of a city fraught with political instability and vacillation, and with real and mortal violence. Even after kingpin Pablo Escobar was killed in 1993 by the Colombian National Police, violence in Medellín persisted.

Yet social and cultural conceptions of Colombia, and specifically Medellín, are fueled not only by the lingering shadow of the memory of violence, but also by the stubborn conviction that a perception of violence remains. On travel blogs and websites, and throughout the pages of magazines, there is no escaping at least a mention of the crime, violence, or fear attached to the image of Colombia. As recently as June 2010, an article appeared in *International Living Magazine* entitled “Medellín, Colombia: The Best Lifestyle You May Not Know About.” Journalist Lee Harrison takes an interesting approach; his article plays with the fear of living in Colombia. His story begins with the retelling of an assassination of a wealthy friend

---

of the President of the United States. There’s a glamorous yacht, and the CIA is involved. It’s a messy affair. The next paragraph of the article reads:

This information is of course from Tom Clancy’s novel *Clear and Present Danger*. Unfortunately, it’s the source of most of our mainstream information on Medellín, Colombia today…even though the famous cartel was crushed back in 1993, more than 17 years ago. Today’s truth is another matter.  

Not only is the staying power that violence possesses present in this article, but also evident is the modern movement to acknowledge it and dispossess it of fear, of all the power it holds over not only the people of Colombia, but also visitors to Colombia.

The Colombian government and travel bureau both attempt to erase violence from Colombia’s image. Although the recent history of Colombia is not so explicitly acknowledged on most Colombian websites, one can’t help but notice the marked attempt to clear Colombia of its stigma. On Colombia’s government website, Mayor of Medellín Anibal Gaviria is featured with a photo and article that relates his 2006 trip to Naples, Italy, to the Urban World Forum. At this forum he was honored for his efforts to improve the quality of urban life in Medellín, and asked to share sections of his book *Laboratory Medellín: An Exhibit of Ten Ongoing Practices*. This work is a compilation of the outlines of new and major programs that the Mayor has utilized in order to make real changes to the social and infrastructural realities of Medellín. The

---

mayor was held up as an international model and inspiration for other leaders dealing with urban obstacles.

On Medellín’s official tourism site, the phrase “transformation of Medellín” is plastered. The reality of modern day Medellín is proven through pictures; huge construction projects of financial centers, shopping malls, residential housing. Parks and infrastructure are being renovated. Modernity has been wielded as a weapon against violence. Cultural capital is being revalued in the complete refurbishing of Medellín’s public library. The 3.4 million citizens of Medellín are characterized, according to the website, as “industrious, hard working, sophisticated people.”\(^9\) The official tourism site for the country of Colombia presents the same tone. The header on the webpage features a rotating slideshow of colorful, vibrant pictures of Colombian architecture, natural geography, local cuisines, indigenous cultural shows, and dancing. All of these pictures run continuously under the boldly lettered “Colombia”, followed directly by the tagline “the only risk is wanting to stay.”\(^{10}\) This tagline is cute and whimsical; it’s a playful seduction technique for otherwise hesitant tourists. But one can’t deny the darker tone, and the persistence of history that belies this tagline. Colombia is still battling a shadow. And now, even though Colombia has fallen behind both Peru and Bolivia in cocaine production\(^{11}\), and is considered

\(^9\) #1 Medellín, Colombia Tourism & Travel Guide, medellintraveller.org (December 2012).
much safer for tourists to visit the country it seems like it has yet to escape this stigma and memory of violence. This is the true Medellín, Colombia today. A city that has clearly risen from the nasty darkness of violence and drug trade to assume its place as the leading textile city in the country and one of the most beautiful in Latin America, but that is still fighting off the mantle of global stigma.

And into the 21st century Pablo Escobar remains the embodiment and representation of centuries of violence that continue to plague Colombia. Realistically, Escobar is only part of the history of Colombia, and of Medellín. Realistically, the violence, sociopolitical upheaval, and cultural stagnancy, which pervaded the streets of Medellín, could not occurred simply because of one man. Realistically, such problems root in a much earlier moment in Colombian history. Realistically, a culture of persistent violence and stagnancy necessitates a population of willing, passive, or even ignorant citizens, in some cases, to perpetuate it.

The telling of history, as we mentioned earlier, often forgoes the story of the everyday. It takes sides. The telling of history trades in the complex for a simpler, easily understandable narrative. It favors the winners, the victors; it favors the louder noises, the more vibrant colors. It favors the story of the criminal mastermind instead of the memoirs of the people that criminal murdered, who lived nondescript lives barring the fame that attached to them through the manner of their deaths.

So perhaps Pablo Escobar is not the person with whom we should begin, in the telling of a history of Medellin in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Because much
has been written about him, much has been suspected, attributed, and blamed on him. But what about everybody else?

What about the history not of the other, one who is not completely outside, or forgotten, but rather in and out; involved but not remembered. What about the history of the sicario? Of the young boys who are at once implicit in the perpetuation of the drug trade, and at the same time, the victims of it. Who are known not throughout history for their own names, but for the names of the people they’ve killed. Who are citizens, and outlaws. Who hope for a better life, but know no reality but their impending death.

**A New Genre of Truth**

Fernando Vallejo’s novel *La Virgen de los Sicarios*, is one of the first novels written that falls alongside a certain grouping of books that are relatively novel in their content. Latin American literature has a rich history in its relatively short lifespan, and continues to evolve and grow. Authors like Jorge Franco, José Libardo Porras, Arturo Alape, and Gustavo Alvarez Gardeazábal all fall into this new genre that portrays the violence that accompanies the production and trafficking of drugs.\(^\text{12}\) This genre, known as *narcotremendismo*, *narcorrealismo*, and *sicaresca*, often receives a type of lash back critical of the authors’ “exploitation of a dark side of Colombian

---

Nevertheless, these authors felt compelled to take a position, and write their truths. Fernando Vallejo’s novel *La Virgen de los Sicarios* is the first among them. It offers a history through literature, through novel. It is not a journalistic account of Medellín by any means, but it tells the story from the ground looking up, from the center of Medellín looking out and around at the city.

The effect I have appropriated as the “shock factor” that Fernando Vallejo accomplishes in *La Virgen de los Sicarios*, Jose Manuel Camacho Delgado has attributed to a certain mechanism he refers to as “el narcotremendismo literario.”

Delgado’s terminology is fitting, as it carries a certain specificity in the attribution of the violence permeating every atom in the fabric of Colombian society to the drug trade in the 20th century, but also situates Vallejo’s work in a larger historical context and type of literary tradition. It is integral first to understand how the concept of *tremendismo* descends from that historical literary tradition that Vallejo taps into in order to claim a structure and space with which to both work with as well as warp to his liking.

*Tremendismo* as a narrative first appeared in the Spanish novels in the 1940s. Characterized by a stark narrative, harsh presentation of the plot, and the oftentimes-violent treatment of characters. Jose Manuel Camacho Delgado explains the literature being produced in post Civil War Spain as:

---

13 Ibid.
risposta y encrespada, escrita al hilo de los acontecimientos históricos, que no dudó en retratar sin remilgos la morbidez y la cochinambre de una dictadura militar que enalteció la chatarra de sus militares, dejó la reconstrucción moral al púlpitos eclesiásticos, y arrasó con cualquier forma de brote cultural…

twisted and curled, writing straightly off the historic events, that did not hesitate to portray without fuss the morbidity and grime of a military dictatorship that praised the scrap of its military, left moral reconstruction to the pulpit clergy, and devastated any form of cultural growth…

Delgado illustrates the fact that tremendismo literature as it applies to Vallejo indeed has a temporal, and perhaps more importantly, a geographic origin. While the specific literary elements present in tremendismo might be traced to a more antiquated era to authors such as Rabelais, Aristophanes, Voltaire, or even Plato, all who wrote with the similar intent of very methodically deconstructing quotidian life to reveal some sort of inadequacy or corruption they perceive, the specific brand of tremendismo and the political, social, and cultural context in which it existed in Spain in the 1940s carries a more similar countenance to the Colombian landscape Vallejo portrays later in the 20th century. In fact, tremendismo can be traced specifically in its modern usage to La familia de Pascual Duarte by Camilo José Cela, a work that Delgado flags in its:

formas de existencia en carne viva, con personajes golpeados de forma inmisericorde, que trataban de sobrevivir en la intemperie política y económica de un país arrasado por las bombas/…dibujó el desquiciamiento de la sociedad, la violencia gratuita…el regusto por lo morboso, por lo repulsivo, por lo deform.16

15 Ibid., 229.
16 Ibid.
raw existence, with characters beaten mercilessly, trying to survive in the open political and economic of a country ravaged by bombs / ... it drew the unhinging of society, gratuitous violence ... the taste for the morbid, so repulsive, so deformed.

Besides the disconcerting tangible parallels in both plot and setting between Cela’s and Vallejo’s novels, the method by which early 20th century Spain is portrayed by Cela and the late 20th century Medellín is evoked by Vallejo is almost identical. Both authors distort their description of the world, hyperbolize reality just enough for readers who have been normalized to what the authors consider the unacceptable nature of their reality to recognize what gruesomeness of their daily lives actually looks like.

Delgado portrays this literary evolution as one both embodied and perpetuated in isolation; the harsh censorship in Spain prohibited outside influence, as well as any aspirations of “libertad política o estética.”17 Perhaps this is part of Vallejo’s commentary outside of the actual content of his novel. For the author chooses to work in a vein of literary history that speaks to cultural and political stagnation, a certain lack of freedom, and that originated precisely because of isolation in the geographic landscape of a colonizer country where:

habituando a la sangre fácil de sus numerosos encontronazos bélicos, habituando a las conquistas y reconquistas, un país en el que eran frecuentes las ejecuciones arbitrarias, la persecución implacable de los derrotados...18

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
accustomed to the easy blood from the numerous military clashes, accustomed to the conquering and re-conquering, a country in which there were frequent arbitrary executions, and the unrelenting persecution of the defeated…

While the Spanish Civil War occurred over a century after Colombia’s declaration of Independence from Spain, Delgado’s quote offers a profile of the sweeping history of a Spain to which internal conflict and governmental censorship and brutality are not rarities, particularly concerning Spain’s colonization of Latin America. Whether Vallejo intends this intensely poignant historical connection or not, his tremendismo is inextricably linked to Spain’s literary history as well as social, political, and cultural history. So intimate is this connection, in fact, that Vallejo’s examination and dissection of Colombian life focuses on minutia as specific as the Spanish language, which Vallejo very consciously addresses throughout the novel by questioning the validity and function of semantics and methods of communication of a society.

This manipulation of the narrator’s and characters’ language as well as the language Vallejo himself uses throughout the novel is but one illustration of how the constant fluctuation of the size and depth of Vallejo’s lens in La Virgen de los Sicarios evokes precisely the character of the violence that persists throughout the country. Some historians might point to a date even more recent than the war for independence lead by Bolívar around 1820, the Thousand Days War that took place from 1899 and 1902 between the liberal and conservative factions in Colombia, as the original catalyst for Colombian violence, and to some extent Delgado seems to approach the discourse with the same attitude:
La violencia colombiana derivada en los últimos años de la influencia nefasta del narcotráfico, ha sido interpretada por observadores de pelaje variopinto como una Guerra larvada, metamorfosis última de las contiendas civiles que tantas amarguras sembraron en los albores de la independencia del país.\textsuperscript{19}

The Colombian violence derived in the last few years from the ugly influence of the drug trade has been interpreted by observers as a motley coat of a latent war, the last metamorphosis of civil strife that sowed so much bitterness in the wake of the country's independence.

Delgado’s conception of a metamorphosis is interesting, and not without logical basis. What began as an ideological battle over the conception of a country, became, as ideological battles often do, an ongoing violence that simmers beneath the narrative during times of peace, erupting over and over again. The assassination of popular candidate Jorge Gaitán completed the evolution of an ideological issue into a political one, and marked the beginning of La Violencia, which took place in the 1940s and 1950s. But just as Delgado and Vallejo both perceive the violence as completely permeating every aspect of life, Colombian violence did not remain quarantined to political or ideological musings. By the 1970s the violence had crept into the economic sphere through the narcotic drug trade, and through its presence invaded the social and cultural spheres of Colombian citizens. Vallejo shows the inescapability of violence, and the mutilation it causes:

¿Se Prohíbe? ¿Y esos gallinazos qué? ¿Qué era entonces ese ir y venir de aves negras, brincando, aleteado, picoteando, patrasiándose para sacarle mejor las tripas al muerto?\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 230.
\textsuperscript{20} Vallejo, 47.
Prohibited? And the vultures, what? What then were the comings and goings of the black birds, jumping, fluttering, pecking, to better extract the guts of the dead man?

Just like Vallejo’s vultures in La Virgen de los Sicarios, the violence eats up everything until there’s nothing left for it to eat, and then it preys on the dead.

This idea that violence preys on the dead functions as more than pure dramatic imagery, and circles around to offer a glimpse at Vallejo’s purpose in writing this novel not as an irreconcilable pessimism for Colombia’s future, but rather the need to show what is lost through the violence that plagues Colombia. Not only are countless narratives, testimonials, and stories buried along with the bodies that lived them, but as previously discussed, Colombia is still battling to build an identity free from the stigma it has been assigned.

Vallejo’s novel is important because it tells history from history’s point of view. That is to say, that Vallejo’s emphasis on testimony isn’t overshadowed by some desire to fill his pages with empirical facts; how many bodies dead, the birthdates and monetary standing of the men who gave the orders. Vallejo’s decision to write this book speaks also to the fact that without literature, history itself might cease to be reflective. Above all though, Vallejo proves that the truth depends on who is telling the story.
Vallejo in the Mirror: The Shocking Narrator

As the author of *La Virgen de los Sicarios*, Vallejo becomes a self-deemed bearer of a collective narrative that is his own just as much as it is Colombia’s and her people’s history. This responsibility is no minor one, and it prompts the reader to question Vallejo’s construction of a narrator who both seems auto-biographical and polemical in his diatribes against religion, anti-institutional rhetoric, and his homosexual relations with young boys.

Before conflating fictional Fernando with author Fernando Vallejo, it is important to establish an understanding of the author. Born in 1942, Fernando Vallejo grew up one of nine children in a well-off Colombian family. After studying at university in Bogota, he left Colombia to study filmmaking in Italy. A year’s worth of instruction landed Vallejo back in Medellín, where he produced his first film. However, the government’s censorship of this film prompted him to leave Colombia in 1971, and move to Mexico, where he completed most of his literary works. Vallejo’s corpus includes several novels, essays, and films. Although *La Virgen de los Sicarios* is arguably his most critically acclaimed work, Vallejo’s five-novel autobiographical work *El rio del tiempo* delivers the same technique of blurring

---

21 To escape unwanted confusion, throughout the thesis the author will be referred to as Vallejo, whereas his narrator will be referred to as Fernando.
the lines between autobiography and fiction, and establishes a precedent for *La Virgen de los Sicarios* to be received by readers as auto-biographical.\(^{22}\)

The plot line in *La Virgen de los Sicarios* follows Fernando, the narrator, on a journey back to his childhood home in Medellín. In returning, Fernando meets Alexis, a young sicario, and pursues a relationship with him that manifests itself through trips around the city, exploration of churches, neighborhoods, and cafes. Central to Fernando’s involvement with Alexis is his exposure to the violence that plagues Medellín. When Alexis is murdered and Fernando begins a relationship with his killer, this exposure to violence morphs into Fernando’s participation in it. Though the narrator’s incredible honesty regarding his pederasty and participation in the violence in the barrios of Medellín might make a comparison between Vallejo and his narrator unlikely for some readers to draw, the commonalities between author and narrator are undeniable.

The novel opens as Fernando introduces the reader to his childhood home, which Vallejo describes in detail similar to his own childhood home. In fact, Fernando explains:

La Virgen de Sabaneta hoy es María Auxiliadora, pero no lo era en mi niñez: era la Virgen del Carmen, y la parroquia la de Santa Ana.\(^{23}\)

The Patron Virgin of Sabaneta today is Mary Auxiliar, but it wasn’t that way in my childhood: it was the Virgen Carmen, of the parish of Santa Ana.

---


\(^{23}\) Vallejo, 8.
Fernando’s discussion of his childhood town’s patron saint references the same one that Vallejo discusses in a 2011 interview:

Unos amigos en Medellín me comentaron que había una virgen en Sabaneta, María Auxiliadora, en el pueblo de mi niñez, que se estaba convirtiendo en santuario de los sicarios que acababan de aparecer.  

Some friends in Medellín commented that there had been a Virgen in Sabaneta, Maria Auxiliar, my boyhood town that had been converted into a sanctuary for the sicarios that had begun to appear.

In this interview, Vallejo affirms his boyhood home is Sabaneta, the very same one Fernando refers to as the town where he grew up in La Virgen de los Sicarios. Perhaps more telling is the fact that Fernando is returning to Medellín after a long absence. Remember that Vallejo moved to Mexico in 1971, and has been for all intents and purposes absent from Colombia since then. If choosing his own childhood town to serve as Fernando’s boyhood home is not convincing enough, Vallejo’s emphasis on Fernando’s return to Sabaneta firmly does the rest of the work in constructing yet another commonality between Fernando and Vallejo.

Fernando shares not only his first name and geographic origin with the author, but also a predilection for grammar, literature, and an understanding of high culture. Before leaving for Italy, Vallejo studied philosophy at the University of Bogota, and the reader can easily identify shreds of Vallejo’s education as Fernando

---

reveals his knowledge through observation of the world around him. Early in the
novel, he criticizes the music Alexis listens to:

Que no se podía vivir sin música, y yo que sí, y que además
eso no era música. Para él era música <<romántica>>. y yo
pensé: a este paso, si eso es romántico, nos va a resultar
romántico Shönberg. <<No es música ni es nada, niño.
Aprende a ver la pared en blanco y a oír el silencio>>. Pero
él no podía vivir sin ruido, <<música>>…

That he couldn’t live without music, and I agreed, and that
this was not music. For him, it was “romantic” music, and I
thought: The way this is going, we’re going to consider
Shönberg romantic. “This isn’t music, child. Learn to
look at the white walls and to hear silence.” But he couldn’t
live without sound, “music.”

Vallejo’s studies in Italy and frequent trips to Europe undoubtedly aided in
developing his academic side, which here infuses Fernando’s intellect. Fernando
champions his understanding of Shönberg’s music over Alexis’ clearly inferior taste.

How would Alexis, uneducated and likely ignorant of Shönberg’s music, understand
Fernando’s reference to the composer’s departure from romanticism and foray into
the expressionist and atonality which would define his later work? Besides this
concession of knowledge of European high culture, Fernando’s frequent internal
monologues cite canonized authors:

<<Vaya lleve a éste a conocer el cuarto, de las mariposas>>.
<<Este>> era yo, y <<el cuarto de las mariposas>> un
cuartico al fondo del apartamento que si me permiten se lo
describo de paso, de prisa, camino al cuarto, sin
recargamientos balzacianos: recargado como Balzac nunca
soñó, de muebles y relojes viejos…

25 Vallejo, 17.
26 Ibid., 9.
“Take this one to get to know the room for las mariposas.”

“This one” was me, and “the room for las mariposas” was a little room at the back of the apartment that, if you permit me to describe quickly in passing, walking into the room, without Balzac-like ornamentation: was brimming like Balzac never dreamed of, with furniture and old clocks…

Fernando’s constant dialogue with Balzac and other authors like Dostoevsky serves to establish him as an intellectual, and identify him with Vallejo, who, as an international literary figure educated in Europe, certainly was exposed to canonized authors. In this particular quote, Fernando playfully mocks Balzac, who Vallejo himself has criticized for none other than the type of narration the French author chooses:

El asunto es que es una cuestión de hacer la literatura verdadera, hay una verdad literaria y hay una mentira literaria. La mentira literaria es toda la novela en tercera persona, la novela de tercera persona es mentirosa en esencia. La que escribe Balzac, Dickens, Dostoievsky, Zola, Blasco Ibáñez, porque ellos están contraviniendo el principio esencial de la vida humana: que uno está metido en uno mismo y que uno no alcanza a ver de los demás y del mundo sino hasta cierta parte.

The issue is that it is a matter of making true literature, there is a true literature, and there is a literary lie. Lying literature is when the whole novel is in third person, the third-person novel is essentially false. The writing of Balzac, Dickens, Dostoievsky, Zola, Blasco Ibáñez, because they are contrary to the fundamental principle of human life: one is so sunk into oneself that one can not see the others and the world past a certain extent.

---

27 Mariposa is a well-known Spanish term for a man who identifies or perceived as queer or homosexual.

28 Vallejo, 14.

29 Fonseca, 84.
Vallejo’s interview answers poignantly illustrate his understanding and intense study of the western authors he speaks of. Fernando’s mention of the same authors throughout *La Virgen de los Sicarios* further emphasizes the fact that Vallejo’s narrative style is executed in opposition to the third person narration he criticizes in this interview, and enlightens the reader as to Vallejo’s method of historiography. This narrative style, which understands attaining truth as admitting to the inescapability of one’s own perspective, is consistent with Vallejo’s decision to imbue his narrator with many of his own personality traits and characteristics. And through Fernando’s mentioning of these canonized authors, Vallejo’s strong position as proponent of the first person narrator leaks into Fernando’s discourse, which only encourages the reader to more strongly link Vallejo’s character with that of his narrator.

Fernando’s quote firmly emphasizes his homosexuality and interest in young boys; the word *mariposa* in Spanish is commonly used in reference to gay men. As a gay man himself, Vallejo’s choice to jointly develop Fernando’s character as a homosexual intellectual further underscores the narrator’s reflection of the author.

It is not just Fernando’s nature and sexual orientation that liken him to Vallejo. The author takes a step further, and declares:

*Es que este libro mío yo no lo escribí, ya estaba escrito: simplemente lo he ido cumpliendo página por página sin decidir. Sueño con escribir la última por lo menos, de un tiro, por mano propia, pero los sueños sueños son y a lo mayor ni eso.*

30 Vallejo, 16.
It is that this book of mine I did not write, but rather it was written: I’ve simply been completing page by page without further thought. I dream about writing the last one, by my own hand, but dreams are dreams and maybe not even that.

While it is unclear whether Fernando speaks metaphorically, there is a staunch suggestion that Vallejo’s narrator is a writer, or at least interested in documenting history. In this moment, Vallejo exposes to the reader the mind of an author who obsesses over his work. Earlier on the same page, Fernando sardonically says:

La trama de mi vida es la de un libro absurdo…

The plot of my life is that in an absurd book…

Who is speaking here? Is it Vallejo, in reference to the life he develops for his narrator Fernando? Or is it Fernando himself? This metaphysical moment is beautifully demonstrative of Vallejo’s ability to both tell a fictional character’s story, and also his own, and seems to speak to his perspective as he explained in an interview in 2011:

Uno no está metido en los pensamientos de los demás, uno más o menos puede saber qué piensan los otros, por la forma como se expresan, por sus actos, como se comportan, pero uno no está metido en la cabeza de nadie para describir sus pensamientos.

One cannot completely comprehend the perspective of others, one can more or less understand how other people think, through their way of communicating, through their actions, how they behave, but someone can’t be in the head of someone else to describe their thoughts.

31 Ibid.
32 Fonseca, 84.
Vallejo explains that even as an author, one cannot completely step inside the mind of someone else. What the reader should understand, then, is the inherent fusion of Fernando’s psyche with Vallejo’s, because Fernando is not only his creation, but also an extension of Vallejo himself. Time should not be spent flipping through the pages of his novels and attempting to delineate between Vallejo the person, and Fernando his character. Instead, the emphasis should be to understand why Vallejo chooses to narrate through a semi-autobiographical narrator.

Because, after all, Vallejo’s choice to imbue his narrator with so many characteristics of his own is not without consequences. Between his playwriting, film directing, and prodigious essays and novels, Vallejo’s works have received international acclaim. La Virgen de los Sicarios has been translated into English, allowing much broader accessibility to the novel, and the author himself was even featured in a 2004 award-winning documentary by Louis Ospina. And because much of his work centers on Colombia and Colombian society, Vallejo is very much considered an author who represents Colombia. So why is Vallejo so criticized within his own country? The majority of Vallejo’s writing deals with Colombian violence, political corruption, drugs, and youth culture; And as a literary representative of Colombia, his sharp criticism reflects poorly on his country, government, and society.

While Fernando’s openness about his homosexuality throughout the novel might suggest a desire on Vallejo’s part to reconcile with the Colombian readers he criticizes by also identifying with them and assuming responsibility with them
through Fernando’s flawed humanity, the truth is, Fernando doesn’t represent the majority of Colombians. While Fernando spends much of the novel ranting against the Catholic Church, Colombia remains a Catholic country. While a gay population did and continues to exist in Colombia, highlighting Fernando’s homosexual relations (with young boys nonetheless) brings a marginalized community and taboo sexuality to the forefront of the global literary stage. Most recently, after gaining his Mexican citizenship, Fernando Vallejo has renounced his Colombian one. However, many blog posts and articles regarding Vallejo’s nationality renunciation, like the one below, show a contempt for Vallejo based not upon his self as he exists outside of his pages, but upon the narrator he constructs in *La Virgen de los Sicarios*:

> What dignity will this man have, because he promotes sexual abuse to underage boys, homosexualism and resentment to the race, this guy who enjoyed to pay children for them to please his sexual fantasies, some of them also devoted to crime and murder, or guess where the inspiration for both the movie and the book “our lady of the assassins” comes from. It was his life, as a young thief in Medellín city.\(^{33}\)

And although other criticisms don’t always equate Vallejo directly with the narrator of his books, they do seem to attack Vallejo personally based solely upon what he has written. The Colombia Herald included this quote from another blogger who wrote:

> I don’t care a bit, mister Vallejo, what you think of this land which gave you birth and which precisely, because it’s so “murderous”, gave you the enough material for you to write

---

\(^{33}\) Carlos Raúl van der Weyden Velásquez, “Controversial Writer Renounces his Colombian Nationality”, *The Colombia Herald*, 
your controversial stories, I don’t care a bit because, for me, 
you are a foolish coward who argues, as so many others, that 
he leaves the country because it’s not offering him anything. 
If it’s not offering anything to them, wouldn’t it be because 
people like you has not anything valuable to offer or to do 
for this country?34

It’s understandable that Vallejo as a writer desired to chronicle what he viewed as the 
ugly realities of Medellín in the early 1990’s. But parsing through such biting 
criticism makes it clear that Fernando did not help bridge the space between Vallejo 
and his readers, but instead polarized readers into harsh opposition against the author. 
This prompts the reader to still question Vallejo’s motivation for developing 
Fernando as he does.

While it’s true that Fernando’s fallibility makes him easier to relate to as a 
fellow flawed human, Vallejo’s literary abilities are certainly strong enough to have 
developed a fully fictional narrator in Fernando who possessed such characteristics 
that the reader would relate to and empathize with rather than find repugnant in his 
belligerent opinions. But he did not do such a thing. Vallejo’s goal was not to simply 
relate to, or represent his readers. Vallejo wanted to shock his readers. Behind this 
motivation lies purpose; Vallejo’s narrator serves to shock readers out of the fiction 
of habituation to violence. Vallejo’s narrator serves to shock readers enough to 
realize that the realities Vallejo presents are what should be shocking and 
disconcerting rather than the diatribes the polemical narrator delivers. And Vallejo’s

34 Carolina, “Bien Ido”, Con Senos y con Sesos, as quoted by Carlos Raúl van der Weyden 
Velásquez in “Controversial Writer Renounces his Colombian Nationality”, The Colombia 
Herald, http://colombiaherald.wordpress.com/2007/05/08/controversial-writer-renounces- 
his-colombian-nationality.
narrator serves to shock readers into acknowledging that marginalized sectors of society are legitimate and deserving of their participation in the narrative. Fernando’s polemical actions and opinions, combined with characteristics that liken him to Vallejo, make Fernando just real and believable enough to be shocking.

Épater les bourgeois served as the rallying call for 19th century avant-garde artists, thinkers, and musicians all over Europe. The etymology of the phrase comes from the French verb épater for to shock, amaze. Bourgeois, commonly denoting a member of the middle class, in Marx’s theory is characterized by owning the means of capital, and exploiting labor power. However, by the late 1880s, those artists who desired to épater les bourgeois considered bourgeois to be descriptive of economic status, as well as of the “dull, unimaginative, mendacious and hypocritical philistine.” Movements that took this concept as integral among their tenets include Dadaism, Decadence, Russian futurist, and Surrealism. The utilization of art to encourage reflection did not originate with the concept of épater les bourgeois. Nevertheless, the épater les bourgeois concept of channeling shock to communicate a piece of art’s message to a group of people set in their socio-economic, and cultural ways mirrors Vallejo’s decision to use Fernando to shock a sector of Colombian society that is not as exposed to life in the comunas, that does not often consider the existence of periphery communities of sicarios, or homosexuals.

La Religión de la Sociedad

From the opening pages of the novel Fernando makes the reader hyperaware of the dominance of Catholic culture in Colombia, and fulfills his function as agent of shock by questioning the usefulness of religion and characterizing the Catholicism in Colombia as merely a tool in the perpetuation of stasis and hypocrisy in the face of the violence in Medellín. Vallejo has very publicly voiced his own opinions about religion. When asked about his views on God, Vallejo told a reporter:

If we understand God as the creator of the universe from all eternity, for me it is very difficult to attribute the eternity of the universe as it is attributed to God. But if the scholastic and Catholic Theology provides the qualities of God’s goodness, I cannot see how he can be kind when his omnipotence, can do good but does evil.\(^3^6\)

In the same interview, Vallejo further adds:

I believe in God, he is a very bad being.\(^3^7\)

While Vallejo feels comfortable publicly discussing radical religious views, his disgust with the Catholic Church and doubt in God make him easy to identify with Fernando, and subsequently with the polemical discourse Fernando establishes in *La Virgen de los Sicarios*.

Vallejo wastes no time addressing his religious discourse, and some of the first imagery Fernando presents the reader with in *La Virgen de los Sicarios*

\(^3^6\) Javier Nuñez Calderón, “Fernando Vallejo: “I believe in God, he is a very bad being”, *The Prisma*, March 2, 2013 (http://www.theprisma.co.uk/2013/03/02/fernando-vallejo-i-believe-in-god-he-is-a-very-bad-being/).

\(^3^7\) Ibid.
inextricably links violence with Catholicism. The novel opens with an image of a balloon. A hot air balloon, to be exact, rises above the neighborhoods and the strife of Medellín. Fernando compares this balloon to the heart of Jesus, climbing red towards immense blue, trailing after it supplications and prayers. The tangibility that Vallejo awards Jesus’ heart illustrates just how ingrained Catholicism is in the country; religion is so present that even every day objects are imbued with symbolism and meaning. The candle that heats the balloon drips red wax, red like the blood colored paint dripping down the statue of Jesus that blessed our narrator’s childhood home. Fernando remembers this statue, and remembers the blood. He recalls:

rojo vivo, encendido, como la candileja del globo: es la sangre que derramará Colombia, ahora y siempre por los siglos de los siglos amen.38

vibrant red, lit like the little candle in the hot air balloon:
It is the blood that drenches Colombia, now and forever for centuries and centuries amen.

The honesty with which the narrator admits to the presence of violence in Colombia arrives in the form of a supplication and suggests a disturbing parallel between religion and violence. When Jesus’ blood connotes the violence in Colombia, it suggests drug violence has become something near sacred. Vallejo’s polemical claim, while offensive in suggesting the Colombian people have become so entrapped in a cycle of violence that it has become something of a ritual, also subtly establishes Colombia as existing in a religious narrative. His supplication, which implies that God is aware of Colombia’s struggle with violence, almost consecrates it as a holy land. The Old Testament, after all, presents a violent world and a vengeful

38 Vallejo, 6.
God. A God who razed the globe with a flood, who ordered Abraham to kill his son, who sent plagues upon the Pharaoh and his people in Egypt, who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, who condemned the beating of slaves, is the same God Fernando prays to now. Colombia’s struggle then, might seem to fit into God’s larger plan. However, what is so disconcerting is that the God Vallejo depicts is cruel, and the religious narrative Colombia fits into is a violent, damned one. Vallejo’s efforts here are not spent in order to demonstrate Colombia’s holiness, but rather to reveal the biblical narrative as one of violence. Add to this Fernando’s equation between blood spilled in Colombia and the blood of Jesus. We might understand Vallejo’s decision to work in the religious sphere in order to highlight the hypocrisy that lives in believing Jesus died for mankind’s sins, but continuing to sin anyway. This interpretation of the Catholic narrative is shocking in that Vallejo seems to see only violence and destruction in the wake of God. Worse, he directly attacks Colombian society. Even though you’re praying, he seems to say, you’re not doing anything to stop the violence. This understanding of the biblical narrative reduces religion then, to being played out in the violence on the streets of Medellín, rather than a vehicle of peace.

Vallejo’s condemnation of Colombian society persists throughout the novel, and roots in his criticism of its performance of Catholicism rather than faith. Fernando himself demonstrates this performance at the beginning of the novel when he recalls:
A mi regreso a Colombia volví a Sabaneta con Alexis, acompañándolo, en peregrinación.\textsuperscript{39}

Upon my return to Colombia, I returned to Sabaneta accompanies by Alexis, for the pilgrimage.

On the next page, Fernando refers back to this pilgrimage, explaining its frequency:

Un tumulto llegaba los martes a Sabaneta de todos los barrios y rumbos de Medellín adonde la Virgen a rogar, a pedir, a pedir, a pedir… \textsuperscript{40}

“On Tuesdays arrives a crowd in Sabaneta, where the Virgen is, from all of the comunas in Medellín, to pray, to ask, to beg…”

While Fernando emphasizes the ability of the poor to ask the Virgen Mary for help, he very rarely illustrates Colombians taking agency for themselves and attempting to stop the cycle of violence. In fact, he characterizes the:

…peregrinación de los martes, devota, insulsa, mentirosa.\textsuperscript{41}

…Tuesday pilgrimages, devout, insulting, untruthful.

By calling the pilgrimage \textit{insulsa}, and \textit{mentirosa}, Fernando once again polemically attacks the ritualistic pilgrimage that functions as part of Colombian Catholicism. Whether his scorn is for the pilgrims themselves, or the requirement of such a ritual by the Catholic Church, Fernando’s disdain suggests a lack of faith on behalf of the pilgrims, and instead an emphasis on repeated rituals that do not carry meaning, and thus are ingenuine in their performance. His criticism of performative religion rather

\textsuperscript{39} Vallejo, 7.
\textsuperscript{40} Vallejo, 8.
\textsuperscript{41} Vallejo, 13.
than one of faith is more poignant, and complex later in the novel, when he discusses entering a church with Alexis:

Adultos y viejos llenaban la iglesia y, cosa notable, muchachos con el corte de pelo de los punkeros, rezando, confesándose: los sicarios. ¿Qué pedirán? ¿De qué se confesarán? ¡Cuánto daría por saberlo y sus exactas palabras! Saliendo como un luz turbia de la oscuridad de unos socavones, esas palabras me revelarían su más profunda verdad, su más oculta intimidad. <<Yo debo de ser muy malo, padre, por que he matado a quince>>. ¿Eso, por ejemplo? La presencia de tantos jóvenes en la iglesia de Sabaneta me causaba asombro. Pero ¿Asombro por qué? También yo estaba allí y veníamos a buscar lo mismo: paz, silencio en la penumbra. Tenemos los ojos cansados de tanto ver, y lo oídos de tanto oír, y el corazón de tanto odiar….Ahuyentad al espíritu maligno y su silbo traicionero, y libradme de la condenación eterna, que la pesadilla del infierno ya la he vivido en esta vida y con creces: con mi prójimo. Amén>>

Adults and old people filled the church and remarkably boys with punk haircuts, praying, confessing: the sicarios. What will they ask? What will they confess? What I would give to know his exact words! Emerging from a murky light in the darkness of the tunnels, those words reveal a deepest truth, a more hidden intimacy. << I must be very bad, Father, for I have killed fifteen >>. Something like that, for example? The presence of so many young people in the church of Sabaneta caused me wonder. But why? I was also there and we came to look for the same thing: peace, silence in the darkness. We both have tired eyes from seeing too much, and the ears of too much hearing and heart full of hate …. Help me from the evil spirit and his treacherous whisper, and deliver me from the eternal condemnation, the nightmare of hell I have lived in this life: with my next. Amen.

This internal monologue is perhaps one of the most complex, but poignant criticisms of the failing of faith in Colombia. At the beginning of the quote, Fernando’s surprise at seeing sicarios in the church reiterates his polemical attack against Colombian

---

42 Vallejo, 54.
society’s hypocrisy in attending church and through that proclaiming faith and devotion to good works, yet continuing the cycle violence. He again questions the ritual of confession, playing out a mock scene in his head, in which the repentant sicario admits to having killed fifteen people. Is this all it takes to make it okay, Fernando seems to ask. His quandary highlights both the ineffectiveness of the ritual of confession in a country that continues to commit violence, but also digs towards the deeper question of individual agency. When rituals like confession remove the blame for a sicario’s killing spree, and allows said sicario to leave church feeling relieved of his guilt, won’t he just kill again, Vallejo questions. This criticism though, of a Colombian Catholic society that doesn’t take responsibility for the state of the country, is tempered and sophisticated too by the end of Fernando’s internal discourse. He identifies with the sicarios for a moment, and allows the reader to question along with him, what else is there to do? *Eyes too tired from seeing, and ears that have heard too much,* Fernando seems to say, deserve a place of quiet, deserve a haven. If *hell is what I’ve lived in this life,* according to Fernando, shouldn’t the Catholic Church provide shelter, even if only for a moment? For Fernando, religion performs a multifaceted, and often times paradoxical role. It embodies the constant struggle between religion as a means towards salvation, and merely a tool of stasis, and provokes the reader to question the difference between institution and religion, and to wonder whether either one is actually functioning in Medellín.
La Institución

This question of institutional purpose bridges into Fernando’s fervent anti-institutionalism, which he discusses frequently throughout La Virgen de los Sicarios. Vallejo centers Fernando’s criticism on two institutions: the Catholic Church, and the Colombian government. In the same interview where he affirms his belief in a God who embodies evil, rather than the good, Vallejo also claims:

We owe to Christianity all the darkness of the middle ages, the opposition to the advancement of science, with its crusade in favor of fertility and its opposition to the interruption of pregnancy, contraception and population control.43

Fernando’s polarizing and brutal conviction in La Virgen de los Sicarios that:

¿La solución para acabar con la juventud delincuente? Exterminen la niñez.44

The solution to stopping juvenile delinquency? Exterminate the children.

Seems a harsh solution to population control, but dialogues with Vallejo’s rant against the Church, quoted above, and links Fernando with Vallejo to the extent that a reader might interpret Fernando’s murderous prescription as Vallejo’s true belief. However, this quote deserves analysis beyond it’s superficial value. Somewhere amidst the reader’s horror at Fernando’s suggestion to kill children, is a parallel realization that the Church, in encouraging procreation, should also provide support

43 The Prisma, March 2, 2013.
44 Vallejo, 27.
and education; programs to keep children off the streets and healthy. Rather than preach against contraception, why not preach for responsible pregnancy? As is discussed later in the thesis, sicarios often choose their profession out of a dire need for money. Shouldn’t the Church, Vallejo seems to insinuate, aim for healthy stable families rather than larger ones subsisting day to day below the poverty line? It is this way, through Fernando’s dramatic discourse, that Vallejo provokes the reader to question the Church’s logic.

Vallejo’s attack on the institution of the Church underscores his criticism of society as not partaking in a useful religion and faith, but rather practicing the rituals the Catholic Church has deemed necessary. He describes a Medellín where churches keep their doors closed for fear of being robbed, thus not even fulfilling their basic function as haven. His criticisms continue throughout the pages:

Al sumo Pontífice o capo de los capos o gran capo, para protegerlo de sus enemigos, los otros capos…le construyó una fortaleza con almenas llamada La Catedral, y pagó para que lo cuidaran, con dinero público (o sea tuyo y mío, que los sudamos…

The Supreme Pontiff or boss of bosses or big boss, to protect him from his enemies, the other bosses, has a fortress built with battlements called La Catedral, and paid to have it taken care of, with public money (or yours and mine, that we sweated for)…

Vallejo’s criticism of the Church here is a loaded one. On the surface level, Fernando’s criticism spotlights the pontiffs who, preoccupied by competition amidst themselves for positions of power, focus less on the well-being of their constituents and more their own personal safety. Fernando again questions the reticence of the

Vallejo, 63.
Church to spend money on social or educational programs, instead informing readers that taxpayer dollars are used to build and take care of Church buildings. However, any Colombian reader would understand that Fernando’s reference to La Catedral is also reference to the prison Pablo Escobar built for himself. Nicknamed La Catedral for its spaciousness and luxuriousness, Escobar agreed to turn himself into the Colombian government in 1991 on the condition that he could build his own prison. The government agreed, incorrectly thinking Escobar would be unable to run his drug cartel from jail, and used taxpayer dollars to fund Escobar’s project. However, while the front of the jail was guarded and secure, Escobar designed the back with escape in mind. In August 1992, Escobar escaped, revealing the government’s deal as futile and ill-conceived, and the taxpayer’s hard earned dollars wasted. The conflation of religious diction and this allusion effectively positions violence as the reigning religion in Colombia. Notice Fernando’s inclusion of the reader when he talks about tax money being used by the church. Yours and mine, that we sweated for Fernando insists, encouraging the reader to feel cheated and lied to along with him. The inclusion of the reader in Fernando’s criticism forces an obligation upon the reader to serve as testimony, encouraging us too, to feel deeply offended by the government’s corruption, the Church’s inaction, and society’s complacency.


47 Ibid.
It’s not just the Catholic Church and the men who hold positions of power but the government too, against which Fernando rails. Amidst a novel full of murdering sicarios, he boldly accuses the state as being:

El primer atracador de Colombia…¿Y una industria? La industria aquí está definitivamente quebrada: para todo el próximo milenio. ¿Y el comercio? Los asaltan. ¿Y servicios? ¡Que servicios! ¿Poner una casa de muchachos? No los pagan. El campo también es otro desastre. Como está tan ocupado en la procreación, el campesino no trabaja. ¿Que de qué viven? Viven del racimo de plátanos que le roban al vecino, hasta que el vecino no vuelve a sembrar.\(^48\)

The worst robber in Colombia ... And industry? The industry here is definitely broken: for the entire next millennium. What about trade? All assaulted. Services? What services! Putting up a children’s house? They wouldn’t pay for it. The countryside is another disaster. So busy procreating, the peasant does not work. What do they live on then? They’re living on a bunch of bananas they robbed from their neighbor until the neighbor has nothing left to plant.

Fernando’s blast of the government here is just one of various opportunities he takes throughout the novel to criticize the Colombian institution. A reader might consider Fernando naming the government more criminal than the sicarios carrying out murders on a daily basis an exaggeration and highly hyperbolic. But, this quote is informational. It reveals a crumbling economy. Between trade, services, and agriculture, Fernando informs the reader that the government is flailing. Vallejo’s criticism of the workers in the countryside speaks to more than their laziness, and begs the question: who would want to work in a poor economic situation? In a sense, Vallejo’s explanation of the inability or unwillingness of the government to establish

\(^{48}\) Vallejo, 46.
social services or programs creates a space for empathy for the sicarios, forced by
virtue of lack of choices to work and make money to feed themselves by killing each
other. Herein lies the purpose of Fernando’s tirade against the government; not to
incite anarchy, but to invoke the reader to understand that the violence in Colombia
has many sources feeding it’s existence, and the government’s inaction is one of
them.

Vallejo creates Fernando as anti-establishment in an effort to shock his
readers. However, much like his criticism of Colombian society, Vallejo’s critique of
the government and of the Church serve to invite the reader to contemplate a type of
violence that is carried out in action by sicarios, but is just as easily fueled by the
inaction of state and Church institutions.

El Amor

Perhaps the most shocking of Fernando’s characteristics in La virgen de los
sicarios are his homosexuality, and his pursuance of love affairs with young sicarios.
In Colombia’s Catholic culture, homosexuality is a taboo subject. This is widely
known, and even tourism sites advise gay travelers to keep a low profile, as
“homosexuality is not widely accepted or understood, especially by older
generations.”\(^\text{49}\) Vallejo though, centers his story on Fernando’s homosexual affair
with Alexis, and then subsequently Wílmar, both sicarios. To complicate his
narrator’s relationships, Vallejo makes it clear that the apartment where Fernando

meets his lovers is one that serves as a type of brothel for the prostitution of young boys:

¿Y qué se ganaba José Antonio con ese entrar y salir de muchachos, de criminales, por su casa? ¿Que le robaron? ¿Que lo mataron? ¿O es que acaso era su apartamento un burdel? Dios libre y guarde.  

And what might it benefit José Antonio with this coming and going of boys, of criminals, from his home? Did they steal for him? Did they kill for him? Or is it the case that his apartment was a whorehouse. God bless.

Fernando never explicitly informs the reader as to whether Alexis and Wílmar were prostituting themselves. However, as a participant in this type of activity, it stands to reason that Fernando would not want to directly admit his guilt, and thus refuses to specify. Nevertheless, Vallejo makes sure the reader is acutely aware that prostitution is a reality in Medellín at this moment, and by constructing a protagonist who is involved in this prostitution, he forces his readers to admit it too.

Vallejo’s motives are more complex than exposing prostitution as a reality. As a representative of the repressed homosexual community in Colombia, Fernando’s participation in the perpetuation of prostitution might incorrectly create an archetype of the gay man as immoral, or represent the gay community as wholly participating in activities that are in some way unnatural. Vallejo’s choice to identify Fernando with prostitution though, is less aimed at creating a portrait of the gay man as immoral and flawed, and more underscores the secrecy with which the gay community must function. Later in the novel, Fernando illustrates just how draining this secrecy is:

---

50 Vallejo, 10.
Abrió la botella, se tomó un trago y me lo dio en la boca. Así tomando yo en su boca, él en la mía, en el delirio de una vida idiota, de un amor imposible..

He opened the bottle, and took a gulp, and gave it to my mouth. We took each other’s mouths, mine in his, his in mine, in the delirium of an idiotic life, of an impossible love…

This quote expresses an exasperation fueled by Fernando’s understanding that his relationship is true love. Fernando describes his affair as being so intimate and passionate, but impossible and unsustainable in his specific time and place. He doesn’t explain why, again a purposeful choice by Vallejo to leave this quote open-ended. Is the love impossible because of social norms? Or is it impossible because:

Todos en las comunas están sentenciados a muerte.

Everyone in the comunas is sentenced to death.

Fernando’s pessimism regarding Colombian society’s fate is expressed throughout the novel, but his understanding that even falling in love is impossible because his relationship will inevitably be cut short by Alexis’ death reflects a stasis so pervasive that it actually impedes and destroys basic human relationships.

As a gay author, Vallejo also takes this opportunity to set the record straight, and position homosexuality and heterosexuality as equals. He does this through Fernando’s descriptions of his love affairs, which offer the embodiment of an honest and pure type of love. Fernando discusses his evenings with Alexis:

---

51 Vallejo, 28.
52 Vallejo, 87.
Sí, nuestro amor nocturno. Nuestras noches encendidas de passion, yo abrazado a mi angel y él a mí con el amor que me tuvo, porque debo consignar aquí, sin jactancias ni presunción, lo mucho que me quería.53

Yes, our nighttime love. Our nights lit by passion, me hugging my angel, and him me with the love that he had for me, I should add here, without bragging, as much as I might want to.

This quote, which might have been lifted from a romantic fairytale, legitimizes Fernando and Alexis’ homosexual relationship through a purity of emotion. The way Vallejo creates Fernando’s understanding of his relationships renders Alexis not as a prostitute, but instead a willing and loving partner. In fact, by the end of the novel, although Fernando buys his lovers gifts and clothes, it’s unclear as to whether Fernando has been paying these boys at all. In this way, Vallejo uses his flawed narrator to address the problem of childhood prostitution in Medellín, the secrecy the gay community has been forced to function under, and also to establish a clear understanding that homosexual relationships are based on the same type of love that heterosexual relationships are based upon.

**From Shock to Realization**

Beyond the initial shock value that Vallejo’s polemical narrator offers in his semi-autobiographical portrait of the author, Vallejo indicates his motivation for writing lies in a certain prescriptive offering. His lack of recognition of God and Church as infinitely good is indicative of faith in individual agency and self -

53 Vallejo, 24.
realization. His attacks on the Colombian government whisper hope for reform rather than anarchical fantasies. In *La Virgen de los Sicarios* Vallejo’s narrator is the primary agent of shock through his actions and perspective. However, the reader’s shock is not only meant to scare the reader into realizing the state of Colombia’s fragmented culture, political failings, and economic backwardness, but also to enlighten the reader towards a truer sense of self. This is part of Vallejo’s genius. He works on multiple levels, focusing on both the individual, and the societal. It is this intersection between the individual and the community or country that Vallejo sees as possessing the power to change the warped and violent society that he portrays. Vallejo perhaps, says it best himself when he acknowledges in an interview that:

Vea una cosa es perder la fe y otra cosa es perder la esperanza.\(^{54}\)

It’s one thing to lose faith, and another to lose hope.

\(^{54}\) Fonseca, 87.
The Language of Violence

Con cada lengua que se extingue se borra una imagen del hombre.
For every language that becomes extinct an image of man is erased.
-Octavio Paz

Vallejo’s portrait of the geography of Medellín reveals social fissures much deeper than the cracks along the sidewalks. In addition to Vallejo dedicating much of the novel to descriptions of the city and its inhabitants, the author’s desire to establish himself as an authoritative voice regarding Medellín also leaks into his narrator’s voice. At one point, Fernando exclaims:

Yo sé más de Medellín que Balzac de París, y no lo invento: me estoy muriendo con él.55
I know more about Medellín than Balzac does about Paris, and I’m not inventing it: I’m dying with him.

This effort by Vallejo to claim Medellín through La Virgen de los Sicarios as his city establishes his relationship as one akin to Balzac and Paris, Joyce and Dublin, and inherently places the novel in discourse with the western canon. Perhaps this mention of Balzac is simply Vallejo questioning the preeminence of European authors. Or perhaps, rather than questioning this canon, Vallejo is suggesting not only that La

55 Vallejo, 42.
Virgen de los Sicarios deserves a spot within it, but that Medellín as a city deserves recognition, contemplation, and study. But Balzac and Joyce did not earn their authority based on acutely accurate physical descriptions of their respective cities. Rather, a deep understanding and analysis of what that physicality represented, along with an ability to communicate the intricacies, language, and ideology of society, is ultimately what sets Balzac and Joyce apart as connoisseurs of their urban cityscapes.

While Vallejo deftly solidifies and reveals his understanding of Medellín and her occupants through his use of parlache in La Virgen de los Sicarios, the evolution of his narrator from disregarding the slang as low-culture to incorporating parlache into his own narrative both implicates Fernando in the action of the novel, and adds to his credence as narrator his testimony as witness and participant.

While Vallejo doesn’t use the specific word parlache to describe the slang that the sicarios in Medellín speak, Fernando offers a description early in the novel that delineates the jargon from the Spanish language:

No habla español, habla en argot o jerga. En la jerga de las comunas o argot comunero que está formado en esencia de un viejo fondo de idioma local de Antioquia, que fue el que hablé yo cuando vivo (Cristo el arameo), más una que otra supervivencia del malevo antiguo del barrio de Guayaquil, ya demolido, que hablaron sus cuchilleros, ya muertos; y en fin, de una serie de vocablos y giros nuevos, feos, para designar ciertos conceptos viejos: matar, morir, el muerto, el revolver, la policía...  

[sicarios and citizens in the comunas] Do not speak Spanish, but in slang or jargon. In the comunas the jargon or commoner slang consists essentially of an old local language from Antioquia, which was what I spoke when I lived there (Christ Aramaic), plus the survival of slang from an ancient malevolent Guayaquil neighborhood since demolished, that ruffians and brawlers spoke, now dead; and finally, a series of new words with ugly twists, to

56 Vallejo, 22.
designate certain old concepts like killing, dying, dead man, revolver, police ... 

This slang that Fernando treats with such negative bias has been examined in an article written by Luz Stella Castañeda, a professor at the University of Colombia in Antioquia, who considers parlache a language that:

utilizan amplios sectores de la sociedad, pero en especial los jóvenes de los barrios populares y marginales de Medellín y de su Área Metropolitana...Ahora bien, en los sectores populares y marginales de Medellín, el surgimiento de los cambios lingüísticos fue tan acelerado... debido a la agudización de la crisis social y al surgimiento de nuevas formas de “trabajo”, caracterizadas por un marco de trasgresión de la ley y por un amplio dominio de la cultura de la droga, en donde el sector social más afectado ha sido el de los jóvenes.57

is utilized by large sections of society, but particularly young people in marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín and its surrounding Metropolitan area. The linguistic changes in marginalized areas of Medellín were so accelerated...because of the deepening of the social crisis and new considerations of “work”, characterized by transgression of the law, and the huge impact of drug culture, in which the social sector most affected has been young people.

Castañeda’s definition of parlache does not render Fernando’s description faulty. What Castañeda does provide though, is a clear framework through which a reader might quickly understand parlache as a result of social crisis due to the dominance of drug culture. This explanation is logically sound, and, for Vallejo, too simple to address without incorporating the language itself into the novel. How might the reader understand the social crisis plaguing the comunas of Medellín if there is no way to access the sicario’s ideology or modes of thinking, which are so tightly bound up in their language? Castañeda herself accentuates the fact that linguistic changes

were predicated on changes in the social environment of the comunas. The plot of La
Virgen de los Sicarios deals with the same social crisis and drug culture to which
Castañeda alludes, but does so from the perspective of the sicarios participating in
that history. Vallejo’s choice to tell a history from the perspective of the people
living it necessitates then, that he incorporate the parlache that is as much an effect of
current events as it is an embodiment of the ideology that results from, or evolves out
of, the events he’s describing. Return, for a moment, to an examination of
Fernando’s introduction of parlache.

Immediately, the reader must note that Fernando first and foremost considers
this slang an antithesis to the Spanish language. He does not define parlache as an
offshoot, or combination language. Instead, he considers what it is by first telling the
reader precisely what it is not. And to Fernando, it is not Spanish. His history of the
language proceeds not as Castañeda’s does, with vague social, economic, and
political reasons for the development and popularization of the jargon. Rather,
Fernando attributes a type of villainous character to the language, as if the murderous
neighborhood of Guayaquil, where he claims the slang has roots, has forever imparted
its criminal streak to the language itself. By lamenting parlache’s ability to hijack
“old concepts”58 and with “ugly twists”59 claim them as its own, Fernando also returns
to his recurring theme of mourning some perceived happier past that has been
undeservedly marred by an ugly present.

58 See footnote 54.
59 Ibid.
This marring, Fernando implies, has resulted in something worse than a complete loss of the past. Instead, the survival of old concepts through new slang represents a Colombian society that, to Vallejo, has not progressed but instead continues towards the future propelled by a perverted past. Vallejo’s fear is one that has been voiced perhaps most famously by Walter Benjamin, in his work *On The Concept of History*. He describes:

…a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm.\(^{60}\)

Fernando’s unwillingness to accept parlache’s existence as the natural evolution of a language mirrors the inability Benjamin’s Angel of History has to view history as a chain of events. As the Angel instead sees chaos, Fernando too understands parlache as a part of the jumbled mess of Colombian history that has progressed only by virtue of temporality. The definition of progress as movement towards a better destination\(^{61}\) no longer holds sway, but instead denotes the force that results in an accumulation of

---

\(^{60}\) Benjamin, Section IX.

\(^{61}\) According to the Miriam Webster Dictionary, progress is defined as a gradual movement towards a goal, or betterment.
“rubble on top of rubble.” This anti-progress that Fernando understands parlache to be a defining characteristic of is a central component of Vallejo’s discourse throughout the novel, and is visible in his description of the physical Medellín, as well as through his commentary on Colombian society and government. Benjamin argues here, that as a result of history being pushed forward by the storm of progress, things get missed. Stories are lost amongst the rubble, people are forgotten and there is no time to contemplate the meaning of their lives as the gales and storm of progress pushes the Angel of History forward. This fear of the loss of voices, stories and testimony might be considered one of the primary motivations for Vallejo to write La Virgen de los Sicarios.

The author’s construction of a narrator whose negative bias towards parlache is built upon the consideration of the language as a result of the detriments of progress Benjamin talks about might indicate to the reader that Vallejo in fact does not value the slang as a part of history that deserves remembering. However, Vallejo’s technique of playing devil’s advocate at the beginning of the story dissolves into an evolution in Fernando’s attitude that ultimately embraces parlache by realizing that effectively telling Alexis’ and Wílmar’s stories necessitates the understanding of their language, which serves not just as a mode of communication, but has embedded in it the ideology and culture of the working-class society in Medellín’s comunas.

62 See footnote 58.
63 Modernity is discussed in more detail in Las Dos Ciudades.
While Fernando’s diatribe against parlache negatively characterizes its existence as that of an unwanted garden weed, Vallejo’s emphasis on the continual evolution of the language reflects the psychological evolution necessary to survive the violence within the comunas. The frequency of murders, and staggering amount of corpses must be so traumatic for inhabitants of the comunas to see, that it necessitates an escape from reality. Parlache’s ability to pair new words with existing concepts allows for a construction of a new reality through diction. Fernando enlightens the reader:

<<¡Corran! ¡Corran! ¡Vengan a ver el muñeco!>> El <<muñeco>> por si usted no lo sabe, por si no los conoce, es el muerto. El vivo de hace un instante, pero ya no.64

‘Run! Run! Come see the doll!’ The ‘doll’ in case you don’t know, in case you don’t understand, is a dead person. Someone who was alive a second ago, but now no.

Fernando explains to an ignorant audience here that corpses are not called cadavers, but muñecas, for dolls. This specific substitution in diction is demonstrative of parlache’s ability to allow communication in terms that soften the horrific nature of reality, and that reiterates Vallejo’s insistence on the importance of understanding parlache to access the mindset of those who speak the jargon. How many times can one person handle seeing a cadaver or corpse, before losing some sanity? How often must one person be forced to face his own mortality? The substitution of the word muñeca allows for a representation of reality that transforms dead corpses into dolls-not quite alive, but not quite dead either. This warped perspective functions as a

64 Vallejo, 27.
safety barrier against the harshness of reality, a type of defense mechanism. However, the consequence of this mechanism is a habituation towards death that Vallejo questions throughout the novel. This quote illustrates Vallejo’s disapproval of the habituation of society towards violence by the way he frames the situation Fernando describes. The narrator replays a scene in which people are running specifically towards the muñeca, as if the cadaver is a spectacle rather than a loss of life. This section is theater-like in quality, the dialogue delivered by anonymous off-stage actors, the action propelled as if by stage direction. Vallejo shows here that parlache’s representation of reality is also a cloaking of it. As a result of this fictionalization, death becomes a performance or ritual, rather than a true event.

Note too, that Fernando informs the reader that Guayaquil, one of the neighborhoods where parlache originated, has since been demolished. Vallejo’s inclusion of this fact suggests the persistence of language and culture even when their geographic origin has been demolished. When this observation is applied to Vallejo’s vision of a physically crumbling and decrepit Medellín, it yields a quiet, but optimistic hope. Although Fernando initially considers parlache’s persistence a detriment to Colombia’s linguistic history, the slang nevertheless serves to define the culture of the working, lower classes in Medellín. While this commentary specifically addresses the community within the comunas, it might be broadened and applied to the whole of Colombia. Based on Vallejo’s (and eventually Fernando’s) conviction that parlache is indeed important in truly understanding the culture and way of life within the comunas, the survival of parlache beyond the destruction of its origins suggests a hope and optimism that even amidst a crumbling city, political corruption
and economic stagnation, a society can adapt and maintain a culture and a narrative through its language.

However, Vallejo’s prescriptive optimism is subtle, and at the moment, the reader trusts the narrator, Fernando, who perpetually privileges his knowledge or understanding of the city even above sociologists and other professionals. He cynically advises:

> Cuando a una sociedad la empiezan a analizar los sociólogos, ay mi Dios, se jodió, como el que cae en manso del psiquiatra.⁶⁵

> When sociologists start to analyze a society, my God, it’s screwed, like the guy who falls into the hands of a psychiatrist.

Fernando’s conflicted relationship with knowledge is revealed here, where through his criticism of social scientists who might be better suited in their field of study to analyze Colombian society, he effectually champions his opinion, which until this point the reader understands as regarding parlache a detriment to Colombian society.

Through his intellectual lens, Fernando unknowingly reveals the power language has to alienate socioeconomic classes within the same society. In a 2011 *Katharsis* article exploring the connection between social consciousnesses and the transmission of ideology through language, Colombian University professors Luz Stella Castañeda, José Ignacio Henao and David Alberto Londoño discuss the demographic of parlache speakers:

---

⁶⁵ Vallejo, 67.
que en la mayoría de los casos, no logra insertarse de manera adecuada en la sociedad urbana. Toda esta situación conduce a la formación de una contracultura que produce una variedad lingüística que expresa la nueva realidad que viven estos grupos sociales.  

...that in most cases, cannot be properly inserted into urban society. This situation leads to the formation of a counterculture that produces linguistic variety expressing the new realities facing these social groups.

This assessment establishes the development of parlache as a result of being othered by society, and echoes Vallejo’s understanding of parlache as a self-perpetuating accessory of alienation. It also reflects the physical state of the comunas as being alienated from Medellín proper.

Though this separation of the comunas from Medellín proper is addressed in more depth in the chapter *Las Dos Ciudades*, it is important to note here that the comunas of Medellín exist on the outskirts of the city. Situated in the Aburrá Valley in the north Andes, Medellín proper is girded by the comunas that cluster on the sides of the hills surrounding the city. The buildings are often shoddily constructed, electricity is not wired out to the comunas, but often siphoned off illegally. The comunas receive recognition from the Colombian government haphazardly, and often have to petition for running water and institutionalized education. In this way, the physical segregation of comunas from the city is reflected in Fernando’s distinguishing of parlache as something very separate from the language he speaks.

As a representative of the upper classes, as well as a resident of Medellín proper, he

---

scorns the use of parlache as un-academic and heathen, and initially dismisses the language. Parlache speakers receiving this scorn, as the quote illustrates, continue to disseminate the jargon as:

…una muestra de rebeldía, y como una forma de encubrir información de crear nexus de cohesión de identidad como grupo, constituyen mecanismos de defensa que imponen ciertas barreras ante el sector social que los excluye.

…a show of rebellion, and a form of ensconcing information to create nexus of cohesion and group identity, they constitute defense mechanisms that impose barriers to the social sectors that exclude them.

Vallejo demonstrates a deep understanding of this circular linguistic alienation, and pairs Fernando’s scorn for the language by illustrating his complete exclusion from it.

In fact, the first few times parlache appears in the text, it appears:

…entre comillas como si fuera aprendiendo un idioma extranjero, desconocido.

…in quotations, as if he was learning a foreign, unknown language.

The first time Fernando integrates parlache into his story, he does so as if he’s setting a scene in a play. Between quotes, he positions a conversation between two sicarios:


“So, buddy, is it good or bad?” What do I say? I say: “Hey you son of a bitch.” It’s a greeting for ruffians.

68 Vallejo, 23.
In this quote, Vallejo incorporates the word *parce*, which means buddy or amigo, and the phrase *vientos o maletas*. While those two words on their own mean winds and backpacks respectively, the phrase here means *good or bad*. More important than the semantics though is the manner in which Fernando describes the comportment sicarios show in greeting each other to the reader as if the situation is a completely foreign one. Fernando himself maintains his distance from this quote. He explains it to his audience, yet establishes a clear space between himself as a cultured intellectual, and the low class slang. This technique that Vallejo employs reiterates the socioeconomic alienation inherent in parlache, but also hints at the type of audience Vallejo addresses as also excluded from the parlache culture.

Although it seems that Vallejo’s choice to include parlache in *La Virgen de los Sicarios* speaks to his understanding of an audience that has background knowledge of the slang, his introduction of parlache to the reader strikes a different tone. While the quote above serves as testament to Fernando’s reticence to become familiar with parlache, it also serves as an educational tool for the audience. Why would Fernando take the time to set up and analyze a brief dialogue in parlache for an audience that already understands the slang? Vallejo understands his potential audience as a broader one, and thus treats his imagined audience as if this novel is perhaps its first exposure to parlache. This move only serves to underscore Vallejo’s authority over Medellín and parlache, and also educates his audience, perhaps ignorant of parlache. This ignorance is one that most readers, unfamiliar with the parlache.

slang, inherently identify with, and thus trust Vallejo, through Fernando, as the mentor or educator.

Just as Vallejo establishes this binary between Fernando and the sicario language, he destroys it. Our narrator slowly but surely begins to incorporate parlache into his own discourse. After introducing parlache to the reader, and serving as a type of removed mentor, Fernando continues to educate the audience as Alexis and Wilmar continue to educate him. Vallejo describes a scene in which Fernando explains to the audience, after learning from Alexis, about the type of revolver the sicarios use:

Ah, y transcribí mal las amadas palabras de mi niño. No dijo <<Yo te lo mato>>, dijo <<Yo te lo quiebro>>. Ellos no conjugan el verbo matar: practican sus sinónimos. La infinidad de sinónimos que tienen para decirlo: más que los árabes para el camello.\(^70\)

Ah, I poorly transcribed the loving words of my little boy. He didn’t say <<I will kill him for you>>, he said <<I will break him for you>>. They don’t conjugate the verb to kill: they practice their synonyms. The infinite amount of synonyms they have to say it: more than the Arabs for the camel.

Before Fernando arrives at his explanation of Alexis’ revolver, he chastises himself for poor transcription of Alexis’ direct words. This emphasis on transcribing Alexis exactly as he speaks reveals an importance Vallejo places on preserving parlache in written form for the purpose of telling of this history. Fernando goes on to exchange the verb *matar*, or kill, for *quebrar*, which has multiple meanings including break, smash, bankrupt, tear, or cut out. Fernando proceeds this time in a vein that is not critical, but analytical. He diagrams Alexis’ choice of words in a

\(^70\) Vallejo, 25.
grammatical sense, claiming Alexis is “practicing synonyms”\(^{71}\), rather than refusing to call things as they are. Although Fernando isn’t critical here, and the reader can actually see him in the middle of his transformation from critic of parlache to part of the parlache culture, Vallejo’s questioning tone seeps through, and the reader is provoked to question too, whether Alexis’ grammatical reformation of diction is in fact a new representation of reality, or a refusal to admit to the violence he truly sees and participates in.

And while Fernando continues to harp on the linguistic obstacle that Colombia faces, he also continues to integrate parlache into his everyday discourse. His hyperawareness that:

\begin{quote}
Todo el problema de Colombia es una cuestión de semántica. Vamos a ver: <<hijueputa>> aquí significa mucho o no significa nada.\(^{72}\)
\end{quote}

Colombia’s problem is a question of semantics. Let’s see: “son of a bitch” here means a lot, or means nothing at all.

is tempered by his increasing use of words like \textit{muñeca}\(^{73}\) and \textit{carajo}\(^{74}\), both common parlache terms. What is so interesting about Fernando’s adoption of the word \textit{muñeca} though, is the fact that he begins to use it when he more frequently experiences shootings and murders with Alexis. Fernando explains that the words for \textit{cadáver} has been replaced with the word for \textit{doll, muñeca}. This internalization of certain slang words communicates Vallejo’s desire for the reader to understand just how inescapable violence is at this moment in Medellín’s history. Sparked by either an

\(^{71}\) See 68.
\(^{72}\) Vallejo, 51.
\(^{73}\) Vallejo, 68.
\(^{74}\) Velljo, 98.
uneasiness around so much death, an unwillingness to admit it, a habituation towards it, or a combination of the three, Fernando’s vocabulary morphs according to the amount of time he spends with his sicario lovers, and subsequently the amount of murders he witnesses. This transculturation utilizes the parlache slang as its vehicle, but is also instrumental in establishing Fernando, the authoritative narrator, as a living part of this testimony that Alexis, Wílmar and the sicarios provide. In a 2010 article examining the role of the narrative in La Virgen de los Sicarios, scholar Adriana Adriana Jastrzębska writes:

Su identificación con los sicarios no se declara en el texto directamente sino que se realiza a través del lenguaje, de aceptarlo como suyo.75

He did not directly declare his identification with the sicarios in the text, but rather realized it through language, in accepting it as his.

It would be unrealistic for Fernando, even considering his love affairs with Wílmar and Alexis, to by his own volition declare his understanding and empathy for the sicario’s struggle, and pledge his effort to legitimize their story. The narrator Vallejo presents his audience with at the beginning of the novel is decidedly stubborn in his convictions, and throughout the novel expresses some fiercely polemical opinions, including the suggestion that Colombian women should stop having children in an effort to stop the violence the sicarios perpetrate. Even if Fernando had possessed an open mind towards parlache and decided he wanted to embrace the jargon, Vallejo has already established his alienation from it due to his education level and socioeconomic status in Medellín society. It is, therefore, through Fernando’s

75 Jastrzębska, 201.
eventual acceptance and incorporation of parlache into his life and vocabulary that
Vallejo develops his strongest argument in favor of the preservation of parlache. He
shows that even with Fernando’s education, communicative ability, and self-
proclaimed authority over the city of Medellín and her inhabitants, the narrator still
could not adequately describe his experience without incorporating parlache. Vallejo
conscientiously allows Fernando access to parlache only through Alexis and Wilmar,
proving the jargon is just as much a way of life, as it is a spoken form of
communication. According to the aforementioned article:

Fernando desempeña un papel doble: el del intermediario entre la
historia narrada y su narrativo y el de protagonista cuya actividad
desarrolla la trama. 76

Fernando plays a dual role: that of the intermediary between his
narrative and the history, and of the protagonist whose activity
develops the plot.

This dual role that Fernando assumes is important in its multiplicity, because
in addition to his responsibilities as narrator of Medellín’s recent history, his
inclusion in the world that Alexis and Wílmar live in denotes a more immediate
agency in the action of the novel. By the end of the novel in fact, Fernando is so
closely involved with Wílmar’s narrative that he describes as scene in which:

Wílmar sacó el revolver y le propinó de pájaro se desplomó
dando su ultimo silbo, desinflándose, en tanto Wílmar se perdía
por entre el gentío. 77

Wílmar took out his revolver and dealt with the bird who
collapsed giving his last whistle, deflated, while Wílmar was lost
in the crowd.

76 Ibid., 195.
77 Vallejo, 104.
Not only is Fernando physically with Wílmar in the violent anecdote, but he relates the story through the use of parlache. Without context, the reader wouldn’t know that the victim in this case was a taxi cab driver because Fernando doesn’t refer to the driver as a human, but rather, a bird. And instead of admitting that this man has just been shot in the head and murdered, Fernando says he is deflated. Notice too, that while Fernando finishes detailing the scene, Wílmar has fled into the crowd. The anecdote has transformed into Fernando’s narrative. And Fernando has assumed, in addition to his role as narrator, the authority of testimony and the mediator of the plot. It is in fact, through his words, that the violence and trauma of the narrative reaches the reader.

  Fernando’s incorporation of parlache into his own speech both marks his assumption of the narrative as partly his, and his implication in the violence committed by Alexis and Wílmar. Fernando and Alexis hear a radio broadcasting news of a murder that Alexis committed:

  …habían caído acribillados en el atrio de la iglesia de Aranjuez cuando se dirigían a misa, por dos presuntos sicarios al servicios del narcotráfico. ¿Yo un presunto <<sicario>>? ¡Desgraciados! Yo soy un presunto gramático! No lo podía creer. Qué calumnia, qué disinformación.78

  …had been gunned down in the atrium of the Church Aranjuez while on their way to mass, by two suspected sicarios in the service of drug traffickers. Me a suspected “sicario”? Bastards! I am a suspected grammarian! I couldn’t believe it. What slander, what disinformation.

  78 Vallejo, 45.
While Fernando’s presence at Alexis’ side realistically technically makes him an accomplice at the scene of a crime, the narrator’s outrage at the media’s characterization of him as a sicario rather than a learned intellectual speaks volumes about his ability, or rather, inability, to admit responsibility or implication in the violence he sees around him. As María Fernanda Landa writes in her analysis of the intellectual’s criminality in Vallejo’s novel:

It is precisely Fernando’s unquestioning confidence in the status traditionally enjoyed by educated men in Latin American society that ironically emphasizes the irrelevance of the present day intellectual as an essential figure in the analysis and comprehension of a national reality.79

Fernando’s paradox exists thus; he continues to consider himself innocent or above the violence in Colombia, even as he witnesses murders, and becomes testimony to the violence that occurs on an hourly basis. In addition, Fernando’s position as grammarian is maintained only by his own opinion, even though he proceeds to undermine himself by incorporating parlache into his diction.

It is through his use of parlache that Vallejo achieves his nuanced end. Vallejo’s introduction and incorporation of parlache into his novel and into Fernando’s vocabulary serves to further establish him as the authoritative author of Medellín, but more importantly emphasizes the importance of dialect to communicate ideology, legitimize parlache culture, and elevate the stories and lives of Alexis, Wílmar, and the rest of the sicarios, to an importance that deserves recognition as a history. Fernando, as he exists in tandem with Alexis and Wílmar, actively

79 Fernanda Lander, 78.
participating in their lives and speaking their language, has the ability to more deeply understand and explain this moment in Medellín’s history while maintaining his position of authority for the readership. Fernando’s increased use of parlache throughout the novel also undermines his self-proclaimed status as the innocent intellectual and effectively implicates him in the violence, proving again, that Vallejo allows nobody to escape responsibility.
Las Dos Ciudades

Podríamos decir, para simplificar las cosas, que bajo un solo nombre Medellín son dos ciudades: la de abajo, intemporal, en la valle; y la de arriba en las montañas.\textsuperscript{80}

we might say, to simplify things, that under the one name Medellín there are two cities: the one below, intemporal, in the valle; and the one above in the mountains.

Although its roots extend as deep as the late 1600s, until the early 1800s the Antioquia region of Colombia was known for little more than swampy land and the occasional gold mine. With an exploratory spirit akin to that of the westward expansionist pioneers in the United States at the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, “thousands of antioqueños\textsuperscript{81} set off south to bring the wild, mountainous hinterland...into cultivation.”\textsuperscript{82} Within half a century, the coffee export trade established Antioquia as a solid, productive economy. This newfound productivity spurred industrialization in Medellín, and soon the region known economically for mining evolved into one of Colombia’s largest textile cities. In fact, Alonso Salazar, author of \textit{Born to Die in Medellín} informs us that “by the end of the First World War, the city was well established as Colombia’s industrial capital, employing some 6,000 textile workers.”\textsuperscript{83}

By the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Antioquia, and the city of Medellín in particular, had become a place of expanding, and building. A century of mining and

\textsuperscript{80} Vallejo, 86.  
\textsuperscript{81} Refers to people who live in the Antioquia region. They are also referred to as \textit{paisas}.  
\textsuperscript{82} Alonso J. Salazar, \textit{Born to Die in Medellín} (Colombia: Latin American Bureau, 1992) introduction.  
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 5.
textile driven industrialization had carried with it the physical demarcations of modernity; Medellín boasted universities, skyscrapers, museums, and libraries. It was, and remains, the home of one of Colombia’s most prestigious newspapers, *El Colombiano.* Indeed, Medellín seems by various historical accounts to have been a bustling, modern city by the early 1900s.

But just outside the city, to the north and south especially, lies the *other part of Medellín.* This part of Medellín, whose origin predates 1945, is called the comuna. The result of migration to the industrialized Medellín from the countryside, comunas are in their most essential form shantytowns. Characterized by shoddy building materials, and a sense of illegality that arrives from the fact that many comunas or districts are not recognized by the Colombian government, the comunas possess in themselves and their geography a type of instability, and marginalization. Comunas rarely receive basic public services like electricity, water, or access to public education:

Structure of Squatter Settlements in Medellín. See Footnote 84.

84 Christoph Stadel, “The Structure of Squatter Settlements in Medellín, Colombia”, *Area* v. 7 No. 4 (1975), pp. 249-254.
85 Comuna is translated into English as communal living engagement, community outside of society, community, or even main irrigation canal.
The population, in many instances, has to rely on self-help measures, either in the form of legal communal efforts (acción comunal), or in the form of illegal tapping of electricity and water (acción pirata). \(^86\)

In Colombia alone, various terminologies are employed to address these communities. Christoph Stadel, in his work “The Structure of Squatter Settlements in Medellín, Colombia”, sets out delineations between terms like urbanización, which describes legal development and construction in urban areas, and nucleos piratas, or illegal settlements. \(^87\) Among the handful of additional (and mostly negative) words, like invasión and tugurio \(^88\), which have taken on new meaning in the Colombian discourse on the geopolitical and structural state of the comunas, is the word rehabilitación. Stadel explains the word, in its relationship to a comuna, as defining a community that has been either integrated into Medellín proper as a legal neighborhood, or is in the process of doing so. \(^89\)

Perhaps the Colombian government’s choice of diction and subsequent characterization of the comunas as little more than a disease, as something broken and needing to be fixed, was unintentional. Perhaps the word was chosen with the best of intentions in mind. Nevertheless, such a definition certainly arose from a perspective that deems the comunas and their occupants as essentially other \(^90\), not truly a part of Medellín. More than a simple effort by the Colombian government to assign words to the discourse surrounding the existence of the comunas, this linguistic distinction

---

\(^86\) Stadel, 252.
\(^87\) Ibid.
\(^88\) “tugurio, on the other hand, is applied to the structural condition of buildings which are composed of loose material, for example, wood, tin, and cardboard.” (Stadel 252).
\(^89\) Ibid.
\(^90\) I use other here to mean separated from the mainstream in some way, to not be considered a part of the main movement, society, history, or narrative.
provides an example of the complexity of the physical comunas and the narratives they represent.

It is clear the comunas are fascinating in their embodied binaries; they represent growth and stasis, poverty and modernity, public and private, regulation and governmental failure. The comuna persists in paradox; it is physically present, but politically invisible. Its citizens are migrants in their own country. The inability of Medellín’s infrastructure to handle such an influx of people left a large, working class population of migrants needing a city that wasn’t big enough to hold them. So they built their own communities in the hills surrounding Medellín.

In their proximity to Medellín, the comunas provide an inescapable physical reminder of the violent history of Colombia. Colombia’s geopolitical boundaries as they are known today, were not settled until 1903, when the United States aided Panama’s quest for independence from Colombia. Prior to the Spanish conquest that began in 1525, sub-Andean and Caribbean peoples inhabited Colombia. Over the next 400 years, Colombia would transition from being part of Spain’s colonized territory Nueva Granada, through a series of groupings of various Latin American territories including Panama, Ecuador, and Peru, and through various names including Granadina, Gran Colombia, and the Republic of New Granada, before finally settling into its current existence as Colombia. Throughout this tumultuous history, the liberals and conservatives in Colombia raged fiercely against each other, oftentimes forsaking diplomacy for violence. Before World War II a series of liberal

leaders guided the country through far reaching reforms, many of which demolished patronage privileges that had been bequeathed by the conservatives upon the elites. Due to the economic modernization of the early 20th century, these new classes demanded social reform, and the liberals provided a voice through which these urban working classes could speak. While the conservatives favored a restructured Colombia along corporatist lines, the Populist and liberal parties in Colombia continued to gain support from those Colombians who wanted access to privileges that the conservative elites were hoarding.

During WWII, in which Colombia entered the war on the Allied side, both the conservative and liberal parties weakened due to infighting. The splintering of the liberal party yielded two liberal candidates for president in the 1946 elections. The lack of a unified front allowed the conservatives to return to power. However, by 1948, it looked like the leftist populist movement had a strong candidate in Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, a well-loved and charismatic leader under whom the liberal party had reunited. This hope was shattered when Gaitán was assassinated on April 9, 1948. Gaitán’s murder sparked riots across the country, and exacerbated existing political rivalries and tension into a decade of outright violence. La Violencia, as this period came to be called, is referred to as the bloodiest period in Colombia’s history in which over 300,000 Colombians were killed. This violence drenched both rural and

---

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
urban Colombia. Conservative groups armed entire towns in the countryside so they might war against their liberal neighbors, and visa versa. To escape this violence, Colombians living in the countryside streamed towards urban centers like Medellín, where there was the promise of a police presence, and safety from this violence. In Mary Roldán’s book *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia Colombia, 1946-1953*, the author explains:

> The bulk of the killing during La Violencia took place in rural areas, and peasants constituted the majority of casualties. Victims were often tortured, dismembered, and sexually mutilated, and women were frequently raped in front of their families.  

It is not only violence that the comunas represent. Years of poor agricultural results and economic downturn plagued the countryside in the 1950s and 1960s, and farmers were being ousted by large-scale cattle ranches and multinational farming corporations. In fact it was the capitalist system too, that forced Antioqueños inwards and towards Medellín.

Beyond his clear desire to portray the *othered* Medellín as part of the whole history, Vallejo insists on working with the physicality of the comunas to suggest a view of history with not a new, but rather a shifted lens, and to illustrate that sometimes it’s not the empirical description of the place but rather the narrative that place carries with it, that is indispensible to the telling of history. For Vallejo, the comunas represent, in their peripheral existence, not only the presence of an

---

unfinished modernity, but all of the detrimental consequences that arrive out of modernity’s failings. In his representation of Medellín, it is the comuna that Vallejo utilizes as the building block in his construction of the city. In the most obvious sense, Vallejo’s choice to ground his history in a marginalized space elevates the history of the comunas to one that deserves being understood and recognized. Beyond Vallejo’s nod to historical perspective, he works with the physicality of the comunas to reveal the experience of modernity in Colombia as an unfinished project which has been both undermined by violence and instrumental in the perpetuation of that very same cycle of violence.

The first sentence in *La Virgen de los Sicarios* reads:

> Había en las afueras de Medellín un pueblo silencioso y apacible que se llamaba Sabaneta.\(^97\)

> On the outskirts of Medellín was a silent, and peaceful town called Sabaneta.

Here is where Vallejo begins to construct his Medellín, reaching outside the city proper, to include the comunas. Notice that right away Fernando makes sure to help the reader understand that the geographic location of his boyhood home, which, subsequently becomes part of the city of Medellín, begins as a lovely suburban town. However Fernando notes that this has changed during his lifetime:

> Sabaneta había dejado de ser un pueblo y se había convertido en un barrio más de Medellín, la ciudad la había alcanzado, se la había tragado, y Colombia, entre tanto.\(^98\)

---

\(^97\) Vallejo, 5.

\(^98\) Ibid., 8.
“Sabaneta had ceased to be a town, and was converted into one more Medellín neighborhood, the city had reached out and had swallowed her, and Colombia as well.

The effect here is three-fold: Fernando demonstrates the ability a city has to morph and grow geographically, the importance that a geographic space can hold in memory, and introduces the reader to a physical representation of modernity. When Fernando mentions that Sabaneta has ceased to be a town, he uses the verb swallowed to describe the way the city of Medellín had fused Sabaneta to itself. Fernando’s history doesn’t exactly illustrate Sabaneta’s move from a suburban area to an urban one, but rather the disappearance entirely of Sabaneta from the map of Medellín. Though he doesn’t outwardly condemn Sabaneta’s new status as urban neighborhood, Fernando’s negative bias towards Sabaneta’s evolution can be intuited. Note too, the tone Fernando uses when he talks about his boyhood home, Sabaneta. The quiet village he describes equates peacefulness with rurality, with an existence that is separate from Medellín. Sabaneta, after all, possessed its own name before becoming just another neighborhood in Medellín. This loss of identity to homogeneity that Fernando observes, along with his nostalgia for some time before, establishes a type of chronology that inherently marks a point in Sabaneta’s history that provokes the reader to understand that something happened. And this happening is Vallejo’s first presentation of the realities of Medellín’s unfinished modernity.

Before continuing, it seems prudent to parse out the term modernity, as it is a loaded term both in its historical context and in what the term actually denotes or represents. In Alejandro Portes’ article Modernity and Development: A Critique,
which appeared in the journal *Studies in Comparative International Development*, the author presents a condensed history of the term:

…that traces its origins to the impact of ideas of the revolutionary political and economic changes which occurred in Europe during the 18th century…The history of the period suggested a before-after model in which societies dormant for centuries suddenly awakened to new forms of thought and adapted themselves to higher levels of social organization.  

However, this European understanding of modernity, while it certainly applies to Vallejo’s work in the sense that Colombia and Latin America’s identity is undeniably entangled with European colonization, is not nuanced enough to do the term justice. Peter Osborne, a European philosophy professor who has written various scholarly articles concerning modernity, offers a more sophisticated approach to the concept. Vivian Shelling, in her preface to a collection of essays entitled *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*¹⁰⁰, cites Peter Osborne’s three-pronged definition of modernity:

…as a historical category of periodisation, an incomplete project, a set of aspirations and as a mode of experience.  

This understanding of modernity as more than a specific time period is crucial, and is integral in understanding the way in which Vallejo presents

---


Colombia’s modernity. Vallejo’s criticisms of Colombia’s modernity reveal his understanding of the term as an experience. His desire to hold Colombian society responsible for the state of the country, and his unwillingness to allow even the underprivileged escape a sharp scrutiny speaks to that understanding. But at the level of the city, in both its structural elements and the way the city functions, Vallejo shows his understanding of modernity to also be both a set of aspirations, and an incomplete project.

Among the aspirations or qualifications in the making of a modern state, are the accumulation of capital, industrialization, technological innovation, and the fact that:

sovereignty and legitimacy reside in the secular state….governed by instrumental rationality defined by criteria of efficiency and productivity.\(^{102}\)

The modern state that functions according to the dominance of rationality and secularity has as its hallmark a stable economy, and a healthy infrastructure.

While the first quote served as Vallejo’s introduction to the modern Medellín and his narrative’s grounding in the comunas, his criticism of the physical city lies not so much in the city’s growth as it does in the state of its infrastructure. As previously discussed, the comunas themselves are dilapidated and in most cases not fit for living. Vallejo doesn’t limit his observations to the physical state of the comunas though, but paints images of Medellín’s crumbling infrastructure throughout the novel. At one point, Fernando notes that the taxi drivers maneuver their vehicles:

\(^{102}\) Schelling, 5.
...por la misma carreterita destartalada de hace cien años, de bache en bache.103

...down the same little dilapidated highway built a century ago, from pothole to pothole.

The details that Vallejo chooses to vocalize through Fernando provide interesting fodder. On one hand, the reader has been exposed to a Medellín that continues to grow (recall the city’s enveloping of Sabaneta). However, what Vallejo juxtaposes that growth with here, is the fact that the city has not been maintained. While the city is getting bigger, it still relies on a small highway. A highway’s one purpose is transportation, yet this route has fallen into such neglect that it can’t even serve its purpose efficiently. Vivian Shelling reminds us too, that modernity’s traveling companions include “massive migrations.”104 While these massive migrations of people towards newly industrialized cities might theoretically be supported by a modern government’s ability to evolve and strengthen its infrastructure, this quote explicitly represents Colombia’s failure to do so.

What complicates the picture of this crumbling infrastructure that Vallejo builds though, is the fact that he does mention certain modern modes of transportation like the taxi cabs, busses, and elevated trains that run through Medellín. One valid argument is that Vallejo’s mention of the dilapidated highway serves to iterate a vision of a city where modernity has almost succeeded but faltered along the way. However, in examining Fernando’s mention of these more modern modes of

103 Vallejo, 11.
104 Schelling, 5.
transportation, it’s clear that Vallejo still problematizes even these accoutrements of modernity. Early in the novel, Fernando comments:

Se murió mi pobre abuelo sin conocer el tren elevado ni los sicarios, fumando cigarillos Victoria que usted, aposto, no ha oído siquiera mencionar.  

My poor grandfather died without knowing the elevated train, or the sicarios, smoking Victoria cigarettes that you, I bet, have never even heard of.

The train is a complex representative of modernity; it both pounds forward in the name of progress, and in its existence seems a critique of the society that could have created such a beast, a Frankenstein of sorts. Trains truly do, with their very being, make the world smaller. The distance between rural and urban is made miniscule, human spatiality is warped and reformed. The train, in this way, actually echoes in its existence precisely what Medellín has done to Sabaneta; it has pulled everything towards the urban center.

There is a majestic power in the facility of movement, and often it seems that trains represent not only physical movement, but cultural and intellectual movement as well. Just as the train has provided opportunity for human and product travel, it has subsequently allowed greater accessibility and movement of ideas and cultural capital. However, Vallejo seems to imply in La Virgen de los Sicarios that these benefits that usually arrive with the train somehow missed their station. Later in the novel, Fernando returns to the image of the elevated train:

Algún día acabarán lo inconcluso y cruzará el tren elevado

---

105 Vallejo, 7.
sobre mi ciudad deslizándose por sus aceitados rieles como volando, transportando gente y más gente y más gente.¹⁰⁶

Some day they will finish what is incomplete and the elevated rail will cross over my city, sliding down its oiled rails as if flying, transporting people, and more people, and more people.

Against the notion of the train as representative of a modernity that transmits ideas and helps culture progress, Fernando’s vision of Medellín’s elevated train provides a stark contrast. He goes so far as to make physical the incomplete modernity the elevated train accompanies; The image of the train crossing over the city evokes a sense of strangulation. Rather than progress, Fernando notes that this train functions as an agent of the city’s persistent and uncontrollable population growth.

Vallejo mentions transportation again at the end of *La Virgen de los Sicarios*. In the final pages of the novel, Vallejo positions Fernando outside of a bus terminal. He observes:

Era la famosa terminal de buses intermunicipales atestada por los muertos vivos, mis paisanos, yendo y viniendo apurados, atareados, preocupados, como si tuvieron junta pendiente con el presidente o el ministro y tanto qué hacer. Subían de los buses, bajaban de los buses convencidos de que sabían adónde iban o de dónde venían… Pobres seres inocentes, sacados sin motivo de la nada y lanzados en el vertigo del tiempo.¹⁰⁷

It was the famous intercity bus terminal crowded with the living dead, my countrymen, coming and going in a hurry, busy, preoccupied, as if they had a pending meeting with the president or the minister and too much to do. They climbed the buses, and off the busses, convinced that they knew where they were going or where they came … poor

¹⁰⁶ Vallejo, 120.
¹⁰⁷ Vallejo, 127.
innocents, removed without cause from nothing and thrown in the vertigo of time.

Fernando looks with pity and scorn upon a population of people he sees as having been tricked into this charade of modern life, where the access to transportation might be thought of as synonymous with progress. However, the lack of self-awareness that characterizes the travelers implies not the great increase in the flow of cultural capital, or progress that the train so commonly symbolizes but rather a vehicle that facilitates fruitless scurrying about with no vestige of true purpose. He shows that mobility without a motivation is simply movement from one place to another without the significance modernity embodies. The only service the busses serve in this moment, is providing people with a schedule that might structure their time and contribute to the illusion of modernity.

Vallejo doesn’t leave his criticism of Colombia’s unfinished modernity to simply the state of the infrastructure. After all, buildings do not build themselves. Men raise cities, and just as important, men are who cause cities to function. A city is just as much how it functions as it is what it looks like, and Vallejo frequently questions the legitimacy and ability of the government in Medellín. Right after Fernando complains about the highway, he continues his rant and accuses the government:

Es que estos cerdos del gobierno no son capaces de asfaltar una carretera tan esencial?\textsuperscript{108}

Is it that those pigs who work for the government aren’t capable of paving such an essential highway?

\textsuperscript{108} Vallejo, 11.
Fernando is not subtle in his criticism of the government here; it’s crucial to notice that his criticism is also prescriptive: the government’s inaction places the ability to modernize Colombia in the hands of the Colombian government.

Fernando’s criticisms of the inefficiency of government are reiterated by his frequent observation of a general absence of authority and law in Medellín. There is one moment in the novel when Fernando, in discussing the porousness and inconsistency of law in Medellín, cynically explains:

Todos en las comunas están sentenciados a muerte. ¿Quién los sentenció, la ley? Pregunta tonta: en Colombia hay leyes pero no hay ley. Se sentenciaron unos a otros, solitos, y a sus parientes y amigos y a cuantos se les arrimen. El que se arrime a un sentenciado es hombre muerto, cae con él.¹⁰⁹

Everyone in the comunas is sentenced to death. Who sentenced them, the law? Silly question: in Colombia there are laws but there is no law. One is sentenced by the other, by themselves, and their relatives and friends and all who are close to them. He who stands next to a dead man is sentenced, falling with him.

Fernando explains that in his youth, people would chase after a criminal, but now:

Policías en torno no había y mejor para ellos…¹¹⁰

There were no police around, and better for them…

Vallejo illustrates a city so overrun by violence that a government-funded branch dedicated solely to keeping the peace can not serve its duty. While this fact echoes

¹⁰⁹ Vallejo, 87.
¹¹⁰ Vallejo, 39.
the severity of the violence in Medellín and the government’s inability to tourniquet that violence, it more poignantly speaks to the lack of trust in the police force by the people. Fernando’s brief comment encapsulates a brutal paradigm of urban violence, and begs the question: if the government can’t protect people, why wouldn’t young boys turn to the cartels who could offer protection through access to weapons and a network of fellow cartel members. It is in Vallejo’s depiction of the inability of the city to function normally that the reader finds the true binary between violence and progress. This opposition is encapsulated later on the same page when Fernando laments:

   No pueden poner papel higiénico porque se roban el rollo: cuando inauguraron el aeropuerto nuevo en Medellín, que costó una millonada, un solo día lo pusieron y nunca más.¹¹¹

   They can’t have toilet paper because the roll will be stolen: When they inaugurated the new airport in Medellín, which cost a fortune, it was there for just one day but never again.

Vallejo reiterates the way violence has hijacked modernity here by presenting the reader with the image of a sparkling new airport, clean and pure, an unquestionable symbol of modernity. But at the most basic level, being able to provide people with a place to take care of bodily functions, this airport fails. Vallejo acknowledges the modern appearance of some structures in the city, but by illustrating as he does in this moment the ineffective functioning of the city, implies that modernity may not be simply replicated, but must be actively carried out.

   In addition, Vallejo continues to thread violence through his narrative as an

¹¹¹ Vallejo, 39.
agent of halting progress. In another scene, Fernando walks with Alexis after a pizza
dinner one evening, which Fernando does not neglect to mention was a normal,
mundane evening, he explains:

La ciudad se estaba como desinflando, perdiendo empuje.
¡Que va! Amaneció a la entrada del edificio un mendigo
acuchillado: les están sacando los ojos para una
Universidad.\textsuperscript{112}

The city is deflated, losing it’s thrust. And no way!
appearing in the entrance of a building, a knifed beggar:
They’re taking eyes for the University.

In this quote, Vallejo utilizes the architecture of Medellín to conflate modernity with
the violence that pervades the city. Vallejo’s use of humor, suggesting that the
university is extracting eyeballs from beggars for study purposes, serves as morbid
comic relief. What begins as the reader’s bemusement turns into a sad recognition
that the scene represents the absurdity of the violence in Medellín. Perhaps
Fernando’s joke is a defense mechanism he employs in the face of chronic tragedy.
Or perhaps Vallejo is again lamenting society’s habituation to everyday violence by
showing Fernando’s ability to make light of a gruesome situation.

On another note, universities and places of learning symbolize the type of
cultural progress Fernando specifically doesn’t see in his observation of Medellín’s
society. A student in university is preparing himself for a career. That much is
obvious, but what is not so obvious is that a student’s time at school is time that he is
not on the street working for the drug cartels. In his retelling of this anecdote,

\textsuperscript{112} Vallejo, 26.
Fernando draws juxtaposition between violence and education that establishes a commentary on the present state of ethics in Medellín. When buildings that are supposed to serve as haven for the eternal quest for learning are desecrated by murders and violence, how are institutions expected to function to inspire the youth of Medellín to work to exterminate this violence? Embedded in this question that Vallejo implies is a disconcerting fear that the violence in Medellín is so invasive that it has punctured the sphere of academia and paralyzed education’s ability to save Medellín’s youth.

It is not just the government that Vallejo views as being responsible in controlling Medellín’s experience of modernity. Vallejo vocalizes both his criticism and the importance of responsibility of the Colombian people through Fernando’s criticism of the campesinos in the comunas:

Los fundadores, ya se sabe, eran campesinos: gentecita humilde que traía del campo sus costumbres, como rezar el rosario, beber aguardiente, robarle al vecino y matarse por chichigüas con el prójimo en peleas a machete. Qué podía nacer de semejante esplendor humano? Más. Y más y más y más. Y matándose por chichigüas siguieron. Después del machete a cuchillo y después del cuchillo a bala, y en la bala están hoy cuando escribo.¹¹³

The founders, you know, were from the country, humble people who brought from the country their customs, like praying the rosary, drinking liquor, stealing from their neighbor and killing each other with machetes for insignificant meaningless. What could be born of such human splendor? More. And more and more and more. And more killing for nothing. After knife and machete knife came the bullet, and the bullet persists today, as I write.

¹¹³ Vallejo, 29.
Superficially, Fernando’s criticism reiterates Vallejo’s unwillingness to let any specific group of people escape responsibility. While Fernando rails against the government, and the lack of a strong leadership to help the city function, he refuses to allow the poor and downtrodden to be victims and paints an ugly portrait of the citizens who dwell in the comunas. According to the educated intellectual, these people are poor drunkards, and hypocritical in their conflicting performance of religion and tendencies towards murdering each other.

Fernando even goes so far as to note an escalation of violence from machetes to bullets, and attribute said escalation to the campesinos. This criticism is particularly interesting. By also noting the evolution of weaponry from the machete to the gun, a more modern and lethal weapon, Vallejo is identifying the campesinos with Colombia’s unfinished modernity and blaming the two for Colombia’s struggle against violence.

Although Fernando overtly criticizes the occupants of the comunas, remember that his character is that of the intellectual. His is the person who never (until his love affairs with Wílmar and Alexis) had need to visit the comunas. He was not forced to grow up there, and part of his perspective includes an understanding that the comunas are what overran and eventually destroyed the vestiges of Sabaneta. At this moment in the novel, Fernando represents the elite’s perspective. Vallejo’s choice to present the comunas through Fernando’s disdain for them reveals how the comunas are perceived by the upper classes, and degraded in their existence. The gentle words at the beginning of this quote quickly peel away to reveal scornful mockery and an ugly portrait of the campesinos. Fernando attributes not only the
evolution of violence from petty machete fights to the absolute overload of gunfire in Medellín to the comunas, but faults the inherent characteristics and customs of the occupants in the comunas for this social problem.

Although Fernando’s perspective seems biased against those Colombians inhabiting the comunas, his harshness reminds the reader that this intellectual never promised to offer objective analysis of Medellín’s situation. Vallejo’s illustration of the narrator-intellectual also reveals one of Vallejo’s social criticisms; one that reflects the stratification of society to such dramatic proportions that one class considers another class less human than itself. At one point, Fernando asks of the comunas:

¿Adónde van con tanta prisa, ratas humanas? ¿Qué se creen que se volvieron? ¿Pájaros?¹¹⁴

Where are they going so hurriedly, those human rats? What do they think they turned into? Birds?

Beyond reducing the lower class of Medellín to animalistic quality, Fernando implies a desire amongst these people to exist as something else entirely. Fernando’s presumption in assuming an understanding of his subjects’ predicament and his judgment of their motivations as foolish only highlights his lack of empathy and elitism. Rather than Vallejo portraying Fernando as so critical in order to illustrate a truth about the comunas, he is pointing out an actual failure on the part of the academic to apply criticism and sympathy to his own perspective. Thus, through Fernando’s diatribes against the government, and the comunas’ citizenry, Vallejo

¹¹⁴ Vallejo, 120.
illustrates not only the fault of the intellectual, but also his emphasis on society and governmental participation in Colombia’s modernity.

**Vallejo got it Wrong**

Vallejo’s vision of Medellín presents a broken city that farcically projects modernity, is run inefficiently by an incapable government, and is teeming with a population caught in a cycle of violence. This is Vallejo’s Medellín of the 1990’s. But, according to critic Pablo Restrepo-Gautier, Vallejo got it all wrong. The Medellín that Vallejo develops in his novel isn’t even congruent with the Medellín that existed in the late 1980s and 1990s, before the myriad public works projects and overall revitalization of the city.

In his work “Lo sublime y el caos urbano: visiones apocalípticas de Medellín en La Virgen de los Sicarios,” Restrepo-Gautier works within the dialectical discourse of sublime and chaos to communicate, and subsequently criticize, the manner in which Vallejo portrays Medellín. While some of Restrepo-Gautier’s analysis seems too focused on fitting Vallejo’s writing into a type of western categorization, he offers an interesting critique of Vallejo’s work as one which fictionalizes the urban space of Medellín. Restrepo-Gautier considers this fictionalization of the city a literary mechanism that fits the novel nicely into the category of Gothic novel.

Restrepo-Gautier writes:
Los rascacielos que forman el típico perfil de la ciudad moderna y del Medellín actual no aparecen en La Virgen de los Sicarios. Las cúpulas de ciento cincuenta Iglesias caracterizan el Medellín de la novela, reemplazando las modernas torres de la capital antioqueña en una especie de retroceso temporal que se dirige hacia la ciudad pre-industrial cuyas construcciones religiosas dominan el paisaje y apuntan hacia un orden teocéntrico.¹¹⁵

The skyscrapers that form the typical profile of the modern city, and of Medellín and do not appear in Lady of the Assassins. One hundred and fifty church domes characterize the Medellín in the novel, replacing the modern towers of Medellin in a kind of temporary setback that goes to a pre-industrial city whose religious buildings dominate the landscape and point toward a theocentric order.

Vallejo completely ignores the skyscrapers that dominated the skyline, and instead characterizes the city as overrun with cupula of churches, and falling down buildings.

It is true that another one of Vallejo’s methods of portraying Medellín includes utilizing biblical diction to develop a sense of ingrained religion. Even in describing the weather in the comunas, Vallejo inserts religious imagery:

Mientras en las comunas, seguía lloviendo y sus calles, ríos de sangre.¹¹⁶

Meanwhile in the comunas, it continues raining and the streets, rivers of blood.

While the imagery in this quote stands as metaphor for the violence perpetrated in the comunas, there are clearly religious undertones. This sentiment is underscored throughout the novel. At another point, Fernando insists:


¹¹⁶ Vallejo, 93.
Uno en las comunas sube hacia el cielo pero bajando hacia los infiernos.\textsuperscript{117}

Someone in the comunas rises towards the heavens, but then falls back to hell.

Juxtaposing the high altitude of the comunas with the grittiness of their violence, Fernando again invokes religious imagery and in Dantesque form condemns the comunas to a hellish existence.

While Restrepo-Gautier suggests that Vallejo’s portrayal actually aims to illustrate the Church’s complete absence in post-industrial Medellín, another interpretation attributes Vallejo’s overpopulation of churches and religious imagery to a more sophisticated and cynical end; one that does not bemoan the church’s absence, but in fact the corruption of the institution itself in Colombia, as I discussed earlier in the chapter. Restrepo-Gautier also fails to at least suggest the possibility that Vallejo’s additional religious architecture might be his own way of symbolizing faith through the physical appearance of faith. Restrepo-Gautier criticizes the author’s city as being oversimplified, and yet the critic seems to view this literary oversimplification as translating into a simple philosophy on Vallejo’s part. He doesn’t admit that amidst such Dante-like imagery, Vallejo’s desire is not to oversimplify, but rather suggest that Colombia’s Catholic culture is another agency of stasis in the face of modernity.

\textsuperscript{117} Vallejo, 29.
Restrepo-Gautier begins his piece by introducing Vallejo’s Medellín as the physical representation of an urban space of chaos. And he’s right, throughout the book, and Restrepo-Gautier does not hesitate to cite these passages. Vallejo refers to Medellín in such terms like:

El gran vertedero de desagües.\textsuperscript{118}

The big dump.

Fernando mentions earlier in the novel that, at the entrance to a city dump was posted a sign that reads:

Se prohíbe arrojar cadáveres.\textsuperscript{119}

Dumping bodies prohibited.

Vallejo’s message is poignant. Besides the multitude of dead bodies that necessitated the erection of a sign, the act of throwing a dead body in with garbage illustrates a complete degradation of value for human life in Medellín. How can there be progress, if human life is valued as highly as the rotten leftovers from dinner?

Any mention of modernity is overshadowed by the detrimental effects the narrator sees in it. Restrepo-Gautier’s point is well taken. Early in the novel Fernando laments the overwhelming presence of television and radio. His complaint is not in defiance of modernity though, but rather that the only news the television provides is of more deaths, or the winners of soccer matches. The presence of vehicles doesn’t speak to the facility of mobility but rather:

\textsuperscript{118} Vallejo, 36.
\textsuperscript{119} Vallejo, 46.
That the motorcycle marks the status of sicarios, and the jeep a drug dealer or Mafioso, unclean rabble.

The modernity that the presence of vehicles illustrates here is one that has been incorporated into the world of drug trafficking to denote the stratification within its hierarchy. Vallejo’s choice to add *unclean rabble* at the end of the sentence might refer to the corruption of modernity by the drug trade, or of the impurity of the actors themselves.

Restrepo-Gautier, however, suggests that this consideration of the space of the city as dirty as the violence that occupies it actually oversimplifies the urban landscape. He writes:

> Este mapa de imágenes violentas que elimina la heterogeneidad de la capital antioqueña constituye una reducción y una simplificación de la complejidad urbana medellinense que convierte la ciudad imaginada por Vallejo en paradigma de la modernidad híbrida latinoamericana.  

This map of violent images that eliminates the heterogeneity of the capital antioque constitutes a reduction and simplification of the urban complexity of Medellín that converts this imagined city of Vallejo’s into a paradigm of the hybridity of Latin American modernity.

Restrepo-Gautier claims that Vallejo robs the city of its heterogeneity, and effectively simplifies the city into nothing more than an area filled with murderous narcotics.

---

120 Vallejo, 96.
121 Restrepo-Gautier, 96.
traffickers. Restrepo-Gautier offers a motive behind Vallejo’s fictionalization of the city:

Vallejo…crea una ciudad imaginaria que representa la modernidad híbrida en decadencia que, al contrario de producir los beneficios que propone, engendra desigualdad, injusticia, y violencia.¹²²

Vallejo creates an imaginary city that represents the hybrid modernity as decadence, which, instead of producing benefits that it claims it will bring, engenders inequality, injustice, and violence.

It’s clear that Restrepo-Gautier focuses heavily on Vallejo’s grotesque portrayal of Medellín as the authorial criticism of a failed type of modernization. However, he fails to define exactly what his definition of hybrid is. Restrepo-Gautier goes on and uses his deciphered vision of Medellín as an oversimplified and grotesque caricature of failed modernization to prove his categorization of the novel as Gothic, that is, based on the esthetic of terror, and one that plays on the intercourse between chaos and the sublime. Restrepo-Gautier’s analysis of Medellín as embodying both the sublime and chaos is interesting for our purposes not on its own merit, but by the effect it has on the citizens living in such a fictitious city as well as the reader.

Restrepo-Gautier takes Vallejo’s city of terror, and in a bold move, suggests that chaos exists inherently with the sublime. It is this, he claims, that holds the consciousness of those participating in the urban space in awe and shock. Restrepo-Gautier utilizes the work of conservative philosopher Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, to

¹²² Restrepo-Gautier, 97.
illustrate the interplay between chaos and the sublime in Vallejo’s novel. According to Burke, that which operates to produce terror, pain, fear, is also a source of the sublime. Restrepo-Gautier combines this theory of the sublime with Kant’s delineation of the state of the sublime as one which effectually results from the consciousness being faced with, but unable to decipher that which is infinite. This philosophical conceptualization of such a state of being is linked closely with Romanticism, and in addition to European literature, is common in Hispanic literature. According to Retrepo-Gautier:

Esta concepción terrorífica influye en la estética del paisaje a partir del Romanticismo, ... en el mundo hispano donde la sublime no llegó a articularse en tratados teóricos, concibiéndose en la práctica literaria como una mezcla de lo religioso y lo natural.

This conception influences terrifying landscape aesthetics of Romanticism, ... as well as in the Hispanic world where the sublime was never articulated in theoretical treatises, but conceived in literary practice as a mixture of the religious and natural.

It’s important to understand that for Restrepo-Gautier’s argument to function, we must allow for his application of western philosophers and European criticism to Hispanic writing, and through a colonized identity, Latin American writing. The questioning of his linkage is not as productive for our purposes as is examining the linkage he establishes through this dialectic of chaos and the sublime, with the city as a type of constructed fiction, as well as the interplay between the sublime and shock. This motif of shock is consistent throughout Vallejo’s novel, and

123 Ibid.
Restrepo-Gautier presents a unique, although less optimistic analysis of the shock that results from Vallejo’s writing.

The Symbolic City: Medellín as Vallejo’s Versailles

For most of the 17th century in France, Louis XIV, the Sun King, reigned supreme over his people. He is the king credited with the famous line “I am the state”\textsuperscript{124}, and is notorious for his dedication to all things decadent and glamorous. But perhaps the most poignant legacy Louis XIV left was his complete transformation of the French Court from one of action to one of symbolism. It was his desire to control every shred of power in his domain that lead him to transfer the power from creating laws and dealing with policy to acts like watching the King rise in the morning, bringing him his pitcher of water, and undressing him at night. Nobles vied not for lands to cultivate, but for the attention of the King. He literally moved the court away from Paris, to Versailles. He chose the architecture to surround him, the environment, and the people. Even though it very much was a reality in its existence, Louis the XIV had sole control over the conception of his court, and everyone else saw it as he did. Yet nothing was what it seemed.

What Restrepo-Gautier misses in his critique is of Vallejo’s Medellín is that neither the author nor the narrator ever promised an empirically honest construction of the city. Vallejo’s Medellín is like Louis XIV’s Versailles in that it is represented

\textsuperscript{124} Louis XIV and Domestic Policy, History Learning Site, http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/louis_xiv_and_domestic_policy.htm (December 2012).
physically how Vallejo sees it symbolically. The urban space is one that exists in the paradox of being incredibly tangible and physical, but nevertheless a space where the symbolism overrides physical realities. And while Restrepo-Gautier insists that:

La novela...construye la imagen de Medellín ficticio que ha sufrido cambios apocalípticos.\(^{125}\)

The novel ... builds a fictional image of Medellin that has suffered apocalyptic changes.

Restrepo-Gautier’s analysis of Vallejo’s imagined city is intriguing in his qualification of the terror of the city through the narrator’s memory. Restrepo-Gautier offers his opinion of the validity of Medellín’s characterization through characterizing Fernando’s memories past and present as faulty. However, he fails to consider the urban space as one that is imagined and perceived just as much as it is built. Perhaps it was Vallejo’s intent to question the reliability and role of memory and its relationship with opinion in the construction of a city. Perhaps, in creating a city that is both undeniably Medellín, yet not quite Medellín Vallejo proves that there is not a way to truthfully describe a city, but rather that places are simply representations of what we see.

Even amidst Restrepo-Gautier’s criticism of Vallejo’s portrayal of Medellín, the discourse that Vallejo creates is one that examines modernity not just as a historical period, but also as an experience of a collective memory. The modernity that he observes in Medellín is an unfinished one that is both plagued by violence, and the motor behind the perpetuation of violence. Vallejo’s utilization of the

---

\(^{125}\) Restrepo-Gautier, 98.
comuna as the building block and main setting of his city forces the reader to understand this modernity the way Vallejo sees it; not from the top of the skyscrapers in Medellín, but from the cracks where those that modernity left behind fell through.
**Portrait of a Sicario: Past and Present**

I caught up with a friend recently who spent his spring break vacationing in Mexico. Having never traveled to Mexico, I asked this friend about his impressions of the country. Although we both recognized that his experience at a beachside resort was not wholly indicative of the country itself, what he did feel confident in mentioning was his experience in the airport. Airports have always fascinated me as indicators of what a certain place’s society prides itself on. For example, Logan International Airport in Boston, Massachusetts, sells Boston’s image as both a sports fan’s paradise, and a history buff’s dream destination. Stores that are not chock full of Patriots, Celtics, and Bruins paraphernalia instead offer history books, photos, and maps of Colonial Boston, identifying “beantown” as the birthplace of the American Revolution, the home of the Boston Tea Party, the city with one of the richest histories and most pertinent role in the formation of the United States of America. It is through these products that Boston projects its identity to the rest of the world that passes through its airport.

The airport in Mexico City that my friend visited though, struck him as unsettling. “Everywhere I looked, in every kiosk there were books about sicarios and drug culture. There was one book that documented the confessions of a hitman\(^{126}\), there were t-shirts boasting images of marijuana leaves, there was Pablo Escobar

\(^{126}\) My friend was likely was introduced to *El Sicario: Confessions of a Cartel Hit Man*, by Charles Bowdon and Molly Molloy, a book that came out in early 2011 and quickly gained popularity in both Mexico and the U.S. as a tell-all testimony of a Mexican Chihuahuan State policeman, who also served as a sicarios for the Juarez cartel.
paraphernalia, it was crazy.” Even though my friend’s experience occurred in an airport in Mexico rather than Medellín, the glamorization of sicarios transcends Mexico’s boundaries, and occurs in Colombia, too.

In 2010, prolific British journalist and author Loan Grillo sat down in Medellín with a modern day sicario. Grillo, who has covered Latin American news since 2001, specifically focusing on narcotics and insurgency, was working on a book about the drug trade in Latin America when he interviewed 26-year-old Gustavo, who works in Medellín, Colombia, as a paid assassin. Grillo has spent hours upon hours walking through prisons, slum neighborhoods, and even into the mountains in countries across Latin America to talk to the men who carry out the drug trade that the United States so very zealously condemns but so very zealously perpetuates at the same time. It’s not often, Grillo implicates in the article, that an active sicario is willing to sit down and talk with a journalist, both for security reasons, and in order to continue “honouring the cartels’ code of silence and avoiding giving away secrets about their trafficking organisations.”

Grillo opens the article as if he’s writing a profile of a friendly, next-door neighbor. And in a lot of ways, he is. He’s writing the profile of a man who likes designer clothes, Japanese motorbikes, and the Premier Soccer League. It’s not until after the reader connects with Gustavo over their mutual love of Salsa dancing,

---

127 Frank Fineis, interview, March 26, 2013.
129 Ibid.
that Grillo adds offhandedly “For when Gustavo isn’t dancing to salsa music – or politely offering his guests drinks – he is a paid assassin for one of Colombia’s most notorious cocaine traffickers.”¹³⁰ This kernel of information, placed so cozily after characteristics that denote a cultured man, certainly comes as a shock to the reader of this article, which appeared in the English newspaper The Telegraph. Grillo’s use of juxtaposition between the normative and criminal serves as catalyst for conflict within the reader, who, in addition to empathizing with Gustavo, also finds him repulsive and terrifying. How might someone so similar to me, the reader must think, hold such terrible ability to kill? Perhaps this question is part of what makes the sicario as a character so seductive, slightly enigmatic, and almost mythological. Certainly, and Grillo’s portrait is just one example of this, the media has taken notice and exacerbated the glamorization of the sicarios. The glamorization of sicario culture through music videos, clothing, and popular movies has elevated the status of the sicario from paid assassin to folklore, myth even, and an integral part of a collective history that doesn’t only pertain to Medellín and Colombia, but other parts of Latin America.

Grillo’s portrayal of the sicarios describes the profession as one that requires someone with a set of almost static characteristics. The sicario is poor, he became a sicario as a young boy, and his youth inevitably lead him into contact with, and even

¹³⁰ Ibid.
participation in gangs. Even the background information Vallejo provides about the sicarios in his novel falls into line with this archetype:

¿Y los hombres? Los hombres por lo general no, aquí los sicarios son niños o muchachitos, de doce, quince, diecisiete años, como Alexis…

And men? Generally no, here sicarios are little boys, of twelve, fifteen, or seventeen years, like Alexis…

Towards the end of the novel, after Alexis dies, Fernando visits his home in the comunas. His mother opens the door:

…un niño en los brazos…Otros dos niños de pocos años se arrastraban, semidesnudos, por esta vida y el piso de tierra…Me contó que su actual esposo, el padre de estos niños la había abandonado; y que al otro, el padre de Alexis, también lo habían matado.

…a baby in her arms…Two other young children crawled, half-naked, through this life and the earthen floor…She told me that her actual husband, the father of these children, had abandoned her; and that the other, Alexis’ father, had also been killed.

Alexis’ narrative pertains to him just as much as it does every sicario. His story represents both the exceptional, as well as the common. He is defined by a kind of anonymity, as well as by the brutally visible and physical crimes he commits.

The anonymity under which the sicarios function can be traced back through the etymology of the term itself. In fact, the sicario’s narrative has its own place in

131 Dennis Rogers writes in his article “Youth Gangs and Violence in Latin America and the Carribbean: A literature Survey”, published by the World Bank as part of a series of papers known as the Urban Peace Program Series that the “First cartel connected youth gangs emerged at the end of the 1970s.”
132 Vallejo, 7.
133 Vallejo, 91.
both historical and religious context. In the few decades before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., a radical group of Jewish zealots seeking to expel the Romans from Judea began concealing daggers under their cloaks and stealthily stabbing men in public assemblies, or during pilgrimages. In fact, the sicarii’s name was bequeathed upon them in reference to those small daggers they used, which were called sicæ, and in representation of their murderous natures. Or at least, that’s how the sicarii are too often generalized.

Perhaps the foremost scholar of the sicarii is Mark Andrew Brighton, whose book *The Sicarii in Josephus’s Judean War: Rhetorical Analysis and Historical Observations*, according to a recent review, provides a “singular investigation into the stylistic, literary, and historical aspects of the sicarii” and “fills a noticeable lacuna.” Brighton’s book examines the way in which the sicarii are characterized in Josephus’s work *The Judean War*. Early in the book, Brighton quotes Josephus as mentioning the:

Sicarii, murdering people in the middle of the city in broad daylight. Especially during festivals they would mix with the crowd, hiding small daggers in their garments, and stab their opponent. Then when they fell dead, their murderers became part of those who cried out in indignation.  

134 The Britannica EncyclopediA Academic Edition, jewishencyclopedia.com, terrorism.about.com, and most general history websites classify sicarii as zealots, or terrorists robbing them, according to Brighton, of their complexity.
136 Ibid.
It’s difficult not to notice the similarities between this description and the descriptions of modern day sicarios, as well as the portrait Vallejo offers. In *La Virgen de los Sicarios*, Fernando realizes that after Wílmar kills a man:

\[
\text{se perdía por entre el gentío.}^{138}
\]

He got lost in the crowd.

Today though, instead of escaping into the anonymity of the crowd on foot, sicarios are known by their utilization of guns to kill, and of motorcycles to aid speedy getaways. Vallejo’s narrator frequently mentions motorbikes, and, when Alexis asked for one, explains:

\[
\text{Tampoco le compré la moto. ¿Me pueden ver a mí, con esta dignidad, con estos años, abrazado a él de <<parrillero>> en una moto envenenada, todos ventiados?}^{139}
\]

Nor did I buy him the bike. Could you see me, with this dignity, at this age, hugging him, the biker on a poisonous motorcycle, both fleeing?

Fernando’s description of the motorbike as venomous illustrates just how inextricable motorcycles and violence are for Fernando. And it’s true, that the image of the archetypal sicario on his motorbike has become so entrenched in Latin American consciousness that on a recent study abroad trip to Costa Rica, I was informed that I should not speak to any boy on a motorcycle because the likelihood that he’s involved in some criminal activity is high. Of course, this warning was based solely on a stereotype that my host mother ascribed to, but the fact of the matter

---

138 Vallejo, 104.
139 Vallejo, 51.
is that the idea has transcended Colombia, and rooted in other cultures and countries in Latin America.

But from where does the particular use of the motorbike come? Most sources point to recently deceased Griselda Blanco, commonly referred to as the “Cocaine Godmother of Colombia”\(^{140}\) for the integration of motorcycles into the drug trade, specifically in Medellín and Colombia. The Kingpin of the Cocaine drug trade between Colombia and Miami in the 1980s, Blanco, served over a decade of her life in federal prison, has been accused of being the mastermind behind thousands of deaths, and personally ordered at least 40 hits between Miami and Colombia. In fact Daily News reported that, “At the height of her empire, some 3,400 pounds of coke was coming into the U.S. every month.”\(^{141}\) While articles surrounding the announcement of Blanco’s death attribute the origination of motorcycle use to Blanco, they never cite sources, and they never give a concrete attribution, again adding a lore-like quality to the character of the sicarios. Most articles simply offer a single line that reads something like “It was the sort of death many had predicted for her: Blanco has been credited with inventing the idea of the motorcycle assassin who rode by victims and sprayed them with bullets.”\(^{142}\)


\(^{142}\) Ibid.
While Brighton’s initial description of the sicarii’s activities strikes a resemblance through the centuries and across oceans to those of the modern sicarios in Latin American culture and in Vallejo’s novel, his continued exploration into the history of the sicarii only reiterates this connection. Brighton explains:

Other than Jonathan, Josephus does not stipulate the identity of the sicarii’s victims. However, the setting (the festivals in Jerusalem) and the immediate context in which Jewish brigand chiefs, bandits, and false prophets bring destruction on their own people) leads to the natural conclusion that the sicarii murdered their own people.\(^{143}\)

By their own people, Brighton means fellow Jews. This characteristic echoes in Mary Roldán’s analysis of violence in Colombia, when she notes:

There seemed to be no Latin American precedent where citizens were killing each other.\(^{144}\)

Vallejo too, makes clear the horror of countrymen killing fellow countrymen throughout the novel. Few scenes are so brutally poignant as the one in which Fernando realizes that his first love, Alexis, had been murdered by his current love, Wilmar:

Entonces me hizo el reproche, que por qué andaba con él que mató a Alexis…Por unos segundos se me detuvo el corazón.\(^{145}\)

Therefore he reproached me, about why I was walking with the boy who killed Alexis…For a few seconds my heart stopped.

\(^{143}\) Brighton, 57.
\(^{144}\) Roldán, 12.
\(^{145}\) Vallejo, 118.
In Caravaggio-like fashion, Vallejo constructs a narrative that takes out any space that might have existed between the reader and the violence. Understanding that Alexis and Wilmar kill other Colombians is awful and sad. But when the reader, with the ability to relate to both the murderer and the murdered because of their centrality as fleshed out characters, is forced face to face with Fernando’s grief, the acts of violence become tragedy.

Until this point in Brighton’s book, his characterization of the sicarii as enigmatic, stealthy assassins who prey on their own countrymen parallels the modern-day image of the Colombian sicarios projected by the media and fleshed out in Vallejo’s narrative. However, Brighton explains through his analysis of Josephus’ writing that the sicarii were not just a band of criminals, but instead much more complex. In his analysis of Josephus’ recollection of the battle at Masada, Brighton makes a distinguishing remark. The context follows thus; the Romans march towards the desert fortress at Masada to squash the sicarii, all Jews in open rebellion against Roman rule. The sicarii, during the Roman siege, realizing their impending doom, proceeded to commit voluntary suicide, aiding each other in their efforts, before the Romans could reach them.

There is an obvious thread here, Brighton argues:

...that those who made war on their own people self-destructed.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{146} Brighton, 123.
Vallejo dialogues with this sentiment frequently in La Virgen de los Sicarios, often expressing through Fernando’s dialogue thoughts similar to:

"Treinta y tres millones de colombianos no caben en toda la vastedad de los infiernos. Hay que dejar un espacio prudente entre dos de ellos para que no se maten."\(^{147}\)

Thirty three million Colombians won’t fit in all of the vastness of the fires of hell. It would be prudent to leave a space between them so they won’t kill each other.

Fernando’s assumption that Colombia is condemned to the fires of hell is only underscored here by his worry that even in punishment, Colombians will continue their ingrained fratricidal tendencies. While Brighton discusses the destruction of the sicarii at Masada as the destruction of the sicarii’s earthly bodies, the destruction Fernando refers to transcends earthly limits and deals with the desecration of the Colombian’s souls. The sentiment rings clearly through Vallejo’s sarcastic humor that the horrific violence committed by Colombians condemned them, in addition to the loss of their human lives, to the loss of a peaceful afterlife as well.

But notice Brighton’s mention that the sicarii killed themselves voluntarily. What he suggests in his comment that these voluntary deaths were “necessitated by god”\(^{148}\) awards the sicarios with a certain teleological purpose. Brighton concludes, then, “Masada is a story about the final recognition of and submission to divine retribution.”\(^{149}\) This side of the sicarii reflects much differently than the original

\(^{147}\) Vallejo, 53.  
\(^{148}\) Brighton, 124.  
\(^{149}\) Brighton, 127.
representation of them as purely bandits and murderers. The sicarii are awarded here a role that has in some way been awarded by God. Although their function is served in their deaths, the sicarii embody, Brighton illustrates, a divine innocence and purity.

It is this fascinating nuance that Vallejo seems to highlight in his characterization of Alexis and Wílmar in his novel. By the middle of the novel, the reader is informed by Fernando that Alexis’ nickname is Angel Exterminador, which translates to the Angel of Extermination. Besides Vallejo’s decision by this nickname to place the sicarios in a religious discourse, throughout the novel Fernando refers to Alexis in cherubic terms, highlighting both a sense of innocence and purity in Alexis. One of Fernando’s first interactions with Alexis yielded this observation:

Pero si Alexis tenía la pureza en los ojos tenía dañado el corazón.\footnote{Vallejo, 7.}

But if Alexis had purity in his eyes, he had hurt in his heart.

One of the first glimpses of the sicario the reader is provided with does not situate him as the murderer, but rather as a pure victim. At the beginning of the novel, Fernando illustrates that even upon entering the world, the sicarios are victim to an existence that they are taught, in their naming, they should desire escape from. Their innocence is betrayed by their names:

Alexis, ajá, así lo puso su mamá. Con eso de que les dio a los pobres por ponerles a los hijos nombres de ricos, extravagantes, extranjeros: Tayson Alexander, por ejemplo, o Fáber, o Eder o

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Vallejo, 7.}
Wilfer o Rommel o Yeison o que sé yo. No sé de dónde los sacan o cómo los inventan. Es lo único que les pueden dar para arrancar en esta miseria vida a sus niños, un vano, necio nombre extranjero o inventado, ridículo, de relumbrón.\footnote{Ibid}

Alexis, aha, so named by your mom. With that they gave the poor children rich, extravagant, foreign names: Tayson Alexander, for example, or Faber, or Eder or Wilfer or Rommel or Yeison or whatnot. I do not know from where they draw them or how they invent them. That's all they can give for this miserable start in life for their children, a vain, foolish foreign or invented, ridiculous, flashy name.

This quote shows that the sicarios are victims with their first breath, even their mothers give them names that are too flashy for the world they live in.

Vallejo doesn’t idealize Alexis’ purity though, a characteristic easily disputable in the documentation of Alexis’ various murders. But Vallejo positions the sicarios, like Brighton’s sicarii, in dialogue with a certain type of retribution. Fernando rants:

\begin{quote}
Mi niño era el enviado de Satanás que había venido a poner orden en este mundo con el que Dios no puede. A Dios, como al doctor Frankenstein su monstruo, el hombre se le fue de las manos.\footnote{Vallejo, 105.}
\end{quote}

My boy was sent by the devil to put order in this world that God could not. God, like Doctor Frankenstein’s monster, was from whose hands man came.

In unpacking this quote, one cannot help but notice the conflation of good and evil. Though God created mankind, Fernando seems to suggest that Alexis’ actions are mediated not by his own hand, but by Gods decision to create them, his subsequent inability to provide order, and the devil’s decision to intervene. This purity or
innocence that arrives from the sicario’s incorporation into a teleological purpose is
complex in Fernando’s understanding that the boys provide order where God cannot.
Was it God’s intention to let mankind stray? Are the sicarios in someway completing
God’s duty? If it was Vallejo’s intention to suggest this, then he certainly seems to be
working with Brighton’s concept of divine retribution. Although Vallejo’s portrayal
differs from Brighton’s by alluding to a satanic influence, the effect is the same: there
is the suggestion that sicarios are awarded a reprieve from responsibility for their
actions because of their role in a larger teleological blueprint.

While it’s difficult to answer conclusively whether Vallejo does indeed draw
parallels between Brighton’s understanding of the sicariis deaths with the intent of
implying a type of divine retribution for the whole of Colombia, it seems clear that
their innocence point towards a larger point that Vallejo attempts to draw, that after
all, these children are not Griselda Blanco’s “cocaine cowboys.”¹¹⁵⁴ And while writers
and scholars like Vargas Llosa consider them:

Además de formar parte de la vida social y política de
Colombia, los sicarios constituyen también, como los
cowboys del Oeste norteamericano o los samuráis japoneses,
una mitología fraguada por la literatura, el cine, la música, el
periodismo y la fantasía popular, de modo que, cuando se
habla de ellos, conviene advertir que se pisa ese delicioso y
resbaladizo territorio, el preferido de los novelistas, donde se
confunden ficción y realidad.¹¹⁵⁵

Besides being a part of social life and politics of Colombia,
the sicarios are, like the cowboys of the west in North
America, or the Japanese samurai, a forged mythology in

¹¹⁵⁴ See footnote 137.
¹¹⁵⁵ Aaron J. Lorenz, “Rosario's Fugitive Voice: Deciphering
Rosario Tijeras's Ironic Challenge to the Notion of Literatura Sicaresca”, Symposium: A
literature, film, music, journalism, and are so popular that, when we talk about them, it should be noted that we’re treading on that delicious and slippery slope… that blurs fiction and reality.

Vallejo seems to depart from Vargas Llosas’ classification of the sicario as a character part fiction and part reality in his effort to dialogue with the sicarii, and place the sicarios in a larger, more complex historical discourse. Out of his dialogue with the etymology, history, and religious tradition of the sicarios, Vallejo communicates his conviction that the sicario profession isn’t one to be glamorized or celebrated. They’re just children. And, perhaps just like the sicarii, Vallejo is implying that the sicarios give up their lives to escape the violence that runs amok on the ground in Colombia.
Conclusion

For a long time, I was jaded about receiving partial truths from teachers in school. As in the case of my learning about lines, I was so hungry for the next piece of the puzzle that I often failed to allow myself to really understand and explore the information at hand. It seems that as soon as I discovered that lines could in fact, begin and end, I took this new piece of information in the stead of the first. It follows suit that I always thought of academic pursuit not only linearly, but also in stark beginnings and endings. Answers were the only way to interact with questions. I failed to see knowledge as infinite, without beginning or end, which even in pursuing it a student might not have the mental capacity to comprehend.

But throughout my college career, and particularly with regard to this project, I have found that it is the discourse and the conversations that lead to more questions that are valuable, rather than strict answers. Because after all so many questions should lead to more than one answer. So how does one tell a story? And where in that story is the ethereal thread that deems it appropriate to classify as history? These questions are what make Fernando Vallejo’s novel *La Virgen do los Sicarios* important as a complex piece of work. Just like the fact that no element in Vallejo’s work exists without layers, or is exactly as it seems, the work itself exists as novel, as historical record, as testimony, and as a work of historiography unto itself. He offers few concrete answers, but evokes rich discourses and heavy questions. He challenges what we know and what we think we know. He participates in history itself by both
contributing to the written record while challenging the way history is not only written and who gets written about, but how it is remembered in the first place. While *La Virgen de los Sicarios* is just one set of bound pages, Vallejo’s willingness to ask questions for the sake of discourse rather than answers is what truly contribute to our understanding of history and how to encounter it.

He builds a Medellín that rises solidly from his pages, cracked concrete, sewer systems, dumps and churches; part memory, part symbolism, but all a type of truth. He manipulates language in his own writing and in the speech of his characters to lay bare its paradoxical and concurrent fallibility and integrality in approaching another’s culture, experience and ideology.

Vallejo’s narrator explores the crevices and uncertainty of individual and collective memory. In fearlessly questioning the validity of the intellectual’s role, he confirms that bias is inextricable from a person’s experiences. But he also shows how that bias is useful and even necessary in understanding perspective. He utilizes Fernando’s storytelling and memory to encourage the reader to ask the question, what does a true fact consist of? He does not imply the absence of an essential truth, but rather that there are many, and it is important not to let one cloud the views of the rest. Not to let one become privileged in the annals of time over the rest. And at the risk of his own reputation, he used Fernando to illustrate the novel’s place in history by revealing just how much reality and fiction inform each other. Vallejo vacillates back and forth in the distance he allows Fernando to maintain between himself and the story he tells, pondering all the while the blurred lines between testimony and scholarship, and constantly keeping pertinent the question of authority.
He reserves center stage for the actor in history who is often relegated to the shadows stage left. He doesn’t consign the sicarios to the same glossed and oversimplified archetype that popular culture and media does, but dialogues with the etymology of the word to dig towards a deeper understanding of the Sicarios in both historical and religious discourse.

But perhaps most importantly, Vallejo reveals that underneath this concept of Colombia’s violence that is so often referred to in history books, periodicals and articles, there are people. People, he shows, are who are responsible for the violence and the perpetuation of violence. And people have the power to stop it, to walk out from under its shadow. In some regards, Vallejo’s choice to neglect mentioning Escobar’s name, a name that has come to symbolize Colombian violence, rejects the power violence has over the Colombian people and history, and proves the agency is in the hands of Colombians. Vallejo’s emphasis on the Colombian society’s agency is the tenet of his historiography, one that explains, perhaps, why I am often left with questions in response to my own questions about history.

History is an experience. I asked various professors of mine from differing disciplines what their concepts of history are. And while all of my professors answered differently, they were all active answers. As Lisa Cohen so eloquently writes in her recent book *All We Know: Three Lives*, “…history is lived, written, and imagined.”

way we can be reborn.” This I think, is what Vallejo captures, the struggle.

History, he seems to conclude, does not flow easily and fluidly alongside the passing of time. History gets stuck, moves backwards, skips forward again, and expands sideways in our imaginations. All of this, Vallejo shows, is because history is our creation, our decision, and our own identity. The beauty in this? Thinking, questioning, and writing, we have the power to tell our own truths and our own history.

\[157\] Professor Giulio Gallarotti, email, April 4, 2013.
Bibliography


Gallarotti, Giulio. Email, April 4, 2013.


Lorenz, Aaron J. “Rosario's Fugitive Voice: Deciphering Rosario Tijeras's Ironic


