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Narco-trafficking and *Camba* Identity in Homero Carvalho Oliva's *La conspiración de los viejos*

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Abstract

This article examines the novel's use of the *camba* identity and the vestiges of narco-violence, embodied by a contract killer and the memory of a local drug baron, Roberto Suárez Gómez, to critique both the contemporary political tensions arising between the Eastern departments of Bolivia and the MAS administration, as well as the lack of collective dialogue regarding the region's involvement in the history of the Bolivian drug trade.

Keywords
Bolivian identity, Bolivian literature, Camba identity, collective memory, crime fiction, drug trafficking, Evo Morales, Homero Carvalho Oliva, Narcofiction

Resumen

El artículo examina el uso que hace la novela de la identidad camba y los vestigios de la narcoviolencia, encarnada por un asesino a sueldo y la memoria de un narcotraficante local, Roberto Suárez Gómez, para criticar las tensiones

políticas contemporáneas que surgen entre los departamentos orientales de Bolivia y el gobierno del MAS, así como la falta de diálogo colectivo sobre la participación de la región en la historia del narcotráfico boliviano.

Palabras clave
Crimen-ficción, Evo Morales, Homero Carvalho Oliva, identidad boliviana, identidad camba, literatura boliviana, memoria colectiva, narcoficción, tráfico de drogas

During a family vacation in 1993, Bolivian writer Edmundo Paz Soldán was unexpectedly invited to the home of convicted drug kingpin Roberto Suárez Gómez. Though under house arrest at the time of their encounter, Suárez was known as one of the key players in the development and expansion of the cocaine trade in Bolivia throughout the 1970s and 1980s, earning him the infamous title "Rey de la Cocaína." The reason for this encounter was simple: Suárez wanted Paz Soldán to review his autobiographical manuscript and offer an honest assessment of its literary merit.[1] Paz Soldán accepted the tasks and conditions set forth by Suárez, then proceeded to spend the next few weeks reviewing the document. Upon completing his reading, Paz Soldán was struck by what little detail the manuscript offered of the element that most defined public perception of Suárez: his involvement in the drug trade. When asked for his assessment of the work, Paz Soldán frankly stated that though Suárez's self-depiction of his success as an entrepreneur and rancher was interesting, any serious interest on the part of an editor would come from the desire to release a detailed personal account of Suárez's life in illicit business and politics. The two cordially parted ways, and even after Suarez's death in 2000, the manuscript has remained unpublished.[2]

Paz Soldán's verdict on the manuscript emphasizes the type of popular intrigue that exists around the myth of Roberto Suárez Gómez. In 1981, he was introduced to a prime-time North American audience when he was personally

[1] Paz Soldán offers a more detailed account of his encounter with Suárez in a chronicle he published in the March 2010 edition of *Vanity Fair - España*, also available on his personal blog: https://www.elboomeran.com/edmundo-paz-soldan/el-rey-de-la-coca-y-yo/

[2] To date, the only such biography to have been published about Roberto Suárez Gómez came in 2012 by his former wife, Ayda Levy. The book is entitled *El Rey de la Cocaína: Mi vida con Roberto Suárez Gómez y el nacimiento del primer narcoestado.*

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proclaimed by Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* to be one of the most notorious drug traffickers of the time.[3] Seven years later, Suárez Gómez was featured and interviewed in a segment of *48 Hours* with Dan Rather. He also served as the inspiration for the Bolivian drug baron in Oliver Stone's 1983 epic film, *Scarface.* These are just a few of the instances that solidified Suárez Gómez's status as a key player in the international drug trade of the 1980s, both in popular cultural imaginary and in international law enforcement circles. His ties to Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel only added to this folklore. Consequently, one would expect the autobiography of the "Rey de la Cocaína" to focus heavily on his illicit activities, in all their gritty details.

Unlike the well-known rags-to-riches story of traffickers such as Pablo Escobar, Roberto Suárez Gómez's biography is considerably tame in comparison, beginning at the heart of Bolivia's traditional oligarchy, the Beni Department. As one of the wealthiest families in the department over various generations, dating back to the founding of the Republic, the Suárez lineage was responsible for some of the earliest economic exploration and development projects in the region, profiting on the early international demand for rubber (Levy 19-20). Suárez Gómez was born into the *camba* ruling class and never deviated from this status.[4] He built upon his family's wealth through agricultural entrepreneurship and investment in cattle. In his article, "Criminal Entrepreneurs as Pioneers, Intermediaries, and Arbitrageurs in Borderland Economies," Eric Dante Gutierrez describes the tremendous economic importance of Suárez Gómez's wealth in the region, stating that "Roberto emerged as an archetypal *pioneer* for capital—he was a criminal entrepreneur who was also an informal but effective source of credit, employment and investments in territories that had been historically isolated from market networks, had little state presence, and governed differently" (8). The amount of money Suárez Gómez was able to circulate throughout the formal and informal economies in Bolivia, with emphasis on the eastern region, established him as one of the more important capitalists in the country in the

[3] This episode is referenced in Mike Levine's 1993 *The Big White Lie: The Deep Cover Operation that Exposed the CIA Sabotage of the Drug War.*

[4] Generally, the contemporary use of the term *camba* refers to someone from the western regions of Bolivia, primarily people from the departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando. However, the term also carries social, political, racial, and cultural significance with regard to a regional identity in opposition to Indigenous Andean identities found throughout the western regions of the country. The struggles for social and political identity associated with the term will be discussed later in this article.

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last one hundred years. In this sense, he is the model *beniano*[5] male: wealthy, landowning, politically well connected, white, and paternalistically benevolent. Even when he was openly involved in the cocaine trade, tales of Suárez Gómez's charity abounded—payment of school fees for entire provinces, and covering university tuition for students studying abroad—though this benevolence was often overshadowed by accounts of his illicit activities, including his infamous role in the Cocaine Coup (Levy 51).[6] Suárez Gómez is arguably one of the most important historical figures in the story of cocaine in Latin America, yet outside of *Scarface* he has been absent in the popular narrative of the Bolivian drug trade.

The story of the Bolivian drug trade is one of many settings, with differing sites carrying equally complex ethnic and economic conditions. Regional and racial differences have garnered increased attention from authors portraying the fictional narrative of the trade, in particular the "boom" years—the decade of the 1980s—and highlight the most emblematic moments in Bolivia's narco-history. Internationally, this same boom provided inspiration for a plethora of cultural production, specifically crime fiction, with Colombian authors acting as trailblazers in establishing a new, popular subgenre to accurately represent many of these realities. In Medellín, Colombia, urban violence escalated in the mid-1980s and 1990s, with confrontations occurring between government, paramilitary, and narco forces, and *sicarios* were hired by the cartel bosses to act as their agents of violence. The relationship between the cartels and the *sicarios*, most notably Pablo Escobar in Medellín, marks an important change in the history of narco-trafficking. Through this relationship, public attention shifted to the *sicario* as the source of the nation's harshest narco-related violence.

In response, the *sicaresca* novel emerged as a new style of cultural representation to portray this emerging level of urban violence confronting Colombian society.[7] This subgenre of crime fiction also encompassed various

[5] The term *beniano* refers to someone from the department of Beni.

[6] In July 1980, General Luis García Meza Tejada orchestrated one of the boldest government takeovers in the Americas by colluding with Bolivia's most powerful drug dealers and military officials in a violent bid for power. The Cocaine Coup, as it was later denominated, only lasted a year, but in that short time the administration eliminated all political opposition and, through active participation, legitimized the illicit business of cocaine trafficking. By financing the coup, the nation's largest drug traffickers, including Roberto Suárez Gómez, attained tremendous power and political influence.

[7] The word *sicaresca* is a play on the words *sicario* and *picaresca*. The *picaresca* is the classic literary genre of the Spanish Golden Age, depicting the lives of lower-class rogues.

forms of artistic production—literature, film, plastic arts—that portrayed the language and realities of this segment of the illegal drug trade, entering the comunas to show how these agents acted as both victims of violence and purveyors of a form of urban violence (Polit Dueñas 116). This became the dominant social narrative consumed by an eager public looking to use popular culture to help make sense of the violence and narco-trafficking surrounding them. Under this classification, novels portraying the lives of the *sicarios* incorporated the spoken language of the comunas, relaying a heightened sensibility to the alternate lived experience of the drug trade in these marginal sectors of the city, and placed the *sicario* as the protagonist of his—or her—own tale, as opposed to only a secondary character. In addition to Franco Ramos's *Rosario Tijeras* (1999), notable works include Mario Bahamón Dussán's *El sicario* (1990), Víctor Gaviria's film *Rodrigo D. No futuro* (1989), Alonso Salazar's nonfiction account *No nacimos pa' semilla* (1990), and Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994). The publication and distribution of these works began to resonate with both Colombian and foreign audiences alike, garnering increased attention to the phenomenon of the *sicarios* of the Medellín drug trade in particular, as well as the authors who portray them. Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* went on to become a film in 2000, whereas Franco Ramos's *Rosario Tijeras* enjoyed a longer run in the spotlight, becoming a film in 2005 and a television series in 2010 and again from 2016 to 2019. From narco-literature to narco-corridos to narco-novelas, cultural representations of Latin American narco-trafficking continue to find captive audiences around the world to this day.

In a more general sense, the emergence of narco-literature in the Colombian context and beyond provides insight into the importance of popular literature in Latin America, both in terms of mass market consumption and social function. In her study of the relation between power, literature, and contemporary memory in the Southern Cone, for example, Gabriela Rodríguez notes,

> Creemos que la literatura, tanto en narrativa de ficción (novelas) como en cuanto crónica que asume la forma narrativa, es un espacio en el que, aceptando las convenciones del género y más radicalmente, aceptando que la propia Historia participa más o menos reconocidamente de esas convenciones, pueden encon-

For a more detailed analysis of the history and significance of the *novela sicaresca*, see Margarita Jácome's *La novela sicaresca: Testimonio, sensacionalismo, y ficción* (2009).

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> trarse rastros de cómo un pueblo vivió, disfrutó, o padeció las piruetas más o menos cruentas del poder institucional, y qué mecanismos de resistencia ensayó frente a ellas. (218)

For Rodríguez, popular literature borrows from the oral traditions through its function of documenting and preserving collective memory, and dialoguing with the lived experience resulting from the encounters with multiple structures of power.[8] It is precisely this encounter between popular literature and history that has the potential to allow for reflection and critical inquiry as to the formulations of these power structures, both formal and informal, in society. Mauricio Zabalgoitia Herrera examines how the emergence of new forms of popular literary representation (i.e., narco-literature) present a powerful cultural challenge to the established literary canon:

> El cuerpo de la literatura—utilizando una metáfora foucaldiana—se ha visto igualmente atravesado por discursos nacionales, populares y marginales; por una afluencia de textos heterogéneos e indefinidos; por cuestiones antropológicas; de "nuevo periodismo"; por políticas de identidad, modos de ver interdisciplinarios e interculturales (Castañeda, 2009); pero también, y sobre todo, por la subida al plano de la representación de las formas más diversas de cultura emergente, marginal y popular. Esto, por supuesto, ha puesto en crisis la estabilidad del canon hispano-latinoamericano, pero también ha abierto la puerta a nuevas formas de aproximación de la crítica y la academia a esos productos culturales que ya no pueden ser leídos desde el eurocentriso o los modelos de teorías de la literatura y literatura comparada que partían de un sistema jerarquizado […]. (429)

Zabalgoitia Herrera's observations regarding the rise of popular and marginal voices not only challenge the established corpus of literature but also the conventional forms of literary and cultural analysis. In this sense, narco-literature as popular literature allows authors to engage with official and informal national discourses. As a popular subgenre of crime fiction, these novels complicate the process further, as many of the narco-related works narrate criminal activity that calls into question the ethical, moral, political, and legal boundaries of society. These works of popular fiction have the capacity to

[8] Though Rodríguez's work centers on the function of popular literature in the Southern Cone, and later on the experience of post-dictatorship, her introductory analysis regarding this relationship between literature and power in history building is applicable to the broader region, including Bolivia.

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engage in critical storytelling that may otherwise remain untold in mainstream media for myriad reasons such as risk of personal harm, possible political persecution, or fear of censure, among others.[9]

Although Bolivia has generally lacked an established tradition of popular narco-literature, a noteworthy omission given the country's importance in the overall chain of illegal narcotics production, there have been several significant exceptions. In 1980, famed Bolivian crime fiction author Juan de Recacoechea published *La mala sombra*, a novel about a university professor from La Paz's cultural elite who becomes involved in drug trafficking. Hailing from Cochabamba, Tito Gutiérrez Vargas has solidified himself as one of the leading fiction writers to address the issue of Bolivian narco-trafficking. Of his four published novels, his narco-trilogy has received the most circulation and public attention. Both *Mariposa blanca* (1990) and *El demonio y las flores* (1998) from this series received Bolivia's top literary prize, the *Premio de Novela "Erich Guttentag,"* upon publication. His most recent work, and the last installment of the narco-trilogy, *Magdalena en el paraíso* (2001), received the *Premio Nacional de Novela* in 2000, the successor to the Erich Guttentag prize. Additionally, this last novel was published by the illustrious Editorial Alfaguara as part of the prize. With publication dates ranging from 1990 to 2001, Gutiérrez Vargas's narco-trilogy chronicles the various phases of the war on drugs in the Bolivian Chapare region.

And yet Bolivia's eastern departments have shown a relative absence in the cultural dialogue regarding the drug trade, lacking a dominant voice and narrative to accurately represent the historical and symbolic role the region has played in drug trafficking. This absence of literature cannot be attributed to a simple dearth of authors from the area, as iconic writers such as Wolfango Montes Vannuci and Manfredo Kempff have consistently produced novels portraying the eastern region of Bolivia in fiction, incorporating colloquial speech and customs in their works. In point of fact,

[9] The case of Mexican author and journalist Javier Valdez Cárdenas highlights the dangers present in writing about the world of the narcos. Blending fiction and journalism in many of his published works, Valdez Cárdenas was one of the few reporters who openly wrote about drug trafficking and organized crime in Sinaloa. He also founded the newspaper *Ríodoce,* dedicated exclusively to reporting on criminal activities and cases of corruption. As such, Valdez Cárdenas was eventually assassinated near the paper's headquarters in Culiacán. It was later revealed that the hit had been ordered by the sons of "El Chapo" Guzmán for the publication of an interview with one of Guzmán's associates. Although tragic, this is just one of many cases of reporters losing their lives for publishing on narco-trafficking and corruption in México.

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Montes Vannuci's acclaimed 1988 novel, *Jonás y la ballena rosada*, serves as one of the only works of fiction to date to directly address the prevalence of drug trafficking and its impact on society in Santa Cruz. Outside of this novel, there is little cultural representation of this region's lived experience in the growth of the Bolivian drug trade.

Given the absence of such a narrative, Homero Carvalho Oliva's recent tale of revenge, tradition, and community, *La conspiración de los viejos* (2011), becomes all the more distinct. Over the last two decades, Carvalho Oliva has established himself as one of the leading literary voices to come out of Bolivia's eastern departments. Originally from the department of Beni and now residing in Santa Cruz, Carvalho Oliva has twice won the *Premio Nacional de Novela* (1995 and 2008), and continues to produce a vast array of novels, poems, screenplays, and essays. Though the subject matter and critique of Carvalho Oliva's work vary as much as his choice of literary genre, his decision to return to his home in the Beni Department to tell the tale of a homicide and, in turn, evoke the recent history of Bolivia's notorious drug kingpin, Roberto Suárez Gómez, merits closer attention. The novel examines the legacy left by the drug trade in Bolivia by creating a memory-scape in the eastern city of Trinidad, the capital of Beni. Under the guise of an honor killing being planned by a group of senior citizens, Carvalho Oliva resurrects the trauma of the cocaine boom of the 1980s through the image of an aging contract killer who once served as a bodyguard for Suárez Gómez. This study examines Carvalho Oliva's use of the *camba* in narrating a collective crime, interpreted through René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, and the resurrection of the region's narco-history through the figure of the contract killer. In doing so, it is possible to question the local *camba* identity and prevailing political tensions in the region. The study also examines the lasting association of cocaine trafficking in Bolivia with the image of the former drug baron, as well as the reproduction of stereotypes common to narratives of narco-trafficking, and how these associations either address or suppress the lived history of the drug trade in the region.

A Note on the Use of *Camba*

When discussing the Bolivian Oriente, the term *camba* is synonymous with both its culture and people.[10] According to the *Diccionario Enciclopédico*

[10] In Bolivia, the term Oriente is used to refer to the geographical region of the ast, encompassing the departments of Pando, Beni, and Santa Cruz.

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Cruceño, the word *camba* was used as a term of endearment in the Chiriguano tribe and has also been linked to the Guaraní word for friend (Peña Claros and Boschetti 153-154). Later, the term took on negative racial and classist connotations, often used to refer to someone as "negro" or of the lower working or rural classes (154). In *Problemas de la Autonomía en el Oriente Boliviano* (2007), H.C.F. Mansilla maintains that the term was again transformed in the second half of the twentieth century:

> En la actualidad (a partir de aproximadamente 1970) camba se asocia con dos conceptos diferentes e igualmente fundamentales: (1) miembro de la comunidad étnico-cultural del Oriente boliviano (opuesto a los collas andinos, por ejemplo), y (2) persona amiga, abierta y hospitalaria. (39)

In highlighting this shift in usage, Mansilla reveals a deliberate distinction, in language and in identity, which is one of the great nuances of the region when compared to the rest of Bolivia. In the Oriente, there exists a constant push to demarcate the political, cultural, ethnic, and economic differences of the *camba,* both with relation to themselves and in opposition to the rest of Bolivia. The term itself adjusts to the environment in which it is employed, representing a regional/ethnic identity when marking the difference from Bolivians of Andean descent and later serving as either a compliment (*persona amiga*) or an insult (lower working or rural class) when addressing people within the class of *camba*. Mansilla elaborates on the formation and definition of this ethnic population, distinct to the Andean population of La Paz and the early viceroyalty of Alto Peru, through his example of the foundation of the city of Santa Cruz, an economic and political center in the Oriente:

> […] Santa Cruz fue, evidentemente, un centro de irradiación de un tipo peculiar de la cultura española y católica. El resultado fue un modelo civilizatorio con una élite muy fuerte de blancos, terratenientes y militares, y una masa laboral de indígenas, a veces en condiciones cercanas a la esclavitud. Pese a ello y hasta la segunda mitad del siglo XX esta masa laboral no tuvo la consciencia colectiva de resistencia al invasor ni de pertenecer a una cultura indígena propia. (22)

From its foundation, the inhabitants of Santa Cruz represented a racial and ethnic dynamic directly related to their white, European colonizers. Mansilla points out that even the masses of Indigenous workers bore a distinct ethnic identity to that of the Andean populations, but lacked the type of collective ethnic consciousness present in the mountainous regions. As colonization in the region expanded, the ethnic model of Santa Cruz followed

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suit, spreading to what would later be known as the departments of Beni and Pando. This monopolized power within these departments in the hands of white landholders of European descent for centuries to come.

Contemporary political identities formed in Santa Cruz at the beginning of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continue to reflect this model of power. The modern *camba* identity is understood to be a result of the colonizing project referenced by Mansilla, with the legacy of the mestizo population serving as the norm. Returning to Peña Claros and Boschetti's analysis, it is possible to see how Mansilla's model remains in effect today:

> En cuanto a las características atribuidas al camba, todos los autores acuer- dan en su condición étnica y cultural mestiza. Con un discurso que tiene como fundamento la supuesta existencia de un carácter cruceño primigenio, producto del mestizaje de los colonizadores españoles y de los pueblos originarios del Oriente, y como base de la continuidad histórica de la región, es que los autores consultados describen a los primeros pobladores de la región como base étnica del camba actual. (155)

Following colonization, Santa Cruz, and the Oriente in general, were geographically and culturally isolated from the *colla* centers of the new republic for centuries.[11] This sense of isolation came to the forefront of debate in 1904, when the Geographic Society of Santa Cruz issued its infamous memorandum to the Bolivian National Congress arguing against the expansion of railroads toward the Pacific due to the likelihood of an adverse economic impact in Santa Cruz (Thomson et al. 188). The later economic and political success of the Oriente region created a sense of independence and a self-made mentality embedded in the patriarchal, landowning oligarchy. In this sense, the *camba* identity incorporates all of these elements in its constant opposition to the *colla* of the Andean region. The rise of the *Nación Camba* plays a crucial role in promoting these ideals and differences as part of its contemporary political project.

Founded in 2000, the *Nación Camba Liberation Movement*, commonly referred to as simply *Nación Camba*, proposes the implementation of an autonomous, plurinational state in Bolivia, separating the country into

[11] The term *colla* is quite controversial. Its technical definition refers to a person from the Occidente or Altiplano region of Bolivia, primarily the departments of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí. However, in popular usage, in particular in the Oriente, the term often has a pejorative connotation, as an insult against the people of the western region of Bolivia.

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autonomous regions based on particular ethnic and cultural similarities.[12] Prior to the election of Evo Morales as president in 2006, the *Nación Camba* focused its efforts on establishing a solid political bloc in the region through active campaigning for municipal positions. The ideology of the movement revolved around the concept of establishing a "*pueblo-nación/región-nación*" in these elections to further the autonomist goals of the party. Morales's rise to the presidency presented a direct assault to the cultural and ethnic solidarity of the group, as his rural, *colla* ancestry was at odds with the movement's regionalist rhetoric, whereas the socialist politics of his political party, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), threatened to destabilize the autonomist efforts. In response, the *Nación* intensified its confrontation against the federal government, pushing for decentralization on a national scale. In order to generate increased support and unification across the region, the *Nación* platform promoted a strong sense of pride in *camba* heritage as a way of defending against the Andean cultural incursion propagated by the Morales regime. Traditional dress, local music, male leadership, emphasis on linguistic singularity, and a generalized disregard for anything related to *colla* culture (i.e., the coca leaf), appeared at the *Nación* political rallies and became the dominant cultural narrative of the movement's ideology.

The city of Santa Cruz became a crucial site around which neighboring departments, including Beni, rallied in cultural and political unison and from which resistance to the Morales administration mounted. The cultural narrative of the *Nación* brand of *camba* pride was thus exported to these departments and a heightened awareness of this ethnic collectivity spread. In his 2006 analysis of the history and contemporary political impact of the *Nación Camba* regional discourse, "La 'Media Luna' Sobre Bolivia: Nación, Región, Etnia y Clase Social," Willem Assies observes that

> [L]a Nación Camba se centra en la identidad étnica y cultural que resulta del mestizaje […], la diferencia entre las luchas anteriores por integración por medio de conexiones ferroviarias y la lucha actual es más bien de un carácter nacionalista frente a un Estado que se ve como incapaz de solucionar el problema y, por eso, tiene que ser atacado. (103)[13]

[12] For a more detailed analysis of the growth of the *Nación Camba* and the development of its ideology, see both H.C.F. Mansilla's and Peña Claros & Boschetti's works, referenced above.

[13] Here, Willem Assies employs the popular term "Media Luna" in reference to the bloc of the eastern departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Tarija, which have banded

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As Assies notes, the appeal of supporting the *Nación* regionalist platform is not limited to identitary politics around the term *camba* but is rather a deeper desire to attack and subvert the state for its inability to reconcile the perceived negligence in the region. The result has been a number of violent confrontations between supporters of the *Nación* and pro-Morales demonstrators or government forces, further polarizing ethnic tensions in Bolivia.[14]

Collective Crime and Girardian Sacrifice in *La conspiración de los viejos*

Homero Carvalho Oliva's *La conspiración de los viejos* opens in the central plaza of a small town, on a bench in front of the main cathedral, as four old men gather to plot a murder and thus give rise to a story of vengeance, friendship, and love. Carvalho Oliva transports the reader to the city of Trinidad, capital of Beni, in the heart of Bolivia's Oriente. The motivation for their crime is simple: to avenge the death of another friend's son, Benito. Benito, a thirty-year-old man with a mental disability, was born into the upper echelon of society and considered a son of the people. Too old to commit the murder themselves, the four senior citizens carefully plan the death of the *camba* responsible for Benito's demise. In their preparations, the men encounter and subvert representatives of the city's most important institutions: the church, the court, and public opinion. As rumors of the seniors' activities spread throughout the town, more and more citizens sympathetic to their cause assist with the plot, raising money to cover possible expenses and passing crucial information to help locate the resources needed to carry out the assassination (i.e., guns and killers). In the process, a ghost of Beni's narco-past emerges in the form of Marcos Vaca Diez, a contract killer and former bodyguard for Roberto Suárez Gómez. Through his relationship with a local prostitute, Angélica, Marcos attempts to reconcile his past and present actions

together to support the regionalist rhetoric of the *Nación Camba* in a bid for autonomy from the central government's populist politics.

[14] Though the *Nación Camba* generally promotes non-violent protest as a show of opposition to the central government, its affiliated Youth Union for Santa Cruz (*Unión Juvenil Cruceñista*) engaged in numerous violent confrontations with pro-Morales supporters throughout the early 2000's. Sharing much of the ideology of the *Nación Camba*, the *Youth Union* encompasses a pseudo-militant faction of the movement. For a more detailed analysis of the organization's ideals, see "Foot Soldiers of Camba Nationalism" in *The Bolivia Reader* 636-638.

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and find salvation in love. As the moment of execution approaches, the murder becomes the town's worst-kept secret, with all of its citizens anticipating and commenting on the crime. Following the murder, a collective sense of relief reigns over Trinidad, as an unjust killing is avenged and the town's communal project is successfully accomplished.

The collective criminal element in the novel differentiates it from the common crime novel, in that there is no moment when readers can definitively identify a single individual responsible for the murder. From the plan's inception, the crime is a group effort, as one of the men, Huáscar Justiciano, ceremoniously opens the novel by declaring, "Hay que matarlo al camba," before a bench full of friends gathered in the center of town (Carvalho Oliva 13). Grammatically speaking, Huáscar's statement is essential to establishing this lack of culpability, as the "Hay que" construction in Spanish serves as an impersonal expression with no defined subject. The statement and the act itself become an imperative that requires a collective response but cannot be attributed to an individual subject. Like a virus, the idea of killing the *camba* spreads throughout the town, and Huáscar's words are repeated by different characters as they become implicated in the plot. For example, Purita, the wife of Miguel Durán, another member of the core group of four conspirators, reinforces the idea by stating, "[L]e preguntó si se trataba del camba ese —poniendo énfasis en el 'ese'—;—sí, le respondió Miguel, se trata del mismo camba. ¡Ah!, entonces está bien, pueden matarlo" (25). Every time the mantra is repeated and Benito's murderer is referred to as "*el camba*," the division between him and the community becomes greater. The term is hurled at his absent body as an insult, carrying the most negative racial and socioeconomic undertones. Carvalho Oliva purposefully employs this term to reference the murderer to evoke the negative aspect of the rhetoric of the *Nación Camba*, in this case revealing the internal socioeconomic conflict between the *camba*-pueblo versus the *camba*-individual. What this shows is how quickly the sense of unity can be turned against one of their own. The collective action of the residents of Trinidad in the crime is better understood through the lens of René Girard's work on sacrifice and the scapegoat.

In his seminal work, *Violence and the Sacred,* René Girard examines the significance of sacrifice and the sacrificial victim across societies. For Girard, killing, in the form of sacrifice, becomes necessary for maintaining a certain order in society. The sacrificial process can be divided into three parts: the sacrificial crisis, the selection of the victim, and the act of sacrifice itself. The sacrificial crisis is a necessary conflict, in whatever measure, that must be resolved through the sacrifice. There is an inherent violence present in the

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conflict that, through the sacrifice, will be transformed for the better. This transformation can be from bad to good, impure to pure, individual to collective, or any combination of these. Girard points out that during the sacrificial crisis, it is the loss of distinction between these types of violence that prompts the need for a sacrifice:

> When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community. […] The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their "identity" and their mutual relationships. (49)

The cultural order must be maintained in order to reinforce the individual identities that exist within a given society. When this order is threatened, the social controls that manage behavior within that society begin to crumble.

Returning to *La conspiración,* the death of Benito represents the rupture of two separate cultural orders. Benito himself was a benign element in Trinidadian society who, through death, is later venerated and becomes sacred to the town. Following the death of his mother, Benito accompanied his father, Alejandro Rodríguez, everywhere and was generally accepted in all social circles (Carvalho Oliva 39). In death, Benito "pasó de ser el hijo de Alejandro Rodríguez a convertirse en el hijo del pueblo" (46). The death of the "people's son" at the hands of a lowly fisherman, whether by accident or not, violates the balance of power in the town and upsets the first cultural order.[15] Though Alejandro Rodríguez does not represent the wealthiest landowning elite that ruled the Oriente in the past, in the contemporary urban space of Trinidad, he and his friends represent an order of power and respect stemming from their upper-middle-class status and age. Therefore, the murder of his son Benito represents an assault against this order as well. The act of continually referring to the killer as "*el camba*" in the pejorative sense represents the disdain felt by the old men and demarcates the socioeconomic difference between them and the killer.

The second cultural order violated by the murder stems from Benito's status as "el hijo del pueblo." His senseless murder sparks a collective outrage against political and legal institutions. The lack of immediate punitive action

[15] Initially, it is unclear whether Benito was murdered by the fisherman or if the death occurred by accident without malicious intent.

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against the accused murderer calls into question these institutions' ability to govern and administer justice. The sacrificial crisis that arises is caused by the people's attempt to subvert these incapable representatives of power:

> Pasarían algunos días para que los rencores incubados en el pueblo produzcan una conspiración colectiva, hilando las palabras apropiadas en el tejido de la imaginación y la memoria del pueblo trinitario que, fecundándose mutuamente, y desencantado con los poderosos, quería sentir el poder en sus propias manos. (44)

This desire to seek out their own justice is later satisfied by the old men's plan. However, before this occurs, the political and legal institutions intervene to regulate the crisis. During the hunt for Benito's murderer, and as a result of public pressure, the police launch a massive operation to locate the killer and, in the process, solve dozens of minor cases, locate and return innumerous items reported stolen, and interrupt business at several houses of vice (46-47). However, these actions do little more than disturb the petty criminal order in the city, causing a mini-crisis around the payment of police bribes that maintained these activities underground. The town still demands the arrest of the killer.

With the sacrificial crisis thus initiated by Benito's death, the selection of the victim can then commence. Girard refers to the person to be sacrificed as the surrogate-victim, whose death represents the quelling of a collective problem that cannot be resolved otherwise:

> […] the victim is considered a polluted object, whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community of its ills […] That is why the pharmakos was paraded about the city. He was used as a kind of sponge to sop up impurities, and afterwards he was expelled from the community or killed in a ceremony that involved the entire populace. (95)

The victim to be sacrificed in *La conspiración* is "[e]l pescador, Francisco Noe Maturana, un hombre de cincuenta años, descendiente de los indígenas mojeños de la zona" (51). If allowed to live, Maturana would serve as a constant reminder of the death of Benito, the loss of the collective son. It becomes completely irrelevant that the circumstances of Benito's murder, as declared by Maturana himself, actually bordered on what would be considered manslaughter in other contexts. Maturana would forever be the *camba* who got away with slapping the established socioeconomic order in the face,

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perhaps inspiring further acts of resistance. Maturana passes through what Girard regards as the duality of the victim, where the victim first serves as the target of insults and later attracts the violence affecting the original victim, in the process converting a baneful violence into a beneficial violence. In Maturana's case, the first step is accomplished by being called "*el camba*" by the old men and their conspirators, with the term functioning at its most pejorative level and stripping him of his individuality and identity (social, political, etc.). The second step comes during the sacrifice itself, where Maturana's violence against Benito is transformed by the old men's planned, collective violence and is redirected against Maturana himself, now a sacrificial victim.

Taking the analysis of Maturana as a sacrificial victim a step further, it is possible to note a broader political critique developing in the novel. Maturana, a rural worker of Indigenous descent, albeit from an Indigenous group native to Beni, upsets a traditional order of power (i.e., the *camba* elite) and is immediately met with violence and resistance from this group. In a metaphorical sense, the scene is representative of the political situation in Bolivia throughout the 2000s, with Maturana representing President Evo Morales and his supporters, whereas the old men encompass the previous political establishment, embodied by political groups such as the MNR, the *Nación Camba*, and former president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. Following Maturana's act, represented in the novel by Morales's rise to power, there exists a strong desire by the establishment to right this wrong through sacrificial violence. In Girard's conception of the sacrificial victim, there is actually a double substitution occurring in the sacrifice between a surrogate victim and a ritual victim, where "[t]he surrogate victim comes from inside the community, and the ritual victim must come from outside; otherwise the community might find it difficult to unite against it" (102). For *La conspiración,* the first victim is the visible, physical victim embodied by Maturana. He is the one paraded before the public and openly targeted. The second, the ritual victim, is purely symbolic and comes to represent the President Evo Morales. Here, it is not an individual being destroyed but rather an idea. It is possible to see the community of Trinidad uniting against this idea during the sacrificial crisis, as the town rises up against the political and legal institutions. This indicates that the sacrificial death of both the surrogate victim and the ritual victim will appease the collective community. Under the guise of Benito's murder, the novel cautiously hints at the collective consciousness that exists in the eastern region of Bolivia and mirrors the region's social outrage against the Morales administration, thus elaborating a call for political action against his presidency.

The assassination of Maturana at the hands of a contract killer completes Girard's sacrificial process. It is an act loaded with political, transformative, and collective power. The sacrifice is also a cyclical act, especially for Maturana, as one act of violence begets another. If executed correctly, the sacrifice restores order and peace in the community and prevents future conflict. Girard explains the transformation of violence in the sacrifice as having the potential for regeneration in the community:

> […] the violence directed against the surrogate victim might well be radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle, that of sacrificial rite—which protects the community from the same violence and allows culture to flourish. (92)

In this sense], the sacrifice creates the stability needed for growth and healing. For the contract killer Marcos Vaca Diez, the death of Maturana resolves a personal existential crisis, allowing him to accept his purpose in life as an assassin and freeing him from the guilt of his past. He is able to move forward and seek more work, finally accepting his role in Bolivian society. For the old men, there is a sense of accomplishment in Maturana's death; upon reuniting in the plaza after the assassination, they talk until late into the night and are unable to part ways: "Como si quisieran prolongar el encuentro temiendo que la despedida les arrebatase el placer de saber lo que sabían, el placer de sentirse poderosos" (106). For the town of Trinidad, the act of violence against Maturana serves as a form of catharsis. Girard explains that this catharsis "is performed in a structural setting so strikingly similar to that of unanimous violence that one can only conclude that it is a deliberate, if not entirely exact, imitation of unanimous violence" (99). By supporting the preparations for the crime, either directly or symbolically, the residents of Trinidad convert the death of Maturana into a collective crime befitting Girard's concept of unanimous violence. As an act of violent ritual, as opposed to an open act of violence per se, the collective crime performs its cathartic function and also prevents future violence in the form of a sacrificial crisis. The reader's role in the process is to piece together the story and act as the detective needed to decipher the order and meaning of the crime.

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Marcos Vaca Diez and the Resurrection of the *Camba* Narco-Past

Though much of the focus of Carvalho Oliva's *La conspiración* revolves around the collective killing of Maturana, his choice of Marcos Vaca Diez as the contract killer is crucial in incorporating the narco element into the narrative. Marcos's function in the novel is two-fold: first, he represents the violence needed to kill Maturana, a skill acquired during his work as a drug lord's bodyguard, and second, he acts as a living history of the *camba* involvement in the drug trade. In this first capacity, his past serves him well in the case of Maturana. His skillful violence is one acquired in the underbelly of the international drug community, as he recalls how after the increased law enforcement efforts in the 1980s, "Marcos tuvo que escapar, se fue a Colombia a trabajar con gente de un cartel local que había conocido cuanto acompañó a Roberto Suárez a reunirse con Pablo Escobar" (61). Later, Marcos explains that

> [c]uando las cosas se pusieron feas en Colombia, se fue a Brasil, regresó a Bolivia a finales del año 2007 porque sus contactos le hicieron saber que las antiguas líneas de narcotráfico se estaban reactivando y que necesitaban de gente como él, capaz de amedrentar con la mirada y de matar a un hombre sin ninguna compasión. (62)

The sites through which Marcos passes reveal a fetish for narco-violence, foreign in the Bolivian context. By his own admission, Marcos's time in Brazil was highlighted by his participation in the taking of a favela in Rio de Janeiro, which represents the central location of the Brazilian drug trade in much of the international imaginary (74). In Colombia, Marcos's contacts in Medellín presumably teach him the ways of the young *sicarios*. This is confirmed later in the novel as Marcos's decision to kill Maturana from the back of a motorcycle bears the hallmark of the Colombian *sicario* (100). In her 2013 study of narco-literature in Culiacán and Medellín, *Narrating Narcos*, Gabriela Polit Dueñas explains the significance of this style of killing:

> On April 30, 1984, when two youths riding a motorcycle approached the Mercedes Benz carrying the Secretary of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla and shot him point blank, a new era of violence began in Colombia. Lara Bonilla's death was the beginning of a war that narco-traffickers (with Pablo Escobar as their leader) waged against the Colombian state and society. It also unleashed one of the most violent periods in Colombian history. (169)

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In the sacrificial process, Marcos's narco-violence is the only weapon powerful enough to complete the sacrificial rite on behalf of the town. He is an ethereal figure who arrives in Trinidad at the beginning of the sacrificial crisis after having been summoned by a collective memory. However, outside of this process, Marcos's presence in the town seems disjointed. He is the product of a widely disseminated popular culture of the drug trade, the face of narco-violence that does not have a place in Trinidad and therefore cannot establish any meaningful relationship or residence in the town. He is condemned to wander.

Through this wandering, Marcos's second function in the novel becomes much more crucial. As the living history of the *camba* drug trade, Marcos serves as a key counternarrative to the changing popular narrative regarding the trade. Early in the novel, one of the old men in the plaza expresses his disdain for an extravagant wedding he reads about in Santa Cruz, where the family being celebrated was part of the "*narco-arrepentidos*" who negotiated with the government during the 1980s in exchange for legal immunity (15). Later, Marcos expresses similar resentment toward this group of traitors, recalling how their cowardly negotiation with the government contradicted the ideals of the *beniano* male. Marcos essentially serves as the opposite of his former boss, Roberto Suárez Gómez, who bravely resisted such temptations for easy resolution (61). These two moments in the novel, taken beyond the narrative itself, work as a living narco-history, preventing the whitewashing of history and the erasure of the participation of the "*narco-arrepentidos*" in the drug trade. Similarly, Marcos's observations on the current state of the drug trade in Trinidad mark an interesting, extranarrative critique of the changing narco-political landscape:

> Al regresar a Bolivia, Marcos notó que algunas cosas habían cambiado, los dueños de la "merca" ya no eran los "narcos" benianos ni cruceños de antes, ahora eran unos cholos chapareños de origen quechua y aymara que estaban comprando las descuidadas y hasta abandonadas mansiones de los excapos de la cocaína. En las ciudades de Santa Cruz, La Paz, y Cochabamba se hablaba de los nuevos ricos del recién instaurado Estado Plurinacional, gente que estaba constituyendo una fuerte burguesía chola que no solamente poseía riquezas sino también el poder político. (62-63)

On a political level, these changes, emphasized as occurring during the drug trade in the Oriente, echo the changes happening all over Bolivia under the presidency of Evo Morales. At the heart of the conflict is the ascent of the *colla* middle class to positions of political and economic power. Aided by the

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official recognition of their ethnic heritage under the newly formed Plurinational State, this middle class continues its migration from the Andean region into neighboring departments, substituting the decadent order of *camba* power on all levels. Marcos's memory of the wonder years of the *camba* drug trade are needed to evoke the figure of Roberto Suárez Gómez, the quintessential *camba* representative of power: wealthy, landowning, entrepreneurial, white, and politically well connected. This is the order of power that has been supplanted by the new-money people who are buying up the ex-capos' mansions and investing in business on their own. As with the sacrifice of Maturana, Marcos's connection to the *camba* drug history becomes the mechanism through which a critique of the current sociopolitical climate emerges.

Conclusion

Carvalho Oliva's fictional account of murder and the associated conflicts surrounding the *camba* identity serve to reexamine the region's past relationship with narco-trafficking as well as contemporary tensions with the Morales administration. I argue that the selection of the sacrificial victim in Carvalho Oliva's work, in the form of the *camba* murderer, meets the conditions needed to quash the sacrificial crisis in the community. In addition, this moment of crisis in the city of Trinidad, Beni, resurrects the memory of the region's history with narco-trafficking and results in a critique of the current state of the illegal drug trade in the region. The ghostlike figures of both Marcos in the novel and Roberto Suárez Gómez in the collective memory of Trinidad serve as the mechanism to force social recognition of the collective involvement in the illegal trade and begin a conversation regarding issues of impunity, accountability, and continuity of the Bolivian drug trade in contemporary society. With few other examples of Bolivian narco-fiction circulating in editorial markets, *La conspiración de los viejos* offers a unique opportunity for popular literature to narrate ethnic tensions, economic impact, political systems, and social changes produced by the drug trade, providing a renewed opportunity for criticism and engagement with Bolivian literary production.

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