

LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Valuing Literature: The Picaresque and the Writing Life in Mexico

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This article contends that Mexican writers have drawn on the picaresque to ponder what they regard as the precariousness of intellectual labor in Mexico. It analyzes the role that the afterlives of the picaresque have played in the portrayal of writers as disenfranchised and vulnerable subjects, two of the most relevant features of the archetype of *pícaros*. In addition, this project also suggests that picaresque narratives embody a discourse of precarity that goes beyond *pícaros* and applies to all subjects who engage in the production and circulation of literature, turning the picaresque in a suitable form in which Mexican writers can reflect on the value of literature in Mexican society.

En este artículo propongo la picaresca como una forma literaria que se ha usado para reflexionar sobre la incertidumbre y la precariedad del trabajo intelectual en México desde la época colonial hasta el presente. Analizo también el papel que la picaresca ha jugado en la representación de la figura del escritor como un sujeto marginalizado y vulnerable, dos características típicas del pícaro. Finalmente, sugiero que estas narrativas encarnan un discurso de precariedad que rebasa la figura del pícaro y que puede aplicarse a todos los individuos relacionados con la producción y circulación literaria, por lo que la picaresca se convierte en una forma de reafirmar el valor de la literatura en la sociedad mexicana.

On August 30, 2016, the New York–based nonprofit organization Electric Literature published on its website a short piece titled “Planes Flying over a Monster: The Writing Life in Mexico City.” The text, by Mexican poet and novelist Daniel Saldaña París (2016), appeared as part of a series in which authors reflect on “their working lives and their literary communities.” In a witty tone, Saldaña París tells of a trip to Mexico City twelve months after having emigrated to Montreal. By that time, his first novel, *En medio de extrañas víctimas* (2013), had been recently translated into English, and though a foreigner to the US literary market, Saldaña París was a familiar name to the small community of emerging Mexican poets—his poems had been collected in *La máquina autobiográfica* in 2012—and to the Mexican artistic community in general, partly because of his work as editor of the renowned and quite polemical literary magazine *Letras Libres*—“a nest of vipers,” by his account.

Earning a living by writing grants and from his salary as editor, Saldaña París was tired of not being able to pursue his literary projects due to work overload and thus decided to emigrate to Canada. “Nobody writes for a living in Mexico,” he asserts in what rapidly develops into a narrative on the perils of intellectual labor in a damaged country:

It’s impossible to find the time to write if you’re working nine or ten hours a day, and given the state of the Mexican economy, it’s impossible to survive if you’re not working nine or ten hours a day. In this context, writers from well-off families have more opportunities. Of course, in comparison to the country as a whole, I wasn’t bad off, even if I did come from a solidly middle-class family of university professors and not one of businessmen. Female writers who come from rural areas and write in indigenous languages are condemned to a marginality infinitely greater than mine. I’m a

white, male, relatively heterosexual and a *capitalino*—a capital-dweller—in a country that's racist, criminally poor and covered with unmarked mass graves. (par. 24)¹

While Saldaña París's piece acknowledges all the privileges he can claim within Mexican society, the sense of marginality that he expresses echoes a well-known story in the context of the history of Mexican literature. I am referring to José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El periquillo sarniento*. In his "Prólogo, dedicatoria y advertencias a los lectores," set up as a conversation between the author and a friend, Fernández de Lizardi describes his struggles to find the right person to whom to dedicate the first installment of his book. Satirizing the practice of patronage, he details the approximate amount that a single person should have to invest for the book to be printed: "A cuatro mil y ciento y tantos pesos, por ahí, por ahí" (2008, 90–91); and he forcefully laments the isolated state of the book market in New Spain. Although his nameless friend suggests the future readers as the ideal collective to be addressed as dedicatees and investors—an idea that appeals to Fernández de Lizardi—he also sums up the conversation in the following terms: "Es gana, hijo, los pobres no debemos ser escritores, ni emprender ninguna tarea que cueste dinero" (2008, 93).

By drawing a parallel between Fernández de Lizardi's and Saldaña París's complaints, I aim to establish what I deem to be the central argument of this study: the close relationship between the picaresque and a discourse of literary value put forth by Mexican writers since the colonial period until the present. Specifically, I am interested in studying how writers have drawn on the picaresque to ponder what they regard as the precariousness of intellectual labor in Mexico. But before delving into the portrait of writers as displaced and marginalized subjects, a discussion is in order of what it is at stake when one reads a literary form such as the picaresque within a national confine.

Is There a Mexican Picaresque?

In the following study, I will focus on nine books: Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora's *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* (1690); José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El periquillo sarniento* (1816–1831); José Rubén Romero's *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (1938); Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969); Luis Zapata's *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (1979); Enrique Serna's *Señorita México* (1993); Josefina Estrada's *Virgen de medianoche* (1996); Xavier Velasco's *Diablo guardián* (2003); and Valeria Luiselli's *La historia de mis dientes* (2013).² These narratives all share features associated with the picaresque form—a first-person narration from a marginalized character who relates his or her life story within an episodic structure—, although asserting that there is one picaresque form would be misleading.

A protean term, the picaresque has been conceptualized in terms of genre, style, tradition, plot, element, structure, discourse, archetype, and so forth.³ Yet, the idea that such a thing as an original picaresque exists is so deeply inscribed in literary criticism that scholars have even coined terms such as "illegitimate picaresque" (Molho 1972, 175) to explain works that do not fit the initial model of this literary form.⁴ Regardless of lucid studies that acknowledge that the picaresque lacks a precise narrative form (Rey Álvarez 1987, 112), there is a resilient debate about the essential features of this elusive term, placing the picaresque at the origins

¹ One year after this short piece was published, Saldaña París's name was included in the second edition (2017) of Bogotá39, a list prepared by the Hay Festival and the city of Bogotá that seeks to promote the work of promising Latin American writers under the age of thirty-nine. If the outcome of the literary careers of most of the writers included in the 2007 first version of the Bogotá39 project is revealing at all, then it is safe to affirm that Saldaña París will share a place with the most central figures of contemporary Latin American literature in the years to come. Both lists can be consulted on the official Bogotá39 website: <http://www.hayfestival.com/bogota39/en-index.aspx?skinid=7>.

² I have listed these titles according to the year of their first edition to provide the reader with a sense of chronology. In some cases, I have decided to use a different edition when quoting them.

³ A resourceful review of the main critical debates about the picaresque is Juan Antonio Garrido Ardila's book (2008). The bibliography on the picaresque is endless. However, it is safe to assert that, over time, the following studies have been considered classics on the subject: Fernando Lázaro Carreter (1970); Anne J. Cruz (1999); José Antonio Maravall (1986); Maurice Molho (1972); Ulrich Wicks (1974); and Claudio Guillén (1977). Studies specifically addressing the Mexican picaresque are scarce: Timothy G. Compton's (1997) *Mexican Picaresque Narratives* offers a survey from colonial times to the twentieth century, as does Carol Blackburn's (1969) unpublished PhD dissertation. Luis Leal (1979) proposes the archetype of the *lépero* as the Mexican appropriation of the figure of the pícaro. Didier Jaén (1987) studies Poniatowska and Zapata through a neopicaresque lens.

⁴ Picaresque narratives have long been studied from an evolutionary perspective that traces their origin backward through time from *Guzmán de Alfarache*, to *Lazarillo de Tormes*, then to chivalry books, and then to the ancient Greek (*Satyricon*, *The Golden Ass*) and Arabic traditions (the *Maqāmāt* and the *Thousand and One Nights*). Here, Sara Ahmed's critique of genealogy as "a straightening device, which creates the illusion of descent as a line" (2006, 122) can be useful to understand the anxiety of origin that leads scholarship to explain the spreading of the picaresque in terms of continuities. Hence, we find terms such as "not fully picaresque" (Compton 1997, 17), "proto-picaresque fictions" (Garrido Ardila 2015, 2), "neo-picaresque fictions" (Godsland 2015, 247–267; and González 1994), "almost-picaresque" (Dunn 1993, 218), "picaresque matter" (Jauralde 2001, xi), or even the "picaresque myth" (Guillén 1977, 99) that imagine a clear, pure genealogy of the picaresque in terms of evolution and transformation.

of the European novel, declaring it dead around the end of the seventeenth century, and proposing “neopicaresque” continuities and elements in contemporary fiction regardless of the previously issued death certificate.⁵ Even recent critical approaches to the picaresque that explicitly reject what Florencio Sevilla has called “taxonomic vices” fall for this tempting yet impossible task of organizing an ideal and closed corpus of picaresque narratives.⁶

Conventions tell us that the picaresque is a literary form that crossed the Atlantic Ocean along with the Spanish conquistadors.⁷ Very few exceptions offer a distinct approach to the common notion of the Latin American *pícaro* as a derivative literary character, even though several theoretical frameworks that study the tensions between hegemonic and peripheral cultures have already demonstrated that Latin American literature transformed, adapted, and appropriated European literary models.⁸ I find Aníbal Quijano’s (2008, 192) acute critique of the “European patent of modernity” quite useful in understanding why the Latin American picaresque in general, and the Mexican in particular, have so frequently been studied through a European lens.⁹

From the few exceptions to this perspective, there are three that open a path to start sketching a decolonized picaresque. Kimberle López’s (1994) “New World Rogues” is a key study for understanding the Latin American picaresque in terms of writing back to the empire. Engaging with the concept of transculturation, she acknowledges that, while it is possible to recognize the Spanish and European roots in nineteenth- and twentieth-century picaresque works written in Latin America, “the most intriguing ... are not those which most closely resemble the model ..., but those which transform it in unique ways” (López 1994, 36). Her main contribution lies in an understanding of the picaresque less as a literary genre and more closely related to Wicks’s (1974) study of the picaresque as a literary mode. Blackburn (1969) provides what I consider a crucial element in the discussion of the picaresque as a device, insofar as her study stems from an understanding of the picaresque even beyond prose and narrative.¹⁰ This opening gesture toward the picaresque canon leads me to the third study I would like to mention, Erik Camayd-Freixas’s (2015) work on the colonial origins of the novel in Latin America.

Camayd-Freixas focuses on the passage from the epic to the picaresque in Latin America, a transition made possible, according to him, by the Spanish chronicles written in the New World. However, the key element in his study is not that these chronicles were written in Spanish America as much as that they were made possible because of the existence these territories. The twist allows him to advance a theory that reads the picaresque less in relation to the peninsular models and more as a revision or subversion of the chronicles and letters of the conquistadors: “after the false heroism of the chronicles, the false roguery of the *criollo*,” as he puts it when commenting on Sigüenza’s *Infortunios* (2015, 238).

World literature theory is the best methodological tool to explain how literary forms travel. The first task in studying the Mexican picaresque from a Latin American perspective should start by acknowledging that “formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power” (Moretti 2013, 59). In this particular case, the analysis of power should begin with a critique of a colonialist view of Latin American cultural production solely as a reproduction of European models. Following Franco Moretti’s work, there are two metaphors that come in handy in explaining culture on a world scale—trees and waves.¹¹

⁵ It is difficult to find a study on this genre that overcomes the anxiety to propose yet another “new” set of criteria for the picaresque, turning papers and monographs into charts of titles and features that, as Florencio Sevilla (2001, xi) argues in the prologue to his anthology of Spanish picaresque novels, “do not define nor characterize absolutely anything.”

⁶ Notable exceptions are Sevilla’s (2001) and Garrido Ardila’s (2008, 2015) works, which undertake the difficult enterprise of defining the picaresque beyond prescriptive constraints. For a reading of the archetype of the *pícaro* in strictly Mexican terms, see Leal (1974, 1979).

⁷ The most well-known source for this assertion is Leonard’s (1966) classic study on the book trade between Spain and the so-called New World, in which Alemán’s *Guzmán de Alfarache* takes a front seat along with *Don Quijote* in the book exportation records of the early seventeenth century (264–265). In his book on the figure of the *pícaro* in Spanish and Latin American literature, Ordaz (2000, 9) explains the appearance of the picaresque in Latin America in the following terms: “[La literatura picaresca] pasará a América como consecuencia lógica de la empresa de conquista que impuso la España imperial en el llamado Nuevo Mundo.”

⁸ I am referring to Rama’s (2004) work on transculturation, Schwarz’s (1992) study on the importing of the novel to Brazil, and Candido’s (1995) notes on literature and underdevelopment.

⁹ To recall Quijano’s words, “the Eurocentric pretension to be the exclusive producer and protagonist of modernity—because of which all modernization of non-European populations, is, therefore, a Europeanization—is an ethnocentric pretension and, in the long run, provincial” (2008, 192).

¹⁰ Blackburn includes poetry by Mateo Rosas de Oquendo (1559?–1612) and Juan del Valle y Caviedes (1645–1697) as examples of Latin American picaresque works.

¹¹ Says Moretti: “The tree describes the passage from unity to diversity: one tree, with many branches.... The wave is the opposite: it observes uniformity engulfing an initial diversity.... Trees need geographical *discontinuity* (in order to branch off from each other, languages must first be separated in space, just like animal species); waves dislike barriers, and thrive on geographical *continuity* (from the view point of a wave, the ideal world is a pond). Trees and branches are what nation states ding to; waves are what markets do” (2013, 60).

Taking Moretti's proposal unquestioningly, a study such as this one would have to read the Mexican picaresque as yet another branch of the Spanish picaresque root and explain these narratives according to a largely recognizable set of features of the picaresque genre. However, an approach such as this one would disregard Moretti's own assertion about the power struggle involved in how forms travel and change, as well as my own reluctance to understand literary history in terms of origins and genealogies. Rather, I would like to suggest Deleuze and Guattari's (2005) rhizome as a third metaphor to explain the Mexican picaresque free from the constraints imposed by chronologies and fixed literary classifications. Because of its principles of multiplicity, heterogeneity, cartography, and rupture, the rhizome resists the idea of hierarchies, origins, and closures. Read in a rhizomatic key, the Mexican picaresque does not reject its alliance to the Spanish and European tradition, but it does become a territory governed by its own rules.¹²

What I propose is an understanding of the picaresque beyond purity and lineage by following just one of the many canals through which it flows. Without the Spanish-root paradigm constraining our vision, a model of the picaresque as a global literary form makes it possible to propose texts such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* as well as Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios* as different deployments of the same narrative strategies, as Robert Stone does in a study that suggests colonialism as the crucial element to understand the picaresque as a literary form.¹³ Far from a prescriptive point of view, I am less interested in what the picaresque *is* than in what it *does*, and more importantly, in studying the specific conditions that trigger the writing of picaresque narratives in Mexico. I do so by focusing on what I deem the most salient feature of these narratives: the written mediation of—and the presence of fictional writers in—the pícaro's first-person account.

Sevilla (2001, xv) has stressed the relevance of what he calls the "dialogic design" of picaresque narratives, that is, the fact that pícaros "perform the role of conversationalists, giving an explicit margin of participation to their interlocutors." In Mexican picaresque narratives, the pícaros' addressees are consistently part of an intellectual clique, members of what Ángel Rama (1996) would call "the lettered city": novelists, poets, and journalists who are willing to listen to pícaros and write their story.¹⁴ I regard the presence of these characters and their written mediation as a leitmotif in Mexican literature that privileges the picaresque as a convenient device for writers to reflect on the material conditions of their own work by narrating the adventures of the pícaro. In so doing they exploit picaresque conventions—particularly the use of a first-person point of view—to their advantage, making the picaresque a forceful denunciation of the disenfranchisement of literature from the public sphere, and an account of the material conditions necessary to produce literature.

The writers' sense of vulnerability, which the Mexican picaresque embodies, can be better apprehended by stressing the double nature on which the hegemony of Rama's lettered city is founded: the *letrados* are simultaneously servants and masters of power (1996, 22). Paul Julian Smith (1988, 117) poses a relevant question in terms of understanding picaresque narratives: "What conditions enabled such a text to be produced?" He argues that the picaresque, "more perhaps than any other genre, reveals the action of the *parergon*; that is, the element in any system which is at once essential and superfluous, dominant and subordinate, inside and outside the confines of relevance; and which ... may be seen as analogous to the 'frame' which surrounds all representative space" (Smith 1988, 121). For the Mexican picaresque, I would argue, this element is literature. As I will show in what follows, the constant presence of writers in picaresque narratives channels a sense of marginality that goes beyond the world of the pícaro and applies to all subjects related to the circulation of literature.

Writing and the Picaresque Economy

At the beginning of Zapata's most renowned novel, *El vampiro de la colonia Roma*, Adonis García, the protagonist, utters the following question: "¡puta madre! ¿contarte mi vida? y ¿para qué? ¿a quién le puede interesar?" (2008, 15). These words, addressed to a writer who is tape-recording the conversation, are relevant not only because they force us to reflect on the purpose of the picaresque account—a purpose that

¹² After all, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, "The important point is that the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models: the first operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes; the second operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies, even if it gives rise to a despotic channel" (2005, 20).

¹³ Stone goes so far as to suggest an inversion to the idea of a Spanish hegemony over the literary form: "In fact, the pícaro *per se* appears after real-world exemplars have sent their letters home from the New World" (1998, 25). It is not my intention, however, to replace one genealogy with a new one.

¹⁴ These are the main characters of each narrative and their addressees: Alonso Ramírez, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora; Periquillo, Fernández de Lizardi (although Periquillo is writing for his children, it is Fernández de Lizardi who ultimately receives the manuscript and amends it before its publication); Pito Pérez, poet; Jesusa Palancares, Elena Poniatowska; Adonis García, unnamed writer; Selene Sepúlveda, journalist; Fortuna Faik, Josefina Estrada; Violetta, Pig; Gustavo Sánchez, Beto Balser.

ever since Lázaro's case has been clearly attached to a personal agenda that includes both an exculpatory monologue and a blunt intention of social mobility—but also because it points toward the presence of an addressee who we, as readers, rarely see or hear, but who is always there as mediator.¹⁵ In a compelling essay on Zapata's novel, Brad Epps (2006, 114) stresses the importance of this mediation by arguing that “the orality that marks *El vampiro*, mediated as it is by tape recorders, transcriptions, and literary history, paradoxically throws writing into relief by questioning its ability to account for everything, and maybe even anything.” Yet, the presence of fictionalized writers mediating the pícaro's life account is so consistent in these narratives that one has to ask whether the relationship between writers and pícaros engages with what Samuel Steinberg (2013) has theorized as an “originary debt” that he traces back to *El Periquillo* to understand where Latin American fiction arises from. According to Steinberg, “Latin American literature begins with duty, in service and in servitude to an extrinsic truth that seem to rule it” (2013, 43). Taking José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's novel as a case study, he asserts that “literature is born, but it comes about in an obligatory relation to the material conditions of its writing and publication. Writing is thus answerable to an outside both necessary and *real* as its condition of possibility” (Steinberg 2013, 44).

While in Steinberg's insightful essay the picaresque form takes a secondary place, I am interested in emphasizing that the Mexican picaresque relies heavily on the concept of debt because both pícaros and letrados see themselves as being part of a transaction that starts in the moment in which pícaros begin their account of their life. As Malkmus (2007, 179) has pointed out, “the success of the picaresque itinerary throughout social and political territory is measured by the circulation of material goods and rhetorical currency—created by the pícaro of nothing.” But this “rhetorical currency” is not the only element at stake, because writers are also following, by the writing of their literature, the circulation of another valuable currency, the one that comes from symbolic and cultural capital. Thus, the “residue of this debt and duty, as both ethico-political impetus and politico-economic necessity”—which Steinberg reads in *El periquillo* as “the specifically Spanish American form of the question ‘what for?’ to paraphrase Adorno, which the arts struggle to answer and overcome” (2013, 45)—is deeply embedded in the picaresque form as a way of questioning the place and motives behind the encounter between the two otherwise distant figures of the letrado and the pícaro.

We find an example of this transaction in Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora's *Los infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*. At the end of his narrative, Alonso Ramírez explains that the Viceroy sent him to pay Sigüenza a visit to recount his life story:

Mandome, o por el afecto con que lo mira, o quizá porque estando enfermo divirtiese sus males con la noticia que yo le daría de los muchos [males] míos, fuese a visitar a don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, cosmógrafo y catedrático de matemáticas del rey nuestro Señor en la Academia Mexicana y capellán mayor del Hospital Real del Amor de Dios de la Ciudad de México, *títulos son éstos que suenan mucho y valen muy poco, y a cuyo ejercicio le empeña más la reputación que la conveniencia.* (2019, 81, emphasis mine)

In the original 1690 edition, the last words of this quote appear in parenthesis. It is perhaps because of their parenthetical nature that these words have caught the attention of scholars; for regardless of being part of Ramírez's account, it is Sigüenza's voice and point of view that stands out between these parentheses, simultaneously present there but belonging to a quite different sphere, disrupting “what would otherwise represent customary relations of vassalage between Ramírez and the viceroy” (More 2012, 205). Sigüenza is not visible only there, in parentheses, and in the most erudite passages of the narration—as Aníbal González (1983) has pointed out—but since the beginning of the text and all throughout it.¹⁶

¹⁵ Incidentally, the opening of Zapata's novel opposes *Lazarillo's* prologue, in which the protagonist affirms his belief in the relevance of his words: “Yo por bien tengo que cosas tan señaladas, y por ventura nunca oídas ni vistas, vengan a noticia de muchos y no se entierren en la sepultura del olvido” (Anónimo 1992, 3).

¹⁶ According to González (1983, 202), there is in the text a first-person rhetoric that allows readers to identify both voices, a rhetoric that is mainly based on how much information the narrator gives and how much he conceals. It is by reading these silences that Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (2008, 156) has advanced her theory about how Alonso Ramírez's account exposes “weakened limits of the Spanish Empire.” It is perhaps Álvaro Félix Bolaños's (1995) reading of *Los infortunios* that elaborates most insightfully on this double-voiced narration. Building upon González's analysis, Bolaños poses Sigüenza's mediation as a coauthorship in which both Sigüenza and Ramírez invest their own agenda in the story. To him, Sigüenza's main interest is to uplift and praise Ramírez's account by providing it with three fundamental features: first, a form that resembles that of a *relación*, whose judicial tone opens the possibility for picaresque echoes; second, the use of irony to turn Ramírez's story into a social and political critique; and finally, a general interpretation of Ramírez as a good Christian who faced and survived the hostility of the world (Bolaños 1995, 137).

Because of his relation to the Viceroy, one of intellectual servitude because of patronage, Sigüenza had no choice but to hear and put in writing the story of a Puerto Rican creole of humble extraction who most likely had become a pirate, and who was claiming ownership of a ship full of goods that he most likely had stolen along the way until his ship sank off the coast of Yucatán, because the Viceroy was using Ramírez's story for his own political purpose.¹⁷ Nonetheless, he made sure to state that there were things that he would do more for his reputation's sake than for his own convenience or economic benefit. By clearly differing in tone from Ramírez's bold voice, the closing paragraph thus allow us to read the narrative as the unfolding of two different kinds of servitude—Ramírez's subjection to the pirates, and Sigüenza's obligations to the Viceroy—setting in motion a presentation of intellectual labor as precarious and vulnerable as the Puerto Rican's position in the midst of his perils. By the end of the book, what Ramírez seems to value most in this relationship is the fact that he can recover his wrecked ship and all the material goods in it without incurring any debt. As it is, the very last words of *Infortunios* speak of a debt that has been forgiven.¹⁸

Debt is also deeply embedded in the picaresque understanding of life, as we see at the beginning of Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*: "Mi deuda debe ser muy pesada ya que Dios me quitó a mis padres desde chica y dejó que viniera a abonar mis culpas sola como lazarina" (2014, 10).¹⁹ Poniatowska's testimonial novel offers a perfect example of how the transaction between pícaros and letrados unfolds around the writer's identification with the marginalized place of the pícara. In yet another account of their acquaintance, Poniatowska remembers the moment in which she expressed her willingness to spend time and talk with Josefina Bórquez, the real name of the woman on whom the character is based. Jesusa's straight answer—"¿Conmigo? Mire yo trabajo. Si no trabajo, no como. No tengo campo de andar platicando" (1978, 5)—situates the conversation within the context of labor, emphasizing the impossibility of giving an account of oneself while enduring a precarious existence.²⁰ Most of Jesusa's reproaches to Poniatowska deal with a sense of being taken for granted and of not being understood at all by her addressee: "Mire. Usted tiene dos años de venir y estar chingue y chingue y no entiende nada. Así es de que mejor allí le paramos" (1978, 6).²¹

What is it that Poniatowska doesn't understand, according to Jesusa's point of view? Later in the same piece, it is Poniatowska who provides the answer: "En las tardes de los miércoles iba yo a ver a la Jesusa y en la noche, al llegar a la casa acompañaba a mi mamá a algún coctel en alguna embajada. Siempre pretendí mantener el equilibrio entre la extrema pobreza que compartía en las tardes, con el lucerío de las recepciones" (1978, 10).²² Part of my argument consists in reading the Mexican picaresque as an attempt by writers to close this gap and, moreover, to present themselves as yet another example of precarious existence.²³

Debt also lies at the core of Xavier Velasco's *Diablo guardián*, whose plot unfolds around protagonist Violetta's debt to her parents after stealing money from them: "Exactamente mil ciento dieciocho billetes

¹⁷ As Fabio López Lázaro (Sigüenza 2011, 25) asserts, "In commissioning *Misfortunes* Galve's publicity campaign against pirates and dodgy allies was twofold. First, Ramírez's story was constructed as a public event to arouse Hispanic indignation against buccaners and other predatory foreigners, and Ramírez undoubtedly acquired regional celebrity status for a time. Second, once the book itself arrived in Madrid in late 1690, it encouraged Spanish councilors there to adopt a policy of keeping Spain's dangerously powerful Grand Alliance partners against France at arm's length, particularly in terms of American campaigns. This popular and high-level campaign argued that England and Holland were allies under duress, which explains why *Misfortunes* catered to a relatively old-fashioned but enduring stereotype—England was perfidious (*la pérfide Albion*), a place which bred heretics and pirates who preyed primarily on their archenemies: Spanish subjects."

¹⁸ "Ayudome [Sigüenza y Góngora] para mi viático con lo que pudo, y disponiendo [que] bajase a la Veracruz en compañía de don Juan Enríquez Barroto, capitán de la artillería de la Real Armada de Barlovento, mancebo excelente consumado en la hidrografía, docto en las ciencias matemáticas, y por eso íntimo amigo y huésped suyo en esta ocasión, me excusó de gastos" (Sigüenza y Góngora 2019, 82).

¹⁹ Cynthia Steele (1992, 37) reads the picaresque element of the book as a way for Poniatowska to emphasize "the radical absence of opportunities for social mobility in post-revolutionary Mexico."

²⁰ Poniatowska has referred many times to the story of her acquaintance with Josefina Bórquez. Beth Jörgensen (1994, 52–54) analyzes these narratives in terms of a "(con)fusion of character and informant."

²¹ Doris Sommer's reading of Jesusa's final message points toward her reluctance to speak: "The message to Poniatowska (and readers) is not only to save your crocodile tears after you have taken my life but also that the life you have managed to eke out over years of diligent plunder (or hours of voracious reading) is indigestible for you because it needs no digesting; it is too simple to be processed or to leave nourishing traces, so it is simply expelled and forgotten" (Sommer 1995, 937).

²² Jean Franco (1989, 181–182) emphasizes the gap between Poniatowska and Jesusa by contending that the book "is not simply a spontaneous life story, but a complex intersection between narrator and listener which ends by affirming the disparity of their projects."

²³ In fact, in her classic study on Poniatowska, Jörgensen concludes that "the writing of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was a crucial moment in her engagement with Mexican society, a hinge between a past and future, between not belonging and belonging, between observation of and participation in her nation's life" (1994, 65).

de cien, cuarentaidós de cincuenta, treinta ocho de veinte y tres de diez. Sólo hay algo mejor que gastar el dinero: contarlo” (2016, 89). Violetta’s words hint at another side of the picaresque economy, one that “emphasises the concept of circulation rather than accumulation” (Malkmus 2007, 196). Because of this emphasis on lavish spending, pícaros naturalize exploitation as a practice that allows them, and the people around them, to stay in the economy of circulation. As Violetta asserts in *Diablo guardián*, when she brags about being the prize herself for a lottery that she organized at bachelor parties after having sex with the groom: “Viva la libre empresa” (Velasco 2016, 428).²⁴

To inquire about the exchanges between pícaros and *letrados*, let us explore further Velasco’s novel, perhaps the most telling example of all. *Diablo guardián* alternates Violetta’s first-person account of her life with the story of Pig, an aspiring writer who keeps failing to finish his first novel. After spending all the inheritance from his mother, he starts writing copy at the same advertising agency where Violetta works and where the two of them meet. To him, landing this job is nothing more than an acknowledgement of his failure as writer: “Hay que hacer porquerías,” his boss informs him when explaining how the business works: “Hay que olvidar el periodismo, las novelas, los poemas. Aquí vas a aprender a hacer basura” (197).

It is at this point that the parallels between the two characters begin to make themselves known. To put it in Violetta’s words, “Pensé: *Este güey estaba haciendo una novela y ahora aquí lo tenemos puteando*. Yo quería vivir en mi película y cada vez que lo intentaba terminaba puteando” (461). Pig’s willingness to put his pen to the service of copy is presented, thus, as akin to prostitution, and his supposed talent for writing will be constantly overshadowed by the requirements of his new job, in which the literary stands second to the monetary. Being mocked by his boss as “El Poeta del Copy” (415), Pig is now subject to a system in which the value of words and writing depends not on any aesthetic quality but on their ability to sell. The title of chapter 21—“Rento par de metáforas con poco uso” (411)—stands as a statement that could be read in terms of the transition of writers from a supposedly powerful place within the confines of the lettered city to the precarious labor market in the creative economy.

In this context, the opportunity to write Violetta’s life story is presented as a task that gives back to Pig the ability to exercise the power that comes with the written word. A servant in the world of advertisement, Pig again becomes the master when it comes to Violetta’s life, as she constantly asserts: “Cuando escribas mi vida lo pones todo en orden, ¿sí?” (74). But however powerful the writer seems to be by virtue of having the ability to structure, arrange, and tell someone else’s life story, he will always depend on the pícara to keep talking, and thus fueling his narrative with enough material for him to retell. Their relationship, then, involves a transaction in which the exculpation that the protagonist seeks, and the reaffirmation that the writer pursues, yields a mimicry of identities, blurring the boundaries that divide the opposition between them.²⁵

Writing and the Picaresque Identity

The blurred opposition between the pícaro’s and the *letrado*’s identity in Mexican literature takes at least three forms. In the first, pícaros are not illiterate subalterns but educated subjects. A famous episode in *El periquillo sarniento* finds Pedro Sarmiento in jail serving as scribe for fellow inmates who need to send letters to friends and family, until the notary offers him a position as copyist: “Como el escribano vio mi letra en el escrito se prendó de ella, y fue cabalmente a tiempo que se le despidió el amanuense, y valiéndose de la amistad con el alcaide, me propuso que si quería escribirle a la mano que me daría cuatro reales diarios” (Fernández de Lizardi 2008, 476). The characterization of writing as labor is emphasized later in the novel, when Perico is writing in Latin to impress a possible master, a pharmacist: “—¡Hola!, dijo mi amo todo admirado, escribe bien el muchacho y en latín. Pues qué, ¿entiendes lo que has escrito? —Sí, señor, le dije; eso dice que los que no saben escribir piensan que no es trabajo; pero que mientras tres dedos escriben se incomoda todo el cuerpo” (514).

Periquillo’s ability is mirrored more than a century later, in Romero’s *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez*. Pito’s beautiful handwriting gets him a job at court: “Por aquel entonces la cruda suerte aún no alteraba mi pulso y era yo poseedor de una letra hermosa, redonda y clara. Cuando Vásquez, el secretario, la conoció, invitome a servirle de amanuense” (Romero 2007, 60). Moreover, as with Perico, Pito Pérez puts his ability

²⁴ Epps (2006, 103) signals the double nature of exploitation in *El vampiro*: exploitation “is not something that Adonis merely ‘does’ to others. If Adonis dupes and deceives, he is also manipulated, ridiculed, and derided by others, including some of his clients.” The same holds true for all pícaros.

²⁵ In the prologue to the 2013 commemorative edition of the novel, Velasco provides a detailed account of the writing of the novel, drawing parallels between Pig, the fictional writer, and himself.

at the service of fellow inmates in jail: “He sido el amanuense obligado de centeraneras de reclusos; los puntos de mi pluma fueron ojos para llorar ausencias, bocas para gritar agravios, troquel de recuerdos para madres, esposas o hijos desventurados” (Romero 2007, 91). These pícaros know how to write, and they do it beautifully. This ability, however, comes with at least one caveat; it is an ability tied to cheap labor, not worth enough for them to break the precarious cycle in which they live. In this view, the writers’ most valuable skill is presented as the opposite of a profitable and, more importantly, beneficial profession.

A second form materializes when pícaros, because of addressing a writer, feel the urge to become writers themselves. Selene Sepúlveda, Serna’s *Señorita México* protagonist, fantasizes about a distant future in which she can spend her retirement reading, painting, and writing: “Tendría una biblioteca enorme y me pasaría las tardes leyendo buenas novelas, libros de cultura, biografías de gente famosa. Para estar en forma, en las mañanas saldría a correr en la playa y luego me encerraría en el estudio a pintar, porque también me gusta el dibujo, creo que tengo facilidad. A lo mejor escribo mis memorias. ¿Usted cree que mi vida se vendería? Bueno, lo haría por gusto, no para ganar dinero” (Serna 2000, 161).

What Selene sells as a modest and quiet existence is actually a precarious life in a small apartment that she shares with her best friend and lover, and that she is only able to pay for by working as a leading star in a nightclub. The questions she poses at the end of her fantasy—Is writing profitable? Is my life story marketable?—indicate her deepest thoughts and intentions, a slip that she quickly amends by placing pleasure over money as the reason for writing. These concerns, nonetheless, prove relevant to Mexican picaresque narratives, making them about both the value of a marginalized life and the value of writing itself.

Writing also proves relevant for posing questions about identity. Fortuna Faik, Josefina Estrada’s protagonist in *Virgen de medianoche*, explains this when she talks about the literary workshop she attends in jail: “La Miss de literatura me explica el significado de las palabras. Nunca me deja con la duda y eso me estimula. Mi escritura y versos le gustan. Me agrada esa clase porque, además de que nos enseña formas y métodos para escribir, nos obliga a sabernos escuchar entre nosotras” (Estrada 1996, 114). The hierarchy that privileges writers over pícaros is an element that operates even when the pícaro is, in fact, writing, and not telling, his or her own life story, as happens at the end of Pedro Sarmiento’s account, before Fernández de Lizardi takes over: “dejé a mi amigo el Pensador mis comunicados y estos cuadernos para que los corrija y note, pues me hallo muy enfermo” (Fernández de Lizardi 2008, 921). It is, thus, the writer’s duty to rewrite, amend, and correct the pícaro’s account, emphasizing the idea that that behind every great pícaro is a great writer.

A third result from the exchange between pícaros and letrados comes in the form of knowledge. Pícaros, in Mexican literature, seem educated enough to comfortably link episodes of their lives not only to other picaresque narratives but to literature from different genres and traditions. Many times, we find pícaros around books, but constant references to literature open the door to questions regarding how and why writers insist on presenting these marginalized characters as readers. Pito Pérez’s account offers an example of this emphasis on the pícaro’s literary knowledge when he explicitly refers to picaresque novels: “Usted mismo, a quien estoy contando mi historia, ¿se ha preocupado por conocerme, por estudiarme con alguna indulgencia? No, usted quiere que yo le cuente mis andanzas de Periquillo o mis argucias de Gil Blas” (Romero 2007, 66). When dealing with these kinds of references, we can either assume that characters such as Periquillo or Gil Blas are so embedded in popular culture that even someone with no formal education like Pito Pérez knows of them, or we can read these literary moments as clear interventions of the hand behind the puppets. The latter option becomes more and more plausible when we realize Pito talks of authors that in no way could he have read about. References to Goethe, Lamartine, and Hugo not only make Pito seem out of character but also stand out because they come in isolated clusters throughout the narrative.

The most revealing example of the presence of literary references in these narratives is Gustavo Sánchez Sánchez Carretera’s account in Valeria Luiselli’s *La historia de mis dientes* (2013). The book is inundated with secondary characters named after writers. Some of them are renowned literary figures—a neighbor from Gustavo’s childhood is, for instance, Julio Cortázar. Some others are established writers from the Mexican literary canon—two of Carretera’s fellow workers at the juice factory are, for example, Salvador Novo and Joselito Vasconcelos. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, more and more emerging Mexican writers’ names appear as minor characters, making the name-dropping almost impossible to discern unless one is an avid and up-to-date reader of Mexican literature or a member of the current Mexican literary milieu. Finally, the main character’s genealogy is built upon a mix of literary traditions, as the names of his uncles show: Marcelo Sánchez Proust, James Sánchez Joyce, Ludwig Sánchez Wittgenstein, and Fredo Sánchez Dostoievski (Luiselli 2013, 15).

Asked in an interview about this name-dropping, Luiselli has suggested displacement as a strategy to explore what happens to an author’s identity when his or her name is placed within a different

context.²⁶ From the point of view of the transaction between pícaros and letrados, this makes Luiselli's *La historia de mis dientes* the most self-conscious picaresque narrative of all the ones included in this article. The answer to her question, however, might not be an optimistic one: nothing happens when she uses a writer's name without the writer's identity. Writers, in Luiselli's novel, are nothing but empty names, barely recognizable to others outside the lettered city, who are the very public to whom the book was *not* originally addressed.²⁷ Yet, at the core of Gustavo Sánchez Sánchez Carretera's life story there is a fierce critique of material consumption and the conviction that narratives and stories are valuable goods, as proved by his signature method for conducting auctions: "Fue en el «Secret of the Night» donde Carretera empezó a poner en práctica su famoso método alegórico, que había concebido años atrás, en sus años de aprendizaje de subastador. Por respeto a Carretera, no puedo detallar los secretos del método, pero puedo decir que durante las subastas alegóricas no se subastaban objetos, sino las historias que les daban valor y significado" (Luiselli 2013, 121).

The role of narratives, according to Carretera, is threefold. First, they provide meaning to the world, and by doing so they create value for things. Second, they entertain: "Con los meses, Carretera, a quien no le faltaba ingenio, optó por aprovechar cuando se le zafaba un poco la dentadura para quitársela completamente. La tomaba entre los dedos, como hacen las sevillanas con las castañuelas al bailar flamenco y, dependiendo de la ocasión, la ponía a hablar o a cantar y a contar historias fascinantes de los objetos que alguna vez habían formado parte de sus Coleccionables" (Luiselli 2013, 118).

Finally, they bring communities together, as Carretera intends with his last project: a tourism company based on the stories of the people in the neighborhood: "Lo importante es contar historias del barrio. En cuanto haya más historias, va a haber gente que venga a oírlas" (Luiselli 2013, 97). If you tell their stories, Carretera suggests, there will be an audience.

Valuing Literature

The characterization of writers as marginal subjects arises from a reflection of the role of intellectual labor in a commodified market. Perhaps the author that most fully presents this perspective is Fernández de Lizardi, who in *El periquillo sarniento* (1816–1831) establishes the activity of writing fiction in terms of debt, investment, and circulation, or as the author put it in the prologue of *El periquillo's* second volume: "Es verdad que apatecería tener no ya muchos lectores, sino muchos compradores, a lo menos tantos cuantos se necesitan para costear la impresión y compensarme el tiempo que gasto en escribi" (Fernández de Lizardi 2008, 293). The Mexican picaresque reflects, ultimately, on the value of literature in society but also presents a case to vindicate the act of writing as underestimated and cheap labor. If writing literature is not enough for a writer to earn a decent wage, the narrative goes, writers are forced to take on many other jobs that eat away at their time to write. Gustavo Sánchez Sánchez Carretera's eloquent dialogue with Beto Bálsar explains the problem as follows:

Yo necesito recuperar mis dignidades, o de perdida mis dientes, porque sin éstos no puedo reciclar nada, déjate tú comer y hablar como un ser humano. Y tú ocupas dinero, tiempo, libertad, paz, experiencia laboral, calle, mujeres, estimulantes, y todo lo que seguramente requieren tus obras maestras.

Así es, señor.

Pero no puedes. No tienes nada de eso porque viajas dos horas todos los días hasta el mugroso centro de la ciudad, donde trabajas para un hijo de perra que te explota, y vuelves a tu departamento, donde viven otros jóvenes como tú, vestidos igual de raro, y resulta que la casa es un chiquero, así que te pones a fregar platos en la cocina, a barrer bolas de pelo en el piso, a doblar camisetas, colgar calcetines sin par, te haces un sánguich de puro queso porque el jamón ya se puso baboso y un poco verde, y al final de la jornada estás tan cansado y deprimido que no tienes alma para sentarte a hacer lo único que te gusta, que es escribir. (Luiselli 2013, 96)

²⁶ Luiselli answered the question in the following terms: "[Pensaba] en la construcción del artista como un personaje público, en la presencia del artista en su obra, en la importancia del tejido narrativo en torno a su obra, que le da un sentido que quizás no tenga sin ese discurso que la envuelve... Por eso, uno de los mecanismos que incorporé a la novela, traído del mundo de las artes, fue el de desplazar nombres de escritores de su contexto habitual, es decir despojarlos de sus referentes usuales y usarlos solo como nombres vacíos, dotados de una identidad distinta y lanzados sobre el texto para ver qué pasaba cuando usas un nombre como Julio Cortázar o Jorge Luis Borges en una historia donde aparecen sin su propia identidad, convertidos en conductores de camión o farmaceutas o lo que sea" (Silva 2016).

²⁷ In the afterword to the English translation, Luiselli (2015, 191–195) explains that the immediate public for the story was a group of workers at a juice factory in Mexico City. See Sauri (2018) for a lucid study on the material conditions of production of the novel.

Through the transaction between pícaros and letrados, the picaresque in Mexico responds to, and arises from, this narrative of marginalization. In his seminal study on *Lazarillo de Tormes*, John Beverley (1987, 64) opens a broad avenue to explain why the picaresque is still alive in the twentieth, and, we should add, the twenty-first century: “it is a literary form that allows the victims of capitalism to speak.” *La historia de mis dientes* engages with this idea inasmuch as it presents a pícaro fighting back against a system in which immaterial labor does not produce surplus value. By posing the question of who pícaros are, and how much are they worth within society, authors in Mexico pose the same question about themselves, thus turning the picaresque into a narrative of self-affirmation of one’s value.

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