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Objetos no declarados:
**The challenge of
translating Venezuelan
literature in the 21st
century**

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*“Yo escribí mis libros con el oído puesto sobre las palpitaciones de la angustia
venezolana”¹*

Rómulo Gallegos

For my parents and Lena for their unconditional love,
for Andy for his support and his patience,
and for Héctor Torres,
who has his ear to the palpitations
of the contemporary Venezuelan anguish.

¹ Translation proposal: “I wrote my books with my ear to the palpitations of the Venezuelan anguish”.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Personal motivations

Much has been written and argued about the precarious situation of the Venezuelan people. The once richest country in Latin America is now under the yoke of violence, administrative corruption, scarcity, and poverty. To date, an estimated six million Venezuelans have fled the country (nearly one in five), many of them undocumented, unprepared and on foot.

And while the need to highlight such news and articles is critical and paramount, there is rarely any reference in newspapers, social media, radio or television to the beauties and treasures that Venezuela possesses, especially those beyond petroleum and natural gas. Venezuela is a country of immense cultural wealth, of thinkers, writers, engineers, and artists. If a passerby were asked about Venezuela, they would answer that “it is currently in a very bad shape”, but they would be unable to name any work of literature, virtue, or positive aspect of the country. And that fact, although it may seem futile or unimportant, is irremediably heartbreaking.

While researching this unawareness about Venezuela, I came across the lack of diffusion of Venezuelan literature, with regard to the few works that are translated into English. Even though the great classics such as *Doña Bárbara*, *Las lanzas coloradas* or *Las Memorias de Mamá Blanca* have English translations, these are incredibly difficult to find, and this reality is exacerbated with regard to the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With the exception of Rafael Cadenas, the contemporary poet laureate and winner of the Reina Sofia Prize for Ibero-American Poetry in 2018 and the Miguel de Cervantes Prize in 2023, very few Venezuelan authors have their books translated, limiting their works to the Spanish-speaking world.

I feel, then, that my duty as a translator and a Venezuelan lies in the mission of building the bridge that enables greater visibility, knowledge, and appreciation for the literature of my country (or, at least, attempting to do so), especially in the current situation it faces. Nowadays, when writing about Venezuela, the narration mostly falls to third parties; that is, journalists who have never set foot on its streets and who publish sensationalist stories and accurate figures but lack the perspective of those who live them

in their own flesh. The contemporary Venezuelan story or novel precisely has migration as a central theme due to the harrowing mass exodus suffered by the country and the trail of psychological and social aftermath left in its wake.

Objetos no declarados is one of those stories. It is a book that delves into the suffering of the Venezuelan soul, which feels its wounds festering, whether it leaves its home or stays in it. Its title fittingly refers to those objects that we carry with us and yet do not declare when we cross the borders of a new country: hopes, memories, defeats, and nightmares. It seemed to me a piece of literature that accurately reflects the current feeling of Venezuela, narrated firsthand by someone who has lived it, suffered it and loves it as it is.

Although my main motivation for the purposes of this work is to translate four of the book's tales, it is my hope that the English translation of *Objetos no declarados*, as well as many other brilliant works of contemporary Venezuelan literature, will be a more emotional, profound, and moving means of sensitizing the international community to what is currently happening in Venezuela. Because Venezuela is still suffering, still bleeding, and still agonizing. And its struggle goes on.

1.2. Biography of Héctor Torres

Héctor Torres Carrillo, who was born June 29th, 1968 in Caracas, is a Venezuelan writer and editor. Since his childhood, his parents and teachers noticed in him a great interest in literature, influenced, among others, by Oscar Wilde, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, William Shakespeare, and Anton Chekhov. After graduating from high school, he began his studies in Computer Science, a degree he would later abandon to devote himself fully to writing and literature.

His work falls into the genre of narrative and includes novels, chronicles, and short stories. Among his titles are: *El amor en tres platos* (2007), *La huella del bisonte* (2008), *El regalo de Pandora* (2011), *Caracas muere* (2012), *Objetos no declarados* (2014), *La vida feroz* (2016) and *Presencias extrañas* (2021). Although his prose focuses mostly on narrative, he is also the author of a comic (*Gallegos, hombre de una sola calle* (2021)) and co-author of two film scripts (*Lucy* (2018) and *Una palabra complicada* (2021)).

In addition to his work as a writer, he is a fervent promoter of Venezuelan literature. He is a compiler, prologue writer, founder of blogs and websites such as Ficción Breve Venezolana and creator and coordinator of awards such as the Premio de Cuento Policlínica Metropolitana for Young Authors and the Premio de la Crítica a la Novela del Año.

1.3. *Objetos no declarados*: summary and argument

Objetos no declarados: 1001 maneras de ser venezolano mientras el barco se hunde (*Undeclared Objects: 1001 ways of being Venezuelan on a sinking ship*²) is a collection of thirty-three short stories written by Héctor Torres and published in 2014 as a continuation of *Caracas muere* (2012), his first set of chronicles about the particularities of being Venezuelan amidst the chaos, violence, and terror within the country and, more specifically, within its capital. Through the chronicle, the author intends to highlight the “undeclared objects”, the defining characteristics of “Venezuelanness”, such as the *viveza criolla* (literally translated as “the Creole way of life” but meaning a disrespect for institutions and laws and a tendency towards maximizing one’s benefits or advantages), compassion, terror, and perennial good humor, which constantly overlap and converge, often emotionally, instinctively and in a manner difficult to rationalize. The title *Undeclared Objects* alludes to the intrinsic elements that every Venezuelan carries within even into exile, taking them inadvertently through immigration and customs across oceans and borders, as they are part of their most intimate *Weltanschauung* and idiosyncrasy. That is why, as part of the “emotional suitcase” of each citizen, these objects, whether beneficial or detrimental, will be made manifest in the new country and the new reality in which Venezuelans find themselves, for, whether they like it or not, their roots constitute the cornerstone of their identity. As Torres (2014) puts it:

Como las familias, las ciudades son esos afectos que nos asignó un dios arbitrario y ocurente al que llamamos vida [...] Son el compás, la ventana, el patio desde donde nos contrastamos para sentirnos orgullosos y desafortunados, a un mismo tiempo. Incitan la rabia, el dolor, la indignación y el despecho que solo puede provocar lo que nos importa. Más que amarlas, nos resultan entrañables. Están presentes en cada silencio

² Translation proposal for the book’s title.

que escogemos, en cada juicio que emitimos, en cada insulto que proferimos. Nos aprovisionan de los códigos con los que amamos, los terrores de los que nos cuidamos, los límites que traspasamos. Esculpen nuestro sentido del humor y el gusto que deleita nuestro paladar.³

2. Objectives

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a proposal for the translation of four of the stories in *Undeclared Objects*, analyzing the difficulties encountered throughout the translation process and identifying the solutions chosen in each case according to the different schools of thought within Translation Studies. Likewise, the main difficulty that becomes evident is to find English equivalents for the jargon, terminology, expressions, and nuances of Venezuelan Spanish, for which the diatopic, diachronic, diaphasic, and other linguistic variations of the language become especially relevant.

This study pursues two main objectives: one practical and one awareness-raising. The first objective responds to a personal interest in translating a Venezuelan author, with the linguistic and cultural specificity the task entails, making use of the tools that, as a fellow Venezuelan, the author also possesses. Secondly, it is of special interest, given the current situation of the Venezuelan people, to contribute to the availability of literature on the subject in English, thus supporting the dissemination and expansion of the stories the country longs to share, written by the ones who know it best: the Venezuelans themselves. It is the purpose of this project, therefore, albeit in a minuscule and modest way, to make known the richness of current Venezuelan literature, which communicates both the national sufferings, pains, and sadness, as well as the worth, the hunger for future and the beauty that Venezuela possesses.

³ Translation proposal: Much like families, cities are those affections assigned to us by the arbitrary and whimsical god we call life [...] They are the rhythm, the window, the stage from which we contrast ourselves in order to feel proud and unfortunate at the same time. They incite the rage, pain, indignation, and spite that can only be provoked by that which matters to us. More than loving them, we find them endearing. They are present in every silence we choose, in every judgment we make, in every insult we utter. They supply us with the codes we love with, the terrors we guard against, the limits we cross. They sculpt our sense of humor and the taste that delights our palate.

3. Methodology

The task proposed in the objectives will be carried out as follows: after reading the entire work, four stories were selected for translation and subsequent analysis. The criterion for choosing these stories is based on the presence of either complex terminology (words or concepts of great cultural specificity) that present a translational challenge or narratives that highlight the explanation or description of the Venezuelan character and its nature. In this sense, the choice of excerpts is intended to bring the reader as close as possible to Venezuelan expressions, ideals, and culture. Thus, according to the above, the selected stories are: *De carambola, como en el billar, Al que pela el chingo...*, *Some kind of nature*, and *Cenestesia*.

First, a theoretical framework will be proposed focusing on the field of literary translation and the main difficulties it entails, such as linguistic variation in its multiple modalities and the presence of culturemes. The main translational strategies that translation theories offer as tools to overcome these obstacles will also be presented.

After the theoretical framework, an analysis will follow, and the translation proposals will be presented together with the commentary and description of the difficulties encountered and the tools or strategies used to solve them. For this purpose, the present work will use comparative tables in which extracts of the original stories and the proposed translations will be studied, although both versions can be found in their entirety in the annexes.

4. State of the issue

4. 1. Background on the translation of Venezuelan literature

The translation of Venezuelan literary works into other languages has historically been very limited. In the case of Latin America, Berman (1985) outlined four stages of translation of Latin American literature into French, a pattern that was similarly repeated in English translations: before the wars of independence, after the wars of independence, the Latin American boom of the 1960s, and “the present”, which encompasses translations of lesser-known authors.

The Venezuelan case follows a similar pattern, although slightly overshadowed by boom authors such as García Márquez, Cortázar, Borges and Vargas Llosa. Although the genesis of Venezuelan literature dates back to colonial times and mostly to texts of a religious and political nature introduced by the Spanish conquistadors, it would not be until the 19th century, with the consolidation of Venezuela as an independent nation, that its literature would begin to flourish (Munday, 1996). During this period, authors such as Eduardo Blanco, Andrés Bello, and Francisco Lazo Martí stood out.

In the 20th century, characterized in Venezuela by the oil bonanza, great names of national literature such as Arturo Úslar Pietri, Salvador Garmendia, Andrés Eloy Blanco, Aquiles Nazoa, Miguel Otero Silva and Teresa de la Parra would emerge. However, the most notable work would be *Doña Bárbara*, published in 1929 by Rómulo Gallegos and translated into English in 1931, which would come to be considered one of the most important works of Latin American literature. The translation of this work, along with other examples such as *Mama Blanca's Souvenirs* and *Iphigenia*, constitute some of the limited works of classic Venezuelan literature translated into other languages. Regarding this, Troconis (2019) argues that the lack of knowledge of Venezuelan literature is due to factors such as the “almost exclusive reliance on national publishing houses, the impossibility of a recognizable literary identity, and the lack of noteworthy innovation”.

Starting in the 1990s and with the arrival of Hugo Chávez to the Venezuelan political scene, there was a resurgence of interest in Venezuelan literature, especially after the awarding of international prizes to authors such as Alberto Barrera Tyszka and Rafael Cadenas. This exposure to Venezuelan literature was due, among other things, to the waves of emigration that exported Venezuelan culture to all corners of the world.

The current reality is that finding Venezuelan works translated into English is an arduous task, especially considering that such literature, in itself, is not widely available in Spanish-speaking countries. One can find, for example, informal initiatives such as *Venezuelan Literature*, a British website that compiles Venezuelan literary works and their English translations. However, contemporary literature has made a comeback dominated by writers exiled as a result of the Venezuelan diaspora through a prose that focuses on the description of the violent and complex reality that currently afflicts the country.

4. 2. Market analysis: the demand for literary translation

It is of interest, when analyzing the English-speaking literary market, to establish a comparison between the United States and Europe. According to Publishers Weekly's Translation Database, in the United States only 3% of published books are translations. Furthermore, of that 3%, only a small fraction gets enough publicity to be noticed by American readers, who are not actively seeking translated content. It should also be added that, according to Publishers Weekly, only 79 books written in Spanish were translated into English in 2020 (Publishers Weekly, 2023) with a special interest in Argentinian and Mexican authors. However, more and more smaller scale publishers are emerging that strive to translate Latin American literature such as Charco Press, And Other Stories, and Peepal Tree Press in the United Kingdom and Coffee House Press and 7Vientos in the United States.

When it comes to looking at the European market, the outlook is slightly more hopeful than in the United States. While the United Kingdom also used to rank around 3% of translated texts among its yearly publications, according to its Translators Association that number has grown to 5.63% in 2019 with a clear preference for works in Swedish and Norwegian (Translators Association, 2023).

Despite the North American publishers' figures and the situation of the current British literary market, it is worth noting a notable interest in the last decade for Venezuelan literature that provides perspectives, stories and approaches that describe the current political, economic, and social situation that the country is going through. Among the latter are works such as *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution*, *Comandante: Inside Hugo Chávez's Venezuela*, *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez*, *Blogging the Revolution: Caracas Chronicles and the Hugo Chávez Era*, and *Crude Nation: How Oil Riches Ruined Venezuela*.

5. Theoretical framework

5.1. Literary translation

Literary translation is a craft whose antiquity dates back almost to the creation of writing itself. However, it was not until the 19th century that it began to be considered as a professional discipline distinct from the one the writer exercises (Calvo, 2018). Until then, literary translation was referred to as just another modality of literary

creation. Literary translators were considered writers and the translated text was largely regarded as an original work. According to Calvo (2018), it is thanks to the influence of the translation of biblical texts and the increased need for communication between different languages and literary traditions that translated texts began to be progressively subjected to a series of minimum criteria of correctness for the sake of quality and equivalence. That is, the translated work must preserve the stylistic elements, registers, and particularities that characterize the original text as a literary work.

Bartrina (2017) argues that literary texts are characterized by making an aesthetic use of language where an intentional relationship between form and content is established. Thus, form has the same importance as meaning, so the mere equivalence of meaning in translation is not enough. For this reason, literary translation is often defined in contrast to technical translation, which is more focused on the transmission of information, conciseness, and accuracy. Literary texts are characterized by the diversity of styles, dialects and, above all, numerous cultural references. There are also different literary genres that require the mastery of various translation skills. Literary texts fall mainly into three categories: poetry, narrative, and theater (Torres Nebrera, 1997). In this dissertation, the focus will be on the literary genre that concerns the novel under analysis: narrative.

Jakobson (1963) proposes six basic functions of language: emotive, conative, referential, phatic, metalinguistic, and poetic. Of all of them, the main function in any literary work is the poetic function, to which the others are subordinate, and which is characterized by the creation through language of a world or reality of its own (Calvo, 2018). It is for this reason that, when translating narrative, there are a myriad of possible translations, very diverse and equally correct. Moreover, when translating this type of genre, in addition to the aesthetic conventions and the historical, social, and cultural circumstances of the time in which it is translated, the individuality of the translator and their way of seeing the world comes into play (Calvo, 2018). The translator must put into practice their skills to find a suitable tone in the target language that reflects the style used by the author in the source text. Within the style, we can consider aspects such as punctuation, sentence length distribution, rhythmic elements, register, dialects, slang, vulgarisms, puns, figurative language, intertextuality or cultural and extralinguistic references, among others.

When it comes to translating literary texts, functionalism has proven to be one of the most effective tools at the translator's disposal. However, functionalist approaches have, almost since their origin in the late 1970s, given rise to criticisms concerning, among other things, the purpose of literature. Broadly speaking, it is argued that literature lacks a specific purpose, so the rule of the primacy of *skopos* would not be valid. Skopos theory (from the Greek σκοπός meaning "aim" or "purpose") was first introduced in 1978 by Hans Vermeer in the hopes of closing the gaps of the Equivalency Theory by considering translations as purposeful actions that strive to reach, besides linguistic equivalence, the adaptation of communicative structures and cultural circumstances or contexts (Du Xiaoyan, 2012). According to Nord, "each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve this purpose. The Skopos rule thus reads as follows: "translate/interpret/speak/write in a way that enables your text/translation to function in the situation it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function" (Nord, 1997). Furthermore, the author proposes that, in order to identify the important factors for the translation of a literary text, special attention should be paid to the intention of the sender, that is, the author. Said intention must be adapted to the target situation as much as possible, making use of the linguistic means that the target culture possesses (Nord, 1997).

In another vein, Huertas (2012) states that authors such as Kohlmeyer argue that literary texts do not perform any function, and that skopos theory does not respect the source text. However, for the purpose of this study, statements such as those provided by Vermeer and Chesterman towards the intrinsic purpose of any communicative act are of special value. In that regard:

Implied in the axiom is the assumption that every translation has a skopos in the first place. Is this assumption testable? Could we in principle refute the claim by finding a translation that does not have a skopos? Perhaps not. Skopos theorists would say that the skopos is always already there, even if not well defined or even definable (Chesterman 2010).

According to this school of thought, the translator is considered an expert who establishes the purpose of translation according to the intention of the original text and, therefore, decides how to translate a given text taking into account the knowledge, expectations, and culture of the target audience.

Finally, it is worth asking what kind of translation a literary translator should make: a free or a faithful one. To discuss the concepts of freedom and fidelity, the work of Rolf Klopfer (1967) distinguishes three types of translation according to their degree of freedom: *Primitive Wörtlichkeit* (primitive literalness), which refers to a word-for-word translation; *Freie Übersetzung*, which gives greater importance to the target language and culture and is based on preserving the strength and style of the sentence over the word; and, finally, *Treue Übersetzung* (faithful translation), which would be an intermediate point between the two. For García Yebra (1983), the translator must be faithful to the best of their ability, and he summarizes it as follows: “[...] El traductor debe aspirar a decir todo y solo lo que el autor original ha dicho, y ha de decirlo del mejor modo posible [...]”.⁴

5.2. Linguistic variation

One of the main challenges in the field of literary translation is linguistic variation, which has been studied from both linguistic and sociological perspectives. This term can be understood as “uso de la lengua condicionado por factores de tipo geográfico, sociocultural, contextual o histórico. La forma como los hablantes emplean una lengua no es uniforme, sino que varía según sus circunstancias personales, el tiempo y el tipo de comunicación en que están implicados”⁵ (Centro Virtual Cervantes b, 2023). Said variations, depending on the factors that condition them, are divided into four groups (Centro Virtual Cervantes b, 2023):

1. **Diatopic:** those that vary according to the geographical origin of the speaker. This category also includes accents and dialects.
2. **Diachronic:** they indicate that the use of the language varies over time and between generations.
3. **Diastral:** they argue that language use depends on the sociocultural stratum to which the speaker belongs.

⁴ Translation proposal: “[...] The translator must aim to say everything and only what the original author has said, and they must strive to say it in the best way possible [...]”

⁵ Translation proposal: “the use of language conditioned by geographical, sociocultural, contextual, or historical factors. The manner in which speakers use a language is not uniform, but varies according to their personal circumstances, time and the type of communication in which they are involved.”

4. **Diaphasic:** states that the expressive and stylistic forms of language vary according to the context of the communicative act. This category includes slang and jargon.

For the purpose of this work, linguistic variation takes on an important role when it comes to the nuances of Venezuelan Spanish. Within the tales, characters such as *maracuchos* appear, which possess a specific connotation for Venezuelans that are difficult to render to achieve the skopos of the original text: people from Maracaibo (the capital of the state Zulia) who speak in a thick accent characterized by the *voseo*⁶, and who are known for being particularly warm-blooded and easily upset. This is also the case with the slang and expressions, which vary depending on the speaker: a *choro* (thief) uses more vulgarisms and insults than a professor or a mother. In this vein, the diaphasic variation is also of special relevance, since in the stories (as is also the case in the current Venezuelan society) the disparity between social strata and levels of education inevitably results in a myriad of different linguistic expressions and vocabulary.

5.3. The role of culture in translation

In her *Translation Studies*, Susan Bassnett argues that “in the same way that the surgeon, operating the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril” (Bassnett, 2002: 23). The previous quote refers to the need for an in-depth knowledge of the extra-linguistic elements that must be taken into account during the translation process, such as culture. Kroeber and Kluckhohn define culture as “patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). In this sense, given the fact that language is embedded within cultures, it is unavoidable for a translator to identify the cultural cues the text, openly or subliminally, possesses. Furthermore, customs, traditions and historical references are present in language as well as in culture, which makes the knowledge of the source as well as the target culture paramount.

⁶ The *voseo* can be defined as the use of *vos* (instead of *tú*) as a second-person singular pronoun, and it can be seen in specific regions of Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, Venezuela, and multiple countries of Central America (Miranda, 1999).

As Nida (1964: 130) points out: “differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure”. In the case of this study, the gap between Venezuelan and English-speaking culture (which also entails a myriad of cultures with their own differences to bridge) highlights the need for a profound (preferably first-hand) familiarization and knowledge of both the target and the source cultures. Thus, it is my hypothesis that belonging to one such culture and being familiar with the other is a key advantage which is beneficial to carry out the translation as faithfully, precisely, and accurately as possible in an attempt to preserve the Venezuelan nuances interwoven in the texts to be translated.

5.4. Culturemes

When translating a text and, more specifically, a literary piece, paying attention to cultural aspects is key, since the need arises, beyond finding equivalence, to exert as cultural mediator. In that sense, culturemes, a term used in Translation and Linguistic Studies to define specific cultural aspects, become especially relevant. Vermeer defined culturemes as “A social phenomenon of culture A, which is considered relevant by the members of this culture and which, when compared with a corresponding social phenomenon in culture B, is found to be specific to culture A” (Vermeer, 1983: 8).

Furthermore, Molina Martínez (2006:85) provides a list of the different types of culturemes, classifying them as follows:

1. **Natural environment:** landscapes, atmospheric phenomena, and place names.
2. **Cultural heritage:** historical or fictitious events and characters, folklore, popular beliefs, etc.
3. **Social culture:** forms of politeness, dress, greetings and farewells, non-verbal language, family relationships, education, political orientation, etc.
4. **Linguistic culture:** anthroponyms, proverbs, insults, connotations, etc.
5. **False cultural friends:** symbolic elements.
6. **Cultural interference:** linguistic elements that do not properly stem from the language of origin.

It is precisely these cultural differences, linguistic variations and nuances that put the translator in the crossroads of what is the most appropriate method of achieving the same effect in the target language as the one conveyed in the original. Upon facing these difficulties, the translator has, broadly speaking, two choices: bringing the text closer to

the audience or challenging the receptor to make an effort in order to understand the text (Schleiermacher, 2000). Later on, Nida and Taber (1982) would coin the terms *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence* to refer to such strategies, whereas Venuti (2000) refers to them as *foreignization* and *domestication*.

5.5. Translation strategies

Translation techniques or strategies refer to the methods chosen by the translator when encountering specific linguistic, technical, or cultural problems. To establish a framework or categorization of such problems, it is necessary to divide the text in micro-units in order to analyze them with their corresponding fragment in the source text according to the strategy used (Molina and Hurtado, 2002).

The first classification of translation techniques dates back to 1958, with Vinay and Dalbarnet's *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, which establishes two main possibilities: direct or literal translation when an equivalence between two languages exists, and oblique translation, which occurs when word for word translation is not possible. From this first proposal stem seven techniques, which would later develop into multiple sub-categories: borrowing (a word that has been incorporated into other languages), calque (incorporating a foreign word or structure), literal translation (word for word), transposition (a change of grammatical category, such as a verb for a noun), equivalence (using coined idiomatic expressions in the target language) and adaptation (changing the cultural context in order to convey the message) (Molina and Hurtado, 2002).

Later on, in 1964, Nida would expand on said techniques, proposing additions (amplification of elements), subtractions (removing unnecessary elements) and alterations (changes that must take place due to linguistic incompatibilities), focusing on maximizing the efficiency of the communicative effect (Nida, 1964). Furthermore, Nida's adjustment techniques refer to the use of footnotes as a tool to add information or correct cultural, linguistic, physical, or geographic differences that might be unknown or contradictory (Molina and Hurtado, 2002). The use of footnotes, for the purpose of this dissertation, is relevant given the few occasions in which no technique would provide sufficient information and an intervention from the translator is required. However, footnotes are not included within translation strategies and their use should be limited so as not to disrupt the story or disturb the reader. Returning to the techniques, in 1993,

Delisle introduced a series of new categories based on Vinay and Dalbernet's work, focusing on the dichotomy between the reinforcement or economy of information, proposing, besides addition vs. omission and paraphrase, the discursive creation, which involves creating a non-lexical equivalent that only works within a specific context (Molina and Hurtado, 2002).

Given the terminological diversity of the techniques' categorization over the years and the need to unify the myriad of methods at the translator's disposal, Molina and Hurtado (2002) proposed a set of strategies based on the contributions of Vinay and Dalbernet, Nida, Margot, Newmark, and Delisle. Said proposal also includes the following techniques (Molina and Hurtado, 2002):

- **Compensation:** introducing an additional element to provide information or achieve a specific stylistic effect.
- **Description:** replacing a term with a definition of its form or function.
- **Generalization:** using a more general or neutral term.
- **Modulation:** changing the point of view or cognitive category in relation to the original text.
- **Particularization:** in contrast to generalization, it involves using a more concrete or precise term.
- **Substitution:** changing paralinguistic elements for linguistic ones or vice versa.
- **Variation:** changes of tone, style, dialects or other linguistic or paralinguistic elements when translating for specific purposes.

With the addition of said categories, the final classification is as follows:

Adaptation	Baseball (E) ⇒ Fútbol (Sp)
Amplification	شهر رمضان (A) ⇒ Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting (E)
Borrowing	Pure: Lobby (E) ⇒ Lobby (Sp) Naturalized: Meeting (E) ⇒ Mitin (Sp)
Calque	École normale (F) ⇒ Normal School (E)
Compensation	I was seeking <u>thee</u> , Flathead (E) ⇒ En vérité, c'est bien <u>toi</u> que je cherche, <u>Q</u> Tête-Plate (F)
Description	Panettone (I) ⇒ The traditional Italian cake eaten on New Year's Eve (E)
Discursive creation	Rumble fish (E) ⇒ La ley de la calle (Sp)
Established equivalent	They are as like as two peas (E) ⇒ Se parecen como dos gotas de agua (Sp)
Generalization	Guichet, fenêtre, devanture (F) fi Window (E)
Linguistic amplification	No way (E) ⇒ De ninguna de las maneras (Sp)
Linguistic compression	Yes, so what? (E) ⇒ ¿Y? (Sp)
Literal translation	She is reading (E) ⇒ Ella está leyendo (Sp)
Modulation	ستصير أبا (A) ⇒ You are going to have a child (Sp)
Particularization	Window (E) ⇒ Guichet, fenêtre, devanture (F)
Reduction	Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting (Sp) ⇒ شهر رمضان (A)
Substitution (linguistic, paralinguistic)	Put your hand on your heart (A) ⇒ Thank you (E)
Transposition	He will soon be back (E) ⇒ No tardará en venir (Sp)
Variation	Introduction or change of dialectal indicators, changes of tone, etc.

Source: *Translation Techniques Revisited: A Dynamic and Functionalist Approach*. Molina and Hurtado (2002)

6. Analysis: translational difficulties and solutions

The translational process of the previously mentioned stories entailed no major difficulties. Given what was stated in the theoretical framework, the translations were carried out with the main purpose or *skopos* of being loyal while preserving the references to Venezuelan culture and heritage and maintaining the aesthetic characteristics of literature that provide the reader with beauty and entertainment. In other words, the translational process tends, in most cases, towards domestication rather than foreignization, in pursuit of what Nida and Taber would call dynamic equivalence.

Below, we can observe, by means of comparative tables, representative examples of problems encountered in the translation of each story, most of them of a cultural nature. Moreover, the translations chosen for the titles *De carambola, como en el billar*, *Al que pela el chingo...*, *Some kind of nature* and *Cenestesia* are, respectively, Knock-on effect, Between the devil..., *Some kind of nature*, and *Cenesthesia*.

6.1. Knock-on effect

Original	Translation	Techniques used
De carambola, como en el billar	Knock-on effect	Established equivalent Reduction

This particular tale entailed its biggest difficulty at the very beginning: in the title. The expression *de carambola* has multiple meanings, including something that happens by pure luck or an action whose execution in turn triggers a second action, such as one billiard ball hitting another. I tried to find an English expression related to the world of billiards, but the phrase was not easily understood, and its meaning was rather ambiguous. Therefore, the best option was knock-on effect, that is, a situation that, indirectly, generates others. This phrase is an established equivalent in English, although the translation strategy also incorporates reduction, since a phrase that is broken down in Spanish is shortened when translated.

Original	Translation	Techniques used
«¡Lo hubieras visto esta mañana! ¡ Bochinando en su salón!».	“You should have seen him this morning! Goofing around in his classroom!”.	Description Linguistic amplification

In Venezuelan Spanish, the verb *bochinchar* refers to making a fuss, causing a ruckus, or having fun with friends, especially at parties or get-togethers. In this context, to be *bochinando en el salón* means misbehaving in class, talking with one’s classmates and not paying attention. Since there is no information about what really happens in the classroom, the most successful strategy, tending to generalize, is description, explaining in English the meaning of *bochinchar* within the translation itself, as well as amplifying the linguistic elements that the sentence possesses.

Original	Translation	Technique used
Pero la hermana no estaba dispuesta a dejar pasar ese trofeo.	But the sister wasn’t about to squander another kick at the can.	Established equivalent

This example depicts, beyond a translation problem, a stylistic decision that brings the reader closer to the text. In Venezuela, *dejar pasar un trofeo* is an informal way of saying that an opportunity that seems to be placed on a silver platter is passed by or ignored. In that sense, the sentence could have been translated as “let that opportunity pass her by” or even “let that trophy pass her by”, since, although it is not a common expression, its meaning could be inferred from the context. However, I opted for a more idiomatic expression, the established equivalent of “squander another kick at the can”, which also reflects the sister’s intentions towards the protagonist of the story: to hurt him, to deliver “emotional kicks”.

Original	Translation	Techniques used
«¡Pregúntame!», ladró la mamá [...]	“As if I cared!” the mom barked [...]	Linguistic amplification Transposition

In Venezuela and many parts of Latin America, the expression *pregúntame* is used to indicate, in a shortened or tacit way, *pregúntame si me importa*, that is, “ask me if I care”. Because of this, it is necessary to resort to linguistic amplification to explain with more words what in Spanish is expressed with only one. In turn, the position of the linguistic elements varies, as well as their grammatical category. In this example, we can see how an imperative conjugated in the second person, together with a reflexive pronoun, becomes a clause with “as if” followed by past subjunctive.

Original	Translation	Technique used
Descubrió que la mamá era un carro de pique frente a un semáforo en rojo y encontró la manera de mantenerse a salvo.	She understood that her mom was as erratic as a race car in front of a red light , and she found a way to keep herself safe.	Amplification

In the Spanish-speaking world, especially in Latin America, drag racing (both legal and illegal) is known as *piques*, an acceleration competition between two cars starting from the same point and covering a distance of approximately one-quarter mile. This sentence, however, is difficult to understand in the original tale and very few people, especially those who lack interest in the automotive world, are aware of this meaning of the word *pique*. The author aims to express that the mother is an impulsive, unpredictable, and erratic person, like a racing car about to accelerate. Therefore, the amplification technique comes into play, since “as erratic as”, which does not appear in the original, is added to facilitate the understanding of the idea.

6.2. Between the devil...

Original	Translation	Technique used
Al que pela el chingo...	Between the devil...	Established equivalence

As with the first tale, this story's main translational difficulty lies within its title. In Venezuela, the saying *si te pela el chingo, te agarra el sin nariz* expresses the dilemma in which someone is forced to choose between two actions that will have a detrimental effect on them or on a third party. In other words, a situation in which, no matter what is done, the outcome will be negative. Luckily, there are many equivalents in English to express the same idea: sitting on a powder keg, between a rock and a hard place, between Scylla and Charybdis, etc. Lastly, I decided "between the devil and the deep blue sea" for stylistic reasons as well as for the fact that it is known, but not as commonly used as other expressions, which is what happens with this particular saying in Venezuela.

Original	Translation	Technique used
[...] aquella expresión inmortalizada por el sonero Héctor Lavoe que advierte que «la calle es una selva de cemento».	[...] that expression immortalized by the sonero Héctor Lavoe that warns that "the streets are a concrete jungle".	Borrowing

The word *sonero* refers to a singer of *son cubano*, a music genre mainly entailing salsa, which dates back the 19th century and mixes elements of the Spanish and African cultures. A *sonero* is characterized by being a daring singer, who improvises and "rides the rhythm". After a thorough research and analysis of corpora in which all translations had left the Spanish original, I opted for borrowing the term, since an amplification or periphrasis would have been too long and unnecessary, since the term per se is not vital to the story. The term in Spanish embedded in an English text, besides appearing in many articles and webpages, can be found in online dictionaries that leave the word in italics as it is. This, along with three other examples, is one of the few situations in which I chose foreignization over domestication since the term is known within the musical world and is incredibly precise (especially when referring to Héctor Lavoe).

Original	Translation	Technique used
Esto es, una cacerina de 15 balas , metida en una cacha, visible en el cinto.	That is, a 15-round clip , tucked into a holster, visible on the belt.	Literal translation

In the case of the present fragment, despite having used a literal translation strategy, a problem of a cultural nature must be highlighted. In most Spanish-speaking countries, *cacerina* refers to a large leather bag used to carry cartridges and bullets. However, this is not what the author is referring to, as the threatening nature of the criminals is reflected not through a leather bag, but because they are visibly armed. In this case, the word *cacerina* has a second meaning in Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela: the magazine or metal case with which light automatic weapons are loaded. Thus, if we focus on the second meaning, translating *cacerina* as “clip” would be a literal translation.

Original	Translation	Technique used
[...] la figura de un hombre cincuentón, moreno, de lentes y guayabera , que se levantó del asiento inmediato al suyo [...]	[...] the figure of a man in his fifties, swarthy, with glasses and a <i>guayabera</i> , who got up from the seat next to his [...]	Borrowing

A *guayabera* is a summery, loose-fitting shirt, usually white in color and made of cotton, linen, or silk. Due to its lightweight fabric that adapts to the heat, it is a very common garment in Central and South America. Thanks to its popularity and the geographic specificity (Latin American) of its origin, the borrowing of the word *guayabera* is established and integrated, which is why I left the term in Spanish and marked in italics. Although it could have been supplanted by the amplification or description strategies of “loose-fitting summer shirt”, it seemed to me that this decision lengthened the sentence too much and, since the borrowing is recognized, it is an excellent and not too daring opportunity to bring the reader closer to Latin American culture and terminology.

6.3. Some kind of nature

Original	Translation	Technique used
Sifrilandros	The posh-thugs	Discursive creation

The word *sifrilandros*, coined by the author, is an invented term originating from the mixture of *sifrinos* (posh) and *malandros* (thugs) to refer to those people who are an amalgam of both. In this regard, since the problem is that the word does not exist, the best alternative is to coin a new word in English that reflects what the author wants to express. Therefore, I resorted to the strategy of discursive creation by merging both terms, opting for “posh-thugs”. This label was coined in order to maintain the author’s *skopos*, creating a term that unifies both characteristics of the group being referred to.

Original	Translation	Technique used
[...] que viven en urbanizaciones clase media de Caracas u otras capitales del país, pero con raíces en algún pueblo del interior.	[...] who live in middle class urbanizations in Caracas or other capitals across the country, but with roots in some town in rural Venezuela.	Amplification

In the case of the translation problem seen above, a literal translation such as “some town in the interior” would be unfeasible due to its ambiguity. It is not understood what is meant by “interior”, since it is a cultureme related to environment and geography. Although it is very common in Venezuela to refer to *el interior* when talking about the rural states far from the capitals and populated cities, in English the word “interior” does not encompass such a specific reference. Therefore, I chose to amplify the term, making it more precise and clarifying that these *pueblos del interior* are “towns in rural Venezuela”, thus facilitating its comprehension.

Original	Translation	Techniques used
Y las montoneras que cruzaron la historia de nuestros últimos dos siglos.	And the montoneras* that cruised our history's last two centuries.	Borrowing Footnote

The word *montoneras* is a very culturally specific historical reference and, in this case, of great importance to understand the argument of the story, which attempts to explain why Venezuelans are the way they are. Given that its translation is an established borrowing, I opted for leaving it in Spanish. This decision, however, does not enlighten the meaning of the term, and interrupts the flow of reading, since the receptor does not necessarily know what a *montonera* is. Therefore, I decided to add the following footnote that clarifies its meaning: “The word *montoneras*, derived from 'montón' (crowd), refers to armed civilian, paramilitary groups that formed in Hispanic America in the 19th century during the wars of independence from Spain”.

Original	Translation	Technique used
La guaya es imprescindible.	The gold chain is a must.	Amplification

Guaya is a term whose meaning has a very cultural significance. Its most common definition, that of “grief” or “lament”, comes from the verb *guayar*, nowadays of uncommon use. In Venezuela, however, the noun *guaya* has two definitions. The first one originates from the English “wire” and refers to a thick steel cable mostly used in wiring or construction. Nevertheless, there is a second meaning, which is the one referred to in this tale, that portrays the attire of a specific sector of the population. A *guaya* can also be a gold chain or metal or silver accessory worn around the neck or wrists. I opted to translate it as “gold chain” and not “silver” or “metal” simply because the use of gold chains is slightly more common.

Original	Translation	Technique used
[...] es ser mal visto por gente que, por menos que eso, saca la <i>bicha</i> y dispara.	[...] is to be disliked by people who, for less than that, take out their gats and shoot.	Adaptation

Although it possesses a myriad of meanings, the word *bicha* is commonly used in Venezuela as a colloquial way of referring to a gun or firearm. Faced with this problem, it would be futile to use literal translation or foreignization strategies, as the result would involve using incoherent terms such as “bug” or extremely vague ones such as “thing”. Even though the verb “shoot” is present, which lessens the ambiguity of the term in English replacing *bicha*, that does not mean the translator should not strive to find an equivalent that maintains the original text’s purpose. In this case, I opted to change the cultural ascription and adapt the term to one that, in turn, was slang in English, as is the case of the word “gat” to refer to any type of gun.

Original	Translation	Techniques used
[...] el que « las tiene cuadradas » [...]	[...] the one who “ has a pair of balls ” [...]	Compensation Established equivalent

This passage from the third story refers to the Venezuelan standard of masculinity and its relationship to being perceived as a “tough guy”. The author provides an enumeration of such qualities, among which is *las tiene cuadradas*, concisely expressing that he *tiene las bolas cuadradas* (literally “he has square balls”), referring to the person’s bravery or fearlessness. In this case, I resorted to compensation by including the term “balls”, tacit in the original, and replaced the expression with an established English equivalent for someone brave or daring, such as “to have a pair of balls”.

6.4. Cenesthesia

Original	Translation	Techniques used
Pero también hemos descubierto un lado luminoso de « lo venezolano » que hace tan difícil la adaptación [...]	However, we've also discovered a luminous side to that “ being Venezuelan ” that makes it so difficult to adapt [...]	Amplification Transposition

When the author writes *lo venezolano* he is referring to the nature of belonging to Venezuela, that is, the way of being of Venezuelans. In this case, I amplified the term by adding the verb “being”, which makes the idea of “belonging to” clearer. Moreover, through the strategy of transposition, I changed the grammatical category of the original expression. Thus, the article *lo* (which in Spanish is *sustantivador*, that is, it turns what follows into a noun) and the adjective (with the function of a noun) *venezolano* are changed to the gerund “being”, maintaining the nationality “Venezuelan” that acts as an adjective.

Original	Translation	Techniques used
[...] ni sueñes con usar el cariñoso “ negro ” en público...».	[...] don't even dream of using the affectionate term <i>negro</i> in public...”.	Italics (Foreignization)

Negro is a delicate word that is difficult to translate. Since in English it is a highly offensive term, I opted for foreignization, leaving the term in italics to denote that it belongs to Spanish. Likewise, I decided not to place a footnote or make any kind of remark since the context of the story itself provides an explanation of its use. When talking about the cultural differences that Venezuelans must get used to in other countries, *el cariñoso “negro”* is mentioned as an expression to be careful with, because, although it is a term of endearment in Venezuela, in other countries it is pejorative and insulting, and its use may even entail legal repercussions.

Original	Translation	Technique used
Las temperaturas en esas regiones pueden alcanzar una media de entre 7 y -9 grados.	Temperatures in these regions can reach an average of between 7 and -9 degrees Celsius .	Amplification

Since for a large part of the English-speaking world temperature is measured in Fahrenheit, I decided to add the word “Celsius” in the target text. This word, which does not appear in the original, serves a clarifying function to eliminate confusion regarding temperature scales. Although measuring temperature in Fahrenheit is limited to countries such as the United States, Bahamas and Belize, the population of these countries combined is approximately 332 million people, so it seemed appropriate to specify the unit of measurement to eliminate ambiguity.

Original	Translation	Techniques used
Tanto o más que la ausencia de harina Pan .	As much or more than the absence of <i>harina Pan</i> *.	Borrowing Footnote

In this fragment, the text provides a cultureme strongly related to cultural heritage (more specifically, to gastronomy) when referring to the *harina Pan*. Given that, within the story, this reference constitutes an important element of what triggers the Venezuelans’ nostalgia for their home country, I decided to borrow the term, leave it in italics and explain its meaning in the following footnote: “*Harina Pan* is the name of the first and most popular corn flour brand in Venezuela, used to make traditional dishes such as arepas and hallacas”.

Original	Translation	Technique used
<p>Se trata de esa manera, quizá primitiva pero hermosa en su visceralidad, de decirle al otro que es nuestro prójimo (próximo): tocándolo.</p>	<p>It's that way, perhaps primitive but beautiful in its viscerality, of showing the other that they're our neighbor, our <i>proximus</i>: by touching them.</p>	<p>Discursive creation Borrowing</p>

The last sentence of the story poses a translation problem by having a play on words (which, in turn, is cacophonous): *prójimo*, *próximo*. This literary strategy only makes sense in Spanish, since the word *prójimo* (“neighbor” or “fellow man”), of biblical origin, shares the same etymology as *próximo* (“near” or “close”): the Latin *proximus*. Given the aesthetic and poetic value of this reference, it seemed vital to me to find a translation solution that would allow it to remain in the target text, even if it was not a play on words, since these are untranslatable. I opted, then, to translate *prójimo* as “neighbor”, maintaining the biblical reference and providing a literal translation understandable to the English-speaking reader. Likewise, I decided to keep the root term in italics as a loan from Latin, since it encompasses the origin of both the word *prójimo* and the word *próximo*.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of this dissertation was to translate four short stories by the Venezuelan author Héctor Torres, analyzing, throughout the translation process, problems, obstacles, and incompatibilities that forced the translator to choose one strategy or another. Likewise, for the purposes of this study, the theoretical framework established a general categorization of which translational strategies can be applied when difficulties arise in order to overcome said complications.

As expected, the difficulties were mostly of a cultural nature, originated by the historical, geographical, political, and social differences between the Venezuelan and English-speaking imaginary. Throughout the texts, specific Venezuelan terms can be found, colloquial voices such as *sifrinos*, *malandros*, *bochinchar*, *bicha*, etc., as well as the presence of toponyms or historical (*montonera* and *caudillo*) or even gastronomic elements (*harina Pan*). It should also be noted that Torres' prose possesses a very high register, which was beneficial when translating his depictions of the Venezuelan nature into English, since the use of culturally specific vocabulary was largely limited.

Given the inherent poetic function of literature, the author of this dissertation opted to use domestication in almost all cases so as to favor the flow of reading and maintain the beauty and entertainment factor expected in this literary genre. However, the occasional use of a foreignization strategy can be seen in examples such as *sonero*, *guayabera*, *negro*, and *guaya*, where it was deemed necessary to leave the original in italics accompanied by a short explanation of its meaning. It would also be interesting to continue the translation of the book in its entirety in order to find out if this tendency towards domestication is maintained, or if with the presence of proper names or other culturemes the translator would opt more for borrowings or footnotes, thus applying foreignization.

I must also state that I do believe that my origins helped immensely in carrying out the task of translating Hector Torres' stories. As a Venezuelan, I felt deeply identified with his depictions and descriptions as well as with the vocabulary used, since it is the one I was raised with. In the same vein, I had the support of Venezuelan family and friends, as well as of the author, who helped me to understand terms or expressions

currently in disuse, such as *carro de pique* or *al que pela el chingo, lo agarra el sin nariz*. Such help constituted a beneficial and extremely valuable asset.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that translating such works is paramount for the development and support of Venezuelan culture. The availability in English of books such as *Objetos no declarados*, and many other treasures of contemporary (and classical) Venezuelan literature, as well as monitoring how said works are received within the target audience constitutes an effective method of sensitizing the public to the country's current situation. It is vital, then, to support the flourishing and expansion of such literature, in the interest of making the world a little more documented, and more sensitive to the Venezuelan struggle that, to this day, continues.

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9. Annexes

9.1. Original tales in Spanish:

De carambola, como en el billar

El más importante es aquel que con más frecuencia accede a la oreja imperial. Con más frecuencia y por más tiempo. Por aquella oreja las camarillas se enzarzaban en las luchas más encarnizadas...

RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI

PASADAS LAS SEIS DE LA TARDE DE UN DÍA CUALQUIERA, sobre el asfalto, la ciudad hierve de ruido y de motores quemando combustible. Debajo de él, hierve de gente y de historias hechas por la gente. Esta es una de esas y sucede en un vagón del Metro en dirección Palo Verde.

Como ya se ha dicho antes, el Metro es una muestra del ADN que circula por la sangre de la ciudad. Viaja a través de él al menos una hora y conocerás un grueso porcentaje de la fauna caraqueña. Es incomprensible que nunca se vea por allí a quienes pretenden dirigir la ciudad. Una sabia ley los debería obligar a usarlo durante un mes, al menos. Así conocerán a quienes pretenden gobernar y se darán una idea de cómo viven, qué piensan, en qué andan.

Quizá, al conocerlos, los respeten más.

Pero no nos alejemos de la historia. Metro, vía Palo Verde, sobre las seis de la tarde.

El vagón va bastante lleno aunque no a reventar. En uno de los asientos está una madre en torno a los cuarenta. A su lado va sentada su hija, de unos doce, y, en el piso, a los pies de ella, va jugando un varoncito de unos siete. La señora tiene acentuadas arrugas marcándole el ceño. Terminaron por ser su forma natural. Es una morena robusta y tosca, de cabello recogido y manos fuertes de uñas sin pintar. Cada tanto regaña al hijo por algo. O, dicho de otra manera, cada tanto el niño hace «algo» que irrita a la madre. O, más preciso aún, cada tantos minutos la madre, bajo cualquier excusa, gruñe y ladra al pequeño.

La hija, sentada a su lado, disfruta de su privilegiada posición en la estructura del hogar. Imita todos los ademanes de la madre y demuestra ser una alumna aventajada. Cada tanto, un poco para confirmar su posición y otro para practicar, le hace notar a la mamá alguna acción del niño que merezca una recriminación materna. Cosa difícil, porque la madre tiene un sensor de los movimientos del hijo.

Y, sin embargo, la aprendiz lo logra. No le quita la vista de encima con la esperanza de adelantársele a la madre en alguna falta y poder dar la alerta. Cuando descubre lo difícil que resulta, recurre al expediente de hacer uso de información que posee de primera mano, que le da ventaja. Esto es, el tiempo que pasan en la escuela.

Entonces le dice a la mamá, imitando perfectamente su ceño y su tono y su fastidio y su calor: «¡Lo hubieras visto esta mañana! ¡Bochincho en su salón!». El niño quiso desmentirla, pero la hermana está más cerca del poder, por lo que no tiene necesidad de

demostrar sus afirmaciones. Otra andanada de amenazas y reproches. El niño, agotado del cerco, se quebró y comenzó a llorar, bajito para no molestar.

Pero la hermana no estaba dispuesta a dejar pasar ese trofeo. «¡Ya está llorando!», le dijo a la mamá en una perfecta imitación producto de muchas horas de observación y práctica. «¡Pregúntame!», ladró la mamá, alzando los hombros y mirando a otro lado.

Y así siguieron todo el camino: la mamá reprochando y la chica disfrutando de su condición de esbirra. Ella sabe que la cercanía al poder le permite hacer prevalecer sus versiones de los hechos que la involucren y tengan al hermano por testigo, por lo que es su deber siempre tener una excusa para desacreditarlo; además de que mientras tenga al poder ocupado en los desmanes del pueblo (su hermanito) nunca le saldrá auditoría a sus actuaciones ministeriales. De una forma muy astuta se coloca en una posición en la que mantiene en control tanto a la madre como al hermanito.

No me digan que no tiene futuro.

Eso le servirá para pasar los duros años de la adolescencia. O, al menos, mientras esté bajo vigilancia materna. Descubrió que la mamá era un carro de pique frente a un semáforo en rojo y encontró la manera de mantenerse a salvo. Después de todo, como sucede en esos casos, no es nada personal.

Y pasará el tiempo. Y el hermanito crecerá débil, pero ocultándolo. Porque a pesar de las humillaciones sistemáticas a las que lo someten, le echarán en cara que debe «ponerse duro» y actuar como un hombre. Ahombrarse, que es la expresión de moda. Y no solo se lo dirán la mamá y la hermana. Se lo dirá la calle en todo momento. Con hechos y palabras. Será, entonces, débil por dentro (no podrá evitarlo, los años de sometimiento habrán hecho su irrevocable trabajo), pero se hará de una pátina de dureza, y hasta de maldad si fuese menester.

Cualquier cosa mientras nadie sepa de qué está hecho en realidad.

Y crecerá con un enorme rencor hacia esa persona que ama de una forma irrenunciablemente leal. Y el amor y el rencor que siente por ella se unirán como dos ríos en algún momento de su vida. Y lo proyectará, sin darse cuenta, en todas las mujeres con las que se relacione. La mamá y la hermana se aparecerán súbitamente en la cara de cada víctima circunstancial.

Y podrá desahogarse.

Y no podrá evitarlo, porque será un tipo débil. No conocerá la magnanimidad, porque adentro no hay más que un niño asustado. Un corazón pequeño. Y ajustará cuentas con la mamá (a la hermana la pondrá en su lugar el día que se pare frente a ella y, entre gritos de parte y parte, alce la mano en señal de advertencia de que las cosas han cambiado), haciéndole daño de carambola.

No podrá enfrentarla, pero no podrá evitar sentir placer cuando, en cada traspie, en cada barranco, vea a la mamá acusar recibo del golpe. La intuya, en el silencio de sus madrugadas, echando la vista atrás. Nunca le dirá a nadie, ni a sí mismo, que sí, que siente algo parecido al placer cuando la hace sufrir con su conducta errática y violenta. Nunca admitirá que los «malos pasos» serán la forma secreta en que descubrió cómo devolverle el dolor que ella, ese ser tan entrañable en su corazón, le proporcionó. Sin tocarla.

De carambola, como en el billar.

Al que pela el chingo...

A Alexis Romero
Friday night in the Kingdom of Doom
Ravens fly across the moon
All in now there's a noise in the sky
Following all the rules and not asking why.
«KINGDOM OF DOOM», THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE QUEEN

Es DIFÍCIL PRECISAR SI A ALGUIEN SE LE HABÍA OCURRIDO, antes que al compositor puertorriqueño Catalino Curet Alonso, aquella expresión inmortalizada por el sonero Héctor Lavoe que advierte que «la calle es una selva de cemento». Por una parte, se trataba de una metáfora destinada a convertirse en lugar común apenas el ser humano avanzase unos cuantos grados en su malicia colectiva. Pero, por la otra, lo mismo constituiría una señal de que se trata de una verdad irrefutable, al punto de ser la razón por la cual la frase estaba llamada a convertirse en un lugar común.

Era una tarde de viernes, y a diferencia de lo que podría esperarse en otras latitudes, en nuestro país cualquier crónica que comience con «era una tarde de viernes» se constituye en otro lugar común que, de inmediato, pone en guardia al lector ante la inminencia de una historia negra.

Esta no será la excepción.

En fin, era, entonces, una tarde de viernes en este reino cuya única norma de uso vigente reza: «Todo el mundo es sospechoso hasta que se demuestre lo contrario».

El asunto tiene como protagonista a un profesor universitario y transcurrió en un microbús rodando hacia la universidad en la que da clases. Entre sus pertenencias estaba la *laptop* que al fin pudo comprar con su sueldo de docente.

Se dan una idea de cuánto tuvo que ahorrar, ¿no?

Absorto en su lectura, no sabía ni cuánto tiempo había transcurrido, ni cuánto faltaba para llegar. En medio de ese murmullo, lejano y confuso, que produce la ciudad cuando uno está concentrado en algo, no notó a los dos tipos que se subieron al microbús, como tantos que suben y bajan a lo largo de su recorrido.

No fue que comenzaran a hablar en voz alta, porque su oído está adiestrado para obviar a los vendedores, declamadores de tragedias y pedigüños. Ni siquiera se trató de lo que decían, porque él no suele prestar atención al entorno cuando va en la calle. Fue, más bien, el tono. Las maneras. Un tono que, para estar acorde con las personas que lo enunciaban, debía estar uniformado de algo que sugiriese autoridad.

Esto es, una cacerina de 15 balas, metida en una cache, visible en el cinto.

Descubrió entonces que no se trataba del tono. Al levantar la vista para ver quién lo empleaba con esa soltura, vio que quienes lo hacían no estaban «vestidos para la ocasión».

Fue allí cuando prestó atención a la situación. No fue sino hasta entonces que se asustó. Estaban ladrando instrucciones, como quien vende Tridents, pero con autoridad: iban a pasar por los asientos y, sin que nadie se sintiese inclinado a ejercer ningún tipo de acto heroico, todos los objetos de valor debían descansar sobre las piernas de los presentes.

Ciertamente no lo dijeron con ese tono, pero así lo procesó él. Suspiró y pensó en su *laptop* de estreno, su costosa y al fin adquirida herramienta de trabajo, y comenzó a calcular cuántas jornadas de clases debía dar para reponerla. Contó con un par de

segundos para decidirse si la ocultaba o la entregaba. Los meses que tardó para comprarla apuntaban en una dirección. La «herramienta de trabajo» que el delincuente empuñaba en la mano, en la dirección opuesta.

El verbo «apuntar» le atravesó la columna como un rayo helado.

No tuvo ocasión de discernir entre el costo de una *laptop* (es decir, de un mal día) y el de una bala (es decir, de un trágico día), por lo que decidió no hacer ni una cosa ni la otra: dejó que el destino decidiera. Resolvió colocarla sobre su regazo, pero bajo unos libros. Ni ocultándola, ni entregándola. La puso en manos de Dios, como dirían las abuelas. Que Él decidiera. Junto a la *laptop* con los libros colocó su cartera y su celular de escaso valor.

Cuando el delincuente llegó hasta su asiento, el profesor miraba fijo, sin altanería ni miedo, en dirección a sus zapatos, en lo que podríamos calificar como una actitud ausente. El delincuente le vio la expresión, la ropa, el maletín de cuero, la camisa manga larga arremangada, el rostro carente de pretensión, los libros sobre las piernas...

¿Usted qué hace? ¿Es maestro?

Así es, doy clases.

¿Dónde?

En la Escuela de Educación.

¡Maestro que enseña maestros!, comentó el hombre, acentuando sus palabras con un dejo de solemnidad.

Así es, respondió el profesor, con una dignidad desprovista de estridencias.

Hubo un silencio de un par de segundos que parecieron un par de semestres.

Siga enseñando, maestro, dijo el delincuente, dándole una palmada en el hombro y siguió hacia los asientos posteriores.

Evitando la soberbia de celebrar lo que había sido una «decisión celestial», el profesor volvió a su silencio, sin quitar la mirada de sus zapatos, hasta que escuchó a los delincuentes ordenarle al conductor que se detuviera.

Luego de bajarse aquellos, quedó un aire enrarecido en el interior del transporte, como si de alguna manera algo de ellos se hubiese quedado entre la gente. Como si hubiesen dejado el veneno que traían en el alma.

Y efectivamente lo dejaron.

Tratando de entender a qué dios agradecerle su suerte, en medio del desconcierto, el miedo y la rabia que quedan tras esas situaciones, sus pensamientos se vieron truncados por la figura de un hombre cincuentón, moreno, de lentes y guayabera, que se levantó del asiento inmediato al suyo y, convencido de que a alguien debía culpar por el mal trago, giró el cuerpo en dirección al profesor y, apuntándolo con un robusto dedo índice, le ladró, con el mismo tono con el que hablaron los delincuentes, y una rabia hirviendo en sus ojos enmarcados:

¡Ahora tú nos vas a explicar por qué fuiste el único al que no atracaron!

El profesor lo cuenta con serenidad. Como el que recuerda una historia que una vez escuchó, ya ni sabe dónde. Cuando se le pregunta cómo logró bajarse en la siguiente parada sin que lo lincharan, esboza una sonrisa indescifrable y se pone a hablar de otra cosa.

Some kind of nature

Los tuki

Tienen entre catorce y veintitantos, un bigotito ralo que decoloran con agua oxigenada y un copete al que le aplican unas mechas de tonos amarillos. También más desconcierto y miedo del que pretenden aparentar. Visten con jeans de colores, zapatos de goma y franelilla blanca. La guaya es imprescindible. Usan lentes oscuros con monturas de pasta en colores extravagantes que no se quitan ni dentro de un vagón a diez metros bajo tierra. Normalmente acompañan este atuendo con una gorra. Escuchan bachata sin audífonos y bailan solos con el teléfono en la mano cuando una canción los inspira, entornando los ojos, conmovidos con los lugares comunes de las canciones.

Son cursis, toda persona simple lo es, y deshonestos de forma natural.

Usualmente delgados, caminan como lo haría una culebra si tuviera piernas. Y pilotan moto de igual manera (por la costumbre de hacer piruetas el cuerpo se acostumbra a buscar el equilibrio).

Aunque se hacen de un aire de malos, no siempre son criminales y, en realidad, rara vez saltan la barrera entre el mundo más o menos ilegal en el que se manejan y uno decididamente delictivo. Por supuesto, hay los que atracan, pero los negocios grandes siempre están en manos de gente que llama menos la atención cuando va por la calle. De hecho, usualmente trabajan en puestos de mercados, de buhoneros u oficios relacionados con el comercio.

Claro, se «ayudan» con lo que se pueda.

Aunque su extravagante atuendo les vale miradas de desprecio de las niñas frescas cuando se dejan ver por los centros comerciales, ese es un asunto menor que ellos asumen sin problemas, tomando en cuenta que peligroso, lo que se dice peligroso, es ser mal visto por gente que, por menos que eso, saca la *bicha* y dispara.

Los snob

Sienten una enorme presión social por parecer cultos o informados, pero no se dan el lujo de cultivar un gusto propio, por lo que suelen ceñirse a lo que parece *cool*. Eso arropa todos los ámbitos de su vida social. Mientras los demás escuchan lo que les place, estos se cuidan de «sentir gusto» solo por lo que se supone que está bien visto en ciertos ámbitos, sacrificando su propia opinión.

Que usualmente no tienen, como ya se dijo.

El asunto está en cogerle el gusto a lo que *se está llevando*, cultivando una cultura *prêt-à-porter*. Curiosamente, su ausencia de gusto tiene un viejo origen, lo que les da espacio en cierta tradición: en latín, carente de nobleza se diría *sine nobilitate*, que era la manera en que se señalaba a la gente de las clases inferiores, para luego designar a los que, renegando de su condición, aspiraban a pertenecer a una clase superior a la que pertenecían. A los arribistas.

De allí que el *sine nobilitate* pasó a ser el *snob*.

Se las arregla para estar al tanto de todo cuanto acontece en el mundo. Siempre está atento al centro. De lo que se esté escuchando en cada momento, tendrá un par de nombres para soltarlos en una conversa. Está al tanto de las películas nominadas cada año al Oscar (aunque pronto las olvidará). No se pierde una entrega de premios. Sigue todos los campeonatos deportivos del momento, y de todos tiene una opinión. En fin, está en todo, que es una forma de no estar en nada. No, al menos, en nada propio.

Los sifrilandros

Les dio por ahí como a otros por el *new age*, la cienciaología o el crudivorismo. Suelen ser muchachos de piel blanca que viven en urbanizaciones clase media de Caracas u otras capitales del país, pero con raíces en algún pueblo del interior. Aunque también este fenómeno se da entre hijos de extranjeros.

Parten de una sensibilidad muy válida, pero ingenuamente manejada. Una especie de culpa acerca de su condición con respecto a las mayorías pobres. En otros casos se trata de un adorno *kitsch*. Son esos artistas y fotógrafos que sienten fascinación por la iconografía malandra y la exaltan de forma frívola.

O los que «descubren» que en su país hay pobreza y la ensalzan desde sus clichés.

Bailan salsa malandra y sueñan con ser de barrio. Les gustaría tener un primo *malaconducta* o cualquier otra historia digna de contar, como haberse batido en duelo en alguna ocasión, o haberse ido de la casa en la adolescencia, por ejemplo. Les aburre la vida segura que, muchas veces con verdaderos sacrificios, les proporcionaron sus padres, y se sienten en minusvalía con respecto a sus conocidos que viven en sectores donde la sobrevivencia requiere de mayores talentos.

Asocian peligro con hombría y lo añoran. Redimen todas las tradiciones vernáculas de sus mayores, o de la vida de pueblo, que les confieren cierta denominación de origen: juegan dominó (a veces solo «ponen piedras»), apuestan a los caballos o a los gallos, toman ron, fuman habanos, les gusta el boxeo, usan guayaberas.

Hablan con tumbao y/o con deliberada mala dicción. Parecer refinados les produce vergüenza. Ellos, que recibieron formación académica, tienen por héroes a tipos toscos. Son prisioneros de cierto conservadurismo que pretende pasar por voluntario. Idealizan la pobreza, pero ignoran que a los pobres no les agrada su vida de privaciones. De hecho, gustan de las formas, pero jamás renunciarían a su vida cómoda. Desconocen que lo que da sabor a esa pasta es una salsa que incluye, en no pocas ocasiones, hambre, dolor, rabia, abuso, hogares disfuncionales y muchas privaciones.

En fin, ignoran que ese *swing* es el coqueto adorno con el que se barniza lo roto.

Los repartebofetadas

Ante todo, no se trata de los muchachos que entran en un cuerpo policial y andan por la calle con un uniforme. Esos son policías, pero esto es otra cosa. Estamos hablando de «los tipos duros», los adictos a la acción. Esos gorditos malos que les toca hacer (y no es que les pese) el trabajo sucio en ciertos organismos de seguridad. Los que andan en motos sin placas ensuciándose las manos para que *da boss* las mantenga limpias, a cambio de que los dejen desahogarse por ahí. No sienten ninguna vergüenza al abofetear a un hombre, porque eso les ofrece una ilusión de superioridad.

Tienen un agudo problema con la figura paterna y lo drenan en la calle, repartiendo (o devolviendo) miedo y dolor, sus dos inseparables compañeros de la infancia. Son los que se sienten a sus anchas estando al margen de la ley, porque ellos son la ley. Existen en tanto la moto, la bicha, la cara de malo, la chaqueta, los lentes y, por sobre todas las cosas, la impunidad, les hagan el piso. O, dicho de otra manera, debajo de todos esos pertrechos no hay nada, además del desconcertado y doloroso recuerdo de unos gorditos frustrados que, en el parque, no atinaron nunca a entrar a una rueda llena de niños alegres.

Los centrocomercialeros

Nunca han oído hablar de la fulana «vida interior». Jamás han cultivado pasión o pasatiempo que los exponga a estar en diálogo consigo mismos. Viven de tener y tienen de todo, excepto interés por cultivarse. Sus necesidades se limitan a ir a la moda. Por eso siempre están pendientes de los sitios *cool*. Desconocen eso que la gente de mercadeo llama fidelidad de marca. Su único interés es detectar tendencias. Saben que las modas pasan rápido y lo importante es estar sobre la ola.

Son otra forma de *snob*, que ya se comentó anteriormente, pero sin aspiración de refinamiento. Este síndrome es más tosco y, por ende, más prolífico. Un rasgo fundamental de su naturaleza es que detestan la soledad. Después de todo, orientan todos sus esfuerzos a que los demás constaten lo bien informados que están en cuanto a «lo que se está llevando».

Y aunque es sabido que quien no cultiva el hábito de estar solo consigo mismo nunca termina de conocerse, eso no les quita el sueño. La singularidad es lo último a lo que aspiran en la vida. O, mejor dicho: la única singularidad a la que aspiran en la vida es a ser uno más del montón.

Los Tyrannosaurus

Se dividen en varios grupos: uno de ellos no abandona el gimnasio y tiene obsesión por mantener un aspecto saludable, aunque en no pocas ocasiones se les va la mano y parecen víctimas de una intoxicación mortal. Otro renunció al cabello y a la barba, que solo traen delatoras canas (esta es una logia numerosa). También está el de los que se mantienen más o menos delgados, aunque dejan ver una rozagante pancita. Este grupo suele usar camisas holgadas con tres botones sueltos arriba en el espacio en que se asoma, por supuesto, una cadena de oro. En la más común son unos gorditos «chéveres» que le hablan siempre a un auditorio así lo estén haciendo para una persona dentro de un ascensor.

Sufren del Síndrome de Lord Farquaad, por lo que se adornan con una gran camioneta, una gran pistola, una gran casa, una gran provisión de carne como compañía o lo que sea pero siempre en gran formato: el plasma, la cama, la mesa, la cuenta bancaria. Es como una añoranza adelantada de la lujuria por los placeres de la vida.

Caminan moviendo los brazos con ostensible interés de llamar la atención y rezuman inseguridad detrás de esos aspavientos de opulencia y locuacidad. Es cierto que nadie quiere sentirse viejo, pero ellos se esfuerzan tanto por ignorar los signos de los tiempos que, quizá porque no han recibido nada a cambio de la juventud ida, pasan a ser un caricaturesco homenaje del joven que, al parecer, nunca pudieron ser.

Los predadores

Se les ve en los restaurantes y se les reconoce de inmediato. Tienen tanto que decir que no pueden esperar a masticar. Van de pantalón de vestir con camisa manga corta. En una versión más «impresionable» llevan saco y corbata. El «traje» lo guardan para impresionar en serio. Una reunión de alto nivel en un ministerio. Una firma de un contrato con un cliente grande. Siempre hablan en voz alta y atienden el teléfono en medio de las conversaciones, tras un breve «disculpen» fingidamente atildado, para escupir un par de órdenes. Sus oraciones suelen estructurarse en un patrón que combina tecnicismos, anglicismos y palabras gruesas. «Esos carajos nos quieren meter la verga con la

hiposerialización del *back-to-back off shore*, pero yo no me calo esa güevonada», no sería un ejemplo demasiado descabellado.

Se hacen llamar emprendedores, o el anglicismo en aterrizaje forzoso de «rompedores», pero en realidad son solo unos aventureros. Ludópatas estresados, que no tienen el *charm* del que no le importa perderlo todo en un golpe de dados.

Eso supondría vuelo poético.

Estos, aunque no les gusta trabajar, están muy aferrados al dinero. Por eso hablan mucho y hacen poco. Ese es su real talento. Hablar. Embaucar. Están demasiado apegados a los símbolos del poder. Si «coronan», cambiarán el carro, la casa y los sitios de diversión, pero nunca las maneras. Blandirlas es una forma de exhibir su desprecio a los métodos y al protocolo. Ratificar al mundo que la única regla de oro es el billete. El único pasaporte y el único cielo.

Son melancólicos monos fieles a la única música que los hace bailar, la del tintineo de la plata.

Los bárbaros

Han sobrevivido a lo largo de nuestra historia. En la lucha entre vida y muerte, representan la muerte. Conforman el rasgo genético más fuerte y antiguo de cuantos nos integran. Iban a caballo entonces, en moto ahora. Son la versión más primitiva de la apuesta humana a la sobrevivencia y representan nuestras fuerzas telúricas, todo eso con que hemos regado la tierra a lo largo de los siglos. Fueron los mercenarios que conquistaron a fuego unas tierras en nombre de un amo. Y los bucaneros que pasaban de tanto en tanto para saquear sus tesoros. Y las montoneras que cruzaron la historia de nuestros últimos dos siglos.

Saben odiar y afincarse en la venganza, gracias a su memoria histórica de sangre, dolor y rabia.

La montonera ha sido su forma de organización más ancestral. Su estructura es primitiva y eficaz: un jefe fuerte y violento aglutina el poder y, en torno a él, un grupo de hombres que hacen méritos con base en la virtud que más estiman: la lealtad. De ella se desprende un código medieval cuya inobservancia se paga con dolor.

El hombre a caballo, el que no duda, el inescrupuloso, el sanguinario, el que ve la vida como una guerra en la que sobrevive el más fuerte, el que renunció a la compasión y a la empatía, el caudillo, al que «no le tiembla el pulso», el que «no masca», el «hombre de acción», el que «las tiene cuadradas», han sido venerados de generación en generación. La historia nos enseña que toda diferencia la hemos arreglado por la fuerza, aplastando, venciendo.

¿Nos extraña, en serio, que muchos niños escuchen un viejo eco que los llame a admirar más al malandro, al militar, al policía, que al músico, al científico o al maestro?

Cenestesia

UNA MAÑANA DE UN DÍA CUALQUIERA. ¿Para qué acotar que el vagón iba abarrotado? En la próxima estación, una chica logró entrar pero quedó en medio del pasillo, sin poder sujetarse. El tren arrancó con tal brusquedad que la hizo perder el equilibrio. Por acto reflejo le extendí la mano y ella no tuvo ocasión de pensar demasiado para aferrarse al salvavidas que le lanzaban. Viajamos tomados de la mano y en silencio, hasta la siguiente estación, donde intercambiamos un breve y tímido «gracias/de nada», y ella aprovechó el espacio dejado por los que abandonaban el vagón para encontrar dónde sujetarse el resto de su recorrido.

Como si de una ancestral parábola se tratara, los venezolanos tuvimos que tomar distancia de nosotros mismos y dispersarnos por el mundo para conocernos. Y, en efecto, de las conversaciones entre los que se han ido con los que se han quedado, han surgido verdaderas revelaciones de cómo somos, a partir de cómo nos ven afuera o cómo nos vemos desde afuera, en contraste con los otros.

Los despachos que nos llegan a través de conversaciones vía Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp o el tradicional correo no han resultado, en líneas generales, muy auspiciosos. Arrogantes, arbitrarios, incumplidos, pantalleros, son algunas de las coordenadas de ese mapa espiritual, de ese retrato hablado que vamos armando. Pero también hemos descubierto un lado luminoso de «lo venezolano» que hace tan difícil la adaptación a ambientes cuyo sentido del trato y del espacio privado es más riguroso que el nuestro.

Un querido amigo que vive desde hace años en Londres me comentó que vino a Venezuela con la familia durante las vacaciones y que, a su regreso, uno de sus hijos tuvo problemas de readaptación. ¿La razón? Echaba de menos el calor recibido durante su breve estadía en la patria. Y no es un reporte aislado.

Testimonios llegados de Nueva York o Berlín acusan lo mismo. «Aquí todo funciona -dicen-, pero debes adaptarte a ciertas normas: no mires a nadie fijamente por más de cinco segundos, no se te ocurra despeinar a un niño desconocido al paso, no intentes abrazar a tus compañeras de trabajo al saludarlas, cuídate mucho de respetar el espacio privado del otro, no des palmadas en hombros de jefes o profesores, ni sueñes con usar el cariñoso “negro” en público...».

Parecerá una nimiedad, pero cuando nos distanciamos de estas demostraciones afectivas, obligados por las restricciones impuestas al contacto físico existentes en otras culturas, se comienza a sentir un frío a la altura de los costados que termina por invadir el ánimo. No tocar, para gente que ve el mundo a través del «yo siento» antes que del «yo pienso», termina siendo una limitación difícil de sobrellevar. Casi una crueldad.

Tanto o más que la ausencia de harina Pan.

Una pequeña digresión: inuit es el nombre que llevan los pueblos que habitan las regiones árticas de América y Groenlandia. Su escasa población, de unos 150.000 habitantes, vive de la caza de caribúes, osos, ballenas y focas. Sus grandes extensiones están rodeadas de agua. Noviembre es el mes en el que se forma el hielo durante un breve período de tiempo, y la gente aprovecha para ir de visita y enterarse de las novedades de familiares y amigos.

Las temperaturas en esas regiones pueden alcanzar una media de entre 7 y -9 grados. ¿Qué paradójico fenómeno climatológico hace posible que gente sometida a tanto frío pueda vivir, no digo ya sin tocarse, sino incluso sin verse demasiado, mientras que

en este sofocante Caribe de 30 grados promedio la gente vive amontonada y sobándose permanentemente?

Luego de la pregunta sin respuesta, cerremos el paréntesis.

En otra ocasión esperaba el Metro en el andén de Chacaíto. Había retraso, para variar. Una señora llegó a mi lado y quiso indagar acerca de la dimensión del asunto. Le dije que tras cinco trenes no había logrado montarme. En eso venía entrando a la estación el que sería el sexto. La señora, decidida a resolver mi problema, me tomó por un brazo y me dijo: «Vente que aquí nos vamos», zambulléndome dentro del vagón, como novios que se echan al agua.

También está el caso de esa señora que, en la cola del banco, se mantiene sentada mientras los demás clientes le «guardan» su puesto en la fila. Cuando está cerca de ser atendida, le avisan. Ella se acerca con parsimonia y, a manera de explicar a todo aquel que no esté enterado de su ausencia temporal, señala que le duele «todo esto», pasándole la mano por el costado a la desconocida que está delante de ella.

Quien abraza a sus amigos con absoluta y despreocupada profusión, que extiende lánguidas caricias que van de los hombros a la cintura por el puro deleite táctil, alguien cuya educación sentimental pasa por el contacto físico, desde niño, ¿cómo podría sobrevivir seis meses viviendo solo en un apartamento del norte de Europa al que fue a parar por razones de estudio u oportunidades de trabajo? Es, en definitiva, un elemento a sopesar a la hora de preguntarse si soportaría cambiar de hábitos, de clima, de códigos culturales.

Tan nuestro como tomar un autobús fuera de la parada o devolver con un detalle culinario la vianda en la que nos mandaron un postre, aquella es de esas cosas que están ahí, nos guste o no, y que no podemos evitar. Es de los rasgos que nos definen. Se trata de esa manera, quizá primitiva pero hermosa en su visceralidad, de decirle al otro que es nuestro prójimo (próximo): tocándolo.

9.2. Translations in English:

Knock-on effect

It was said that one was more important if one had the Emperor's ear more often. More often, and for longer. For that ear the lobbies fought their fiercest battles...
RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI

AFTER SIX O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON OF ANY GIVEN DAY, on the asphalt, the city boils with noise and engines burning fuel. Beneath it, it boils with people and stories made by people. This is one of them, and it takes place in a subway car in direction to Palo Verde.

As mentioned before, the Metro is a sample of the DNA that courses through the city's veins. If you were to travel by it at least an hour, you'd encounter a substantial percentage of Caracas' fauna. It's unfathomable that those who intend to run the city are never seen around. A wise law should force them to use it for a month, at least. That way, they'd get to know those they intend to govern, and they'd get a sense of how they live, what they think, what they're up to.

Perhaps, by meeting them, they'd respect them more.

But let's not get side-tracked from the story. Metro, direction Palo Verde, around six o'clock in the afternoon.

The car is quite full but not packed. In one of the seats is a mother in her forties. Next to her sits her daughter, about twelve, and, at her feet, a little boy of around seven is playing on the floor. The woman has deep wrinkles outlining her brow. They ended up becoming her standard expression. She's a stout and rough brunette, with her hair up, and strong hands with unpainted nails. Every so often she scolds her son for something. Or, in other words, every now and then the child does "something" that irritates the mother. Or, even more precisely, every few minutes, the mother growls and snarls at the boy under any excuse.

The daughter, sitting next to her, enjoys her privileged position in the household structure. She imitates all her mother's gestures and proves to be an outstanding student. From time to time, partly to confirm her position but also as practice, she points out any behavior of the child that could be deserving of maternal reproach. Quite a difficult task, given that the mother has a sensor for the child's every move.

And yet, the apprentice succeeds. She keeps her eyes on the boy in the hopes of getting one step ahead of her mother and raising the alarm in case he misbehaves. When she realizes how difficult it is, she resorts to making use of first-hand information, which gives her an advantage. That is, the time they spend at school.

Then she turns to her mother, perfectly imitating her frown and her tone and her annoyance and her irritability: "You should have seen him this morning! Goofing around in his classroom!". The boy wanted to refute her, but the sister is closer to power, so she has no need to prove her claims. Another barrage of threats and recriminations. The child, exhausted from the encirclement, broke down and began to cry, quietly so as not to disturb.

But the sister wasn't about to squander another kick at the can. "He's crying already!" she said to her mom in a perfect imitation that was the product of many hours of observation and practice. "As if I cared!" the mom barked, shrugging her shoulders and looking away.

And the whole way they went on like that: the mother scolding and the girl enjoying her condition of henchwoman. She knows that her proximity to power allows her to assert her versions of the facts that involve her and have her brother as witness, so it's her duty to constantly provide excuses to discredit him; besides, as long as she keeps the power busy with the people's (her little brother's) misdeeds, her ministerial actions will never be audited. In a very astute way, she places herself in a position that allows her to keep both mother and brother on a tight rein.

Don't tell me she doesn't have a promising future.

That'll get her through the tough teenage years. Or, at least, while still under maternal surveillance. She understood that her mom was as erratic as a race car in front of a red light, and she found a way to keep herself safe. After all, as it happens in such cases, it's nothing personal.

And time will pass. And the little brother will grow up weak but hiding it. Because, despite the systematic humiliations to which he's subjected, he will be told to "toughen up" and act like a man. To man up, which is the latest buzzword. And he will hear this not only from his mother and sister. The streets will remind him all the time. With actions and with words. And so, he will be weak inside (he won't be able to help it, the years of subjugation will have caused their irrevocable damage), but he'll develop a patina of toughness, and even meanness if necessary.

Anything as long as no one knows what he's really made of.

And he will grow up with an enormous resentment towards that person he loves in an unwaveringly loyal way. And the love and resentment he feels for her will merge like two rivers at some point in his life. And he will project it, without realizing it, on all the women he meets. The mother and the sister will suddenly appear in the face of every circumstantial victim.

And he will vent his pain.

And he won't be able to help himself because he'll be a wimp. He won't know magnanimity, because deep inside there's nothing but a scared little boy. A small heart. And he will settle the score with his mother (he will put his sister in her place the day he stands in front of her and, amidst knock-down drag-out yelling, raises his hand warning her that things have changed), hurting her indirectly.

He won't have it in him to face her, but he won't be able to avoid feeling pleasure when, in each misstep, in each stumble, he sees his mother taking the blow. When he feels her looking back, silently, at the break of dawn. He will never acknowledge it, not even to himself, that yes, he does feel something resembling pleasure when he makes her suffer with his erratic and violent behavior.

He'll never admit that "going down the wrong path" is the secret way he discovered how to repay her for the pain that she, that being so dear to his heart, inflicted on him. Without even having to touch her.

As per knock-on effect.

Between the devil...

For Alexis Romero
Friday night in the Kingdom of Doom
Ravens fly across the moon
All in now there's a noise in the sky
Following all the rules and not asking why.
«KINGDOM OF DOOM», THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE QUEEN

IT'S DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH WHETHER ANYONE, before the Puerto Rican composer Catalino Curet Alonso, had ever thought of that expression immortalized by the *sonero* Héctor Lavoe that warns that “the streets are a concrete jungle”. On the one hand, it was a metaphor destined to become commonplace as soon as human beings advanced a few notches in their collective malice. But, on the other hand, that could also be a sign that it's an irrefutable truth, to the point of being the reason why the phrase was destined to become commonplace.

It was a Friday afternoon and, unlike what might be expected elsewhere, in our country any chronicle that begins with “it was a Friday afternoon” becomes another commonplace that immediately triggers the reader's alert to the imminence of a black story.

This is no exception.

Anyway, it was a Friday afternoon in this kingdom whose only rule in force is: “Everyone's a suspect until proven otherwise”.

The matter involves a university professor, and it took place in a minibus on its way to the university where he works. Among his belongings was the laptop he was finally able to buy with his teaching salary.

You get an idea of how much he had to save, right?

Absorbed in his reading, he didn't even know how much time had passed, nor how much time was left to arrive. In the midst of that distant and confusing murmur that the city produces when one is concentrated on something, he did not notice the two guys who got on the minibus, like so many who get on and off along its route.

It wasn't that they started talking loudly, because his ear is trained to ignore salesmen, tragedy declaimers, and beggars. It wasn't even about what they were saying, because he doesn't usually pay attention to his surroundings when he's out on the street. It was, rather, the tone. Their ways. A tone that, to be in accordance with the people who enunciated it, had to be uniformed with something that suggested authority.

That is, a 15-round clip, tucked into a holster, visible on the belt.

He then realized it was not about the tone. When he looked up to see who was using it with such ease, he saw that the men were not “dressed for the occasion”.

That's when he really started to pay attention to the situation. It was not until then that he got scared. They were shouting instructions, like someone selling Tridents, but with authority: they were going to go through the seats and, without anyone feeling inclined to exercise any kind of heroic act, all valuables were to rest on the passengers' laps.

They certainly didn't say it that way, but that's how he processed it. He sighed and thought about his brand new laptop, his expensive and at last acquired work tool, and began to calculate how many classes he'd have to teach to replace it. He had a couple of seconds to decide whether to hide it or hand it in. The months it took to buy it pointed in

one direction. The “work tool” the criminal wielded in his hand pointed in the opposite one.

The verb “pointing” shot through his spine like an icy bolt of lightning.

He had no chance to discern between the cost of a laptop (that is, of a bad day) and the cost of a bullet (that is, of a tragic day), so he chose neither: he let fate decide. He placed it on his lap, but under some books. Neither hiding it, nor giving it away. He put it in God’s hands, as grandmothers would say. Let Him decide. Next to the laptop, with the books, he placed his wallet and his cheap cellphone.

When the criminal reached his seat, the professor was staring at his shoes without haughtiness or fear, in what could be described as an absent attitude. The criminal noticed his expression, his clothes, his leather briefcase, his long-sleeved shirt rolled up, his unpretentious face, the books on his lap...

What do you do? Are you a teacher?

That’s right, I teach.

Where?

At the School of Education.

A teachers’ teacher!, said the man, stressing his words with a hint of solemnity.

That’s right, replied the professor, with a dignity devoid of stridency.

There was silence for a couple of seconds that seemed like a couple of semesters.

Keep teaching, professor, said the criminal, patting him on the shoulder, and continued to the back seats.

Avoiding the pride of celebrating what had been a “heavenly decision”, the professor returned to his silence, without taking his gaze off his shoes, until he heard the criminals order the driver to stop.

After they got off, there was a peculiar atmosphere inside the minibus, as if somehow something of them had remained among the passengers. As if they had left the poison they carried in their souls.

And indeed, they did.

Trying to understand which god to thank for his luck, in the midst of the bewilderment, fear and rage that follow such situations, his thoughts were cut short by the figure of a man in his fifties, swarthy, with glasses and a *guayabera*, who got up from the seat next to his, convinced that he had to blame someone for the ordeal. He turned his body in the professor’s direction and, pointing a sturdy index finger at him, yelled, with the same tone in which the criminals had spoken, and a boiling rage in his fiery eyes:

Now you’re going to explain why you were the only one who wasn’t mugged!

The professor calmly explains it. Like someone who remembers a story they once heard and can’t remember where. When asked how he managed to get off at the next stop without being lynched, he gives an indecipherable smile and starts talking about something else.

Some kind of nature

The tukis

They are between fourteen and twenty-something, have a wispy moustache that they bleach with peroxide and a quiff with yellowish highlights. They're also more afraid and bewildered than they pretend to appear. They wear colored jeans, rubber shoes, and white tank tops. The gold chain is a must. They wear sunglasses framed in extravagant colors they don't take off even in a wagon ten meters underground. This attire is usually accompanied by a cap. They listen to bachata without headphones and dance alone holding their phones when a song inspires them, squinting, moved by the songs' platitudes.

They are cheesy —every simple person is— and dishonest by nature.

Usually thin, they walk like a snake would if it had legs. And they ride motorcycles the same way (when doing stunts becomes a habit, the body gets used to searching for balance).

Although they strive to pass as bad guys, they're not always criminals and, truth be told, they rarely jump the barrier between the more or less illegal world in which they operate, and a resolutely criminal one. Some of them mug, of course, but big business is always in the hands of people who attract less attention when they walk down the street. In fact, they usually work in market stalls, as hawkers, or in trade-related occupations.

Of course, they “help themselves” however they can.

Although their extravagant attire earns them looks of disdain from snobby girls at malls, that's a minor matter they easily accept, taking into account that dangerous, what we'd actually call dangerous, is to be disliked by people who, for less than that, take out their gats and shoot.

The snobs

They feel enormous social pressure to seem educated or informed but, as they don't cultivate a taste of their own, they tend to stick to what seems cool at a given time. This permeates all areas of their social life. While others listen to what pleases them, they are careful to “derive satisfaction” only from what's supposed to be well regarded in certain areas, sacrificing their own opinion.

Which they usually lack, as already mentioned.

The point is to get a taste for whatever is *fashionable* or *trendy*, cultivating a *prêt-à-porter* culture. Interestingly, their tastelessness has an old origin, which makes them part of a certain tradition: in Latin, lacking nobility is called *sine nobilitate*, which was the way people from the lower classes were referred to, and which later on would come to designate those who, denying their condition, aspired to belong to a higher class than the one they belonged to. The social climbers.

Hence, *sine nobilitate* became “snob”.

They manage to always keep up with everything happening in the world or what's in the spotlight. On any popular topic of conversation, they'll drop a couple of names to show they're up to date. They know which films are nominated for the Oscars every year (although they'll soon forget them). They never miss an award show. They follow all the sports championships of the moment and have an opinion on all of them. In short, they're in everything, which is a way of not being in anything at all. Not, at least, in anything of their own.

The posh-thugs

They hopped on this trend like others get into new age, scientology, or raw foodism. They are usually white boys who live in middle class urbanizations in Caracas or other capitals across the country, but with roots in some town in rural Venezuela. Although, it must be said that this phenomenon also occurs among the children of foreigners.

They possess a very valid, but naively handled sensitivity. A kind of guilt about their condition with respect to the poor majorities. In other cases, it's a kitsch decoration. They are those artists and photographers who are fascinated by the "thuggish iconography" and exalt it in a frivolous way.

Or those who "discover" that there's poverty in their country and extol it with the help of its clichés.

They dance thuggish salsa and dream of being from the hood. They'd like to have a misbehaving cousin or any other story worth telling, like having been involved in a shoot-out at some point, or having left home as a teenager, for example. They are bored of the secure life that their parents, often with real sacrifices, provided them, and they feel at a disadvantage compared to their acquaintances who live in areas where survival requires greater talents.

They associate danger with manhood and yearn for it. They redeem all the vernacular traditions of their elders, or of the small-town life, which give them a certain designation of origin: they play dominoes (sometimes they only "lay down tiles"), bet on horses or cockfighting, drink rum, smoke cigars, like boxing, and wear *guayaberas*.

Either their words have a sort of swag to them, or they speak with deliberate bad diction. Or both. They are ashamed of seeming refined. They, who have received academic training, regard uncouth guys as their heroes. They are prisoners to a certain conservatism that attempts to pass as voluntary. They idealize poverty, but they ignore that the poor do not enjoy their lives of deprivation. In fact, they like the looks of it, but they would never give up their comfortable life. They ignore that what gives flavor to that life is a sauce that includes, not infrequently, hunger, pain, rage, abuse, dysfunctional homes, and many deprivations.

In other words, they ignore that that swing is the flirtatious ornament whose sole purpose relies on covering up what's broken.

The smackers

First of all, these are not the guys who join the police force and walk around in a uniform. Those are cops. This is something else. We're talking about "the tough guys", the action junkies. Those mean fatties in charge of dealing with the dirty work (not that they dislike it) in certain security agencies. The ones riding around on unlicensed motorcycles, getting their hands dirty so *da boss* will keep them clean, in exchange for letting them blow off a little steam from time to time. They feel no shame in slapping a man because it gives them an illusion of superiority.

They have an acute father-figure problem, and they vent it on the streets, dishing out (or giving back) fear and pain, their two inseparable childhood companions. They are the ones who feel at ease acting outside the law, because they are the law. Their existence depends on the motorcycle, the gun, the mean face, the jacket, the glasses and, above all, the impunity. Or, in other words, underneath all that gear there's nothing beyond the

bewildered and painful memory of a few frustrated fatties who, in the playground, never managed to get into a merry-go-round full of happy children.

The mall-goers

They have never heard of the so-called “inner life”, nor have they ever developed a passion or hobby that exposes them to being in dialogue with themselves. They live to have and have everything, except interest in self-cultivation. Their needs are limited to being fashionable, which is why they’re always on the lookout for the cool places. They have no clue what marketing people talk about when they speak of brand loyalty. Their only interest is to spot trends. They know that fads fade quickly, and the important thing is to be on the wave.

They are another kind of snob, as mentioned above, but without aspirations of refinement. This syndrome is coarser and, therefore, more prolific. A fundamental feature of their nature is that they detest solitude. After all, they direct all their efforts to making others see how well informed they are about “what’s in”.

And although it’s well known that those who do not cultivate the habit of being alone will never really know themselves, that doesn’t keep them awake at night. Uniqueness is the last thing they aspire to in life. Or, better said: the only uniqueness they aspire to in life is to be just one more of the bunch.

The Tyrannosaurus

They are divided into several groups: one of them does not leave the gym and is obsessed with maintaining a healthy appearance, although, on many occasions, they go overboard and look like victims of a deadly intoxication. Others gave up their hair and beard, which only reveal telltale gray hairs (this lodge is a numerous one). There are also those who remain more or less slim, although they’re starting to show the hint of a belly. This group usually wears loose-fitting shirts with three loose buttons at the top, allowing a golden chain to be seen dangling on their chest. Most frequently, they’re the chubby “cool guys” who always seem to be speaking to an audience, even when they’re talking to a single person in an elevator.

They suffer from Lord Farquaad syndrome, so they embellish themselves with a big truck, a big gun, a big house, a big supply of meat, you name it, but always in large format: the flat screen, the bed, the table, the bank account. As if their lust had developed an early longing for the pleasures of life.

They walk around waving their arms with an ostensible interest in attracting attention, and ooze insecurity behind those signs of opulence and loquacity. It’s true that no one wants to feel old, but they try so hard to ignore the passing of time that, perhaps because they’ve received nothing in return for their lost youth, they become a caricatured tribute to the young man that, apparently, they never got the chance to be.

The predators

If you spotted them at a restaurant, you’d recognize them immediately. They have so much they want to say, that they barely chew. They wear smart pants with short-sleeved shirts. In a more “upgraded” version, a blazer and tie. They save the “suit” for when they really want to impress. A high-level meeting in a ministry. A contract signing with a big client. They always talk loudly and pick up the phone in the middle of conversations, after a brief, feignedly polite “excuse me”, to spit out an order or two.

Their sentences are usually structured in a pattern that combines technicalities, anglicisms, and coarse words. “Those bastards want to stick it up our asses with the hypo-serialization of the offshore back-to-back, but I won’t put up with that bullshit,” would not be too far-fetched an example.

They call themselves entrepreneurs, or the newly acquired anglicism “groundbreakers”, but, in reality, they’re just adventure junkies. They’re stressed-out compulsive gamblers who don’t have the charm of those who don’t mind losing everything in a throw of the dice.

That would, at least, be poetic.

Although they don’t like to work, they are very attached to money. That’s why they’re a lot of talk and little action. That’s their real talent. Talking. Bamboozling. They’re too attached to symbols of power. If they “score”, they’ll switch cars, houses, even entertainment spots, but never their manners. Brandishing them is a way of exhibiting their contempt for methods and protocol. To ratify to the world that the only golden rule is having the big bucks. The only passport and the only heaven.

They are melancholic monkeys, faithful to the only music that gets them dancing: the jingle of money.

The barbarians

They’ve survived throughout our history. In the struggle between life and death, they represent death. They constitute the strongest and oldest genetic trait of all those that comprise us. They rode horses then, motorcycles now. They are the most primitive version of the human commitment to survival and embody our telluric forces, all that with which we have watered the earth over the centuries. They were the mercenaries who conquered lands by force in the name of a master. And the buccaneers who, from time to time, would crop up to plunder its treasures. And the *montoneras*¹ that cruised our history’s last two centuries.

They’re hateful and take root in revenge, thanks to their historical heritage of blood, pain, and rage.

The *montonera* has been their most ancestral form of organization. Its structure is primitive and efficient: a strong and violent leader holds the power surrounded by a group of men whose merits are based on the virtue they value the most: loyalty. A medieval code derives from it, whose violations are paid for with pain.

The man on horseback, who never hesitates, the unscrupulous, the bloodthirsty, the one who sees life as a war in which the strongest survive, the one who renounced compassion and empathy, the *caudillo*², the one who “doesn’t flinch”, the one who “never wavers”, the “man of action”, the one who “has a pair of balls”, has been venerated from generation to generation. History teaches us that every difference has been settled by force, by crushing, by defeating.

Is it any wonder, really, that many children hear an old echo that calls them to admire the thug, the military man, the policeman, more than the musician, the scientist, or the teacher?

¹ The word *montoneras*, derived from “*montón*” (crowd), refers to armed civilian, paramilitary groups that formed in Hispanic America in the 19th century during the wars of independence from Spain.

² A *caudillo* is a personalist leader who wields military and political power, especially in Spain and Latin America during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Cenesthesia

A MORNING LIKE ANY OTHER. Why mention the wagon was crowded? At the next station, a girl managed to get in, but was stuck right in the middle, unable to hold on to anything. The subway took off so abruptly that she lost her balance. I instinctively reached out my hand, and she didn't have time to think too hard whether to hold on to the lifeline thrown at her. We traveled silently, hand in hand, until the next station, where we exchanged a brief and shy "thank you/you're welcome", and she took advantage of the space vacated by those who left the wagon to find a place to hold on for the rest of her journey.

As if it were an ancestral parable, we Venezuelans had to take distance from ourselves and scatter around the world in order to understand who we are. And, in fact, true revelations of our nature have emerged from conversations between those who left and those who stayed, based on how we are seen from the outside or how we see ourselves from the outside, in contrast with other people.

The reports we receive through conversations via Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp, or the traditional email, have not been, in general terms, very auspicious. Arrogant, arbitrary, unreliable, posers, are some of the coordinates of that spiritual map, pieces of that spoken portrait we're assembling. However, we've also discovered a luminous side to that "being Venezuelan" that makes it so difficult to adapt to environments whose sense of manners and private space is more rigorous than ours.

A dear friend of mine who's been living in London for years told me that he came to Venezuela with his family for the holidays and that, upon his return, one of his sons had trouble readapting. The reason? He missed the warmth he received during his brief stay in the country. And this is not an isolated report.

Testimonies coming from New York or Berlin point to the same thing. "Everything works here", they say, "but you must abide by certain rules: don't stare at anyone for more than five seconds, don't even think of ruffling an unknown child's hair as you pass them by, don't try to hug your female colleagues when you greet them, be very careful to respect other people's private space, don't pat your bosses' or your teachers' back, don't even dream of using the affectionate term *negro* in public...".

It may seem a trifle, but when we distance ourselves from these displays of affection, forced by the restrictions imposed on physical contact in other cultures, we begin to feel a coldness in our flanks that ends up invading our spirits. The inability to touch, for people who see the world through "I feel" before "I think", ends up being a difficult limitation to bear. It's almost cruel.

As much or more than the absence of *harina Pan*³.

A small digression: Inuit is the name given to the peoples that inhabit the Arctic regions of America and Greenland. Their small population, about 150,000 inhabitants, lives from hunting caribou, bears, whales, and seals. Their vast lands are surrounded by water. November is the month when the ice forms for a short period of time, and people take the opportunity to visit and hear news from family and friends.

Temperatures in these regions can reach an average of between 7 and -9 degrees Celsius. What paradoxical climatological phenomenon makes it possible that people

³ *Harina Pan* is the name of the first and most popular corn flour brand in Venezuela, used to make traditional dishes such as arepas and hallacas.

subjected to so much cold can live, not only without touching each other, but even without seeing each other, while in this sweltering Caribbean of around 30 degrees Celsius people live huddled together and rubbing each other constantly?

After this unanswered question, let's close the parenthesis.

On another occasion, I was waiting for the Metro direction Chacaíto. As usual, it was delayed. A lady approached me and wanted to inquire about the scale of the matter. I told her that, after five subway trains, I had not been able to get in. At that moment, the sixth one was entering the station. The lady, determined to solve my problem, took me by the arm and said: "Come on, this one's ours", plunging me into the wagon, like lovers jumping into the water.

There's also the case of that lady at the bank who remains seated while the other customers "save" her place in line, and they let her know when it's about to be her turn. She approaches with parsimony and, explaining to anyone who's not aware of her temporary absence, she points out that "it hurts all over here" while sliding her hand along the side of the stranger in front of her.

Someone who hugs their friends with absolute and carefree profusion, who extends languid caresses that go from the shoulders to the waist for pure tactile delight, someone whose sentimental education relies on physical touch since childhood, how could they survive six months living alone in a northern European apartment where they moved for academic reasons or job opportunities? It's definitely an element to consider when wondering if they could bear to change habits, climate, cultural codes.

As Venezuelans not taking the bus at the stop or returning with a culinary treat whichever container we were sent a dessert in, it's one of those things that are there, whether we like them or not, and that we cannot avoid. It's one of the traits that define us. It's that way, perhaps primitive but beautiful in its viscosity, of showing the other that they're our neighbor, our *proximus*: by touching them.