

Two-Way Mirror: The Two Voices of Exile in *La Rambla paralela* by Fernando Vallejo

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Abstract: This article explores the duality of narrative voices as a representation of exile in the 2002 novel *La Rambla paralela* by the Colombian author Fernando Vallejo. Shifting between first and third-person narrators, Vallejo's work exposes the self that is caught between times, spaces, and realities. My contention here is that the alternation of first and third-person narrative voices reflects the pluralism of exile as voices in dialogue rather than a monologue, exploring the fluctuating distance between times, places, and identities.

Keywords: Fernando Vallejo, exile, *La Rambla paralela*, Colombia, nostalgia, narrative voice

Todo cambia. Cambian el clima y las ciudades. Si hubiera forma de parar el tiempo para que no avanzara, y el mundo para que no cambiara... Nada de lo que estaba mal se componía, y todo lo que estaba bien lo dañaban. Ésa era la ley del mundo.

La Rambla paralela

The mirror is the mysterious window that allows the viewer the rare opportunity of looking out while looking in. A reflection, be it a shadow or an echo, is a convincing double agent; it is at once its own entity and its representation. In his 2002 novel *La Rambla paralela* – a hallucinatory extracorporeal chronicle of the narrator's own death– the Colombian author Fernando Vallejo navigates the complex space between the reflection and the self. It is *el viejo's* somnambulistic trek through a world that is neither the Medellín of his childhood nor quite the Barcelona that he fully recognizes; rather, it is a chronotope created in the refraction of a past and present that at once do and do not exist. In this article, I explore the depths of the narrative voice in *La Rambla paralela* as both the mirror and the reflection of the experience of exile. The experience of exile, as I propose here, is a superimposition, a parallel of unparalleled voices: the voice of memory and the voice of reinvention.

The narrative wandering of *La Rambla paralela* traces the final, fragmented

footsteps of its protagonist/narrator, *el viejo*, as he groggily attempts to acclimate himself to Barcelona during his trip as an invited speaker at the Feria del Libro. The novel begins and ends in *el viejo's* hotel bathroom, as he awakes from a nightmare and examines his dying self in the mirror: “En ese instante me desperté bañado en sudor, con una opresión en el pecho y un dolor confuso en el brazo izquierdo” (10). During *el viejo's* awareness of his own departure from body, an external, third-person narrator appears and assumes control of the text: “El viejo se apoyó en el espejo para no caerse y al hacerlo dejó en él las huellas de los dedos ensuciándolo” (10). The narrator then begins to follow the flesh and phantom character of *el viejo* through the streets of Barcelona and the clouds of his memory, which is further fogged by vermouth, jetlag, insomnia, and the persistent confusion between life and death. Bound at both ends by the same dream and *el viejo's* self-observation in the mirror, the novel wades into the purgatorial space of nostalgia and destruction. The voice of the narrator supplements the growing gaps in *el viejo's* memory and serves as a symbolic affirmation of his separation from the world. The moment of death, as performed through the mirror, opens up a metaphysical space for self-observation vis-à-vis an external narration of self.¹

If we are to believe the narrator, or *el viejo*, for that matter, the question is not whether he died, but rather at what point. In fact, the narrator is quite explicit throughout the novel about *el viejo* having already died; he observes that to kill him is impossible because he is already dead (100), to which he later enthusiastically adds: “[q]ué bueno que se murió” (111). Despite the narrator's repeated assurances of *el viejo's* death, the temporal and spatial localization of the actual moment eludes concrete identification. The fantastical image of *el viejo* floating far above the streets of Barcelona happens when he is “[s]ituado fuera de este mundo en su instante eterno” (171). Despite his gradual denials and distancing of self from *el viejo*, the narrator is able to observe and describe such mystical moments because the narrator is *el viejo*. Returning to the opening and closing moments in front of the mirror, the parallels between them suggest that they are a single instant of metaphysical hyperawareness experienced during his death. That is, the appearance of the third-person narrator in the opening scene of the novel is the performance of the classic out-of-body experience so often attributed to the individual's proximity to death. In the beginning of the novel, *el viejo* wakes from his recurring dream, in which he is told that he has already died, of which he finds visual confirmation in the mirror. Upon that confirmation, the first-person voice of *el viejo* is subsumed by the third-person narrator. In contrast, at the end of the novel, the narrator watches as *el viejo* first observes himself closely in the mirror, and then retreats into the

¹ Here I will consider the multiple voices of narration in *La Rambla paralela* as different voices of a single entity, expressed alternately through the first and third-person perspectives throughout the novel. While the *narrator* assumes the role of the first-person voice, his observations about *el viejo* appear in the third-person. A possible third voice appears towards the latter part of the novel in the form of an invisible interlocutor.

familiar dream one last time. The performance has concluded, and “[e]n la angustiosa irrealidad del sueño la arritmia tomó entonces el control del corazón” (190).

The pain of exile, while not explicitly identified by Vallejo’s protagonist, is an underlying element that profoundly impacts the shape of *La Rambla*’s narrative. *El viejo*’s quickly fading world of the present is juxtaposed with the world that has left him behind a lifetime ago (84). While the pangs of nostalgia reverberate throughout the works of Vallejo, the experience of exile is particularly evident in *La Rambla paralela* through the often confusing interweaving of multiple voices. Vallejo’s narrator echoes *el viejo*’s allusions to exile: referring to the process in which “esa Colombia tuya que en tu ausencia se hizo ajena” (122). It is a narration that yearns, mourns, criticizes, wanders, wonders, forgets, and remembers. *El viejo* wanders through the world of living ghosts, haunted by the painful memory of loss. Faced with the impossibility of erasing that pain, he retires to his hotel room to count sheep or exhume the dead (144). Rapidly departing from the physical world, the spatial and temporal constructions that begin to surround *el viejo* blend Barcelona, Medellín, and Mexico City, from different stages of his life. The fragmentation of *el viejo*, as performed through the disembodied observation from his third-person self, further illustrates his division between spaces and times. My contention here is that Vallejo’s superimposition of first and third persons in the novel reflects the pluralism of exile, presenting it as voices in discourse, rather than a monologue.

Recognizing the multidimensionality of exile is critical to understanding its plurality of voices.² Exile is neither here nor there; rather, it is the space negotiated between what was and what is. Edward Said proposes that exile “is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (173). Said accounts for the pain of loss by highlighting the permanent disconnect between places and selves; his view recognizes that exile is an irremovable wedge and an irreversible process that traps the individual inside and outside of space. In *La Rambla paralela*, *el viejo* is caught between insomnia and the weight of nostalgic dreams, between life and death, and between places and times. The narrator explains the advantages of *el viejo*’s insomnia by suggesting that it cushions him from the painful dreams of death and destruction. The dream that marks the end and beginning of the novel is not a novelty; rather, it is a recurring narrative of an eternal separation, played through the silence on the phone that replaces his grandmother (110). The pain that characterizes the relived nightmare of *el viejo*’s failed phone conversation derives not from absence, but rather from a presence that is just beyond reach. The paradox of exile, as Sophia McClennen suggests, is that it

² Luis Roniger’s article highlights the difficulty of classifying experiences according to terms such as “exile” or “expatriate,” suggesting that even a departure formally recognized as voluntary may be interpreted and experienced by the individual as forced displacement (166).

is “both a condition of confinement and of limitless movement” (164).³ This parallel relationship between movement and confinement unfolds throughout the novel; although *el viejo* freely wanders the streets of Barcelona, he cannot resurrect the city as experienced during his youth. Exile creates a set of concurrent, temporal spaces that influence the reconfiguration of self. The individual lives in the new present while the alternate present, rooted in the past, continues its own forward advance *in absentia*. This alternate present does not cease to exist; rather, it becomes inaccessible. Vallejo’s narrator in *La Rambla paralela* notes the relationship between exile and space: “[m]ientras nuestro amigo andaba afuera soñando con volver, Colombia se le había ido rumbo a otro siglo y otro milenio y otros dueños, y ya no había forma de recobrarla y dar marcha atrás. Nadie puede reenrollar el carrete loco del tiempo. Desandar los pasos sí, pero en calidad de fantasma” (122).

Colombia did not disappear; rather, *his* Colombia has been lost. The spaces of self and place, like the space of time, exist multi-dimensionally. Said observes that “[f]or an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (186). Confinement, then, does not reside solely within spaces themselves, but also originates in the inaccessibility of spaces. Vallejo’s *viejo*, for instance, longs for returning to *his* Medellín, that is, “no al de ahora: al de [su] infancia” (42). It is the separation from time and space that, following a Heraclitian metaphor, prevents *el viejo* from stepping back into the same Colombia that he has lost. Stranded between the irrecoverable past and the exclusionary present, *el viejo’s* voice becomes inhabited by the plurality of exile.

To view exile as a multidimensional condition of confinement between inaccessible spaces recognizes that the process, the experience, and the identity of exile are reflections of reflections. That is, they are the present as viewed through the past, and the past as experienced through the present. Within that reconstructed space, nostalgia emerges as a second voice of narration.⁴ The exile’s voice of nostalgia echoes longing, lamentation, and condemnation alike.⁵ Thus, for Vallejo’s *viejo* in *La Rambla*, the Río Cauca exists as both one of “esos ríos tan bonitos” (30) of the Colombian landscape and as a bloody highway of corpses throughout El Bogotazo (27). The two voices of narration attempt to navigate the space between the rivers of memory. Although *el viejo* longs for the fondness of his childhood as remembered in *la finca Santa Anita*, his childhood memories also bear the scars of decapitated corpses and scavenging vultures. The beautiful moments of his past are ruptured by violence and loss. Excluded

³ This article owes much to Sophia McClennon’s excellent study of exile, which illustrates the very fluidity and complexity of experiences.

⁴ For further information regarding the role of nostalgia in Vallejo’s works, please see the doctoral dissertation by Andrés Fernando Forero Gómez.

⁵ Robert Hemmings suggests that “[n]ostalgia and trauma operate from the same liminal space between memory and forgetting” (3).

from time and place, caught between spaces, much of the exile's perspective relies on the voice of nostalgia and memory. As Paul Ricoeur contends, the trustworthiness of memories depends greatly on the tension between presence and absence of representations of the past (41). *El viejo* toys with that notion, suggesting that "los que se borran a sí mismos de la memoria por completo son los muertos. De un momento al otro, sin darse cuenta, dejan de saber quiénes son y quiénes fueron" (21). The complexity and the confusion of voices lies in the very multidimensionality of memory itself. To return to Heraclitus, Vallejo's *viejo* cannot step in the same Río Cauca. Rather, the narrative voices attempt to remap and rechannel the lost river through the forces of memory and nostalgia.

In order to understand the significance of Vallejo's use of two voices in *La Rambla paralela*, it is useful to situate the novel within the context of Vallejo's corpus of fiction. The intertextuality of Vallejo's work is evident in the compilation of *El río del tiempo*, an anthology beginning with *Los días azules* (1985), in which *el viejo* relates various chapters of his life.⁶ There is a general tendency to position *La Rambla paralela* outside the realm of *El río del tiempo*, but the many parallels that appear in *La Rambla* make a very strong argument that it should in fact be considered as part of that greater narrative. Is it not the same *viejo* born in *Los días azules* that meets his own death in *La Rambla paralela*? Many of the same memories that flood *El río del tiempo* repeat themselves in *La Rambla: la finca Santa Anita*, his grandmother's green eyes, his trip to Rome, balloons at Christmas, and his dog la Bruja. Could it be, then, that the novel is excluded from the discussion of *El río del tiempo* because of its deviation from Vallejo's narrative formula?

Fernando Vallejo's works prior to *La Rambla paralela* avoided the third-person narrative because, as he playfully contends, the first-person narrative is the only one that does not betray the truth (Fonseca 2). Instead, his stories have been presented through a first-person character that very much reflects the non-fictional Vallejo: Colombian novelist, Mexican citizen, animal lover, filmmaker, biographer, linguistics aficionado. For this reason, Vallejo's work has generally been regarded as autofiction.⁷ By situating his narrator within a landscape that is biographically his and allusions that are historically recognizable, Vallejo the author lends a certain credibility to the criticisms made by his narrator.⁸ For instance, in *La Rambla paralela*, he sarcastically notes that "antier mataron al arzobispo de Cali unos sicarios. Y que ayer el país amaneció tan

⁶ Beginning with *Los días azules* in 1985, Vallejo's anthology of *El río del tiempo* also includes *El fuego secreto* (1987), *Los caminos a Roma* (1988), *Años de indulgencia* (1989), and *Entre fantasmas* (1993). Ariztizábal Peraza brilliantly approaches these connections in her article.

⁷ In addition to outlining the complex subcategorizations of autofiction, Arnaud Schmitt's article proposes an alternative term of *self-narration*, which is informed by the awareness "that every life narrative, as honest as it purports to be, is flawed simply because our memory is also by definition flawed. We forget, we misunderstand or only partially understand, we lie, we use our imagination to escape our limited empirical experience" (129).

⁸ For a further exploration of the relationship between the biographical Vallejo and the autofictional narrative please see Francisco Villena Garrido's doctoral work.

indignado por el vil asesinato que casi tienen que suspender un partido importantísimo de fútbol” (102). His brief description leaves enough clues for the reader to partially conclude that the murder represents the shocking assassination of Archbishop Isaías Duarte Cancino in 2002.⁹ Additionally, but not alternatively, Julia Musitano’s investigation compares the novel’s details about the Feria del Libro with information from the newspaper *El País*, situating it historically during the week of July 14, 1998 (n.p.). The hints that either, or neither, of these temporal localizations accurately contextualizes the novel further bends the lines between fiction and reality. Situating *el viejo* and his narrative within a recognizable and authentic historical context reveals the challenge of reconciling fragmented perspectives. The subtle ambiguity that emerges in the space between Vallejo’s fiction and the reader’s ascription of the historically recognizable to events in the novel underscores the work undertaken by autofiction. In staging *el viejo*’s final night, the narrator places himself among the mixed company of unnamed participants in the *feria* and Luis Armando Soto, an actual (former) official with Colombia’s Cultural Ministry (185). In doing so, the narrator legitimizes his separation from *el viejo* by invoking the witnessing presence of an identifiable personage. In the space between fiction and autobiography, Vallejo builds a narrative that is critical, nostalgic, emotional, and deeply personal. The blurred borders between fictional and autobiographical selves reflect the very nature of the exiled identity as it drifts between the parallel planes of what once was and what now is.

Autofiction lends the author certain creative elements of fiction that allow for an exploration of self that the autobiography does not afford. In bending the rigid structures of space and time and revisiting lost places and resurrecting the dead, Vallejo’s narrators explore the nature of memory. His work recognizes that memory is flawed, and exploits its subjectivity to expose a paradox of human experience: existence is reconstructed memory. *El viejo* describes memory itself as a filter: “No recordés sino los momentos felices. Los tristes son para olvidarlos” (94). The past is irretrievable and the present is oppressively fleeting, while memory attempts reconciliation through reconstructing the inaccessible. In the repeated sequence of *el viejo*’s dreamed phone call, the question of whether he has dialed the right number is answered by the cold contradiction of a voice on the other end of the line that responds “[s]í, pero no” (9). Seeking clarification, *el viejo* finds little consolation in the ensuing conversation:

- ¿Pero sí estoy hablando a la finca Santa Anita, la que está entre Envigado y Sabaneta, saliendo de Medellín, Colombia?
- A la misma. Al aire que quedó.
- Y que es de Raquel Pizano.
- Era: de misía Raquelita. ¡Cuánto hace que se murió! (9)

⁹ As noted in the *Semana* article “Con la cruz auestas,” official figures counted “26 religiosos católicos y 39 pastores evangélicos” assassinated between 1998-2002. However, Duarte Cancino was the first bishop murdered in Colombia since the 1989 death of Jesús Emilio Jaramillo Monsalve.

The revelation of information that *el viejo* already knows, a memory buried in the confusion of a dream, surprises him nonetheless. Of course, *el viejo* soon discovers that he, too, has died. More accurately, he is told in a dream, he tells himself, and the newly introduced narrator tells us.

The death of *el viejo* in *La Rambla paralela* could easily be interpreted as the death of Vallejo's autofiction.¹⁰ To kill his self-narrator would certainly be the logical punctuation to his chronicle, coinciding with the introduction of the uncharacteristic third-person narrator in *La Rambla paralela*. However, if the first-person and the third-person are two voices of the same character, does the author really stray from his model? Julia Musitano suggests that Vallejo has designed a cleverly structured narrative that aims to confuse the reader, overlapping the voices in a way that makes it at times impossible to determine which voice is speaking. According to Musitano, it is simply "una máscara más al yo autoficticio, un nuevo disfraz para expresar la gran contradicción entre el deseo de esconderse y el deseo de mostrarse" (4). Vallejo is not simply killing a character in *La Rambla paralela*; rather, he is opening another dimension of self-exploration. *El viejo's* death is the end and the means; it is the only way in which he can have two voices and two perspectives. In that brief eternity of confused clarity, the soul leaves the body and life's saga replays itself in flashes and fragments. The superimposition of voices and perspectives allows *el viejo* to finally see the Rambla and the Río Cauca together:

Rápido, rápido, rápido iba arrastrando el río los decapitados en la lejana Colombia y por las calles de la Rambla gente. El río era el Cauca, el de mi niñez, y la Rambla la de mi muerte, la de Barcelona. Y mientras el niño que fui seguía desde la orilla del río eterno el desfile de los cadáveres con gallinazos encima que les sacaban las tripas y salpicaban de sangre el agua pantanosa, el viejo que lo recordaba veía desde su mesa de café, viendo sin ver, el deambular interminable de la Rambla (11).

With an added perspective and voice, the narrator recognizes the absence and presence of both places and times. The alternating superimposition of the first and third-person narrative in *La Rambla paralela* is born from the metaphysical moment of hyperawareness in death, and continues to develop in the created narrative space of dying.

The problematic of situating the precise moment of *el viejo's* death in the novel owes partly to the limits of the narrator's own knowledge of that timing, as the two

¹⁰ Villena Garrido cites an interview with Javier Fernández in which Vallejo admits that his introduction of a third-person narrator serves multiple purposes, as both a vehicle for action and as parody: "resolví el problema de mi muerte en primera persona, y me burlé de la tercera en que están escritas casi todas las novelas" (34-35).

voices are fragmented parts of the same phantom. Throughout the novel, *el viejo* responds directly to the presumably interior monologue of the narrator's observations about him. The seamless crossover between the two voices suggests that both entities exist within one another. The multiple glances into the hotel mirror and the recurring dream of the phone call to the *finca* suggest both a longer process of emotional death in motion, as well as the immediacy of the physical death. Additionally, *el viejo's* wanderings, outside of the mirror, are further categorized by states of questionable reliability and altered consciousness, which suggest an overlapping process of unfolding separation from the physical world. Indeed, *el viejo* insists that his status as deceased be "bien claro en el papelito o no me dejan subir el avión de Mexicana y no voy a poder regresar a México" (187). His actual return flight becomes, through his awareness of death, the metaphorical journey into the other world.

The confusion that haunts the novel in regards to *el viejo's* narrative waltz with the shadows of death continues to build with the physical unraveling of the character. These slightly altered states experienced by *el viejo* further blur the boundaries between the world of the living and his approaching, or already completed, physical expiration. Likewise, the processes represent *el viejo's* exclusion from the present and past, wedging him further still into existential limbo. His brief breaks from insomnia only find him with the enormous weight of dreams of death and loss. Lost in the modern shuffle of Barcelona's streets, he attempts to cross roads with his eyes closed. Even with his eyes opened, the salt from the sea fills them with tears, and disorients him further. He does not suspend the dizzying consumption of vermouth and absinthe, but rather at one point switches to Cynar because it is said to regenerate the liver (167). The ironic futility of self-preservation is not lost on *el viejo*, as the narrator observes that "el único que él seguía haciendo ahí era preservando el yo, unos míseros recuerdos en el gran desastre de la vida" (166). As he notes throughout, *el viejo* finds himself at times no more dead than the living phantoms that walk the streets of Barcelona, and no more alive than the spirits from his past. His heartbeat, the loud clock ticking towards the "desastre inminente" (11) of his death, becomes almost indistinguishable from the deafening tocks of five alarm clocks that he has set to five o'clock (188). *El viejo* no longer trusts the interior biological cadence or the mechanized time of clocks.

The structure that Vallejo designs with regard to the two voices in the novel parallels the static rhythm of the experience of exile itself. The moment of the mirror establishes the duality of voice and of selfanswers, as *el viejo* looks at and from himself at once. The two voices establish a complex narrative of both harmony and discord that evolves throughout the text. Initially, it appears as though the narrator and *el viejo* are simply a dying man's internal dialogue as he looks for closure in a rapidly fading world. It is certainly a bidirectional exchange, as the two voices question, correct, answer, interrupt, and consult one another. The confusion of voices often blurs the already fuzzy line between the narrator and *el viejo*:

- ¡Un vermut! - pidió instalándose como se le habría de hacer costumbre en los días que permaneció allí, en la ciudad de los herejes y los réprobos, a una de las mesas exteriores del Café de la Ópera: frente al hueco, el otro hueco, el que dejó el incendio.
- ¿Cuál incendio? ¿De cuál estás hablando, hombre? ¿Del sexual?
- No. Del del teatro ese que se quemó, ¿y que se llamaba cómo?
- ¡A ver! ¿Cómo, cómo, cómo?
- ¡El Liceo!
- Exacto, el Liceo, se había acordado! Por lo menos esa batalla contra el mal de Alzheimer la había ganado. (20)

Throughout the novel, the voices criss-cross and consume one another, and at times seemingly invert themselves. Blending the two voices projects the complex multidimensionality of exile, which is further explored through the separation of the narrator from *el viejo*.

As the novel advances, the voice of the narrator begins to contrast and distance itself from *el viejo*. The narrator at times explicitly highlights the disconnection and distance between the two manifestations of self: “El viejo se levantó, pagó la copa, y volvió a tomar hacia el Moll de la Fusta. ¿Qué se iba diciendo en camino? Ah, eso sí no sé, no tengo un lector de pensamientos” (30). Here the narrator toys with the notion of his authority; despite his apparent access to *el viejo*'s consciousness, he suggests to the reader that he has no way of reading another individual's thoughts. Claiming to be nothing more than an impartial biographer that “abre y cierra comillas y se atiene a los datos,” (140), the narrator steps further away from *el viejo* and claims that his “último recuerdo de él es alejándose por las Ramblas en la noche entre el gentío” (185). If, as impartial biographer, this were the narrator's last memory of *el viejo*, he would not be able to faithfully portray the final intimate moments in front of the mirror, nor would this explain the first-person account of self-observation in the beginning of the novel. Rather, the narrator's above-mentioned last sighting of *el viejo* is significant because it marks the final moments in which he sees himself walking amongst the world of the living.

There is, then, a very fluid relationship between these two voices; from the perspective of the narrator, he owns a shifting sense of access to the other voice, while *el viejo* at times scarcely has ownership over his own. Throughout the novel, *el viejo* wanders the streets of Barcelona with his eyes closed, “oyendo sin oír, viendo sin ver, como un fantasma más en medio de los fantasmas” (34). I propose that the separation of voices and *el viejo*'s blind walks through the city represent a parallel to the experience of exile. Isolated, excluded from time and space, the individual loses the first-person perspective of home. The story of home becomes a third-person narrative, as the exile relies on the word of others to experience that inaccessible parallel space. Home begins to speak through such channels as phone calls, letters, newspaper headlines, and

memories. Remembering his favorite café, for instance, the narrator observes that “[c]uando se quemó el Miami [él] estaba en Londres y hasta allá [l]e llegaron los ecos del incendio” (29). Similarly, the death of *el viejo*'s grandfather reaches him by letter during his youth in Rome; the news marks the beginning of a chronic chain of tragedy experienced from the isolation of distance. This experience and observation of life and tragedy from abroad does not replace the first-person voice, but rather becomes a supplemental component of the exile's reconstructed identity.

Torn away from his past and his home, *el viejo* in *La Rambla paralela* is stranded between two voices. As a result, a new, split-identity emerges that attempts to negotiate both spaces. Said observes that “[m]uch of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule” (181). Much of that world for *el viejo* is a recreation of memory, the blending of his lost world and the world in which he is lost. The painful longing for his grandmother mixes with the salty sea air of Barcelona, blurring his eyes with tears. He is thus temporarily transported, through nostalgic wandering and his physically distorted vision: “Se levantó, se despidió de sus paisanos y salió de la frescura del stand al calor del verano. Una brisa fresca sopló por la calle del Perú, la de su infancia, y agitó las ramas de los carboneros” (63). With his eyes closed, *el viejo* constantly tries to resurrect the dead and revisit the lost spaces of both the Medellín of his childhood and the Barcelona of his youth. His attempt to reconcile what has gone with what remains is a revelation of his own duality: “Esa calle, la de su juventud, lo partía en dos: Él era uno antes de ella y otro muy otro después. -Dos personas distintas y un solo hijueputa verdadero” (97). Exiled by distance, time, memory, and modernity, *el viejo* must create a new self that recognizes both presence and absence. The insertion of the third-person narrator into *La Rambla paralela* is a way in which *el viejo* has created that new identity.

El viejo embraces a very binary view of the world, rejecting the notion of intermediaries (50). How, then, can he account for an identity and an existence that are neither here nor there? Perhaps, finding himself in a space of detachment and uncertainty, he cannot. The creation of a second voice, as I proposed earlier, offers him the perspective to see multiple layers of himself at once. It represents an attempt to explore the paradoxical nature of the exile's identity. The narrator's multiple self-identities as Antioqueño, Mexican, and Swiss are not an attempt at deception, but rather an exploration of the construction of self. He only exists, after all, as a condition of *el viejo*'s death. *El viejo*'s identity is not solely Colombian; the earthquake and the politics of Mexico and the distinct space of Barcelona have also shaped him through the years. The narrator claims that *el viejo* was “un anarquista, un pesimista, un terrorista, un despatriado, un despechado, un amargado. Un cínico que abusaba de su calidad de fantasma” (162). Straddling the world of the living and one in the world of ghosts, *el viejo* finds his balance in the voice of the narrator. It is a reconfiguration of identity that accounts for his isolation from both worlds.

In much the same manner, language plays an important role in the exploration

of the exile identity throughout *La Rambla paralela*. It is hardly surprising that Vallejo the linguist has given it such attention throughout the novel.¹¹ Language reflects the idea that *el viejo's* identity is a multidimensional construction. It serves as both a reminder of his connection to and his absence from Colombia. The narrator observes, for instance, that “[l]a palabra que el viejo pronunció yo nunca la uso. Es de él, un colombianismo vulgar y grosero” (41). Language, in a very significant way, connects him to a time and a place to which he cannot return. *El viejo* uses language to express his identity. Throughout the novel, the narrator continues to call attention to the peculiar relics of Antioquía in his voice, such as *vos* and *semos*. While Jacques Joeset follows the rationale set by Vallejo’s narrator in the text that such colloquial references ring with a tone of mockery, I would like to suggest that *el viejo* also employs them as a technique of salvaging what he can from his otherwise irrecoverable world (34).¹² Language has become an anchor and a symbol; it ties him to home and it identifies him as Antioqueño to the outside world. The narrator notes the distinction that “El viejo escribía en español pero se hablaba en antioqueño” (54). The remnants of *el viejo's* Antioquía Spanish form one dimension of his identity that reaches towards and inaccessible past.

While language serves as a bridge to *el viejo's* Medellín, it also represents his distance. Despite the survival of his dialect, it becomes evident throughout the novel that his language has also changed during his years of exile. Much like his identity, his language has begun to incorporate elements of the new space in exile. For instance, the narrator explains that his use of “estoy norteadado” is a Mexican expression for being lost (153). His brief vocabulary lesson on the Colombian, Mexican, Guatemalan, and Peninsular Spanish variations for the word *hungover* is more than a nod to his interest in language. It is a testament to a life lived between spaces. The change in *el viejo's* language is not limited to lexical differences, nor is there a consistent pattern. The narrator, who at times tries to distance himself from the Antioquía dialect, incorporates certain elements of it into his speech. *El viejo*, alternatively, in trying to preserve his Antioquía identity, wanders between the language of home and dialects from abroad.¹³ The narrator snidely comments that after only five days in Spain, *el viejo* “ya hablaba de ‘vosotros’ y decía ‘hideputas’ como Cervantes” (74). Ironically, the narrator also occasionally uses the Barcelona pronunciations of the same words that he ridicules *el viejo* for using. Although the narrator later contends that *el viejo's* language, country, and self have all been reduced to disaster, the continued influence of Colombia and Spain on

¹¹ In the opening pages of the novel, Vallejo’s narrator draws a parallel between his own death and that of the seventeenth century grammarian César Oudin, suggesting that he, too, was going to die while trying to resolve a grammatical triviality (11). His reference to the legacy of the great Colombian grammarians, in particular the suggestion that “[t]ras la muerte de [Rufino José] Cuervo fue el acabose” (44) further serves to wedge him between the world of the living and dead.

¹² Joeset’s article presents a detailed linguistic reading of *La Rambla paralela*.

¹³ It is worth noting that although much reference is made by the narrator with regard to *el viejo's* use of Peninsular Spanish, Spain represents one of many spaces of his exile.

the language suggests that his language and his identity have changed rather than dissolve (152).

In much the same vein, the fall of Rome did not destroy Latin or erase the people of the Roman Empire; populations resettled and Latin morphed into new languages that redefined the landscape. Vallejo's incorporation of Latin into *La Rambla paralela* is the novelist-linguist's unique way of representing both *el viejo's* experience and the exile's struggle to maintain identity. Although Latin, like *el viejo*, is largely considered dead, it continues to wander phantasmically through a temporal and spatial dimension to which it no longer belongs. There is a silent resilience in Latin for maintaining its presence in a world that has largely disposed of it. It survived crises of identity, time, and space. It took refuge in the major institutions of church, state, science, and medicine. As both *el viejo* and the narrator illustrate throughout the novel, it has assured its own survival by planting itself in prayers and business mottos. The presumably dead language that for so long was inaccessible to the masses has ironically returned to the masses after its death, immortalized in such phrases as *Carpe diem* and *Semper fidelis*. Latin cannot be returned to the days of its youth; it likewise cannot simply insert itself into the river of modern human language and expect to be accepted and adopted. Latin, like exile, occupies a space toward which return is impossible and from which change is inevitable.

If language is the exile's attempt to connect with a space that is only accessible in the selective, subjective, and sometimes contradictory realm of memory, how are those spaces represented by the voices of *el viejo*? Throughout the novel, the same images from the landscape of Colombia are presented in very different tones. The narrator, for instance, groups the caimans with the likes of mosquitoes, yellow fever, and snakes, to represent the threat of death in the Magdalena (80). *El viejo*, on the other hand, laments the mass hunting of caimans that has turned a population into bags and belts. Similarly, the narrator evokes the visual of vultures feeding on decapitated corpses in the Ríos Cauca and Magdalena as testimony to the grim violence of El Bogotazo. *El viejo* later reworks the same image by categorizing Colombia's actions as devouring its own guts. Through the contrasting projection of images, Vallejo's dual narrators argue that Colombia is the victim and the perpetrator. Such imagery illustrates the paradoxical isolation in his exile. By emphasizing his use of the word *gallinazo* versus the terms *buitre* and the Latin *vultur*, the narrator declares the birds - and Colombia- as his (23).¹⁴ On the other hand, *el viejo* is very methodical about his rejection of the vultures. The narrator explains that *el viejo's* love for animals extends to very few bipeds, among them the "gallinas, gallos y pollos" (139). The enumeration of various names for a domesticated animal that, while standing in contrast symbolically to the vulture, is a deconstructed sequence of sounds that constitute *gallinazos*, suggests that both the warmth and the pain

¹⁴ The narrator later refers to newscasters as "buitres" rather than *gallinazos*. I interpret this as another example of exclusion, in which the narrator wants to underline the distinction between the corrupt newscasters and the public.

of Colombia are always effectively on the tip of his tongue.

El viejo's reconstructed view of his home is much more than a reflection on a lost time and space. Memory becomes a criticism of a government and a country whose violence has exiled him from his past, present, and future. His perspective is based on an experience charged with the pain of abandonment, brutality, and indiscriminate destruction. In contrast with *el viejo's* nostalgia for his family's farm and the beauty of Colombia's mountains, the voices in *La Rambla paralela* also express outrage at a continuing genocide that has turned the country into a Shangri-la for the vultures (23). The novel makes repeated references to the rivers of corpses and gruesome descriptions of decapitations as the *modus operandi* of Colombia's war. Perhaps there is the very literal connection between the heads and the rivers that Vallejo wants to illustrate: headless bodies dumped in rivers floating past *el viejo* as a young boy. Or perhaps the image of the head and the river is Vallejo's way of connecting Colombia's violence with nature and humanity. The personification of Colombia by both *el viejo* and the narrator further lends support to the connection between nation and people. It is also a technique that draws a target for a criticism that is otherwise very widely aimed. The narrator refers to Colombia as "la destructora, el país bulldozer" (139), "ladrona" (80), and the responsible party that "asesinó" its own population (138). *El viejo* directly accuses Colombia of murder: "[e]l año pasado mataste a veintiocho mil y secuestraste a tres mil quinientos" (53). Such direct criticisms of Colombia coincide with a blend of voices throughout the novel that combines satire, nihilism, and outright rage. *El viejo*, for instance, suggests that "Colombia nunca tendrá un papa ni ganará el mundial de fútbol" (98). Intertwined with the criticism of cockroach bureaucrats and vulture newscasters is the repeated conclusion by both voices that Colombia is the happiest country in the world. The claim is consistently met with a response of disbelief by the other voice. Here the suggestion is that neither perspective is inherently wrong; systemic violence and the happiness of a population are not mutually exclusive.¹⁵ Similarly, his exile is a wandering between nostalgic longing and the pain of continuous loss.

Exploring that expanse of space between memory and loss, *el viejo* finds himself caught between two worlds. His navigation of a world to which he does not belong is like to waking up trapped in a body that is not his own. His search for the Rambla paralela in Barcelona reveals his disorientation in both the present and the past: his map lists it as "el Paralelo" (53). Similarly, his constant search for the 18°C temperature of Medellín instead finds only the salty humidity of Barcelona's sea breezes. In the abyss of exile, from the heights of death, *el viejo* floats between Barcelona and Medellín. It is a world and a time that do not make sense to him; much like the Colombia of his youth,

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek uses the term *systemic violence*, suggesting that "[i]t may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be "irrational" explosions of subjective violence" (2).

Barcelona has also changed in his absence. He wonders why he cannot get medicine without a prescription in Barcelona if he does not need one in Colombia (88). While *el viejo* struggles with the hotel key card and cannot find the brothel from his youth, the narrator forgets whether or not Barcelona sits on the sea. *El viejo* is effectively exiled in exile, “[o]bsoleto como una llave” (99). He reacts to his exclusion from time and place by also criticizing everything that is not Colombian: Barcelona is a city of heretics, the Spanish buy books but do not read them, the French are philosophical potheads. Vallejo’s hyperbolic criticism of the world also represents *el viejo*’s defense against a world and a time that have conspired with another world and time to exile him within his exile.

The two voices in *La Rambla paralela* represent a resistance to adopt the new identity of exile. The reconstructed identity is another instrument of oppression and exclusion that shadow the politics and psychology of exile. There are two perspectives that form the exile’s identity outside of the homeland: the new nation’s exclusion of the exile from its society and the individual’s perception of self as a consequence of loss and distance. The dual forces further serve to isolate the exile: the new country imposes stereotypes while the individual begins to self-identify in a way that reflects life on the outside. *El viejo*’s experience on the Air France flight demonstrates the struggle that the exile faces as a result of the imposition of stereotypes. He was denied access to his connecting flight at the airport, “[p]or colombiano[...] por ladrón, atracador, secuestrador, narcotraficante y asesino” (13). He later reappropriates a similar stereotype by sarcastically suggesting that all Colombians grow coffee and cocaine, while the narrator proposes that all Colombians dream of becoming the President. Such exaggerated reconstructions of identity from stereotypes reflect the difficulty of self-identity within the context of exile. The outside world attempts to classify individuals based on preconceived images, while the exile struggles with the inaccessibility of cultural beacons from home and in the new space. It is not surprising that *el viejo* gets his news from the Colombian booth at the Feria or looks forward to the Mexican tequila aboard his return flight. His collection of old passports is testament to his constant search for identity; they remind him of who he is, who he was, where he is from, and to where he cannot return.

As the world closes around *el viejo* in death, he sees the Cauca and the Rambla flowing together, out of his reach. The narrator admires his old-fashioned waiter: “de cuando España era pobre pero digna y para un camarero era un orgullo serlo” (150). *El viejo* is metaphorically that waiter, pouring the same drinks for a world that has left him behind. Vallejo’s third-person narrator is the shifting reflection of his autofictional *viejo* wandering through a hall of mirrors. The confusion of voices is not the author’s game of smoke and mirrors designed to surprise and awe the reader; rather, Vallejo commandeers the vehicle of death as a means for separating soul and body in the final search for self. The world of *La Rambla paralela* is a shifting reconstruction of memories superimposed over an unfamiliar yet familiar landscape. The two voices shift between

discord and harmony in a static rhythm that ruptures the planes of space and time. Vallejo's dismantling of self through death is symbolic of the search for identity. The space of dying represents the unmarked avenue between the tangible world of the living and the inaccessible world of ghosts. Vallejo uses this space to explore the multidimensionality of the exiled self as a perpetual series of reflecting reflections. The narrator suggests that *el viejo's* return to Colombia is as simple as boarding a plane. But no plane can return him to the only Colombia that he knows, lost through distance and time. The Rambla paralela and the Río Cauca of his youth are clouds of his memory blowing away in the wind: "La nube explotó y el viejo se precipitó a tierra jalado por la que nos une a todos y no nos deja dispersar en las inmensidades del espacio eterno: la fuerza de gravedad, doña verraca" (148).

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