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**Violence and Globalization in *De que nada se sabe* (2002) by Alfredo Noriega: A Dark Account of Late Twentieth Century Ecuador in a *Glocal Noir Ecuatoriano***

**Abstract**

In Alfredo Noriega's novel, *De que nada se sabe*, we witness the entrance of Ecuador in the neoliberal and globalized world when the South American country is immersed in an unprecedented institutional crisis. The stories narrated in this novel create an account of an Ecuadorian postmodern social reality of the late twentieth century and beginning of this century. Quito, the capital city, is represented through a collision of narrations where the local melts with the global while describing the radical transformations of the city in a type of fictionalized chronicle.

**Keywords:** Alfredo Noriega, global Quito, local Quito, chronicle

In a recent interview to a major Ecuadorian newspaper, Alfredo Noriega refers to his novel *De que nada se sabe* as “una obra que habla del Ecuador, de su gente, de sus crisis” (“a work that speaks of Ecuador, its capital city, its people, and its crises” ) [1] (El Universo 2003). Thus, with this work, we witness Ecuador’s entrance into the neoliberal and globalized world of the South American region—an Ecuador of the late 1990s, immersed in an unprecedented institutional crisis. The stories narrated in this novel create an account of an Ecuadorian postmodern social reality of the late twentieth century and the beginning of this century through a collision of narrations where the local melts with the global. This assertion is based on the sociological studies of Roland Robertson and the argument outlined by Hubert Pöppel in his essay “Fuerzas centrífugas y centrípetas en Santiago Gamboa y Gonzalo España.” According to Pöppel’s observations regarding the Colombian crime novel, “la globalización de ideas, discursos y propuestas permite, por ende, volver a pensar, desde una nueva perspectiva, lo local y lo particular” (“the globalization of ideas, proposals and speeches can therefore make us re-think what it is considered the local and the particular”) (361).

The story narrates the life of a forensic doctor, Arturo Fernandez, who through his work attempts to reconstruct the tragic events of the deaths of the bodies arriving at the police morgue where he works, while describing the radical transformations of Quito in a type of fictionalized chronicle. In this novel, we clearly identify the narrator’s social concerns couched in colloquial expressions that reinforce Ecuadorians’ own dialect, but at the same time, with a meta-textual strategy that remains distant from the local. This starts with the title of the novel, *De que nada se sabe*, a fragment of the Jorge Luis Borges poem of the same name, and each chapter has an epigraph from that same poem announcing the motifs that govern the events of the story, as noted by Ecuadorian writer Cesar Carrion in the prologue of the novel (10). The protagonist of the novel works as a medical examiner in the police morgue, but he also assumes the role of a detective in pursuit of finding the criminal. He reminds us of the literary characteristics that direct the line of questioning used in classic detective novels. In this case, the protagonist reconstructs the stories of those bodies that he dissects, and, in the process, he even tries to prosecute the perpetrators of the crimes committed against them.

“(El cuerpo de María Chiriboga) cayó primero de bruces, tiene las rodillas y la cara raspadas (...) su agresor la agarró de los brazos (...) su mano izquierda está rota, hay restos de piel en las uñas (...) la violaron y estrangularon al mismo tiempo (...) cuando el asesino eyaculó, la víctima ya estaba muerta (...)”

Colombiano, leo, miembro de banda de asaltantes. Otro colombiano más, muerto de muerte violenta. (...) No lo mató la policía. El calibre del revolver no da. Seguramente fue un guardia de barrio; no será el primero que cae bajo las balas de estos guardianes del orden improvisados (...) necesarios, dicen, en esta ciudad cuya violencia la Policía Nacional no solamente no puede contener sino que ella misma ejerce (...)” (90; 95)

*“(Maria Chiriboga’s body) first fell on her face, her knees and face had scratches... Her aggressor grabbed her by the arms... Her left hand is broken, there are traces of skin on the nails... She was raped and strangled at the same time (...) When the murderer ejaculated, the victim was already dead (...)*

*Colombian, I read, member of a band of assaulters. Another Colombian dead from a violent death... The police did not kill him. The caliber of the revolver does not match. (The killer) surely was a security guard; he won’t be the first to die under the bullets of these improvised custodians... They are necessary, they say, in this city whose violence the National Police not only can not contain but also executes itself...” (90; 95)*

In this narrative, we witness an oscillation between two alternating narrators. First, the forensic doctor who tries to give an identity to the corpses by reconstructing their life stories and pursuing the perpetrators of the crimes, attempting to uncover the reasons for their deaths within the organs of the bodies that he dissected. The second narrator is an omniscient one, whose judgments and visions focus on the description of Quito landscapes where the crimes take place. The correspondence of these two narratives allows the reader to speculate about the time of the crime, the type of weapon used by the alleged murderer, and the reasons he or she has committed the aforementioned crime. This omniscient narrator also assumes the description, in a historicist form, of the moral decline being experienced by the Ecuadorian capital of the end of the last millennium, “(...) Quito no le quita nada a Guayaquil o a Bogotá, ni Mexico D.F., Río de Janeiro, Los Ángeles o Nueva York, en esta ciudad también se le teme a la policía (...) deberíamos tener un monumento al muerto desconocido (...)” (95) “(...) *Quito does not take anything away from Guayaquil or Bogota, or Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles or New York, in this city also the police are feared... We should have a monument to the unknown dead (...)*” (95)

Framed in a distinctly urban setting, Noriega’s work describes the transformation of Quito, as a representation of what French Anthropologist Marc Augé would call a “non-place.” In anthropological terms, a place could be considered “as a site that can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity” (77). From the foregoing statement, the author defines those non-vital or ahistorical places as “non-places.” A “non-place,” then, would be an airport, a cafe, a hospital, a highway, a supermarket or a hotel room, or other area without a definite configuration, a place defined almost exclusively by transient individuals. The city of Quito, as narrated by the characters in Noriega’s story, is transformed into one of these anthropological spaces. For Augé, the “non-place” is the result of the inability to represent a space forged or modified by postmodernism largely due to technological, cultural and economic global capitalist breakthrough product innovations, which become creators of experiences or influences in art or in the field of knowledge; therefore, that territory is transformed into a mimetic effect and not a stable entity. Noriega’s character describes these spaces in a hyper-realistic way, such as detailed references to the Benalcázar building built during the oil boom of the late 1970s, public

transport, shopping centers, or “los kilómetros de la avenida oriental y los túneles de San Juan” (“The kilometers of Avenida Oriental and the tunnels of San Juan”) (*De que nada* 46). These “non-places” are sites frequented by transient, ephemeral and temporary subjects who are immersed in a state devoid of history, trapped in an area without knowledge (Augé 30-33).

The novel reveals a Quito from the end of the last century, a city that expanded thanks to the Ecuadorian oil boom of the 1970s and with a population that witnessed the return to democracy in the 1980s, where the absence of law and justice became an unavoidable presence. With the advent of the neoliberal economic model implemented under President Sixto Duran Ballen in the early 1990s and radicalized under the presidency of Jamil Mahuad at the end of that same decade with the dollarization of the economy, a new scale of values aroused powered by a widening gap between the rich and the poor and by the further displacement of social classes. In this late capitalist urban setting, interactions between people are minimal, exemplifying the distrust felt by all, with the presence of extremely marked social boundaries that divide the population. The characters in the novel include rich, poor, foreigners, men, women, homosexuals and indigenous, and although the division between these classes is clearly present, the city of Quito acts as their only binding tie. Each of the characters also responds to their own interests and characteristics: The apathetic librarian Osorio negotiates his emotionlessness with Hortensia, Arturo’s mother, who also refuses to express her feelings to a person from a lower social class. In contrast to the tenacity and solidarity of taxi driver Campos, there is the negligence of the medical student Maria Chiriboga. The commitment and professional ethics found in the protagonist Arturo are distinct from the excess of irresponsibility as showcased by Wilfrido, the immigrant from the Ecuadorian coast. And the only faithful and healthy relationship narrated in the story; represented by the clandestine love of Jorge, the homosexual brother of Arturo, and his partner; is abruptly interrupted by the assassination of one of the lovers, corroborating the latter as an impossible relationship. Therefore, the relationships that are told in this story, those considered healthy and the ones suffering from a terrible loneliness or in dysfunctional environments, fail sooner or later due to the presence of an external agent that interrupt these relationships in an abrupt way. This agent is related to the prevailing crime in the city, which acts as a universal element.

Murder and violent deaths that frequently occur in *De que nada se sabe* and Quito is the binding element that leads the different social classes to interact with each other. A single crime connects the characters of Gonzalo, Caceres, Eulalia—all of them from the lower middle class—with Arturo, the forensic doctor, whose office becomes the final destination of each death in the novel. The doctor, in his role of investigator, reconstructs the events of each of these violent deaths. He is dedicated to working with the corpses and then connects these facts with the deaths of other characters, the deaths of Campos, Wilfredo, Jorge, Mary and the indigenous. The presence of indigenous people is a particular element of the country that does not escape from

the universality of crime. The number of deaths continues to rise in a novel that serves as a social critique, capturing an Ecuadorian modernity of the late twentieth century defined by inequality and marginalization.

In both cases, Amir Valle 's argument can be taken into account. In his essay “Marginalidad y ética de la marginalidad en la nueva ciudad narrada por la novela negra latinoamericana” Valle describes the role of contemporary crime fiction as a type of writing that:

“[h]a dejado de ser negra para convertirse en la novela costumbrista de nuestros días. Sólo aceptando esos criterios podrá entenderse por qué y cómo en la nueva novela negra latinoamericana se esconden hoy las claves para entender esa Marginalia y esa ética de la marginalidad en la cual habitamos los latinoamericanos, una marginalidad que, lejos de convertirnos en seres inmundos, desvalidos, desesperanzados, nos recuerda que estamos allí por culpa de nuestra propia raza y que nadie, excepto nosotros mismos, nos puede ayudar a salir de esa fosa” (Amir Valle 100).

*“[h]as ceased to be noir to become today’s novel of manners. Only by accepting these criteria will it be possible to understand why and how the keys to understand that Marginalia are found in the new Latin American noir fiction: A marginality ethic in which Latin Americans live today, a marginality that, far from turning us into useless, filthy, despairing beings; reminds us that we are there because of our own race and that nobody, except ourselves, can take us out of that ditch” (Amir Valle 100).*

*De que nada se sabe* can also be read as the dissection of a capital city, which itself is occupied by marginal spaces and subjects.

Just as the human body, organs located far from each other as the liver and the heart respond to an interdependent relationship. In the novel, characters distant from each other, like Arturo and Wilfrido, end up finding each other on the threshold of death. It is in this way that in the work of Noriega, Quito becomes a scenario in constant motion throughout the narration.

The descriptions of the omniscient narrator refer to the transition that this city suffers by the end of last century, which turns Quito into a cosmopolitan city full of foreigners and inhabitants from outlying areas of Ecuador. The narrator compares the expansion of the city with the growth of moral decay. This growth is perceived as a centrifugal movement in which the escape from the city center is also associated with the abandonment of the core principles of the community that once characterized this former Andean village of the mid-twentieth century. Through the descriptions of urban change in the city, which stretches from the center, “(el) Centro Histórico, único sitio en esta ciudad imbuido de un carácter propio”, “(the) historical center, the only place with its own sense of identity” (47)” to the surrounding valleys and the foothills of the mountains that surround it, lead to a loss of geographical cohesion that is accompanied by a loss of social cohesion.

The author portrays a sort of a classist nostalgia of a smaller Quito from the 1950s and 1960s and well into the 1980s. This Quito was characterized by a community where everyone knew everyone, and its inhabitants were linked in one way or another by diverse ties of kinship, forcing them to comply with certain social conventions beyond the law.

In addition to the centrifugal movement of the city's urban expansion, there are multiple references to emblematic landmarks of the city, aimed to those readers who know the history and cartography of Quito. This geographic relationship is also a centrifuge to the extent that local expressions and regional symbolism that deviate from the dominant literary trends of the publishing market are highlighted in the text. Consequently, Noriega's novel also denotes a "glocal" crime fiction story of the transformation of Quito. The precept exposed by Roland Robertson, when defining what I would call an aesthetic of "glocalization," will serve as a foundational guide to understanding the influence of the global in this Ecuadorian novel. In his essay, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," Robertson explains some of the trading strategies used by multinational companies to adapt, from a global perspective, their products, goods, and services within a local market. Also, from a sociological perspective:

"[t]he description of a global world, understood as an economic and cultural manifestation of an imperialistic way to homogenize all of the local expressions, increased, in the same time, the debate about what is considered to be the local, and helped to stimulate the emergence of local cultural manifestations and discourses." (Robertson 77)

The descriptions of the neighborhoods and landmarks of Quito, and the author's concerns about the local regarding globalization are a confirmation of the above as the author includes in a colloquial tone, expressions of the Ecuadorian dialect such as *montubio* (a term to denote a native from a low social class from the Ecuadorian coast), *arrejuntados* (an expression to describe the action of setting up house together or to shack up together), *aguar* (to wait), *acolitar* (to help) and *Bibidi* (a tank top shirt).

In some passages, the narrator gives extra-narrative opinions on Ecuadorean politics of the late twentieth century in an open and free manner. In those passages, the narrator mentions the names of real key players in Ecuadorian politics. These included former presidents Sixto Duran Ballen, Arosemena Monroy, Abdala Bucaram, León Febres Cordero, who are described in the story in a disgraceful way as the architects of the Ecuadorian neoliberal model that started "en la modernidad nacida en los años setenta, con la ostentación y la grosería del nuevo rico" ("In the modernity born in the seventies, with the ostentation and rudeness of the new rich") and led to the social and political crisis by the end of the last century (*De que nada* 37).

At the same time, beyond the references of Quito, the author jumps to other less restricted literature references, such as the epigraphs from a Borges poem indicating the events of each

chapter to the reader. These local and global references reveal the troubled relationship of the two narrators (both the omniscient one and the protagonist one) with the city of Quito. Arturo was upset, for example, with the typical inconsistent weather of a city built in the middle of the Andes, and this instability reflects the faltering social climate of the country:

“[o]tra farsa de esta ciudad llena de atavismos, de madrugada, frio; a media mañana, calor; luego viento; por la tarde, lluvia, lluvia desconcertante, y por la noche otra vez frio” (107).

*“[a]nother farce of this city full of atavisms, at dawn, cold; at midmorning heat; then wind; in the afternoon, rain, bewildering rain, and at night, cold, again” (107).*

The marginalization that creates social divisions within a city also creates a space where certain universal elements can penetrate the walls that separate the upper from the lower classes. As such, members of the lower class or lower middle class can be found in the homes of the wealthy, dead on the street, in the morgue being dissected by a forensic doctor, during the rape of a woman from the upper class, getting up from the bed with a prostitute, getting drunk with a homeless person or committing a murder without a reason. The protagonist of this story, a forensic doctor who has to dissect corpses with the objective of discovering the causes of a death, serves also as a detective who reveals a social radiography of the causes of the moral decay of the inhabitants of the city.

This social radiography displayed in this crime fiction reveals marginalization as the common cause or element that connects the tragic destiny of every person in this literary representation of Quito from the end of the twentieth century.

## Endnotes

[1] All translations from Spanish into English are provided by the author of this article.



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