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# *Miguel Otero Silva*: Writing and reading from and about a dictatorship

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Professor Rafael Tomás Caldera says that talking about Rómulo Gallegos is "necessarily talking about Venezuela"[1], an angle he shares with authors such as Teresa de la Parra, Arturo Uslar Pietri and Mariano Picón Salas. Even though it cannot be said with scientific rigor, our literature, so "realistic" insofar our authors share a sincere and inescapable concern for reality, shows us who we are. Any unsuspecting reader could rightfully say that in each one we discover and recognize the soul of our people.

During the 20th century, intellectuals and artists of the continent, generally gathered in a diverse group of political actors, focused their interests on the historical evolution of a reality that was evidently alive and changing. Americans saw and lived the history of their continent from the first row; they wrote, painted, sang, and developed ideas around it.

In the case of Venezuela, the notion that our literature results from this concern is a generalized and accepted idea. The critic Juan Liscano makes it clear that in Venezuelan literature, regardless of the literary tendency which this or that writer ascribes to, or that

1 Own translation, from Rafael Tomás Caldera, *En busca de nuestra expresión* (Caracas: Centauro, 2006), 39.

characterizes their production, their eyes are always fixed upon the historical process that the country is going through during the particular moment the writer is living through.

> This realism was naturalistic, satirical, with Pocaterra; then idealistic with Gallegos; intimate with Teresa de la Parra; avant-garde with the Generation of 1928; subjectivist with current narrators. At no time did our literature disassociate itself from its environment, even when it ceased to be reformist, idealistic and landscapist[2].

This constant fixture on reality[3], which does not necessarily exclude fantasy stories and novels, nor the beginnings of magical realism, suggests above all a way of being that tends to focus on "venezolanidad", or the quality of being Venezuelan –especially if the historical moment of the end of the dictatorships is considered, or the imminent oil exploitation and the consequent modernization. There has not been a decade in the history of Venezuela which hasn't given writers genuinely interested in their country enough to talk or write about:

> The concern for social events has been constant in contemporary Venezuelan literature. Far from portraying individual problems, novels of the 1930s were interested in putting into question the values cultivated by rural society, which was progressively forced to modify its patterns due, among other reasons, to the boom in oil exploitation which had brought with it an accelerated modernization process. But, on the other hand, the concern for social problems was

2 Own translation, from Juan Liscano, *Panorama de la literatura venezolana actual* (Caracas: Publicaciones españolas, 1973), 35.

3 This interest for reality is described by Liscano as "realism" but does not correspond to realistic aesthetics.

also evidenced in the political questioning that confronted gomecismo and that became openly critical after 1930[4].

This becomes much more evident in the 20th century, for dizzying changes bring immediate consequences in all nation-building areas. The end of the agrarian economy, the fall of the military and/or militarist governments –such as those of Juan Vicente Gómez and, years later, Marcos Pérez Jiménez–, the installation of democracy, political participation, the growth of urban population, the creation of new cities and the unexpected death of old populations (just like Juan Rulfo's Comala). This long list of things that happened within the same century, in a country with a stubbornly observant literature, explains the innumerable ways of periodizing the cultural production of the time[5].

In the first decades of the 20th century, change was decisive: the rural and agrarian economic scheme suddenly switched to a liberal one, guided by the pace of oil growth; the foundations to change that tradition marked by paternalism and caudillismo to an institutionalized democracy were established, which would later be threatened by Pérez Jimenez's dictatorship and its doctrine of the "New National Ideal". This sudden transformation could only impact the daily life of Venezuelans and generate, as is logical, a cultural dynamic around it.

4 Montero, *La crítica social en la novela venezolana contemporánea (1936-1939)* (Caracas: Unpublished master's thesis. USB, 1994), 58.

5 Juan Liscano, for example, suggests three periods: "one of buried restlessness and suffocation that extends from 1918 to 1928; another of revolutionary awareness that can be dated between 1928 and 1958, and a third that extends to this day of action, of activism, of attempts to impose extreme solutions, of violent disagreement, of literary and political intransigence in the most determined groups to destroy the prevailing system" (Own translation, from *Panorama de...*, 13).

> The answer is offered by the key event of 20th century Venezuela: agriculture, which constituted the material base of the system in crisis, was already incapable, as an endogenous factor, of providing the necessary income to finance its transformation, which explains the little growth mobility during the first two decades. In this way, the country was heading towards a more exacerbated crisis and towards its violent outbreak when oil came to solve the problem from above. No one, not even Gómez, had oil, which came, like the magic beans from the tale, to solve, by juxtaposition, the problems of productivity and income posed by pre-capitalist agriculture[6].

That recurring connection between reality and textual space, which seems to be a stamp of Venezuelan literature, and a sign of proximity to that of the rest of the continent, is still present in the most recent Venezuelan literary productions. Liscano already warns of it in a decisive way when he describes the relationship that exists between social, historical and geographical reality with that of fiction, which is not based so much on imagination as on reality itself, as "tormented but firm"[7].

Amid this scenario of Venezuelan literature, we can take a closer look at the figure of Miguel Otero Silva and specifically at his novels *Casas muertas* and *Oficina No. 1* in order to identify how, through this discourse, he protests against the dictatorial governments of Juan Vicente Gómez and Marcos Pérez Jiménez but also exposes how they marked the future of the people through his characters and settings. In this sense, we will first briefly acknowledge how we live what we call "oil modernity."

6 Orlando Araujo, *Narrativa venezolana contemporánea* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1988), 162.

7 Liscano, *Panorama...*, 30.

Then, we will briefly review where author' is speaking from and his performance as a politician and writer –in addition to his many other facets. Finally, we will identify in what specific moments of the novels are his denunciations evident.

## 1. Modern Venezuela

The 19th century in Venezuela saw, as in the rest of the continent, a modernity announced and not concretized. But even more strikingly, it was a period of recurring dictatorships and revolutions. Professor Guillermo Morón's historical interpretation seems quite fitting: "modernity's 19th century" occurred in Venezuela from 1830 to 1936.

> The Venezuelan State, the Venezuelan nation, the republic, and the current historical Venezuelan people, already duly configured, were built during that period that should have been modern history. But in practice, in those 105 years, from the seizure of power of José Antonio Páez until the death of Juan Vicente Gómez, there is no modernity. Only a vast and harsh struggle to survive as a State and as a people[8].

Gómez governed the country directly and indirectly for 27 years; only his death divorced him from power. He built a solid regime supported by Caracas' elite and oligarchy, surrounded by intellectuals who helped give a legal appearance to many of his actions while justifying his power.

In these years, Venezuela underwent essential transformations. Caudillismo ended with Gómez imposing himself as the only caudillo in a country he understood as his hacienda. Communication channels were built so that his troops

8 Own translation, from Guillermo Morón, *Breve historia contemporánea de Venezuela* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994), 199.

could circulate across the country, which facilitated territorial integration. Years later, the emergence of Venezuela as an oil-exploiting country began to promote a process of transformation from an agricultural and livestock economy to one in which energy would ultimately be its great support. This stimulated migration from the countryside to the city, as people began searching for better jobs and living conditions, which changed the country's social structures. Miguel Otero Silva's novels *Casas muertas* and *Oficina No. 1* are set in this context.

It was a period of false peace, achieved through fear and persecution; a silence that a single man imposed on an entire country. The restrictions placed on freedom of expression and opinion and the repression forced many intellectuals to go into exile and thus inhibited the country from interacting with and being influenced by the world and new ideas. It was a stage of cultural backwardness and isolation for Venezuela, making progress seem far away at a time of significant change in the world.

Gómez's administration installed a system of repression that curtailed press freedom, generated a significant number of political prisoners, and made torture its most effective weapon to silence rebellious voices. The Generation of 1928 emerged and issued criticism of the dictatorship[9]. Miguel Otero Silva recreates the actions of this group of activists, to which he belonged, in his novel *Fiebre* (1940).

9 In addition to Miguel Otero Silva, Jóvito Villalba and Rómulo Betancourt stand out from this generation, who later became actively involved in the country's political life. Betancourt also stands out as president and founding member of the Democratic Action party, as well as Villalba as the founder of the Democratic Republican Union Party and candidate for the presidency on several occasions.

Gómez's dictatorship, whichever way you look at it from, was a long and determining moment in recent history that in many ways triggered what would be the subsequent performance of Venezuelan society:

> It seems as if all history had established the elements for Venezuela to end with that 27-year-old structure, key to its past destiny and key to its future destiny. Gómez ends a process of national consolidation, deepening the roots of the country, sticking all the sociological components to its soil, nailing all the regions to a single national table, collecting diversity and anarchy in a single course. The Venezuela that began in 1830 arrived, unified, as if dominated and subjugated, to 1936. And parallel to that severe unity, to that domestication, to that hard rivet, a new contemporary destiny arose[10].

During these years, thanks to the inhumane work imposed on prisoners –among whom are many opponents of the regime–, part of the road network that today –with certain improvements– continues to connect the entire national territory was developed. This is referred to in the journey of some of the characters in *Casas muertas* and *Oficina No. 1.*

## 2. Miguel Otero Silva: a politician made for literature

Miguel Otero Silva was born the same year that Juan Vicente Gómez installed himself in power and began the longest dictatorship in the history of the country. He lived the first 27 years of his life under this regimen. Both his maternal grandfather and his paternal grandfather were active critics of Cipriano Castro's administration and other politicians of the time, which

10 Morón, *Breve historia...*, 227.

condemned them years to a devastating prison which they were freed from soon to die.

Miguel Otero Silva moved to Caracas after the death of his mother. There, he had contact with the youth of the Generation of 1928, those who would become the political class the coming years. In 1925, he entered the Central University of Venezuela to study Engineering on to family demand, very aware of his literary vocation, which had already manifested itself in the writing of poetry at the age of 14. Years later, Otero Silva declared that he would not exercise any other profession than that of journalism and writing. From then on, he published in *Elite* magazine and the weekly publications *Fantoches* and *Caricaturas.*

His college life didn't make him the engineer he did not want to be, but it did give him the chance to engage in politics. In 1927, he became part of the Board of Directors of the Federation of Students of Venezuela, which was the starting point for the events that took place during the Student Week of 1928.

Otero Silva is among those who turned themselves in to the authorities to show solidarity with the leaders who were imprisoned after the Student Week revolt. This meant 12 days in prison for him in the Castillo Libertador of Puerto Cabello, in which the group of young people who would take on the fight against the Gomecista dictatorship was further consolidated.

These intellectuals, politicians, artists, writers, poets and journalists are the same ones who developed the cultural field, with novels, essays, stories that –as already suggested– were produced with eyes firmly upon historical developments, upon the reality which writers actively live. Miguel Otero Silva is an excellent exponent of this condition: he became a journalist, writer, humorist, and all of his work was determined by his political

ideology, using it to inform against dictatorial governments and social injustices.

After a long exile and after the death of Gómez, he returned to the country in 1936, anxious "not to enjoy a democratic freedom that was just hypocritically being offered with immense limitations, but to put to the test what he considered a model of redemption from the ills of his country"[11], for which he had arduously trained during his stay in Europe and Trinidad.

As a consequence of his consolidation as a leader of the left, since 1937, Otero Silva went into hiding and then into exile. He consolidated himself as a fiction writer and a poet inspired by a deep concern for such an unjust reality: "two tendencies [that] will rarely be absent in his writing: the testimonial character and social realism (which is not synonymous, but perhaps a bastard brother of what Stalinism called socialist realism)"[12].

For the author, writing prose or poetry are opportunities to convey his ideology to the people, as he himself states in a letter to his future wife, María Teresa Castillo, assembled by Argenis Martínez: "For me, it would be of much greater importance to succeed with novels than with my verses. The reasons are clear: greater genre reach, more readers, greater authority, greater ease when dealing with various fundamental questions"[13].

11 Own translation, from Argenis Martínez, *Miguel Otero Silva* (Caracas: El Nacional, 2006), 50.

12 Own translation, fromManuel Caballero, «Miguel Otero Silva» en *Miguel Otero Silva: una visión plural,* ed. Rafael Arráiz Lucca (Caracas: El Nacional, 2009), 11-19

13 Own translation, from Martínez, *Miguel Otero...*, 76.

Miguel Otero Silva produced his first version of the novel *Fiebre* in 1937[14]. It is based on the experiences of the Generation of 1928 and received favorable criticism from several countries on the continent. This novel was rewritten 40 years later, incorporating the very different opinions of 28 of the protagonists of the stories it tells. According to Manuel Caballero, this is "the first and almost only literary testimony of one of the most important civil feats in Venezuelan history, which signaled the course that it would have to follow once the tyrant was dead"[15].

The intense participation of Otero Silva jointly in the political and intellectual sphere was also manifested in the creation of the newspaper *El Nacional*, in 1943:

> Literature and journalism have always flowed together in my blood; they have never been completely differentiated inside my head. When I have worked as a journalist, I have tried to do so without hiding my status as a writer; and when I write novels or poetry, I can't get rid of, nor do I want to get rid of, my journalist features[16].

Subsequently, he rejected the coup d'état carried out by the military and civilians to install the *Junta de Gobierno*, which ended up promoting the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. This dictatorship brought a period of attacks and repressions against the critical and reactionary spirit of Otero Silva and his newspaper.

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14 The first of his novels, which begins the series of titles that, as if it were a game, continuously adds up to the number of words: *Fiebre* (1); *Casas muertas* (2); *Oficina No. 1* (3); *La muerte de Honorio* (4); *Cuando quiero llorar no lloro* (5);

15 Own translation, from Caballero, *Miguel Otero...*, 15.

16 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Prosa completa* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1976), 40.

Otero's literary production is reduced to his journalistic projection and a single novel until 1955, when his second novel *Casas muertas* was published. *Casas muertas* is a manifestation of a concern for the profound economic change that Venezuela was experiencing. In 1961, its sequel, *Oficina No. 1*, was published. Together, these novels reflect upon the end of the agrarian economy and the birth of the new oil-based economy. These two novels refer to the last years of the Gómez dictatorship and the first oil exploits with their determining impact.

This increase in literary production is maintained to the point that, in 1964, he published *La Muerte de Honorio*, with which he took a look at those repressed by the Perezjimenista dictatorship and wrote a novel with the journalistic rigor of a report. Six years later, Otero Silva, still concerned for a violent Caracas, takes a living photograph of the Caracas of the 1960s with its new social configuration and its already-chaotic dynamics as the world's capital, this time with a much more innovative style than he had achieved in his previous works. This novel is inscribed among those that recount the so-called "violent decade"[17].

But what is most characteristic of Otero as a novelist is that he is a true exponent of the thesis that Venezuelan literature is profoundly realistic. He is a writer and politician who cannot stop doing one thing when he does the other: "bringing life experience to literature is going to be one of the fundamental objectives of Miguel Otero Silva (...) He believed that he could communicate the events that happened to him through novels, which often tries to retrace reality"[18].

17 Own translation, from Nieves María Concepción Lorenzo, *La fabulación de la realidad en la narrativa de Miguel Otero Silva.* Unpublished doctoral thesis (Tenerife: Universidad de La Laguna, 2001), 32.

18 Own translation, from Laura Febres, "Miguel Otero Silva y una nueva generación" en *Miguel Otero Silva: una visión plural,* ed. Rafael Arráiz Lucca (Caracas: El Nacional, 2009), 46.

## 3. Literature and dictatorship: *Casas muertas* and *Oficina No. 1*

The story of *Casas muertas* (1955) is inscribed in the complex panorama that was the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez, at the end of the agrarian economy and incipient oil and industrial developments[19]. This fictitious story, in which hardly anything happens, shows, through the decline of a town in the Venezuelan plains, a moment in the country's recent history in which –to put it succinctly– society barely survives change.

Of the seven novels written by the author, five –*Fiebre* (1939)[20], *Casas muertas* (1955), *Oficina No. 1* (1961), *La muerte de Honorio* (1963) and *Cuando quiero llorar no lloro* (1970)– respond to "a manifest will to create a fictional fresco of the history of Venezuela, understanding it as the course of the different agents (politics, social events, culture, etc.) that make up a national reality"[21].

Otero Silva **writes and publishes** at a time of another dictatorship, another political crisis, in which his activity as an actor against the regime persists. The novels that we study, published between 1955 and 1961, recreate the Venezuela of Gómez's dictatorship, as author and reader find themselves in the midst of the end of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958)[22]. The place from which Otero Silva writes is very particular because he had already founded the newspaper by then, and

19 As Isidoro Requena clarifies, the novel could be set between 1909 and 1929 (1992, pág. 65).

20 In 1971, the author revises and corrects the text of *Fiebre* and re-edits it with important changes.

21 Own translation, from Concepción Lorenzo, *La fabulación...*, 8.

22 The dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez begins in 1952, after four years of military governments that first initiated in 1948 after the last democratically elected president was overthrown: the writer Rómulo Gallegos.

through journalism he kept his political struggle alive. He does not tell the story of the past after his retirement, but does so amid a reality determined by strong political pressures, in which his ambitions to free the population from recurring injustices are still relevant.

The same thing happens to the reader. It is worth taking into account Miguel Marcotrigiano's interpretation: he assures that, on a first approach to his writings, the qualification of "dictator" "was only more or less clear in reference to General Pérez Jiménez"[23]. This singularity contributes to these novels becoming political discourse more than mere fiction, since they naturally separate them from their unsuspecting character of "historical report" since the reader is naturally oriented to understand them as a narration about what the dictatorship has done to the Venezuelan people and what they have had to do to defend themselves. A network of tensions is established between the *Perezjimenista* and *Gomecista* reality and any other –such as the current one–, in which appealing to the desire for liberation is possible and necessary.

This responds to the author's intention previously mentioned of including certain "propaganda" in the narrative discourse. Today, reading *Casas muertas* and *Oficina No. 1* strikes the same nerve as it would for someone who lives under a dictatorial regime.

As Otero Silva himself declares, his novels are set in certain historical moments that he had to live personally and in which he played a leading role, so they cannot be understood without considering that references to time and space are subject to the

23 Own translation, from Miguel Marcotrigiano, M. (2012). *Casas muertas : circunnavegando islotes de memoria o de la lectura como actividad iniciática*, 3. Retrieved on March 15, 2022, from https://www.academia.edu/427843/De_orilla_a_orilla._Estudios_sobre_literatura_española_y_venezolana

reality that the author studied and documented with a journalistic vocation[24]. They are, ultimately, critical tools:

All my novels are protest literature. Fiebre is a denunciation of the Gómez system and terror; *Casas muertas* is the denunciation of the ill death of a city annihilated by malaria, gamonalism, and civil wars; *Oficina No. 1* is the denunciation of the ill birth of a city in the embers of imperialist mining exploitation[25].

*Casas muertas* and *Oficina No. 1* can be read together since they tell the story of Carmen Rosa Villena's transit, who leaves a dying agricultural town –already far from the reference of fertile nature– to a newly founded town around an oil well –incipient seed of the new cities. The first describes the death of the agricultural town, while the second, the birth of the oil producer.

These novels are stories of places: Ortiz and *Oficina No. 1*[26], that are presented, constructed and recreated in fiction by an author deeply committed to the national life:

> A description of the space would reveal the degree of attention that the novelist offers the world and the quality of that attention: he can fix his eyes on the object described or go beyond it. Descriptions express the relationship, so fundamental in the novel, of the man, author or character

24 Otero Silva tells how he prepared to write *Casas muertas* : "I went to Ortiz, which by then was on the verge of total collapse; I looked for the survivors of that terrible time, who were very few, and they told me what the trees and the birds were like at the time, what they ate, how they dressed, what songs they sang, and I began to fill notebooks with their confidences" (Own translation, from Otero Silva, 1976, p. 45).

25 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Prosa completa* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1976), 55.

26 Since the name of the town is the same as the novel, they are distinguished by presenting the name of the book in cursive letters and the name of the town in normal format.

> with the world that surrounds him: he flees from it, substitutes it for another, or immerses himself in it to explore it, understand it, change it or know himself[27].

### 3a. *Casas muertas* : the end of the story of the llano

*Casas muertas* is set in a real town, Ortiz, which still exists in the middle of the Venezuelan plains. This condition can be associated with the then still-present influence of regionalism in Rómulo Gallegos, where the llano is the propitious environment for the representation of the nation, and even to value the entrance to urban life that is already beginning to grab the attention of the literati. It is no coincidence that Otero Silva has chosen the llano to recreate *Casas muertas* :

> That geographical reality of typology of the Venezuelan landscape, closely linked to national agriculture, was extremely shaken by the turn that the Venezuelan economy took under the pressure of oil extraction. The llano stands, then, as a symbol of Venezuela's –telluric and economic– reality[28].

However, this book separates itself from other regionalist works of fiction since its approach does not present possible solutions to the difficult situation of the llano; it rather problematizes a reality and turns it into social commentary. Otero Silva himself declares that his works do not offer solutions –like Gallegos, who creates a plan for the country– "because that would be becoming a moralist, a social preacher or something like that

27 Roland Bourneuf and Râeal Ouellet, *La novela* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1975), 141.

28 Concepción Lorenzo, *La fabulación*..., 113-114.

(...) My novels do not provide solutions for the simple reason that our history has not yet found them"[29].

And so, in the words of the one who recounts the glorious past, Ortiz begins to collapse: "Yellow fever arrived in 1990. Malaria, hematuria, hunger and ulcers immediately appeared. The graceful contours of Father Franceschini vanished. The splendid church was left half-built, the brick walls bare, arches without doors, windows without sashes[30].

Not only is the epithet "*la flor de los llanos*" (the flower of the plains) recurrent, but also the historical and geographical references that agree with the past and the constitution of 20th-century Venezuela:

> "Ortiz's last big party, «said Cartaya», was in 91, when Andueza was preparing the continuation. Carlos Palacios, Andueza's cousin, launched his candidacy for the presidency of Guárico and celebrated it with dances and calves that made history (...) And neither Andueza could be re-elected, nor Carlos Palacios came to preside over Guárico, because my general Joaquin Crespo, from Parapara, did not allow it"[31].

Joaquín Crespo, one of the main leaders in Venezuelan history, is a llanero, from Parapara no less. His importance is evidenced in the words of one of the character: "«And since he was killed,» concluded Cartaya, «the word caudillo had to be erased from Venezuelan language»"[32].The author wastes no opportunity to establish a position regarding the governments and the directions

29 Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*, 55.
30 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*, 20.
31 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*,, 26.
32 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*, 26.

that Venezuela's history has taken. His work is a platform for denunciation and a propitious environment to promote his ideas. The death of Ortiz is the death of the Venezuelan people who are dying in the face of the end of the agrarian economy and the inefficiency of an authoritarian government. He does not miss an opportunity to relate the moment of splendor of the town with the time of government of the caudillo, who, as in any personalist government, revolves the resources around his estate. This is how the story is told:

> Yellow fever had already passed but malaria was beginning to dry up the roots of the city. However, under the presidency of Crespo, who was a Parapareño, which is almost like saying Orticeño, Ortiz lived hours of fleeting splendor, struggling against a destiny that had already been mapped out. Dr. Núñez, Crespo's secretary-general, had been born in Ortiz himself. In his house, "La Nuñera", large banquets were held, which Crespo personally attended on more than one occasion. Cartaya remembered the caudillo, riding a white horse, ready to kick a steer between the gatekeepers of the royal street[33].

Otero Silva is inscribed –although critics do not always describe him that way– in the style of social realism, whose utmost purpose is to expose reality. This trend is channeled towards the construction of the new chronotope of Arcadia, which is in decline and in which all the writers of the time must participate. *Casas muertas* and *Oficina No. 1* are part of those first attempts to build a new reference of the countryside.

The author makes use of the real image of abandoned towns to associate it with death –unlike Gallegos or Lazo Martí, who sing

33 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*, 26.

to life on the plain– and uses it as a background image to show the moment of the rural exodus from the crisis in the countryside, in addition to the terrible sanitary abandonment to which the population was subjected in the hands of the dictator.

Throughout the novel, it is very evident that the author is interested in critically presenting reality and very limitedly in reclaiming causes and proposals for the nation. Ortiz's death is an open letter of the abandonment to which a large sector of the population was left to, at the hands of a dictatorial, authoritarian and personalistic government that had not been able to channel the end of the agrarian economy conveniently.

One of the prisoners who pass through Ortiz on a bus from Caracas puts it succinctly: "I didn't see the houses, nor did I see the ruins. I only saw the wounds of men". A phrase that reveals the metaphor: dead houses as lives coming to an end. It is a symbol of a political protest: "Houses are collapsing, like the country which we were born in"[34]. With each house that falls down, with each town that dies, the country dies.

And with the death of Ortiz, the end of the chronotope of the triumphant llano is also suggested, of the promising land of Bello and Gallegos, of the myth of the civilization of the countryside, to make way –in the framework of social realism– to true modernization for the country: the ill-born modernity of oil.

### 3b. The threshold: the door of the llano

Ortiz acquires the character of a symbol when, at a certain moment in the book, it is given the name of "*puerta del llano*", or "door of the llano". This gives it the character of a place of passage: "A collapsed Ortiz was still the forced milestone on the road to

34 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*, 85.

the llanos"[35]. It is an obligatory crossing point where death and desolation come to be.

To understand this symbol, it is convenient to define the spaces it separates: firstly, it is striking that there is no "door" to enter Ortiz. Rather, Ortiz is a threshold between the path traveled from Caracas –the capital where rebellions take place– and the road to the bloody reality of Palenque, where political prisoners are taken to. Ortiz is not a portal you want to cross for it does not indicate a pleasant path; sadly, it is a town turned into nothing more than a place of passage.

In the transit of the imprisoned students, Ortiz's qualification as a door to the plains is made explicit. The prisoners do not know where the bus is headed. It is a journey that starts from a recognized and well-identified place, towards a remote destination that can only mean horror and death. Ortiz is a midpoint on that route, a place that, although could function as neutral ground, soon becomes the harbinger of a dire fate: "They only caught a glimpse of the fate that awaited them when the bus left the highway in search of the sea and turned sharply towards the plains. Then one of them simply said: «This is the road to Palenque»"[36]. This is also a condition of the threshold, that of warning of a danger to come.

The route of the bus in which the prisoners travel also allows us to broaden the perspective of the nation, as the real places through which it travels are described in detail:

> It was the first stop since the day before, when it left Guatire, far beyond Caracas with its load of prisoners. It had crossed, during the night and at great speed, the deserted silent streets of the capital. It later took the course of the valleys of

35 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*, 94.
36 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Prosa completa*, 79.

> Aragua, until it fell into the plains stumbling, with its engine at full speed[37].

The particular phenomenon of the insurrection, with which Sebastián's spirit is renewed, embodies the idea of the smallness of the people compared to national companies. The insurrection is born in a cartoonish way. Ortiz dies and can barely participate, in its agony, in the national reality. When Sebastián becomes aware of the injustice that is being committed, he recognizes himself as a little individual in the middle of nowhere that is Ortiz. "What could Sebastián do alone, unarmed, inhabiting a malarial region and without people, against the implacable, annihilating machinery that was the government?"[38]. Like the rest of the students, Sebastián should represent that promising future that threatens the prevailing system and that, because of it, represents a danger that the dictator faces in such a challenging way. This idea of justice conquers his soul, but he truly has no chance of emerging from his reality to join in on a patriotic fight.

In Ana Teresa Torres's words: "What is interesting about that interpretation of the country is that the storyline focuses on an insignificant and tiny population, where distant echoes rumble, saying that power is elsewhere, in a place that almost had nothing to do with them, about which they know little or nothing"[39].

Sebastian's desire to become a hero cannot outweigh a dying and abandoned town in the plains; politics cannot be the center

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37 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Casas muertas* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980), 78.

38 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Casas muertas* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980), 88.

39 Own translation, from Ana Teresa Torres, «*Casas muertas* », in ed. Rafael Arráiz Lucca, *Miguel Otero Silva: una visión plural* (Caracas: El Nacional, 2009), 87.

of the very little life in that place: "The conversations of Cartaya, Miss Berenice, Carmen Rosa and Sebastián did not reach a meter beyond the ferns of the Villenera house"[40].

A community being presented in such an insignificant way precisely when the imposing power of the government is referenced is a way to denounce the deep injustice being experienced in the Venezuela of that time –the moment in which the novel is published and read–, that of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez.

It is still contradictory that the students, on their way to torture, are concerned by Ortiz's agony. The reality of the town is so impressive that it ends up being the object of compassion of the young people. This is nothing more than a paradox: on the insurgents' bus, after passing through Ortiz, "they no longer spoke of their own misfortune but of the already consummated misadventure of Ortiz and its people"[41]. The sentence that awaits the convicted students is nothing compared to the death that day by day destroys Ortiz; or perhaps it has more to do with the fact that they see there a manifestation of their future reality:

–What an eerie town! It is inhabited by ghosts[42].
And the one with the candid round face:

40 Lorenzo considers that the reason why politics does not interest the inhabitants of Ortiz is "censorship, the repressive system and political espionage established by Gomez's absolutism, which in turn contributed to the peace and order longed for by foreign companies" (Lorenzo, 2001, pág. 138).

41 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Casas muertas* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980), 83.

42 The idea of a ghost town suggested by the students associates this town with the aesthetic proposal of Juan Rulfo, persistent in his stories, particularly in *El llano en llamas* (1953) and *Pedro Páramo* (1955), in which he exposes the same migratory process in Mexico.

–And the houses? Houses pain me more. It looks like a city sacked by a horde.
And the corpulent mulatto, a medicine student:
–A horde of anopheles. It was destroyed by Malaria.
And the one with the snub nose and mocking eyes:
–Poor people! And you can tell they are good.
And the one wearing Sebastian's hat:
–People are always good on this earth. The bad ones are not people[43].

One misfortune compared to another: a country in ruins facing the injustice of a torturing dictatorship. Somehow realities that dialogue with each other recognizing their connection, one as a consequence of the other as well as cause. The presence of the students also gives meaning to the idea of smallness versus immensity, because the relationship between big and small can only be established by someone from outside who can appreciate it. The dictatorship looks strong and powerful in the face of weakened forces in a country that cries of hunger and death.

The news that reach Ortiz about the revolutionaries are all associated with places, somewhere beyond, an outside world that seems to have more possibilities than its own to rise up: "General Gabaldón rose up in Santo Cristo"; "Norberto Borges responded in the Valles del Tuy"; "Venezuelan exiles took Curaçao and invaded Coro"; "A large expedition is expected, with a ship and everything, coming from Europe"[44]. News with names and surnames, with real references; no anonymous revolt.

43 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Casas muertas* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980), 84.

44 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Casas muertas* , 90.

We are not in the presence of grand heroic gestures or complex political intrigues, but of little beings who, in the solitude of a nation in a state of disappearance, have heard that people are rising against the dictator. They have heard it as distant and amazed as they have heard about everything they do not know: Caracas and the sea[45].

*3c. End of the dictatorship*

The death of General Gómez and the end of the dictatorship is "told" in *Oficina No. 1.* With the Villenas installed in the up-and-coming town, the news arrive. Given that the novel takes place in the first third of the 20th century, the death of General Gómez appears as a determining moment within the story. But it is also presented in terms that should be recalled in order to assess how microcosms are developed at the moment of transition that Venezuelan democracy is experiencing.

The news come, as always, from abroad, loaded in a car from Maturín, in a truck from Ciudad Bolívar:

–He's dead!
–The general is dead!
–General Gómez is dead![46].

The intel comes from students and freed people who remember the figure of Sebastián. The news are focused on freedom, on the release of prisoners, on stripping spaces –with violence– and making them their own...

45 Own translation, from Ana Teresa Torres, «*Casas muertas* », en ed. Rafael Arráiz Lucca, *Miguel Otero Silva: una visión plural* (Caracas: El Nacional, 2009), 88.

46 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Oficina No. 1* (Caracas: El Nacional, 2001), 67.

Faced with the possibility that the students, with his speech, will also break into *Oficina No. 1*, Mr. Taylor defines the entire place not as a city, but as a "workplace." The others are not citizens, politicians; they are "a group of technicians, geologists and workers, Venezuelans and foreigners, who are carrying out industrial work, totally separated from politics"[47]. Oficina No. 1 is not and does not intend to be a city, so much so that its commissioner does not depend on the Government, but on the Company itself. They want to be –at this particular moment– a neutral site, where work –exploitation– is the only way of life. That explains the non-existence of traditions, of rites. The little meaning of the lives of those who come to populate the place depends solely on the usefulness they represent in the order that the Company has established. For this reason, it only wants to participate as a spectator: "the Company will be very pleased to witness this transformation"[48].

The author shows the fall of the dictatorship and uses it to show the distance between the particular interests of foreign exploiters and the national political future. For Otero, it isn't that Oficina No. 1 is detached from history, but rather that those who came to expand the oil industry are so alien to our idiosyncrasy that they may well live behind the backs of the changes in the political spheres, as long as they ensure their "peaceful" participation in business.

In this town –which is not yet a town and does not seem to want to be one– the authority, who represents all the residents, is not a mayor, a governor, a councilman... it is Mr. Taylor, a representative of the Company who ultimately has control over the place.

47 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Oficina No. 1*, 68.
48 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Oficina No. 1*, 68

Nothing happens, despite the incredulous looks of Secundino Silva, Luciano Millán and Pancho Marcano: "And is that all that is going to happen in this place while the country is shaken from one end to the other, while the death of the tyrant changes decisively the course of our history?"[49]. Venezuela is reaching a milestone in its history and *Oficina No. 1*, whatever it may be, does not participate in it. Mr. Taylor wants to imply –out of economic interest– that it is a neutral space, but the novel itself reveals that neutral spaces do not exist: change is already upon them.

But the emerging oil city remains insignificant. Millán responds: "And what do you want to happen? This is nothing but a handful of bahareque and moriche huts –not even thirty–, four portable houses belonging to the Americans, a canvas camp, and a drill"[50].

These are not stories that pay particular attention to the psychological aspect of the characters, their ways of seeing the world; they are fictional tales based on actual events that give prominence to those events and their impact on the lives of the people. As has already been suggested, Otero Silva is interested in presenting a "reflection of the Venezuelan reality more or less lived or witnessed"[51]. So its value as a testimony does not interest us, but the notion that microcosms were built consistently with reality, with the purpose of becoming critical elements of it.

49 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Oficina No. 1*, 69.

50 Own translation, from Otero Silva, *Oficina No. 1*, 69.

51 Own translation, from Miguel Otero Silva, *Prosa completa* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1976), 41.

## 4. In conclusion

These two works are a very evident manifestation of four central ideas:

The first is that for Venezuelan literature –and I would dare to say that for all cultural discourse–, reality and historical development have been an ever-present element. Our history, so rich in events, so brutal and cruel at certain moments, and so radiant at others, is the history of our souls, of each man and woman who, after all, are the characters that are recreated in each story. We have a vibrant history that, whether we like it or not, is reflected in the lives of so many characters and environments and spaces recreated in our literature.

Secondly, we have literary politicians and political writers, we have artistic expressions full of the life of our history, and we have a very artistically told history. The life of an author like Miguel Otero Silva's shows us an upright citizen who not only responded to his political and social vocation but, seeing that he had a vocation as a writer, wanted and knew how to use it to defend his ideals and understand the historical moment that he had to live.

The third idea is that literature functions as a discourse that can well criticize reality through its own mechanisms. It is explicitly seen in the novels studied and the author referred to. The author finds himself in a historical moment subsequent to the one he narrates, but both moments are times of dictatorship. So while the text alludes to a specific moment from the past, at the same time it draws attention and somehow exposes the current moment. This is a kind of meta-discourse that allows referring to one moment but pointing to another through its essence.

And finally, we can propose a possible answer to the endless concern about whether or not literature tells the story of a country. Certainly, literature cannot be considered a testimony nor a historical account; it is a truth that should be accepted and repeated in the face of the recurrent confusion that usually occurs among students and young readers who feel that they have discovered the history of Venezuela when they read literature. However, it must be recognized that, in works like these, which demand previous journalistic research and which have the intention to act as propaganda, it is possible to recognize the concern of a man of his time. And in his characters, in his built and destroyed cities, in his growing and dying gardens, in his streets, and in his new generations, the soul of a people can be seen represented in fiction.

Fiction is an essential part of our culture as a people, of our *venezolanidad*, our Venezuelan identity. Encouraging new generations to discover in it glimpses of our recent history is a valuable and very constructive exercise at a time when so many things that are somehow denounced, deconstructed and criticize in these pages are also happening.

# The time for real representation

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Long-lasting dictatorships tend to gnaw at the spaces of resistance of society. The consolidation of ill-doing erodes the institutions that should guide the democratic struggle and can configure a survival psychology that encourages adaptation. This pattern of decay has been repeatedly seen in countries that have suffered fierce dictatorships like ours. A pattern today present in Venezuela. This article, open to time and its considerations, delves into two issues: the erosion of those areas that should give way to our desire for freedom, and the paths available to brave this reality.

## Let's talk about representation

To start, let's talk about representation. It is an exciting concept, perhaps best described by Eric Voegelin. This author suggests that representation is the ability of a person or a group of people to organize and mobilize a community in an orderly manner towards a specific goal. That is to say: representation comes to be when a person points to a destination and others follow. In a democracy, elections are the formal mechanism for representation *par excellence*. When citizens vote freely, they choose those who will "represent" them and, from that moment on, they have the legitimacy to govern. Representation and legitimacy have a close relationship. Without the first, the second becomes diffuse. What

happens when those mechanisms are unreliable or exhausted? What happens when a dictatorship twists or manipulates those tools?

This is what Venezuela is currently going through: a power-hungry dictatorship. And, to this day, it is necessary to reflect on this particular. The way I see it, it was in the second half of 2019 that we fell into this abyss of political "invertebration", and we still don't know how to deal with or free ourselves from it. The last image of a truly competitive election was in 2015, which, seven years of repression, struggles, missteps and misunderstandings later, now seems blurry. More recent images are limited and do not appear to be accurate records of reality. This situation has configured a true crisis of representation visible in our daily lives. The disenchantment with –and sometimes contempt towards– the political class, the apparent inaction of society and the divorce from public affairs are unequivocal signs of this social disease.

### The first route

So far, this phenomenon has been dealt with in two ways, both of which will be considered. The first is led by Nicolás Maduro. The dictatorship quickly understood the dynamics of the power vacuum and set out to create factual instruments in order to build legitimacy, which dispensed with the constitutional mechanisms of formal representation. The first attempts were *malandros*, thug-like. The negotiating table and the "scorpions" –as those members of the opposition who have reconciled their views with Chavismo have come to be know–were evident transactions of conscience that did not succeed in immediately creating a more docile opposition that would be credible inside and outside the country. So, they forged ahead with another strategy: they set out to deepen retail negotiations with members of civil society and members

of political parties with whom they reached partial agreements. These political operations were based on factual mechanisms of legitimacy. That is to say: in the absence of formal mechanisms of representation, the only source of legitimacy that those who participated in these spaces had –and have– was the one granted to them by the dictatorship when it designated them as valid interlocutors. I should clarify that I do not question the rectitude of intention of those who advanced –and continue to do so– in these agendas. My considerations are practical, not moral. In my view, enabling these spaces with the dictatorship, in an evident condition of weakness, unilaterally and without any guarantee of real compliance, imposes personal and collective risks that can affect our journey towards democracy.

Let's assess an approach to the logic that could motivate these actors. From what I have heard and read about this outlook, I understand that the intention is to create conditions in order to crystallize the reformist wills that the dictatorship may be hiding. Those who stand by this approach perceive that some within the regime wish to advance towards democracy, a path that must be facilitated for them. It is a strategy that bets on changes from the inside out. This is a desirable option. Who could oppose an agreed-upon process of political change that could lead towards a stable and lasting democracy? No one in their right mind could resist such an outcome. That is why I believe that we must ask ourselves, with rectitude, realism and honesty at the very least, these questions: Can Chavismo-Madurismo be reformed? If so, and since retail negotiations are political initiatives that were born unilaterally, how can we advance in a more inclusive manner, configuring a liberation movement that represents the majority of Venezuelans and that contributes to the institutional reconstruction of the country's democratic political forces? However, if such an itinerary is impossible, we must ask other

questions: What are the consequences of advancing towards a destination that seems unattainable? And how could it impact the future of our democratic struggle if "direct actions" and "watertight compartments", as Ortega y Gasset would say, were to lead initiatives?

Some countries have resorted to this form of struggle. Perhaps the most relevant case is Zimbabwe and the "Power Sharing Agreement" (2008). The opposition of the African country, backed by evident popular support and encouraged by the entire international community, agreed to become part of Mugabe's government, preside over some of the dictatorship's institutions and lead reforms towards democracy. Unfortunately, what happened a short time later, was the contrary: reforms failed, the opposition was corrupted, the dictatorship did not evolve into a democracy and the rest of the country became disenchanted with politics. Fourteen years later, Zimbabwe is still not a democratic nation. This experience –and others– force me to firmly reiterate that this is a risky struggle. Trying to remedy the deep crisis of representation that we suffer with factual mechanisms of legitimacy created by those who hijack power is a daring bet. Unwittingly, a perfect scenario can be configured for democratic simulation, for autocratic rebalancing and for the appeasement of our impulses that yearn freedom. The dictatorship does not give anything for free, and I am afraid that, sooner or later, it will end up taking the "power" that was deliberately granted to those who bet on this form of liberation.

### The second route

Let us now review the second alternative that could remedy our crisis of representation. Juan Guaidó was sworn in as Interim President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on January 23,

2019. I will not delve into this recent and complex political process in this article; it will undoubtedly have to be done in the future. I will only say what is evident to us: after three years, we have yet to achieve our goals of liberation, the instance has been dilluted, and it seems that the center of our political struggle no longer gravitates there. In terms of what has been said about the concept of representation: the interim presidency is a faded photograph that does not seem to portray our current situation. Previously I stated that representation is evidenced in the capacity for articulation and social mobilization. To date, it seems that the interim president lacks this potential.

In order to remedy this deficiency, legitimacy granted by international allies, especially the United States, has been sought. This means that the current source of legitimacy of the interim presidency is not found in formal or real representation mechanisms, but rather in one granted by part of the international community which qualifies them as valid interlocutors. Some may disagree with this analysis and resort to the legitimacy granted by supposedly constitutional interpretations that are not clear or evident. However, there is a political reality that confronts this constitutional voluntarism. The legal basis for the interim presidency was closely associated with its short-term victory. In other words: the Transition Statute was created to channel the potential for change that existed in 2019. In the absence of that condition, the mechanism lost its political *raison d'etre*. This has happened before, in other latitudes. For example, the 1976 "Law for political reform" that allowed Spain to go "from the law to the law" was useful for political change in the country because it facilitated its orderly realization. Without that outcome, that legal work by Torcuato Fernández Miranda would have been a dead letter and would not have gone down in history.

In summary: after three years, the interim government is a body reduced to the legitimacy granted by international allies. Provided this, I consider that this ceded condition is insufficient in terms of real or formal representativeness. However, we could ask ourselves if the interim could be a source of real representation. I wonder: Could this space be transformed into an instance that inspires, articulates and mobilizes Venezuelan democratic forces and society? In this sense, it is convenient to briefly consider the current configuration of the so-called "Interim Government". Formally, it includes the country's main (G4) and minority (G8) parties. However, the modes of "government" installed have led to the political actions of Juan Guaidó's team and minority forces being imposed, which are oversized and benefit from this order. In my view, it is a kind of "hegemonic vocation" that badly impacts our political struggle because it seriously hinders the generation of consensus and the construction of real unity, one that must respond to the true problems of Venezuelans. And, being profoundly exclusive, it atomizes the opposition political spectrum even more.

This situation is unfortunate because it fuels disenchantment with politics and deepens the crisis of representation. It widens the gap between the country and politicians. Surveys show that the minds and hearts of Venezuelans are set on the idea that as politicians we spend our time caring for artificial plots of power and do not tend to real problems. It is as if it were confirmed that we live in the mirage of what could have been, but which is not. And, in addition, it consolidates the dynamic of atomization of the opposition's political spectrum. The closure of the interim government was –and is– a breeding ground for retail negotiations to arise and for the dictatorship to go out to the dissatisfaction

market and identify individuals willing to be valid and credible interlocutors.

### A third route?

So far we have reviewed the two ways that have been explored in order to overcome the representation gap that afflicts us. They are divergent paths with a common characteristic: an apparent legitimacy that does not derive from formal or real mechanisms of representation and that has been granted to them by de facto powers. This is a complex aspect. When the legitimacy of a political instance is not anchored in a real or formal power of representation, it can be reduced to appearances and be profoundly dependent and unstable. And, since it is solely backed by the will of those who infuse it with "power", it can be subject to their interests or outbursts. This risk reminds us that freedom of conscience and personal independence are irreplaceable conditions for the creation of real representation that could promote true legitimacy and lead the democratic struggle.

This analysis necessarily leads us to think of solutions. Such a difficult diagnosis cannot halt us: What should we do? How to take advantage of those pre-existing spaces or initiatives that could contribute to our liberation? How to reach above this abyss? How to build the real representation that Venezuela so badly needs? There are no single or exclusive answers to these questions. I will next share five ideas that can encourage reflection and pave the way for a political and social reconstruction.

*First idea*: moral leadership. History teaches us that the lives of those who have led struggles like ours in other latitudes and times have been marked by a transcendent vision of politics. By "transcendent vision" I mean immaterial values of the human spirit that give meaning to effort, to the existence of ill-doing

and suffering. There are three examples that move me: Lech Walesa, Oswaldo Payá and Vaclav Havel. Walesa and Payá clung to their Christian faith; Havel, to the goods that culture offers. I am not talking about romanticism or self-help. It is a reminder of the necessary moral strength needed to overcome obstacles and to become the voice of a country that distrusts, is tired and is beginning to accept that it is condemned to live unjustly. I believe that this aspect of leadership is essential to advance in the construction of real representation. Therefore, it is important to create and promote spaces for education and training, and socialization that ensure the prevailingness of this kind of people.

*Second idea*: the predominance of consciousness. Alexander Solzhenitsyn used to say that the real fight for freedom takes place in the human heart, an idea I often go back to. Our country is a multitude of human and material shortcomings. Wandering through its streets and roads, I have come across the *Casas muertas,* or "dead houses", of Miguel Otero Silva and the barbarism described by Rómulo Gallegos. In the 21st century, our political work must have deeply educational and human purposes. We have the duty to rehabilitate public spaces and go out to meet the other, others, Venezuelans. We must listen and be there for them. Reflect and act. Encourage once more the value of political testimony and pave the way so that those awakened consciences can be inspired to fight for democracy.

*Third idea*: the *criollo* or "creole" character. For many reasons, in the twilight of our democracy, we decided to ignore our republican tradition, an attitude that was fertile ground for the Chavismo-Madurismo narrative. In this way, the revolutionary story that told us to despise our past and condemn any alternative for a free future made its way into our democratic veins. I must firmly insist that, in order to rebuild the country and our democracy,

we must overcome this distortion that orphaned us historically and culturally. The "clean slate" that Chavismo tried to promote wanted to take away the pride of civility. That must change. In order to move forward, we must retrace who we are, embrace our lights and face our shadows, return to our roots with maturity and rediscover the "affirmative Venezuelan", as Augusto Mijares would say.

*Fourth idea*: Industriousness. Moral leadership, the predominance of conscience and the *criollo* character will harvest the fruits of freedom if they crystallize in concrete plans of political and social organization throughout the country. I am amazed when I see the commitment of politicians and social leaders who dedicate their lives to expanding their organizations and institutions at the service of the country. Like farmers, they go about pulling weeds of discouragement and sowing hope. They move on with many limitations. They mobilize state by state, municipality by municipality, parish by parish. It is a silent and indispensable job. The only way to overcome the factual mechanisms of representation is to create a movement that is the faithful and indisputable bearer of real legitimacy. We must work, create and build. Tweets, analyses (such as this one), comments, and groupings are insufficient. No one will grant us freedom; we must earn it.

*Fifth idea:* An opening. Building real representation is a task that brings us all together. One of our current tragedies is the "invertebration" of the opposition's political spectrum. The regime has thickened the fog, and thus made it difficult to distinguish the horizon. It is not easy to know who is who. And saying that whoever is not part of the government is part of the opposition is no longer sufficient. We all know that reality is much more cloudy and tangled. Ignoring this difficulty will not make it go away.

We have to walk this land of shadows with the audacity gained by political expertise. It is necessary to build networks that are authentically opposed to the government, that will not belie –once again– the impulses of freedom of the country. It is essential to know the reality of each region and draw a real map of the opposition forces that operate in them. Only then can we "build" with greater assertiveness. The necessary political window must be accompanied by an almost artisanal work that allow will allow us to move forward with confidence.

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I thus conclude this analysis, but leave it open to time. I am aware of the complexities that I have ventured to describe. I note the difficulties and I understand that none of the topics presented here is exhausted. I insist: These ideas are open to time. Our country demands reflection and work. For this reason, I embrace José Rafael Pocaterra's words, written in 1937 when our country seemed doomed to decay: "The time has come to call things by their names, and not names by their things". Venezuela awaits us. It is the time for real representation.

# Take a piece of the agora with you

Rafael Osío Cabrices

*We cannot understand the decline of democracy or imagine a way back towards it without knowing how minimal consensuses that transcend small elites with decision-making power are lost and produced. But, in order to spread and discuss the ideas of such consensuses and integrate them public opinion, we must begin by understanding how the system has been fragmented. The media crisis and the atomization of audiences are a central story in the contemporary crisis of democracies.*

Any Monday 30 years ago, during our mid-morning break, many students of the Lisandro Ramírez School in Valencia were talking about the same thing: the movie we had seen in *Cine Millonario* the night before. We were very likely discussing, for example, how the policeman had been able to defeat that giant shark shooting his rifle, *in extremis*, at the oxygen tank stuck between its jaws. Most of us saw the same movies. So did most of our parents, teachers and school employees, as well as the bus driver and the ice cream man who waited for us at noon when we left for home.

Low and middle class children from different areas of the capital of the state of Carabobo came to study to my school. We all had a TV at home and watched a very narrow range of

shows –*Planet of the Apes, Tom & Jerry, Mazinger Z, Candy Candy* and, if allowed, *Miami Vice* and *Cine Millonario*– on the three TV channels broadcasted: channels 8, 4 and 2. We also listened to a restricted range of radio broadcasts, just like the adults. If they read newspapers at home, there were no more than two: usually one of the two regional ones, *El Carabobeño* and *Notitarde*, and one of the national ones, such as *El Universal, El Nacional* and *Últimas Noticias*. From time to time there were other Venezuelan magazines within our reach, as well as a few international magazines like *Geomundo, Buenhogar, Mecánica Popular, Muy Interesante* and, of course, *Reader's Digest Selections*.

What almost all of us, except for some who traveled or had particular expertise, knew about the world and human culture was, for the most part, what was presented to us in those few, large media outlets. Without being much different in terms of our age or purchasing power, almost all of us consumed discourses and aesthetics that resembled each other, coming from a Venezuela dominated by two parties which we only knew how to distinguish based on their colors, or by the United States of Ronald Reagan. It was difficult to see anything more audacious than *Radio Rochela* or hear anything more *avant-garde* than Vangelis or Phil Collins's Genesis. Access to video and the carelessness of adults was all it took to see nudity or extreme violence. Until 1989, everything was quite stable and predictable for us, and we did not realize that our real world, the society that we really were, was much more diverse, complex and convulsive than the universe we saw on TV, where real threats like the nuclear holocaust seemed too abstract to feel close, and where the threats that were most palpable to us and that really instilled fear in us were frankly unlikely, such as being carried away by a huge shark when we were ten meters from the shore in *Punta Brava*.

Let's now fly ahead 30 years, to the present.

Today, during the mid-morning recess of a school in Venezuela, or in any country on the continent for that matter, it would be very unlikely that even the Russian invasion of Ukraine would prevail as the common conversation prompt among students. Within the same classroom, not to mention the entire school, no child has seen the same film in the same place at the same time as another classmate –unless they have coincidentally attended the same function at a cinema. Some girls may be talking about a show on YouTube or Netflix that they like, and some boys about a video game, but it would be unlikely for all of them to have seen or played them at the same time the night before. The rest of the class is probably playing games, watching, listening or reading other things on their screens or, in certain cases, on physical records such as books. These children cannot discuss with their teacher, as we could in 1982, about what they simultaneously consume. Everyone spends their Sunday seeing something different, communicating with contemporary culture or world events individually. Now, that conversation about Jaws which many different children agreed upon on a Monday morning in 1982 is impossible: children today have few interests in common in terms of entertainment.

Currently there are few big media that diffuse few big discourses and aesthetics to all society. I don't think that even the Kardashians or Lionel Messi can have the practically universal omnipresence that, for example, Michael Jackson had when his *Thriller* video clip came out, which not even my grandmother freed herself from seeing at some point, even when she didn't want to. Our eight-year-old daughter has never seen a minute of the Kardashians' show or a football game with Messi in her life –without any effort on our part. Fewer and fewer people

have cable television as more people design their own "menu" of video on demand, streaming, and on their Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, or Twitter apps, just scrolling their finger through a screen. Instead of a few TV channels, radio stations and newspapers, today we have a few big platforms, not with reduced contents that play one after another, but rather with an ever-changing menu that feeds itself and that is, in practice, infinite. From that menu, guided not only by our own interests but by an algorithm, we choose what we are going to consume. While in 1982 the kids from a barrio in the south of Valencia and those from a middle-class neighborhood in the north of the city had all experienced watching the same film, today socioeconomic differences determine the strength and reach of your internet signal and the device at hand to surf the net, and therefore your access to that endless menu.

Except for occasional audience phenomena such as the Korean series *Squid Game* or colossal financial entertainment operations such as Marvel Cinematic Universe's saga of 18 feature films (plus video games, comics, and associated merchandise), that consensus on entertainment products that we spontaneously had in 1982 is no longer possible by virtue of the limitations of that content menu within our reach. If there cannot be consensus entertainment-wise, regarding what gives us pleasure to watch or listen to, it is much more difficult to have it on certain things which we generally approach more reluctantly, such as what our worst problems are as a society and what we should do to fix them.

In order to discuss this matter, and save –or build– our democracy, a significant part of society must gather. The individuals and organizations that are working towards "democratization", towards rebuilding a democratic path, must

address citizens, grab their attention, make them understand what such an enterprise means, and listen to what they have to say. We must organize a roundtable, let's say, made up of innumerable conversations, debates, fights, agreements and disagreements that lead to a consensus. No one is expecting everyone to attend or consensus to be unanimous, but certainly for there to be a certain quorum so that what is decided has some representativeness.

Surely it sounds difficult, firstly because the mere process of convening such a gathering or –what is the same– of having something that we can call public opinion is much more difficult today than before, because the resources with which we could previously invite people to this roundtable, and with which we could present the issues to be discussed or the proposals to solve our problems, have lost their reach, their voice. It is very difficult for them to make themselves heard through the closed doors or the distances that separate the dispersed members of that community.

**Renny's lonesomeness**

More than ten years ago, during a time when I used to write about our challenges in terms of respect towards norms or about simple urban coexistence, it was common for a reader to say that what was needed in Venezuela was a campaign like Renny Ottolina's. I never knew if what this television producer and entertainer said about respecting crosswalks and traffic lights, for example, had any effect whatsoever, but I was aware then that what he was able to do with his enormous influence as a respected *prime time* star, on one of the two main channels of the country and before a captive audience, would be impossible to replicate in 2010, not to mention 2022. Renny would basically find himself preaching in a desert. His show would probably not

be able to become the platform it became n the 70s. In order to free himself from a declining open television network, he would have had to join Youtube and compete among the rest of content creators, without ever aspiring to reach the general public, nor a wide range of people of different ages and strata, which he managed to have hold of at the zenith of his career.

Today, Renny would be as alone as journalists are: competing on the Internet not only against other entertainers or other media, but against all the content on the Internet. That means that he would be competing for the minuscule range of attention and the highly disputed idle time of the audiences, against television series, celebrities, jokes, online classes, and any amateur video on how to put on makeup, how to repair a damaged sink, or how to defend yourself from the 5G chip that the New World Order wants to insert in your blood through the Covid vaccine by design of a Hungarian tycoon. As great as Renny was, if he were alive and active today, his message would reach only an infinitesimal fraction of the audience he reached at the time, –even taking into consideration that population has grown, because everything has been fragmented into relatively independent circuits of production, distribution, and content consumption, where control is exercised much less by the powerful media executives of the past and much more by artificial intelligence software, and where for every Renny there are a million fans who can be much more effective or, as it's eloquently put today, more *viral* than any communication professional. Today, Renny would have to speak to an audience that already agrees with him, that sees him on television, while those who most need to listen to him, those who most ignore common rules on the street, would not even know who he is; and although they may use YouTube just like him, they will never come across his message as long as the algorithm favors a teenager who knows and applies SEO

(Search Engine Optimization, one of the most sought-after skills in the contemporary world) in order to make their show visible on stream, which simply consists of making jokes and comments hour after hour while browsing a video game and live thanking the donations that are coming from their thousands or millions of subscribers.

Journalists, such as myself, nowadays go through something similar: I used to work in a newspaper in Caracas that on any given Sunday would print 150,000 copies to be distributed all throughout the nation, but today it has not a single print in circulation. I learned to be a journalist before a large audience contained in the same territory. Now, I have to accept that anything I write will normally –and with luck– be read by some 2,000 people spread across Venezuela and some ten other countries. Before, getting to interview someone was easy: all I had to do was say that I worked for the newspaper *El Nacional*. Today, I have to explain to each source –if they even respond to an email– that I work for two digital media companies that they most likely do not know, despite having been in circulation for years. Even the very fact of being interviewed in a responsible media is not as attractive or prestigious for the interviewee as it was before.

We could easily conclude that Chavismo devastated the Venezuelan media landscape. But this is happening everywhere, with very rare exceptions such as international newspapers like *The New York Times* and *El País*, which have grown with digital subscriptions, newspapers and magazines that seem to have taken the same path towards the irremediable disappearance of open or cable television. Not even forgoing the expense of printing and distributing paper copies can save them, because the media outlets' online advertising revenues also plummeted once they were gobbled up by Google, Facebook and others.

For me it has been very illustrative, and also very sad and worrying, to see how the fragmentation of audiences and the annihilation of traditional media is a global event, which like many other things we saw first happen in Venezuela, but which will go on to become a worldwide historic event. And I currently even see it in a country radically different from Venezuela regarding social, economic, and political indicators: Canada, the country where I now live, and where I have also seen how the common public space is crushed and how the weakening of the consensus on elementary norms of collective relations is affecting one of the most stable democracies that exists.

### The winter of discontent

In the frigid February of 2022, a curious scene took place in a court in the Canadian capital, Ottawa. One person from a group of people who were detained by the police at the end of an anti-vaccine protest led by truckers that paralyzed the political center of the second largest country in the world for three weeks, the husband of one of the movement's organizers, declared to the judge that violating several laws while participating in the downtown occupation was simply exercising his First Amendment right to demonstrate. "The what?" asked the judge. "What amendment?" When the defendant tried to explain himself, they realized that he was talking about the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which has no validity in Canada, a different country with its own constitution.

This man was repeating –without any translation– content imported from the United States and its alt-right movement, as many other slogans and conspiracy theories that the protesters chanted and promoted before, during and after the protest, as well as the Confederate and the "Don't tread on me" flags that

the so-called Libertarian use there (and a couple swastikas that also waved in front of the Parliament of Canada). This man, like many of his colleagues, had no idea that he was trying to defend himself in court with a legal argument invalid in his country, because –among other reasons– a considerable part of the ideas that feed his and the movement's mindset came to him inside an echo chamber: a vicious cycle of him only reading and listening to content that reinforces what he is already thinking, therefore isolating him from other opinions and convincing him further of what he believes in. This man distrusted anything but the media and spokespersons who told him that there is a great conspiracy underway to end the freedom to bear arms and the white race, that vaccines are a great hoax to install a communist regime run by Jews, pedophiles and black people, and that the undoubtedly legitimate and democratic governments of Justin Trudeau –"Fidel Castro's son"– or Joe Biden must be overthrown by force.

This echo chamber is produced not only thanks to the discursive ruse –which Venezuelans have seen unfold since the early years of Chavismo– of relentlessly sowing the perception that everything that is not Donald Trump and the nebulous alt-right induces this man to watch Rebel News[1] in the same way that the entrenched chavistas only watched VTV, because the algorithms of his Facebook and Google accounts have fed him similar content for years, not necessarily because Google and Facebook have wanted to turn people into polarized fans, but because they are platforms designed to increase content consumption guided by the labels associated with what users have seen before. It's

1 This Canadian outlet, a classic example of what has been called "post-truth", reproduces conspiracy theories and disinformation against the liberal government, vaccines, progressive causes or climate change, in clear affinity with Trumpism, which grew before the rise of Trump airing xenophobic and anti-Islamic speech: https://www.rebelnews.com/

just like Netflix and Spotify: if I like Spinetta, the algorithm will recommend Charly and Fito. That is exactly what happened to that man in court: the algorithm suggested more Soros, more New World Order, more First Amendment.

This happened a year after the assault on the United States Congress, an event for which Facebook, Twitter, as well as other external agents who work in networks with armies of trolls and bots to multiply the messages that feed the algorithms and echo chambers, particularly from Russia, have been blamed (and rightly so). But it also comes a few months after several politicians at different levels in Canada have quit their careers because they couldn't stand the hate on social media. The truckers' protest took place on the same day that Canada was to publicly commemorate five years since the massacre of six people in a mosque in Quebec City at the hands of a 27-year-old who was convinced by Islamophobic sites that Muslims in Canada had to be exterminated. Less than a year before another Canadian, aged 20, ran over a Muslim family who was just walking down the street in London, killing four out of five of them, and less than two years after almost fifty newspapers were closed forever in the same country, during the first six weeks of the pandemic alone[2]. Yes, almost fifty newspapers in less than three months, in a country with almost total literacy and without having a Diosdado Cabello stealing their headquarters for a rigged defamation trial.

The echo chambers and radicalization are directly related to the truckers' protest and the difficulty to achieve full vaccination in Canada, where vaccines abound and are free for citizens. They fuel reaction to the feminist and anti-racism movement, as

2 Data taken from a research cited in this report on the general state of the media in Canada, in my favorite magazine in the country: The Walrus, https://thewalrus.ca/future-of-journalism/.

well as xenophobia. They use and contribute to the media crisis, and undermine confidence in institutions, political leaders, and the very idea of democracy, magnifying the errors of leaders or systematically attacking messages such as "Get vaccinated so the virus won't kill you and so the health system won't collapse".

This is not in Latin America; this is in Canada. I stress this not to get discouraged –any more than those of us who worry about these things already are–, but to try to show that the fragmentation of the media and public opinion has the same effect as the dissolution of the prestige of institutions that previously exercised some arbitration and social cohesion, such as churches or educational systems. It is not only the parties that are disconnected from the people and the corrupt or incapable politicians who use democracy to undermine it from within; the same decent or responsible politicians that still exist have serious limitations transmitting their messages and convincing people. A scenario in which a minimum democratic governance consensus is produced such as post-Pinochet Chile or post-Fujimori Peru is today much more difficult to achieve than in 1991 or 2000.

## The broken agora

It was much simpler for the ancient Greeks: in an Athens inhabited by a few thousand people, it was enough to distribute emissaries around the city who summoned the citizens to walk to the agora and participate in the debate. In societies of millions or billions of people, many of them separately absorbed by the screens of their devices, we seem to be much closer to dystopian novels like *1984* or *Fahrenheit 451* than to the luminous legends about the Periclean Greece that bequeathed us "the government of the people".

The promise of freedom offered by the internet was fulfilled in regards to the dissemination of knowledge, while also spreading a contempt for knowledge like wildfire. Fake news and conspiracy theories accumulated for the past two years against measures imposed during the pandemic and vaccines have also led a large portion of Americans into believing that their current government is illegitimate. Prior to that, rumors spread through WhatsApp filled millions of people with fear, who threw themselves into the arms of reactionary and authoritarian political movements in India and Brazil who promised safety. They may sound absurd to us, but the damage they do is real, and sometimes it translates into violence and loss of life. They act against the fight for climate change, against the rights of all, against the challenge of the epidemic and inequality. They act against democracy, constantly and in ways in which it is not easy to distinguish the spontaneity of the common citizen from the organized action of a political agent who is attacking the relationship with the truth and with the common institutions that make democracy possible, in nations where we can still say democracy prevails. In 2021, The Economist's Democracy Index[3] recorded its worst score since it began in 2006: 5.28 out of 10.

Is there hope? I ask myself that question while the home country of a million Canadians, Ukraine, is being invaded and its people massacred by an autocratic military power just because in 2014 it embarked on its path towards democratization. Just a few weeks after I realized that the harassment of journalists happening in Ottawa during the protest that I saw in the media was exactly

3 You can find it here, but do pour yourself a glass of rum first: https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/02/global-democracy-has-a-very-bad-year.

the same[4] as both what Trump supporters have unleashed in the United States, as well as what we have experienced in Venezuela so many times since at least 2001.

The Greek *agora* that classic thinkers described as a busy square in the sun, and that we have tried to recreate many times in the last two centuries, may today seem as dilapidated as the Berlin Wall to us. When journalists, burdened by these issues, or democrats in general, find ourselves helpless before a society that does not listen and does not want to listen, we feel that we only have fragments of the *agora* left, splinters that we ca'n carry in our hands as a souvenir, or even as a religious relic.

### Is there hope?

I believe so. Or, rather, I believe we must hope and work for that hope. Do what we have to do. We journalists have to assert the truth and do our job well, do the right thing, instead of saying just about anything for that extra click. But we have everything against us, and the work that must be done is not only ours.

I also tend to think that my parents' generation, that same generation that claims they miss democracy so much, took it for granted, let it slip away, voted for coup plotters and charlatans, and now complains that we do nothing. I also tend to think that the generation that succeeds mine is better. I say this for the young people with whom I interact at work, to whom I try to teach a few things in exchange for how much they teach me.

My 26-year-old son is well-aware of the difference between what tyranny is and what it is not, what the use of truth is, and

4 Here is one case, among many, of what can be called sub-zero Bolivarian circles: https://www.thewrap.com/canadian-freedom-convoy-protesters-shout-obscenities-live-report/

how much harm a lie can do. My 8-year-old daughter, as she came home the other day from her public school in Montreal, told me there is a place where the youngest children gather in their moments of rest to play, eat or read.

The name of that place at her school?
*Agora*.

# Culture as a fundamental human mark

Ana Teresa Torres

> *Cultural creation is free (art. 98).*
> *The values of culture constitute an inalienable asset of the Venezuelan people and a fundamental right that the State will guarantee through the necessary conditions, legal instruments, means and budgets (art. 99).*
> From the National Constitution, 1999

Looking towards the future, is it in our interest to change our views of the past and show that Venezuela is not only the homeland of warriors and caudillos, as some nationalist rhetorics insist. Venezuela is also the homeland of those who, after achieving Independence, found themselves in a country that had been left in extreme poverty and dedicated themselves to the arduous task of building a republic and restoring the economy destroyed during the war. It is also the homeland of those who, during the rest of the 19th century, took on the tasks of education and thought amid great hardship and a constant factional struggle. It was in that country that electricity and oil were first exploited, which over time turned into large advanced technology industries. It is also the homeland of those who first proposed social policies in the mid-20th century, almost non-existent until then, and continued to put them in practice during the decades of representative democracy; the same time when new universities

were created, where important figures of medicine, education, engineering, social sciences and humanities of our country were educated. And it is the homeland of writers, artists, artisans and many other creators of culture who constitute a valuable tangible and intangible heritage, and, not less important, it is also the homeland of millions of men and women who, even practicing the most modest trade, build the productive life of the country.

Our store of values is enough to build Venezuelan culture. This production, whichever area it is developed in, forms a fundamental part of the heritage of nations and contributes to its placement as a country in international dialogue, to the image it portrays, to its political profile assessment, and to national self-esteem. The consolidation of the dignity and value of communities is directly related to the self-esteem derived from their contribution to the economic and cultural production of the world, and the poor self-esteem that Venezuelans have of their values and products is disturbing, which to a great extent is a consequence of the poor information and training they have received on this subject. This is one of the reasons why, when looking for merits and stories, heroic and warrior myths adulated from many angles come to mind, as rarely does the national narrative include the values of citizenship and peace.

**Culture is the transversal axis** that sustains the development and well-being of peoples, yet cultural action is often considered superfluous, sumptuary –not to say unnecessary. At most, a kind of recreational activity that should not demand too much consideration or funding. This is more than regrettable because it indicates that it is yet to be understood that culture is one of the main sources of citizenship, and that social, economic, and political development derive from it. This does not mean that a country where everyone is an artist or a prominent creative

is ideal, or even that it should be a leading country in universal cultural events. Let's rather consider lifestyles, the exercise of citizenship, the respect for the things that dignify and allow to enjoy existence, the pride of having values and contributing to the universal culture in a way that particularly characterizes us in the world. None of that is improvised. It requires persistent action on the part of society itself to create its own culture, to maintain and respect it, and –not least importantly– to be able to pay for it.

Cultural actions constitute extraordinary vehicles to promote a sense of belonging, respect for the nation's tangible and intangible heritage, and strengthen social bonding and respect for diversity. They promote the identification with values such as solidarity, construction, peace and enjoyment of existence, as well as skills and talents, and the intellectual and creative growth of people. On the other hand, cultural products can establish axes of correlation with economic companies, which could disregard the understanding of culture as a subsidy and at the same time insert it into the productive sector. Certainly not all cultural actions will be profitable for accounting purposes. Its benefit must be seen in social terms, as a fundamental source in the construction of citizenship, because culture is the heart of a country.

In the past, the Venezuelan State created a considerable amount of institutions and made very important investments in cultural actions (publishing houses, festivals, orchestras) and in infrastructure (libraries, museums, theaters), led by notable personalities from the cultural environment, but the belief in this investment as a fundamental part of any social policy was never firmly rooted. Certainly the State, but also civil society –even its enlightened sectors– have been, with few honorable exceptions, little inclined to place importance on culture. Anyone will agree on the value of school education, but the position regarding cultural

education is quite ambiguous, perhaps because culture has been perceived more as a private than a public matter. And, above all, it has been difficult to assimilate that in the contemporary world the concept of culture has surpassed the traditional borders between elite culture, mass culture and popular culture, thus including not only the different sectors of interests and needs, but also new cultural and technological spaces. If this division is to be maintained just for linguistic convenience, it is key to take into account that the cultural object can be categorized but not the subject of culture, and that it is necessary to allow the free exercise of citizenship so that particular instruments of creation and production can be developed in a diverse and multicultural country, such as democratic countries in which interests and motivations coexist according to age, gender, traditions, lifestyles and particular hobbies. A cultural policy set by the State – which is very different from a State-run culture– must be based on a collective notion and at the same time attentive to diversity. This should be the case in Venezuela.

### Culture and poverty

Poor countries are characterized by having educated elites who consume first-world cultural products versus large sectors excluded from the enjoyment of cultural goods and services. It could be said that the same occurs in other spheres, such as health, education, housing, etc., and that it ultimately responds to the conditions of poverty. Still, what must be emphasized is that one of its causes is precisely the exclusion from those goods in a kind of vicious circle. It is necessary to insist that, to conduct cultural deeds, we must not wait for all the problems related to poverty to be solved; on the contrary, we must realize that they will not be solved unless culture is understood as an essential tool in this fight. For a person to participate in the cultural assets of

their society, they must first constitute themselves as a subject of culture. That is, they must feel part of a community that carries out actions that improve and dignify existence, to therefore carry themselves as an actor and recipient of these goods. The exclusion of large sectors of the population from cultural goods and services must be considered one of the most severe and pernicious effects of poverty, which entails cultural deprivation and drastically limits the possibilities of human development of individuals and communities. Cultural action is an indispensable factor within public policies that tend to eliminate both its effects and its causes, because it has a high impact in the fight against the destructive impact that poverty produces in the social fabric in terms of exclusion, loss of cohesion, low self-esteem and initiative, and deterioration of civic values.

We know that people who live and grow up in excluded communities develop other sources of citizenship linked to values dissonant to the standards of well-being and achievement of included communities. It is necessary to ask what happens to the values generated by formal education (decent work, welfare goals, appreciation and civic insertion) when they are dissonant with the values and signs of prestige of the community, as well as with the tangible results in economic terms. In order to support the values of citizenship encouraged in children and young people through formal education, they need to be accompanied by a minimum accordance with the values promoted by the community. It is thus essential to facilitate and promote cultural actions that link the community with values related to its dignity, the enjoyment of positive creativity, and citizen participation. Poverty requires considering the human being in its complexity, and a fundamental aspect is its dignity as a subject of culture, that is, the role it plays on values, identities and symbolically. Cultural action is an indispensable factor within public policies

that tend to eliminate both the effects and the causes of poverty, as it has a high impact in the fight against the destructive impact that poverty produces in the social fabric in terms of exclusion, loss of social cohesion, low self-esteem and initiative, and deterioration of citizen values. Its effects consolidate networks of community identification. They teach individuals to participate in positive recreation jointly. They turn leisure into creative production. They participate in preventing delinquency and early pregnancy, two factors that weigh heavily on the low-income adolescent population. They substantially improve the capacity of individuals and communities to carry out useful and beneficial projects for themselves. They insert the subjects in a symbolic network representing their traditions, updating their abilities and talents, identifying with values of construction, peace and enjoyment, and offering references of self-esteem in the face of violence and devaluation to which exclusion has subjected them.

In order to work for a strategy of social and productive development in the construction of citizenship, it is necessary to prioritize the problem of the exclusion of the subject from cultural discourse; a) In terms of their belonging to the tradition and production of cultural goods of the society; b) In terms of the territorial exclusion of the instances and actions where that tradition and production takes place. Incorporation must therefore also act in both directions: a) the production of particular cultural actions developed in the local sphere, and b) the linking of the communities with the actions produced by the cultural institutions in the extensive sphere. On the one hand, the desired effects are the internal appropriation of cultural action that builds it into a subject of culture. On the other hand, territorial appropriation allows it to recognize shareable public goods symbolically.

## Literature and construction of free people

This is the story of a girl who was so poor that she believed running water was an invention from soap operas. A person who lived under the dictatorship of poverty until chance opened a door for her. I met her briefly years ago at a book fair. She was then a woman in her forties, and as we talked, she showed herself as someone who highly valued reading and who, with great effort, had earned a higher education degree. She also told me that her life had not been like that of other girls in the neighborhood where she was born. I could not miss this opportunity, so I asked her why her life had turned out differently from theirs. "Reading", she said, "Because of the books I was able to read." My next question was how she had gained access to the books. It turns out that a neighbor worked in a library and sometimes took books to her house and lent them to her. "Books changed my life," she said. This was precisely what I was looking for: for someone to confirm what I have always believed in: that a book can change a life. Then, I had to know how that change had come about, so I asked her what books she remembered. She mentioned several, among which *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* grabbed my attention because it is one of my own childhood books. And what was it that she had found in that adventure book that is probably no longer of interest to contemporary children? "That life can happen in many ways," she answered. I don't think there is a better answer. Indeed when he wrote the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn on the Mississippi, back in 1870, Mark Twain could not suppose that a Venezuelan girl in a poor neighborhood of Caracas, a city which he had probably never heard anything about, read his books a century after on loan from a public library employee and that it changed her life forever. Books are not just entertainment for those dedicated to reading and writing, who are obviously a minority everywhere in the world. Books are for life. They help

improve it, change it, expand it. Literature is a window that opens the world because language is what makes us; we constitute ourselves in words. And the written word is the possibility that some signs, arbitrary and different according to languages and cultures, contain what we call the world: what exists and what we imagine exists. What is and what can be. Books not only include information about reality: when the phenomenon through which a person apprehends that reality occurs, their entire inner world, their entire life, is expanded. And that can happen with a chemistry, history, poetry or even adventure book alike.

On the other hand, and to conclude, if we think –as we mentioned at the beginning– in terms of the future, if we visualize the rupture of the national dialogue that has been taking place, the distortions of historical and social identity, the disarticulation of the social fabric at the hands of violence in all orders, it seems that fact, action and cultural value are the most precious instruments in the process of re-establishing a sense of reunification, because they act precisely at the symbolic level of society. Books are an ideal way to learn about the social imaginaries that Venezuelans have experienced in their history: the problems, the suffering, the hardships, the exiles... but also the conquests, improvements and journeys, their secret soul. Much of Venezuelan history lives in their pages, as told through the voice of novels, stories, poems, chronicles. Books are a place that one day we will recognize as a meeting place for reconciliation because within them all hatred is shaken and appeased. The intimate history of Venezuela can be read in the pages of its literature, from mythical times to the diaspora. That is where the diversity of Venezuelan society breathes there.

# Narrating the vastness of our tragedy

Héctor Torres

Literature feeds on the existence of two worlds, opposed in nature but inescapably complementary: the world of artistic creation, elusive of any form of categorization, and the world of publishing, governed by the pragmatic laws of the market.

The professionalization of a country's literary production calls for the consolidation of a market and a publishing industry. In Venezuela, the history of this industry has been directly related to the vicissitudes of the State: a story full of ironies and contradictions.

Authors of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, had the benefit of valuable diffusion policies set by the State, but they had a rather meager market. On the other hand, around the decade between 2005 and 2015, the State was almost exclusively dedicated to using literature as a vehicle for ideological propaganda, so the publishing industry (and, therefore, literary creation) flourished in growth and had an enthusiastic market.

For better or worse, the contemporary history of our publishing industry has been linked to the presence of the State. With this in mind, as well as the current devastation of the literary scene in general, I will try to outline some thoughts that could allow me to envision a possible scenario for the immediate future.

The anecdote I am about to tell is Andrés Boersner's, owner of the renowned bookstore Noctua, located in the Centro Plaza shopping mall in Caracas. It was the late years of the 20th century. Like any bookseller who has earned that title based on reputation, Andrés' clients blindly trusted his literary recommendations. They used to take every book he put into their hands. It was an unquestionable matter, right until the moment he suggested a Venezuelan author. In those cases, his clients would usually frown and ask, more or less invariably: "Venezuelan? No, I'm not interested".

Boersner said that it was difficult to persuade them just appealing to the literary quality and the depth of the author's reflections. The solid barrier of prejudice used to be insurmountable, even for a bookseller of his prestige.

This is how it went until Chavismo rose to power. Those clients who were so reluctant to read local authors understood that, in order to more or less put together the pieces of their now chaotic reality, which was outpacing any attempt to assimilate it, they had to search for some keys offered by cautious observers. Keys that, still incipient for the world scenario, could only be found in the sphere of thought of local authors.

Books written by research journalists, historians, political analysts and the like were finally being carefully read for the first time, and even became eagerly sought after. The desire to understand what was happening and where we were heading led people to look for clues in our history. Where did we start off? How did we not notice? How did we get here? Forty years had not led to believe that such brief and relative calm encompassed and explained our present and future history.

Eventually, the same readers invested in the thoughts of local journalists and historians also began to look for insights of our cryptic reality in historical novels, and in the novelistic genre in general, as they sensed that those voices that narrated their present forecasted something that had remained hidden and that could offer hints about where we were headed.

By the mid first decade of this century, a brief but feverish relationship blossomed between Venezuelan readers and its narrators, making the publishing industry grow at a rate that seemed to predict great splendor.

But what happened decades before? What was the state of Venezuelan editorial production in those years? Without a doubt, there were very important projects, such as the Editorial Monte Ávila, founded in 1968, or the ambitious collection of the Ayacucho Library. Both projects were the legacy of an oil-producing Venezuela that was at the forefront of the continent. Monte Ávila published consolidated writers from the region and had excellent translations of world literature of important authors; while the Ayacucho Library conducted research and produced systematic compilations of those writers that shaped Latin American literature. And there was also Fundarte, a publisher dedicated to disseminating the work of emerging voices of then-present Venezuela.

And so, each ministry, each governorate, had its own editorial imprint.

Why then did Noctua's customers looked upon the local authors recommended by Boersner with suspicion? Could we build a profile of the usual book buyers of that time based on their impressions? In any case, why, except for a handful of valuable names, wasn't contemporary Venezuelan literature bought, or

–even more importantly– why was it unknown to the great mass of readers? Was it a matter of quality or of prejudice? Marketing or climate?

It is not easy to dare to answer these questions. The truth is that, with its need to polarize and impose its historical narrative, the insurgency of Chavismo in the Venezuelan panorama stirred the waters of our society and, indirectly, contributed to a new-found interest of Venezuelan readers in books that explained what we were experiencing.

That decade not only saw the consolidation or flourishing of various local initiatives, but also the establishment of some important transnational publishers in our country, such as Planeta, Alfaguara, Mondadori, Norma and Ediciones B, with sales numbers close to the average of the region.

Thus, keeping up with its agenda, which vouched for the appropriation of the national narrative, was an uphill struggle for the Chavista regime. Literature, like all the arts, must seduce, not impose; propose diversity, not uniformity; promote the delight of reading, not the duty to "prepare for the battle of ideas". That is why all their efforts to indoctrinate through editorial offers stumbled upon an audience that had gotten to know and read our authors and that playfully enjoyed building themselves as a society that acknowledged diverse and multiple perspectives.

In fact, in 2009, the Venezuelan Chamber of Books, the Mayor of Chacao and the Embassy of Spain in Venezuela, in honor of the tradition of Saint Jordi, joined together to organize a reading festival in Plaza Francia, Altamira, which was to last five days.

From then on, and in the midst of this incipient but lively reunion of Venezuelan readers with their authors, the tradition of

Saint Jordi became the perfect excuse to convene activities in that space starting on April 23, thus giving birth to the Chacao Reading Festival. The following year, under the slogan "*Palabras al vuelo*", the festival not only increased its ability to attract publishers and the public, but also the length of event, which then lasted ten days, as it did for several years later.

By its fourth edition, in 2013, the organization expected the attendance of some 130,000 visitors. At the end of the day, they counted nearly 200,000 people who walked between stands, bought books, attended presentations, talks, children's events and musical concerts in each of the four spaces arranged in Plaza Francia.

The year 2014 saw the second turning point in our recent history, both in relation to Chavismo's determination to cling to power at any price. The first was the oil strike of 2003. The second episode took place on the 2014 Youth Day march when, in the center of Caracas, young Bassil Da Costa and Chavista leader Juancho Montoya were assassinated at the hands SEBIN officials who opened fire (as was demonstrated by the investigative unit of the newspaper *Últimas Noticias*).

That year, which marked the beginning of the upsurge of repression in Venezuela, fractured our society. A clear division arose between those who felt that events such as the book fair were acts of resistance against Chavismo's desire to take over all public spaces and those who saw it as an unconcerned party that disrespected the pain caused to the victims of the repression.

The military vision and the sort of epic we were fed as a society began to take the reins of speech. Some despaired and could not tolerate any form of civil organization that was not focused towards displacing Chavismo from power. Those of

ideas of changing the system from below, living in truth and other endeavors that require patience were at odds with the desperation to be free from the nightmare.

The Reading Festival had its years numbered. The last edition, in the midst of setbacks, the exacerbation of collective spirit and enormous frustration due to all the fights lost, was in December 2017, and it to the five-day format of the first edition.

Then, the earth was scorched. Hyperinflation, the pauperization of income, the exodus of publishers and authors (and of millions of citizens, of course), the shutdown of bookstores, the humanitarian emergency, and so on. This all suffocated that brief moment in which readers dialogued with Venezuelan literature. Currently, only five bookstores remain open in Caracas. And publishers have not had better luck. In this context, young authors not only lack spaces for dissemination, but they also have no knowledge of the voices that, just ten years ago, paved the way for subsequent generations. Today, the bulk of our narrators live abroad, as they try to make a name for themselves in markets where they are not known.

Like our authors of the 80s, who did not have an audience to speak to, our writers of the Venezuelan diaspora slip through the smallest cracks in the publishing industries of Spain, mostly, and of Miami, Mexico or Colombia, without much visibility or ability to influence the social imaginary of the moment.

It is a new beginning. For those who migrated and for those who stayed.

For decades, Venezuelan literature was largely absent in international markets. We explained it then saying that, unlike the countries of the Southern Cone, Venezuelans did not have a

migrant tradition. Many southern migrants arrived at universities and publishers in countries with a publishing tradition, such as Spain and Mexico, which facilitated the publication and dissemination of their compatriots, catapulting their names towards other markets.

A good part of our writers live abroad. Many teach at universities and even work for publishers in countries with well-established industries. However, despite being a hypothetical mirror where other countries of the region could see themselves reflected, and despite the ever-increasing number of authors who make their way in those markets, it is still quite an incipient matter.

What differentiates our migration, our socio political tragedy, from what other Southern nations have experienced? It may not be just (or as much) a matter of strategy as it is of where we stand on the political spectrum. The dictatorships of the Southern Cone were right-wing. The world listened to its authors, to their protests. Movements within universities were willing to denounce the atrocities of those dictatorships, to spread the news of the struggles of those peoples and to lament the stories of those who were disappeared.

Venezuela, on the other hand, suffers from Cuba's same double tragedy: Not only do we suffer from atrocious regimes that trample human rights, but also from the fact that these tragedies are not "marketable" in the cultural and academic spheres, both in Latin America and in the world. It is the tragedy of the diaspora fleeing a "leftist" government: "What is said about Maduro is not «so true»", "You left because you are part of the privileged class", "What *gringos* want is to get their hands on Venezuelan oil",

and so on. Old mantras from entrenched "opinionologists" who cannot acknowledge the frailty of their stagnant biases.

In fact, the great chroniclers of Latin American today, who enjoy great visibility and wide markets, do not seem interested in visiting and learning about Venezuela in order to tell the world about our incredible reality. Stories abound of people who have disappeared, of murders at the hands of the police in popular neighborhoods, of girls who are enslaved and stationed in the mines in the south, of grandparents who die of poverty because they survive on seven dollars a month. But, in that decaying binary logic that still lives in universities and cultural environments, the good guys cannot be the bad guys. Although the world keeps moving, they keep wandering around their circuits, addressing their usual audiences, conversing in the spaces where they have always lived.

It has been up to Venezuelans to make their way on their own. And it seems like a good time for testimonial literature. That urgent literature that leaves a record of what has been lived. The one that will be an input for future works; that needs, out of fear of oblivion, to leave in writing its wounds and cries. It is in the testimonial literature of these times that will lie the resources of what we will write during the next decades.

It is one of the many paradoxes that we have had to live: the most difficult time to be published is the most feverish and powerful time to be a writer. It is the worst yet also the best place to practice journalism and literature. Those who take on the challenge may not be published immediately, but nowhere else in the world can they be so close to the limits to which the human condition is exposed, precisely the raw material of literature.

It seems early for the great novel about the dictatorship. It seems early for conclusions. The pain is just beginning to subside. A cycle is not closed as soon as pain settles. The literature of a country is longer than the lives of its protagonists. In this dramatic atomization that we are experiencing, in the midst of this torment and this nostalgia (classic fuels of literature of all times), is the seed of the work that will emerge in the future. After all, the two great poems that inaugurate Western literature tell a story of war and a journey home.

Defeated in all its attempts to expel Chavismo from power, our society assumes a new reality, as a first step towards a different way of seeing ourselves, and begins to conflate a new story (of the country). We begin to relocate ourselves on a map. Accepting the loss, understanding that the fight that millions of citizens gave was not enough, burying our dead and healing our wounds is part of the slow fusion of a new social imaginary, alien to that impatient epic with which we were fed on.

It is a turn of the tables that makes us look further inside. Not within the country, but within that confusion, that rage and that despair, that fatigue and that apathy for everything that these turbulent, painful and unforgettable first decades of the century have left us.

The experience of Venezuela is useful for the continent. It is the story of a country full of resources and possibilities that was plundered until it went bankrupt. The story of a peace agreed-upon turned into a collective nightmare. Of populism, of corruption, of a power capable of anything to sustain itself at all costs. But also of a society that fought in all the scenarios it could, and that, against all odds, never stopped assisting others, even in

silence. The story of people picking up the pieces and trying to figure out what to do with whatever they have.

We must assimilate the terrible history that we have had to live. And, in doing so, use that raw material to produce stories that can express what we are experiencing. The bar is high, because we have to face the disbelief and suspicion of the cultural spheres of the continent and the apathy of a world that is losing its capacity for wonder, as well as that ephemeral character that social networks are assigning to all tragedy.

Seen in perspective –although it seems like decades–, five years after the decline of an unparalleled flourishing in our publishing history, we have to understand that such prosperity was not the final destination, but a stop on the road. The new challenge is narrating the vastness of our tragedy to a numb audience. That indecipherable lottery ticket that is the talent to narrate will soon land upon someone with the clarity to articulate and synthesize this anomie we have suffered.

We already managed make a market once. Eventually we will have an economy that will readjust and allow us to recover lost spaces. There will be spaces and there will be readers. And when we manage to assimilate and tell this story, a great moment in our literature will emerge: that which will tell the world, finally, the dimension of what we have had to live through.

# Ricardo del Búfalo: "Culture must move society"

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Testimonies are an extraordinary source to understand our present and advance in the difficult task of reconstructing what has been lived. In this edition of Democratization, dedicated to culture, we have returned to this idea that has inspired us since our beginnings with a renewed commitment. When the horizon looks blurry, it gives more meaning to our task of chronicling the present with the purpose of guarding the past and building the future.

With this intention, we had a conversation with Ricardo Del Búfalo. Ricardo is a young guaro who was born on December 2, 1991, in Florence, Italy. Three months after coming to this world, he "migrated" with his family to Venezuela. He landed in Maiquetía three days after a coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías on February 4, 1992. For this reason, he does not hesitate when he says, with some disappointment: "I was born with Chavismo. Somehow, this has marked my life".

He defines himself as a comedian. He is a screenwriter and mass communicator and has extensive experience in the digital world. He composes, does stand-up comedy, leads workshops, writes and thus leaves traces of the Venezuela that he has had to live. He is not indifferent to what happens in

the country. In 2021, he released the album "Venecadencia". We could say that he gave rhythm and put lyrics to the complex humanitarian crisis that still affects us today. In this conversation, we talked about that album and other topics.

–Without a doubt, the title "Venecadencia" is a nod to José Rafael Pocaterra. How did you get to that reference?

I discovered Pocaterra when I was 15 years old. When I read him for the first time, I thought: "¡*Qué bolas*! How absurd is it that this happened in our country? I hope it never happens to us again." But years later, it happened. Chavismo, political prisoners... all the horrors that Pocaterra narrated we were seeing again in Venezuela. And, as I went back to the book over the years, I came across a passage by Dr. León. He was in prison, and every morning one of the henchmen approached him and asked him to tell a joke. And Dr. León always told a joke. Pocaterra doesn't explain why he did it. Perhaps it was out of fear... but the truth is that it made the oppressor laugh. And that laugh humanized them. Because Dr. León made an effort to interact and, during those brief minutes, the guard saw him as a human being.

The shared laughter made the guard see Dr. León as a person and not as a thing that was hooked to a shackle. They were still cruel to him. But shared laughter humanized them. That laugh created an important connection. Because it is very easy for the enemy to destroy you if he sees you as an object. Humanization is the beginning of possible salvation, because what is shared lays the foundations for possible forgiveness. The depth of this passage made me realize that we can use laughter to resist today's oppressors. And, even though the reference to Pocaterra can be very pessimistic, *Venecadencia* presents e a photograph of these last three years. In ten or twenty years, when someone listens to the

album, we will reminisce what we felt and thought at that time. We will wonder again what happened. Those are the memories of our declining Venezuela.

–In some ways, the context that inspired *Venecadencia* is now different. What has changed in the country in 2022?

I started this year making some Morat songs and others about cohabitation problems that I have with my girlfriend. I dedicated myself to adding humor to my daily life. I decided to try to live without making my life bitter. But, eventually, politics finds its way into your private life. And this has already happened to us. For years, people tried to live their lives disregarding Chávez, but Chávez got to them. He knocked on our doors and escorted us out of our house with a tank. If we stop and remember for a bit, it becomes clear that we will not be able to escape this situation forever. But the truth is I am tired. That's why I think 2022 is the year of tiredness, of silence, and of turning a blind eye. But I don't know if in the face of reality this position can be sustained over time. As I am saying, sooner or later politics knocks on your door, bursts in and invades you.

–What "difficult reality" do you mean when you talk about 2022?

I think it's difficult because it's the year we decided to play dumb in the face of what's happening in the country. For example, this year, I open my shows with this joke: "There are many strange businesses in Caracas. I was invited to do a show in a place that did not seem very trustworthy. It was a pink, pompous, weird coffee shop, so I told my producer to charge them double so that they wouldn't hire us. But they accepted. We refused again. Who pays that kind of money for a show? And they offered us triple. And look... The show was great, Mr. Tarek is very kind and friendly".

That joke pretty much sums up the moment we're living through. It references how difficult it is to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. That is our country in 2022. This year our conflict is moral.

–And how do people react when you tell that joke?

They laugh... they laugh hard. Because people understand. People understand that tension. Everyone has been through something like this. I'm sure we've all been through that moral dilemma.

–What do you think is the role of culture in the face of this moral challenge?

There is a realm of personal consciousness. For example, when a new client calls me, I try to find out who they are, what they do... I look for references and inform myself not only for moral issues but also for security. But the truth is that you often do not know who is who and... what can you do? As a society, what can we do? Is there a moral thermometer that we can turn to right now? Are there bad *enchufados*[1] and good *enchufados*? How can we face this gray and complex context? Because the reality is that, for those of us who live in Venezuela, there is no way to escape it. That is why I believe that the challenge is more personal than social. We have to debate internally about what is right and what is wrong.

1 "*Enchufado*" is a Venezuelan idiom to refer to a corrupt person, who, even if not a part of the State bureaucracy, obtains access to permits, contracts and economic benefits that only the government can facilitate.

–The economy drives lifestyles and lifestyles generate culture: What kind of culture do you think this economy marked by illicit and irregular actions is creating?

It scares me that we might create an accommodating and conformist culture. I'm worried we'll be muzzled by a pack of dollars. That we will shut up because we all know that all of us –whether we want to or not– have dirty hands and are part of a system that drags us down. I think that when this is over no one will have clean hands. Because the reality is that when corrupt money is laundered, it could reach the hands of a priest who receives it as offerings for the church.

–Going back to *Venecadencia*: Have you noticed that the public's reaction to the songs included in this album has changed over time? Have you noticed any difference?

There is a little of everything. For example, recently I sang "*Testaferro de tu amor*" at the end of a show and a guy told me, very proud of himself: "I love that song because it tells my story." And all I could think of was: "You're not really getting the song...". That song alludes to a *merenguetón* singer linked to the dictatorship. I never thought that this could be a source of pride for anyone. But it is a sign of the times we are living. I have also seen how political songs annoy people.

–Why do you think that happens?

I think that the problem of 2022 is that Chavismo won. Despite the fact that it is not stable, that it is not at its best, there is the perception that Chavismo defeated us. And I'm not referring to elections. I mean morally. They defeated us morally. We get tired of continuously fighting them morally. But we don't get tired because we are comfortable or lazy; we get tired because we

have given everything we had and they beat us. So we decided to resist in our most intimate space and move forward in the best possible way.

–In *Venecadencia* there is a song called "Antes del abismo", "Before the abyss", and it describes what the country was like before the destruction we have experienced. Did we learn to live in the abyss?

Yes, we learned to live in the abyss. And in the abyss plants grow, some lights sneak in... good things happen in the abyss.

–By the way, that song refers to Chavismo, right?

(Laughs) That is your opinion...

–Doesn't it refer to chavismo?

(Laughs) Yes, it refers to chavismo. In fact, it was called "*Antes del chavismo*", "Before chavismo". But I self-censored and changed the name to "Before the Abyss". That song narrates the before, the during, and the after. It is a hopeful song.

–Speaking of, have you felt the weight of self-censorship when composing or performing?

Yes. That is always present. It is constant. Once, for example, after a show, a relative of a high-level Chavista approached me and introduced herself to me. She didn't tell me anything about the songs, she just told me, "I'm related to this person." It was weird. I wondered: Why is she coming to me? Why is she telling me that she is family with this person?

–What did you say?

(Laughs) Well... I tried lying to her. I wanted to tell her: "Everything I said was a lie, love forgives everything, we have differences, criticism is good for the government." Obviously, I didn't. I greeted her, and that's it. But it was an act of intimidation. It is a warning, a way to say they are in control. They have the power. So, what do I do with that? Do I shut up? Do I stop putting myself at risk unnecessarily? Does that make me feel better? I don't want to. Indeed, I can be fearful of what I say and act prudently. But surrendering to self-censorship is very hard. I would not like to be silent. I wouldn't want to be a buffoon.

–*Venecadencia* speaks of a material decadence: power outages, poverty, migration, violence, among others. If you had to make a Venecadencia 2022, what would it be like?

It would be up to me to speak of moral decadence, the worst of all. We keep on falling apart. And this decadence must move us, and I hope we will. I hope we don't give into lethargy and ask ourselves things about what we do and what we can do. For example, how much can I do? What am I capable of doing?

–How do you think this moment is going to affect our history and our culture as Venezuelans? What will it be like after the abyss?

I don't know how it will affect us. But I know that to mitigate its effects it is important to think beyond our personal interests... We must think again about the common good. We must think about how our actions affect others and the country. That is going to be important for us to move forward. If we really want democracy, we have to think beyond ourselves.

–What role does culture play in this path of moral reconstruction?

Culture has the duty to pose questions that challenge society. For example, comedy has the power to expose ridiculousness and if someone sees themselves reflected in that mirror, they should think a little about what they are doing. It is very easy to feel attacked or offended when this happens, but it is very difficult to dig in and find out why it did. That is where culture must head, towards moving society. This is what José Ignacio Cabrujas used to say: "A writer's job is to pinch society's ass". A hard-to-answer question is a way of pinching... that's our job.

–What would you say to Venezuelan opposition politicians?

Be honest. It seems to me that they are afraid of the truth, that they are afraid of telling people the truth. They are afraid to tell us that we will probably not get out of this in 2024, that there will be no recall, and that there will be no free elections. They are afraid of the truth and of people. That's why I believe that young politicians must end this way of doing politics that does not consider that people can think for themselves.

They are afraid because they believe that speaking the truth will make us lose hope. I understand that it is difficult to oppose a dictatorship. I have seen them fight. But I think it's a mistake to deceive people... People are not stupid.

–And what do you think is the hardest question we have to ask ourselves right now?

Are we willing to accept that Chavismo defeated us morally? Are we willing to accept that things will not change? Are we

willing to live without democracy? Are we willing to become another Cuba?

I feel that after 23 years of Chavismo in power and such decay, we really have to ask ourselves, how do we get out of this? How do we really get out of this without lying to each other, without false ideas, without false arguments? How do we get out of this without fooling ourselves?

As a society, we have to move each other, but we don't have to be so hard on ourselves. We have done what we could and we have not managed to move forward in the way we would have wanted. But it wasn't for lack of effort. Nobody taught us to fight against something like that. We gain nothing by mistreating or trivializing each other. It is a tension between condemnation and indulgence. We are not the Avengers...

## Authors

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Grisel Guerra de Avellaneda is a Doctor in Hispanic Philology and Literary Theory from the University of Navarra. She did studies in a master's degree in Latin American Literature at the Simón Bolívar University. She has a degree in Mass Communication Studies (Cum Laude) and did a specialty on print journalism in the Andrés Bello Catholic University. She is a Partner-Director of *Inteligencia Digital*, and a communications consultant specialized in digital communications. She has taught "writing and style" and "Ibero-American literature" at the Faculty of Communication and Information Sciences of the Monteávila University. In addition, she has taught the courses Literature I, II and III at the Simón Bolívar University and the Seminar on "narrative spaces" in the Doctorate in Literature at that University. She is also a wife and mother of three girls.

### Paola Bautista de Alemán

Paola Bautista de Alemán is a Venezuelan politician and intellectual. She graduated as a journalist from the Andrés Bello Catholic University, then studied for a master's degree in Political Science at the Simón Bolívar University. In 2019, she earned the title of Doctor Rerum Politicarum (Cum Laude) at the University of Rostock (Germany). She is President of the FORMA Institute, a member of the National Board of Directors of Primero Justicia, and chairs the Juan Germán Roscio Foundation. She is the authorof *A callar que llegó la revolución,* editor of the book *Autocracias del siglo XXI: caso Venezuela*, director of the magazine

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## Ana Teresa Torres

Ana Teresa Torres (Caracas, 1945) is the author of the novels *El exilio del tiempo* (1990), *Doña Inés contra el olvido* (1992) –which earned her the Pegasus Award in 1998–, *Vagas desapariciones* (1995), *Malena de cinco mundos* (1997), *Los últimos espectadores del acorazado Potemkin* (1999), *La favorita del Señor* (2001) –finalist in Tusquet's contest "La sonrisa vertical" in 1993, *El corazón del otro* (2004), *Nocturama* (2006), *La fascinación de la víctima* (2008), *La escribana del viento* (2013) –which won the Critics Award in 2014–, and *Diorama* (2021); various acclaimed essays such as "*Historias del continente oscuro*", "*Ensayos sobre la condición femenina*" (2007), "*La herencia de la tribu. Del mito de la Independencia a la Revolución Bolivariana*" (2009) –which earned her a special recognition from the jury of the Debate-Casa de América essay award–, "*Diario en ruinas (1998-2017)*" (2018); and "*Viaje al postcomunismo*" (2020), the story of a journey with co-writer Yolanda Pantin. She has been awarded, among others, the Anna Seghers Award (Berlin, 2001) for her work in general. She is a ranking member of the Venezuelan Academy of Language and holds an Honorary Doctorate in Literature from the Cecilio Acosta Catholic University (Venezuela).

## Héctor Torres

Héctor Torres (Caracas, 1968) is a narrator and editor, author of several narrative books. He is the co-director of *La Vida de Nos* (www.grupolavidadenos.com) and co-founder of ficcionbreve, a pioneering site in the dissemination of Venezuelan narrative in digital format. He was also co-organizer of the Urban Narrative Week, for PEN Venezuela. He is the external coordinator of the Metropolitan Polyclinic Short Story Prize for Young Authors (today known as the Julio Garmendia Short Story Prize for Young Authors).

**Index**