

Daniuska GONZÁLEZ GONZÁLEZ

Simón Bolívar University

“SO MANY STARS THAT YELL ABOVE AND NONE IS SEEN”¹

MALANDRA COURT AND THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF URBAN VIOLENCE IN VENEZUELA

ABSTRACT Urban violence enters into, and creates interstices in both public and private life of Venezuelans and, as revealed by academic studies to the mass media, has made Caracas one of the most chaotic and unsafe cities in the world by the number of murders, robberies, and kidnappings, with latent cultural anxiety (Martin-Barbero), in which the majority of its inhabitants lives. Hence that is drawn around an imaginary, in some cases established by their own players. In this paper, we will seek an approach to urban violence, emphasizing the dynamics of new forms of representation, and the emergence of alternative discourses of hegemony, which set up a fresh look on it.

KEY WORDS Malandra court, urban violence representations, Venezuela.

*Oh, Hail queen, María Lionza
over Venezuela she goes with her ounce taking care of it
looking after its entire land
(...)*

¹ The phrase appearing as the title of this paper was taken from the short story ‘El frío’, de *Salsa y control* (1996), written by José Roberto Duque. J.R. Duque, ‘El frío’ in idem, *Salsa y control*, Caracas 1996.

She is the queen that people adore

She is the most popular goddess

(...)

Flowers for your altar

Doña Maria I am going to bring you

(...)

With tobacco and liquor

the ceremony is going to start

María Lionza, a Rubén Blades' song

The video "Azotes de barrio en Petare," is a home-made film about urban violence in one of Caracas's suburbs. In a close camera shot, there's shouting inside one of the precarious houses, a small altar appears with rough figures carved in unfinished plaster. Among the images, that of a man with blue trousers, purple sweater and dark glasses, a gun in his waistband and his face cut by numerous scars. The camera moves very rapidly but it allows to capture it between the Christian icons. This way, Venezuelan syncretic pantheon has included new saints: Malandro Saints, delinquents in life turned now into saints after their death, *not so holy saints*.

PROLOGUE

Since 2006 – until today – Caracas has had the highest rate of urban violence in Latin America², over Sao Paulo, Mexico City, and Guatemala City: a death every half hour. In respect to year 1998, the number of violent³ homicides increased by 215%, 100,000 murders in recent years, a number that exceeds the deaths in the wars of Afghanistan (33,000 dead) and Chechnya (50,000 dead).⁴

When discussing urban violence, multiple variables are overexposed, including poverty in large *ghettos*, and the so-called "shanty towns", a misery belt around all areas of Caracas and developments which prove, at first glance, government's model's failure that lasted for forty years and continues today.

Some official discourse is added to this about the commiseration that highest and middle-income society must exhibit with the poor, who, not having enough financial capacity, are forced to commit crimes. That argument collapses under its own weight

² According to Scientific, Penal and Criminal Investigations (CICPC) official figures, there were 12,257 homicides due to urban violence, 2218 in Caracas, although these numbers have been quoted by experts in the field, for example, in a report called *Una década de impunidad en Venezuela (1998-2009)*, Venezuelan Violence Observatory (VVO) revealed that this year there were 16,047 homicides, more than 3,000 that did not appear in CICPC numbers. According to VVO, by 2010, there were 17,600 murders, 230 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

³ Though disregarding the adjective 'urban', the reference to violence in this paper focuses on this specific type.

⁴ In L. García Mora, 'Cráteres', *El Nacional*, 18 June 2006, p. A9.

when criminals, *malandros* in Venezuelan slang, rather than stealing, engage in harming the victims of a kidnapping or robbery, torturing, and even murdering them.

As Monsiváis points out⁵, urban violence is a complex of meshing surfaces which go one above the other, for example:

- the everyday link with violence representations in the electronic media;
- crime scope brought about by police corps decay, popular economy disasters, and confidence in impunity;
- the products of city pressures;
- the violation of human rights by the police and a corrupted judiciary system.

These circuits pointed out by Monsiváis trace an urban violence cartography and its most evident conditions because, beyond them, in Venezuelan case, it aims at a fixed and recurring exacerbation edge, a violence that does not withhold a recognition mark to develop speeches, like for example, videos like *Azotes de barrio en Petare*, mentioned before, and *Azotes de barrio en Guarenas*, whose registered sales were unimaginable, or songs like *Petare, barrio de Pakistán*; to family groups that visited relatives in prisons and caused a strike in order to make the authorities release their imprisoned relatives. In the first case, it is a media representation, which Monsiváis included within the "daily connection" with violence images; the latter corresponds to the police and the judicial system's "decay." Both form areas which, in some other perspective, will not touch each other, but which legitimize violence as another discursive object.

But this violence paralyzes another edge, maybe the most fundamental: the delinquent image, which is sealed from different angles, such as resentment, impotence or, in certain cases, heroism. Further than making simple questions about why he acts in such ways, what drives him to do it, or how he survives; working it out has to do with constructed representation holes at the social and media level; with a particular discourse society – using Foucault's term – that has originated, a jargon adjusted to its praxis⁶; and with constant movements and insubordinations under which he hides.

However, with increased frequency, the delinquent dynamites the hegemonic discourse about violence to which he inlays new and fluctuating constructions; *subordinate manifestations* (Said). It is the case of the phenomenon, even without a deep preceding research, called *Malandros Saints Court* or *Calé Court*.

Any reflection about this Court is crossed by a glance at urban violence as a restless space that floods and, symbolically, and physically reorganizes Venezuelan society, which produces a *cultural anxiety*⁷ (Martin-Barbero). On the victims' side, between 1998 and 2005, over 65,000 people were murdered. In contrast, *acting violence* supposes such an extreme exercise that protection can only be sought from those who have

⁵ C. Monsiváis, 'La violencia urbana' in A. Sánchez Vázquez (ed.), *El mundo de la violencia*, México 1998, pp. 275-280.

⁶ Within the language, designations by which the delinquent is known, exemplify him/her clearly: *malandro* or *o azote de barrio*. In Venezuela, at the linguistic level, the word delinquent is used less frequently.

⁷ J. Martín-Barbero, 'La ciudad: entre medios y miedos' in S. Rotker (ed.), *Ciudadanas del miedo*, Caracas 2000, pp. 29-35.

done it before, as if their “spirits” were more open to understand and preserve current delinquents.

Thus, this symbolic imagery – imaginary because, as Baczko⁸ theorized, through it “is an identity given” and fluctuates over itself, on a part of a social sector, *a permanent invention of representations*⁹ with the imaginary *societies are engaged in a permanent invention of their own representations (...) through which they are given identity, perceive their divisions, (...) [it is a] category of collective representations, global society ideas-images and all that have to do with it. (...). One of the social imaginary roles consists in organizing and managing collective time on the symbolic level* – increasingly common in the visual media representation of the delinquent, it has been built with dozens of *malandros* figures killed in violence acts, from confrontations with the police to grudge fighting. *Ismaelito, Isabelita, Freddy, Malandro Ratón, Miguelito, Pez Gordo or Johnny*, among others, have a criminal record in which is evident that violence has been the only life gesture. What was mentioned at the beginning, *not very holy saints*.

“MARÍA LIONZA, DOES ME A LITTLE MIRACLE AND A FLOWER BOUQUET I’LL BRING YOU”¹⁰: WHERE TO REGISTER THE MYTH?

Maria Lionza’s founding myth gives a temporary character to subjectivities outside the Christian faith. Her story¹¹ goes back to the fifteenth century or so, when the Spanish began to colonize Venezuelan territory. Her native name, Yara, was changed to Maria del Prado de la Talavera de Niva, but, as being accompanied by an ounce, on which she rode, she began to be called Mary of the Ounce, and when time passed, popular language turned her into María Lionza, the Sorte Mountains Deity. In Yaracuy State, 272 kilometers from Caracas, her cult has a large number of devotees, who solemnize Santería “works” at the mountain foot.

Up to the moment in which the *Malandra* Court appears, along with María Lionza’s myth, two courts were condensed, which formed an alternative trio to the Holy Trinity: Cacique Guaicaipuro and Negro Felipe or Negro Primero. At present, as part of “*marialioncera*” Court, at its lowest level, is the *Malandros* Saints Court or *Calé* Court. *Calé* because the “canonized” criminals belonged to an epoch (60s and 70s of the twentieth century) where the youth spoke a jargon called *calé*.¹² As Salas notes, they produce *robbery and theft idealization, when linking these facts with the*

⁸ B. Baczko, *Los imaginarios sociales. Memorias y esperanzas colectivas*, Buenos Aires 1991.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The sections’ titles are in stanzas of Rubén Blades’ songs.

¹¹ Because of the multiple versions about the life of María Lionza, the book called *La historia de María Lionza* (1998) was chosen, written by Homero Salazar. H. Salazar, *Yara, el libro del siglo. La historia de María Lionza*, Venezuela 1998.

¹² A fictional generation that appeared in Francisco Massiani’s novel *Piedra de Mar* (first edition 1968). F. Massiani, *Piedra de Mar*, [Caracas 1968].

*mismatch between wealth and poverty, (...) there is a mythologizing posture in this social bunker.*¹³

Unlike other phenomena related to violence, as, for example, *malandro* language interstice in Venezuelan popular speech, *Malandro* Saints Court has been built secretly. Hence, its study is full of emptiness and crossroads that contradict each another, especially with regard to life stories of 'sacred' criminals. No wonder the gap between real and idealized biography (Kooistra) is so immense.

For example, *Ismaelito*, the Court's father. His existence is a mixture of interwoven, divergent stories – all temporalities of unlimited violence. He has a tattoo of a hawk on a motorcycle; it has remained as the symbol for the Court's devotees. His real name is unknown. For some, he is Juan Francisco Carrillo; for others, Ismael Sánchez. He was stabbed to death in "23 de Enero", one of the most violent parishes in Caracas, he led a gang in "El Guarataro", since then it is a reference point for urban violence in the capital; he was responsible for bank robberies and shops' looting. Or *Isabelita*, the Court's emblematic figure, whose violent life took her to death. Raped at the age of 12, she came from a wealthy family from which she moved away due to drug addiction and her close friendship with criminals. She was blonde and white, married to a poor black man from Barlovento, who cheated on her – an important fact due to class differences, still in force in the country – it is unthinkable that a wealthy young woman from Caracas could have a romantic relation with someone from that poor area. From then on, she took revenge on all men until she was killed, at the age of 25.

There is an enclave for understanding *Malandro* Saints phenomenon, which is the iconographic development of their statuettes matching the current delinquents clothing, the saints were created as their own images: wearing NBA shirts and hats (which are very expensive in the Venezuelan market, only affordable by young criminals with enough money from their felonies), sunglasses, and guns. They listen to their favorite songs, one of them is "La Cárcel" by Sexteto Juventud, a kind of anthem that continues to be heard in Caracas' poor neighborhoods, and they also require offerings that come precisely from where life lost them; those are drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.

Thereon, some considerations indicate other entries. Constantly, Venezuelan society has been refunding spaces demarcation, with emphasis on the symbolic and medial. Divided into two contrasting vortices, Caracas is defined by the division between East and West. In the first one, the part of the society with greater economic possibilities is grouped, which radiates the allegoric as well as real power to the rest of the social structure; for those who live in the western suburbs, the person in the east holds culture, beauty, and money – very questionable canons, indeed, especially in the case of Venezuela, if one takes into account the lack of a sustained cultural reference in most of those with economic resources. Ads and speeches value the image of a "white male

¹³ Y. Salas, 'Imaginarios y narrativas de la violencia carcelaria' in S. Rotker (ed.), *Ciudadanías...*, pp. 203-216.

patriarchy” and ‘counsel’ man¹⁴ at the expense of those with sallow skin, “indigenous and proletarians” – Avelar’s dimension extended to all Latin American societies – but this requires another analysis, outside the scope of this paper. Of the opposite zone, violence, dirt and poverty are represented, “monkeys” as the inhabitants of that area are called, a term that for Sanoja and Vargas-Arenas¹⁵ conforms a cosmogony of discrimination and isolation:

[The] monkeys living in miserable and ephemeral homes devoid of sanitarian or hospital services, mostly without water or roads and mainly unskilled labor, with no right to have hopes for achieving once, a life without bitterness and suffering.

The above, where do we try to get? For decades, urban violence has been marked on one side of society (although this has fluctuated in recent times), but what has impacted is the overcrowding of poor groups, surrounded by *the perpetual – economic, social and demographic – expansion of cities*.¹⁶ Then, proper symbolic representations are needed for that context, a particular descriptive imagery.

The “*malandro* figure” can only establish a link to a related symbol. In a context of so much violence as found in Caracas’ neighborhoods, where grudge fighting, drug trafficking, impunity and abuse, turn to be everyday life facts in a survival simulacrum, the margins for the plea for life and connection with “afterlife” are based on equality of knowledge and action: he who committed a felony, “listens” better to the pleas of someone who is now taking his place.

But, in parallel, an identification mark of Venezuelan society converges behind *Malandros* Saints Court: their syncretism. A culture impregnated by the mixture of ethnic and religious groups is observed in an open area built by oil (in the sense of how ephemerally this is interwoven). In Venezuela, to define an ideology, politics, or religion becomes an endeavor with an impossible reference of uniqueness. In Venezuelan religious pantheon, we can equally find Shango of Santería, or Santa Bárbara of Christianity, José Gregorio Hernández, María Lionza and *Pétroleo Crudo*, the latter was a famous criminal in the nineteen-forties, assimilated into the *Malandros* Saints Court. A syncretism that floods and corrodes everything, creating a fluctuating and varied religious map: *our queen María Lionza, our little mother, is the spokesperson of God Almighty, then, by her, a chance is given for [the spirit of a malandro] to come [possessed]. As Cheito el malandro, he was from Petare, he stole, yes; he stole*.¹⁷

This syncretism is mapped, primarily, on Caracas’ most popular neighborhoods; corresponding with the highest rates of violence. One of the neighborhoods where it appears more frequent, getting down and representing the *Malandros* Saints Court, is in José Félix Ribas a poor neighborhood, in Petare, considered a red zone.

¹⁴ I. Avelar, *Alegorías de la derrota. La ficción postdictatorial y el trabajo del duelo*, Santiago de Chile 2000, p. 39.

¹⁵ M. Sanoja Obediente, I. Vargas-Arenas, ‘Un necesario análisis antropológico de nuestra sociedad. El origen de monos y escualidos’, *Question*, Octubre 2003, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶ C. Monsiváis, ‘La violencia...’, p. 275.

¹⁷ Y. Salas, ‘Imaginaris y narrativas...’, p. 209.

This is not a random convergence. Amid the huge urban violence, a symbol made of violence, its actions and transgressions is needed to get hold in order to survive.

***IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD (...) BE CAREFUL ON THE SIDEWALK,
WATCH OUT BRO, HE WHO DOES NOT RUN, FLIES***

From the above considerations a new *discursive format of urban violence, an imagery*, is derived, since it is already appearing in representation areas that are not part of the hegemonic discursive space about violence, staging a particular subjectivity to understand and work it out. It does not come from an academic, sociological or generated analysis by traditional means of communication, but from the same centre where it is generated and from which flows towards society.

At least in Venezuela, discourses on urban violence are subjected to silencing or justification. For the current government, violence is a drain in front of the gap that most of the population exhibits. Conversely, some opposition analysts think that the lack of adequate policies in managing the urban problem has been answered with increased violence, which is intended to be silenced or faced on the margins, paradoxically, violent, such as death squads.¹⁸

Undoubtedly, *Malandros* Saints Court gives two new devices to examine it. The first is related to the religious space: there is in the criminal a rupture towards asking for protection to Catholic saints, which he has *replaced* with this court that converges with his social actions: like him, they were criminals who robbed and murdered, and now appear in a spiritual pantheon, at a higher level but closer to the believer, more human in the sense of being akin and identifiable. This directly leads to guilt denial; contrary to Catholic saints, *Malandros* saints do not have to forgive because they are in the same interaction zone as the one who worships them.

Thus, one of the saints of this Court named *Tomasito*, died from 132 shots during an unsuccessful bank robbery attempt. After the shooting, his body was left on the street, because his accomplices fled. What symbolic place can establish prayer and protection requests to a saint who died in a confrontation with the police, if it is not the recognition of the one who is alike? Therefore, his violence (which manifests in an identical registry as to the current offender) correlates to a *sublime* subjectivity, since it is entering the spiritual territory¹⁹ and awe, the latter according to Kant: *an object (...) that prepares the spirit to think about the impossibility of reaching nature as presentation of ideas*.²⁰

¹⁸ Between 2004 and 2005 in Caracas, extermination of beggars or "recogelatas" (as they are popularly called) took place. These crimes were never solved, but around those a discourse that had to do with the urgency of social prophylaxis and the ineptitude of the political system and police force was created.

¹⁹ Traditionally, the term has been associated with spiritual purity. On the contrary, the Court of *Malandros* Saints exists outside of this outlook and any religious recognition, including not being accepted within Santería, already detested. Regard only linked to the spiritual fact in itself, as a giver of good discourse.

²⁰ J. Lyotard, *El entusiasmo. Crítica kantiana de la historia*, Barcelona 1997, p. 69.

The second device derives from the previous one and places violence in one of the spaces that Western thought has defined within the evil statutes, which had already been observed – in a *recovery contrary zone*, that is, a representative area of good has been created, because it has raised as a sacred object, packed with godly values, goodness and faith, for Baudrillard in *La transparencia del mal. Ensayo sobre los fenómenos extremos: which is based on an enlightenment belief in the natural attraction of Good*.²¹

Taking into account one of the concepts for violence, we find the following conceptualization:

Violence is a kind of power: (...) energy, power, strength... The specific (...), to define what it is, untamed potency, extreme, relentless, overwhelming, power of opposition and transgression. It is just one of human strength resources, the most primitive, impulsive, rudimentary and brutal. It is inseparable from aggression, destruction, and is always associated with war, hatred, domination and oppression.

*(...) Violence has all the features of an etiologically negative phenomenon. Violence is terror, inasmuch as it occurs. It means (...) going back to impulsive forces, irrational and pre-moral.*²²

According to this quotation, violence can only be understood as a negative and destructive impulse. It is a tension point that returns with equal intensity its own strength, hence, becoming a sacred object, as for *Malandros Saints Court*, the sense of that meaning is being removed, for Gonzalez, it is only an *impulse*, an *opposition power* and *hatred*.

But at the same time, as a phenomenon that implies negativity, keeps and spits its own violent substance, often so extreme that only by creating symbolic elaborations such as *Malandros Saints* they can get pacified, because, basically, what does this court represent? *They are low-light spirits who live almost by force and in people's minds – the people who have kept them alive, because they are the people who have behaved (...) ill.*²³

Going back to *Ismael Sánchez* figure, it sets down a very primitive cult, the ritual itself builds an unresolved area in the sense of violence in a stronger form, when, in fact, it is a space that should have been dissolved: in the Southern General Cemetery, on his grave, first “a fist sign of the cross is made on his grave.”²⁴ “A closed fist” is behavioral gesture of violence, a corporal expression denoting anger. Then cigarettes are smoked, and then a drink called “Anís Cartujo” is poured onto the grave, this indicates a very particular social consumption preference; this event may also involve the use of drugs. The worshipers fluctuate rapidly, one after another die in criminal actions. According to a devotee's testimony, after begging *Ismael Sánchez* for his protection, all his enemies, who he “had a lot of” “have been killed one by one.”²⁵

²¹ J. Baudrillard, *La transparencia del mal. Ensayo sobre los fenómenos extremos*, Barcelona 1997, p. 95.

²² J. González, ‘Ética y Violencia (La vis de la virtud frente a la vis de la violencia)’ in A. Sánchez Vázquez (ed.), *El mundo de la violencia*, México 1998, pp. 139-145.

²³ Y. Salas, ‘Imaginarios y narrativas...’, p. 210.

²⁴ M. Tabuas, ‘También hay santos malandros’, *El Nacional* (Caracas), 13 November 2005, p. B22.

²⁵ Y. Salas, ‘Imaginarios y narrativas...’, p. 210.

In this new subjectivity a *reversal of values* is being produced, with respect to the concepts of praying and blessing related to Christian saints with that of *malandros*, which operates on the variables dimension, most of them originate violence: alcohol and drugs.

Malandros Saints imaginary puts on stage a specific discourse on urban violence, which implodes the official word, and whose episteme itself is constructed from the intersection of practicing that violence with its executioners. In no sense is it a discourse *subspace*; in this moment, it constitutes one of the key essential symbolic/medial axes to understanding/analysis of the problem of urban violence in Venezuela.

CLOSING STATEMENTS: *CORNER KILLER, WHO KILLS BY IRON, BY IRON ENDS*

The results of urban violence in Caracas have reached similar dimensions to those of a civil war; the latest figures show 65,000 murders in 6 years. Facing an increasingly uncontrollable and daily phenomenon, there have been symbolic representations that are rebuilding as medial, remaking this violence as long as operations outside the hegemonic discourse about it, focusing, on the one hand, on poverty and lack of life opportunities for more than 80% of the population, and, on the other hand, on the values dissolution due to the populist government policy or the prophylaxis ideology by extreme-right groups.

Complex and fluctuating, the problem of violence is constantly regenerated within areas considered by their managers as more representative, more akin to themselves, as *Malandros* Saints Court, with its syncretic iconography, that seals the perspective on violence from a cartography perforated by more violence and blood.

So much violence, that, in 2005, "The little Girl" – one of the guardians of *Calé* Court, was found murdered in the Southern General Cemetery in Caracas. Her body bore obvious signs of abuse; it was burned and thrown into a grave-pit. Years before, she had been shot in the head and, according to her; she was saved by *Malandros* Saints from her serious condition; she later devoted and consecrated herself as a caregiver of their graves. It is that facing delinquents of reality, these ones with ethereal powers do not seem to get much. From violence, any request or pledge is lost within the bullets' real echo, in their intermittent buzzing in a city shackled by the fear of violence. Those who also find themselves in the care of *Malandros* Saints with their guns made of plaster, behind a video screen, are as powerless as any citizen against a genuine 9 mm in the hands of the other worshippers.

REFERENCES

- Avelar I., *Alegorías de la derrota. La ficción postdictatorial y el trabajo del duelo*, Santiago de Chile 2000.
- Baczko B., *Los imaginarios sociales. Memorias y esperanzas colectivas*, Buenos Aires 1991.

- Baudrillard J., *La transparencia del mal. Ensayo sobre los fenómenos extremos*, Barcelona 1997.
- Duque J.R., 'El frío' in J.R. Duque, *Salsa y control*, Caracas 1996.
- García Mora L., 'Cráteres', *El Nacional*, 18 June 2006, p. A9.
- González J., 'Ética y Violencia (La vis de la virtud frente a la vis de la violencia)' in A. Sánchez Vázquez (ed.), *El mundo de la violencia*, México 1998, pp. 139-145.
- Lyotard J., *El entusiasmo. Crítica kantiana de la historia*, Barcelona 1997.
- Martín-Barbero J., 'La ciudad: entre medios y miedos' in S. Rotker (ed.), *Ciudadanías del miedo*, Caracas 2000, pp. 29-35.
- Massiani F., *Piedra de Mar*, [Caracas 1968].
- Monsiváis C., 'La violencia urbana' in A. Sánchez Vázquez (ed.), *El mundo de la violencia*, México 1998, pp. 275-280.
- S/A. *Una década de impunidad en Venezuela (1998-2009)*, Venezuelan Violence Observatory, 6 August 2010.
- Salas Y., 'Imaginarios y narrativas de la violencia carcelaria' in S. Rotker (ed.), *Ciudadanías del miedo*, Caracas 2000, pp. 203-216.
- Salazar H., *Yara, el libro del siglo. La historia de María Lionza*, Venezuela 1998.
- Sanoja Obediente M., Vargas-Arenas I., 'Un necesario análisis antropológico de nuestra sociedad. El origen de monos y escuálidos', *Question*, Octubre 2003, pp. 4-5.
- Tabuas M., 'También hay santos malandros', *El Nacional* (Caracas), 13 November 2005, p. B22.

Daniuska GONZÁLEZ GONZÁLEZ, Ph.D. in Humanities (Universidad Central de Venezuela). Master's degree in Contemporary Latin American Literature (Universidad Simón Bolívar). Associate Professor in the Language and Literature Department at Simón Bolívar University. Her research focuses on contemporary Latin American literature, primarily in the areas related to political and urban violence. Among her books are *La escritura bárbara. La narrativa de Roberto Bolaño* (Fondo Editorial Cultura Peruana, Lima, 2010). Some of her essays and poems have been published in Spain, Italy, France, USA, Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Costa Rica, to name only a few.