

# **Fleeing (Post-)Chávez Memories: The 1990s and the Black Friday Generation**

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There is no original past to redeem; there is the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us.

Ana Mendieta

## **Introduction**

Over recent years, we have witnessed the end of the so-called Latin-American pink tide. After the neoliberal decade, leftist governments that occupied power in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela might not have fulfilled the political and social expectations they generated at the beginning of the 21st century. Some recent articles even refer to the failure or setback of the left.<sup>1</sup> The uncertainty generated by this end of an era compels us to inquire about the paradigms that sustained some of these post-neoliberal projects. In particular, Laclau's theory on populism offered a conceptual foundation for the legitimization of these governments, positing that politics serve to discursively constitute an antagonism between two subjects: on the one hand, the people, and on the other, the one anathematized as anti-popular, elitist, oligarchical, imperialist (Laclau, 2005, p.99). Venezuela, as any other country in the region, reveals the devastating consequences of the construction of political binary imaginaries, not only those of the state power but also those

from its opposition. As we face the collapse of the Chavist hegemony, by now bereft of a concrete alternative horizon, it is helpful to review the subjectivities and affects that did not enter the polarized political discourses of the last decade. Memories of the 1990s offer a particularly productive field, as it was in that period when disputes for the interpretive legitimacy of the current socio-political crisis were first staged.

### Memory conflicts

After the early—and still unexplained—death of Venezuelan writer Alejandro Rebolledo on August 18, 2016, a debate about the “literary value” of Rebolledo’s only novel, *Pim Pam Pum* (originally published as *Pin Pan Pun* in 1998) erupted on social media, reaching visceral tones. In a way, it initiated a rekindling of the debate that the work had triggered in the late 1900s, when its juvenile and irreverent proposal, to a great extent disconnected from the national lettered tradition, burst onto the literary scene. On this occasion, though, the debate about *Pim Pam Pum* was magnified by the historical perspective provided by the 17 years of Chavist rule. Aesthetic considerations got mixed with discussions about memory and the “true” rendering of the years immediately prior to the political change. In its appeal to memory, the official discourse has erased or Satanized the period of Venezuelan two-party democracy in order to legitimize its own hegemony as a social and historical claim pending since the 19th century.<sup>2</sup> The majority of intellectuals, however, has resisted Chavism by means of a romanticization of that period, turning it into a legacy that must be salvaged from populist “barbarism.”<sup>3</sup> Both the recurring “we were happy and we didn’t know it” and the call to achieve Simón Bolívar’s epic feat are two sides of the same coin; two approaches that aim at encapsulating the hermeneutic paradigm of the nation in a pristine past. The dispute about memory stems from a nostalgic affectivity that seeks the permanent restoration of that which was lost in terms of absolute truth (Boym, 2001, p.xviii). The appeal to the past, which has sustained the political hegemony of the official imaginary, has served for the intellectual opposition to attempt—and acknowledge the impossibility of—the recovery of its own hegemony (Beasley-Murray, 2010, p.177). The embrace of a remembered authenticity expels those antagonistic and illegitimate elements with respect to the national narrative. A melancholic reasoning imposes boundaries and understands memory in the dichotomic terms of political polarization, such as civilisation versus barbarism, and oligarchy vs. the people.

## The Black Friday Generation

There is a way to read the 1990s, though, which reveals departures from the two nostalgic discourses. Neither the official Chavist paradigm nor its lettered opposition fully capture the subjectivity of the youth of that decade, who now feels scarcely represented, in those discourses that abound in the virtues of liberal representative democracy and those that underscore the epic quest for independence that began in the 19th century. Bearing in mind the arbitrariness of any generational characterization, which might attenuate differences in ideology, class, ethnicity, and gender, I propose to use the term “Black Friday Generation” to refer to the Venezuelan youth born in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s. Black Friday alludes to the year 1983, when the national currency suffered a spectacular devaluation that shelved for good the myths of the successful Venezuelan modernity and the exemplariness of its democracy for the region. This historical event activated the consciousness of its own country for this generation, and in turn inaugurated a state of permanent crisis.

Three main characteristics allow us to define the Black Friday Generation. First, its unrelenting experience of the failure of the modernizing project during a series of historical events: Black Friday (February 18, 1983), the *Caracazo*<sup>4</sup> (February 27, 1989), the first coup (February 4, 1992), the second coup (November 27, 1992) and the electoral victory of Hugo Chávez, which marked the end of social democracy (December 6, 1998) and the beginning of the “Bolivarian revolution” (1999 to the present). Second, its in-between situation, book-ended by seemingly different and opposite historical contexts and political projects. And third, the assumption of a constitutive alienation with respect to previous generations. On this last point it is worth noting that many of the generation’s subjectivities show, as Raquel Rivas Rojas posits, a “radical disagreement with the imaginary of roots,” a “rejection of identity” with “very little antecedents in the local [literary] tradition” (2013, p.11). This characteristic of the Black Friday Generation, which estranges it from the meaning of the nation, removes the generation from previous modes of knowledge and value systems, resulting in an alienation from any code of belonging which, in a way, is equivalent to the subjectivity of the migrants.

In the book *Emergencia de Culturas Juveniles*, Rosanna Reguillo-Cruz affirms that social movements are sustained by two opposite forces: a centripetal force that “keeps bodies rotating around a core” and which “manifests in a constant return to a past that got lost, somewhere along the path,” and a centrifugal one, “which keeps bodies away from

core and in a tangent line” and that expresses itself in “movements of withdrawal, self-marginalisation in the face of a present that is perceived as chaotic and hopeless.” (Reguillo-Cruz, 2000, p.153) In what follows I propose to revisit the ways in which some writers of the Black Friday Generation have elaborated an alternative centrifugal archive of the 1990s from juvenile perspectives. With different nuances, not exempt of centripetal forces and different class positions, the novels *La Última Vez* (2007) by Héctor Bujanda, *Bajo Tierra* by Gustavo Valle (2009), *Valle Zamuro* (2011) by Camilo Pino, and *Pim Pam Pum* (1998, 2013) by Alejandro Rebolledo propose stories disconnected from national mega-narratives and avoid the substitute operations of nostalgia. Based on a close reading of these four novels, I will set forth an itinerary that starts with the attempt of an impossible recomposition of the past stemming from alienation, to the full acceptance of a centrifugal subjectivity, ungraspable for the predominant yet conflicting discourses about the memory of the 1990s.

Despite political change and the passing of time, we acknowledge that the hostile and chaotic Caracas of the end of the century is still recognizable. Little seems to have changed between the present and the past city, a city of poverty, violence, rubbish, lines to buy food, inflation, disproportionate electoral propaganda, and forecasts of disaster. We witness an urban landscape suspended in a perpetual present, unaffected by the new millennium; a suspension that translates into the existential milieu of the majority of protagonists: students or permanently unemployed young men, or those who ramble the city without purpose. These narratives reveal contextual continuities, not only between the neoliberal and the Chavist period, but also, as we will see, between the 1990s and the previous decades. We thus encounter a paradox at the heart of the Black Friday Generation: as their perspective breaks away from the inherited foundations of the nation, its reading of the past does not express a rupture with the present of Chavist (post)hegemony. There is no justification, then, for nostalgia. It is precisely for this reason that this generation departs from the dominant imaginaries and abandons the ideological frameworks that determine the interpretation of reality and the past. In the meantime, the Black Friday Generation acknowledges the continuity of a catastrophe that affects both late 20th century neoliberalism and, implicitly, 21st century socialism.

## The fathers of the “archive fever”

In a historical context delimited by financial crisis, shortages worsen by neoliberal cuts, social violence in the wake of the Caracazo, two coup attempts, and the 1990s emptying of political language (Reguillo-Cruz, 2000, p.22), the young protagonists of Bujanda and Valle’s novels try to keep afloat by means of a search for their fathers. They display a centripetal motivation, so to speak, which aims at finding sense by turning toward the origins. Both novels present absent fathers: one disappears after the burial of his elder son, dead by AIDS; another is supposedly killed while working in a subterranean excavation in the subway. These characters never get to find their fathers, though; the trip toward the original seed, the search “for the tunnels of the ancestors” (Valle, 2009, p.211) implies a growing estrangement from reality. In the case of *La Última Vez*, historical references to the Caracazo are central to describe the atmosphere of paranoia, madness, and violence of the months immediately prior to Chávez’s ascension to power (1999). In *Bajo Tierra*, the main historical referent is the Vargas landslide in 1999,<sup>5</sup> right before the new century.

Luis Duno has pointed out the recurrence of an imaginary of sickness and natural catastrophe “to respond to the generalised anxiety caused by the socio-political reordering of the last decades.” (2009, p.401) There are, however, three reasons why this interpretation of the phenomenon is problematic. In the first place, it connects sickness and catastrophe to political polarization (the *other* being a sick person or destructive agent); second, it links pathological metaphors with 19th century literary biologicistic discourse; and third, Duno seems to understand that the emergence of these imaginaries occurs in the midst of contexts of radical transformation. While the first approach reduces the hermeneutical framework of sickness and catastrophe to the dichotomies of polarization, the second reveals an enlightened epistemic matrix, under which literature retains a function of social regulation. Finally, the third notion seems to assume the official narrative of emergence of a Bolivarian revolution, which effectively would amount to a radical rupture with the past similar to the French Revolution, the example posed by Duno. Contrarily, I would like to underscore a kind of narrative that resists the binary logics of polarization and promotes the reading of the continuities between the 1990s and the present; a present in which literature has forfeited a guiding function. These novels narrate their insufficiency both to order as well as to represent the affectivity of turn-of-the-century Venezuela. Any diagnosis of the nation fails because the hermeneutical collapse

affects writing as well. Thus, the narrator of *La Última Vez* admits that “nothing in this story has been easy. I have tried to unsuccessfully arrange an impossible quantity of events” (Bujanda, 2007, p.118). Fictional imaginaries float adrift in a dimension in which topics such as sickness and natural disaster become ungraspable metaphors. While they do not dodge historical consciousness, they resign the explanatory sufficiency of naked historiographical or social data.

I would like to pick up here on Javier Guerrero’s (2012) allegorical reading of the Venezuelan family in order to discuss the nation and its violence. The figure of the (disappeared or spectral) father is particularly productive to consider how and from which position one thinks about the exclusion from the codes of belonging to the country. Allegory must not be understood here in the way prescribed by Frederic Jameson (1986) for third-world literature. Fathers in these novels do not fit the norm of Bolívar, Chávez, nor their condemned opponents; rather, they can be better read under Ignacio Álvarez’s terms: “National allegory is not necessarily a reflection of the real conditions of our existence or a blind adherence to any type of nationalism. *It is rather the place where political inquiry settles*” (Álvarez, 2004, p.4, my emphasis). Such inquiry would then be different from the discursive Manichaeism of the national, and cautious of any ideological reordering.

The main character of *La Última Vez*, José Ángel, is a journalist who in 1998 tries to discover what happened with several missing weapons after the 1992 coup d’état. In parallel, he tries to find out the whereabouts of his father, who abandoned him, his mother and sister in the cemetery right after the burial of his older brother. José Ángel’s investigations about the rifles and about his father José Ramón end up converging in the same plot line when his father is identified as a guerrilla member involved in an obscure confrontation between the police, the army, the narcos, and the guerrilla for the missing weapons. José Ángel is astonished by the possibility that José Ramón, who disappeared three years ago, might be in reality a member of a clandestine unit of the Bolivarian Movement for Justice (Movimiento Bolivariano por la Justicia, MBJ). The image of a hyper-virile father who shoots guns utterly contrasts with the image José Ángel keeps of his father, a man who had spent the last 20 years in college studying law without ever obtaining the degree while always taking the worst part in court cases. For the narrator, then, his father is a totally fragmented figure, constituted by the polarities of a familiar-legal failure and the hyper-virility of a guerrilla fighter. In Lacanian terms, José Ramón is clearly not capable of structuring any symbolic or legal order, not even under the new guise of his father, whose nonentity is summarized in

the narrator's conclusive sentence: "The only thing that José Ramón did well in all his life was to disappear" (Bujanda, 2007, p.46). Paternal insufficiency is reinforced by his rejection of his elder son, whom he abused and beat because of his homosexuality. When the son dies of AIDS, the father's shock is so great that he literally vanishes from family life. The true "monster," then, to use Guerrero's terms, is not the gay son but the homophobic father-turned-guerrilla fighter. The abuse and abandonment of his sons combines with the image of the ailing body of his son: ulcerated and scrawny after surgery, affected by diabetes and pneumonia. The exhibition of violence on that body does not aim at the normalization of the family, but rather uncovers an intimate process of long-term destruction. José Ángel pieces together childhood memories to determine when the familiar disintegration began. Some of the episodes of the past include failures in employment, political crookedness, genealogies of suicide, double lives, and grandiloquent fantasies. Among these memories, the allusion to the Caracazo is the most intense. The narrator's brother is buried close to the "new pest," the area of common graves for the unidentified corpses of the Caracazo in the Cementerio General del Sur. The latent presence of anonymous countrymen murdered is reinforced by the walls of the building where José Ángel lives with his mother, pierced by bullets in 1989 (Bujanda, 2007, p.76). The Caracazo thus becomes omnipresent and stifling, gradually causing the mother to go insane. In turn, José Ángel discovers that the missing weapons are being used by different and apparently opposite social actors, including the narcos and policemen, the army and guerrilla bands complicit with the media. Far from announcing a true political-social transformation, this fact implies merely to "move some pieces in the bedroom so everything remains the same" (Bujanda, 2007, p. 134). For the narrator, the coming replacement of the political casing is as somber as everything that surrounds his father. Not only does he never find the father, but also he is himself demoted and ends up losing his way in a city affected by several explosions. By then, though, several works of graffiti cover the country, foretelling the future: "You must choose: destruction or destruction" (Bujanda, 2007, p. 99). This recurrent sentence first appears in a letter that a mysterious commander Maigualida of the MBJ had sent to José Ramón. Upon reading it, José Ángel tries to decipher the discourse of an illuminati that invites his father to join an "indestructible process" that will spread through the galaxy driven by God (Bujanda, 2007, p. 119). Although given the rampant corruption, a coup by the military and groups of the MBJ seems imminent; the political change that José Ramón embraces would perpetuate and even aggravate the catastrophe. The novel does

not underscore the regenerative aspect of the revolutionary movement but rather its destructiveness as demonstrated in such millennialist discourses. Paradoxically, in her obsessive drive for destruction, commander Maigualida is a product of the past, on which she depends, even if it is by negation, to sustain her legitimacy. The delirium of the commander, shared by the father, and the mother's madness, trapped in the terror of the Caracazo, do not enable José Ángel to find meaning in what happens to him. Such interpretative impossibility is evident in the final dissolution of the family: his sister migrates to Spain and ends all communication with José Ángel, and the mother is confined in a psychiatric institution. Due to the open ending, we ignore whether the main character flees the city or commits suicide. It is clear that José Ángel's path toward his father becomes centrifugal, and that the protagonist ends further away from his father than he started.

Significantly, when José Ángel deviates from the hard-boiled editorial line of the newspaper where he works, his boss removes him from the investigation and relegates him to the archival section. For Jacques Derrida, the relationship between the archive and power is based in the latter's retention of memory (2001, pp.13–14). What the French author termed "archive fever" is summarized by Murguía as "placing oneself at the origin in order to always return to it. This eternal return evades the very impulse of life: the act of abandoning origin one's origin" (2011, p.27). In Bujanda's novel, the archive-punishment reveals the deathly impulse of authority over a memory, which José Ángel inherits without partaking in it. Thus, his boss rebukes any attempt for journalistic autonomy:

Are you forgetting who feeds you? It was me who gave you a fucking chance to grow in this company and develop a serious journalistic career. We gave you the green light, we blindly trusted in you, and that's how you pay us back? (Bujanda, 2007, p.133)

"Archive fever" connects in this manner with the search for origins through the father figure, a fruitless search that only generates estrangement from the country and the acknowledgment of an unliveable reality.

The word "apocalypse" encompasses the meanings of *destruction* of the old order and *revelation* of a truth (Fabry and Logie, 2010, p.12), but Bujanda's imaginary does not include the second sense. The archive only reveals the redundancy of its own power. José Ángel's stubbornness to find the origins of his tragedy preserves the desolation of the past



in the present, and turns the future into impossibility, because “there is no after-trauma” (Fabry and Logie, 2010, p.18). Paradoxically, the apocalypse does not signal the end but rather prolongs it indefinitely.

In Valle’s *Bajo Tierra*, which also narrates a search for a missing father, the investigation into the origins is also problematic. Sebastián C is a 30-year-old student on a “spiritual, physical and metaphysical drift” (Valle, 2009, p.19) and whose father (a Bolivian immigrant) disappears in the tunnels of Caracas subway when Sebastián is 12. In December 1999, Sebastián and his friend Gloria, whose father also vanished some years ago in Trinidad during a work trip, decide to descend to some subterranean tunnels guided by Mawari, an indigenous beggar who had to abandon his lands in the Orinoco delta due to the exploitation of mining industries. Their original pretext is to help Mawari find his wife and son and a subterranean path to the sea, which the Mariche natives may have used to escape the Spanish *conquistadores*. However, Sebastián and Gloria are in reality driven by the hope of finding their respective fathers. Sebastián is fascinated by Mawari’s physical resemblance of his father:

I fantasised that Mawari was a simulation of my old man, his impossible double. And I wanted to believe (I swear) that he might take me to where he was. Somehow I convinced myself that his search coincided with mine. (Valle, 2009, p.104)

Again, the father figure is offered as motivation for a centripetal trip toward origins. In Sebastián C’s words:

down here everything is anchored in the past. You don’t even live a present or a meanwhile, even the air seems to be dominated by a slow and foreign time, which is not yours, not anybody’s, only belongs to these caves. And I am not exaggerating when I say that this suffocating space, narrow as a trap, constituted everything, absolutely everything. As if these stone walls had swallowed time, as if they contained it and did not let it scape. (Valle, 2009, p. 173)

As if a trip to a frozen past, the young man finds a “cavern of readers” who seem “engineers of prehistory” (Valle, 2009, p. 175): some 15 indigenous people sit and “read” handwritten letters aloud in an incomprehensible language; then they register them in a rolled-up scroll of papyrus and store them in one of the underground galleries.

In this way, the trip toward the center of the Earth becomes a discovery of a sort of primordial archive, made of thousands of letters from the 1990s that never reached their destination. We soon learn that Mawari is a former shaman who has guided these indigenous people there to carry out that activity, persuading them that they would only be able to reconstruct their past by stealing the words from the white people. But the archive, in truth, serves Mawari to take revenge from those who forced him to abandon his land, lose his family, and live like a beggar in Caracas. In contrast to him, his companions are illiterate, and they merely imagine what the letters say, “translating” them into their own language. Ignorant of the written text, they have been deliberately manipulated by the former shaman. The narrator comments that the letters constitute “the memory and the unlived past.” (Valle, 2009, p.183) Thus, Mawari’s archive alludes to a kind of uprooting which compulsorily demands the recovery of what was lost. This recovery, however, as a product of a desire for vengeance, is deadly. It constitutes the collection of fossilized, unlived, and even frustrated memories for the senders and addressees of those letters from the 1990s. The “Cosmic egg” that Mawari tries to reproduce in the subterranean caves following a mythical memory does not bring liberation to the natives who are literally subjugated by the obscure archival practice.

The journey below the ground of Caracas is punctuated by a series of accidents that inevitably threaten the characters’ lives. Gloria gets lost in one of the tunnels and Mawari presumably dies under the rubble of the landslide of Ávila. Only Sebastián C seems to survive as he is abruptly expelled by the Vargas Landslide, from the center of the Earth toward the sea. His accidental discovery of the mythical exit to the Caribbean does not display utopian traits. Rather, the main character witnesses the ravages of a three-day continuous deluge: houses and trees drag by the water, drowned animals and bodies shattered by the force of the stream. The expulsion from the core of the Earth to the sea marks the ultimate centrifugal movement in the story and alludes to the alienation that traverses the subjectivities of the 1990s. Even more than Bujanda’s novel, *Bajo Tierra* marks this alienation as a common element of the characters: the immigrant father, the indigenous people exiled by mining operations, the Chinese who own a bar in Caracas, the Trinitarian governess of a grubby boarding house, Gloria, who abandons Canoabo for the capital and whose ancestors migrated from Stockholm. While previous generations seem to have had some options to accommodate themselves to the circumstances, the current cohort finds it impossible to integrate into society. For all the efforts of Sebastián C to regain his family’s past, despite the authoritarian

drive of Mawari's archive, it all comes to nothing. Sebastián C's father is never found, adding to the thousands of missing people after the Vargas landslide in 1999. The natural disaster, metaphor for the ending of the novel, represents the violent dislocation of the characters and the myriad of orphans already existing before these last days of the 20th century. As in *La Última Vez*, we find an open ending in which "there is no after after trauma." The young main character is left with only an apocalyptic landscape of loot and ruins, of wounded and missing people.

### **Animal revelation**

Camilo Pino's novel is also set in an apocalyptic urban landscape. The plot, which unfolds between 1988 and 1989, presents Alejandro Roca, a high-class young publicist who quits his job even though he lacks any other prospects. In contrast to the precarious condition of the characters of the other two novels and their search for origins, Pino's novel narrates a rather frivolous quest. Alejandro wants to write a novel about an old hippy sect that established a commune in the inner country to impress Romina and his other friends. The story invites us again to visit the past, not just the immediate past of the months before the Caracazo but it also takes us back to the 1970s that, in contrast with the 1990s, represent the apotheosis of the Venezuelan project of modernization. At the time, a group of youngsters, including some North-Americans, founded "a commune in Boconó, an idyllic and isolated village in the Andes, which remained anchored in the past" (Pino, 2011, p.21). Utopia makes its appearance here in a past temporality imagined as a primary space that contrasts to the Babel-like Caracas, somewhat similar to Mawari's lost origins in his native community in the Orinoco delta. As in *Bajo Tierra*, Alejandro's reconstruction of the past does not end well. A young girl from the commune, the daughter of a *hacienda* owner of the region, fell pregnant by an unknown father, as they all practiced "free love." This enraged the family and villagers, triggering the murder of the hippies and the destruction of the commune. Alejandro travels with Romina and a couple of friends to Boconó to compile information about the events. The pastoral inner country reveals to be a semi-feudal space under the rule of Alejandro's uncle and other *hacienda* owners, with the complicity of the army. Governmental authority fades, as revealed in a delirious episode in which the uncle and a soldier target practice on a billboard of the presidential candidate Carlos Andrés Pérez. The reference to the politician is not random, emblematic as he was of what Fernando

Coronil termed the “magical State” in his homonymous book (2013), referring to the way in which the Venezuelan state is constituted in the collective imaginary as providential given its control and distribution of wealth derived from the oil reserves. Carlos Andrés Pérez’s second term as president after the 1988 elections seemed to herald the return of the “magical State,” which he himself had built in the 1970s. However, his electoral victory was followed by the announcement of budget cuts of a neoliberal bent, ultimately causing the end of his rule and of two-party democracy. Thus, the archive that Alejandro constructs for his novel also documents the failure of a (national) communitarian utopia back in the 1970s.

The shattering of the utopia is revealed in the apocalyptic imaginary of Caracas to which the young friends return after their research in Boconó. Different elements present in the other novels reappear in this urban landscape: the 1989 Caracazo, AIDS, the prophecy that the Ávila ridge will split in two, and finally, a sort of “natural disaster,” materialized under the guise of an infestation of *zamuro* vultures in Caracas valley. In contrast to Bujanda and Valle’s novels, in Camilo Pino’s *Valle Zamuro* the itineraries across this apocalyptic scenario are circumscribed to the higher echelons of society, quite different underworlds from the hovels in Avenida Baralt in *La Última Vez*, or the sections of the Los Caobos park packed with paupers in *Bajo Tierra*. In *Valle Zamuro*, social marks introduce the futility of a youth totally isolated from the rest of the country. The climax of social alienation occurs during the Caracazo, when the group of friends decides to hold a pajama party on the day the curfew is declared and constitutional guarantees suspended. Inspired by the vague news available, they declare theirs to be “the looting party,” and take over the castle-house of an eccentric local millionaire. The luxury of the party finds its parallel in the so-called “Coronation,” the pharaonic inauguration of Carlos Andrés Pérez celebrated a few days before the announcement of a package of neoliberal measures, and the subsequent social explosion. The contrast between these two celebrations and realities triggers Alejandro’s anagnorisis. As he tipsily walks away from a party after an adolescent sentimental quarrel, he is detained by a military patrol and experiences the hellish repression unleashed in those days, even being forced to throw the corpse of a homeless person into the Guaire river. During his nocturnal wandering, he witnesses another episode of target practice. On this occasion, the militia men “fusillade” a gigantic illuminated Santa Claus that garnishes the Ciudad Tamanaco Shopping Mall, a “warm up” for the task that awaits them during the night. Shortly after, Alejandro is taken to the Helicoide, an unfinished

mammoth structure situated in a poor neighborhood, initially intended to be the biggest mall in Latin America, where the army and the political police lock, torture, and execute the detainees. The images of the volleyed Santa Claus and the shopping mall-turned-detention center reveal the unterritorialized character of Venezuelan modernity, its biopolitics of consumption that allows the division of lives between disposable and non-disposable, between those that belong and those that do not belong to the national project. In the inner “outside” represented by the Helicoide, the protagonist firstly encounters people from different social classes, as well as “revolutionary” leaders as socially privileged as himself. The horror that transpires the place is immune to political rhetoric. A beggar imprisoned with a group of young leftists shouts back at them

that, if anyone, he is the one who knows about reality, he who knows all the realities of the city, who while they lived in their revolutionary bubbles ... has been living under bridges, sucking dicks to be able to have lunch. (Pino, 2011, p.208)

Reality acquires a density that blocks any ideological reductionism, an intensity impossible to be seized and that is alluded by an animalistic imaginary. Alejandro learns that one of the torture techniques practiced upon the prisoners is to lock them naked in a tight space with scavenger birds, where they suffer the prospect of a horrible death under the vultures’ pecks. As the ordering mechanism of modern Venezuela collapses in the late 1980s, human beings come closer to, even touching, animal life, the kind of life that takes over the city as the narration unfolds. While at the pajama party some of the youngsters had dressed up as vultures, ridding the signifiers of death of meaning, a state necropolitics settles in the depths of the Helicoide, turning the hierarchies between human and non-human irrelevant. The bodies of birds shot at by anonymous marksmen before the Caracazo are replicated in the bodies of those men tortured and murdered during the state of emergency. *Zamuro* vultures acknowledge the “bare life” of the detainees and merge with the “popular body,” which Alejandro and his friends, locked in their high-class underworld, had not previously noticed. Animality—like illness and natural catastrophe in the novels examined previously—does not burst in to herald a denouement; here, that which resists discourse demonstrates a protracted biopolitics. Hence the narrator states: “the *zamuro* vultures have been here for a long time and we did not notice,”

we are actors in junk TV ... obsessed with ourselves, determined to delay the grand finale until one day it arrives and bang!, it explodes in our faces, and not even then do we realise that we have been calling for it for years. (Pino, 2011, p.190)

Despite this quotation, the “grand finale” never happens. Alejandro is released from the Helicoide due to his social status and abandons the country after a brief recovery. The final pages of the novel offer his perspective during his trip to the airport: the Caribbean sea glows elusively upon passing the poor foothill suburbs of Caracas. A new catastrophe has replaced the plague of vultures, the “Black Slick” along the highway that “will eventually cover of the structures of the city” (Pino, 2011, p.221). Thus, in *Valle Zamuro*, as in *La Última Vez* and *Bajo Tierra*, the apocalypse does not bring any final outcome. Rather, we witness a disastrous continuity, uninterrupted by the Caracazo, which expands to the present of the reader in the early 21st century. The apocalyptic tone does not only allude to a destructive process, however—it also signals a *revelation*. The protagonist’s infernal experience at the Helicoide forces him to see the inner “outside” in which life is disposable and that predates the Caracazo. One of the characters notes: “what occurs here happens everyday in the shanties” (Pino, 2011, p.165). Such revelation does not include a programmatic proposal, but motivates the character to flee the country. Thus, Pino’s novel decodes an historical event such as the Caracazo, co-opted by the Chavist narrative as a foundational moment of its emancipatory movement, by revealing the complicity of the army with the terror of those days. But the novel also demystifies the fantasies of modernity and consumption of pre-Chávez Venezuela. As in Alejandro’s unfinished novel about the hippy commune, there is no utopia to recover from a past that continues to dictate the centrifugal displacements of the nation’s youth.

### **Fleeing the archive**

Written in the 1990s without the advantage of retrospective hindsight of the other authors, *Pim Pam Pum* turned prophetic. What is more, Rebolledo’s is perhaps the most contemporary novel of the group under study in this essay, given the way it bluntly rejects any nostalgic impulse and forfeits teleological intentionality. The main character, Luis Lapiña, is a young man who abandons his philosophy studies at college to live a leisurely life of sex, drugs and friendship in late 20th century Caracas.

This is but one piece, though, of an ensemble and fragmentary novel that maps a whole generation. Different narrative voices reflect the experiences of different young characters that cross paths in the city. A fake kidnapping, a party at the Country Club, a police operation that ends up in an execution, the death of a dog, the theft of an embassy's coat of arms, the purchase of a gun, the selling of a motorbike, the emigration of an ambitious reporter, the social vulnerability of a radio host... these are some of the disorderly stories that unfold in the urban landscape. But Rebolledo's novel is not merely a generational story, it is also a narrative proposal. Both the descriptive elements and the central plot about a failed kidnapping become irrelevant in front of the weight of language, the excited language of the urban tribes through which the different characters self-constitute. We discover nomadic subjects, alienated from the structures of the state. Youngsters "laugh their heads off" and de-territorialize any national referent, whether it be Carlos Andrés Pérez or Hugo Chávez, the Copei political party or the Bolivarian Movement. Luis affirms: "South America, Latin America, what the hell is that? Nobody cares" (Rebolledo, 2013, p.17). Once these subjectivities assume their alterity with respect to the predominant codes of belonging, the sense of community becomes different from that of previous generations. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Venezuelan literary establishment has rejected a proposal so distanced from its ideological and aesthetic parameters. We are left without origins to find or utopias to build. In contrast with the works of Bujanda, Valle, and Pino, the drifting of some of Rebolledo's characters is not limited to their social class. Their radical estrangement causes a transversal displacement across different social spaces throughout the city. Some characters are aware of the disparity, which is often portrayed with caustic humor, but they do not use this fact to establish collective bounds. If there were one element that brings these characters together, it would be the drugs that push them to move and coincide in a slum or in the Country Club. Selling and taking drugs replaces the "magical state" in the configuration of a sense of community. The movement of the youth is not framed by a modernizing teleology, but by the oscillations of immediate desire. Thus, the turbulence of drugs provides the rhythm of the novel: the slowing down of marihuana, the explosiveness of acid, the rushing of cocaine. Drugs become the distinctive element of a hopeless turn of the century, but they also signify the possibility of liberation from the "Humanist North that set in motion the populist politics" of both pre-Chávez Venezuela as well as of 21st century socialism (Valero, 2001, p.124). I would like to summarize the evasion of any "ideological

fastening of discourse” (Duchesne, 2007, p.76) on this ambiguity. The (self)destructiveness but also the self-government of the bodies parallel both their compulsive consumption—of drugs but also of all the referents of popular culture of late capitalism—and their chaotic decoding in a series of affective impulses. In the novel, the Black Friday Generation is defined as a circumstantial being-together, even in conflict. The fleeting forms of juvenile coexistence are determined by sexual pleasure, tripping of drugs, sudden rage, or fear. Toward the end of the novel, Luis abandons the capital and moves to Margarita Island. Shortly after, he decides to commit suicide in a humorous and ambiguous scene, in which we end up ignoring whether he succeeds. His move to the island in the Caribbean Sea and his intention to end his life foreground, once again, the late 20th century centrifugal intensities in what refers to uprootedness. Interestingly, Rebolledo’s novel also presents the figure of an absent migrant father from Spain and of a young man who emigrates from Cabimas to Caracas. While the latter does not manage to settle in the capital and finally moves to the US, the Basque father of Luis seems to achieve a certain degree of social mobility, though ultimately frustrated by his “good for nothing” son. Thus, the story confirms the generational rupture and apocalyptic landscape that characterizes a present without closure. As one of the characters notes, “I don’t know how I got here, nor I am interested in knowing. There’s nothing behind. Nothing exists, except today” (Rebolledo, 2013, p. 40).

In sum, in the past few decades in Venezuela there has been an abundance of nostalgic discourses aiming to bestow legitimacy to the past in order to sustain or dispute the sociocultural (post-)hegemony of Chavism. The imaginaries of polarization, typical of the logics of populist antagonism, appear ossified in a past that cripples politics for common good and the definition of the nation. Unable to provide answers to both the post-neoliberal and the current Chavist crisis, these imaginaries equip themselves with a dichotomical hermeneutics that insists on establishing exclusions. Faced with this scenario, the revisiting of the 1990s Caracas youth that we find in some Venezuelan novels allows us to recognize certain centrifugal subjectivities in the archives of the nation. From their interstitial and groundbreaking perspective, the Black Friday Generation foregrounds perceptions of historical continuity denied by the discourses of nostalgia. By means of the representation of an apocalyptic Caracas at the end of the 20th century, Bujanda, Valle, Pino, and Rebolledo’s novels point at a permanent crisis that determines the estrangement of the young protagonists. It is precisely this uprooting that allows subsuming



different meanings of what is common (and what is not), dynamic and alien meanings, alien to the ideological definitions that violently fracture the social fabric. Far removed from utopian mega-projects and binary logics, these young characters exhibit a democratic trait absent in the state's discourses and in a part of the opposition's: the "explicit acknowledgement of being carriers of no absolute truth in the name of which it is possible to exercise discriminatory power" (Reguillo-Cruz, 2000, p.14).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See for example Martín Caparrós, "¿Fracasó la izquierda latinoamericana?" *The New York Times*, December 16, 2016; Massimo Modonesi (2015) "Fin de la hegemonía progresista y giro regresivo en América Latina," *Viento Sur* 142; Marcelo Leiras, Andrés Malamud and Pablo Stefanoni (2016) *¿Por qué retrocede la izquierda?*, Buenos Aires: capital intelectual; and the dossier "Crisis de la izquierda latinoamericana" in *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, July–September 2016.
- <sup>2</sup> For an analysis of Chavist historical teleology, see Ana Teresa Torres (2009).
- <sup>3</sup> On the intellectual reaction against Chavist hegemony, see my article "Sobre el culturalismo neoconservador y los gobiernos de izquierda en América Latina," *Condistingtosacentos. Investigación y reflexión sobre América Latina* (blog), December 4, 2013, [www.condistingtosacentos.com/sobre-el-culturalismo-neoconservador-y-los-gobiernos-de-izquierda-en-america-latina/](http://www.condistingtosacentos.com/sobre-el-culturalismo-neoconservador-y-los-gobiernos-de-izquierda-en-america-latina/)
- <sup>4</sup> The *Caracazo* or *Sacudón de febrero* (February jolt) was the outbreak of violent riots, looting and the subsequent brutal police repression in Caracas and other inner cities in February 1989. Conservative estimates report 396 deaths (Ochoa Antich, 1992, p.35).
- <sup>5</sup> The so-called *Deslave de Vargas* (Vargas Landslide) refers to a series of landslides in the Ávila mountains and floods in Caracas and Central Litoral area in December 1999. Between 10,000 and 30,000 people were killed or disappeared.

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