

Threatening Masculine Images of Power: María Lionza and Juan Vicente Gómez as Vampire in Arturo Uslar Pietri's *Oficio de difuntos*

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If Juan Vicente Gómez is not, as many of his biographers and commentators have claimed, the most important Venezuelan figure of the twentieth century, he is arguably the most contradictory one. His arrival in 1898 on the national political scene as the main financier of Cipriano Castro's *Revolución Restauradora* marked the beginning of a new era. A well-established landowner elite was suddenly replaced by an aristocracy founded on the production and commercialization of coffee. Named as Castro's military chief, Gómez spent the first six years of the twentieth century fighting opposing caudillos and consolidating the rule of the new government. During this time he also acquired large tracts of land adjacent to Caracas that shortly after allowed him to create a monopoly on beef distribution all over the country. In his years of military activity, Gómez also established commercial relationships with political figures in the provinces and created a diverse portfolio of investments that soon made him the richest man of Venezuela. Once Castro threatened the privileges of Gómez's businesses and associates, Gómez had no other option but to take over the reins of the country. He did so in 1908 via a bloodless coup d'état—after Castro had left Venezuela citing health issues. As president, Gómez's control over

Venezuela was based on the interweaving of political and commercial power and a system of railroads and highways that allowed him to effectively mobilize a large number of troops. Although Gómez identified himself and Venezuela as rural, oil profits opened the door to a timid industrialization that served as the basis for the later modernization that occurred in the late 1930s and 1940s. Until his death in December of 1935, Juan Vicente Gómez was able to centralize political power and preside over a consolidated nation.¹

Nevertheless, Gómez's was a violent rule. His personal security was in the hands of a *sagrada*, a small militia of well-armed collaborators who were believed to be ruthless and to have magical powers (*Juan Vicente Gómez*). His allies were in charge of the most popular newspaper. The secret police took note of all political opinions. Those who opposed him were confined to one of the most denigrating prisons, La Rotunda, where dissidents and critics were sent without trial and remained incarcerated for years with no access to sanitation. The number of political exiles soared. Until his death, Gómez crushed violently all regional opposition and a significant number of foreign invasions. In 1928, he successfully punished the student demonstrators who threatened to end the "peaceful" days of his regime.²

Both great leader and condemned villain, Juan Vicente Gómez is a figure who evades all clear-cut definitions. He is at the same time devoted father and vile rapist, long-awaited leader and despicable dictator, restorer of peace and despotic ruler. Gómez is, in this sequence of ideas, monstrous. But his monstrosity surpasses his horrendous acts as a dictator. The common understanding of what a monster is in everyday language—"this person, because of his evil acts, is a monster"—reflects only partially what the monster, as a cultural construction, represents. The monster is situated at the intersection of a "metaphoric crossroad" in which praise, hope, anxiety, and rejection coincide (Cohen 4). The monster "signifies," as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has stated, "something other than itself" (4). The main characteristic of the monster is its capacity of hosting difference in its own body by simulating unity. A monster is a prodigy in which difference coexists, such as the Minotaur, a creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull, or like the "ombres mostrudos" that Columbus was expecting to find in his first trip to America thanks to the information that his maps provided—and which located creatures with giant feet and men with hands that stemmed from their chests in the margins of the known world (Palencia-Roth 5–14).

In his novel *Oficio de difuntos* (1976), Arturo Uslar Pietri—one of the most preeminent Venezuelan intellectuals of the twentieth century—situates Juan Vicente Gómez's fictional representation at the intersection of several metaphors. Gómez's rise to power becomes the

journey of a supernatural being who descends from a marginal, mountainous, and fetishized unknown to prey on the inhabitants of the center of Venezuela by inoculating a disease of an orgiastic nature. These features remind readers, of course, of the vampire, a character whose first appearance in nineteenth-century British fiction conveys gender and social issues. As Dracula does in Bram Stoker's novel and in his many subsequent representations in literature and film, Gómez in *Oficio* establishes a peculiar relationship with women: by refusing to spend an entire night with a female, he condemns women to a marginal position, denying them access to everyday intimacy and the status of equals. Moreover, Gómez's decision to abandon a woman's bed before sunrise—as Dracula is obliged to do as well—intimates patriarchal control.

In the pages that follow, after a brief discussion of the plot and reception of *Oficio*, I shall examine the different fragments that shape Gómez's monstrous appearance and the unity that he conveys by appealing to the figure of the vampire. First, I will consider the fetishized space from which Gómez proceeds. Second, I will analyze his supernatural and mystical powers, described as the simultaneous objectification of his white-European background and his indigenous roots—and an exclusion of African elements. Third, I will focus on his peculiar relationship with women. By exploring the nature of each one of these fragments, I argue that Gómez's fictional return as a vampire has a specific connection with the history of popular religion in Venezuela. The mid-seventies witnessed the final ascension of the cult of María Lionza and the consecration of an indigenous woman at the center of the national religious pantheon. María Lionza's presence relegated to subordinate roles masculine figures originally related to the *culto a los próceres* such as Simón Bolívar and later Juan Vicente Gómez. It might be said that *Oficio de difuntos* and its appeal to Gómez as a vampire, becomes an instrument directed at controlling female autonomy, aiming at the restoration of a cult centered on masculine and paternalistic values, and at preventing the worsening of sexual anarchy.

Many of the features utilized by Uslar Pietri to depict Juan Vicente Gómez did not originate in *Oficio*. They precede Uslar Pietri's novel and are part of a long inventory of images, names, and symbols used by the opposition as well as by Gómez's supporters to categorize his person and legacy. In my desire to clarify some of the images used in *Oficio*, I can only bring to the fore a few significant titles among a list of dozens of works that deal with Gómez.⁵ My aim is to discuss some texts published before 1934, leave behind other works more contemporary with Uslar Pietri's *Oficio*, and thus shed some light on the origin of his resources. One of my main purposes in this essay is to explore why these traditional images of Gómez are reused in *Oficio* almost fifty years

later. This apparent lack of originality on Uslar Pietri's part is a symptom of his desire to detach Gómez from a political context and establish a direct dialog with the popular religion of Venezuela.

Gómez (Un)masked: Aparicio Peláez in *Oficio de difuntos*

Oficio narrates the last day in the life of Father Solana, an undisciplined Catholic priest condemned by the hierarchy of the church for his romantic escapades. An alcoholic and doomed poet who witnessed the ascension to power of the figures brought by the *Revolución Restauradora* and ended up serving as chaplain in Gómez's headquarters, Solana's story is based on the historical figure of Father Carlos Borges. First a fierce opponent of Gómez's coup d'état in 1908, after spending a number of years in La Rotunda when his daring editorials caught the attention of the authorities, Father Borges was sent to Maracay and became Gómez's chaplain as well as his entertainer and buffoon.⁴ *Oficio* is situated on the day after the death of Gómez in December of 1935, during the violent demonstrations that brought looting and destruction against the properties of all those connected with the defunct leader. In *Oficio*, Solana is instructed to preside over the Office of the Dead of the dictator.⁵ While he prepares his homily, he reviews seventeenth-century French sermons, describes the main instances of the life of the dictator, and confesses that although he is expected to praise the memory of the dictator, he recognizes that all laudation and approval is immoral. Solana's fate as a character is therefore his destruction: after his liturgy is canceled he abandons his house terrified, roams the streets of Caracas, and is finally trampled to death by the mob.

Solana mirrors the contradictory nature of Gómez's legacy. While *Oficio* still degrades all praise of the Andean leader by stating that Solana's words are reprehensible—to the point that they must never be spoken—the novel becomes a description of the main stages of Gómez's rise to power, an inventory of the clichés that have characterized his figure, and eventually a justification of his new return. Due to the immoral act of praising a ruthless dictator, the author of *Oficio* condemns Solana to death and his words to the most extreme form of silence. Nevertheless, the novel becomes the recollection of Solana's memories in a laudatory style. *Oficio* is thus revealed as a novelistic discourse of that which cannot be said but is said regardless.

Literary criticism also mirrors the contradictory character of Gómez's inheritance and *Oficio's* purpose as a work of art in direct dialogue with Venezuelan culture and popular religion. It seems that

Oficio disappeared very early from the horizon of Latin American literature and from Uslar Pietri's works. Although Uslar Pietri's affinity for Gómez's persona is a well-known fact, critics seem to question the overall purpose of the publication of *Oficio* in 1976—almost twenty years after the ousting of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the last Andean dictator. It seemed that critics distrusted Uslar Pietri's novel and his advocating for the return of a father-like figure that pretended to rule the nation in a personal manner at a time when Venezuela had enjoyed a successful democracy for twenty years.

The reasons for questioning Uslar Pietri's *Oficio* arise from two main factors. First, *Oficio* moved in the opposite direction of a series of publications written between 1974 and 1975 that mainly focused on the representation of the dictator. Without major stylistic complication and narrative novelty at a time when the prerogatives of the Boom were still operating, and compared with the obvious avant-garde features of Roa Bastos's *Yo, el supremo* or Gabriel García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca*—among many other works with similar characteristics—*Oficio* appears easily readable and entertaining.⁶ His reconstruction of the life of the dictator departs from an inquisitive or mocking tone. In relation to Uslar Pertri's other works, the construction of characters such as Simón Bolívar in *Las lanzas coloradas* (1931) and Lope de Aguirre in "El fuego fatuo" (1936) or in *El camino de El Dorado* (1947) was more ambiguous, suggestive, and open to contradictory interpretations—although he held in high regard the unifying role that military and political leaders played during the early history of Latin America and after the independence from Spain. *Un retrato en la geografía* (1962) even contains a tacit criticism of the injustices of Gomecismo. On the other hand, *Oficio* discloses nothing but approval once the reader accepts the opposing nature of Solana's discourse. By entrusting the narrator with the difficulty of commending what is reprehensible and despicable, the author is free to advance his argument on the coming of a new Gómez.

Masked behind the name of Aparicio Peláez, in *Oficio* Gómez appears as a supernatural presence. To the question "¿Y quién es ese Aparicio?" Solana answers: "El aparecido, la aparición, la apariencia" (87) (And who is that Aparicio?; The ghost, the apparition, the appearance). Close to the end of his life, Peláez pays an anonymous visit to Caracas. Solana points out that "Así debían volver los fantasmas a las ciudades de los vivos. Sin penetrar, desde lejos, sin comprender tal vez. Cortados y separados de todo. Él era un fantasma" (348–49) (This is how ghosts return to the cities of the living. From faraway, perhaps without understanding. Separated and divided from everything. He was a ghost). But this ghostly presence in the realm of life produces admiration instead of fear. Borrowing from Derrida's idea of the

specter, in 1976 Aparicio Peláez clearly returns as a symbol that “disjoins [and] dis-adjusts” the Andean leader’s initial identity, as well as that of Venezuela as a nation (xx). As I examined briefly in the initial paragraphs of this essay, Gómez’s rule over Venezuela was contradictory. And after his death in 1935, the conflicting nature of Gómez deepened even more. Like the Roman god Janus, he became a token with two opposing but concurrent faces. The remnant military generals of Gomecismo at the end of the thirties and the *Grupo uribante* in 1950 expected the return of a new Gómez. But the military was always cautious of any attempts of any president to remain in power, just as Gómez had done in the past. Gómez’s figure throughout the twentieth century multiplies in novels, films, and soap operas, but his name is absent from any form of national imagery—at least until the 1990s.⁷

The “dis-joinment” and ghost-like manifestation that Aparicio Peláez represents in *Oficio* implies an examination of the nature of Gómez’s return. Uslar Pietri, by sentencing Solana to death, silences praise all the while eliminating all remaining opposition, therefore granting commendation and condemnation similar status within the novel. The presence of Gómez as an apparition in *Oficio* does not resolve the contradiction of his two-face representation. But by deepening this contradiction, Uslar Pietri disjoins the effigy of Gómez and reifies him as a monstrous symbol directed at surpassing a mere political reading of his figure. Peláez’s presence in Venezuelan society in 1976 is intended to problematize religiosity and national identity and to set the foundations of the return of an era of simplicity, clarity, and difference founded on overvalued masculine and paternalistic values (Pacheco 84–85). Uslar Pietri’s exaggerated description of the supernatural value of Gómez’s authority and masculinity has a purpose in the cultural and religious realms of Venezuela. As I will advance in the last section of this essay, Gómez’s glorified masculinity and mystical power counter the rise of a feminine figure that threatens the stability of Venezuelan society. And this figure is none other than María Lionza.

The Andes: A Contradictory Space

In a passage that evokes images of the sublime and also of the Transylvanian landscape, *Oficio* stresses the legendary nature of the Andes, the place from which Peláez—Gómez’s fictional avatar—proceeds: “Solana no conocía la frontera, pero se la figuraba. Un panorama neblinoso de colinas, riscos, gargantas y ríos torrentosos. Y de

hombres encobijados en oscuras mantas y hondos sombreros. . . . No recordaba dónde estaba mientras aquel montón de aventureros entraba en la tierra, por allá lejos, por más nunca” (60) (Solana never saw the border but he imagined it. A foggy landscape made of hills, cliffs, gorges, and fast-flowing rivers. Men covered under dark blankets and hats . . . He did not remember where he was while that bunch of fortune seekers entered the land through a far and remote place). When faced with the description of the origins of Peláez, Uslar Pietri employed temporal signifiers along with geographical references, through an obvious reference to *Doña Bárbara*—who also came, “de más lejos, de más nunca” (21). This borrowing eventually situates Peláez’s imaginary in the same context as Doña Bárbara, since she also proceeded from a fetishized unknown—the Amazon. Furthermore, *Oficio* also states that the familiarity of the people of Caracas and surrounding states with Peláez’s invading army and with Peláez’s spatial origins was entirely based on rumors:

Eran los montañeses, los hombres de otro mundo, de más allá de llanuras y ríos y montes. De donde nadie iba nunca, de donde nadie venía nunca. Pocos los conocían. Muy pocos habían llegado alguna vez hasta la apartada provincia de los confines. Pero ahora se contaba y se oía una espeluznante revelación de durezas y crueldades, que vivían entre cercas de piedra, borrados en la niebla, junto a retumbantes arroyos, en los páramos, cultivando paños de tierra junto a los abismos sin fondo. (80)

(They were the mountaineers who came from a different world, farther than the plains, rivers, and mountains. Nobody visited that region; nobody came from that region. Few people knew who the mountaineers were. Few had visited that faraway province. But now everyone mentioned stories of cruelty. People said that the newcomers were concealed by fog and lived between stone fences and close to loud creeks in high elevations, cultivating their fields next to endless abysses.)

Although this passage stresses ruthlessness and cruelty, the character of these rumors is once again monstrous and contradictory—although they are presented as a unified and consensual discourse. The Andes are situated, as Gómez is, at the intersection of several metaphors. At the base of these metaphors lies a series of nationalistic discourses that emphasize difference. The natives of El Táchira and the inhabitants of the central plains and the coasts of Venezuela recognized each other as racially and culturally diverse. In 1923, Rafael Pocaterra described in his *Memorias* the ferocity, lack of culture, and primitivism of “estos

hombres de 1898” (45). But Tachirenses, in turn, believed that the lower plains of Venezuela were an unwelcoming land host to lazy, hostile people. They professed honesty, hard work, and economic success as their fundamental values.⁸

The reality behind these opinions was that the *Revolución Restauradora* of 1898 was the product of economic and social progress. By the end of the nineteenth century, this region was exploited by private proprietors who owned small plots of land and benefitted from migrating groups of workers and a long and well established system of communications with Colombia. This new aristocracy, founded on the cultivation and commerce of coffee, became a strong middle class that supported a stable and generalized educational system and strived to find new markets and more participation in Venezuela’s political arena. However, in Pocaterra’s descriptions or in Rufino Blanco Fombona’s *Judas Capitolino* (1912), as well as in Uslar Pietri’s *Oficio*, Tachirenses are a cruel army of illiterates. In *Oficio*, the inhabitants of Caracas in 1898 complain about the newcomers: “Están saqueando las bodegas. Hay muchos borrachos, mucho atropello” (83) (The newcomers are looting. Many of them are drunk and attack the population).

The Andes, depicted as a land of both ruthlessness and progress, also becomes a monstrous space made from contradictory fragments. Obviously, Uslar Pietri’s description makes use of a sublime characterization. This fetishization, however, conceals vestiges of colonial and positivistic thought, especially the version popularized by intellectuals like César Zumeta and José Gil Fortoul at the end of the nineteenth century in Venezuela. According to these authors, even during the times that preceded colonial occupation, more advanced, friendly, and capable human groups occupied the higher areas of the mountains. Hostile and inferior peoples, on the other hand, settled in the usually hot and humid lower valleys. Spanish whites and white Europeans in general, as a result of better, dryer, and more comfortable weather, established themselves in the higher elevations, while poor indigenous and mestizos as well as newly-arrived blacks, occupied zones unfavorable to civilization—and particularly in the case of blacks, along mining sites and regions, located generally in unwelcoming, extremely hot and rainy sectors. José Gil Fortoul, one of Gómez’s most faithful apologists and also an important functionary in his bureaucratic system, stressed the difficulties that human development faced in the plains and on the coasts. If history was a struggle between human beings and nature, only in the higher elevations of the Andes could humans have the upper hand (35).

Zumeta, as was also the case of the *caraqueño* elites at the end of the nineteenth century, desired the return of an “educated and brilliant dictator” (8). The arrival of Cipriano Castro’s revolution of 1898,

Castro's meteoric ascension to power, and, a few years later, the rapid consolidation of Gómez's power can only be understood as the result of racial and class prejudices among the elites (Wright 10–11). Castro and Gómez proceeded from an overvalued space closely associated with the stereotypes ascribed to whites. Still in 1936, Thomas Rourke voiced similar opinions. The Andes of Juan Vicente Gómez, located in the “the northwestern part, have always been vastly superior to the lowland tribes of the rest of the country” (11).

Benevolent *Brujo*

But El Táchira, as was the case in Colombia, was considered at the same time more mestizo—the reverse of the inhabitants of the plains and coastal regions of Venezuela, since the rest of Venezuela was perceived as having a much greater African influence. This was partially true. There was a higher concentration of blacks in the Llanos and the coasts for historical and geographical reasons, such as the absence of developed indigenous civilizations, the peripheral location of Venezuela in relation to the main commercial routes during colonial times, and the difficulties of the few indigenous populations in adapting to the discipline of the plantation (Wright 14–27). This apparent regard for the benefits of racial intermixing in the Andes represents at the same time a desire to erase the influence of Afro elements (Wright 4–6). Uslar Pietri did not escape the easiness of this set of ideas that eventually condemned the social advance of the Afro and mixed racial population—the *pardos*. In *Del hacer y el deshacer en Venezuela* (1962), he entitles the section that recounts the history of the processes of foundation of the main settlements of the central and the coastal regions of Venezuela as “testimonios de la pobreza” (1234–41) (testimonies of poverty). As I mentioned above, for the narrator of *Oficio* the Andes, the space from which Peláez proceeds, is mysterious and overvalued. The Andes are white and indigenous and, as a consequence, mestizo, but are never related in any manner to any kind of Afro influence.

The supernatural construction of Peláez as a character in *Oficio* postpones the conflicting nature of difference. In Uslar Pietri's version of Gómez, which is similar to his traditional portrayal in literature and film, the indigenous—by definition less white and less civilized—does not exclude the objectified fragments of the white father. Gómez is prosperous, disciplined, and honest. “Llegó a ser un hombre muy considerado, por su firmeza, cumplimiento, seriedad. Se podía confiar en él. Era seguro. En fin, en el Táchira lo llamaban *mano Juan*” points

out González in *Mi compadre* (43) (He became a very popular man due to his seriousness and strength of character. People trusted him. He was reliable. In El Táchira he was known as brother Juan).⁹ In *Oficio*, Peláez is the successful and wealthy financier of the *Revolución Restauradora*, the mind behind all logistics, and the voice of reason that opposes Carmelo Prato, the delirious figure that disguises Cipriano Castro (60). But just at the same time, Peláez is adorned with the materialized qualities of the indigenous shaman or *brujo*. In *Oficio*, as in *Mi compadre*, the glorification of a once shameful stereotype—that of “Indian malice” and superstition—became the symbolic confirmation of the ideal ruler. Suddenly practical knowledge, agrarian skill, and the financial rudiments of a coffee grower transform into supernatural power. While Peláez travels around Venezuela battling the opposition he is able to find hidden paths in the middle of the night. His fame of being a *brujo*, fueled by his soldiers’ respect, grows as fast as his mythical depiction in *Oficio*: “El veía quebrarse las luces sobre los metales relucientes de los arneses y las ancas del tronco. Iba por la noche como hacia lo desconocido” (101) (He saw the light breaking on the shiny metals of the harnesses of his horse. He walked through the night towards the unknown).

In 1976, *Oficio* cited one by one the different occasions in which Peláez was able to recognize fortune, perils, and threats based on hunches and premonitions, as if he could communicate with some supernatural power. Uslar Pietri, as González did in 1934, incorporates in *Oficio* the many instances in which one of Peláez’s premonitions guided him to purchase great extensions of land while in others saved him from an ambush, a bomb, or a traitor. He was “medio brujo” (114). Peláez himself confirms the rumors through an appeal to the imagined space from which he proceeded: “Usted no sabe, pues, que la cordillera está llena de brujos, de ensalmadores, de piaches, de adivinos y de almas en pena” (123) (Don’t you know that the mountains of the Andes are full of witches, sorcerers, healers, and lost souls?). González as well as Uslar Pietri’s glorification of Gómez’s indigenous ancestry served the purpose of his own objectification as a magical, supernatural subject, as a shaman of useful knowledge after carrying out a meticulous exclusion of all abjection from his persona.

Besides the mutual existence of characteristics that oppose each other in terms of racial stereotyping—honesty and malice, reason and superstition—one of the most obvious qualities of the construction of Gómez as a *brujo* is the elimination of abjection. Accusations of *brujería* were always a sign of othering. In the case of the New Granada, for instance, the indigenous were exempt of charges of witchcraft because real witchcraft was only possible among blacks—the ones who still resisted cultural assimilation and were therefore labeled as

dangerous and rebellious (Ceballos 88–89). In Uslar Pietri’s depiction of Aparicio Peláez, Gómez’s patriarchal effigy rejects any form of social sanction and any mention of blood, impurity, or spiritual contamination.

Being *brujo*, as Martín has described in relation to the coastal zones of Venezuela, implies social sanctions, such as the lack of distinction based on *compadrazgo* relationships. Furthermore, the goods of the *brujo* are generally buried with him because his property is also deemed as impure and malevolent. The fear behind his power, as behind the power of the vampire, is the ability to curse and devour. *Brujos* consume an individual by preying on her shadow or by mixing impure substances, such as excrement, hair, salt, dirt, or saliva, or elements previously handled, with food (82–83). This fear of being devoured by a supernatural power produces a breakdown in meaning, as Julia Kristeva has elaborated in her book *Powers of Horror*. Gómez’s political power, the overarching influence of his secret police, and his personal control over every-day routines in the life of Venezuelans became a thin threshold between life and death. A rumor or a suspicion implied the disappearance of the prisoner in La Rotunda or a life full of privations and hard work in one of the multiple campsites that stretched throughout the main roads of Venezuela. While the opposition characterized Gómez as an immense and monstrous catfish that lived in the lower depths and fed on dirt, or as a turbulent river of blood and bones that traversed Venezuela from the Andes to the center, for Uslar Pietri Peláez’s power is emptied of all reference to bodily functions and impurity. Uslar Pietri also departs from the depiction of Rómulo Gallegos’s “El brujeador,” Gómez’s characterization as a malignant sorcerer and *guate*—the nickname given by the inhabitants of the central plains to Andeans, especially when stressing their relationship to Colombians (246). He also forgets the social and economic sanctions that Gómez’s property went through after his death, the confiscation of all his land and assets, and the civil prosecution of all individuals who were associated with him.

The Vampire of the Andes

In *Oficio* Gómez becomes a supernatural subject composed of the objectified qualities of the white father and the supernatural power of an indigenous *brujo*. This monstrous reconstruction does not exclude each of these terms—although in the positivistic background from which they originate, they do oppose and exclude. Gómez proceeded from a space embedded with white desire, depicted as mysteriously mestizo, and imagined as lacking the burdening elements of blacks. As happened to

Dracula, Gómez's agrarian past was erased and substituted with something else—in Dracula's instance, with the modern manners of the Imperial citizen (Malchow 129); in Gómez's case, with the benevolence of a *brujo* that behaves as a responsible father and the bread provider for a feminized nation. And Gómez, like Dracula, descends from the mountains to prey on the powerless. As early as 1921, it was rumored that Gómez consumed the blood of young children in order to survive (Caballero 15). In February of 1929, the adherence to Gómez's ideas—referred to as “bagrismo”—was described as an illness “como la sífilis, que es un mal traidor adquirido tras emociones placenteras y orgiásticas” (*El pensamiento político* 155) (as syphilis, a treacherous illness that one acquires after blissful and orgiastic adventures). Less than a year after the death of Gómez, Thomas Rourke reproduced a portrait of the Benemérito in his volume *Tyrant of the Andes* in which protesters had modified an existent picture by adding a mustache, blood-injected eyes, and a pair of hungry fangs—like those of a vicious vampire (305).

But the most striking similarity between Aparicio Peláez, and by extension Gómez as a cultural creation, and Dracula is his particular way of relating to women. While Peláez still lives on his farm in El Táchira, he employs women as coffee harvesters and both uses and is used by them for gratification: “Tenían una manera de mirarlo que era como de provocación o de espera. No recordaba con cuántas de ellas se había echado sobre las hojas caídas o había pasado un rato de sombra vehemente en el escondrijo del rancho” (34) (Women looked at him in a provoking way. He did not remember how many women had lain with him on top of fallen leaves or he had taken for a moment of passion inside a secret room in his farm). But Peláez's patriarchal agenda with regard to females is summarized soon thereafter: “No había que amarrarse. Las mujeres eran buenas para un rato de descarga violenta y corta” (35) (There was no reason to tie oneself to a woman. Women were good for a short and violent discharge). This objectifying role is representative of Peláez's more formal relationships with two female characters in *Oficio*. While still in his native Leon, Natalia Vélez is seduced by Peláez and later invited to dwell in a house near Peláez's main quarters. However, she is never asked to reside with him. After spending their first day together, and before hearing the first signs of dawn, he decides to return to his own place:

Por la noche fueron al lecho. Pocas caricias y sexo llano y pronto. Cuando ella iba a empezar a dormirse sintió que Aparicio se levantaba y se vestía en la oscuridad. “¿Para dónde va usted?” “Para la casa”, respondió sin inmutarse. “¿No se va a quedar?” “No, más bien vuelvo.” Tomó su mula y emprendió el camino entre sombras

para La Boyera. Cuando los primeros gallos cantaron ya estaba él de pie, poniendo a trabajar los peones, ayudado por los hermanos. No lo hizo nunca y no lo iba a hacer nunca más. Nunca amanecería junto a una mujer. Era un modo de atarse y de someterse. (35)

(They went to bed at night. Few caresses. Only quick and plain sex. When she was falling asleep she heard Aparicio getting dressed. “Where are you going?” “I’m going home,” he answered, unmoved. “Won’t you stay the night?” “No, I’m turning back.” He got on his mule and began his way back to La Boyera. At the first sunrays he was already up, telling workers what to do. He would never wake up next to a woman. It was only a way of submitting himself.)

Similar features are employed by Uslar Pietri in the seduction of Elodia, when she says that “A veces viene y otras me manda a buscar” (212–13) (Sometimes he visits. Other times he asks me to come to his house). When other characters ask Peláez about the motifs behind his lack of a formal and exclusive relationship with a woman, he excuses himself by mentioning that he is Venezuela’s main provider. He even feminizes Venezuela by calling the nation his own “novia” (310).

Gómez in *Oficio* is represented as a supernatural sorcerer who proceeds from an exotic unknown and shows no interest in making women part of his private routine. However, for the narrator of *Oficio* and extensively for its author, Peláez’s actions are praiseworthy. Fernando González in 1934 believed as well that Gómez’s attitude was almost heroic: “Lo veo tratar a las mujeres como un medio para la grandeza de su obra, usar de ellas y no dejarse usar por ellas” (72) (He treats women only as a means to advance his own plans. He does not allow women to manipulate him).¹⁰ As with the category *brujo*, Aparicio Peláez’s depiction as a vampire excludes all abjection. The text does not offer any form of criticism or disapproval of Peláez’s relationship with women—not to mention the exclusion of Afro elements in his questionable version of *mestizaje*. Peláez even argues that he never touched a woman against her will and that his relationships were based on respect and equality (*Oficio* 166). The narrator even makes Peláez affirm that “soy un hombre muy respetuoso de la sociedad y las mujeres” (165) (I am a man who shows great respect for women and society).¹¹

If, as Cohen argues, “the undead returns in slightly different clothing, each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event,” we must inquire about the characteristics of such an event in Venezuelan history (5). In 1953 Marcos Pérez Jiménez, in order to appeal to a popular icon, brought to the fore the effigy of an indigenous woman, María Lionza, whose

worship had already spread throughout the northeastern regions of Venezuela. Pérez Jiménez believed that by interlacing the cult of the founders of the nation and María Lionza, a real popular and patriotic religion could be created. By the mid-seventies devotion to María Lionza, away from all official influence, had become an organized worship ceremony which placed her in the highest position, while Simón Bolívar and Juan Vicente Gómez—already added to the pantheon of founders and rulers—were condemned to secondary roles.¹¹ According to the cult's belief system, in the scheme of priests, mediums, and officers, María Lionza, in the rare event of a momentary incarnation, requires the most extreme purity of the soul of the medium. Bolívar requires a similar status, but his influence is trumped by María Lionza's primacy and power.

María Lionza's worship signals a displacement of masculinity as the core value of popular power. In her scheme of religious devotion, masculine power subscribes to the rule of an indigenous woman, precisely the opposite of the caudillo politics embodied by Peláez. Read against Peláez's rural and patriarchal agenda, the enthroning of María Lionza might be perceived also as a practice that aggravates sexual anarchy and the confusion of social roles. As Martín explains, the mediators of the cult are people originally marginalized from society who found social prestige by serving in her cult. Society imposed marginality on these individuals because of their race, gender, class, history, health, or personal decisions—for instance, ex-convicts serve as the intermediaries (Martín 183). But when they turn to María Lionza, those same characteristics become the perfect credentials that allow them to serve as mediators (Martín 223). As Michael Taussig describes, thousands of pilgrims travel every year to the mountain of Sorte, located in the state of Yaracuy, in search for an answer to their prayers for health, money, and jobs (489). Taussig is surprised by the extreme popular and improvised character of María Lionza's officers, whose ceremonies he describes as a mixture between animism and a number of stereotypical and generalized versions of witchcraft (498).

As an epiphany, *Oficio* conceals the process of production that assembled Peláez out of the objectification of separate and conflicting fragments. *Oficio* expects that by covering the linkages that hold Peláez's body together and by offering a unified and unifying image of masculine power, the reader will eventually surrender to the testimony that he communicates. And that message originates on the positivistic and colonial thought that served as the basis for Peláez's construction. Peláez's values mirror the ideals of the primordial father who proclaims that the family is a simile of the nation and that, as a presupposition, the ruling of the state must be conducted following the same principles that governed the administration of a nineteenth-century hacienda. In his

primitive philosophy, indigenous and Afro elements are deemed exotic albeit undesirable, and must be washed out through a process of miscegenation that originates in a sublime, whitened, and mountainous border that finds its way into the center. For Peláez, political power must be exerted in a personal and centralized manner and social roles are deemed to obey a strict and conservative logic of gender and class differences.

María Lionza threatens this imagined primacy of the masculine ruler and also pretends to invert the primitive hierarchy that he represents. *Oficio*, aware of the societal signs that forewarn the destabilization of a cult centered on the father and founder, redoubles its attempts to contain a feminine outburst of independence. It does so mainly by haunting and threatening the female, instilling fear and at the same time admiration and longing in the populace, and reinforcing the symbolic borders that serve as a referent for social roles and functions, since those borders, as Cohen claims, “are in place . . . to establish strictly homosocial bonds, the ties between men that keep patriarchal society functional. A kind of herdsman, this monster delimits the social space through which cultural bodies may move” (14). Peláez’s monstrous display of patriarchal and masculine influence expects to serve as a deterrent to social and gender mobility and popular mobilization and warn about the consequences that follow the trespassing of the values that Juan Vicente Gómez, as a cultural referent, still represents.

The desire of leading the feminine and discouraging the popular, since it emerges as a sudden hierophany, consumes itself and evaporates. To affirm in 1976 that, in Venezuela, one of the most fundamental credentials of the ideal leader resides in his capacity to insinuate control is indeed a very curious lapse. This is especially true if we consider the fierce battles of Acción Democrática during the 1940s and 1960s, and the resolute efforts conducted by women to incorporate themselves in the political life of Venezuela, as described by Elizabeth Friedman in her study on gender and democracy in Venezuela (Friedman 101–2). With the passing of time, as Taussing, Martín, and other critics have explained, María Lionza will occupy a central place in the altars of many Venezuelan homes, especially those located in the main cities. As I mentioned in the introduction of this essay, Peláez’s footprints can be traced around a timid and brief reception that followed the publication of *Oficio*. They soon disappeared from Latin American literary commentary and from the criticism that focuses on Uslar Pietri’s narrative. The destiny of the monster is to exit and to fade. “We see the damage that the monster wreaks, the material remains . . . , but the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes” (Cohen 4). However, in a different time, with altered garments and a new appearance, it will

return, trying to communicate the deceptive enchantments of a patriarchal ruling of the nation.

Notes

1. See Burggraaff 8–9; Yarrington 9–11, 14, 18. Yarrington, in his fascinating article about the economic and political consequences of Gómez’s businesses for the everyday life of common Venezuelans, affirms that “The Gómez regime existed fundamentally as a business enterprise to monopolize wealth generated within the agrarian economy and to distribute it among the men who made up the official faction in power” (13).
2. Juan Vicente Gómez appealed to well-defined values that resonated with the image of a rural Venezuela. The slogan of his regime was “Paz, union y trabajo.” Burggraaff argues that the main difference between Gómez and Castro regarding the institutionalization of a strong and professionalized army had to do with their ultimate goals. Castro pretended to defend Venezuela from foreign powers. Gómez, on the other hand, “wanted a powerful army, not to defend his country, but to crush domestic opposition” (16). For a complete account of all the foreign expeditions against Gómez’s regime, see McBeth’s *Dictatorship & Politics*.
3. For a complete inventory of the fictional works that recuperate the figure of the Andean dictator until 1980, see Pacheco 81; 81 n 49. Pacheco points out that the seventies coincide with an explosion of titles in fiction as well as the emergence of films and TV series that returned to Gómez (82).
4. For a biography of Father Borges, see Lavin 249–54. “By royal command, the priest visited the presidential bode frequently and both Gómez and his entourage were held spellbound by his drollery and flow of sparking poetry. His talent reached its sublime brilliance when he was inebriated. If Gómez happened to be present in such an occasion, ministers and generals would be kept waiting until the *padre*’s ready wit had spent itself” (Lavin 254). Fernando González in his volume *Mi compadre* also includes a section on Father Borges (84, 88, 109). González recounts that Borges’s health had been seriously affected by alcohol consumption: “El Padre Borges es ya una ruina. Lento, casi paralizado, no habla” (88) (Father Borges is now a ruin. Slow and paralyzed, he barely talks).
5. In the Catholic Church the Office of the Dead is a series of psalms, hymns, and responses that belong to the yearly cycle of the Canonical Hours. The Office of the Dead is usually a communal celebration whose primary motivation is to pray for the final repose of the soul of the deceased. Therefore, what Father Solana was supposed to preside over was not the Office of the Dead but the Mass of the Dead, traditionally known as “Requiem Mass.”
6. Roberto González Echevarría in his 1980 article entitled “The Dictatorship of Rhetoric/The Rhetoric of Dictatorship” affirms that until Miguel Ángel Asturias’s *El Señor Presidente* Latin American writers still longed for the return of a powerful caudillo. But in the series of novels published in the seventies, the death of the dictator became the vehicle that enabled writing (209). *Oficio* and his support for the return of a new Gómez contradicts not only this basic rule stipulated by González Echevarría but also a movement that

- encouraged the advent of democracy at a moment when dictatorships were still an occurrence in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala—among other countries.
7. Particularly after 1989, Gómez found a place in Venezuela's symbolic realm. His name is now attached to the airport of San Antonio del Táchira and presides over one of the battalions of the Venezuelan National Army. But the most evident example of Gómez's symbolic return is a letter signed by sixty retired officers of the Venezuelan Army addressing the failed coup d'état by Hugo Chávez in 1992. In their letter, the officers justified the extreme actions of some members of the Armed Forces by pointing out the inefficacy of politicians in the previous four administrations to maintain the minimum levels of "seguridad pública, paz y trabajo" achieved during the rule of Juan Vicente Gómez (qtd. in. Olavarría xxii). Gómez's most publicized slogan was back in vogue.
 8. See Burggraaff 8–9 and Alcalde 81. Tulio Chiossone affirms that the economic development of El Táchira had created by the turn of the 19th century an encompassing educational system that provided a number of important political figures during Gómez's rule and after Gómez's death, such as Román Delgado Chalbaud, Diógenes Escalante, Eleázar López Contreras, and Ramón José Velásquez, under the direction of Father Jáuregui (109). Fiction provides perhaps one of the best examples of how these nationalistic rivalries still survive. In *El pasajero de Truman* (2008), Francisco Suniaga relates the unfortunate circumstances of Diógenes Escalante's exit from Venezuela's presidential run in 1945. When Escalante recounts his years as a functionary of Gómez's regime, he highlights hard work, order, cleanliness, and punctuality as his core values because of his Tachirense origins (58–59).
 9. *Mano* can be translated as a shortcut for brother (*hermano*), used commonly in Colombia, or as hand (*mano*). This, in turn, opens a new point of contact with the monster as a cultural construction and with popular religion. In many passages in *Oficio*, Gómez is substituted with the objectification of his single hand, for instance, as "la mano que empuña la rienda" (275) (the hand that holds the reins). The reiteration of Gómez's hand, which highlights also patriarchal control and masculine power, becomes as well a point of contact with popular religion and its devotion to God's hand, known as "la mano poderosa," worthy of worship all over Latin America.
 10. Rourke voiced similar opinions: "there were few peon girls who dared to resist them [Gómez and Gómez's brothers]" (43). Rourke also describes that the sons engendered out of these casual encounters were brought to the farm to be later employed as workers. In this respect, Gómez behavior is typical of nineteenth-century caudillo. As Wolf and Hansen illustrated in their 1967 article, the hacienda was perhaps the only institution that survived the chaos that followed Independence (171). Women represented a means of establishing territorial alliances, multiplying the number of workers, allies, and soldiers, and acquiring social mobility—if a mestizo married up with a white woman (172).
 11. As Coronil pointed out, the effigy of Bolívar was central in the depiction of the ideal ruler in Venezuela—since Antonio Guzmán Blanco's presidency, who introduced himself as the continuator of the founder's dream (169). At the same time, Bolívar's life of personal oblivion and suffering was connected to Jesus's passion and resurrection, and soon became the object of a popular cult (Salas 39). Bolívar's name and its connection with the national currency only intensified its importance in relation to the hardships of Venezuelans (Salas 68). Additionally, the racial character of Bolívar served also as a justification

for a popular adherence to his figure. He is depicted as white (his father was a Spaniard), indigenous (as the reincarnation of Guaiquipuro), and black (his mother was a slave), as a result of a series of legends that, like in María Lionza's case, characterize each one of his progenitors as bearers of diverse racial characteristics (47–48).

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