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Sopa de Caracol (2002)

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The plot of Arturo Arias's 2002 novel *Sopa de caracol* unfolds during a dinner party hosted by the protagonist, Rodrigo. Over the course of the evening, Rodrigo recounts to his guests a series of anecdotes about his days as a revolutionary in the Latin American left. This opportunity provides the protagonist an ideal occasion to playfully reflect in humorous fashion, and with an ironic tone, upon the faults of his former militant revolutionary ideology. Arias thus puts into practice his notion that novels, as systems of ideological signifiers, allow for the exploration of transitions in identity and ideology.¹

Rooted in this notion, in the present study, I seek to demonstrate the way in which *Sopa de caracol* reveals a transition in leftist ideology in the wake of the nation's civil war. Specifically, I analyse the text's ludic discursive mode by calling particular attention to the use of humour, irony, Bakhtinian carnival and linguistic play. These elements, I argue, converge in *Sopa de caracol* to provide a critical perspective of the revolutionary discourse upheld by the Guatemalan left during the 1970s and 80s. Understanding this discourse as a metanarrative that promised a transformation of Guatemalan society, my reading of *Sopa de caracol* as a postmodern novel is informed by Jean-François Lyotard's notion that in postmodernism, the grand narrative has lost its credibility.² This analysis is further underpinned by the notion proffered by critics Emma Kafalenos, Ruth Burke and Brian Edwards that ludics (play) is one of the fundamental elements of postmodern fiction.³

¹ Arturo Arias, 'Gioconda Belli: The Magic and/of Eroticism', in *The Postmodern in Latin and Latino American Cultural Narratives: Collected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Claudia Ferman Latin American Studies 3 (New York: Garland, 1996), 181-99 (p. 181).

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* 1979, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Lit. 10 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), 37.

³ Emma Kafalenos, 'From the Comic to the Ludic: Postmodern Fiction', in *International Fiction Review* 12.1 (1985), 28-31. Ruth E. Burke, *The Games of Poetics: Ludic Criticism and Postmodern Fiction*, American University Studies Ser. III, Comp. Lit. 47 (New York: Peter Lang, 1994). Brian Edwards, *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies 3 (New York: Garland, 1998).

Theorists such as Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois have studied the concept and uses of play since the middle of the twentieth century. Derrida's notion of deconstruction, however, has led to an increase in critical focus on the uses of play in contemporary literature.⁴ Although the word *ludic* has traditionally been defined as 'expressive of a playful but aimless outlook',⁵ Warren Motte has convincingly argued that in literature 'play does have *uses* and *functions* beyond itself'.⁶ More specifically, Philip Lewis demonstrates that play possesses 'destructive, corrective, or emancipatory' qualities.⁷ Following both Motte's and Lewis's assertions, in the present study I intend to demonstrate that in *Sopa de caracol* the ludic element that may appear superficially to be aimless is, in fact, not aimless at all, but, rather, forms the basis of the work's subversive aesthetic. By analysing this novel in relation to its cultural context, I attempt to establish a direct relationship between subversive literary aesthetics and concomitant changes in both cultural identity and political ideology at the end of the millennium in Guatemala.

Guatemalan Culture at the Millennium

In his insightful analysis of Guatemalan postmodern culture at the millennium, Mario Roberto Morales asserts that participation in the global market has altered previously maintained perceptions of identity in Guatemalan culture. Following García Canclini, Morales examines spaces of cultural hybridization, both urban and rural. He demonstrates the ways in which cultural identities are constantly being negotiated in the context of globalization due to industry, mass media and consumption of popular culture.⁸ In light of this postmodern cultural dynamic, he asserts that the time has come 'to begin accepting the fact that there are no pure identities, only negotiable ones (live or extinct)'.⁹ Ultimately, he suggests that

⁴ Derrida argues that the absence of a center or origin to stabilize meaning in the language structure allows for a form of freeplay. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1970), 247-72.

⁵ 'Ludic', *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 3rd College Edition 1994.

⁶ Warren F. Motte, *Playtexts: Ludics in Contemporary Literature* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995), 20-22.

⁷ Philip Lewis, 'La Rochefoucauld: The Rationality of Play', in *Game, Play, Literature*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 134.

⁸ Mario Roberto Morales, 'Autochthonous Cultures and the Global Market', trans. Eva L. Ramírez, in *Latin America Writes Back: Postmodernity in the Periphery (An Interdisciplinary Perspective)*, ed. Emil Volek, *Hispanic Issues* 28 (New York: Routledge, 2002), 123-57 (p. 128).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

globalization demands that the left reformulate and rearticulate a new utopian project for the twenty-first century, 'a more intelligent utopia, less demagogic, less dreamy, and more realistic than the one just unraveled'.¹⁰

Arturo Arias's novel, *Sopa de caracol*, emerges precisely at the historical juncture described by Morales. Published in 2002, it was written at the end of the twentieth century at a moment when, as Morales suggests, the Latin American left of the 1960s had come unravelled. As Arias explains in his critical work *La identidad de la palabra*, the 'new left' appeared in the wake of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution:

A partir de la revolución cubana en 1959 y la aparición de guerrillas en la región Centroamérica] desde 1961, se creó una división entre una 'vieja izquierda' (pro-comunista y alineada con Moscú) y una 'nueva izquierda' (pro-guevarista, antiestalinista y alineada con el ideal romántico de la revolución cubana tal y como aparecía poéticamente expresado en la 'Segunda Declaración de la Habana').¹¹

The development of the new left in Guatemala was also a response to the 1954 CIA-sponsored uprising of right-wing insurgents, which ended Guatemala's decade of democracy by forcing President Jacobo Arbenz to resign. Subsequently fostered by thirty-one years of military dictatorships, the Guatemalan new left grew in resistance to governmental oppression of indigenous citizens. The conflict eventually evolved into a civil war, and between 1978 and 1988 governmental death squads assassinated more than 50,000 leftist insurgents and members of indigenous communities.¹² As a result, between 1950 and 1990 the indigenous community was reduced from 60% of the nation's population to 45%.¹³ There was no outright military victory for either side, and despite the initiation of peace agreements in the mid 1980s, it was not until 1996 that President Álvaro Arzú signed the final peace accord between the government and leftist guerrillas. In Arias's words, 'the whole thing is the legacy of '54 without question, because what

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹¹ Arturo Arias, *La identidad de la palabra: narrativa guatemalteca a la luz del Siglo XX* (Guatemala City: Artemis Edinter, 1998), 214.

¹² Judy Maloof, 'La "herencia cósmica" versus *Guerrilla Playland*: la ideología de una subcultura en *Itzam Na*', in *Cambios estéticos y nuevos proyectos culturales en Centroamérica: testimonios, entrevistas y ensayos*, ed. Amelia Mondragón (Washington, DC: Literal, 1994), 73.

¹³ Catherine Rendón, *La dictadura y el indígena en la obra de Luis Cardoza y Aragón*, Colección Molinos de Viento 111 (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1996), 62.

'54 did was prevent the real creation of a democratic nation. It bottled up that process and polarized it for way too long'.¹⁴

The end of the armed struggle has afforded Guatemalan intellectuals the opportunity to reflect upon the conflict that divided the nation for decades, and to consider viable options for the future. Gustavo García's collection of short stories *La revolución y otras razones para pegarse un tiro* (2003), Aura Marina Arriola's memoirs *Ese obstinado sobrevivir* (2000) and Arias's *Sopa de caracol* (2002) are evidence of a moment of retrospection in Guatemalan literary production. As Arias suggests, 'a newer theme that's beginning to emerge recently, is the collapse of the Latin American left in the sense of loss of utopian dreams and people who believed in the revolution almost as a mystical experience, who all of a sudden are bereft of their beliefs and who are cast adrift and who now are wondering what to do with their lives and with themselves and lost at sea'.¹⁵ In the Lyotardian sense, if the discourse of militant revolution is the metanarrative that drove the new Latin American left's utopian projects, then the scepticism with regard to this narrative in *Sopa de caracol* can be understood as postmodern. That is, if the left's utopian vision of socio-political transformation through militant revolution was the embodied modern project in Guatemala, then the collapse of that project implies a passage into the postmodern, thus allowing for a self-reflexive, critical perspective. As suggested above by Morales, postmodern culture in Guatemala is marked by identities in a state of constant negotiation. *Sopa de caracol* reflects this process of negotiation, and undermines the revolutionary metanarrative of the new Latin American left through the use of ludics.

Late Postmodernism

The postmodernism of *Sopa de caracol* is not the radical postmodern experimentation of Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres* (1967) and José Emilio Pacheco's *Morirás lejos* (1968), or of novelists such as Diamela Eltit or Ricardo Piglia.¹⁶ Rather, to appropriate a term used by Jeremy Green in his study

¹⁴ Arturo Arias, 'An Interview with Arturo Arias' by Cheryl Roberts, *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*, ed. Farhat Iftekharuddin, et al. (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1997), 23-34 (p. 30).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶ Raymond L. Williams and Emir Rodríguez Monegal coincide in indicating a significant change in the Spanish American novel during the late 1960s and early 1970s marked by a more radically experimental set of strategies than that of the modern novel, which dominated the previous three decades. Williams synthesizes the following strategies that Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, and Ihab Hassan associate with the postmodern novel: unresolved contradiction, breaking of genre

Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium, *Sopa de caracol* might be described as an example of 'late postmodernism'. Green distinguishes late postmodernists writing in the 1990s from the more experimental 'high postmodernists' of the 1960s and 1970s, suggesting that we are no longer postmodern in quite the same way as when the concept was first developed.¹⁷ Despite Green's narrow use of the term to describe novels of the 1990s that are essentially pessimistic about the future of literature, late postmodernism might also be a useful term with regard to Spanish American literature. Raymond L. Williams describes a 1990s trend among some younger novelists who were 'less interested in technical experimentation than the most radical innovators among their postmodern predecessors'.¹⁸ This trend coincides with Hal Foster's assertion in *The Return of the Real* that the middle 1990s mark a revival of the subject whose death was proclaimed by theorists of the 1960s.¹⁹ Arias falls between the generations of the high postmodernists of the 1960s and the younger novelists of the 1990s, but *Sopa de caracol* is clearly more aligned with the production of the end of the millennium. As discussed below, it incorporates several fundamental postmodern tropes, but does not display the radical narrative strategies of the high postmodernists.

Sopa de caracol's status as a late postmodernist text allows for playful references not only to modernist authors and texts, but also to earlier postmodernists. Thus, the protagonist and narrator of *Sopa de caracol* makes reference to high postmodernists such as Thomas Pynchon and Guillermo Cabrera Infante with the same facility with which he makes reference to modernists such as Kafka and Borges. Borders between high and low culture are also blurred in this text, as it references philosophers associated with postmodernism such as Derrida

boundaries, historiographic metafiction, dialogue with the modernist novel, fragmentation that does not lead to ultimate unity, 'self-conscious lack of centre and lack of unified characters as "beings"' and 'a generalized skepticism toward any possibility of the searching for or establishing of truths'. Raymond L. Williams, 'Modernist Continuities: The Desire to Be Modern in Twentieth-Century Spanish-American Fiction', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 79 (2002), 369-93 (p. 369). See also Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'The New Latin American Novelists', *TriQuarterly* 13-14 (1968-69), 13-32 (p. 32).

¹⁷ Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1; 25.

¹⁸ Raymond L. Williams, *The Twentieth-Century Spanish American Novel* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2003), 215.

¹⁹ Foster states: 'In a sense the death of the subject is dead in turn: the subject has returned in the cultural politics of different subjectivities, sexualities, and ethnicities, sometimes in old humanist guise, often in contrary forms--fundamentalist, hybrid, or "traumatic" '. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 209.

and Foucault as well as popular cultural production such as Disney cartoons. Indeed, 'Sopa de caracol' is also the title of a song originally composed by Belizean Garífuna songwriter Chico Ramos that was later made famous by the Honduran salsa group Banda Blanca. Such a reference to popular culture, while not exclusive to postmodernism, is indicative of an element that has been dominant in postmodern production from the late 1960s into the new millennium.

Despite the retreat from earlier radical experimentation, another element that remains constant in postmodern fiction from the 1960s to the present is ludics.²⁰ Specifically, irony and self-conscious play with language and text are two important forms of ludics associated with postmodern fiction.²¹ As in other postmodern fiction, the role of these play elements is fundamental to a hermeneutical analysis of *Sopa de caracol*.

Humour, Irony and the Carnavalesque in *Sopa de caracol*

Like the song of the same name, the title of Arias's novel derives from a traditional Central American dish (conch soup) known for its aphrodisiac effect. In fact, this dish forms part of the menu that provides the structure of Arias's novel. In the 'Introducción al menú' at the beginning of the novel, an extradiegetic voice enumerates the dishes to be offered at the dinner party of Rodrigo, an ex-revolutionary from Guatemala. The host, who is now a professor in San Francisco, is in need of letters of recommendation from his guests in order to avoid termination of his academic post. Each dish on the menu is also the title of a corresponding chapter in the novel. Titles such as 'Tostaditas de guacamol con jaibol en la mano', 'Sopa de caracol a la beliceña con un Pouilly Fouissé extraseco'

²⁰ Emma Kafalenos has argued that postmodern fiction marks a passage from the comic to the ludic. Kafalenos, 'From the Comic to the Ludic', 28-31. Ruth Burke concurs with Kafalenos, asserting that postmodern fiction demands a form of criticism that seeks out 'game structures and strategies generated by the text'. Burke, *The Games of Poetics*, 64. Similarly, Brian Edwards contends that 'the concept of play provides perspectives on language and communication processes useful not only for analysis of literary texts as cultural products but, in addition, for understanding the interactive nature of constructions of knowledge generally'. Edwards, *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, xii.

²¹ Jonathan Tittler has suggested that there are many points of contact between irony and play, arguing that 'irony encompasses the solemn and the ludic'. Jonathan Tittler, *Narrative Irony in the Contemporary Spanish-American Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), 195. Christopher Donovan argues that irony has been associated with postmodernism since early conceptions of the notion and continues to be an important element of postmodern fiction today. Christopher Donovan, *Postmodern Counternarratives: Irony and Audience in the Novels of Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson and Tim O'Brien* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

and 'Cafecito espresso en tacitas chiquitas con un toquecito de sambuca y un coñaquito Courvoiser (hay también Armagnac para los que prefieren) al lado' head up each chapter.

The novel's menu structure functions in several ways. First, it establishes a merry tone that is essential to the work's parodic nature. Second, the elaborate and abundant menu strikes a marked contrast with the ascetic ideals of the new Latin American left that the host of the novel supposedly once represented.²² In Guatemala's case, the guerrilla movements claimed their struggle to be a form of self-sacrifice on behalf of poverty-stricken farmers and disinherited indigenous groups. Perhaps most importantly, however, the dinner table presents a forum for the host to speak in order to question the underlying metanarrative.

As Bakhtin establishes in *Rabelais and His World*, eating and drinking form part of the popular-festive images that constitute the grotesque body of carnival.²³ The banquet, for Bakhtin, is an occasion for 'wise discourse' and 'gay truth'.²⁴ There is an ancient tie, he asserts, between the feast and the spoken word that was evident in the classical symposium and continued in the medieval tradition of festive speech, imbued with grotesque realism. In this sense Arias follows the literary tradition of Rabelais, who, according to Bakhtin, 'was convinced that free and frank truth can be said only in the atmosphere of the banquet, only in table talk'.²⁵ Carnival, which, according to Robert Stam 'promotes a ludic and critical relation to all official discourse',²⁶ is an ideal trope for this text that seeks to distance itself from the revolutionary discourse of the 1970s and 80s in Guatemala.

Despite the long tradition of the carnivalesque mode in literature, it is particularly suitable for adaptation in postmodern fiction. Bakhtin defines carnival laughter as 'a festive laughter [. . .] gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives'.²⁷ Carnival thus bears a striking resemblance to Linda Hutcheon's assertion that 'Postmodern art similarly asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order,

²² This contrast is akin to the monk's role at feasts in twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature observed by Bakhtin: 'as a devotee of material bodily life he sharply contradicts the ascetic ideal that he serves'. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1965, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 294. The elegant nature of the menu also presents a reversal of more conventional Bakhtinian subversion, as it moves away from the celebration of the popular.

²³ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 285.

²⁶ Robert Stam, 'Mikhail Bakhtin and Left Cultural Critique', in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), 116-45 (p. 139).

²⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 12.

meaning, control, and identity'.²⁸ Brian McHale points out that postmodernist representations of carnival frequently take the form of some reduced version of carnival, such as the festive dinner or wild party.²⁹ As demonstrated below, the dinner party in *Sopa de caracol* can be understood as a postmodern form of banquet in which the festive speech is composed of a series of anecdotes that reveal the host's naïve allegiance to a discourse of truth that has ultimately failed him.

The postmodern world view, according to Theo D'haen, is to see 'man as the meeting point of *signifying* practices, in which linguistic (verbal and textual) codes play a prominent part'. What distinguishes the modern from the postmodern world view, he maintains, is that the postmodernist 'is *aware* of his being caught in a web of codes, and of only existing at the point where a number of such codes intersect'.³⁰ The relationship between human beings and language described here by D'haen is foregrounded in postmodern fiction through metalinguistic play. In *Sopa de caracol* word play contributes to the carnivalesque mode that seeks to liberate the protagonist from his former revolutionary discourse.

The opening passage of the 'Introducción al menú' presents an example of the self-conscious play with language that is present throughout the novel:

La explicación más simple del círculo hermenéutico es que para entender una solitaria parte hay que ilusionarse con la creencia de comprender el todo. Para agarrar ese elusivo toldo carente de verdades absolutas, de conocimientos objetivos, de significados estables, toldo disfrazado de todo y no de toro, hay que captar las pletóricas partes platónicamente preñadas de significantes pedantemente putones. El todo, el toldo, puede ser un menú. El de una cena (¿obscena?) ofrecida por un ex revolucionario cuarentón. (9)³¹

By playfully shifting from *todo* to *toldo* to *toro* in this passage, the narrative voice undermines the notion of language as a set of stable signifiers. This form of word play attempts to emancipate language from its restrictive nature and thus sets the stage for the liberation of the protagonist from a discourse to which he was once

²⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 13.

²⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 174.

³⁰ Theo D'haen, 'Genre Conventions in Postmodern Fiction', in *Convention and Innovation in Literature*, ed. D'haen, et al. Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature 24 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), 411.

³¹ This, and all subsequent in-text page references are to Arturo Arias's, *Sopa de caracol* (Guatemala City: Santillana, 2002).

beholden.³² Following Robert Detweiler's categorization of postmodern forms of play, this opening passage can be understood as aleatory play. That is, 'playful or whimsical fiction, writing that is based on exuberance and exaggeration, it is funny and appears spontaneous and casually composed (even though it is not)'.³³ In the above example, the shift from one word to another produces a comic effect and appears spontaneous, but is, in fact, a carefully calculated deconstructive move.

This aleatory form of play is present throughout *Sopa de caracol*. Often, it is manifested as exaggerated alliteration, such as in the following sentence: 'Golosamente glosando el glorificado guateque guardoso, la glotis glotonamente haciendo "glúglú" mientras gritaba gregaria los graciosos, gráciles garabatos grasosos del glúteo como un glucómetro, glorifiqué mi cuerpo cada vez más glutinoso y gozoso gorgoteando gloriada glucosuria' (31). In certain instances, the protagonist employs alliteration in an effort to unveil what he sees as the myth of the revolution:

Diez años que parecen mil, diez años sin sentido, la década perdida, la década del desahogo, del desaliento, de la desgracia, la década del desalino, la década desalmada en que quedamos desahuciados como especie humana. La década del desangre, la década desafortada, desafortunada, desgarrada, desagradecida, desaguisadamente desarticulada, desairada, desajustada, desanimada, la década del desamor en que nos desalojaron de nuestras tierras dejándonos en el más vil desamparo mientras desandábamos descalzos el camino recorrido desde los dorados años sesenta, desanidados y descogotados cuando no desaparecidos, desaparejados, desapasionados, desapegados de todos los valores éticos y morales por el trauma de la guerra [. . .]. (95)

In this example, what appears to be a spontaneous use of alliteration to produce a comic effect, is, rather, a carefully constructed passage that contributes profoundly to the novel's playful deconstruction of revolutionary discourse. The negative prefix *des-*, a prefix of unmaking, is particularly important as Rodrigo attempts to unravel the myth of the revolution. What he once viewed as a utopian project, he now considers a *desgracia*. The words *desalmada* and *desamor* are also particularly powerful as they signify the opposite of what the revolution, according

³² As Peter Hutchinson asserts, 'To "play" with language is thus not merely to test its resources or amuse, but also to illustrate its restrictive, conditioning nature'. Peter Hutchinson, *Games Authors Play* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 20.

³³ Robert Detweiler, 'Games and Play in Modern American Fiction', *Contemporary Literature* 17 (1976), 48.

to Che Guevara's notion of 'el hombre nuevo', purported to be based on—love and compassion for one's fellow human beings. Indeed, as the protagonist alludes to in the final words of this passage, many revolutionaries were stripped of these very values by way of their own violent actions. Rodrigo later confesses that although everyone talked about the necessity of creating 'el hombre nuevo', no one, in fact, knew how to do so (151).

The protagonist specifically denounces the confusion, in certain sectors of the Guatemalan left, between Catholic mysticism and Marxist materialism. He recalls, 'Nos decíamos marxistas-leninistas guevaristas pero en realidad éramos unos místicos teresadeavílicos-sanjuandelacrúricos' (149). The result, according to Rodrigo, was 'una actitud dogmáticamente cristiana' in which good and evil were clearly delineated between the revolutionaries and the government forces (148).

For the protagonist, this dogmatism led to a process of dehumanization:

En los años de militancia esos trances se racionalizaban remachando la hartada frasecita 'el costo social de la revolución'. En ella se resumían todos los muertos, desaparecidos, torturados, masacrados. Pero también éramos nosotros que mentíamos, engañábamos, fingíamos, utilizábamos, instrumentalizábamos a cualquiera y especialmente a las personas que más queríamos en aras de 'la causa'. Nos deshumanizaba fundamentalmente. Mataba los sentimientos. Nos volvíamos los robochafas de la izquierda. (107-08)

In this passage, Rodrigo implies that, blinded by a Manichean concept of good and evil, the revolutionaries were able to justify unethical acts that led to a process of dehumanization. His decision to persuade his lover Valéria to seduce an enemy informant so that the informant could be executed is perhaps the novel's best example of the process of dehumanization described by Rodrigo. He recalls that after this episode, 'Me había desgajado por dentro, me arrancó una capa de humanidad que nunca recuperaría. Entregué mi más preciado tesoro' (93). The suffering expressed here by Rodrigo eventually leads to a psychological deterioration. In the novel's conclusion, this process is essential in unravelling the myth of the revolution embodied in the protagonist.

The final fault of the Guatemalan left expressed by Rodrigo is a lack of ideological coherence. One aspect of this problem he explains as a result of differing political agendas between various factions. He also attributes their incoherence, in part, to the fact that although they considered themselves Marxists-Leninists, ironically, no one had read either Marx or Lenin. He exclaims, 'Coherencia ideológica en el EGP pues, ni la mencionen. Era un vibrador sin

baterías' (149). The image of the vibrator in Rodrigo's comment not only produces a comic effect, it also forms part of the system of carnivalesque imagery that is present throughout the novel. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque mode creates a process of degradation through a symbolic shift in focus from the upper to the lower stratum of the grotesque body. He asserts, 'The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity'.³⁴ To equate the guerrilla movement to a vibrator without batteries suggests that it was narcissistic and ultimately ineffective. Moreover, it demonstrates, in exemplary fashion, the carnivalesque process of degradation.

Throughout the novel, the implied author debases the noble cause of the revolution by imbuing the text with playful eroticism and images of the lower stratum of the grotesque body. Words such as 'piernas', 'nalgas', 'clitoris', 'anos' (24) and 'la punta de la verga' (118) help to achieve the effect of degradation by shifting the reader's focus to the lower stratum. Abusive language, which Bakhtin maintains is also an important aesthetic element of grotesque realism, fills the pages of *Sopa de caracol*. Language such as 'joder' (104), 'coger' (25), 'puto', and 'cabrón de mierda' (278) contributes to the self-denigration of the protagonist and the degradation of the once sacred discourse of the revolution.³⁵

In several instances, the protagonist strays from his anecdotes about strictly revolutionary matters to recount his sexual encounters during his days as a militant. He describes, for example, a scene in which his Brazilian lover, Valéria, seduces him. He recalls, 'Ya a la altura de mis ojos se volteó, agitando la bundinha frente a mis narices, tan cerca que percibí los vellitos que se escabullían debajo del fillo dental y surgiendo del humedecido abismo oscuro se arqueaban sobre la tirita de tela en traviosos colochos provocadores. Por primera vez en mi vida temí una eyaculación precoz' (52). The playful eroticism and imagery of the lower stratum are obvious in Rodrigo's detailed account. However, by boastfully recounting his sexual encounters as conquests, he also constructs his revolutionary identity as a virile and *machista* young man. This ultimately plays an important role in the decline of his character in the denouement. After abandoning the revolutionary cause, Rodrigo faces an existential crisis:

³⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 20.

³⁵ The descending movement implied in degradation is further evident in Rodrigo's confession that 'Nos sentíamos dioses. Todavía no sabíamos que éramos ángeles caídos' (143).

Todos los que militamos y sobrevivimos nos estamos muriendo ahora por el mundo de manera poco noble, poco soñada, nada literaria, invisible, invisible, invisible. Hicimos la guerra por la sentida necesidad de ser visibles. Sin visibilidad no hay posibilidad de existencia. Pero perdimos. Nos quedamos invisibles. Sin embargo como ya dijo mucho antes el Maestro Gironde, una vida sexual activa y muy fecunda es un camino para alejar el fantasma del suicidio. ¡Viva el esperma...aunque yo perezca! (96-97)

The revolutionary slogan ‘Hasta la victoria siempre, patria o muerte, venceremos’ (41) has now become, for Rodrigo, ‘¡Viva el esperma!’. His life has lost the meaning that the revolution once provided. Furthermore, as he confesses, he has lost a sense of his humanity due to unethical decisions made during his days as a militant. At the time, he justified these actions through his belief that he was on the side of good. In retrospect, however, he recognizes that his harm to others has led to a sense of dehumanization and a crisis of identity.

His attempts to recuperate his lost humanity turn to acts of sexual desperation. Two young girls report him for committing acts of lewd behaviour with his dog on a public beach in San Francisco. His dog, who he later proclaims could have been the great love of his life, is eventually seized by animal control. If the explicit details of his sexual encounters during his days as a revolutionary produce the effect of degradation, his acts of bestiality take the grotesque to its extreme. To further compound his pathetic circumstances, he faces termination of his professorship as a result of a sexual harassment accusation by one of his students. Rodrigo’s decadent sexual behaviour upon abandoning the revolutionary cause clearly highlights the desperation of a man who is facing a crisis.

The protagonist’s identity problem is intensified by a further ironic development. Indeed, the novel is underpinned by this particular irony with regard to Rodrigo’s identity. In the first chapter of the novel, the conversation at the dinner table begins when the protagonist is asked about a portrait of him taken during the revolution. It is later described as ‘La famosísima foto que publicó la Jean Marie Simon en su libro sobre la noble lucha del pueblo guatemayense. El Cerotón de verde olivo, Galil en las manos, la mirada bovina perdida en el futuro de la humanidad, la boina negra con la estrella roja en el centro’ (261-62). This published photo converted Rodrigo into a mythical hero of the Latin American left. He acknowledges, ‘Gracias a la foto como. Gracias a la foto tengo empleo. Gracias a la foto conseguí compañía más de alguna noche solitaria. También gracias a la foto no puedo solicitar nacionalidad gringorroide, hemorroide, condenado al *mare nostrum* del posible regreso a chipilínlandia’ (261). Ironically, however, the novel’s conclusion reveals the photo to be a farce. He was merely

posing in a guerrilla uniform that he had worn to a carnival celebration. The assault rifle was a plastic toy borrowed from the neighbours' children, and the red star on his beret was cut and pasted from a schoolbook. He had no idea that the photo would one day be published and win a prize.

Sopa de caracol is ultimately a parody of an ex-revolutionary. Through the revelation that the photo is a farce, Rodrigo's heroic status is reduced to a grotesque caricature of 'un ex revolucionario cuarentón [. . .] vulgar académico de segunda en una universidad estadounidense de tercera, dedicado a perseguir niñas de 20 años para ejercitar ese concepto conocido en Guatemaya como "meter mano" ' (9). In addition to the fact that the revolution failed, it is revealed that Rodrigo never had the power that he once dreamed of. The photo thus facilitates the protagonist's transformation into an object of parody: '¡La foto! ¡Fo-fo-fo! ¡Fo-ro-fofó! Es simple. El emblema de mi transformación de sujeto en objeto' (261).

The conclusion of *Sopa de caracol* completes the symbolic process of Rodrigo's identity transformation. During his days as a revolutionary, Rodrigo is portrayed as a *machista* in constant search of a woman to conquer. He is, perhaps, not unlike the character ironically named Pensamiento for his lack of intelligence: 'Un normal guatemayense, o sea, un egoísta muy formalote, engomado machista que le tiene miedo a las mujeres' (65). In his post-revolutionary days, Rodrigo seems to have lost his ability to seduce women as he resorts to bestiality and is charged with sexual harassment. In the final scene, Rodrigo's female guests dress as men, strip him, and redress him in women's clothing. He exclaims, 'el splendor de verlas hombres, de ser mujer, la muerte de las identidades sentenciadas' (268). After dancing on the table in high heels to the rhythm of 'Sopa de caracol', Rodrigo, now 'Rodriguita', (270) performs a strip-tease, and then proceeds to a juggling act as he shouts, '¡Damitas y caballeros, les presento el circo más grande del mundo!' (273). His hands are subsequently bound behind his back as he is forced to the sofa:

Qué escándalo. El Amapolo Ojo Duro rehace el mundo con su falo artificial. Lo rehace a su imagen y semejanza, sin mí, lo reconstituye en la destrucción de las viejas creencias, las derruidas racionalizaciones que empujaban su lógica hasta barroquizar la cerebralidad, la irracionalidad de la razón. [. . .]

Me dejo llevar suavemente, no empujés, Sibello, te admito que estoy sorprendido y conmovido por la pérdida de mis más elementales indicadores de identidad. Ya no sé quién soy. (276)

After sodomizing him, Rodrigo's guests assure him that he got what deserved, referring to him as 'el manoseador manoseado' (280). He lies on the floor, physically exhausted and in pain as he declares:

Ustedes son ahora las fuertes, las que hablan, las que mandan, las que imponen sus furias. Para mí ya sólo dolores, soledad y vacío. Cascarón sin nada adentro, roto, purgado, regurgitado, sin fuerzas para defenderme, escombros humano, trazos de un pasado que no condujo a nada, de un sacrificio en vano, sueños desperdiciados, deseos perdidos, voluntades intensas, descarriadas. Piltrafa. (281)

Rodrigo's symbolic transformation of identity is thus complete. The once virile revolutionary *machista* is now rendered impotent. This transformation symbolizes not only the life cycle of the revolution, but also alludes to another theme that Arias deems important to Latin American culture at the millennium. He suggests that the nature of male-female relationships in the context of a traditional *machista* society has begun to evolve and change.³⁶ In *Sopa de caracol*, this reversal of traditional gender roles is symbolic of the desire for an ideological paradigm shift.

The grotesque realism of *Sopa de caracol*'s carnivalesque mode culminates in the above-described scene from the final chapter of the novel. The first seven chapters of the novel correspond with the dishes presented in the 'Introducción al menú'. The last two, however, present an unexpected turn of events. As the party moves from the table to the dance floor, the host becomes the main dish. In Rodrigo's words, 'Es así siempre que la suerte cambia. Suele ser con grotesca comicidad' (208). Bakhtin maintains that in the popular-festive system of imagery, 'Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage'.³⁷ In *Sopa de caracol*, however, the protagonist and his former ideals are ultimately devoured. Rodrigo exclaims in anguish, 'El costo social de la revolución. ¿Qué tal el costo ético y social?' (266). Bakhtin also asserts that the process of degradation symbolically marked by a shift in focus to the lower stratum of the body implies a rebirth. He states: 'To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place'.³⁸ If

³⁶ Arias, 'An Interview with Arturo Arias', 32.

³⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 281.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

Rodrigo's *machista* sexuality symbolizes the life force of his utopian project in *Sopa de caracol*, there is clearly no chance that the revolution will be reborn. The shift in power from Rodrigo to his female guests, however, suggests that a new utopian project must ultimately emanate from outside of the traditional left in order to present a new paradigm. Guatemala's utopia, as presented in *Sopa de caracol*, is no longer in the hands of the new left of the 1960s.

Conclusion

Ludic explosions correspond with moments of rupture in society.³⁹ As illustrated in this study, the playful nature of *Sopa de caracol* also corresponds with a moment of rupture in Guatemalan culture. After several decades of violent struggle without victory, the revolutionary cause of the new left's guerrillas had come to an end. *Sopa de caracol*, written between 1993 and 1997, was created during the end of what Arias refers to as Guatemala's holocaust.⁴⁰ The failure of the revolution necessitated the reformulation of the left's utopian project. According to Arias, the magnitude of changes such as the end of the guerrilla cycle and transformations in the international economic order have obliged the Latin American intellectual to rethink the space of subjectivity. This is the plane, he asserts, in which ideologies are constituted and from which literature emerges to restructure meaning.⁴¹ The dynamic of change described here by Arias supports Morales's assertion that Guatemalan intellectuals must reformulate a new utopia. In *Sopa de caracol*, this process is represented symbolically through the identity transformation of Rodrigo.

The elements of play in this novel indicate an attempt to subvert and transcend previous modes of intellectual thought.⁴² Ludic humour's desacralizing effect pervades *Sopa de caracol*.⁴³ The word play in Arias's text produces a comic effect when juxtaposed with the serious discourse of the revolution. His novel is based upon the central irony, embodied in the protagonist's photographic pose, that the

³⁹ Burke, *The Games of Poetics*, 31.

⁴⁰ Arias, 'An Interview with Arturo Arias', 34.

⁴¹ Arias, *La identidad de la palabra*, 11-12.

⁴² As Burke maintains, 'All forms of play [. . .] contain an element of transcendence in that they provide momentary escape from ordinary perception and existence'. Burke, *The Games of Poetics*, 34.

⁴³ Renato Prada Oropeza has demonstrated through his reading of Mexican avant-garde fiction that ludic humour has a desacralizing effect. Renato Prada Oropeza, 'Texto y proyección: los relatos de Arqueles Vela', in *El estridentismo: memoria y valoración*, SEP 80/50 (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983), 159-75 (p. 166).

revolution was not what it appeared to be. In this postmodern novel, the dinner conversation about the photo provides an opportunity for the protagonist to reflect in ironic fashion on the modern project of the revolution. Through the use of carnivalesque humour, the revolutionary becomes the object of playful parody. Ultimately, ludic humour and situational irony are interwoven into a carnivalesque system of imagery.

Together, these ludic elements create the work's subversive aesthetic. The final image in *Sopa de caracol* of Rodrigo's guests laughing at him as he lies humiliated on the floor exemplifies the text's subversive nature. Just as the protagonist wishes to dissociate himself from his revolutionary past, Arias's novel undermines the metanarrative of the revolution, and thus implies that Guatemala must seek an alternative utopian project.