"A Bewitched Reality: Narrating the Hacienda System in Rosario Castellanos’ *Balún Canán*

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*A Bewitched Reality*

In an early scene in *Balún Canán* (1957), Rosario Castellanos’ semi-autobiographical novel set in 1930s Chiapas, a seven-year old ladina or European-identified girl watches with glee as indigenous servants unload a cornucopia of agricultural products brought from her family’s remote hacienda: “Es una fiesta cada día que vienen a casa los indios de Chactajal. Traen costales de maíz y de frijol; atados de cecina y marquetas de panela” (15). Her father receives the Indians in the hallway of the house, speaking to them in Tzeltal from a reclined position in his hammock. But as so often is the case in this novel, this cozy scene of provincial girlhood quickly gives way to something much more disturbing, even horrific. In the kitchen, the little girl’s indigenous nanny shows lifts up her tzec (skirt) to reveal an open wound on her leg, “una llaga rosada, tierna, que le desfigura la rodilla” (15). The nanny or *nana* explains that the *brujos* or witches at Chactajal had placed a curse on her for her loyalty to the landowners, “los que mandan.” Peeking back into the hallway, the little girl is able to see her father in a new light. She sees him as if ‘por primera vez. Es el que manda, el que posee’ (16). Unable to stand this new knowledge, she runs back into the kitchen to seek refuge in her nana’s warm lap. But herein lies the horror: the girl now knows that to seek comfort in her nana is, literally, to grind into her open wound, “una llaga que nosotros le habremos enconado” (16).

With scenes as powerful as this, it is easy to see why critics have focused on two main themes in *Balun Canan*: first, the extraordinary self-awareness of the little girl as she grows into maturity, along the lines of the *bildungsroman*; and second, the intimate and yet vexed
relationship between the ladina (European-identified) girl and her nana, as she is (partially) incorporated into a world of indigenous stories, myths and beliefs.¹ My reading in this essay seeks to address how the novel’s imagery and form mediates material social relations: namely, the dominant system of forced indigenous labor on large ladino-owned estates in Chiapas. The individual story of development posited by the bildungsroman, that is, cannot be considered separately from the larger story of material development (and underdevelopment) in Chiapas; likewise, narratives of transculturation and textual hybridity cannot be separated from the hacienda system and its particular form of forced indigenous labor on large, ladino-owned estates.

In the spirit of this special issue of *JLACS*, dedicated to a rethinking of the legacies of dependency and development in Latin American(ist) criticism, I offer a reading of *Balún Canán* that aims, first, to reassert the centrality of modes of production as sites of mediation for literary texts; and, second, to re-inscribe peripheral locales such as mid-twentieth century Chiapas into the history of global capitalist modernity in order to examine how literary texts encode that system.

More specifically, I focus on the forms of magic and witchcraft that hail from setting of uneven and combined development. As I explore in this essay, the hacienda system is a site of what Sylvia Wynter has called a “bewitched reality” to name the forms of enchantment that emerge in plantation societies in the Caribbean, not from isolated folk beliefs, but from peripheral societies’ uneven and unequal articulation with world capitalism. In her 1971 essay “Plot and Plantation,” Wynter writes: “(O)ur societies were both cause and effect of the emergence of the market economy; an emergence which marked a change of such world

¹ For readings of *Balún Canán* as a feminist bildungsroman, see Lagos, Ahern, and O’Connell. For readings of the novel that focus on indigenous source texts and legends, see Lienhard, Crumley de Pérez and Martínez-San Miguel.
historical magnitude, that we are all, without exception still ‘enchanted’, imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality” (95). Or as Mike Niblett, in dialogue with Wynter, puts it, plantation societies are home to an “unreal reality produced by the socioeconomic pressures of the plantation regime and the disjunctive, alienated relationship to the land it installs” (59).

*Balún Canán*, I argue throughout this essay, captures a similar ‘bewitched reality,’ one that while more peripheral and isolated than the Caribbean sugar plantation nonetheless registers the ‘uneven and combined’ character of development in Chiapas, and the simultaneously modern and backward, and isolated and integrated character of the hacienda system. To return to the scene discussed above, it is not accidental that the girl’s moment of self-awareness comes from a veiled recognition of the relations of production that structure the hacienda system, and the horror it engenders. The knowledge of how the beans, corn and sugar loaves came to the house—which should be straightforward enough under conditions of bound labor—is rendered magical and mysterious through an indigenous curse. But is the curse itself “indigenous”? Not wholly, because it is the system of production—itself experienced as unnatural and diabolical by indigenous people—that generates the magic. Moreover, the girl seems to sense that her own class, the landowning oligarchy in Chiapas, is the real cause of the curse, intuitions that her own comfort depends upon the constant irritation of her nanny’s open wound. This situation is at once untenable and, for the little girl at this moment, unimaginable any other way.

And yet change is in the air, as conflicts taking place at the hacienda filter their way into the girl’s consciousness in the first part of the novel. In a scene following the one discussed above, she catches sight of an agonizing Indian laborer who has been brought from the hacienda to the city house, his arm nearly severed from his body with a machete. Later, while at Church,
the little girl screams when she sees a crucifix because it looks just like the bloodied Indian brought to the house. Beyond associations of Christ-like sacrifice to the landowners (the group that introduced and enforces Catholicism among Indians as a mechanism of dispossession and social control), this scene continues to mark the hacienda as the organizing principle of reality in this social context. For it is not, as we might expect, that the little girl sees the Indian and remembers Christian imagery; instead, she sees a figure of Christ and remembers the macheted Indian laborer from the hacienda. In symbolic terms at least, it is the world of the hacienda that provides the ground for the little girl’s interpretation of the world. Just as an ‘indigenous’ curse provides a language for a system of production, so too does Catholic gore provide an image of the hacienda as a site of horror.

That the hacienda should provide the center of the girl’s world becomes even more compelling once we take stock of the immediate historical context of the novel: the land and labor reforms inaugurated under the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas; namely, the 1937 reform to the Agrarian Code, which stipulated that indigenous peons on estates had the right to claim access to land, even that on haciendas. As Balún Canán shows, this threat shook landowning elites—accustomed to unfettered access to indigenous land and labor—to the core. Rosario Castellanos’ immediate family—powerful landowners in the region since the mid-nineteenth-century Reforma—lost their estates (at least temporarily) during this period, and relocated in near penury to Mexico City, where Rosario became a prominent poet, novelist and feminist intellectual.

Curiously, while critics have been apt to remark upon Balún Canán as a feminist bildungsroman or kunstleroman, culminating in the girl narrator’s and self-possession, very little has been said about how the novel deals with actual regimes of property and labor. This critical
oversight is important not the least because of ongoing struggles over land and resources in
Chiapas, most powerfully represented by the Zapatista uprising in 1994. But we need not look to
the future to understand why the hacienda and its system of production is important to *Balún
Canán*, for the entire novel is organized around this system. As seen from the examples above,
the hacienda system functions as the baseline of social existence in the novel; any threat to
change or reform it will cause an irrevocable break in how the world can be perceived and
represented. The seven-year-old narrator sees a world not simply from a perspective of youth
and innocence, then, but from a perspective of a member of the landowning class whose world
seemed on the verge of disappearing.

In these and other instances in *Balún Canán*, the center of economic production—the
hacienda—is grasped as the dark ‘heart’ of social reality during moment of crisis for the
landowning class. The centrality of the hacienda in *Balún Canán* is most powerfully embedded
in the novel’s (notoriously) disjointed form: Parts 1 and 3 are narrated by the seven-year-old girl
from the provincial city of Comitán. By contrast, Part 2—the long mid-section of the novel—is
narrated omnisciently, and takes place on Argüello family’s remote hacienda, Chactajal. The
transition takes place when the little girl, upon arriving to the estate, is lulled to sleep by an
indigenous woman at Chactajal. During this figurative slumber, the novel abruptly shifts terrain
to narrate growing indigenous unrest on the hacienda, sparked by the Cárdenas reforms,
culminating in burning of the hated sugar mill. In part III, the novel returns to the girl’s first-
person narration in Comitán, where her brother Mario dies after the nanny predicts that he is
being “eaten” by the witches at Chactajal.

Since publication in 1957, critics have puzzled over and criticized this curious form,
earning even the apologies of the author herself.\(^2\) But as Jean Franco notes in an insightful 1975 essay on dependency theory and Latin American literature, the “mysterious oddness” (66) that marks the region’s literary works simply looks like an aesthetic defect until we are able to understand how these works express conditions produced by the world capitalist system in peripheral locales: “At the very least, the dependency model suggests the possibility of regarding American and European culture as a relationship, as "intertextuality" of a very special kind” (67).\(^3\) In like manner, the “odd” structure of \textit{Balún Canán} acquires meaning given the specific conditions of uneven and combined development in mid-twentieth-century Chiapas.

First, the remote hacienda—and not the town, as we might expect—forms the “center” of social reality as the site of economic production, a truth thrown into relief by the looming threat (for the landowning class) of land and labor reform. Along similar lines, the hacienda—and not the town—is the place where history is happening. Here it is relevant to note that while the first and third parts of the novel take the form of impressionistic vignettes, the second part reads more like a historical novel. And the force of the history unfolding on the estate has the power to interrupt the first-person narrative that begins the novel, literally splicing it into two parts. With this short discussion I mean to show that history creates its own formal necessities, which are meaningful in their own right as expressions of modernity from a peripheral locale. The uneven structure of \textit{Balún Canán} becomes even more meaningful when we consider the novel’s shifting and disjointed narrative registers, which as I argue below, are modeled on a specific history of uneven and combined development in Chiapas.

\(^2\) In an interview with Emmanuel Carballo, Castellanos states: “La estructura desconcierta a los lectores. Hay una ruptura en el estilo, en la manera de ver y de pensar. Esa es, supongo, la falla principal del libro. Lo confieso: no pude estructurar la noveal de otra manera” (qtd in Tarica, p. 141).

\(^3\) Along these lines, Roberto Schwarz, of course, has dedicated much of his career to examining how the importation of European literary models into peripheral social contexts created meaningful dislocations and ruptures in literary forms. See Schwarz, \textit{A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism}. 
Uneven and Combined Narration: Seeing Like a Sugar Mill

At the literal and figurative center of the novel, then, stands the hacienda and its system of production, bookended on both sides by a first-person narrative from the perspective of a girl in Comitán. At the center of the hacienda, in turn, stands the sugar mill or trapiche, the instrument of production that acquires significance on levels of both plot and narrative form. As an instrument of production, the sugar mill emerges in the second part of the novel as a metonym for uneven and combined development, and, as such, a model for “uneven and combined” forms of narration that attempt to grasp the larger history of the estate.

We are introduced to the sugar mill in the second part of the novel by none other than the landowner and patriarch himself, César Argüello (the father of the girl narrator of parts I and III, and modeled on Rosario Castellanos’ father Ernesto). César is giving a tour to his bastard nephew Ernesto, whom he has invited to Chactajal in order to comply nominally with the law that all haciendas must provide schooling to its indigenous workers. César points to the corrals his grandmother Josefa had built, then to the decrepit indigenous huts or jacales. In the process, he casually tells stories of ancestors who whipped Indians in the morning, “para terminar de desapabilarlos.” In equally offhand fashion, he offers his nephew sexual access to any of the indigenous women he might fancy, noting that many of the half-nourished children running around had been fathered by him. Though in offhand manner, beatings and rape are identified as veritable foundations of the social order of the hacienda, past and present.

What César really wants to show Ernesto, however, are the canefields and sugar mill, centerpieces of the estate. “‘Aquél,’” he says, pointing at a hulking mass, “‘es el trapiche.’ Bajo un cobertizo de teja estaba la máquina, del modelo más antiguo, de las que todavía se mueven
por tracción animal” (84). Here, the sugar mill is represented as inert and antiquated, one that still operates by animal traction. We have support, up until now, for a characterization of César as a feudal lord, the most common understanding of this character (and, by extension, the social structure in Balún Canán). The estate he runs with personalistic control relies upon forced, not free labor; much of the production is destined for his own household’s consumption, not distant markets; and, as the sugar mill attests, it is undercapitalized. And yet some qualifications are necessary. Sugar is the linchpin of the estate, a cash crop that, we learn later from plot details, is sold in Comitán to make cane alcohol. And while it is true that the decrepitude of the sugar mill points to the dearth of capital investment, as well as to César’s seeming lack of interest in making improvements, we learn that this is not entirely the case. For as he explains, there is a good reason why he still uses the mill: “Naturalmente que César había oído hablar de aparatos más modernos, más rápidos Los había visto en sus viajes. Pero como éste aún daba buen rendimiento, César no veía ningún motivo para cambiarlo” (84). It is not that César doesn’t know or care that there are other ways he might manage production on his estate: he has traveled the world, after all, and seen how things are done in more cosmopolitan locales (in other moments we learn that he studied in Paris as a young man, and orders seeds from catalogues from the United States). Instead, he (at least according to his own narrative) actively chooses to retain his old mill, not because because he doesn’t care about productivity, but because it still makes him a profit. The reason, upon reflection, is quite simple: there is enough available indigenous labor around to offset the low productivity of the old machine. “En caso de necesidad puede engancharse un indio” (84). César is referring here to the practice of pressing indigenous labor into work by advancing them a wage, essentially a form of debt bondage. In addition to baldiaje, by which Indians dispossessed of land were forced to work for the landowner several
days a week in exchange for access to small plots (a practice referenced repeatedly in Balún Canán), enganche encodes the basic truth of the hacienda: the creation of surplus depends on the landowner’s unfettered access to stolen land and forced labor. This is precisely why Revolutionary land reforms and worker rights (education, but the right to a wage and to own land), is experienced as a looming disaster to the landowning family.

As a landowner, César Arguello is simultaneously a feudal lord, exercising brute control over land, labor and bodies, as well as an agricultural businessman interested in turning a profit, however modest. Put alternately, he is a feudal lord in a bourgeois world, which, as dependency theorists have argued, forces us to reconsider what feudalism means in the first place when applied to Latin America. He—and by extension Chactajal—does not live in a moment prior to capitalist modernity, nor does he exist completely outside of the realm of capitalist accumulation, even as the mode of production on the estate itself remains non-capitalist. In this manner, the sugar mill, and by social world evoked in Balún Cánan, is perhaps most productively approached as a site of what the Marxist tradition has called ‘uneven and combined development,’ wherein capitalism both transforms and preserves non-capitalist modes of production in its midst. In a literary vein, we can insist, with Fredric Jameson, that literary modernisms unfold within a “singular modernity,” even when the registrations of that modernity are, along the warped tracks of uneven and combined development, incredibly variegated and multi-faceted. Inspired by

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4 In Leon Trotsky’s “law of uneven and combined development,” capital is unable to fully subsume communities in an even and predictable fashion, allowing pre-capitalist modes of production to persist within and alongside capitalism. For Rosa Luxemburg, the capitalist sector staves off crisis by continually looting from the non-capitalist sector, which is never transformed into the mirror image of capitalist society. Latin American dependency theory, in its treatment of surplus transfers between cores and peripheries, is part of this tradition. But whereas some articulations of dependency theory (such as the early one associated with Andre Gunder Frank) insist that because haciendas were created by world capitalism, they are in essence capitalist, the perspective of uneven and combined development (included in later Althusserian-inspired discussions of ‘articulation’) would point to the coexistence of different modes of production in a single social context. Likewise, we need not insist, with the early Ernesto Laclau, who debating Frank, refused to label contexts without free labor ‘capitalist’ because it rendered Marx’s labor theory of value meaningless. Rather, in the spirit of Harry Harootunian’s re-readings of Marx, we might say that capitalism as a system produces unevenness everywhere and always, in centers and (semi)peripheries alike.
Jameson, as well as by Franco Moretti’s characterization of the world-literary system as “one, and unequal” (itsel fborrowed from world-ystresms analysis), the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) has recently proposed uneven and combined development as an analytical horizon that understands ‘world literature” as “the literature of the capitalist world-system.” Posited within the totality of global capitalism, the uneven and combined character of development allows for the appreciation of “the specific modes of appearance of modernity in different times and places – St. Petersburg in the 1870s, say, Dublin in 1904, rural Mississippi in the 1930s, a village on a bend in the Nile in the Sudan in the 1960s, Bombay in 1975, Glasgow in the 1990s.” (14).

In Balún Canán, one of the specific modes of appearance of uneven and combined development in 1930s Chiapas is the sugar mill, simultaneously antiquated and up-to-date; isolated from and connected to a larger world-system; economically rational, and as we’ll soon see, the site of the production of what Sylvia Wynter calls the “bewitched reality” of monocrop plantations. More importantly, I want to argue, the sugar mill and its operations become a model for narration itself, embedding the history of uneven and combined on the estate into literary form.

In order to make these arguments, I turn now to the remarkable chapter in Balún Canán, not frequently discussed by critics, in which the indigenous peons burn down the sugar mill. This occurs after César, the landowner, cynically thwarts their demands for state-mandated schooling on the estate by placing his half-literate and monolingual nephew Ernesto as a schoolteacher. Ernesto, who hates the Indian children even more than he hates himself for being a bastard, gets drunk and beats the children. The chapter begins by evoking, in a register of oral storytelling, a longer history of indigenous dispossession: “Los que por primera vez conocieron esta tierra dijeron en su lengua: Chactajal, que es como decir lugar abundante de agua” (188).
“Agua donde se miró el mecido ramaje de los árboles. Agua, amansadora lenta de la piedra. Agua devoradora de soles. Todas las aguas no son más que una: ésta, con su amargo presintimiento del mar.” (189). This narrative of origins is immediately undercut, however, by the catastrophe of colonialism: “Los que vinieron después bautizaron las cosas de otro modo. Nuestra Señora de la Salud. Éste era el nombre de los días de fiesta que los indios no sabían pronunciar. Les era ajeno. Como la casa grande. Como la ermita. Como el trapiche” (190).

The passage begins by invoking a linguistic and cultural dispossession, as Spanish names and belief systems are imposed on the indigenous population. The sentence “Les era ajeno” allows the passage to shift gears into the realm of property relations, metonymized by the colonial triad of the master’s house, the chapel and the sugar mill. The Spanish word “ajeno” makes this movement possible, signifying that which is “foreign” and “strange” at the same time as it designates possession by another person. In this manner, the passage tells of a process of enajenación, or alienation, that begins with the imposition of Spanish names and culminates with the imposition of the sugar mill. Castellanos gives us a literary symbolization of what the process of rendering ‘alien’ looks like in a colonial context. The passage encodes recent memories of primitive accumulation, a practice that as Rosa Luxemburg was perhaps the first to note, is not simply a phase that precedes capitalism in Europe (as in Marx’s classic discussion), but instead an ongoing strategy of accumulation, especially in colonial contexts.5 As Joshua Lund notes regarding another scene in part 1 of Balún Canán, in which the landowner’s daughter

5For Luxemburg, the non-capitalist sector functions permanently a site of accumulation for the capitalist sector, as exemplified in her era by the ongoing plunder of Europe’s colonies (46). In Mexico, the history of land-based primitive accumulation remits to the Spanish Conquest, but acquires new dimensions under 19th-century Liberal reforms, first during the period known as the Reforma (when church and indigenous lands were privatized under the Ley Lerdo of 1856), and then on a massive scale during the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). Indeed, the historian Maria del Carmen Legorreta notes that the Castellanos family, members of whom had been administrators on church estates, rose to prominence as landowners in the Ocosingo region of Chiapas the mid-nineteenth century as they acquired vast tracts of land and access to forced indigenous labor through the baldiaje system. Across Mexico, the scale of dispossession was so massive that it became a central plank of the 1910 Revolution (supported by peasant armies), reaching its apex in the Lázaro Cárdenas era (1934-40).
finds an indigenous testimony marking the successive generations of Argüellos at Chactajal, “(t)he origin of the tribe is nothing more nor less than the secret of primitive accumulation, the ongoing violence exacted against their existence…In other words, for Castellanos, indigenous identity always emerges, indeed, can emerge only from this historical trauma” (81).

I want to continue to examine how the historical and ongoing violence of primitive accumulation expresses itself as novelistic form in *Balún Canán*, especially with respect to the last piece of property mentioned in the triad above: the sugar mill. Still employing a collective indigenous storytelling mode, the omniscient narrator notes that the ladinos who came to Chactajal measured and fenced the land, placing the big house on a hill and the chapel “al alcance de sus ojos”. For the sugar mill, meanwhile, “calcularon una distancia generosa que fue cubriendo, un año añadiendo al otro año, la expansion del cañaveral (190). The logics of enclosure and social discipline the ladinos put in place are revealed to support the logic of expansion represented by continuously growing cane fields. The linchpin of the hacienda, the sugar mill “pesó sobre la tierra después de haber pesado sobre el lomo vencido de los indios. Su mole se asentó, resguardada de la intemperie, por un cobertizo de tejas ennegrecida…” (190). With this, we can begin to grasp the literal and figurative weight of the sugar mill at Chactajal, as a concrete material referent for a whole system of indigenous exploitation by ladinos. At the same time, even as the narrative voice zeroes in on this object, it remains covered, and inscrutable in its massiveness.

This inscrutability deepens as the sugar mill is described as a fixed presence, “mudo, quieto como un ídolo, mirando crecer a su alrededor la caña que trituraría entre sus mandíbulas” (190). *Baín Canán* is a novel full of references to indigenous curses and witchcraft; but here, in a section narrated by a collective indigenous voice, it is not an indigenous object but rather a
modern apparatus of production that is coded as an ‘idol.’ Here it is useful to recall the scene discussed at the opening of this essay, in which the little girl narrator, viewing crops from the hacienda parade into her home in the provincial city. In that scene, the little girl was able to understand that the hacienda was a source of exploitation, even as this exploitation remained veiled through an indigenous curse. The scene describing the imposition of the sugar mill, by contrast, brings us closer to the system of production on the hacienda, at the same time as its representation as ‘idol’ opens onto the irreducible mystery of this system. Significantly, this mystery is not encoded through an indigenous curse, but rather through the diabolical relations of production engendered by the sugar mill.

But why should the sugar mill, rather than ‘solving’ the mystery of colonial production, be seen as an ‘idol’? In The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in Latin America, Michael Taussig has shown how indigenous belief systems, particularly understandings of evil, transmorphed into stories about commodity production. In a re-reading of Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish, Taussig shows how in South American mines and plantations, the devil pact became a particularly powerful way in which subjugated people could understand their separation (alienation) from the commodities they produced. And what could be more diabolical than the constant ‘sacrifice’ of indigenous workers, generation after generation, to a mutely voracious sugar mill that demands labor and cane, ceaselessly and without end? Here again the context of uneven and combined development, or the coexistence of different modes of production, must be taken into account to fully appreciate the uniqueness of Castellanos’ representation of the mill. For from the standpoint of the indigenous agricultural economy, sugar emerges as the diabolical counterpart to maize as the basis of indigenous agricultural systems. While maize is produced to

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6 In José Eustacio Rivera’s novel La vorágine, rubber is also referred to as a “black idol,” generating some of the same connotations as the sugar mill in Balún Canán. For a discussion of Rivera’s representation of rubber commodity fetishism, see Beckman (2013).
feed the tribe, sugar is produced for exchange on a wider market; and while maize is consumed locally, sugar is sent away from the hacienda, never to be seen again. Here we are able to see why the sugar mill, as an instrument of production, acquires fetishistic properties, as a visible referent for a wider market system whose coordinates are unavailable from the standpoint of the hacienda. Magic, that its, springs directly from the sugar mill, and not from the wider system of production to which this instrument belongs. This, I think, is the origin of the “bewitched reality,” to recall Wynter’s phrase once more, of the hacienda system in *Balún Canán*, which, as I’ll discuss later, is itself expressed through an indigenized idiom of sorcery and curses.

But for now, I want to focus on the mill as an “idol” of production, accorded the ability to see, as it “watches” the canefields around it grow. The sugar mill, in accordance with its status as a fetish, acquires animated properties; it is also, importantly, accorded a kind of objectivity that, I argue below, serves as a model for narrative omniscience in the novel.

In order to make this argument, let us return to the scene above to note that immediately after describing the sugar mill in a continuous historical past (“Y el trapiche permanecía allí, mudo, quieto como un ídolo, mirando crecer a su alrededor la caña que trituraría entre sus mandíbulas.”), the narrative voice enacts an abrupt shift in temporality and tone: “Pero el día de su actividad se desperezaba con un chirrido monótono, mientras a su alrededor giraban dos mulas viejas, vendadas de los ojos, y en el cañaveral los indios ondeaban sus machetes, relampagueantes de velocidad entre las filudas hojas de la caña. (190-191). Here the sugar mill, and more specifically the sugar mill’s *gaze*, brings into relation the past and the “present” of Chactajal. Likewise, the indigenous storytelling mode that tells the history of Chactajal morphs here into the all-seeing gaze of realist omniscience, which narrates the action on a specific day. In a dazzling rhetorical display, the sugar mill is the agent and initiator of this process: the shift
to narrate the scene of work taking place in the present is signified by the springing into action of the sugar mill, with its “monotonous squeal.” We see and hear the previously ‘mute’ idol as it shifts into high gear. On one level, the sugar mill “awakens” to direct and watch over the working day in the fields. On another, deeper level, that of form, the sugar mill’s all-seeing power at least temporarily takes over the narrative voice in the form of a radically objective omniscience.

As if inspired by the sugar mill’s power of omniscience, the narrative voice sheds the indigenous storytelling mode outlined above to adopt a perspective closer to the one associated with European realism, characterized by (an always deceptive) neutrality and objectivity. As the sugar mill springs into action, it conditions an abrupt shift in temporality, as we are transported from the long story of colonial exploitation, into the immediate present: a single working day on the estate. Suddenly, we are given access to a scene in which Indians and then take their posol; the landowner, meanwhile, “los observaba desde lejos, bien resguardado del sol vertical de esa hora.” (191). Remarkably, the effect of this passage is not simply that we see the landowner exercising his function of vigilance. Rather, the narrator allows the reader to observe the landowner and his Indian workers from a distance.

The representation of the sugar mill in this chapter, then, enacts a radical break, inscribing the particular context of uneven and combined development into literary form. The agency of sugar mill interrupts an indigenous mode of storytelling, introducing a principle of realist omniscience we associate with the European novel. In like manner, the sugar mill introduces a different temporal scheme, interrupting a longer history of colonization and exploitation to focus on a single day of work on the estate. In this manner, the sugar mill is simultaneously a bridge between different temporalities and ways of seeing, at the same time as
it marks a sundering, much in the way as the sugar mill functions as a material referent for the dispossession of indigenous people by ladino landowners that continues into the novel’s present. In this sense, the sugar mill becomes a metaphor for the production of the narrative itself, gathering the raw material of colonial history within its jaws to spit out a new story.

The fact that the sugar mill seems to take over narration in the section discussed suggests its unique power as an instrument of production on the hacienda. But why exactly does the sugar mill become a model for omniscient narration? Most obviously, this omniscience has to do with the system of vigilance and minute control the production process of sugar implies. Forced labor, time-sensitivity of the cutting of the cane, boiling. (this is what makes Eric Williams and Sidney Mintz, among others, argue that the sugar plantation of the Caribbean is the laboratory for the European factory). Readers might object: we are not in the world of the nineteenth-century Caribbean sugar factory, but on a small-scale hacienda, where, we learn in different plot details, sugar is sold on the domestic market to make cane alcohol. And yet, still needs this vigilance and discipline. In like manner, even though we are not in a full-scale plantation producing the global market, the omniscience accorded to the sugar mill in *Balun Canan* on some level owes to this instrument’s special access to the vast totality of market relations into which the hacienda is (unevenly and incompletely) incorporated. Linchpin of production, it is the apparatus that connects the hacienda to the outside world.

In *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti makes the provocative claim that in Balzac’s *Comedie Humaine*, one of the classic representatives of nineteenth-century European realism, “the place of omniscience…resembles not a registry but a bank” (137). What I understand Moretti to be saying here is that the bank—an amalgam of social relations that assume a phantom [^7]

[^7]: The historian Aaron Bowbrow-Strain describes how cane liquor made on large estates in Chiapas was consumed mainly by lowland coffee plantation workers in the form of an advanced wage, what he calls, playing on Lenin’s phrase, the “cane liquor road to capitalism.”
objectivity in the form of money—serves as a principle of all-knowingness in Balzac’s novels. In this manner, omniscience is itself made possible by the vast and always unknowable totality that is capitalism, represented in Balzac’s fiction through the figure of the bank. The origins of omniscience, in line with Moretti’s Lukacsian interpretation, are inscribed in a gesture toward knowing that vast totality, an effort that necessarily always falls short. Perhaps, along similar lines, the place of omniscience in Balún Canán, set in a context uneven and combined peripheral development is not a bank, but the sugar mill. The sugar mill, even though antiquated and creaky, is the instrument that connects the hacienda to outside markets: the mill was brought from afar, and its finished product travels from the hacienda to more distant markets. It is for this reason, I think, that the representation of the sugar mill turns on its ability to see, followed by the narrative’s own adoption of an (ostensibly) neutral and distant perspective. This neutrality, I hasten to add, is not simply a ruse: for the sugar mill, in this context, is an instrument that simultaneously represents the direct and violent coercion of indigenous laborers and the impersonality of the larger market system of which the hacienda forms a part.

The sugar mill thus acts as a model for the heightened powers of seeing acquired by the narration as it shifts from an indigenous-storytelling mode to the putatively neutral gaze of realist omniscience. In keeping with the radical narrative instability of Balún Canán, the narrative principle shifts once again to narrate the climax of this chapter: the burning of the sugar mill by indigenous peons.

The voice of realist omniscience inspired by the all-seeing sugar mill brings us into a single day of life in Chactajal: We, as readers, see—like the sugar mill watching the cane fields and the landowner watching his workers—from a distance. As the Indians take their posol, “silence” and “calm” reign. Then, suddenly, the first flames erupt. With this, it is no longer the
sugar mill with its all-seeing vigilance that serves as a model for the narrative voice, but the unruly and ‘savage’ properties of fire as it spreads through the hacienda. We continue to see events unfold from a distance: César tries to keep his workers at their posts, whipping them as they, then his own horse, escapes from the rapidly spreading fire. But the cultivated neutrality of this narrative voice does drop away, as it shifts to describe in graphic detail the agony suffered by animals consumed by flames. The two mules that power the mill have no choice but to continue to run in circles around it; after the first drops dead, “la otra siguió corriendo, arrastrando aquel peso muerto al que estaba unida, todavía una vuelta más” (193). The fire itself becomes a “roja bestia de exterminio,” killing all in its path. A calf tries to escape the flames by throwing itself into a barbed-wired fence, “arrancándose la piel en cada esfuerzo por libertarse, mugiendo, con los ojos desorbitados, hasta que un llamear súbito vino a poner fin a su agonía” (193). Cattle drown in the river, their bloated bodies floating downstream. Here is another moment in which the sugar mill conditions narrative voice in Balún Canán, this time to announce its destruction. If the moment of vigilance by the sugar mill introduces a principle of cool narrative distance into the text (a distance I have argued that is linked to the unknowable totality of market relations), its destruction by fire introduces a principle of spectacular excess and irrationality.

The culmination of the scene of indigenous resistance is expressed through a narrative register inspired not by the sugar mill but by fire itself. On the one hand, this final scene conjures most elemental powers of resistance: destruction of the hated instrument of production that has alienated them from land, subjected them to horrors of near slavery. Not for nothing in numerous slave rebellions in Caribbean, the first thing destroyed was the sugar mill. But the image of a burning plantation cuts both ways, and at least since the Hatian Revolution (and in Chiapas, since the nineteenth-century “Caste Wars”) a burning plantation also functions as a
projection of landowner fears and fantasies. In this sense it is important to examine the precise way in which this fire is conjured and imagined as a ‘savage,’ uncontrollable, unstoppable force, as Castellanos comes uncomfortably close to representing indigenous rebellion itself as chaotic and pre-political. In short, Castellanos seems to slip into a landowner ideology rooted in what Subcomandante Marcos has called “el fantasma de la barbarie indígena” (9).

And yet Castellanos, as Joshua Lund has noted, is “cagey,” and difficult to pin down. For she is fully aware, or, perhaps, unaware that she is aware, that the destruction of the sugar mill does indeed function as a landowner fantasy in Balún Canán, at least on a structural level. Let us remember, as Estelle Tarica reminds us, that the section of the novel in which the indigenous peons rebel and burn the sugar mill takes place as an indigenous woman at Chactajal lulls girl narrator of part I to sleep, saying: “Duerme ahora. Sueña que esta tierra dilatada es tuya, que esquilas rebaños numerosos y pacíficos; que abunda las cosechas en los trojes. Pero cuida de no despertar con el pie cogido en el cepo y la mano clavada contra la puerta. Como tu sueño hubiera sido una iniquidad” (72). The cozy bedtime story turns into a horror story. Its contours are formed by what ladinos, as a class, fear most: an overturning of the master/slave dialectic that would result in the same methods of punishment—the stocks found on every hacienda—used against indigenous workers being used against ladinos themselves. The image of a hand ‘clavada contra la puerta’ conjures the deep-seated fear on the part of ladinos of being trapped, surrounded by the people they have dispossessed. 8 This prophecy is, in essence, a ladino version of what ‘expropriation of the expropriators’ (Marx) would look like: on a formal level, because announced as the girl falls into slumber, it introduces the possibility that what happens in the rest

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8 This landowner fantasy of being surrounded and trapped becoming reality is vividly captured in the Peruvian film Kuntur Wachana, made in the aftermath of the Velasco land reforms; its climax records the look of panic and horror on the landowner’s face as he runs to open every door and window of the estate to see crowds of his former indigenous peons, armed with sticks, surrounding the house.
of the novel is in effect the waking nightmare of landowning class on the eve of land and labor reform. Here we get another reading of what the burning of the sugar mill means: it is simultaneously a realistically and omnisciently narrated event (with omniscience itself modeled on the operations of the sugar mill) and a landowner fantasy of indigenous barbarism. On this reading, Europeanized ladino landowners, that is, turn out to be the subjects most imprisoned by the ‘bewitched reality’ of the hacienda system in Balún Canán.

White Magic

The sugar mill, I argued above, generates the bewitched reality of the hacienda; its destruction, in turn, liberates another kind of witchcraft internalized by the threatened ladinos in part III of the novel. After the destruction of the cane crop and probable economic ruin of the Arguellos, the family returns to Comitán, and with this to the perspective of the seven-year-old narrator. César Arguello, accompanied by another landowner, travels to state capital in Tuxtla Gutiérrez to demand the attention of state authorities (which in this moment is not forthcoming). In this moment of economic ruin and absent patriarchal authority, we learn from the narrator’s nanny that the witches at Chactajal—who before limited their maleficence to indigenous servants loyal to landowner—have cursed the sole Argüello son and heir, Mario. The nanny approaches the boy’s mother, Zoraida, sobbing, to tell her; the latter responds by beating the nanny with a comb and casting her from the home, calling her an “india revestida” (228).^9^9

The insult is inapt, not only because it is baldly racist, but because it is ultimately the ladina woman who deep down, internalizes the ‘Indian’ curse as a sign of a particularly ladina—

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^9^ This story, like many in Balún Canán, is rooted in autobiography, the fictionalization of which is significant to the argument I’m making. The way Castellanos recounts the story is that it was an (ostensibly ladina) aunt who prophesized her brother’s death, not an indigenous nanny. In Balún Canán, however, the prophecy is reinvented by the ladina author as an indigenous prophecy that in turn expresses a particularly ladina (and feminine) form of psychosis. See Tarica on this point.
not indigenous—form of psychosis. And indeed, for the rest of the novel, until her son Mario actually does die, no one can convince the mother that the witches are not eating her son. She approaches a Catholic priest for counsel, who complains, in a fury, that members of his congregation bring children to him not to make them Christian, “sino ...para ahuyentar a los nauhales y los malos espíritus” (244). The most important function of Catholic rites, notes the priest, is to ward off the indigenous spirits that ladinos, as Christians, should know better than to believe in. When the priest is unable to convince Zoraida that her only son is not being eaten by witches, she takes Mario, whose health does in fact begins to deteriorate, to a medical doctor. This doctor isn’t much help either: after suggesting that Mario might or might not have appendicitis, he writes a prescription for quinine, pointing to malaria (paludismo) as a possible culprit. Zoraida lets the paper fall to the ground however, having accepted her son’s fate: “No podemos hacer nada. Ni usted ni nadie, doctor. Porque a mi hijo se lo están comiendo los brujos de Chactajal” (265).

Earlier I argued that the hacienda’s bewitched reality emerges from the uneven and combined character of development on the estate, characterized by multiple temporalities and articulated with different modes of production. I want to suggest, in like manner, that the novel’s deployment of witchcraft is yet another expression of that bewitched reality, this time as a specifically ladina fantasy of unbecoming. Whether there are really witches ‘eating’ Mario is not the point, but rather that his mother believes this to be the case. The supposedly archaic and premodern beliefs associated with indigenous people are themselves revealed to be ladino fantasies. This is not to deny that witchcraft is not an important part of indigenous spiritual practice, or that belongs to a genealogy that extends beyond the history of colonialism and forced production on estates. What Balún Canán reveals over and again, however, is that the hacienda
system itself produces distortions that bewitch, imprison and deform. In the case of indigenous people, this logic might be best grasped from the perspective of the diabolical sugar-mill idol to which their bodies and their lands have been sacrificed. And from the perspectives of ladinos faced with the prospect of dispossession in a moment of historical crisis, this logic is most powerfully expressed as a form of witchcraft that seems indigenous but is in fact a projection of ladino fantasies of indigenous barbarism and revenge. ¹⁰

Wither the self?

Under such circumstances of bewitchment, superstition and delusion, how is the ladina female self to develop? Here we must remember that *Balún Canán* is among other things, a bildungsroman, which as noted above is literally divided in two by events taking place at the hacienda. More specifically, the bildungsroman is spliced open by the looming threat of state intervention that transmorphs into an indigenous rebellion, precipitating the symbolic decline of the landowning class to which the girl belongs.

I say symbolic, because notwithstanding the very real fear that gripped this class—powerfully captured in *Balún Canán*—the Cárdenas reforms was largely unsuccessful in breaking up large estates or in redistributing land to dispossessed indigenous peasants in Chiapas. [[one historian writes: only 2 years, and in retreat…]] And as the historian María del Carmen Legorreta writes, in 1950, a decade after the reforms, over 50% of the population in Ocósingo (the region of Chiapas where the Castellanos family was dominant) remained in bondage on large estates. The final death knell of this system occurred, she maintains, between

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¹⁰ In another essay, I provide a more detailed analysis of ladina fantasies of indigenous revenge, arguing that the indigenous beliefs structures referenced in the novel, particularly the *dzulūm*, a shape-shifting creature who eats sheep and carries off ladina women, are in fact a projection of ladino fears and anxieties in a moment of historical crisis.
1970 and 1994; only then was landowner hegemony shaken by new round of land reform, the transition to wage labor and finally, the Zapatista uprising. ¹¹

Notwithstanding this class resilience, it is clear from *Balún Canán* that the threat of land reform in the 1930s was a moment of danger that allowed Castellanos to symbolize the monstrous social reality of twentieth-century Chiapas. But the question remains: what are the possibilities of selfhood for the girl narrator whose own story is both sundered and made possible by the hacienda and its horrific system of production?

In the end, the girl will be able to identify neither with members of her own class, nor with her indigenous caretaker. Her mother, we have seen, only cares about the fate of her first-born son, a revelation (rooted in Castellanos’ recollections of her brother’s death) of the girl’s insignificance in a patriarchal system of landed property. At the same time, the resolution of the bildungsroman, when the girl affirms who she really is, comes at the moment in which she disavows her relationship to her nanny. In one of the novel’s most memorable scenes, the girl thinks she sees her nanny on the street after the latter has been cast from home. But the woman she runs up to doesn’t respond, either because she is not really the nanny or because she chooses not to recognize her former charge. At any rate, the girl’s response is devastating, as she explains her mistake to herself by saying, “Todos los indios tienen la misma cara.” Here, as other critics have noted, the girl is seemingly inducted into ruling class racial ideology.

The girl’s dis-identification with her indigenous nanny opens in turn into her final gesture of maturation: after her brother’s death, she takes up a pen and writes her dead brother’s name

¹¹ Even though Rosario Castellanos reports that her father gave away his estates in anticipation of the reforms, relocating to Mexico City, the larger Castellanos family has long remained dominant in Chiapas. Along these lines, one of the first actions by the Zapatistas was to kidnap the general and former governor of Chiapas, Abasalón Castellanos Domínguez (Rosario’s cousin), and try him for the torture and assassination of indigenous activists during his administration. He was later released unharmed.
“Mario” on the wall. This act has been read over and again by critics in the vein of an écriture féminine, revealing the liberatory potential of writing. Taking a less celebratory view, Estelle Tarica, in dialogue with Gayatri Spivak’s critique of bourgeois feminism, has noted that it is not accidental that this expression of selfhood is made possible by the girl’s prior dis-identification with her indigenous nanny. Taking this argument a step further, the novel’s disjointed structure—with parts 1 and 2 spliced by the story of the hacienda—might be read as an attempt to keep separate the story of (pre-political) indigenous rebellion from the story of ladina self-discovery.

The fact that the girl inscribes her brother’s name on the walls is a fundamentally ambiguous gesture. If it is true, as several have already pointed out, that this act of writing marks the symbolic birth of the female self as writer (the ultimate horizon of liberation for many critics), why is this birth is predicated upon the writing of the name of the brother, the heir, “el varón” whose death marks the crisis of the patriarchal system? In one sense, this gesture corresponds with the very real sense of guilt the girl feels in causing her brother’s death: she doesn’t think, like her mother, that Mario was taken not by the brujos, but instead that she had invited punishment by Catashaná (an indigenized referent for the devil) after stealing the keys to the sacristy. If the girl’s inscription of her dead brother’s name on the wall might be read legitimately as one of memorializing a loved one and opening a new space for self-expression, I’d like to propose, by way of conclusion, that it simultaneously marks a passage from a masculine system of landed property to a form of property rooted in the (ladina and female) self. This is a form of selfhood that, on a larger level for Castellanos, promises to break through the bewitched reality that imprisons both Indians and ladinos in the context of uneven and combined development. This kind of selfhood might be read as what CB MacPherson famously referred to
as “possessive individualism” to name a form of property resides in the self. This form of selfhood, it is worth underscoring, only becomes thinkable with the intervention of the Revolutionary Mexican state into Chiapas. In Castellanos’ essay, “El hombre del destino,” in which she thanks Lázaro Cárdenas from saving her from what would have surely been her fate had land reform not forced her family to move to Mexico City: marriage to “a fairly close relative who owned a ranch”; following this, “a child every year,” whose upbringing was “delegated…to the Indian nannies”; a respectable obesity, and, finally, death ‘in the aroma of sanctity.” This, she notes ironically, is the “paradise” she lost “por culpa de Cárdenas.” It is ultimately the modernizing state that opens a way out of the bewitched reality of underdevelopment, for the individual ladina writer as well as for indigenous subjects. Here we might also remember that Castellanos wrote Balún Canán and other works from her so-called “Chiapas trilogy” (the novel Oficio de tinieblas and the stories of Ciudad Real) after returning to the region to work for the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), an institution that attempted to integrate indigenous people into national life after attempts at radical land distribution had ended.12

Notwithstanding Rosario Castellanos’ faith in the modernizing and rationalizing impulse of the Mexican Revolution and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, her novel’s evocation of the intransigence of the hacienda system perhaps reveals the limits of this hope: Balún Canán conjures the threat of land reforms that never really took place, and (perhaps optimistically) imagines the material and psychic undoing of a class that remained in power for decades. In fact, the bewitched reality of hacienda agriculture might only have been given new symbolic contours with the Zapatista uprising of 1994, and with it a new narrative for understanding the history of uneven and combined development in Chiapas.

12 For accounts of Castellanos’ work with the Instituto Nacional Indígena, see Tarica, Lund, and Navarrete Cáceres.
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