

Wasting Away in the *Allá-otro*: Juan Villoro's Narratives of Tourism

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This essay considers three pieces of the Mexican author Juan Villoro's travel writing: the *crónica* *Palmeras de la brisa rápida*, the short story "El crepúsculo maya," and the novel *Arrecife*. While Villoro produces different literary genres in each case, the intertextual trilogy reveals his experiences in Mexico's tourism industry as it shifts from a post-revolutionary to a neoliberal state. The essay describes shared positionailities and attitudes in what can easily be considered a trilogy of misadventures in a commodified Mexico. Villoro's narrative voice reflects on the demise of a nationalistic approach to tourism as global capital assumes the national toward what William Robinson describes as the "intensive and extensive expansion" of the Yucatán peninsula. In each text, the region's history, contemporary sociopolitical struggles, and environmental crises are all co-opted by a floundering resort tourism model that is subsumed by global capital interests. Even in the works of fiction, Villoro ascribes his ironic *cronista* voice to protagonists who, like Villoro himself, operate uncomfortably in this transition point. An analysis of the intertextuality of *Arrecife* with its precursor texts reveals Villoro's own conflicted approach to travel, travelogue, and critiques of tourism.

Juan Villoro's literary imagination varies widely and expertly in theme, location, and historical context, but his work consistently challenges monolithic projections of national identity. Villoro narrates Roger Bartra's "post-Mexican" and Saskia Sassen's "denationalized" conditions, in which constructs of the local and the national are recast by expanding globalization. For Bartra, the post-Mexican condition is a result of gradual but incremented mistrust in Mexican revolutionary nationalism, especially from multiple capitalizing sectors that leveraged their discontent with presidential mismanagement of the 1982 economic crisis to "set off a speculative and rent-seeking euphoria" (79). For Sassen, denationalization is the outcome of increased deregulation and privatization on a global scale (27). Liesbeth François has discussed how these dynamics play out in *El disparo de argón* (1997), in which organ trafficking and managerialist ambition at an eye clinic put on display a decaying nation-state identity (70). Villoro continues to novelize this shift from post-revolutionary familiarity to global commodification in *Arrecife* (2012), whose institutional and globalizing setting is the Pirámide, a massive hotel on a once idyllic coastline of the Yucatán peninsula now damaged by erosion and aggressive offshore oil drilling. The Pirámide is populated by employees and guests who seek consumerist enhancement of a dated pleasure palace by abandoning sedentary

leisure in favor of a more physically and sexually experimental packaging. The state of decay in the Pirámide's more conventional seductions serves as an analogy of post-revolutionary nationalism's failure in the wake of inflation and the devaluation of national currency starting in the 1980's. Likewise, the efforts to reinvigorate the hotel by means of high-risk vacationing alludes to the free market, technocratic turn that followed the economic crisis. *Arrecife*'s various characters are scrutinized by a cynical but defeated protagonist who is a clear *alter ego* of Villoro himself, a traveler not just in commodifying destinations, but in the liberalization of one of Mexico's most expansive and contradictory industries.

For Villoro to write from this position, he must implicate his own post-national qualities. His autobiographical and literary legacy comes up against the edges of what Sassen refers to as the breakable "containers" of the national (39), and they guide many of his narratives about the encounter between self-generated and externally imposed simulacra in Mexican life. As a *cronista*, memoirist, travel writer, and author of complex fiction, Villoro contemplates his and his characters' positionality in a globalized Mexico. His narrative voice reveals a subjectivity adrift in the consequences of redirecting centrist notions and constructions of authenticity assumed by the label of *lo mexicano*. Ash Deborah Cohn describes, this elusive term refers to many of Villoro's cosmopolitanist influences—Fernando del Paso, Carlos Fuentes, Carlos Monsiváis, Sergio Pitol, to name a few—who challenged the nationalistic, and, in their view isolationist, preferences of the post-revolutionary cultural elite (142).¹ The debate also includes seminal contributions by Luis Villoro, Juan Villoro's father (Cohn 153, note 31), who is identified by Ignacio Sánchez Prado as an important voice in the break with the more essentialist proponents of *lo mexicano* (220). In her description of the cosmopolitan turn in mid-twentieth century Mexican literature, Cohn cites tourism as one of the industries in ascension during the economic boom of the Mexican Miracle, industries whose effervescence was mirrored in intellectual spheres by a proliferation of elite literary journals (150). Villoro's tourism narratives likely draw from at least two novelists associated with this phase of *lo mexicano*. Fuentes's *La región más transparente* (1958) momentarily transports its cast of Mexico City *popoff* socialites to an obligatory vacation season in Acapulco, and eventually kills off the Octavio Paz-like Miguel Zamacona there. Luis Spota's *Casi el paraíso* (1967), which traces the maneuvering of an Italian grifter through the same *popoff* society, opens in an heiress's yacht off the Bay of Acapulco, and from there takes the protagonist through a PRI operative's lavish beach properties, and into his familial and political spheres of influence in Mexico City. These plot lines are

1 Ruisánchez and Zavala name these same authors as major influences of Villoro: Fuentes for his redefinition of the urban, Monsiváis for his grounding in contemporary popular culture, Del Paso for his pivotal framing of 1968 in *Palinuro de México*, and Pitol for his ruinous characters (9-13).

written from the authors' access to the spaces of tourism, but they also point toward its problematic relationship with the ascending postrevolutionary nationalism of their time.

In the context of such predecessors, tourism becomes a *de rigueur* exploration for Villoro. A recurring theme in his writing, the travel and tourism industry concentrates labor, real estate, and its related goods and services toward intensified global investment and consumption, and undeniably creates a myopic dependency on the part of local economies and communities. Sergio Molina, author of a 2006 business-administrative monograph titled *El posturismo*, describes that an exponential development of tourism as a global industry took place between 1950 and 1997, when it grew from 25 million tourists to 700 million worldwide (20-21). This same period saw the apex and decline of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the economic crisis of the 1980's, and the emergence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). For authors and actors of the tourism industry like Molina, globalization and its attendant denationalization creates an opportunity for a shift to a managerially focused form of "post-tourism," in which, among other iconic practices, beach lounging is replaced by risky and physically taxing excursions. A principal goal of post-tourism is to make its clientele feel like adventurers who are attuned to the social and environmental struggles of a given region, even as they continue to feed the political economy that generates those circumstances. As this article will demonstrate, *Arrecife* generates a gallery of characters who define and re-define themselves in this industry shift. The Pirámide is filled with guests who want to distinguish themselves as especially intense or knowledgeable vacationers, employees who must either facilitate this desire or become obsolete, and managers who are torn between selling off the outmoded hotel or repackaging it in a post-touristic makeover.

While the decay or demise of the national is assumed in the globalization of industries like post-tourism, it hardly evaporates. As William J. Robinson argues, nationalist constructs—among which I would include the core "Mexicanness" that Villoro's literary predecessors so ardently debated—are not fully discarded by the emergence of a transnational economy. Rather, global investment in property, imagery, and labor deploys the concessional or coercive gestures of nationalism toward a broader accumulation of capital, paired with a more restricted access to it (34-37). The current globalized expansion of Mexican tourism drafts off the post-revolutionary state, represented by the *Secretaría de Turismo*, which thrived during the ascent of the Institutional Party of the Revolution (PRI) and the Miguel Alemán presidency (1946-1952). As Robinson argues, a wave of similar actors and institutions in Latin America eventually facilitated the processes of incentivized deregulation and transnational investment (134). One such case that may well have served Villoro as source material for the fictional Pirámide is the Acapulco Princess Hotel, whose imposing pyramidal design marks a

rupture with the PRI-era emulation of U.S. post-war hotels and resorts. At first glance, both the Princess and the Pirámide seem to monumentalize indigenous referencing in the same way that Juan O'Gorman's "aggressive" architecture sought a reverence for precolonial imagery and iconography as part of the post-revolutionary search for *lo mexicano*, and Octavio Paz's "lost self" (Eggner 5–12). While the Acapulco Princess represents a continuance of the quest for Mexicanness, the hotel also illustrates Robinson's shift to the transnational state, which maintains remnants of a nationalistic economy as a legitimizing gesture. It is no incidental detail that Princess Hotels International separated its magnificent pyramidal hotel and the adjacent Pierre Marqués from the earlier hotel strip in Acapulco, and thereby set the stage for a global-commercial acquisition of an already manufactured national image (Gómez Jara 138). In the offing, the Princess also became the iconic structure of Acapulco's coastline, thereby straddling national coding and global distinctiveness.

On multiple occasions in his travelogues and related prose fiction, Villoro has explored this shift to a transnational capital state, which Robinson describes as the result of "extensive and intensive expansion," in which deregulatory practices allow for global capital investment, accumulation, and the commodification of "public and community spheres that originally lay outside (or buffered from) market relations" (16). Such is the relationship between major tourist zones in the Yucatán peninsula and the surrounding communities that are forced by the industry to orient all their labor, folklore, and natural resources to the destination site. Villoro's experiences of traveling in and around a tourist-commodified Yucatán peninsula, interacting with residents and workers who are funneled into tourism labor by increasing global demand, and writing about it, are illustrated in full relief by *Arrecife*, but in incipient forms by the memoir *Palmeras de la brisa rápida*, first published in 1989 and republished in 2009, and the 2007 short story "El crepúsculo maya," which describes a road trip through Oaxaca and the Yucatán peninsula, in which the characters set out to review area hotels in a road trip gone awry. Together, these narratives examine the contradictory forces that emerge from Robinson's extensive-intensive spheres as they play out in the shift from tourism to post-tourism. Villoro complicates this ongoing discourse by casting himself—or a fictional alter-ego—as both traveler and resident, observer and observed, and, especially in the construction of his protagonists, consumer and consumed. He brings along with him a literary self-consciousness that seeks to rise above the more facile versions of travel and its attendant consumerism, but which doesn't always succeed in wresting itself from the manipulative strategies of the tourism industry.

As a conflicted narrative voice, Villoro enters a discursive space in which actors and structure engage in transcultural play, and in which vertical social discourses are challenged by registers that lay bare a tourism industry that

is leveraging its national simulacra as nodes of global capital investment. Villoro's refusal to simply leave this sphere behind, even when his vast cultural and literary awareness would justify it, vindicates him in some instances as a committed satirist, and in others obligates him to recognize his participation in a Mexico beleaguered by the demands of tourism. He is especially equipped to address the contradictions of globalized projections of the national not only because of his impressive output as an author, but because of his ability to filter journalistic and fiction genres through the multi-modal form of the *crónica*, a genre in which he engages self-consciously, and which he has designated as "the platypus of prose" because it sits at "la encrucijada de dos economías, la ficción y el reportaje" ("La crónica," January 2006). As Villoro recalls, his debut in the *crónica* was in 1979, when he began writing a rock music supplement for the newspaper *Unomásuno*, and he found in the practice relief from the loneliness of the fiction writer (quoted in Masoliver Ródenas 38). For a contemporary *cronista* who is influenced heavily by the engagements with popular spectacle of José Joaquín Blanco, Carlos Monsiváis, and Elena Poniatowska,² this relief is more than an existential one, as it locates the narrative voice within, and not apart from, experiences that are worthy of both admiration and critique. Readers of Villoro's tourism narratives will easily recognize variations of would-be authors and other creative types who seek sustenance and companionship as they adapt their talents to the tourism industry.

As a *crónica* and travelogue, *Palmeras de la brisa rápida* combines family memoir, profiles of local celebrities and luminaries, accounts of regional lore, vignettes of renowned meeting spaces, venues, and sites of interest. In the offing, it addresses the touristic gaze on multiple levels. Villoro's caricatures of visitors, guides, drivers, hotel staff, restaurant goers and owners, and his reflections on of his own presence among them, demonstrate his belief that the travelogue may begin as a form of sustaining the loftier aspirations of a serious writer, but "[e]l principal truco del oficio consiste en transformar esta interrupción de la Obra en una necesidad estética" (quoted in Cantú 395). Villoro thus establishes a reciprocity between his travel writing and his fictional representations of the same or similar destinations, a vital interplay when the reader considers how his personal anecdote in *Palmeras* transfers to the experience of his protagonists and other fictional characters in the same region. Irma Cantú also perceives in Villoro's multi-register literary career a struggle with the unilateral dynamics that one might expect from the more commercial travelogue. According to Cantú, the reader can anticipate from the genre that the travel writer "actúa como el CEO de la otredad" (400), because, through imperialistic, authoritarian, and then neoliberal engagement, they are in the position of determining the

2 In *Voces y voceros de la megalopolis* (2002), Anadeli Bencomo cites these three *cronistas* as representatives of the twentieth century turn in form that leaves behind exclusive forms of nostalgia and confronts popular action and spectacle.

coordinates of the “aquí-hogar (metrópoli, democracia, riqueza)” and the “allá-otro” (periferia, autocracia, pobreza).” The travel writer adopts this center-to-periphery relationship as a means of sustaining the liberal democracy from which they emerge as a representative of stability in the face of the perceived nether-region they are visiting (401). However, in her reading of Villoro’s travel writing, Cantú observes a certain rupture in moving away from the unilateral gazes of the genre and entering Mary-Louise Pratt’s “contact zone,” where colonial and post-colonial encounters generate an uncomfortable exchange (406), uncomfortable at least for a reader who is expecting an easily digestible travelogue.

Palmeras ostensibly conveys an experience of the Yucatán peninsula which should have been easily rendered, given the author’s familial background. As a biological and literary heir to a philosopher father and a psychiatrist mother who reside in Mexico City, and as the grandson of a Spanish entrepreneur who marries into a family that ran an ice cream parlor in Mérida, Villoro seems to ground *Palmeras* in a search for one’s provincial and European roots, but the episodes and vignettes that follow suggest a far less manageable proposition. A supposed exploration of family lineage gives way to the author’s lively but meandering attention span. After a regional-biographical sketch of his grandparents, Villoro drifts from one oddity to the next: the rhetorical and narrative acrobatics of tour guides as they describe Mayan cosmovision, celebrations of baseball culture, or interviews with rock legends. Villoro enjoys privileges of race, class, and education, but he does not exercise the condescending gaze of the “missionary of liberal democracy,” as described by Cantú (399–400). Cantú also finds in his detours and deviations a challenge to the coloniality that defines the Western travelogue in that it destabilizes binaries of center-periphery or native-foreign. In a final passage, Villoro observes how the Yucatán peninsula “se destella y desfigura en las moldes coloniales, se reconstruye en las escalinatas de la gran pirámide, barre al costa con un anuncio de lluvia y aviones de despegue rápido, gira, se disipa, recomienza entre las palmeras despeinadas. El viento que se va, acaba de volver” (*Palmeras* 207). This vertiginous regard of living landscape and intersecting monumentality offers no summary vision to the effect of “go there” or “don’t go there” to the reader who would seek the facile musings of a travel guide. Rather, it promises only eddies of uncertainty in what ought to have been a largely consumable experience.

Villoro next fictionalizes this decentering positionality in “El crepúsculo maya,” which forms part of the 2007 short story anthology, *Los culpables*. While another story gives the collection its title and thematic center, “El crepúsculo” stands out in the author’s (or at least the editor’s) view as emblematic, since a giant iguana, referring to a central figure in the story, splashes the cover artwork. In “El crepúsculo,” Villoro bifurcates the “intersecting economies” of the *cronista* to an unnamed narrator and frustrated poet who recalls his relationship with El Tomate, an old friend who

once worked as a sound engineer for large-capacity and culturally grandiose concerts. El Tomate is now a travel writer who in a non-descript office in Mexico City generates his essays about locations he never visits. Both the narrator and El Tomate had traveled together previously, and they had competed for love interests as well as in the realm of cultural influence. In the central narrative of the story, El Tomate convinces the narrator, who has just won a car in a raffle, to take a fact-finding trip to Oaxaca and the Yucatán peninsula with him. They are accompanied by Karla, a young hipster who has been living platonically with El Tomate. During their journey, the trio adopts an iguana that weaves in and out of their road experience, hiding in the car, disappearing, and reappearing in the small hotels where they stay. The iguana's flightiness and unpredictability suggest the characters' own lack of grounding as travelers, casual intellectuals, and citizens of a tourism-dependent state. By the end of the story, El Tomate has abandoned the narrator and Karla, who initiate a sexual relationship but then separate after the iguana's final departure, and then a car accident that demolishes both the vehicle and the mystique of their road trip. Suggestions of the Tennessee Williams play and the John Huston film, *Night of the Iguana*, certainly apply, but it is also clear that this storyline channels a host of Kerouac-inspired stories and movies that take place in Mexico or depict Mexicans engaged in travel and tourism. Films and television series such as *Y tu mamá también* and *Desenfrenadas* immediately come to mind as contemporary exponents. So does earlier narrative fiction that depicts awkward and conflictive engagements with travel sites of indigenous resonance, such as Carlos Fuentes's *Cambio de piel*, D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, or Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, or, in more complex terms, María Luisa Puga's *Las posibilidades del odio*, in which the author's interrogations of Mexican nationality merge with her experiences in Kenya.³ Villoro's story dialogues easily with these works, but he has also created his own universe of discourse, in which he addresses the many contradictions of space, nationality, and identity borne out in the pursuit of travel experiences.

Both the autobiographical *Palmeras de la brisa rápida* and the fictional, or auto-fictional, "El crepúsculo maya" put in greater relief Villoro's conflicted positionality as a yeoman writer who is equipped with the intellectual agility to enter and exit the unilateral touristic gaze, but who is also forming a critical apparatus to confront it. The structural shift of *Palmeras de la brisa rápida*, in which an atavistic return to the peninsula decenters Villoro from the Mexico City in which his family had resided for years, certainly places him in the contact zone, where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt 34). The journey from Mexico City to the commodified indigeneity of the Yucatán in "El crepúsculo" returns an alter ego of Villoro

³ See Crouse (2018) for an analysis of traveler and tourist positionalities in *Las posibilidades del odio*.

to this “grappling” sphere. While Villoro hardly fits the guise of the subaltern narrator of autoethnography that Pratt describes, there are multiple instances in which Villoro engages a the “aftermath,” in Pratt’s words, of a colonized circumstance (35), in this case the exponential growth and dependence on the tourism industry in Mexico. For example, in the face of the “heritage tourism” that derives from both domestic and foreign consumption of archaeology, history and vistas (Castellanos 243), Villoro does more than simply amuse himself with the variable constructions of Mayan civilizations and cosmovision during facile guided tours of ruins and other cultural institutions. Rather, he overwhelms the reader with the ubiquity of heritage tourism. In one resonant moment of *Palmeras*, he identifies the touristic gaze on the peninsula and its indigeneity as one that emanates from multiple *aquí-hogares* by observing that both a U.S. Midwesterner or an affluent resident of Monterrey would insist that the pyramids could only be the work of extraterrestrials, and not an indigenous culture (105). Similarly, in “El crepúsculo maya,” the ubiquitous chatter of archaeologists who deliver self-styled and conjectural accounts of myths and origins inspires the narrator to observe that they were all “como peces de las profundidades ... Había tantos que resultaba imposible no oír lo que salía de sus cabezas llenas de agua oscura” (73). Through his own voice as a reporting observer or a through a narrator-protagonist, Villoro is present to interrupt the discourses of heritage tourism and bring his reader into an awareness of its reductive and objectifying discourses.

Villoro practices his celebrated ironic asides throughout both these tourism narratives by placing himself amid the industry’s spaces and discourses. In an especially vivid moment of *Palmeras*, he recounts his experience on a bus that included an assortment of tourists en route to Chichen Itzá. The American tourists who join the group include a retired couple and two women from California. Villoro goes out of his way to distinguish between a group of weary Mexican and more broadly Latin American visitors, and the rhetorical jolt delivered by the *gringos* from the Holiday Inn. Where the initial group had resigned itself stoically to the heat, the retirees announce their grievances about the weather openly and loudly, followed by recommendations about how to overcome it. One of the Californians espouses deep breathing, while the patriarch of the retiree couple responds condescendingly to all utterances from his wife and the Californians with, “I see your point.” Throughout these exchanges, Villoro counters the rhetorical imposition with observationist humor. Through a translation and redirection of the expression “into deep breathing,” he explains to the reader that one tourist from California “era aficionada de respirar, y para demostrarlo pegó un suspiro capaz de inflar uno de esos plátanos de hule que son remolcados por lanchas para el *banana-ride*” (103). On the falsely diplomatic practice of seeing everyone’s point, he notes that the retiree’s compatriots “se callaron, felices de que él viera tantos puntos” (103). In a mode that he will repeat in *Arrecife*, Villoro practices multilingualism as a form of critique by

deconstructing and redirecting the outbursts and exclamations of tourists exercising their assumed economic superiority. As the narrative evolves, Villoro describes the addition of a specialized tour guide who attends to the U.S. participants' need for confirmation that Mayans are brilliant only because their imaginary is repeated globally by an Indian goddess who is tellingly named Maya and because Itzamná sits in a lotus position like the Buddha (104). The group's exploration of Chichén Itza is accompanied by the pedantry of an Argentine traveler who commandeers a formulaic debate over preserving or reconstructing an archaeological site (107). Throughout all of these exchanges, Villoro writes not from, but within, the coordinates of *aquí-hogar* and the *allá-otro*, a variable position from which he can both identify the slights to his nationality when they occur and challenge the facile artifices of a national *mythos* by means of juxtaposing contemporary, ancient, or imagined Mayan culture.

Arrecife easily reads as an expansion and novelization of *Palmeras de la brisa rápida* and "El crepúsculo maya." However, where in his previous narratives Villoro might describe a nuanced sojourn in the contact zone, the novel questions the ability to circulate through and beyond it, if one is savvy enough, and if one is buffered by multiple cultural and biographical influences. The "CEOs of otherness" may farcically weave in and out of the structurally elusive *Palmeras de la brisa rápida*, and they may be subject to countercultural resistance in "El crepúsculo maya," but they expand their enterprise in *Arrecife*. The tensions between Villoro, author of familial and local memoir, and a gallery of tourists and residents in his previous travel writing, intensifies in the novel. It is narrated by the protagonist, Tony Góngora, an ex-musician and sound engineer who describes his past and ongoing relationship with Mario Müller, a childhood friend, and an events manager at the Pirámide. Tony, who has been employed by Mario to create soundscapes to accompany the light show of an indoor aquarium, describes the Pirámide as,

un enorme edificio inspirado en el Templo de las Inscripciones de Palenque. Las escalinatas que desafiaban el vértigo en la fachada y sólo servían de decoración, los arcos triangulares, los bajorrelieves con glifos, las esculturas del dios Chac Mool desperdigadas en los jardines y la reitirada presencia del logotipo con las cuatro direcciones del cielo, daban a esa ciudadela de descanso el curioso aire de un sitio histórico (*Arrecife* 44–55).

As noted previously, Villoro's initial description of the Pirámide, with its gestural facades and iconography that blends with the hotel's branding, seems to channel the real-life Acapulco Princess and its monolithic but superficial gestures toward *lo mexicano*. Just as the Princess both expands and distinguishes itself from its coastline, Tony's initial description of the Pirámide ends with him noting that the entire structure is surrounded by a

subtropical forest that may suggest harmony with the natural environment but is designed to cover the electrified fence that separates the hotel from the surrounding community (45).

A swirl of contradiction thus emerges from the Pirámide, the primary space that convenes Tony Góngora and the characters of *Arrecife*. As a former member of the rock band Los Extraditables, Tony has found stable but boring employment there thanks to Mario, who is the hotel's manager and another ex-member of the band. The reader will immediately recognize the strained relationship between the narrator of "El crepúsculo maya" and El Tomate, two would-be musicians and authors who eventually co-opt their skills and sensitivities to the tourist industry. This trope is not unique to Villoro's tourist fiction. Along with *Arrecife* and "El crepúsculo maya," Villoro has often codified the relationship between a creative or intellectualizing narrator and a more managerialist relative or friend as an allegory of denationalization. In *Materia dispuesta*, the protagonist witnesses his father's ascent and descent from stardom as an architect of *lo mexicano* and a cultural icon. In *El disparo de Argón*, a young doctor at an eye clinic unwittingly competes with a savvier colleague for institutional status. In *El testigo* (2013), a professor returns to Mexico after the pivotal defeat of the PRI in the 2000 presidential election and reconnects with an old literary colleague who tries to involve him in *telenovela* and reality TV projects. All of these plot lines reflect the conflicted nature of Villoro as an author and intellectual who intersects with more lucrative professional and cultural spheres.

Like Villoro's autobiographical self in *Palmeras*, Tony positions himself as an observer both within and outside of a tourist industry that thrives on the grandiosity of *lo mexicano*, but in the process offers itself up as an "intensive" site of global-capital accumulation. In the novel's opening, he regards his professional and cultural exile with a literary gaze by juxtaposing the pristine and sterile rooms at the Pirámide with his own employee's dwelling, which for him projects the disorder of "un guionista que se alejó para adaptar una novela incomprensible, un lector maniático en un sitio donde los demás sólo leen etiquetas de bronceadores, un profesor alérgico al aire libre, un perturbado que aguarda su momento" (18). This quick procession of avatars is meant to distinguish Tony from the vapid clientele and staff, and yet, he admits he is a beneficiary of the tourist industry in a moment where he describes his jealousy of another employee's larger accommodations (11), one of many instances in which his attempt to act as the detached social observer is betrayed by a tourist's need for comfort and security. As Tony circulates around the Pirámide complex, he continues to deliver the clever asides of Villoro the travel writer in *Palmeras*, but with adjustments that suggest a more deeply embedded submission to simulacra of consumable indigeneity. For example, it is now the entire hotel staff, comprised of workers from the surrounding communities, and not just its condescending visitors and

guides, who maintain “una extraña visión de sus antepasados. Los meseros, los guardias, los afanadores, los camareros, los plomeros, los electricistas, los barrenderos y los jardineros de La Pirámide creían que sus ancestros habían sido extraterrestres. Sólo así se explicaban su grandeza” (65-66).

Tony's state of personal defeat and stagnation in these circumstances have inspired the title for this article. Much like Jimmy Buffett's lyric self in his famous anthem about “Margaritaville,” he is initially depicted as a lost soul bumbling through a beachside existence. But it would be too simplistic to equate Villoro's protagonist with the disingenuous self-effacement of Buffet and his “Parrot Head” culture, for whom the “wasting away” is in reality a self-satisfied whiling away in sunny locales beyond the tourist season, because its participants have the income or the *savoir faire* to do so, their misadventures notwithstanding.⁴ Buffet's lyrics describe unrequited love, drunken tattoos (“a Mexican cutie”, i.e. a lost weekend in a border region), and minor injuries that are alleviated by more drinking, but his light-hearted melody suggests that all misfortunes are mere contingencies of the idyllic. Meanwhile, and as will be described below, Tony and the Pirámide complex are indeed wasting away. His backstory as the proverbial drug-addled rocker who takes on the equally proverbial “hotel gig” after years of instability, actively feeds the narrative of economic dependency on tourism. Tony is accompanied in his commodified status by three U.S. expatriates: Sandra, a yoga and martial arts instructor from the hotel, Martin “El Gringo” Peterson, a Vietnam veteran and early investor in the Pirámide, and Ginger Oldenville, a scuba instructor whose body is found mysteriously shot through by a harpoon in the hotel's indoor aquarium. Villoro seems to pursue one of Tony's literary imaginings by offering the reader a tropical mystery novel ready for beachside consumption, but the search for Ginger's killer is ultimately eclipsed by accounts of the various characters' personal deficiencies, and their dependency on the Pirámide to provide economic refuge.

The scene that Tony describes at the Pirámide reflects Henri Lefebvre's initial view of travel and leisure in *The Production of Space*, in which “the identification of sex and sexuality, of pleasure and physical gratification, with ‘leisure’ occurs in places specially designated for the purpose – in holiday resorts or villages, on ski slopes or sundrenched beaches” (310). Likewise, the Pirámide is divided into color-coded zones of access that are “designated for the purpose” of conspicuous leisure, and sexual experimentation. This function is represented in *Arrecife* by Sandra, whose fetishized U.S. “beach body” secures her employment at the hotel as a fitness instructor and trainer

⁴ See Hansen's 2010 master's thesis for more on Buffett's rise to fame via the imaginary of his iconic song, and the Parrot Head culture that seeks to emulate its life of leisure. In the final chapter, Hansen recognizes and documents the philanthropic and environmental work of both Buffett the Parrot Head Club, although the goal of “Party[ing] With A Purpose” (138-154) reflects Mario Mühler's efforts to infuse tourism with a social conscience, as will be described later in this article.

for the high-risk excursions, and Ginger, whose equally athletic homosexual body is tolerated by masculinist society in carefully assigned spaces, including hotels and resorts. Although both characters' sexuality and sexual innuendo might suggest refinements of a previous tourist imaginary, in *Arrecife*, as it does in "El crepúsculo maya," it reads more as sexual consumption, or, as Lefebvre would have it, a fusion of sexuality and commodified leisure. Meanwhile, Tony Góngora stands as a counterpoint to these interactive, post-touristic values, in that he carries with him a leg injury that is the result of a car accident when he was fourteen. In other words, at the beginning of his sexual awakening, his body was prohibited from full participation in the ableist forms of tourism that are facilitated by Ginger and Sandra, and that have afforded Tony, a failed musician and would-be writer and social commentator, safe haven within the industry. For Tony, the *allá-otro* is not precisely the Yucatán region, which Villoro both satirized and suffered for its contact with the tourist industry in his precursor narratives. In this new iteration, the *allá-otro* is the tourist industry itself, and its ability to co-opt the skills of even its most cynical workers.

Tony and Mario stand out in these circumstances in that their anguished youth and the friendship it generated serve as raw material for an analogy of national transition. Both are educated but wayward men who seek footholds in the transition from a post-revolutionary to a neoliberal state.⁵ As the tragically ambitious friend in this equation, Mario represents the culture of aggressive free market investment in property. His nickname, *Der Meister*, alludes equally to his glory days as a rocker as it does to his desired ascension in the hierarchy of the Pirámide. His plan to salvage the hotel from its precarious financial condition centers on offering physically taxing excursions, in which guests who have purchased the most expensive junkets show off their wounds in the hotel's common spaces. (45) *Der Meister* models these excursions within the Pirámide complex after a brand in the surrounding area known as "Cruci/Ficción," in which Ginger, the murder victim, frequently participated. If we regard *Arrecife* as a fictionalization of Villoro's travel writing as Cantú describes it, Cruci/Ficción and Mario's supposedly more refined version of it would represent the *allá-otro* of the tourist spectacle. However, the *allá-otro* is not as easily packaged or consumed as it used to be, due to the liberalization of a hotel industry constructed on the ruins of monolithic post-revolutionary tourism and the environmental crises it generates. In an ecologically conscious aside, Tony observes the deterioration and "días contados" of the reef on which the Pirámide sits, its heavy rains, and the closures or diminished bookings of surrounding hotels (43). Conversely, Mario leverages these circumstances by featuring sociopolitical and

5 As Puga and Tovar, Patricia note, Villoro draws in this sense from José Emilio Pacheco's youth literature, especially *Las batallas en el desierto* and *El principio del placer*, which directly analogize the conundrum of the "institutionalized" revolution (the "I" in Partido Revolucionario Institucional or PRI, which held the presidency for decades) in dramas of adolescence (58-59).

environmental risk of injury in his excursions. He argues that “el peligro es el mejor afrodisíaco,” and that, more than luxury accommodations, feeling like a survivor of an ordeal attracts the international pleasure-seekers on which the hotel thrives. Mario calls this approach “posturismo” (43).

Just as the fictional Pirámide closely resembles hotels in existence, the term “posturismo” applies to real-world versions of Mario’s high-risk excursions. In more than one interview in support of *Arrecife*, Villoro cites as an inspiration for the novel tours in which participants cross the U.S./ Mexico border and experience the physical and emotional risk of migrants for the limited duration of the experience.⁶ As noted above, post-tourism is the subject Molina’s eponymous book, which traces the development of “pre-tourism,” or the *grand voyage*, to “industrial tourism,” namely the ascension of luxury cosmopolite travel in post-revolutionary Mexico, and finally high-impact “post-tourism.” Along with this new phase, the author celebrates an industry shift in which the cult of individual customer service gives way to a more group-oriented but still exclusive customer experience. In her contextualization of *Arrecife*, Brigitte Adriaensen also alludes to this shift, and contextualizes Mario’s excursion packages within existing forms of narco-tourism and thanatourism that make a spectacle out of violence. As Adriaensen demonstrates, Mario cultivates a philosophy around violence as a final frontier and notes the “porousness” with which his business model encounters the actual narco-trade that is asserting itself in the hotel and the surrounding community (Adriaensen 151–53). In *El Posturismo*, Molina does not imagine anything quite like Mario’s vision, but he does identify personal risk as one of the characteristics that attract a new clientele, and, more importantly, he praises the managerial and entrepreneurial qualities that Mario embraces, particularly the ability to generate “interactivity,” that is, an enhanced situational and sensory experience that can also generate related products and services, and in which the tourists cast themselves in an intervening or discovering role (Molina 57–58).

As Villoro develops Mario’s profile, the reader easily imagines a lofty entrepreneur, perhaps with a dog-eared copy of Molina’s book at hand, who is encumbered by the vestigial *turismo industrial* of the beach resort. Through a managerial spirit that is unwanted by El Gringo Peterson, who would prefer to collect the insurance from the hotel’s demise, Mario represents Molina’s ideal of an “activist” in development and growth (Molina 75). This choice of terminology on Molina’s part speaks resoundingly to the co-optation of former discourses, including those dimensions of post-revolutionary Mexico that sought to challenge the revolutionary nationalism that crystallized in the PRI and favored technocrats, banks, and sectors of the bourgeoisie that rally more around transnational investment than they

⁶ See for example his interview for the 2012 *Feria Internacional del Libro* in Monterrey: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InSqgDpUYE>.

do around a party or particular social stratum (Bartra 73). Molina equates activism with the intense managerialism that post-tourism requires to bring about this shift. While there is no clear indication that Villoro was familiar with Molina's book when he utilized the term *posturismo* or its profile of the managerial "activist" in *Arrecife*, it is interesting to consider Tony Góngora's backstory in light of it. Distortions of the "activist" qualifier in the novel include Tony's father, who presumably disappeared in the midst of the 1968 student movement and the Tlatelolco massacre, but who in reality left his family over marital strife. Tony's own years of youthful rebellion are spent traveling with Los Extraditables in emulation of the mercurial jazz and funk bassist, Jaco Pastorius, who died in his late thirties in a bar brawl after a night of heavy consumption (54-55). Just as Molina's profile of the entrepreneurial activist and Marió's illustration of it distort the term, Tony's past and its current outcomes are forged in the period between 1968 and the economic crisis of the 1980s, a time in which the ideals of social rebellion give way to the ideals increased privatization and an economic future that is willing to operate in the dynamics of transnational capitalism.

One scene from *Arrecife* especially presents Mario as a managerial "activist" and Tony as an unwilling but resigned byproduct of the neoliberal state. During the investigation into Ginger Oldenville's murder, Mario invites Tony to observe one of his specialized excursions. Tony and the participants, accompanied by Mario and a group of hotel employees, travel by jeep into the gated subtropical forest surrounding the hotel complex. The tour group is ostensibly scheduled to observe a sacred Mayan ritual and learn about astronomical and sacrificial practices. When they arrive at the appointed site, Tony observes the ash-covered ground, and in a self-appointed capacity as cultural and social critic that recalls the autobiographical Villoro of *Palmeras de la brisa rápida*, he notes that "los nuevos mayas" practice scorched earth in order to plant more corn, but their more lucrative options are narco-trafficking or working at the Pirámide (66). This silent observation underscores the artifice of Mario's presentation of Mayan mysticism, which inspires predictable commentaries from the tourists and immediately recalls Villoro's bus ride to Chichen Itzá in *Palmeras*: "—¡Es increíble que hayan construido tanto con estas temperaturas! -dijo una argentina", "—*Quite something!* -una mujer de pelo color Fanta estuvo de acuerdo" (70). A shot rings out, and another participant wonders out loud if it is guerilla combatants, which inspires Mario to cast Tony as a former military commander. Mario gives him a plastic mock-up of an automatic weapon and entreats him to answer questions about the guerillas' motives. A supposedly poisonous snake appears, and an employee produces a net under the pretense of transporting it to an ecological preserve. It is obvious to Tony that the event was staged, and that it was a non-venomous species that resembled a coral snake. In the ironic mode of a *cronista* who participates directly in a cultural spectacle while maintaining a critical regard of it, he muses that both he and the snake were actors in an elaborate performance of heritage tourism,

ecotourism, and extreme sport. At this point, a group of employees emerges. They are armed and disguised in the iconic *pasamontañas* of the Zapatistas. One of the tourists notes formulaically that the combatants were smaller in stature than he had imagined. Mario pivots to a tourist-light presentation on Mayan cosmovision and the metaphoric anonymity of the Zapatistas as they recede into the jungle. Unexpectedly, an excursionist chases after them, and Mario restrains her in order to preserve the simulacrum. In a fervor of laughter and tears, she embraces Mario, her protector and facilitator, as the combatants recede into the jungle and flash “V’s” for victory. Tony brings the episode to a close by quoting the overwhelmed tourist sympathizer: “Cuando la mujer recuperó el habla, musitó: ‘gracias... gracias... –luego dijo algo sobre los desposeídos de la tierra (72).”

Tony’s critique of grandiose tourists recalls *Arrecife*’s precursor texts. For example, the instigating conflict of “El crepúsculo maya” is a memory of a previous trip through the Yucatán peninsula and Oaxaca, in which the narrator pushed El Tomate into an endemic freshwater pool (*cenote*) as he enthusiastically listened to a tour guide’s conjectural waxing on its *mythos* (60). Later, the narrator’s car is relieved of its taillights by the accomplices of a gas station attendant, who distracted the travelers with the legend of a luminescent jaguar. El Tomate, who could have witnessed the theft “no notó nada porque pensaba en el tiempo” (67). The difference between the parallel exchanges in “El crepúsculo” and *Palmeras*, and those in *Arrecife*, can be described as the difference between “industrial” (nationalistic) tourism and post-tourism, as celebrated by Molina and satirized by Villoro. While Villoro appears to have grafted the situational irony of *Palmeras* neatly onto *Arrecife* with the transference of his own positionality as an observer-participant to Tony Góngora, important modulations have occurred. The *Arrecife* scene illustrates Cantú’s assessment of a more nuanced and less unilateral travelogue in a contact zone of *gringos* and *latinoamericanos*, where the facile mutterings of U.S. tourists meet the posturing of other nationalities, and the tourist industry that attends to them all. But Tony Góngora is bound more intimately to the political economy of various individual consumer types who enjoy or suffer the conditions of prepared tourist spaces. Likewise, Mario Müller may well be the author of the Pirámide’s high-risk excursions, but he counts on the participation of the hotel guests to help create the experience of “survivorship” that he is manufacturing. In addition, the hotel guests are complicit in the production of Mexican risk. For example, Tony had first become aware of Mario’s entrepreneurial “activism” when he observed a group of delighted guests as they were willingly blindfolded and taken away by masked assailants, who accidentally attack Tony as well. In the hotel’s infirmary, Mario does not hesitate to explain to his dazed friend the complexity of his artifice. Later, and after the excursion, Tony converses with an Argentine guest who, separated from the noise of US tourism, discloses to him that she has enjoyed the manipulations (123). Both scenes confirm that Villoro spreads out the ironic mode of *Palmeras* to various characters

in *Arrecife*. This level of awareness marks the Pirámide's final departure from "industrial" tourism to the at once bold and catastrophic realm of post-tourism.

In its entirety, *Arrecife* thrives on Tony's encounters with such would-be adventurers, but it is the novel's third act that truly satirizes the post-touristic condition and the principles of free market idealism. Throughout the novel, the reader is alerted gradually to the presence of the Atrium conglomerate from London that owns the hotel and has entrusted its management to Martin Peterson and Mario. In these instances, the hotel's precarious circumstance does not threaten Atrium or Peterson, because they operate with the knowledge that they can always collect on insurance from the hotel's final demise. Peterson explains to Tony that abandoned hotels, in which the true guests are rats and seagulls, are an excellent form of money laundering (109). A series of revelations appear to accompany Peterson's dismissal of the entire enterprise. The reader learns that Ginger Oldenville's murder was not the suspected crime of homosexual passion, but rather a narco-assassination, because Ginger's lover had accidentally discovered a transport route during one of his scuba excursions, and he sought to report it to the DEA and other offices. The reader later discovers that Ginger's motivation as a witness was not as pure as anticipated since he had deserted the Coast Guard and was seeking immunity through his testimony (221). Sandra, the expatriate fitness instructor, is deported to the United States by Leopoldo Támez, the hotel's security manager, to keep her from over-investigating the links between the hotel's management and local narcotrafficking, and because he has always been her enamored protector, in the fashion of a male *patrón* more suited to the age of industrial tourism (135). Amid these departures and closures, Peterson reveals to Tony that the managerial success of Mario, who is dying from lymphatic cancer, in reality is compromising the liquidation of the Pirámide (108). In the eyes of Atrium, the London conglomerate, the *allá-otro* is not only the region, but also the entire enterprise of the Pirámide, its management, its employees, its clientele, and its imaginary.

It is at this juncture that Villoro introduces the Atrium representative James Mallett, a celebrity-level connoisseur and investor of globalized cultural products. Like Tony, Mallett cuts the figure of a managerial "activist," but clearly as a more refined version. Where *Der Meister's* body exhibits the features and stylings of previous decades and is decaying from illness, Mallett's is athletic, impeccably dressed, and adorned with lavish, exoticized tattoos. Mario's post-touristic excursions are imaginative and effective, but they have exhausted all his energy and resources, while Mallett proves himself able to effortlessly conjure the same illusory yet participatory world for the hotel guests. He shows up at the Pirámide at a moment when the region around the hotel has experienced several hurricanes that curtail the high-impact excursions. Mallett drafts easily off Mario's carefully constructed Zapatista theater by gathering the disgruntled guests into an auditorium and

explaining that their activities had to be suspended because the combatants were taking advantage of the storm conditions to advance their position, “pero enviaban un saludo tranquilizador a los ‘hermanos’ de la Pirámide. Esta noticia de riesgo y solidaridad fue recibida con admiración” (175). Along with this manufactured solidarity and risk—the post-touristic ideal—Mallett invents a new threat, a swarm of deadly African bees that a crop-duster pilot, complete with leather jacket and scarf, will be exterminating with a brightly-colored insecticide. The guests, who marvel at the purple clouds streaking across the sky, are also delighted with this development. This, in fact, is Mallett’s design for the new iteration of the Pirámide: a hermetic multi-media center of cultural appropriation in a region that is now too socially, politically, and environmentally dangerous to attend to even the most willing participants of Mario’s high-impact excursions. As a final betrayal of his efforts, Mallett seeks to leverage Tony’s expertise in sound production and have him succeed Mario in the management of these new cultural spectacles. The co-optation of the national toward the project of global accumulation as described by Robinson is now fully realized. In addition, this outcome aligns with Lefebvre’s conclusion about tourism, which seems to directly address notions of participatory risk and entrepreneurial activism in tourist zones:

Such spaces appear on first inspection to have escaped the control of the established order, and thus, inasmuch as they are spaces of play, to constitute a vast “counter-space.” This is a complete illusion. The case against leisure is quite simply closed – and the verdict is irreversible: leisure is as alienated and alienating as labour; as much an agent of co-optation as it is itself co-opted; and both an assimilative and assimilated part of the ‘system’ (384).

The novel’s final scenes appear to suggest an escape from the managerialist bent of the post-touristic condition. Mario reveals that he has a daughter, Irene, hidden in a refuge for abused women. Tony is described leaving Kukulcán with Irene and her caretaker, Laura, who is also the daughter of an old acquaintance and a resident of the women’s refuge. It is an Adam and Eve trope that Villoro has developed in previous novels. In *Materia dispuesta*, the awkward coming of age of the protagonist, Mauricio, culminates in the 1985 earthquake, from which he is described emerging as a rescue brigade worker with a stable, heteronormative partner.⁷ At end of *El testigo*, the protagonist, Julio Valdivieso, whose initials reveal him as another *alter-ego* of Villoro, rides off in a truck toward an idyllic heterosexual union with a resident of a provincial community, away from the colliding forces of neo-PAN, catholic-infused investor capitalism (Bartra 125) and his past as a failed *literato*. In *Arrecife*, the newly founded family will return to the

⁷ See Puga and Tovar, Patricia (62–67) for an expanded analysis.

same *aquí-hogar* Villoro identified in *Palmeras de la brisa rápida*, namely Mexico City, from where his identity as both traveler and resident emerges. The return to a center-periphery dynamic reminds the reader of the uncertain final lines of *Palmeras*, in which “el viento que se va, acaba de volver,” and thereby analogizes the indeterminacy of Cantú's traveler-resident continuum that resists the binary of *aquí-hogar* and *allá-otro*. Indeed, as Tony leaves Mario Müller's abandoned room, he seems to echo Villoro as narrator of the coming-and-going winds of *Palmeras de la brisa rápida* when, gazing at the line of palm trees that led to the Pirámide, he muses that “Las vi con la tristeza de lo que ya pertenece al pasado pero todavía no es recuerdo” (226). The sudden appearance of Laura and the revelation of Irene are part of a final reveal in *Arrecife* that all along, Mario has been providing refuge in Kukulcán for the forlorn characters of his rocker past, including Tony. It would seem, then, that *Der Meister* has applied his entrepreneurial “activism,” toward a personalized form of community service and philanthropy. In addition, Villoro appears to seek a revision of the manipulative sexual dynamics of “El crepúsculo maya” by describing a restoration of order in the form of a heteronormative family for Tony—consisting in the legal adoption of Irene, instead of an affair with a young hipster, that emerges in the wake of abandoning all associations with the Pirámide. The iguana even returns in the final pages of *Arrecife*, in the form of Siguifredo, who inhabits the women's shelter, and, according to Laura, was the only adult male in residence (231). Irene adds tenderly that because the iguana had bad breath, she attempted to feed him mints. Tony once again evokes Villoro's *cronista* mode, in which the autochthonous meets contemporary popular culture: “Empezaba a conocer mi nueva vida: un lugar donde los reptiles mascan Sugus” (231).

Despite this tidy ending, there remains in the novel a lingering sense of neoliberal defeat that would jade even the likes of Molina with his utopic vision of post-tourism, its celebration of global free markets, their potential to renovate stagnating and bureaucratically encumbered forms of travel and leisure. While at the novel's closing, Tony Góngora and his new family are awaiting a flight away from the Pirámide and its surroundings, he does not appear to have wrested himself from the extensive-intensive sphere of global capital. Tony will continue to operate in a realm constructed for him neither by the opportunism of El Gringo Peterson, nor by the neoliberal swashbuckling of James Mallett, but by the paternalistic managerial “activism” of Mario Müller. *Arrecife*'s ending thus echoes Robinson's admonition that globalization does not erase nationalistic values, in this case a redemptive fatherhood that emerges from participation in the tourist industry, but rather transfers them to a sphere of global capital investment. For Villoro, *Arrecife* has been an exercise in doubting his own capacity to enter and exit such dynamics unscathed, and yet, his insistent reflexivity demonstrates his talent for finding unexpected depth in a farcical tropic. In the context of its predecessors, *Arrecife* adapts and amplifies the spaces of travel and tourism through a sustained engagement with their most

manufactured features. Villoro's willingness to enter fully and unflinchingly the post-touristic condition, its spaces, and its participants, proposes a contact zone that puts to task both the touristic gaze and a critical counter-gaze.

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