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Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios*: The Inferno of Bare Life

LETICIA NINI VILLASEÑOR

During the late 1980s and 1990s, Colombia was the global capital of cocaine trafficking and home to powerful organized crime groups like Pablo Escobar's multinational Medellín Cartel, which brought in up to \$60 million per day at the height of its operations. The tensions and feuds that erupted between rival cartels and left-wing guerrilla groups and paramilitaries working for traffickers manifested into a state of civil war in Medellín and led to the suspension of virtually the entire social and judicial order. As a result, drug lords began using *sicarios* (hitmen) as hired killers of authority figures and adversaries that threatened the cartels' status and transactions. This new breed of assassins was primarily composed of young teenage boys who lived in the economically depressed and crime-ridden *comunas* surrounding the city below. In the early 1990s, at the height of the conflict among Escobar, the Colombian state, Cali Cartel, and the emerging paramilitaries, the murder rate in Medellín soared. There were 7,081 murders in Medellín in 1991, as compared to 730 in 1980—nearly a tenfold increase. This is the chaotic landscape of lawlessness and social upheaval that Fernando Vallejo examines in his loosely autobiographical novel *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994).

The Hobbesian narrative of a life that is solitary, poor, nasty, and short would probably read something like the endless scenes of brutality and abjectness conveyed in Vallejo's prose. The protagonist, a middle-aged writer who shares the author's name, has just returned to Medellín after a thirty-year absence and can scarcely recognize the city that he revered as a youth. As Fernando struggles to adapt to a metropolis that has become completely alien to him, he begins the task of documenting his tragic love affairs with two adolescent *sicarios* who fall victim to the inescapable cycle of violence that now permeates the city of Medellín. Through his relationships with the young *sicarios*, Fernando enters a previously inconceivable realm of law and justice in which the former judicial system has been replaced by a primal law of self-preservation that facilitates an endless cycle of murder and retribution encompassing all of Medellín's inhabitants. "Todos en las comunas están sentenciados a muerte," he remarks when faced with the gravity of

this new Colombia; “¿Qué quién los sentenció, la ley? Pregunta tonta: en Colombia hay leyes pero no hay ley” (Vallejo 146).

This article will further explore the complex process of the physical and metaphysical reconfiguration of the body within this alternate system of laws, with Medellín being the site of sacred life. By examining Vallejo’s *La virgen de los sicarios* through the lens of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s writings on bare life, sovereignty, and violence, I will expound upon the various ways in which this new juridical category of life devoid of any value renders the citizens of Medellín *homines sacri*—life that is “situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 73).¹

As the novel progresses, Fernando increasingly grapples with the incomprehensibility of the endless cycle of violence and mayhem to which he bears witness, along with the “muertos vivos” that emerge from it (Vallejo 133). With this transition likened to what Agamben conceives as a “state of exception” (building from Carl Schmitt’s legal theoretical concept of *Ausnahmezustand*), the human body now becomes a disposable commodity at both the physical and metaphysical level with the suspension of law and diminishment of citizenship and individual rights. As Agamben describes it, the state of exception is “not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law’s threshold or limit concept” (*State of Exception* 4). As Fernando passes further into this realm of bare life absent of legal authority, he begins to seek out a means to destabilize the biopolitical state that Medellín has become by making himself visible in this system that, as in the case of the *homo sacer*, “treats its citizens as objects of violence exceeding the sphere of law and sacrifice” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 86). “Creemos que existimos pero no, somos un espejismo de la nada, un sueño de basuco,” Fernando reflects after Alexis’ murder (Vallejo 138). It is this invisibility, the *nada* of human life, the “muertos vivos” that the citizens of Medellín have become, that must be subverted in order to return to the state that existed prior to the denouement of the Colombian juridical system.

With the protagonist’s conception of reality increasingly pushed to its limits, Vallejo offers a scathing social commentary on the imploding economic, political and social infrastructure of Colombia: “La ley de Colombia es la impunidad y nuestro primer delincuente impune es el presidente” (27), Fernando bluntly remarks. The reader is simultaneously confronted with a locale in which the past is evoke

as a utopia and the present as a perpetual state of lawlessness and corruption. These two realities—the cosmopolitan city in which the narrator spent his youth and the now unrecognizable space of violence and disorder to which he has returned after an extended absence—have fused together into a variation of Agamben’s state of exception in which bare life reaches its maximum indeterminacy. Medellín has now taken the form of a “zone of indistinction between sacrifice and homicide” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 83). Just like the Roman *homo sacer* figure of the *devotus*, who “exists on a threshold that belongs neither to the world of the living nor the world of the dead” (99), the inhabitants of Medellín are metaphorically a part of the living dead and are thus incompatible with both the human and divine world.

Within the urban sprawl of the novel, this threshold between the living and the dead has given way to a space of pervasive alienation. Violence and murder without legal repercussion permeate the narrative of *La virgen de los sicarios*, while the protagonist delivers a disconcerting account of a cruel world in which natural life has been abandoned for sovereign violence. This, in turn, has facilitated the emergence of what Agamben calls “bare life”—human lives that have so lost the quality of legal good that their very existence no longer has any value, either for the person leading such a life or for society (*Homo Sacer* 138). Agamben posits that bare life is not natural life per se; neither *bios* (human life) nor *zoe* (animal life). Instead, bare life emerges from within this distinction and can be characterized as “life exposed to death,” especially in the form of sovereign violence (88). In the intensely graphic scenes that Fernando depicts, Medellín is stripped to a state of bare life in which all of its inhabitants are *homines sacri*—bare life situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law (73).

Fernando, the self-proclaimed “último gramático de Colombia” (Vallejo 41), tells the reader that he has returned to his city of birth, as an old man, ready to die (5). However, Fernando is confronted with a parasitic locus of murder and theft; the Medellín of the past has been simultaneously eaten away by drug lords and corrupt political and religious officials, and infiltrated by the poor and uneducated masses. Contemplating the national reality of Colombia, the narrator enters into a dialogue with the reader as he attempts to navigate the surreal landscape of Medellín during the early 1990s. The *comunas* have become an infectious locale, spilling into the city below, no longer contained by the spatial and socioeconomic

boundaries of the past. This marginal body has infiltrated the city that Fernando has fervently idealized throughout the years, thus leading to a rupture between past and present, and resulting in an abysmal space of otherness. In this new biopolitical zone within which political and social power trumps life, “these thresholds pass [...] beyond the dark boundaries separating life from death in order to identify a new living dead man, a new sacred man” (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 130). Thus, it is in this space of otherness, the threshold between the living and the dead, that a state of bare life is initiated.

Confronted with this new citizenship of “muertos vivos” within Medellín (Vallejo 133), the narrator’s fierce desire to eradicate the physical body, thereby cleansing the social body, ultimately manifests itself in a profound hatred of women and all things associated with procreation: “[A]quí todo el que existe es culpable, y si se reproduce más” (145). As the story progresses, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with the need for the total annihilation of the female body in order to eradicate the reproductive vehicle entirely and put an end to this inclusion of bare life at the political level. The curbing of reproduction is accomplished through the reversal of social norms, including the dominance of homosexuality despite the overtly *machista* character of the *sicairesca* narrative genre. In Fernando’s depiction of Medellín, homosexuality is the prevailing sexual norm and women thereby hold a superfluous place within society. Women, impure and corrupted, become unnecessary figures within the social realm, with their very existence repeatedly called into question. As Fernando explains:

[P]ara mí las mujeres era como si no tuvieran alma. Un coco vacío. Y que por eso con ellas era imposible el amor ... [A]prendí que la relación carnal con las mujeres es el pecado de la bestialidad, que es cuando se cruza un miembro de una especie con otro de otra, como por ejemplo un burro con una vaca. (24-25)

Thus the killing of pregnant women and their children becomes a tool to end the suffering of mankind and restore the cosmopolitan city that once existed. Homosexuality becomes an indirect means of eradicating the population of human “*porquería*” and the breeding of “*ratas*” in this landscape of poor uneducated masses. Gabriela Polit Dueñas further illustrates this overtly misogynous message advanced throughout *La virgen de los sicarios*:

La violencia en la mirada de Fernando es absoluta con respecto a todo lo femenino. Es tan recalcitrante su odio por todo lo que se parezca a una mujer que parte de la pureza que encuentra en sus

dos amantes es que ellos no han tenido relaciones con mujeres ... Resulta imposible leer con ironía los párrafos en los que Fernando habla de lo femenino con desprecio, de la mujer con asco, sobre todo de su función reproductiva, como si las mujeres fueran únicas responsables de la pobreza. (131-32)

Alexis, the teenage *sicario* aptly nicknamed the “*Ángel Exterminador*,” becomes the principal tool with which Fernando indirectly facilitates his desire to destroy the procreative apparatus that women represent. Despite the hundreds of murders perpetrated by the “*Ángel Exterminador*,” Alexis nevertheless retains an eternal purity in the narrator’s eyes. As a product of this new national reality that Fernando observes, Alexis still possesses a certain degree of innocence, in part because of the fact that he has never slept with (or, in other words, been tainted by) women: “Conque eso era pues lo que había detrás de esos ojos verdes, una pureza incontaminada de mujeres. Y la verdad más absoluta, sin atenuantes ni importarle un carajo lo que piense usted que es lo que sostengo yo. De eso era de lo que me había enamorado. De su verdad” (Vallejo 25). In this regard, Alexis, the “*Ángel Exterminador* que había descendido sobre Medellín a acabar con su raza perversa” (94), is the antithesis of the corrupting figure of the woman. He has not mixed with the inferior species as Fernando has, and hence has retained an infinite pureness. For Fernando, Alexis seems to be the only virtuous character in the sea of “porquería humana” (134). This purity allows him to carry out the act of cleansing Colombia of children “[que] surgen ... de todas partes, de cualquier hueco o vagina como las ratas de las alcantarillas cuando están muy atestadas y ya no caben” (125).

Alexis can be read as a metaphorical fallen angel sent by the *señora Muerte* to rectify the abysmal situation down below (96). Both Alexis and Wilmar, Fernando’s second *sicario* lover, embody this new form of violence and retribution, as expressed by Pablo Restrepo-Gautier: “Su representación como ángeles-demonios es otra cara de la fusión Dios/Satán ... El joven sicario se encuentra en el extremo del círculo donde el ángel se convierte en demonio y viceversa ... Ambos sicarios descienden sobre Medellín para limpiarlo del odio matando a aquéllos que encierran el odio dentro de sí mismos” (100-1). As Restrepo-Gautier posits, these two opposing religious symbols have fused together to produce the figure of *señora Muerte* who guides the *sicarios* on their mission to eradicate the urban inferno of daily life, the urban violence in which the

inhabitants of all zones and social spheres of Medellín are imprisoned (100).

Though the two appear to have nothing in common on the surface, Fernando bonds with Alexis as they now coexist in their “miserable present without future: in that occurring of the hours and the days empty of intention, full of the dead” (Vallejo 132). The longer Fernando remains in Medellín, the more time and space blur into a zone of indistinction and invisibility, as he becomes increasingly detached from humanity while watching Alexis’s murder victims pile up. Though initially horrified when he witnesses Alexis’s first murder and sees the revolver itself, Fernando gradually becomes desensitized to and alienated from mankind as he continues to observe this new form of law and justice. Rather than shying away from Alexis and the other *sicarios*, Fernando immerses himself in this new reality while offering an intensely disturbing testimony of the unrecognizable national reality that he distinguishes before him.

Alexis’s death symbolizes the loss of human innocence as well as any hope for redemption or salvation. The end of Alexis, the *Ángel Exterminador*, is the end of mankind itself. When Alexis exits “el horror de la vida para entrar en el horror de la muerte” (Vallejo 138), it symbolizes humanity’s permanent descent into the abyss of nothingness. The sequence of events leading up to Alexis’s demise combined with the narrator’s fierce animosity toward God and His role in the unraveling of humanity play an instrumental role in Fernando’s transformation into *homo sacer*, “el hombre invisible,” toward the end of the novel.

Immediately prior to Alexis’s murder, he and Fernando are both confronted by the sight of a mortally wounded dog begging for mercy. Like the eyes of Alexis “tras el cual [Fernando] trataba de adivinarle el alma” (21), the dog’s “ojos dulces, inocentes” are the key feature that resonates with Fernando as the repository of a lost human innocence (136). Though Alexis is capable of indiscriminately killing hundreds of people without any inkling of a guilty conscience, he finds it impossible to shoot the injured dog that begs to be delivered from its suffering and pain. Why is Alexis unable to put an end to the animal’s suffering? Perhaps because when he looks at the virtuous eyes of the dog he sees his own lost virtue reflected back at him. Ultimately, Fernando must shoot the dog himself.

This act of wielding the gun and ending the life of an innocent creature, merely a victim within this alienated state of exception, marks the pivotal moment in which Fernando begins his transitions into the realm of the living dead: “[V]ivir en Medellín es ir uno

rebotando por esta vida muerto. Yo no inventé esta realidad, es ella la que me está inventando a mí. Y así vamos por sus calles los muertos vivos ... fantasmas a la deriva arrastrando nuestras precarias existencias, nuestras inútiles vidas, sumidos en el desastre” (133-34). Referencing the moment when he shoots the injured dog, Fernando continues, “[p]uedo establecer, con precisión, en qué momento me convertí en un muerto vivo ... [E]ntendí que la felicidad para mí sería en adelante un imposible” (134, 136). Instead of blaming man for this state of being, Fernando blames God for the inescapable and dehumanized inferno of existence, saying, “Sólo Dios sabrá, él que es culpable de estas infamias: Él, con mayúscula que se suele usar para el Ser más monstruoso y cobarde, que mata y atropella por mano ajena, por la mano del hombre, su juguete, su sicario” (135).

The novel indicts both women and the Catholic Church as the masterminds behind Medellín’s descent into bare life. In this manner, God and women work hand in hand: God orchestrates the murders and violence carried out by the *sicarios*, and women allow this state of exception to continue through their steady reproduction of life. As Fernando remarks, after shooting the injured dog, “La detonación sonó sorda, amortiguada por el cuerpo del animal, cuya almita limpia y pura se fue elevando, elevando rumbo al cielo de los perros que es al que no entraré yo porque soy parte de la porquería humana” (136). Thus, for Fernando, the only thing that retains its eternal pureness in this state of suspended law is the fallen dog that symbolizes the lost innocence of Alexis and thus mankind itself.

The perceived abandonment of God leads to a hybridized form of religious devotion among the people of Medellín. This new religious system is a fusion of murder and salvation (two opposing variables within the Catholic Church) that bestows the *sicarios* with a certain duality as both the angels and avengers of *señora Muerte*. Bullets are “balas rezadas” (108); pilgrimages to the Virgen of Sabaneta are done for begging and murdering (8); *sicarios* wear religious scapulars for protection from gunshots as if God would protect the life of an assassin (20); and *sicarios*’ prayers for protection during their killings are addressed to the Virgin Mary, *la virgen de los sicarios*. People are shot directly where they mark the holy cross on Ash Wednesday (40), and hitmen are granted absolution if they attend one mass for each victim as penance (51). Thus, this alternate form of religious devotion, melding violence with holiness and murder with salvation, becomes the norm in the state of suspended law and individual rights.

“Aquí la vida humana no vale nada,” Fernando remarks several times. Both human and divine law have been suspended and replaced by a law of vendettas, debts, and retribution. Captured in this sovereign ban is the human victim, *homo sacer*. “Nada funciona aquí. Ni la ley del talión ni la ley de Cristo” (127). Men have become indiscriminate killing machines and women have become machines that reproduce these killers. “Reparen en esas imagines que ven: eso es vida, pura vida” (66). Humanity is exposed and laid bare, and everyone may now be killed yet not sacrificed: “Aquí nadie es inocente, cerdos. Lo matamos por chichipato, por bazofia, por basura, por existir. Porque contaminaba el aire y el agua del río” (42-43). This double exclusion in which *homo sacer* is banned from both human jurisdiction and divine law renders man the target of anyone with sovereign power, now equated with the power to kill. Thus, *homines sacri* can be killed simply for existing in this new urban milieu.

Fernando resorts to suicide, described by Agamben as the ultimate “expression of man’s sovereignty over his own existence” (*Homo Sacer* 136). In this context, suicide reestablishes man’s control of his own destiny and frees him from the new zone of indistinction between the living and the dead. Ultimately, Fernando is unable to take his own life despite repeatedly expressing a desire to do so as the legal and moral decay of Medellín boils over to an ever increasing degree (Vallejo 136-37).

The attempt to cleanse and purify the social body of this ceaseless cruelty and escape from the limbo of bare life manifests itself in the narrator’s desire to eradicate the current population of Medellín and replace it with the utopian state of the past: “Hay que desocupar a Antioquia de antioqueños malos y repoblarla de antioqueños buenos” (Vallejo 70). Accompanied by Alexis and Wilmar, Fernando crosses into the unknown, the camp of the *comunias* containing the bare life that invades the city below, in order to carry out this national cleansing and expunge it. As Carlos Jauregui observes, Vallejo paints an image of “la ciudad como un lugar contaminado no por los ruidos y la polución industrial de la modernización periférica, ni por los residuos petroquímicos de los motores que la Cruzan, sino por una ‘polución humana’” (368).

The spreading of the contaminated body is figuratively materialized when Fernando and Alexis search for a vantage point from which to admire Medellín. A sign reads: “*Se Prohíbe Arrojar Cadáveres*” (76). However, right next to the sign lays an anonymous corpse, representing the spillover of bare life into the city of

Medellín. This displacement of corpses and the infiltration of death into the realm of the living further illustrate the suspension of law and order within the state of exception. Fernando sees the only means of escape as the total annihilation of Medellín, carried out by the guns of the *sicarios*, who equally represent the marginal social body that Fernando wishes to annihilate.

Although all of the victims within the novella are executed at the hands of the young killers for hire, it is evident that the narrator is the mastermind who instigates and, ultimately, reclaims this taking of life (Fernanda Lander 81). Though appearing to the reader as a figure on the periphery of the violence that he witnesses, Fernando is essentially at the core of the events and outcomes that he describes. He cleverly manipulates the *sicarios* as pawns in his personal quest to eradicate what he sees as the filth of human existence, the tainted citizens of Medellín. In Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios*, the *sicarios* are essentially "vacíos" (53), having no voice outside of the narrator. They kill because that is their sole identity—a one-dimensional construct encompassing both the murderer and the murdered. The *sicarios* are interchangeable entities that embody this new state of exception, and Fernando skillfully uses them to expedite the annihilation of Colombia itself. Specifically, his involvement with both Alexis and Wilmar highlights the complementary relationship that exists between his own desires for destruction and his lovers' realization of them. When Fernando decides to eliminate what he dislikes or cannot accept, Alexis and Wilmar then become the means through which this elimination can materialize (80).

Fernando continually transforms reality through his use of repetition and constant breaches with time and space that fuse together both past and present: "Sin pasado, sin presente, sin futuro, la realidad no es la realidad en las barriadas de las montañas que circundan a Medellín: es un sueño de basuco" (Vallejo 102). This loss of temporality and ambiguity of fact and fiction allow the narrator to manipulate the reader's perception of time and space. Wilmar becomes Alexis, as Fernando interchanges their names several times, blurring the young *sicarios* into one encompassing entity of anonymity. The past becomes the present; men who have supposedly died reappear. Memory unravels and the reader is left with a landscape in which the living and the dead are indistinguishable in this absence of temporality. Just like the dozens of old clocks in the butterfly room "detenidos todos a distintas horas burlándose de la eternidad, negando el tiempo" (10), the past and

present, living and the non-living, are fused into one indecipherable state of temporal intangibility.

After the death of his second lover, Wilmar, Fernando further embraces his role of sacred man and ultimately relinquishes himself to the state of exception that surrounds him. Fernando, initially standing outside of the morgue among the living, symbolically crosses the threshold in order to go inside (among the dead) and identify Wilmar's body. There, he sees "esos ojos verdes y vi reflejada en ellos, allá en su fondo vacío, la inmensa, la incommensurable, la sobrecogedora maldad de Dios" (212). This acute experience of trauma is the catalyst that serves to alienate Fernando fully from the physical and temporal space before him as he transcends into the realm of the living dead, of the *homines sacri*: "Salí por entre los muertos vivos ... caminando sin ir a ninguna parte, pensando sin pensar tomé a lo largo de la autopista" (214). From the "llanto de los vivos" to the "silencio de los muertos" (208), he completes his transformation into this invisible man and comes out among the "muertos vivos" (214).

Like the *sicarios*, who "hoy son fantasmas de lo que fueron" (102), Fernando becomes the ghost of what he once was—"el hombre invisible" (208). By crossing this threshold into the state of bare life, Fernando's voice is temporarily suspended and he compensates by reverting to a third person narrative. This shift from first to third person demonstrates his depersonalization of mankind as well as his utter sense of detachment from life and the living body. Hence, the loss of his voice marks the official entry into the state of exception and the *homines sacri*—formerly living and breathing young men now likened to slabs of meat, inert matter (209)—trapped within it:

El hombre invisible pasó. Era una sala alta, espaciosa, la de necropsias, con unas treinta mesas de disección ocupadas todas por los del último turno. Todas, todas, todas y todos hombres y casi todos eran jóvenes. Es decir, fueron. Ahora eran cadáveres, materia inerte. Desnudos, rajados en canal como reses, les habían dejado nada de sustancia qué comer a los gusanos ... lo que aquí dejaban ... era el casco del que fue ... El hombre invisible les fue pasando revista a los muertos ... esos cuerpos desnudos sin corazón que pudiera volver a sentir el odio. (209-10)

The conclusion of the novel materializes the elimination of the reproduction of bare life. Women remain on the periphery, standing outside the morgue, excluded from this final passage. The corpse of an infant, thrown into the sea of masculine anonymity spreading

across the cold metal tables of the morgue, represents the last remnant or trace of the woman (the past). The baby's aestheticized corpse, compared to an image out of a Surrealist painting (Vallejo 211), is placed on top of the feet of a nameless *sicario* corpse and set at ninety degrees to it like "los brazos de una cruz" (211). This martyrdom of the baby, along with the expulsion of women from the last scene, symbolizes the end of the reproduction of life and, thus, the culmination of the narrator's final project to annihilate the perpetual state of bare life that has become the reality of Medellín.

By reading Vallejo's novel through Agamben's notion of bare life and its connection to sovereignty, it has been my goal to introduce a new dimension to the ongoing debate surrounding the politicization of physical life. I have sought to demonstrate that the concept of bare life, first introduced by Walter Benjamin as *Blosses Leben (Critique of Violence)* and explored throughout the works of Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Agamben, among others, can be employed as a means to theorize Latin American cultural responses to contemporary forms of violence and social invisibility more fully. Through a thorough investigation of the connection between Agamben's explorations of the juridical ambiguities of sovereignty and Vallejo's *sicaresca* narrative, *La virgen de los sicarios*, this article highlights a new aesthetic trend emerging within a system of suspended law and order: literature that seeks to eliminate the production of bare life by subverting traditional paradigms of religious devotion, reproduction, and gender.

NOTES

¹ *Homo Sacer* (pl. *Homines sacri*), Latin for "the sacred man" or "the accursed man," is a figure of Roman law who is banned from society and can be killed with impunity, though not sacrificed in a religious rite. See Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1995).

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