

Performing and Critiquing the Human in Eduardo Mendoza's *Sin noticias de Gurb*<sup>1</sup>

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Eduardo Mendoza Garriga (1943), a writer and translator native of Barcelona, has received various literary prizes from Spain, among which is the prestigious Miguel de Cervantes Prize in 2016 for an outstanding lifetime writer in the Hispanic world. The aim of this working paper presentation is to briefly examine the impact of urban development, though not entering the urbanistic terminology, but rather through the lens of Eduardo Mendoza's peculiar and eccentric short novel *Sin noticias de Gurb*. The work has been translated later in several languages, such as French *Sans nouvelles de Gurb*, English *No Word from Gurb*, German *Nichts Neues von Gurb*, among several languages. Mendoza has confessed as well that *Sin noticias de Gurb* is his bestselling and most known work, especially among younger readers. As a holistic characterization, Mendoza's work demonstrates the capacity of writing and rewriting, or fictionalizing, the city of Barcelona through the lens of modern picaresque characters while offering both at the same time a critical and satirical message on the daily lives of the city dwellers using humorous language as tradition and disruption, as Javier Aparicio Maydeu points out. That is also one of the reasons for which literary critics and writers from Spain consider him as a follower of Miguel de Cervantes, notably famous for *Don Quixote*, a novel meant as a parody and a satire of chivalric novels but plenty of lessons about life, realism, and idealism. As a side note, Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza also visit Barcelona, the only city both ever manage to reach and to experience as reality near the end of the second part of the novel.

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While *Sin noticias de Gurb* first appeared periodically in Spain's largest national newspaper *El País* between August 1<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of 1990, Mendoza goes back later to his written piece and decided to convert it into a short novel that would be published at Seix Barral in 1991. How does this work relate to the actual debates on the environmental impact of tourism and especially aggressive mass tourism, or, to say a buzz word, "overtourism" in Barcelona? The answer may look straightforward but is effectively plenty of ambiguities, especially that the problems and consequences both positive and negative are linked to globalization. While a serious reader would consider Mendoza's *Sin noticias de Gurb* as a lightweight reading, compared to a toy for its use of colloquial language, such lightness rather enters the realm of a playful yet profound social critique of ambitious urban projects from mid 1980s, especially regarding the venue for the Olympic Games of 1992, a moment of intensified local modernization and globalization of Barcelona, Catalunya, and Spain.

If that is then the case, the critiques focalize from an unnamed narrator which we consider as an alien, along with a peer alien named Gurb who practically disappears for the great part of the novel morphed into Marta Sánchez, a well-known pop star in the Hispanic world. And both aliens just happen to arrive on the planet, on a town called Cerdanyola del Vallès, in the suburbs about 20 kilometres north of Barcelona city centre. While the main objective of their mission is, as explorers, to understand and mimic human behaviours, its reflection of performing the human indeed feeds itself with the notions of imitation, curiosity, and discovery of everyday life, all of which the reader encounters narrated through language. Moreover, Mendoza's novel unfolds their direct participation in a human society, culturally, economically, politically, or even for pleasure. Now, how do the generalized behaviours of humans judged and performed by the aliens in Mendoza's work intersect with the environmental critique?

The critique through the lens of the other (in the case of Mendoza's work, an alien) has a long tradition of satire close to Spanish literature: may it be the voyage to the moon in Lucian of Samosata from second century AD, Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Voltaire's *Micromégas*, Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* to which José de Cadalso's *Cartas marruecas* interacted to defend the place and role of Spain in the eighteenth century. From the Romantic period onwards, we also have such views from the travel writings of Chateaubriand or Théophile Gautier about the highly criticized exotic Spain. Benjamin Fraser's study of the alien narrator draws parallels to the ironic social critiques in Mariano José de Larra's satirical journalism as part of urban and spatial *costumbrismo* and an insight to everyday life. Beyond these plenty of well-known reminiscent references. There has always been an emphasis on the invented otherness between distinct cultures and traditions, sure, they are all canonical but also polemic those works have a certain relatable connection while reading of Mendoza's short and witty narrative.

In effect, the alien's voice is both ambiguous and at times contradictory through its self-distanced imitation as a performance and its critique as well of humans. The alien does question everything, even mock the lack of sophistication of human language and movements, but it serves as mechanism on how the alien could access such means of communication and behaviours to the locals. Eduardo Ruiz Tosaús interprets the novel as a "corrosive paradox" and points out the aspect of *costumbrismo* in other works of Mendoza where the novelist rewrites and fictionalize the space of Barcelona at a different period. Ruiz Tosaús also emphasizes that the unnamed alien came to earth to denounce absurd habits of consumerist society that lead to the competition and obsession for money and thus the results of negative quality of life in urban areas where traffic jam, construction works, huge crowds, and atmospheric pollution have always been a typical urban problem. But I think this also goes beyond pointing out the problem. For sure, the problems were

similar in the early 1990s and today, but these same symptoms of urban areas have accentuated and have become even more alarming nowadays, especially with “overtourism,” or the presence of huge crowds in Barcelona (but in several major cities as well). A part is linked to the accessibility of travel, tourism, and the impact of social media where users mark a desirable destination as a checklist and at the same time as spectacle, thus determines later the popularity of place for tourist to visit repeatedly and, of course, to cause pollution to the environment.

The literary text is a filter through which the unnamed alien’s voice and comments are encountered as pieces of information like a report about the society it studies, imitates and criticizes for its degrading urban environment. The unnamed alien narrator criticizes the human ways of living and the problems that come with it. When the alien enters a local bar for breakfast, it decides to browse the news. There, the alien boasts its sophisticated way of obtaining information, such as the news, in contrast with the written language which the alien finds primitive, yet the structure seems complex. For example, it compares a newspaper to a simple egg, supposing that a single egg contains much more information than the newspapers published throughout the country. Regarding the corporal aspect, the alien is originally an infinite but radioactive metaphysical form and throughout the novel morphs into human bodies to participate in the world of humans while it experiments, learns, and criticizes them. For David Knutson, such morphing points out the narrator’s eccentricity. That is also why the alien constantly and systematically compares and studies itself to humans, although most of its comments are negative with respect to its existence. The alien also comments on aspects that urban living poses, especially how its radioactive presence negatively affects certain urban ecology and order. When the alien analyses the composition of water, the conclusion comes to hydrogen, oxygen, and excrement – but the latter is rather expressed as “caca,” in colloquial fashion. This shows how the humans living in urban areas are simply

indifferent about keeping the environment clean. As well, after walking on the streets, the alien complains about pollution, having to suffer eye irritations, obstructed nose, and dry mouth, and longs for the purity of the suburbs in Cerdanyola del Vallès. Part of the alien's denouncing is related to class inequalities, between the rich and poor, and how the rich have access to the best services, as well as the best education, healthcare, and other commodities, as well as the high probability of appearing on magazine and news covers which is the case of the travel partner Gurb, who has had access to this luxury throughout the entire visit on earth.

Once the unnamed alien narrator poses its critiques about human life, it also performs human actions as a learning experience. Beyond that, the alien performs actions like and for the locals, in this case the Catalans, from which it picks up the distinctive accent when communicating but the alien exposes the stereotypes of Catalans as well, being obsessed of discussing their work, that, according to the alien, if the Catalans were able to do something, it is nothing else than to become bosses of the world. Despite this satirical intention, the best thing of the alien's living in Barcelona is the obsession for eating *churros* which has become beyond a comfort food, especially that the alien has been worried searching for its travel companion Gurb, the cause of all the havoc.

The alien character's various metamorphoses into reputed historical figures consist of its indeterminacy yet discovery of possible identities. It is as well an ironic way of escaping notice which readers usually find humorous, odd, and yet critical on learning about *being* and *performing* the inferior yet complex human. These behaviours consist mainly of what are socially and culturally acceptable and adequate or common sense to humans, but not in the case of our learning alien, whose ontology, phenomenology, and mechanisms Antonio Gomez Lopez-Quñones takes into further examination through the lens of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas. Yet the realm of fiction is permissible for an array of *being* and *performing* regardless of limits of representation.

In the real world, there is a resemblance with the interaction when an individual or a group travel in a foreign place and try to figure out local customs without necessarily being aware of whether their actions are deemed appropriate, or ironically rude, to the local inhabitants. For sure, the best intentions of the alien also work well in the novel, such as working for a local bar owned by two elderly people and speaking with the building concierge to find out more on how to approach the single-mother neighbour living with her young child. Interestingly, the alien's multiple corporeal transformations come up to the readers as a showcase of cultural and historical references of Spain. Despite these references to important and reputed personalities chosen for their biographical virtue, it is not always certain how the alien puts importance to each of its transformations, and it is even more ironic in a greater sense, since the aim of the mission on Earth is to specifically not cause suspicion to the local inhabitants and especially not to affect their environment, both of which the alien could not prevent because of its radioactive presence.

The alien makes many learning opportunities (but also unfortunate ones) with these transformations to show and experiment with character traits. These show the alien's adaptability to every situation, but it is also used to camouflage for its misbehaviours. For example, he would use the Spanish thinker and Hellenist Miguel de Unamuno to show compassion to its jail companion when he was incarcerated after a night of excess debauchery on the streets of Barcelona. The alien's misbehaviour is also a way for trial and error, to test the limits of its adopted corporeal body as well as the limits of what is allowed and permitted, while unfortunately learning late about the reason for ending up in jail consequently. The alien's transformations are many, ranging from historical figures, politicians, thinkers, artists, intellectuals, even pop culture references, and I name only some of them: Pope Pius XII, Yamamoto, Duke and Duchess of Kent, Mahatma Ganhdi, Gary Cooper, José Ortega y Gasset, painter Julio Romero de Torres, designer

Giorgi Armani, President Eisenhower, singers Luciano Pavarotti, Gilbert Bécaud, Yves Montand. Indeed, the identities of the alien are articulated on the appearances, such as the way it tries to do, but these appearances on corporeal transformations are only one part. The alien's identities reflect better in its intentions, such as the thoughts it develops. Each time the alien morphs into a body, the more it accumulates failures of intent, especially that every change not only catches attention but leads the alien badly for example in the city jail. Perhaps, ending up in jail shows how the alien's incongruent metamorphoses throughout the novel as lacking stability, control, and awareness of the concept of limit and its inclination to hedonism, as one of the ways the alien tends to act while roaming around the city.

As a point for further reflection, *Sin noticias de Gurb*, Mendoza's highly peculiar and popular work, offers a bridge on how sociopolitical critique of the early 1990s may still prolong to questions pertinent to the environment, especially considering the state of culture within the literary representation of contemporary Barcelona. How? We can only say it outside fiction. But fiction feeds itself from what is representable, from the chaotic urban spaces of Barcelona, but such chaos seems to cause pleasure, such as laughter, to the reader once it becomes fictionalized, since the reader is not only able to recognize the daily operations of their own city, but the city is also converted to a subject matter of critique of *moeurs*. And perhaps, by recognizing the use of humour and satire of customs, the reader may encounter pleasure or disgust, which of course is a marker of their position and attitude toward the reading, either lightly or too seriously. Or perhaps, taking a distance and embark on the points of critique. I end with an anecdote, when I was visiting Barcelona, I ended up commenting on *Sin noticias de Gurb*, and we simply laughed. Thus I considered this as a social phenomenon, since we encounter herein performances and critiques toward our ways of living and travelling through humour, satire, and irony.

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