Luis Rafael Sánchez and Norman Mailer:
Puerto Rico and the United States as Heard on the Radio

With the development of television in the late 1940s and early 1950s, radio narratives lost the dominance over radio programming that they had enjoyed during the previous decades. Radio then turned to music broadcasting as the focus of its entertainment offerings. The emerging broadcast format, although not a narrative structure, offers an organizational structure that has had considerable impact on recent literary production. The music format of radio broadcasting that has predominated since the late fifties is one structured around the disc jockey, an anchor figure who provides light chatter and information between musical selections. D. j.s, as they are known, have often been described as "the ones who tie it all together," their function being that of providing a linking text. This text is characterized by the fast-paced and aggressive use of a language that expresses the energy and movement embodied in modern popular music and in the young audiences for whom these broadcasts are intended. This language has a quality of assault that conveys force and personality through mocking and irreverent monologues.

The literary possibilities of the d.j. as a media figure capable of creating a text which links different realities have been explored in two recent novels: Norman Mailer's Why Are We in Vietnam? (1967) and Luis Rafael Sánchez's La guaracha del Macho Camacho (1976; Macho Camacho's Beat),[1] works that parody the music format of radio broadcasting in order to analyze the dialectical tensions existing between various interacting social elements. In Mailer's work, the analytical process is aided by the anti-establishment, anti-war message of d.j.s and the music of the 1960s. Sánchez, in turn, uses his perception of Puerto Rican society as one totally absorbed by the media as the means of creating a text which forces the reader to confront this media-dependency and its impact.

Why Are We in Vietnam? is structured like a program put out by a self-styled disc jockey. The "Intro-Beep" chapters, narrated by a Harlem hippie named D. J., are used to introduce and comment on the narrative chapters with which they alternate. These chapters tell the story of a hunting trip undertaken by a Texas teenager (also named D. J.), his friend Tex, his father Rusty, and some of the latter's business associates. La guaracha del Macho Camacho follows an almost identical structure. As in Mailer's work, the voice of the d. j. serves as a link between

chapters. The long-winded introduction to Camacho's song alternates with the voices of characters caught in a traffic jam. The structural and thematic link between these characters is the voice of the d. j. Not only are the structures of both works similar, but the conceptual frameworks of both novels (the hunting trip in Mailer, the traffic jam in Sánchez) are meant to work as symbols of the ills that plague their respective societies.

In Why Are We in Vietnam? the hunting trip and the observations of animal relations that it prompts can very well be seen as a parallel to the war in Vietnam. The hunt itself, being firmly based on the technological superiority of the hunters, offers opportunities for such a comparison. The effect of this technology on the animals (their conduct no longer in keeping with natural laws) creates a climate of guerrilla warfare similar to the one encountered by American forces in Vietnam. The predatory cruelty of the eagle and the bear, national symbols of the United States and the Soviet Union, could also point to this connection. But, however valid, the drawing of these parallels mechanizes rather than enlightens the view of America offered by Mailer, and the hunt remains the more effective metaphor of the moral illness that led to Vietnam. The author implies that the same forces which motivate these hunters to kill are responsible for the country's aggressiveness overseas. It is in this context that the hunt as a means of advancing within the corporate structure (as it is for Rusty and his associates) becomes relevant. It serves to question both the source and nature of power in America. Rusty and company emerge as travesties of creative energy. Caught as they are in the world of corporate competitiveness, they have no outlet for their aggressiveness other than murder. Thus it becomes essential for Rusty to kill a bear because failure could spell disaster for his corporate status.

As the hunt in Mailer becomes emblematic of military aggressiveness, so the traffic jam in Sánchez's novel becomes a metaphor for the effects of colonialism on Puerto Rican society. As the oft-quoted passages state,

> aquí en Puerto Rico, colonia sucesiva de
> dos imperios e isla del archipiélago de las
> Antillas [13] . . . miércoles hoy, tarde de
> miércoles hoy, cinco pasado meridiano de miér-
> coles hoy . . . el senador Vicente Reinosa [14]
> . . . está atrapado, apresado, agarrado por un
> tapón fenomenal como la vida made in Puerto Rico,
> muestra ágil el tapón de la capacidad criolla
> para el atolladero [27] . . .

> (here in Puerto Rico, the successive colony of two empires and an island in the archipelago of the Antilles [5] . . . today Wednesday five post meridian . . . . Senator Vicente Reinosa [6] . . . is tied up, held up, caught up in a traffic jam as phenomenal as life, Made in Puerto Rico, the tie-up is an active sample of the Latin American capacity for obstruction [17] . . . .)

The entrapment Sánchez suggests is emphasized by the entrapment in time of the characters of the novel. If it is true that they are trapped in a traffic jam, it is also true that they are trapped within the d.j.'s monologue --caught in the minutes that elapse between the d.j.'s announcement of the guaracha and its playing time. The paralysis implied by the traffic jam is reinforced by the paralysis in time, by the characters' and the plot's inability to move beyond five o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon.

The effectiveness of the conceptual metaphor rests on the voice of the narrator. In Mailer's work, this voice can conjure all the available speech levels of America, from the voices of the Deep South to the pedantic language of intellectuals to the obscenities and characteristic syntax of Harlem slang. John W. Aldridge has identified some of the voices as belonging to a Hell's Angel, a Harlem hippie, a small-town southern deputy sheriff, a drunken revivalist preacher, and a filthy-minded top sergeant in the Army.[2] Their combined voices create a voice of assault, aggressive and mocking, with a hidden, unknowable identity behind it--a voice which arbitrarily identifies itself as that of D. J., a rich White Texan adolescent, or D. J., a crippled Harlem Black dreaming that he is a rich Texan. Its identifying characteristic is indeed its not being identifiable. The narrator is no one and everyone because, although he lacks an identity of his own, he has internalized the hidden compulsions and power obsessions of American society. On hearing D. J.'s narrative "one has the disturbing sensation of tuning into many wavelengths at once."[3]

Similarly, in La guaracha del Macho Camacho we have a re-creation of Puerto Rico's social reality through its multiplicity of languages. Sánchez offers a wide range of characterizations through the interweaving of the narrator's urbane and literate voice with the linguistic peculiarities of different social classes. He offers the language of the d. j., upbeat and nonsensical, the language of advertisements, the language of the

media-besieged slum dwellers, the language of radio, television, film, and comic strips, the language of conspicuous consumerism, the language of popular magazines, the language of the Americanized bourgeoisie, and the language of political groups. The resulting linguistic melange is a force which appears to negate the paralysis implicit in the traffic jam that frames the novel. This paralysis is counterbalanced by a language that is seemingly vibrant, a language as upbeat as the rhetoric of the d. j. and the lyrics of Camacho's song: "La vida es una cosa fenomenal" (Life Is a Phenomenal Thing). It is a language full of rhythm, whose pulsating qualities match the beat of the guaracha:

> Lo dijo un hombre hecho y derecho: el país no funciona, el país no funciona, el país no funciona; repetido hasta la provocación, repetido como zéjel de guaracha; frente a una luz roja que era negra porque el semáforo no funcionaba, indignado el hombre hecho y derecho, el estómago contraído por la indignación, las mandíbulas rígidas: el país no funciona. Los pasajeros inscribieron dos partidos contendientes: uno minoritario de asintientes tímidos y otro vociferante que procedió a entonar, con brío reservado a los himnos nacionales, la irreprimible guaracha de Macho Camacho, "la vida es una cosa fenomenal" . . . . (21)

> (It was said by a proper man: the country doesn't work, the country doesn't work, the country doesn't work: repeated to the point of provocation, repeated like the zéjel at the end of a guaracha: facing a red light that was black because the traffic signal wasn't working, the proper man indignant, his stomach contracted with indignation, his mandibles rigid: the country doesn't work. The passengers signed up in two opposing parties: one a minority of timid people in agreement and the other a vociferous majority who proceed to intone with a verve reserved for national anthems Macho Camacho's irrepressible guaracha Life Is a Phenomenal Thing . . . .) (11)

Yet the vibrating quality comes not from the language of the characters but from the narrator's display of linguistic versatility. The language of the characters, the object of the narrator's ironic text, is as empty and alienating as the models it copies. It is a language full of clichês, molded on the rhythmic but repetitious messages of commercial jingles, popular songs, and magazines--a language in the process of losing its ability to communicate "truth" because of its alienation from reality. The empty energy of this language attempts to mask the weak foundations on which it rests in the same way as the culture it represents rests on unsound values taken from a media which offers t.v.'s sex symbol Iris Chacón as a social model. Rhythm replaces meaning in the novel, functioning as a drug which obliterates reality. "La vida es una cosa fenomenal" (Life Is a Phenomenal Thing) becomes the national anthem of a population incapable of coming to grips with the fact that "the country doesn't work."

In Why Are We in Vietnam? we have a similar use of language as a weapon against paralysis. It is against the impulse towards stasis that D. J.'s outrageous rhetoric becomes a weapon. The voice of the Northern Ice, which D. J. and Tex "hear" when they go to the edge of the mountain, is a voice which negates life and seems to work through the higher orders of the animal kingdom to promote the principle of entropy by instilling in them destructive impulses. As in Sanchéz's work, language becomes the energetic force in a world moving towards stasis, its energy coming forth as a barrage of obscenities. Here the linguistic assault is a way of getting rid of the waste in the American consciousness, "a way of getting rid of blocked aggressions and spiritual constipations":[4].

> Your body, D. J., will inform you, send out a call to all cell waters; gather here, kiss this crystal, dissolve its form. Unloose my stasis. Crystal washes down to glub, glub, glub. Urine is a pipe running the dissolution of all unheard messages. That's why people piss like horses at good parties and bad--they are getting uncouth oceanic messages from all over the room: come here I want to fuck you; go there I want to kill you. Whoo-ee! That bladder gets full of piss. Therefore, D. J. seeks to avoid all frustration of impulse in order to test his hypotheses. For figure thee, Henry, if D. J. makes it through a

> day without a single impulse held back, he
> should not need to piss a drop. That's
> science, dear clients. (153)

D. J.'s compulsive obscenity his obsession with feces and disembowelment, the "lingual bowel movement" to which the reader is subjected, is projected onto America itself. The message appears to be that "America is powerful, fertile, and thriving, but only as a weed (or a cancer) is powerful, growing on waste, both product and process diabolical."[5] The war in Vietnam is seen by Mailer as an extension of this waste.

Mailer finds the forces that led the country into the Vietnam War in the world of corporate America, where aggressive competition goes out of control. D. J.'s satiric monologues in the "Intro-Beep" chapters reveal the other side of the Vietnam issue--the opposition to the war found outside corporate structures. This opposition comes, according to Mailer, from the perception of the wagers of the war as anti-Black, anti-poor, anti-women, and anti-Jew. Attitudes about the war are polarized according to class, sex, race, and religion with the White male, symbol of corporate America, as the villain.

It is not surprising, then, that Mailer turns D. J. (the Texas adolescent) into an agent of death. The novel ends, ironically, with a celebration of the imminent departure of Tex and D. J. for Vietnam (this being the only direct reference to the war in the novel). D. J., the rich White Texan, becomes part of the war which D. J., the Harlem hippie, repudiates.

Vietnam is only a marginal issue in Sánchez's work, although not an unimportant one in a novel that attempts a portrait of the political, class, and social contradictions existing between the Americanized upper classes and the media-bombarded lower classes. The class polarization in the novel reflects the irreconcilable forces which operate in a society where political colonization has led to cultural colonization. Support for the Vietnam war, in this context, becomes a symbol of collusion with the colonial power.

The class polarization is matched in the novel by linguistic polarization: we are shown two social classes with their corresponding languages. The language of the guaracha, that of the have-nots, of whom the Senator's lover is representative, is modeled on the offerings of the mass media. These media also mold their aspirations:

> ¿Aprendió el dulce encanto del fingimiento
> de los manerismos repercutidos del gran-

dioso teleculebrón "El hijo de Angela María"
que convirtió en melaza el corazón isleño?
. . . ¿Aprendió que la vida es una cosa fe-
nomenal de la mismísima guaracha de Macho
Camacho? arrasadora consigna, incitadora al
permanente fiesteo, evangélica oda al conten-
to y al contentamiento . . . . (23)

(Did she learn the sweet charm of pretense
from the mannerisms that reverberate out of
the magnificent snake-long soap opera The
Son of Angela María that had turned the
island's heart to honey? . . . Did she
indeed learn that life is a phenomenal thing
from Macho Camacho's guaracha?, a slogan
that sweeps everything along, inciting to
permanent partying, an evangelical ode to
happy happenstance . . . .) (13)

The upper classes reject the guaracha, thereby rejecting contact with a language (and its people). The Senator feels the guaracha on him like a taint:

La guaracha del Macho Camacho, su furor
vulgar, lo ha maculado, contaminado, aso-
lado: altito o bajito, poquito o muchito,
la guaracha: tiara de la ordinarez, pei-
neta de la broza, estandarte de la tuza,
se ha posado en sus labios. (151)

(Macho Camacho's guaracha, its vulgar furor
has tainted him, contaminated him, laid him
waste: high or low, a little or a lot, the
guaracha: a tiara of vulgarity, a headdress
of trash, a banner of the rabble, has
alighted on his lips.) (122)

This rejection is already evident in their language, which eschews vulgarity, strives to be exquisite, and reflects an elegant reality bought on credit. It is also a language full of anglicisms and modeled on a foreign society. Vicente's language reflects his colonized mentality and attitudes. His frequent slips into English

and his sexual exploitation of lower-class women go hand in hand with his support of the Vietnam War and his pro-American stand (he calls Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson "los padres de la patria"). The lower classes, as Sánchez points out, suffer the effects of this political stand.

It is not surprising, then, that this political attitude among the upper classes prompts a predilection for foreign literature and a rejection of any literature that reflects the reality of the Puerto Rican working classes:

> . . . hace tiempo que quiere meterle el diente a algo de Enrique Laguerre o algo de René Marqués: también los del patio son hijos de Dios; objetiva, democrática, bien maquillada: si los del patio no fueran pesimistas y dramosos: dale con el arrabal, dale con la independencia de Puerto Rico, dale con los personajes que sudan; todo lo que se escribe debe ser fino y elevado, la literatura debe ser fina y elevada . . . . (109)

> (. . . for some time she's wanted to sink her teeth into something by Enrique Laguerre or René Marqués: people in our own backyard are God's children too: objective, democratic, well put together: if the backyard people weren't so pessimistic and tragical: forget slums, forget Puerto Rican independence, forget characters who sweat: everything that's written should be refined and elevated, literature should be refined and elevated.) (86)

Passages such as this are aimed at showing the polarized forces in Puerto Rican society. The linguistic polarization emphasizes the economic and social polarization. It reflects patterns of exploitation that in the novel are linked to sexuality. The Catholic, middle-class morality perceived by Manuel Puig in Boquitas pintadas (Painted Lips) as a social evil is satirized here in the asexual, puritanical attitudes of Graciela Alcántara de Montefrío. For the lower classes, however, sexuality has become a marketable commodity on which they must rely (however exploitative) in order to satisfy the desires created by the

media and the proliferation of life on credit. The Senator's lover sees her sexual services as a means to an end: the dinette set advertised by a local furniture store and the vedette costume she will need to emulate Iris Chacón. The resulting sexual and economic exploitation is another example of the bottled-up society Sánchez is portraying.

It does not come as a surprise, then, that Sánchez's upper-class teenager--Benny--will, like D. J. and Tex in Mailer's novel, become an agent of death. Benny's efforts to extricate himself and his Ferrari from the colonial traffic jam results in the death of China's son, one final indictment of the upper classes' literal and metaphorical "squashing" of the lower classes.

One last point of affinity between these two works should be mentioned. Both novels underscore their assessment of their respective societies through the systematic use of humor. Sánchez's humor stems from a rupture in the system of rational links provided by language. The juxtaposition of the narrator's sophisticated, debonair language and the linguistic idiosyncracies of his characters creates an incongruous text where styles and realities are mixed with comic results. Mailer's humor is predominantly perverse humor (often called black humor), relying on scatological and sexual jokes, and on gruesome portraits of destruction. The novel displays Mailer's gift (which is also Sánchez's gift) for extravagant off-color rhetoric, which comes forth in a "swift flow of puns, verbal play, insinuation, and obscure allusion to the artifacts of contemporary life."[6]

If we are to judge by the works discussed above, the use of the music format of radio leads to works whose primary goal is the depiction of society through its languages. This may be explained by the fact that the d.j., the central anchor figure used by both Mailer and Sánchez, is a media presence whose reality for the audience is purely linguistic. It is also a figure that ties realities together, serving as a link between voices that show the linguistic spectrum of society. It is undeniable that the d.j.'s ability to link or connect is his primary function in these works: he becomes the voice that ties the narrative together in Mailer and offers the unifying element in Sánchez.

Lizabeth Paravisini
Herbert H. Lehman College
City University of New York

NOTES

1. Norman Mailer, Why Are We in Vietnam? (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1967); Luis Rafael Sánchez, La guaracha del Macho Camacho (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1976); also see Macho Camacho's Beat, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (New York: Random House, 1980). All subsequent references are made to these editions and appear in the text.

2. "From Vietnam to Obscenity" in Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work, ed. Robert Lucid (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971) p. 184.

3. Tony Tanner, "On the Parapet," Critical Quarterly 12, (1970) p. 175.

4. "From Vietnam to Obscenity," p. 191.

5. Andrew Gordon, "Why Are We in Vietnam?: Deep in the Bowels of Texas," Literature and Psychology 24 (1976) p. 62.

6. Allen Guttman, "Jewish Humor," in The Comic Imagination in America, ed. Louis D. Rubin (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1973) p. 337.