Surrealist Associations and Mexico's Precariat in Roberto Wong's París D.F.

Kevin M. Anzzolin
University of Wisconsin, Stout

Since its origins in the 1920s, few places in the world have greeted Surrealism as enthusiastically as Latin America. Accordingly, the region's unique relationship to one of the foremost artistic movements of the twentieth century has received ample scholarly attention—especially in the last decade. In 2012 a collection of essays edited by Dawn Ades, Rita Eder, and Graciela Speranza was published as *Surrealism in Latin America: Vivísimo Muerto*. But a year later, in 2013, Melanie Nicholson's *Surrealism in Latin American Literature: Searching for Breton's Ghost* was also published. Of the Latin American locales where Surrealism took root during its 1920s and 1930s peak decades, the general scholarly consensus is that Mexico assumed a privileged role.[1] In Paris, Aztec figures were exhibited alongside surrealist art while Mexico hosted some of Surrealism's most prominent names: André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Wolfgang Paalen, Benjamin Péret, and Remedios Varo.[2] Mexico, as the story goes, was even lauded by no less than Breton as the "surrealist country par excellence."

And yet, as Nicholson perceptively reminds us, Mexico's history with Surrealism has been paradoxical: due to the arrival of the movement to Mexico during the country's epoch of Revolutionary nationalism, Surrealism's distinctly internationalist character was met with some skepticism.[3] Although Surrealism, responding directly to World War I, most definitely began as a revolutionary movement, on Mexican soil the movement's internationalist spirit oftentimes had to be tempered by nationalist concerns, even while remaining politically savvy.[4] All told, it would be somewhat disingenuous to suggest Surrealism's political nature has always been a given—either in the case of Mexico or beyond.[5] The movement entered a de-politicized period leading up to World War II, before again reigniting its political animus in 1935 when Surrealism's two heavyweights (and perennial

Kevin M. Anzzolin: kmanzzol@gmail.com

Copyright © 2020 (Kevin M. Anzzolin). Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. Available at http://jsa.asu.edu/

antagonists) Breton and Georges Bataille joined forces to form the anti-Stalinist group Contre-Attaque. When Contre-Attaque dissolved after a short eighteen months, Breton nonetheless continued his involvement with Communism, especially via his relationship with Leon Trotsky, who, in political exile, had taken up residence in Mexico. Alternatively Bataille became increasingly involved with the Acéphale group, while his work itself became progressively rarefied. Yet others involved in Surrealism—like poets Paul Éluard and Louis Aragon—notoriously remained Stalinist sympathizers. As David Hopkins insightfully explains: "Surrealism would continue in the post-World War II period, yet the Cold War political landscape would exacerbate its disengagement from established political movements."[6]

This preliminary history of Surrealism in Mexico raises several questions: How does contemporary narrative remember the relationship between Mexico, politics, and Surrealism? What is Surrealism's legacy in Mexico? How have the formative years of Surrealism been rendered in twenty-first century Mexican narrative?

With what follows, I respond to these inquiries by examining an unstudied novel from 2015, Roberto Wong's *París D.F.* Via an analysis of the work's surrealist techniques, I read the novel as arguing for Mexico's intimate relationship with Surrealism; furthermore, I claim that Wong's novel characterizes Surrealism as continuing to be politically relevant. I thus build upon extant scholarship that has situated Surrealism—with its emphasis on chance, fantastical associations of places and names, and an "end of history" hopelessness—as a precursor to postmodernism.[7] Finally, upon examination of the text's explicitly political language, I show that Wong's novel constitutes an attempt to represent what we can best understand as Mexico's precariat—a class which confronts the similarly unstable employment conditions of the proletariat—but which lacks the proletariat's occupational identity. In this way, Wong forwards a politically engaged strain of Surrealism appropriate to confront contemporary socioeconomic malaise.

Wong's Novel

The first novel written by Mexican-American Roberto Wong (Tampico, Mexico, 1982), *París D.F.* won *El Premio Dos Passos* for literature in October 2014. Wong's work garnered favorable reviews from Spanish newspaper *El País* as well as in Mexico's *La Jornada*.[8] Various online forums from Mexico also covered the novel's launch.[9] Since its publication, Roberto Wong has continued to review novels for one of Mexico's most prestigious journals, *Letras Libres*, and also contributes to *El Anaquel*, a blog dedicated to literature.[10] In September 2016, the novel was published in French and in 2019 the digital edition of the French version was released.[11] Wong also published a collection of short stories in 2018 under the title *Los recuerdos son pistas, el resto es una ficción* (Memories are Clues, Everything Else is Fiction), which won Mexico's ninth *Certamen Internacional Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* prize.

The protagonist of Wong's novel is thirty-three-year-old Arturo, an aspiring poet who finds himself in an unfulfilling job and with a tumultuous love life. Disturbed and depressed, he is haunted by the death of his father while his mother succumbs to diabetes. Arturo's life is suddenly transformed when his Mexico City workplace, Farmacia París, is held up by an assailant.[12] The assault at the pharmacy takes an unforeseen turn when a police officer—on the scene by sheer chance—haphazardly guns down the would-be robber. The deceased assailant, who the police find out was named Luis, bears a preternatural resemblance to Wong's protagonist. Traumatized by his close brush with death and confused as to how closely his fate is tied to that of his dead criminal doppelgänger, Arturo begins an existential journey across time and space: he attempts to mend his disquieted consciousness, and begins reevaluating the grim conditions and chance encounters that characterize his life in Mexico's monstrous capital. In the grips of a full-on emotional breakdown, Arturo laments having never seen the city that inspired both the name of his workplace as well as the artistic production of so many Surrealists: Paris. Rather than rejecting these disassociative daydreams, Arturo cultivates them by placing a map of the European metropolis (Paris) atop one of Mexico City. This cartographic superimposition becomes the novel's organizing conceit. Spatial and temporal confusion ensues as Arturo explores his own troubled psyche; the protagonist associates different people and disparate places from his personal life. Most notably, Arturo combines locales in Mexico City and in Paris.

During his self-exploratory and liquor-fueled downward spiral, Arturo places sporadic telephone calls to Nadia, a woman whom he has never met, and whose telephone number Wong's protagonist obtains after the police had dialed her from his cell phone in the moments after the failed stick-up. Toward the end of the novel, Arturo becomes increasingly involved, like Luis before him, in Mexico City's violent and sordid demimonde. The work's concluding section reads like a dreamlike collage filled with fantastical encounters and lost loves. Here, Arturo eventually assumes a role as a hitman, having accepted an offer to murder someone at Arena México, a premier locale for wrestling matches in Mexico City. Essentially, the feigned violence of *lucha libre* become very real. With his parents deceased and his love life in shambles, the novel's last pages see Arturo oneirically immersed in a fantastical Paris.

Throughout the novel, Wong mines liberally from Surrealism's gig bag: the author explicitly references some of the movement's established techniques, representative authors, and salient storylines. In terms of structure, Wong's chapters oftentimes alternate settings in Mexico City and Paris, a literary device reminiscent of the well-known structure of Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*. Arturo ambles through the streets of Mexico City—and, via his imagination, those of Paris—much like a Bretonian *flâneur*. Indeed, the almost completely unknown object of Arturo's obsession is referred to as "Nadia," a name that resonates with the eponymous enchantress of André Breton's 1928 *Nadja*—described as young and crazed,

epitomizing chance, unpredictability, and mad love. Like Nadja, it is explained that the object of Arturo's affection, too, signifies "hope" in Russian.[13] Finally, Arturo's lascivious wanderlust, along with the occasionally violent character of his sexual conquests, echoes Surrealism's erotic ethos.[14]

París D.F. thus employs a plethora of Surrealism's quintessential motifs: criminality, psychology, violence, sexuality, enigmatic females, existential angst, the acuity of the irrational, chance encounters, convulsive love, and the epiphanic reevaluation of the everyday.[15] Of these many references to Surrealism however, two of the artistic movement's primary concepts are markedly prominent: Breton's notion of objective chance and Bataille's idea of sacrificial eroticism. Appropriate for a discussion of a movement that values the power of association, *París D.F.*'s references to objective chance and sacrificial eroticism effectively task readers to link Mexico and Surrealism.[16] In the concluding section, I examine how Wong's Surrealism speaks directly to what I will define as Mexico's present-day precariat and thus, propose that the novel constitutes an attempt to maintain Surrealism's political edge.

***París D.F.* and its Surrealisms**

During Surrealism's formative years, a number of the movement's polemics, schisms, and personal differences played out in very public ways. At the helm was Breton, the self-appointed "Pape du surréalisme," who was, at best, demanding and organized; at worst, he was cantankerous and controlling. At various junctures, political and artistic differences divided artists and intellectuals involved in the movement: Breton fell out with Aragon, Jacques Prévert, Antonin Artaud, and Salvador Dalí and, most strikingly, Bataille.[17] And although it would be disingenuous to suggest that Breton and Bataille, the two surrealist heavyweights, never got along (their cooperation in Contre-Attaque proves otherwise) they were only intermittent collaborators throughout their lives, as their respective notions of Surrealism frequently diverged.[18] While Breton emphasized the potential of manifestoes, focused on the movement's purpose, the power of convulsive beauty, and the transformative opportunities afforded by objective chance, Bataille became more interested in iconoclasm and nihilism. Surrealism, especially for Bataille, harnessed the dark forces of sex, violence, and primitivism.

Breton's impetus for developing the notion of "objective chance"—a term which began appearing in surrealist texts after 1930—stemmed from the idea that coincidences are oftentimes more than mere happenstance;[19] rather, they can be profoundly meaningful.[20] For Breton, objective chance was the flashpoint between the subjective and objective realms of experience; by infusing real-life conditions with an appropriate amount of volition, emotion, and desire, one could manipulate reality so as to satisfy individual hopes. As he defines it in *Mad Love*, objective chance can be catalyzed via an openness to everyday experience and a

determination to careful observation: "Still today I am only counting on what comes of my own openness, my eagerness to wander in search of everything, which, I am confident, keeps me in mysterious communication with other open beings, as if we were suddenly called to assemble."[21] According to Breton, the observant wanderer realizes that "[d]aily life abounds, moreover, in just this type of small discovery. . .You only have to know how to get along in the labyrinth. Interpretive delirium begins only when man, ill-prepared, is taken by a sudden fear in the *forest of symbols*."[22] By properly combining disparate parts of the everyday, new means of fulfillment become apparent and an individual may create the life they long for.[23] Within surrealist texts, objective chance is most apparent in relation to a protagonist's aleatory encounters in the city, and especially in pursuit of sphinx-like women.[24] Of note are Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926), Breton's *Nadja* (1928), and Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963). *Nadja* begins with the question "Who am I?," which motivates the narrator to discover the female lead, while Cortázar's protagonist, Horacio Oliveira, opens *Hopscotch* wondering if he would find Maga.[25] As Gerárd Durozoi explains, "to wander was to be open to whatever might happen: such openness transformed how one could satisfy their desire. Even if the actual setting was mediocre, the stroller could intuit a deeper meaning, more secretive and intimate."[26] The concept of objective chance became so central to Breton that he could not resist bending even Trotsky's ear about the notion during their 1938 meeting in Mexico.[27]

In *París D.F.*, Wong's protagonist, Arturo, walks around Mexico City in search of just such fruitful confluences of reality and intuition. Objective chance is the novel's foremost surrealist technique and is made most apparent with the numerous references to "azar"— "chance." This "azar" or "objective chance" is present from the work's first pages and is alluded to when we learn of the novel's primary trope—again, Arturo's overlaying maps of Mexico City and Paris:

> Sobrepuse dos mapas y comencé a calcular. Lo que siguió fue escoger el lugar del que equidistan todos los puntos: República de El Salvador, 97, Farmacia París, epicentro alrededor del cual gira mi vida. En París, este centro debiera situarse en la catedral de Notre-Dame….
>
> Tenía ante mí la llave del azar, el mecanismo para activar la probabilidad. Un engaño, quizá, pero ¿qué no lo es? Es curiosa la manera en que las cosas se esfuerzan en anudarse unas con otras, como calcetines enrollados en una lavadora. Años sin darme cuenta de nada que no fueran borracheras y la misma vista absurda desde la ventana, y de repente un relámpago o un flash, y con él, un entramado de concordancias que se esforzaban por ser visibles, acaso con un propósito, con un sentido.
>
> [I overlaid two maps and began calculating. What I needed to do was

> find where locales lined up: República de El Salvador, 97, Farmacia París, epicenter around which my life rotated. In Paris, it would be the Cathedral of Notre Dame….
> I had before me the key to my destiny, the way to trigger chance. A ploy, perhaps, but what isn't? It's curious how things get mixed up with other things, like socks rolled up in a washing machine. Years without thinking about anything save for drunken benders and the same absurd view out the window, and suddenly a lightning bolt or a flash, accompanied by a harmonious configuration making itself visible, perhaps with a purpose, with meaning.][28]

During the rest of the novel, Arturo's narrative toggles between Paris and Mexico City as Wong's protagonist looks for love, aims to emotionally heal after his parents' death, and laments his employment situation. His attempts to activate objective chance are also presented in terms of spatial metaphors:

> En el Zócalo, la luz del atardecer sobre la cantera rosa de Palacio Nacional le hace pensar en Gema. Su enojo le parece tan lejano. Regresa a Regina e intenta recrear el camino que ha tomado. La cuadrícula de la ciudad le hace pensar en esos juegos de feria en los que se tira una canica por una tabla de madera con pequeños postes. La canica cae, golpeando las trabas, hasta aterrizar en un apartado que define el premio. El azar depende de los obstáculos.
> Gira a la izquierda, pasa por en medio de varios puestos callejeros con pornografía y luego sigue a la derecha por Chapultepec. Las lonas verdes del tianguis evitan mirar el cielo. Frente a él, la avenida se extiende infinita. Tiene la sensación de que todos los que pasan a su lado contienen historias que con gusto cambiaría por su vida.
> [In the Zócalo Square, the sun setting on the National Palace's pink stones makes him think about Gema. His anger seems so far away. He returns to Regina Street and tries to retrace the path he's taken. The gridded city streets make him think about those carnival games where you shoot a marble around a wooden board with small posts. The marble falls, striking against obstructions, until it lands in a pothole ensuring a prize. Obstacles determine one's chances. He turns to the left, moving through various stands selling pornography before skirting to the right through Chapultepec. The green tents in the marketplace avoid looking at the sun. The avenue stretches out before him infinitely. He senses that everyone that passes by him have lives he gladly trade his for.][29]

Like the anonymous protagonist of Breton's *Mad Love*, who walks the city in hopes of chance encounters via "an itinerary just as capricious as possible," Arturo, too, meanders holding on to the promise of breaking with routine.[30]

> Al llegar al D.F. evitas mirar el mapa: sabes que algo se revelará apenas des la vuelta a la esquina, otra pieza más de ese rompecabezas que alguien ha llamado París. ¿Por qué seguir? Tal vez siempre te ha seducido el azar, accidentes que, elevados a la enésima potencia, rompan lo establecido, lo común, lo que das por sentado.
> [After returning to Mexico City, you avoid looking at the map: you know that something will pop up right after you turn the corner, another piece of that puzzle that someone called 'Paris.' Why go on? Perhaps chance has always seduced you, accidents that—multiplied to the umpteenth power—shatter all that has been proven, all that is common, all of your assumptions.][31]

Especially interesting for our considerations here is the fact that Arturo's wanderings—his emotional and mental investment in objective chance—are not just about finding love. Rather, they also constitute attempts to overcome the harshness of the everyday in Mexico City, a metropolis of over twenty million people, where survival itself has been seen as elusive.[32] Arturo ruminates:

> Sé que no fue vano tratar de reinventar una ciudad y volver a vivirla, salvarse así de lo ennegrecido cotidiano. En algún lugar, alguien tal vez recuerde esto, descubra los itinerarios y los publique. Me gustaría ver a hombres y mujeres persiguiendo fantasmas por la calle tras haberse revelado el azar, la certeza de repentinas proximidades y coincidencias alucinantes.
> [I know that trying to reinvent and relive a city—thus saving oneself from the filth of everyday life—was not in vain. Somewhere, someone would perhaps remember this—they would discover the routes and publish them. I'd like to see men and women chasing ghosts through the street, after chance has revealed itself: the assuredness of unforeseen associations and hallucinatory coincidences.][33]

I shall return to this invocation of the social world in Mexico City and its everyday "griminess"—which, I claim, gestures towards a critical, political engagement—in greater detail below.

Objective chance is not the only surrealist technique stressed in *París D.F.* Wong's novel also emphasizes sacrificial eroticism, a concept strongly associated with

Bataille, Surrealism's dark prince. Bataille's attraction to the diabolical, the primal, and the immoral began in 1925, when his psychoanalyst introduced him to the set of the so-called "lingchi" photographs.[34] These infamous images, taken in 1905, show the ritual execution of a Chinese criminal by way of a "death by a thousand cuts;" for Bataille, "the ecstatic/agonizing face of the victim (Fou Tchou Li) belies that the ultimate truth of the mystic experience is not God but rather the timeless instant in which sexual ecstasy is indistinguishable from death."[35] Bataille's Surrealism emphasizes the violence of sex and alternatively, the sexual character of violence—both of which point to the transcendence of the human: "[e]roticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death."[36] Ultimately, Bataille's "aggressive anti-idealism delights in exposing the mechanism of "base seduction," the fascination of the repugnant, which ultimately involves man's equivocal attitude toward violence and death."[37] Like the ecstatic grimace of those put to death by a thousand cuts, sacrificial acts intimate both eroticism and the dissolution of the self.

In both modest and in significant ways, references to sacrificial eroticism, suicide and, more generally, the productive power of death, abound in *París D.F.* During Arturo's scatterbrained trip to a psychic, he draws a tarot card of a hung man, which "significa la redención a través del sacrificio" [represents the redemption via sacrifice].[38] Later on, the protagonist's friends attempt to vanquish the haunting memory Arturo has of Luis, explaining that the attacker, now dead, is little more than "fertilizer."[39] The French artist Jeanne Hébuterne is also alluded to various times in *París D.F.,* who famously committed suicide while carrying the child of fellow artist Amedeo Modigliani.[40] But especially prominent are references to BDSM as well as to anal sex, each activity being a subject of debate among Surrealists such as Breton, Bataille, and Salvador Dalí.[41] These acts appear throughout the novel; they characterize Arturo's relationships with Gema, his colleague from work, as well as with Noemí, a Mexico City prostitute whom Arturo sees regularly during his downward spiral. One particular night, Arturo cajoles Gema to accompany him to a cabaret show, where they take in an erotic performance entitled "Beauty and the Beast," and which concludes with a male performer dressed as "the Beast" penetrating a female performer ("the Beauty") anally.[42] The scene foreshadows a later one, when Arturo's own inner animal appears; he oversteps personal boundaries during a lovemaking session with Gema. Although the tryst begins as consensual, Arturo becomes carried away by his animal instincts. When Arturo penetrates Gema anally, she protests, but to no avail. Pulling her hair and grabbing her hips, a relentless Arturo finally climaxes. Important for our considerations here is the fact that Arturo describes the violent and erotic act as a loss of self, and is thus consonant with Bataille's hallmark concept: "No sé cuánto tiempo pasa. Tal vez mucho. Tal vez poco. Me deslizo sobre una ola que se ha formado entre su espalda y mi pecho. Termino" [I don't know how much time passes. Perhaps a lot. Perhaps a little. I ride a wave that has formed between her back and my chest. I finish].[43] Angry and disgusted with Arturo, Gema orders him to

leave.

Erotic excesses, violent transgression, and BDSM are present in Arturo's relationship with the prostitute Noemí as well; they perform sadistic acts upon each other. Thus Arturo recounts how Noemí burns him during a love-making session:

> Se detiene. Luego regresa y mete sus dedos en mi boca y con la otra mano vuelve a masturbarme. Huelo un cigarro encendido. Toma mi pene y se lo restriega por la vulva. Cuando lo inserta por fin, apaga la ceniza en mi pecho. Grito.
> Juega conmigo por un tiempo que no mido. Desamarra mis pies y los une con esposas. Hace lo mismo con mis manos.
> [She stops. Then she starts again and sticks her fingers in my mouth and, with her other hand, she masturbates me. I smell a lit cigarette. She takes my penis and runs it along her vulva. When she finally inserts it, she puts out the cigarette on my chest. I scream. She plays with me for an amount of time I don't keep track of. She unties my feet and clasps them together with handcuffs. She does the same with my hands.][44]

In keeping with Bataille's thought, the passages suggests that transgression, especially of an erotic nature, opens up new possibilities of community and communication due to a dissolution of self in the other—again, the "amount of time" Arturo cannot "keep track of." For Bataille, "[t]here exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed."[45] That is, transgression is understood dialectically vis-à-vis human the capacity for community and order. Later on, Arturo also uses sadistic tactics on Noemí:

> "Abre la caja y saca una navaja de barbero. Separa la ropa de Noemí de su piel y la rasga, dejando expuesto su pecho desnudo. Noemí lo mira con las pupilas dilatadas. Arturo le quita el pantalón y mete la navaja entre el hueso de la cadera y sus calzones y jala hacia arriba, dejando su pubis al descubierto.
> [He opens the box and takes out a straight razor. Pulling Noemí's clothes from her skin, makes a cut, exposing her chest. Noemí looks at him with dilated pupils. Arturo takes off her pants, sticks the knife between her hips and her panties, and pulls upward, leaving her pubis naked.][46]

Significantly, both of these love-making scenes conclude with allusions to aspects of erotic life that became polemical in surrealist thought. While the first passage ends with Arturo's doppelgänger Luis anally penetrating the protagonist, the second

concludes with Arturo shaving Noemí's pubic hair. While Bataille's infamous "Solar Anus" essay undermined the cohesive whole of Surrealism and, essentially, any other "ism," Dalí's frequent reference to pubic hair riled even some of the Surrealists.[47] Wong again employs touchstone tropes of Surrealism's scandalous side—its predilection to *pater la bourgeoisie*.

Associations of Places and Names: Mexico's Uniqueness

Having shown how *París D.F.* references some of the Surrealists' foremost artistic techniques, I now develop my proposition that the novel constitutes an argument for the centrality of Surrealism in Mexico, and furthermore, champions the movement's political character.

Associations between distinct objects, between places and between names, are crucial to Surrealism. The movement's interest in dreams, psychology, and automatism speak to this centrality.[48] Particularly noteworthy in terms of associated locales is Breton's celebrated *Communicating Vessels*, a book "full of nomenclature, of detail, of time and place markers, of reference," as Mary Ann Caws notes.[49] Herein, Breton links places around Paris due to personal associations and visual commonalities. He observes sunbathers on the Marne River, who work a whole week in order to "disport themselves for one day on some green patch as long as the weather is fine,"[50] and recounts how, in one of his dreams, speaking freely to woman is likened to breaking down borders between France and Germany, "the marvelous country, made of thought and light."[51] Similarly within Arturo's imagination, places are rendered not unlike Freudian composite images or Bretonian communicating vessels; the logic of *París D.F.* primarily associates the two cities in light of their politically significant histories and locales.

Thus the place association that provides the novel's organizing trope: namely, the fact that Arturo's place of work is named Farmacia París, a real pharmacy located in Mexico City's old quarter, and whose logo includes a drawing of the Eiffel Tower. In a deflationary tone, Arturo describes the pharmacy as the "epicentro alrededor del cual gira mi vida" [epicenter around which my life turns].[52] Later on Arturo imagines the customers who queue up at the pharmacy as devotees seeking salvation not via prayer but rather through modern medicine:

> Notre-Dame se quedará ahí, perpetuada en República de El Salvador, 97, siempre y cuando los peregrinos sigan llegando con sus recetas. [Notre-Dame is still there, it will last forever on 97 El Salvador Street as long as pilgrims keep arriving with their prescriptions.][53]

Arturo's composite image thus underscores the specter of disease in Mexico City, or the difficulty of everyday life there. Illness serves as one of the novel's recurring metaphors. The pharmacy's assailant, Luis, demands antiretroviral medication during

the stickup while Arturo's mother, in turn, succumbs to diabetes, a disease endemic to present-day Mexico.[54]

Yet other Mexico City and Parisian locales are linked; many of these associations, too, evince a critical or more explicitly political charge. Arturo imagines himself in Paris' Hôtel des Invalides, an edifice whose cupola is architecturally reminiscent of Mexico City's Monumento a la Revolución. Wong's protagonist ostensibly connects these two buildings, also on account that they enclose the remains of revolutionary heroes:

> En 1840, los restos de Napoleón Bonaparte fueron depositados ahí.
> En el lugar también descasan Villa, Zapata y Carranza.
> [In 1840, the remains of Napoleon Bonaparte were laid to rest there.
> Villa, Zapata, and Carranza are also entombed there.][55]

In yet other passages, Mexico City's La Merced is likened to Paris' Bastille, both locales having formerly been located on edge of their respective cities.[56] The Place de la Concorde, in turn—site where the guillotine was constructed during the French Revolution—is associated with Mexico City's statue of Vicente Guerrero, a revolutionary hero of African heritage who abolished slavery in Mexico.[57] Here, too, is a doubling-up of associations—some historical, some visual. Guerrero's statue is located in Parque Hundido, a green space comparable to the Place de la Concorde. In terms of history, Guerrero is Mexico's avenging angel, and thus very much in keeping with the ethos of the Reign of Terror in Paris. Arturo's imaginative associations also link Mexico City's blue-collar Tlatelolco neighborhood with the Parisian church of the Sacré-Coeur, built as an architectural insult to the Paris Commune of 1871 and to the radical, proletariat class living in Montmartre: "Este lugar conserva la memoria de importantes batallas: Comuna de París o la manifestación estudiantil del 2 de octubre de 1968" [this place preserves the memory of important battles: the Paris Commune or the Student Movement of October 2, 1968].[58] Both sites are renowned as places where the government squashed leftist activism. Arturo's oneiric combinations are also attuned due to their cultural significance. Thus, Arturo imagines that the Louvre auditorium in Paris hosted the likes of Lola Beltrán, Maria Callas, and Luciano Pavarotti, all of whom have performed in Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes. In this same passage, we are told that Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* was painted by David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the big three Mexican muralists, while Hyacinthe Rigaud's *Portrait of Louis XIV in Coronation Robes* is attributed to yet another Mexican muralist, José Clemente Orozco.[59]

Finally, Arturo associates the Eiffel Tower with the Mexican capital's Monumento a Cuauhtémoc, linking these sites in terms of time (both were erected in the 1880s) as well as space. The structures are located within vast urban areas—Mexico City's Avenida de la Reforma and Paris' Jardins du Trocadéro, respectively.

Unlike Arturo's numerous place associations, however, this juxtaposition suggests both commonalities and differences: "la Tour Eiffel es el símbolo de la expansión vertical, preludio de la conquista del espacio" [the Eiffel Tower is the symbol of upward expansion, a prelude to the conquest of space]. In contrast, the Monumento a Cuauhtémoc, a statue of the last Aztec warrior, Cuauhtémoc, is erected to memorialize "el aniversario de la caída de la ciudad" ["the anniversary of the fall of the city"].[60] Wong's composites thus mimic how the mind works dialectically—at times combining like concepts, at other times combining antithetical concepts. Or, as Breton himself explains in paraphrasing Sigmund Freud, "Even in the subconscious…everything thought is linked to its contrary."[61]

These juxtaposed places or combined locales linked within Arturo's consciousness can be best understood as what the art historian David Bate refers to as "counter-hegemonic interventions." To elaborate this concept, Bate reads Man Ray's 1926 photograph known as *Noire et Blanche* as an attempt to undermine given, hegemonic knowledge as it is promoted by the West. Man's photograph, which depicts Parisian model Kiki of Montparnasse posing next to an African mask, forges a provocative association that points to the denied ways of being and knowing that are unfairly dismissed as "primitive." Against crass repudiations of global knowledge systems outside of the West, Man Ray's photograph offers a "counter-argument…[which] is that surrealism dissolves—collapses—the dualistic opposition of an 'interior reality' versus the 'world of facts.'"[62]

With Bate's compelling scheme in mind, we may similarly claim that Wong renders the spaces of Mexico City and Paris near equivalents not only to underscore the centrality of Surrealism in Mexico, but also to interrogate the notion that world-historical events, figures, and places are only present in Paris as one of Surrealism's foremost hubs.[63] Wong's homage to Paris puts the distinct histories of two locales on the same plane. Surrealist techniques—that is, the mental associations that Arturo makes and which seemingly stem from the automaticity of his thought—task us to equate the Mexican and French capitals. No longer are Mexican politics, culture, and history "othered" or fetishized as primitive: Mexico produced its own *Mona Lisa*, and its students fought for their own Commune.[64]

This logic of near equivalence—which foregrounds the deep connection between Mexico and Surrealism, even while being politically astute—is underscored most strikingly by the name of Wong's protagonist (Arturo) as well as that of his doppelgänger (Luis). While the name "Arturo," an aspiring poet, alludes to French poet and proto-Surrealist Arthur Rimbaud, "Luis" suggests Mexico's national poet, Ramón Velarde López (1888-1921). Rimbaud is referenced explicitly in *París D.F.* with mention of his poem 1870 "Sensation." Similarly, we are told that "Luis Velarde López" is the full name of the would-be assailant of Farmacia París. With a first name that references one of France's foremost poets and a last name referencing one of Mexico's, Wong's protagonist thus appears as a Bretonian communicating vessel

of a sort: his name itself is a combination of nations, realities and fictions, some Mexican, some Parisian.

Mexico and Paris are likened in other ways throughout the novel, most notably in a conversation between Arturo and Noemí. After Arturo untruthfully intimates that he has visited Paris, he tells Noemí that the city evinces a "belleza casi insoportable" [almost unbearable beauty].[65] Her laconic rejoinder, however, casts the cities as being more alike than different, and more importantly, more putrid than palatial: "Una ciudad duele. La gente se queja de ella como una sarna que no puede quitarse. Y a la menor oportunidad, todos escapan […] Todas las ciudades son así, en cualquiera de ellas uno termina quejándose de todo" [A city inflicts pain. Its residents complain about it like scabies that never stop itching. At every opportunity, everybody escapes…All cities are like that, in any one of them, you end up complaining about everything].[66] The conversation bears out Arturo's unhealthy idealization of Paris and gestures toward the counter-hegemonic notion that Mexico City is no less special than the French capital. This point is evidenced in Wong's references to 815 Donceles Street, a Mexico City address where Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes set his surrealist-tinged novel *Aura*, as well as the inclusion of lines from Mexican Octavio Paz's poem *I Speak of the City*. Time and time again, *París D.F.* underscores the fact that Mexico is a privileged place within Surrealism.

Conclusion: Surrealism for Mexico's Precariat

París D.F. is not only about a traumatized poet's surrealist associations. The novel also represents the crippling sameness of the everyday grind. Workplace malaise, the stultifying effects of labor, and the futility of higher education are all referenced throughout the novel. The cash register at Farmacia París where Arturo works is described as a "corral de vidrio y metal dorado" [a corral made of glass and gold metal];[67] there, he and his co-workers participate in the "rutinas mecánicas de las que se componen los días" [mechanical routines that make up the days].[68] Arturo ruminates, "pensando en mi vida…en lo que me hubiese gustado *ser otro*" [thinking about my life…what I would have given to *be someone else*].[69] His coworker, Gema, similarly thinks to herself, "No quiero estar aquí. No quiero estar detrás de este puto mostrador resolviendo dudas pendejas de viejas idiotas" [I don't want to be here. I don't want to be behind this damned counter answering old ladies' stupid questions].[70]

Unlike the historical moment of Breton and his *Communicating Vessels*, in which Surrealism allows the proletariat to dream beyond their downtrodden condition, Wong's historical moment, our present day, renders these dreams more escapist than aspirational. Appropriate for our contemporary times, the political character of *París D.F.* foregrounds not a proletariat but rather what Chris Dunkley has defined as the precariat, a social stratum which maintains "a distinctive bundle of insecurities and will have an equally distinctive set of demands."[71] Dunkley's precariat

faces a more dire lack of job security than in previous generations, and an even more fragmented global structure; the precariat confronts a greater erosion of protections against arbitrary dismissals. Finally, and distinct from the proletariat, the precariat is characterized by a greater access to education that nevertheless offers few real possibilities for advancement. As Ivan Illich has proposed, "[s]chool has become the world religion of a modernized proletariat, and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age" but does not necessary entail betterment of one's wellbeing.[72] On various occasions the futility of education is mentioned in *París D.F.* As Arturo explains, he takes the job at the Farmacia París because "[m]e gradué y no encontré trabajo" [I graduated and I didn't find work].[73] Elsewhere he notes, "No necesitaba ser un genio para darme cuenta de que nunca iba a dejar mi trabajo, que nunca iba a publicar nada, que nunca iba a tener el dinero suficiente siquiera para mudarme de barrio" [I didn't need to be genius to realize that I was never going to quit my job, that I was never going to publish anything, that I was never even going to have enough money to move out of my neighborhood].[74] More succinctly stated, Wong's novel expresses the extreme countervailing tendencies of capitalism, now rendered more acute in postmodern times.

The uniqueness of *París D.F.* thus lies in the fact that this feeling of workplace burnout, or the disquiet of Mexico's precariat, serves as a springboard for Arturo's surrealist associations and mystical thinking. Arturo's dire financial exigencies initiate the novel's hopscotch between his banal workplace and the City of Lights:

> Mi padre murió, a mi madre le dio "azúcar" de la "impresión". Empezamos a tener problemas económicos y busqué trabajo en los anuncios del periódico. Cuando vi el de la Farmacia París, pensé: "Si no he ido a París, al menos puedo trabajar ahí".
> [My father died, my mother got 'the sugar' from 'fright.' We began to have money problems and I looked for a job in the newspaper advertisements. When I saw the ad for Farmcia París, I thought: "If I've never been to Paris, at least I can work there."][75]

Wong's novel advances Surrealism as a means to apprehend Mexico's precariat politically. Unlike previous generations of Surrealists, whose politics oftentimes supported an international proletariat, Wong's novel describes something different—the life of a national precariat.[76] Appropriately, although Arturo explores the idea of a trip to Paris, he realizes his financial situation will never allow him this luxury. He will remain in Mexico dreaming of other ways to beat back the ennui of labor.

All English translations from *Paris D.F.* are my own.

1 For Surrealism in Mexico, see Courtney Gilbert, "Negotiating Surrealism: Carlos Mérida, Mexican Art and the Avant Garde," *Journal of Surrealism of the Americas* 3, no. 1 (2009): 30-50. See also Fabienne Bradu, *André Breton en México* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012). See also L. M. Schneider, *México y el surrealismo (1925-1950)* (México, D.F.: Arte y Libros, 1988) and Daniel Garza Usabiaga, "André Breton, Surrealism and Mexico, 1938-1970: A Critical Overview," *Arara* 10 (2011): 1-20.

2 Luis M. Castañeda, "Surrealism and National Identity in Mexico: Changing Perceptions 1940-1968," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 3 (1-2) (2009): 9-29.

3 "The story of surrealism in Mexico, in sum, is one of great paradoxes. In the period of the 1930s and 1940s, Europeans found Mexico to be the quintessential surrealist country, while most Mexicans adopted an attitude of resistance." Since Mexico "encountered European surrealism exactly at the moment when it was striving to establish a strong national—that is, autochthonous—character in the immediate wake of the 1910 Revolution, a fact that helps to explain the largely negative reception of surrealism in that country." Melanie Nicholson, *Surrealism in Latin American Literature: Searching for Breton's Ghost* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 225 and 34.

4 "By the late 1930s Mexico had in fact become an aesthetic and political icon for the exiled European avantgarde, so that the Mexico of Cárdenas was imbued with a "timeless and immanent revolutionary ethos" (according to Breton) and it was a "dynamic site of social and political transformation" (according to Trotsky)." Susanne Baackmann and David Craven, "Surrealism and Post-Colonial Latin America, Introduction," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 3:1-2 (2009): vii.

5 See Gerrit L. Lansing, "Surrealism as a Weapon," in Isabelle Dervaux and Michael Duncan, ed. *Surrealism USA* (New York: National Academy Museum, 2004), 30-35. Lansing makes a suggestive distinction between "Social Surrealism"—which took root in America—and European Surrealism, which Lansing reads as less politically savvy.

6 David Hopkins, *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism* (Boston: Wiley, 2018), 127.

7 Nicholson, 2.

8 See Carlos Paul, "La ficción es un mecanismo de rebeldía ante la realidad, opina joven autor," *La Jornada*, Feb. 6, 2015, 4. Also see Javier LaFuente, "Francia-México, el viaje imaginario de Roberto Wong," *El País*, Jan. 14, 2015, https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/01/14/actualidad/1421259015_930811.html

9 See Agencia 22 Noticias at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWeCxKF_HQM as well as González's piece at: http://aristeguinoticias.com/0502/kiosko/roberto-wong-habla-de-paris-d-f-libro-ganador-del-premio-dos-passos/

10 Roberto Wong, Página de autor. *El Anaquel*. 2009, https://el-anaquel.com/roberto-wong/

11 Roberto Wong, *Paris Mexico District Fédéral: Premier Roman* (Brussels: Christophe Lucquin Éditeur, 2019).

12 This pharmacy is a real locale in Mexico City, located on the corner of Avenida República de El Salvador and 5 de Febrero.

13 "Tu nombre en ruso es Nadege, el diminutivo de la palabra "esperanza, es decir, la versión abreviada de un trayecto" [Your name in Russian is Nadege, the diminuitive of the word "hope," that is, the abbreviated version of a trajectory] (98). Roberto Wong, *París D.F.* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2015), 98.

14 Alice O. Letvin, *Sacrifice in the Surrealist Novel: The Impact of Early Theories of Primitive Religion on the Depiction of Violence in Modern Fiction* (New York: Garland, 1991).

15 For women in Surrealism, see Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). See also Rudolf E. Kuenzil, "Surrealism and Misogyny," *Dada/Surrealism* 18 (1990), 17-26. For criminality in Surrealism, see J. P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008).

16 For example, the fun Bretonian passage that reads "ENCYCLOPEDIA. Philosophy. Surrealism

is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought." From André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.
17 See J.F. Dupuis and Raoul Vaneigem. *A Cavalier History of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: AK, 2000). AlsoBottom of Form Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford UP, 2000).
18 See Alice Letvin, 18. She refers to Bataille as the *bête noire* of the Surrealists. Also Juan Carlos Ubilluz, *Sacred Eroticism: George Bataille and Pierre Klossowski in the Latin American Erotic Novel* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2006), 83-87.
19 Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron and Vivian Folkenflik, *Surrealism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 79.
20 "The reason why Breton coins the concept of objective chance is that some events do not seem to him to be just coincidences. Or rather, they seem to be a signal: he cannot believe that such extraordinary events do not reveal something." "Neither clear nor obscure: André Breton and chance" in Denis Lejeune, "Neither Clear nor Obscure: André Breton and Chance." *Clarity and Obscurity*, 1 (September 2005): 4.
21 Breton, André, and Mary A. Caws. *Mad Love: L'amour Fou* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 25.
22 Ibid., 15.
23 Breton's is "the most aleatory technique, [that] suddenly puts the stress on the impression of meaning produced by this flagrant aleatoriness" according to Denis Lejeune, *The Radical Use of Chance in 20th Century Art* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 3. For further discussion of objective chance, also see also Dawn Ades, Rita Eder, and Graciela Speranza, *Surrealism in Latin America: Vivísimo muerto* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012), 167.
24 "Los hombres surrealistas tenían la convicción de que la mujer había nacido para ser descubierta. Pensaban que tanto los hombres como las mujeres estamos a merced de los encuentros casuales. Una característica esencial del movimiento es el papel que ocupa en éste el azar; de ahí se deriva la gran importancia que se daba a los 'encuentros casuales" [Male Surrealists held the belief that women had been born just to be discovered. They thought that both men and women were at the mercy of casual encounters. An essential characteristic of the movement is the role that chance plays; it was from there that 'casual encounters' obtained immense importance]. In Guiral J. Caballero and Rosalía Torrent, *Mujeres y surrealismo: Remedios Varo y Leonora Carrington* (Castelló de la Plana: Universitat Jaume I, 2010), 74.
25 The quote is, "Would I find La Maga." For the first line of Cortázar, see Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966). For Breton's quote, see André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1990).
26 Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 13.
27 Fernando Buen Abad Domínguez, "Tomar el cielo por asalto. Ponencia para el Encuentro Internacional sobre Surrealismo del 19 al 25 de nov," *Rebelión,* Nov. 23, 2007: https://rebelion.org/el-surrealismo-en-america-latina/
28 Wong, *París D.F.*, 9-10.
29 Ibid., 27.
30 Breton, *Mad Love*, 43.
31 Ibid., 97.
32 In his essay "Identity Hour," Carlos Monsiváis writes that "Mexico City is the place where the unliveable has its rewards, the first of which is to endow survival with a new status." See Carlos Monsiváis and John Kraniauskas, *Mexican Postcards* (London: Verso, 2000), 33.
33 Wong, *París D.F.*, 168.

34 Ubilluz, 26.
35 Ibid., 27.
36 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (San Francisco City Lights Books, 1986), 11.
37 Letvin, 36.
38 Wong, *París D.F.*, 33.
39 Ibid., 33.
40 Ibid., 11, 81, 185.
41 Dalí "included in his *Minotaure* articles everything that he knew would enrage Breton: coprophilia, scatology, masturbation, pederasty, anal and sexual obsessions." See Delia Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 64.
42 Wong, *París D.F.*, 56-57.
43 Ibid., 92.
44 Ibid., 108.
45 Bataille, 63
46 Wong, *París D.F.*, 174.
47 "Adding hair to an oneiric object is the surrealist gesture par excellence, because it both shocks and outrages the audience." See Ungureanu, 66.
48 Donald M. Kaplan, "Surrealism and Psychoanalysis: Notes on a Cultural Affair," *American Imago* 46, 4 (Winter 1989): 319-327.
49 Mary Ann Caws, "Linkings and Reflections: André Breton and His Communicating Vessels," *Dada/Surrealism* No. 17, 1 (1988): 93.
50 André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, Ed. Mary A. Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 83
51 Ibid., 40.
52 Wong, *París D.F.*, 9
53 Ibid., 82.
54 Jason Beaubien, "How Diabetes Got To Be The No. 1 Killer in Mexico," *NPR: All Things Considered*, April 5, 2017, www.npr.org. Two lengthier studies regarding how noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes are the direct consequence of neoliberal trade policies areTop of Form Alyshia Gálvez, *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018) as well as Gerardo Otero, *The Neoliberal Diet Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).
55 Wong, *París D.F.*, 119.
56 "La Merced fue tomada por asalto el 14 de julio de 1789 por el pueblo, en el que es considerado como el primer acto de la Revolución francesa." [La Merced was taken by popular uprising on July 14, 1789, now considered the beginning of the French Revolution]. Ibid., 136.
57 "Place de la Concorde Guillotine would be set up during the French Revolution. En el centro, Vicente Guerrero mira al noroeste con una espada en la mano y la frente perlada de cagadas de paloma." [In the center of the square, Vicente Guerrero looks toward the northeast with a sword in hand and his forehead spattered with pigeon droppings]. Ibid., 51.
58 Ibid., 158
59 Ibid., 77.
60 Ibid., 29.
61 Breton, 46-47.
62 The use of the "Orient myth" by Surrealism is conceived by Breton as a kind of counter-hegemonic intervention, to invoke those "other denied knowledges" that Bhabha claims disrupt the authority of Western culture. For Pierre Naville, this world of surrealism was in "the mind" as opposed to revolutionary action in the "world of facts." Breton's counter-argument to this is that Surrealism dissolves—collapses—the dualistic opposition of an "interior reality" versus the "world of

facts." David Bate, *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2011), 134.
63 Walter Benjamin "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century" *Perspecta* Vol. 12 (1969): 163-172.
64 For the fetishization of all things Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century, see Mauricio Tenorio, "De la Atlántida morena y los intelectuales mexicanos. Historia de recuerdos." *Fractal. Revista Trimestral* 40, 2011.
65 Wong, *París D.F.*, 121.
66 Ibid., 122.
67 Ibid., 36.
68 Ibid., 59.
69 Ibid., 59.
70 Ibid., 26.
71 Chris Dunkley, *The Precariat* (London: Oberon Books, 2013), 7.
72 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyars, 2019), 10.
73 Wong, *París D.F.*, 60.
74 Ibid., 60.
75 Ibid., 60.
76 Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).