



The *Flâneur* in Paris and Mexico City: Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera's Transnational Search for Modern Beauty

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In their introductory chapter to *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel examine the relevance of “place, proximity, [and] position” to diverse modernist discourses and invite a “dialogue about ‘placedness’” to constitute their proposed rethinking of modernist studies (1). By breaking modernism “open” into something they call “geomodernisms,” Doyle and Winkiel advocate for “a locational approach to modernisms’ engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity” (3). I take up their concern with literary works that display “a self-consciousness about positionality” in the present analysis of two chronicles by Mexican *modernista* author Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895). Whereas “Stora y las medias parisienses” (1881) presents the titular character as a poor, foreign-born artist wandering the streets of Paris, “La novela del tranvía” (1882) introduces a wealthy and idle narrator-protagonist who enjoys traversing Mexico City in a streetcar. The former text begins with a juxtaposition of the putrid and contaminated Mexico City and the privileged and delicious city of Paris, while the latter tale celebrates the living pictures that can be observed when traveling to the many unknown worlds and virgin regions that surround Mexico City. In the present investigation, I aim to analyze the extent to which Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera is able to show an “aesthetic self-awareness [... of] a geocultural consciousness.” That is, to speak “from outside or inside or both at once”; to orient “toward and away from the metropole” or to unhinge “simple binaries (such as metropole and margin)”; and to exist “somewhere between belonging and dispersion” (Doyle and Winkiel 4, 7-8).

My examination of these texts by Gutiérrez Nájera will focus specifically on his portrayal of two different *flâneur* figures—one strolling the streets of Paris, the other riding through Mexico City in a streetcar. Stora’s aesthetic interest in the fleeting beauty of the step, shoes, stockings, and legs of the Parisian women he follows on rainy days contrasts with the unnamed narrator-protagonist’s curious method of *flânerie* in “La novela del tranvía,” which involves a mixture of both moral and aesthetic musings on the unknown passengers who accompany him in the trolley. This comparative analysis explores how location (Paris versus Mexico City) and transnational versus intranational approaches account for

variations in the protagonists' methods and motivations as they take on the task of the *flâneur* and search for modern beauty in differing ways.

It is important to note that the selected chronicles about Paris and Mexico City were both published in Mexican newspapers using pseudonymous French identities, which creates an intriguing dynamic of a Mexican author speaking through two different fictionalized French personalities. Gutiérrez Nájera is known to have used upwards of twenty different pseudonyms in his more than fifteen hundred chronicles as a way of “creating the illusion of a new personality” and varying the point of view from which he wrote (Mapes 648-9).¹ Gutiérrez Nájera famously explains that “escribir sin seudónimo es como salir a la calle sin camisa” (qtd. in Mapes 649). There is, indeed, a connection in Gutiérrez Nájera between the act of writing, the act of going out on the street, and the act of dressing up. This connection points to the fact that so many of Gutiérrez Nájera's chronicler identities take on the role of the *flâneur* as they wander the streets and record their impressions of urban life.² Scholars tend to agree that “in assuming a new pseudonym Nájera did not simply change his name; he usually chose some designation which implied a special point of view [...] and made the writings published over the signature conform to this point of view” (Mapes 648). Luis J. Peña and Magdalena Maiz agree: “[a]sí como Gutiérrez Nájera ficcionaliza su identidad, signo del control de su discurso y de su poder sobre el mismo, así el cronista cambia de nombre, voz, gesto, tono y máscara” (49). With each pseudonym, Gutiérrez Nájera adopts a different narrative point of view, an altered subjectivity, and a specific writing style. Using pen names allows him to narrate events “as seen and lived from the perspective of a different subjectivity,” which is why it is imperative that we examine in detail the two different subjectivities presented as the supposed chroniclers of “Stora y las medias parisienses” and “La novela del tranvía” (Mondiváis, qtd. in Bielsa 32).

“Stora y las medias parisienses” was first published in *Cronista de México* on June 4, 1881, as part of the longer article “Memorias de un vago” and signed with the alias “M. Can-Can” (*Cuentos completos* 81). Monsieur Can-Can was the pseudonym used for approximately one hundred compositions that were actually written by Gutiérrez Nájera. This chosen pen name is a reference to the *can-can*, a dance of French origin that was growing in popularity in late-nineteenth-century Mexico. “M. Can-Can” or “Monsieur Can-Can” is presented as “a sophisticated individual, with a typically French conception of morals and propriety” (Mapes 653). When he first introduces himself to his readers in the column “Bric à Brac” in *El Republicano* in 1879, he offers the following self-description: “francés de nacimiento, viajero de profesión, poseedor de 35 años de capital y de una renta de cuarenta y dos ingleses por semana,” which underscores his supposed alliance with the French, the idle, and the economically self-sufficient qualities of the *flâneur* (qtd. in Mapes 651). M. Can-Can also underscores his unfamiliarity with Mexico City in his introductory remarks to his readers:

Ya otra vez lo he dicho: soy el menos a propósito para hacer los oficios de cronista. Conozco mal el castellano; llevo pocos meses de residencia en México; todavía conservan mis vestidos el olor penetrante de los buques; no tengo amistades; tropiezo con mil y mil obstáculos; las costumbres de este país me son desconocidas; tendré que recurrir muy a menudo al

empolvado almacén de mis recuerdos; soy en suma, el menos adecuado para charlar de lo que pasa, de lo que va a pasar y de lo que no pasará nunca en esta sociedad, en cuya puerta me detengo cortés y respetuoso con el sombrero, el bastón y los guantes en la siniestra mano y mi tarjeta de visita en la derecha. (qtd. in Peña and Maiz, 49).

M. Can-Can insists, then, that he is the least apt to take on the profession of chronicler on account of what he presents to be his poor Spanish, on the one hand, and his unfamiliarity with Mexico City, on the other hand. Of course, knowing as we do that the true author of the column is *not* the fictionalized chronicler but rather the real Mexican writer means that M. Can-Can's Spanish is as good or as bad as Gutiérrez Nájera wants it to be and that his knowledge of Mexico City is as limited or as expansive as the true author wishes it to seem. Moreover, when M. Can-Can says that his "amigo" Pomponnet, another of Gutiérrez Nájera's pseudonymous French identities, "tendrá la bondad de servirme de heraldo, y avanzando un poco me anunciará cortésmente a sus lectores," we see a layering of narrative voices and fictionalized identities that supports the role of Gutiérrez Nájera as author and puppeteer of these creations (qtd. in Peña and Maiz, 49).³

"La novela del tranvía" was first published in *La Libertad* on August 20, 1882, under the title "Crónicas color de lluvia" and signed with the pseudonym "El Duque Job" (*Cuentos completos* 154). The text was published three more times with the same title, "La novela del tranvía," and signed "Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera": first in the collected volume *Cuentos frágiles* in 1883; next in *El Correo de las Señoras* on July 17, 1887; and finally in *El Pabellón Nacional* on November 13, 1887. It was also republished again under the pseudonym "El Duque Job" with the new title "Humoradas dominicales" in *El Partido Liberal* on September 30, 1888 (*Cuentos completos* 154). "El Duque Job" was Gutiérrez Nájera's favorite pseudonymous identity; it was used more than the author's own name and was often discussed and analyzed as if referring to a real person. The name "el Duque Job" was taken from León Laya's 1859 French Comedy *Le Duc Job*. Considered "poeta de estirpe francesa," he was known for his aristocratic taste, elegant prose, and dandified pose (qtd. in Mapes 670). "El Duque Job" was represented in caricatures from the period "con puro en la boca, gardenia en el ojal de la solapa, bigote con púas, sombrero hongo, nariz gruesa y enorme, y en la mano un bastón," and his personal creed was that of "elegancia, cortesía, el buen vestir, corrección, [y] rechazo de lo 'curso'" (Carter 31).

Both "Monsieur Can-Can" and "el Duque Job" are presented as elegant, refined, and sophisticated upper-class gentlemen who see Mexico City's increasingly urban landscape through supposedly French eyes.⁴ Wanting always to contemplate "el entorno conocido con los ojos de un francés," Gutiérrez Nájera takes to the extreme "el espíritu galicista imperante durante el fin de siglo" insofar as he invents "una sociedad entera de falsos parisinos que vive de acuerdo con los estilos de vida franceses" (Gutiérrez, "Manuel" 612). Given his use of pen names for the initial publication of both texts, we must examine the situation of a Mexican author writing and narrating as an upper-class French gentleman. In one instance, "Monsieur Can-Can" narrates as a Frenchman on Mexican soil who begins by comparing Mexico City to Paris and then chronicles the life and death of the titular Stora, a bohemian of unspecified origin engaged in acts of *flânerie*

in the French capital. In the other instance, “El Duque Job” is a Frenchman living in Mexico City who chronicles his own urban journey on a streetcar from the center to the periphery. Still, in both cases, the true author is Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, a man who never left his native Mexico, yet who considers himself among those best described as “espíritus franceses deportados á tierra mexicana” and who aimed to express “[p]ensamientos franceses en versos españoles” (“El bautismo de *La revista azul*” 537, qtd. in Carter 30).

I. The Baudelairean *Flâneur* in/on Paris in “Stora y las medias parisienses”

In “Stora y las medias parisienses,” both Monsieur Can-Can (as chronicler or as narrator) and Stora (as the subject of the chronicle or as its titular protagonist) should be seen as *flâneur* figures in the traditional—i.e. Baudelairean—sense. In *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Charles Baudelaire likens the *flâneur* to an “observer,” a “philosopher,” and a “passionate spectator” and insists that he is a “kind of artist”—“the painter of the passing moment” (4-5, 9). Yet the *flâneur*, Baudelaire explains further, is not an “artist” in a “very restricted sense,” but rather “a man of the world” in a “very broad one,” someone who is “by nature a great traveler and cosmopolitan” and a “passionate lover of crowds and incognitos” (5-7). The *flâneur* does not seem limited to one geographic area, at least not in Baudelaire’s characterization, since he is “a man of the whole world,” who is “at the centre of the world” and is able “to feel [...] everywhere at home” (7, 9 emphasis added). Nevertheless, the *flâneur* is linked to the urban landscape, where the “crowd is his element” and he can penetrate into “the heart of the multitude” (9-10). The *flâneur*’s role as a gentleman stroller of city streets and a botanist of the sidewalk is part and parcel of his ability to treat life aesthetically and to see his urban surroundings through the eyes of an artist. It is important to also note that Baudelaire’s *flâneur* figure is most concerned with the “relative, circumstantial element” of beauty that consists of “the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions” and corresponds to “the fugitive, fleeting beauty of present-day life” that is “modernity” (3, 40). “[B]eing obsessed and possessed by form,” the *flâneur* is a “pure pictorial moralist,” who is markedly different from an actual moralist insofar as his concern is with aesthetics not ethics; with formal features rather than moral principles (Baudelaire 8, 9). It is interesting to note that Gutiérrez Nájera’s praise for Baudelaire’s aesthetic can be seen as early as his 1876 essay “El arte y el materialismo,” in which he declares

[a]ún hay poetas que rinden culto a la belleza; aún hay poetas que elevan su espíritu a los celestes espacios del idealismo; aún hay artistas que conservan en toda su pureza el fuego sagrado. Al lado de *Las flores del mal* de Charles Baudelaire, podemos ver aun *Las contemplaciones* de Víctor Hugo.” (*Obras Crítica Literaria* 62)

Indeed, this passage is considered to be the first reference to Baudelaire recorded in the Spanish language in Spanish America, and I am inclined to think that Gutiérrez Nájera had Baudelaire’s characterization of the *flâneur* in mind as he wrote “Stora y las medias parisienses.”⁵

Gutiérrez Nájera begins this chronicle with M. Can-Can's, or the narrator's, comparison between Mexico City and Paris:

Para vivir ahora en México, como para leer una novela de Zolá, se necesita irremisiblemente llevar cubiertas las narices. Las primeras lluvias han convertido la ciudad en un mar fétido, donde se hospedan las amarillas tercianas y el rapado tifo. ¡Quién estuviera en París! Cuando los primeros chaparrones descargan sobre la ciudad privilegiada—dice Banville—y cuando las primeras brumas, a la vez transparentes y espesas, rodean su atmósfera, París es abominable y delicioso. (167)

While Mexico City becomes foul-smelling, fetid, and diseased in the rain, Paris is described as a privileged city—one both abominable and delicious. Although “el mantel de lodo [...] es espantoso,” Paris nonetheless “se convierte en una enorme decoración maravillosa que hechiza la mirada,” “un cuadro admirable para los artistas” (167). To further underscore the notion of Paris as the site of the artist's painting, the chronicler-narrator mentions Théodore de Banville in the opening paragraph, and Honoré Daumier and Paul Gavarni in the second paragraph, references which parallel Baudelaire's own interest in Daumier and Gavarni as well as Constantin Guys as the “painters” par excellence of “modern life.”⁶ Equating himself with an artist and evoking notable French artists from the period, the narrator underscores his own supposed French identity and establishes himself as an insider to the Parisian and Parnassian settings. Whereas Mexico City resembles negatively the naturalist novels of Zolá, Paris can be equated positively with the Parnassian movement's creed of art for art's sake. In Mexico City, one finds base nature; in Paris, one discovers elevated art.

M. Can-Can then goes on to explain that the admirable picture and marvelous adornment that Paris presents has to do with “la verdadera parisiense [...] que] marcha a pie [...] y] desafía sin temor al lodo y a la lluvia” (167). He describes her aesthetic act as follows:

Camina [...] con un paso seguro, rítmico, glorioso, saliendo pura de los charcos, como esas hadas milagrosas que andan por sobre las espigas sin doblarlas. Su irreprochable calzado cautiva las miradas, y sin encogimiento ni impudencia, andan a saltos, a pequeños brincos, mostrando con donaire nada más lo bastante para dar una prueba de su raza, el vigoroso arranque de una pierna esbelta, aprisionada en la tirante media, cuyo tejido espeso ilumina la luz con rayos de oro.

Sí, aquel París fangoso es el triunfo de la mujer, que, toda agilidad y luz, cruza las calles, suelta y garbosa, como la estrofa alada de una oda; y por la misma razón, al propio tiempo, es el paraíso del soñador que sigue a las mujeres. (167-8)

The narrator thus discerns beauty in the Parisian woman's elegant walk and graceful step; he finds pleasure—a “paradise”—in her triumph over the mud, in her victory over the rain. Yet it is he who is the true “artist” or “dreamer” insofar as he finds and appreciates beauty while following these particular women. Knowing whom to follow is essential, as

the narrator purposefully disregards the other women who do not go by foot, namely “la mujer cursi [que] sale en carruaje,” “la obrera que está obligada a defender su enagua y su calzado [y por eso] se consiente a sí propia el despilfarro de subir un ómnibus,” and “la gran señora de la clase media [que] se creería deshonrada si no alquilara un coche” (167). Whether snobbish, wealthy, or working-class, these other women do not dare to walk on a rainy day, preferring as they do the carriage, the streetcar, or the automobile. Thus, they cannot offer the beauty that emanates from the *true* Parisian woman “que marcha, victoriosa, repugnando, como los cisnes, toda mancha,” and who represents an aesthetic triumph over the baseness of nature, remaining undefiled and unstained (167). It is indeed interesting and noteworthy that this ideal Parisian woman must walk, just as the traditional *flâneur* figure goes afoot in pursuit of the beauty she offers him.

The remainder of this chronicle involves a characterization of Stora as a foreign-born *flâneur* in Paris, whose actions parallel the narrator’s own interest in the step (“paso”), shoe (“calzado”), leg (“pierna”), or stocking (“media”) of true and refined Parisian women. The narrator—speaking as the supposed chronicler M. Can-Can—uses the following first-person passage to transition from a third-person, impersonal discussion of Paris to a third-person chronicle about Stora: “Yo conocí cierta ocasión a uno de esos piratas callejeros que vivió y que murió en la impenitencia. Era un bohemio, de apellido Stora” (168). This is the only first-person reference in the entire text, which nonetheless has the effect of underscoring the chronicler-narrator’s overt presence in the work, since it points out his dual position as writer of, and expert on, Paris, on the one hand, and as acquaintance of Stora with privileged first-hand knowledge of one of Paris’ great *flâneurs*, on the other hand. The narrator further highlights his presence in the text by inserting four rhetorical questions in the six paragraphs dedicated to Stora and by repeating the exclamation “¡Pobre Stora!” on three separate occasions (168-9).

In the second half of the text, we are introduced to the titular Stora, who is a curious combination of the bohemian and the *flâneur*. Stora’s poverty is underscored on numerous occasions—from his “impenitencia” to his existence in a “mísera buhardilla,” a situation that anticipates the state of so many of Darío’s artist protagonists from the 1888 collection *Azul* (168). Stora “no conocía las monedas de oro más que de nombre”; he is “aquel pobre hongo,” “aquel solitario, privado de todo lujo, de toda fiesta, de todo despilfarro” (168). Living between “la soledad y la tristeza,” Stora finds pleasure only on rainy days, when he leaves his impoverished dwelling, takes to the streets, and assumes the wanderings of the *flâneur* (168). “[C]uando la lluvia descendía a torrentes y el lodo se apiñaba en las aceras,” the narrator recounts, Stora “no podía ni un instante permanecer en casa [...]. Tomaba entonces posesión de París, creyéndose dueño de un dominio más grande y rico que el de Salomón (168). Once engaged in the act of *flânerie*, which for him consists in the constant pursuit of elegant, Parisian women (or at least their stockings and footwear), Stora’s awareness of his lack of wealth immediately disappears as he becomes the owner of that grand and rich city. Although initial descriptions of Stora present him as a poor and struggling artist, later accounts of him as a *flâneur* underscore his success in viewing the world artistically, in seeing Paris unfold in the same way in which the narrator and supposed chronicler prescribe, namely as “un cuadro admirable para los artistas” (167). Stora is now likened to a prince and a millionaire, and is once again described as owner and also as conqueror of Paris. His artistic approach to life—which

consists in “conocer y anotar todas las medias de las grandes señoras parisienses”—is described in detail as follows: “Clavada la pupila en su calzado, iba en seguimiento durante el día y la noche, y andando, andando, como el judío errante, miraba desaparecer las plazas y las calles, dejaba atrás los boulevares, se perdía en los cuarteles más oscuros y lodosos, dejando una media azul por una media gris, o una bolita de cabritilla negra por un garboso botín de piel dorada” (168). Leaving behind the city center and losing himself in the darkest and muddiest of neighborhoods in the periphery seem intentional, even crucial elements of Stora’s method. What matters are the art-objects to be found and followed, since they are linked to “the search for, or claim to, inside knowledge, a certain vision of the ‘real’ Paris, on the part of the protagonist” (Jones 21). Walking in search of modern beauty, Stora clearly intersects with the late-nineteenth century Parisian *flâneur* as well as with the specific method of *flânerie* prescribed by the narrator or supposed chronicler M. Can-Can in the introductory remarks about the aesthetic ideal offered on rainy days in Paris.

Yet we must not overlook the fact that neither Stora nor the narrator are interested in the whole woman, just a particular fragment of her:

En ocasiones se adelantaba a la mujer que seguía; con una ojeada rápida le miraba los ojos, la boca y el cabello, solamente para cerciorarse de que aquellas gracias correspondían a las que imaginariamente le había dado, y para ver si aquella media, rosa o blanca, estaba bien acompañada. Pero, en rigor de verdad, Stora conocía muy pocas caras. ¿Para qué? Su único afán, logrado ya, había sido conocer y anotar todas las medias de las grandes señoras parisienses. Y ya las reconocía perfectamente, las saludaba como a amigas viejas, e iba tras ellas abstraído y mudo, haciendo provisiones de recuerdos para esos días interminables que pasaba componiendo nocturnos para piano. (168)

The stockings of the great Parisian woman are what matters; they have true aesthetic value and are not linked to anything human, useful, or whole. As Julie Jones rightly explains, “[t]he woman, then, is a vehicle that affords the protagonist a certain angle of vision, but inevitably his are the eyes that see, and his is the imagination that captures Paris. Reduced to their footwear, Stora’s women are an emanation of the passing scene, and *that* is the real object of Stora’s desire” (21). Stora does not need to know their faces; he does not need to talk to the women he follows. He seeks the outer and superficial, an external and transient beauty only visible or discernible to *his* eyes. The parallels with Baudelaire’s artist-*flâneur* are noteworthy, since as Bruce Mazlish rightly contends, “Baudelaire’s heroic *flâneur* is a male, prepared to admire woman in her finery as one would a piece of art” (52). Stora is the one with vision and imagination, the artist who will convert what he observes into “poesías” or “nocturnos,” much in the same way the chronicler-narrator records his observations in eloquent prose (168).⁷ The narrator mentions Stora’s role as poet or composer on three occasions, and thereby suggests that by transforming his visions into musical compositions or books of poetry, he reveals his true artistic nature and the direct relationship between *flânerie* and artistic creation. In search of art to admire and to inspire his own artistic creations, Stora—both aesthete and *flâneur*—is celebrated and praised for his method. Yet it is a method that not only involves

the aestheticization of these women, but so too the objectification, fetishization, and sexualization of them. Given the importance of raised petticoats, uncovered stockings, and the usually hidden parts of a woman's body and clothing, both Stora and M. Can-Can seek a type of beauty that has sexual undertones even as they turn women into art, and the human into aesthetics.

Curiously enough, however, it is when Stora's economic situation improves and he suddenly becomes rich, that "se vio obligado a renunciar sus deliciosas caminatas [...] por mandato de los médicos" (168). Rather than travel through the streets of Paris, he must travel to places such as Bordighera, Monaco, and Geneva. His prescribed cure, a journey in search of nature and repose, leads him to "los naranjos, los limoneros, los aloes, la mar azul," which only serve to bring him "una incurable tristeza y una nostalgia profundísima" on account of the fact that "[e]n aquellos países de sol no llueve sino poco, y cuando llueve las mujeres desdeñan levantarse las enaguas o si lo hacen descubren una pierna flaca y angulosa, de pronunciado empeine, y revestidas por medias sin color e irregulares" (169). "¡Únicamente las parisienses restiran bien sus medias!" Stora reflects bitterly (169). Being wealthy, then, does not appear to be a prerequisite for the *flâneur* in this text, although living in Paris—"la ciudad privilegiada"—and having an artistic sensibility certainly are requirements (167). Nature is clearly not the answer, as Stora seeks an urban, artificial, and transitory beauty. When he squanders his fortune and returns to Paris, "ni *paletot* tenía" (169). Still, while no longer rich in economic terms, he is wealthy in other ways, as the narrator clearly suggests: "¿Qué príncipe, qué millonario, qué Nabab, ha satisfecho sus caprichos como Stora, dueño de la imaginación de aquel París, que su deseo invencible le había conquistado?" (169). The narrator's celebration of Stora's return to Paris and to a life of *flânerie* presents his "demise as a kind of triumph" (Jones 21). When Stora resumes his acts of *flânerie*, he soon dies from an illness brought about by his constant wandering in the rain. As a direct consequence of "aquellas medias que fueron su perdición y su ruina," Stora suffered from "bronquitis y laringitis," [s]e enfermó de pecho," "un afonía estuvo a punto de arrancarle la existencia," "tosía, se sofocaba," "se desmayó [...] y fue a despertar en el hospital a donde murió luego" (169). That which brings Stora happiness and defines his existence—his *flânerie* in Paris on rainy days—is also that which causes his decline and subsequent death. The poor poet can find happiness in the act of *flânerie*, but only on the streets of Paris, and even then the idea of living life for the sake of art and beauty inevitably leads to his untimely and tragic death, a death the narrator or supposed chronicler, Monsieur Can-Can, repeatedly laments. In this text, Gutiérrez Nájera clearly associates the *flâneur* with the great city of Paris. Even if the author never clarifies Stora's exact origins, which we might presume to be Scandinavian given this surname, it is important that he sets up a distinction between Mexico and Paris initially, and then underscores that a foreigner (Stora) can be a *flâneur* only in Paris, while a Frenchman (Monsieur Can-Can) will have difficulty being a *flâneur* in Mexico City.

II. The Benjaminian *Flâneur* in/on Mexico City in "La novela del tranvía"

While the Baudelairian *flâneur* most likely served as model and inspiration for M. Can-Can's and Stora's methods in the first text, it is Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* figure that best resembles el Duque Job's method in "La novela del tranvía," even if Gutiérrez Nájera

predates Benjamin by more than three decades and died when Benjamin was just two years old. Benjamin's characterization of the *flâneur* as amateur detective and investigator of the city sheds light on the type of *flâneur* figure and the method of *flânerie* presented in "La novela del tranvía." Finding a "[n]oteworthy connection between *flânerie* and the detective novel," Benjamin argues that *flânerie* gives "the individual the best prospects for playing the detective" (*Arcades* 441, *Selected Writings* 21). Both depend on the power of observation and the ability to read the "traces" left in the city, since the "phantasmagoria of the *flâneur*," writes Benjamin, includes the ability "to read from the faces the profession, the ancestry, the character" (*Arcades* 429). In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin cites Victor Fournel, whose 1867 book *Ce qu'on voit dans les ruines de Paris* (*What One Sees in the Streets of Paris*) may have been familiar to Gutiérrez Nájera: "With the aid of a word I overhear in passing, I reconstruct an entire conversation, an entire existence. The inflection of a voice suffices for me to attach the name of a deadly sin to the man whom I have just jostled and whose profile I glimpsed" (431). In "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" Benjamin argues that "[n]o matter what trace the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime" (*Selected Writings* 22). Probing his surroundings for clues, hints, and traces, Benjamin's *flâneur*-as-detective shares some of the qualities of Baudelaire's poet-as-*flâneur*, although Baudelaire's description of "a roving soul in search of a body," who enters "another person whenever he wishes" finds new meaning when requoted by Benjamin (*Selected Writings* 31-32). Part detective and part poet or author, Benjamin's *flâneur*

is thus turned into an unwilling detective, which serves to "legitimate" his "idleness" and make his "indolence" "only apparent," since "behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. Thus, the detective [...] catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist." (*Selected Writings* 22)

By "detecting the truth of the street" and "uncover[ing] the mysteries of the city," the *flâneur*-as-detective changes slightly the undertaking of *flânerie* and gives new meaning to the task of the urban chronicler (Salzani 175).

"La novela del tranvía" begins with the chronicler-narrator-protagonist's assertion that "lo mejor que el desocupado puede hacer es subir al primer tranvía que encuentre al paso y recorrer las calles, como el anciano Víctor Hugo las recorría, sentado en la imperial de un omnibus," since "para el observador, nada hay más peregrino ni más curioso que la serie de cuadros vivos que pueden examinarse en un tranvía" (6). Similar to Monsieur Can-Can and Stora in the previous text, el Duque Job has chosen a rainy afternoon to explore the urban landscape. This time it is Mexico City that will offer the series of living pictures, but the act of *flânerie* is nevertheless likened to Víctor Hugo's methods and linked to France from the outset, much in the same way "Stora y las medias parisienses" evokes Banville's artistic approach to Paris and Gutiérrez Nájera himself praises both Baudelaire and Hugo in his essay "El arte y el materialismo." Here it is "[e]l movimiento" of the streetcar that "disipa un tanto cuanto la tristeza" (6). Movement and motion are needed to overcome *ennui* and to counteract boredom. The narrator-protagonist explains his method of *flânerie*: "Yo, sin embargo, paso las horas agradablemente encajonado en esa miniatresca arca de Noé, sacando la cabeza por el ventanillo, no en espera de la paloma

que ha de traer un ramo de oliva en el pico, sino para observar el delicioso cuadro que la ciudad presenta en ese instante” (6). The use of “Yo, sin embargo” suggests a distinction between the narrator-protagonist and everyone else. He goes along pleasantly, observing delicious pictures that are linked to the urban and the transitory; the other passengers enter the streetcar to avoid the rain and to reach their destinations. In contrast, el Duque Job, “el desocupado” and “el observador,” establishes himself as an idle traveler in search of aesthetic and intellectual stimulation (6).

The chronicler-narrator-protagonist, in the true spirit of the *flâneur*, declares himself an expert on the metropolitan scene: “No, la ciudad de México no empieza en el Palacio Nacional, ni acaba en la calzada de la Reforma. Yo doy a ustedes mi palabra de que la ciudad es mucho mayor” (6). In “La reflexión sobre el *flâneur* y la *flanerie* en los escritores modernistas latinoamericanos,” Dorde Cuvardic García rightly notes that in this instance “la *flanerie* [...] conlleva el descubrimiento de espacios urbanos que la burguesía desconoce, una Otredad geográfica y social todavía no tipificada” (28). As the trolley takes el Duque Job to “muchos mundos desconocidos” and “regiones vírgenes” that surround Mexico City, he becomes our guide on this journey away from the center toward “barrios extravagantes, cuyos nombres son esencialmente antiaperitivos,” to places he likens to the “patas [...] sucias y velludas” that extend outward from the “gran tortuga” that is the city (155). Perhaps because the outer world is deemed unaesthetic and unappetizing, his journey actually takes him from the exterior to the interior, from outside to inside. Note that “[d]espués de examinar ligeramente las torcidas líneas y la cadena de montañas del nuevo mundo por que atravesaba,” el Duque Job “volv[ió] los ojos al interior del vagón” (7). The outside setting—the New World—does not sustain his interest, either because the crooked lines and mountain chains pass by too quickly, represent only an imperfect or unaesthetic nature, or fail to offer the cosmopolitan scene or “delicioso cuadro” that the true *flâneur*—and supposed Frenchman, el Duque Job—needs or desires. He also mentions on two occasions that he is speaking to his insides—“dije para mis adentros”; “continue diciendo a mis adentros”—which further underscores the transition from external to internal (7, 8).

Turning to the inside of the streetcar and to the inner workings of the imagination, the narrator-protagonist alternates phrases that show certainty (e.g. “[d]e seguro,” “me parecía indisputable,” “[i]ncuestionablemente,” “[t]engo la certidumbre de que,” “[e]stoy serguro de que,” “indudablemente,” “[l]a única explicación de [. . .] es,” etc.) with others that reflect supposition or even doubt (e.g. “[p]robablemente,” “[t]al vez,” “parece que,” “[e]n mi opinión,” “[d]ebe de ser,” “[b]ien puede ser que,” etc.), even though he can really be sure of nothing, given that the entire “novel” and all of its “characters” are subjective mental creations (7-10). The inclusion of twenty rhetorical questions in the text also serves to underscore the fact that the narrator-protagonist is seeking knowledge that he does not possess, but that he will nonetheless go on to create. It is important to recognize that in contrast to Benito Pérez Galdós’s 1871 short story “La novela en el tranvía,” Gutiérrez Nájera’s chosen title replaces “en el” with “del” and thus reads “the novel *of* the streetcar” rather than “the novel *in* the streetcar.” This slight change in wording reflects a major change in thematic focus. In the former text, the protagonist hears of and then reads about “novelistic” events during his journey on a Madrid trolley, whereas in the latter work the protagonist creates a series of fictional stories based on

what he observes and invents while on a Mexican streetcar.⁸ Prescilla Parkhurst Ferguson's belief that "the *flâneur* sounds very much like an author in search of characters and intrigue" and that "[a]n entire novel can spring forth from a single encounter observed from the street" relates particularly well to this work and to the inventive and active role of Gutiérrez Nájera's narrative persona, even if he does move from "the street" to the "streetcar" (29). The text thus promotes the idea of converting the world into art and of being an artist of life—and Gutiérrez Nájera clearly chooses a *flâneur* as the person best able to do this.

One challenge to reading this text as a celebration of the *flâneur*'s conversion of life into art, however, comes from the fact that *el Duque Job* frequently focuses on the negative qualities of a life marked by poverty, hunger, and inequality. Many of Gutiérrez Nájera's writings such as "La hija del aire" and "La mañana de San Juan" are tinged with moral sympathies and social critique, especially for Mexico's poor and struggling youth, and this has often led literary scholars to classify Gutiérrez Nájera as a romanticist and to label him a precursor to Spanish American *modernismo*, rather than one of its founding figures. In this regard, "La novela del tranvía" is no exception, given that it too voices overt ethical concerns. "Stora y las medias parisienses" would appear to be a notable exception, since it is virtually devoid of moral considerations and focuses almost exclusively on aesthetics.⁹ Yet, I am interested here in the ways in which the moral critiques in "La novela del tranvía" often—though not always—give way to aesthetic musings as this serves to realign Gutiérrez Nájera with the aestheticist thrust of the *modernistas* and keeps his chronicler-narrator-protagonist closely aligned with the *flâneur*'s task of searching for beauty and aesthetic pleasure. It is true that the narrator shows concern for the imagined children of both the old man and the thirty-year-old woman that sit next to him on the streetcar. Describing the former's imagined two daughters as "desventuradas criaturas" and "chiquillas pobres y decentes," he demonstrates concern for their socioeconomic condition and personal struggles with poverty (7, 8). Deciding that the latter figure must also have children, he laments that they are "pobres seres indefensos," whose mother abandoned them "para ir a traerles su porción de vergüenza y deshonra" on account of her infidelity (9). Despite these moral musings, we must consider the possibility that the narrator's aesthetic interests frequently trump his moral concerns. For example, the narrator proposes a method for rescuing the old man's daughters from their misery, for saving them from their hardships or "penas" (8). His plan involves, in a strikingly anti-Pygmalion fashion, making one of those lucky daughters his wife: "yo la educaré a mi gusto. Le pondré un maestro de piano. [...] y como la voy a sujetar a un régimen higiénico se pondrá en poco tiempo más fresca que una rosa. [...] con el piano, los libros, las macetas y los pájaros, ya no tendré nada que desear" (8). His plan does not consider what the woman desires, but rather ensures only that his own needs—mainly aesthetic ones—are met. The difference between "tendrá" and "tendré" is important here; rather than commenting that "she would have nothing left to desire," the narrator underscores that it is *he* who will be satisfied. She will lose her inherent realness to become his statuesque ideal. Similarly, his moral censure of the thirty-year-old woman, whose imagined act of infidelity he initially deems "una traición" and "una villanía," ultimately gives way to indifference followed by aesthetic interest: "Después de todo, ¿qué me importa que esa señora se la pegue a su marido? ¿Es mi amigo acaso? Ella sí que es una real moza" (9-10). In general, then, the concern with ethics repeatedly yields to an interest

in aesthetics. Whether someone is honest, decent, virtuous, or respectable may matter, but it is far more important that they are beautiful, presentable, well-dressed, and that they pay attention to “delicadezas y finuras” (7). As noted previously, the narrator admits from the outset that despite the fact that his journey in a streetcar on a rainy day resembles a voyage on a miniature Noah’s Ark, he himself is not waiting on the dove that will bring the olive branch in its beak; that is, the symbol of peace and forgiveness, but rather, he is there because “nada hay más peregrino ni más curioso que la serie de cuadros vivos que puede examinarse en un tranvía” (6).¹⁰ Wanting the delicious over the divine, the aesthetic over the ethical, the narrator also wants to turn life into art and real people into characters in his novel. Yet it is essential to note that the beautiful or the aesthetic is here found only after much mental effort and intellectual contortionism. It is not simply glimpsed or spotted as is the case with Stora’s and M. Can-Can’s methods in the other text. In this instance, the search for beauty and pleasure is based on the fictitious and the invented. It requires the chronicler-narrator-protagonist to “overlook” reality, rather than simply “look” at the external world; it necessitates a journey inward and a subjective reworking and beautification of his surroundings, which is markedly different from Stora’s search for outer beauty on the streets of Paris.

In addition to his role as novelist, the chronicler-narrator-protagonist in “La novela del tranvía” corresponds closely to Benjamin’s definition of the *flâneur* as amateur detective and investigator of the city.¹¹ Consider, for example, his momentary belief that he has found the thirty-year old woman’s husband, informed him of his wife’s affair, and gone with him to seek revenge on the pair of lovers. He becomes so engrossed in the thought of his direct involvement that “[u]n sudor frío bañaba [su] rostro” and made him scan the woman’s clothes for a “mancha de sangre” (10). El Duque Job seemingly transitions in this instant from the perspective of an unoccupied observer to that of an engaged participant. Nevertheless, he remains passive and appears unwilling to leave his seat. He insists that he would have followed the old man “[s]i no lloviera tanto,” and when the thirty-year-old woman exits the streetcar, he asks whether he should follow her—“¿La seguiré?”—but refrains from doing so, stating simply: “Yo sigo en el vagón” (8, 9, 10). In stark contrast to the active and ever-moving Stora, this chronicler-narrator-protagonist appears paralyzed by the rain and parallels Benjamin’s description of E.T.A. Hoffman’s protagonist in “The Cousin’s Corner Window,” who “looking out from his corner window, is immobilized as a paralytic” (“On Some Motifs,” 173, emphasis added). As Viviane Mahieux accurately explains, it is from the “protected enclave of the streetcar” that el Duque Job remains “isolated from the scenery he describes” (81, 54).¹² What M. Can-Can says of Mexico City in the opening lines of “Stora y las medias parisienses”—“[p]ara vivir ahora en México [...] se necesita irremisiblemente llevar cubiertas las narices”—seemingly serves as justification for el Duque Job’s passivity as he remains in the streetcar and thus avoids exposure to “las amarillas tercianas y el rapado tifo” that accompany “[l]as primeras lluvias” in Mexico City (167). I agree with José Eduardo González’s assertion that “the reality of living in Mexico City made his dream [of emulating Baudelaire’s wandering through Paris] impossible. For Gutiérrez Nájera, the city streets are obstacles to overcome, a hostile environment that must be navigated as one moves from one interior to another [... always seeking] refuge from the inhospitality of the city, symbolized by the rain” (205-6). Whereas the rain prompts M. Can-Can and Stora to take to the streets in search of outer beauty, in Mexico City it warrants a retreat

from external ugliness, so much so that Baudelaire's *flâneur* becomes an impossibility in the Mexican context, making Gutiérrez Nájera rewrite this figure in a manner that anticipates Benjamin's own ideas regarding the evolution of the *flâneur*, who comes to resemble a detective and who explores a space between exterior and interior.

III. Transnational Variations on the *Flâneur* Figure in Gutiérrez Nájera

By incorporating a Frenchman in Paris (M. Can-Can), a foreigner in Paris (Stora), a foreigner no longer in Paris (Stora), two Frenchmen in Mexico City (M. Can-Can and el Duque Job), and various Mexicans in Mexico City (the secondary characters in "La novela" and the real Mexican author of both texts), these chronicles underscore Gutiérrez-Nájera's ability to examine geographic location from a cross-national perspective as *both* insider and outsider, Frenchman and Mexican, metropole and marginal, idle *flâneur* and salaried scribe. While these texts share an interest in wandering and observing a capital city on rainy days, in searching for "living pictures," and in establishing oneself as an expert on urban geographies, they differ not only insofar as "Stora" promotes walking in Paris, while "La novela" prescribes riding through Mexico City, but also because the former story emphasizes the metropolitan, the outer, the aesthetic, and the erotic, while the latter tale highlights the peripheral, the unseemly, the inner, and, at least partly or initially, the ethical.¹³ Indeed, the differences with regard to the sexual subtext in the French context and the more moralistic perspective in the Mexican context may well reflect the author's own assumptions about French versus Mexican life, values, and art. In "Stora y las medias parisienses," Gutiérrez Nájera associates the *flâneur* with the great city of Paris, and even if the narrator never clarifies Stora's exact origins, which we might presume to be Scandinavian given his last name, it is important that he sets up a distinction between Mexico and Paris initially, and then underscores that a foreigner (Stora) can be a *flâneur* only in Paris, while a Frenchman (Monsieur Can-Can) will have difficulty being a *flâneur* in Mexico City. In "La novela del tranvía," Gutiérrez Nájera redefines the *flâneur*'s domain—moving him inside, away from the urban center, and out of the rain. Most importantly, for our purposes, is the fact that "Stora y las medias parisienses" presents the *flâneur* as an active follower of beauty and an artist figure—both poet and musician—in his own right, while "La novela del tranvía" offers a variety of possible roles for the *flâneur* as a passive observer of morals and manners, as an amateur detective or investigator, and as a novelist in search of characters and plot lines who fictionalizes life so as to create his art. In short, whereas the Baudelairian *flâneur* serves as the model in "Stora," the Benjaminian *flâneur* is anticipated in "La novela." Gutiérrez Nájera contrasts the act of *flânerie* in Paris and Mexico City, and the variations in these chronicles can be attributed to the differences in the figure of the *flâneur* as discussed by Baudelaire and Benjamin.

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Notas

- ¹ In “The Pseudonyms of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera,” E. K. Mapes offers a detailed outline of the Mexican chronicler’s various pseudonyms and concludes his investigation by arguing:

[T]he foregoing discussion seems to indicate that twelve of the pseudonyms and sets of initials used by Nájera are his exclusive literary property. These are ‘El Duque Job,’ ‘G.N.,’ ‘M. G. N.,’ ‘Frú-Frú,’ ‘M. Can-Can,’ ‘Fritz,’ ‘X. X.,’ ‘Croix-Dieu,’ ‘Juan Lanás,’ ‘El Cura de Jalatiaco,’ ‘Recamier’ and ‘Juius (Senior).’ Three more—‘Rafael,’ ‘Pomponnet,’ and ‘Perico el de los Palotes’—are exclusively his with sporadic and unimportant exceptions, sometimes in the form of foreign contributions. Five, including some of the most important, were used by one or more other writers, and it requires much care to determine which of the compositions so signed are by Nájera. These are ‘Ignotus,’ ‘Gil Blas,’ ‘Junius,’ ‘Omega’ and ‘Puck.’ Three are on lists of Nájera pseudonyms compiled by his friends and associates, but seem to have no other claim to recognition. Those so classified are ‘Nemo,’ ‘Etincelle’ and ‘Can-Can.’ [...] Lastly there are two, ‘Titiana’ and ‘Manuel Gutiérrez,’ which obviously are not Nájera’s, though some well-informed persons have believed them to be. (677)

- ² For example, writing in “Las misas de navidad” as “M. Gutiérrez Nájera” and later in “Crónica de Noche Buena” as “el Duque Job,” the Mexican chronicler explains: “He salido a flanear un rato por las calles” (37). Speaking in “Crónica de las carreras” as “M. Gutiérrez Nájera” and again in “En las carreras” as “M. Can-Can,” the narrative persona describes the way in which he fixed his gaze with curiosity in every one of the accidents and details of the urban setting. Using the pseudonym “el Duque Job” in his chronicle “El amigo,” the author begins with a description of his walk through the streets filled by the crowds.
- ³ Gutiérrez Nájera’s use of pseudonyms often led him to engage in playful cross- or self-references. Writing under the pseudonym “Cero,” for example, Gutiérrez Nájera names his other “personalities”: “¡Ah! Si yo fuera un ‘Duque Job,’ un ‘Frú-Frú,’ un ‘Pomponnet,’ un ‘Mr. Can-Can,’ un Gutiérrez Nájera en fin!” (Mapes 650). Similarly, writing as “El Duque Job,” he offers a ranking of his own personas in terms of their popularity and supposed level of talent: “...el Duque Job...cede en parte a las instancias de su...amigo Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera y a las... suplicas de los señores ‘Frou-Frou’ y ‘M. Can-Can,’ que son los periodistas más famosos, discretos y entendidos de la prensa mejicana después del ‘Duque Job’ y del sabio...Sr. Gutiérrez Nájera” (Mapes 655-6).
- ⁴ In addition to the two pseudonymous identities under examination here, there is one additional pen name that also intersects closely with the French *flâneur*, namely “Pomponnet,” who is described as “vago de profesión,” as someone who is always up-to-date on all the latest events and frequents “la calle de Plateros”—Mexico City’s most famous street for window shopping, people watching, and acts of *flânerie*—donning formal clothes, cologne water, and delicately tinted gloves (Mapes 653-654). The name is probably a reference to the French verb “*se pomponner*,” which translates

to English as “to get ready with care,” “to take care of one’s appearance,” or “to get dolled up.” Pomponnet also contributed, along with Monsieur Can-Can, to the column “Memorias de un vago,” and is described by M. Can-Can as a friend and as the one who will introduce him to their readers.

- ⁵ Boyd G. Carter insists that “Gutiérrez Nájera se halla por primera vez en español en Hispanoamérica, que sepamos, una referencia a Baudelaire,” and notes this same passage as evidence (29).
- ⁶ Banville is an intensely Parisian poet and writer, who is known for being a leader of the Parnassian movement and for his studies and sketches of Parisian life. Daumier is a French printmaker, caricaturist, painter, and sculptor whose many works offer a commentary on the social and political life in nineteenth-century France. Gavarni is a French illustrator, born in Paris, who became director of the journal *Les Gens du Monde* and whose work likewise focuses on Parisian manners.
- ⁷ Many theorists of the Spanish American chronicle note the similarities between the “cronista” and the flâneur. See Chapter 5, “Decorar la ciudad: crónica y experiencia urbana,” in Julio Ramos’s *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina*; Chapter 1, “Tras los pasos del crónica modernista,” in José Ismael Gutiérrez’s *Perspectivas sobre el modernismo hispanoamericano*; Chapter 2, “Modernismo and Journalism: the crónicas,” in Aníbal González’s *A Companion to Spanish American Modernismo*; and Esperança Bielsa’s *The Latin American Urban Crónica: Between Literature and Mass Culture*.
- ⁸ José Eduardo González agrees: “he looks at each passenger as if he or she were a character in a novel, hence the title of the story” (204).
- ⁹ Perhaps the Parisian setting in “Stora y las medias parisienses” allows Gutiérrez Nájera to focus on what he sees as French values or morals, instead of the Mexican values or morals that underlie many of his texts.
- ¹⁰ It is worth mentioning that the term “peregrino” in this passage does not carry the connotations of one who journeys to a sacred place for religious reasons, but rather is used as an adjective to refer simultaneously to strange, rare, or foreign beauty. For Gutiérrez Nájera, the verb “peregrinar” is equated with the verb “flanear”—both involve wandering and searching in strange or foreign lands or for strange and rare things.
- ¹¹ José Eduardo González agrees that “Gutiérrez Nájera’s narrator behaves like a detective” and that “he is a detective that could easily cross the line and becomes a criminal” (208).
- ¹² In *Urban Chroniclers in Modern Latin America: The Shared Intimacy of Everyday Life*, Viviane Mahieux argues that the chronicler-narrator-protagonist of “La novela del tranvía” “rides for the pleasure of anthropological observation” (54). She insists that “[t]his flâneur, like a visitor in a museum of live culture, conceives the city as an exhibit” (54). She explains further that “his ethnographic gaze establishes him as an outside observer,” who always “keeps his distance from the crowds” (54). This “anthropological observation” and “ethnographic gaze” keep him further removed and isolated from those he observes and distinguish him from Stora’s more active and aesthetic searching.
- ¹³ Another difference has to do with the class status of the chronicler identities, narrators and main characters, as well as those that they follow and observe through in their acts of *flânerie*. In “Stora y las medias parisienses,” we encounter a rich and idler chronicler-narrator and a poor and starving bohemian protagonist. In “La novela del

tranvía,” “el Duque Job”—the supposed chronicler, the narrator, and the chief protagonist—is an elegant, refined, and upper-class gentleman, who has leisure time, does not appear burdened by the need to work, and enjoys traversing and observing the urban spaces of Mexico City. Both M. Can-Can and Stora seek out refined and elegant Parisian women, while “el Duque Job” examines poor and struggling passengers on the outskirts of Mexico City. Both chronicler identities, Monsieur Can-Can and el Duque Job, are presented as wealthy French idlers, while Gutiérrez Nájera is really a poor Mexican author writing chronicle after chronicle simply to make ends meet.

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