LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Acapulco and the Literary Geography of Underdevelopment

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Abstract: This essay surveys Mexican literary and cultural production to model a literary cartography of Acapulco. I examine cultural materials that register the patterns of Acapulco's peripherality at different scales, ranging from the intimate to the global, and across periods, from the heyday of Mexican developmentalism to the so-called neoliberal era. Focusing on the cultural figuration and representation of Acapulco, the essay suggests that the port city's ascendancy as an iconic resort destination from the 1940s to the 1970s and its inexhaustible afterlives in literature, film, theatre, photography, and popular culture, offer a model to ponder the urban dimensionality and organization of social life in the global periphery.

Keywords: Acapulco, space, literary cartography, underdevelopment, cultural studies, Mexico

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It could be said without fear of contradiction that like no other place outside Mexico City, Acapulco gives urban form to the misadventures of Mexican developmentalism. Routinely heralded as a token of Mexico's successful quest for capitalist modernization, from the 1940s onward the coastal city gained notoriety as an international tourist attraction: large-scale urban development, foreign direct investment, and an avalanche of full-page ads and travel brochures transformed Acapulco from an isolated way station that was once part of the transpacific route of the Manila Galleon, into a modern-day Garden of Earthly Delights, now available for rent.[1] Acapulco's urbanization paralleled the ascendancy of industrial capitalism in Mexico and attested to the period of sustained economic growth known as the Mexican Miracle, when in tune with the import-substitution framework of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, the Mexican government 'redirect[ed] its attention from distributive issues to the business of fostering economic development' (Babb 2018: 77-78). This sudden change of heart heightened the authoritarian disposition of the post-revolutionary state, leading to multiple episodes of state violence: from the repression of railroad workers' strikes in 1958-9 to the Tlatelolco (1968) and Corpus Christi (1971) massacres and the assassinations of social leaders Rubén Jaramillo, Genaro Vázquez, and Lucio Cabañas. Social tensions spiraled as the frantic modernization of Acapulco's seafront displaced local populations and segregated the city center from its rural surroundings, where peasant movements and guerrillas continued to uphold a longstanding tradition of civic insurgency (Bartra 1996). Moreover, Acapulco's consecration as a luscious travel destination provided a catalyst and a magnet for the countercultural effervescence of the Mexican 1960s, its lenient atmosphere promised the national middle classes the simultaneous felicities of extravagant luxury and joyous intemperance. Ricardo Garibay notably teased Acapulco as 'a heart swollen by beauty and putrefaction, violence and rapture'[2] (Garibay 1979: 7). Shaped by a desire for cosmopolitan citizenship and economic progress, Acapulco's modernization and its discontents offer an opportunity to retrace the spatial logic of underdevelopment.

This essay surveys a long list of literary and artistic works to model a literary cartography of Acapulco, which, I argue, registers the spatial patterns intrinsic to underdevelopment. Disciplinary differences between literary geography and spatial literary studies open the term literary cartography to multiple definitions (Van Noy 2003; Bushell 2012; Tally Jr. 2013; Maher 2014; Tally Jr. 2019). For the purposes of this essay, I use literary cartography as a designation of the spatial model that can be derived from the analytical juxtaposition and integration of a series of literary and cultural works centered on a particular place. I call this a model and not a map to emphasize the distinction established by Sheila Hones between the metaphorical use of the term in literary studies (my own disciplinary field), and its literal use in geographical contexts, where literary cartography is often treated as synonymous with 'the actual processes of literary mapping' (Hones 2022: 87). As a literary scholar, I also make us of the term to refer to the aesthetic registration of the 'new and enormous global realities [that] are inaccessible to any individual subject or consciousness' (Jameson 1988: 350), that is, the *actually existing* spatial patterns that, escaping direct representation, make a situated representation of the world viable in the first place. I therefore use the term in a manner that is less invested in the

exploration of a sense of place than in the patterns that generate the conditions of possibility for the literary and cultural representation of any given place (real or imagined). And while any single literary or artistic work must communicate a certain amount of information regarding these patterns, it follows that a comparative approach would help authenticate their prevalence and regularity. A somewhat similar impulse can be found in Bertrand Westphal's articulation of a 'threshold of representativeness' and what he describes as a 'reticular arrangement of a certain number and a wide variety of viewpoints' (Westphal 2011: 127). But whereas Westphal's project is motivated by the pursuit of a 'wide-angle geocriticism' meant to avoid the 'risk of generalization' (Westphal 2011: 126), I am rather interested in precisely those generalizations that can be said to emerge only through the continued, multifocal representation of a given place.

In this spirit, what follows is a reflection on the registration of the spatial patterns of peripheral capitalism, which, I argue, find distinctive expression in the literary and cultural representation of Acapulco, at once a framework for the modeling of peripheral sociality and a blueprint for the re-construction of a world shaped by the logic of uneven and combined development. The essay's first section situates Acapulco in the Mexican national imaginary by looking at its prominent role in popular culture, music, photography, and television. The second and third sections then analyze how cinematic and literary representations of Acapulco have synthesized and reproduced the spatial patterns of underdevelopment. While exhaustivity is not my goal, I have tried to accommodate works that underscore Acapulco's symbolic fortitude at different scales, from the intimate to the global. Expansive rather than tactical, wide-ranging rather than focalized, the essay attempts to map the world imagined by the literary and cultural cartography of Acapulco, the patterns conveyed by the logic of invention, figuration, and representation of 'Mexico's first planned resort destination' (Berger 2015: 2). The goal of the essay is to cover enough ground to problematize the paradigmatic space Acapulco holds in Mexico's national imagination and to suggest that its ascendancy as an iconic resort development from the 1940s to the 1970s and its inexhaustible afterlives in literature, film, theatre, photography, and popular culture, offer a model to ponder the urban dimensionality and organization of social life in the global periphery.

Remembering Acapulco

Mexican composer Agustín Lara ingrained Acapulco in the Mexican national imagination with the opening verse of his waltz "María bonita" (1946): 'Remember Acapulco / those nights / beautiful María / María of my heart.' Lara presented the song to world-renowned actress and popular icon María Félix during the couple's honeymoon in Acapulco, and the love letter quickly became the score to the national middle classes' developmental reverie. Lara's waltz inspired a society that, throughout the mid-decades of the twentieth century, 'rejects the museum, insists on age limits, chooses Acapulco as its favorite shop window and a youthful tone as its distinctive marker' (Monsiváis 1977: 162). Saccharine impatience demanding 'illusions' be turned into 'realities,' "María bonita" instituted Acapulco as the land of consummation, of mirthful adventure and perennial nostalgia, always already

an act of remembrance. Enlivened by the upbeat tempo of Pedro Vargas' 1946 original recording with the Orquesta de Agustín Lara, Lara's verse has enjoyed many returns: conjured by Pérez Prado's instrumental adaptation of "María bonita" for his 1957 album *Prez*, it is harmonized into *norteño* style by Los invasores de Nuevo León at the onset of the Mexican debt crisis of 1982, only to reappear charged with melancholic persuasiveness in Natalia Lafourcade's 2012 tribute album *Mujer divina* and with glistening bonhomie in Omara Portuondo's and Regina Orozco's *Pedazos del corazón* (2019). Luis Mariano assuredly echoes "María bonita" when he sings 'Je me souviendrai d'Acapulco' (I will remember Acapulco) in Francis López's 1951 operetta *Le Chanteur de Mexico*. Lara's catchphrase titles, among others, a panegyrical tourist guide of Acapulco (Loaeza 2011), a documentary on contemporary violence and the everyday struggles of *acapulqueños* (Bonleux 2013), and a warmhearted, mass-paperback, bite-sized memoir (Beltrán 2021). More recently, Lara's verse was rehabilitated as part of the climate crisis awareness campaign and humanitarian efforts that followed hurricane Otis' devastating passage through Acapulco in October 2023. Like no other popular verse, 'Acuérdate de Acapulco' conjugates the timescales of the individual and the nation-state, knitting together the national drama of capitalist development with present-day realities of extinction and ecological catastrophe. Two decades into the twenty-first century, the cultural travels of Lara's verse tell the story of the Great Acceleration, the post-1950 dramatic escalation of the human, fuel fossil-driven impact on the Earth and its 'crucial biogeochemical cycles' (McNeill 2014: 4).

The genealogies of "María bonita" register the palpably peripheral development of '[t]he most luxurious and cosmopolitan port of Latin America' (Loaeza and Granados 2008: 347), from its modern ideation as the tropical backyard of the Mexican bourgeoisie to its rampant transformation into a *locus amoenus* for its international counterpart. A 1966 *New York Times* article comments on the character of Acapulco's bourgeois coterie:

> Sleekly groomed, wearing the sort of far-out resort clothes one usually sees only in the pages of Elle or Gentlemen's Quarterly, clutching their Coco Locos and watching the sun go down, they made an intriguing tableau—a Fellini-esque bouillabaisse of obese Milanese bankers, sulky French movie starlets, Hollywood divorce lawyers, Wall Street brokers, Spanish bullfighters, fading nineteen-thirties movie queens, New York dress designers, Glamour models, gaunt Parisian industrialists, Sutton Place South-*cum*-Social Register divorcées, Texas natural-gas millionaires, aging London peeresses, and assorted other deeply tanned playboys and playgirls of the Western World. (Meehan 1966: 38)

In 1953 John and Jackie Kennedy honeymooned in Acapulco; Elizabeth Taylor and Mike Todd married there in 1957 (the ceremony was performed by Acapulco's mayor; actor Mario Moreno "Cantinflas" was part of the wedding party); two years later, Dwight Eisenhower stayed in the lavish Pierre Marqués hotel while paying an informal visit to Adolfo López Mateos (Sackett 2022: 444). The March 2, 1959 issue of *Life* magazine shows Eisenhower's motorcade driving across town while crowds gather on Acapulco's 'modernistic balconies' to give the U.S. president a 'friendly welcome.' Eisenhower '[took] in the sights of

one of the hemisphere's most stunning playgrounds,' he relaxed on López Mateos' yacht and enjoyed an 'exotic sunset' in the company of Acapulco's most 'eccentric resident,' 'a two-year old macaw who was taught to drink martinis by her owner' (*Life*, 1959). Such 'tropicalist fantasy' (Bencomo 2016) reconciled Mexico's developmental aspirations with its cultural diplomatic internationalism (Niblo and Niblo 2008; Berger 2006): not only Frank Sinatra ('Just say the words and we'll beat the birds down to Acapulco Bay'), Rita Hayworth, Brenda Joyce, and Johnny Weissmuller (the list goes on), but Edward VIII (then Prince of Wales), Josip Broz Tito, Sukarno, Robert F. Wagner Jr., Ronald Reagan, Henry Kissinger, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Queen Elizabeth II bathed in the sun of Mexico's beachside arcadia. Propped up by new patterns in postwar tourism, lucrative investment opportunities, Hollywoodian glamour, and shifting global geopolitics, Acapulco lent credence to the Mexican ruling classes' pipe dream of paving a road out of underdevelopment.

Music of all genres extolled Acapulco's attributions and blended a heartening accompaniment to Mexico's capitalist modernization, as, for instance, in the mellow vocal harmonies of Los Once Hermanos Zavala's "Fiesta en Acapulco," the joyful tropicalism of Trío Caribe's "Verano en Acapulco," Los Hooligans' upbeat "Acapulco Rock," or Los Apsons' enthusiastic "Fuiste a Acapulco" and "En Acapulco fue." Many of these songs provided inspiration for the beneficiaries of the country's 'mid-century bonanza' (Walker 2013: 5), creating a soundtrack that broadcast the wants, dreams, and desires of the Mexican middle classes. 'La Quebrada is a balcony of dreams,' announces Alejandro Fuentes Roth's "Buenos días Acapulco" in reference to the famous cliff used as a platform by Acapulco's cliff divers. "Buenos días Acapulco" served as the title song for the 1961 homonymous film, was then recorded by the Mexican powerhouse *trío* Los Tres Diamantes in 1962 and was later adapted and popularized by the Cuban quintet Hermanas Benítez. José Agustín Ramírez, one of the most popular and enduring composers of the state of Guerrero, coupled the expressiveness of the *corrido*, the *chilena*, and the *huapango* with the bourgeoning promise of post-revolutionary jubilation to produce some of the most lyrical images of Acapulco in songs like "Caleta" (1942), "Acapulqueña" (1945), "Playa de Hornos" (1951) and "Diamante Azul" (1951, with León Osorio). Ramírez's songs encapsulate the nationalist convictions of post-revolutionary Mexico in their celebration of regional cultural forms in conjunction with the infrastructures of the national-popular state: 'he sang to rivers or women the same as to schools, hospitals, and even congresses' (Granados 2019: 87). The popular Conjunto Acapulco Tropical has similarly cultivated Acapulco's festive and romantic resonances since the 1970s in songs like "Mi lindo Acapulco" and "Canto a Acapulco." One could easily interpret the contrast between the propitious conventions of many of these songs—e.g. the optimistic perspective of Rigo Tovar's cumbia "Acapulco eres mi amor" (1973)—and the melancholic despair of Juan Gabriel's "Amor eterno" (1984)—with its noted lament for 'the saddest memory of Acapulco'—as a melodic testimony to the foreclosure of the modernization project that brandished Acapulco as the country's crown jewel, a nostalgic declaration for the now irrecoverable developmental impetuses of the Mexican Miracle.

Although Acapulco's paramountcy began to dwindle with the neoliberal turn and the consolidation of novel tourist destinations elsewhere on the Pacific Coast, the Baja California

Peninsula, and the Caribbean, the musical jubilation for the real-and-imaginary ecstasies associated with the Acapulco Bay did not subside—the Acafest music festival, an annual event sponsored by Televisa, Mexico's largest media corporation, was only inaugurated in 1991. Latin music icon Luis Miguel, "El Sol de México" [The Sun of Mexico], re-aligned Acapulco with Televisa's ideological conservatism and its dogmatic commercialization of youth identity (Cosentino 2016: 47) with his synth-pop hit "Acapulco amor" (1985), an escapist fantasy that captures the mushy, mind-numbing, and delirious style imported at the onset of the era of free trade agreements as a palate cleanser to the lingering aftertaste of cultural nationalism. The song's catchy, clichéd lyrics ('Playing in the sand there will never be sorrow') and the picture-book fable they vindicate sharply contrast with the economic instability and the sense of social decomposition of the 1980s, a "lost decade" colored by the degradation of national ambitions into petty-bourgeois chimeras. Further, while the 1980s debt crisis frantically restricted the working and middle classes' access to recreational spaces, the carefree sentiment of songs like Bob Dylan's "Goin' to Acapulco" (1975), Neil Diamond's "Acapulco" (1980), and Ricchi e Poveri's "Acapulco" (1983; adapted into Spanish by Magneto in 1987) continued to reproduce for international audiences the status of Acapulco as a refuge against the alienating features of freely competitive capitalism: 'Goin' to Acapulco…goin' to have some fun'; 'We're sailin' around the horn of love to Acapulco'; 'Acapulco…Nuova dolce vita.'

The hedonistic mood of many Acapulco-themed songs of this period buttressed neoliberalism's ideal of individual freedom and the emergence of new forms of cultural socialization where leisure, entertainment, and relaxation increasingly became the prerogative of international tourism and the national ruling classes—the marked pace of privatization and labor flexibilization echoed in the pace of the exclusions that remodeled Acapulco into a feverish free-for-all: hotel evening performances giving way to wet T-shirt contests; marijuana, psilocybin, and LSD giving way to cocaine, methamphetamines, and synthetic opioids; and dance-pop and electronic music overhauling Acapulco's nightlife. Acapulco's growing immoderation and exclusivist self-esteem were paraphrased by a series of mass-circulated products ranging from telenovelas (Mexican soap operas such as *Tú o nadie* [1985]; later adapted as *Acapulco, cuerpo y alma* and into English as *Acapulco Bay* in the mid-nineties) to teen dramas (*Gossip Girl: Acapulco* [2013]), each more illusory than the previous one. The culture industry's perpetuation of Acapulco's voluptuous ambiance in a context marked by the increased militarization of public life and the delegitimization of state institutions not only attests to the symbolic constancy of Acapulco, but to the peculiar ways its representation favored neoliberalism's ideological tendency to separate the political from the economic. Thus, the licentious undertones of songs like Los 5's "Acapulco" (2017) or Jason Derulo's "Acapulco" (2021), reprise the image of Acapulco as a land of conspicuous consumption, a fabrication where ephemeral beatitude obscures the city's actual struggles with crime, urban involution, and immiseration (Rodrigues et al. 2017). Certainly, this is not the only register in which contemporary cultural production has continued to appropriate and reimagine Acapulco's legacies, the surf rock reverberations of Lost Acapulco's breakthrough album *Acapulco Golden* (2004), the rehabilitative accentuations of Los Vaguens' *Hotel Acapulco* (2020),

and Disco Bahía's reanimation of disco-pop in *Música para adultos* (2023), all add to a history of nostalgia grounded in the intricate symbolism of Acapulco's coastline.

Nostalgic deliberation for Acapulco's Golden Age seems similarly appropriate if we compare photographs of *acapulqueños* by Lola Álvarez Bravo and John Mack almost sixty years apart. Álvarez Bravo's 1951 emblematic photograph of Apolonio Castillo (fig. 1), beloved diver and Olympic swimmer whose tragic death shocked Acapulco in 1957, captures the developmental mood of mid-twentieth century Mexico in its iconic bravura and desirous appetite for the future. Castillo stands on a rock holding a speargun on the right hand and a set of swim fins on the left, he gazes into the horizon, ready to jump into action (a diving mask strapped to his forehead.)

Fig. 1. Apolonio Castillo. Francisco Tario and Lola Álvarez Bravo, *Acapulco en el sueño*, 1951. © 2025 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.[3]

Bathed by the seductive light of a nationalist masculinity, the photograph's point of view renders a heroic conviction that is tonally coordinated with the 'aggressive turn toward state-supported industrialization' and the 'authoritarian corporatist approach to labor relations' (Alexander 2016: 79-80) that characterized the presidency of Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-52). The forward-looking articulation of a modernizing gaze in Álvarez Bravo's photograph is reversed in the muted, reflexive, and ponderous tone of John Mack's portrait of José Luis Bello, "the Knife," 'cliff diver by lineage,' taken inside the Hotel Mirador in 2009 (fig. 2).

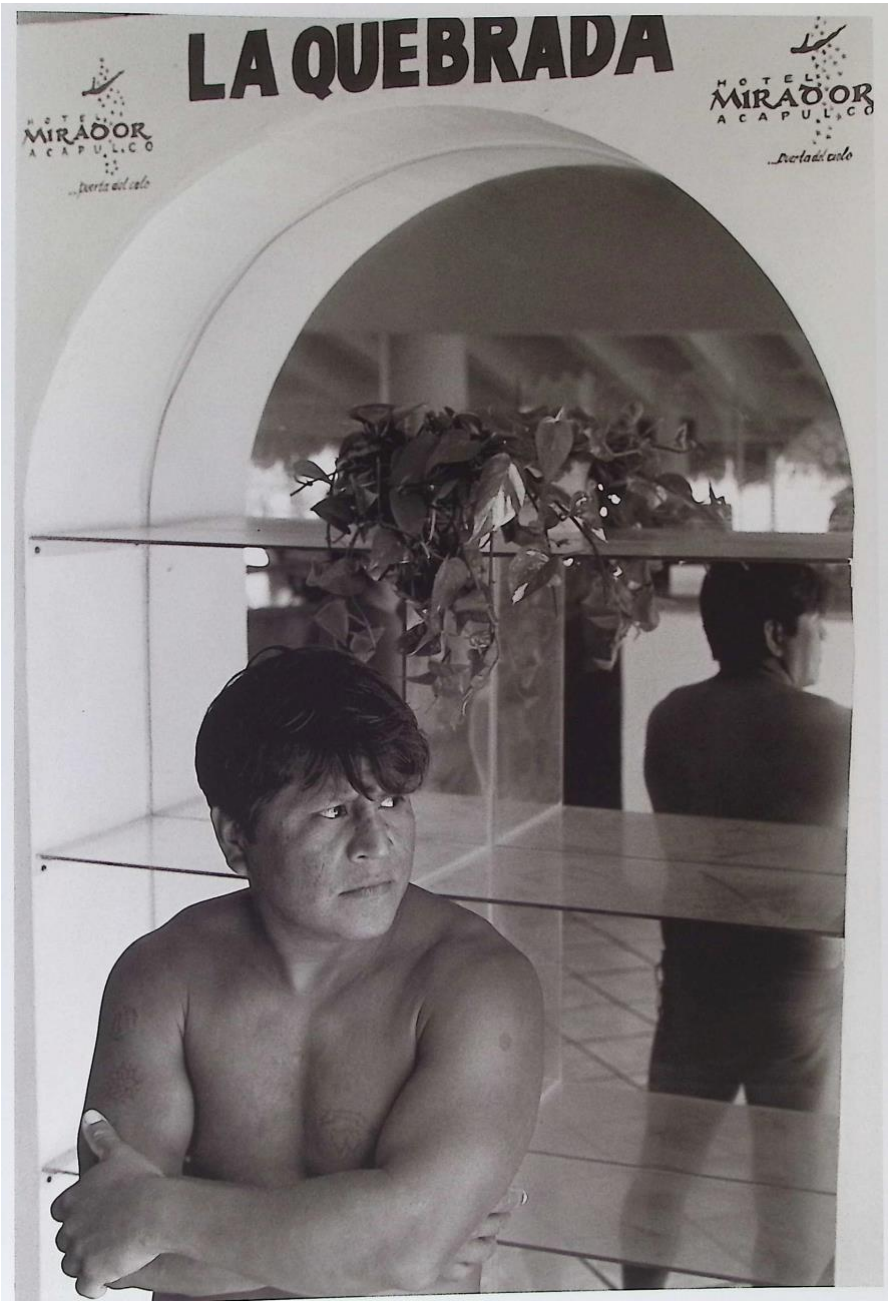

Fig. 2. José Luis Bello, "the Knife." John Mack and Susanne Steines, *Revealing Mexico*, 2010. © John Mack, courtesy Robert Mann Gallery.

Bello poses with his arms crossed, standing in front of a built-in mirror and glass shelf. The relatively high-angle of the shot compresses Bello's body, shown mid-torso up, as he looks away from the camera in a gesture that is equal parts indifferent and evasive. La Quebrada only appears referentially, a specter signaling toward the landscape that the diver has been dragged away from: the timeless cliff that exists outside the house of mirrors constructed by the photographic composition. Bello's pose evokes a sense of dejection, it exposes a man barraged with recollections, longing for the world on the other side of the wall of mirrors. Side by side, Álvarez Bravo's and Mack's photographs illuminate a historical turn experienced as an involuntary break with the past, the emergence of a new structure of feeling in Mexican society kindled by the frustration of Mexico's developmental ambitions.

The nostalgic partisanship that has from the very beginning been a constitutive element of the experience of place characteristic of Acapulco, reappears now as the intimate experience of the nation, of the situated exchange and negotiation of a collective identity that transforms Acapulco into what Yi-Fu Tuan calls 'a center of felt value' (Tuan 2001: 138), such that individual fertility becomes a question of collective inheritance. This is the presupposition that gives Slim Aarons' 1952 photographs of actress Dolores del Río in a swimming pool in Acapulco or Acapulco-born goalie Jorge Campos' neon-colored jerseys their emotional legitimacy, and that similarly sustains Apple TV's series *Acapulco* (2021) as something more than just a glossy, bilingual coming-of-age story or a 'generous serving of Eighties nostalgia' (Sepinwall 2021). To remember Acapulco is, from this vantage point, a communally oriented prospect rather than an individual incantation, reflexive synthesis rather than glistening idiosyncrasy. To properly remember Acapulco is to re-present the historical overtures produced by a particular form of capitalist development, to reconstruct the dirt roads and highways opened by modernity in Mexico, and to revisit the dead ends that map the transition between two structures of feeling in Mexican society. Cinematic and literary narratives centered on Acapulco, I argue below, offer an opportunity to account for the conflicting interaction between these elements, to mediate the discordances between collective desire and global political arrangements in ways that systematically trace the inflection points of peripheral sociality and inscribe a literary cartography of underdevelopment.

Film and the Cultural Credentialization of Acapulco

From early on, the film industry choreographed Acapulco's urbanity for national and international audiences. In 1938, a short documentary directed by Gregorio Castillo for Mexico's Autonomous Department of Press and Advertising promoted the México-Acapulco highway with an unmistakably peripheral disposition: panoramic views of natural landscapes, archetypal rurality, and lush vegetation alternating with brand-new automobiles, pristine road signs, and spinning wheels accentuated by the iconic Ford V8 hubcap. Moving through a narrow tunnel in the Cañada del Zopilote and across the arch bridge over the Papagayo River, the documentary leaves behind the "backward" hinterlands and makes its way to the Acapulco Bay for a modern holiday.

Internationally, Acapulco's modernization activated a creative sequence that successfully exploited the spatial juxtaposition of the archaic and the contemporary, as in Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) and Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), two films that capitalized on Acapulco's bewitching interference between autochtony and cosmopolitanism to avow the psychological preoccupations of film noir. The world-systemic topography traced by these films encounters Acapulco as a distinctive enclave of U.S. postwar hegemony. *The Lady from Shanghai*'s 'dreamlike air' (Welles and Bogdanovich 1992: 191), its carefully constructed game of opposites, 'filled with bizarre, visual dissonances' (Naremore 2015: 138), seamlessly integrates Acapulco's cityscape into its surrealist mood:

> As Grisby [Glenn Anders] and O'Hara [Orson Welles] climb the hillside, the whole social structure of Acapulco passes them by, from the impoverished peasants at the bottom of the hill to the American tourists and their Latin retinue at the top. The atmosphere at the bottom is dirty, crowded, and hot, but at the parapet above, a sea breeze is blowing and Acapulco sparkles in the sun like a "bright, guilty world." (Naremore 2015: 142)

The spatial arrangement of the sequence is disturbingly optimal, owing at least in part to the location's inherent distortions; as Welles himself recalls: 'We didn't build a thing. We used Acapulco just as we found it' (Welles and Bogdanovich 1992: 198).

In Tourneur's *Out of the Past*, Acapulco's uneven spatiality similarly heightens the film's form by lending an aura of irrealism to the encounter between Jeff Bailey, a.k.a. Jeff Markham (Robert Mitchum), the former private detective at the center of the film, and Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer), the mysterious woman Bailey was hired to track down after she allegedly stole $40,000 from a gambling kingpin. Set in Acapulco, a locality shot through with the pronounced duplicities of peripheral social formations, Jeff and Kathie's encounter—appropriately narrated in a flashback, a device that brings about the inversion of effect and cause through a non-linear narrative (Tyler 2016: 60)—elicits a kind of spatialization of the structure of retroaction that expressively enhances the film's psychological fixations. In Acapulco, Bailey spends the evenings drinking beer at a café while listening to the music that comes out from a movie theatre located across the street. When Moffat finally steps into the café, Bailey strikes casual conversation: 'I could go down to the cliff and look at the sea like a good tourist, but it's no good if there isn't somebody you can turn to and say, "Nice view, huh?" It's the same with the churches, the relics, the moonlight or a *Cuba libre*. Nothing in the world is any good unless you can share it.' The dialogue relies on Acapulco's dual ambience, a visit to a local church followed by a walk in the moonlight sipping on a *Cuba libre*, or a rendezvous in a *cantina* where a man 'plays American music for a dollar' and where you can 'sip bourbon and shut your eyes' and feel like you are in 'a little place on 56th street.' Against the uneven and combined background of Acapulco, Bailey inevitably falls for Moffat: they spend the night together, first playing roulette at a high-end casino, then strolling under the moonlight, surrounded by fishing nets and boats—an idyllic scene if there ever was one. The combined idiosyncrasies of the setting allow the characters to seemingly move between past

and present, or, more properly, to integrate otherwise differentiated geographical patterns in a way that reinforces the cartographical imagination of the film: Acapulco's dual ambiance mirrors Bailey's struggle to liberate himself from a past that nevertheless continues to assert itself as an immediate force in the present: 'I fire people,' asserts Bailey's employer following an homologous logic, 'but nobody quits me.'

Acapulco's allure was similarly licensed by Mexican cinema. Golden Age films such as Tito Davison's *Doña Diabla* (1949), Chano Urueta's *Serenata en Acapulco* (1950), Emilio "El Indio" Fernández's *Acapulco* (1951), Alejandro Galindo's *Sucedió en Acapulco* (1952), and Miguel M. Delgado's *Cantando nace el amor* (1953), helped sediment the perspective of Acapulco as paradise on Earth, a place where the exhilaration of the Jazz Age lived on, where personal fortune could turn in a heartbeat and romance could be fully realized—not without obstacles, but surely without inhibitions. Fernández's *Acapulco*, for example, reinscribes the port city's combined structures through the story of Diana Lozano (Elsa Aguirre), a bankrupted socialite who arrives in Acapulco looking for a rich husband, only to fall in love with the sentimental, lighthearted, and (in her eyes) penniless Ricardo Serrano (Armando Calvo). Diana fantasizes about spending her life eating 'maraschino grapefruits from Florida,' 'waffles dorés,' and 'hot scones with Orange Royale marmalade,' but after a series of egotistical suitors lets her down, she is compelled to abandon her materialistic ambitions and follow her heart, finding redemption (and, ultimately, unimaginable wealth) in the arms of Ricardo. Meanwhile, *Sucedió en Acapulco* (It Happened in Acapulco), mobilizes Acapulco's aura of immoderation as a plot device to threaten the relationship between Licha (Martha Roth) and Raúl Montalvo (Raúl Galindo), a famous radio singer with a flair for romance whose integrity is put to the test by, among other things, a compromising photograph fittingly signed 'Recuerdo de Acapulco' (Memory of Acapulco). While the story's happy ending disproves the film's title (the protagonist saves face, nothing really *happened* in Acapulco), the verisimilitude of the predicament (what happens in Acapulco doesn't always stays in Acapulco) further allegorizes the port city as a national Pandora's box, a significant trope that will continue to inform representations of Acapulco into the twenty-first century, as in Juan Carlos de Llaca's 2000 road film *Por la libre*.

One of the best-known representations of Acapulco in Mexican cinema comes from Miguel M. Delgado's *El bolero de Raquel* (1956), starring Cantinflas, Mexico's most notable *peladito*, 'a lumpen, streetwise itinerant citizen, the master of *mal gusto*, bad taste' (Stavans 2012: 80). While the film has aged poorly (some scenes bordering the grotesque, flooded with racist and sexist denotations), the picturesque, commercial-like luminance with which the film portrays Acapulco (water skiing, poolside cocktails, coconut oil application) is a calculated inventory of tropicalist tropes and developmental fabrications: nothing is impossible in Acapulco, a place where a shoe shiner can find himself inadvertently metamorphosed into the most legendary of cliff divers. The symbolic cultivation of Acapulco rehearsed by *El bolero* marked the pace for the filmic representation of Acapulco during the next decade. Although varying in tone, films such as *Acapulqueña* (dir. Armando Pereda, 1958) *Vacaciones en Acapulco* (dir. Fernando Cortés, 1960), *Secuestro en Acapulco* (dir. Federico Curiel, 1960), *Cielo rojo* (dir. Gilberto Gazcón, 1961), *Buenos días Acapulco* (dir. Agustín Delgado, 1962), *Acapulco a go go* (dir.

Arturo Martínez, 1966), and *Un latin lover en Acapulco* (dir. Fernando Cortés, 1967), simultaneously relied on and helped solidify Acapulco's reputation as a site of amusement and exhilaration.

In Richard Thorpe's musical comedy *Fun in Acapulco* (1963), Mark Windgren (Elvis Presley), notorious womanizer who finds himself stranded in Acapulco, manages to find fortune and overcome personal trauma while engaging in a silly flirtation game with Dolores Gómez (Elsa Cárdenas), a Spanish 'lady bullfighter,' and Marguerita Dauphin (Ursula Andress), a hotel worker whose family lost a Duchy and moved to Mexico when their home country 'went behind the Iron Curtain.' Windgren secures part-time jobs as lifeguard and live performer with the aid of Raoul (Larry Domain), a local, orphaned boy whose honest friendship and ingenious entrepreneurship sanctions the infantilized image of Mexico as the United States' imaginative-but-immature good neighbor: 'I'm your *amigo*, for free!' Despite being shot in Los Angeles, 'on the Paramount backlot with stock footage and phony-looking process screen backgrounds' (Neibaur 2014: 128), *Fun in Acapulco*'s cheesy stereotyping helped secure the credentialization of Acapulco as an international tourist attraction, a First World enclave in a Third World country overcharged with cosmopolitan possibility: '*Todo está encantador aquí en México*' (Everything is enchanting here in Mexico).

In a different cultural industrial vein, René Cardona's 1968 ur-feminist *La Mujer Murciélago* recruits Acapulco's radiance for the superhero/*luchador* (Mexican pro-wrestler) genre. Cardona's film instantiates a global crime organization that runs from Macao and Hong Kong to Acapulco, effectively rendering the latter as a geopolitical node in a transnational network. Gloria (Maura Monti), an 'immensely rich' female pro-wrestler who fights crime under the alias of "La Mujer Murciélago" (The Bat Woman), parachutes off a plane and glides into Acapulco to meet the special agent that the International Bureau of Intelligence has commissioned to work on a series of murders of prominent Mexican *luchadores*. Mad scientist plot, rising race of sea monsters, and historical prescience (Gloria first appears as Batwoman in a shooting range, firing near-perfect shots into a paper target while standing in front of a 1968 Summer Olympics poster, inadvertently foretelling that year's violent repression of the student movement in Tlatelolco), *La Mujer Murciélago* projects Acapulco as a potential setting for the resolution of an international conflagration, a globally configured locality whose outward-looking facade underwrites the collective enthusiasm for Mexico's capitalist modernization. Like no other, Argentine filmmaker Raymundo Gleyzer captured this enthusiasm in his 1970 documentary *México, la revolución congelada*: beaming high-rise hotels and calm waves welcoming foreign investors, speculators, and corrupt government officials to see the divers of La Quebrada plunge into the waters of the Pacific Ocean. Gleyzer's documentary contrasts with the formal simplism of many films that, in post-Tlatelolco Mexico, continued to exploit Acapulco's double-barreled aura of joyfulness and immoderation for commercial purposes, such as Gilberto Martínez Solares' *El rey de Acapulco* (1970), Aldo Monti's *Acapulco 12-22* (1971), Ángel Rodríguez Vázquez's *Reventón en Acapulco* (1980), Rafael Baledón's *Canta Chamo* (1983), René Cardona Jr.'s *Fiebre de amor* (1984), Juan Manuel Herrera's *Mafia en Acapulco* (1987), Javier Durán Escalona's *El Mofles en Acapulco* (1988), and Víctor Manuel Castro's and Lourdes Álvarez's *Juan Camaney en Acapulco* (1998).

Two films that dispute the imaginative pauperism of many of the films set in Acapulco during the 1970s and 80s are Emilio "El Indio" Fernandez's *Zona roja* (1975) and Luis Alcoriza's *Viacrucis nacional* (1979). Despite its crude fixation with the female nude and what Dolores Tierney describes as 'a lack of basic filmmaking craftsmanship' (Tierney 2007: 165), *Zona roja*, scripted by Fernández and José Revueltas, succeeds in constructing a sardonic approximation to Acapulco's underbelly that is also a derisory objection to state censorship and the moral conservatism of Mexican society. The film, which no doubt benefitted from the cinematic *apertura* of the Echeverría administration (Fox 2000), revolves around "El Paraíso," a brothel governed by a flamboyant Italian procurer (Venetia Vianello), whose activities are upended when a fugitive named Juan (Armando Silvestre) washes up on the beach and begins a violent affair with one of the brothel's sex workers, Leonor Dubois (Fanny Cano). Inside "El Paraíso," the artificial red lighting produces a dense, underground atmosphere (actress Meche Carreño dances herself into a paroxysm in one of the most unforgettable, disheveled, and lengthy music/dance sequences of Mexican cinema) that sharply contrasts with the festive sentiment of the film's exterior scenes, prominently featuring Acapulco's historic downtown. "El Indio" himself plays the role of Francisco Canales, a local *caudillo* that rules over a rustic, stateless territory where Celeste and Juan find a momentary respite from persecution. In clear contrast with the nostalgic and restorative mood of Golden Age melodramas (Fernández's own *Acapulco* is a good example) *Zona roja* deals in misfortune and calamity: the film ends with Juan (the fugitive) and Canales (the strongman) dead at the hands of the local authorities, and Leonor forced back into prostitution. Despite its technical shortcomings, *Zona roja* offers a uniquely troubled counterpoint to the prosperous, inviting, and luxurious Acapulco fantasied by many other films.

On the other end, Alcoriza's *Viacrucis nacional* advances an indecorous critique of Mexico's social fractures through the story of a Mexico City middle class family that travels to Acapulco for the Holy Week holiday. Their treasured expedition quickly devolves into a matter of costly distress: a $30 pesos premium to sit on a chair at the beach, $200 pesos to enter a discotheque, $20 dollars for a medical consultation, a $1,500-pesos fine to avoid going to jail… 'What has happened?' wonders Silverio (David Reynoso), the head of the household and prototypical know-it-all *macho*, as he looks straight into the camera, 'that every day the poor are poorer, and the rich are more powerful.' *Viacrucis*' guileless representation of Acapulco as a locality where Mexico's social inequities are spatially exposed (the boisterous beachfront bursting with local, working and middle-class tourists as the diametrical opposite to the uncluttered luxury of the yacht and the private pool treasured by white, Anglo-vacationists) adequately charts the chasm between the upper and lower spheres of consumption that would continue to expand as Mexico transitioned into the 1980s debt crisis: 'Damn country, so beautiful,' Silverio concludes ironically. Compared to earlier films' tendency to portray Acapulco as a romantic and blazing locality, *Zona roja* and *Viacrucis* remind us of Acapulco's subjection to capitalism's laws of spatial differentiation, exacerbated here by the unreservedness with which Acapulco's local population became fettered to the service industry and tourism. While these films instantiate some of the more dramatic consequences of these laws, alerting us to the series of inequalities set in motion by Acapulco's

modernization, it has nevertheless been in the literary realm where Acapulco's underdeveloped continuity and its modernizing mirages have been more dynamically upbraided.

A Janus-faced Community

Acapulco has long been a site of imaginative speculation and figurative ambivalence. Alexander von Humboldt gauged its appearance to be 'at once doleful and romantic' (von Humboldt 2019: 349), its history amalgamated with 'a multitude of recurring legends' (Alessio Robles 1932: 109) involving smugglers, privateers, and oriental princesses. Throughout the modern period, such bipartite configurations (affliction and jubilation, history and legend, fiction and reality) have been reshaped and enhanced by the patterns of uneven and combined development, i.e. the patterns set forth by 'the imposition of capitalism on cultures and societies hitherto un- or only sectorally capitalised' (WReC 2015: 10), to the point where Acapulco's modernization—swift, strenuous, convulsive—has produced some of the most vexing contrasts in Mexican social history: 'A bay with thirty thousand toilet bowls, as snow-white and ascetic as a tourist's buttock, in a state of latrines and open-air defecation' (Bartra 2000: 13). The torturous image emblematizes the implacable counterpoint between amelioration and calamity brought about by the sudden transformation of Acapulco into a veritable capitalist enclave, a process that not only involved 'destroying unsightly buildings in the historic district where working-class families lived,' but expropriating lands that had been 'awarded to peasant *ejidatarios* (beneficiaries of [communal landholdings known as] *ejidos*) a decade earlier to fulfill the revolutionary promise of agrarian redistribution' (Berger 2015: 2). Literary representations of Acapulco have systematically modeled the spatial dichotomizations produced by the violent imposition of capitalism in the region, giving place to a cartographic projection that aptly captures the peripheral character of Mexican sociality.

Acapulco's modernity is already displayed in the teeming crowds that make it possible for Filiberto to enjoy 'the evening's dark anonymity in Playa de Hornos' in Carlos Fuentes' "Chac Mool" (Fuentes 1982: 9), a short story that notably synthesizes bureaucratic profanity with mythical awareness. In Luis Spota's 1956 novel *Casi el paraíso*, Ugo Conti, an Italian "Prince," appraises Acapulco's beachfront as he stands on the deck of the *Cykora*: 'From a distance, the port seemed to him like a gigantic columbarium, monotonously repeated, with its Californian-style houses; its large hotels and hundreds of bathers, lying like flies, on the beaches' (Spota 1959: 24). The imported architecture that decorates the seafront, however, is an image of sophisticated indulgence and contemporaneity as much as it is a purposeful facade, an attempt to disguise the growing immiseration and debasement necessary to amplify Acapulco's aura of glamour. Standing not on the deck of a yacht, but in one of the 'modernistic balconies' of this 'gigantic columbarium,' Artemio Cruz, the grotesque, unmatched representative of the Mexican bourgeois class at the center of Carlos Fuentes' *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), offers a poignant perspective on the bay's urban configuration:

> From his table the new, modern face of Acapulco could be seen, hotels built hurriedly to accommodate the great numbers of American travelers kept by the war from Waikiki, Portofino, and Biarritz, and also to hide the grubby, muddy yards of the nude fishermen, the huts crawling with big-bellied children and mangy dogs and trichina and bacilli, the open sewers. *Always two faces in this Janus-town, so far from what it was, so far from what it wanted to be.* (Fuentes, trans. Hileman 1964: 144, my emphasis)

Modeled by the frictions and dissidences secreted by its dual temporality, Acapulco's Janus-faced community presents a diaphanous image of capitalism's relational structures and inherent nonsynchronisms; the 'huts crawling with big-bellied children and mangy dogs' turned into the precondition and symmetrical consequence of the convenience enjoyed by the 'great number of American travelers' that brighten Acapulco's modern face; the so-called *jet set*, 'the barefoot aristocracy' (Tario and Álvarez Bravo 1951: 40).

The peripheral amplitude of the question lies, precisely, in the genuinely *modern* character of such duality, the irrevocable reciprocity between Acapulco's capitalist development and the quasi-mechanical rejuvenation of its equally capitalist underdevelopment, a parabola whose coordinates may vary socially and historically, but whose expanded reproduction is a function of its world-systemic integration. This is the main problem to be formally worked out in a series of texts that bear witness to the transition between a moment of aspirational non-reciprocity between the poles of development and underdevelopment, and a moment of legitimate identification where the poles are shown to necessarily balance each other out. Thus, in Ricardo Garibay's *Bellísima bahía*, Acapulco is, at once, an 'immense mouth of lights and distant delights' (Garibay 1968: 54) *and* the thousands of 'shacks that the poor fill with wooden railings, wooden columns; tin chimneys, gutters, drains, and doors; wood and tin in this damned climate, shelter for big-bellied children, mangy dogs and old women with elephantine legs, naked and open, jagged and black' (Garibay 1968: 58). In José Agustín's *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)*: 'the Costera is all flashy but behind the mountains there's nothing but potholes and people starving to death and little four-year-olds with bloated bellies from so many bugs' (Agustín 2017: 117). In Garibay's *Acapulco*: 'Hell and glory, Acapulco is the thug and the fisherman, the humanist and the knifer, the prayer and the joint. It is the golden skin of luxury—promise and quest of boredom—and the burnt skin of misery—scabs, scales, and sores, mole children in the drainage pipes with their cement pots. Burrows and marble terraces. Slums, and ponds of millionaire sentimentality' (Garibay 1978: 7-8). And in María Luisa Puga's *La forma del silencio*, 'beaches invaded by strident and white, really white *chilangos* [people from Mexico City] that running across the burning sand made the most atrocious fools of themselves' (Puga 1987: 29) alternating with the 'Acapulco-street; Acapulco-people; Acapulco-sound of drums and music, engines and distant laughter. The one I heard from the terrace, that I saw through the car window. The one my grandmother said was dangerous' (Puga 1987: 236). Each face a constant reminder and distortion of its opposite; a relationship that has been continuously mapped in Mexican literature through the figures of repetition and sameness.

Besides stamping the bay area with a cartographic distinctiveness, the dualities instantiated by the capitalist modernization of Acapulco provided the city with a highly recognizable social texture. Yes, Acapulco was an extraordinary and highly unique melting pot vivified by youth identity and an eclectic countercultural liveliness—'In Acapulco, 1967,' writes José Agustín, 'the hippie wave was red hot, and with the *gringos* came the great records of rock's first psychedelic phase' (Agustín 1990: 82)—but its form of sociality also provided a theme or model useful for the abstract differentiation of general relationships. Because of its distillation of capitalism's general laws into a system of concrete sociospatial dualities, Acapulco's literary cartography, to borrow a phrase from Roberto Schwarz, 'strikes a chord that reverberates beyond its local setting' (Schwarz 2012: 53). This rather simple realization offers the opportunity to glance the universal in the particular and to establish a comparative standpoint based on situated affinities rather than irreducible difference and unassimilable experience. In other words, because of its poignancy, Acapulco's Janus-faced community orients us toward the singular system supporting the production of concrete inequalities rather than toward a highly particularized expression of the system's process and tendencies. Whereas 'Acapulco rolls off the tip of the tongue and sounds like an exotic Mexican dish' (Berkoff 1994: 90), nothing could be said to be less exotic than Acapulco's recognizably capitalist proportions.

Therefore, it is only appropriate for Acapulco to be the model that makes Mombasa's deprivations identifiable to José Antonio in María Luisa Puga's *Las posibilidades del odio*: 'And so, the market was identical to the one in Acapulco, the women laughed in the same way, the children asked for money in the same way. It was poverty that was the same everywhere' (Puga 1978: 88). At the very least the resemblance should produce a sense of suspicion, for how can Mombasa and Acapulco be anything other than nonidentical, their histories and cultural trajectories distinctly asymmetrical? Yet it seems equally valid to conceive their resemblance as not only natural but determinedly unambiguous. Here, the relationship between Acapulco and Mombasa takes on the logic of homology rather than metaphor, the former's Janus-faced community serving as a blueprint for the conceptualization of the misery surfacing in the latter; the correspondence precipitated by their parallel relationship to capitalism's uneven and combined expansion.

A similar orientation could be derived from the ominous expedition to the Acapulco Bay narrated in José Agustín's *Dos horas de sol* (1994), where the search for a sunny, dissolute, and erotic experience derived from Acapulco's touristic imagery is betrayed by an overpowering hurricane of environmental degradation, political corruption, and social violence. Here, the 'tropical, exotic, easygoing, sexualized, and debauched' (Sackett 2022: 441) ideal of Acapulco's Golden Age is reprised as gimmick and misdirection: 'along the beach the sea was blue, diaphanous, beautiful, until you saw a watercourse, a true serpent of filthy, brown water, coming out from the beach and spreading into the sea'; further, 'when it rained things got really ugly: the floods washed away everything in their path, all the streams filled up with debris and sometimes you couldn't even see the beach of all the garbage that came rolling down' (Agustín, 1994: 97-98). The muddy torrent falsifying Acapulco's splendors is revealed as the trademark of peripheral capitalist development, the separations that had supported the

vision of Acapulco as a modern encampment tore down by an avalanche of oppression, destitution, and immiseration.

In *Dos horas de sol*, the correspondence between the environmental degradation of the Acapulco Bay and the degradation of Acapulco's bourgeois etiquette—police brutality, petty theft, sexual abuse, and political violence encroaching upon an ever more tattered tourist area—traces the limits to the dissociative episode that kept Acapulco's two faces spatially, if not dynamically, isolated. Reflecting back on the Acapulco of the 1960s and 70s, Julián Herbert suggests in his autofictional *Tomb Song* (2011) that this was a moment when 'Utopia had a shootout with the Wild West,' a period that, experienced 'from the tables of an Acapulco brothel, was…like lapping up the cream of two worlds at once' (Herbert, trans. MacSweeney 2018: 126). Throughout the neoliberal era, literary representations of Acapulco have traced the collapse of the spatial separations between these two worlds, their mutual contamination (a process driven by violence and social conflict), and the apparent dissolution of the system of dualities that shaped Acapulco's Golden Age, as in the short stories of Roberto Ramírez Bravo's *Solo es real la niebla* (1999) and the anthology *Acapulco en su tinta* (2013). I would like to conclude by arguing that, in doing so, these narratives have, retroactively and often inadvertently, opened the door to advance the characterization of the literary cartography of Acapulco as an orienting device that I have suggested throughout the essay.

From the vantage of the post-Golden Age moment of dissolution and contamination, Acapulco's Janus-faced community, the symptom and token of its peripheral modernization, begins to appear less as the particular form of sociality produced by the port city's idiosyncratic incorporation into the capitalist world economy (a vision that is both momentarily accurate and a distortion betrayed by historical development), and more as a cartographic model that represents, in synchronic terms, a fundamentally diachronic problem, namely that underdevelopment is not a product but an inherent function of capitalist sociality, operating at every scale and moment of the capitalist process and inherently linked to its continued transformation of material conditions and social practices. Betrayed by the emergence of a complex, post-industrial meshwork of alleys and dead ends (urban involution, social violence, drug trafficking, etc.), Acapulco's rigorous dualities begin to look more like the accidental disclosure of the ground plan that frames peripheral capitalist development altogether—the foundational elements that circumscribe peripheral capitalism's historical contingency and variegation—than the uniquely Mexican version of a singular modernity.

Read against the contemporary vortex of social involution and ecological catastrophe, Acapulco's uncanny bifurcations turn out to be a highly propitious prototype to grasp the tendencies at work under capitalism's thicknesses, as if the frictions produced by Acapulco's unique form of approximation and separation of wealth and misery were the historical permutation that stood closest to an ideal model of peripheral capitalist contradiction. The persistence of Acapulco's underdevelopment, the 'timelessness' of its 'dystopian post-rural slums' (Herbert 2019: 13), makes it impossible to contemplate Acapulco's Janus-faced community as anything other than the inner essence of a process that must now be reconstructed in the abstract. If Acapulco's Janus-faced community demonstrated the compulsory imbrication between the accumulation of wealth and the accumulation of misery,

the historical actualization of Acapulco as a pole of immiseration necessarily brings about the question of the actualization of capitalism's developmental promise *elsewhere* (a question not entirely void of a utopian impulse.) Historicized through the literary cartography of underdevelopment, Acapulco's Janus-faced community resurfaces, at one and the same time, as the most autochthonous form of spatial differentiation *and* the most accurate portrayal of the deep structural arrangements of the capitalist world economy.

Notes

[1] Acapulco's commercial prosperity during the colonial era was followed by a long period of decay after Mexico's War of Independence (1810-1821).

[2] All translations are mine except when otherwise noted.

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