

The Politics of Drug Trafficking in Mexican and Mexico-Related Narconovelas

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ABSTRACT: *This essay traces the emergence of the Mexican and Mexico-related narconovela. It examines perspectives on drug trafficking and traffickers expressed in novels by Elmer Mendoza, Leonides Alfaro, Gerardo Comejo, Homero Aridjis, Arturo Pérez-Reverte, and Paul Flores. The variety of positions taken refutes the tendency of the Mexican mainstream media to define all narconarratives as sympathetic to drug trafficking. Nonetheless, the writers are unanimous in critiquing the corruption in the Mexican police and government. All the authors are eager to expose the symbiotic link between narcos and state officials, as well as to denounce the duplicity of Mexican officials who publicly repudiate drug trafficking while privately reaping substantial rewards from narco bribes.*

Given the high visibility of drug money and power in Mexican society, it comes as no surprise that drug trafficking has been steadily gaining presence in social and anthropological studies as well as in Mexican films, *telenovelas*, music, and novels. Until the late 1980s, drug-related themes had only a limited representation in the official media and were restricted to the uniformly negative picture of drug traffickers—*narcos*—as physically ugly, cruel, and uncivilized people. More recently, however, a favorable image of traffickers has emerged in *narcocorridos*, a musical genre that glorifies traffickers as the new heroes of disenfranchised Mexicans. Accompanied by Sinaloan *tambora* or *banda*, *narcocorridistas* sing about the real and sometimes imaginary adventures of the brave narcos as they engage in conflict with the Mexican police, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and the U.S. Border Patrol.

In an essay on the figure of the *narcotraficante*, Mexican writer Federico Campbell points to the discrepancy between the negative official portrayal

of narcos disseminated, via the media, by the police and politicians—a significant number of whom are involved in the narcobusiness—and the positive image of traffickers that circulates among the lower strata of the society:

La percepción que se tiene del narcotraficante entre las clases medias y en los medios políticos no es la misma que se vive en los estratos más bajos de la sociedad, en el imaginario colectivo más recóndito—riquísimo en fantasías—donde triunfa el mito y se disuelve en la historia oral que cuentan los ancianos del pueblo y los trovadores. . . . El narco es como el caballero andante: un ser no repudiable, el héroe que se realiza a sí mismo, el que posee enormes cantidades de dólares colombianos y que los ha obtenido no menos ilícitamente que los políticos en el poder. (2001, 376)¹

In the last decade, the use of narco themes and characters in films and soap operas has grown, and the traffickers portrayed tend to be depicted as sinister but ultimately attractive and likable men who epitomize the figure of the *gran macho* cherished by mainstream Mexican culture; for example, in the popular soap *Todo por amor*, aired by TV Azteca in 2000, two of the main characters were drug traffickers who were romantically involved with beautiful and virtuous women from respected families. The ubiquitous presence of narcoculture in daily life is visible also through the adoption of narcofashion—*norteño*-style hats, ostrich boots, silk shirts, embroidered belts, and gold jewelry—and narco *caló* (slang) by disenfranchised young Mexicans. These youths see the narcos' life trajectory as the best example of the realization of the capitalist rags-to-riches dream, whether achieved by legal or illegal means. The enormous popularity of narcocorridos, the presence of narcotics in the media and popular culture, and the adoption of narcofashion (narcochic) and values among the vast underprivileged sectors of Mexican society all point to the “normalization” of this subject and a tacit recognition that drug traffickers and their business have become an inherent part of the Mexican social reality.²

As far as the academic consideration of narco topics goes, the phenomenon of the narcocorrido has been practically exhausted, especially in the influential works of Luis Astorga (1995), José Manuel Valenzuela Arce (1998), Elijah Wald (2001), and Helena Simonett (2001). By contrast, the

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emergence of the *narconovela* in Mexican letters has yet to receive similar attention. While both the Mexican literary establishment and non-native Mexicanists have ignored this newcomer on the literary scene, the Mexican media noted the appearance of this new genre in the early 1990s and baptized it the *narconovela* or *narcoliteratura*.³

My intention in this essay is to address this omission through an exploration of two aspects of narcoliterature. I will first identify the most significant works that deal with the topic of drug trafficking and narcoculture in Mexico. Second, I will examine the narcopolitics that frame the texts under consideration and help to explain the authors' diverse views. I focus on narratives that take place either partially or entirely in the Mexican north, the region where most narco dealing is concentrated. These works are written not only by Mexicans but also by writers from other parts of the Hispanic world. Elmer Mendoza and Leonides Alfaro write from Culiacán, Sinaloa, the cradle of Mexican drug cultivation and trafficking, while Gerardo Cornejo writes from Hermosillo, Sonora, another northern state known for its drug industry. The three other authors studied are outsiders to the area: Homero Aridjis writes from Mexico City, the bestselling author Arturo Pérez-Reverte from Spain, and Chicano author Paul Flores from the United States. For reasons of space I have limited my discussion to these six authors, who represent a variety of views. However, I would note that a more comprehensive work on this subject should also include texts by Mexican writers such as Juan José Rodríguez, Gabriel Trujillo, and Paco Ignacio Taibo II, who write detective stories and novels that treat narco subjects.

Elmer Mendoza: The “Father” of the Narcogre

Elmer Mendoza's collection of six stories, *Cada respiro que tomo* (1991), is the first literary work centered on drug traffickers written in Mexico. Told from the narcos' point of view, Mendoza's book reveals the human face of the people involved in the drug business and thus stands in sharp contrast to the dominant negative representation of Sinaloa as a criminal drug state. The story “La parte de Chuy Salcido” could be defined as the first narco testimonial narrative, albeit a fictional one. Its main character is a small trafficker, Chuy, who from prison tells his life story to the writer. In this sense it could be said that what Luis Zapata has done for the gay world with his first Mexican gay testimonial, *El vampiro de la colonia Roma*, Mendoza has done for the small Sinaloan trafficker. He achieves this through his

portrayal of working-class people and campesinos living in dire poverty who are abandoned by God and the devil, as the popular saying goes, in a social milieu where only migration to the United States or dealing in drugs represents a viable form of social mobility. In the stories that make up this collection, Mendoza does not moralize about narcos and their environment. Instead he presents them as an integral part of Sinaloan and, more generally, Mexican social reality, as people who should be given a voice and should have the right to their point of view. Mendoza's refusal to lecture on this matter resonates with Nietzsche's famous dictum, which Luis Astorga (1995) uses as an epigraph in his influential study on the narcoculture of his home state: "No existen fenómenos morales, existe solamente una interpretación moral de los fenómenos."⁴

Insofar as Mendoza's stories offer a counter-discourse to the consistently negative official representation of lower-class and rural narcos, it could be said that his writing fulfils a function similar to that of the revolutionary testimonial narratives of the 1980s, whose main objective was to give voice to the social agents omitted from the history written by the hegemonic social classes and in so doing to provide an alternative to the official narrative. Mendoza presents small traffickers as ordinary people one can easily relate to, and in most cases their motives for involvement in drugs are figured as understandable. They are involved either because this is the only type of work available to such poorly educated men and women or because it is a line of work that offers incomparably better incomes to people of the lower social stratum who otherwise would be migrating (illegally) to the United States or working for US\$3–\$5 per day at one of the maquiladoras scattered along the border. The fact that the drug business is highly dangerous and may well result in violent death does not seem to deter young Sinaloans, as is evident in the popular saying "Mejor vivir un año como rey que cincuenta como buey."⁵ It is important to stress that Mendoza's sympathy lies with small traffickers and not with the big drug bosses who, because of their money, power, and government connections, can by no means be viewed as being on the margins of society.

The common thread running through all Mendoza's narratives is the conflict between the people involved in the cultivation and distribution of drugs and the government—that is, the Mexican police and politicians. The solidarity that average Sinaloans feel with the traffickers, even when they do not condone them, is apparent in the story "Camelia la Tejana." The title points to the affinity between the story's main character and a legendary female trafficker, Camelia, protagonist of the eponymous narcocorrido. The

Camelia of the narcocorrido kills her partner and lover Emilio and runs away with the drug booty when she finds out that he is going to leave her for another woman. The Camelia of Mendoza's story moves with her two children, and no husband, to the working-class neighborhood of Col Pop in Culiacán, but the constant traffic of men and drugs bothers her neighbors, who are used to a quieter existence:

Nadie supo cómo, pero a la semana de estar con nosotros todo mundo conocía la historia de la nueva vecina. Era gomera, originaria de Durango, a su esposo se lo habían carraqueado junto con la banda a la que pertenecía . . . A los vecinos no les agradó. Hablaban de mal ejemplo, vulgaridad y estas cosas . . . otra cosa que no les gustó fue que Camelia pistiaba con profusión y estilo, frecuentemente jalaba a la banda, y como la complació el apodo, ya sabrán cuál era su canción favorita. (53)⁶

The story takes a surprising turn when the police raid Camelia's place and spray the house with hundreds of bullets. Despite the animosity the people of the barrio feel toward this woman, in this time of crisis Doña Lore shelters Camelia and the children, saving the four of them from certain death. Nobody in the neighborhood is willing to aid the police. This suggests the solidarity that Astorga believes typically exists in real life between the people and the narcos, with both taking a united stand against the police, who act with brutality and impunity.

The mention of "Operación Condor" provides a time frame for the narrative. In 1975, in order to satisfy U.S. demands for the eradication of drugs in the opium- and marijuana-growing areas of Mexico such as Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango, the Mexican army and police embarked on a joint offensive with the CIA and the narcotics office of the U.S. State Department. The operation had impressive results, triggering a dramatic fall in the Mexican share of the U.S. marijuana and heroin market. But it also resulted in unprecedented government-sponsored violence, the dislocation of many rural communities, and the deaths of hundreds of innocent people, events that Sinaloans are not willing to forgive or forget.⁷

The stories included in *Cada respiro que tomo* are told in a lively and colloquial norteño dialect, punctuated by the music and lyrics of narcocorridos. A pervasive presence is the narcosaint, Jesús Malverde, to whom Lucía, a narcoprotagonist of the story "Una de Malverde" prays, offers candles, and brings musical bands on her visits to Culiacán. A little coin that Lucía has taken from Malverde's temple makes possible her miraculous escape from the police and army who are chasing her with helicopters and cars near the border in Ciudad Obregón.⁸ Lucía's story is interwoven with

the words of the famous corrido “Una camioneta gris,” which mirrors her experience almost exactly.

Mendoza’s two novels, *Un asesino solitario* (1999) and *El amante de Janis Joplin* (2001), also deal with drugs and narcopolitics. *Un asesino solitario*, inspired by the murder of the PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in Tijuana in 1994, explores the complex web linking Mexican politics, drugs, and violence. It reveals the hidden story in which an unnamed president, whom readers know is Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–94), is himself implicated. The story is told from the perspective of Macías, a young member of the Federal Judicial Police, who is paid by the government to assassinate a presidential candidate, only to be later framed and killed by the same bosses who ordered the murder. The plot focuses almost entirely on the shady dealings of the government, which in the story as in real life has been directly involved in many illegal activities.

El amante de Janis Joplin takes place in Sinaloa in 1970, the year of the famous American singer’s death. It was a period when strong links were forged between narcos, the police, and the government. These interconnections are revealed through the story of the mentally retarded protagonist, Daniel Palafox Valenzuela, and his relationship with his friends Chato, a student guerrilla leader, and Cholo, a former student-cum-narco. The backdrop of the plot, as in the rest of Mendoza’s narratives, is provided by the real circumstances that marked the period: political repression in the 1960s and 1970s that was particularly ferocious in quashing student movements; the creation of urban guerrillas and the simultaneous organization of paramilitary groups by the government to torture and execute on its behalf; the creation of Sinaloan drug cartels and narcodynamies; and the omnipresence of U.S. popular culture and the hippie movement. Hippie style and the rhythms of Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, and Santana frame the text and provide an implicit commentary on the influence of U.S. popular culture on the identity of young urban Mexicans.

To describe the narco world Mendoza juxtaposes four characters, each of whom has different motivations for involvement in the trafficking of marijuana to the United States. Daniel Palafox is an unwitting trafficker involved in the business because of his friendship with Cholo and Chato. Cholo, a middle-class young man, abandons his university studies as a useless pursuit and turns to drug trafficking, which he sees as the only rational option in an economic and political system that offers little to the majority while at the same time brainwashing them, via the media, to desire products and lifestyles they can never obtain through legal means.

The drug involvement of Chato, alias Comandante Fonseca, is pragmatic. He solves logistical problems concerning the shipping of drugs by sea from Sinaloa to the United States and in exchange receives arms and money for his revolutionary cause. The dark shadow pervading this novel is Don Sergio Carvajal Quintero, whose role, as in many real cases in Mexico, is dualistic. The boss of the Sinaloa cartel, he is also a prominent and respected politician and businessmen and for this reason is beyond the law. The figure of a powerful, government-linked drug lord is a ubiquitous archetypal image in Mexican literature that deals with narco topics, but as I pointed out earlier, it is an image that is rarely seen in mainstream media representations of narcos.

Apart from depicting the narco environment from within, Mendoza also captures the changing power relationships in Sinaloa. The old-time *hacendados* and their *peones* are being replaced by new *narcocaciques* (narcochiefs), who instead of raising cattle grow opium and marijuana and move around in jeeps and airplanes, their faithful peasants turned into paid killers. This creates a curious social milieu, a hybrid of premodern and postmodern traditions. Mendoza's excellent re-creation of the Sinaloan dialect and shifting social environment, as well as his creation of convincing and often likable drug traffickers and solitary killers, has undoubtedly earned him the right to be called the master of the Mexican narconovela.

Throughout his narratives Mendoza strives to maintain a neutral distance from his narcocharacters. Despite this, however, the ideology that frames the text is one of sympathy to small narcos, whose psyche and motivation the author describes convincingly. His critical view of Mexican politicians and of the Federal Judicial Police, *los judiciales*, coincides with the collective sentiment of the vast majority of Sinaloans and many other Mexicans, who tend to see the traffickers as a lesser evil and ultimately as more honest people than the corrupt and treacherous state officials. Nevertheless, Mendoza's portrayal of lower-class narcos is not without problems, particularly in the light of the staggering number of narco-related deaths in Mexico, which over the past twenty years have reached 16,000 in Sinaloa alone (Getty 2004). This drug-related violence is the other side of the narco world into which neither Mendoza, who depicts a more humane side of the traffickers, nor the media, afraid or unwilling to publicize the links between narcos and state officials, is willing to delve.

Leonides Alfaro and the Narco Bildungsroman

The case of another Sinaloan writer, Leonides Alfaro, differs somewhat from that of Mendoza. This divergence lies not only in the vast gulf separating the impeccable narrative style of Mendoza and the less refined one of Alfaro, but also in their aims. While Mendoza avoids any moralizing or explicit exposition of his point of view, Alfaro, in his novel *Tierra Blanca* (1996), vacillates between not passing moral judgment and subtly preaching against involvement with drugs. This is most obvious at the end of the novel, when he condemns to death all the main characters who were portrayed sympathetically at the beginning.

If *Cada respiro que tomo* can be defined as the first narco testimony, *Tierra Blanca*, which is set in the late 1960s and early 1970s, can be described as the first narco bildungsroman. It tells the story of Gumersindo González, son of a poor working-class family from the Culiacán neighborhood of Tierra Blanca, famous for its narcos. The protagonist's father suffers a brutal death at the hands of the judiciales, who falsely accuse him of being a trafficker, Chacal de Tierra Blanca. Afterward, Gumersindo undergoes a gradual but radical change from a sensitive and intelligent student to a callous narco boss. In the first half of the novel, the authorial voice that frames the text empathizes with Gumersindo who, as the eldest son of a poor family, becomes involved with drugs to support his mother and four siblings. The second part sets the scene for Gumersindo's fall from grace. The reader inevitably sides with this strong and proud character who is generous, fair, and unpretentious and whose intelligence makes him stand out from a group of rough and uneducated narcos. His bravery and quick thinking endear him to the big bosses, but his ever more risky decisions regarding shipments—as well as the treachery of the police, who switch their support from one cartel to the other—cost him his life just when he is preparing to quit the business and escape with his pregnant wife to the United States.

The story is told in such a way that Gumersindo's death at the end comes across as just punishment for his deeds. The final lesson to be learned is not to get involved with drugs in the first place. As Gumersindo rises from poor working-class boy to narco millionaire, his tribulations are narrated in a style that mixes thriller, bildungsroman, and melodrama, but also has a subtext: a more essayistic voice that comments on official corruption that reaches as far as the president. It is in this latter aspect that the weaknesses of the novel become more evident. One example is found in

the scene in which an incorruptible general of the Mexican army teaches the lesson of patriotism to the president's men, who are already profoundly involved in the narco world. Another is when the narrator abandons the plot to comment directly on Mexican politics, economy, and society. In instances like this, the author expresses his own wishful thinking regarding the honesty of the army, perceived historically as a defender of collective Mexican values and the embodiment of the nation (unlike the police, who are widely considered corruptible and guided by selfish interests). However, as became evident in the series of drug scandals that rocked Mexico in the 1990s and involved several army generals and public prosecutors, the reality is quite different. Arrests of the leading army officers have dispelled the myth, widely accepted both in Mexico and the United States, that the Mexican military is incorruptible.⁹

Unlike any other author who writes on this topic, Alfaro attempts to develop a theory about U.S. narcopolitics that coincides with the opinion of many Mexicans, namely that the U.S. government's position on this issue is hypocritical because there is ample evidence that Washington protects and helps drug trafficking in other parts of the world when that serves its political interests.¹⁰ According to Alfaro, this problematic attitude to drug issues is also reflected in the fact that the U.S. government invests very little money and effort in addressing the causes of drug use in its own country. Instead, he argues, it channels billions of dollars into never-ending tasks such as burning coca, marijuana, and poppy fields in Mexico, Colombia, and Bolivia and into increasing border surveillance to prevent the flow of drugs, knowing full well that eradication or seizures in one place will simply shift the business to another location. Alfaro goes even further and builds a full-blown conspiracy theory, according to which the United States not only lacks a genuine interest in reducing domestic drug use but also actually promulgates it. Aware that drugs are the real opiate of the masses, the U.S. government's purpose is to keep disenfranchised Americans passive and subdued.

Even with its stylistic flaws, *Tierra Blanca* is an important narconovela. It is the first novel that tries to deal comprehensively and critically with the question of drugs in Sinaloan society. Alfaro's position is much more transparent than Mendoza's and is structured around his anti-narco and anti-U.S. views. The author understands the reasons why people get drawn into the drug business, but at the same time he transmits a clear message against their involvement, even when they are poor and have no other resources. He also echoes the prevailing, albeit not entirely correct, belief

held by Mexicans that their country is merely a drug supplier and not a user: “ellos piden, nosotros surtimos” (they demand, we supply) (62). His point seems to be that in the global capitalist economy—whose philosophy and morality, or lack of it, were designed by neoliberals in the United States and from there spread to the rest of the world—the main imperative is not morality and justice but supply and demand. In this schema drugs are simply another commodity that poor countries sell to the rich.

The Narcos and the Police: Two Sides of the Same Coin

From the cover of his novel *Juan Justino Judicial* (1996), Gerardo Cornejo announces in a tongue-in-cheek fashion that this is not just any novel but a “novela corrido”—that is, a hybrid genre that in novelistic form tells a story about events and characters that normally feature in corridos. The main protagonist is Juan Justino, who was born *chiclán* (with only one testicle), a condition that will tragically mark his life in his small Sonoran village where, as in the rest of the country, enormous value is placed on machismo as a cornerstone of male identity. His “incomplete” manliness is a source of trauma and insecurity and provokes the cruel jokes of his countrymen, to whom he feels he has to prove that he is as masculine as those who have their sexual organs intact. Like Pichula Cuellar of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Los cachorros*, Juan Justino compensates for his physical defect with excessively macho behavior that eventually leads him to become a member of the hated Federal Judicial Police. Belonging to such an organization is commonly seen in Mexico as a passport to violence, corruption, and drug-related enrichment. The novel follows Juan Justino, aka Comandante Castro (“One Who Castrates His Victims”), aka Rodrigo Nomás (“No More”), through his rise to power until his painful and nonheroic death from what is suspected to be cancer in his remaining testicle.

The story is told in three conflicting voices: the collective anonymous voice of the people and the two voices that belong to Juan Justino before and after he becomes a judicial. The collective voice, which is similar to the one used in corridos, repeats what is already public knowledge about Juan Justino’s “lack.” The oral tone of the tale and its link with corridos are enhanced by phrases such as “se dice” or “dicen,” at the beginning of practically every chapter, and “así pasó,” at the end. However, the narrative we read in fact subverts the tone and intention of corridos as it ridicules rather than pays homage to its protagonist. The actual corrido, which frames the narrative and whose fragments are revealed gradually in the text,

is a sarcastic and cruel composition that pokes fun at Juan Justino/Rodrigo and his physical handicap. The novel itself is constructed around the lyrics of this taunting corrido, whose content the protagonist desperately but unsuccessfully tries to amend by paying a *corridista* to modify the verses and project a different, more heroic image of himself.

Even if this novel does not center on narcos but on their presumed opponents, the judicial police, it is an indispensable work that falls into the category of the *narconovela* for the simple reason that it portrays narcos and judiciales not as adversaries but rather as mirror images of each other, a perception shared by the vast majority of Mexicans. Cornejo is absolutely right when he presents small traffickers and police of lower rank, supposedly on opposite side of the law, as pawns sacrificed by big narco and political bosses, who in reality collaborate while leaving the impression that they are set against each other. Juan Justino himself dwells on the class, ethnic, and ideological similarities between narco “soldiers” and judiciales, while at the same time pointing to the class and power affinities between the two sets of leaders who have to be protected at all costs by the constant sacrifices of their underlings.

Cornejo is primarily interested in exposing the symbiotic link between narcos, judiciales, and the “respectable” politicians and businessmen, all of whom are involved, as Juan Justino says, “en el mismo ajo” (in the same game) (95). On an allegorical level, the cancer that rots the protagonist’s body, and which is significantly located in the center of his masculinity, alludes to the putrefaction of corruption that eats into Mexican government institutions from within.

***La reina del sur* and Narcoglamour**

As we have seen, Mendoza walks a subtle line between defending and describing the narcoworld, Alfaro vacillates between projecting anti-narco and anti-U.S. messages, and Cornejo paints a scathing picture of the police as criminals and traffickers. By contrast, Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s approach to drug traffickers in *La reina del sur* (2002) is one of open sympathy. His novel pays homage to a fictitious *narca*, Teresa Mendoza, in a book the writer himself describes as a *narcocorrido* in 500 pages. Pérez-Reverte thus makes a clear connection between the literary text and the musical genre that praises narcos and their adventures. Apart from paying tribute to the *narcocorrido*, a genre that fascinates the Spanish writer, he also pays homage to the father of Mexican narcoliterature, Mendoza, who appears

as a character in the novel. In many of his interviews, Pérez-Reverte acknowledges that without the example of Mendoza, writing *La reina del sur* would not have been possible.¹¹

The singular attractiveness of the novel reflects, among other things, the fact that the author chooses for the main character a young woman who rises from rags to riches by using her intelligence and her innate survival skills. Originally a poorly educated and unsophisticated girl, the fiancée of an assassinated narco who turned out to be a DEA agent, she transforms herself into a shrewd and attractive businesswoman who manages a transnational drug enterprise from her base in Spain. Her name and image appear regularly in the pages of the leading gossip magazine *Hola*. The choice of a female protagonist stands in stark contrast to the omission of women from other narconovelas, whose plots are dominated by males, with women appearing as wives, sisters, or lovers of problematic morality but not as active agents in the narcoworld. Women are similarly excluded from the huge repertoire of narcocorridos, which includes only a handful of songs with female protagonists.¹² It is difficult to say whether this lack of heroines reflects only the quintessentially masculine nature of the narco world or the masculinist orientation of Mexican society more broadly. However, there are signs that the role of women may be changing, at least in the real drug world. A case in point is the powerful Tijuana cartel, long headed by the Arrellano Félix brothers. There are reports that an Arrellano Félix sister, Enedina, has taken over the helm of the cartel following the death of one of her brothers and the imprisonment of another in 2002.

Teresa Mendoza's metamorphosis from provincial girl to prominent businesswoman fits the archetypal plot of (narco)Cinderella. Apart from this, however, her story conforms perfectly to the capitalist archetype of the self-made woman whose rise is due to hard work and business acumen in the transnational drug industry, which forms an integral part of the world economy and international politics. By presenting Teresa as an elegant lady of high society, Pérez-Reverte suggests that in a world that worships wealth and power, money buys social status and privilege, and the origin of many dubious fortunes is very quickly and conveniently forgotten. As the holders of these illicit fortunes are gentrified, "money laundering" is accompanied by "social laundering." In this schema, through drug trafficking Teresa becomes a successful capitalist entrepreneur of the kind eulogized by neoliberal capitalism. Pérez-Reverte, much like Alfaro and Mendoza, blurs the frontier that according to the official discourse of neoliberal capitalism separates the business of drug trafficking from other, supposedly

more moral capitalist enterprises. In this sense, his opinion is not unlike that of Eric Hobsbawm, who states that there is no difference, as far as the principles of capitalism set by Adam Smith are concerned, between “the investors from Medellín cartels and the English and Dutch traders in the Indies” (1986, 35). The straightforward business orientation of the drug cartels is reflected in the word “cartel” itself, which is unlike other descriptors such as “mafia” or “yakuza” that have connotations of secrecy. The volume of capital they turn over, as well as the complexity of their transnational trade and financing, suggests the great entrepreneurial skill and business efficiency of the cartels, the real ones as well as the fictional one, here managed by Teresa Mendoza.

Teresa is depicted as an enigmatic and multifaceted woman who combines fragility and innocence with hardness and the ability to be violent and strike back when necessary. She orders the execution of her treacherous close collaborators, including the father of her unborn child; she fights by the side of her faithful bodyguard when the notoriously corrupt judiciales in Culiacán set a trap to assassinate her in order to stop her from testifying against leading politicians. At the same time Teresa conserves the innocence and innate sense of justice of a Sinaloan girl who does not feel comfortable in the high society of Spain, the country where she lives and whose drug business she controls. On a symbolic level, she cleanses her sins by testifying against those who ordered the death of her former boyfriend. She immediately disappears, in an unknown direction and with a changed name, under the protection of the DEA.

With Teresa Mendoza, Pérez-Reverte has created a perfect heroine, modeled on narcocorrido archetypes that mystify and romanticize these personalities who live on the margins of the law. The appeal of this character, as I have already mentioned, is heightened by the fact that she is a woman, and in this sense *La reina del sur* represents quite a subversive feminist rewriting of the celebrated figure of *el valiente*, epitomized by Pancho Villa. Compared to women in traditional corridos, Teresa is certainly stronger than the revolutionary Adelitas and Valentinas, as she not only survives in the male narcoworld but dominates it. Given the appeal of the main character and the plot, which combines all the ingredients necessary for a successful Hollywood movie—drugs, violence, a rags-to-riches story, and political scandal—it is not surprising that Pérez-Reverte has already sold the movie rights for his work. The novel is also interesting from a wider perspective as it deals with the cooperation and rivalry between international cartels and the issue of international borders. It underlines similarities

between the predicaments of poor countries, such as Mexico and Morocco, that border rich ones, such as the United States and Spain.

Nevertheless, many readers and critics outside Sinaloa have found this glamorous portrayal of narcos not only unrealistic but morally problematic (Arvizu 2003; Hernández Quezada 2003). Pérez-Reverte hinted at his position on this matter in an interview in which he stated, somewhat naively, that “la novela nunca habría sido posible en el ‘narco’ colombiano que es mucho más frío y siniestro. El narco colombiano tiene podrida el alma y es difícil encontrar valores como la lealtad” (Haw 2002).¹³ But Pérez-Reverte is not alone in buying into the Robin Hood image of Sinaloan drug traffickers. This view is shared by the majority of Sinaloans and is present in the works of many local sociologists and anthropologists who, like Astorga, argue that the narcos are well-integrated and respected members of Sinaloan society and in this sense differ radically from the more individualistic, callous, and violent members of the Tijuana and Juárez cartels. Even though it is true that in Sinaloa drug money has indeed “trickled down” and has contributed to the economic development of the state, it is a matter of debate whether the benefits of this development have outstripped the negative impact of narco violence in Sinaloa and across Mexico.¹⁴ Like Mendoza, Pérez-Reverte closes his eyes to senseless narco violence; instead he opts to represent only conflict between the “goodies,” the virtuous narca Teresa and her loyal bodyguard, and the “baddies,” the corrupt police and army. Pérez-Reverte is well aware that the romantic, enigmatic, and glamorous narcomythology of his novel, whose winning style combines thriller, film script, and narcocorrido, sells much better than more realistic and bleak representations of narco violence.

The Narcosatanic Cults

“La Santa Muerte,” a short novel, forms part of the eponymous collection by Homero Aridjis (2003). According to its author it is based on a real event, a twenty-four-hour *narcofiesta* organized by “un capo mafioso,” to which the writer was invited, together with numerous Mexican politicians and generals (Rodríguez Calderón 2005). In the fictional version of this story, the narrator, an anti-narco journalist, attends a party that celebrates the fiftieth birthday of the country’s most powerful drug lord, Santiago López, head of the fictional “Cartel Latinos Unidos.” The macabre and decadent fiesta, which takes place at “El Eden,” a ranch on the outskirts of Mexico City, serves as a trap to kill the protagonist, who has written

against narcos and their “respectable” collaborators. On a tip-off from a DEA agent—a man disguised as a woman at the party—the protagonist swaps the room he was assigned for the night and escapes the violent death that the birthday boy had prepared for him. During the night, he sneaks around the ranch and witnesses the macabre worshiping of la Santa Muerte, or Saint Death, who is ready to receive her human sacrifice. In the morning the journalist wakes to find that everyone is gone, along with all traces of the previous night’s party. It becomes clear to him that another person has been killed in his place.

The mere fact that Aridjis envisages a united transnational drug enterprise, “Cartel Latinos Unidos,” signals the futuristic flavor of this text, which foresees Mexico as a country entirely controlled by narcos. Like the Three Kings bearing gifts, representatives of the Mexican ruling classes—senators, bishops, businessmen, politicians, and television personalities, among many other archetypal professions—come to the party bringing opulent presents to the honored one. Thus we see the corruption and servility of the government and civil servants who are bought and controlled by drug money. While this futuristic vision of Mexico as a narco state *par excellence* may seem exaggerated to those unfamiliar with Mexican politics and its scandals, there is no doubt that it is inspired by a series of well-publicized real events, reported by the media, that speak of the involvement of prominent public figures in the drug business.¹⁵

Aridjis’s attitude toward narcos could not be more different from those expressed by Mendoza, Alfaro, Cornejo, or Pérez-Reverte. There is no sign of sympathy or understanding: the small protagonists are stupid and violent, the big bosses cunning and sadistic. The only values they believe in are money and la Santa Muerte, to whom they pray.¹⁶ Aridjis presents the narcos as ugly, perverted, and ultraviolent, and the narrative abounds with descriptions of their cruelty: their victims are skinned alive, barbecued, or thrown to ferocious dogs. To these attributes the author adds the negative sexual stereotyping not uncommon in Mexican letters. In his eagerness to emphasize the perversion of narcos, he presents many of them as homosexual or bisexual, pedophiles or pederasts; López’s secretary is a lesbian. The author strips drug traffickers of any hint of nobility and bravery and mocks the positive qualities ascribed to them in narcocorridos and the other novels examined here. To show how the line between narcos and Mexican and American businessmen and the drug mafia is completely blurred, he gives personal names to very few characters, while naming others with pompous and often grotesque nicknames: “La Leyenda

de la Mafia,” “El Señor de los Llanos,” “El Señor de las Rejas y las Flores,” among others, which point to their infinite power and the fact that they are the rulers of the country. He treats the narcocorridistas who play at the gathering with the same lack of reverence. Famous bands such as Los Tigres del Norte, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, and Los Huracanes del Norte, whose music is favored by the narcos—some have performed at real-life narcoparties or have composed corridos dedicated to the most notorious figures in this business—become in this text Los Perricos del Norte and Los Gallos de la Frontera. Their cannibalized and carnivalized names reflect Aridjis’s view of narcocorridistas not as simple and innocent performers but as “organic intellectuals” of the narcoworld: as accomplices responsible for the normalization and glamorization of narco themes and characters.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe that Aridjis himself is engaged in a curious enterprise. On the one hand, he is the strongest and the most vociferous critic of narcos in the Mexican literary world. On the other hand, he profits from the current popularity and marketability of anything narco, producing a text in which he refers to a plethora of topics that have inspired the morbid curiosity of the Mexican yellow press. For example, he describes in gory detail the cases of tortured and mutilated women in Ciudad Juárez, whose unsolved deaths are often attributed to narcosatanic cults that venerate la Santa Muerte, and he makes repeated references to Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez as centers of evil from which vice spreads to the rest of the country. In 2004 TV Azteca also capitalized on popular interest in the gruesome circumstances of “las muertas de Juárez,” producing a five-part soap-style series entitled *Tan infinito como el desierto*, which outraged the parents of the killed women.

Because of its title and macabre cover, *La Santa Muerte* was cataloged in many bookshops under *literatura esotérica* rather than fiction, thus attracting a wider audience and boosting sales. This, together with the successful marketing of the book by Alfaguara as a novel that deals with drugs, violence, corruption, and satanic cults, has contributed to the popularity of *La Santa Muerte*, currently in its fifth edition. It should be noted, however, that Aridjis’s success stems more from interest in the cult of la Santa Muerte in Mexico and internationally than from the literary quality of his book. In fact, *La Santa Muerte* has been almost completely ignored by major Mexican journals and critics. For example, the short notes that appeared on the novel in *La Jornada* (Barranco 2005) and the *Conaculta* newsletter (Trejo 2004) are peculiar in that, rather than reviewing the text, they dwell exclusively on the cult that inspired the book. The only critic

who has dedicated serious attention to *La Santa Muerte* as a work of fiction—Sandro Cohen, a former director of Planeta—dismissed it for its poor style, inadequately developed plot and characters, and lack of plausibility (2004). It is ironic that Mendoza's and Pérez-Reverte's positive portrayals of narcos have resulted in compelling fictional works that stand in stark contrast to Aridjis's anti-narco narrative.

Along the Border Lies: Narcojuniors, the New Breed of Traffickers

Along the Border Lies (2001), by the young Chicano author Paul Flores, is devoid of any sympathy for narcos. It displays no signs of glamorizing the topic in the style of Pérez-Reverte, nor of the pamphlet-style moralizing favored by Aridjis. Born and raised on the U.S.-Mexico border—in Chula Vista, California, just across from Tijuana, Mexico—this writer, performer, and youth activist has experienced the problems of this area firsthand. Accordingly, his view on border issues is more complex than that of authors who write from a greater geographic distance. He finds it impossible to deal with drug trafficking as a folkloric and exotic phenomenon; rather, he treats it as an inseparable part of the complex border relations between Mexico and the United States, where the issues of illegal immigration, drugs, and racism are entwined in a complex way.

Flores tells two parallel stories. The first is the story of a Mexican American working-class teenager, Alfredo, who lives with his mother and his American stepfather in Chula Vista and is ashamed of his Mexican heritage. With his Anglo and Filipino friends, he creates a vigilante group. On one of their expeditions they shoot an illegal Mexican immigrant and are arrested by the police.

The other story is that of Miranda, daughter of a wealthy Tijuana businessman, who out of boredom and hunger for excitement starts running drugs between Tijuana and San Diego. Through the interweaving of these two stories, which eventually intersect, Flores offers a picture of the border seen from both sides. It is a dual perspective practically impossible to find in contemporary border writing either in Mexico or in the United States, where writers normally refer only to "their" side of the dividing line. By presenting the border as a concrete geopolitical space, Flores corrects, and complements, the predominantly metaphorical conceptualization of border in Chicano narratives, where the notion of the border is used to evoke the hybridity of race and culture of the Chicano nation. In a manner

similar to Tijuana writer and critic Heriberto Yépez (2001) and Mexican American sociologist Pablo Vila (2001), Flores describes the border as a volatile geopolitical space heavily surveyed and policed, marked more by conflicts and exclusion of the other than by the “happy hybrid” of races and cultures. This is particularly evident in the conflictive relationship he depicts among Chicanos, Mexican Americans, recently arrived Mexican immigrants, and illegal Mexican arrivals.

The drug traffickers in *Along the Border Lies* are a species different from the rough campesinos and working poor portrayed by Alfaro, Cornejo, Mendoza, and Pérez-Reverte. Flores’s focus is on a new breed of traffickers, the so-called *narcojuniors*, sons and daughters of rich Tijuana families.¹⁷ He describes these newly arrived protagonists on the narco scene as “yummies”: young urban Mexicans raised with money who got involved in the business out of boredom and greed. It is noteworthy that before emerging in fiction, narcojuniors like Miranda, Roni, and Julián of Flores’s novel appeared in corridos. The first corrido composed about these protagonists was “Narco Juniors” by Los Tucanes de Tijuana (1998). Its lyrics specifically refer to the difference between the unpolished style of Sinaloan lower-class narcos and the sophistication of the educated narcojuniors, who dress and talk smartly and deal directly with bosses. The corrido celebrates their intelligence, bravery, and daring, ending with the incitation “long live the juniors.” It describes the suburb of San Diego called Barrio Logan; it is a nest of narcojunior killers and dealers, whose presence has turned it into a “number one location”:

Con escuela y con dinero, a la moda y bien vestidos
con muy buen vocabulario, y en un carro deportivo
no aparentan ser personas, que disfrutan del peligro.
Gente joven y muy valiente, no se diga enamorados
de un estatus elegante, así son catalogados.
Los apodan los narcojuniors, por la prensa bautizados.
Les achacan muchas cosas, pero no comprueban nada,
y lo dudo que comprueben, porque es gente muy pesada.
Se apalabran con billetes, y si no pues con metralas.¹⁸

It is through the perspective of one of the juniors, Miranda, that a significant part of the story is told. Miranda, Roni, and Julián, thanks to their white skin and social status and the fact that their parents run an export and manufacturing business, cross the border faster and more easily than the poorer and darker-skinned traffickers.

After the assassination of her cousin Julián and her friend Roni for double-crossing the powerful political and narco clan Reyes, Miranda is on the run from their killers. She hides in the United States with her Chicano lover, Edgar, to whom she tells the story of her involvement with drug trafficking. Her account reveals the symbiotic and intricate connections among high-ranking politicians, the police, and drug money in Mexico. Those who know Tijuana well will recognize in the figure of Reyes the eccentric multimillionaire Jorge Hank Rhon, son of one of the wealthiest Mexican politicians and a close collaborator of president Carlos Salinas and his brother Raúl. For example, the novel tells of a high-society party that takes place at an opulent racecourse. Its owner is a young Reyes, a sinister character who maintains perverse (sexual) relationships with people and wild animals. These references point clearly to Jorge Hank Rhon, who in real life is the owner of a *hipódromo* (*galgódromo*) that also functions as an eerie private zoo. Those who don't have this information will possibly read this character as an exaggerated, magical realist invention of Flores. Flores's attribution of power to this character was prophetic: in a strange twist of fate, Hank Rhon was elected mayor of Tijuana on the PRI ticket in December 2004.

Along the Border Lies was written in English and published in the United States, and for this reason the novel has not circulated in Mexico. This lack of fame has allowed Flores to visit Tijuana on several occasions without attracting public scrutiny regarding his implication of Hank Rhon, the fictional Reyes, in narco business and killings.¹⁹ Flores rightly attributes infinite power and impunity to this fictional family, which so closely resembles many real, well-connected, and rich families in Mexico who are above and outside the law because they are its representatives.

Flores's critique centers on the corruption of Mexican politicians and police and not on the individual traffickers and narcojuniors. These he neither criticizes nor condones, but limits himself to describing them as privileged Mexicans who deal drugs out of boredom and greed. It is notable that the works of Alfaro, Cornejo, Mendoza, and Pérez-Reverte make practically no mention of drug taking among the traffickers from poorer social backgrounds. In Flores's novel, however, the upper-class juniors are heavy users of cocaine. The effect of this combination of greed, drug use, and social privilege makes it difficult to see the narcojuniors as sympathetic characters, not even in the case of Miranda, who flees from the Reyes clan with her young daughter.

Conclusion

The variety of perspectives on drug trafficking and traffickers and the internal contradictions of the narratives examined in this essay demonstrate that there is no uniform vision on this vexing topic, and that its representation cannot be reduced to a simple black or white version. The positions vary from the completely negative one of Aridjis to the glamorized one of Pérez-Reverte, while the rest of the authors position themselves somewhere in between, leaning toward the negative or positive sides of the spectrum. For this reason I would not agree with the tendency of the Mexican media to define all narconarratives as sympathetic to drug trafficking, nor would I fully agree with Astorga, who states that there are only two possible stances that can be taken on this issue: “La distancia entre los traficantes reales y su mundo y la producción simbólica que habla de ellos es tan grande, que no parece haber otra forma, actual y factible, de referirse al tema sino de manera mitológica, cuyas antípodas estarían representadas por la codificación jurídica y los corridos de traficantes” (1995, 12).²⁰ While Astorga is right in claiming that the official-judicial discourse demonizes narcos, whereas narcocorridos mythologize them, he is not right in claiming that all representations of narcos in Mexico are therefore purely fictional—that is, far from the truth. The narratives examined here demonstrate the existence of more complex views of narcos and their enterprise than the two options put forward by Astorga.

There is no doubt that the emergence of the narco genre is due, among other factors, to the marketability and easy conversion of this topic into fiction. The extraordinary real lives of the rich and powerful drug bosses, marked by violence, political intrigue, money, sex, economic privilege, and dominance over government, provide fertile ground for works of fiction. More important, especially in the case of countries such as Mexico and Colombia, the rise of the narconovela is primarily a response to the particular social conditions and the role that drug money and power play in contemporary society.²¹ With the exception of Pérez-Reverte, the authors considered here are less interested in mythologizing the traffickers than in addressing issues that mark Mexican society: the social injustice seen in the marginalization and poverty of the majority, and the corruption, opulent lives, and impunity of state officials and drug bosses. While the writers examined take varying positions with respect to narcos, their negative stance regarding the corruption of Mexican police and government is unanimous. All the authors are eager to expose the symbiotic link between narcos and state officials as well as to denounce the hypocrisy and

duplicity of Mexican officials, who publicly repudiate drug trafficking and narcos while they privately reap huge profits from bribes and offer police and judicial protection to the most powerful drug lords. In this respect, Mexican and Mexico-related narcoliteratura coincides with the Colombian literature in which narcos are viewed not as an embodiment of evil, as some simplistic positions would have it, but rather as a symptom of the much deeper social problems affecting the continent.

Notes

1. "The perception of drug traffickers among the middle classes and political circles is not the same as that in the lower strata of society, in the fantasy-rich collective imaginary where myth reigns and becomes part of the oral history told by village elders and troubadours. . . . A drug trafficker is like a wandering knight, beyond reproach, a self-made hero who has at his disposal enormous quantities of Colombian dollars that he obtained in a manner no more illegal than the politicians who hold power" (all translations are by the author).

2. This recognition is also reflected in the creation of widely accepted and used neologisms such as *narcocultura*, *narcopolítica*, *narcoeconomía*, *narcoviolenencia*, *narcosanto*, *narcosatánico*, *narcoestética*, *narcochic*, *narcocorrido*, and *narconovela*, among many others. I use this same logic to create one-word neologisms in English based on the prefix "narco" in order to capture a series of activities and issues related to drugs.

3. This dearth of analytical work on the Mexican narconovela contrasts with the greater critical attention to Colombian narcoliteratura, on which several studies have been published. See, for example, María Mercedes Jaramillo (2000). The only Mexican critic who has dedicated any attention to Mexican narcoliteratura is Miguel Rodríguez Lozano, who, in his *Escenarios del norte de México* (2003), examines Gerardo Cornejo's novel *Juan Justino Judicial* (1996) but stops short of agreeing that a distinct narcogénre is emerging in Mexico.

4. "There is no such thing as moral phenomena; there is only moral interpretation of phenomena."

5. "It is better to live one year as a king than fifty as an ox."

6. "Nobody knew how, but after she had lived only a week among us, everybody knew the life story of our new neighbor. She was an opium grower originally from Durango whose husband was killed together with the gang to which he belonged. . . . The neighbors did not like her. They spoke of how she was a bad example, vulgar. . . . another thing they did not like was that Camelia drank profusely and with flair, and that she often brought home music bands, and given that she took a liking to her nickname, you can imagine which song was her favorite."

7. It is important to note that in this period, the persecution of drug lords had concentrated on smaller Sinaloan producers and traffickers and had avoided others who were better and more efficient at bribing government officials. The diminished ranks and power of the smaller producers allowed the growth of bigger, bloodier, and more sophisticated organizations such as the cartels of Tijuana and Juárez, which still dominate the Mexican drug scene. For more information on Operation Condor and on the continuing cross-border collaboration in law enforcement, intelligence sharing, surveillance, and training between the United States and Mexico, see María Celia Toro (1995).

8. Mexico is possibly the only country in the world that has its own narco-saint, Jesús Malverde, with a temple in Culiacán. The big and small narcos as well as many illegal immigrants worship this saint, who is not recognized by the Catholic Church, leaving him money and offerings to secure safe passage across the border.

9. Salinas's top antidrug prosecutor, Mario Ruiz Massieu, was charged in 1994 with taking bribes of up to \$1 million from police and federal prosecutors in return for assigning them to profitable border posts. In 1997, Mexican chief army officer General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, head of the Mexican federal antidrug agency, was detained. It was revealed that the general, while persecuting smaller traffickers as well as the members of rival cartels, was himself working for the Juárez cartel. A few months later, another general, Alfredo Navarro Lara, was arrested when he offered \$1 million per month to the top federal justice official in Baja California at the behest of the Tijuana drug cartel. The subject of Mexican narco-politics and narco-related scandals was amply covered in all Mexican daily papers of this period. For a more academic enquiry, see, among others, Bruce Bagley (1994), Sebastian Rotella (1998), and Peter Andreas (2000).

10. On the U.S. government's problematic involvement with drugs in Asia and Latin America, see Alfred McCoy (1992).

11. *La reina del sur* had a mixed reception in Mexico. In Culiacán, where the book was launched, it was received with praise, Sinaloans being happy that a renowned writer had placed them on the international map in a positive light. Elsewhere in Mexico the reception was primarily negative, the main criticisms being related to the unfaithful rendition of Sinaloan dialect by the *gachupín* writer, the fact that he "unrealistically" chooses a female as leader of a powerful cartel, and his exotic and glamorous portrayal of narcos. One critic, Francisco Arvizu, described this novel as "narco folcloroide y for export" (2003). For another negative review, see Javier Hernández Quezada (2003). Even if such criticism is partially correct, it is also true that Pérez-Reverte has produced well-written, engaging prose, and that thanks to his fame, Sinaloa has entered the international literary scene, now not only as an infamous narcostate but also as a land of narcos who live by rules of honor and justice. Given that *La reina del sur* is a work of fiction, the fact that Pérez-Reverte glamorizes his subject and is not factually precise should not be considered as detracting from the quality of his book.

12. The abovementioned "Camelia la Tejana" is the most famous corrido about a narca. More recently, in 2003, *Los Tigres del Norte* released a CD, *La reina del sur*, whose title track of the same name is based on Pérez-Reverte's novel. Another track

on the same CD, “Ellas también pueden,” also talks about female drug traffickers, in this case Guatemalan and Sinaloan narco who are ambushed by police in Los Angeles. It is important to note that nowadays a great majority of narcocorridos, including those that have women as protagonists, are produced and performed by Chicano and Latino musicians in Los Angeles. For further information on the portrayal of women in Mexican narcocorridos, see José Manuel Valenzuela Arce (1998). For an excellent analysis of the new narcocorrido scene in Los Angeles, see Helena Simonett (2001). For the most comprehensive study of narcocorridos, see Elijah Wald’s *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns and Guerrillas* (2001), an excellent mix of ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and travel journal from the author’s explorations in the United States and across Mexico in search of the roots of this genre.

13. “This novel would not have been possible in the context of the Colombian narcoworld, which is more cold-blooded and sinister. The Colombian narcos have rotten souls and do not cherish values such as loyalty.”

14. In June 2004, while I was in Mexico researching this article, two high-profile assassinations took place in Sinaloa and Baja California, along with killings of several lesser-known individuals. A young commander of the Policía Ministerial, Sidarta Walkinshaw, proclaimed in 2003 as the best policeman in Mexico on the basis of his anti-narco stance and his incorruptibility, was executed in broad daylight in front of the government ministry in Culiacán. In a second incident, Francisco Ortiz, editor of an independent Tijuana weekly, *Zeta*, was executed at point-blank range in his car in front of his young children. He had written against narcos and revealed the corruption of local politicians such as Jorge Hank Rhon, a real man who becomes a fictional character in the novel by Paul Flores (analyzed later in this article). Ortiz’s assassins, as in the case of the murder and wounding of other colleagues from *Zeta*, will most likely remain uncharged due to a total lack of political will to stop or resolve these types of crimes.

15. A wealth of information on the public scandals and hidden stories behind drug trafficking in Mexico can be found in the collection of essays and short stories *Viento rojo: Diez historias del narco en México* (Monsiváis et al. 2004).

16. La Santa Muerte is a fast-growing Mexican cult that has inspired much curiosity outside of Mexico. This saint, not sanctioned by the Catholic Church, is venerated not only by killers, narcos, and marginalized youth, but also by housewives, the middle classes, and other common citizens. All across Mexico, but particularly in Tepito, a rough central suburb of Mexico City, there are temples dedicated to la Santa Muerte in which she is represented as a human-size skeleton, the Grim Reaper, dressed in red, white, and black velvet, with a tiara on her head and skeletal fingers adorned with jewelry. Around her figure are placed offerings of money, tequila, roses, weapons, food, and candles: white for benign requests, red for love, and black for wishing the death of one’s enemies. Since the publication of *La Santa Muerte*, Aridjis has come to be seen as a specialist on the cult and has been interviewed by newspapers in Latin America, the United States, Asia, and Europe.

17. Jesús Blancornelas (2003) attributes the meteoric rise of the Tijuana cartel precisely to its link with the narcojuniors, whose privileged social, political, and

economic position has allowed them to mediate with state officials on behalf of the Tijuana cartel.

18. “Schooled and wealthy, fashionable and smartly dressed, with a big vocabulary and a sports car, they don’t seem like people who would enjoy danger. Young and brave, and needless to say, hooked on their elegant lifestyle; that’s how they are perceived. They call them narcojuniors, as they have been baptized by the press. Many wrongdoings are attributed to them, but nothing can be proved, and I doubt they ever will be, as these are dangerous people. They speak with money, and if that fails, with machine guns.”

19. Mentioning the involvement of leading politicians or families with drug business can be lethal in Mexico. In 1988, years before the killing of Francisco Ortiz, his predecessor at *Zeta*, co-editor “Gato” Félix, was assassinated by the bodyguard of Jorge Hank Rhon because he had written about the shady dealings of this powerful man. Jesús Blancornelas, another editor from the same paper, published several articles in 1997 on the bosses of the Tijuana cartel, the Arrellano Félix brothers. Days later, Blancornelas was attacked and shot four times and his bodyguard was killed. Since this event, Blancornelas has been living in self-imposed house arrest in Tijuana, still writing for *Zeta* and publishing books that speak of the link between the government politicians, police, and narcomoney. See, for example, his book *Horas extra: Los nuevos tiempos de narcotráfico* (2003).

20. “The distance between the real traffickers and their world, and the symbolic production that speaks about them, is so great that there does not seem to exist another way of referring to this subject except in a mythologizing manner whose two poles are the language of law and the narcocorrido.”

21. The fictional flavor of the lives of big drug bosses can be illustrated by the example of Amado Carrillo Fuentes (“El Señor de los Cielos”), the leader of the Juárez cartel. The official version of his death is that he died during plastic surgery that was meant to radically change his appearance and thus prevent his detection and arrest by Mexican or U.S. authorities. However, the official story is contradicted by the unofficial one, embraced by many Mexicans. According to this version, Carrillo staged his death during surgery, and the corpse identified by his mother in fact belonged to his double, while Carrillo, presumably with the DEA’s blessing, acquired a different identity and is still alive, enjoying his billions in another country. Robert Rodriguez’s recent movie *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2004) borrows this exact storyline, while Steven Soderbergh’s movie *Traffic* (2000) also refers to plastic surgery as a common way for major traffickers to escape recognition and the law. Given this intertwining of fiction and reality in the narco world, it is practically impossible to decide whether the narcos, and here specifically Carrillo, have modeled their lives on Hollywood scripts or whether it is the other way around.

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