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Globalization, Yankee Imperialism, and Machismo in the Mexican *Narco-Narrativa*

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ABSTRACT: Rather than existing in a parallel, disconnected manner from the licit transnational circuits of the global capitalist economy, the transnational drug trade is in fact a core component of this system and one that has to a considerable extent dictated the terms of Mexico's placement within it, as well as the shape of contemporary Mexican society. This has given rise to a sizeable body of *narco-narrativas* ('narco-narratives') which serve as means of textually exploring Mexico's immediate 'street-level' experiences of the transnational flows of capital and goods comprising globalization and the social consequences of the shift towards neoliberal political economy. This essay argues that in doing so these narratives variously confront the shifting social dynamics of neoliberal-globalizing Mexico, a U.S. imperialism that takes new forms for a new era, and the culture of machismo that animates Mexican drug cartels. Martin Solares's *Don't Send Flowers* poses this period of rising cartel violence as a second major crisis transforming Mexican society, after the economic collapse and subsequent IMF-mandated structural reforms of 1982, one that runs the risk of simply producing more uneven and socially marginalizing capitalist development. Elmer Mendoza's *The Acid Test*, on the other hand, sees a sad inevitability in continuing drug violence and an exiled but not effaced possibility of moral action and leftist populist social reform, while Yuri Herrera's *Kingdom Cons* uses the figure of the drug trafficking kingpin to allegorizes the relationship of art to worldly power and to stress the need of art to distance itself from capitalist criminality and propagandistic social functioning.

KEYWORDS: globalization and the drug trade, neoliberalism and the drug trade in fiction, narco fiction, Martin Solares, Yuri Herrera, Elmer Mendoza

The dominant U.S. cultural narrative about transnational narco-trafficking holds that it, like other forms of illicit trade, circulates amongst bad actors in a manner that is parallel to and outside of the transnational circuits of capital, commodities, information, and people that have come to be labeled 'globalization.' This is the product of a Manichean conceptual divide between a capitalism that is conceived of as virtuous, freedom-bestowing, and progress-driving on the one hand, and a trade that is conceived of as alien and incompatible with the structures of the hegemonically sanctioned capitalist economy on the other. Contrary to this outlook, however, the drug trade is in fact a central, constitutive feature of globalization, an industry responsible for a substantial amount of transnational commodity and capital transfer and one that has dictated the terms of integration into the global capitalist system for Mexico, Colombia, and the countries of Central America to a similar degree to oil in Saudi Arabia and manufacturing in China.

At the same time, in a complexly multi-faceted and mutually reinforcing relationship, the forces impelling globalization have intensified the proliferation of the trans-national drug trade, whose profits then function as one of the major sources of capital within the global economy. As far back as 1998, the United Nations reported that 'globalization, the liberalization of international markets, and the suppression of borders' was contributing to the flourishing of the world drug trade ('Effects of Globalization'), while political scientists Garth le Pere and Brendan Vickers note the improvement and expansion of global travel and communication systems, the growth of international trade volume, transnational flows of people, and insufficient regulation of the ever-expanding international financial system—all core features of globalization—have spurred the growth of various forms of transnational organized crime, including the drug trade (51). In return, the drug trade has served in various ways to prop up the shaky edifice of a global capitalism increasingly based on the virtual, speculative financial industry rather than the production of tangible goods and increasingly strained by decreasing consumer demand as it concentrates wealth more and more exclusively in the hands of the global capitalist elite. Estimates vary, but Moises Naim figures the annual global illicit trade falls in the range of 2-3 trillion dollars a year, while the World Bank estimates that the informal, untaxed economy (not all of this being illegal commerce) comprises a third of global trade, around $20 trillion annually (Gilman et al 20). In 2009 Antonio Maria Costa, head of the U.N.'s Office on Drugs and Crime, announced that in the midst of the major global economic recession of the time, the funds from international drug trafficking were all that was keeping some banks liquid (Saviano 259). When in 2010 Wachovia Bank was found guilty of laundering hundreds of billions of dollars for Mexico's Sinaloa

drug cartel, it got off with a fine amounting to only five weeks of its organizational income and none of its executives were prosecuted, despite the flagrancy of their complicity[1], for fear that bringing the large financial institution to justice would trigger a major global economic downturn (Paley 106-107, Saviano 256-260).

In other ways as well the drug trade is structurally bound up with the world system of globalizing capitalism. The so-called war on drugs, which has had not at all lessened the volume of worldwide drug production and consumption, has served in substantial part as a partial 'fix' to capitalism's 'woes,' according to Dawn Paley—providing a pretense for increased military spending and arms purchasing while allowing for the spread of neoliberal capitalism by, among other things, clearing native populations in Latin America off of lands that are thereby freed up for resource extraction at the hands of transnational corporations (16, 220, 223). And given the manner in which globalization has been enacted through a 'free market' neoliberal economic framework that invariably redistributes wealth from the poor and middle class to the upper class, it has spurred the global demand for drugs, both as an item of conspicuous consumption for global economic elites (Saviano 144) and as a self-administered opiate for those who have suffered economic reversals brought on by neoliberal globalization[2] or who otherwise find themselves inextricably caught in positions of poverty and hopelessness due to the changing global economic dispensation.

As previously noted, Mexico has been one of the nations whose experience of neoliberal capitalist globalization has been most markedly structured by the transnational narcotics trade. From out of the wake of the Mexican Revolution the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) ruled over the country during the decades spanning from 1929 until 2000 in a manner typified, until the worldwide spread of neoliberal economics starting in the 1980s, by protectionist, interventionist economics and mild redistributive concessions to the middle, working, and peasant classes. But hit hard by the collapse in oil prices and the burden of the state having had to take over a large number of firms driven into dire financial straits by the global economic crisis of the previous decade, in 1982 Mexico declared bankruptcy and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, pushed by the newly ascendant Reagan and Thatcher regimes to adopt a new neoliberal economic dogma, for the first time insisted on 'structural reforms' of austerity measures, privatizations, reduced labor power, lowered protective tariffs, and greater openness to foreign capital in exchange for loans to help the country meet its balance of payments obligations to its Global Northern creditors (Harvey 99-100). Again in 1994 Mexico faced a financial crisis and its bailout at the hands of the U.S. government came at the condition of even more openness to the global economy, more reduction of the social role of the state, and more privatizations that placed the resources of the country increasingly in the hands of transnational corporations and a small ascendant class of billionaire oligarchs (Klein 242-243). These 'reforms' devastated the Mexican middle class, deeply sharpened wealth inequality in the country, drove large numbers of small farmers off their land, and drastically reduced the state's ability to provide poverty alleviation. The first caused industries to collapse, at least 800,000 jobs to be lost, inflation to soar to 100 percent, and over half the population to suffer from malnourishment by 1987; the second caused a collapse in real wages, devastation to the agricultural sector leaving two million farmers unemployed, and the rise of a small billionaire class while eight million stood unemployed and labor became generally more precarious and poorly remunerated (Boullosa and Wallace 45, 51-53). Throughout this period, as the PRI pulled back from the state benefit provision system that had cemented its post-revolutionary rule under these neoliberal 'reforms,' large drug traffickers stepped into this social provision vacuum, providing employment, investment, and support of local public institutions (Beard 10). So both socially and economically these *narcotraficantes* came to occupy an increasingly large role in Mexico as the country became further and further integrated into the global system of 'free market' flows of capital and goods. They were both a social reaction to the forms of material lack created by Mexico's adoption of neoliberalism and a product of the cultural valuation of consumerism, entrepreneurialism, and wealth amassment that has been used to drive and legitimize neoliberalism (Boullosa and Wallace 54). In this they can be seen as embodiments of the driving spirit of globalization, as Ed Vuillamy argues:

> Narco-cartels are not pastiches of global corporations, nor are they errant bastards of the global economy — they are pioneers of it. They point, in their business logic and modus operandi, to how the legal economy will arrange itself next. The Mexican cartels epitomized the North American free trade agreement [sic] long before it was dreamed up, and they thrive upon it [. . .] So Mexico's war is how the future will look, because it belongs not in the 19th century with wars of empire, or the 20th with wars of ideology, race and religion — but utterly in a present to which the global economy is committed, and to a zeitgeist of frenzied materialism we adamantly refuse to temper: it is the inevitable war of capitalism gone mad.

The fallout from the rise of these 'pioneers of the global economy' in Mexico has included a rise in violence and the delegitimation of state institutions like the military, the police, and local governments, each of which has been infiltrated by the drug cartels and/or has a long history of collaboration and complicity with them. And this social impact has taken a particularly dark turn since 2008, with the U.S government providing funding and training to facilitate a militarization of the Mexican government's struggle with drug traffickers under the Mérida Initiative, modeled on its earlier bloody Plan Colombia, that has claimed the lives of upwards of 100,000 people in its first six years, while instituting a system of U.S.-style

mass-incarceration, boosting corporate profits, and displacing tens of thousands more people (Paley 125-6,129-142, 147, 157).

A number of Mexican writers have responded to this systemic confluence between neoliberal globalization and the drug trade, leading to the rise of a fictional genre many have come to term 'narcoliteratura.' However, as these works are defined more by a common subject matter than shared formal elements, Alberto Fonseca prefers the term '*narco-narrativa*' (narco-narrative), which will be employed throughout this essay (9). Unlike more popular genres of Mexican cultural production that take up the figure of the *narcotraficante* in a largely celebratory vein, like the *telenovela* and the *narcocorrido* ballad, the narco-narrativa takes a critical stance on drug traffickers and their connection to globalization and the neoliberal transformation of Mexican society (Enriquez 75). As Fonseca observes, they 'manifest the divergences and fractures in neoliberalism, globalization, and repressive policies in the struggle against drugs' (7-8). As such, the narco-narrativa has taken on a prolific life within the world of Mexican letters, not just because of the lurid sex, violence, and materialism associated with the drug trafficker figure, but because this form of narrative has allowed Mexican authors to make textual explorations of Mexico's immediate 'street-level' experiences of the transnational flows of capital and goods comprising globalization and of the social consequences of the shift towards neoliberal political economy. Intrinsically these narco-narratives thus offer thematic takes on how local and regional social realities in Mexico have been reshaped by the forces of neoliberal globalization incarnated in the drug export trade and often on the status of Mexico within the complex system of transnational relations comprising this world system as well. This article analyzes a range of what these takes look like in three of the most compelling narco-narratives to be published in recent years, parsing out how they thematize through their representations of drug trafficking and traffickers Mexico's situatedness within the global flows of capital, commodities, culture, and human beings comprising our era of neoliberal transnationalism, both in terms of the novel social conditions neoliberal globalization has created and in how it newly inflects enduring social realities, most prominently the continuing geopolitical force of U.S. imperialism and the local face of Mexico's unabating cult of machismo.

Like many narco-narratives, in Martin Solares's noir novel *Don't Send Flowers* (2015) the social world of the drug trafficking cartel power struggle and violence comprises the milieu within which the narrative's plot unfolds rather than providing its protagonist or central narrative conflict. Set in and around a fictional northeastern Mexican Gulf Coast city named La Eternidad, *Don't Send Flowers* tells the story of the search for the kidnapped teenage daughter of a local business magnate, focusing in a third-person limited omniscient manner first on the experiences of Carlos Treviño, the former police officer hired to find the victim, and then of Margarito Gonzalez, the crooked police chief who it turns out has masterminded the kidnapping. Along the way both characters run into complications with drug trafficking cartels Los Viejos, aka the Cartel del Puerto (The Old Ones/The Port Cartel), and their breakaway former hired guns Los Nuevos (The New Ones), based in roman à clef fashion on the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas criminal organizations, respectively. This plot takes place during the early 2010s, as the U.S.-supported Mexican War on Drugs initiated by President Felipe Calderon just after his contested election in 2006 (Boullosa and Wallace 86) raged on, with splintering drug trafficking groups leaving spiraling body counts as they sought to control key smuggling routes and branch off into other profitable ventures like kidnapping and extortion. The novel evokes its setting as a time and place in which violence has become so habitual that it is mundane and in which the police and military have become so renowned for corruption that the line between the criminal world and the repressive apparatus of the state has become hazy at best: 'The sound of gunshots—a single round or a hail of bullets—or a grenade blast in the distance as night fell had become a part of life around the port, no more unusual than the words *extortion* and *kidnapping*' (4), and the U.S. consul opines that 'The police would sell their souls to the devil if he was the highest bidder, and the military depends on the politicians. And you know who they work for [i.e. the cartels]' (6). As a result, La Eternidad has gone from a place where friendly people lounge about outside barbequing for hours on end to one where, outside of necessary excursions into public spaces, they spend their time hiding in their homes (41-42).

The violent discord sown by the inter-cartel power struggle produces these social spaces conceptualized by the novel, but the macro-level social structure within which this occurs is one produced by a collusion between post-NAFTA U.S. neo-imperialism and the Mexican plutocratic elite created by the rise of neoliberalism in the country. Treviño is hired by the sole representative of the U.S. to appear in the novel, Don Williams, the U.S. consul in La Eternidad, who works as a sort of advisor or *consigliere* to Rafael De Leon, the wealthy father of the kidnapping victim who runs a large family enterprise consisting of a slew of automotive repair, steel manufacturing, and pharmaceutical retail and wholesaling businesses. The fact that the U.S. consul in the novel serves essentially at the beck and call of a Mexican businessman—which he justifies to his superiors by noting he has recently helped the De Leon family to acquire U.S. citizenship (218)—is striking. The particularities of this relationship can be read as allegorizing the contemporary relationship between the two nations, one that exerts a strong determinant influence on what takes place in Mexico: like Williams, the U.S. exerts a directing influence on Mexico's decision-making socio-economic elite and helps provide the intelligence (Williams has access to a wide array of satellite imagery) and the armed wherewithal (the hired gun Treviño or the armaments and military training for Mexico's disastrous War on Drugs) to put the plans it helps to instigate into effect.

In this regard it is noteworthy that Rafael De Leon led his family business out of financial instability and into the position of economic powerhouse during the years leading up to and out of the

Mexican Debt Crisis of 1982 (19) that was addressed by a serious of structural reforms mandated by the IMF under its new U.S.- and U.K.-fomented neoliberal orthodoxy. These "reforms" devastated the country's middle class, brought an end to its era of Keynesian government economic interventionism, and began paving the way to the rise of the country's powerful billionaire class, of which the De Leons are the novel's textual exemplar. All of the lines of social power represented in the novel, all of the shifts in Mexico's social landscape, are dated back somewhat pertly to this moment in time. Margarito Gonzalez, the corrupt longstanding police chief of La Eternidad, has begun his tenure shortly after helping to kill his mentor, Lieutenant Elijah Cohen, in 1981 (349).[3] And the Cartel del Puerto, the novel's fictional rendering of the Gulf Cartel, has shifted from noble smuggling of consumer goods out of the U.S. to cocaine distribution in 1982 due to the fact that the its former middle class clientele, ravaged by the economic crisis, could no longer buy its smuggled goods (376).[4] So in the purview of the novel, 1982 marked the point in time when the newly minted capitalist giants of Mexico, both the U.S.-backed licit sector and the illicit narcotraffickers, began to seize control of the country and collectively steer it towards a future of greater corruption, social instability, and material inequality. The narrative present in the text is posed as a similar moment of crisis, this one born of the sheer scale of the violence and instability produced by the country's configuration within the global system of neoliberal capitalism—both its vast structural inequalities and the social fallout from its narco-economy—whereas the crisis of 1982 was a product of its initial forced entry into this system. While Treviño had previously thought systemic change would be brought to the country by revolutionary action such as that of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, he comes to conclude that the possibilities for change have in fact been produced by the cartels (165)—that embodiment of the very spirit of neoliberal globalization, as argued above. But the novel sees this crisis not necessarily leading to progressive social change, but rather offers a vision similar to Naomi Klein's concept of opportunistic 'disaster capitalism' in her *The Shock Doctrine* and the way that Dawn Paley sees the drug war in Mexico as having been implemented in a way that allows for new forms of capitalist accumulation in her *Drug War Capitalism*. At the climax of *Don't Send Flowers* it becomes evident that, killing having become just another form of 'free enterprise' (411), the new mayor of La Eternidad has planned the murder of Chief Gonzalez's son/successor to create a martyr and thereby bring an end to the cartel violence plaguing the city[5]. The mayor then plans to have the city pivot to join the vast Global Southern tourist service economy by becoming a resort town. While the tourist industry is the largest economic sector in the global economy, bigger than even the oil business, the tourist trade has largely only brought low-wage neocolonial service jobs and large profits for exogenously headquartered multinational corporations to countries like those of the Caribbean that have embraced it (Carrigan xi, 19).[6] And the novel hints at just as much, noting that the mayor's previous capitalist land development schemes have promised environmental sustainability and local economic stimulation, but have only displaced indigenous populations, damaged fragile ecosystems, and failed to produce most of the jobs they have promised (414). So in *Don't Send Flowers* the ultimate aggregate picture is of a Mexico embedded in transnational flows of capital, goods, and violence while attempting to turn away from a particularly bloody epoch of its history, a country that is wary of the promise of more capitalist market-driven development that simply wears a false kinder, greener face.

Also set against the backdrop of Mexico's war on drugs, though in its earliest days, Elmer Mendoza's novel *The Acid Test* (2011) also seeks to survey a northern Mexican social landscapes realigned by drug violence while asking what are the possibilities of moral action in a world of such incessant killing born of the free market profit motive. As Michael Wood observes, the fiction of Mendoza, , who is sometimes dubbed 'the godfather of narco-lit,' generally makes a survey of Mexican society from the "point of view" of a crime that has been committed, focusing on local social dynamics that have been intensely shaped by globalization (25, 28). Maria Eugenia de la O specifies what the emergent picture of Mexican society looks like, noting that Mendoza's

> works allow one to recognize the social structures drug trafficking has established in Mexican society in the context of globalization of production, consumption, and drug consumption. It fosters understanding about drug trafficking and its social implications, such as narcoculture. It is about the expressions of a society that adheres to formerly traditional values under new conditions that are reflected in popular narcocorridos, the recreation of an imaginary collective, new popular aesthetic and religious forms and the presence of new actors like hitmen, corrida singers, drug traffickers, mob wives/girlfriends, judges, politicians, paramilitaries, and new saints like Chuy Malverde and Santa Muerte. (195)[7]

In *The Acid Test* these concerns play out amidst Detective Lefty Mendieta's search, carried out early in the wake of President Calderón's declaration of a war on the drug trade, for the killer of the beautiful Mexican/Brazilian stripper/prostitute Mayra Cabral de Melo who has ensorcelled him during a recent short tryst in Mazatlán, just as she has many of the powerful political figures, businessmen, and cartel bigwigs of Culiacán, where the novel is set. The novel draws on noir narrative conventions like a morally uncertain narrative universe, sudden outbreaks of violence, and corruption on the part of both state officials and the wealthy and powerful, but Mendieta diverges from the hard-boiled detective type in his uncertainty and vulnerability: when first encountered in the narrative he is sleepless, full of self-loathing, and on the cusp of flirting with suicide. Having been molested by a priest as a child, he is troubled and discontent, all the more so after becoming fixated on crusading

to avenge the violation visited upon the slain woman. At the same time, while his idealism makes him the closest thing the novel has to a moral center, Mendieta shows particular flexibility when it comes to enforcing the law, allowing a club bouncer to keep at illegal firearm at one point, contemplating simply allowing a better-resourced drug kingpin former lover of Mayra's to uncover and deal with her killer, and calling in backup from the leader of the local drug cartel when the killer has been unveiled and an armed showdown is imminent.

In two symbolically laden scenes in the novel Mendieta loses possession of an automobile he is driving: first when a drug-addled and mentally ill former boxer knocks him out and takes his car, and then when a vehicle leant to him by FBI agent Win Harrison suddenly explodes outside of a hunting lodge where he is investigating. The loss of control and mobility he experiences in being stripped of these vehicles mirrors his lack of absolute self-control due to his past traumas and his lack of complete autonomy in pursuing his murder investigation, given how he is forced to negotiate both the corrupt bureaucracy of his police force and the even more powerful local institution of the drug cartels. But at the same time, Mendieta stands in synecdochically for Mexico itself in being constrained and thwarted by manifestations of U.S. imperialism. Just prior to his loaner vehicle exploding in front of the hunting lodge, he finds himself surrounded by Secret Service agents guarding the visiting father of the U.S. president: 'Mendieta's discomfort was evident. Here he was, surrounded by Americans in uniform, their weapons in view, and he felt out of his element' (219). Seized, handcuffed, and interrogated by these men so openly flaunting on Mexican soil their foreign-power- bestowed authority and state-sanctioned right to employ violence, these agents provoke protests from Mendieta that he is the one with jurisdiction who should be in control of this situation: 'I'm a detective with the Mexican police, not an undocumented immigrant, and I'm in my own country [. . .] He won't crush me, he thought, he might kill me, but he won't humiliate me [. . .] some gringos have class, but not him [. . .] this pansy can suck my dick' (223). Faced with this breech of Mexican sovereignty, Mendieta contrasts what his position as police detective should be with the relative powerlessness of the undocumented border-crossing migrant, and eventually takes refuge in sullen masculinist sexualized bravado. But the point is forcefully made here that Mexico is not independent in its own affairs but continually pushed and influenced by its powerful neighbor to the north. The text continually emphasizes how in the era of neoliberal globalization the two countries are not wholly separate entities, but are complexly intertwined as represented in ways such as the host of Mexican characters who live in the U.S (including Mendieta's brother and son), the flows of popular culture and U.S. governmental personnel from north to south, and even one character's remark that Mexican produce will soon 'supply the White House itself' (173). But this intertwining is structured in terms of very unequal power relations of an imperialist sort. In light of this question of imperialism, it is noteworthy that Mayra's killer, the novel's ultimate villain, turns out to be Adán Carrasco, an Americanized Mexican who has served in the U.S. military and is friendly with the family of the U.S. president. Carrasco has bought up a large amount of land that he has turned into a hunting preserve frequented by American visitors like the U.S. president's father, for whom Carrasco has also provided the 'exotic' 'surprise' of Mexican prostitutes—making him both literally and metaphorically a panderer, profiting mercenarily off the leasing of Mexico's resources to affluent U.S. tourist-consumers as part of the bundle of transnational economic flows that have on the balance been unfavorable to the people of Mexico.

In this arrangement women's bodies become one of the commodities traded upon by the capitalist brokers of Mexico's resources, which, in a novel centering on the investigation of a woman's murder, raises the question of the narrative's broader thematics of gender.[8] The novel draws attention to the masculinist bravado undergirding the culture of the narcos and Mexican law enforcement at the same time that it complicates this by making female both Mendieta's partner and the eventual successor of the main Culiacán cartel boss—though in taking on these roles both of these characters adopt hegemonic-masculinist[9] forms of behavior including using violence to assert their position of authority. And while many more men than women die in the course of the narrative, the text focuses on the male obsession or fixation on its female murder victims, especially the vampy Mayra—or more accurately 'Roxana,' her professional persona. In speaking of these 'murdered women in our fair city,' a radio reporter wonders, 'will it turn out like in Juarez, where mysterious criminals sacrifice beautiful young maidens' (182). This rather hyperbolically phrased reference is to the rash of over 400 female murders that swept Ciudad Juarez from the eve of NAFTA's signing in 1993 up into the first decade of the twenty-first century (González Rodriguez 71). According to Sergio González Rodriguez, a reporter whose work helped draw widespread attention to these killings, they have been the product of what he calls 'the femicide machine': a suddenly drastically altered social environment in which poor women of color became a mistreated and disposable workforce for the manufacturing boomtowns of Northern Mexico and local men, faced with diminished economic power and the broadening phenomenon of female wage earners, have reacted in an uncoordinated mass-serial manner in carrying out these killings (8,9). And the female killings in *The Acid Test* can be understood in a kindred manner, as a male backlash against neoliberal globalization's breakdown of traditional social orders and the slightly greater degrees of female agency that have arisen as a partial corollary to this. But in her *Drug War Capitalism* Dawn Paley suggests an alternative framework for understanding the Juarez femicides. Paley notes that they have occurred against the backdrop of a whole lot of generalized violence, as drug cartels have fought to control the lucrative drug corridor through Juarez, and the number of slain women there has at its highest equaled eighteen percent of the total killings, averaging just under ten percent for the period—less

than half of the twenty to twenty-five percent rate of U.S. murder victims who are women (112). Looked at in this regard, the situation in Juarez becomes less a matter of the serial killing of women, and more about the fact that these deaths just garner more attention—that is, it is more a matter of patriarchal society's fixation on the image and bodies of murdered women.[10] This is certainly the case in *The Acid Test*, wherein a host of male characters are fixated upon Mayra/Roxana, whom they seek to incorporate in their fantasy renderings of their worlds and themselves, both before and after her death. These men range from Mendieta, who is haunted recursively by memories of snippets of conversation with the woman he remembers as a hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold who really understood him, to drug kingpin Dioni de la Vega, who imagines he will be more powerful than the repressive arm of the state in bringing her killer to justice, to Carrasco, who carries out the ultimate act of objectification in rendering Mayra a corpse who can no longer hold aspects of her body and self aloof from him in the manner she has been doing. So *The Acid Test* places in evidence not only how the rise in criminal violence attendant upon Mexico's relation to global narcotics commodity flows has redounded in part on the country's women, it also explores how the masculinist domain of the struggles to control and to suppress the drug trade are themselves impacted by their participants' psychological relationships towards women, living and dead.

At its close the novel does not seem to offer much hope of this violence against women or men abating, which is appropriate, given how it is set at the outset of the attempted government crackdown on drug trafficking that in the ensuing years would claim over 100,000 lives and deepen and diversify rather than stem criminality in Mexico. In its final scene, after the cornered Carrasco commits suicide, as opposed to being shot by a heroic lawman in a violent act of restorative justice, Mendietta wanders off, resolving to get drunk on whiskey and, in a quixotic gesture that is more about repairing his fantasy image of Roxana than doing anything purposeful for her, plans to restore 'the integrity of Roxana's body' by bringing back the nipple Carrasco has severed from it. So it bears asking just what the vision of moral action and recourse is here in the face of all of this futility and mounting violence. Traditionally the Catholic Church was appointed to be the guardian of Mexico's moral order[11], but the only representative of the church mentioned in *The Acid Test* is Father Bardominos, the priest who molested Lefty Mendieta as a child. This wrong has been addressed by Lefty's brother Enrique, a leftist guerilla during the time of Mexico's Dirty War, who is forced to flee the country to take up a life of exile in Oregon after killing the priest. Enrique can be read figuratively as personifying both the ability to act morally and decisively in the face of clear-cut wrongdoing and, intertwiningly, Mexico's lost leftist-populism that had been crushed and pushed aside with the proliferation of neoliberalism within the country. In both these regards the symbolism of his place of exile, roughly 2,000 miles away, is significant: he does not live close to Mexico in a U.S. border state, but he and the qualities he represents continue to exist as a far-distant exiled possibilities—still extant, but far out of reach at the time of the onset of Mexico's drug war.

While most *narco-narrativas*, like the hard-boiled, noirish narratives of *The Acid Test* and *Don't Send Flowers*, draw on some crime fiction genre tradition, Yuri Herrera's novella *Kingdom Cons* (2008) employs the fable form to use the drug trafficking kingpin figure to offer an allegory about the relationship of art to worldly power.[12] As a result of this aesthetic mode far from social realism, *Kingdom Cons* offers a focused representation of the interpersonal and local ramifications of the transnational drug trade divorced from the broader geopolitical context offered by Solares and Mendoza. It does so by way of the story of Lobo, also known as 'the Artist,' a barroom troubadour and composer of corridos[13] whose music wins him a place in sprawling residential compound ('the Court') of 'the King,' a powerful drug cartel leader. While intensely devoted to his patron, the King, and bedazzled by the opulence and plenty of the Court that contrasts so starkly with the aridness and poverty of the northern Mexican locales amongst which he has come of age, the Artist becomes increasingly disillusioned by the pettiness and intrigue of the narco-trafficker social milieu, and after he has perhaps inadvertently hinted at the King's dark secret of either impotence or infertility in a corrido, he is forced to flee the court. The novella ends with the King having been arrested and the Artist turning down an offer from his successor to return to the Court and write ballads for him, having realized that he needs autonomy to create his art and that his vocation lies in chronicling the experiences of less flashy and exalted members of society: 'the fortunes and tragedies of the average jack' (95).

At the thematic heart of this narrative arc is a contrast between artistic creation, personified by the Artist, and wealth/social power, personified by the King. At the start of the narrative the Artist is one who 'out of sheer passion [. . .] mastered the ways of syllables and accents, before being ordered to earn his keep on the street, offering rhymes in exchange for pity, for coins' (11). Thus exiled from the spaces of commerce and bourgeois society, it is only through achieving the patronage of the King that he can achieve some level of material comfort and a greater audience for his work through live performances and black market-distributed recordings.[14] As the King's balladeer, the Artist's songs take on the social function of propaganda, legitimizing the King's position of affluence and power through violence or its prospect, as well as the way that he functions as a sort of local lord who holds court for local residents beseeching him with grievance and cases of economic need. As noted in the introduction to this article, with the erosion of the social provision function of the state in the wake of IMF-mandated structural adjustment programs nominally geared towards more intensively integrating the country into the global neoliberal capitalist system, powerful crime figures have stepped in to fill this role in Mexico as in countries like Jamaica and Nigeria. Hence, as Rafael Acosta Morales observes, in *Kingdom Cons* the King takes on the functions of the state, illustrating how drug cartels have come to provide parallel

state functions and cultural provision for Mexico's socially excluded (184, 185). The degree of social power that this involves leads Edmundo Paz Soldán to read *Kindom Cons*, like other narco-narratives, as a further permutation of the Latin American dictator novel and also as a reflection on the place of art in a hyper-capitalist society shaped by drug trafficking (28, 29). Stepping into the role of local benefactor and strongman while fostering a major value shift towards U.S.-style consumerism encouraged by globalization's information flows, criminal bosses like the King have been in need achieving an air of social legitimacy, and *Kingdom Cons* bears witness to how the corridos of northern Mexico have helped to serve these ends—though as Alexander Beard points out, as the narrative reaches its resolution the Artist moves beyond passively, propagandistically reflecting the sense of flashy majesty the King wants to convey to using his art to actively seek out social truth (147).

At the same time the novel explores the relationship of art to the worldly power embodied in the figure of the narco-trafficker, it also illustrates how kingpins like the King also maintain their lucrative positions atop a very cutthroat business by performing the social role of the patriarch, with all the symbolic power and authority that is vested in it. When the Artist first encounters the King, a barroom drunk has vaguely alluded to a secret the latter holds, causing the King to kill him to maintain his public aura of tough, in-charge masculinism. The King is continually associated with the peacock, his favorite animal in his menagerie: both depend on making a flashy public show to achieve their position, and the death of the King's peacock presaged his downfall as the narrative moves towards its climax (93). For the King, this show involves maintaining a public veneer of masculinist virility. When the top-ranking woman in his organization, the Witch, wants to gain advancement for herself and her daughter in the Court, she seeks to do so by shoring up the King's public image through having him impregnate her daughter. 'Even if his damn peacock doesn't work,' she tells the latter, 'I'm going to find a way to leave all of this to you' (63). When the Artist seemingly innocently observes in song that the members of his gang are 'the only sons' the King has, art's capacity to undermine the high and mighty comes to the fore (79) and the King's air of masculine imperviousness is punctured by this open declaration of his inability to be a literal patriarch, causing his organization to then unravel through internal plotting and external law enforcement pressure. The King's 'Court' functioned by having rigid, inflexible roles ascribed to each of its members in the manner of the feudal societies of the Middle Ages. Within this order gender plays a central structuring role, with women taking on subordinate roles that serve chiefly to prop up male positions of dominance and authority: the Girl, the fungible sex worker whose role is to cater to the physical needs of the King's men; the Commoner[15], who has no status or import unless she can be the vessel through which the King proves his masculinist potency by siring offspring; and the Witch, an archetype figuring female agency as underhanded, malign, and deserving of violent punishment. But again, once the King's persona of patriarch is publically undermined, this order falls apart until a new cartel leader emerges from the infighting.

All the while, one thing that is conspicuously absent from *Kingdom Cons* is any direct representation of the drug trade or the sort of larger-than-life exploits of narco-traffickers that feature so prominently in popular cultural representations of them. As Alexander Beard points out, this, along with the Artist's turn from writing narcocorridos to focusing on the stories of common people, can be read as allegorizing the social need to move away from romanticizing the figure of the drug don, as doing so adds to the mystique that helps narco-traffickers maintain their positions of power in the manner of the propagandizing the Artist carries out through much of the narrative (165-166). If, as Ed Vuillamy has it, the drug kingpin is simply a pronounced form of arch-capitalist feeding consumer demand to turn a voluminous profit, regardless of the externalities of death and destruction produced in the process, perhaps it would be better to focus on those particular thematic contours of the narcos' stories as part of the recent general expressive-cultural turn against the excesses and inequalities fostered by neoliberal capitalism—or, like the Artist, to turn aesthetically from the narco-trafficker *tout court*.

In her illuminating theoretical treatise *Gore Capitalism*, philosopher/activist Sayak Valencia argues along the same lines, positing that most representations of violent criminality tend to glamorize it and by extension the socio-economic system it is a manifestation of, and that there is a marked need for language and education to work to dissuade individuals from these practices (253-254, 290-291). Valencia's broader claim in this treatise is that the extremes of neoliberalism have produced in the Third World a system in which tortured and dead bodies, their representations, and the illicit good circulations they facilitate become commodities within our globalizing circuits of transnational exchange—a system of what she terms 'gore capitalism' (19-20). Predicated as this socio-economic system of gore capitalism is upon hegemonic cultural constructs of masculinity, within it the drug don comes to serve as a provider within a world driven by U.S.-style hyper-consumerism, which speaks particularly to the 'marginalized masculinities' of the men driven from their traditional status-defining roles of provider by the economic depredations of neoliberalism, who go on to serve as the rank-and-file members of drug cartels (79, 256). Thus to short-circuit this system of violent authoritarian masculinism and winner-take-all transnational consumer capitalism it is necessary, as Valencia argues, to deromanticize the figure of the drug cartel boss. Given the potentiality for narco-narratives to do so, noted at the outset of this essay, it becomes socially imperative to have more of these tales that take a critical, debunking approach to drug violence and the figure of the *narcotraficante*, but doing so always carries a risk that cultural producers would do well to keep in mind. Perhaps the most celebrated narrative of the ultimate senselessness and destructiveness of drug trafficking is Brian De Palma's film *Scarface* (1983), which ends with its drug- and materialism-addicted protagonist

floating ingloriously face-down in a fountain, having destroyed all of his loved ones and allies online the way. However, *Scarface* has come to be embraced as a magnum opus and inspiration by a legion of real-world drug industry workers, from street dealers to kingpins, with iconography from the film having been particularly featured in the material culture (artwork, custom firearms, etc.) of some of Mexico's cartels (*Narco Bling*). So while cultural production has the capacity to expose to scorn or ridicule, the cultural work is always open to counter-hegemonic readings, and when one stares into the abyss, the abyss may end up spawning more monsters.

NOTES

[1] For instance, teller windows at Mexican currency exchange locations (*casas de cambio*) affiliated with Wachovia were widened to permit the dropping off of larger quantities of cash at once from cartel members (Paley 107).

[2] Such as the members of industrialized nations who have fallen out of the blue-collar middle class due to the outsourcing of production and the agriculturalists in the developing world who have been driven off their land by falling crop prices brought on by the fact that lowered trade barriers now have them competing with government-subsidized largescale agriculture from the Global North.

[3] However, the chronology in the novel is a bit confused and disorganized here. Cohen has attempted to recruit Gonzalez, who is already working with the leader of what would become the Cartel del Puerto, to steal a shipment of cocaine and use the proceeds to 'go after Los Nuevos [...] Otherwise Los Nuevos are going to gather some serious fucking momentum, and there'll be no stopping them' (353). However, as noted below, the novel notes shortly thereafter that the Cartel del Puerto did not get into cocaine smuggling until 1982, after Cohen had been killed, and Los Nuevos, the former armed wing of the Cartel del Puerto, did not splinter off from the cartel until a much later date. Perhaps the jumbled timeline here is due to the emphasis the text wishes to place on 1982, dating all the major seminal backstory events of the narrative right around this time despite the temporal impossibilities this creates.

[4] For what it is worth, the story of the historical Gulf Cartel is a little more complex. While it got its start smuggling liquor into the U.S. during Prohibition, it moved into marijuana smuggling during the 1970s and did in fact begin moving cocaine for the Columbian cartels during the early 1980s (Cockburn and St. Clair 361)

[5] Just how the killing of the younger Gonzalez would accomplish this, given the high stakes in controlling the drug corridor through the area and even the Mexican military's inability to bring an end to the violence represented in the novel, is not exactly clear.

[6] See 'Consumption, Desire, and Neo-Imperialism in the Tourism Fiction of the Global South' in Michael K. Walonen's *Imagining Neoliberal Globalization in Contemporary World Fiction*.

[7] Thanks to my research assistant, Sara Gonzalez, for assisting with this translation and otherwise helping to gather the source material for this essay.

[8] See the conclusion of this essay for Sayak Valencia's reflections in her *Gore Capitalism* on how murdered bodies become one more commodity within the frenetic global capitalist circuits of exchange.

[9] The culturally predominant form of male gender role that equates masculinity with competitiveness, aggression, and dominant behavior, one that has been disseminated throughout the world through colonization and then the mediascapes of globalization in different stages of world history. See *Masculinities* by R.W. Connell and *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation, and Amplification* by James W. Messerschmidt.

[10] In a recent *Guardian* article Hallie Rubenhold examines this phenomenon in regards to U.S. and U.K. popular culture, asking why there is such unabating fixation on the 'pornography of violence' against women in the form of movies and television programs about the likes of Ted Bundy and Jack the Ripper. In a social media response to this, novelist Marlon James notes that this cultural obsession with the figure of the dead woman has tended to apply only to white women.

[11] This is not to negate the long tradition of anti-clericalism in Mexico or the various historic efforts that have been made to combat the hegemony of the Catholic Church in the country. Rather, it is to say that looking to the church as the ultimate arbiter of morality has historically been the cultural dominant in Mexico.

[12] Alexander Beard objects to applying the label of fable to the text for the reason that fables generally feature animals as characters, preferring to write of *Kingdom Cons* as a *kunstlerroman*, given that its plot centers on the moral and aesthetic development of an artist (142-144). However, there are some fables with human characters, and with its stock two-dimensional characters, sparse verbiage, and stripped down plot, *Kingdom Cons* hearkens back generically just as much to premodern forms of prose fiction as it does to novels of education.

[13] A type of ballad popular in northern Mexico that often features outlaws from humble social origins as protagonists and often features struggles against exploitative Yankees or corrupt Mexican officials.

[14] Despite their widespread popularity, narcocorridos—corridos in praise of drug cartel members—have been banned by the Mexican government as part of its efforts to reign in the drug trade (Burnett).

[15] Or 'Nobody,' as her Spanish name, 'la Cualquiera,' can also be translated (Beard 133).

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