

***Narconovela: Four Case Studies of the  
Representation of Drug Trafficking in Mexican  
Fiction***

Alexander Charles BEARD  
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Merton College, University of Oxford

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## Short Abstract

In addition to coverage in the national and international media of the ongoing violence in Mexico related to the drug trade, there has been growing interest in fictional representations of the Mexican drug trade, its origins and social context. There is now a considerable body of written narratives that have been christened *narconovelas*. A small number of academic works has charted the emergence of the *narconovela* and sought to examine how drug traffickers have been represented and evaluated in fiction. However, very little attention has been paid to the aesthetic qualities of ‘narco-literature’. This study examines four of the most highly-regarded works in detail: *Balas de plata* (2008), by Élmer Mendoza; *Los minutos negros* (2006), by Martín Solares; *Contrabando* (2008), by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda; and *Trabajos del reino* (2004), by Yuri Herrera. So embedded is the phenomenon of drug trafficking in northern Mexican culture, so suffused with cliché is its representation in other media, that to write about the topic with originality and ethical nuance is difficult. This thesis accounts for the distinct choices made by the four authors in question to address this difficulty of representation in the structure, style and tone of their novels. The self-awareness exhibited by these works of fiction regarding the challenges of representing their subject matter render them the most sophisticated examples yet created of the so-called *narconovela*.

## Long Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a literary-critical examination of four of the most highly-regarded examples of the so-called *narconovela* in northern Mexican fiction. It was originally conceived as an effort to fill a significant gap in the critical literature. Very little of an academic nature had been written about the *narconovela*. No academic articles had been written about *Balas de plata* (2008), by Élmér Mendoza, *Los minutos negros* (2006), by Martín Solares, *Contrabando* (2008), by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, or *Trabajos del reino* (2004), by Yuri Herrera, despite the wealth of good reviews enjoyed by these novels. A few general studies or introductions to the *narconovela* have now been produced, but they do not address the four novels examined in this thesis. To date, three articles have been written about these novels, but they do little more than describe the works in question and provide a cursory examination of their themes. This thesis attempts to examine them in detail as works of art. The thesis takes the view that a work of art can, implicitly, be a response to a question. The question in this case is ‘what is the most appropriate way in which to represent the phenomenon of drug trafficking’? ‘Most appropriate’ is understood to encompass both ethical and stylistic concerns. This is not a problem that is implicit to all works of fiction about drug trafficking in Mexico. The premise of this thesis is that it ought to be, given the complex nature of the phenomenon, and a preliminary conclusion is that the four novels in question are of particular merit in large part because they take this question seriously. Although each chapter examines and evaluates its particular novel on its own terms, the ‘problem’ of representing drug trafficking and, hence, the particular features in each novel designed to address this problem, are the unifying concern.

In the first chapter, the Introduction, I place the *narconovela* in its literary and historical contexts. Given that some general works on the subject of drug trafficking in Mexican fiction have been recently written, the purpose of the second and third sections of the Introduction is to summarize, add to, and evaluate the positions of these critics regarding the origins and characteristics of the *narconovela*. There is little agreement about a definition: the *narconovela* is not a clear genre. A summary of the historical development of the drug trade in Mexico, as it is understood by

historians of the subject, is also provided. This is often disregarded or insufficiently understood by critics. For example, Diana Palaversich, in ‘The Politics of Drug Trafficking in Mexican and Mexico-Related Narconovelas’, concentrates principally on the attitudes expressed by authors in their fiction towards drug traffickers, but provides little detailed analysis of the motives or justification for such attitudes. One purpose of the first section of the Introduction is to extract the reasons for some of those features of northern Mexican fiction that are a consequence of the history of the drug trade in Mexico: for instance, the attitude that drug trafficking is just one illegal activity among many, the prominent regional pride shown by *norteños*, and the particular contempt in which Mexico’s politicians and security forces are held. The historical section also serves to provide a base from which there follow more specific discussions of Mexican history in the chapters about *Trabajos del reino* and *Los minutos negros*.

Many of the best *narconovelas* talk indirectly about drug trafficking. Throughout the thesis there is an unspoken attempt to justify this increasingly common approach, which is introduced explicitly in Chapter 1. Many *narconovelas* are, for instance, detective novels, but this choice of format poses very particular ethical and aesthetic problems. There is the matter of how to avoid cliché when employing a relatively rigid format. But, more importantly, one might wonder how a category of fiction developed elsewhere in the world could possibly be considered relevant to a distinctively Mexican situation. This is the unifying concern of the second and third chapters of this thesis. In Ch. 2, Part I, I examine the prose style of *Balas de plata* alongside a discussion of the novel’s cinematographic influences and its pervasive self-awareness as a work of genre fiction. It cannot be said to be a novel that avoids cliché, but, at the least, it attempts to render its clichés transparent. Whether this is an acceptable procedure is the point in question. What is more important about the novel, I argue, is its expression of a very particular *norteño* sensibility towards the violence created by the drug trade. In Parts II and III I examine the contribution of several of the novel’s features – its humour, allusiveness and characterization – to the creation of a single, cynical, point of view. *Los minutos negros* (Ch. 3) is also a highly allusive and self-aware novel. Its sensibility is more playful than that of *Balas de plata*, however, and some readers might find

this to be an inappropriate representation of a very serious situation in reality. In Ch. 3, Part I, I argue that, as a renovation of the detective fiction format, *Los minutos negros* is highly original. Moreover, its variety of style and tone provides a richer literary experience than that of *Balas de plata*, including moments of pathos that depend for their effect on the novel's generally ludic tone. What is most distinctive about the novel is its abandonment of the 'realist' spirit of most *narconovelas*, even when they are genre novels. Nonetheless, in Part II, I contend that the novel provides the reader, analogically, with a convincing representation of the political dimensions of Mexico's relationship with drug trafficking.

The remaining novels are more innovative conceptually. *Contrabando* (Ch. 4) makes the difficulty of representing drug trafficking the central concern of its protagonist, a fictionalized version of the author, on his return to his turbulent hometown in rural Chihuahua. The novel includes many 'testimonial' chapters narrated from different points of view, as if they were short stories, as well as a work for the theatre and sections of a film script. This implicitly acknowledges the fact that there is more than one way to understand the town's baleful predicament. In Ch. 4, Parts I and III, I analyse the connections between these different representations and evaluate the extent to which the novel coheres as a whole. Particular attention, in Ch. 4 Part II, is paid to the contribution of the play *Guerrero negro* to the novel's general impression on the reader. Alongside other techniques, the novel's structure and its use of multiple points of view lead to an emphasis on the doubts and anxieties experienced by those who live surrounded by drug trafficking and its violence, a perspective that has been often neglected in the *narconovela*.

*Trabajos del reino* (Ch. 5) reimagines the inner ranks of a drug cartel as a mediæval court, but retains its realism by virtue of attributing this analogy to the fancy of its protagonist, a writer of *corridos* for the cartel's leader. I contend in Ch. 5, Part I, that the novel's conceit is very informative with respect to the historical operations of drug trafficking organizations. In that section I also analyse the techniques employed by Herrera to present the protagonist's point of view as limited and naïve, which (like *Contrabando*) raises the question of how complete or justifiable a single representation of drug trafficking can be, but conclude that this does not

diminish the worth of the original analogy. Several chapters of the novel, written in a different, more figurative style, require additional comment in relation to their function in the narrative as a whole, which I provide in Ch. 5, Part II. Finally, in Ch. 5, Part III, I make the argument that the novel's treatment of unresolved doubts about the plot implies a rejection of the current popular obsession with the topic of drug trafficking.

In each case my concern has been to provide an explanation for the novel's interesting and noteworthy features with reference to the author's implied designs for his narrative. As such, barring introductory comments and comparisons, Chs 2–5 are intended to stand on their own as interpretations of each novel in turn. Nonetheless, the four novels selected also demonstrate a range of different approaches to the task of representing drug trafficking and its context. In the Conclusion I briefly consider two other ambitious approaches that have been less successful. Given that the *narconovela* is a very loosely defined category of fiction, and also because many authors have been (justifiably) intent on presenting partial perspectives on their subject matter, I conclude that there is little chance of a 'definitive' Mexican *narconovela* being written. Nevertheless, the range of possible approaches has not yet been exhausted.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Since December 2006, when the newly-elected President of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, deployed 6,500 federal troops in the Pacific coast state of Michoacán to fight organized crime, Mexico has experienced a surge in the number of violent killings relating to the drug trade. Whereas in 2004 some 900 persons were officially registered as having been killed in confrontations between rival drug trafficking organizations or between those traffickers and the various units of the Mexican state, this figure had increased to 2,300 in 2007, to more than 5,000 in 2008, and by 2010 it had reached 12,500 per annum.<sup>1</sup> By some accounts the number of deaths during Calderón's presidency exceeded 60,000.<sup>2</sup> Beside the extensive coverage afforded to the on-going violence in the Mexican and international press, there has been growing interest in fictional representations of the Mexican drug trade and its origins. There is now a considerable body of written narratives that have been dubbed *narconovelas* by the media. For the well-known author and critic Jorge Volpi, 'narco-literature' has become the new paradigm of Latin American literature, replacing the previous fashions for the subject of dictatorship or 'magical realism'.<sup>3</sup> A *narconovela* of sorts — *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2011), by the Colombian author Juan Gabriel Vázquez — has even won the Alfaguara Prize. Although several Mexican novels have been written recently, in response to the current crisis and, predictably, to the commercial demand for writing on the subject, fiction about drug trafficking in its heartlands of the north of Mexico is over 20 years old. In Mexico, the father of the genre, if indeed the *narconovela* can be defined as such, is regarded as Élmér Mendoza (1949). His collection of stories *Cada respiro que tomo* (1991) was the first modern Mexican work of literature to take drug traffickers as protagonists and to explore the sub-culture of drug

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<sup>1</sup> Wil G. Pansters, 'Zones of State-Making', in *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur*, ed. by Wil Pansters (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012), pp. 3–39 (p. 5).

<sup>2</sup> Nick Miroff and William Booth, 'Mexico's drug war is at a stalemate as Calderón's presidency ends', *The Washington Post*, 27 November 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See Gabriela Polit Dueñas, *Narrating Narcos: Culiacán and Medellín* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), pp. 3 and 180 (n. 5). Volpi claimed that 'La 'literatura del narco' se ha convertido en el nuevo paradigma de la literatura latinoamericana (o al menos mexicana y colombiana): donde antes había dictadores y guerrilleros, ahora hay capos y policías corruptos; y donde antes prevalecía el realismo mágico, ha surgido un hiperrealismo fascinado con retratar los usos y costumbres de estos nuevos antihéroes' (Jorge Volpi, 'Cruzar la frontera', *Milenio* [Mexico City], 24 October 2009, p. 10).

trafficking in the north-western state of Sinaloa.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, in the same period several authors of detective fiction considered drug trafficking an important feature of their stories' context, including Paco Ignacio Taibo in *Sueños de frontera* (1990), Gregorio Ortega in *Los círculos del poder* (1990), and Gonzalo Martré in *El cadáver errante* (1993). Since there is increasingly an association between that format and the *narconovela*, these novels must also be considered important precursors. Mendoza himself is heavily indebted to the traditions of crime fiction in his novels, which began in 1999 with *Un asesino solitario*.

Although a small number of academic works have now charted the emergence of the *narconovela* and sought to examine how drug traffickers have been represented and evaluated in fiction, very little attention has been paid to the aesthetic qualities of 'narco-literature'. In the chapters that follow I shall examine four of the most highly regarded works in detail: *Balas de plata* (2008), by Élmer Mendoza; *Los minutos negros* (2006), by Martín Solares; *Contrabando* (2008), by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda; and *Trabajos del reino* (2004), by Yuri Herrera. It is astonishing how little critical attention has been paid to these novels, three of which are prize-winning works of fiction. In this introduction, I begin by providing a summary of the origins and progression of the drug trade in Mexico: the historical contexts for Mexican fiction about drug trafficking. In the second and third sections, I discuss the literary contexts: first, I examine attempts by critics to categorize the *narconovela*; second, I outline the major literary influences on the corpus of Mexican drug-related fiction as it stands. Nonetheless, the purpose of this thesis is neither to define the *narconovela* nor illustrate its many varieties, but rather to examine an age-old difficulty for writers of 'serious' fiction: how to be 'engaged' without making aesthetic compromises. I introduce this topic in the fourth section of this introduction, making particular reference to a novel that (to my mind) fails on both aesthetic and ethical grounds: *Tierra Blanca*, by Leónidas Alfaro. Aside from their quality, what the four novels covered in this thesis share is an understanding that drug

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<sup>4</sup> Diana Palaversich, 'The Politics of Drug Trafficking in Mexican and Mexico-Related Narconovelas', *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 31.2 (2006), 85–110 (p. 87). Palaversich is incorrect to state that Mendoza's collection was the *very first* literary work centred on drug traffickers. That honour falls to Angelo Nacaveva, whose 1962 novel *El diario de un narcotraficante* (México, D.F.: Costa-Amic Editores, 1994 [5<sup>th</sup> ed.]) has recently been rediscovered. See Polit, *Narrating Narcos*, pp. 49–54.

trafficking, its culture and its wider social context are not straightforward subjects. The world of organized crime in Mexico is diverse and murky, its connections to wider society so strong in places that it is difficult to draw a comforting line between what is criminal and what is decently law-abiding, or between moral and clearly immoral courses of behaviour. All four novels attempt to incorporate in both their structure and narrative perspective their authors' understanding of the difficulties of representing such an ambiguous phenomenon as drug trafficking. Aside from their other merits, it is arguably that quality of self-awareness that renders the novels in question the most insightful fictional representations (so far) of drug trafficking in Mexico.

## **I History**

The drug trade in Mexico is by no means a recent phenomenon. The illicit smuggling of contraband into the United States is as old as the Mexican Republic itself, and narcotics have been a significant part of this activity since at least the Porfiriato.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the trade in illegal drugs should not be considered unique, at least until recently: a wide range of products and activities that have been illegal in the United States have prospered along the Mexican-American border in the last two centuries, including prostitution, bootleg alcohol, gambling, pornography and car theft.<sup>6</sup> Mexico has not been alone in providing such opportunities. Until 1959, Cuba was the more important base for the organized smuggling of narcotics into the United States.<sup>7</sup> In Mexico, the *corrido* is the musical genre now most closely associated with drug trafficking, but in fact the earliest *corrido* heroes were mere rustlers of cattle who used the border to escape the authorities;

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Knight, 'Narco-Violence and the State in Modern Mexico', in Pansters (ed.), *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making*, pp. 115–134 (p. 119).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Gootenberg, 'Cocaine's Long March North, 1900–2010', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 54.1 (2012), 159–180 (pp. 161, 164).

the earliest *corridos* about smuggling date from the era of Prohibition in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Mexico is also a long-standing producer of narcotics. The first widespread production of the opium poppy, for example, was begun by Chinese immigrants to Mexico, who had turned Sinaloa into a heartland for this activity by the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> Even though the opium poppy was formally criminalized in Mexico in 1926, the first widespread attempts at eradication came only in the 1970s, under the U.S.-backed ‘Operation Condor’. In the 1940s the United States had even sponsored Sinaloan farmers to provide medical morphine for the war effort.<sup>10</sup> This long history is one of the reasons why it is difficult to disentangle the phenomenon of drug trafficking from other features of northern Mexican (and especially Sinaloan) culture and society. As we shall see, this renders a precise definition of fiction about drug trafficking problematic.

What is unquestionably new is the *extent* to which drug trafficking has come to saturate the culture of northern Mexico in the last twenty-five years. It has been visible to an astonishing degree for an illegal activity. One need only note the popularity of the *narcocorridos*, the ubiquity of ‘narco-fashion’ (an image we might call ‘stylized cowboy’) among young urban men, or the celebrity status afforded to the most important traffickers. There were doubtless very few people in Mexico in the 1990s who would not have known who Amado Carrillo Fuentes was.<sup>11</sup> This is why *narconovelas* have emerged only in that period. A degree of diffuse sympathy for the trade has

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<sup>8</sup> The best example is ‘Los tequileros’: see Mark Cameron Edberg, *El Narcotraficante* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), pp. 37–42, and also Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido* (New York: Rayo, 2001), pp. 13–14. The association of a popular musical form with drug traffickers is not unique to Mexico. One feature of *vallenato* music in Colombia is the tendency for singers to add improvised words between verses to recognize friends in the audience or to comment on the party. In the 1970s, in commercial recordings, these interpolations began to refer to the record’s sponsors, which by the 1980s would often be famous *costeño* drug traffickers (See Molina Lora, ‘Narrativa de drogas: una investigación transatlántica en la producción cultural de España, México y Colombia’ [unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Ottawa, 2001], pp. 75–6). According to Peter Wade, ‘[A]lgunos de los grandes traficantes llevarían conjuntos vallenatos, entre otros músicos, para las fiestas de fin de semana en sus grandes fincas’ (*Música, raza y nación: música tropical en Colombia*, [Bogotá: Vicepresidencia de la República, 2002]). The *narcocorrido* also became popular in Colombia in the 1990s (see Luis Astorga, ‘Los corridos de traficantes de drogas en México y Colombia’, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 59.4 [1997], 245–261).

<sup>9</sup> Knight, ‘Narco-Violence’, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Reuter and David Ronfeldt, ‘Quest for Integrity: The Mexican-US Drug Issue in the 1980s’, *Journal of InterAmerican Studies and World Affairs*, 34.3 (1992), 89–153 (p. 92).

<sup>11</sup> Carrillo Fuentes led the Juárez Cartel until his death in 1997, allegedly as a result of a failed operation to change his appearance. He was famed for his extensive use of jet aircraft to smuggle cocaine, for which he earned the moniker ‘El señor de los cielos’. A *telenovela* with that title, based on his life, was released in 2013.

long existed in the north of Mexico, but the modern prestige of drug trafficking is partially a product of impunity, and, with it, a widespread social acceptance of the activity and those involved in it. It is impunity that has bred legends about the power of individual drug traffickers, to the point where impressionable young men will imitate traffickers in their music and clothing.<sup>12</sup> It was impunity that led drug traffickers at all levels to make little attempt to conceal their identity in public, at least until the recent crackdown by the Calderón administration (2006–12).

Why, then, did Mexican authorities take so long to grow uneasy about this clandestine industry? Of course, it was not illegal to begin with, but that scarcely mattered. The Mexican state has never been a perfect *Rechtsstaat*, committed to the rule of law.<sup>13</sup> Authoritarianism and the ubiquity of patron-client networks have made corruption commonplace, just as in many other parts of Latin America.<sup>14</sup> The political oligarchy has often used the state's authority to enrich itself. In the case of narcotics, an early example is Esteban Cantú, governor of Baja California between 1914 and 1920. Rather than let a lucrative business perish when the United States outlawed opium in 1914, he seized control of this suddenly more profitable trade for himself, granting leases for opium trafficking in the region in exchange for a monthly payment.<sup>15</sup> This pattern of behaviour continued once the Revolution was over and a single national party had been established in 1929.<sup>16</sup> The Mexican Revolution significantly expanded the reach and role of the Mexican state, by incorporating a mass base of support into the corporate structure of the PRI, and by greatly extending the state's powers of regulation over such areas as land, labour, education and the

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<sup>12</sup> Luis Astorga, 'The limits of anti-drug policy in Mexico', *International Social Science Journal*, 53.3 (2001), 427–434 (p. 430).

<sup>13</sup> Knight, 'Narco-Violence', p. 121. The concept of a *rechtsstaat* generally refers to states in which the judiciary and the executive are bound by the law of the land, and the legislature is bound by a constitution. Individual citizens are accorded certain inviolable rights in such a constitution.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley A. Pimentel, 'The Nexus of Organized Crime and Politics in Mexico', in *Organized Crime & Democratic Governability*, ed. by John Bailey and Roy Godson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 33–57 (pp. 35–6).

<sup>15</sup> Luis Astorga, 'Organized Crime and the Organization of Crime', in Bailey & Godson, *Organized Crime*, pp. 58–82 (p. 62). The price of each lease was \$45,000, plus a monthly fee of c. \$10,000.

<sup>16</sup> It was Plutarco Elías Calles who founded the first national party, the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, in 1929. Lázaro Cárdenas changed its name to the *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* in 1938. It assumed its current name, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, in 1946.

Church.<sup>17</sup> With greater power came greater scope for exploitation. It was practically an official strategy for local and regional politicians to abuse their discretionary powers, typically over land redistribution and labour reform, to maintain their personal popularity and the prestige of the PRI.<sup>18</sup> The same powers could be used for personal enrichment via rent-seeking. Many legitimate business, from mining companies to newspapers, would pay to avoid the putative threat of government intervention. Drug trafficking was illegal, so politicians could demand a higher price still from the smugglers.<sup>19</sup> This was a ‘cash-cow’ too difficult to resist.<sup>20</sup> Modern traffickers are often depicted as a Mafia, yet, as Alan Knight has argued, the real Mafia of the post-Revolutionary period could be found within the ranks of the PRI, since they were extorting money for protection.<sup>21</sup> The arrangement suited all sides. The smugglers avoided competition and gained the limited complicity of the state where necessary, while — aside from the profits — the politicians acquired a degree of local stability, plus the incorporation of yet another interest group into the PRI’s grand coalition.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, insofar as many government officials were motivated in part by nationalistic sentiments, they could easily rationalize their tolerance of people who gained valuable foreign currency by exporting to the USA and only caused significant domestic problems for the unpopular North American authorities.<sup>23</sup> Many *narconovelas* indict the Mexican state for complicity with drug trafficking, and their accusations rest on firm foundations.

In effect, the structure of drug trafficking in Mexico obeyed what social scientists call a model of

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<sup>17</sup> Knight, ‘Narco-Violence’, pp. 121–2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 122. A memorable example in Mexican literature of the far-from-equitable practice of land redistribution after the Revolution is given by ‘Nos han dado la tierra’, from Juan Rulfo’s collection of short stories *El Llano en llamas* (1953).

<sup>19</sup> Of course, such behaviour by government officials is hardly unique to Mexico among Latin American nations. To give a literary example, one might recall how Cayo Bermúdez extorts the illicit brothels in Lima in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Conversación en La Catedral*. It was the same government in real life, the military regime of Manuel Odría, that ended the legal cocaine trade in Perú (Gootenberg, ‘Cocaine’s Long March’, p. 163).

<sup>20</sup> Pimentel, ‘Nexus’, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Knight, ‘Narco-Violence’, pp. 122–3.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley Pimentel (‘Nexus’, p. 33) asserts that politicians received money for ‘development, investment, and campaign funding, as well as for personal enrichment’. However, Alan Knight believes the amount of money was relatively unimportant for purely political purposes until the 1980s, when the PRI was much weaker (‘Narco-Violence’, p. 125).

<sup>23</sup> See Reuter & Ronfeldt, ‘Quest’, pp. 99–101.

‘elite exploitation’.<sup>24</sup> Drug producers and traffickers were weak and geographically contained; local politicians and officials acting for an all-powerful political party could suffer them for as long as it was profitable or sensible to do so. What changed the situation was the extraordinary boom in demand for narcotics in the United States from the 1960s onwards.<sup>25</sup> This had several related consequences. The trafficking operation grew enormously both in scope and profitability, especially when Mexican smuggling operations began to transport Colombian cocaine.<sup>26</sup> The bigger the business, the larger and more high-level the network of state protection had to be. The infamous association between the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS) and narcotics dates from the 1970s, when the Mexican intelligence agency found support from the traffickers instrumental to fighting the left-wing insurgencies and could provide the nation-wide protection that larger trafficking operations now required.<sup>27</sup> It is for this reason that authors such as Élmér Mendoza, in *El amante de Janis Joplin*, and Martín Solares, in *Los minutos negros*, set their novels in the 1970s and draw attention to the brutality of the national security forces. It is correctly considered an important period of transition in the structure of the Mexican drug trade.<sup>28</sup> There have long been allegations that even the presidents of Mexico were complicit, and some authors directly allege this.<sup>29</sup> Outwardly, at least, Mexico paid lip service to the United States’ increasingly belligerent ‘War on Drugs’. It was the only nation to accept financial support for an aerial spraying campaign

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<sup>24</sup> Knight, ‘Narco-Violence’, p. 125.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126; Astorga, ‘Limits’, p. 428.

<sup>26</sup> Initially the most popular export was marihuana. Heroin produced in Mexico received a boost in the early 1970s when Turkey, hitherto the largest producer, outlawed the opium poppy and pursued a moderately successful eradication programme. In 1975 Mexico was supplying between 70 and 80% of US heroin (Reuter & Ronfeldt, ‘Quest’, p. 93). Demand for cocaine was not large until the late 1970s.

<sup>27</sup> The DFS was founded in 1947 to deal with internal security in Mexico. Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall credit Miguel Nazar Haro, director of the DFS between 1977 and 1982, with bringing the various smuggling operations under one organization, in order to control and protect it better (*Cocaine Politics* [Oxford: University of California Press, 1991], p. 40).

<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Sergio González Rodríguez sets *El vuelo* (2008) in the late 1960s, during the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. However simplistic, it is often thought that the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 marked a transition from the populism of the post-Revolutionary period to a more repressive period in the history of the PRI. González Rodríguez sets his novel at that juncture for the same reasons as Mendoza and Solares choose the late 1970s; that is, to connect the (perceived) corruption in national politics to the rise of the drug trade.

<sup>29</sup> See Dale Scott & Marshall, *Cocaine Politics*, p. 39; Leónidas Alfaro, in *Tierra Blanca* (1996), is the least subtle author with regard to this accusation. Martín Solares is more oblique: See Ch. 3 of this study.

in the 1970s: Operation Condor.<sup>30</sup> But while Mexico's production of marihuana and heroin decreased markedly in the late 1970s, as a result of both 'Condor' and a serious drought, the trafficking organizations themselves were thriving on the cocaine trade.<sup>31</sup> The 'Guadalajara Cartel', led by Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, acted as an umbrella organization for most of Mexico's drug traffickers in the 1980s, and some analysts argue that it had completely co-opted the government in Mexico's second city.<sup>32</sup> However, it is clear that the state still held the upper hand. When DEA agent Enrique Camarena was notoriously tortured and murdered in 1985, pressure from the United States forced the Mexican President, Miguel de la Madrid, to take a harder line. The principal suspects, key allies of Félix Gallardo, were arrested within a year, and the Guadalajara cartel broken up into the many competing organizations we see today.<sup>33</sup> The DFS was disbanded completely, and trafficking was declared a threat to national security.<sup>34</sup>

The Mexican state has not been able to act so decisively in the last decade, else the bloodshed since 2006 would surely have been avoided. Far from eradicating the drug trade, some critics of recent government policy have seen the current conflict as a belated attempt simply to reinstate central oversight after the balance of power had been fundamentally altered. Thus, the journalist Anabel Hernández argues that the Calderón presidency systematically favoured the organization led by Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán, in an attempt to simplify the criminal underworld.<sup>35</sup> This has been difficult because the traffickers are more powerful in absolute terms. Certainly their operational networks within Mexico are larger. Traditionally drug traffickers had little reason to get involved with 'domestic' crimes such as robbery, kidnapping and racketeering: drugs were profitable enough, and it was unwise to provoke one's patrons in the PRI.<sup>36</sup> But this has changed in the last 30 years, once Mexican traffickers expanded their operations to include distribution of drugs *within*

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<sup>30</sup> Reuter & Ronfeldt, 'Quest', p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 114. While this may have been true as regards the local authorities, Felix Gallardo was clearly still dependent on the DFS nationally.

<sup>33</sup> Astorga, 'Limits', p. 429.

<sup>34</sup> Reuter & Ronfeldt, 'Quest', p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> Anabel Hernández, *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and Their Godfathers* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 241.

<sup>36</sup> June S. Beittel, *Mexico's Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of the Rising Violence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 07.01.11), pp. 3, 6.

Mexico, and not just their production and conveyance to the United States. Their connections to lower-level street gangs have been strengthened accordingly.<sup>37</sup> At the heart of this transformation was a move by the Colombian cartels, in the mid-1980s, to pay their Mexican smugglers in cocaine rather than cash.<sup>38</sup> Whereas Mexico was once unusual among drug-producing nations in lacking significant levels of domestic consumption, this is no longer the case.<sup>39</sup> The more cocaine that stayed in Mexico, the more people found reason to buy it, and the more criminals were needed to sell it. Even so, there is a more important reason for the cartels' increased power, and it is simply that they are wealthier. In the 1980s the major Colombian groups, based in Cali and Medellín, were the dominant drug-trafficking organizations in the world, all but monopolizing the production of coca leaf in South America and its refinement into cocaine. After their collapse in the 1990s, the cocaine industry became progressively splintered, although large parts of it in Colombia itself were subordinated to paramilitary organizations such as the FARC and the AUC, because they controlled the relevant territory.<sup>40</sup> At the same time the United States was pursuing a successful maritime interdiction campaign that crippled the smuggling operations running from Colombia to Florida via the Caribbean.<sup>41</sup> Only the politically weak Haiti remained as a viable haven for Caribbean drug smuggling.<sup>42</sup> The best route was now Mexico. A third of all cocaine reaching the United States was transhipped through Mexico in the late 1980s, but by 2007 the figure was closer to 90%, as the fragmented and weaker South American producers became dependent on Mexican intermediaries.<sup>43</sup> The volume of trade has increased dramatically. A single tonne of cocaine per annum was reaching the United States in 1970, one year after Nixon began his 'war on drugs'. The

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<sup>37</sup> The U.S. government alleges that Mexican organizations are taking control of retail-level distribution in the USA as well. It notes the presence of Mexican groups in 230 US cities (Beittel, 'Mexico's DTOs', p. 3).

<sup>38</sup> Beittel, 'Mexico's DTOs', p. 5. There is doubt as to which side instigated this significant alteration in the arrangement; Gootenberg ('Cocaine's Long March', p. 169) blames the Mexican groups.

<sup>39</sup> Reuter & Ronfeldt, 'Quest', p. 91.

<sup>40</sup> Clare Ribando Seelke, Liana Sun Wyler & June S. Beittel, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Illicit Drug Trafficking and U.S. Counterdrug Programs* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 25.01.11), p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Colleen W. Cook, *Mexico's Drug Cartels* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 16.10.07), p. 4. It was *relatively* successful by the standards of other eradication or interception campaigns, most of which have been manifest failures, especially Operation Condor in Mexico.

<sup>42</sup> Haiti still deals with some 10% of shipments bound for the USA (Gootenberg, 'Cocaine's Long March', p. 169).

<sup>43</sup> Reuter & Ronfeldt, 'Quest', p. 91; Seelke, Wyler & Beittel, *Latin America and the Caribbean*, p. 2; Gootenberg gives the same figures in 'Cocaine's Long March', p. 172.

current estimate ranges from 900 to 1400 tonnes produced for the US market.<sup>44</sup> Revenues from the sale of illegal drugs in the United States, of which cocaine constitutes approximately half, have been estimated at 80 billion dollars.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, even though the Mexican cartels have been more divided than ever in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the importance of Mexican territory as a reliable point of access to the American market has made them far more profitable too.<sup>46</sup> In the struggle to control the border, more violence can be afforded, in both senses of the word.<sup>47</sup>

Such an expansion of drug trafficking would have posed a problem for any political system, but it has been catastrophic in the unstable Mexico of the last two decades. In the face of several economic crises (1982, '86, '95), high inflation and limited resources, successive presidencies shrank the enormous web of patronage and state benefits that had held the Mexican system together since the Revolution.<sup>48</sup> In doing so, the PRI was forfeiting the personal loyalties that had buttressed its political dominance. The drug traffickers filled this hole directly in some parts of the country with a form of limited 'social banditry'.<sup>49</sup> At times of recession, the drug trade brought jobs and investment to many rural areas of northern Mexico, and several *narco* bosses have made a show of their generosity by building schools, holding public parties, supporting the Church and donating to charity.<sup>50</sup> This aspect of the behaviour of major drug traffickers is well reflected in Herrera's *Trabajos del reino*, which casts the drug lord as a medieval king dispensing patronage.

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<sup>44</sup> Gootenberg, 'Cocaine's Long March', p. 160. Some of this is intercepted, however.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>46</sup> One of the reasons that Mexico is a more reliable point of access than in previous decades is the North American Free Trade Agreement, which came into force in 1994. The increased volume of legal trade across the U.S.-Mexican border has undoubtedly made smuggling narcotics cheaper and easier. However, it is hard to say whether, for this reason, Mexico would have become more important to the drug trade even if the Colombian cartels had not collapsed or the maritime interdiction campaign had failed.

<sup>47</sup> That is, the stakes are higher, so the traffickers are more prepared than ever to resort to violence, and to extreme manifestations of it; with greater finances, veritable armies of enforcers can now be bought.

<sup>48</sup> Knight, 'Narco-Violence', pp. 128–9.

<sup>49</sup> On this subject, consult Mark Edberg, 'Drug Traffickers as Social Bandits', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 17.3 (2001), 259–277. In his seminal work *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), Eric Hobsbawm defined social bandits as 'peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who [...] are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported' (p. 17). The limited provision of welfare to the peasantry is a common feature of these bandits' practice: 'There is no question that 'noble' bandits have the reputation of redistributing wealth. [...] Naturally in pre-industrial societies liberality and charity are a moral obligation for the 'good' man of power and wealth' (pp. 44–5).

<sup>50</sup> Knight, 'Narco-Violence', pp. 130–1.

Elsewhere, pressure to democratize meant the PRI could no longer maintain its political monopoly. The opposition *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) won its first governorship in Baja California in 1989. By 1997 the PRI had lost control of the lower house of Congress, followed by the Presidency in 2000. As the protective power and authority of the central government declined, regional PRI politicians found it much harder to subordinate the powerful traffickers in their vicinity.<sup>51</sup> Where money was needed for increasingly competitive elections, and the Presidency was no longer providing it, it was all the more likely that politicians would be ‘bought’.<sup>52</sup> Opposition governors were less likely to want to co-operate with traffickers, but without even the support of the weakened PRI Presidency, they lacked the means to enforce their will. It is probably no coincidence that higher levels of violence associated with drug trafficking in the 1990s were experienced in precisely those states where the political opposition had gained power, such as Chihuahua and Nuevo León.<sup>53</sup> Here is another unfortunate coincidence, because the right-wing opposition was more likely to make breakthroughs where it counted, in the rich northern states where drug trafficking was based. Despite its importance, the decline of the PRI has not been a major topic in Mexican fiction about drug trafficking. Nonetheless, the fact that Mendoza, for example, sets *Un asesino solitario* (1999) in the days before the assassination of the PRI candidate for president in 1994, Luis Donaldo Colosio, shows some appreciation of the importance of national political developments to the north of Mexico’s experience of drug-related lawlessness.

From 2000, the two PAN Presidencies made several attempts to regain the initiative. Most recently, from 2006 to 2012, President Calderón militarized the struggle against the cartels by deploying over 45,000 soldiers and federal police across the country.<sup>54</sup> But in a pluralist democracy with weak institutions, the loyalties of politicians, police officers and soldiers go to the highest bidder, not least if the offer is ‘plata o plomo’. Governments have been very successful in disbanding the operations of several high-profile *narcos* in the last decade. The arrest of nearly all the leaders of

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<sup>51</sup> Astorga, ‘Limits’, p. 430.

<sup>52</sup> Knight, ‘Narco-Violence’, pp. 133–4.

<sup>53</sup> Astorga, ‘Limits’, p. 430.

<sup>54</sup> June. S. Beittel, *Mexico’s Drug-Related Violence* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 27.05.09), p.1.

the Tijuana Cartel between 2000 and 2003 is a case in point.<sup>55</sup> But whenever one leader or one group falls, the other organizations fight viciously over the spoils, which accounts in part for the shocking increase in violence between the traffickers themselves since 2006. Without doubt the Sinaloa cartel has been the major beneficiary of Calderón's campaign, because the majority of its rivals have been seriously weakened.<sup>56</sup> With this achieved, and with the new PRI presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto, Mexico may well see a decline in violence. Nonetheless, the scale of the killing has shocked the world. With the exception of *Balas de plata*, the novels examined in detail in this thesis were written before the beginning of Calderón's counterinsurgency campaign. In general, the literature written since has failed to come to terms with the chaos of this period in Mexico's history.

## II Definitions

Critics who have addressed the *narconovela* agree that it is difficult to define. For Alberto Fonseca, they do not amount to a distinct literary genre.<sup>57</sup> He prefers the broader term *narrativa del narcotráfico*, or simply *narco-narrativa*, which suggests that we are dealing with a category based on subject matter not form. Hermann Herlinghaus talks of both 'narconarratives' and the 'narco-novel', but he cannot pin down their essential subject matter; rather, there is 'an array of interwoven phenomena whose increasing presence across the hemisphere seems to correspond to the difficulty in providing a general description'.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, Fonseca is able to suggest five characteristics, both formal and thematic, that recur in the fiction he covers: the use of either well-

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<sup>55</sup> See Jorge Fernández Menéndez, *El otro poder* (Mexico: Aguilar, 2002), pp. 75–90.

<sup>56</sup> For a journalist's version of Calderón's six-year campaign, see Anabel Hernández, *Narcoland*, Chs. 10–11.

<sup>57</sup> '[N]o constituyen un género literario en particular' (Alberto Fonseca, 'Cuando llovió dinero en Macondo: Literatura y narcotráfico en Colombia y México' [unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kansas, 2009], p. 9).

<sup>58</sup> Hermann Herlinghaus, *Narco-Epics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 51.

educated observer or first-person protagonist narrators;<sup>59</sup> a tendency towards a testimonial or documentary register; an emphasis on the similarities between drug traffickers and the police; an emphasis on the transnational features of the drug trade; and an evaluation of the damaging effects of drug trafficking on the social fabric, in particular the corruption of officials and a culture of 'easy money'.<sup>60</sup> Fonseca's definition attempts to cover both Colombian and Mexican fiction. Arguably the fourth point is uncommon in Mexican fiction.<sup>61</sup> Should we discount it, of the four novels examined in this thesis only *Contrabando* would fit the specification. This is not to say Fonseca's observations are unhelpful. The final feature is almost universal, although it clearly admits of a wide range of concerns. Nonetheless, if *Balas de plata*, *Los minutos negros* and *Trabajos del reino* are not typical of Mexican writing on drug trafficking (by Fonseca's criteria), then this hints at the extent to which the best writers on the subject have attempted to avoid the emerging clichés of the genre. Not one of them would consider himself a *narconovelistista*.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Well-educated — *letrado* — narrators are more common in Colombian *sicaresca* fiction. Fonseca cites Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994) and Darío Jaramillo Agudelo's *Cartas cruzadas* (1995). The reason may be a perception among Medellín's writers (and inhabitants) of the 1990s that *sicarios* were an alien phenomenon, hence the need for a separate local voice that could distance itself from them. According to Gabriela Polit, this attitude is evident in the condescending attitude towards the local slang, *parlache*, in *sicaresca* novels, where it is clearly linked to the *narcos*. Antonio Salazar's *No nacimos pa' semilla* (1990) included a glossary. By contrast, Élmer Mendoza provides no help to the reader. His own language is the *culichi* slang of the drug traffickers, because that is the common idiom of the people of Culiacán (see Polit Dueñas, *Narrating Narcos*, pp. 118–20). Rascón Banda's *Contrabando* has a well-educated narrator, but this has to do with an attempt to dramatize the author's struggle to represent his subject adequately (see Ch. 4).

<sup>60</sup> Fonseca, 'Cuando llovió dinero en Macondo', p. 53. While providing a good overview of the range of fiction written about drug trafficking in Mexican and Colombian fiction, Fonseca's main aim is to examine what he calls 'the culture of easy money' (Ibid., p.3). He does not analyse his selection of novels as literary productions so much as mere illustrations of the social and cultural changes that international drug trafficking has wrought.

<sup>61</sup> Some of Mendoza's fiction is an exception, e.g. *Efecto tequila* (2004) and *La prueba del ácido* (2010). Several *narconovelas* mention (and criticize) the United States, but few are set there or contain American characters. An exception is *The Gringo Connection: Secretos del narcotráfico* (2000), by Armando Ayala Anguiano.

<sup>62</sup> According to Herrera, 'el hecho de tener el tema del narco como punto en común sólo significa que tenemos el tema del narco como punto en común en nuestras vidas cotidianas, pero no significa que sea el núcleo de todas esas historias' (Patricio Zunini, 'Escrito en la frontera', *Blog Eterna Cadencia*, 21 June 2011, <<http://blog.eternacadencia.com.ar/archives/2011/14235>>). Mendoza is considered a spokesperson for *narcoliteratura*, but he often maintains that he is not interested in drug trafficking *per se*: (e.g.) 'Yo no siento que a mí me interese el tema así como tal, pues que sea parte de mis preocupaciones o que me exija una preparación, no. Estoy ahí y él está conmigo y entonces sale natural. Creo que es un asunto de contexto o de destino. Vivir ahí y estar ahí y querer expresar cosas sobre mi realidad real entonces siempre aparecen temas que tienen que ver con el narco.' (Miguel Cabañas, "'Un discurso que suena': Élmer Mendoza y la literatura mexicana norteña', *Especulo: Revista de estudios literarios*, 31 (2005), <<http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero31/emendoza.html>>).

Luis Eduardo Molina Lora favours the term *narrativa de drogas*, on the political grounds that *narcotráfico* subsumes a wide range of activities under the stigma of illegality. Certainly the term *narcotraficante* is vague. There is an important difference between the poor peasant farmer from the highlands who occasionally (or, indeed, frequently) grows drugs on his plot — the *gomerero* or *chutamero* — and the large landowner who directs the production of narcotics in his locale and is likely to have important connections to the drug trade outside his own base of influence. The ill-fated small-timers of Ch. 8 of *Contrabando* are hardly comparable to a powerful *patrón* such as don Heleno in Leónidas Alfaro's *Tierra Blanca* (1996). Moreover, there is a vast difference between that rural milieu and the urban world in which, for instance, independent street gangs may have a role in the distribution of drugs and extreme poverty encourages many to join even larger trafficking organizations in a range of capacities. A breadth of urban characters with variable connections to the drug trade appear in Ramírez Heredia's *La Esquina de los Ojos Rojos* [sic.] (2006). With regard to a larger criminal organization, the experience of the specialist smuggler and the contract killer (or *sicario*) can differ, not least if the individual in question will often operate independently. And despite their close entanglement — a common theme in the *narconovela* — there is an obvious difference between the henchmen (lately, the paramilitary forces) of a drug cartel and the officers of the local Judicial Police who, depending on the situation, might regulate the drug trade themselves or be entirely subservient to it. The former is the case in Gerardo Cornejo's *Juan Justino Judicial* (1996). Molina's notion would incorporate novels whose focus is not the drug trade itself but any of the related and contingent phenomena.<sup>63</sup> However, since this could include almost anything, without the need to mention the drug trade at all, it is doubtful whether his term is helpful. Indeed, it may not suggest what he wants it to. A collection of short stories dealing only with the consumption of drugs, such as Julián Herbert's *Cocaína: Manual de usuario* (2006), which ignores the sub-culture of the traffickers, the violence and the corruption, has little in common with novels that concern themselves with precisely such topics; yet *Cocaína* is surely a *narrativa de drogas*. Understandably, other critics have avoided the issue. Gabriela Polit

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<sup>63</sup> Molina, 'Narrativa de drogas', pp. 288–9.

Dueñas discusses only fiction written by authors based in Culiacán in the relevant sections of her recent monograph, *Narrating Narcos*. Such is the long-standing connection of Culiacán, and Sinaloa as a whole, with the production of narcotics and the cultural trappings of drug trafficking, that *culichi* fiction appears to count necessarily as fiction about drug trafficking. Hence she does not trouble herself with the thorny issue of whether fiction set in Chihuahua (*Contrabando*), Tamaulipas (*Los minutos negros*), or along the border (*Trabajos del reino*) might have anything important in common.

What they do have in common is that they are written by northern — *norteño* — authors about the north of Mexico. Some authors and critics have suggested that this is an important trait in itself. In an article for the Mexican daily *La Jornada* in 2001, Eduardo Antonio Parra outlined what he termed *la nueva narrativa del norte*.<sup>64</sup> Parra drew attention to the wealth of fiction written in the 1990s that used a distinctively *norteño* idiom and recounted what was, in his view, a common experience of living in the north of Mexico:

El norte de México no es simple geografía: hay en él un devenir muy distinto al que registra la historia del resto del país; una manera de pensar, de actuar, de sentir y de hablar derivadas de ese mismo devenir y de la lucha constante contra el medio y contra la cultura de los gringos, extraña y absorbente.<sup>65</sup>

Parra's grievance, in this and later essays, was the lack of serious attention being paid in Mexico City to the literature produced in the north. This was an assertion of regional pride. But the authors mentioned, from Daniel Sada to Ricardo Elizondo to Élmer Mendoza, varied hugely in terms of style and subject matter. There were many dissenting voices. Although he recognized the popularity of certain 'symbols' associated with the north, such as the desert with its connotations of inhospitability, lawlessness and barbarity, Julián Herbert has argued that there is nothing

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<sup>64</sup> Several critics have endorsed the idea. See Nora Guzmán, *Narrativa mexicana del norte: aproximaciones críticas* (El Paso: University of Texas Press, 2008); Miguel Rodríguez Lozano, *Escenarios del norte de México: Daniel Sada, Gerardo Cornejo, Jesús Gardea y Ricardo Elizondo* (Mexico: UNAM, 2003); Miguel Rodríguez Lozano, *El Norte: Una Experiencia Contemporánea En La Narrativa Mexicana* (Monterrey: Fondo Estatal, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Eduardo Antonio Parra, 'Notas sobre la nueva narrativa del norte', *Jornada semanal*, 27 May 2001, <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2001/05/27/sem-parra.htm>>.

particularly distinctive about the region.<sup>66</sup> Parra had created a myth to which certain northern authors were happy to subscribe, and which Mexican publishing houses were eager to market as the distinctive new ‘flavour’ of their national literature.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, Rafael Lemus, who accepted the notion, complained that *norteño* fiction was obsessed with drug trafficking:

Desde allá se escribe una literatura que alude irreparablemente al narco. Es imposible huir: el narcotráfico lo avasalla todo y toda escritura sobre el norte es sobre el narcotráfico. Algunos autores omiten su presencia y retratan su ausencia: el desierto de Daniel Sada, el circo de David Toscana, la metaliteratura de Cristina Rivera Garza. Otros miran de frente al narco y apuntan: Federico Campbell, Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, Élmer Mendoza, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, Juan José Rodríguez, Eduardo Antonio Parra, Luis Felipe G. Lomelí... El Barrio.<sup>68</sup>

Parra objected that this was untrue. In places the drug trade was an inevitable context, but it was rarely the specific subject of the authors mentioned.<sup>69</sup> To include those who avoid the topic entirely is unhelpful. Nevertheless, the growth in fiction about drug trafficking and the marketing of *la nueva narrativa norteña* have coincided to the extent that most northern novels that touch upon the topic, however briefly, have been branded *narconovelas* by the media. Whatever else they share, their being designated *narconovelas* is one attribute that the four novels covered in this study have

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<sup>66</sup> ‘¿Qué comparte mi pueblo con ciudades como Hermosillo, Monterrey, Zacatecas, Mexicali, por dar algunos nombres?... No siempre una geografía: mi casa está a mil kilómetros del D.F. y a tres mil de Tijuana [...] No comparte tampoco mi ciudad con otras del norte un estricto corpus de hábitos generados por el entorno natural, social o económico: Coahuila es (o era hasta hace unos días) un estado con bajos índices de violencia, contrario a otros estados fronterizos. Durango tiene mayor emigración que inmigración, a diferencia de lo que sucede en Nuevo León o en la Baja Norte. Y en Zacatecas rifa más el mezcal que la Tecate, con sobrada razón: aquí a las doce del mediodía nos estamos derritiendo entre sudores, allá casi siempre hace un chingo de frío. [...] ¿Cuál será entonces el eje de nuestra “norteñidad”? Me parece que, de manera señalada, un conjunto de símbolos: el desierto [...] la franqueza [...] el rabelesiano ritual de la fiesta que no se acaba nunca; el ancestral nomadismo comanche traducido en clave posmoderna a los fenómenos de la migración ilegal y la población flotante; y el subversivo privilegio de haber hecho de la violencia [...] nuestro patrimonio, nuestra Gran Aportación al imago nacional’ (Julián Herbert, ‘El norte como fantasma’, *Literal*, 19/20 (2006), pp. 6–11).

<sup>67</sup> Diana Palaversich, ‘La Nueva Narrativa Del Norte: Moviendo Fronteras De La Literatura Mexicana’, *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 61.1 (2007), 9–26 (p. 11).

<sup>68</sup> Rafael Lemus, ‘Balas de salva: Notas sobre el narco y la narrativa mexicana’, *Letras libres*, September 2005, <<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/balas-de-salva>>.

<sup>69</sup> Eduardo Antonio Parra, ‘Norte, narcotráfico y literatura’, *Letras libres*, October 2005, <<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/norte-narcotrafico-y-literatura>>.

in common, and is reason enough for considering them together.<sup>70</sup>

### III Varieties and Influences

Evidently there is no all-encompassing definition of the *narconovela*; but there are common characteristics in the vein of a Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblance’.<sup>71</sup> Insofar as Alberto Fonseca was able to identify features exhibited in both Colombian and Mexican narratives about drug trafficking, this points to the influence of the earlier Colombian fiction on Mexican approaches to the topic. Parra is correct to assert that most northern Mexican authors have approached the phenomenon of drug trafficking in an oblique manner. It has been a mere ‘complemento’ to a wider social narrative, or a ‘soporte circunstancial’ in the development of a character.<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, there is a purely aesthetic motivation for this choice. Parra was concerned that authors should not merely reproduce the style and subject matter of documentary journalism, which naturally concentrated on the most important *narcos* and their notable actions. Indeed, such is the quality of the investigative writing produced by Jesús Blancornelas, for instance, that one wonders what a work of fiction could possibly add.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, there is an implicit political stance. Not all of northern Mexico’s social problems can be attributed to the consequences of drug trafficking, and few authors consider themselves to be solely *narconovelistas*, if at all. But a third reason is the influence of Colombian models. Colombia was not the first country to produce fiction about drug trafficking. There is agreement that the first such novel was a little-known Mexican testimonial

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<sup>70</sup> Among many others, Jorge Volpi cites the work of Herrera, Solares and Mendoza in a review of Mexican literature about drug trafficking for the *The Nation* (Jorge Volpi, ‘Dispatches from the Front: On Narconovelas’, *The Nation*, 19 August 2013, <<http://www.thenation.com/article/175535/dispatches-front-narconovelas>>). Herlinghaus includes Herrera, Mendoza and Rascón Banda (but not Solares) in his list of Mexican authors of ‘narco-novels’ (*Narco-epics*, p. 82).

<sup>71</sup> By analogy with the physical features shared by members of the same family, in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that, in fact, many things apparently related by virtue of their sharing a common feature may instead be connected by a series of overlapping similarities where there is no single feature common to all.

<sup>72</sup> Eduardo Antonio Parra, ‘Trabajos del reino de Yuri Herrera’, *Letras libres* (Sept. 2005), <<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/libros/trabajos-del-reino-de-yuri-herrera>>.

<sup>73</sup> Jesús Blancornelas (1936–2006) was the author of six books and founded the Tijuana-based magazine *Zeta*, well known for its reporting on drug trafficking. Due to where he was based, much of his work centres on the Arellano-Félix organization, who attempted to murder him on several occasions. He won the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize in 1999.

narrative, *Diario de un narcotraficante* (1962), by the Sinaloan journalist Angelo Nacaveva.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, the Uruguayan author Carlos Martínez Moreno covered the international cocaine trade in *Coca* (1970), and the Bolivian Tito Gutiérrez Vargas began a trilogy of novels that would chart the deleterious effects of coca production on the Chapare region with *Mariposa blanca* in 1986.<sup>75</sup> Just one Colombian novel — *Coca, novela de la mafia criolla* (1977), by Hernán Hoyos — treated a similar topic, in relation to the Valle del Cauca region. None of these works of fiction was (or is) well known.<sup>76</sup> It was only in Colombia, in the early 1990s, that there developed a recognizable and acknowledged body of fiction that dealt in a similar fashion with the same concrete situation: namely, the explosion in urban violence that was partly the result of the activities of drug trafficking organizations. In 1995, Héctor Abad Facionlince coined a pejorative name for this ‘nueva escuela literaria’: the *sicaresca*.<sup>77</sup> Unlike the isolated *narco*-novels mentioned, these were not narratives about the drug trade *per se*, but about the society that the drug trade had wrought. Most Mexican fiction has followed a comparably indirect path.<sup>78</sup> While the *sicaresca* is also a broad category, several of its specific approaches have also been essayed in turn and developed by northern Mexican authors.

The *sicaresca* takes the (typically youthful) assassin for hire — the *sicario* — as its centre of attention.<sup>79</sup> As a recognizable type, it dates from the assassination in April 1984 of the Colombian Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, at the hands of two youths riding a motorcycle. The

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<sup>74</sup> Molina, ‘Narrativa de drogas’, p. 287; Herlinghaus, *Narco-epics*, p. 53; Polit, *Narrating Narcos*, p. 48.

<sup>75</sup> Herlinghaus provides a good summary of *Mariposa blanca* in *Narco-epics*, pp. 66–82.

<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, both Herlinghaus and Polit Dueñas devote sections of their recent monographs on the fiction of drug trafficking to Nacaveva’s novel: *Narrating Narcos*, pp. 49–54; *Narco-epics*, pp. 53–66.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Hay una nueva escuela literaria surgida en Medellín: yo la he denominado la Sicaresca antioqueña. Hemos pasado del sicariato a la sicaresca. Al sicario mismo, inventado por ellos, después lo emplearon, lo siguen empleando otros grupos. Para cobrar, para ajustar cuentas, para secuestrar y también para liberar secuestrados, para asuntos políticos. Y lo ha empleado la literatura como nuevo tipo en relatos a veces buenos, a veces horribles, casi siempre truculentos’ (Abad Facionlince, ‘Estética y narcotráfico’, *Número*, 7 [1995], 2–3).

<sup>78</sup> This fact leads Hermann Herlinghaus to embrace novels not often considered *narconovelas* using his fuzzy concept of ‘narco-epics’ (‘Narco-epics’, p. 83), including Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004) on the grounds that it contains one section on the Cd. Juárez *femicidios*, a series of murders which may or may not have anything to do with drug gangs.

<sup>79</sup> The term *sicario* derives from the Latin *sicarius* (in modern Hebrew סיקריקים - *siqariqim*), which referred to a faction of the Jewish Zealots who carried out public murders of notable figures with their small daggers, *sicae*, in order to destabilize Roman rule in Judaea. In later Latin, the term was extended to refer to any assassin.

murder was commissioned by Pablo Escobar, and heralded a period of bloody direct confrontation between Escobar's 'Medellín Cartel' and the Colombian state. Thus the *sicario* and the drug cartels became associated, although motorcycle-bound assassins had been a common fixture of gang violence in the poor *comunas* of Medellín since at least the late 1970s.<sup>80</sup> The *sicario* is a central character in the novels *El sicario* (Mario Bahamón Dussán, 1988), *El pelaíto que no duró nada* (Víctor Gaviria, 1991), *Sicario* (Alberto Vázquez Figueroa, 1991), *La Virgen de los sicarios* (Fernando Vallejo, 1994), *Morir con papá* (Óscar Collazos, 1997), *Rosario Tijeras* (Jorge Franco, 1999), and *Sangre ajena* (Arturo Alape, 2000). He is a marginal figure in a host of other novels, including Gustavo Bolívar's popular *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* (2005).<sup>81</sup> Arguably there is no particular feature of the Mexican context that would encourage a focus on the figure of the hit-man to the exclusion of other possible character types in the diverse world of Mexican drug trafficking. The fact that the stock character exists in Mexican fiction at all owes something to the Colombian influence. But Molina is correct to say that Colombian fiction has concentrated much more on the figure of the *sicario* than Mexican fiction.<sup>82</sup> He is a protagonist in only Parra's *Nostalgia de la sombra*, Mendoza's *Un asesino solitario* and Alejandro Almazán's *Entre perros*.

The term *sicaresca* is also controversial.<sup>83</sup> Evidently there is a comparison being drawn with the Spanish picaresque tradition. In an interview in 1999, Abad claimed that the similarity lay in the use of a 1<sup>st</sup> person protagonist narrator, who is presented with benevolence.<sup>84</sup> Both genres centre on a stock character: the *pícaro* and the *sicario*. Among several shared characteristics, Camila Segura Bonnet notes their youth, their dirty urban surroundings, their experience of living (and suffering) at the margins of society, and their functional role as revealers of corruption and hypocrisy in

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<sup>80</sup> Polit Dueñas, *Narrating Narcos*, p. 113.

<sup>81</sup> It is not well regarded. Óscar Osorio calls *Sin tetas* 'una de las novelas peor escritas en la literatura colombiana' ('El sicario en la novela colombiana', *Poligramas*, 29 (2008), 61-81 [p. 72, n. 21]).

<sup>82</sup> Molina, 'Narrativa de drogas', p. 247.

<sup>83</sup> Aside from the considerations that follow, Abad Faciolince was wrong to consider the phenomenon exclusive to Medellín. Osorio notes that *El sicario* was published in Cali and that *El pelaíto que duró nada* takes places mainly in Bogotá ('El sicario', pp. 64-5, n. 4.) He prefers the term *literatura del sicariato* (p. 66).

<sup>84</sup> Renato Ravelo, 'Entrevista con Héctor Abad Faciolince', *La Jornada*, 27 May 1999, <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/1999/05/27/cul-oponer.html>>.

others.<sup>85</sup> Their lives are typically peripatetic. As such, the typical picaresque or *sicario* narrative consists of a series of episodic adventures in which a range of social problems are discerned and implicitly criticized. But here the similarities end. For Óscar Osorio, the central function of picaresque fiction is didactic — ‘divertir y moralizar’ — whereas Colombian authors tend to be more concerned with expressing shock at the irrational world around them.<sup>86</sup> In his judgement, nearly all Colombian fiction dealing directly with *sicarios* holds a nigh-on apocalyptic view of the extent of Colombia’s social disintegration.<sup>87</sup> They are primarily sociological rather than psychological novels. Naturally there has to be a perspective available from which to express such disquiet. It is significant, therefore, that few of the 1<sup>st</sup> person narrators to which Abad alludes are actually the *sicarios* themselves. This differs significantly from the picaresque in which, in the words of one critic, ‘not only are the hero and his actions picaresque, but everything else in the story is colored with the sensibility [...] of the *pícaro*-narrator’.<sup>88</sup> The picaresque is autobiographical, sometimes ‘confessional’ in tone, but the Colombian *sicaresca* is not.<sup>89</sup> Arguably the relevant *sicario* is not even a well-developed character in the two most famous Colombian *sicaresca* novels: *La virgen de los sicarios* and *Rosario Tijeras*. According to Ana María Mutis, the *sicarios* Alexis and Rosario are ‘objectified’ figures, since they can only be understood in the terms imposed on them by tendentious narrators who pay frequent attention not only to their

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<sup>85</sup> Camila Segura Bonnett, ‘Kinismo y melodrama en *La virgen de los sicarios* y *Rosario Tijeras*’, *Estudios de Literatura Colombiana*, 14 (2004), 111–36 (p. 115).

<sup>86</sup> Osorio, ‘El sicario’, p. 65.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>88</sup> Claudio Guillén, ‘Toward a Definition of the Picaresque’, in *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 71–106 [p. 81]. Ana María Mutis (‘La novela de sicarios y la ilusión picaresca’, *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 34.1 [2009], 207–226) examines this point of difference in detail (p. 209). It should be noted that not all picaresque novels are written in the first person, but the foundational ones are (*Ibid.*, p. 223, n. 4). This is accepted by Peter Dunn (*Spanish Picaresque Fiction: A New Literary History* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993], p. 5) even though Dunn rejects the idea that the picaresque is a coherent genre.

<sup>89</sup> Mutis, ‘La novela de sicarios’, pp. 208, 213.

fascinating (hence, little understood) behaviour but to their physical beauty.<sup>90</sup>

It is Mexican fiction, particularly in the work of Élmér Mendoza, that has shown greater enthusiasm for those picaresque characteristics that are absent from Colombian fiction.<sup>91</sup> The *sicaresca* has not just been slavishly imitated. Jorge Macías, his *sicario* in *Un asesino solitario*, is a humorous rogue rather than a brutal or brutalized killer; he retells his own adventures in a very idiosyncratic and tendentious fashion. Here is the autobiography and the subjective perspective that picaresque in particular demands. The protagonists of *El amante de Janis Joplin* and *Efecto tequila* are in the same mould. What is lacking is the moralistic or confessional tone of picaresque fiction. Jorge regrets his own decisions only when they put him in danger; he does not repent of his profession or his values, which are scrupulously static and obviously questionable. For this reason Mendoza has been open to the criticism of being too sympathetic to his characters. It would be inaccurate to say that the criminal characters in his novels, *narcos* or not, are treated favourably, especially by comparison with their well-known glorification in (some of) the *narcocorridos*. But in the absence of an alternative perspective on events than the one provided by the protagonists, and in the presence of brutalities and manipulations from a range of other superficially ‘respectable’ figures, be they politicians or police officers, it is all too easy to sympathize with them. As we shall see, in Mendoza there is no overt anger or shock at the situation represented, in stark contrast to the Colombian *sicaresca*. For the critic Rafael Lemus, a resident of Mexico City, this is a lamentable feature of northern Mexican fiction in general.<sup>92</sup> There does exist in Mendoza a variety of the

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<sup>90</sup> See Mutis, ‘La novela de sicarios’, particularly pp. 211–15. Mutis assumes, following certain strains of Feminist theory, that because the *sicario* figure has no voice then he or she has no power. She appears blind to the consideration that being the object of someone else’s attention can (in certain circumstances) be a position of power from which one can control the beholden observer. Neither Alexis (in *La virgen de los sicarios*) or Rosario (in *Rosario Tijeras*) are subservient figures. Nonetheless, their inner life is certainly given no attention.

<sup>91</sup> Eduardo Antonio Parra makes this point: ‘Los protagonistas de Élmér Mendoza pertenecen a la estirpe de la picaresca. Son buscones quevedianos que deambulan por el norte sin esperanza de hallar lo que jamás se les ha perdido [...] Pícaros con suerte, su buena estrella los abriga de la tragedia, aunque se pasen la vida cerca de donde se generan las catástrofes’ (‘Efecto tequila, de Élmér Mendoza’, *Letras libres*, May 2005, <<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/libros/efecto-tequila-de-elmer-mendoza>>).

<sup>92</sup> ‘Seamos sinceros: ninguno de estos autores denuncia porque ninguno desea el fin de la narcocultura. De ella se nutren sus novelas, de ella depende su imaginario. Más aún: el norte, su identidad, cuelga, en buena medida, del mismo gancho. El narco ha delineado una identidad regional antes más difusa: su cultura recorta y aglutina. Ah, el norte. Ah, el narco. Sonrisa’ (Lemus, ‘Balas de salva’).

'ethnographic' disposition exhibited by some Colombian *sicaresca* fiction, such as *El pelaíto que no duró nada*, in which the sociolect and subculture of a poor urban district are collected.<sup>93</sup> Mendoza's extensive references to popular culture and his use of a very local register of Spanish have been labelled crudely *costumbrista* by Lemus.<sup>94</sup> However, given that Mendoza embraces the sociolect of the Sinaloa underworld as his own, rather than casting it as only the language of his characters, that criticism is hard to sustain. It is Colombian fiction that has perceived the culture of the *comunas* as 'foreign', so much so that that Antonio Salazar, in *No nacimos pa' semilla* (1990), had to include a glossary, in the manner of the classic *costumbrista* novels of the 1920s and 30s. In Mendoza, all this could lead to a charge of complicity with the culture of drug trafficking, at least if that sub-culture is perceived to be uniformly negative. At the least, however, the individual perspective of the *sicario* (and sundry rogues) is provided, which is true of Parra's novel too, albeit without the use of a first-person narrator or a large amount of slang. In this, Mexican fiction has gone further than Colombian fiction in exploring the phenomenon of criminality (whether in *narcos* or not) from the inside out.<sup>95</sup>

Some of the Mexican novels that exhibit features of the picaresque and *sicaresca* also betray a different influence. Given that Jorge Macías spends a lot of his time in *Un asesino solitario* attempting to discover who has set him up, the structure of the novel could also be compared to

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<sup>93</sup> Osorio calls it 'una novela cercana a un trabajo etnográfico' ('El sicario', p. 67).

<sup>94</sup> '[T]odas aluden al asunto del narcotráfico. Aluden a él tradicionalmente: a través de un costumbrismo candoroso. La intención es sólo una: retratarlo todo, la política y la violencia, los espectáculos y los deportes, el norte y el otro lado. Retratarlo todo con ánimo turístico para crear una postal del México más reciente' (Lemus, 'Balas de salva')

<sup>95</sup> An exception in Colombian fiction is Oscar Collazos' *Morir con papá* (1997), which looks closely at the psychology of the *sicario*. It is significant that in doing so Collazos distances himself from the stereotype of the despairing, hopeless *sicario* who is the victim of deterministic social forces. Rather, the job is a positive decision in a context where violence is normalized (Osorio, 'El sicario', p. 68). The same might be said of Mendoza's Jorge Macías, except that Macías's route into the profession is barely mentioned, which casts the role of *sicario* as even more 'normal' because no special explanation appears to be needed.

that of a detective fiction.<sup>96</sup> Although the novel has a broad scope, *Entre perros* features prominently an investigation into a murder by the journalist Diego Zapata, childhood friend of the *sicario* Ramón Guerrero. In fact, the *novela negra* or *novela policiaca*, in which a non-criminal investigator slowly uncovers the background to a notable crime, is increasingly the most common form of *narconovela*. It is easy to see why it has been so popular. It is well known that the genre has its origins in the ‘hard-boiled’ style of detective fiction developed in the United States, originally in the popular ‘pulp’ magazines of the 1920s, and later in the celebrated work of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. In stark contrast to the genteel ambience of classic ‘whodunnits’, these new detective stories provided the urban reader with grimly realistic depictions of the corruption and violence of modern cities, amid the context of a boom in organized crime as a result of Prohibition.<sup>97</sup> The conventions of the frontier adventure story were transposed into an urban setting, where the battle was between organized crime and the police rather than Indians and cowboys. In the middle stood the hero — the private eye — struggling to find a semblance of justice. Sean McCann has argued that there was a populist spirit to this genre, a sense that the legal and social order was failing to protect ‘decent people’ from elite exploitation on the one hand, and criminality on the other.<sup>98</sup> It is understood to be a cynical, often morally ambiguous category of fiction. One can readily understand the appeal for a Mexican reader who feels similarly,

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<sup>96</sup> Summarizing critical opinion on the novel, Aileen El-Kadi says the following: ‘*Un asesino solitario* ha sido [...] considerada una novela neopolicial [...] [e]l crimen [...] es no sólo núcleo del relato [...] sino el determinante de la estructura de la trama’ (Aileen El-Kadi, ‘*Un asesino solitario*, la autoría de un crimen compartido: del centro a los márgenes y el espectáculo de la violencia política en el México de los 90’, *Revista de Literatura Mexicana Contemporánea*, 44 [El Paso: University of Texas, 2010], 44–55 [p. 45]). From this description, in addition to a) the focus on the criminal protagonist’s psychology, and b) the constant danger that menaces him, *Un asesino solitario* could be considered a ‘crime thriller’ or ‘noir thriller’ by John Scaggs’ criteria (Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* [London:Routledge, 2005], pp. 107–8). However, it might be better understood as (in part) an ‘Anti-Conspiracy thriller’ in which the protagonist is pitched against a conspiracy — the plot led by ‘El Veintiuno’ — without recourse to the forces of law and order. Such narratives resemble adventure stories, with the addition of an element of constant danger, according to the dictates of the thriller genre in general (see Scaggs, pp. 117–8). If so, in addition to his picaresque qualities, this is one reason that we are invited to look kindly upon Jorge Macías.

<sup>97</sup> Sean McCann, ‘The hard-boiled novel’, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. by Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 42–57 (p. 43).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

frustratingly, caught between drug traffickers and a corrupt or unresponsive government.<sup>99</sup>

Some authors have followed the hard-boiled format very closely. Miguel Ángel Morgado, the principal character in *Mezquite Road* (1994), by Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, is a human-rights lawyer hired to investigate the death of a friend of a friend, but his profession is practically the only departure from the hard-boiled pattern. Morgado is a solitary, cynical man who nonetheless believes in justice. He comes into conflict with the corrupt police (e.g. Trinidad Rodríguez) as well as the organized criminals. There is even a *femme fatale* (Eloísa), who attempts to seduce Morgado by breaking into his bedroom in Chapter 9 in a scene almost identical to the one in *The Big Sleep* (Chapter 24) where Carmen Sternwood sneaks into Philip Marlowe's bed.<sup>100</sup> But other detective novels have been more imaginative. In *Asesinato en una lavandería china* (2006), for instance, Juan José Rodríguez features a secret society of vampires which has only recently moved into the cocaine business.<sup>101</sup> Most modern detective stories feature police officers as protagonists. But given the widespread distrust of the police in Mexico, it is hardly surprising that many of the principal characters in northern Mexican detective fiction should not be police officers. The protagonists of *Los círculos del poder* (1990), by Gregorio Ortega, and *No me da miedo morir* (2003), by Guillermo Munro, are journalists (a more respected profession).<sup>102</sup> Like a picaresque narrative, the advantage of the detective format is that the peripatetic investigation can draw attention to a broader range of social problems than drug trafficking alone. Rarely are *narcos* the major focus, even if they are a ubiquitous feature of the context, and even if the collective

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<sup>99</sup> There are impressionistic similarities between Raymond Chandler's disillusioned vision of a wealthy but morally degenerate California and a northern Mexico that is, in parts, prosperous yet suffers from extreme levels of corruption and violence.

<sup>100</sup> Jennifer Insley does identify some (in my view, minor) deviations from the American pattern in Trujillo's work, including the fact that Morgado is an outsider in Mexicali, unlike Marlowe in Los Angeles, and has more respect for the rule of law than the typical Private Eye. She accepts, however, that the latter is an equivalently 'populist' stance, given the Mexican context. See 'Border Criminals, Border Crime: Hard-Boiled Fiction on the Mexican-American Frontier', *Confluencia*, 19.2 (2004), 38–49.

<sup>101</sup> Other narratives have incorporated elements of the gothic genre in an attempt to generate a feeling of horror at the situation. The brief middle section of *A wevo, padrino* (2008), by Mario González Suárez, features zombies, whereas the rest of the novel is a delirious first-person autobiography which probably constitutes the Mexican *narconovela* most indebted to the picaresque model. Elements of the supernatural can be found in *El vuelo* (Sergio González Rodríguez, 2008), and (as we shall see) in *Los minutos negros*.

<sup>102</sup> This is a development recommended also by Carlos Gamerro, with regard to Argentine literature, in his article 'Para una reformulación de la literatura argentina' (in *El nacimiento de la literatura argentina* [Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2006], pp. 79-91). See p. 81, n. 26 below.

disrespect for the rule of law can be understood (implicitly) as both cause and effect of the *narcos*' power. In *Mezquite Road*, for example, the only references to drug trafficking are the obscure dealings of the local police chief and the minor involvement of a DEA agent. The principal theme is more general: the lawlessness of the borderlands. But, in this specific case, rather than drug trafficking, this has more to do with the power of the local biker gang ('Los Cuervos') and the propensity of local business owners, such as Doña Matilde, to take the law into their own hands. Following Parra's assertion that *norteño* literature is not about drug trafficking specifically, in Mendoza's *Balas de plata* the reader is given to believe as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter that the drug lord Samantha Valdés is responsible for the principal murder, although this turns out to be false. It is misguided, we might infer, to blame everything on drugs. Nevertheless, in recent years most detective fictions or crime-related thrillers set in the north of Mexico have been designated *narconovelas*.

The enthusiasm for crime fiction is not without its critics. In his controversial article for the Mexican magazine *Letras libres* in 2005, Rafael Lemus lambasted a range of northern Mexican novels for their 'tramas populistas' and lack of technical innovation.<sup>103</sup> It could be argued that fiction about drug trafficking has been in danger of replacing one set of clichés, found in *corridos* and *telenovelas*, that glamourize or exalt the *narcos* and their lifestyle, with another set that documents with pessimism the state of northern Mexico, but not without providing the reader with a modicum of reassurance in the shape of a protagonist who is (at heart) not quite as corrupt as the rest. In the introduction to her recent study of fiction written in Culiacán, Gabriela Polit Dueñas cites the surprise felt by the *defeño* author Juan Villoro at the indifference shown by many *culichis* toward the violence in their city. Fiction, she comments, can provide 'alternative versions of realities otherwise unbearable'.<sup>104</sup> Since violence is taken for granted in the *novela negra*, it is difficult to express the sort of shock at the situation that one takes from the Colombian *sicaresca*. Whether they are appropriate to Mexico or not, the stock features of the hard-boiled genre are long

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<sup>103</sup> Lemus, 'Balas de salva'.

<sup>104</sup> Polit Dueñas, *Narrating Narcos*, p. 8.

established in the popular imagination, due to the popularity of American *film noir*, so they are undeniably comforting. That cynicism and indifference are common emotional responses to situations of rampant injustice and violence seems obvious, but whether this is the only possible response remains open to question. Nonetheless, it will not do to accuse every author of the northern *novela negra* of naivety. In the first half of this study, I analyse two novels (*Balas de plata* and *Los minutos negros*) which are extremely self-reflexive.<sup>105</sup> This is not some post-modern streak of playfulness for its own sake. If it were, it would hardly mesh with the far from humorous situation in Mexico. Rather, it is evidence of the authors' comprehension of the difficulties of representing a phenomenon such as drug trafficking, and hence their desire to question the assumptions underpinning their own choice of format. Mendoza and Solares are not the only authors to parody the hard-boiled style. Gonzalo Martré's *Los dineros de Dios* (1999), for instance, features a detective called Jesús Malverde Chandler, which is a bizarre mixed reference to the 'patron saint' of drug traffickers and the king of hard-boiled fiction.<sup>106</sup> Like Mendoza and Solares, Martré is well aware of his influences, but the former go further in foregrounding that heritage.

#### IV On the Question of Representation

The four novels in this study have been chosen primarily on aesthetic grounds. Three are prize-winning fictions, the other a finalist.<sup>107</sup> I contend that they are better written and better constructed,

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<sup>105</sup> Polit believes *Balas de plata* is just a cheap genre novel (*Narrating Narcos*, pp. 77–8). I disagree.

<sup>106</sup> The 'generous bandit' Jesús Malverde is venerated as a 'folk saint' in northern Mexico; his association with the subculture of the drug trade points to the success obtained by drug traffickers in projecting themselves as 'social bandits'. Some historians believe that the Malverde myth derives from the story of the real-life outlaw Heraclio Bernal, as recorded in the famous *corrido* bearing his name (Sam Quiñones, *True Tales from Another Mexico: The Lynch Mob, the Popsicle Kings, Chalino, and the Bronx* [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001], p.227).

<sup>107</sup> *Trabajos del reino* won the Premio Binacional de Novela Joven in 2003, and the 'Otras voces, otros ámbitos' prize for the best novel published in Spain in 2008. *Contrabando*, in manuscript, was awarded the Juan Rulfo Prize in 1991. *Balas de plata* gained the third Tusquets Prize in 2007, while *Los minutos negros* was a finalist for the Antonin Artaud Prize in 2006 and the Rómulo Gallegos Prize in 2007. Excerpts from Herrera's and Solares' novels were selected for a recent anthology of writing about contemporary Mexico: *México sabe México: Textos de cincuenta prosistas contemporáneos*, ed. Concepción Zayas (Salamanca: Universidad de Sevilla, 2010), pp. 87–9 and 91–4 respectively.

as works of art, than any other Mexican narratives commonly described as *narconovelas*.<sup>108</sup> It is surprising that so little of an academic nature has been written about them.<sup>109</sup> Although I have tried to appraise each novel on its own terms, it is a happy coincidence that all four novels address, or embody a response to, what we might call the ‘difficulties of representation’ with regard to drug trafficking. Aesthetic concerns, such as how to move the reader and avoid cliché, are intimately bound up with ethical concerns, such as finding the most responsible attitude towards the phenomenon or the most appropriate object of attention. Consider, again, the depiction of violence. Gabriela Polit Dueñas concludes that many authors ‘run the risk of either glamorization or glossing over the depths of its effects’.<sup>110</sup> Amid the current instability in Mexico, the latter seems much more likely. When the Mexican media, in television and print, is replete with gruesome images of the *narcos*’ ‘exemplary’ brutality, some degree of desensitization is inevitable. We might very well wonder whether it is possible any longer for a Mexican reader to be shocked at what they read. Writing in 2009, the Salvadoran novelist Horacio Castellanos Moya made this very point in relation to Latin American literature in general:

What I didn’t imagine when I wrote my book [*El arma en el hombre*, 2001] was that the violent behaviour of the main character, which some readers regarded as exaggerated, would be exceeded by the actual levels of violence that took place in the same Latin American countries just a few years afterwards [...] A novel that in a European country could be regarded as cruel and dark, in Mexico, Colombia or El

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<sup>108</sup> One novel that I do not cover is *Fiesta en la madriguera* (2010), by Juan Pablo Villalobos, shortlisted (in translation) for the Guardian First Book Award. Narrated in the first person by Tochtli, the precocious yet somewhat autistic young son of a powerful drug lord (Yolcaut), it highlights the capriciousness of the powerful *narcos* and their bizarre distortions of values. Although it counts as an innovative approach to the topic of drug trafficking in Mexican fiction, I concur with Jorge Volpi’s assessment that Villalobos ‘has not added anything new to what is already known about the narcos from the newspapers and television — once again, they are sadistic and eccentric — nor has he offered an especially moving portrayal of an innocent’s perception of horror’ (Volpi, ‘Dispatches from the Front’). Volpi concludes that ‘for all its excessive cleverness, *Fiesta en la madriguera* does not transcend clichés about the narcos’.

<sup>109</sup> The following articles were all released after my research for this thesis began: Manuel González, ‘La tensión entre ética y estética en “Trabajos del Reino” de Yuri Herrera’, *Critica.cl*, 14 April 2013, <<http://critica.cl/literatura/la-tension-entre-etica-y-estetica-en-“trabajos-del-reino”-de-yuri-herrera>>; Aileen El-Kadi, ‘El narcothriller nacional en *Balas de plata* de Élmer Mendoza’, *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, 77 (Tufts University: 2012), 325–346; Diana Palaversich, ‘¿Cómo hablar del silencio? *Contrabando* y *Un vaquero cruza la frontera en silencio*, dos ejemplares del acercamiento ético en la literatura mexicana sobre el narco’, *Ciberletras: journal of literary criticism and culture*, 29 (2012), <<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v29/palaversich.html>>.

<sup>110</sup> Polit Dueñas, *Narrating Narcos*, p. 172. Polit emphasizes the importance of concerns about representation for many Mexican authors of fiction about drug trafficking. However, she pays little attention to how this manifests itself in the style and structure of the novels that she details. The novels I have selected exemplify the concern, yet she mentions only *Balas de plata* in her study, and only then in passing (Ibid., p. 77).

Salvador would seem to be *light* compared with what we read every day in the newspaper or what we learn in the streets.<sup>111</sup>

It is easy to see why authors would try to avoid the problem. Much of the violence in the novels that comprise this study is deliberately set ‘off-stage’. At times it is almost possible to forget about it. But it cannot be overlooked indefinitely. In *Los minutos negros* and *Contrabando*, the most effective moments of pathos occur when the reader is occasionally reminded of violence, rather than constantly overwhelmed by it.<sup>112</sup> Either it is retold in an understated fashion, such that the full horror of it, and its consequences, can only be inferred, or it is left out of view and instead we are only given to imagine the extent of its effect on the characters. The shock (such as it is) is provided not by the violence itself but by an abrupt shift in tone that makes the reader feel like he has been complacent. This is not to say shock is never an appropriate response. Several scenes in Mendoza’s latest novel *Nombre de perro* (2012) — in particular the pointless torture of the character Blake Hernández — are obviously shocking. Nonetheless, it is an uncommon sentiment.<sup>113</sup>

To provoke the reader successfully, whether it be on the topic of violence or not, is an aesthetic matter. But there also is an ethical or ‘political’ dimension to representations of drug trafficking. The *narco* lifestyle is frequently presented as glamorous and exciting in Mexican television, in series such as *La reina del sur* (adapted from Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s similarly glamorous novel of 2002) and *El señor de los cielos*. The popularity of the *narco* *corrido*, a commercialized version of the rural folk ballad tradition, has been cited by many observers as evidence of a diffuse circle of sympathy for drug traffickers in northern Mexico.<sup>114</sup> On the other hand, most of the journalism that follows the activities of drug traffickers is extremely critical, and so is the official discourse of the Mexican state, as one might expect. I do not consider it naïve to expect narrative fiction to be able

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<sup>111</sup> Horacio Castellanos Moya, ‘Notes on the Culture of Violence and Fiction in Latin America’, *Sampsonia Way: An Online Magazine for Literature, Free Speech & Social Justice*, 31 October 2009, <<http://www.sampsoniaway.org/literary-voices/2009/10/31/notes-on-the-culture-of-violence-and-fiction-in-latin-america-by-horacio-castellanos-moya>>.

<sup>112</sup> An attempt to overwhelm us with the violence is made in Alejandro Almazán’s novel, *Entre perros*, which draws out the pleasures of committing violence, according to the *sicario*.

<sup>113</sup> The horrific torture of Jorge Romero at the hands of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* in Part II Ch. 26 of *Los minutos negros* is an important exception to this tendency in the novels surveyed in this study.

<sup>114</sup> On this topic, consult Elijah Wald, *Narco* *Corrido* and Mark Cameron Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*.

to offer more nuance, that is, to attempt to understand drug traffickers, their situation and their sub-culture without side-stepping their frequently heinous behaviour. An ethical concern is perhaps another reason why authors might want to treat the topic obliquely, as Parra recommended (see above, p. 17). At one extreme, Yuri Herrera comes to the conclusion that fiction should not pay attention to famous drug lords at all, despite writing a novel that appears to have precisely such a figure at its heart (see Ch. 5). To give credit where it is due, most of the *narconovelas* tread a middle path between supporting and condemning drug traffickers.<sup>115</sup> Yet there still exists the danger of a ‘nuanced’ cliché. One can readily deplore specific acts of violence, for example, while appearing to excuse the perpetrators ‘with the recurring litany that becoming narcos is the only way these youths can escape from deprivation and their lack of opportunities’.<sup>116</sup> *Tierra Blanca*, by Leónidas Alfaro, falls squarely into this trap. *Trabajos del reino*, on the other hand, pays critical attention to the sense of belonging that involvement in the drug trade can provide. In *Contrabando*, while there are many degrees of involvement, all variably culpable, the tangle of cultural and family loyalties in the village of Santa Rosa make a clean separation from the trade practically impossible. Both novels offer a deeper perspective on the contexts and causes that link people to the drug trade, yet neither obviates the importance of poverty too. In sum, drug trafficking is a multifaceted phenomenon that does not deserve to be depicted in too Manichean or too simplistic a fashion. The matter, then, is one of perspective. *Los minutos negros*, *Contrabando*, and *Trabajos del reino* provide several perspectives on their subject matter, and I contend that this is a superior approach to that of the majority of *narconovelas*, which do not. On this account, despite its sophistication, the monolithic style of *Balas de plata* seems deficient, but I shall argue that Mendoza demonstrates an appreciation of the difficulties of representing his subject matter nonetheless.

Perhaps the best way to begin to consider the strengths of the four novels covered in this study is to compare them with a novel that is weak in precisely the characteristics that I have just highlighted.

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<sup>115</sup> This is Diana Palaversich’s conclusion (in ‘The Politics’, pp. 104–5), with which I generally agree.

<sup>116</sup> Polit Dueñas, *Ibid.*, p. 175. This is a cliché partly inherited from the *sicaresca*.

By any purely artistic criteria, Leónidas Alfaro's popular *Tierra Blanca* (1996) is a poor novel.<sup>117</sup> But its other features are arguably more interesting. In defiance of the general tendency in Mexican fiction, Alfaro addresses the drug trade directly. Diana Palaversich has called *Tierra Blanca* 'the first narco bildungsroman'.<sup>118</sup> It will be useful to provide a short summary. When his honest, hard-working father Pedro is arrested by police in Culiacán, and later killed, for holding a package of marihuana that he picked up by chance on the street, the protagonist Gumersindo decides to escape his family's precarious situation by joining a group of drug producers. He is despatched to grow poppies in the mountains of the Sierra Madre, where his diligence and intelligence are repaid by his being given steadily greater responsibilities. Back in Culiacán he gains the trust of the organization's leaders — Don Víctor, Don Heleno, and Canuto Mendoza — after saving their lives during an ambush. He escapes an attempt on his own life by the spiteful Roberto Peralta, and his transition from innocent working-class boy to ruthless *narcotraficante* is complete when he locates Roberto, tortures him, and leaves him for dead. Gumersindo rises to the top of his organization, and his family becomes wealthy. However, he decides to exit the trade and emigrate to the United States when his younger brother is shot by accident outside a party and his wife falls pregnant. Predictably, before he can leave he is killed when a shipment of cocaine from Colombia is intercepted by local police who have switched their allegiance. As Palaversich summarizes, 'the story is told in such a way that Gumersindo's death at the end comes across as just punishment for his deeds'.<sup>119</sup> She fails to mention that this is a product of the supremely unlikely return of Roberto

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<sup>117</sup> Quotations are taken from the Spanish edition: Leónidas Alfaro Bedolla, *Tierra Blanca* (Córdoba: Almuzara, 2005). The original edition was released by Fantasma Editorial (Culiacán, 1996). According to Gabriela Polit, it has been reissued five times since (*Narrating Narcos*, p. 55). Alfaro is the author of eight novels, most of them about Culiacán and the drug trade, with such melodramatic titles as *La maldición del Malverde* (2004) and *Las amapolas se tiñen de rojo* (2006). Curiously, he 'does not consider his work to be literature of narco trafficking' (*Narrating Narcos*, p. 54).

<sup>118</sup> Palaversich, 'The Politics', p. 92.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Peralta in order to orchestrate the attack.<sup>120</sup> In this, *Tierra Blanca* is a transparent morality play. But it is also a thinly-disguised local history book, since Alfaro uses sections of clumsy expository dialogue, a series of mini-essays by the narrator at the start of chapters, and the most implausibly didactic mental monologues by the central characters to inform the reader of (the author's view of) the development of the drug trade in Sinaloa between the 1950s and the 1970s, for which Gumersindo is merely a representative prop. This is arguably the most egregious example:

Cuando el avión ya había tomado altura, don Víctor comenzó a divagar: “Desde que el gobierno de Castro en Cuba, y el de Venezuela empezaron a atacar en serio el tráfico de cocaína en sus territorios, las mafias comenzaron a incursionar por México, especialmente en Sinaloa [...]” (129).

Alfaro supplies a populist and simplistic understanding of the rise of the drug trade.<sup>121</sup> Before his unmerited demise, don Pedro's major concern is his inability to provide a 'patrimonio digno' for his family despite years of 'sacrificio' in honest work (22). Beside a desire to avenge his father's death, Gumersindo's principal motivation for involving himself in the drug trade is his family's poverty, which is a commonplace in fiction written about drug trafficking. In this novel Gumersindo's proposal is as political as it is pragmatic and predictable. He blames his father's death not on poverty *per se* but on his helplessness vis-à-vis the authorities as a result of that poverty:

Sintió ganas de gritar que prefería morir y pudrirse en los infiernos antes que seguir soportando, sumiso, los embates con los que el destino se ceba en los desposeídos. [...] ¿Y sabe por qué amá? Porque los que tienen dinero desprecian a los pobres; no piensan que los pobres somos buenos, ¡no!, nos dicen buena gente para darnos atole con el dedo. Piensan, con su perdón, que los pobres somos unos pendejos y que por ser pendejos nos merecemos todo lo malo (44–5).

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<sup>120</sup> Polit writes that 'Gumersindo's own death evokes the tragic luck of the fallen, [...] the character's luck is decided by circumstances beyond anyone's control' (*Narrating Narcos*, p. 56). While it is true that Gumersindo is not wholly responsible for his death, which can be attributed in part to the machinations of *los de arriba* (see below), the surprise arrival of Peralta (*Tierra Blanca*, p. 270) cannot be understood as anything other than a reminder of Gumersindo's past crimes, for which he must atone, even though the malicious Peralta also dies, and even though Gumersindo attempted to expose the government's connections with organized crime (pp. 271–2), which partially redeems him.

<sup>121</sup> In effect, Palaversich also says this: 'Alfaro attempts to develop a theory about U.S. narcopolitics that coincides with the opinion of many Mexicans' ('The Politics', p. 93). However, I maintain that Alfaro's major cause for irritation in *Tierra Blanca* is the complicity and corruption of the Mexican government, not the role of the United States. That the U.S. has behaved deviously is taken for granted, which is arguably more 'populist' than actually trying to make that case.

The author goes further. He talks of ‘el México subdesarrollado’ (38), implying a cod Marxian understanding of global poverty, and in the final chapter has a bishop denounce the ‘líderes que no ven los reclamos de millones que sufren hambre y desamparo’ (272). Those ‘leaders’ are assumed to be the source of Mexico’s problems. For Diana Palaversich, nearly all *narconovelas* take a poor view of the Mexican police and government.<sup>122</sup> In *Alfaro* they are the major problem. Notably in Ch. 10, he includes dialogues between a set of close advisors to the Mexican President that are designed to demonstrate their support for the drug trade and their unscrupulous pragmatism. *Alfaro* clearly holds them in contempt. With reference to the supposedly callous intellectual élite of the *Porfiriato*, the most cynical of the group is labelled a ‘científico’ (134). In each conversation, it is the Mexican general who voices *Alfaro*’s ethical critique of government policy, reflecting a popular reverence for the rectitude of the military which, as Palaversich also notes, is a poor reflection of reality.<sup>123</sup> In the general’s view, Mexico’s drug policy is a ‘trágica farsa’ (134); in the author’s, the justifications for it are mere ‘verborrea’ (136). In contrast to *los de abajo* who — in the popular imagination — embodied the spirit of the Mexican Revolution, the advisors and their class are unfavourably cast as ‘los de arriba’ (193, 196, 227). The President is ‘el señor de arriba’ (217). Both directly and indirectly, they are responsible for ‘la más nefasta corrupción que aniquila el espíritu patriótico de la inmensa mayoría’ (227). Furthermore, in keeping with this conjecture that the powerful have always directed the drug trade, *Alfaro* displays a penchant for conspiracy theories, including the allegation that the American mafia originated the countercultural movements of the 1960s precisely in order to increase the sale of narcotics (195, 218).

This provides some ‘poetic’ justification for Gumersindo’s death. For much of the novel he is viewed favourably, but by the time of his demise he has become ‘uno de los meros gruesos’ (230), a term previously reserved for ‘los gruesos del gobierno’ (57). As much as for his individual crimes, his ascent to the ranks of the powerful justifies his death in *Alfaro*’s scale of values. The

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<sup>122</sup> Palaversich, ‘The Politics’, p. 104–5.

<sup>123</sup> ‘[T]he author expresses his own wishful thinking regarding the honesty of the army, perceived historically as a defender of collective Mexican values’ (Palaversich, ‘The Politics’, p. 93). Polit, while not citing this example, wonders whether ‘the world *Alfaro* describes is [merely] the one [...] he would like to observe’ (*Narrating Narcos*, p. 56).

word *grueso* describes anyone with considerable power in Mexico, born of a populist belief that all power is deployed corruptly and arbitrarily.<sup>124</sup> However, with this attitude Alfaro risks endorsing a crude moral dichotomy between the powerful (almost always affiliated to, or representatives of, a corrupt state) and the weak (understood as the decent ‘man in the street’ that Gumersindo once embodied).<sup>125</sup> Of course, that the Mexican state, in various ways, has fostered the drug trade and that sections of the security forces have acted unjustly with impunity for much of the post-revolutionary period is beyond doubt. The theme is prominent in *Los minutos negros* and *Contrabando*, not to mention Mendoza’s *El amante de Janis Joplin*. But these novels are more morally complex. Indeed, the very act of making a police officer the (likeable) protagonist of a detective fiction, as Mendoza (in *Balas de plata*) and Solares have done, shows some appreciation of complexity, given the poor reputation enjoyed by all levels of the Mexican police, which might otherwise merit their being depicted in a uniformly negative fashion. Nevertheless, Alfaro’s approach is common. Even Mendoza is party to it in *Un asesino solitario*, since the protagonist Jorge Macías, a callous *sicario*, is portrayed in a kinder light than the manipulative commanders of Mexico’s security forces. This attitude seems problematical because it resembles a perspective pervasive to the *narcocorridos* that magnifies drug traffickers by association with a long history of popular outlaws in northern Mexico who have been considered virtuous in comparison with a repressive state. Alfaro dislikes drug trafficking, but he comes close to endorsing an analysis of

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<sup>124</sup> In Mexico it is often used in the sense, deemed archaic by the RAE, of ‘fuerte, duro y pesado’ (*Diccionario de la lengua española*, <<http://lema.rae.es/drae/?val=grueso>> [accessed 5 February 14]). The negative connotation is captured by María Moliner’s definition of the same archaic usage: ‘duro o penoso de aguantar’ (*Diccionario de uso del español*, 2 vols [Madrid: Gredos, 1998], I, p. 1424). In turn, ‘los pesados’ is another common term for powerful *narcos*. See Mendoza: ‘eran para el privado donde se reunirían los pesados’ (*Nombre de perro*, p. 121); ‘gente muy pesada, dueños de vidas y haciendas’ (*Balas de plata*, p. 170). Alfaro also expresses this indiscriminate attitude towards the powerful towards the end of his novel when he talks of ‘la impunidad que les brinda el poder’ (*Tierra Blanca*, p. 259).

<sup>125</sup> Alfaro may also share the populist view that the Revolution had been corrupted by those in power. After the commander of the Judicial Police talks to don Víctor García in Chapter 10, he is reminded of a comment made by a colleague when the commander was assigned to Sinaloa: ‘¡Ahora sí, angelito, hasta que te hizo justicia la revolución!’ (129). The suggestion is that the commander will be able to profit from graft in his new position, and that personal profit is a clear indication, for someone not from the élite, that the Revolution has worked in one’s favour. One assumes that Alfaro disapproves of this sentiment, while accepting the proposition that *justicia* of another (better) kind has not been done.

power that, when commonly held, is beneficial to the reputation of drug traffickers.<sup>126</sup>

The problem with so clearly endorsing a set of values, as Alfaro does, is that they are exposed to closer scrutiny. Alfaro's appeal to a popular conception of masculinity can be called into question on similar grounds. Central to Pedro's concern about being unable provide for his family's long-term security is his sense of failure as 'el jefe de la familia' (20). When he is mistreated in prison, we are invited to take exception not just to the cruel injustice of the situation, but to how it has left him 'desvalido, contrariando su condición de macho' (32). In short, his masculine pride is at stake. The crude symbol of Pedro's helplessness against the police is the fact that they castrate him (34). Accordingly, when he seizes the opportunity to turn on his captors, there is a certain dignity — we are led to believe — in his defiant behaviour. As he challenges the prison guards to confront him, Alfaro describes Pedro as 'Magnífico y terrible en su furia': '¡Vamos cabrones, éntrenle! ¡A ver si son tan valientes con un hombre armado!' (35) It is easy to mistake this line for the words of a stereotypical hero in the *corrido* tradition, particularly on account of the sentiment (defiance) and the attribution of cowardice to the enemy. The critic Guillermo Hernández has identified seven features of the narrative structure of the traditional heroic *corrido* of northern Mexico, which he labels 'fate', 'pursuit', 'challenge', 'confrontation', 'defeat', 'judgement', and 'farewell'.<sup>127</sup> Although we rarely find all seven, a *corrido* will contain several of them in (loosely) the order given. In our case, Pedro's unmerited arrest counts as (an unjust) 'fate', while the scene at the prison is a model of what critics of oral poetry call the 'emotional core' of a ballad: for a *corrido*, this is the occasion of (explicitly) challenging one's enemies, the ensuing confrontation, and the inevitable defeat of the hero.<sup>128</sup> Alfaro is not condoning violence in general, otherwise

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<sup>126</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Alfaro's attitude is wrong *per se*. One can reasonably claim, *contra* Kant and his 'categorical imperative', that to act or believe in one way in one context is acceptable where it would not be in another context. His values are not demeaned merely by association with the *narcos*. Rather, I claim that Alfaro's approach is a *simplistic* denunciation in a context in which both an appreciation of complexity and a clear awareness of the values one is endorsing or exhibiting in a narrative constitute more subtle approaches. In this I am (consciously) committed to the view that, in general, a novel that encourages empathy and understanding, even where it still favours one group or person over another, is superior to one that does not.

<sup>127</sup> Guillermo Hernández, 'What is a Corrido?', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 18 (1999), 69 – 92 (p. 81).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

Gumersindo's own brutality could not count against him. But by tapping into a popular conception of justified (defensive) violence and its associations with an ideal masculinity, Alfaro is (again) doing exactly what the *narcos* have done in their patronage of the modern *narcocorrido*: attributing prestige (in that case, to themselves) by association with an archetypal figure.

This would be less of a contradiction if Alfaro were supportive of the *narcos*. But he is not. The most obviously favoured characters in the novel are the aforementioned General of the army and the bishop who, in the final chapter, attempts to expose the government's corruption with the aid of a list of complicit officials provided by the late Gumersindo. Both are highly critical of the drug trade and participants in it. Furthermore, *Tierra Blanca* is narrated by a third person omniscient voice that is extremely judgemental. I see no reason not to equate it with Alfaro himself. Unlike Élmér Mendoza, Alfaro tends to distance himself from the people and culture that are his principal subject matter. In the first scene of the novel (11–15), the author draws attention to the sloppy grammar and pronunciation of his *narcos'* American associates by using italics. In return, Canuto Mendoza mocks them with parodical sentences such as ‘¿Qué *parecerles* la *yerbitou*, *señoures*?’ (12). To take a cheap shot at Americans is unremarkable, but Alfaro proceeds to italicize a great deal of the non-standard usage and pronunciation of his Mexican characters as well, including words such as *intiligente* (21), *decedido* (41), *melitares* (42) and *albierto* (159, for *advierito*). His own register, by comparison, is relatively neutral.<sup>129</sup> Rather than repeat (and endorse) terms associated with drug trafficking, he makes it clear that those are not his own designations: ‘el llamado “triángulo de oro”’ (157), ‘la policía llamada “secreta”’ (114) and ‘el llamado “Espinazo del Diablo”’ (177). It befits the style of a slightly aloof tourist brochure, or else a pointedly sarcastic political tract, which is certainly the case when he mocks ‘nuestra *dizque* izquierda mexicana’ (196). This is not to say Alfaro is never proud of (aspects of) his local culture. He expresses no surprise at a local band mixing European classical waltzes with popular *ranchera*

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<sup>129</sup> Most examples involve the swapping of E for I, or vice-versa, which has appeared in Mexican literature as a transcription of rural speech at least since the novels of Mariano Azuela. Strangely, there are plenty of examples of colloquial usage that do not get italicized by Alfaro, such as *pérate* (158) or *supites* (41). Regional vocabulary is never italicized.

music (150), as if to equate the two, and praises Sinaloan music as ‘alegre y bravía’ (212), which is further evidence that he does not think aggression to be a questionable trait. But he certainly does not endorse that culture as unequivocally his own. Often Gumersindo’s perspective is used to express Alfaro’s sense of separation from some features of Sinaloan culture:

Era curioso ver los letreros que tenían en las defensas: “El Cochi Cuino”, “Mi Cariñito”, “El Toro Prieto”, “La Alazana”, “Mi Güerita”, etcétera, pintados con rústico arte, por idea del dueño del vehículo o de algún cliente; así se popularizaban en el medio aquél (52).

The *ranchera* sensibilities of rural Sinaloans, as evidenced here by the musical taste of a group of bus drivers and their use of music as an expression of identity, might appear ‘curioso’ to an outsider, but it would not strike a Sinaloan thus. Perhaps Alfaro was aware that writing a novel so clearly blaming the state for the evils of drug trafficking might expose him to accusations of favouring the traffickers. After all, Gumersindo’s path to the moral ‘dark side’ is not a product of his involvement in the trade *per se*. Accordingly, Alfaro makes a special effort to distance himself from them, and to side with the non-Sinaloan or even non-Mexican reader for whom he takes pains to explain every little detail.<sup>130</sup> But this hardly improves our imaginative understanding of the *narcos*. Alfaro is not a detached analytical observer, but nor is he an initiate in the culture of drug trafficking. The result is a novel that succeeds on no count, neither ethically nor imaginatively.

In general, Alfaro’s novel is an (admittedly extreme) example of the perils of failing to consider features such as perspective and narrative form, not to mention the danger of asserting clear conclusions rather than persuading by more artful means. The four novels covered in this thesis demonstrate more self-awareness and tact. Whether they are more successful on account of this virtue is the subject of what follows.

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<sup>130</sup> Polit also mentions this particularly infuriating feature of Alfaro’s style: ‘[t]he book’s realism is undermined by constant explanations of events on the author’s part’ (*Narrating Narcos*, p. 56).

## Chapter 2. *Balas de plata*, by Élmér Mendoza

*Balas de plata* (2008) is a novel written broadly within the conventions of the ‘hard-boiled’ school of detective fiction.<sup>1</sup> The plot concerns an investigation by the detective Edgar ‘El Zurdo’ Mendieta into the murder of a young lawyer, Bruno Canizales, in Culiacán, Sinaloa. As the novel’s title intimates, the crime is notable for the use of a silver bullet by the murderer. The novel displays such hallmarks of the hard-boiled genre as the gloomy urban setting, the troubled but well-meaning and stoical hero, and a quest structure in which the quest itself is at least as important as its resolution. Mendieta’s lover, Goga Fox, is a typical *femme fatale*. Although there are many clues provided to the reader, like most hard-boiled or *noir* novels the plot’s resolution depends more on chance encounter than the rigorous deductions of the protagonist. Mendoza considers the drug trade less directly in this novel than in much of his previous fiction. Nonetheless, the hopelessly corrupt and violent society that reveals itself in the course of Mendieta’s investigation — a very typical context for a hard-boiled detective novel — can be understood as the outcome of the drug trade’s well-known stranglehold over Culiacán. The *narcos* are not the only ones to blame. The novel’s epigraph might suggest that all of Culiacán’s inhabitants have an implicit responsibility for the desperate state of their city.<sup>2</sup> However, I shall argue that, rather than with apportioning blame, *Balas de plata* is more concerned with demonstrating the cultural and emotional consequences of living in such an insecure place.<sup>3</sup> Strong moral judgements are left for the reader to draw. In the second section of this chapter, I examine the novel’s principal theme, which is the apathy of Culiacán’s inhabitants and their resultant propensity to imagine themselves living in more interesting or more significant circumstances, taken mostly from fiction. In the final section, I

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<sup>1</sup> Élmér Mendoza, *Balas de plata* (México: Tusquets, 2008). Subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> ‘La vida es peligrosa, no por los hombres que hacen el mal, sino por los que se sientan a ver qué pasa’ (9). This might also be taken as an allusion to readers of the novel, however. Mendoza questions the suitability of literature to contribute anything positive towards the reality it depicts, other than simply to *show* it.

<sup>3</sup> This is consistent with Eduardo Antonio Parra’s conclusions about the indirect approach of Mexican literature about drug trafficking. Alfonso Castañeda summarizes it thus: ‘Ahora, escritores como Eduardo Antonio Parra, Yuri Herrera, Martín Solares, David Toscana o Édgar Chías, por citar algunos ejemplos, no sólo retratan parte del dolor que deja el crimen organizado, sino que exhuman las consecuencias de una guerra que no tiene cabida’ (‘Narcoliteratura: Que el tiempo diga’, *Sin Embargo*, 23 September 2011, <<http://www.sinembargo.mx/23-09-2011/44455>>).

consider the novel's use of humour and allusion as the means of creating an overwhelmingly uniform tone. *Balas de plata* is a very bleak but nevertheless very funny novel. The themes, style and tone of the book combine to create considerable unity of impression. I discuss the merits of this quality in my concluding comments. The novel has a binary structure. The odd-numbered chapters follow Mendieta's investigation, and the brief even-numbered chapters show snippets from the lives of a host of supporting characters, from members of the dysfunctional middle-class Rodríguez family to Culiacán's social elite, which includes the drug lord Marcelo Valdés and his daughter Samantha. The attention paid to the personal lives of these characters has led some critics to judge *Balas de plata* a melodrama.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, and likewise because it is a detective fiction, *Balas de plata* is certainly a novel awash with cliché. However, we ought not to condemn it for that reason. It is a very self-conscious work of fiction, one that foregrounds its own clichés and does so — I argue — for a better reason than the pandemic 'post-modern' desire to be 'playful'.

## **I Variations on the Hard-Boiled Model**

It is natural for the action of a crime fiction to take place at the margins of society, and we might expect to encounter a series of 'marginal' characters. The picaresque protagonists of Mendoza's earlier novels, *Un asesino solitario* and *El amante de Janis Joplin* fit this mould, so it is no surprise to encounter enterprising small-time crooks such as El Chapo Abitia or contract killers like Foreman Castelo in *Balas de plata*. Less anticipated is the number of characters that hail from a separate sub-culture, rarely represented in Mexican literature: it is an indication of how much Mexico has changed that there are so many homosexual and transvestite characters. La Cococha, Frank Aldana and Alexis Valenzuela could still be considered (somewhat) marginal figures, both socially and with regard to the plot of *Balas de plata*, but the same could not be said of the openly bisexual Bruno Canizales and Samantha Valdés, the respective children of two of the most

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in 'El narcothriller nacional en *Balas de plata* de Élmer Mendoza', *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, 77 (2013), 325–346, Aileen El-Kadi claims that '[I]a investigación del crimen se convierte en una "excusa" para acercarse al melodrama [...] Como si se tratara de una especie de "talk show", los "melodramas domésticos" se presentan como un espectáculo público; la muerte violenta pasa a un segundo plano y la focalización se concentra en lo mundano de las vidas de los personajes de clase alta de la región de Sinaloa' (p. 340).

powerful men in the country, the politician Hildegardo Canizales and Marcelo Valdés.<sup>5</sup> For better and for worse, Culiacán is a place where nearly everything now thrives in the mainstream. For better, perhaps, is the cultural vibrancy, especially the fusion of Mexican and Anglophone popular culture reflected in the plethora of musical references made by Mendieta and the narrator. For worse, no doubt, is the simultaneous ubiquity of *narcocultura*, and the fact that Foreman Castelo can freely operate an assassination agency that is sufficiently respectable to be called ‘una empresa con ética’ (155). This is a society where any traditional distinctions of respectability have evaporated. It was a mark of the Private Eye’s disrepute that in Chandler and Hammett’s novels the protagonist knew so many people from different walks of life. This is true of Mendieta in *Balas de plata*, as we might expect, but it is also true of everyone else. Consider a typically convoluted example: since the detective visits his bar, Mendieta is acquainted with La Coccocha, who knows another client, a cheerleader for the *Tomateros* baseball team, who sleeps with Montaña (the police forensic scientist, who works with Mendieta), and has her friend kidnapped by Ernesto Ponce, who is now in charge of Marcelo Valdés’s accounts, but was once a colleague of Mendieta’s in the police and in charge of the investigation of the murder of Klaus Timmerman, whose good friend was René Villegas (married to Goga, who has an affair with Mendieta), but who was in a relationship with the transvestite Alexis Valenzuela (another of the cheerleader’s friends), who spent time with the part-time transvestite Bruno Canizales, whose death Mendieta is investigating. *Balas de plata* is a novel in which the leader of a street gang (Ezequiel Barraza) just happens to be the son of the *Subprocurador* (164), and a witness to that boy’s murder just happens to be an old flame of the forensic scientist (162). Of course, these seemingly accidental connections are essential to creating a mood of intrigue in the novel. It is, after all, a detective story. But it is also

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that homosexuality has been ‘normalized’. Calling a man *maricón* is still an insult (e.g. 138); Mendieta’s colleague Gris expresses clichéd opinions about homosexual love (61: ‘los amores homosexuales son apasionados e impíos’); and rumours of Bruno’s exploits as a transvestite prostitute are considered slanderous by his close friend Laura (170: ‘Calumnias, don Pedro, mugrientas calumnias’).

evidence of a sort of social chaos in Culiacán.<sup>6</sup>

*Balas de plata* has a notably distinctive style. Overwhelmingly, the inspiration for that style is American *film noir* rather than the hard-boiled novels that inspired it. At the beginning of the novel, he recreates the murky atmosphere of the best of those films. The first scenes take place in enclosed, oppressive spaces: the smoke-filled office of Dr Parra, Mendieta's psychiatrist, and the dark bedroom where Paola Rodríguez finds Bruno Canizales dead in the early hours of the morning. In a novel thin on description, the author presents the opening scenes as if they were being filmed through a dark filter, or even in black and white. Parra's office is 'tenebroso' and 'lúgubre' (13), while the defining characteristic of Bruno's house is the 'penumbra' (16, 53). The sky outside is invariably grey or overcast (13, 27, 42, and 55), while a reference to the rain literally encloses the events of Ch. 2 ('lloviznaba': 15, 17). There are many other literary equivalents of cinematographic techniques. The most frequent and unremarkable is flashback. More noteworthy is Mendoza's occasional use of one-sentence descriptions or snippets of dialogue comparable to the instantaneous 'flashback cut' of television and film:

Le dolía además que la hubiese abandonado por ese siniestro bailarín que maldita la hora en que ella misma se lo presentó. Es un gran amigo y el mejor bailarín del mundo. Pao, no exageres, por favor, ve cómo me he puesto (16).

In the first sentence the narrator conveys Paola's feelings in the present, but in the second we witness the very words that she used to introduce Frank Aldana to Bruno at an unspecified point in the past, followed by Frank's bashful reply at the time. At this point the narrative returns to the present. Mendoza is fond of such swift transitions. When Mendieta chases an intruder at the home

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<sup>6</sup> Aileen El-Kadi makes a similar point: '[E]n sus ficciones encontramos la figura del criminal habitando las varias esferas de la sociedad, no al margen de ella. Y es este punto, la idea de la representación del criminal con un *insider* y la del crimen como parte intrínseca al sistema, lo que quizás nos acerque históricamente a la concepción del enemigo interno de las narrativas decimonónicas' ('El narcothriller nacional', p. 328). While I agree that Mendoza sees criminality as intrinsic to Sinaloan society (hardly an unusual opinion), it is not true that in Mendoza's earlier novels the protagonists, though peripatetic, can operate comfortably in all areas of civil society. Jorge Macías, in *Un asesino solitario*, considers himself an outsider even within the world of contract killing (which is why he adopts the self-differentiating nickname 'El Europeo'). Moreover, the close connections between people of different social standing are drawn to our attention in *Balas de plata* whereas they are not in Mendoza's earlier novels. If one were to evaluate this in positive terms, then Culichi society appears to be remarkably cohesive: class barriers do not prevent extensive interactions between individuals from different walks of life. Naturally, there is little else that could be considered 'cohesive'.

of Mariana Kelly in Ch. 40, we see something comparable to ‘fast cutting’, in which consecutive shots of brief duration are used to convey speed or chaos:

Las mujeres que estaban agazapadas lo siguieron. Escalera. Vestíbulo. Puerta. *Luigi* bajando sin ladrar (219).<sup>7</sup>

Many of the chapters concerning Mendieta are divided into fragments, creating discrete scenes opened regularly by simple scene-setting sentences. Telling the reader little more than the time and place of the scene to follow, they are akin to an ‘establishing shot’:

Tres de la tarde. El sol resplandecía (115).

Sala de espera (11).<sup>8</sup>

Mendoza also removes verbs in order to focus the reader’s attention on essential details. This is analogous to the use of ‘close up’ in film: ‘A su lado los zapatos’ (17). Having said that, the curt tone conveyed by the absence of a verb in so many sentences also recalls the famously terse quality of Philip Marlowe’s language in the novels of Raymond Chandler.

Mendoza’s cinematographic sensibilities manifest themselves in his use of strong visual contrasts. In particular, there is Paola Rodríguez’s bright red hair in Ch. 2, striking amid the aforementioned gloom and described with an uncommonly lyrical turn of phrase: ‘astroso por la humedad y la hora’ (15). Similarly, in Ch. 3, the blood-stained, jumbled sheets of the bed on which the body of Bruno Canizales is lying are conspicuous amid the ‘armonía’ of an otherwise punctiliously tidy bedroom (23). It is also, perhaps, cinema that informs Mendoza’s distinctive prose style, in which he switches quickly and without warning between 3<sup>rd</sup> person description, free indirect discourse, direct thoughts, and dialogue:

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<sup>7</sup> Something similar can be seen during the attack on Mendieta’s home in Ch. 25: ‘Ruido en la reja. Balas. Balazos. Balacera. Agazapado. Tras la barra de la cocina. Cristales que caen. Sonidos. Puerta acribillada. Descarga completa. Silencio’ (149).

<sup>8</sup> They also resemble the introductory comments about setting in a screenplay. There is one instance of a complementary technique, too: ‘Calle vacía. Aunque Culiacán es una ciudad de más de un millón habitantes, muchas matronas acostumbran barrer su calle cada mañana. Esta vez no habían aparecido. La camioneta se perdió rumbo a la Costerita’ (158). This paragraph, which comes immediately after the murder of Ezequiel Barraza in Ch. 28, resembles the way in which a camera might pan out at the end of a particularly dramatic scene, which is sometimes called a ‘reveal shot’. The ‘reveal’ is that nobody has seen — or *wants* to see — what has happened in the middle of the street in broad daylight.

Además no la amo, no me gusta su pelo corto, ni sus faldas, ni su perfume. Ring. Es patética su esbeltez, sus pechos pequeños, su paso..., todo es patético. Ring. ¿Qué haces en casa, estás regando las plantas o qué? Estoy rezando el rosario. Tú rezabas el rosario con nuestra madre, eras el único que le seguía la onda. ¿Te acuerdas? Como si fuera ayer (224).

Here, the first and third sentences show Edgar's direct thoughts about Goga, interrupted by a single-word phrase to indicate that the telephone is ringing. Abruptly, in the sixth sentence, begins the dialogue on the phone between Mendieta and someone we soon discover to be his brother, Enrique. It is not uncommon for Mendoza's characters to interrogate themselves in their thoughts; given the lack of indication, by punctuation or otherwise, that Mendieta has picked up the telephone, it is difficult to comprehend immediately what has happened, and easy to misread the first line of the dialogue as Mendieta's self-interrogation. Even then, the identity of the caller is unclear until the mention of 'nuestra madre'. By removing the written 'scaffolding' that often indicates dialogue and the representation of thought in narrative fiction, Mendoza is arguably attempting to convey something of the immediacy of cinema: we get sight and sound but little else. It is one respect in which Mendoza takes Hemingway's dictum to 'show' rather than to 'tell' to extremes, and also resembles the intensification of free indirect discourse in Vargas Llosa's early novels, in particular *La casa verde* (1966).<sup>9</sup> But there is a second consequence of this style. Initially, at least, the text is difficult to follow. The difficulty is compounded in the early chapters by oblique references to characters and situations that have not yet been introduced or explained, most notably to Mendieta's abuse as a child at the hands of the priest Bardominos.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the most important mystery in the first half of the novel is Mendieta's past rather than the murder of Bruno Canizales,

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<sup>9</sup> In *Mario Vargas Llosa: La invención de una realidad* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1982), the critic José Miguel Oviedo calls the technique 'pluridimensional narration'. In that case, however, there is an attempt to make the narrative voice 'disappear', in order to give an impression of objectivity, which cannot be said for Mendoza in *Balas de plata*, given the novel's predominantly ironic tone and the occasional wry remark by the narrator.

<sup>10</sup> For example: 'Me sorprende el bajo perfil de tu instinto de conservación, ¿cómo es posible que no dieras un pataleo? ¿Podría usted haber dicho que no?, yo no; era un niño y no pude salir corriendo o gritar, no pude' (11). While it is (eventually) clear that this is a conversation between Dr. Parra and Mendieta, the subject matter is not. To suppress such an important piece of information is reminiscent of Vargas Llosa's use of 'datos escondidos'.

since we are falsely given to believe in Chapter 6 that Samantha Valdés is responsible.<sup>11</sup> By reducing the reader's 'cognitive ease' (or 'processing fluency'), Mendoza is able to induce in him a troubled state of mind that is apposite for a *novela negra*.<sup>12</sup> Since the reader will acclimatize, the effect is most pronounced in the early stages of the novel to complement the other means by which Mendoza creates a shadowy atmosphere. Regardless of the congruence of these techniques, his prose style increases the perceived sophistication of a work that might otherwise be too easy to get to grips with (because stereotypical in other regards), and hence dismiss as uninteresting.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to such marks of distinctiveness, Mendoza finds ways to foreground his use of crime-fiction formulae. One procedure, common to much post-modern metafiction, is to remind us of the novel's fictionality. Comments from Frank Aldana, when he compares his interrogation by Mendieta to similar situations in crime fiction (94–5), or from Samantha Valdés, when she calls Mendieta an 'héroe anónimo' (131), draw attention to the predictable role that the detective must play. It is ironic, therefore, that he hates reading detective fiction (86). The novel is also full of adages and proverbs employed to no obvious purpose other than to look clichéd.<sup>14</sup> These have the same function in broad terms as the many specific instances in which Mendoza makes a pointed exaggeration of a stereotypical feature so that the reader will notice it and assume that Mendoza is offering it up deliberately for disapproval. For example, given that Gris Toledo plays the role of

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<sup>11</sup> '¿Fuimos nosotros? El Tany Contreras hizo el viaje desde Nogales y, como tú bien dices, no sabe fallar, el viejo movió la cabeza desaprobando. Era necesario, papá' (35).

<sup>12</sup> In psychology and neuroscience, 'processing fluency' is the ease with which information is processed by the brain, which involves 'perceptual fluency' (in processing external stimuli) and 'retrieval fluency' (in recovering information from memory). There is evidence that high perceptual fluency is associated with feelings of familiarity and positive affect. For a summary of these concepts, consult Rolf Reber, Norbert Schwarz and Piets Winkielman, 'Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8.4 (2004), 364–382. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012), Daniel Kahnemann uses the related concepts of 'cognitive ease' and 'cognitive strain' (pp. 59–60).

<sup>13</sup> The prose style in *Balas de plata* is not dissimilar to that of Mendoza's earlier novels. However, at least in the case of *Un asesino solitario*, the amalgamation of different parts of speech is less unusual because it represents the stream of consciousness of a tendentious 1<sup>st</sup>-person narrator, and since Modernism readers are accustomed to a degree of 'disorder' in such monologues. It feels more 'stylized' in *Balas de plata* because there is (ultimately) an omniscient 3<sup>rd</sup>-person narrator, no matter how ironic or how often he appears to confine himself to Mendieta's point of view.

<sup>14</sup> They do, of course, characterize the speaker (including the narrator). Often they are presented ironically, such as in this comment by Ezequiel in which the final four words draw attention to the banality of the statement: 'Nadie sabe lo que tiene hasta que lo ve perdido, pensó nomás por pensar' (55). On other occasions the adage is simply irrelevant: [a] lo lejos un remolino indicaba que si febrero era loco, marzo otro poco' (20).

‘sidekick’, Mendoza makes her appear *excessively* boring and unimportant. Amid all the chaos, she prefers to spend time completing crosswords and playing chess at home with her long-term boyfriend (250).<sup>15</sup> Her forename might be considered an ironic charactonym. An important feature of the novel is the extremely male set of values that predominates. Nearly every conversation between Mendieta and his colleagues (Ortega, Montaña, Noriega, Robles) refers to the desirability of one of their female acquaintances. Ezequiel renders a pervasive attitude explicit with his remark that ‘[u]na mujer que no es bella no es nada’ (158). Whenever Mendieta meets someone new he notices how attractive she is. It has often been suggested that the hard-boiled genre exhibits an excessively male or even sexist perspective.<sup>16</sup> Its heroes, such as Sam Spade and Phillip Marlowe, are tough, stoical, laconic, heavy-drinking womanizers; they are stereotypically ‘masculine’ men. Set against them, the notion of the *femme fatale* arguably makes (all) women out to be the enemy. In Raymond Chandler’s fiction, there is a more oblique sense in which women embody undesirable values. One of Chandler’s themes is the gap between outward appearances and reality. Some critics have taken this to be an indictment of the ‘American Dream’.<sup>17</sup> At the physical end of the frontier, in California, ‘frontier values’ such as personal reinvention and the opportunity of material success for everyone had also come to their end. Characters in Chandler novels have often reinvented themselves, at least in their outward appearance or by changing their names, but they have invariably done so in order to escape the shame of past misdemeanours.<sup>18</sup> In other words, their success is built on deception. The typical *femme fatale* is similarly deceptive. Whereas Philip Marlowe is necessarily tough on the outside but inside retains a romantic spirit that inspires him to investigate wrongdoings, many of the women are charming on the outside, but ruthless and manipulative within.<sup>19</sup> Given the strong association of drug trafficking with *macho* values, it might not be appropriate to reproduce uncritically the masculine outlook of hard-boiled fiction. Mendoza does exhibit it in his characters (and, as we shall see, in his narrator), but he does so in such an

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<sup>15</sup> Gris’s stable private life contrasts markedly with that of the other characters.

<sup>16</sup> Dennis Porter, ‘The private eye’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Martin Priestman (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 95–114 (p. 112).

<sup>17</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, p. 68; Porter, ‘The private eye’, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> This point is also made by Scaggs (*Crime Fiction*, p. 65).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

obvious fashion that he is implicitly casting doubt on its legitimacy.

One concern about detective fiction is that, however cynical the tone of a hard-boiled novel, its plot will still result in an answer to the mystery and the focus on a well-meaning detective will reassure readers that there do exist individuals with the skill and motivation to successfully carry out criminal investigations. For real-world situations of extreme impunity, this might be a falsely optimistic representation of reality. Is any sense of reassurance appropriate? Mendoza makes many concessions to this criticism. The nominal hero, Mendieta is never truly in control of his investigation. He is described as being hopelessly trapped in it ('atrapado') or fixated upon it ('clavado'), metaphors which do not suggest pro-active direction.<sup>20</sup> Mendieta's colleagues are conscious of how haphazard and difficult their job is. When the clues seem to lead nowhere, the suspect is flippantly compared to Jack the Ripper, who was never caught (41, 63, 99, 116, 139, 253).<sup>21</sup> As if to highlight the detective's epistemic limitations, subtle clues are provided which he could not possibly detect. Thus, for instance, Goga is said to have 'cabello platino' and first meets Mendieta on the night of a full moon (129). Abelardo Rodríguez is said to possess a small 'ánfora plateada' (186, 212). From a point of view internal to the novel, these are irrelevancies. However, given that the murders were committed by silver bullets, and every detail in the novel is important, to a reader they can be taken to suggest the murderer's identity.<sup>22</sup> A common motif in the final third of the novel is that the investigation appears to be resolving itself, despite having been officially suspended.<sup>23</sup> The structure of the narrative reflects this. From Ch. 38 onwards, the binary pattern breaks down, which might imply that Mendieta's attempt to impose some logical order on

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<sup>20</sup> '[A]unque no iba a seguir en el caso se hallaba atrapado en él, en su imposibilidad' (195); 'Oye, ¿qué no cerraron el caso? No me digas, y yo clavado' (242); '¿sigue clavado, mi niño?' (244)

<sup>21</sup> This might count as a clue, given the theories about Jack the Ripper which posited doctors, barristers and even members of the Royal Family as the murderer. René Villegas and Goga Fox are of equivalent social status.

<sup>22</sup> On other occasions, Mendoza foregrounds the detective's failure to do something he *could* have done. This applies particularly to his failure to investigate the list of people who had imported silver bullets, to interview Ernestina Villegas as a result, and then to notice her relation to Goga Fox: 'detectó la imposibilidad y decidió abandonar, por el momento, esa línea de investigación' (111); 'una lista de notables que no sirvió' (139); 'hizo caso omiso' (242); 'Mendieta vio la galería de fotos de la familia pero no se interesó' (243).

<sup>23</sup> Namely: 'Cerraron el caso pero el muy cabrón se está resolviendo solo' (202); 'Si les digo, el caso marcha solo' (205); 'Seguramente [el asesino] no sabe que el caso fue cerrado' (211); 'Qué bueno que suspendieron el caso' (218); 'Canizales no está de acuerdo en que su caso finalice por decreto y al parecer el asesino tampoco' (227); 'Qué bueno que no continuemos' (235).

events around him has failed. If the case resolves itself, it will not be because of him. In fact, many of the major discoveries are made by his partner, Gris.<sup>24</sup> By one interpretation, even his decision to hand over Goga and René to be murdered by Samantha Valdés at the end of the novel is a case of acquiescence to another's demand rather than a considered choice, and it is only rendered possible by the chance arrival of Samantha at Goga's house. Mendoza modifies the tone of his narrative to draw attention to how unsatisfactory this conclusion is:

[E]l del rifle les cubrió las bocas con cinta canela y les amarró las manos por detrás. Salieron.

Mientras le marcaba a Ortega [Mendieta] advirtió que sacaban a la pareja y la subían a la Hummer negra de los guaruras. ¿Dónde estás? Muy cerca, en Obregón y Zapata. Olvídalo, no hay nada [...]

Jefe, Toledo le devolvió sus esposas, ¿hicimos lo correcto? No creo, ¿nos vamos? Abordaron el Jetta (253).

In this final scene, the murderers are taken away, Mendieta tells his fellow officer (Ortega) not to bother turning up, admits frankly to his assistant that he has done the wrong thing and gets in his car. As we shall see, the tone of the novel is consistently humorous. Typically, the reader is invited to share Mendieta's ironical attitude and rarely is there good reason to reject this sensibility. Here there is. Mendieta is experiencing considerable distress at this point: he has just sentenced the woman he has spent the entire novel obsessing about to death. The gap between the significance of what has happened and the matter-of-fact style in which it is narrated is huge. It is the stylistic equivalent of the detective's brave face. He cannot even bring himself to make an off-colour joke at this point, his typical response elsewhere. In short, there is little sense of relief for the reader when the case is resolved. A typical detective fiction cannot stand incomplete, but throughout *Balas de plata* a host of different details and techniques make us aware of just how fortuitous and inadequate the necessary resolution is.

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<sup>24</sup> It is Gris who makes the connection between a truck spotted close to the failed attack on Mariana Kelly and the vehicle owned by Abelardo Rodríguez (228). Gris tries to convince Mendieta to visit Ernestina de Villegas, which will be essential to resolving the case (237–8), and Gris is the first to notice Goga in photographs at the Villegas house (244). She acts professionally to detain her later (250), an act undone by Mendieta when the murderers are handed over to Samantha Valdés.

## II Major Themes in *Balas de plata*

Mendoza might appear wary about his novel's status as a detective fiction; but he is more confident about placing *Balas de plata* within another literary tradition: that of the 'Great Mexican Novel'. This is implied by his treatment of other notable Mexican novels. *Pedro Páramo* is regarded by Mendoza's characters with bewilderment. Guillermo Ortega does not consider it important enough to buy a copy for his son Memo (107), and is unable to distinguish it from Rulfo's short stories of *El Llano en llamas* (243). Memo struggles to understand it at all (179). Mendieta hands over his copy of the book to Ortega immediately after his house has been riddled with 102 bullets fired by AK-47s from a Ford Lobo by the foot soldiers of a drug baron far more powerful than the local government (150). For a moment we might doubt whether anything has changed: Marcelo Valdés is easily as powerful and capricious a *patrón* as Pedro Páramo. Nonetheless, the specifics and the context are unimaginably different. The contemporary context is obsessively illustrated by the references and allusions in the novel to Anglophone culture, whether it be the plethora of pop music, television programmes such as the *Lone Ranger* (173), or the adolescent dress sense of Ezequiel's gang (186). The fashions and tastes of *narcocultura*, not to mention the enduring aspects of Mexico's native and more generally Hispanic culture, are simply additional features of a multifaceted cultural *mêlée*. Hence Mendieta will happily watch a documentary about the *Quixote* prior to a programme about John Lennon 'donde Yoko Ono enseña una teta' (105). More self-consciously than young Memo, the detective cannot claim to understand his country's 'patrimonio intangible' (11), to which *Pedro Páramo* presumably belongs.

If he did, it might not help. *Balas de plata* also makes reference to Fernando del Paso's magnum opus *Noticias del Imperio*. Mendieta discovers two copies at the scene of Bruno's murder, belonging to Bruno and Paola respectively (23). Before she committed suicide Paola also handed a copy to Ezequiel, which he determines to read in full before agreeing to renew his relationship with Beatriz (89). It is not clear that any of these characters benefits from the experience. If Mendieta is correct to surmise that Paola drew a comparison between her relationship with Bruno and the troubled marriage of Maximilian and Charlotte in *Noticias* (81), then this knowledge, and whatever

else they learnt from the novel, did little to prevent the end of that relationship or the terrible denouement to both their lives. Ezequiel believes that he will finally ‘understand’ Paola by reading *Noticias*, but he fails in this endeavour and is murdered shortly after deciding to give the novel up for being ‘grueso y complicado’ (158). This is but one example by which the purpose of literature and art is laid open to question in *Balas de plata*.<sup>25</sup> But Mendoza could have selected any notable novel from Mexico to make such a point. Plausibly he chooses del Paso’s novel on account of its documentation of the eccentric behaviour of an alien aristocratic couple culpably aloof from the war-torn country about them. In *Balas de plata*, we witness the melodramatic antics of characters such as Samantha Valdés, Mariana Kelly, Goga Fox and her husband René: a shallow contemporary ‘aristocracy’ whose *notables* (196) also bear names marking them as outsiders, like Charlotte and Maximilian von Habsburg in *Noticias*. It cannot be a coincidence that Goga and René have their home in a district called Chapultepec, after Maximilian’s famous residence in Mexico City (228). Evidently, some things — strong social inequalities — have not changed. If the characters cannot spot this parallel, the reader can, and will mark inequality as one of a myriad of causes of Culiacán’s present-day malaise.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the extensive focus on the lives of the rich and powerful in *Balas de plata* is unlikely to be understood in any way except as an ethical criticism of that lifestyle amid the poverty and violence of the rest of Culiacán.<sup>27</sup>

In defiance of his usual cynicism about literature, Mendieta believes Memo could benefit from

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<sup>25</sup> At Paola’s funeral, Beatriz laments that nobody in Mexico pays any attention to acclaimed playwrights such as Jesús González Dávila (65). Mendieta claims that he would not study literature again if given the chance (86: ‘no lo vuelvo a hacer’), and mocks Ezequiel’s devotion to reading *Noticias del Imperio* for Paola’s sake: ‘[A]lguien que te pone a leer te odia desde lo más profundo de su ser’ (136). Having read *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* does not prevent him from suffering for his love for Goga (132). It is the therapeutic potential of good literature that appears to be doubted in these examples.

<sup>26</sup> In their own way, Maximiliano and Carlota were also dreamers who had trouble understanding the far-from-ideal world around them, which may explain their appeal to Bruno and Paola. Many characters in *Balas de plata* exhibit this ambivalent tendency.

<sup>27</sup> The contrast is reinforced by Mendoza’s use of colour. Aside from the aforementioned darkness, the colour associated with Culiacán is brown, which often connotes drabness and disrepair: e.g. the ‘puerta ocre’ of Parra’s office (11), the beige walls of Paola’s bedroom (28), or the coffee-coloured blanket on which Bruno’s body is discovered (20). Other details reinforce this characterization: the ‘desgastado sillón’ in Parra’s office (13), the ‘pared descarapelada’ of the police station (52), and Mendieta’s ‘agenda desgastada’ (58). By contrast, the *narcos* are associated with more vivid colours. The drug lord’s mansion is ‘verde claro’, with ‘puertas de aluminio dorado’ and ‘dos cúpulas de azulejos violáceos y amarillos’ (59). Samantha Valdés has red hair, green eyes, and her nails painted purple (82).

reading *Pedro Páramo* (150). There must be *something* one can learn from the Mexican classics. Perhaps there is. In one respect, *Balas de plata* has much in common, thematically, with Rulfo's work. One of Juan Rulfo's principal themes is the failure of family relationships. It constitutes both cause and effect of many of the particular anecdotes that he relates in his collection of short stories *El Llano en llamas*. For instance, in 'El hombre' a man pursues his enemy in order to take revenge for the latter's murder of his entire family. In 'Es que somos muy pobres', the family's poverty causes the two eldest daughters to fall into prostitution and incur disgrace and abandonment by their parents. The most frequently difficult relationship in *El Llano en llamas* is between fathers and sons, such as in 'No oyes ladrar los perros', in which a father carries his injured son to a distant town to gain medical treatment, but treats him with only a barrage of recrimination along the way. The difficulty of forging strong family bonds and of passing on some sort of inheritance to one's children was a very real problem for Mexicans who lived through the decades of intermittent violence that began in 1910. Rulfo himself was an orphan, his father murdered in June 1923. But in his fiction the violence that leads to the collapse of such a basic social unit as the family is not so much situational, a mere result of war, but elemental, natural, and ubiquitous. It is the normal mode of interaction between people reduced to animalistic instincts by their harsh environment. As such, the narrators in *El Llano en llamas* never express any surprise or shock at situation: they take it for granted. The same might be said of *Balas de plata* with regard to the tone and the brutalizing environment.

Although in Rulfo the theme has principally concrete dimensions, it has been understood by others in more symbolic terms. In the work of Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes, for instance, the Mexican revolt against Spain in the early nineteenth century has been imagined as a usurpation of the father's power by the son, one which left Mexico as a figurative orphan, unsure where to look for its sense of identity. Decades of authoritarian, paternalistic government have also been imagined as a father's harsh treatment of his sons, punctuated by the sons' rebellion in the various civil wars that marked Mexico's post-independence history. This is one of the most famous themes of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Mexican literature, and Mendoza is transparent in his attempt to place *Balas de plata*

within the same canon. Nearly every parent-child relationship in the novel is damaged. Hildegardo Canizales rejects his son Bruno's licentious lifestyle; Alonso Barraza has practically no contact with his son Ezequiel.<sup>28</sup> Even an ostensibly family-oriented man, Abelardo Rodríguez, fails to appreciate the strained relationship between his two daughters Beatriz and Paola, and then exacerbates an already horrendous situation by murdering the former's lover, Ezequiel, and proceeding to commit suicide.<sup>29</sup> Two of the three Rodríguez children are called Dante and Beatriz, an obvious allusion to *The Divine Comedy*. The bitter truth, however, is that while Dante's masterpiece eventually ends in Paradise, in this novel we cannot escape the *Inferno*. The Rodríguez household appears to be a microcosm of society as a whole. Mendieta explicitly considers Culiacán a hellhole: 'callar es una virtud cuando vives en el infierno' (73). Indeed, several characters are appropriately referred to as 'devils' in the course of the novel.<sup>30</sup> As such, even Mendieta cannot escape the curse of family breakdown, for he lives in the same society. An orphan himself, we learn towards the end of the novel that he has fathered a son, Jason, with whom he does not yet have any contact.<sup>31</sup>

Since they fail to appreciate the Mexican literary canon and end up in conflict with their parents, the characters in *Balas de plata* exhibit a comparable concrete and cultural rupture between the generations to the one that Rulfo and others have portrayed. Such is the cultural distance from the past, however, that these characters lack the ability to appreciate the problem by understanding the very literature that has hitherto drawn attention to it. There is a bitter irony in this, typical of the novel as a whole. In light of his allusions to this grand theme, Mendoza cannot be suggesting that the Mexican literary canon is useless. Rather, it is too remote from present experience. This is self-

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<sup>28</sup> Barraza: 'Qué relación guardaba con su hijo? Pésima, me odiaba, pero dado el caso quiero que todo marche normal, no sé si me entienda. Claramente y no se preocupe, comprendió que Barraza nada sabía de su hijo' (164). Canizales: '[S]é que era un gran abogado pero teníamos más de cuatro años sin dirigirnos la palabra' (70).

<sup>29</sup> Abelardo claims that his daughters were 'carne y uña' (121), whereas Beatriz tells Mendieta that it was an 'infierno' (87) putting up with her sister.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, 'la diabla que nos encontró aquella vez' (16: Paola, referring to either Samantha Valdés or Goga Fox); 'te toca hablar con el diablo' (73: Mendieta to Quiroz, about the *narcos*); 'amaneció convertido en diablo, ¿o qué?' (154: Ger, Mendieta's housekeeper, to Mendieta); 'pinche diabla' (236: Mendieta, about Goga); 'Mi Diablo Urquídez' (240: Mendieta, to Mariana's bodyguard).

<sup>31</sup> Jason arrives in Culiacán in Mendoza's latest novel about Mendieta, *Nombre de perro* (2012).

serving. If there is a novel required to bridge the distance, then *Balas de plata* is it. It is a necessary 'update'. Mendieta may not be able to understand Mexico's cultural heritage, but *Balas de plata* is itself a tribute to that chaotic patrimony such that the reader, on the outside, can succeed where Mendieta has failed. This provides some justification for the features that Lemus dismisses as *costumbrismo*. If *costumbrismo* is just the depiction of cultural idiosyncrasies for their own sake, then this is not it. Some readers may find the novel's cultural allusions excessive, but taken as a whole they help to illustrate the (often problematical) diversity of northern Mexican culture and hence the need to write a novel like *Balas de plata* that acknowledges this, that incorporates this new reality into the canon. Even if this were not the case, Mendoza does not simply make allusions as 'window dressing'. With regard to the references to popular music, for instance, the lyrics or the tone of the song in question will typically be consonant with the situation or the emotion experienced by Mendieta. Thus they function in a similar fashion to the soundtrack of a film, to complement the novel's many other cinematographic touches.

There are, however, more important concerns than culture. The drug trade and its violence are an essential contextual feature of the Culiacán represented in *Balas de plata*, but there is little explicit treatment of violence in the novel.<sup>32</sup> Mendoza's concern for family ruptures certainly demonstrates an awareness of the social consequences of endemic violence, but greater attention is paid to the *psychological* response of *culichis* to their unfortunate situation. In a word, that response is apathy. Although several characters espouse the apathetic opinion that life is pointless, given that we do not have regular access to the states of mind of other characters in the novel, it is Mendieta who is

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<sup>32</sup> There is violence in the background, but we rarely witness it directly. Either it is simply implicit in the number of dead bodies mentioned, or we hear about it second-hand on the radio show *Vigilantes Nocturnos* (49, 72, 181, 209), or from Ger's gossiping (92). There *are* occasions in which a violent act is narrated as it happens, but they are somewhat trivial: the attack on Mendieta's house kills nobody, while the occasion on which Mariana Kelly and Samantha Valdés are targeted results only in an injury for their dog, Luigi. Paola's suicide is narrated, but very coldly ('se acostó en su cama y se dio un tiro en la sien derecha', 28). Note the contrast with Mendoza's more recent novels, especially *Nombre de perro*, in which a police torture scene is played for laughs, no doubt in order to shock any reader who has begun to identify with Mendieta (*Nombre de perro*, pp. 38–41).

the principal exponent of such fatalism.<sup>33</sup> Apathy is often considered to be a result of feeling powerless to change one's situation. There is a specific cause for Mendieta's unrelenting sensitivity to his own lack of power: his having been sexually abused by Father Bardominos as a child. His choice of words to describe the abuse is indicative: he felt like a mere 'monigote' or 'títere' of the priest's designs (11).<sup>34</sup> But it is a general phenomenon in Culiacán too. Even Marcelo Valdés felt it prior to his rise to the peak of the drug trade (215). Accordingly, Mendieta believes strongly in the concept of fate, with the understanding that 'fate' will rarely be positive. Life, for Mendieta, is a 'tómbola' (12), a game in which the winning tickets have already been assigned and, evidently, he has not been given one. The 'poderes fácticos' (180) make the important decisions. Nonetheless, the detective believes that *some* people can exercise (a degree of) control over their own and others' lives. He names Goga 'arquitecta' of his destiny (175), and revels in being able to turn the tables on Mariana Kelly by leaving her, for at least a few hours, 'a la merced del destino' (145) when he holds her for questioning. Mendieta's predicament is evidently thrown into relief by this comparison with the wealthy inhabitants of Culiacán who do not suffer the same affliction. It is reinforced by the fact that, as we have seen, he cannot control the one thing that he is employed to direct: the investigation into Bruno Canizales's murder.

One response to living in a dreary or insecure environment is to seek psychological compensation. Nearly every character in the novel exhibits this pattern of behaviour, which implies the apathy and discontent that Mendieta shows us directly. Goga Fox explicitly endorses the following adage: '[h]ay que comer y amar que el mundo se va a acabar' (211). Mendoza's characters spend most of the novel indulging in precisely these two activities. If one were to claim that the environment had brutalized the inhabitants of Culiacán — to continue the comparison with Rulfo — then their

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<sup>33</sup> Take Paola's sentiment, voiced by the narrator, prior to her suicide: 'Las cosas de la vida y las de la muerte son las mismas, sólo que unas suceden a las siete y otras a las siete y media' (27). Even the powerful Samantha Valdés has cause to regret life's unpredictability (102: 'puta vida, jamás es lo que esperas').

<sup>34</sup> Geney Beltrán Felix believes that this aspect of Mendieta's characterization is superfluous: 'el abuso de la niñez parece un rasgo adherido y no un rasgo inherente al personaje. Parecería que ese hecho se hubiese dado aislado de su relación con sus familiares' ('Balas de plata, de Élmer Mendoza', *Letras libres*, May 2008, <<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/libros/balas-de-plata-de-elmer-mendoza>>). I contend that it is simply an additional element to reinforce our general perception of his (and others') powerlessness.

apparent reduction to the most basic of human needs (at least, according to Maslow's hierarchy) would be good evidence for the assertion.<sup>35</sup> The narrator is obsessed by food, providing gratuitous details about what characters are eating (e.g. 29, 46, and 56). It is an echo of Mendieta's own interests, exemplified by his conversations with his erstwhile colleague, LH. When Mendieta claims that eating is a form of therapy (61), it is clear that he recognizes its role in compensating for *something*. Even so, it is not obviously palliative. On the one hand, it can be a distraction: Briseño seems more interested in arranging what to have for dinner with his wife than attending to Mendieta and his case (50, 207). On the other hand, it can make things worse. An incorrigible masochist, Mendieta claims that the very best food must 'do a bit of damage' ('debe hacer un poquito de daño', 115); he admits to LH that a taste for good food and drink is an addiction (196). Something similar could be said for the amorous pursuits of characters in *Balas de plata*. Before committing suicide, Paola Rodríguez stops to remember the passion of her relationship with Bruno, which did not exhibit the 'monotonía' (28) of the rest of her life and circumstances. Bruno himself lived a life of 'excesos' and 'emociones fuertes' as a reaction, one assumes, to the dispiriting world around him (30). This is no more evident than in the particularly vibrant art that hangs on the walls of his house in marked contrast to the drab and dark world outside (15, 22), and perhaps even in the pristine orderliness of his house, when considered against the 'disorder' of Sinaloan society.<sup>36</sup> If the attention paid to romantic relationships in the novel is the mark of melodrama, then perhaps a taste for melodrama can be excused as a legitimate response to this particular social situation. However, none of these relationships is healthy.<sup>37</sup> To wit, Beatriz loves Ezequiel who loved Paola who loved Bruno who loved Samantha Valdés, but all of them in vain. Even stable relationships

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<sup>35</sup> Food and sex belong to the 'physiological' stratum at the base of Abraham Maslow's pyramid of human motivations. The next level — 'safety' — is evidently absent from Mendoza's fictional world. The third — 'love or belonging' — includes family relationships, which is a particular problem in *Balas de plata*, as we have seen. Beyond these strata, 'esteem' and 'self-actualization' seem to require a sense of self-efficacy and power that Mendieta, in particular, is conspicuously lacking. See A.H. Maslow, 'A theory of human motivation', *Psychological Review*, 50.4 (1943), 370–96. Mendoza is not alluding directly to Maslow's theory, but the author is nonetheless invoking a common perception of what counts as a 'basic need', a perception which has been influenced by Maslow's ideas, for all their dubious validity.

<sup>36</sup> The work of Frida Kahlo and Edvard Munch is well known. Kijano (22, 117) is the alter-ego of Mexican artist Carlos Maciel, some of whose art can be viewed at <<http://cargocollective.com/kijano>>.

<sup>37</sup> Beatriz unwittingly suggests the unhealthiness of her relationship with Ezequiel with the words 'estoy enferma de ti' (88). She is blind to his scorn for her in their conversation of Ch. 16.

are marked by jealousy, as in the case of Mariana and Samantha, or mutual psychopathy, as in the case of Goga and René. It is a sorry world in which the only distractions heap misery upon pain.

A desire to escape from (or compensate for) the unsettling reality around them may also lie behind what Aileen El-Kadi has called the ‘histrionic’ capacity of characters in *Balas de plata* to engage in games of make-believe.<sup>38</sup> That is, many characters pretend to play roles from novels, films and other media in the course of their daily lives. No doubt in another context this could be a positive activity, providing an opportunity for emotional catharsis or an expansion of empathy.<sup>39</sup> But in *Balas de plata* it is more obviously a desperate attempt, by associating with familiar models of behaviour, to find elements of significance in lives that are otherwise felt to be meaningless. Insofar as melodrama seeks to squeeze as much emotional intensity as possible out of the typically mundane, this proclivity could also be considered melodramatic. As befits a budding actress, Beatriz appears to take her inspiration from Shakespeare. To seduce Ezequiel she performs that classic ruse the ‘bed trick’ on him, by pretending to be Paola (88). It is plot device associated with plays like *Measure for Measure*. When Ezequiel decides he cannot see her until he finishes reading *Noticias del Imperio*, she promises to wait in her window until he returns, as if to mimic scenes from *Romeo & Juliet* (89).<sup>40</sup> This does nothing to impress Ezequiel. Mendieta is more self-aware than Beatriz. His appreciation of the ‘heroic’ potential of his role as detective is evident when he considers answering the phone as James Bond (110), or indeed in his choice of ringtone — the marching tune used by Custer’s 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry — which might suggest he feels like the protagonist of a Western film. What can be said about Mendieta’s analogies to fiction is that he is aware of their

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<sup>38</sup> ‘El componente histriónico condiciona el desarrollo de los personajes, y nos da la sensación de ser actores aspirando a representar roles o poniendo en escena papeles de tipos sociales que forman parte del imaginario popular’ (‘El narcothriller nacional’, pp. 336–7).

<sup>39</sup> Kendall Walton, in *Mimesis as make-believe* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), summarizes such opinions thus: ‘It has been suggested, variously, that such activities furnish opportunities to try out unfamiliar roles, thereby helping us to understand and empathize with people who have those roles in real life and to develop skills needed to assume them ourselves; that they provide safe outlets for the expression of dangerous or socially unacceptable emotions, or purge us of undesirable ones, or help us to recognize and accept feelings that are repressed or just unarticulated; that they assist us in working out conflicts and in facing up to disturbing or unpleasant features of ourselves and our situations; that they give us practice in dealing with situations of kinds we might actually expect to face; and so on’ (p. 272).

<sup>40</sup> Even her mathematically-minded brother Dante concludes that Bruno and Paola were comparable to that famously ill-fated couple (164).

inadequacy or, rather, that he has less faith in his own games of make-believe. James Bond is a famously successful womanizer, and Mendieta is self-consciously not. Of all the songs associated with the Wild West, he chooses the one connected with Custer, who is remembered precisely for being a failure. Thus, when he describes his decision not to pursue Goga to Los Angeles after she abandons him as an ‘acción heroica’ or ‘hazaña’ (133), this is an instance of bitter self-parody. In light of Mendieta’s ironical attitude, the tendency of other characters to imagine themselves in fictional roles may appear damaging, at the very least because it generates no other benefit than a fleeting sense of fun.<sup>41</sup> It is no better than those other fruitless pastimes, eating and unrequited love.<sup>42</sup>

Although it is understandable, the propensity to play games of make-believe could be regarded as sinister. For example, the use of silver bullets by the murderers in *Balas de plata* elicits light-hearted banter among Mendieta’s colleagues that Bruno Canizales must have been a vampire (41, 52, and 58). Insofar as Mendieta neglects fully to investigate the matter of the bullets until late in the novel, perhaps such frivolous speculations were a genuine impediment to resolving the case. A murder, we might feel, should be taken seriously. Since Mendieta’s obsession with Goga manifestly prevents him from suspecting her, we are entitled to wonder just what damaging effects might derive from the many other ‘distractions’ enjoyed by characters in the novel. There are two ways of conceptualizing the behaviour in question. First, to inhabit a role or draw a comparison with fiction might be described as ‘stylizing’ one’s behaviour in order to render it more gratifying or interesting. In itself this is harmless, unless what one is stylizing is *criminal* behaviour, since that could excuse or encourage it. The glamour associated with *narcocultura* is an example, and (in general) it is not regarded favourably. In the novel, this is relevant to Goga and René. In the final pages Goga confirms that the use of silver bullets was a ludic gesture (‘era por jugar’, 252), consistent with earlier speculations that the unusual ammunition was chosen on grounds of style

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<sup>41</sup> If one takes the view that the way in which people represent their own lives to themselves is of political importance, then there is little radicalism in the *culichis*’ conventional choice of models either.

<sup>42</sup> An equivalence between these two sets of behaviour is suggested by Mendieta’s wistful comment that ‘enamorarse es soñar, imaginar situaciones que pocas veces ocurren’ (153).

(235) or originality (203). Hard-boiled detective fiction invariably provides social criticism. If the murders in the story are partially the result of a class of behaviour exhibited by every other character, then this will invite us to question the suitability of the behaviour in general.

A second, still less charitable, understanding is that to liken oneself too much to fictional models is comparable with reducing oneself to a stereotype. It may encourage others to make false assumptions. When Gris Toledo assumes, initially, that the murder of Bruno Canizales was committed by drug traffickers because of the ostentatiousness of using silver bullets (62), this is an example of reasoning from stereotype alone. It turns out to be false. We might have suspected this, since there is evidence that the *narcos* do not conform invariably to type, such as when they fail to pay for the meals of other diners at a restaurant in the anecdote retold by Laura (31). Amid the morass of whimsical and escapist self-representations, the truth can easily be occluded. This is evident because there are instances in the novel in which the gap between reality and the way in which it is represented really matters. The novel's tone is consistently humorous. One occasion in which it is not (and which consequently invites our attention) is when Mendieta is berated by a well-meaning barman after a video taken on a mobile phone appears to show the detective senselessly assaulting two youths (191). The video does not show that the men were *narcos* who had attempted to murder the detective. Mendieta responds with indignation:

Tuvo el impulso de saltar la barra y molerlo a patadas: Le voy a dar un consejo, amigo, nunca se meta en lo que no le importa. Esto nos importa a todos, señor, México está cambiando, aunque usted no contribuya, ahora hay más democracia. Democracia mis huevos [...] (191).

What is unsettling about this episode is that the reader is asked to share Mendieta's sense of injustice while perhaps simultaneously feeling uncomfortable at the detective's sceptical attitude towards such civic values as transparency and accountability ('democracia') of which many readers will approve, in theory.<sup>43</sup> The episode is important because it suggests that even a representation of the police that the author himself has endorsed — that they are brutal and corrupt

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<sup>43</sup> It might be that Mendoza does not expect the reader to feel this way by default, and that we are expected to side firmly with Mendieta against naïve idealists. Nonetheless, there is still something unsettling about Mendieta's aggression in this incident.

— is not unvaryingly fair. It is also ironic, in the situational sense, since Mendieta himself contributes to the misrepresentation of reality by the press when he routinely makes a game out of providing them with incorrect information (19) and then conspires with Daniel Quiroz to fabricate a story for the radio in order to provoke the murderer into revealing himself (204, 209). In sum, escapism is one thing, but a reality replete with misrepresentation, whoever is the subject of it, will invariably produce injustices.

That is an ethical concern. But there is also an aesthetic explanation for the emphasis placed on the characters' propensity for make-believe. The clichés in Mendoza's novel extend well beyond the aforementioned conventions of detective fiction. It is difficult to qualify every instance of cliché in a novel with irony, but if an author does not do so he risks being accused of endorsing a distorted or hackneyed view of reality. What one *can* do is have characters 'flag up' the clichés by recognizing legitimate points of comparison between their own reality and fictional representations, unaware (of course) that they are in fact characters in a fictional representation. This would account for the fact that Paola and Beatriz both enjoy reading the poetry of Sor Juana (95, 185). They must be fully aware that the exaggerated chain of love affairs in the novel is encapsulated perfectly by the line from Sor Juana that is quoted: 'Al que ingrato me deja, busco amante; / al que amante me sigue, dejo ingrata' (185). This furnishes the novel with an additional internal perspective, a product of the characters themselves, that absolves the narrator of any need to distance himself from the attitudes of the characters or vouch (unconvincingly) for the verisimilitude of his tale. There is also a hint of self-parody. As if to make a point of his 'knowingness', Mendoza renders the novel even more predictable than it need be. There are what we might call 'internal' clichés. An *external* cliché would be the unoriginal representation of Marcelo Valdés as an astute *patrón* who has risen from humble origins in the most famous of *narco* villages, Badiraguato (177), to a position of extensive power where he can support *corridistas*, politicians and the needy (215), construct zoos full of exotic animals (177) and worship freely at the altar of Jesús Malverde (48). The character is predictable in light of our experience of other representations, from outside the novel. But there are also patterns that the novel generates

internally. For example, Mendieta's interactions with his colleagues follow a script. His banter with Ortega invariably involves Mendieta's sexuality being called into question (107, 138, 166), while every conversation with LH on the telephone begins with Mendieta revealing the details of an imaginary meal that he is about to consume (58, 196, 234). There are running jokes that Montaña spends every night with a different 'girlfriend' (45, 159, 162, 179, 239) and that Gris will inevitably be assigned the most tedious and labour-intensive work (26, 52, 61, 63).<sup>44</sup> These 'internal clichés' produce humour, and the butt of the joke must be, in part, the novel itself. Mendoza kits out a clichéd novel with individualized clichés, as a meta-joke of sorts. Consider, also, the novel's characterizations. Mendoza does not so much develop his themes as simply illustrate the same patterns of behaviour occurring in several characters in diverse situations.<sup>45</sup> This may well be necessary. Little room exists for extensive characterization in a detective novel, beyond that of the protagonist.<sup>46</sup> Thus, instead of including a cast of quirky but inevitably two-dimensional characters, Mendoza almost reduces them to a single pointed dimension: that is, every character acts to exemplify the apathy and delusion that bedevils Culiacán. There is no process of disillusionment in a character; rather, there are many separate instantiations of its effects. Not only does this further emphasize the novel's clichés, lest we think them unknowing, it also provides a circular justification for the novel as it is. The novel's characters live immersed in cliché, so the only representation that could do them justice would be one which imitates and thus conveys that predicament. Mendoza is asserting an *ego quoque*. He will take no aesthetic 'high ground'. To depict a reality so often understood via cliché requires a clichéd novel. As a resident of Culiacán himself, Mendoza is well placed to write that. There is no outside view.

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<sup>44</sup> Gris herself realizes how much her professionalism is abused: '¿Por qué nadie me toma en cuenta?' (168).

<sup>45</sup> Arguably Mendoza does something similar in *Un asesino solitario* (Mexico City: Fábula, 2001), in which the protagonist Jorge Macías reacts to different events with the same catchphrases that express his cynical humour, e.g. 'pues sí ni modo que qué' (pp. 51, 219 etc.), 'no me la andaba acabando' (pp. 153, 218 etc.), 'hay veces que uno pierde y otras en que deja de ganar' (pp. 133, 189 etc.). There is little character development as a result.

<sup>46</sup> *Los minutos negros*, as I discuss in Ch. 3 of this study, is an exception.

### III Humour, Allusion and Tone

Vivo en Santa Mónica, se sirvió de nuevo, estaré aquí dos semanas y por lo pronto tenemos la noche por delante, las muchachas dormirán en casa de Samantha, se acepta cualquier propuesta por más indecorosa que sea, se acomodó en el sofá descubriendo el 87 por ciento de sus piernas. Mi hombre lobo. Mendieta percibía que se le acababa el mundo. Los antiguos tenían razón, la tierra es plana y termina en una gran cascada, ¿cuál era la canción que cantaba ella? Cuánto hubiera dado por que eso hubiera ocurrido medio año antes, *Tengo testigos: la madrugada, un perro, el frío*, es demasiado tarde, pensó, y él no era mujeriego, se puso de pie, aterrado: Me voy, ha sido un placer verte, de veras, hizo una pausa, no puedo quedarme, no puedo ir en contra de mis convicciones. Edgar, no tienes por qué marcharte, somos gente madura, capaz de ubicarnos en cualquier contexto, de evaluar nuestra relación con lucidez, pero él no la escuchó, no quiso, no pudo, dejó su vaso sobre una credenza, abrió la puerta y se largó por la escalera, sin ver al Luigi que no paraba de menear su cola.

Se metió al bar del hotel Lucerna, donde bebió y lloró como los hombres, junto a unos aficionados encrespados que veían cómo la selección mexicana de futbol era derrotada por la de Estados Unidos en serie de penaltis.

Pues sí, ni modo ni que qué (133–4).

Mendieta has just encountered his former lover Goga at the apartment of Samantha Valdés, and it is Goga who is speaking at the outset of this passage. This is a moment of great emotional intensity for Mendieta, but much of his distress is conveyed indirectly, via humour. There is a tendency in *Balas de plata* for the characters and narrator to engage in ‘tension relief’, that is, to (try to) make light of serious events.<sup>47</sup> Just as we were given to infer characters’ apathy from their escapist fantasies, we infer their anxiety from the ubiquity of this sort of humour. It ranges from flippant exaggeration or understatement to cynical black humour, depending on the severity of the situation. The tone of this passage passes from one pole to the other. First there is the absurdly precise percentage attributed to the length of her legs that Goga leaves on show, which might imply both how calculated the gesture is and how closely Mendieta is paying attention. Mendieta’s shock is conveyed with a cliché: it is figuratively ‘the end of the world’. The cliché is foregrounded by a facetious flight of fancy in which the detective imagines the geographical end of the world according to pre-modern belief. Mendieta is pretending to claim that this is *literally* the end of the

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<sup>47</sup> For Rod Martin, it is ‘a means of cognitively managing many of the events and situations that threaten [...] wellbeing, by making light of them and turning them into something to be laughed at [...] Because it inherently involves incongruity and multiple interpretations, humor provides a way for the individual to shift perspective on a stressful situation, reappraising it from a new and less threatening point of view’ (*The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* [London: Elsevier, 2007], p. 19).

world, in the knowledge that his exaggerated resuscitation of a dead metaphor is nonsensical.<sup>48</sup> We have returned to the idea that it is difficult to express oneself without cliché, but the vehicle for the topic is a joke. The end of the passage is much darker, a reflection of the fact that Mendieta keeps up appearances while he is in Goga's company, only to break down in tears after he departs. The detail that Mendieta 'cried like a man' is intended to sound incongruous since this is not a stereotypically 'masculine' thing to do. But the incongruity of the action is removed, to humorous effect, by its juxtaposition with the grief exhibited by other men in the bar as a result of the Mexican football team's loss to the United States.<sup>49</sup> The sentiment in question will be immediately recognizable for the Mexican reader for whom the perpetual disappointment of his national team is a familiar idea.<sup>50</sup> The humour operates via an allusion, and as such it creates an effect of 'identification' between narrator and reader that is reinforced by the subsequent expression of stereotypical *nimodismo*. However, one might be inclined to question the validity of the analogy too, since (on reflection) we know that Mendieta's pain is stronger and more important than that caused by the loss of a football match, even in the worst case scenario, a loss on penalties. Mendoza makes light of the situation, invokes our cooperation in making light of the situation, but then leaves us with the feeling that the procedure was inappropriate. In this light, the final 'ni modo' can sound almost resentful.

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<sup>48</sup> Although an exaggeration, it counts as 'making light' of the situation since the exaggeration is so absurd that it sounds typical of someone who feels the need to 'play up' the mundane. Mendieta is imitating this hyperbolic attitude to try to suggest that he feels less strongly than he does. It is a transparent 'double bluff'.

<sup>49</sup> The principal theories of humour are known as 'relief theory', 'superiority theory' and 'incongruity theory'. The latter is most relevant here: 'An accepted pattern is violated, or a difference is noted — close enough to the norm to be non-threatening, but different enough from the norm to be remarkable' (John C. Meyer, 'Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication', *Communication Theory*, 10.3 (2000), 310–331 [p. 313]). According to Meyer, social humour has four functions in communication: to generate identification with the audience, to clarify (softly) or enforce (strongly) a social norm, or to encourage the audience to differentiate itself from another group (Ibid., p. 311). 'Identification' and 'clarification' are typical when the joke lays greater emphasis on the norm rather than the violation of the norm (Ibid., p. 325). This must be the case here, since the point of the joke seems to be that men *do* cry in public, in certain circumstances, such that Mendieta's violation of a norm is not so serious or the norm itself is wrong. There is obviously an element of the so-called 'pleasure of recognition' in the scenario.

<sup>50</sup> In the words of Juan Villoro, '[u]n mexicano adicto al fútbol es, entre otras cosas, un masoquista que colecciona agravios, jueves de dolor para los que no hay domingo de resurrección. ¿Qué sería de nosotros sin este agitado melodrama?' (*Dios es redondo* [Mexico City: Planeta, 2006], p.63).

Football is not the only allusion in the passage.<sup>51</sup> The text in italics is a lyric from the song ‘Te perdono’ by Silvio Rodríguez, the subject of which is the singer’s struggle to forgive the behaviour of a former lover in the realization that to forgive her would be to begin to forget the love which he continues to feel for her.<sup>52</sup> We assume that Mendieta feels equivalently conflicted. However, Mendoza makes a joke at the expense of the allusion by having Luigi — *un perro* — literally observe the occasion. The joke is multidimensional, however, since his presence has been frequently documented hitherto (101–104, 131–133). The dog’s happy obliviousness to the world around him has become another of the novel’s running jokes by this point. He begins the novel as just another *costumbrista* detail, intended to indicate his owner Mariana’s frivolous wealth. Yet he turns out to be important to the plot, since his failure to bark at the intruder who tries to kill Mendieta (219) reveals the murderer to be an acquaintance of Mariana and Samantha, while his being shot accidentally by Abelardo Rodríguez (193) sets in motion the events that reveal Abelardo’s own wrongdoing. Luigi is a good example of how the author uses individual elements in the novel for the separate purposes of characterization, plot, and tone. This is highly economical, as is his density of allusion. There is also an economy of symbols. Consider Goga’s term of affection for Mendieta in this passage: ‘mi hombre lobo’. Since the murders are committed with silver bullets, and silver bullets are the only effective way of killing a werewolf, we wonder whether Mendieta is to be the next target, which indeed he is. The term might be taken to imply a certain lunacy on the part of the person described, which the intensity of Mendieta’s sentiment for Goga would justify. There are several other examples of Mendoza’s supple use of specific details. The fact that Mendieta starts to read *Noticias del Imperio* after its previous three readers have been killed is both ominous *and* suggests that he has adopted their tendency to prefer fiction to reality.

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<sup>51</sup> I take William Irwin’s definition that allusions are ‘references that, for their correct understanding, depend crucially on something more than mere substitution of a referent. Certain associations are to be made’ (‘What Is an Allusion?’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59.3 [2001], 287–297 [p.288]). Thus, for the comparison between Mendieta’s grief and that of the football fans to be taken as darkly humorous, rather than merely jarring, one has to recognize the importance of football in Mexican culture.

<sup>52</sup> The relevant section is this: ‘Te perdono los cientos de razones, | los miles de problemas | en fin, te perdono no amarme. | Lo que no te perdono | es haberme besado con tanta alevosía. | Tengo testigos: un perro, la madrugada, el frío, | y eso sí que no te lo perdono, | pues si te lo perdono seguro que lo olvido’ (Musica.com, ‘Letra: Es más, te perdono’, <<http://www.musica.com/letras.asp?letra=1880229>> [accessed 09 February 2015]).

But the motif can also be the grounds for a joke. Thus, for example, there is dramatic irony when Ezequiel tells Paola that he cannot see her again until he has finished reading *Noticias*, since we know that the novel is extremely long and Ezequiel fails to tell her this: ‘¿Es delgado? Más o menos’ (89). Among other details, it confirms his lack of commitment to Paola.

The novel’s allusiveness and humour are designed to create complicity between the narrative voice and the reader. In order to get all the jokes the reader must share the narrator’s cultural knowledge and (at least) entertain his cynical outlook.<sup>53</sup> In this respect, the narrative voice shares many of the attitudes exhibited by the characters, especially Mendieta. It is not an individualized voice. Mendoza is able to blur the lines even further because some statements are difficult to attribute. Given the prose style, it is impossible to say whether statements such as [q]uien no merece amor no merece nada’ (88), or ‘[c]on la policía mexicana cuanto más lejos mejor’ (20) are to be accredited (as free indirect discourse) to Ezequiel and Mendieta, respectively, or to the novel’s narrator. The characters are prone to making generalizations, and so is the narrator. I have already remarked upon Mendieta and other characters’ prominent tendency to notice female characters’ appearance above all else. The narrator does the same, whether or not Mendieta is present.<sup>54</sup> This is not to say that the novel itself endorses such a perspective. As in other cases, a separate point of view is fleetingly created by the characters or the use of irony. Thus, although Mendieta is the vehicle for many of these judgements, he will also (subtly) criticize them in others, as in the following exchange with Ezequiel: ‘[U]n cuerpo tan perfecto como el de ella bajo tierra no sirve para nada. Órale, se nota tu fidelidad y buen gusto’ (37). The detective’s response is so explicit that it must be ironical. Similarly, the fact that Gris and Samantha are the two most competent characters in the novel can be understood as challenging the reductive attitudes

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<sup>53</sup> By ‘cynical’ and ‘cynicism’, here and elsewhere, I mean distrustful of the virtue of others and of the likelihood of positive outcomes: a form of jaded prudence, if you will, typical of someone whose past ideals and hopes have been repeatedly denied by reality. It is the opposite of a naïvely idealistic attitude, but may nonetheless involve a latent, suppressed idealism.

<sup>54</sup> Aside from the many examples of dialogue referring to women, the physical appearance of a female character is described or evaluated by the narrator on pp. 38, 40, 45, 73, 82, 94 and 161. In these cases, either obviously or implicitly the narrator is indicating Mendieta’s judgement. However, on pp. 17 (‘Bella: imposible describirla’), 36 (‘Facciones suaves, bellas’) and 102 (‘poseía una belleza agreste’) Mendieta is absent.

displayed by the novel's men. There are occasions, however, in which the narrator does allow some distance between himself and his subject matter. As if to break the fourth wall, he occasionally steps back to address the reader:

¿Indecisa? Ni lo piensen (15).

¿Vieron The Good, the Bad and the Ugly? El joven recordó la música (28).

Espero que estén de acuerdo en que es una situación desesperante (133).

¿Alguna vez, por cualquier causa, han querido salir corriendo? Pues Mendieta se sentía igual (174).

Naturally this procedure furthers a sense of shared understanding between reader and narrator. It also has another function. In all of these situations a serious event is about to take place or has just been described: Paola's suicide, Mendieta's break-up with Goga and his struggle to avoid her charms for a second time. Assuming a minimally empathetic reader, the novel's tone of ironic detachment is likely to be lost on these occasions. By taking a step back to remind us that this is just a story or directly to make light of the situation with the use of a cliché, Mendoza restores the novel's tone even when it has been stretched to breaking point by the severity of events. The effect is not so much to validate that tone as to remind us once more of its inadequacy. The novel itself does not provide an alternative sensibility, but readers can provide their own.

*Balas de plata* is a clever novel, but it is not, perhaps, very subtle. Like the lives of so many of his characters, and with the few exceptions that I have noted, Mendoza's novel is (in one literal sense) monotonous. That is, there is an overwhelming unity of style, tone and theme. Little room is given for an alternative perspective, except implicitly. If there is no obvious solution to Culiacán's predicament, according to those who live there, then what is the purpose of another point of view? Taken as a whole, Mendoza's fiction has been considered an attempt to assert the importance of his

native region to Mexico's history and identity.<sup>55</sup> The north deserves a place in the canon, so it is for this reason that he makes reference to such important novels as *Pedro Páramo* and *Noticias del Imperio*. Above all, in *Balas de plata* he asserts a *norteño* — or more specifically *culichi* — sensibility. *Balas de plata* has an essentially expressive, rather than representational, purpose. To claim that it is clichéd or *costumbrista* is beside the point. Whether in certain respects Culiacán is very much like it is depicted in the novel matters less than the novel's exemplification of a cynical and darkly humorous attitude that (we are led to believe) is typical of Culiacán's inhabitants, and understandably so. Since Mendoza also lives there, he decides to take the side of his characters. Thus, *Balas de plata* is a playful, stylized novel about a stylized murder committed for fun. The author will not place himself in a position of superiority. If his characters have vices, then his narrative voice must share them. They are self-conscious, ironical and sometimes bitter. So is he. They struggle to make sense of their lives except by means of stereotype and fiction. Mendoza (or, at least, his voice in this novel) is the same.<sup>56</sup> Hence the clichés. Here is an author who does not distinguish too obviously between what is morally good and bad in the reality that he is depicting, confident that reader can do this for themselves. His aim is to 'show', indeed to provide an extensive cultural panorama, but not to 'tell' or to judge.<sup>57</sup> On the only occasions when the narrator does step back his intention is to build complicity with the reader in such a way as to invite us to entertain the same outlook and (perhaps) to note its limitations. The reader has to understand this sensibility — to understand why those who have lived in a situation of extreme uncertainty and violence might protect themselves like this from despair and trauma — but the reader does not, in the final reckoning, have to share or endorse it. If Lemus's principal criticism of Mendoza is that

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<sup>55</sup> Thus he situates his first two novels at important junctures in Mexico's recent history, retelling them from a northern point of view. The protagonist of *Un asesino solitario* is the man commissioned to assassinate prominent politician Luis Eduardo Barrientos, a thinly disguised fictionalization of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the presidential candidate who was infamously assassinated in Tijuana in 1994. Mendoza set his next novel, *El amante de Janis Joplin* amid the upheaval of the 1970s, in which the guerrilla movements that grew up in several parts of Mexico during Luis Echevarría's presidency were brutally suppressed.

<sup>56</sup> This must be part of Mendoza's reason for having his detective share his initials, EM.

<sup>57</sup> Mendoza is adamant about this point in interviews: e.g. 'Como escritor lo que estoy intentando es dilucidar algunos registros que pudiera tener sobre la realidad y sobre la mitología; más sobre la mitología que ha surgido sobre el caso. Y buscar convertirlo en literatura, sin que haya un sentido moral o un sentido de juzgar a los que no me corresponde [juzgar]' (Miguel Cabañas, "'Un discurso que suena': Élmer Mendoza y la literatura mexicana norteña', *Especulo: Revista de estudios literarios*, 31 (2005), <<http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero31/emendoza.html>>).

he fails to show what it *feels like* to live in a reality dominated by drug trafficking, then he is wrong. Mendoza simply does not focus on the chaos and the anxiety and the fear, but rather on the disillusionment and the coping strategies that (after a time) almost anyone will be likely to employ. We do not see much violence, but we do see the society that has been forged by it. There is no need to dwell on sensationalist details.

Ultimately, readers will differ in their assessment of this complex motivation. No doubt for some a formulaic genre novel cannot be redeemed by self-awareness and the excuse that these are the parameters within which *culichis* tend to think. The author believes in the worth of detective fiction. He has followed *Balas de plata* with two further novels about Mendieta in the same mould: *La prueba del ácido* (2010) and *Nombre de perro* (2012). However, they are less sophisticated, less economical, and less well plotted; that is, they are inferior as examples of detective fiction. If one is going to write detective fiction, one still has to do it well. Clearly, in spite of the novel's ironies, Mendoza cannot be taken to be condemning detective fiction. Yet we are also made aware of the form's limitations. This suggests, I maintain, that Mendoza is not interested in finding an 'ideal' way in which to represent his social reality. Perhaps a perfect representation for such an imperfect reality would be absurd. Mendoza, his narrator and (to a varying extent) his characters all recognize this, which is why they are so self-conscious about the way in which they represent themselves and others. In effect, they recognize their failure and accept it. From the inside, from Culiacán, there is no obviously better way to think or feel about their predicaments. It may not be ambitious, but there is sincerity in this attitude.

### Chapter 3. *Los minutos negros*, by Martín Solares

At the end of *Balas de plata* the reader may feel that ‘justice has been done’, albeit in the imperfect fashion outlined in the last chapter. As I have intimated, one can harbour misgivings as to whether this is a suitable representation of northern Mexico, given its high levels of impunity. Although it is also (principally) a *novela negra*, in *Los minutos negros* (2006) Martín Solares avoids this problem by recounting two separate investigations.<sup>1</sup> The first quarter of the novel concerns detective Ramón Cabrera (nicknamed ‘El Macetón’) and his reluctant enquiry into the murder of a young journalist in Paracuán, a fictional city in Tamaulipas that is modelled on Tampico. In the much longer Part II, in five subsections, an account is given of a long-forgotten case lead by another detective, Vicente Rangel, in the late 1970s, some 20 years prior to narrative present. Rangel attempts to hunt down ‘El Chacal’, the psychopathic killer of five local schoolgirls. This section comprises the greater part of the novel. The connection between the two sequences of events is that the journalist, Bernardo Blanco, had been preparing an *exposé* of that first, unsuccessful investigation. Cabrera must discover what happened in order to establish a motive and a list of suspects for the journalist’s murder. A brief third section follows the chief of police, Joaquín Taboada, as he attempts to respond to the threat to his own position begotten by Cabrera’s discoveries. *Los minutos negros* is arguably more moving than Mendoza’s detective fiction. In Part II, Rangel apprehends the killer only to see him evade his reckoning. The President’s personal security force, the infamous *Dirección Federal de Seguridad*, arrives in Paracuán. Having decided that it is not expedient to convict a man with important political connections, the DFS colludes with local police and politicians to close down the investigation, release the killer and torture Rangel’s assistant, Jorge Romero. In the final scene of Part II it is strongly suggested, though not explicitly stated, that Rangel’s girlfriend, ‘La Chilanga’, has been killed when the DFS burns down his house. It might seem gratuitous for a detective story to end in this way. It succeeds here because Solares embeds this story within another investigation in which the facts of the matter *are* eventually resolved and

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<sup>1</sup> References in the body are to the following edition: Martín Solares, *Los minutos negros* (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2007).

Rangel at least gets his happy ending. Cabrera's wife turns out to be none other than the girlfriend assumed dead in Rangel's narrative, and, in a moment that recalls *Casablanca*, Cabrera willingly gives her up to him. The men who had collaborated in the original cover-up are removed, and Cabrera is set to take over as *procurador*. The novel boasts (in part) an emotionally satisfying ending while maintaining that sequence at its heart — the 'black minutes' of the title — in which we share Rangel's sense of powerlessness and injustice, not only out of empathy with his situation, but also because our expectations about how detective stories end have been thwarted, if only temporarily.

The author's endeavours to confound the reader's expectations are an important quality of the novel. Whereas Mendoza attempts principally to foreground the clichés and conventions of detective fiction, Solares opts more often for parody and, lest that be considered too easy, for a series of manipulations of any naïve reader who approaches the novel with fixed assumptions as a consequence of its genre. The first section of this chapter documents some of the tools employed by Solares to avoid being too predictable. One of our expectations, for what has been termed a *narconovela*, is that drug traffickers will play a leading role in the plot.<sup>2</sup> Solares appears to assign them importance by providing a discrete section for 'Los narcos' in the cast list at the beginning of the novel (11). The subject of narcotics emerges in the very first chapter, when Cabrera advises Blanco on how to successfully avoid their being detected at checkpoint inspections (21). A local trafficker, 'El Chincualillo', is the first man arrested for Blanco's murder (23), and one of the journalist's friends, Rodrigo Columba, tells Cabrera that Bernardo had been writing a report on drug trafficking in the city (48). An important sub-plot in the first section involves the possibility that Cabrera has endangered himself for having confiscated a gun from the 12-year-old son of a

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to the references included in the Introduction, Alfonso Castañeda mentions Solares in a review of *narcoliteratura* for the on-line newspaper *Sin Embargo* ('Narcoliteratura: que el tiempo diga', *Sin Embargo*, 23 September 2011, <<http://www.sinembargo.mx/23-09-2011/44455>>). Reviews by Juan Carlos Galindo ('Minutos negros: dos detectives y el narcotráfico en México', *El País*, 17 April 2013, <<http://blogs.elpais.com/elemental/2013/04/minutos-negros-dos-detectives-y-el-narcotrafico-.html>>) and Edmundo Páz Soldán ('Martín Solares: Los minutos negros', *El Boomeran(g): blog literario en español*, 24 November 2008, <<http://www.elboomeran.com/blog-post/117/5483/edmundo-paz-soldan/martin-solares-los-minutos-negros/>>) begin from the premiss that *Los minutos negros* is a novel about drug trafficking.

notable *narco*. As in *Balas de plata*, this is misdirection. Blanco's report turns out to have nothing to do with drug trafficking, and, although we never discover who is responsible for his murder, it seems more likely to have been unknown political interests or the police chief's enforcer, Rufino Chávez, than the local cartels. Here we encounter the quintessentially northern perspective also expressed in Mendoza's fiction, that drug trafficking is just one aspect, however salient at the current point in time, of a longer tradition of corruption and criminality in northern Mexico.<sup>3</sup> In the second section of this chapter I shall argue that *Los minutos negros* offers a specifically political analysis of that history of corruption and criminality. As such, whereas other *narconovelas* draw attention to the particularities of northern Mexico, Solares places his story firmly within the historical context of Mexico as a whole.

Although *Los minutos negros* is a detective story — narrated in 3<sup>rd</sup> person in a concise, almost journalistic style — there are chapters that do not follow this model. Some are narrated by one of the large cast of supporting characters. Some chapters tell stories that have, at best, an ambiguous relationship with the development of the novel's main plot, such as Rodrigo Montoya's farcical account of his behaviour at a party in Part II Chapter 18, a parody of the style of *el nuevo periodismo*.<sup>4</sup> There are several dream sequences and fantastical occurrences. The two are difficult to distinguish because Solares deploys the technique — typical of the fantastic in literature — of not clearly marking the moment of transition to what later appears to have been a dream or hallucination.<sup>5</sup> For example, in Part II Ch. 16, one of the novel's characters taken from real life, Alfonso Quiroz Cuarón, is said to have fallen asleep before a passage that begins misleadingly: 'Lo

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<sup>3</sup> This is the critical corollary of popular attitudes in the North, implicit in the success of the *narcocorrido*, that accept drug trafficking because it has always existed, like several other illicit activities.

<sup>4</sup> An example of The New Journalism, Capote's *In Cold Blood*, is one of the books on Father Fritz Tschanz's bookcase when Cabrera interviews him about his relationship with Blanco, alongside *Jekyll and Hyde* and Dürrenmatt's *The Judge and His Hangman* (58). The latter might be taken as a clue, since one of Dürrenmatt's detectives is called Walter Tschanz, and he is responsible for two murders in that novel. The twists and turns of that novel and the theme of detectives manipulating each other for their own ends are features that evidently influenced Solares's designs for *Los minutos negros*. Montoya's testimony is amusing because it fails even to approach the model of a 'True Crime' narrative.

<sup>5</sup> There is often the use of ambiguous phrasing to mark the transition: E.g. 'Veía la chavita y el vampiro en la etiqueta de ron, un trago y otra vez la muchacha; un nuevo trago y la chavita le fue pareciendo sensual, irresistible. La vista se le puso borrosa [the point of transition] y lo siguiente que vio fue una vasta planicie de pasto, en algún lugar del campo' (259)

despertó el ruido de un estruendoso clavado' (306). We only infer on p. 308, when he is woken by Vicente Rangel, that what followed this ostensible awakening on p. 306 was in fact a dream. Likewise, in Ch. 19, it is only retrospectively evident to us, when Quiroz is told that he is dead on p. 350, that the criminologist must have died just before the paragraph that begins 'Desperté a la mañana siguiente' (348). That chapter is the most difficult to explain in naturalistic terms. But perhaps the strangest moment occurs at the very centre of the narrative (in Part II, Ch. 9), when a fictionalized version of the real-life author B. Traven arrives in Paracuán and proceeds to tell a bizarre fairy tale about a notable local family, the Williams. Traven's entrance, alongside references to his most famous novel, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (135, 220, 236), invite the reader to consider the significance to *Los minutos negros* of the two major themes in the German author's work: the corrupting power of greed and the deficiencies in the social and political policy of post-revolutionary Mexico.

*Los minutos negros* is also less dependent on hard-boiled conventions than, for instance, *Balas de plata*. There is no *femme fatale*, although the brief appearance in Pt. I Ch. 6 of Bernardo Blanco's girlfriend, the stunning Cristina González, despite her absence from the cast list, might give some readers cause for suspicion. Although there is a loose quest structure to both Cabrera's and Rangel's investigations, they spend less time interacting with a cross-section of local society than does the prototypical Private Eye, and more time analysing crime scenes in the manner of a police procedural or, in Cabrera's case, doing archival research. The novel does exhibit what some critics call 'gothic causality', so typical in Raymond Chandler's novels, in which a secret from the past threatens to undermine the position of important characters in the present.<sup>6</sup> Rangel and Cabrera are both warned off continuing their investigation by their superiors and their rivals in the police department. Like the classic P.I., both detectives are isolated and somewhat troubled figures, albeit

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<sup>6</sup> On 'gothic causality', see John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, p. 66. An example from Raymond Chandler is *Farewell, My Lovely*, in which the wealthy Mrs Grayle goes to considerable lengths, including murder, to cover up the fact that she was once the showgirl Velma Valento, in order to stop her one-time lover, Moose Malloy, from coming after her when he is released from prison.

for different reasons.<sup>7</sup> Both are more honourable than those around them. Nevertheless, the novel takes a view of its detectives that is distinct from that of the traditional hard-boiled novel or even Mendoza's imitation of it. For all of Mendieta's faults, Mendoza's narrator usually takes him seriously. Not so Solares's. Cabrera's apparent lack of competence is indicated in the novel's first sentence: 'La primera vez que vio al periodista le calculó veinte años, y calculó mal' (17). His mistakes become a running joke as the narrator uses the same mocking aside — 'y se volvió a equivocar' (22, 103) — to undermine him. Cabrera is presented as someone on the cowardly side of cautious, who has convinced himself that his submissive behaviour towards his boss and his wife (72, 79) is evidence of an ennobling pacifism:

En el momento en que entró a la oficina del comandante el agente Chávez salía, y lo empujó con el hombro. Por fortuna el Macetón es un elemento pacífico, y no devolvió la agresión y se reportó con el jefe (23).

The second sentence expresses Cabrera's own rationalization of the situation, a thought with which he tries to validate himself for his restraint in a situation in which he would never be likely, in fact, to react aggressively. The tone here, as elsewhere, is lightly mocking and never sardonic. Rangel's weakness is demonstrated in a comparable fashion to convey the character's poor attempts at self-reassurance: 'Rangel era un policía bragado, pero no pudo evitar que se le revoliera el estómago' (143). Unlike Cabrera, Rangel wants to be considered tough and masculine, but does not believe that he is. In this, at least, Solares echoes Mendoza's rejection of the 'masculine' sensibility of the hard-boiled novel, albeit in a more parodic fashion.<sup>8</sup> Cabrera's forte is discretion, which is not a typically masculine value, and this results in his abilities being overlooked by other characters, such as the priest Fritz Tschanz (60–61), and perhaps also by the reader.

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<sup>7</sup> Namely, Cabrera's marriage is breaking down and Rangel dislikes his job. Cabrera is largely disregarded by his colleagues whereas Rangel deliberately takes no part in their corrupt practices.

<sup>8</sup> There is reason to believe that Solares's novel influenced the writing of *Balas de plata*. One hysterical local response to the murders is to speculate about werewolves (205). Traven's fairy tale features a werewolf killed by ingesting five silver bullets (222). There are many (sometimes gratuitous) references to music and literature in *Los minutos negros*, which function either as a tone-setting soundtrack or to hint at the novel's influences. Mendoza does this in his earlier novels, but not nearly to the same extent as in *Balas de plata*. The influence may be mutual, since Mendoza features in Solares's list of acknowledgements (461).

## I A Ludic Aesthetic

Ostensibly a *novela negra*, *Los minutos negros* also betrays the influence of other models of detective fiction. Alfonso Quiroz Cuarón, a real-life criminologist, is depicted in the novel as an amateur sleuth (such as Poirot) typical of ‘golden age’ detective fiction. He is known as ‘the Mexican Sherlock Holmes’, much to his annoyance (342, 351). The rigorously deductive method of many classic fictional detectives is parodied because Quiroz allegedly possesses a scientific equation (hence the title of Part II: ‘La ecuación’) which allows him simply to plug in the names of the suspects on one side and get out the name of the killer on the other (346).<sup>9</sup> But this should not be taken as a straightforward rejection of the golden-age style. Arguably Solares embraces its ludic sensibility. Aware that in a classic detective novel the slightest detail might be taken as a hint about the identity of the murderer, he provides as many false clues as possible.<sup>10</sup> One of the most sustained instances of misdirection involves Joaquín Taboada, who is mysteriously absent when the murders in Part II take place. His name also figures in several conversations between his colleagues about the murderer (e.g. 205, 269, and 294). From a point of view internal to the story, these references are innocuous. But from our position as readers, they are liable to be taken as significant juxtapositions:

Nueve años, pensó Rangel, ¿Quién puede atacar a una niña indefensa? Sólo un  
cabrón enfermo asesino.

—¿No ha vuelto Taboada?

Era la segunda vez en una hora que el comandante García preguntaba por el  
panzón (149).

Naturally, Taboada did not commit the murders.<sup>11</sup> Solares delights in leading the reader up the

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<sup>9</sup> This detail is additionally ironic because the killer of the schoolgirls does not feature on the novel’s cast list, so it would be difficult to include him in any ‘equation’ even if such a thing were plausible. Solares may have borrowed this idea from the neo-noir film *Se7en*, in which Kevin Spacey’s character does not feature in the opening credits.

<sup>10</sup> There are clues in *Balas de plata*, of course, but they are generally clues that *do* indicate the murderer(s).

<sup>11</sup> Solares plays with this misdirection at the beginning of Part III, when Taboada is shown to possess a French Poodle (413). Rangel’s dream (in Part II Ch. 11) which leads him to investigate a key piece of forensic evidence features a French Poodle (261). In reality, the hairs subsequently found on the victims’ bodies come from the sheep on the murderer’s ranch (391). Thus, even after the identity of the killer has been revealed, a bogus hint is dropped, and at this point we are meant to realize it. The detail also serves to humanize (and mock) a character hitherto presented as a corrupt thug.

garden path.<sup>12</sup> The most notable example consists in the multiple references to billboards advertising *Refrescos de Cola*, an obvious rechristening of Coca Cola (21, 128, 212, 386). One critic considers them gratuitous period detail, but there is a political point to this symbol.<sup>13</sup> Many of the references posit a connection to the oil business in Paracuán. The drink is twice described as being petrol-coloured (128, 250), and the *Sindicato de Petroleros* has hoardings up in the same locations (212). Both organizations buy protection from the police (168, 182). For many Mexicans the oil business has been a source of national pride, not only as one of the country's most important exports but as one of the recognized successes of the post-Revolutionary period, after Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized the industry in 1938. Whereas Coca Cola has long been an emblem of capitalism, and in the mind of many Mexicans (including Rangel, 128) a symbol of American 'imperialism', the nationalization of the oil industry symbolized precisely the opposite of that. If, by 1970s, the two organizations are similar, Solares is suggesting that the PRI's 'revolutionary' days are behind it. I would argue that the signs also work as a playful plot device. One of the suspects in Rangel's investigation is Jack Williams, son of the owner of the bottling plant for *Refrescos de Cola*. Traven adds to our suspicions, in Part II Ch. 9, by recounting a fairy tale in which one of the Williams family's ancestors was a murderous werewolf.<sup>14</sup> We might readily surmise that the Cola billboards are signs of another sort, that they point to the murderer. Like Taboada, Jack Williams has nothing to do with the murders, and Solares has not one but two laughs at our expense:

Tres latas vacías de Refresco de Cola condujeron su vista en dirección de la hamaca, donde había un bulto enredado en la frazada. Rangel le dijo que había venido a buscarlo y el hombre descendió de la red (392).

Cabrera sacó una botella de Refrescos de Cola, de antes de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Qué coincidencia, se dijo, qué coincidencia que aparezca justo ahora, y arrojó la botella lejos de él (450).

In the first case, just as Rangel is arriving at the hut where he hopes to find the murderer of the five

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<sup>12</sup> The games played with the reader in *Los minutos negros* echo the sensibility of Borges's detective stories, but there are no obvious allusions to Borges in the novel.

<sup>13</sup> Hugo Hiriart, 'Los minutos negros, de Martín Solares', *Letras libres*, January 2007, <<http://www.lettraslibres.com/revista/libros/los-minutos-negros-de-martin-solares>>.

<sup>14</sup> This is especially suggestive because the murders were committed every month on the full moon (188).

schoolgirls, the cans of Cola do literally point him out, by directing the detective's eyes to the part of the hut where the killer is lying in his hammock. But this is not the type of sign, nor the murderer, that we were expecting. In the second, with the reader already disabused of any suspicions about the Cola signs, immediately after Cabrera has understood the reasons for Blanco's research into the 1970s he seems to suggest that there was indeed some connection to *Refrescos de Cola*. As far as this reader is aware, there is no connection significant to the investigation. Rather, it is another joke.

Many of the novel's eccentric features can be explained as props in the game played by the author with his reader. One obvious reason for a cast list is for it to act as an *aide memoire*. In *Los minutos negros* it also predisposes the reader to certain expectations, which can then be manipulated. We might assume that it would proceed in order of the characters' importance to the narrative. It is confusing to encounter the police intern Rosa Isela atop the list, with a particularly long description of her function. Later, we learn that it is to Cabrera that she is of disproportionate importance, not to the novel; her position on the list is the first of many jokes at the detective's expense. Although Cabrera is the main character in the novel's first section, he appears only fourth on the list, and it is not even until the end of the first chapter (22) that he is revealed as the novel's putative protagonist (we expect there to be one in this genre). In time we realize that Rangel is the real protagonist of *Los minutos negros*, despite his lowly position and meagre description on the cast list: he is simply 'Vicente Rangel, detective' (10). Some details on the list invite our first suspicions. La Chilanga is recorded fourth under the section headed 'Los locales', despite a nickname that indicates her origins in Mexico City. Most readers will only realize on the final page of the novel that she is a 'local' on account of her marriage to Cabrera. The name of Cabrera's wife is mentioned in an off-hand fashion in Ch. 9 (73), but we are liable to forget this detail since she does not appear to be important enough to feature in the cast list. Accordingly, most readers will not make the connection when La Chilanga's name is also casually revealed to be Mariana in Part II (197).<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> This 'dato escondido' recalls Vargas Llosa's magisterial use of different names for the same characters in *La casa verde*.

sub-section titled 'Los visitantes' is more bemusing. In what respect could Miguel Rivera be considered a 'visitante'? Why is the King of the Martians, who (we assume) cannot be a real character, listed alongside three characters drawn from real life? Only much later in the novel can we understand that the characters listed here are related on account of their appearance in the novel's multiple fantastical sequences. They participate in supernatural or hallucinatory 'visitations'. 'El Albino' is there because, even if he is a normal character, he arrives mysteriously at the crime scenes he is sent to photograph and behaves *as if* he were a ghost.<sup>16</sup> Rangel is suitably scared of him.<sup>17</sup>

The games discussed so far involve the particular clue-guessing dynamic of detective fiction, but Solares also manipulates our more general literary expectations. In one scene he employs horror motifs to suggest that Rangel is about to be attacked in his home, as predicted by an acquaintance (el contador Práxedes) shortly beforehand (283–5):

Put a madre, ¿qué es eso? No era la caída de un mango de río, ni los borbotones del calentador de agua, era algo distinto y repetitivo, que tenía algo de suplicio chino: en cuanto lograba dormirse se producía el nuevo ruido, que no lograba ubicar, y en más de una ocasión creyó ver una figura de pie junto a su cama. La enésima vez que despertó, con los nervios rotos, salió a buscar el origen del ruido, furioso, con la veintidós en la mano. No estaba preparado para lo que encontró (286).

The mysterious noises turn out to be a family of raccoons in the kitchen. The final phrase is one instance of a common procedure whereby phrases that sound ominous precede an event of no consequence. For example, shortly after the phrase 'el policía notó que había algo fuera de lugar' (251), we realize that it refers to the fact that the dancers in the strip club are not doing their usual routine. Of the many chapters comprising first-person accounts, few proceed as anticipated. Part I, Chapter 15 is labelled 'Segundo Testimonio del Padre Fritz Tschanz, S.J.', but his own narration lasts little more than a paragraph before Cabrera's point of view takes over again with a play on

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<sup>16</sup> '[E]ra un tipo silencioso, de cabello blanco y cejas blancas, siempre vestido de blanco entre los mares de sangre [...] ¡Ora, cabrón!', Rangel le gritó: Que te largues. Pero el Albino permaneció quieto, *como si estuviera muerto*' (132–3, my italics).

<sup>17</sup> 'Quizá no quería reconocerlo, pero le tenía miedo, siempre le tuvo un poco de miedo, acaso le acobardaba la visión del sujeto, siempre tan silencioso, ojos claros, de gato, denso como una premonición [...] En el fondo temía que no trabajara en ningún diario. Una vez le preguntó por él a su tío: ¿Un albino? ¿Cuál, tú? No lo conozco, y ya no insistió' (144). It is certainly possible that he is, in fact, one of Rangel's hallucinations.

words: 'Eso le cambió completamente la perspectiva' (102). Part II, Chapter 19 is supposed to provide the 'Memorias del Doctor Quiroz Cuarón, detective' (339). We assume that this is the document given to Cabrera by Rodrigo Montoya in Part I (93), since it follows Montoya's own farcical 'testimonio'. Instead, it is a further fantastical account in which Quiroz is stalked by a mysterious black figure that turns out to be Death itself. The final pages take place after the criminologist has died (348–351). The novel's most effective moment also depends on the manipulation of expectations. Initially, the structure of the novel has an obvious effect. By beginning in the narrative present before regressing to the 1970s, Solares casts a veil of tragic futility over the events involving Rangel. We already know that René de Luz will be framed for the murder of the schoolgirls, that someone as incompetent as Taboada will become police chief, and that Rangel is nowhere to be found. We understand the brutal irony of Romero's nickname, when he introduces himself to Rangel as 'el ciego' with the explanation that he is discreet (204), because a literally blinded Romero has already appeared in Part I. And yet, for all this inevitable 'tragedy', the tone of Part II is frequently humorous, at least until the final three chapters. Many readers are likely to forget that the investigation has to fail. The reason the end of Part II is so moving is that the abrupt transition from playful parody back to deadly seriousness is (by then) a shock. This unpredictability of tone sets *Los minutos negros* apart from much detective fiction.

One final literary convention worth consideration relates to the author's representation of ambient features such as the weather. Multiple references are made to the fog and the reddish sky over Paracúan, phenomena with well-known connotations in literature: uncertainty and violence. Readers will interpret them as the commonplace means of setting a scene's mood that they usually are, particularly as they are pertinent to the novel's content. However, Solares foregrounds such details more than is necessary for the purposes of mood. They are introduced with 'words of estrangement' such as a form of the verb *parecer*, the phrase *como si*, or some other indication that

it is the character in question who notices (and interprets) the weather, and not the narrator.<sup>18</sup> In itself this amounts simply to an avoidance of cliché. But I would claim that there is more to this feature. Elsewhere in the novel the idea that it is possible to take natural phenomena to be significant in relation to apparently unlinked events is directly stated. The drought and forest fires prior to the murders in the 1970s are described as ‘un presagio’ (87). Rangel makes the following analysis of the local newspaper:

La portada reproducía la foto del jefe, que prometía una intensa persecución y captura, y a un costado, lo contradecía el pronóstico del tiempo con cierta malicia: «Sólo vientos ligeros, y lluvias aisladas en la región» (267).

Stated as baldly as this, the analogy cannot but appear absurd. Naturally, as readers who know (some of) what is to come, we can sympathize with the attempts of a character like Rangel to find portents of the future. It is a similar human desire to comprehend unpredictable dangers that doubtless motivates the local obsession with UFOs during Rangel’s investigation (291, 352). But there is some indication that Solares is mocking this propensity, even while the enjoyment of his novel partly depends on it.<sup>19</sup> The unpredictable local climate is attributed frequently to pollution from the nearby oil refineries (103, 110, 318). One reporter on the radio goes out of his way to explain why the port suffers from fog during storms (239). That is, naturalistic explanations are clearly provided; there is little justification for over-interpretation. In an analogous situation, Cabrera’s over-active imagination is offered up for criticism:

Había una pareja de gaviotas a un costado del auto, y el Macetón se preguntó si iba a dejarlo su chava. Por respuesta, la más veleidosa de las gaviotas se echó a volar, dejando a la otra al lado del auto, exactamente como el Macetón: Ay, cabrón. Nunca practiques la adivinación con gaviotas (80).

The reader will commit similar mistakes throughout the novel. What difference exists between

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Entonces la luz *pareció* menguar y *el Macetón advirtió* que el cielo se había encapotado’ (101); ‘Caía una lluvia violenta, *como si* un ser de mil puños estuviera golpeando las láminas del metal de la azotea’ (253); ‘Cuando estuvo dormida [La Chilanga], Rangel salió a la terraza y miró las nubes rojas del cielo, que *parecían* advertirle: Carajo, ésta puede ser la última vez que te encuentres aquí’ (374); ‘*Les sorprendió* una gruesa capa de niebla que apareció de repente’ (386); ‘La niebla se está espesando, *pensó* Vicente. *Parece* un pueblo fantasma, *se dijo*’ (246). I take the term (words of estrangement) from Roger Fowler’s excellent *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: OUP, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Psychologists call this human capacity for seeing patterns or significance in meaningless data ‘apophenia’.

characters striving foolishly to discern indications of the future and readers believing other irrelevant details (like a billboard for *Refrescos de Cola*) to be significant to the investigation? Given that Cabrera is supposed to be short of understanding and we already know that Rangel's investigation will fail, readers might feel that they are in a privileged position in comparison with the novel's two detectives. We think we know more than they do. It is obvious that this is not the case at the end of the narrative when Cabrera (and Taboada) neglect to reveal everything they discover in Part III.

This may be one justification for inconsistencies in *Los minutos negros* that make forming a 'configurative meaning' of the plot very difficult.<sup>20</sup> To hold expectations and look for clues presupposes that there is a stable truth to be discovered, but is foolish if there is no such thing. One of the novel's most confusing features is its timeline. The importance of dates is foregrounded by the fact that they are mentioned so frequently. There is also the suggestion that they are significant to El Chacal. In the following example, the second sentence acts to insist that the reader remember Rangel's passing intuition about the matter.

De repente se dijo: Qué coincidencia, la otra niña también murió en un día 17. Pero no le dio importancia a este hecho y la casualidad quedó archivada en el fondo de su inconsciente (156).

As soon as we pay close attention, however, there are oddities. When Cabrera reviews newspaper articles from the 1970s in Ch. 11, the year of the *Chacal* case is given as 1978 (85). But readers possessed of a good memory will note that the cultural references in that chapter date from other years: the films *Live and Let Die* and *The Exorcist* (85) were released in 1973; Henry Kissinger was no longer U.S. Secretary of State by 1978 (86). When the sorry tale of René Luz de Dios is told in Ch. 14 the year is now 1975 (97). Initially we are inclined to attribute this to René's poor memory. At the beginning of Part II of the novel, the first day of Rangel's investigation is said to

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<sup>20</sup> In the writing of Wolfgang Iser, a 'configurative meaning' refers to the coherent understanding in the mind of the reader of the story and its significance at any given time, an understanding that is liable to change as the reader proceeds, especially in the case of texts which Iser deems 'literary', that is, which do not follow one's initial expectations.

be 17<sup>th</sup> March (123, 131), which agrees with the date given in Ch. 11 (87). However, the year is now 1977, a detail confirmed several chapters later (179). Each of the five sub-sections comprises a separate day in Rangel's life, suggesting a coherent sequence from 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> March. When we are told it is 'jueves 20 de marzo' in the 4<sup>th</sup> section (291), this is as expected. We are surprised to learn, therefore, that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> section it is meant to be 'miércoles 19 de *abril*' (268), the same month implied by the mother of the first victim when she marks three months since her daughter's disappearance in January (315). There are many more contradictions. If Miguel Rivera died shortly after being visited by the writer B. Traven (235), then this could not have been 1975, as suggested by Rivera's tombstone (304), since in real life Traven died in 1969. Another character from real life, the criminologist Alfonso Quiroz Cuarón, dies in the course of the novel. In reality this occurred in 1978, which is coherent with his recollection in the novel that Rivera had died three years previously, as long as we assume that Rivera did die in 1975 (340). Yet if Rangel's investigation is supposed to be taking place in 1978, there is no direct mention of this in Part II. In Part III, the chapters that follow Joaquín Taboada equivocate between '77 (438) and '78 (416). It is equally impossible to deduce the date of Cabrera's investigation in the narrative present, since Rangel's investigation is said to have occurred either 'más de veinte años' previously (93, 450), precisely 'veinte años' before (107, 413, 439, 450), or even as much 'veinticinco años' prior to the present (416, 421). What does one make of these inconsistencies?

One thought is that few characters in the narrative present have a good recollection of the original investigation. How easy it is to sweep past injustices under the carpet! The title of the first part of the novel — 'Mil lagunas tiene tu memoria' — points to this interpretation. Cabrera upbraids himself for forgetting the case when he is reminded by the research he conducts in the *hemeroteca*: 'Cómo no me voy a acordar, si trabajamos de cuarenta y ocho horas, a fin de encontrar al culpable' (87). Moreover, the mistakes made by Fritz Tschanz in Part III — that the investigation lasted four months, and four girls were killed (442) — are explicable by the fact that his memory is demonstrated to be faulty: contrary to his poor opinion of Cabrera's intellect in Part I (61), Fritz discovers that he had given Cabrera very high marks for his work as a schoolboy in the priest's

charge (443). This provides some justification for the inconsistencies in Part II, since Fritz is revealed to be Blanco's principal source of information (439, 441). However, this does not account for the inconsistencies in Parts I and III. It is not even clear that Part II is, indeed, meant to be Blanco's report from Parts I and III. The final lines of Part I suggest that what follows will be the report: 'Todo por un informe que ni siquiera leyó. El informe del periodista' (117). But, at first, Part II seems to be narrated by Cabrera:

Hay dos tipos de policía en todo el mundo: a los que les gusta su trabajo y a los que no. A mí me gustaba mi empleo, al agente Chávez le gustaba su empleo, al comandante García claro que le gustaba investigar y resolver un problema, pero a su mejor detective no (123).

The abundant use of colloquial phrases in the early stages of Part II, references to events 'back then', and an increased tendency to provide an explanation for particular details all imply that Part II is being narrated by one of the characters in the narrative present.<sup>21</sup> Gradually, however, this identifiable perspective fades away and the narrative voice follows the thoughts of Rangel, as it did with Cabrera in Part I. However, in Part III Cabrera's annoyance at the fact that Blanco leaves him out of his report, consistent with Cabrera's absence from Part II, implies once more that Part II is based on Blanco's report (458). There is no fact of the matter here. Eagle-eyed readers will note that the 'mistake' made by Fritz is also made by the novel's cast list: while Réne Luz de Dios López is said to have been arrested for killing four girls, there are in fact five girls listed at the bottom of the sub-section (10–11). There is simply no secure point of view from which one can evaluate the veracity of some of the novel's key details, at either point in time.<sup>22</sup> With regard to the

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<sup>21</sup> The second paragraph of Part II begins in a colloquial fashion: 'Bueno, hay que empezar por alguna parte' (123). Some of the narrator's explanations of particular references are also colloquial: 'Eso del tío era una broma entre ellos, si pudiera decirse que a Vicente Rangel le gustaban las bromas... La verdad es que no' (124). The narrator frequently points out differences between Paracuán in the 1970s and the present day: 'Por entonces el ayuntamiento sólo tenía tres vehículos' (127); 'Llegó al bar León en otros seis minutos — entonces toda la ciudad podía recorrerse en media hora' (128). On occasions he reminds us of his role in telling the story: 'Lo de la chava es más complicado y se explicará en su momento' (128); 'Rangel, como ya lo señalé antes, tenía seis años en el cuerpo de policía (134). None of this is typical of Parts I and III, in which the narrative voice is less distinctive.

<sup>22</sup> In Part III, the fact that additional killings of schoolgirls have taken place, even though the putative killer René is in gaol, is described thus: 'lo cual crea una laguna, o una gran contradicción' (439). On the grounds that the *laguna* most commonly mentioned in the novel acts as metonymy for the city of Paracuán, Solares is clearly acknowledging the fact that his fictional setting is rife with contradictions and unresolvable gaps.

dates, if one were to take reality as a guide, the only possibility would be 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> April 1978, since this combination of dates is the only one that comprises a Monday-to-Friday sequence, the one detail not questioned in the novel. For Cabrera's investigation, the only 15<sup>th</sup> January (23) within the period 20–25 years later that was a Monday was in 2001. But the novel's fantastical sequences in Part II (impossible by any realist yardstick) tell us that real life is not an appropriate gauge. That this is a work of fiction, and fiction does not always require verisimilitude, is the only explanation. This is one reason for the passage in which Quiroz Cuarón dreams about encountering the director Alfred Hitchcock.<sup>23</sup> Hitchcock mentions that Quiroz Cuarón had claimed that the script to the film *Psycho* was insufficiently logical to be true-to-life. Quiroz provides a response that would seem to excuse the inconsistencies in *Los minutos negros*: 'Sir Alfred, dígale a sus detractores que si a usted le importara la verosimilitud, estaría haciendo documentales' (308).

## II Politics, the Police, and Drug Trafficking

Given what has been stated above, it might appear difficult to maintain that *Los minutos negros* is a representation of reality from which one can derive any important truths about that reality, that is, about a Mexico afflicted by corruption, violence and impunity. However, features of even the most fantastical fictional worlds can be taken to exemplify similar features in real life. What exactly does a novel such as *Los minutos negros* tell us about drug trafficking? It is certainly an element of the context of both storylines, and perhaps the 'elephant in the room' in Rangel's time frame, given the large number of oblique or only fleeting references to it (160, 208, 320, 328, 370, 383, 398). However, the major focus of the novel is the activity of the police. In the modern *novela negra*, if the investigator is a police officer it is for reasons of verisimilitude. The object of attention is society at large. This is somewhat less true of *Los minutos negros*. The principal conflicts are between individual police officers, rather than between the police and felons: Cabrera and Chávez in Part I, a contest which culminates in a fist-fight in Ch. 18, and Rangel and Taboada in Part II. There are literary reasons for focusing on the police itself. One salient theme in the Mexican

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<sup>23</sup> Another reason might be to allude to Hitchcock's concept of the 'MacGuffin', a plot device designed to operate as a red herring or have no obvious motivation. Some of Solares's games could be described thus.

*narconovela* is the extent to which organizations and individuals entrusted to carry out one activity in reality encourage behaviour precisely contrary to their designated purpose. This is one way in which the tragedy of the current situation in Mexico is underlined. Of all organizations it is the *Sindicato de Profesores*, in *Los minutos negros*, that shelters and abets the psychopath who is abducting and murdering schoolgirls. The ironically-named Clemente Morales is the brother of the teaching union's director, Edelmiro. Not only does Edelmiro protect his sibling, he also provides the original opportunity for him to commit his crimes since they are carried out in an abandoned school building commissioned in a crooked transaction by the union itself (395). Such ironies are not the sole preserve of fiction. For instance, General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo, appointed head of the *Instituto Nacional para el Combate a las Drogas* in 1996, was famously revealed as an agent of the Juárez cartel only two years later.<sup>24</sup> The novel itself alludes to the most egregious example of police abuse of power in Mexican history. The head of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* in *Los minutos negros* is José Carlos Durazo (417), described as 'lo peor que ha dado la policía nacional' (52). He is an obvious fictionalization of Arturo 'El Negro' Durazo Moreno, also an erstwhile agent of the DFS, but most infamously, during the *sexenio* of his childhood friend José López Portillo, president in real life at the time the novel is set, Chief of Police in Mexico City. Durazo turned the city's police into a racketeering empire that engaged in extortion, arms smuggling and, of course, drug trafficking.<sup>25</sup> Evidently Solares wished to underline this theme.<sup>26</sup> In their defence, police officers are amongst the most likely individuals to be corrupted by drug traffickers and other organized criminals. Historically their pay has been poor, they lack the protective connections

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<sup>24</sup> Jorge Fernández Menéndez, *El otro poder*, p. 161. Another example from the 1990s is Armando Martínez Salgado, chief of the *Unidad de Antisecuestros* for the Judicial Police in Morelos, whose officers were implicated in a spate of kidnappings designed to supplement their meagre salaries.

<sup>25</sup> Phil Gunson, 'Arturo Durazo', *The Guardian*, 14 August 2000, <<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/aug/14/guardianobituaries1>>.

<sup>26</sup> Carlos Gamerro has proposed that the subject of any realistic detective story in Latin America should be, in part, the criminality of the police. In 'Para una reformulación del género policial argentino', he makes several suggestions followed loosely by Solares's novel: the crime is committed by the police or at least with the acquiescence of the police (Gamerro's first and second points); the clues are not entirely reliable (Point 3); those accused by the police are innocent (Point 8); the investigation is carried out by a journalist (Point 9). However, Blanco's investigation is a failure in *Los minutos negros*, since he is killed before its findings are made public. For Gamerro, publicizing one's findings is the best possible outcome of a verisimilar investigation (Point 10), since justice is unattainable. That does not happen in *Los minutos negros*, and even the truth is not fully discerned by the reader. In this respect, Solares is demonstrating more pessimism still. See Gamerro, *El nacimiento de la literatura argentina*, pp. 90-91.

enjoyed by some politicians, and their cooperation is essential to the traffickers.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, it feels particularly galling that individuals whose fundamental purpose is to uphold and enforce the law should be in cahoots with violent criminals. There is rhetorical mileage in emphasizing hypocrisy and the police are an easy target. Nevertheless, the author's interest in the police is not merely for the purposes of denunciation. The general effect of Part III, in which Taboada recalls the events of the 1970s, is to show that even individuals hitherto presented as irredeemably corrupt and dishonest are subject to forces beyond their control. Taboada has little option but to involve himself in the original cover-up, and is unceremoniously abandoned when the political situation changes in the narrative present. He too is, in part, a victim of 'the system'.

The unpleasant operation of that 'system' is one of the dominant themes in *Los minutos negros*. Although not strictly an allegory, the novel provides a persuasive representation of the political mechanisms by which the PRI governed Mexico before the democratic transition and thus prepared the ground for the power of drug-trafficking organizations in the present. Two socio-political traditions stand out: 'corporatism' and 'clientelism'. They do not necessarily go together, but there are explanations as to why they have often co-existed in Latin America. According to one interesting (if idealized) argument, advanced by the historian Glen Dealy, in Protestant, capitalist countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century men typically sought social status through the accumulation of private wealth, which might be converted later — though not necessarily — into political power.<sup>28</sup> But in Catholic, 'corporatist' countries, like those in Latin America, men sought public power more directly, through the accumulation of useful followers and allies.<sup>29</sup> According to Dealy, in Protestant countries there was competition at the micro level between individuals for wealth, which paralleled the competition between interest groups in a pluralistic political system. In Catholic countries, however, the focus was on cooperation and the exchange of favours between individuals,

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<sup>27</sup> There is no particular instance in *Los minutos negros* of the common motif in the *narconovela* that drug traffickers and law enforcement are two sides of the same coin. However, some characters have been both policemen and outlaws at various times. Both El Chaneque and Jorge Romero have 'antecedentes penales' (165, 342), and Romero travels full circle by ending up 'al margen de la ley' (94).

<sup>28</sup> Glen Dealy, 'The Public Man', in *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*, ed. by Hugh Hamill (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), pp. 42–61 (p. 45).

<sup>29</sup> Hugh Hamill, 'Introduction', in *Caudillos*, pp. 3–26 (p. 11).

via systems of personal patronage and *compadrazgo*, which at the higher level of politics tended to result in a ‘monistic’ corporatism, where as many interest groups as possible were subordinated to an accepted central authority.<sup>30</sup> Most historians now view the Weberian analysis of Capitalism with scepticism. Moreover, it is likely that no society has ever operated exclusively along the lines of one side of Dealy’s dichotomy to the complete exclusion of the other. Clearly, the near ubiquity of capitalistic economies in the present day renders Dealy’s distinction untenable for any analysis of a modern society. In *Los minutos negros*, for instance, the local power of the Williams family in the 1970s is a direct result of their accumulation of wealth from *Refrescos de Cola*; the *narcos* led by ‘el Señor Obregón’ are in a similar position in the 1990s. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a rough correlation between social clientelism and political corporatism in Latin America.<sup>31</sup>

*Los minutos negros* amply demonstrates the connection between these two social phenomena during the PRI’s governance of Mexico. Rangel’s uncle, Miguel Rivera, has an informal, client-based style of policing. It is exemplified in Part II, Ch. 4, when he takes Rangel to *la Coralillo*, the most dangerous district of the city, in order to investigate a spate of robberies. He attempts to procure information from ‘El Chimuelo’, a suspect butcher who calls Rivera *patrón* and with whom he has obviously had a long-standing relationship:

—¡De veras que no se puede contigo, licenciado! [...] Siempre que vienes a verme resulta que estás defendiendo a tus compadres.

—¿Y qué culpa tengo yo de tener tantos compadres? Tú sabes cómo trabajo yo, pero a lo mejor mi coche no te gusta y prefieres que regrese con la Julia [the police van].

[...]

—Mira Chimuelo: tú sabes que siempre fui derecho contigo... No te conviene perder la relación (163–164).

<sup>30</sup> Hamill, in *Ibid.*, pp. 11–13; Francois Chevalier, ‘The Roots of Caudillismo’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 27–41 (p. 36).

<sup>31</sup> One example is the endemic *caudillismo* experienced by Latin American nations after independence. Under the Empire, the Spanish Crown operated as a general mediator between interest groups in the various regions of Spanish America. Specific agreements — ‘pacts’ — were made with corporate bodies such as guilds, townships, villages and ethnic groups in return for specific obligations, such as a lump sum in tax. These individual arrangements contributed to a sense of a ‘general pact’ between all the relevant sectors of society. The lack of legitimacy enjoyed by the superlatively liberal constitutions promulgated in many Latin American nations after Independence had much to do with their inability to recognize such traditional arrangements. Many a *caudillo* rode to power on the back of personal — clientelist — loyalties afforded to him in return for promoting the interests of groups that felt abandoned in the new political environment. See Francois-Xavier Guerra, ‘The Spanish-American Tradition of Representation and its European Roots’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26 (1994), 1–35.

The way in which Rivera seeks to solve the problem by maintaining close personal connections with people on both sides of law (with both his *compadres* and clients like Chimuelo) resembles the PRI's habitual relationship with regionalized drug trafficking after the Revolution. Indeed, the deal he offers Chimuelo, to cooperate or face the consequences, is practically blackmail. Like the PRI with the traffickers, Rivera is firmly in charge. What protects these arrangements from becoming abusive is simply Rivera's personal integrity. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for many other characters, and this is the system's principal problem. The reason the DFS gets involved at the end of Part II to cover up the murders is because it is convenient for all the parties involved. Romero pronounces on it thus in perhaps the most scathing passage of the novel:

Hijo de su putísima madre, pensó el madrina. Pactaron todos: pactó el gobierno, pactó el presidente, pactaron sobre el cuerpo de las niñas. Como ocurre en todo el mundo, la ciudad creció alrededor de las tumbas (406).

The government maintains order, the key interest groups (like the *Sindicato de Profesores*) are satisfied, and several individuals benefit immensely. The governor is promised investment for the region, and Taboada is promoted to police chief in return for his support. It is effective government, but it is utterly corrupt and neglects the rule of law. To emphasize the injustice of the agreement, Taboada is forced to take part in Romero's brutal torture while being reminded that he is now in debt to his new *patrones*: 'favor con favor se paga [...] Hacer favores es bueno para la amistad, ¿o no?' (419).

The importance of such behaviour is manifest in the consequences that befall anyone who rejects it. The opposition mayor Agustín Barbosa opts out of the PRI's political monopoly, but he has to wait on tables in his own restaurant to save enough money to finance his council's budget (which the Presidency delights in withholding), and he ends up falsely imprisoned on ridiculous — and particularly hypocritical — charges of drug trafficking (398). Arguably it is also Rangel's biggest mistake to reject clientelism. Initially he benefits from it, insofar as he gains a paid job in the police

department on Rivera's recommendation whilst more deserving applicants are forced to wait.<sup>32</sup> With respect to Rangel's trajectory in the novel, the purpose of the episode in which Traven tells the detective his life story (Pt. II, Ch. 9) is to mark a change in Rangel's position as a police officer. The primary message of Traven's autobiography is that an individual can reinvent himself no matter what has happened in the past, summarized by his rhetorical question '¿Somos una persona o nos habita una multitud?' (235). This is intended to convince Rangel to finally accept his position as a police officer rather than a musician. The secondary moral is that the individual person, however insignificant, has the power to change his society for the better. Initially, when the three communists in his story visit Traven in Germany to propose that he write for them in order to 'cambiar vidas', the author is sceptical.<sup>33</sup> Yet when he arrives in Mexico years later, an altered person with a different name, he finally succeeds in doing just that: 'Le llegan cerros de cartas, y el comentario más frecuente dice: Su novela ha cambiado mi vida' (234). Miguel Rivera dies at the very moment Traven is imparting this implicit advice. Rangel must now stand on his own two feet, without Rivera's guidance and connections, but he seems in good stead if he can follow Traven's example of individual success against the odds. It turns out to be a terrible example. Rangel only keeps Rivera's gun and its holster, as if he thought that were all he needed to be a successful policeman (236). But as soon as Rivera is dead, Rangel's colleagues in the department begin to make his life difficult (170). He prefers to work alone, and fiercely resists Romero's initial offers of assistance (204). For Romero, it seems completely natural to establish a clientelist relationship with Rangel, so he begins to carry out unsolicited favours for his *patrón*. Rangel repudiates this directly: 'No me digas patrón' (253). Nevertheless, the detective is not unaware of how isolated he has become, especially once his only friend in the department, El Brujo, is murdered.<sup>34</sup> Other than brute necessity, this motivates his trust in Romero when the time comes to arrest the murderer. Of course, the arrest comes to nothing once the various groups pitted against him arrive at their

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<sup>32</sup> 'Recibió su nombramiento al mes, gracias a que el comandante le debía favores a su tío. Pronto empezó a cobrar un sueldo quincenal, para sorpresa de los padrinas que hacía meses esperaban lo mismo' (165).

<sup>33</sup> '¿Cambiar vidas? El dramaturgo argumenta: Ése no es mi proyecto, yo busco otras cosas...' (230).

<sup>34</sup> 'Se resistía a creer que hubiera muerto el Brujo, un aliado impecable. Me quedo solo, chingado' (373). Of course, if we count Rivera's subsequent appearances (e.g. 377) as the hauntings of a ghost rather than as a hallucination on the part of Rangel, then the detective is not truly alone.

agreement to protect the killer. It is fitting, therefore, that he should throw Traven's German coin over the bridge in disgust in the final scene of Part II of the novel (410). Rangel has tried to follow Traven's example, but the results have been disastrous. The reason, we might conclude, is that no individual can change *this* society on his own, because justice comes second to satisfying the aggregate interests of the people in charge.

If the PRI's system of government was ever just, it is evidently unjust by the time of Rangel's investigation. Allegory or not, and however imprecise, the novel's setting is noteworthy. Both the 1970s and the late 1990s are significant periods in Mexican history. It is generally accepted that the PRI lost much of its legitimacy in the 1970s, not least among left-leaning intellectuals. The beginning of this disenchantment was the massacre at Tlatelolco on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1968, a date alluded to by Quiroz Cuarón in the novel as a criticism of the president (347). The man responsible for the security forces that day was Luis Echeverría, secretary of the interior. Two years later he became president. His term of office was particularly difficult, both politically and economically. From 1971 a number of guerrilla movements arose across Mexico, the largest led by Lucio Cabañas in Guerrero. It required 10,000 soldiers to repress. A series of high-profile individuals were kidnapped by rebels, including the U.S. consul general in Guadalajara. Echeverría struggled to control Mexico's high rate of inflation. In September 1976, capital flight due to inflation reached a level that forced the government to devalue the peso by 60%, then by another 40% a month later.<sup>35</sup> The 1970s was also when the DFS was at its apogee, charged with brutally suppressing insurrection and, in doing so, creating several ad-hoc alliances with drug traffickers. Several authors have traced the origins of Mexico's current instability to the 1970s, because it was arguably the first time the PRI began to lose its tight control over the country and this period coincided with the growth of the drug trade. Élmér Mendoza set *El amante Janis Joplin* in that decade for this very reason. Although Luis Echeverría's real-life term in office ended in late 1976, in *Los minutos negros* Solares has a President 'Echavaretta' in command a year or two later. This fictional president is famous for wearing *guayabera* shirts (76, 210), as was Luis Echeverría in real

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Skidmore and Peter Smith, *Modern Latin America* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p.281.

life. If Solares had set his novel specifically in 1976 with a president Echeverría, it would have been an accurate period detail. By altering the information slightly but unmistakably, he implicates the ex-President more directly in the corruption and injustice of that decade, of which the novel gives several, albeit fictional, examples. The DFS agents who arrive in Part II Ch. 26 to destroy Rangel's investigation operate with the President's direct authority (403). With regard to the drug trade, some historians have alleged that Echeverría had strong connections with cocaine traffickers such as Alberto Sicilia Falcón.<sup>36</sup> It was Echeverría who authorized Operation Condor in 1975, but the campaign was ultimately ineffectual, and many have claimed that it was a smokescreen for the expansion of the cocaine trade in this period.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the era in which drug trafficking infiltrated the highest levels of the Mexican government is commonly thought have begun with Echeverría too.<sup>38</sup> Whether Echeverría can be held personally responsible or not, he stands symbolically for the debasement of the Mexican system of government.<sup>39</sup> If the PRI's dominance began its long decline in the 1970s, that decline was all but complete by 1997, the earliest possible date for the events of the novel, a year in which the party lost its majority in the Mexican Congress for the first time. Three years later it would lose the presidency. Many analysts would argue that since the political transition of 2000, Mexico has replaced a corrupt government with a more open but weaker government, a weakness demonstrated by President Calderón's failure to win his 'War on Drugs'. Arguably *Los minutos negros* echoes this development: Taboada and Chávez are brutal and venal, but they are replaced at the close of the

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<sup>36</sup> Dale Scott & Marshall, *Cocaine Politics*, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> The American novel, *The Power of the Dog* (2005), by Don Winslow, exemplifies this attitude. Winslow has the character 'Tío' Barrera, based firmly on Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, actively organizing the spraying of opium fields, in his role as an aide to the governor of Sinaloa, in order to give the impression that the Mexican authorities were cooperating with the USA. While the DEA's attention is diverted, Barrera begins arranging to smuggle cocaine from Colombia.

<sup>38</sup> Though it can only constitute guilt by association, Echeverría's brother-in-law, Rubén Zuno Arce, was one of the men convicted for his involvement in the infamous murder of DEA agent Enrique Camarena.

<sup>39</sup> Historian William H. Beezley is categorical about Echeverría's political legacy: 'The populist elements of the Echeverría regime [...] — especially what now appears as the overemphasis on state entrepreneurial development that crashed with the devaluations of the 1980s and the structural political reforms in voting, congressional representation, and attacks on business leaders that pushed them to take over the Party of National Action (PAN) — ultimately resulted in the events that led to the victory of the opposition candidate Vicente Fox in the 2000 presidential election and ended the political monopoly of the revolutionary party' ('In Conclusion: Gabardine Suits and Guayabera Shirts', in *Populism in twentieth century Mexico: the presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría*, ed. by Amelia Kiddle & María Muñoz [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010], pp. 190–205 [pp. 204–5]).

novel by Cabrera. Cabrera means well, but one wonders how strong he can be against the ‘problemas’ he envisages on the last page of the novel (460), especially given that several powerful people already want him dead (456).

Whether or not the problems of the 1970s are to be taken as determining the present situation, the structure of the novel underlines the similarities between the two points in time. Whereas in the 1970s the police are subservient to a host of corporate and union interests, in the present day they have swapped those masters for a new set: the *narcos*. Thus, when Cabrera confiscates a gun from the impudent son of a trafficker, he is immediately ordered to return it by Taboada (77). When Taboada makes the mistake of arresting a low-level trafficker to frame for Blanco’s murder, he is summoned to explain himself to the local cartel leader, el señor Obregón (425). It is obvious who is in charge. These are circumstances that Cabrera finds intolerable, accustomed as he was to the days when traffickers deferred to the police: ‘Una cosa era evitar la violencia y otra muy distinta soportar a los narcos’ (36). The relationship is specifically different, but not in structural terms. Thus, for instance, the children of the powerful are just as conceited in the present (the boy *narco*) as they were in 1970s (Jack Williams).<sup>40</sup> Although they may have less power, the authorities do try to behave in the same arbitrary manner as ever. In the 1970s it was normal for the governor to purchase all the local copies of national newspapers in order to avoid the dissemination of any criticisms of his administration (184). Taboada considers doing the same in order to escape the Blanco family’s attacks on the competence of his department’s investigation (423). Finally, the general public remains in denial about the source of local criminality. In the 1970s, people are happy to fantasize by attributing the violence either to extra-terrestrial beings or to a magical beast called a *nagual*.<sup>41</sup> It is not the only case in which responsibility is shifted onto non-existent shoulders: in one particularly ironic passage, a local radio station blames global warming on the

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<sup>40</sup> The fact that Jack Williams is nicknamed ‘Junior’, in spite of the fact that his father is not called John but Bill, reinforces the analogy since the new generation of urban drug traffickers in the 1990s, often the children of the older rural *patrones*, was called the *narcojuniors*.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Los nagueales, el problema son los nagueales, el día que los agarren a todos desaparece el Chacal’, says one hysterical lady (205); one of the newspapers connects the monthly murders to the UFO craze: ‘Cada luna nueva se ven flotar luces verdes en dirección de los cerros’ (313). In Latin American folk religion, a *nagual* is a human with the power to turn himself into an animal.

Martians (127). In the narrative present, it is an influx of Colombian drug traffickers that apparently lies at the heart of the increase in local violence (26, 47). People blame anyone but themselves for their problems, and this seems unlikely to change. Of course, the outcome of both investigations is also analogous. For all these reasons, it is appropriate that the final section of the novel should be titled 'La espiral'. Evidently 'what goes around comes around'. Nonetheless, we might reasonably suppose that a spiral involves some degree of gradual progress, and although there is no definite justice at the end of the novel, there still remains the possibility of it, which is more than can be said for the end of Rangel's investigation in Part II. The clearest symbol for the situation at the end of the novel is the HGV that Cabrera spots on the highway outside Paracuán. It has broken down, but eventually gets repaired and continues its slow uphill journey with a heavy load (452).

Even here, however, the symbol is first introduced, some pages earlier, as one of Cabrera's thoughts. We are not left simply to interpret on our own: 'Pensó: El trailer está como yo, igual de varado' (446). Accordingly, the doubts that exist about what one can legitimately interpret in *Los minutos negros*, a product of the games discussed extensively above, serve to reinforce the sentiment with which the novel closes. It is a thoroughly 'open' ending. The one symbol that might suggest progress is cast into doubt because *all* symbols in the novel have been rendered suspicious. Both Cabrera and Taboada have the mystery of Blanco's death figured out at the end (434, 449), but they do not reveal it all to the reader. Taboada is removed from office before the relevance of a mysterious business organization, *El Grupo Enlace*, can be elucidated. Cabrera is most interested in Blanco's motivation for writing his report, that he knew one of El Chacal's victims as a child (451). Too much is left unexplained for the reader to have any firm sense of what is to come. This is an entirely pertinent sentiment with regard to the recent instability in Mexico. Likewise, the fact that there is no immediate or even inevitable justice in *Los minutos negros*, although there are some specific instances of it. However, the doubts and confusions in this novel are generally played for fun, not for the other possibility: anxiety. Rascón Banda's novel, *Contrabando*, leans further in that direction. Nevertheless, if the appropriateness of the reader's response to a work of

fiction is a relevant consideration, *Los minutos negros* is a novel that amuses the reader yet leaves him shocked and possibly regretful for feeling that way when the brutality of reality intermittently reveals itself. We are certainly not invited to take violence and injustice lightly. Our next novel, *Contrabando*, deploys one important tonal shift for the same reason. In general, however, the emotional and cognitive experience of reading *Los minutos negros* — above all, the humour, foreboding and frustration — depends firmly on the tools of fiction rather than the brute significance of the events recounted. It is a novel that constantly manipulates our desire for understanding and never entirely fulfils it. Whatever the context in which it was written, this is principally an aesthetic intention, a venture to renew the predictable patterns of the *novela negra*. Some critics have stated their dislike for the unusual aspects of this model, in particular the fantastical sequences.<sup>42</sup> However, Solares certainly ties these scenes into the novel's central dynamic of detective fiction. They are not mere window-dressing. For instance, there is the detail at the centre of Traven's fairy tale that the werewolf likes *sauerkraut* and Rhinish wine (223), recalling the particular tastes of Fritz Tschanz (66–67). It would therefore appear to be a clue. Moreover, Rangel's principal epiphany about the case occurs inexplicably in a dream (261). Perhaps the most important service of the dream sequences is to characterization. Cabrera and Rangel are more satisfying characters than the average hard-boiled P.I. or police detective. Despite all this, the novel still shows us interesting facets of reality. According to the author, these are a matter for the reader alone. In a 'Posdata' to the novel, Solares writes that 'todo espejismo o reflejo de realidad es cortesía del amable lector' (461). It is not a novel to which one can attribute a clear message or characterize as a response to a given social situation. The fact that important truths about the political context of drug trafficking can nonetheless be extracted is testimony to the ability of literature to do many different things at once.

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<sup>42</sup> In particular, Hugo Hiriart ('Los minutos negros, de Martín Solares').

## Chapter 4. *Contrabando*, by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda

Although they adopt genre fiction as their preferred means of representing reality, the metafictional elements that we have encountered in the work of Mendoza and Solares attest to their authors' concern about how to write most appropriately about the subject of drug trafficking. It is a problem that also interested the playwright Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda (1948–2008), though in different circumstances. In the late 1980s, with the possible exception of Culiacán, very few urban centres in Mexico experienced high levels of drug-related violence.<sup>1</sup> *Narcocultura* was concentrated, and was still largely left to itself, in the traditional producing region of the 'golden triangle'. Rascón's only novel — *Contrabando* (2008) — was written in the early 1990s to draw national attention to the strife occasioned by drug production and organized crime in that region. However, despite the award of the prestigious Juan Rulfo Prize in 1991, *Contrabando* remained unpublished until after the author's death.<sup>2</sup> Here, and in *Volver a Santa Rosa* (1996) — his collection of short stories — Rascón is naturally sympathetic both to the rural northern culture in which he grew up and to the people who still live within it. Many are his relatives. Yet, he can hardly celebrate that culture unequivocally, for it openly accepts what is a socially deleterious activity. A good deal of writing about the north of Mexico displays this ambivalence. It is reflected in Rascón's attitude to the *corrido*, in particular. By his own account, *Contrabando* was inspired by the folk ballads that suffuse the popular culture of northern Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Rascón wrote his own *corrido* to accompany the play *Guerrero negro* (1988), and a version of *Contrabando* adapted for the theatre (1991) was

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<sup>1</sup> Before the recent conflict, the violence in Culiacán peaked in the 1970s during Operation Condor (Astorga, 'Organized crime and the Organization of Crime', pp. 75–76; Gootenberg, 'Cocaine's Long March', pp. 171–2). Astorga notes that shows of violence by drug traffickers were on the increase in Sinaloa (Culiacán) and Jalisco (Guadalajara) in the 1980s, but there was little direct conflict with the state ('The limits of anti-drug policy in Mexico', p. 429).

<sup>2</sup> He died on 31 June 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, *De cuerpo entero* (Mexico: Ediciones Corunda, 1990): 'La novela *Contrabando* salió de los corridos de contrabando y traición que tocan los conjuntos norteros' (p. 51). Quotations from the novel are taken from the following edition: *Contrabando* (México: Planeta, 2008).

accompanied by a collection of representative *corridos*.<sup>4</sup> In the novel, the innocent enthusiasm shown by the narrator's father Epigmenio for this musical genre attests to how important it is as an expression of local identity, of pride in the 'patria chica'. Yet, the *corridos* frequently glorify violent men and illegal activity. Likewise, in *Contrabando*, Rascón is torn between sympathy and legitimate criticism. He implicitly bemoans the fact that nobody can be sure 'quién es quién' in his home town, that everyone is complicit to a variable extent with the violence that has begun to engulf it.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the lack of moral security is almost as uncomfortable as the lack of physical security. Naturally this entails a very different sensibility to any that we have seen so far. Mendoza and Solares are frequently humorous; their attention to form is principally an aesthetic concern. For Rascón, it is more of an ethical issue, a question of how to portray a distressing moral complexity without being glibly relativistic.<sup>6</sup>

*Contrabando* is a difficult novel to categorize. The main narrative, in the odd-numbered chapters, details the return of a fictionalized version of the author to his hometown, Santa Rosa de Uruáchic, in southern Chihuahua. The ostensible purpose of the visit is to find the inspiration to write a screenplay for Antonio Aguilar, the well-known Mexican actor and singer.<sup>7</sup> Aguilar demands a popular romance, to be based on his *ranchera* love song 'Triste recuerdo'.<sup>8</sup> Víctor Hugo is well equipped to write it, since he knows more about the 'real' rural north than anyone else in Mexico

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<sup>4</sup> Adriana Berrueco García, *El derecho y la justicia en el teatro de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda* (Mexico: UNAM, 2011), pp. 72, 74. Berrueco identifies other works in which Rascón uses popular music as a thematically-relevant counterpoint to the action on stage, whence she infers the influence of Bertolt Brecht on Rascón's dramaturgy (Ibid., p. 63).

<sup>5</sup> The narrator's mother, Rafaela, does so explicitly: 'Acá en Santa Rosa no hay ley que valga ni gente libre de culpa [...] Acá no se sabe quién es quién' (209). Rascón, or the character Víctor Hugo, echoes this view in his autobiographical play-cum-dialogue, *De cuerpo entero*: 'antes en este pueblo había paz, pero ahora es refugio de narcotraficantes y ya no se distingue la verdad y la mentira, el bien y el mal' (p. 13).

<sup>6</sup> Diana Palaversich (in 'Cómo hablar del silencio? *Contrabando* y *Un vaquero cruza la frontera en silencio*, dos ejemplares del acercamiento ético en la literatura mexicana sobre el narco') agrees that *Contrabando* is particularly valuable for its provision of an ethical perspective on drug trafficking, although she provides little more than a brief summary of the novel.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Aguilar (1919–2007) was best known for his folk music and his films about rural themes. His most celebrated role in cinema was as the protagonist in Felipe Cazals's historical epic *Emiliano Zapata* (1970). Rather inexplicably, Palaversich ('Cómo hablar del silencio?') claims that Tony Ayala is the man who commissions Rascón's script.

<sup>8</sup> A recording of the song can be heard on YouTube (<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faFVSS6OllQ>>).

City.<sup>9</sup> At first, therefore, the plot might appear to resemble a (rather mundane) quest narrative. If so, it is a failed quest. In the final chapter Aguilar rejects Víctor Hugo's script, accusing it of being inauthentic. For the reader, and for some of the novel's characters, the narrator's presence in Santa Rosa might appear to involve a different mission. Soon after his arrival, his cousin Julián, the mayor of Santa Rosa, goes missing. The gradual revelation of details about Julián provides a slither of plot progression. But this is not another detective story either. Julián's case is never resolved, and none of the details that we do learn come from the narrator's investigations. Certainly the narrator travels around town collecting evidence, like any hard-boiled detective, but much of what he hears has little to do with Julián. That is, over half of *Contrabando*, in the even-numbered chapters, consists of a series of semi-independent short stories and dialogues. This is not an unusual procedure for Rascón. When he published his only collection of stories, *Volver a Santa Rosa*, he tied them together with a loose novelistic thread.<sup>10</sup> The first chapter, which bears the title of the book, recounts the young Víctor Hugo's departure from the town as a child, from the perspective of the adult who has since returned. He is urged by his grandfather to write down all that he wants to remember about Santa Rosa, in order to never forget his homeland.<sup>11</sup> These are the stories that follow, narrated in the naïve voice of a child. Each tale could stand on its own, but several characters reappear throughout, and there is some degree of character development.<sup>12</sup> The same could be said for many of the even-numbered chapters in *Contrabando*.

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<sup>9</sup> Henceforth I shall refer to the novel's principal narrator and protagonist as Víctor Hugo, and the author as Rascón (Banda). The novel is heavily autobiographical, and it is not clear that Rascón sees the narrator as pointedly different to (his usual conception of) himself. Nevertheless, this is a work of fiction, rather than testimonial journalism, and we can legitimately assume that some of what Víctor Hugo encounters does not belong to Rascón Banda's lived experience. Much of what is provided as information about Víctor Hugo in *Contrabando* is consistent with Rascón's life story, according to *De cuerpo entero*. However, in real life his cousin was called Jaime, rather than Julián (Ibid., p. 14). I have been unable to ascertain whether Jaime went missing in real life, as Julián does in the novel. If so, one can speculate that a respect for his cousin's memory motivated the change of name. Otherwise it may be an indication that this detail is entirely fictional.

<sup>10</sup> Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, *Volver a Santa Rosa* (Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> 'Escribe aquí todo lo que quieras recordar de Santa Rosa, porque los que se van de su tierra no regresan nunca, se vuelven desarraigados y pierden la querencia.' (Ibid., p. 15).

<sup>12</sup> For Eduardo Casar (in 'El norte es un destino: sobre *Volver a Santa Rosa* de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda', *Revista de la Universidad de México* 11 (2005), 89–90), 'es un libro difícil de clasificar genéricamente, ya que podría ser una novela por la presencia constante de algunos personajes y del narrador, pero además cada texto puede leerse de manera independiente y se cierra sobre sí mismo, algunos textos incluso, como cuentos perfectos, como es el caso de "La casa de las golondrinas" y de "Los perdidos"' (p. 89).

Evidently the novel has a binary structure. There are odd-numbered chapters in which the narrator, Víctor Hugo, is a character and experiences events in Santa Rosa at first hand. They are typically short. And there are more extensive even-numbered chapters in which several distinct tales are related to him. Víctor Hugo is not typically mentioned in these parts at all, though he is always implicitly present.<sup>13</sup> But there are several types of even-numbered chapter. In three of them, women who have experienced the indirect effects of drug trafficking narrate their own fraught stories of violence and injustice (Chs. 2, 4, and 10). When Rascón adapted his novel for the theatre, he chose these three characters as protagonists: Damiana, Jacinta, and Conrada.<sup>14</sup> There are also three conversations overheard by Víctor Hugo: the personal messages relayed by radio in Ch. 6; a recording of the interview between the journalist Rubén Mendoza and the trafficker Lencho Guadarrama in Ch. 12; and one half of a conversation between whom we assume to be the Governor of Chihuahua and the head of the Federal Judicial Police in Chapter 14. In addition, there are two sets of stories narrated to Víctor Hugo by his parents, Rafaela and Epigmenio. In Chapter 8 Rafaela gives an account of the lives of a series of local folk who met their death on account of their involvement in the drug trade. In Chapter 16, Epigmenio recalls the antics at the local drug lord Valente Armenta's wedding, along with a host of related anecdotes. Finally, there are three written documents in the second half of the novel. First, a letter composed by Armenta shortly before his suicide (Ch. 18). Then, two extensive chapters in which Víctor Hugo makes his own attempt at representing the town, in a work for the theatre called *Guerrero negro* (Ch. 20), and finally a summary of the screenplay he has been commissioned to write by Aguilar (Ch. 22).

Despite this diversity, which integrates a variety of perspectives into the novel, there is much more cohesion in *Contrabando* than in *Volver a Santa Rosa*. It is not just a collection of short stories. Some of the cohesion is purely thematic. For instance, nearly all the inhabitants of Santa Rosa display an aversion to outside interference in their local affairs; the incompetence and callousness

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<sup>13</sup> There are one or two unimportant exceptions to this, such as at the end of Ch. 12 in which Víctor Hugo's voice returns briefly in order to prepare the transition to the next chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Rascón Banda, *Contrabando*, ed. by Olga Harmony (Mexico: El Milagro, 1993). It was first staged in 1991.

of the different security forces is pervasive. Such themes are independent of the novel's complex structure. But the variety of form and technique is not gratuitous. The author's presentation of two other themes depends on it. Above all, in *Contrabando*, Rascón seeks to portray the confusion that is rife in Santa Rosa. A wealth of often conflicting perspectives reinforces our appreciation of this sentiment. I shall discuss this primarily in the first section of this chapter. Moreover, as I argue in the third section, Rascón examines the adequacy of different representations of this violent reality. We need to be presented with the whole range — from personal testimony and local gossip to literary invention — in order to make an informed evaluation.

But there is also a coherent structure to the narrative as a whole. The plot of *Contrabando* might best be compared to those stories of a voyage to a strange and sometimes threatening land that are often the basis of children's adventure narratives.<sup>15</sup> In stories of this kind, the narrative often develops such that an initially delightful, albeit unusual, reality becomes threatening for the protagonist. Once his position in this alternative world becomes a problem, he is forced to make a risky return to the world that he came from. Clearly Santa Rosa is no 'Wonderland'; from the very beginning it is dangerous. But there is still an appropriate narrative progression. At first there is some distance between the narrator and the reality he observes (Chs. 2 to 10). Víctor Hugo is not a witness to the distressing events told by Damiana, Jacinta, or Conrada. They are part of the (albeit recent) past. In Víctor Hugo's first few days in Santa Rosa, very little happens to him directly. He is told of Julián's disappearance, but does little more than listen to the conversations of others about the situation. He offers no thoughts on the matter himself. In short, the narrator is at one remove from reality in both odd- and even-numbered chapters. Slowly his involvement develops. The even chapters (6, 12, 14) begin to feature dialogues rather than testimonies. Although they offer limited information, since the interlocutors are wholly or partially absent, they at least allow Víctor Hugo more direct access to what is happening around him. That is, they do not have mediating narrators. It is here that the possibility of a threat to Víctor's life is first suggested, when

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<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the best examples of this plot pattern are *Alice in Wonderland* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Christopher Brooker cites it as one of his 7 universal structures in *The Seven Basic Plots* (London: Continuum, 2004).

the journalist (and fellow outsider) Rubén Mendoza is killed for having asked too many impertinent questions of Lencho Guadarrama (Ch. 12). At the same stage, in Chs. 11, 13, 15, and 17, the violence that has dominated the stories in the even chapters begins to leak into Víctor Hugo's own narrative. He offers his first independent thoughts on the situation in Chapter 11.<sup>16</sup> In Chapter 13, we see the attack on Santa Rosa by the Federal Judicial Police. Even here, though the violence is now occurring in the narrative present, we are still told the details second-hand, since he is safely at home at the time. This changes in Ch. 15, when helicopters belonging to the military attack prospectors for gold in the river while the narrator and his father are visiting a friend there. Finally, in Chapter 17, the extent of Víctor Hugo's connection to the town's current situation becomes clear, when his uncle Lito accuses him of having indirectly caused Julián's abduction, and a threat by the *narcos* to his own life is revealed.<sup>17</sup> The narrator's own voice is strongest in these pages (109–113), which occur roughly half way through the novel. At this point we might expect a narrow escape back to the safety of the city. This is what we get when Víctor Hugo's truck is attacked on his way back to Chihuahua in the final chapter (208). But it does not happen immediately. Instead we are presented with the three written documents that I mentioned above, occupying almost the entire second half of the novel. I shall discuss the play — *Guerrero negro* — in the second section of this chapter. Evidently we are meant to contrast these literary representations to the 'reality' that has come before. In several respects, as we shall see, they do not compare favourably. In the children's' adventures to which I am comparing *Contrabando*, the protagonist is usually afforded the opportunity to learn something important from his stay in a mysterious land. Here it is as if, before he leaves, Víctor Hugo must be shown to have failed to learn what he ought. The reality is too confusing for anyone who is living through it to comprehend in full. The only person who might is an outsider: the reader. As we shall see, the arrangement of

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<sup>16</sup> 'Ahora, la mitad del pueblo, los más pobres, se han convertido. Quizá porque no tienen nada que perder, porque quieren cambiar de suerte o porque del otro lado llegan los americanos con cargamentos de ropa, medicinas y alimentos que reparten dos veces al año, en junio y en Navidad' (74). These speculations can be attributed to Víctor Hugo, but many of the other details in the chapter are tagged as the opinion of others ('Dice mi mamá', 'dicen que', etc.).

<sup>17</sup> 'En uno le decían [a Julián] que previniera a su primo [Víctor Hugo] que venía de México a escribir sobre los narcos, porque no lo iban a dejar llegar'; 'Es más, agregó [Lito] con voz grave, mirándome a los ojos, se podría decir que tú en parte eres culpable de lo que le pasó a Julián' (112).

chapters also suggests that this is the case.

## I Pueblo en vilo

One way in which an otherwise ‘polyphonic’ narrative coheres is around a common emotional outlook. Rascón portrays a town whose inhabitants are tormented by moral and practical uncertainties, and their attendant emotion, confusion. Since drug trafficking is a clandestine and predominantly male business, one group of people likely to be left in the dark about it are women. As in much of his work for the theatre, Rascón pays greater attention to their experiences than to men’s.<sup>18</sup> Three women offer extensive testimony in the novel: Damiana (in Ch. 2), Jacinta (in Ch. 4), and Conrada (in Ch. 10).<sup>19</sup> Since they appear to have no direct involvement in the drug trade, the losses they incur as a result of it seem particularly unjust. All three fail to resolve important doubts about what has happened to them, and this confusion is an integral part of that sense of injustice. In Ch. 2, at least, Damiana fails to understand why her family was targeted. Jacinta never discovers whether her husband is dead or alive. Conrada never learns how her son was killed, or who was directly responsible. The connection between doubt and injustice is most firmly established in Chapter 2, when Damiana is interrogated about her family’s involvement in the drug trade:

Me hacían muchas preguntas que yo no entendía. Que cuánta gente andaba conmigo. Que cuál era mi verdadero nombre. Que cuántos campos teníamos. Que en qué ciudades teníamos propiedades [...] Yo nomás decía No sé. No. No sé. No. No sé. Qué más podía decir [...] Me pegaban en el estómago. No. No sé. Me metían la cabeza en el agua. No. No. No sé. Me echaban soda en las narices. No sé. No. No (19–20).

Rascón renders the situation more maddening by the order in which the interrogation is presented.

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<sup>18</sup> According to Adriana Berruero (*El derecho y la justicia*), ‘es relevante la presencia de personajes femeninos (Tina Modotti, Concha Urquiza, la Malinche, Rita Carrillo, por citar unos cuantos ejemplos, lo cual dota de una característica distintiva — por no decir que es el reflejo de una obsesión que acompañó la existencia entera del escritor — a los dramas del abogado y literato chihuahuense’ (p. 2).

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the fact that these are the principal characters in Rascón’s adaptation of *Contrabando* for the theatre (apart from a fictionalized version of himself, akin to the novel’s narrator), the partial and confused understanding of events possessed by each character is also a major theme of the play: ‘El conocimiento de la verdad es necesariamente ambiguo y fragmentario para cada uno de nosotros. Éste parece ser el punto de partida que tomó Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda [sic.] para elaborar *Contrabando*, en la que recoge algunos personajes de su premiada novela próxima a publicarse’ (Olga Harmony, ‘Introducción’, in Rascón Banda, *Contrabando* [1993], p. 7).

Damiana is subjected to a volley of questions, each one of which could be adequately answered with the response ‘No sé’: she simply does not know. One assumes that in fact this is how she replied. But the dialogue is not presented thus. Instead, she does not appear to get the opportunity to reply, even though each question demands an informative answer.<sup>20</sup> The repetition of ‘que’ is mechanical and incessant. By the time her words are recorded, it is as if she is responding to all the questions at once. It is overwhelming, therefore. The police, we might infer, were not in fact expecting a coherent answer. Once her plangent ‘no sé’ is finally introduced, it is not even the correct reply to what is happening to her. At this point, following every description of physical torture, it feels futile to respond as she does. Indeed, her response is minimally varied (‘No. No. No sé’ > ‘No sé. No. No’). No matter *how* she says the same words, it cannot prevent the torment; but she continues to try, as if there were no other option available. The disorder in this dialogue conveys who is in control of the situation, and the extent of Damiana’s confusion.<sup>21</sup> When she is released, her emotional state (confused, and indignant) is all that remains. She no longer has a family. Better, one feels, to have died in the attack on Yepachi than to be left like this.

The reader is invited to share some at least of the characters’ uncertainties. Our understanding of the town’s mayor, Julián, is a case in point. Initial impressions of him are likely to be positive, not only because he is a member of the narrator’s family, but because he demonstrates his generosity very early in the novel by assisting the ill-fated Jacinta both to set up a stall in the town after she is abandoned by her drug-trafficking husband José Dolores, and to educate her fatherless children (38). The juxtaposition of Chapter 4, in which Jacinta portrays him positively, and Chapter 5, in which he is first reported missing, invites us to sympathize. Given the novel’s subject matter, it is

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<sup>20</sup> Stylisticians would term this a dialogue in which the correct ‘turn order’ is not respected, suggesting that one party is bullying and the other is left frustrated: See Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: OUP, 1986), pp. 109–114. Fowler claims that ‘yes-no’ questions are common in interrogations, where one participant is in full control of the subject matter and the other can only affirm or dissent. The questions here do allow for a fuller response, but, of course, that appears to be denied. The fact that Damiana responds ‘No’ might show that she feels like she is being asked a series of ‘yes-no’ questions, that she feels as if she is in such a dialogue where she has no control.

<sup>21</sup> By way of contrast, consider the similar situation in Leónidas Alfaro’s *Tierra Blanca*, when don Pedro recalls his interrogation by the police after being wrongfully arrested: ‘Después, me dieron unos papeles pa que los firmara. Les dije que no sabía leer ni escribir [sic]. Me contestaron que eso les valía madre, que yo pusiera mi huella. Les dije que no, que se fueran a la chingada, que podían matarme y que no les iba a sellar nada... porque nada malo había hecho’ (p. 31). Pedro appears unrealistically calm about his predicament.

important for the characteristically wise Rafaela to discount any connection between Julián and the *narcos*: ‘Si fuera mafioso, lo protegerían los narcos y los judiciales, pero como no ha querido entrarle a la yerba ni a la goma, quieren vengarse’ (41).<sup>22</sup> While there are doubts about the purpose of the journey during which he disappeared (41), most of the details that follow invite our compassion: the attendant of a local petrol station ineptly fails to spot that he was being abducted when he recognizes him there on the day of the kidnapping (51), and we soon obtain further evidence of his generosity, when we learn that Conrada has also been provided for, with a job at the radio station, after losing her son (68).

The first challenge to Julián’s reputation is presented by Damiana. This is significant, for it is not until Chapter 16 that any doubt is cast on her story, which is by far the most shocking and unjust of all of the testimonies, and is given pride of place, shaping our initial impressions of Santa Rosa, by its position in Chapter 2. So we are meant to take her seriously, and she accuses Julián of having orchestrated the pitiless assault on Yepachi (89).<sup>23</sup> In this new light, Julián’s generosity begins to sound like corruption or social banditry, typical of the *narcos*:

Mientes, le responde Conrada, él es un buen hombre. Cercó el panteón, hizo la escuela nueva, arregló la iglesia, echó el agua potable y está abriendo el camino para Sonora. Está compautado con esa gente, afirma Damiana (89).

This impression is strengthened if we recall the details of another man highly esteemed in Santa Rosa: Bernabé Gonzaga. Bernabé built up his reputation by bringing new products to the town, and by loaning liberally on credit at his store (60–1). But he also took advantage of the new roads connecting Santa Rosa to the outside world to explore the region for drug production, and is subsequently blamed for bringing the town to ruin (61). Thus, Julián’s construction of a new road to Sonora cannot sound completely innocent at this point.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, if he has any connection at

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<sup>22</sup> Rafaela is a keen proponent of the idea that *narcos* and *judiciales* act and look the same: ‘los judiciales y los narcos no distinguen’ (42); ‘tres hombres, judiciales o narcos, quién sabe, son tan parecidos’ (60).

<sup>23</sup> Yepachi has been the site of drug-related violence in recent years too. See <<http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2010/04/chihuahua-on-borderland-beat.html>>.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Epigmenio and Rafaela rehearse this debate shortly afterwards: ‘Y los narcos podrán viajar más fácilmente a ver sus siembras, agregó mi padre. Mi sobrino cumplió su promesa de hacer la carretera, ya si se hace mal uso de ella, eso no es su problema, respondió ella con sequedad’ (97).

all to the *judiciales*, one is less likely to excuse it now, since Damiana's accusation immediately follows the scandalous attack on the town in Chapter 13 by agents of the PFJ. Nevertheless, it is impossible to arrive at a firm conclusion about the man. In Chapter 14, the head of the PFJ denies any knowledge about Julián's abduction in a telephone conversation with the governor of Chihuahua (94). In Chapter 17, Julián appears to have received threats from the traffickers (112). Nevertheless, he is guilty in other respects. In Chapter 19, it is revealed that he abandoned a girl named Anselma in order to marry his wife Marcela, and that the girl then committed suicide, leading her brothers to seek revenge on Julián.<sup>25</sup> His fate is never revealed for certain, although two of his bodyguards are later found dead (209).

Another cause for uncertainty is that Víctor Hugo resists the temptation either to endorse or challenge the stories he hears. There is a nigh-on complete absence of modal adverbs, evaluative adjectives or verbs implying special knowledge or subjective judgement that can be attributed to the narrator himself. In short, his style is 'journalistic', befitting a non-participant observer.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative as a whole is not 'cold'. Evidently we are offered a wealth of perspectives in the even-numbered chapters. This is also the case in the sections narrated by Víctor Hugo:

Se oyó un tiroteo. Les van a dar un balazo, métanse, gritó mi padre. En el balcón de enfrente estaba Nicho, mi primo, que es juez de paz. Dicen que en la otra banda andan tocando puertas. Parece que los forasteros buscan algo. Si nos vienen a tocar, no hay que abrir, nos aconsejó [...] Tratamos de dormir pero a cada rato se volvían a escuchar los balazos. Algo debe estar pasando, dijo mi madre. No pasa nada, la tranquilizó mi padre. Si pasara, ya hubieran parado el baile. Tenía razón, la música seguía [...] Hoy en la mañana vino muy temprano mi tío Lito a enterarnos de lo sucedido. A la plaza habían llegado al oscurecer tres trocas nuevas, las mismas que vio mi padre (86).

Here there is plenty of emotional response to the attack on Santa Rosa by the *judiciales*. But it is presented through the words of other characters in the narrator's presence, and not by the narrator

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<sup>25</sup> The fact that they wait for him in the town square recalls the scene of Santiago Nasar's death in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, by Gabriel García Márquez. Clearly there are other reasons for violence in Santa Rosa, not just the repercussions of drug production. That is one inference we can draw from Rascón's representation of the town in *Volver a Santa Rosa*: drug trafficking is hardly mentioned, but the town is far from idyllic in other respects.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Fowler would call this a 'type C' narrator, the most impersonal (*Linguistic Criticism*, p. 141).

himself. Speech is not indicated by quotation marks or indentation, but several sentences are introduced or qualified as speech. Others appear to be transcriptions of speech by implication. All three sentences between the narrator's introduction of Nicho and the phrase 'nos aconsejó' are best understood as Nicho's words, even if only the last sentence is marked. Furthermore, the narration that follows this quotation, which begins in the final two lines, is introduced so as to suggest that it is transcribed exactly as Lito told it. There might as well be a semi-colon after the phrase 'lo sucedido'. The only judgement one can clearly attribute to the narrator amounts to a statement of fact, that his mother was correct to say the music was ongoing. Otherwise, he limits himself to describing facts and actions. Speech is introduced, but it is not commented upon. The synonyms for 'said' ('gritó', 'tranquilizó', 'aconsejó') certainly have connotations, but they are neutral in this context, suggesting tones of voice that would be clear without the use of such specific words.

Despite the lack of help from our narrator, the reader is not left bewildered by *Contrabando*. Rascón Banda simply finds more subtle ways of influencing the reader's evaluation of characters and events. Most obvious is the introduction of important information at unexpected moments, in the manner of the 'dato escondido' so beloved of Mario Vargas Llosa. Thus, when Damiana mentions her husband Rogelio Armenta in the second chapter (14), it is insignificant until we realize that Rogelio was brother and ally to the most important local trafficker, Valente Armenta (105). Perhaps Damiana was not so innocent after all.<sup>27</sup> Such details typically provide evidence against a character, in contrast to their own point of view. But they are not always damning. It is in Valente Armenta's letter (123) where we learn of his murder of José Dolores, which can only increase our sympathy for Jacinta as she clings on to the prospect of her husband's return (e.g. 38). In such cases we can assume that at least some of the townsfolk, implicitly the narrator and his parents, are able to make informed judgements. But elsewhere it is only the reader who could, because the message is conveyed by the arrangement of the novel, and not by events in the story.

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<sup>27</sup> Another potentially important detail is that another of Valente's brothers, Rómulo, lived in El Madroño (104), which is the village to which Damiana retreats for support from the *judiciales* before approaching Yepachi. Therefore, the claim that the *judiciales* travelling with Damiana were *narcos*, initially presented by Damiana as a calumny (22), could well be true.

The significance of narrative juxtapositions is necessarily invisible to the characters, and *Contrabando* makes effective use of them. Thus, Antonio Aguilar's idea for a romantic film about the north (24–5) seems ingenuous when the very next chapter, about Jacinta, shows the 'real-life' consequences of such a hopeless belief in romance. Likewise, the film script written to his melodramatic specifications appears all-the-more inadequate when contrasted to the matter-of-fact mention of death that Víctor Hugo includes in the final chapter: this is not a situation to romanticize. The fact that every chapter in *Contrabando* ends on the precise words that provide the title to the next chapter provides an illusion that events in *Contrabando* are only superficially ordered. It might appear as if Víctor Hugo simply drifts from one thing to the next. But this could not be further from the truth. Accordingly, the theme of division is best emphasized because a violent dialogue between two old friends, titled 'O tú o yo', is made to follow Víctor Hugo's consideration of religious divisions in the town, in Chapter 11. The title of Chapter 13, 'Una noche en Santa Rosa' would be merely descriptive if not for the irony, visible only to the reader, that it is the name of a love song mentioned in the previous chapter. What follows shows that reality fails to live up to idealistic expectations. And the callousness of the head of the Judicial Police is evident from his very first words in Chapter 14, 'Qué bonito es Chihuahua', because they follow convincing evidence to the contrary in the chapter before.

If the global significance of events in Santa Rosa is only meant to be visible to the outsider, to the reader, then this is reason enough for Víctor Hugo's discretion as narrator.<sup>28</sup> As a temporary insider, he cannot be seen to be more knowledgeable than the other characters. But it is not the only reason. On several occasions the importance of merely bearing witness to events is noted.<sup>29</sup> Víctor Hugo feels this need in the very first line of the novel: '[...] no quiero dormir sin dejar un pormenor de lo

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<sup>28</sup> Much characterization in *Contrabando* is achieved via dialogue, so it is notable how little Víctor Hugo gives away on those few occasions in which he records his own words: (e.g.) '¿No es usted investigador?, me soltó de pronto. Le contesté que no. Es que me contaron que había llegado un forastero preguntando cosas. ¿Cuánto cree que cueste un detective privado de esos que se anuncian en las revistas? Le dije que no sabía' (28).

<sup>29</sup> The expression typically employed is *dar fe*: (e.g.) 'De Santa Rosa fue el Ministerio Público a dar fe, pero nadie quiso levantar cargos' (101); '[N]o trae caso que lo haga yo, un simple escribano que sólo da fe de los hechos' (174).

que me ha pasado este día' (7). And his chapters are written in the style of a journal: to record events, if not to comment extensively on them. The idea is that justice is impossible without a permanent record of events being written. For this reason, the narrator's family goes to great pains to document the attack on Santa Rosa in Chapter 13, in order to inform the authorities in Chihuahua adequately.<sup>30</sup> This effort pays dividends insofar as it defines the accusations that the Governor presents to the head of the Judicial Police in the following chapter. In a novel designed to raise awareness of the plight of communities in the 'golden triangle', to inform is an important act in itself. And, in that spirit of bearing witness, each person's account has to be allowed to stand on its own. Each perspective is given recognition. Hence a narrator who lets them speak for themselves.<sup>31</sup> It is clearly something that the other inhabitants of Santa Rosa crave. Damiana's major concern is simply that her story be heard: 'Por eso necesito que me escriban una carta para que se me haga justicia. Y alguien debe hacer un corrido para que no se olvide' (13).<sup>32</sup> Simply recognizing her suffering is the first step towards restoring justice. This is one reason for the status afforded to the *corrido*: it records for perpetuity the events of most importance to the local community. Of course, *corridos* are also notoriously unreliable. There has to be scope for a different perspective too. So Rascón Banda provides many, and we are left to make up our mind. There may also be a 'legal aesthetic' at play here. Rascón is concerned that all parties should be allowed to present their case, but that does not preclude the jury of readers from making a judgement from the best available evidence. Rascón was a lawyer, and many of his plays deal with

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<sup>30</sup> Rascón refers to this activity in several works: it was his father's job, as *Subagente del Ministerio Público* to collect information for legal purposes. Legal proceedings are important in several stories from *Volver a Santa Rosa*, particularly 'Mi prima paloma', 'El tarahumar primitivo' and 'La muerte de mi tío Antonio'.

<sup>31</sup> This is one way in which Rascón shares Élmér Mendoza's preference for 'showing' rather than 'telling'.

<sup>32</sup> It is a common concern, due to the town's isolation. Rafaela gives Víctor Hugo the recording of the conversation between Rubén and Lencho on behalf of the former's sister, 'para que se sepa cómo estuvo' (75); a friend of Víctor Hugo's uncle acquired the tape of the governor's conversation in Chapter 14 'para que se supiera que a todo lo sucedido en Santa Rosa le llamaban simplemente el incidente' (91).

legal proceedings.<sup>33</sup> One is inclined to say that the adversative style of much of his dialogue, in *Contrabando* and elsewhere, was influenced by his experience in courtrooms. Certainly the trauma of observing division, and the difficult, perhaps impossible process of resolving it, are as much a theme of this novel as of many of his plays.

## II *Guerrero negro*

Notwithstanding the positive reviews for *Contrabando*, it is for his plays that Rascón Banda is best known in Mexico. He published 55 works of theatre, over 40 of which have been staged, including the aforementioned adaptation of his only novel.<sup>34</sup> Most critics place him within the so-called ‘nueva dramaturgia mexicana’, a generation including Óscar Liera and Jesús González Dávila that counted Vicente Leñero as a formative influence.<sup>35</sup> *Guerrero negro* was published first in 1988, several years prior to the completion of *Contrabando*.<sup>36</sup> Arguably the most unusual feature of the novel is its inclusion of this free-standing play in the second half of the narrative, as Chapter 20. It spans 35 pages in the Planeta edition, where most chapters barely reach five. It introduces characters scarcely mentioned elsewhere, and develops its own independent themes and symbols. So it is worth considering at length how convincingly it coheres with the rest of the work. One could argue, perhaps, that the screenplay for *Triste recuerdo* is just as anomalous. At 33 pages, in Chapter 22, it is certainly just as long. However, the film script has greater justification within the narrative, since it is the explicit purpose of Víctor Hugo’s arrival in Santa Rosa to write it (25).

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<sup>33</sup> For example, in *Fugitivos* (1992) Rascón portrays the tribulations of a young female lawyer charged with defending Valente Armenta and la Güera Chenda, characters from *Contrabando*. A good survey of Rascón’s plays dealing with crimes, miscarriages of justice and the legal system can be found in the second chapter of Adriana Berrueco’s study, *El derecho y la justicia en el teatro de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda* (pp. 39–81). According to Adriana Hernández Sandoval, in ‘El ejercicio del poder en *Armas blancas* de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, 1990), two of Rascón’s best known early works *Nolens Volens* and *Las fuentes del derecho* ‘ilustra[n] válidamente su primera etapa creativa, en la cual, profesión y obra se interpenetran e influyen a tal grado, que abundan las alegorizaciones del derecho instituido, y los problemas de los particulares con la ley canónica del Estado’ (p. 26).

<sup>34</sup> *Contrabando* was first staged under the direction of Enrique Pineda, at the Benito Juárez theatre in Mexico City in 1991 (Berrueco, *El derecho y la justicia*, p. 69). For a list of Rascón’s plays, see *Ibid.*, pp. 121–8.

<sup>35</sup> Berrueco, *El derecho y la justicia*, p. 1; Hernández Sandoval, ‘El ejercicio del poder’, pp. 21–2. Óscar Liera has also written about the culture of drug trafficking in his 1984 play *El jinete de la divina providencia*, which takes the ‘narco-saint’ Jesús Malverde as its principal subject.

<sup>36</sup> Rascón Banda, *Guerrero negro y Cierren las puertas!* (México: Obra Citada, 1988).

Moreover, the tale that will become *Triste recuerdo* is effectively narrated by Nana Lupe, in a procedure similar to the distanced point of view that we have seen in evidence for much of the rest of the novel.<sup>37</sup> Only a few important scenes are delivered directly, with dialogue and stage directions. *Guerrero negro*, on the other hand, is provided in full, and introduced almost casually with a comment in the previous chapter that the story of Israel Montes would not be appropriate for *Triste recuerdo*, but could indeed serve to elaborate a piece for the theatre workshop that Víctor Hugo attends in Mexico City (134). It deserves closer attention.

*Guerrero negro* is set near the small coastal town of that name in Baja California. The town is famous in Mexico for its opportunities for whale watching in the bay, as well as for hosting the largest active salt mine in the world. The play concerns the fractious interactions between four characters: an erstwhile agent of the judicial police, Eloy Bárcena; the gypsy Saurina, known here as ‘La Gitana’; the drug smuggler Israel Montes; and his well-to-do lover, Martha Corona. Israel and Martha have arranged to meet here before embarking on a trip to the United States. ‘La Gitana’ has long had a business relationship with Israel, for whom she smuggles cocaine. She has known and been courted by Eloy since their youth. For his part, Bárcena has been sent to track down Montes, using Martha as the unwitting bait.<sup>38</sup> Yet, initially, few of these details are clear. One reason for this is the extent to which the four characters deceive one another. The first five scenes comprise cagey dialogues between each pair of characters in turn (with the exception of Israel and Eloy Bárcena). When La Gitana encounters Martha sleeping naked on the beach in the first scene, Martha maintains that she is there on holiday from Monterrey, visiting her aunt in order to see the famous Guerrero Negro whales (137, 141). La Gitana makes an allusion to Israel, whom she has also arranged to meet, but Martha is too wary to break her cover (137). In the next scene, she tells

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<sup>37</sup> See page 100 above.

<sup>38</sup> Myra Gann (in ‘El teatro de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda: Hiperrealismo y destino’, *Latin American Theatre Review*, 25.1 [1991], 77–88) suggests that Martha has betrayed Israel, citing Margarita Mendoza López’s synopsis of the play in support (p. 82): Margarita Mendoza López, Daniel Salazar, Tomás Espinosa, eds, *Teatro mexicano del siglo XX, 1900–1986: catálogo de obras teatrales* (México: IMSS, 1987), p. 371. Moreover, the *corrido* that Rascón wrote to be performed alongside the play could be read to suggest this: ‘Su error fue haber conocido | en un día de mala suerte | a una joven de otra clase | que fue causa de su muerte.’ (cited in Berruco, *El derecho y la justicia*, p. 74). This could equally imply misfortune, not treachery, and I see little evidence for the latter in the text of the play.

Eloy that she is a student from Mexico City, investigating the local salt works (143). In both she claims to have had her clothes and possessions stolen (136, 145). Eloy is not persuaded, but, before he can arrest her, La Gitana returns with the claim that Martha is in fact her daughter Mayra, from Ensenada (146). Here, for the first time, it is obvious to the reader that a lie is being told. In the third scene, with Israel, Martha repeats the idea that her travel documents have been stolen, and now it emerges that they have been planning to escape to the United States together (148–151). Nevertheless, in conversation with La Gitana, in Scene 5, Israel suggests that this is not his real purpose, although we never know what that might be (159). Shortly before the final scene, we learn from Martha that she had thrown the documents away from the beginning (166). Evidently she had no intention of travelling. Meanwhile, in Scene 4, Eloy has been rebuking La Gitana for a lifetime of deceit, for having given him false hope that she could love him, and for selling him worthless herbs to cure a gastrointestinal ailment (156). He appears to accept La Gitana's statement about her 'daughter', but is certain that 'Mayra' is nonetheless the person he is looking for (157). Having given the gypsy time to retrieve some unspecified information from Israel, in the final scene he returns to confront the rest of the group directly. Eloy shoots Israel dead, but is killed in turn by Martha. The curtain falls as Martha and La Gitana are shot by unnamed assailants (169).

The deceit can make *Guerrero negro* disorientating. Rascón omits sufficient background information on each of the characters, so it is difficult (at first) to decide when someone is lying. In fact, a lack of contextual clues is a well-recognized feature of his style, associated with an aesthetic approach called 'hiperrealismo'. Vicente Leñero describes it thus:

Ahora ya no se trata de simular sobre el foro una realidad parecida a la que se vive o reflejo de la que se sufre; se trata de mostrar y generar tal cual la realidad con la medida exacta de su tiempo, de su ritmo, de su lenguaje, de su drama. En lugar de optar por una realidad verosímil — que ése sí se va haciendo cada día más viejo — se propone, sin trampas, un realismo verdadero.<sup>39</sup>

According to Myra Gann, 'hiperrealismo' attempts to restore the 'fourth wall' to the theatre, to

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<sup>39</sup> Vicente Leñero, 'Presentación', in Rascón Banda, *Teatro del delito* (Mexico: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1985), pp. 37–8.

present scenes as if nobody were actually watching them.<sup>40</sup> Above all, this entails (an attempt at) naturalistic dialogue and a rough correspondence between the time that is supposed to elapse within the fiction and the length of the play as experienced by the audience. The plot of *Guerrero negro* takes place over the course of a whole day, so strictly speaking it does not fit the prescription. Moreover, there is the dramatic monologue by Eloy in Section 6, and Israel's recitation of (the translation of) a poem by Allen Ginsberg in the 7<sup>th</sup> scene, neither of which could be called 'naturalistic'. I shall consider each in turn, below. Nonetheless, Rascón's dialogue does at least appear to have been 'transcribed', not invented, because it eschews the information necessary for a third party fully to understand a normal conversation between two individuals who share unspoken knowledge about the situation that an outsider (the reader) will tend to lack.<sup>41</sup> This is less true of the other dialogues presented with minimal context in *Contrabando*. Though they both say very little that is explicit, we already know before the conversation between Rubén Mendoza and Lencho Guadarrama in Chapter 12 that the latter is an infamous trafficker and the former an investigative journalist.<sup>42</sup> The rest is readily inferred. Likewise, even if we do not see the governor's half of the conversation in Chapter 14, we do know the topic of the conversation, which is the attack on Santa Rosa in the previous chapter. Those chapters cannot stand on their own. The play can and is obviously meant to do so. This makes it harder to comprehend. The previous chapter (19) does tell us briefly who the four characters are, but provides little information as to why they should all be in Guerrero Negro. We have to work out the rest for ourselves, from dialogue that is deliberately confusing. Consider the following:

Cuando regresé, nadie supo darme razón de mi hijo. Ahorita debe tener veinticinco años, entrados a veintiséis. Y estamos citados aquí, cerca de La Laguna... (*La gitana cambia de actitud*) ¿Escuchas...? (*Se escucha una música suave, atrayente, mágica, que llega del mar con el viento. La Gitana se pone de pie y mira hacia el mar.*)

Gitana. —Allá viene... (*Martha se coloca a su lado y mira en la misma dirección. La música se escucha más fuerte. Ellas miran fijamente hacia el mar.*) Siempre

<sup>40</sup> Myra S. Gann, 'El teatro de Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda', p. 79.

<sup>41</sup> Gann also makes this point: 'El teatro', p. 79.

<sup>42</sup> Strictly speaking, we do not know this for certain. When she gives her son the tape, Rafaela says only 'Habrás oído hablar de él, se dicen muchas cosas' (75–6), but the implication is relatively clear in the context.

pasa a esta hora. Una vez, cada cuatro semanas... Es bonito, ¿no? (*Pausa. Los rostros de las dos mujeres se van transformando con la música que las envuelve. Hay ilusión, alegría, tristeza y dolor. Ellas giran el rostro siguiendo la dirección de la música que se va alejando hasta desaparecer. Se sientan en la arena.*)

Gitana. —A mí me gusta verlo pasar. Por eso vengo aquí. Quisiera ir en la cubierta [...] (140).

La Gitana has just been explaining how her son disappeared without trace as a child. We assume she is referring to Israel, from the age she gives her son, which is Israel's age in the cast list (135), and because it is consistent with her comment about him in the previous chapter: 'Es el que perdí en las salinas' (133). The supposition ('debe') implies that she is meeting him for the first time since their separation. The gypsy is then distracted by the sound of music coming from the sea. Given the current topic, the reader might assume that it is Israel who is about to arrive. He could easily be the subject of the statements that follow ('siempre pasa a esta hora', 'es bonito'). Only with the mention of a deck ('la cubierta') do we realize that the two women have been watching an unrelated ship sail past. But even now there are uncertainties. Take the phrase 'por eso vengo aquí'. La Gitana claimed initially that she was in Guerrero Negro to meet her son, and this new comment *sounds* like a change of tack. But it is not, in fact, inconsistent. Perhaps she often visits the town to watch the ships, and only on this occasion is it to meet her son as well. This ought not to be a particularly difficult inference to draw, but in the absence of secure information about the character, it *feels* like it is. Indeed, what happens later in the play casts doubt on these suppositions. It is evident from Scene 5 that La Gitana and Israel have known each other well for a long time. Her assistance to Israel in smuggling cocaine is revealed ('ya no voy a seguir trabajando para ti', 161), and she appears to have provided him with a safe house in the area.<sup>43</sup> This challenges the idea that she visits Guerrero Negro to see the ships. And at no point after the conversation with Martha is there any evidence that Israel and La Gitana are actually related. In the absence of more contextual clues, consistency with what we already assume to be the case is the best means of making sense of the dialogue in *Guerrero negro*. However, Rascón makes it difficult to find an original position of

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<sup>43</sup> '¿Por qué no llegas a tu casa o a un hotel? [...] ¿Y a mi casa? ¿Qué pero le pones? | Israel. —Nunca estás. No sabe uno si andas en Guerrero o en Durango' (159).

certainty from which to infer further truths. Some characters lie; La Gitana, I would argue, is deluded.<sup>44</sup> In this respect, the reader or spectator is in a position analogous to the characters. Reader and character are not always unsure about the same details, but the sensation of uncertainty is shared nonetheless.<sup>45</sup> Though it is achieved by separate means, this is an atmosphere akin to the rest of the novel. Arguably, it is an intensification of it, appropriate to the feelings we could attribute to Víctor Hugo at this stage in the narrative.

To take *Guerrero negro*, in *Contrabando* at least, as the narrator's best expression of his feelings is perhaps the only way to make it cohere effectively with the rest of the novel. As we have seen, if the narrator as a character is interested in anything in particular, it is divisiveness and interpersonal conflict. Drugs are not his principal focus. Indeed, unlike most authors of drug-related fiction, Rascón tends not to depict physical violence. In *Contrabando* there is undoubtedly plenty, but Víctor Hugo treats it in an understated manner. It is quietly mentioned, or alluded to, rather than described. The unglamorous social effects of drug trafficking are his subject matter; thrilling armed encounters are not. One could even argue the three major female narrators in the novel suffer as much, if not more, as a result of words. One of Jacinta's preoccupations is the censorious local gossip about her relationship with José Dolores. Although she repeatedly professes not to care, the fact that she goes on to mention several precise criticisms of her behaviour suggests she has been effectively made to feel guilty.<sup>46</sup> Conrada's grief is exacerbated not just by her ignorance of the circumstances of her son's death, but because there are at least three competing stories that prevent

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<sup>44</sup> Israel is probably not her son, although I cannot assert this with complete confidence. To call her 'deluded' is a judgement informed by what we learn about her idiocies in the screenplay, *Triste recuerdo*. That evidence is not yet available in *Guerrero negro*, so our initial reaction to her inconsistencies is closer to bewilderment.

<sup>45</sup> Perhaps another consequence of omitting contextual detail is the creation of an impression of intimacy between characters, since the reader knows less than the characters do. We might feel like 'outsiders' to a 'knowing' conversation. This then makes the conflict between the four appear more stark by comparison.

<sup>46</sup> 'Ni me importaba que la gente hablara tanto por andar bailando con un extraño y por haber dejado plantado a mi chambelán que tanto luchó para que yo fuera reina' (32); 'La gente hablaba. Decían que me daba mal lugar y que estaba dejando en descrédito al pueblo' (33); 'Descansé cuando se arregló lo del reinado, pero de todas maneras le gente habló mucho' (35); 'La gente es muy habladora. Yo no hago caso de lo que dicen [...] Dicen que yo me meto con sus maridos para sacarles dinero. Puros infundios' (38).

her achieving any peace of mind.<sup>47</sup> And, as we have seen, Damiana's interrogation is the worst part of her ordeal. Certainly the emphasis lies on the suffering, rather than its causes, which are manifold. But there is also a respect in which words are especially important. In relation to one collection of his work, *Teatro del delito* (1985), Rascón stated the following:

En cuanto a la violencia que dicen que se palpa en este libro de teatro, se debe a que basta tomar un teléfono para sentir la agresividad latente o manifiesta de muchas de las personas con las que hablamos [...] Creo que para un dramaturgo es una obligación el generalizar y trascender una situación en vez de particularizarla.<sup>48</sup>

The author's interest appears to lie in situations of conflict in general, of which drug-related violence is only one manifestation.<sup>49</sup> Conflict, as an idea or a mood, can just as easily be suggested in words as in actions. Perhaps it is better articulated thus. If conversation is the bedrock of social interaction, and is more common than violent behaviour, to demonstrate ubiquitous aggression and division in that most basic of activities is an assessment of society's state of decay that is far more damning. Though it is hardly surprising that a playwright should use dialogue, the point is that the aggressive language people use towards each other alone tells us almost all we need to know about the situation.

Three of the even-numbered chapters in the novel consist predominantly or exclusively of dialogue. As such, there is precedent in the novel for the form taken by Chapter 20, the inclusion of a play consisting almost entirely of dialogue. All three begin harmoniously before descending into acrimony. In Chapter 6, this is evident from the participants alone. The chapter begins with only two interlocutors, in Chihuahua and Santa Rosa, indicated by italics and plain text respectively. The first few messages are transmitted without trouble (43). Gradually the radio's weak signal causes difficulties of understanding between the two, for which several different interlocutors (in

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<sup>47</sup> 'Dicen que lo mató el Astolfo. Quién sabe. El Astolfo dice que no [...] Muchos dicen que no fue así, que otros sembradores [...] Don Laureano piensa otra cosa' (72).

<sup>48</sup> Miguel Ángel Pineda Baltazar, 'Entrevista con Victor Hugo Rascón Banda', in Rascón Banda, *Teatro del delito*, pp. 15–27 (pp. 18, 26).

<sup>49</sup> According to Adriana Hernández Sandoval, a tendency to favour abstraction is a feature of much of the theatre written by the 'nueva dramaturgia mexicana': 'Hasta la anécdota pasa a un plano secundario, en favor de la abstracción, esencialmente humana, que proyectan los intérpretes con gestos y movimientos decodificables para cualquier espectador' ('El ejercicio del poder', p. 19).

underlined text) intervene to clarify the message. In time, a separate conversation between drug traffickers (underlined, in italics) interrupts the initial dialogue, sowing confusion among all parties (47–8). An argument for control of the frequency ensues, and even after the official transmitters regain it, they send messages that assist another group of traffickers. No real harmony is restored. We might interpret the similarly acrimonious dialogues in *Guerrero negro* as a distillation of this idea of conflict. Like the squabbling in Chapter 6, the conflicts in the play have little to do with drug trafficking per se. Here they are about trust, and the desire to ‘settle down’. Obviously drug trafficking is the motive for Eloy and Israel’s encounter, and this results in physical violence. But it is verbal ‘violence’ — accusation, interrogation, anger — that predominates.

There is good reason for verbal conflict to concern Víctor Hugo. Not only is the social fabric of his town clearly under threat, but perhaps the cohesion of his very family too. Many of the odd-numbered chapters feature fierce disagreements between the narrator’s parents, Rafaela and Epigmenio. Such is scope of the social disorder in Santa Rosa: there is no escape from conflict, even among the ‘good guys’, or among those who otherwise avoid violence. Some of his parents’ disputes are trivial, such as the question of who should take Víctor Hugo back to Chihuahua (42), but others evince a fundamentally different approach to the situation. For instance, both Rafaela and Epigmenio can be sententious, but their attitudes diverge:

No todos ellos son malos, ni todos buenos. Siempre hay quien tiene el corazón más negro que el de los demás, y otros que se pasan de inocente [...] Unos son la yerba y otros la contrayerba (104).

Acá en Santa Rosa no hay ley que valga ni gente libre de culpa, dice mi madre. No quiero que vuelvas a pisar este pueblo. Si sientes deseos de vernos, iremos adonde tú estés. Acá no se sabe quién es quién (209).

Both statements refer to roughly the same predicament. There is obvious wrongdoing in Santa Rosa, but moral ambiguity withal. For Rafaela, this is a problem, which she underscores by drawing attention to what is lacking. There is no rule of law, but there *ought* to be. Nobody is innocent, so nobody can be trusted. This is reason enough to warn her son against returning. Epigmenio, on the other hand, presents wrongdoing as a perennial feature of life. His emphasis falls on what always *is*, not on what could be. It is futile to be upset about it. As such, Epigmenio’s

default response to the chaos in his town is stoicism.<sup>50</sup> Whereas Rafaela is troubled by the fate of Julián, Epigmenio makes light of his disappearance, joking that perhaps he has eloped with another woman (52), or defrauded the local government's finances (171). His major interest, even after injury in the final chapter, is mining, as if nothing in the town had changed.<sup>51</sup> Occasionally this leads him to fail to take the threat of violence seriously, such as during the aerial attack on the river: 'Sólo están jugando, los quieren asustar, dijo mi padre' (100). Nonetheless, he is enthused by the exploits of the Armenta family in Chapter 16, and he loves the *corridos*, which leaves him open to the criticism that he only pays attention to the glamour of drug trafficking, and not its grim reality. Rafaela, by contrast, has no interest in the *corridos*. What matters is the tangible threat to her family in Santa Rosa: 'Me importa un comino, comenta mi madre, los que desaparezcan allá [en Sinaloa]' (170). She defends Julián vociferously, though the evidence against him accumulates. And to her husband's irritation, she even asks Epigmenio to transport one of her godsons, a known trafficker, into the mountains (98). In short, her family loyalties expose her to exactly the sort of complicities that are incompatible with the desire to determine 'quién es quién'.

Both of these characters' foibles can be viewed as a consequence of their anxiety to preserve a precious (and precarious) sense of identity under conditions of great insecurity. Rafaela can no more abandon her family than Epigmenio can abandon the trappings of his traditional local culture. The same self-doubt is in evidence throughout the novel in the townsfolk's suspicion of outsiders. Nearly everyone attributes the origin of the drug trade in Santa Rosa to outsiders, for whom Bernabé Gonzaga is the prototype.<sup>52</sup> In Chapter 6, the *narcos'* abrupt interference with personal conversations on the radio appears to be analogous with a general tendency to meddle in local

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<sup>50</sup> Epigmenio's reaction might be fruitfully compared to Edgar Mendieta's, in the fiction of Élmér Mendoza. Both play down the significance of disturbing events, but there is usually more bitterness and self-effacing humour in Mendieta's voice the product of prior idealism reluctantly abandoned.

<sup>51</sup> 'Mi padre está todavía en la clínica del Parque de Chihuahua, pero ya se salvó y todos los días pide a los médicos que lo den de alta para regresar a Santa Rosa y denunciar otra mina antes de que se la ganen' (208).

<sup>52</sup> Bernabé's life and demise are retold by Rafaela in Ch. 8, one of her 'retratos en blanco y negro'.

affairs.<sup>53</sup> Violence and corruption are inevitably the preserve of ‘forasteros’.<sup>54</sup> And even Víctor Hugo sees the foreign protestant missionaries as disruptive and divisive (73). If the conflict between Víctor Hugo’s parents is essentially over the most appropriate emotional (and ethical) response to the town’s decay, then a conflicting conception of local identity is closely associated with it. It matters to Víctor Hugo since it will influence his own conclusions. In dialogue, the narrator’s parents play out their son’s dilemmas: the terms on which he can take any pride in his roots. Indeed, one way of understanding the odd-numbered chapters in *Contrabando* is as the gradual assumption by the narrator of a problematic local identity. Initially he appears to be an outsider. Damiana compares his appearance to that of a *narco* or *judicial* (12). Jacinta asks for his help to investigate the disappearance of her husband precisely because he is a ‘forastero’ (28). But the more we learn about Julián’s potential involvement with organized crime, the more Víctor Hugo himself is implicated, such that by Chapter 17 we discover that the narrator’s well-publicized plan to visit the town might have resulted in Julián’s abduction (112). As such, the subject of identity is bound to be consciously problematical for Víctor Hugo. If *Guerrero negro* is an expression of his response to visiting the town, then it should be no surprise to see that theme feature there.

In fact, identity is one of the principal themes of the play, and a principal cause for disagreement between the characters. As we have seen, in the first two scenes Eloy and La Gitana challenge Martha about her name and her origin. The fact that she is naked not only robs them of evidence that could be used to guess at her identity, but suggests her own uncertainty about it also. Like the narrator of *Contrabando*, and the author, the characters in *Guerrero negro* have long abandoned the places they grew up in. They are forced to define themselves less by where they come from and

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<sup>53</sup> ‘Qué más tienes, antes de que se vuelva a meter esa maldita gente. *Nos vamos a seguir metiendo, mamacita...* Qué dices, Santa Rosa, no te escucho. Hay mucho ruido. Yo sí te oigo, mi cielo. Cuando vienes a vernos. *Estamos muy solitos por acá en las barrancas.* No le hagas caso, Chihuahua. Son narcos. ¿Cómo dices? Santa Rosa, no te escucho. Que los que se están metiendo son narcos’ (47–8).

<sup>54</sup> Damiana claims that Julián ordered the attack on Yepachi after arranging to sell the land there to ‘forasteros’ (89). *Narcos* and *judiciales* are indiscriminately described as ‘forasteros’ during the violent attack on the town in Chapter 13 (85–7). The distinction between ‘paisanos’ and ‘forasteros’ is important to Epigmenio when he considers the variety of suspicious folk who attended Valente Armenta’s wedding in Chapter 16 (103).

more by the direction in which they might be travelling. But this is still difficult. As a result, both Martha and Israel tell stories that allude to their uncertainty of purpose. In Martha's case, it is a tale written supposedly by her colleague Margo, about an injured whale stranded on the shoreline, gratuitously attacked by machine-gun fire from a passing vehicle, but eventually released back into the ocean with the help of the local police (141–2). Martha appears to feel vulnerable, just as 'out of her element' as the whale. Indeed, the fact that she has been discovered alone, naked and without identification on the sand by La Gitana — figuratively 'beached' — implies that she is making an analogy to her own situation.<sup>55</sup> 'Margo' is none-too-subtle cover for Martha herself. For his part, Israel mentions a young boy whom he sometimes sees playing on the beach (160). He wonders who he is, and would like to help him, but the child always runs away when Israel approaches. We subsequently read the following lament:

No sé qué quiero. Bueno, a veces lo sé. Pero al día siguiente ya no me importa. Me aburro. No tengo amor ni querencia. No tengo raíz [...] A veces todo me vale madre. No sé quién soy, Gitana (160).

His lack of fulfilment could not be any clearer. It is tempting, therefore, to interpret the child as an image of Israel's carefree younger self. Israel can no longer recognize him; he has lost a sense of who he is. This is a judgement repeated by La Gitana, who accuses Martha in the penultimate scene of having corrupted Israel's character, when she sees him snorting cocaine (167).

Yet the unfortunate complement to this subjective insecurity is to be pigeonholed by others.<sup>56</sup> During their argument in the third scene, both Martha and Israel appeal to a negative judgement of the other's character that they each made on their very first meeting. Rather than accept that either one could change, they seek to 'essentialize' each other. For Israel, Martha was always a 'puta

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<sup>55</sup> Several details in the story prefigure Martha's fate in the play. She is indeed discovered by an agent of the police, Eloy Bárcena, although this does nothing to help her. She is also attacked by a 'ráfaga de ametralladora' (169) in the final scene, which kills her, unlike the 'descarga' that merely injures the whale (141). Finally, Martha comments on the sexual impulse that brings the whales to the region to mate ('vienen a entregarse al sexo', 141), and her attraction to Israel could be seen as equivalent. They attempt to have sex in the third scene (149), although they quickly descend into recriminations thereafter.

<sup>56</sup> The incommensurability between one person or group's self-conception and how they appear in the eyes of others is a common topic in Rascón's work. In *Voces en el umbral* (1984), the conflict is between the Tarahumaran people and the predominant Spanish-language culture of Chihuahua. A similar problem emerges in *Los Apaches* (2004). See Adriana Hernández Sandoval, 'El ejercicio del poder', p. 27.

decente', a spoilt rich girl with a dissolute lifestyle (154). For Martha, Israel was vulgar and uneducated from the beginning (153).<sup>57</sup> Even far away from the rest of society, they are defined by their social origins, and by their past. The latter looms large in the interactions between Eloy and La Gitana too. Eloy has murdered many people in his life, but refuses to take responsibility for his actions: 'ellos buscaban su muerte, la andaban deseando' (157). As a result La Gitana cannot trust him, even if he claims that in his own conception of himself, 'en el fondo' (154), he is not a violent person. Likewise, her rejection of his advances and her provision of bogus medical treatments in the past make her difficult for him to trust too (156). There is apparently no way to escape these accumulated resentments. In his monologue Eloy claims that spending time on the beach at Guerrero Negro gives him freedom from the psychological burden of the past: 'Aquí soy otro. Me siento más liviano, casi ligero [...] No hay huellas ni sombras' (163). However, the entire play proves that this is not the case, since all four characters spend their time here arguing, before confronting each other in a final scene that leads to their deaths. The confrontation is caused primarily by the failure to overcome long-standing feelings of mistrust.

One colloquial way of expressing this problem is that all the characters have significant 'baggage', and Rascón has explicit recourse to this metaphor in the seventh scene, in which Israel glosses the first part of the poem 'In the Baggage Room at Greyhound', by Allen Ginsberg. This sees the poet seated in the coach station where he works pondering the spiritual significance of his life while

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<sup>57</sup> Notably, the couple's most prominent *physical* interaction is an indication of unity: they have sex (149). Unfortunately, this is overridden by their *verbal* relations, which force a descent into argument within half a page (149–150). Speech is once again shown to be a truer indication of the social situation than anything else.

observing the rush of people and luggage that suggest the inexorable passage of time.<sup>58</sup> There are several reasons why it might appeal to Israel. The poet here is also on the cusp of a change in his circumstances. He uses the poem in part to bid farewell to an unhappy period of employment at the station.<sup>59</sup> His melancholy thoughts as he observes the scene are described as not ‘eternos’; that is, they are not durable, transcendent or redeeming, and the same seems true of the painful and pointless journeys of the countless passengers. So, despite his imminent departure, one feels that he lacks a sense of significant direction for the future, as Israel has already intimated for himself in *Guerrero negro*. The verses follow the wandering eye of the poet, with each of the images acting as ‘objective correlatives’ for the poet’s mood: the ‘empleados malgeniosos’, the ‘parientes llorones’, the ‘indio muerto de espanto’, and the ‘vieja temblorosa’, whose association with the poet is rendered even more evident in Rascón’s version by his use of polyptoton (‘temblando’, ‘temblorosa’) where none exists in the English (‘shuddering’, ‘trembling’). Many of the people observed are also physically frail (‘esa vieja temblorosa’, ‘el duende cojeando’, ‘Pepe [...] con sus ataques’), which seems to reflect the poet’s existential unease: his ‘spiritual sickness’, if you will. Víctor Hugo also makes use of such symbolic equations, since both *La Gitana* and *Eloy* are physically unwell in the play (156, 161), a cure for which is suggested to be a trip to the United States (for medical treatment), the same ‘cure’ that Israel hopes to achieve for his rootlessness,

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<sup>58</sup> ‘In the depths of the Greyhound Terminal | sitting dumbly on a baggage truck looking at the sky | waiting for the Los Angeles Express to depart | worrying about eternity over the Post Office roof in | the night-time red downtown heaven | staring through my eyeglasses I realized shuddering | these thoughts were not eternity, nor the poverty | of our lives, irritable baggage clerks, | nor the millions of weeping relatives surrounding the | buses waving goodbye, | nor other millions of the poor rushing around from | city to city to see their loved ones, | nor an indian dead with fright talking to a huge cop | by the Coke machine, | nor this trembling old lady with a cane taking the last | trip of her life, | nor the red-capped cynical porter collecting his quarters and smiling over the smashed baggage, | nor me looking around at the horrible dream, | nor mustached negro Operating Clerk named Spade, | dealing out with his marvelous long hand the | fate of thousands of express packages, | nor fairy Sam in the basement limping from leaden | trunk to trunk, | nor Joe at the counter with his nervous breakdown | smiling cowardly at the customers, | nor the grayish-green whale’s stomach interior loft | where we keep the baggage in hideous racks, | hundreds of suitcases full of tragedy rocking back and | forth waiting to be opened, | nor the baggage that’s lost, nor damaged handles, | nameplates vanished, busted wires & broken | ropes, whole trunks exploding on the concrete | floor, | nor seabags emptied into the night in the final | warehouse.’ (Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* [San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2006] pp. 44–5).

<sup>59</sup> See the fourth section: ‘Farewell ye Greyhound where I suffered so much’ (Ibid., p. 47). Also, ‘*In the Baggage Room at Greyhound*, is based on a short-lived job that Ginsberg had’ (Jonathan Bolding, ‘Emerson and the Beats’, in *The Only Sin Is Limitation: Essays on R. W. Emerson’s Multi-faceted Influence on America*, ed. by James Aguilar [Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2009], pp. 7–18 [p. 16]).

which is a psychological problem: 'En el otro lado será diferente' (151). In this way the choice of this poem in particular strengthens the association between physical and mental ailments that is in evidence elsewhere in *Guerrero negro*. Hence Israel's addiction to cocaine (166) can be understood as indicative of an unrelenting attachment to his precarious way of life as a smuggler, despite his protestations to the contrary with Martha (151).

But Rascón's translation is not entirely faithful. Whether by accident or design, here the poem is notably more congruent with the concerns of Rascón, Víctor Hugo and Israel than Allen Ginsberg's original would be. In the original poem there is a contrast drawn between the situation the poet finds himself in, the 'depths' of the terminal building, with poverty and decay all around him, and an unreachable 'high' ideal that he contemplates as he looks out longingly 'at the sky', which is significantly referred to as 'heaven' (Line 5). Indeed, the vault of the room in which the baggage is kept is compared to a 'whale's stomach interior', which may well be an allusion to the story of Jonah and the whale, for whom imprisonment in the beast's belly was both penance and symbol for a separation from the divine. In sum, there is a spiritual anxiety (and an implicit idealism) that appears to be lacking in Rascón's translation. Rascón writes merely '*allá* en la terminal'. Even though he does use the word 'paraíso' to translate 'heaven', which connotes an ideal situation, the contrast between two significant places at a figurative top and bottom is not established. Whereas Ginsberg's speaker is 'worrying about eternity' while he looks at the sky, which has a religious or even moral connotation, Rascón's poet merely sees it ('veo'), which renders 'eternidad' just a shop-worn metaphor for the vastness of the sky. The comparison of the vault to the insides of a whale is not even clearly made, since Rascón treats 'el estómago verde y gris' and the 'tablas de baúl interior' as separate elements in the enumeration, not as part of the same metaphor. When translating Line 7 ('these thoughts were not eternity'), Rascón does not repeat the abstract noun, which could be taken in English to imply more clearly an ideal which is out of reach. Rather, the poet's thoughts are simply not 'eternos': they do not endure. Hence the emphasis is more on the passage of time. The idealism, in Ginsberg, also has a social dimension. Consider several details of the scene: the Indian talking *with fear* to a policeman (omitted in

Rascón's translation), the fact that only the poor pass through this place (for perhaps they have no other means to travel), and the character 'fairy Sam', whose nickname is almost certainly an allusion to his homosexuality, which would have been taboo when the poem was written in 1956 (another nuance lost in the translation, which renders him as a literal fairy: 'el duende'). Various 'oppressed' groups congregate in Ginsberg's unhappy terminal, their presence an indication of social inequalities that (we assume) he deplures.

Rascón's version lacks this dimension, but it does preserve one of the poem's important images: the racks of 'equipaje'. For Ginsberg, they seem to stand for the fleeting connections between suffering people from a broad cross-section of society. There is convergence, but not significant inter-connection between them.<sup>60</sup> For Rascón, and Israel, the subject is once again identity and self-direction. There may be a significant alteration of the original here. Where Ginsberg has 'nor the baggage that's lost | nor damaged handles', Rascón writes 'ni el equipaje que se pierde, ni los *pensamientos* usados'. The original emphasis lies with the suitcases' state of disrepair, a reflection of their owners' misery. But Rascón refers us back to the original point of comparison in the poem: 'los pensamientos'. Note the generalization. It is not just the poet's thoughts about eternity ('*these* thoughts', in Ginsberg), but potentially *all* of our ideas, intentions and values. If so, what has gone before ('los pensamientos usados') is just as meaningless as what is being thought right now. In context, it is easy to infer that Israel is thinking once again about his ambiguity of purpose in life. Rascón preserves the two images on either side of this phrase that could be used to suggest the idea of uncertain identity: the lost baggage, and the rubbed-out nametags. Together they seem coherent: the thoughts we have had, the labels we were given, the figurative baggage we carried — in sum, all residue of past behaviour — feels ultimately unimportant.

Israel would clearly prefer to hold a stronger sense of who he is. He might, then, know how to proceed. But he does not. In both Ginsberg and Rascón's poems, the emphasis is on all the

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<sup>60</sup> This becomes clearer in Part 3 of Ginsberg's poem, in which the poet emphasizes the different types of bag on the racks: 'the Japanese white metal postwar trunk gaudily | flowered & headed for Fort Bragg, | one Mexican green paper package in purple rope | adorned with names for Nogales, | hundreds of radiators all at once for Eureka, | crates of Hawaiian underwear' etc. Rascón only translates the first section.

evidence that goes against the speaker's aspiration, in the procession of details that support the original, negative statement. Their essential emotion is therefore despair, and the poem's procedure is to wallow in it. This sensibility is also the best explanation for *Guerrero negro*'s other important metaphor: the salt. It is Eloy who draws attention to it, when describing the desolate beach:

Para el oriente, los vientos, los ruidos. De allá vienen los gritos, los sonidos, la pólvora, el peligro, los barcos, el polvo blanco. Para el sur está el mar y la sal. La sal de la Biblia. La sal de las hijas de Lot. Yo he leído el Libro. Ahí están los Sagrados Testimonios con el santo y las señas de todo. Hay sal en el agua, en la arena, en el aire, en la tierra, en el cuerpo. Estamos hechos de sal. Yo sé cosas. La sal se necesita para poder vivir. Antes pagaban con sal. Era la sal de la vida. La sal del mundo. Sal. Salina. Salero. Salitre. Salador. Salvador. Salazar. Sal y azar. Sal y azahar. Sal y azar... (163–4).

In the biblical sense, salt has positive connotations. Eloy Bárcena concentrates on these at first. It is valuable and necessary for life. People described as 'the salt of the earth' are honest and simple. These connotations are clearly part of the attraction of a place like Guerrero Negro to Eloy, who is trying to escape the complications and complicities of his earlier identities, which he lists by name (as if to renounce them) in the passage that proceeds this extract (163). This is why he contrasts the salt of 'el sur' with the 'ruidos' and 'vientos' of 'el oriente', which together imply the disruption and conflict that he is fleeing from. He proceeds to list several negative elements of that previous life, a life that continues for others back in Santa Rosa, involving drug trafficking ('el polvo blanco') and violence ('la pólvora, el peligro').<sup>61</sup> This is no doubt also the purpose of the reference to the tale of Lot in the Bible, who fled into the wilderness, to a new life away from the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah. Eloy would like to do the same, to escape his immoral past. But, as we have seen, there is in fact no peace to be had in *Guerrero negro*. It is a hopeless ambition. The possibility of negative connotations for the word 'sal' is introduced only tentatively at the end of the passage. Chance ('azar') could easily obstruct his ambitions of freedom.<sup>62</sup> Blossom ('azahar') is used by Rascón in *Volver a Santa Rosa* as a folk symbol of the violent passions that often appear

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<sup>61</sup> The repetition of sounds in 'polvo' and 'pólvora' is designed to emphasize the association between drug trafficking and violence.

<sup>62</sup> The reference to 'Salazar' is less easy to comprehend. The surname is common, but nobody in particular comes to mind. In the final scene, the drug lord who has sent Eloy to trace Israel is called 'Saldívar', which connects the word 'sal' to something more negative (168). Unless Rascón has made a mistake, with 'Saldívar' meant to be 'Salazar', I cannot account for the latter in this passage, other than as a play on words.

to animate social life in the town.<sup>63</sup> The play's final scene confirms that such passions persist in Guerrero Negro. By closing, or trailing off, on more ambivalent words, Eloy suggests the same uncertainty of purpose that informs the behaviour of all four characters in the play. Indeed, salt could easily be given an even more negative spin. Eloy fails to elaborate on it, but his line of thought can be continued by the reader, especially since he goes on to consider both the positive and negative connotations of the sun and the moon on the following page (164): 'el sol es bueno y malo, según como se vea'. We can do the same. One of these negative senses is given by Víctor Hugo in the closing lines of the novel, in which he bemoans his situation with words that must surely remind us of the play: 'Pero mejor no lo sigo contando, porque dicen que en el teatro las cosas contadas se salan y nunca se hacen realidad' (211). Salt, we infer, can also be a symbol of bitterness and failure, by contrast, of course, with the figurative sweetness of victory.<sup>64</sup> Given what else we have discussed, these are more appropriate sentiments for Eloy and the other characters in *Guerrero negro*, and for Víctor Hugo too. In this sense the characters of the play instantiate the mood of the author as his stay in Santa Rosa is drawing to its close. If this is true, Víctor Hugo is slightly more partial to his mother's emotionally-engaged response to the turmoil in the town, rather than his father's droll detachment.

But despite such thematic links and continuities, for this reader *Guerrero negro* feels slightly out of place. In the rest of *Contrabando*, and in *Volver a Santa Rosa*, Rascón portrays the hellishness of life in a close-knit community, even as he laments that community's self-immolation. It is as if he needed to find precisely the opposite location, the empty beach by the sea, somewhere thousands

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<sup>63</sup> 'Santa Rosa es como todos los pueblos mineros. Vivimos rodeados de cerros de metal que provocan fenómenos. Vivimos entre huertas de azahares que remueven sentimientos y hacen que la gente sufra pasiones' (*Volver a Santa Rosa*, p. 69); 'En Santa Rosa siempre se ha dicho que la gente de El Mirasol está loca, porque el calor que hace allá no los deja dormir y porque de tanto vivir bajo el aroma de los azahares de sus huertas, se les ha dañado el cerebro y los padres heredan a sus hijos parte de su locura' (Ibid., p. 37). Typically *azahar* has a purely romantic connotation, but at least in the case of the village of Mirasol ('Los locos de Mirasol', pp. 37–46) the town becomes known for its drug trafficking and violence.

<sup>64</sup> One critic, referring briefly to the play in isolation, also talks of the salt as a symbol for bitterness: '[E]s además importante la presencia (implícita, pues es sólo citada) de la sal, el elemento que es símbolo de la amargura que corroe las vidas de los cuatro personajes' (Francisco Beverido Duhalt, 'Arena: mar y desierto. El paisaje como personaje en la joven dramaturgia del norte de México', *Tramoya*, 59 (1999), 119–126 [p. 125]). As Beverido notes, Rascón fails to develop the symbol in the play, but we can assume that its setting in Guerrero Negro is significant, and the salt from the mines there is firmly associated with the place.

of miles from his rural society and its tangle of dubious allegiances, in order to emphasize better his own despair. Even here there are no easy solutions, no 'black and white'. Guerrero Negro feels like a place to escape to, and it is for Eloy and Israel, but it offers no firm or permanent fulfilment.<sup>65</sup> It is merely a 'liminal zone', a waypoint between Mexico and a sought-after 'promised land', the United States. All four characters make reference to going there, so there is something especially hopeless about the protagonists meeting their end here, on the final leg of their journey. As such, *Guerrero negro* echoes the first scene of the novel, in which the traffickers Rubén and Santos are murdered just as they look to escape to the runway side of Chihuahua Airport, another 'liminal zone'. Perhaps, at this point in the novel, we can take Víctor Hugo to be despondent about his own chances of escape. Nonetheless, the play does not fulfil the need to bear witness ('dar fe') to what is happening in Santa Rosa, which is clearly (part of) the purpose of the rest of the novel. It is too neat, too self-contained, to do so, which is probably the result of its original need to stand alone. Arguably the ending is 'neater' with the deaths of La Saurina and Martha, for instance. There is narrative closure in death. But closure is precisely what has been lacking in the rest of the novel. Damiana, Jacinta, and Conrada all lack a sense of closure, and with good reason. Rascón is attempting to convey doubt, confusion, and anxiety. Yet there may still be some general coherence in such differences of sensibility from the rest of the novel. Perhaps Víctor Hugo, the character, feels compelled to impose an emotional order on events, after braving the chaos of living in Santa Rosa. It would feel truer to life to leave the two women alive and bemused. Accordingly, one could argue that Rascón wants us to notice Víctor Hugo's failure to adequately encapsulate his lived experience in his art. From this point of view, *Guerrero negro* is meant to be partially a failure. Clearly, if the play were the only instance of such a failure, there would be insufficient evidence to arrive at this conclusion. There is no irony in the way the work is presented. Nonetheless, I have argued that the novel's arrangement is fundamental. *Guerrero negro*, as an even-numbered chapter, sits between two other clearly inadequate representations: Valente Armenta's unrepentant letter, and the melodramatic, heavily ironized script for *Triste recuerdo*.

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<sup>65</sup>For instance: 'Aquí soy otro. Me siento más liviano, casi ligero, y la mente se me aclara. Aquí no hay nadie' (Eloy, 163); 'No tengo raíz. Antes, cuando venía a esta playa, me sentía bien' (Israel, 160).

They form a set in the novel's progression, both in terms of their form (a written document) and their development of another major theme in the novel, the difficulty of producing an acceptable representation of the violent reality that is northern Mexico. I shall turn to this subject next.

### III Problematic Representations

Vine a Santa Rosa por dos motivos. Pide vacaciones. Un mes acá se te va a pasar volando. Podrás descansar, dormir a gusto, sin los sobresaltos de México, esa ciudad terrible, y tendrás tiempo para escribir, tranquilamente, en la calma del pueblo, eso que me contaste que tienes que hacer, pero que no te sale, me había escrito mi madre. Cuando tengo un problema, vengo a Santa Rosa, y aquí, donde no hay luz eléctrica ni teléfono, puedo encontrar los fantasmas que se vuelven personajes y los rumores que se convierten en argumentos (24).

This passage, taken from the beginning of the third chapter, clearly resembles the opening lines of Juan Rulfo's iconic novel *Pedro Páramo*.<sup>66</sup> Here we are also given the reason for the journey, and the voice of the narrator's mother also intervenes here with an encouragement to travel and a positive assessment of the town. But there are important differences. Whereas Juan Preciado is embarked on a grand quest for his father and the font of his identity in Rulfo's novel, here Víctor Hugo's journey has rather more mundane motivations: to take a short break from city life, and perhaps find inspiration for the screenplay he is writing. The narrator's mother gives much more pragmatic encouragement than Dolores Preciado in *Pedro Páramo*. Her view of Santa Rosa is less idealized than Dolores's edenic vision of Comala.<sup>67</sup> Both are misleading, but unlike in *Pedro Páramo*, in which Dolores provides our first impression of Comala, we already know that Santa Rosa will not be as welcoming as Rafaela suggests, since we have read about Víctor Hugo's encounter with violence at the airport in Chapter 1, and we have also heard the grave injustice of Damiana's treatment at the hand of the *judiciales* in Chapter 2. One wonders just how terrible Mexico City could be if returning to Santa Rosa is an opportunity to relax. In short, there is greater

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<sup>66</sup> 'Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre, un tal Pedro Páramo. Mi madre me lo dijo. Y yo le prometí que vendría a verlo en cuanto ella muriera. Le apreté sus manos en señal de que lo haría, pues ella estaba por morir y yo en un plan de prometerlo todo. «No dejes de ir a visitarlo —me recomendó—. Se llama de este modo y de este otro. Estoy seguro de que le dará gusto conocerte.»' (Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo y El Llano en llamas* [Barcelona: Planeta, 2006], p. 9)

<sup>67</sup> 'Hay allí, pasando el puerto de Los Colimotes, la vista muy hermosa de una llanura verde, algo amarilla por el maíz maduro. Desde ese lugar se ve Comala, blanqueando la tierra, iluminándola durante la noche.' (Ibid., p. 10)

irony in this passage than the equivalent part of *Pedro Páramo*, because we have been given a different perspective first.<sup>68</sup> Naturally, we are inclined to question Rafaela's judgement as a result, since she still lives in Santa Rosa and ought to know better, whereas Dolores Preciado is at least evoking a bygone era. The reader will also recall the supernatural element in *Pedro Páramo*: the ghosts and the disconcerting 'murmillos', the voices Juan Preciado hears on the wind. Víctor Hugo alludes to both here, but the 'fantasmas' and the 'rumores' are not to be taken in the same way. He is referring to the anecdotes he will learn in the course of his stay, with a sense that the town's atmosphere will inspire him to write. There will not be anything magical or mythical about Santa Rosa.

In fact, any disposition to think in supernatural or magical terms is derided in *Contrabando*. The first thought of the brothers Duarte in Chapter 9 is that a mysterious figure in the graveyard must be a spirit, an 'ánima en pena' (63). But it is merely la Güera Rosenda, on the way to murder her boyfriend Erwin (in cold blood, for a fee). The only place dead people actually appear is on the electoral register used by Julián's opponent in the municipal elections, in which the fraud is described as 'haciendo la alquimia' (111). In both cases there exists the danger of concealing iniquity behind the veil of a non-naturalistic description.<sup>69</sup> Elsewhere, it is a front for incompetence. La Saurina is a character one might expect to find in a novel by García Márquez. She is the mysterious gypsy who sporadically reappears in the town. Nearly all her behaviour in the novel is damaging or dishonest. She informs Jacinta that she has seen her husband arrested by the *judiciales*,

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<sup>68</sup> There are, nonetheless, some echoes of Rulfo's work in the first two chapters. Damiana appears at the roadside in the first chapter like an 'aparecida' (11), and the narrator describes her as 'la imagen de una muerte triste o del ánima en pena de una mujer sin sepultura' (12). The very name Damiana is suggestive, since it is also a character in *Pedro Páramo*. However, these details come after the violence at the airport, which is nothing like the situation in Rulfo's novel. Damiana could be said to lead the protagonist into Santa Rosa, as Abundio does for Juan Preciado in *Pedro Páramo*, since she is picked up on the road before they arrive and gives us our first details about the mountain region. However, she provides a very clear point of view. Abundio is mysterious and unwittingly misleading. Damiana eventually turns out to be misleading, but the impression that she leaves in Chapter 2 is strong and straightforward. Therefore, despite these notes of comparison, I argue that the reader is most likely to note the obvious differences from *Pedro Páramo* when the opening lines of that novel are reworked in Chapter 3 of 'Contrabando'. The equation has merely been pre-prepared.

<sup>69</sup> The title of Chapter 6, 'Los ruidos del aire', might also suggest Rulfo's 'murmillos', but it is less clear that this is a tendentious description. Rather, it is another example of a very concrete phenomenon — the use of radio — which ought not to be confused with anything mysterious.

which serves cruelly to maintain the beauty queen's false hope that he is still alive (37). Only much later do we realize that this must have been a fabrication, when Valente Armenta admits to killing him (123). Víctor Hugo evidently mistrusts her, since she comes off worst in his play and screenplay. In the former, the mysterious 'guerrero negro' statues to which she attributes magical powers turn out to be devices for concealing cocaine (166).<sup>70</sup> In the latter, she inadvertently brings about the catastrophic finale to the film by informing José María of Manuel's intention to move away with Rosalba, which forces him to rescue her and thus reveal the truth of their illicit relationship. There follows a fatal showdown between the two. In the meantime, La Saurina is placing a curse on Manuel's ranch, whereafter she burns it down (200–1, 204). This does nothing to help the main characters. There is no obvious benefit to seeing the world on her terms, and she only causes trouble as a result.

To the extent that *Pedro Páramo* is associated with 'magical realism', that is, with what has often been criticized as a tendency to mythologize or romanticize remote regions of Latin America, one reason for alluding to Rulfo's novel in *Contrabando* must be to reject any potentially rose-tinted representation of northern Mexico. For this reason magic is criticized in the manner I have detailed.<sup>71</sup> Rascón means us not to marvel at rural superstitions, but to be shocked at the violence and moral degeneration. But this is not to say Rascón rejects entirely Rulfo's assessment of rural Mexico. After all, Rulfo's approach to Comala is far less nostalgic than even García Márquez's ambivalent attitude towards Macondo, let alone the cheap exoticism of the school of literature that

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<sup>70</sup> In La Saurina's description, the statue's magical effects bear a striking resemblance to the effects of using cocaine (139).

<sup>71</sup> A similar attitude is evident in *Volver a Santa Rosa*. 'El Bachicas' (pp. 73–82) tells of the arrival in town of a magician who performs a popular one-man show, only to disappear at the end of the performance, never to be seen again. The story is told in an innocent, jovial tone that revels in the mystery. We are encouraged to see through this when it is suggested that the mayor has had Bachicas killed for accidentally insulting him. In retrospect, an amusing skit perceived as a joke by the audience during the show appears to have been a genuine fight between Bachicas and the mayor. The mystery allows a crime to go unpunished. In 'Las húngaras' (pp. 97–108) a group of gypsy women arrive in town to perform marvellous feats of divination, entrancing the impressionable young Víctor Hugo. Before leaving, they arrange a scam to 'bless' the locals' valuables in order to steal them, to which Víctor Hugo unwittingly contributes. As with La Saurina, 'magic' turns out to be a front for criminal behaviour.

novels such as *Pedro Páramo* and *Cien años de soledad* have inspired.<sup>72</sup> His tone is understated, but ultimately disheartened. Rascón would endorse this sensibility with regard to a different region of Mexico with many similar problems, only without the magic. After all, Rulfo's use of the supernatural in *Pedro Páramo* was but one method of communicating the fatalistic world view of a people left isolated and forgotten by the rest of Mexico, mired in poverty, violence and relentlessly damaging systems of belief. His stories, in *El Llano en llamas*, are realist, even though they tackle similar subjects. To take an example, one reason for a belief in the continuing presence of the pining souls of the dead is the reflex assumption that everyone has some sort of guilt to expunge. The idea is taken literally in *Pedro Páramo*, but it is also present in stories such as 'Es que somos muy pobres', in which the narrator's mother cannot accept the family's misfortunes except on the understanding that some unspecified sin has been committed in the past. Rulfo's bleak message is that the uneducated peasants of Jalisco blame themselves for their inexorable conditions of hardship. The inhabitants of Santa Rosa possess an effective way out of this moral predicament: they can blame outsiders for corrupting their town. As a result, although nearly everyone is culpable in some respect of collaborating with drug trafficking, nobody *feels* particularly guilty about it. Compared to the self-flagellation of some of Rulfo's characters, this might appear healthier, but it has its own problems, because the existence of at least some moral standards is essential. Nevertheless, one is reluctant to be too judgemental. As in Rulfo's Jalisco, the environment is overwhelmingly influential.<sup>73</sup> For Rulfo, the essential problems were poverty and isolation, especially insofar as the latter discouraged any attempt to alleviate the former. The same is true of Santa Rosa, and thus Rulfo needs only be amended.

If Rulfo is not the main target, that honour surely belongs to Antonio Aguilar.<sup>74</sup> It is Aguilar who

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<sup>72</sup> I am thinking, in particular, of novels such as Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989). *Cien años de soledad* is a very funny novel, as Clive Griffin has persuasively argued ('The Humour of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*', in *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings*, ed. by Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell [Cambridge: CUP, 1987]). Not so *Pedro Páramo*.

<sup>73</sup> This point is made most forcefully in Chapter 8, in which Rafaela recounts the stories of several townsfolk who ended up involved in drug production or trafficking despite their better intentions.

<sup>74</sup> One wonders whether part of the reason for delaying *Contrabando*'s publication until 2008 was a desire not to offend Aguilar, who died in 2007.

commissions Víctor Hugo's screenplay, to be based around his own song 'Triste recuerdo':

Usted es de un pueblo serrano del norte y debe saber cómo siente la gente del campo, cómo quiere de verdad y cómo es capaz de morir por un amor. Quiero una película como aquellas que hacía el Indio Fernández, con hembras de a veras y con hombres de a caballo [...] Hay que meter a Chelelo [Eleazar García] en el asunto [...] Hágale un campito ahí y póngale a decir sus chistosadas o vístalo de mujer para que se muera de risa el público [...] ¿Ya escuchó "Triste recuerdo"? *El tiempo pasa y no te puedo olvidar, te traigo en mi pensamiento, constante, mi amor...* (25)

The films of Emilio Fernández first established an unduly glamorous vision of rural Mexico in the international imagination, during Mexican cinema's 'golden age'. But they hardly replicated the intense upheaval of the revolutionary period. Therefore, Aguilar wants to imitate a representation of reality that was already inadequate over 50 years previously. Now, it appears ludicrous. 'Real men' drive pick-up trucks rather than horses. One is more likely to die in drug-related violence than in an attempt to 'follow one's heart'. This much is clear even by Chapter 3, when Aguilar's words are introduced. Indeed, given how harrowing the opening scene of the novel is, it feels absurd to envisage a film about the north being a comedy. The sentiment expressed in the lyrics to the song is also clichéd and saccharine. This is not to say nobody would share it, however. If there is one character who might, it is Jacinta Primera, who is introduced in the following chapter. Yet her predominant character trait is naivety. She is too easily impressed by the wealth of José Dolores and the excitement of being crowned beauty queen to harbour doubts about her soon-to-be husband's character and occupation.<sup>75</sup> When he disappears, she clings hopelessly to the belief that he will return, when all the evidence suggests otherwise. It is not healthy to behave like this in a town like Santa Rosa. Juvenile illusions are likely to be punctured. Thus, if we thought Antonio Aguilar's perception of the north of Mexico was merely false in Chapter 3, by the end of Chapter 4 we might be inclined to think it pernicious.

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<sup>75</sup> Jacinta repeats the phrase 'me llamó la atención' to demonstrate her amazement at the pomp of the festival (pp. 30–3). It serves ironically to indicate just how little she really notices, since rumours about José Dolores are ignored, along with her father's advice (35). Despite her idealizing the situation, her first sexual encounter with José Dolores is amusingly awkward and prosaic: 'Y lo que tenía que pasar pasó, ahí adentro de la cabina de la troca roja, con las puertas abiertas, porque él es muy alto y no cabíamos' (34). The emphasis on local rumour ('la gente hablaba', or similar [32, 33, 35, 38]) also underlines how embarrassing Jacinta's behaviour is, especially when she has to give up her title for becoming pregnant.

Following Antonio Aguilar's prescription, the film script provided in Chapter 22 is full of clichés. But they are obviously deliberate. *Triste recuerdo* purports to tell the true story of the romance between Rosalba, wife of the drug-lord Manuel Fonseca, and José María Villarreal, a local rancher. Epigmenio first mentions the anecdote in Chapter 16 when he recalls the wedding of Valente Armenta (105), and the narrator promises not to distort the story's ending, since 'la realidad [...] sobrepasa en acción dramática a cualquier ficción' (172). This implies the screenplay has some basis in reality. But it is soon clear that Víctor Hugo is not, in fact, committing himself to the veracity of the story. He has heard it told differently on several occasions, but gives no justification to Antonio Aguilar for selecting Nana Lupe's version to adapt (174). This will strike the reader as suspicious, since only a page previously he has written the following: 'Lo que la Nana olvida, el Güero recuerda, porque los niños tienen más fresca la memoria y a los viejos se les confunden los tiempos y las personas' (173). From the beginning, therefore, we are aware that Víctor Hugo does not consider Nana Lupe to be a reliable witness. Yet the bulk of Chapter 22 is effectively narrated by her. As elsewhere in *Contrabando*, Rascón introduces the speaker ('cuenta la Nana', 178), then continues the narrative with the occasional stylistic reminder that this is supposed to be someone other than the narrator speaking. Her voice is at its most apparent in the plethora of sententious sayings that pass for an old woman's wisdom.<sup>76</sup> However, her doubts about the story are conspicuous. She struggles to decide who is ultimately to blame for events (178), nor can she adequately explain Rosalba's impulsive behaviour (181), wasting time on idle and contradictory conjectures.<sup>77</sup> Some of her knowledge comes second-hand from Rosalba.<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere, she contradicts herself:

Cómo hacía el amor José María Villarreal, sólo Rosalba lo supo. Aunque también los otras mujeres que tuvo desde que enviudó, como Mirta, la del restaurante, que fue la más permanente de todas (181).

This attempt to cultivate mystery, with a sense of the grandeur of José María and Rosalba's

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<sup>76</sup> For example: '[T]odos tuvieron razón para hacer lo que hicieron' (174).

<sup>77</sup> Her confusion is foregrounded by phrases such as 'yo tampoco lo entiendo' (180), 'todavía no lo comprendo' (181), and the series of statements that begin 'sería por' or 'será que' to introduce a speculation (181).

<sup>78</sup> 'Ella me contó' (179); 'Me contaba Rosalba', 'Me contó' (181).

relationship, is undermined to humorous effect by the concrete, almost banal, mention of his previous lovers. As if all this were not enough, the trustworthiness of Nana Lupe is surely undermined by association with La Saurina. Nana Lupe is equally to blame for the film's violent denouement since it is she who informs La Saurina so that the gypsy can pass on the message to José María (197). Since she attempts to conceal Rosalba's affair from Manuel, and does not caution against it, she must share some of the blame for the entire sequence of events. In this respect, her behaviour is no less counterproductive than the machinations of the easily maligned gypsy. One key detail corroborates this. Nana Lupe is said to provide special 'yerbas' to Ligorio to heal his ulcer, which dissuade him from travelling to the United States to be treated (192). In *Guerrero negro*, La Saurina provided herbs to Eloy Bárcena to cure an ulcer, to no apparent benefit. He considers travelling to the US for an operation instead (156). Both La Saurina and Nana Lupe trust in an obviously faulty 'folk wisdom'. Clearly neither of them is reliable.

In a final irony, Víctor Hugo promises to change the film's ending if it feels inappropriate (206). Having provided a story that is questionable as regards all its specifics, he offers to change the one feature that is meant to be true. Yet the script is still rejected by Aguilar. If even the most inadequate representation of life in Santa Rosa cannot gain the attention of the rest of Mexico, what hope remains that the region's genuine plight will ever be noticed? The novel closes on a note of despair. While returning to Chihuahua, Víctor Hugo's truck is accidentally attacked by the army, and several people die. It is narrated in the same understated fashion with which violence is treated elsewhere in *Contrabando*:

El Ventarrón venía manejando bien, en medio de la noche, y al dar la vuelta en una curva se encontró de pronto con un retén de soldados recién puestos ese día. O no los vio o no alcanzó a detenerse o se asustó y en vez de frenar pisó el acelerador y los soldados dispararon. De la gente que traíamos atrás sólo quedaron vivos una mujer y su niña que venían durmiendo acostadas en el piso de la troca. El Ventarrón falleció al instante (208).

Here Víctor Hugo, openly but discreetly, shares the same doubt and confusion that many of the people he has met in Santa Rosa have shown with regard to the violence they have suffered. He is simply unsure how the attack came to pass. But he does not particularly need to highlight the

sadness of this turn of events. Having ended *Triste recuerdo* with a melodramatic showdown between lovers, the bald detail that hardly anyone survived the attack is enough to move the reader. It is a poignant reminder that away from the nostalgic films and the fantastical novels that stereotype rural Mexico, there are people dying in a myriad of unremarkable ways every day. The dead do not even get their names recorded. They are forgotten, and the violence continues. When his friends in Mexico City ask Víctor Hugo how he injured his hand, he is now too bitter to reveal the details: ‘Le digo que me quemó un gusano negro que cayó de un granado, un gusano quemador de los que hay en la sierra’ (208). The tone is one of resignation: why bother to tell the truth if it is only likely to be ignored?<sup>79</sup>

Throughout *Contrabando*, Rascón Banda shows that a major problem in Santa Rosa is not so much the production of drugs in itself, but the confusions and delusions of the people who live there. The trade has destroyed both the town’s sense of self and any semblance of moral clarity. But if anything is to be done about it, *someone* has to perceive clearly what is happening. The structure of the novel, and the events within in, suggest that this can only be an outsider. Víctor Hugo is part of the world he is representing, so he does not claim to understand everything. His most careful, poetic response is *Guerrero negro*, but it is more expressive of his general concerns than acutely analytical. It is not even set in the town. The film script is worse: it is a (clearly resentful) parody. But perhaps by comparing and contrasting the wealth of different representations, by noting their strengths and deficiencies, the reader of the novel can come to a more complete conclusion. The problem, then, lies with the outsiders. Quite apart from the traffickers and security forces that bring further disruption to Santa Rosa, the people who matter in Mexico City do not seem prepared to listen. All Víctor Hugo can do is to bear witness to what is happening, as his parents have done for the purposes of enforcing the law. He can lend locals the national voice they lack, to publicize their

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<sup>79</sup> This was a common concern among authors from northern Mexico in the 1990s. Leónidas Alfaro includes the following in *Tierra Blanca* with reference to an army operation to eradicate plantations of the opium poppy: ‘Mientras, en la ciudad de México no publicaron nada sobre estos hechos; posiblemente los jefes de información de los diarios capitalinos estimaron que la noticia no era del interés de sus lectores o, quizás, la consideraron de mal gusto’ (*Tierra Blanca*, p. 99). Víctor Hugo’s comment sounds like a deliberately ‘exotic’ explanation of the sort that his interlocutor in Mexico City would expect.

plight, and he can demonstrate his own (anguished) incomprehension. The rest is up to us. One wonders whether the novel would have generated the necessary publicity had it actually been released in 1991. By 2008 there seemed little need to simply draw attention to the problem of drug trafficking. But *Contrabando* is arguably more moving for showing someone who tried and failed.

## Chapter 5: *Trabajos del reino*, by Yuri Herrera

Despite their wide-ranging influence on northern Mexican society, drug traffickers play only minor roles in *Contrabando*, *Balas de plata* and *Los minutos negros*, in part because it is difficult to depict them directly without lapsing into cliché. By and large the emphasis is placed on the multifarious effects of drug trafficking, rather than on the phenomenon itself. In *Trabajos del reino* (2004), Yuri Herrera does represent the *narcos* more directly, and yet also indirectly.<sup>1</sup> All the main characters in the novel belong to the inner ranks of a drug cartel, but Herrera casts a defamiliarizing veil over the story by avoiding conventional terms for the characters and the novel's setting. The cartel is cast figuratively as a 'mediæval court', ruled over by a 'King'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than names, the characters have titles that often suggest familiar archetypes. The King's ambitious second-in-command is 'el Heredero', and he is closely and mysteriously assisted by 'la Bruja'. The protagonist does have a name: Lobo. However, he is known only as 'el Artista' at Court, where he functions as minstrel and jester to the King. Neither drugs nor the U.S. border are mentioned by name, but a host of euphemisms and allusions make the setting apparent.<sup>3</sup> Thus, if there is an emphasis on particulars in Mendoza and Rascón Banda — a specific place and its predicament — then Herrera strives to draw out the more universal significance of his narrative.

Accordingly, drug trafficking is not the principal focus of the plot, which revolves around Lobo and what he learns about himself as an artist while he lives at the Court. Lobo is a *corridista*, a singer and composer of popular ballads or *corridos*. At the beginning of the narrative, he is working as a freelance entertainer in the bars and restaurants of an unnamed city on the border. When a local drug

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<sup>1</sup> Page references are to the following edition: Yuri Herrera, *Trabajos del reino* (Cáceres: Periférica, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> When I talk about the 'mediæval' qualities of the King's organization, I intend a loose impressionistic sense of the word, more the product of various representations of the Middle Ages in the popular imagination (such as Shakespeare's plays) than a rigorous structural definition. Nonetheless, there are structural similarities between drug trafficking and some aspects of governance in the Middle Ages, which I discuss in the first section of this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> For example: '[E]l gringo [lo] devolvía a su casa con amor de padre y los asientos hartos de yerba buena' (33: *yerba* is a common colloquialism for marihuana); 'Ya había probado menjurjes: chiva le habían dado unos borrachos pudientes de los que declaran amistad a la botella y tres canciones' (42: *chiva* is traffickers' slang for heroin); 'No sólo aprovisionaron a los invitados con suficiente pisto, perico y mujer, sino que se organizó un casino' (47: *perico* is slang for cocaine); '[A]quí el Gerente va a arreglar con unos amigos para que muevan su música en la calle ... Al cabo así es como hacemos negocios' (61). See footnote 35 for euphemisms for the border.

lord, 'el Rey', visits one of the canteens in which Lobo is working, he is blinded by awe, and decides to move to Court where he impresses the King enough to be hired as a retainer, in exchange for the security and comfort of living at Court, and the company of a girl, 'la Niña'. At Court he learns about the organization by writing *corridos* for a variety of the King's employees, meeting many who hold a similar position to himself, such as 'el Joyero' and 'el Periodista'. Lobo basks in the wealth and the glamour of the 'palace', but there are constant indications that all is not well below the surface. Although the novel is written in the third person, much of it is effectively presented from Lobo's point of view. The suppression of important information (which he does not appear to know) provides a degree of suspense.<sup>4</sup> This is heightened by the occurrence of two murders at Court (of 'el Pocho' and 'el Periodista'), which are not investigated but nonetheless pique the reader's interest because they pass unexplained for so long. In this, *Trabajos del reino* borrows some of the techniques of the *novela negra* which has influenced Mendoza and Solares. Lobo grows disillusioned with the Court as he falls in love with the unhappy daughter of the Witch, 'la Cualquiera', who is promised to the King. When the King's power unravels towards the end of the novel, Lobo makes his escape to a new life.

The central theme of *Trabajos del reino* is the relationship between art and power. As such, the novel is best understood as a 'coming of age' story in which Lobo slowly develops his understanding of his particular art and its function in the world. Lobo's artistic talents are subordinate to the King's will as long as he lives at Court, so the question considered implicitly by the novel is the extent to which a dependent artist is an artist at all. I discuss this at length in the second section of this chapter. In the first, I consider the manner in which the novel is narrated, particularly with regard to how it characterizes the protagonist, then additionally in relation to the validity of the novel's central metaphor, that a drug cartel is in some respect similar to a mediæval kingdom. In the final section I look at what the novel does *not* explicitly tell us. That is, the underlying circumstances that trigger Lobo's own development — the intrigues at Court, the murders, the King's fall from power —

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<sup>4</sup> The narrative is also episodic, which does not help the reader to establish a coherent sense of how long Lobo spends at the Court. This makes it all the more difficult to piece together a continuous narrative of what is happening *behind* the scenes.

which remain largely obscure. I argue that, despite ostensibly writing a *narconovela*, Herrera implies a criticism of the reader's interest in fiction about drug traffickers.

## **I Narrative Perspective and the Mediæval Metaphor**

Many of the features depicting the King's organization as a mediæval court exist independently of Lobo's own belief in that metaphor. The King has a luxurious palace with gardens (51), employs several permanent retainers in various stations, holds banquets for his guests (22) and public audiences for the poor and needy (e.g. Ch. 10). Nonetheless, the titles given to characters are clearly Lobo's invention, and not the narrator's. On observing his behaviour, on the first page of the novel, Lobo decides that the drug lord is 'un Rey' (9). The King does indeed call Lobo 'artista' when they meet, but he does not know his name at the time and it is intended to flatter (13). Once Lobo arrives at court he simply assumes the title 'el Artista', without any immediate cause (20). Among the other characters, the Jeweller introduces himself by giving his real name, but we are not told what it is. Instead, once the man has pompously stated his profession to Lobo, he acquires the corresponding title in the narrative (21–2). Tellingly, no one else uses Lobo's names for other characters. The Doctor and the Manager are referred to by their titles, but this is not unusual for holders of specific offices. 'El Pocho' is so called by 'el Gringo' (84), but this is a common term for Americans of Mexican heritage, and not one of Lobo's archetypes: it is simply a nickname. For other characters, untouched by Lobo's fancies, the King is just 'Señor' (22, 59, and 109). Titles like 'Rey' and 'Heredero' do seem to fit the power structure at the court, but others are tendentious or absurd. Whatever 'dark arts' she might practice — which in any case the reader cannot postulate till much later in the novel — the Witch gets her name simply because Lobo overhears the Heir insulting her as 'esa bruja' (37). He repeats the insult without question, failing to understand it. For the Doctor, on the other hand, she is 'esa mujer' (71). Similarly, when la Niña calls the object of Lobo's interest 'una cualquiera' — at best a 'nobody', at worst a 'hussy' — she is being dismissive and jealous (38). Nevertheless, Lobo elevates her to the absurd title 'la Cualquiera'. He seems unaware of la Niña's reason for calling her that. To take what is normally a pronoun as a name or title smacks of a child-

like miscategorization.<sup>5</sup>

The names accorded to different characters in *Trabajos del reino* are only one part of Lobo's conceptual armoury that is mimicked by the narrator. In fact, the entire narrative is oriented towards his point of view. In the main this is achieved via the consistent use of free indirect discourse, replete with *verba sentiendi* and value judgements that are consonant with the Artist's beliefs. On occasion, it is a colloquialism that gives this away: e.g. 'Había, *verdad de Dios*, hasta algunos que habían visto el mar' (19). Several descriptions appear to have been filtered through Lobo's consciousness in terms of their lexicalization:

Tuvo escuela fugaz, en la que entrevió *la armonía* de las letras, *el compás* que las ataba y las dispersaba (15).

[E]sta cara que *rima* entre sus partes [...] este rostro que ahora *se entona* a sí mismo (83).<sup>6</sup>

Here is evidence of a mind that understands the world by relating features of it to something it already knows very well: in this case, for the *corridista*, it is music. Many other descriptions are subtly expressive:

Se oía *promesa* de carne asada y cabrito (22).

Apenas un par de voces *hendían* a maldiciones el silencio (42).

In these cases, a mental state (Lobo's, one presumes) intrudes on an otherwise objective description because of the specific choice of noun and verb. Lobo is excited in the first example, and somewhat shocked in the second.

Not only is the narrative voice frequently oriented towards Lobo's own perspective, it is typically *limited* to that perspective. An external view is taken with regard to other characters. Their actions

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, 'cualquiera' acts as a descriptive noun here, but it derives from a pronoun. What is important is that 'una cualquiera' is a possible, even common, phrase in Spanish. 'La Cualquiera' is not, and appears to be a contradiction in terms anyway. Errors of grammatical categorization are common in infants. A good example is the failure to understand the reciprocity of pronouns e.g. 'You did it', 'NO, I did it'. See Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> In all quotations, my italics unless otherwise indicated.

are described in physical terms, their words introduced by *dijo* alone, if by anything at all.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say we have *no* indication of the states of mind pertaining to other characters. However, they are usually presented with words of estrangement, that is, with phrases that indicate doubt about the truth of the description. These doubts must be Lobo's:

Ella rió con ternura, *quizá* (55).

Esa —dijo el Gerente, *como* distraído, *como si* pensara en algo más—, es de quien lo precise (26).

*Como que* mucha calma para tanta rabia [...] pero *seguro* sabe lo que hace (43).

Such phrases are often inserted into passages of free indirect discourse to remind us that it is Lobo who perceives the world in this way. The phrase *como si* is especially prevalent (26, 81, 108, 126 etc.) Another device, with the same effect, is to foreground Lobo's process of thought or perception. The verbs *ver*, *observar*, *mirar*, *figurarse* and *reparar* are pervasive. Lobo prides himself on his invisibility at the palace (30–31), which allows him to function as a 'fly on the wall'. But when so many allusions are made by other characters to details that Lobo leaves unexplained, the reader is entitled to wonder what Lobo is *not* seeing. Therefore, the emphasis on Lobo's process of observation serves to remind us of his perceptual limitations. More than anything, it is this that generates the novel's atmosphere of intrigue. However, I do not think much specific information is to be questioned by the reader. It is a more general impression of uncertainty that matters; there is an absence of relevant information, akin to Vargas Llosa's 'datos escondidos', rather than a series of significant distortions. Nevertheless, it cannot be a coincidence that the few pieces of information that evidently *are* a (dubious) projection of the protagonist's are introduced in a manner that calls attention to that fact:

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<sup>7</sup> There are some exceptions, and they are significant. The first two characters to have the tone of their speech described are la Niña and el Doctor, on pp. 68–69. La Niña talks 'con desprecio', 'con crueldad', and 'desafiante'. This is where she is castigating Lobo for failing to understand how the palace really works, for failing to see it as it really is: 'Tú no sabes nada de nada' (68). Although her angry state of mind is manifest to anyone, it is tempting to conclude that an alternative perspective is intruding here. This is less evidently true for the Doctor on the following page, who talks 'con desaliento'. Nevertheless, this is the chapter where Lobo is given glasses, and hence begins to re-evaluate the Court. It seems significant that at the very moment Lobo begins to change his point of view, two other characters suddenly become ever-so-slightly less inscrutable. It may be, however, that Lobo is projecting his own incipient 'desaliento' onto the Doctor.

*Observó las joyas que le ceñían y entonces supo: era un Rey (9).*

*Era como siempre se había imaginado los palacios (19).*

*Tiene que serlo, pensó el Artista, si es el Heredero (23).*

One might argue, from this evidence, that the reader is invited to query the novel's central metaphor. Indeed, although Lobo's point of view dominates the narrative, the reader is not invited to identify with it. Instead, I contend that Herrera intends us to see through it. Most often, he simply selects details about the Court that cannot fail to reflect badly on it, then filters the information through Lobo's point of view — with free indirect discourse — to reveal the deficiencies of such a perspective. Consider the following passage:

Salieron a los jardines, pasaron junto a la fuente en cuyo centro un dios con tenedor tiraba agua por la boca, siguieron por el laberinto de arbustos trazado con las letras del nombre del Rey, y al llegar a donde una alberca se ornaba con mosaicos de hoja de yerba al fondo (51).

The King's garden will strike most readers as *kitsch* in the extreme, not least the mosaics depicting leaves of marihuana. This might well remind us of the oft-forgotten political function of so much great art and architecture in the world. Extravagant gardens and palaces were as much about underlining royal authority as pleasing the senses. Nonetheless, this garden seems pretentious and false in view of the scope of the imitation and its appreciable failure. Appreciable, of course, to the reader, but not to Lobo. This is why the word 'tenedor' is revealing. Perhaps nobody else at Court would recognize Neptune and his trident either, which stresses anew how starkly instrumental the garden is: it is not just Lobo who is ignorant. But we can hardly trust the point of view of someone who makes such naïve mistakes. Indeed, the description sounds child-like again, because to a young child that is exactly what a trident looks like. A certain naivety is in evidence on many other occasions. At times, the narrative voice seems to be parodying Lobo's thoughts rather than simply reproducing them indirectly. His comparison of the King's situation to Calvary in Ch. 7 is particularly egregious (45). On another occasion, the propagandistic value of Lobo's *corridos* is underlined by his very attempt to deny it:

El Artista comprendió. Debía dejarlo cumplir su trabajo. Para entretener a los necios

con mentiras limpias el Periodista tenía que hacerlas parecer verdades. Las noticias verdaderas eran cosa de él, materia de corrido, y había tantas por cantar que bien podía olvidar las que no servían al Rey (35–6).

What Lobo fails to grasp, but the reader will not, is that it does not matter much whether the stories you tell are technically true or false if you select them only on the basis of whether they portray the King in a positive light. Both practices are deceptive. The example demonstrates some of the more subtle modulations Herrera achieves in the narrative voice. By framing what follows with the apparently neutral assertion that Lobo understood the situation, there is irony (even bathos) when what follows — in a voice more evidently aligned to Lobo’s — undermines that assertion.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the final clause is more like a caustic aside than a genuine imitation of Lobo’s thoughts. More subtle still is the following case: ‘No querían sus canciones. Los loros de la radio decían que no, que sus letras eran léperas, que sus héroes eran malos’ (57). Lobo’s own voice is manifest in this extract, with his anger at the situation expressed in the repetitive clauses (‘que no ... que ... que’). The terse first sentence suggests he is taking the situation very personally. But another voice is also alluded to. We assume Lobo is reporting the response at the radio station almost verbatim, because he would never use the word ‘léperas’ (vulgar, ‘trashy’) to describe his own work. For a second we glimpse another point of view — one apart from and critical of Lobo — and it is cruelly deflating to his artistic pretensions.<sup>9</sup>

Our ability to see through the Artist’s point of view is fundamental to his characterization in the novel. He is young and naïve, but he will eventually know better. Moreover, the maintenance of an external narrative perspective towards characters other than Lobo, coupled with the obvious deficiencies in Lobo’s ability to see what is happening, helps to generate an atmosphere of intrigue. In the main, if we are not given a piece of information, we can assume that it is because Lobo does not know it either. The ellipses are thus motivated by character and not just by the author’s designs

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<sup>8</sup> The same occurs with the aforementioned comparison of the King’s difficult circumstances to Christ’s. The passage begins ‘si algo entendía’, which invites us to notice how much Lobo does *not* actually understand (45).

<sup>9</sup> It is not always necessary to present a different point of view, since events (and characters) can speak for themselves. The self-evidently barbaric behaviour of some of the minor members of the Court is recounted in their own words when Lobo interviews them. It reflects badly on Lobo that he does not challenge their comments, and that he bothers to recover their stories as material for a *corrido* in the first place (29).

for the plot. This changes in the latter stages when we are told that Lobo has worked out who the murderers are, even though they remain unknown to the reader. In this respect there is a clear purpose to narrating the novel in 3<sup>rd</sup> person rather than 1<sup>st</sup>, because the narrator can step back from Lobo's point of view where necessary: in this case, in order to prolong the readers' doubts. In all these cases the narrative perspective functions effectively in *Trabajos del reino*. However, there may be one area that is problematic. If Lobo is responsible for the conceptualization of the drug cartel as a mediæval court, are we not invited to question the merits of that conceit? After all, at the end of the novel Lobo abandons his title 'el Artista'. That word defined him at Court because it designated his function there, but by rejecting the Court and its ideals, he recovers his individuality, an identity independent of his role at the palace. Indeed, many of the titles given to characters in the novel suggest that these people matter only to the extent that they provide the relevant service to the King ('el Gerente', 'el Joyero' etc.). Hence Lobo's use of them is expressive of his belief in the King. When he abandons that faith, he ought to categorize people differently, and indeed, la Cualquiera loses her nickname accordingly.<sup>10</sup> Even the King is just 'un pobre tipo traicionado' (118). If there are doubts about the justice of the novel's central conceit throughout, and Lobo rejects it himself when he leaves, are we as readers supposed to reject it entirely?

The problem is that the 'mediæval kingdom' metaphor is useful. Several features of feudal governance — broadly construed — resemble the manner in which drug trafficking (or any organized crime) operates, and the analogy is not uncommon among historians and social scientists.<sup>11</sup> In a famous essay, the historian Charles Tilly characterized State-formation in the Early

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<sup>10</sup> Lobo's name might be an indication that he is to be understood as an outsider — a 'lone wolf' — before and after his time at the Court. The significance of La Cualquiera's nickname is that, for the King's purposes (reproduction), *anyone* will do. This is no longer the case once she leaves the Court.

<sup>11</sup> Economist Stergios Skaperdas ('The political economy of organized crime: providing protection when the state does not', *Economics of Governance*, 2 [2001], 173–202) notes that 'the main job of the mafioso is not much different from that of the feudal knight: he provides protection or, to put it more respectably, security. In rural Sicily the mafioso used to perform straightforward intermediary and judicial functions that were conferring legitimacy from the community' (p. 185).

Modern period as the aggressive extension of what were, in essence, protection rackets.<sup>12</sup> Rulers engaged in wars to protect and acquire territory in order to extract resources from a larger number of people, because this was the most reliable means of accumulating wealth and maintaining power.<sup>13</sup> It was mostly a zero-sum game. This is little different to the conflict between cartels on the Mexican border in the last 20 years: since the level of drug consumption in the United States is relatively stable and the resources directed towards interdiction huge, the best way to increase market share is not to produce more drugs more efficiently but to increase one's chances of successfully reaching the market in the first place.<sup>14</sup> In Mexico, reliable access to the market means control of the points of access, which is the U.S.-Mexico border. As for many pre-modern monarchs, profitability depends on the size of one's territory, and territory is a limited resource.

If States have resembled organized crime by virtue of the logic of their expansion, organized crime in turn often resembles the State because of the functions it fulfils. For the criminologist Federico Varese, a Mafia group 'is a type of organized crime group that attempts to control the supply of protection', which is a basic function of the State if we call it 'security'.<sup>15</sup> The provision of protection tends to lead Mafias to acquire additional features of the State, especially mechanisms for enforcing contracts and resolving disputes — i.e. the rudiments of a justice system — since this is a perennial problem for illegal enterprise.<sup>16</sup> But if drug cartels can function like States, they are very

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<sup>12</sup> See Charles Tilly, 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. by Peter Evans et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), pp. 169–186: 'Someone who produces both the danger and, at a price, the shield against it is a racketeer [...] Since governments themselves commonly simulate, stimulate, or even fabricate threats of external war and since the repressive and extractive activities of governments often constitute the largest current threats to the livelihoods of their own citizens, many governments operate in essentially the same way as racketeers' (pp. 170–171).

<sup>13</sup> '[T]he people who controlled European states and states in the making warred in order to check or overcome their competitors and thus to enjoy the advantages of power within a secure or expanding territory' (Ibid., p. 172).

<sup>14</sup> See Stephanie Brophy, 'Mexico: Cartels, corruption and cocaine', *Global Crime*, 9.3 (2008), 248–261. 'Like the state, the Gulf cartel controls territory [and] [...] collects taxes. It does this by demanding *pisos* (tolls) from anyone wanting to run drugs, weapons, illegal immigrants or any illicit contraband into the US from points in Mexico under its control' (p. 254). The logic of the situation is common to organized crime in general: see Federico Varese, *The Russian Mafia* (Oxford: OUP, 2001) : 'In a world protected by the mafia, sellers compete, not by improving quality or reducing prices but by acquiring more efficient violent skills in order to enlarge their share of the market' (p. 190).

<sup>15</sup> Federico Varese, 'General Introduction', in *Organized Crime: Critical Concepts in Criminology*, ed. by Federico Varese (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 2–20 (p. 17).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

limited, arbitrary and personalistic States, much more like the governments of the Middle Ages than today's nation-states. Indeed, in Mexican drug trafficking, the assignment of *plazas* to minor *narcos* is a necessary devolution of power not unlike the tradition of granting fiefs to vassals for land that the monarch could not hope to control directly.<sup>17</sup> As in the hey-day of feudalism, this grant is the principal method by which major drug lords maintain the loyalty of their followers. Some *narco* groups carry out additional functions akin to a form of 'social banditry' as a way of generating popular support for their local monopoly of power. After all, if States justify their dominance with reference to abstract principles and the assent of the governed, criminal groups can follow similar — albeit more limited — strategies.<sup>18</sup> Drug producers have been doing this for decades in Mexico as a continuation of the traditional patronistic behaviour of large landholders, since in drug-producing regions this is what they are. There is undoubtedly something 'mediæval' about this practice. Where the Mexican State is especially weak, it is more common for being necessary. Consider Michoacán, where 'La Familia Michoacana' has cast itself as a religious organization that exists to provide social support for the poor.<sup>19</sup> In 2011 a splinter group emerged calling itself the 'Knights Templar', claiming to be fighting a war against 'poverty, tyranny and injustice', and distributing 'codes of conduct' full of mediæval imagery.<sup>20</sup> The articulation of a purpose other than trafficking drugs for profit has become a helpful legitimator, perhaps because the increase in drug-related violence threatens to reduce support for drug cartels in the regions they control. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that organizations operating like 'mediæval kingdoms' are now recurring to such apposite legitimizing symbolism.

There is also something 'mediæval' about the interactions of drug lords with one another. For the historian Phil Williams, they are like the mediæval barons who, in the absence of a strong central

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<sup>17</sup> According to Varese, there is a fundamental governance problem in organized crime due to the lack of transparency and rule-bound procedures. As a result, most criminal organizations are small and localized: '[T]he longer the chain, the harder it is to monitor agents. On the contrary, the shorter the agency chain, the easier to solve the governance problem' (Ibid., p. 11). A degree of devolution in large organizations like drug cartels makes perfect sense, therefore.

<sup>18</sup> 'Parallel to its illicit activities, the Gulf cartel also acts as a charity organization' (Brophy, 'Mexico', p. 255).

<sup>19</sup> Sigrid Arzt and Guillermo Vasquez del Mercado, 'Violencia en México: realidades y perspectivas', *ISTOR*, 42 (2010), 41–59 [p. 51].

<sup>20</sup> Eduardo Castillo and Mark Stevenson, 'Mexico cartel issues booklets for proper conduct', *Associated Press*, 20 July 2011.

power, engaged in perpetual power struggles in which precarious alliances were formed only to be broken at the earliest opportunity.<sup>21</sup> Operating outside the law has many consequences. For one, in the criminal world one's capacity and reputation for violence is the main form of social capital. It is a variant of Max Weber's charismatic authority, the bulwark of so much pre-modern politics, since no form of legalistic authority can exist outside the law.<sup>22</sup> In this light we understand why the King in *Trabajos del reino* maintains *corridistas* and other retainers whose principal function is to spread propaganda. Maintaining one's reputation by these means is the only route to any security of position, as the King states explicitly: 'Para estar donde yo estoy no sólo basta ser un chingón, eh, hay que serlo y hay que parecerlo' (108).<sup>24</sup> As Williams notes, in a situation where charismatic authority predominates, battles over succession are endemic, for there is no clear procedure for the transfer of power. This was so in many parts of Europe in the Middle Ages, and it is precisely the nature of the struggle between el Heredero and la Bruja in *Trabajos del reino*. Indeed, battles over succession are one of the principal reasons for the increased violence in Mexico in recent years, since the more leading *narcos* the police arrest, the greater the number of power struggles that ensue.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, there is a mediæval flavour to the commercial rationale of drug cartels, to the additional functions their organizations fulfil, and to the way drug lords treat one another, manage their holdings and project their authority within their 'kingdoms'. It will not do to simply reject this comparison. One of the important features of this novel is that there is a truth in the way it represents drug trafficking, and not just a vague 'poetic' truth.<sup>26</sup> Some commentators on drug trafficking have stressed its more modern 'capitalistic' features. For Ed Vulliamy, 'Narco-cartels are not pastiches of

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<sup>21</sup> Phil Williams, 'El crimen organizado y la violencia en México: una perspectiva comparativa', *ISTOR*, 42 (2010), 15–40 [p. 20].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> The occasional absurdity of the role of reputation in the criminal world is highlighted in Leónidas Alfaro's *Tierra Blanca*, in which the protagonist Gumersindo gains a clear advantage in matters of trust (e.g. p. 54) from the fact that he is the son of 'el Chacal de Tierra Blanca', a title invented by the press (pp. 35–6) to incriminate his father who, in fact, had nothing to do with the drug trade.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, 'El crimen organizado', p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Since Herrera studied Social Sciences at university, he could well have been aware of how organized crime has been conceptualized by academics, and sought to reflect this in his novel.

global corporations, nor are they errant bastards of the global economy — they are pioneers of it.’<sup>27</sup> *Trabajos del reino* reminds us that drug trafficking is *not* best thought of as simply ‘the inevitable war of capitalism gone mad’, but as something which — in part — has a more traditional pedigree, like the Italian Mafia itself.<sup>28</sup> Thankfully not everything in the novel is so clearly a product of Lobo’s imagination, and hence we need not cast off the metaphor. The power struggle, the hired retainers, the pomp of the court, and the charismatic authority of the King are features of the world Lobo encounters, and not just the whims of his perspective. There is a difference between saying that the drug cartel operates, in some respects, *like* a kingdom, and the false belief that it *is* one. The first involves an analytical analogy, the second an evaluation, a belief in the legitimacy of the organization because of how it is perceived. One might conclude that Lobo was not wrong to perceive these affinities between the drug cartel and a mediæval court, but he was wrong to romanticize it. In this way the protagonist is guilty of a mistake made in many representations of drug trafficking, of glorifying what ought not to be glorified.<sup>29</sup>

## II Lobo’s Artistic Journey

According to the author, the central theme of *Trabajos del reino* is the relationship between art and politics, construed broadly as the exercise of power.<sup>30</sup> Several commentators have called it a ‘fable’ about the topic, owing to the use of archetypal characters and situations.<sup>31</sup> It is an impression

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<sup>27</sup> Ed Vulliamy, ‘Ciudad Juarez is all our futures’, *The Guardian*, 20 June 2011. Vulliamy’s *Amexica* (London: Bodley Head, 2010) takes a similar line.

<sup>28</sup> Vulliamy, ‘Ciudad Juarez’. Nevertheless, many commentators have also stressed the importance of American materialism to organized crime, at least within the USA. See, e.g. Peter Lupsha (‘Individual Choice, Material Culture, and Organized Crime’, *Criminology*, 19.1 (1981), 3–24): ‘They did it because they [...] saw in American values and culture an alternative easy, exciting, and romantic route to wealth. Namely, “something for nothing, there’s a sucker born every minute” lawlessness. [...] [O]rganized crime is rooted in our values and culture, and [...] its development mirrors our economic and political institutions (pp. 13, 22).

<sup>29</sup> No doubt drug cartels encourage this mistake, as the King’s organization does in *Trabajos del reino*.

<sup>30</sup> ‘El narco en sí no es el núcleo de la novela, sino que el núcleo es la relación entre el arte y el poder.’ (spoken in conversation with Patricio Zunini, ‘Escrito en la frontera’, *Blog Eterna Cadencia*, 21 June 2011, <<http://blog.etercadencia.com.ar/archives/2011/14235>>).

<sup>31</sup> ‘[A]lgunas veces adquiere registros de fábula infantil’ (Eduardo Antonio Parra, ‘Trabajos del reino de Yuri Herrera’, *Letras libres*, September 2005, pp. 79–80 [p. 80]); ‘[S]u novela es una fábula sobre las relaciones entre el poder y el arte’ (Rubén Arribas, ‘Yuri Herrera: «Si uno va a intervenir la página en blanco, debe saber para qué»’, *Revista Teína*, 19 [Oct. 2008], <<http://www.revistateina.es/teina/web/teina19/lit5.htm>>); ‘Herrera ha hecho una apuesta narrativa a contracorriente [...] al escoger un género literario clásico como la fábula’ (María José Gil Bonmatí, ‘Canciones que no son de este mundo’, *La Razón*, 13 March 2008, p. 45).

reinforced by the figurative setting and the suppression of all direct references to drug trafficking, Mexico, or the U.S. border, both of which might imply the story has some wider significance. Strictly, a fable cannot feature human characters, so *Trabajos del reino* is at best a ‘parable’. Nor is the novel’s sole purpose to impart a moral lesson, though if we wanted to extract a thesis, it seems to support the quasi-Romantic notion that a ‘true artist’ must be independent of any political authority. What *can* be said is that the novel contains several features that evoke pre-modern folk literature of one sort or another. If one were to describe Lobo’s love affair with la Cualquiera as a ‘pauper’ seducing a ‘princess’, helping her to escape her ‘prison’, while trying to avoid the attention of an ‘evil step-mother’ (although la Bruja is her *real* mother in this case), it would sound very much like (a pastiche of) a fairy tale. Consider Chapter 8, indeed, in which Lobo acts quickly to save the King’s reputation when he realizes he is losing a shooting contest. The situation itself recalls the archery tournaments from various versions of the Robin Hood story, and Lobo plays a stock character, the mischievous or crafty lackey. For some readers these qualities may increase the impression that Lobo is living in a fantasy world, but again, they are characteristics of the plot and not of Lobo’s point of view. If anything, they simply increase the novel’s ‘mediæval’ impression.

The plot structure of *Trabajos del reino* has much more in common with a coming-of-age novel, or *Bildungsroman*. Since his parents abandon him to cross the border, Lobo is effectively an orphan at the novel’s outset, like the protagonists of many other *Bildungsromane* (e.g. *David Copperfield*). For this reason he places such store by the sense of community he feels at Court: his *corrido* in Chapter 19, for example, contains the line ‘pues como somos familia’ (98). At the beginning he is forced to survive in the world on his own, and he predictably makes mistakes. The biggest is to be seduced by the power of the King and the glamour of his organization. Lobo’s time at Court amounts thus to an extended trial of his maturity, from which he slowly emerges as a better man. I emphasize the world ‘slowly’ because a key feature of any ‘coming-of-age’ novel is the difficult *process* of growing up. There is no single moment at which the scales fall from Lobo’s eyes. The apex of his commitment to the Court occurs almost exactly half-way through the novel. He writes a *corrido* in Chapter 12, and it expresses what many would consider the worst features of narco-culture: arrogance, acquisitiveness,

and a callous attitude towards women.<sup>32</sup> La Niña promptly disowns him, and in the very next chapter the beginning of his *desengaño* is signalled (too obviously, perhaps) by his acquiring a new pair of spectacles from the Doctor. But there are several incidents that adjust his attitude towards the court, and they have a cumulative effect. He begins to read more books; he falls in love with la Cualquiera and aligns himself progressively with her discontentment; he revisits the city where he grew up and sees it differently for having been away; finally, he is sent to spy on another drug lord and notices how little difference there is between one Court and the other. In light of all this, the perceptual naivety I referred to in the previous section reinforces the general scheme of the novel. The reader has to be aware of Lobo's mistakes, of his conceptual limitations and immaturity, in order to effectively assess his development. Furthermore, the fact that several of his mistakes are child-like rather than malicious maintains our sympathy despite the invitation to resist his point of view.

But how does this bear on the subject of art and politics? Since Lobo regards himself as 'el Artista', to reflect upon the nature of art seems fundamental to his growth as a human being. It is a matter of self-realization. In *Trabajos del reino*, the main theme is primarily elaborated by the development of Lobo's own thoughts about art, expressed in four critical chapters placed at roughly even intervals throughout the novel (Chs. 6, 11, 16, and 24). Although they are not written in the first person, they undoubtedly articulate Lobo's thoughts, albeit in a heavily stylized fashion. For convenience, I shall call them monologues. As they depend on his circumstances at Court at each moment in time, and involve more extensive expositions of the protagonist's mental state than the other chapters, these sections help the reader to plot more precisely his trajectory towards maturity. Therefore, the category of the novel and its principal subject reinforce one another. In effect, we have a *künstlerroman*, that precise breed of coming-of-age novel that tracks the development of an artist and his ideas about art. The monologues are written in a far more metaphorical — even cryptic — style than the rest of the novel. I shall attempt to elucidate the more important phrases in order to give a general impression of their sense and to demonstrate how these chapters cohere with the rest of the

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<sup>32</sup> '[P]odría llamarse *Sabrosas y enamoradas*, o *Por amor no quedó*, pensaba, y los gallitos empezaban a sacar provecho de las lanudas y conquistadas como mulas de aquí pallá' (65).

novel:

Son. Tantas letras juntas. Suyas. Puestas ahí sin otra cosa que hacer más que fecundar la testa. Son. Muelen la hoja entre rodillos de insomnio, avisan, hurgan la blancura baldía en el papel y en el mirar. ¿Y qué había sido la hoja sino un trasto del jale, como el serrucho si armara mesas, como la fusca si arreglara vidas? Qué, pero nunca este despeñadero de arena con brío y propósitos a saber. Tantas letras ahí. Son. Son un destello. Cómo se empujan y abrevan una de otra y envuelven al ojo en un borlote de razones. Y qué si perfectas, igual rejegas, ya se incriminan con el miedo al desarreglo: palabras. Tantas palabras. Suyas. Bronca de signos que se atan. Son una luz constante. Son. (Él ya sabía de los libros, pero lo repelían, como una patria que no invitaba. Y ahora se ha dejado llevar de la mano hasta el acopio de secretos. Una luz constante.) Un resplandor diverso cada una, cada una diciendo el nombre verdadero a su modo. Hasta las más mentirosas, hasta las más veleidosas. Ajá. No. No están ahí nomás para fecundar la testa. Son una luz constante. El rumbo a otros cartones, lejos de ahí. El descenso a oídos ocultos, ahí. (Como los bichos que lo pueblan.) No. No están para nomás entretener la vista ni alimentar la oreja. Son una luz constante. Son un faro que se derrama sobre las piedras a su merced, son una linterna que se pasea, se detiene, acaricia la tierra y le descubre cómo acabar el servicio que le ha tocado (39–40).

The passage begins in a disjointed style, in the opening three sentences, implying that the words in Lobo's head are overwhelming him. It is as if he is struggling to get them all out, at least in any coherent fashion: hence the fragments and the lack of paragraphing (unlike in the subsequent monologues). Indeed, throughout this extract there are suggestions that Lobo is not in full control of his artistic talents. The multiple repetitions of the word 'son' imply that the Artist thinks his words just exist — they just *are* — prior to his using them and in spite of any designs he might have for them. In no sense does he believe that he *creates* them. Ordinarily, words or language are the instruments of a human subject, by which he acts on the world in speaking or writing. The grammar of this passage indicates otherwise. It is the words which are the subject of numerous action predicates e.g. 'muelen', 'hurgan', 'se empujan', 'repelían'. The cumulative effect is one of personification: the words seem to have a life of their own. Accordingly, Lobo is merely the instrument — the figurative roller ('rodillo') — by which the words inscribe themselves on the page ('muelen la hoja'). The words dictate, and Lobo is powerless to resist or control them, an impression strengthened by the connotations of violence in several of the word choices (e.g. 'borlote', 'bronca', 'rejegas'). He defers to their capricious authority — 'se ha dejado llevar' — just as he defers to the charisma of the King.

Lobo initially entertains the idea that words — language in general — exist only to ‘fecundar la testa’. At first the precise implications of this phrase are unclear. However, it is repeated in the final lines of the chapter, where whatever sentiment it holds is rejected by Lobo in a phrase paralleled only a few lines later by another, more comprehensible sentence: ‘no están para nomás entretener la vista ni alimentar la oreja’. This recalls a statement by el Periodista in the previous chapter, in which he compared listening to *corridos* to the enjoyment one gets from drinking alcohol (‘pistear’, 36). Lobo seems to be rejecting a purely aestheticist conception of art: it is not just entertainment or hedonistic stimulation. The alternative is a vision of art that regards it as a source of ‘light’, whether we interpret this as inspiration or insight, or both. Lobo’s words are described several times in these terms (‘destello’, ‘resplandor’, ‘luz constante’, ‘faro’, ‘linterna’). Furthermore, the final metaphor suggests that words are a beam of light that shines on all things in order to reveal their purpose in the world (‘el servicio que le ha tocado’). The connection between the two is not immediately obvious, but can be explained by an earlier metaphor in the passage, in which Lobo considers the role of paper. What was its point, he asks, before the writing of words gave it a *raison d’être*? It was just a crude tool, fit for cutting or consuming drugs (‘jale’), purely functional, like a saw for building tables (‘serrucho’) or a gun for killing people (‘fusca’).<sup>33</sup> Now it has a more transcendent purpose. Clearly we are meant to equate the protagonist with this rhetorical piece of paper, since inanimate objects do not actually possess mental states like ‘brío’ and ‘propósitos’, but they are eminently applicable to Lobo. Indeed, one of Lobo’s capacities is placed in a position of pseudo-metrical equivalence to the piece of paper in the line before: ‘en el papel y en el mirar’. Like this piece of paper, Lobo is given meaning by his instrumental role in the transmission of truth, the ‘luz constante’ that his words provide. He is a relatively passive but important conduit for something greater than him.

None of these thoughts are independent of Lobo’s circumstances at this stage in the novel. In this way the monologues are both an elaboration of the theme and a measure of Lobo’s character

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<sup>33</sup> The comparisons are telling. Lobo treats weapons like any other tool that facilitates the completion of a task, even when the task is killing, which he describes euphemistically as ‘arreglar vidas’ (‘sorting out people’s lives’). It is another example of Lobo’s misplaced values at this point in the narrative, since he treats building tables no differently to drug taking or murder. Indeed, the euphemism lends a positive valence to the latter.

development. For instance, much of the same imagery has already described the King and his Court. He is ‘glowing’ in the light of the sunset when Lobo first meets him: ‘Lo admiró a la luz del límite del día [...] la mirada alta, el brillo’ (9). Like the *letras* in this chapter, the Court is a ‘faro’, a ‘beacon’ of prosperity amid the squalor of the border region (20). There are references to its ‘lustre’, in both senses of the word (20, 36). When Lobo arrives at Court for the first time, he is ‘blinded’ by the promise and prestige of the place: the phrase used is ‘ciego de luces y de futuro’ (25). Indeed, Herrera employs the verb *deslumbrar*, with similar connotations, to convey how the *narcos*’ flashy attire makes an impression on the protagonist (23). For Lobo, the Court is clearly also a ‘light’: a source of inspiration, illumination, or even enlightenment. It is no coincidence that he also sees the lyrics of his songs in such terms. They are something he does not originate, but by transmitting them he justifies his own existence. By analogy, spreading cheap propaganda in the form of a *corrido* is a question of sharing the inspiration — the ‘light’ — of his leader’s deeds. The words and the King have a similar effect on Lobo, and he treats — and assists — them similarly. For this reason he acts at their ‘mercy’ and fulfils his necessary service (‘merced’, ‘servicio’). Both terms are applicable to his position at court under the King.

Evidently, just as Lobo feels controlled by his words, a passive instrument of their awesome agency, he has a similar relationship with his leader. The passage above gives us a good indication of Lobo’s current position in the story of his coming of age. Before he comes to Court, Lobo is powerless and without purpose in the world. The King solves both those problems, but in return for a relation of dependence. In fact, in the chapter before the first monologue, Lobo seems perfectly aware of how reliant everyone else is upon the King:

El Artista contaba la hazaña de cada cual sin olvidarse de quién la hacía posible. Sí, eres chilo, porque te lo permite el Rey. Sí, qué valiente eres, porque te inspira el Rey (34).

What is evident from the monologue is that Lobo does not think it is a problem for himself. To reiterate: being a conduit of important truths makes one an important person. Similarly, although his status at Court derives from the King, and not from any individual virtue, he revels in it: ‘Y sabía darse su lugar: si decía Orita no, estoy haciendo un corrido, el cortesano respetaba’ (35). Therefore,

one of the important threads in Lobo's story is the steady achievement of his *independence*. The themes of independence and agency are closely related. Naturally, being independent involves exercising one's own agency more fully and towards one's own ends, rather than those of a master. As he sees it, in the first monologue, Lobo is unable to do this in the early stages of the novel even with regard to the one thing he knows best: how to write *corridos*. The ultimate expression of his mature agency is therefore the *corrido* in Chapter 19, which fatally diminishes the King's prestige. It represents the height of his poetic powers, and he employs them to express his own sentiments, not those of the Rey. From here we can identify the function of Chapter 17 too, in which Lobo describes how to write a *corrido* in conversation with el Periodista: by that stage, Lobo is the one controlling his words, and not the other way round. One of Lobo's final actions at Court is also a matter of agency: he decides that he cannot remain a passive observer of the intrigues that have culminated in two deaths, but must intervene in order to save his own and his loved one's life (103). It is at this point, significantly, that he abandons the court. He does so by breaking the King's prohibition on using a secret door in the palace (112), which turns out to lead to la Bruja's lair. In this, his recovery of agency (or 'self-direction') is connected to his loss of ignorance about the true nature of the King and his organization.

Están muertos. Todos ellos están muertos. Los otros. Tosen y escupen y sudan su muerte podrida con engaño pagado de sí mismo, como si cagaran diamantes. Sonríen los dientes pelados cual cadáveres; cual cadáveres, calculan que nada malo les puede pasar.

Simón.

Tienen una pesadilla los otros: los de acá, los buenos, son la pesadilla; la peste de acá, el ruido de acá, la figura de acá. Pero acá es más de veras, acá está la carne viva, el grito recio, y aquellos son apenas un pellejo chiple y maleado que no atina color. Un reflejo hecho materia blanda y prendido de alfileres.

A los muertos no se les pide permiso. Se hace lo que se hace. Se agarra el modo y se presume, como quien pronuncia el nombre, y no se fija en lo que les buiga a los demás. O sí: para sentir su espanto, pues, porque el susto de los otros alimenta bien, remacha que la carne de los buenos es brava y necesaria, que hace bulto y zarandea las cosas.

Habría que tomarlos de la crin y restregarles la cara contra esta verdad puerca y áspera y maloliente y verdadera, que les dé tentación. Hay que sentarlos en las púas de este sol, hay que ahogarlos en el escándalo de estas noches, hay que meterles nuestro cantadito bajo las uñas, hay que desnudarlos con estas pieles. Hay que curtirlos, hay que apalearlos.

Machín les escama oír mentar de este mal sueño que cobra vidas y palabras. Les escama que Uno sume la carne de todos, que Aquel guarde la fuerza de todos. Les escama quién es y cómo es y cómo se lo dice. Sólo se atreven a saberlo cuando se

abandonan a la verdad de sí mismos, en el pisto, en el baile, en el ardor, jodidos, para eso estaban buenos. Mejor quisieran oír nomás la parte bonita, verdá, pero las de acá no son canciones para después del permiso, el corrido no es un cuadro adornando la pared. Es un nombre y es un arma.

Cura que les escame.

Quién quita y al final averiguan que ya son carne agusanada (63–64).

The second monologue follows the scene in which Lobo learns that his *corridos* have been rejected by various radio stations. He reacts with defiant indignation, as the final lines of Ch. 10 demonstrate:

Basta con que a nosotros nos cuadre lo que somos. Que se asusten, que se asombren los decentes, sobájelos. Si no, ¿pa qué es artista? (62).

It is a tone that continues into Chapter 11. Here Lobo expresses a black-and-white view of the world, a conflict between ‘los otros’ and ‘los de acá, los buenos’.<sup>34</sup> In part, ‘the others’ are the Americans. *Trabajos del reino* never talks explicitly about the Mexican-American border, but among the euphemisms that it uses ‘allá’ or ‘el otro lado’ refer to the United States, while ‘acá’ or ‘este lado’ refer to Mexico.<sup>35</sup> In the first few lines, with their suggestions of impending death, the physical symptoms of an illness (‘tosen y escupen y sudan’), and especially the ‘dientes pelados’, ‘los otros’ must be a reference to drug addicts.<sup>36</sup> They represent the United States in general, a society which consumes huge quantities of illegal narcotics while simultaneously attempting to destroy the drug trade and the foreigners who operate it. In this light, American society is hypocritical or inauthentic, in stark contrast to the Mexicans, who exemplify authenticity: ‘acá es más de veras’. But the Artist is subsuming all opponents of drug trafficking under one banner: ‘the others’ includes ‘los decentes’ whom he criticizes at the end of Chapter 10. The point of focusing on the infirmities of a particular group is to cast all of them as ‘the living dead’. By comparison, the traffickers exude strength and vitality. They are the ‘carne viva’ and ‘el grito recio’.

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<sup>34</sup> Lobo’s thoughts in this passage explain why his visit to another *capo*’s party in Chapter 18 is particularly important. He cannot maintain a black-and-white view of the world when he sees that one of the enemies is operating in an identical fashion. Indeed, the glamour of the Court cannot be ‘authentic’, a quality Lobo praises in this ‘monologue’, if it is no different to anywhere else.

<sup>35</sup> ‘El Pocho había sido agente de allá’ (34); ‘El Pocho ya ni se paraba por allá, después de que les dio la espalda a aquellos ya nomás hacía negocios de este lado’ (84); ‘Al día siguiente [su padre] se fue al otro lado. [...] Después, su madre cruzó y ni promesas de vuelta le hizo’ (16).

<sup>36</sup> Also, the adjective ‘maleado’ is often used to refer to a person who has declined in health due to excessive use of drugs or alcohol.

This question of vigour or vitality is, in fact, a major part of the King's initial appeal to Lobo. Naturally, as Lobo slowly loses his admiration for the Court, that quality will be thrown into question. The illusion is fundamentally shattered when we confirm that the King is impotent (113), which the Artist has unintentionally revealed to everyone in his *corrido* of Chapter 19, although the King's impotence is alluded to in the very first chapter (10), as the 'secret' which Lobo's client says he knows about the drug lord. Two features help to develop this theme throughout the novel: Lobo's use of the word 'sangre' to describe other characters' personalities, and his changing relationship with the geographical setting. The latter provides one reason for Lobo's enthusiasm for the Court. Prior to meeting the King, Lobo twice describes his existence as one of 'dust and sunlight': 'polvo y sol' (10, 15). The phrase evokes the barren sun-baked landscape of the northern Mexican deserts as a reminder of how inhospitable the region is. As such, life on the border is a dreary struggle, full of 'desgracias' (16), where the only thing one can look forward to is death. Indeed, on his return to the city in Chapter 15, Lobo imagines burning the place down: 'porque por donde quiera que la vida se abría paso era ultrajada de inmediato' (81). By contrast, the King and his Court are fully 'alive': they stand for wealth, power, and excitement, which is undoubtedly part of the appeal of drug trafficking to any poor young inhabitant of northern Mexico.<sup>37</sup> All this changes in the course of the novel. The character that plays the largest part in leading Lobo to reassess his attachments is la Cualquiera.<sup>38</sup> The desert, for her, is not a wasteland but an escape from the stifling prison of the Court.<sup>39</sup> The city, which they visit together in Chapter 15, is a source of 'fascinación' (80). It is no coincidence that Lobo describes her face as 'arena caliente' in the same scene, a phrase one cannot imagine him using with such positive connotations earlier in the novel (83). By Chapter 23, when Lobo goes out into the

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<sup>37</sup> See Mark Cameron Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*, pp. 108–9, and Alan Knight, 'Narco-Violence and the State in Modern Mexico', pp. 132–4.

<sup>38</sup> One piece of evidence for this is the transferal of imagery originally associated with the King to la Cualquiera. Accordingly, la Cualquiera is also associated with light: 'La manera en que a ella *se le iluminaron* los ojos le dio seguridad para continuar' (79); 'Miró a la Cualquiera, que sobre la acera observaba a una clandestina sin que esta se diera cuenta, que la veía como si le hiciera una caricia, como si la consolara, y al Artista le pareció que por un momento *caía una luz más limpia*' (81); 'Qué cosa, las mujeres, pensó, si nomás hay que curarse para ver *cómo brillan*' (115). The King's arrival is pitched as a 'miracle' for Lobo early in the novel: 'Apenas quedaba esperar, continuar, esperar. ¿A qué? Un milagro' (18). At the end of the novel, Lobo sees la Cualquiera thus: 'Un milagro, sintió, que una mujer como esa pudiera ser contemplada por horas y horas por alguien como él' (115).

<sup>39</sup> Arguably the following phrase implies the descriptor 'longingly': 'Luego miró más allá, hacia el fin del jardín, la reja electrificada, el desierto' (52).

streets to collect stories for his *corridos*, the city is clearly his new source of inspiration. Figuratively, the palace is now the ‘desert’, since it is abandoned by everyone when the King dies, and is described as such in the previous chapter (‘el Palacio estaba desierto’, 114).

Lobo labels many characters in terms of what their blood is like, and prides himself in his capacity to ‘saber de sangres’ (17). Most of these descriptions suggest that the blood of the characters in question does not *flow* properly, with the implication that they lack power or even strength of character.<sup>40</sup> It is an oddly ‘mediæval’ metaphor.<sup>41</sup> After all, one’s ‘blood’ was once a sign of nobility, in both sense of the word. It is congruent, at least, with a mentality that equates drug lords with mediæval monarchs. Here is another reason why the reader might be inclined to question Lobo’s point of view early in the novel. The King’s strength, his ‘life force’ if you will, is evident in the first line: ‘Él sabía de sangre, y vio que la suya era distinta’ (9). Lobo then goes on to describe the King’s distinctive air of authority, which is the evidence for his ‘otra sangre’. La Cualquiera, in keeping with her role as the second object of Lobo’s wonder and loyalty at least has the *potential* to be strong too. Whereas la Niña’s blood is ‘un filito entre guijarros’ (28), hers is a ‘flujo’, albeit ‘titubeante’ (82) at this stage. Ultimately, however strong the King’s ‘blood’ might be, he is powerless to prevent real blood from being spilt in the heart of his kingdom, when el Pocho and el Periodista are murdered at the palace. Moreover, there is considerable irony in the fact that la Bruja’s scheme to cure the King’s impotence involves administering a mysterious concoction containing the blood of a peacock.<sup>42</sup> His strength evidently needed some ‘topping up’. At the time of the second monologue, however, the King still appears to be powerful. Perhaps this is the reason his enemies are described as ‘cadáveres’,

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Podía descifrar cómo se cuajaba en las sabandijas que le decían Ven, chiquito, ven, y lo invitaban a los rincones; cómo trababa las venas de los miedosos que sonreían sin tener por qué; cómo se hacía agua en el cuerpo de los que ponían de nuevo y de nuevo la misma herida en la rocola; cómo era piedra seca en ceñudos con ganas de torcer’ (17); ‘La sangre de la Niña era un filito entre guijarros’ (28).

<sup>41</sup> This is not the only evidence of a ‘mediæval’ mindset. Lobo is superstitious, appearing to believe in omens, premonition, and magic. The verbs ‘presentir’ (24, 104, 107, 114, 116) and ‘presagiar’ (35, 41) are used on several occasions. A false passport is described as a ‘pasaporte hechizo’ (34). And this is not to mention La Bruja, of course. Some of the bizarre cultism associated with drug traffickers is chronicled — badly — in Homero Aridjis’s *La Santa Muerte* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 2003). On the superstitions surrounding the ‘narco-saint’ Jesús Malverde, see Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido*, pp. 60–68. The concern about ‘naguales’ in *Los minutos negros* seems to confirm that folk superstitions are alive and well in northern Mexico.

<sup>42</sup> At least, that is what we infer: ‘Cuando la sangre rica que le doy arregle su semilla, tú [la Cualquiera] también tienes que estar lista. Aun si el maldito pájaro no sirve voy a encontrar la manera de regalarte todo esto’ (76–7). This is the first real indication that la Bruja deserves her epithet.

whose skin lacks colour ('pellejo [...] que no atina color'): in effect, they are bloodless and lifeless, so they cannot be difficult to overcome.

To an even greater extent than in the previous monologue, the imagery in this extract is violent. The reason, as the quotation above from the previous chapter suggests, is that Lobo is angry at the lack of *recognition* he receives from the outside world, and by extension the lack of respect the King and his Court receive. Drug trafficking is a 'bad dream' ('este mal sueño') that many would prefer to ignore. *His* role is to assert its existence — its *right* to exist — in no uncertain terms: to 'restregarles la cara contra esta verdad puerca'. There is a note of triumphalism in this, typical of someone who has gone up in the world very quickly, but is resentful that others do not yet appreciate his new-found power and position. To solve the problem, Lobo advances a very political function for art. The *corrido* is not just a pretty picture to put up on one's wall ('un cuadro adornando la pared'). It is not 'decente'. Rather, it is a means to upset the balance of power in the world, to assert the identity of a newly powerful group, and in turn legitimize that group. Of course, Lobo seems to have forgotten that he was once poor and powerless. Now he justifies the right of the powerful to dominate the weak: 'a los muertos no se les pide permiso [...] se hace lo que se hace'. Naturally he is somewhat deluded, because the enemy is more powerful than Lobo thinks. In fact, he emulates an attitude that has been common in the *corrido* throughout its long history. One of the principal themes of early *corridos* was the cultural conflict in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans in the border regions. The folk ballads often focused on the heroic exploits of men who were outlaws according to the authorities but — for poor Mexican and Mexican-American listeners — embodied a feeling of just resistance to U.S. power.<sup>43</sup> Positive values like bravery and eloquence were attributed to the hero while the Americans were incompetent cowards who prevailed by force of numbers alone.<sup>44</sup> *Corrido* heroes are powerful men, and some folklorists see this characterization as a type of poetic or symbolic compensation for the sense of weakness felt by the Mexican-American community in real

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<sup>43</sup> Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*, pp. 21–23.

<sup>44</sup> The best early example is the *Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*, in Américo Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero* (Urbana: University of Texas Press, 1973), p. 65.

life.<sup>45</sup> Evidently, one of the reasons the *corrido* has been so easily adaptable to drug trafficking is that, whatever the precise nature of their profession, Mexican drug smugglers can be considered praiseworthy solely by virtue of their struggle with the age-old antagonist, the powerful American authorities. Lobo continues this tradition of compensatory role-reversal by depicting the Americans as weak, where the traffickers themselves are strong. He can believe it because he feels strong himself, in comparison with his previous poverty and aimlessness. And just as the *corrido* hero would symbolically defend the whole Spanish-speaking community, here the King also articulates a more general interest, and derives symbolic strength from that fact: ‘Les escama que Uno sume la carne de todos, que Aquel guarde la fuerza de todos’.<sup>46</sup>

¿Qué hay ahí? ¿Qué hay ahí detrás? ¿Otro mundo que se pone de frente al sol? ¿Un alud de linderos que se repiten tras una piedra en el agua? (¿Será la vida una piedra en el agua?)

Mirar y mirar y mirar y no mirar: no hay forma, sólo un amasijo hastío de sí. Una mueca soberbia, un mundo zángano.

¿Qué hay ahí? ¿Qué hay ahí, detrás de los muros de las cosas?

Así, así, no hay nada.

Dar la espalda a esa yerba satisfecha y elegir un espejo propio: alzarlo a la altura de los ojos

y mirar:

un resquicio álgido que se perdía, una espiral breve que pide la procure, un secreto doblado en sus luces ocultas. Todo el mundo cabe en este espejo, cada pormenor como una cifra reversible. Cachos y cachos que se atropellan a pedirle que los acaricie, piel siempre distinta (85–6).

The third monologue begins on a note of doubt indicative of the disillusionment that Lobo is experiencing at this point in the novel, coming as it does during the steady shift in his attitude towards the Court. The initial questions are ones the reader will have been considering throughout the novel, with reference to the intrigues at the palace. But Lobo is asking a wider existential question. The Court has been the only meaningful thing in Lobo’s life, so if it is all pretence, is there

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<sup>45</sup> José Limón, ‘Folklore, Social Conflict, and the United States-Mexico Border’, in *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. by R.M. Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 216–226 (p. 221).

<sup>46</sup> This is not an untypical rationalization among organized criminals: ‘Nearly all gangs believe that their ethnic group has been denied access to conventional opportunities that would allow them to live better lives. Their members subscribe to a social Darwinist perspective according to which predatory behavior is how one gets ahead everywhere in society. The gang, then, contributes to the advancement of its members and their ethnic group, just as the more powerful networks contribute to the welfare of their own members in the larger society’ (Skaperdas, ‘The political economy of organized crime’, p. 185). Hence Lobo’s comment ‘se hace lo que se hace’.

anything worth living for? Behind the surface appearances of reality, Lobo finds nothing that matters. Reality is shapeless ('no hay forma'), so it must lack design, and if it wants for design, it cannot have any transcendent 'meaning'. Figuratively, it is lazy ('zángano') and weary ('hastío') for it is devoid of *purpose*. These are not the only metaphors in the novel that equate some form of 'structure' with 'significance'. The King is described at the very beginning as 'uno de los que hacían *cuadrar* la vida' (10). When Lobo describes his early childhood in chapter two, he notes that he had never paid attention to a calendar, because every day was the same as the next (16). Clearly, his life had no significant shape. With the arrival of the King, he remembers what day it is, because that day now matters: 'ninguna otra fecha significaba nada, sólo esta' (13). With implicitly the same analogy, at the end of the novel Lobo rejects the possibility that another powerful person could make his life meaningful: 'A partir de ahora ningún rey le daba nombres a sus meses' (124). By then he has recovered some of his confidence. In the meantime, he seems content to turn his back on the world. The outside world is a drug ('esa yerba') to be rejected in favour of introspection. Of course, the metaphor here cannot fail to indicate that Lobo is reconsidering his attachment to the King's drug cartel. An important theme of any *bildungsroman* is the character's development of a sense of purpose in life. But there also seems to be an artistic comment here. The previous monologue espouses a very political view of art, in which it can act significantly on the world. Here, Lobo seems to wonder whether there is anything at all worth writing about. Perhaps one can write about oneself ('un espejo propio'), but it is not clear the result will be anything revealing or coherent, and the metaphors of the final lines suggest that any sense of coherence will permanently escape us.

The brief final monologue tries to resolve the difficulty:

Decir cuate, sueño, cántaro, tierra, percusión. Decir cualquier cosa.  
Escuchar la suma de todos los silencios.  
Nombrar la holgura que promete.  
Y luego callar (119).

Lobo suggests that it does not matter what one writes, a point reinforced by the lack of connection between the words he proffers ('cuate' etc.), other than a loose association with the north of Mexico.

It is difficult to understand without the final words of the previous chapter:

El Artista se permitió sentir esa potencia de un orden distinto al de la Corte, la maña con la que desprendía las palabras de las cosas y creaba una textura y un volumen soberanos. Una realidad aparte (118).

For the Artist, fiction can provide the coherence and significance that the world by itself is missing, because fiction can create in our imagination a world different to the one we live in. While he was attracted to the Court because it gave him a sense of purpose, he now realizes that he can find the same thing in his art alone, whatever he happens to write about. The subtext is that we make our own ‘meaning’, through art or otherwise, and should not depend on others for it. Nevertheless, Herrera seems to allude to his own style in this passage. As I discuss in the following section, *Trabajos del reino* is replete with ‘silencios’, or deliberate omissions of relevant information. It is full of suggestive phrasing, the sort that promises (‘promete’) or alludes to a full explanation, but never actually provides it for the reader, leaving only a pregnant ‘holgura’. His talk of a ‘realidad aparte’ where words are ‘desprendidas’ from their ordinary referents is consonant with the extremely figurative approach Herrera takes in this novel, especially his use of unconventional descriptive nominalization such as ‘una clandestina’ (a prostitute) and the other aforementioned euphemisms. While this might be appropriate for Herrera as an author of literary fiction, is it really appropriate for Lobo, who writes *corridos*, popular ballads which are narrative-heavy and often specifically located in time and in space? *Corridos* are not devoid of metaphor, but they hardly go to the inventive extremes that Herrera prefers. Furthermore, it is not clear how the conclusions implied by this monologue are motivated by the events Lobo has experienced. Certainly Lobo refuses to sing about the King’s defeat, but his alternative is to choose entirely different material to employ, the everyday ‘tragedias veraces’ which I discuss in the next section. Herrera, if he were a *corridista*, might allude obliquely to the King’s story, but it is unlikely to be Lobo’s approach. He abandons the topic entirely. The *corrido* he writes in Chapter 19 is without doubt full of word play. For example, the phrase ‘Ni que fueras de vil palo / Somos tus únicos hijos’ is a thinly-veiled reference to the King’s impotence: he has no biological children, so his ‘palo’ must be defective. But it is not totally clear that Lobo knows about the King’s impotence at this point, even though his ballad can be taken to suggest it. Although the ‘briago’ in Chapter 1 appears to know the King’s secret (‘lo otro’, 12), we are not told

whether Lobo actually hears it. The author's own allusiveness may be at work here. At any rate, where and why would Lobo have learnt to write allusively? In sum, Lobo comes to very *literary* conclusions which are not well accounted for.

### III Tragedy and the Focus of the Narrative

In the previous section I argued that *Trabajos del reino* is a *bildungsroman*, and coheres as such. Nonetheless, there is clearly more happening at Court than Lobo's own personal development as an artist and a man. Several pieces of information, and an even greater quantity of allusions, point to clandestine intrigues at the Court, and in particular to a power struggle between the Heir and the Witch. In addition, of course, there is the mystery surrounding el Pocho's murder, and later the Journalist's. I do not intend to commit the so-called 'documentary fallacy' here, and spend too long supposing potential facts about a fictional world which have little bearing on the plot or themes of the novel.<sup>47</sup> But it would be perverse to argue that we are invited to 'see through' Lobo's point of view only to conclude that the 'story behind the story' is in fact irrelevant. Quite the reverse: it may well be the major point of interest for the reader. In this section I show how this does not detract from the novel's principal design, but actually reinforces it. Several commentators on *Trabajos del reino* have mentioned its atmosphere of 'Shakespearean Tragedy'.<sup>48</sup> There is no doubt something Shakespearean about a story set in a 'mediæval palace' where the courtiers plot on balconies and in gardens out of earshot from a monarch whom they finally succeed in removing.<sup>49</sup> In fact, there is good evidence to suggest Herrera did not intend this sub-plot to be perceived, categorically, as a Tragedy.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, it seems appropriate for a 'mediaeval court' that a Tragedy should occur

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<sup>47</sup> See A.J.A. Waldock, *Hamlet: A Study in Critical Method* (Cambridge: CUP, 1931), p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> '[A]dquiere registros [...] de tragedia del Renacimiento' (Parra, 'Trabajos del reino de Yuri Herrera', *Letras Libres*, p. 80); 'Volvamos a la crítica; ésta también ha querido ver una reescritura de Shakespeare en la trama, por aquello de las intrigas palaciegas' (Arribas, 'Yuri Herrera', *Revista Teína*) 'Y esto es México, donde un personaje que procede del mundo popular se ve inmerso en el lujo hortera y colosal del cártel. Crónicas que van desde la fábula infantil a la tragedia renacentista' (Juan Luis Tapia, 'Narco palaciego', *Ideal* (Granada), 21 February 2008, p. 6).

<sup>49</sup> For example: 'Los vio juntos [al Heredero y al Periodista] en un balcón de Palacio liquidando un par de güisquis' (35).

<sup>50</sup> 'Esto no fue intencional. Sí he leído a Shakespeare y he visto muchas representaciones de sus obras, pero no lo tenía en mente cuando escribía la novela. Sin embargo, visto en retrospectiva, es indudable que tenía presentes ciertos arquetipos desarrollados en su obra' (in Arribas, 'Yuri Herrera')

there. And perhaps Tragedy is a good way of approaching drug trafficking. Philip Sidney famously wrote that it ‘teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilded roofs are builded’.<sup>51</sup> Scarcely can there be a more appropriate sentiment for the volatile world of drug trafficking, in which great fortunes are built quickly, but an early death is almost inevitable. The King is clearly of an appropriate social status to be a classical tragic hero. Moreover, the King’s peacock, found dead in the closing stages of the novel, could easily be seen as a ‘tragic symbol’, given the long-standing associations between that animal and the sin of pride, which is so often a characteristic of tragic heroes in their period of *hubris*.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the King’s story remains too obscure to the reader for us to identify a clear moment of *peripeteia*. Although the Artist’s *corrido* of Chapter 19 has a devastating effect, it is more of a ‘final nail in the coffin’ than a clear reversal of fortune. La Bruja agrees: ‘Nomás esto faltaba para que terminaran de comérselo’ (113). Since Lobo never gets the chance to tell the King whom he saw at the other drug lord’s party, there is no *anagnorisis* either. The King falls without ever knowing for sure who has been plotting to unseat him. In truth, the King’s downfall is designed to bear more importantly on Lobo’s development, for that is the focus of the novel.

But there is one feature that is *plausibly* ‘tragic’. According to Aristotle, an error of judgment, or *hamartia*, should be the cause of the hero’s demise, rather than his vice or depravity, and there is precisely such an event in *Trabajos del reino*.<sup>53</sup> In Chapter 18 the King approaches Lobo to cajole him into spying at a rival drug-lord’s party. There is good reason to believe Lobo is sceptical of the King’s blandishments, because his means of manipulation are foregrounded:

Esa manera de mirar, esa ternura paterna, esa inocencia [...] esa mirada cómplice. El modo en que le palmeaba un hombro y conducía al Artista por el parque [...] ojos francos que insistían (91–2).

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<sup>51</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. by Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: MUP, 1964), p. 118.

<sup>52</sup> It is unclear who kills the peacock. Its body is found just after Lobo encounters el Joyero with a blood-stained knife in Chapter 22 (114), which might suggest he was responsible. I cannot imagine what motive the Jeweller would have for this killing, however, since he is fanatically supportive of the King. At a stretch, if the Jeweller killed the bird it might symbolize the counterproductive effects of his other killings, which far from assisting the King have increased the instability at Court which has culminated in the King’s downfall. The Witch could also be responsible, since earlier in the novel she used the peacock’s blood for her concoction (see p.151, n. 42), although she had no need to kill it to do so.

<sup>53</sup> See Chapter XIII of the *Poetics*.

At any rate, by this time Lobo has lost much of his enthusiasm for the Court. Nevertheless, the King makes a clear mistake with the comment ‘llegó la hora de hacerse útil, Artista’ (92). This belittles Lobo’s previous achievements at the palace, which surely informs his decision to prove his artistic worth in Chapter 19 by writing his best *corrido* yet. Of course, it is the trip to the party itself which finally dispels any illusions Lobo had about the brilliance of the Court. Howsoever the King managed to persuade Lobo to go, the mission itself, and hence the King’s ill-advised decision to choose Lobo to fulfil it, were directly responsible for the *corrido* that destroys the King’s public image. One can imagine sympathizing with someone who made only this unwitting mistake. Therefore, the emphasis on the King’s manipulation of Lobo in Chapter 18, and his inability to conceal it, underscores the extent of his actual accountability for Lobo’s subsequent behaviour. We do not so readily sympathize now. In sum, there is an error of judgement, but not one that invites our commiseration.

In retrospect, the significance of the shooting contest in Chapter 8 also becomes clear. It was there that Lobo demonstrated both his loyalty to the King and his ability to do more than just compose and perform *corridos*. It was also there that the King congratulated his own sense of judgement about Lobo with the phrase ‘me había salido cabroncito’ (50). We can reasonably infer that the King would not have approached Lobo in Chapter 18 had it not been for this earlier incident.<sup>54</sup> There is considerable irony in this. The shooting contest was an important episode in a causal chain that led the King to accidentally reveal his low opinion of Lobo’s contribution at Court to his face. Yet presumably it was also an important part of Lobo’s own estimation of his importance to the King, and so a good reason for his being so annoyed at the comment when it came. Moreover, there is an ironic parallelism in terms of the consequences of each episode. In Chapter 8 Lobo salvages the

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<sup>54</sup> Of course, the story itself gives us little explicit reason to believe the two incidents to be connected, and in real life there would clearly be insufficient evidence to draw such a conclusion. But narratives are not real life and, as Gregory Currie puts it, ‘[a] narrative is rich in indications of the maker’s intentions, and anything a character is represented as doing in the narrative can be assumed to be so represented for a reason’ (Currie, *Narratives and Narrators* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p 189). The events of Chapter 8 clearly call for interpretation, given that they do not initially seem to enhance the plot, and yet they are given more prominence (a whole chapter) than the other illustrations of court life. To infer a causal connection, in addition to the parallelism I also note, seems the best explanation of that chapter’s function in relation to the novel as a whole.

King's reputation thanks to his own quick thinking and initiative. In contrast, as a direct result of the conversation between the two in Chapter 18, Lobo ends up destroying that reputation. The King will chide Lobo for thinking for himself on this occasion (108), but in the previous episode that was a good thing, and in reality the King has himself to blame for the disaster. All this makes it especially difficult to pity the King. Indeed, his fate is hardly 'tragic'. The King offers himself peacefully to the police, and even succeeds in recovering his shattered 'masculine' image: the newspaper carries the fabricated story that he was caught *in flagrante delicto* with three women (122). If there is one person to pity at the close, it is not the King but the Witch, whose corpse appears riddled with bullets in a photograph on the paper's front page (121).

Aside from Lobo's involvement, many of the other details of the plot — in both sense of the word — can only be *inferred* from what the novel tells us, or else remain entirely unclear.<sup>55</sup> This is a product of the limitations of the narrative perspective, and Herrera's parsimonious style. Therefore, not only is the subplot not *tragic*, it hardly amounts to much of a plot at all. Where there are exceptions, they have a purpose within the design of the novel. There is no space here to consider every single obscurity in *Trabajos del reino*, but the reader has a special interest in resolving the identity of the murderers.<sup>56</sup> Two pieces of evidence suggest that the Jeweller was responsible for el Pocho's death. When the Journalist is killed in Chapter 20, our first indication is that the same killer has struck again: the murder weapon is 'una daga, otra vez, de filo ondulado' (102). But the Jeweller interjects to disagree: '[E]ste cuchillo es diferente, este cuchillo es una mierda' (103). The importance of this outburst is underlined by the fact that the Artist immediately guesses the identity of the murderers. We are actually not told who they are; however it appears that the Jeweller has been betrayed by his

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<sup>55</sup> One hint that is never satisfactorily resolved is la Cualquiera's background: we learn that her mother abandoned her father because he was 'un hombre bueno y por lo tanto inútil' (54), but there are several suggestions that she might have worked as a prostitute at some point in the past. She looks on tenderly, perhaps with the smile of recognition, at a 'clandestina' when she and Lobo visit the city in Chapter 15 (81); shortly afterwards she is accosted by a man in the street who recognizes her and offers her a 'negocio' that will apparently be pleasing to both parties; when Lobo and la Cualquiera attempt to have sex later in the scene, she treats him mechanically ('lo montó fría, concentradamente'), and later admits that she does not know how to treat 'hombres que parecen buenos' (82). Whether this is the case, or the story behind it, we never know for sure.

<sup>56</sup> Lobo even calls the murders 'tragedies': '[S]upo que había sucedido otra tragedia' (102).

pride in his own craftsmanship and his belief in the justice of his actions.<sup>57</sup> Nobody but a self-righteous killer would be unable to stomach a second crime, with a sub-standard knife, being attributed to him. Our suppositions are substantiated when the Artist, as he flees the palace in Chapter 22, encounters the Jeweller wielding a blood-drenched dagger identical to the one used to commit the first crime (114). The second murder is more mysterious, but one can suppose that la Bruja is responsible. She is the first person Lobo encounters after he is said to have figured out who the murderers were, and she is described suggestively: ‘Parecía como si ya hubiera resuelto algún dilema y finalmente se ocupara de lo trivial’ (103). Lobo proceeds to wonder whether his own life might be in danger. The obvious candidate to murder him is la Bruja, since at this point she believes he has scuppered her plan for her daughter to bear the King a child, by getting her pregnant himself (104–5). She then gives Lobo a look that reminds him of the way in which one sacrifices calves (105). Of course, we cannot necessarily take the Artist’s fears seriously, given the obliviousness he has shown to other matters. But if we assume she is capable of murder, then there is an available motive for the Journalist’s killing: he is thought to be plotting with the Heir, and hence, we can assume, *against* the Witch.

Why can we be *more* certain about the particulars of the murders than about many other obscure details in the novel? Herrera will not have wanted to disappoint the reader on every point. But there are thematic motives too. For instance, the Jeweller’s story acts as an instructive comparison to Lobo’s.<sup>58</sup> While Lobo gradually loses his faith in the Court, the Jeweller’s intensifies in adversity, to the point where he commits murder in defence of the King. Both men are craftsmen, but whereas the Jeweller’s work can only function to show off the King’s wealth and power, Lobo’s *corridos* acquire a wider purpose. Of course, he does not realize this at first. Thus, at the turning point in the novel,

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<sup>57</sup> Compare such previous statements as ‘[T]odo lo que ve dorado lo he hecho yo’ (22), and ‘¡Y que nadie se haga ilusiones de arrebatarle nada al Señor!’ (60): He is emotionally invested in the King and Court.

<sup>58</sup> The Jeweller is not the only character who acts as a comparison to the Artist. La Niña starts off life as a prostitute, but despite continuing in that role at the palace, she sees things differently simply because of the wealthy setting. In reality, the pomp of the court is superficial, which is underlined by the manner in which she describes it: ‘La Niña nombraba su entusiasmo con montón de palabras aprendidas recién: estar aquí es cura, cantor, es bacán, es chilo, es guay, es copado, es padre, cantor’ (28). All these words are synonyms for ‘cool’, which, if it is the only attraction of the place, does not reflect well on Lobo’s more cultivated enthusiasm for it.

when la Niña throws him out, she equates the two men directly: ‘Ya hablas como cualquier puto que hace joyas’ (68). As long as Lobo writes only for the King, he is entirely dependent on him, and his only purpose is to exalt him. Unlike Lobo, the Jeweller cannot escape this condition. If Lobo had not matured, he could well have suffered the desperation that befalls the Jeweller: by the end he is a ‘resoplo armado’, a man who has nothing to live for, and is capable of anything, including murder (114). If that is true, la Bruja’s culpability also has a point. The murder of the Journalist can be read as an act of desperation by someone who knew her long-set plans had come to nothing. As Lobo leaves the Court, the Witch suggests — unconvincingly — that all is not lost: ‘Aquí hay que seguir viviendo’ (113). But she does not survive, and her death is surely horrific:

Se veían dos fotos en primera plana: en una, el cadáver de la Bruja, moteado innumerablemente de orificios de bala, arrojado junto al cadáver del Traidor, un tiro en la nuca (121).

Both characters struggle in vain and in desperation against the current of events. Again, if there are any ‘tragic’ figures in *Trabajos del reino*, it is they, and not the King.

The King’s story is much more obscure. We know the Artist’s *corrido* is the ‘final straw’, but the reasons for the King’s loss of power before this point remain unclear. There are certainly hints throughout the novel that the Heir has been plotting to dethrone the King. On Lobo’s very first day at Court he is cast as excessively ambitious (‘entrón’, ‘alzado’) by the Jeweller, who evidently dislikes him (23). Lobo then treats him with suspicion for the rest of his time there.<sup>59</sup> When el Pocho is killed in Chapter 7, the Heir seems unnaturally calm about the situation, in stark contrast to the Witch, which might imply how comfortable he is with any crisis at Court. He also lets slip a telling remark: ‘Así no matamos nosotros —la cortó el Heredero, señalando la herida del Pocho—, o sea que así no matan ellos’ (44). El Pocho’s body was not left as drug traffickers typically dump their victims, with their hands tied and a bin-liner thrown over their head. This is evidently what the Heir means by ‘nosotros’ — it is an allusion to *narco* conventions, which the King and his cohorts

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<sup>59</sup> For example: ‘[D]aba escalofríos el Heredero’ (35), ‘Frío’ (43), ‘Sonrió ampliamente, pero como si le sucediera un accidente en la cara’ (72). Of course, by casting him as the ‘Heredero’ in the first place, Lobo has suggested a power struggle.

presumably abide by, where the killer in question has not. Nonetheless, he immediately disassociates himself, as if he fears the comment will be taken to suggest his affiliation with the ‘traidores’ whom the Witch is blaming for the murder (44). There are further intimations of disloyalty to the King. Lobo stumbles upon the Heir and the Journalist talking furtively on a balcony in Chapter 5, and later describes their behaviour as ‘intrigar’ (56). When the Journalist is enigmatically describing the cartel’s troubles to the Artist in Chapter 17, he implies that some of the King’s subordinates have been going over his head to deal with other drug lords, a comment that is immediately juxtaposed with their noticing the Heir (90). Moreover, the Artist spots a member of the Court at a rival leader’s party, in Chapter 18, and the obvious suspect is the Heir (95). Nevertheless, we cannot be sure it is him. Indeed, an alternative candidate is el Gerente, since the man at the party is described as ‘elegante’, which is a characteristic of the Manager when he comes looking for Lobo at the end of the novel (122), but not of the Heir who is ‘menos elegante’ than the others when introduced in Chapter 3 (23). Indeed, at the last el Gerente suggests he has not always been working in the King’s interest: ‘Ahora sí las cosas van a marchar como Dios manda, ya todos estamos del mismo lado’ (124). It would be ironic if the real traitor were the Manager all along, since he is hardly mentioned throughout the novel, and all we know about him is that he is an efficient administrator.<sup>60</sup> It would also fit with what the author has said about his novel, that he wanted to allude to a generational shift in the world of drug trafficking, as paternalistic and ostentatious leaders gave way to a more discreet and business-like mode of operation.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, there is insufficient evidence in the novel to be certain about this. Moreover, there is little one can reliably infer about the *process* by which the King’s power is diminished. Certainly the Artist does not witness it directly. It is the Doctor who informs us that the alliance with another cartel (‘los del sur’) has collapsed (89), and that a former member of the King’s organization (‘El Traidor’) is in cahoots with them. According to la Niña, *someone* — and it might not be the same person — has been circumventing the King’s local

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<sup>60</sup> It would constitute further evidence of the limitations of Lobo’s point of view, of course.

<sup>61</sup> ‘La idea responde a un arquetipo, quería dejar claro que se está produciendo un cambio generacional en el tipo de liderazgo. Por un lado, está El Rey, un modelo arcaico y paternalista, que se enfrenta a otro más joven que quiere tomar el poder y llevar a cabo otras prácticas empresariales’ (in Amelia Castilla, ‘Literatura del narcotráfico’, *El País: Babelia*, 16 February 2008, <<http://editorialperiferica.blogspot.com/2008/02/yuri-herrera-autor-de-trabajos-del.html>>).

monopoly (38). The reference to the ‘Supremo Gé’ is undoubtedly to the government or the state governor (57), who has been cracking down on the dissemination of *narcocorridos*. Since the men who arrive to negotiate with the King wear ‘uniformes verdes’ (107), the State is definitely involved. Perhaps officials are looking for a high-profile scapegoat to appease the U.S. government, such as when Juan García Ábrego, the head of the Gulf Cartel, was arrested in 1996. But all this can be no more than supposition. There could well have been a plot, but there is no clear *narrative*. It is outside the scope of the story, and to a greater extent than with the murders, we are not meant to be able to reconstruct it clearly.

Why, though, does Herrera not allow us to reconstruct this ‘story behind the story’? One explanation can be adduced from the counterpoint Herrera provides in Chapter 23, when Lobo finds inspiration for his *corridos* in several stories he hears on the streets. Arguably a *convincing* story will be high in ‘narrativity’. For the philosopher Gregory Currie, any discourse high in ‘narrativity’ will exhibit ‘highly interrelated persons, their actions, motives, and fortunes, richness in causal connectedness and connectedness by thematic unity’.<sup>62</sup> The King’s story, as Herrera alludes to it, lacks many of these features, and is not even particularly ‘tragic’. Contrast the following tale collected by Lobo, which is the most moving of the ‘tragedias veraces de los hombres de a pie’ (117):

Del muchachito que simulaba su propio secuestro para sacarle dinero a los padres, que creídos le respondían ¿Sabe qué? Este inútil ya nos tiene hartos, ¿por qué no se lo echa y le damos la mitad de lo que pide? Y él, de pura tristeza, decía que Sí, recogía el dinero, lo gastaba en pisto y luego cumplía su parte (117).

In just a few lines we see all the features Currie mentions. Each action has a strong motive and consequence, and follows lucidly from the last one. Even the first action in the chain of causes can be understood in the context of what follows: a depressive, neglected child is precisely the sort to go to such extremes to grab his unloving parents’ attention. It is narrated from a point of view sympathetic to the boy, with the suffix *-ito* qualifying him affectionately while the parents are condemned as *creídos*, and this is congruent with the substance of the story, since if the son was

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<sup>62</sup> Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators*, pp. 36–7.

genuinely *inútil*, the parents must be partly to blame. It also has a tragic (although not strictly ‘Tragic’) sensibility: in the irony that the blackmail backfired so badly, in the sadness that such a thing could happen within a family, which is intended to be a loving institution, in the fact that the boy brought his fate on himself unwittingly — i.e., made a tragic error of judgement — by attempting the ruse in the first place, and in the pointless heroism of his final act, which at least proved him capable of *something*. Perhaps it is excessive to say the boy undergoes *anagnorisis* when he discovers his parents’ true feelings. Even still, there is far more quotidian tragedy, more cohesion, and more emotional force in these seven lines than in any narrative one can reconstruct about the King. It is simply a better story. I suggest that it is meant to be, to show the reader what he *ought* to be more interested in. It is a story more worthy of being told.<sup>63</sup> In comparison, the King is merely ‘[u]n pobre tipo traicionado. Una gota en un mar de hombres con historias’ (118).

In recent years a host of different representational media has dealt with drug trafficking, and nearly all of it assumes the *importance* of the phenomenon. Novels such as *La reina del sur*, or the many current *narco-telenovelas*, have glamorized drug trafficking and its sub-culture. *Narcocorridos* have become a propaganda tool for the cartels, but even in its more traditional popular and tragic mode, the *corrido* has validated and memorialized the lives of violent men. Herrera clearly understands the desire among the poor and the powerless in northern Mexico to ‘make a dent in the cosmos’, as the sociologist Mark Edberg puts it.<sup>64</sup> For Edberg, the *corrido* encourages young men to aspire to have successful and significant lives in drug trafficking, if only for a short time before they bow out valiantly, just as the King was prepared to do in *Trabajos del reino* before being saved by el Pocho: ‘Ya se disponía a *bien morir* antes de que lo agarraran’ (34). Lobo is seduced by all this initially. What is less obvious is that the reader is seduced too. It is not that we endorse or even sympathize much with Lobo’s perspective. As I have shown earlier in this chapter, the subtle modulations in the narrative point of view allow us to see through his view of the world. As readers,

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<sup>63</sup> Lobo also comes to realize that the other stories he told at Court were unimportant too, after he goes to the rival capo’s party and listens to the trivial gossip there: ‘Había muchas, la intriga de un hombre viejo contra su mujer, la de tres muchachas contra el vestido de la madrina, la de dos gallitos contra un trajeado, la del cura contra sus deseos de apurar un sotol, pero ninguna que lo informara. Todo era igual que en la Corte’ (94).

<sup>64</sup> Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*, p. 118.

we are not similarly disabused of our naïve assumptions over the course of the novel. Nevertheless, the archetypal tone of the story, Herrera's parsimonious style, the obvious limitations on the narrator's point of view, the murder mystery, and the various hints surrounding a conspiracy against the King all invite the reader to pay close attention to what is going on below the surface. The story we really want to be told is the King's, the 'important' story about someone of note. But we are never given it. In the end, Lobo cares much less than we do: 'Se dio cuenta de que no le interesaba en lo más mínimo la intriga, que se trataba de meros incidentes de algo más definitivo que ya comprendía' (121). One inference we can draw is that it will not do to be interested only in drug trafficking and the larger-than-life characters that inhabit its sub-culture. Popular curiosity either reinforces the power of the cartels or at best avoids bigger social problems. This is Lobo's realization at the end of *Trabajos del reino*. He chooses to sing instead about the 'tragedias veraces', stories about the injustices and hardships of people who are ordinarily ignored, and not the big 'Tragedy' that his time at Court could well have been written as. Herrera is aware that we do not need to be convinced of the evils of drug trafficking, at least in its present form, but perhaps we *do* need to be convinced not to take a prurient interest in its flamboyant wealth, its violence or its melodrama. In sum, the 'King' does not deserve such attention.

The emphasis on these everyday 'little tragedies' suggests that Herrera wishes to avoid writing exclusively about drug trafficking. His second novel, *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo*, has a different subject entirely. He is on record as claiming that the idea of there being coherent genre of *narconovelas* is misconceived.<sup>65</sup> Rather, authors write about the north of Mexico, and in doing so cannot avoid the topic in one way or another. Nevertheless, Herrera still has something interesting to say about the topic. As a loose allegory, one can take *Trabajos del reino* to be indicating a generational shift in Mexican drug trafficking from its rural, paternalistic roots with larger-than-life leaders like Rafael Caro Quintero, to more discreet, modern, and commercially-minded operations

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<sup>65</sup> 'Yo creo que se están haciendo cosas muy interesantes y muy diversas en México y el hecho de tener el tema del narco como punto en común sólo significa que tenemos el tema del narco como punto en común en nuestras vidas cotidianas, pero no significa que sea el núcleo de todas esas historias' (in Zunini, 'Escrito en la frontera').

under men like the pioneers of the Tijuana cartel, the Arrellano Félix brothers.<sup>66</sup> But *Trabajos del reino* was written in 2001, and published in 2004. Since then, the world of drug trafficking has experienced enormous upheavals in the wake of the government campaign against it. However differently el Heredero and el Gerente will run the organization to el Rey, they are keen to preserve unity and stability: ‘ya estamos del mismo lado’ is the Manager’s boast (124). For all Lobo’s attempts at foresight, he cannot predict the chaos of Calderón’s tenure as president in Mexico, something which is at least imagined in the final pages of Martín Solares’ novel, *Los minutos negros*. What Herrera avoids is romanticizing the phenomenon, an approach that was oddly prevalent in televised representations of drug trafficking in the period of Calderón’s presidency, despite the increased levels of violence. Lobo falls into the trap of romanticizing the criminal underworld, and we are made to see through his delusions. As readers we are disabused of our wrong-headed interest in the King’s demise. In these two ways, the problem of how to represent drug trafficking is brought to the fore, as it was in *Contrabando*. Like Víctor Hugo in that novel, Lobo’s difficulties in understanding and evaluating the world in which he is living are closely connected with artistic concerns. However, Lobo’s major problem is to determine the appropriate object of attention rather than to find a suitable form.

Ultimately, *Trabajos del reino* is about Lobo’s search to invest his life — and his art — with value and significance. It is a very universal theme, fit for a novel that tries to persuade the reader to eschew too narrow a focus (in this case, on drug traffickers). Lobo’s art is dependent and instrumental at Court. It gives him the impression of having a significant purpose in life. In the end, however, he can enjoy his art for new reasons. His *corridos* can tell other — more worthy people’s — stories, and he can discover his own, *independent*, meaning in life in the process of writing them. For this reason Lobo refuses to recount the King’s story at the end of *Trabajos del reino*. Since he is now independent of the King, he is no longer part of His narrative. For a while Lobo was caught up

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<sup>66</sup> The existence of the notorious *narcojuniors* is alluded to in Chapter 5: ‘Este [el Gringo] se había pegado a un hatajo de muchachitos ansiosos de mareo que cada viernes cruzaban a desmayarse de este lado del muro. [...] El más desmedido era un pecoso hijo de cónsul a quien el Gringo devolvía a casa con amor de padre y los asientos hartos de yerbabuena’ (33).

in a different story, the focus of which was drug trafficking, but happily the entanglement was temporary. No doubt Herrera is expressing a similar hope for northern Mexicans and their society in general. Lobo is representative of his peers in another respect. Any *bildungsroman* contains the basic plot structure of a rags-to-riches tale. This is appropriate for the northern border regions of Mexico, where the appeal of being involved in drug trafficking is often attributed to the desire for easy social mobility in a context where other options are lacking or considerably less appealing. In sum, it is a society in which it is difficult to grow up. Lobo's tale is an example of a more general problem for many thousands of other young Mexicans who live along the border. Unlike Lobo, many others make the wrong decisions. By writing about a *corridista* Herrera sidesteps the potential difficulty of persuading the reader to sympathize with a clear-cut *narco*, such as Gumersindo in Alfaro's *Tierra Blanca* (or worse, a *sicario*), while nonetheless covering a theme that is relevant to *narcos*. The novel's setting might suggest that it has little in common with the other works considered in this study. Its figurative approach is distinctive. But like Mendoza, Solares and Rascón Banda, Herrera is little interested in drug traffickers *per se*. It is the difficult experience of living with, through, and amid drug trafficking that matters. Lobo gets closer to the phenomenon than Edgar Mendieta or Víctor Hugo, but his fundamental difficulty is similar.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

It would be too convenient to propose that Mexican literature about drug trafficking exhibits what the philosopher Noël Carroll has termed an ‘animating problematic’, that is, a fundamental artistic difficulty to which each novel constitutes an implied response.<sup>1</sup> Most Mexican fiction about drug trafficking is not very self-aware. Moreover, as I argued in the first chapter of this study, it is also difficult to deliver a convincing definition of the *narconovela*. What may be asserted, however, is that the best fiction in this loose category shares similar aesthetic concerns, and that these relate to the ethical problem of how to represent a reality that is difficult to come to terms with, in both cognitive and emotional respects. Both Mendoza and Solares find ways to alert the reader to the commonplaces of crime fiction, aware that their choice of an ordinarily strict genre format might be understood by readers as an endorsement of an outlook on life to which they do not, in fact, subscribe. Rascón Banda and Herrera dramatize the problem by making the difficulties of representing the reality around them the central concern of their protagonists. The choice of format is a greater concern for Víctor Hugo in *Contrabando*, whereas Lobo in *Trabajos del reino* struggles to find the most appropriate object of attention for his art. Above all other forms of writing, novels are adept at providing the reader with a subjective perspective — one we can associate with — in order to comprehend the emotional and moral significance of a sequence of events. However, in this case, to provide a single perspective might appear to be a limitation. If the phenomenon is supposed to be difficult to understand, then a single point of view, however troubled or confused, might be taken to imply that there is a single right way of viewing it. The four novels studied here are careful in this regard. Mendoza provides the narrowest range, but includes several occasions in which the justice of his novel’s sensibility is questioned (p. 63). Herrera’s protagonist is shown to be naïve, at first (p. 137). In *Contrabando*, several characters offer their own, incomplete perception of events, and the protagonist’s opinions are kept carefully to a minimum, lest we assume that he possesses a more

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<sup>1</sup> Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 103–105. Carroll refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s idea that an ‘artwork is an answer to a question—a question that arises in the artist’s conception of his or her situation’ (p. 105).

reliable point of view from which to evaluate the others (p. 100). In *Los minutos negros*, an entirely clear view of events is rendered impossible by the author's inclusion of deliberate contradictions (p. 77). This is not to say that these novels have no clear implications, that they offer no conclusions at all. In each case I have argued that they do. Rather, it is a matter of not appearing to endorse ideas definitively. This is a common aesthetic consideration, but it has additional importance in this particular context.<sup>2</sup> For the same reasons none of the narratives in question offers much closure. Solares leaves the reader frustrated for details about the death of Bernardo Blanco. Rascón leaves his protagonist nigh-on bitter at the difficulties of communicating his hometown's predicament to a national audience. His filmscript is a failure by his own criteria, but also by the standards of his patron and (arguably) the reader. Lobo, in Herrera's novel, is left free to follow his own star, but he does not 'get the girl'. The narrative arc has been completed — the protagonist has grown up — but it is not a typical 'happy ending'. A similar concern is surely the motivation for the otherwise bizarre final lines of Mendoza's novel:

Por consejo del doctor Parra, pasó unos días en Mazatlán donde conoció a una morena que tenía un ojo verde y otro miel, que también era zurda, pero ésa es otra historia.<sup>3</sup>

Despite resolving the story in this particular novel, the author indicates that the bigger story — the rest of Mendieta's troubled life as a detective — has not been resolved. Hence, of course, the subsequent novels, *La prueba del ácido* and *Nombre de perro*.

Although an emphasis has been placed on doubts rather than certainties, on failures rather than success, and I have argued that this sensibility is apposite, one might still wonder whether the range of possible responses to drug trafficking in Mexico has been exhausted. Herrera might be taken to think so. In the end, his novel disavows the public's interest in fiction about this topic. As for many other *norteño* writers, including Mendoza, this amounts to an insistence on the importance of the wider social context and not just the beguiling trappings of *narcocultura*. But, again, it is difficult to

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<sup>2</sup> Another novel with evident partiality of perspective is *Fiesta en la madriguera*, by Juan Pablo Villalobos, although it has the limitations that I note in Ch 1 (p.27, n. 108).

<sup>3</sup> Mendoza, *Balas de plata*, p. 254.

disentangle ethical from aesthetic motivations. It cannot be very interesting to talk directly about drug traffickers if they behave in such a consistently hackneyed fashion. Herrera was fortunate enough to find a particular angle by which to write about drug traffickers with originality. Other serious authors have been forced to relegate the *narcos* to the background. Some writers have strained to be direct and still original. In *A wevo, padrino*, Mario González Suárez attempts to avoid cliché by having his *narco* protagonist use a range of invented terms to refer to the activities and actors in the drug trade, as if avoiding the words themselves avoids the clichés. He does, however, find a way of introducing a critical perspective into an otherwise monolithic monologue. The protagonist's attitude towards his adventurous life comes to appear gradually more ridiculous and grotesque as he responds to increasingly severe and horrific turns of events with the same set phrase, that of the novel's title, an expression of callous enthusiasm.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, for all its failings, that novel does not deal solely in understatement. It might be argued that all the novels studied in this thesis have a concise, understated prose style. There are individual chapters that break this mould in *Los minutos negros* and *Contrabando*. The more poetic chapters in *Trabajos del reino* offer some variety. But there is little rhetorical excess in these novels. The more delirious sections of *A wevo, padrino* provide this, even when their success relies on the same technique deployed by the four authors studied here, that is, the impression of a disparity between the tone of the passage and the significance of the events narrated.

Rafael Lemus has argued that a less restrained approach to writing about drug trafficking and its effects would be preferable:

¿Qué es el narco? En principio, el puto caos [...] Un elemento anárquico, desequilibrante, destructor. Una organización en contra de lo organizado. El desgobierno [...] Sus lecciones son las del nihilismo: el dominio de la violencia, la futilidad de la vida, la victoria de la muerte. Ésas y esta otra: la incoherencia.<sup>5</sup>

One novel that approaches a response to Lemus's criticisms is *Tijuana: crimen y olvido*, by Luis

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most horrendous moment in the novel comes in the final pages of Part I, during which the protagonist, Alfredo, accidentally runs over and kills his wife and daughter, from whom he had been forceably separated earlier in the novel (Mario González Suárez, *A wevo, padrino* [México: Random House Mondadori, 2008], pp. 98–9).

<sup>5</sup> Lemus, 'Balas de salva'.

Humberto Crosthwaite. Crosthwaite follows a similar procedure to Rascón in that he dramatizes an attempt by a fictional version of himself to make sense of the world around him. Crosthwaite pretends (in a prologue) that he has been investigating the disappearance of two journalists, Magda Gilbert and Juan Antonio Mendívil. He employs the basic structure of an investigation, but he does not limit himself to it. The first section consists of fragmentary snippets of Magda's diary, ostensibly reproduced verbatim by the narrator, with occasional fragments of his own commentary. There follows a series of opaque interviews with those who knew the journalists, before a section protagonized by Juan Antonio begins. However, this section is very different. Crosthwaite (as narrator) prefaces it with a note explaining that he has taken liberties with the 'facts' of the case, and proceeds to narrate the section as if it were a work of fiction. This is then followed by what can only be described as a fantastical section in which Juan Antonio confuses his own identity in a dream with that of another man from 40 years previously. It becomes difficult to know precisely which story is meant to be true according to the novel and which is a dream. It is a procedure not unlike that employed Julio Cortázar's famous story, *La noche boca arriba*, which is extensively alluded to.<sup>6</sup> In the final section, the author's fictional alter-ego expounds the reasons for taking on the investigation and laments his failure to solve it. At this point one of the characters who we had been unsure existed at all, since he featured prominently in the fantastical section, arrives in what is meant to be 'real life' and threatens Luis Humberto. The man exhorts Luis Humberto to finish the book that we are reading, because it depicts him as 'el más cabrón'. The novel ends with the narrator living in fear for his own life while wondering whether to publish his investigation. The experiment is anything but an unqualified success.<sup>7</sup> But there is, nonetheless, an attempt to communicate the chaos and uncertainty of a society dominated by violence by reproducing in the mind of the novel's readers the bewilderment that such a society can create for its inhabitants. For all its uncertainties, *Contrabando* does not do this; the outsider, the reader, is supposed to be able to resolve at least some of the town's conundrums. Moreover, the focus is social rather than psychological. *Los minutos negros* does

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<sup>6</sup> Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, *Tijuana: crimen y olvido* (México D.F.: Tusquets, 2010), pp. 85, 222.

<sup>7</sup> For a review of Crosthwaite's novel with which I substantially agree, see Geney Beltrán Félix, 'Tijuana: crimen y olvido de Luis Humberto Crosthwaite', *Letras libres*, April 2011, <<http://www.lettraslibres.com/revista/letrillas/tijuana-crimen-y-olvido-de-luis-humberto-crosthwaite>>.

provide unresolvable doubts, but in most respects the narrative is still internally coherent and there is little attempt to provoke anxiety. Not so *Tijuana: Crimen y olvido*. The works of fiction considered in this study were chosen on aesthetic grounds. Nonetheless, these less commended novels by González Suárez and Crosthwaite indicate that northern Mexican authors are continuing carefully to consider the question of how to represent their insecure environment. For this reason, although perhaps the definitive *narconovela* cannot exist, there remain to be written original and valuable novels on this topic.

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