

Globalization and Other Acts of Violence Power and Death in the Contemporary Mexican-Sinaloan Novel

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This essay analyzes how urban violence is depicted in two Sinaloan novels. Both *Efecto Tequila* (Tequila Effect) (Tusquets, 2004), by Élmer Mendoza (b. Culiacán, 1949), and *Mi nombre es Casablanca* (My Name is Casablanca) (Mondadori, 2003), by Juan José Rodríguez (b. Mazatlán, 1970) provide a local setting for the symbolic transnational globality that leads to an unexpected outcome of a conflict or enigma. These books analyze critically the “conventions of globalization,” as defined by literary critic Jean Franco,¹ and establish collective symbolic metaphors about the dangers of the neoliberal order and its historical links to oppression in Latin America. As another critic, Néstor García Canclini, suggests with regard to recent Latin American films, these novels make us recall the daily fascism and social decay in Latin America;² and, while flirting with the crime and spy movie genre, they also show us how the commercialization of life has led to the commercialization of death.

Mendoza and Rodríguez are both writers comfortable writing about a regional space while clearly also renowned in national and transnational markets. In the early twenty-first century, regional literature has become transnational, perhaps in the search for readers who understand the north of Mexico as an in-between region for the cultural centers of Los Angeles and Mexico City’s Federal District. This literature is located in the realm of collective conflicts involving several countries: in the case of *Efecto Tequila*, Argentina, Spain, and Mex-

ico; in *Mi nombre es Casablanca*, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States.

These novels show how the normal existence of local spaces is disrupted by globalization, and how local spaces become globalized. Signs of neoliberal interventions in this space can be found in the tropes and plots that revive the “globalization thriller,” a phrase used by Néstor García Canclini,³ imbuing it with a new semantic meaning within new local micro-narratives. These novels could be said to constitute cultural experiments that criticize neoliberalism and raise our awareness, sometimes literally or metaphorically, of how this system rearranges local communities and how the apparent transparency of the socioeconomic model is murkier than commonly believed. As Francine Masiello explains,

Art and literature . . . force us to think of interpretative resistance, interrogating the past and leading to a politics of cognition with which to move toward the future. Against the marketed package of “ready-made” cultural products and ideas that neoliberalism places at our disposal, the cultural experiment provokes forms of thinking that move toward alternative frameworks for apprehending social forms.⁴

In this way, Masiello rescues the value of art and literature—historically rejected by Latin American subalternists,⁵ who belittle them and are overly zealous in their endorsement of testimony and its sociopolitical interventions. It can be said that in Mexico, at least, the emergence of genres of popular literature becomes stronger in neoliberalism with a view to solving current sociopolitical enigmas. The best examples would be in the detective or crime novel, as referred to by Tijuana writer Federico Campbell in his book *Máscara*

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negra: crimen y poder (Black Mask: Crime and Power),⁶ with important authors such as Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Daniel Sada, Élmer Mendoza, Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, and Eduardo Antonio Parra. Also, in Mexico there is an abundance of stories resulting from investigations that reflect on the past and present to disentangle the reality of impunity. One outstanding example of these texts is *Huesos del desierto* (Bones of the Desert), in which Sergio González Rodríguez denounces the deaths of the women of Ciudad Juárez. We also have the investigative journalism of Jesús Blancornelas and Anabel Hernández, as well as the anthology *Nuevas líneas de investigación: 21 relatos sobre la impunidad* (New Lines of Investigation: 21 Stories of Impunity), criticizing the justice system as well as the state's multinational policy and its consequences for citizens.⁷

Élmer Mendoza's *Efecto Tequila* tells the story of Elvis Alezcano, a Sinaloan spy with the Mexican secret service, the CISEN, who is dismissed with the end of the Cold War. Alezcano is involved in recovering stolen cars and dismantling networks of Mexican car thieves when he is enlisted by a former boss to help investigate the connection between the fraudulent collection of the "Single Vehicle Registration," or RUV tax, with an organization whose members include torturers and high-ranking officials from Argentina's Dirty War, and who are apparently on the verge of launching another coup d'état in their home country. The novel's title, *Efecto Tequila*, is the term used by Argentinians for the peso devaluation in 1995 during Ernesto Zedillo's presidency (1994-2000) and coincides with the deepest ever economic and political crisis to have hit Mexico, one that also affected Argentina. As a result, neoliberal agendas accelerated in both countries, resulting in the privatization of state companies, tax hikes, and reduced public expenditure. In Mexico, NAFTA entered into force on January 1, 1994, on exactly the same day as the Zapatista rebellion began, and was followed shortly afterwards by the assassination of Mexico's presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, on March 23, 1994.

Another crisis also took root: people lost trust in the country's politics and economy. Subsequently Raúl Salinas de Gor-

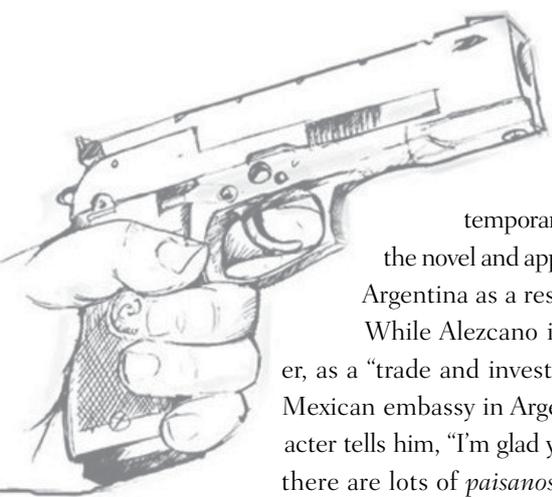
tari, brother of former President Carlos Salinas (1988-1994), was imprisoned for his involvement in illegal activities in the banking sector and for his ties to drug traffickers. For its part, the DEA accused Carlos Salinas of collaborating with his brother. This scenario of corruption and the PRI government's crisis provided the context of greater neoliberal deregulation, and Presidents Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982-1988) and Carlos Salinas de Gortari could be said to be the masterminds behind this move toward market liberalization and privatization.

With his title, therefore, Élmer Mendoza inserts the narrative in the period of Carlos Salinas's rabidly neoliberal rule, and the novel recreates elements applicable equally to Mexico and Argentina. In *Efecto Tequila*, the group that tortures and escapes justice by committing crimes against civil rights are the owners of neoliberal capital. I quote a passage describing the military assassins: "They're all filthy rich. They own fleets of merchant vessels, car dealerships across the hemisphere, car-theft insurance agencies in 18 Latin American countries, restaurants, hotels, three factories of military uniforms, gas stations."⁸ Mendoza sets most of the novel in Argentina, revealing the connection between the military, responsible for the murder of 30 000 people who resisted the repressive dictatorial policy, and magnates, both legal and illegal, in control of transnational businesses.

Former agent Elvis Alezcano is in charge of finding evidence against them to put an end to their plotting in Argentina and Mexico. Therefore, the destinies of both countries appear linked. This crossover between illegitimate power and economic power at a transnational level lays bare the irreconcilable irony of neoliberal capitalism. As Jean and John Comaroff have remarked, "Neoliberal capitalism, in its millennial moment, portends the death of politics by hiding its own ideological underpinnings in the dictates of economic efficiency: in the fetishism of the free market, in the inexorable, expanding 'needs' of business, in the imperatives of science and technology."⁹ Therefore, one could say that Mendoza's novel exposes the overlapping mechanisms of the repressive past in the hemisphere (dirty wars and military dictatorships) and the "benign" present —quote marks intended— of neoliberal trade liberalization.

Through a kitsch parody of this *culichi* James Bond —"culichi" is a nickname for people from Culiacán—, the injustices of Mexico, here embodied by the RUV tax, are interwoven with networks of global meanings for the reader to reflect on neoliberal realities from an ironical and satirical perspective. We have,

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therefore, a parody of the investments made by Mexicans in Argentina, a contemporary reality at the time of the novel and applicable to present-day Argentina as a result of the crisis.

While Alezcano is working undercover, as a “trade and investment officer” for the Mexican embassy in Argentina, another character tells him, “I’m glad you were posted here, there are lots of *paisanos* looking to invest in

Argentina and who need up-to-date information.”

This is his reply:

Information is my thing, Alezcano said with a smile, We’ll fill the pampas with factories producing tamales and candied sweet potatoes, and install cannabis irrigation systems; we’ll plant fields from Córdoba to Río Negro, it grows like a weed. It’s good that you’re not losing your sense of humor, but seriously now, big money in Mexico is ready to invest in Argentina. . . . [Argentina] is a nation with a history of consumption.¹⁰

Elvis’s joke refers to the export of local and historical Mexican industries, particularly the *culichi* specialty of marijuana. The image of the tamale factory and fields in the pampa planted with cannabis is not only for comic effect: it unveils the mechanisms of neoliberalism and the lack of market logic.

Mendoza introduces our main character with expert knowledge of commercials or ads that crop up throughout the novel when least expected. While spying on a Spanish judge in Madrid, Alezcano reads the newspaper and thinks, “Tell me which ads you like, and I’ll tell you who you are: you wear a Patek Philippe, drink Soberano, wear Armani or Carolina Herrera, whoa! whaddaya know, Vargas Llosa, I’ve read that dude.”¹¹ Our consumption defines our identity. This eliminates history from the discourse that clashes with the unofficial history which in turn progressively unravels as the novel progresses, through the connection between the dirty war and neoliberal capitalism.

The insertion of advertisements at surprising moments in the narrative also draws our attention to the presence of multinational capitalism in Mexico and in the Americas. Other examples in the novel include the slogans: “Soy totalmente Palacio” (I’m totally Palacio);¹² “De Tijuana a Yucatán usan

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sombreros Tardán” (From Tijuana to Yucatán, everyone wears Tardán hats);¹³ “La línea aérea que va donde quiera” (The airline that goes where ever it wants);¹⁴ “Todo mundo tiene un Jetta, al menos en la cabeza” (Everyone has a Jetta, at least in their head);¹⁵ “Con Pepsi sí” (With Pepsi, sí);¹⁶ “A que no puedes comer sólo una” (Bet you can’t eat just one);¹⁷ “Tómalo con calma, tómalo con leche” (Take it easy, drink milk);¹⁸ “Nacidos Ford, nacidos fuertes” (Born Ford, born strong);¹⁹ “Yo sin Klínex no puedo vivir” (I can’t live without Kleenex);²⁰ “Esta navidad, Presidente estará presente” (This Christmas, Presidente will be present);²¹ “Es caro, pero creo que lo valgo” (It’s expensive, but I think I’m worth it).²² These and other advertising slogans appear with an underlying tension given the background of repression. They set the scene of a utopian consumer community, since these products apparently confirm the individual’s life and freedom, at the exact same moment that the Dirty War is being waged. In that sense, the mention of the document *Nunca más* (Never Again), unstitches the fabric of utopia woven by multinational companies both in Argentina and in Mexico:²³

Sharing’s good. Do you remember Up With the People and their ad for Coke?: “I’d like to build the world a home and furnish it with love, grow apple trees and honey bees and snow-white turtle doves,” Elvis clammers up onto the cornice, “That’s what you get for running around with fundamentalists. . . . Running away is the best thing about spying, having someone chasing you to save the world or to destroy it. And you with balls like the Uyuyuy bird. Dying in Madrid is not part of my plan.”²⁴

The timing of this image of the Coca-Cola advertisement of a peace-and-love-filled world makes the situation heavily ironic, since Elvis is being hunted down to be killed. The slogan juxtaposes and exposes the deceit. It should be pointed out that the novel has no communist or Marxist bias, however. Irony is used by contrasting the advertising and narrative discourses, although everything takes place in the hippie world inhabited by Elvis’s parents, portrayed as a less formulaic, alternative space of cultural consumption (drugs, music).

While Élmér Mendoza's novel intertwines the Dirty War with the neoliberal order, Juan José Rodríguez's book tackles the issue of drug trafficking, something that cannot be disassociated with the capitalist development of our era. As Adalberto Santana has stated,

I consider that the premise of the demand for drugs in our consumer economy of the late twentieth century and at the start of the third millennium is a particular feature of the capitalist development of our era. To me, it seems that the use of drugs around the world, and particularly in developed countries such as the United States, has prompted a form of capital accumulation in a globalized world and marketplace.²⁵

As suggested by sociologist Luis Astorga, economic and political power is not disconnected from the creation of illegal trade networks; hence in Mexico we have "narco-liberalism."²⁶ According to Astorga, this "narco-liberalism is sanctioned by the legal structure with the legitimate monopoly over establishing the rules of the game," but is not eliminated because of its economic, "entrepreneurial" power.²⁷ Federico Campbell has also reached the conclusion that "the mafia is a system of informal, secret government within the state, and its tolerated existence and complicity give cohesion to the whole power structure and oil its machinery."²⁸ Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Rodríguez presents us with the ambiguous position of the Mexican drug trafficker in a society with free-market values.

In *Mi nombre es Casablanca*, after the murder of a number of close associates of an important drug trafficker from Mazatlán, the novel develops along the well-known plot lines of a series of revenge killings by rival narco groups. However, the story radically changes track when it turns into a struggle over the control over drug markets by a major league Colombian drug trafficker who plans his killings using chess moves as a metaphor for control and power. He starts by killing the daughter of the Sinaloan narco, then the racehorse of another, then two bricklayers, or pawns, and so on. The murderer's character is based on a real-life drug trafficker

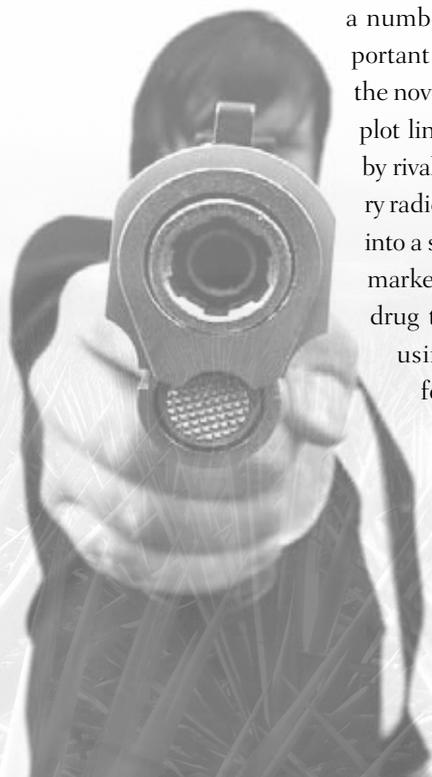
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nicknamed "The Chess Player,"²⁹ who embodies the greed of the neoliberal market with the resulting network of metaphors: the Mexican kingpin is a businessman or, as he says later, "The Wall Street of drugs," equating the illegal drug trade to lucrative free-market enterprise. This is the context in which the Colombian drug lord strategically sparks a bloody conflict between his fellow Sinaloan drug traffickers to take them out of the global game.

The novel begins with a sketch of the game being played in the drug war and in corruption. According to detective Luis Marsella, "A thief who steals from thieves has been a son-of-a-bitch for a hundred years. Right then my instinct told me to move my pieces. You don't need to move every piece you touch. In this business, you need to know when to back off. You've got to make the right moves in this game."³⁰ Of course, the detective is incorruptible, although he does occasionally think about taking part in the illegal game.

From the outset, events are compared to the story of the Italian mafia. In the first chapter, the police talk about *The Godfather* and one of them tells Marsella that "Sicily is not that different from Sinaloa."³¹ The detective inserts a paradoxical story of Elliot Ness and Al Capone in the narrative, saying that while Ness "died of alcoholism and racked with doubt . . . Capone knew that only a tiny fraction of his liquor had been confiscated and he felt quite safe with his connections with politicians and the police. In fact, he was only in prison a short time. Syphilis was his real enemy; that's what sent him to his grave."³² This reflects an attitude that runs counter to the hypocrisy observed in the so-called War on Drugs. The book shows how drugs are caught up in a tangled web of legality and illegality, politics (not only including politicians but also the Church, the media and the police) and poverty, the economy (tourism, agriculture, construction, table dance bars, etc.), and crime.

The Sicilian mafia therefore provides a perfect historical template with which to explain this complex scenario: first, Marsella receives a death threat that will be carried out unless he abandons his investigation, and then when they kill



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a table dancer he is involved with, solving the crime becomes personal for him.

A SORT OF CONCLUSION

If we look at some of today's cultural offerings, including literature, *narco corridos* or drug ballads, and Mexican films, we realize that popular aesthetic and sociological reflections are inspired by this dark world of legal and illegal magnates. In other words, the *narco corrido*, as in many novels or pieces of investigative journalism, gives rise to readings, interpretations, and complexities that place drug trafficking within a broader context of the disappearing role of the national state, transnationalization, the disintegration of citizen ethics, and its replacement by the principles of the marketplace, the commercialization of life and death, and the negotiation of transnational power. In these novels, spies find global meanings and local detectives learn to live with the ambiguities of drug traffickers who live their lives in and out of "glocal" legality—to use the term coined by García Canclini.

Both Élmer Mendoza and Juan José Rodríguez show Sinaloa as an in-between area among the global spaces through which power and money flow. These novels show how external and internal forces transform local or marginal areas and also how, on a more powerful level, the local or marginal, once centralized, become that counter-hegemonic narrative that rediscovers the "interweaving" and flows between the legal and illegal world in the neoliberal shadow. The conventions of globalization, as suggested by Jean Franco, not only comprise hired assassins or *sicarios*, but also neoliberal magnates, assassins embedded within the state's monopoly of force, and drug traffickers with global ambitions. **MM**

FURTHER READING

Monsiváis, Carlos, "El narcotráfico y sus legiones," *Viento rojo: diez historias del narco en México* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés, 2004), pp. 9-44.
Palacio Castañeda, Germán, *Globalizaciones, Estado y narcotráfico* (Santa Fé

de Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia/Facultad de Derecho, Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Universidad de Investigaciones Jurídico-Sociales y Políticas "Gerardo Molina"/Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Democracia "Luis Carlos Galán," 1998).

NOTES

- ¹ Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- ² See Néstor García Canclini, *Latinoamericanos buscando lugar en este siglo* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2002), p. 80.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁴ Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 13.
- ⁵ The subalternists are a group of cultural critics who support post-colonial theories and their stance on issues such as power, literature, and the West. In his book *Against Literature*, John Beverly refers to literature as an institution that oppresses the subaltern.
- ⁶ Federico Campbell, *Máscara negra: Crimen y poder* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortz, 1995).
- ⁷ Martín Solares, comp., *Nuevas líneas de investigación: 21 relatos sobre la impunidad* (Mexico City: ERA, 2003). [Editor's Note.]
- ⁸ Élmer Mendoza, *Efecto Tequila* (México: Tusquets, 2004), p. 126.
- ⁹ Jean and John Comaroff, eds., *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 31.
- ¹⁰ Mendoza, op. cit., pp. 116-117.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13. This refers to the prestigious Mexican department store, El Palacio de Hierro. [Editor's Note.]
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18. In allusion to an Aeroméxico slogan in the 1970s, the text of which was actually "La línea aérea que va para arriba" (The airline that's on the way up). [Editor's Note.]
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58. Slogan of a well-known brand of potato chips. [Editor's Note.]
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132. "Presidente" refers to the trade name of an extremely popular Mexican brandy, with political overtones referring to the supposed omnipotence of the PRI presidents prior to the 2000 transition. [Editor's Note.]
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 205. Advertising slogan for a hair dye. [Editor's Note.]
- ²³ This refers to the document produced by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (Conadep) about the victims of the dictatorship in Argentina. See <http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/conadep/nuncamas/nuncamas.html>. [Editor's Note.]
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75. "Hay que compartir" (Sharing's good) is the refrain of this slogan in Spanish version. [Editor's Note.]
- ²⁵ Adalberto Santana, *El narcotráfico en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2004), p. 9.
- ²⁶ Luis Alejandro Astorga Almanza, *Mitología del "narcotraficante" en México* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 1995), p. 31.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
- ²⁸ Federico Campbell, *La invención del poder* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 2001), p. 112.
- ²⁹ Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, who belonged to the Cali cartel, was known as "El ajedrecista," or The Chess Player. He was captured in 1995 in Colombia and extradited to the United States in 2004.
- ³⁰ Juan José Rodríguez, *Mi nombre es Casablanca* (Mexico City: Mondadori, 2003), p. 22.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ³² *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.