

Drug Trafficking And Literature

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We are used to hearing polemics in the media about censorship of *narcocorridos*, or traditional *corrido* songs about drug trafficking. Many of us have also seen Mexican, Colombian or U.S. movies in which a drug trafficker is a character or even the lead. We can say that drug trafficking is part of global collective imaginaries. Who has not read or hear about Spanish writer Arturo Pérez Reverte's best seller *La reina del Sur* (Queen of the South)? Who in Mexico and in the U.S. Southwest has not heard some song by the Tigres del Norte about the topic? The thing is, as some people say rather ironically, drug culture is "in". However, that comment trivializes the reality of those people who for different reasons die or have to live with the phenomenon.

More than being "in", drug trafficking is not alien to international economies or policies or to transnational societies. Moreover, this phenomenon extends to the global market of legal products and is associated above all with money laundering.

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Also, recently, several Mexican authors have been dealing with the issue and developing it systematically, saying what the media has been unable to say and what *narcocorrido* composers have not been able to fit into their short narrations. Writers from Sinaloa like Élmér Mendoza, César López Cuevas, Juan José Rodríguez and Leonides Alfaro, as well as writers living on the northern border (Eduardo Manuel Parra and

Gerardo Comejo, among others), pen fiction thrillers that come dangerously close to everyday realities.

Mexico has experienced a kind of a boom in detective and spy novels. Examples are *En busca de Klingsor* (Seeking Klingsor) by Jorge Volpi (1999), *Espiral de artillería* (Spiral of Artillery) by Ignacio Padilla (2003) and Paco Ignacio Taibo II's innumerable novels, among others. The examples of this genre may have multiplied thanks to the paranoia produced by Salinism¹ and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) "democratic dictatorship." Thus, these novels offer us stories that, in their own way, analyze Mexico's past and future, as well as showing up what happens in the margins of the shadows.

Nevertheless, the novels of the genre we are dealing with here maintain a border and regional vision of the theme, delving into the relationship between drug trafficking and power. As Federico Campbell has pointed out in *Máscara negra* (Black Mask), "What we have here is one of the phrases from *Política y delito* [Politics and Crime, by Hans Magnus Enzensberger] most often quoted in political essays of recent years: "There is an old, close, dark dependency between murder and politics. This dependency is situated on the foundations of all power up until now: power is exercised by whoever can kill the subjugated. He who governs is the *survivor*.'"²

The theme of drug trafficking is not alien to this continual debate about society, not even when dealt with in literature, since literature is a reflection of the thirst for self-knowledge to which any good writer aspires to also profoundly understand his/her society, his/her world. Thus, this kind of novel presents drug trafficking not as isolated from the processes of hegemonic power, but rather as part of the historical and transnational complexities that these processes involve.

In the case of Colombia, as illustrated in works like *Rosario Tijeras* by Enrique Franco (1999) or *La virgen de los sicarios* (The Virgin of the Assassins for Hire) by Fernando Vallejo (1994), the assassin for hire has begun to be a main character. So many novels have been written using this theme that Colombian writer Héctor Abad Faciolince has called this kind of narrative *sicaresca*, a play on words in Spanish making the word "sicario" or assassin, rhyme with "picaresque", a kind of narrative whose main character is a rogue. This leads us to reflect about the function of social criticism that this character plays in the contemporary Colombian novel.

In Mexico, we are beginning to encounter main character-narrators who are assassins for hire or gunmen, such as in *Un asesino solitario* (A Lone Assassin) by Élmér Mendoza (1999) and in *Nostalgia de la sombra* (Nostalgia for the Shadow) by Eduardo Manuel Parra (2002). These characters represent marginality and keep to the shadows, but in contact with the legal, legitimate world with which they do their "business." *A Lone Assassin* recreates the voice of the assassin of a presidential candidate—which may sound familiar—although the important thing is that we are offered the other side of the coin: the assassin's association with personages who have dark, disreputable links with political power and an ambivalent relationship with the drug world. Thus, Sinaloa language, in the voice of the gunman, takes on a leading role in the novel, and the gunman

lets us enter into his world of ambiguity and shadow so we can discover and be surprised by the fact that he is a charismatic, consummate man, just a cog in the machinery of a socio-political system.

One of the novels of northern literature that best condenses the historic networks of power and crime is *El amante de Janis Joplin* (Janis Joplin's Lover) by Élmér Mendoza (2001).³ The author manages to bring together the ambiance of repression during the 1970s revolutionary movements, linking it with the regime's repressive forces lending a blind eye to the budding drug trafficking. If *A Lone Assassin*—also by Mendoza—can be considered a 100-odd-page *corrido*, *Janis Joplin's Lover* establishes a cultural clash between two genres of music: rock and Mexican northern music; that is, global versus local; marginalized ideology versus marginalized practice; the transnational social revolution versus the business of drug trafficking.

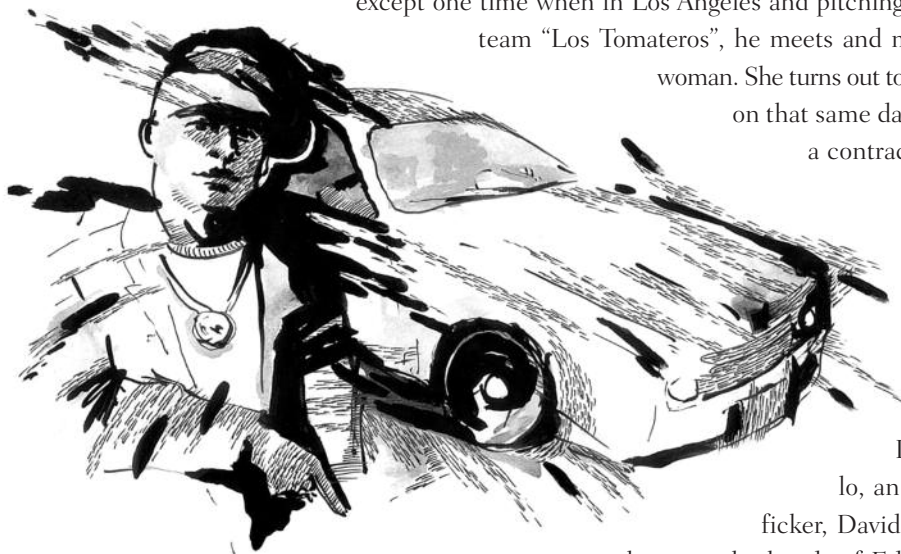
On the one hand, *Janis Joplin's Lover* looks at the beginnings of the influence of drug trafficking and the corruption of the political and legal system, and on the other hand, it examines urban and rural guerrilla movements and the state government's repression through the anti-guerrilla group "The Dragons", the historical equivalent of "The Hawks." The novel's perspective makes us think about the origins of the social, political relationships between repression and what Mexican sociologist Luis Astorga has called "narco-liberalism."⁴ According to Astorga, 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.⁵

It can be said, then, that the novel presents the problems Mexico has gone through in the last 30 years. As Mendoza said in an interview, "The time frame of the novel does not budge from 1970, but ... given the comments I have heard, there is a very clear projection to today, above all regarding the administration of justice, the resurgence of the idea of clarifying the [cases of] the disappeared-detainees, the strength of drug trafficking and corruption."⁶

Janis Joplin's Lover tells the story of David Valenzuela, a young man described as the town fool in a Sinaloa mountain village, who gets into trouble because of his naivete. At a town fiesta, David is attracted by a flirtatious young woman who has been "reserved" or forbidden contact with other men by the younger son of an influential local "gomero" or drug trafficker.⁷ When the young man attacks David for dancing with the girl, David kills him in self-defense by throwing a rock at his head. Shortly after the incident, David escapes to Culiacán to go into hiding with his uncle. These circumstances launch him on a series of adventures in which he is always the victim,

except one time when in Los Angeles and pitching for the Culiacán baseball team "Los Tomateros", he meets and makes love to a mysterious woman. She turns out to be Janis Joplin herself, and on that same day, the Dodgers offer David a contract.

Despite the fact that he tries to continue his life and get away from his cousin Chato, who has become a member of the guerrilla group "September 23 Communist League", and his friend Cholo, an up-and-coming drug trafficker, David is the object of state violence at the hands of Eduardo Mascareño of "The



Dragons.” While Chato represents the Marxist ideology typical of the guerrillas, Cholo becomes a metaphor for the development of the illegal business and the expanding economic system, not because he is intrinsically evil, but because of his great adaptability. In fact, in the end, he is the only character who is left standing after state repression, thanks to his money and influence. According to the novel, pragmatism is productive and the ideological struggle becomes an overwhelming obstacle.

María Fernanda, David’s cousin, shows several times how excessive force against ordinary people creates resistance because it breaks the law.

She says so, for example, when the family is attacked and beaten by “The Dragons” who are looking for Chato: “We cannot stand for this kind of mistreatment. Just imagine, they violate our civil rights; the next thing you know they’ll do whatever they want with us....Of course we can [stop these outrages.] Why should we let the police and the rest of those lowlifes break the law? Just think of the violence that’s going to cause.”⁸

Don Gregorio, Chato’s father, who dies from the mistreatment he suffers at the hands of the anti-guerrilla police, several times notes the defenselessness of peaceful citizens with no access to economic power. The novel subtly sketches the excessive institutional violence and the emergence of drug trafficking. This makes us think about the use of ideological and practical violence to avoid the real democratization in the country, at the same time that it allows drug traffickers to penetrate all spheres of Mexican society.

In that context, Chato the guerrilla’s idealistic discourse is clearly beaten by the drug trafficker’s pragmatic argument. This is summarized in a conversation between Cholo and Chato:

Cholo, you don’t know about this shit. You’re a drug trafficker, you son of a bitch. You can’t understand that we want a more just system, a government of the people and for the people. Well, you’re gonna eat my dick because you’re not going to get anything. Who says so? The government, the bankers, the industrialists? I’m saying it, brother. I don’t know jack shit about politics, about imperialism or any of that crap, but you’re not gonna win. I’ll cut off my balls if you win. We’re going to win, Cholo. The future is ours. That’s a fucking pile of bullshit. Before this country goes socialist or communist or whatever, I’ll bet you my balls everybody will turn into a drug trafficker like me. People don’t want land, Chato, or factories. No fucking way. People want cash. They want make to some dough and to drive cars like this one.⁹

The novel clearly makes Cholo’s discourse come out the winner, and the revolutionary discourse is metaphorically murdered and thrown into the sea (as Chato ends up), or jailed and finally co-opted.



The space of Sinaloa is enormously globalized despite the fact that the turn of the phrases in the language is totally regional. The novel establishes this tension between Sinaloan and U.S. symbols and space: on the one hand, David lives only to marry Janis Joplin; Don Gregorio is always watching his favorite baseball team, the New York Yankees; Cholo has an enormous Grand Marquis, and the music they listen to on the radio is mostly in English (the Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin, the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan). On the other hand, after Cholo becomes a drug trafficker, he starts listening to *corridos* “because it’s a man’s music,” and María Fernanda likes popular balladist José José. Mexico is also represented as a liminal point and the political pivot between the Nicaraguan revolution, Cuba and the United States. Chato explains this, saying, “I don’t know. Sometimes this is a pile of shit. Usually you don’t know shit. You can’t plan. Lots of dudes emigrating to Nicaragua. We’ve got the Cubans breathing down our necks, the Tupas. We’re infiltrated by the CIA. Almost everything’s concentrated in Mexico City; even in that we’re centralists.”¹⁰

It is well known that the U.S. government used drug money to finance arms for the Nicaraguan Contra, and Culiacán then became the center for these new conflicts and crisis that resulted from military, economic and political globalization. On one occasion, Cholo says —not without irony— that “A gringo without pot is a crazy gringo,”¹¹ as though that were the motto of his new business. And the book reminds us of the context of the war in Vietnam and the student movements as the point of departure for an increase in consumption in the United States, symbolized in the novel by Janis Joplin’s tragic death from an overdose.

Perhaps the most significant thing is that drug trafficking is the link between these worlds and, as a result, the new parallel power, strengthened by the impunity promoted from within the state, which eliminates opposition through violence and its iron-fisted control over the citizenry. Actually, the criminalization of drug trafficking, which already existed spurred on by U.S. consumption, became more severe after the murder of DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena in 1985.

Janis Joplin’s Lover reveals the gradual commercialization of existence and the clashes of social values viewed through the lens of the capitalist meaning of money. The city and the countryside appear fully in the networks of globalization, and violence emerges from the transnational repression against ideologies that question that economic globalization. The novel also audaciously questions the hypothesis of political corruption by drug traffickers,

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although the novel's hypothesis may be that socio-political corruption predates the arrival of the turbulent forces of drugs.

Peasants appear already inserted in global capitalist networks, while inhabitants of the polis gradually lose their rights. A foreshadowing of voracious neo-liberalism and impunity; the beginning of the crisis of the nation and the end of the great narratives that proposed progress and liberty. The novel becomes the memory of the

student movements and its sinister outcome in Tlatelolco, while from the viewpoint of victorious economic pragmatism, it presents the story's ironies. It also reminds us that abuse of its characters did not end in Mexico City, but extended to the periphery. All the states in Mexico become protagonists of international reality. Faced with a black-and-white reality presented to us by the media, faced with amnesia, *Janis Joplin's Lover* discovers the twists and turns and the intersections of legality and illegality, leaving the reader to reflect about these murky connections.

Mendoza gives us a glimpse of that upside-down world where government officials do more damage than "the revolutionaries" or "the traffickers." In the book, the *narcocultura*, the trafficker culture, becomes fashionable because it offers protection and ways out and creates status for people who would never have achieved it under other circumstances. If in some milieus individuals become commercialized, in other milieus, violence comes from the centers of power, including the state. In both cases, the results are wretched for ordinary characters-citizens. Violence and memory; crisis of the legitimacy of the state and consolidation of the power of the drug-bourgeoisie; revolution and repression; local products and global products; commercialization of death and humanization of the murderer. These are some of the paradoxes these texts offer us.

The trafficker culture may be fashionable because it has become a source of illegal profit worldwide. Undoubtedly, the legal world interacts in a complex way with this illegal industry: banks launder money; construction companies use investment flows; and governments mount anti-drug campaigns to renew the state's monopoly on violence.

Meanwhile, in an atmosphere of politization and censure, literature—in a different way from other media—tries to shed light on the issue, making a call to debate about how violence creates social inequalities and impunity in the post-national, global world. ■■

NOTES

¹ All things related to former Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. [Translator's Note.]

² Federico Campbell, *Máscara negra: crimen y poder* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortíz, 1995), p. 102.

³ Élmer Mendoza, *El amante de Janis Joplin* (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores, 2001).

⁴ Luis A. Astorga A., *Mitología del "narcotraficante" en México* (Mexico City: IIS-UNAM/Plaza y Valdés, 1995), p. 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

⁶ Eduardo Castañeda H., "Élmer Mendoza: Pasión por el filo de la navaja," p. 4 of the document at <http://www.puntog.com.mx/2001/200111214/ENB141201.htm>, consulted December 4, 2003.

⁷ "Gomero" has been a colloquial term used for decades to describe drug traffickers, and refers to the people who clandestinely extract and commercialize opium gum or *goma*. Today, given the diversity in the production of drugs, people prefer the generic abbreviation "narco". [Editor's Note.]

⁸ Mendoza, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.