NARCOVIOLENCIA IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN CULTURE

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Abstract

Narcoviolencia in Contemporary Mexican Culture analyzes cultural production that emerged during the crisis of narcoviolencia, beginning with the Ciudad Juárez femicides in the 1990s through the wake of the public protests of the 2014 Ayotzinapa massacre. Narcoviolencia is characterized by spectacular cruelty aimed at reducing resistance to expressions of necropolitical power and at shutting down the public sphere; it is also characterized and by uncertainty about the identities of the dead and the circumstances surrounding their deaths. With few other available avenues for political contestation, cultural interventions provide sites for the articulation of distrust toward official explanations of the violence and for the articulation of public secrets about culpability. Works of art, literature, and film ask what role members of the public can have in restraining necropolitical power and in overcoming uncertainties and silences. The dissertation argues that one of the primary strategies for countering the public’s sense of powerlessness is the prevailing representation of a broad and engaged public that shares the same grief, the same vulnerabilities to violence, and the same perception of reality as intolerable.

The first chapter examines so-called narconovelas by Élmer Mendoza and Eduardo Antonio Parra, which elucidate otherwise invisible networks and consider the allure of power that narcotrafficking offers, and the films Miss Bala and Heli, which dispute the ungrievability of victims and the state-imposed label of narco criminal. The second chapter evaluates literary fiction by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, Daniel Sada, and Roberto Bolaño, all of whom indict the figure of the complicit intellectual and reorient the public’s attention toward the country’s peripheral spaces. The third chapter surveys
the primacy that the image has achieved in the information void that surrounds the events of *narcoviolencia*, and includes analysis of artwork by photographers and by the conceptual artist Teresa Margolles, whose work addresses the alienating spectacle of *narcoviolencia* that disregards victims’ identities.
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Introduction

A Public that Recognizes Itself

Nos merecemos otro país.
– Javier Valdez Cárdenas

On the afternoon of May 15, 2017, the journalist Javier Valdez was leaving the offices of Ríodoce, the magazine he founded, when masked gunmen pulled him from his car and shot him twelve times. The day after Valdez’s murder, the national newspapers published photographs showing Valdez’s corpse face-down on an ordinary street in Culiacán, as a group of onlookers watched from behind a police cordon (Figure 1). These were images of one of the country’s most respected journalists rendered another public cadaver, with another helpless public gazing on the scene. Sinaloa’s state prosecutor immediately argued that the shooting was not necessarily related to Valdez’s work, and that he might have been the victim of a carjacking (“Cumplen amenaza”).

Valdez was the sixth journalist murdered in 2017; he died just weeks after Miroslava Breach Velducea, a reporter for La Jornada, was killed in Chihuahua. Despite such precedents, Valdez’s murder shocked many members of the public. In 2011, he had received the International Press Freedom Award, and Columbia University had presented Ríodoce with the prestigious Maria Moors Cabot Prize. Many assumed that Valdez’s level of international recognition would protect him. And in a way, his reputation did protect him: not from death itself, but from the spectacular cruelty characteristic of drug violence. For this to be credible as a random carjacking—and for press freedom to remain ostensibly secure—Valdez could not be tortured; his cadaver could not be used for narco
messaging. Alma Guillermoprieto reacted to her colleague’s death by writing, “On reflection, I was grateful that, unlike many of the more than one hundred reporters killed in Mexico over the last quarter century, he was not abducted, tortured for hours or days, maimed, dismembered, hung lifeless from an overpass for all to see” (“Voice” n. pag.).

Just over ten years into what President Felipe Calderón called the government’s “guerra contra el narco,” violence is so extreme that gratitude is a reasonable reaction when confronting a body that has been allowed to remain more or less undesecrated.

Valdez’s murder received several days of sustained coverage in the press. It inspired a protest in Mexico City and one in Culiacán. This is much more attention than all but a handful of other victims of drug violence have received. In part, this is because the victims are often anonymous. They often come from the most vulnerable sectors of society: they are poor, young, and live in rural areas.\(^1\) Some victims are traffickers; others are innocent bystanders and victims chosen at random; still others fall somewhere in between, individuals who, perhaps coerced or afraid, may have in some way abetted the *narcos*.\(^2\)

The narrative that explains how Mexico arrived at its current circumstances often begins with the “war” initiated in 2006. This was when President Calderón, in reaction to

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\(^1\) For “males at the bottom of the economic spectrum,” homicide is the leading cause of death (Heinle et al 8). The authors of the Special Report from the Justice in Mexico Project at the University of San Diego note, “While there is a general perception that Mexico’s violence is pervasive and persistent throughout the country, the reality is that violence has been highly localized, sporadic, and geographically mobile (moving from one geographic area to another) over the years” (Heinle et al 16).

\(^2\) Manuel Castells has written of drug trafficking worldwide: “Drug traffickers have to corrupt and/or intimidate local and national authorities, police, customs, judges, politicians, bankers, chemists, transportation workers, journalists, media owner, and businessmen….In the absence of a decisive affirmative state power, narcotráfico’s networks take control of as many people and organizations as they need in their environment” (201-2). While Castells’s list of those who are sucked into trafficking skews oddly toward white-collar workers, he describes how trafficking has the power, through fear, intimidation, and money, to involve numerous different kinds of civilians without limitation.
increasingly public and theatrical violence by cartels, adopted the “kingpin strategy,”
directing members of the military to capture or kill the leaders of the cartels in Mexico.
According to social scientists, the effect of this strategy was to fracture the cartels,
causing an increase in violence as smaller criminal organizations struggled to fill the vacuum (Fisher and Taub). The guerra contra el narco is often understood as the state
taking on narco actors motivated by profit, actors who—in contrast to other
narcotrafficking conflicts—fundamentally lack ideological objectives.³

In the wake of the “kingpin strategy,” the numbers of dead have been too
astounding to allow the public to take in the biographies of those killed. The Secretaría de
Gobernación reported 104,089 intentional homicides (homicidios dolosos) during
President Calderón’s administration (2006-2012), and 79,344 intentional homicides under
President Enrique Peña Nieto up until March 2017 (Ramos n. pag.). These statistics only
include those murders that are reported by the state. It is unlikely these statistics are
complete, because criminal groups instruct families not to search for their missing
relatives, and authorities tell victims’ families that missing person reports are not
necessary (Dittmar n. pag.). And disappearances do not necessarily become part of the
public record: it was only thanks to documents leaked from Mexico’s attorney general to
the Washington Post in 2012 that we know that 25,000 Mexicans were reported missing
during Calderón’s administration (Booth n. pag.).

At the same time, the discoveries of mass graves, or “narcofosas” have only
added to the public perception that the dead are much more numerous than the state lets

³ The anthropologist Natalia Mendoza writes, “Difícilmente podría decirse que exista una serie de
demandas políticas propias del narcotráfico—como lo fue, por ejemplo, la lucha contra a extradición en
Colombia. Tampoco parece haber una narrativa social o ideológica coherente y general que enmarque,
defina, o dé sentido al sufrimiento” (23)
on. When, in 2014, federal police began looking for forty-three disappeared normalista students in Guerrero, they found multiple graves, none of which contained the bodies of the students. This followed the discovery of fifty-five corpses in a mine shaft near Taxco, Guerrero in 2010; the discovery of 193 corpses in San Fernando, Tamaulipas in 2011; and of forty-nine corpses in Cadereyta, Nuevo León in 2012. “The image of Mexico as a giant clandestine grave, decried by human rights champion and priest Alejandro Solalinde Guerra, has haunted public opinion,” writes the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz (“Acceptance” n. pag.).

I use the term narcoviolencia throughout this dissertation to refer to public acts of violence whose origin is presumed to be the conflict produced by drug trafficking. These are acts carried out by criminal organizations or by representatives of the state (local police, federal police, the military) acting either in collusion with or attempting to suppress these criminal organizations. Narcoviolencia so often involves a cruelty that goes past death—a cruelty that involves the open decay of corpses and tortured and staged cadavers.4 There is not always a clear connection to drug trafficking itself. This maybe be because cartels have diversified into an assortment of other criminal activities as well, activities that victimize ordinary citizens and migrants: human trafficking, kidnapping, ransoming, and extortion, money laundering, and recently, the massive theft of gasoline from national pipelines.

One of the most important features of narcoviolencia is that it is characterized by uncertainty—by uncertainty about how many are dead, who they are, and finally, to

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4 Étienne Balibar uses the term cruelty for “those forms of extreme violence” that “appear to be ‘worse than death’ and that amid contemporary processes of globalization emerge in geopolitical spaces labeled as peripheral (“Topography” 15).
whose power this violence testifies. The violence then is both easy to interpret as a message to the public to limit resistance—in the form of questions, dialogue and journalism, movement in public spaces, and varied forms of political or civic participation—and at the same time ambiguous in terms of who carries out the violence, against whom, and why. At times narcoviolen\n\ncia cannot be distinguished as having been carried out by the state itself or by enemies of the state. Did state actors actually carry out the murders? Did they simply look the other way? Is state incompetence to blame?

This blurring of the lines between the state’s active and passive roles in exercising power is characteristic of what Deleuze and Guattari have theorized as the war machine, and what Michael Taussig described in Colombia during the drug violence of the 1980s. In his diary from that period, published as Law in a Lawless Land, Taussig wrote, “There is no outside anymore, just as there is no clear boundary between the paras and the state, which is, I believe, the most crucial characteristic of the war machine. The paras are part of the state. But at the same time, they are separate and even opposed to it” (23). In Mexico, the narcos are both the opposition to the state and yet also in some places are part of it. The state fights the narcos and yet the state is also itself narco. This is why many more journalists report being threatened by police and mayors than by criminal organizations (Ahmed “Journalist”). The greatest example of the state working at cross purposes emerged in September 2014, with the disappearance of the forty-three normalistas. Many suspect that the students were killed at the 27 Batallón de Infantería, the military base in Iguala, possibly because the students had inadvertently interfered with a shipment of heroin to the United States (Hernández, “Batallón,” Goldman,
“Mexico’s Missing”). The perception has been that while fighting the “guerra contra el narco,” the military had begun working on behalf of “el narco.”

In a situation in which narcoviolencia again and again demonstrates to the public its own vulnerability, silence is both necessary to survival but also untenable—especially for those sectors of the public that make up the privileged intellectual class: writers, academics, the educated upper-middle-class clustered in the country’s largest, relatively safe, cities. These sectors have largely not reacted with political organization or civic mobilization; instead, many cast their hopes of ending the violence with the truth-telling of journalism. For the left, journalism has become nothing short of heroism, a struggle to uncover the truth that must be supported. Journalism is an important component of ending the violence, but so is unifying and mobilizing different sectors of society, work that journalism cannot accomplish by itself.

The continued non-emergence of sustained, large-scale social movements commensurate to the scale of the violence itself has been disappointing to many intellectuals. The historian Pablo Piccato writes, “The demand for justice and the truth from civil society remains limited, except for massive but isolated and fruitless demonstrations after egregious cases like that of Iguala,” (“Crime” 511), and expresses disillusionment that the “large-scale violence underlying” emblematic cases like Ciudad Juárez femicides and the disappearance of the normalistas “has not been the object of mobilizations, nor has it become a point of reference in electoral politics” (Infamy 268).

Numerous articles published at various points throughout the past ten years have characterized certain appalling events as a “punto de inflexión” or a “parteaguas” (Reguillo “Seis meses” n. pag.; Noble “Visual” 422). These moments include the Villas
de Salvárcar massacre in 2010 (in which *narco* hitmen killed fifteen high-school and university students at a birthday party), Javier Sicilia’s moving public reaction to his son’s death in 2011, the Ayotzinapa disappearances in 2014, and the accelerated murder of journalists in early 2017. Yet after each such event, the violence continues, and the momentary outrage seems to dissipate.

The U.S. journalist Ioan Grillo, an expert on Mexican drug violence, recently wrote of being “dumbstruck by the extent to which normal life seems to carry on next door to such terrors” as mass graves. Grillo made this comment in reference to the smell of rotting corpses from a mass grave in Colinas de Santa Fe, Veracruz, where over 250 cadavers were recently discovered. (The word *discovered* here is misleading, since many people knew the bodies were there: the state prosecutor Jorge Winckler told the press, “Es imposible que nadie se haya dado cuenta de lo que aquí sucedió….Si no fue con complicidad de la autoridad, no entiendo de qué otra manera pudo ocurrir” (Gómez, “Complicidad”)). One of narcoviolencia’s most disconcerting features is this carrying on of normal existence in the midst of constant horrors that appear and then are normalized as part of everyday life. In the context of the Argentine military regime, Diana Taylor described this kind of spectacular and yet everyday violence intended to produce public denial and blindness as “percepticide,” committed against the public at large. Rather than state violence remaining invisible—which is what the term “disappearance” suggests—the violence is carried out in public ways that force bystanders to look away and carry on with their lives (123). Taylor writes,

The triumph of atrocity was that it forced people to look away—a gesture that undid their sense of personal and communal cohesion even as it seemed to bracket
them from their volatile surroundings….To see without being able to do disempowers absolutely. But seeing without the possibility of admitting that one is seeing further turns the violence on oneself (122-4).

The silence and the insufficiency of reaction in the public sphere around these events should not be understood as apathy. It is unclear how the public could contest this violence effectively. And at a more fundamental level, there is hardly yet a language or a way of understanding the severity of the violence. In The Differend, Jean-François Lyotard asks why there was so much silence surrounding Holocaust atrocities. The silence, he concludes, indicated a truth that has yet to be phrased, for which language was insufficient. He analogized Auschwitz to an earthquake so powerful that all it destroyed all instruments of measure, leaving only a feeling which has not yet entered the symbolic or linguistic representational system, whose meaning is undecided or absent (56-7).

These remarks signal the incommensurability of the violence with the language available to represent it. But if language is unable to articulate these events, this is temporary. Lyotard writes, “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics, perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them” (13).

This dissertation examines some attempts to find such an idiomatic register for the atrocity during those years in which drug violence emerged so suddenly and so shockingly that silence, confusion, and disavowal prevailed in the public sphere. In each chapter, I consider a handful of works—crime narrative, film, literary fiction, ...

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5 In a recent article, Diane Davis rejects scholarship that emphasizes indifference as the primary reaction to different forms of violence throughout Latin America, and calls on scholars to search harder for “oppositional uses of culture” and “pro-active responses.” She asks scholars “to identify collective action and oppositional uses of culture to undermine (rather than sustain) the forces and conditions that have perpetuated violence, impunity and corruption over the decades….Did no larger social movements or pro-active responses ever materialize in reality, or do scholars just no know where and how to find them?” (266)
photography, and art—that demonstrate a desire to move past an initial phase of
disorientation, and to develop ways to understand the violence and the power dynamics
underlying it. One of the strategies to emerge from the disorientation is the effort to view
society holistically, envisioning different classes and geographical spaces as
interdependent and connected. Therefore, what happens in the country’s often invisible,
violent peripheries matters to those at its centers of political power and cultural capital.
Another strategy has been to defend the victim as worthy of justice and public
mourning—a reaction against the state’s claim that victims of drug violence are
criminals, and therefore not deserving of the public’s sympathy.

By articulating these ideas, cultural texts advance the notion that there exists a
single, common public, which shares a single source of suffering. The greatest strategy
from cultural production for resisting narcoviolencia is the representation of a public that
experiences the same fear, frustration, and grief. The works analyzed in this dissertation
imagine a public comprised of members who see and recognize one another’s
vulnerability, bear witness to it, and engage with this crisis it in whatever spaces are
available to them. These texts’ appeal lies in how they offer that promise of universal
mutual recognition to a public that is in so many other ways stratified and fractured.

The cultural arena offers a privileged space where representations of what is
“really” happening can emerge with more fidelity to reality than often happens in the
country’s newspapers and magazines. The danger to journalists is not the only barrier to a
healthy public sphere. Class and geographical divisions have also made it possible for
elites to remain insulated from the violence, and for a variety of reasons, inclined to deny
its severity or the involvement of the state. Varying reactions to narcoviolencia can be
understood as different reactions to a crisis of state legitimacy. After Ayotzinapa, the far left declared the state’s culpability, as in the protest slogan “fue el estado.” Commentators in *El Universal, Reforma, Milenio,* and *Nexos* have often departed from the assumption that the state is acting in good faith, doing its best in a fight against *narcos* that impede the country’s progress. For those elites who saw NAFTA and the procedural democratization of the late nineties as a harbinger of Mexico’s finally becoming modern, watching the country slide into violence has raised painful questions about the nation’s future. Often systematic violence is clouded by anxieties that the cruelty of *narcoviolencia* reveals a deep-rooted predilection for barbarism that is impossible to change.

In these conditions, the public sphere—that realm “where questions of the common good can be negotiated and decided”—has expanded beyond the traditional realm of independent periodicals that we often think of as responsible for the formation of a critical public (Hohendahl 101). In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Jürgen Habermas emphasized the interconnectivity of the political and the literary spheres, demonstrating how national images circulated in literary discourse in eighteenth-century Western Europe before they entered the political arena in the nineteenth. Public and political life have been entwined with cultural aesthetic life, with both serving as ways to understand matters of justice.⁶ In contemporary Mexico, the

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⁶ In “The Public Sphere: Models and Boundaries,” Peter Uwe Hohendahl argues that Habermas did not distinguish between “the public/political” and “the cultural/aesthetic,” since both are forms of understanding matters of justice and what constitutes the good life (108). He writes, “In *Strukturwandel* Habermas demonstrated the close connections between the political public sphere and the literary public sphere during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The debate in the literary public sphere (criticism), Habermas argued, prepared the discussion in the public sphere….The cultural component should come more into the foreground, since what Habermas used to call the ‘literary public sphere’ is precisely the locus where problems of identity and difference have been articulated….To emphasize the public nature of the cultural sphere is so important because political theorists tend to marginalize cultural
cultural sphere has become an important space for the constitution of an autonomous public sphere, where discourse and dialogue about narcoviolencia can take place, where belonging and commonalities can be affirmed. The cultural and aesthetic precedes and provides, as Habermas theorized, the language and expectations of the political sphere.

In Mexico, public discourse has been coordinated by a state heavily involved in the national cultural life through a system of awards and funding in literary and artistic realms as well as control over the press. In the chapters that follow, I will focus on artists, writers, and intellectuals whose work seeks a dialogue that takes place directly among members of the public. Reading still has a key role to play in the decisions of a critical civil society, though so do watching films, and more importantly, the daily practice of viewing photographs published in the nota roja and online, as well as the online forums and social media dedicated to understanding narco power.

The artworks, films, crime narratives, and literary fiction emerging from this crisis are “artifacts [that] represent the material reality of an abstract public,”
“represent[ing] an audience…real but in principle not identifiable” (Warner 61, 62). In The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America, his study of the “res publica of letters” that precipitated the American Revolution, Michael Warner argues that material texts (the pamphlets and broadsides circulating in colonial North America) were a “metonym for an abstract public” that “held the tangible promise of universal mutual recognition,” and which set the stage for (especially aesthetic) questions as private, personal, ‘nicht wahrheitsfähig’ (not true or false), and therefore ultimately irrelevant for the process of political decision making. A rigid distinction between the political and the cultural spheres, as it is reinforced by contemporary political institutions, will necessarily constrain our understanding of those concerns that come under the category of the good life” (108).

7 For an in-depth study of Mexico’s historically “semi-authoritarian media institution,” see Sallie Hughes, Newsrooms in Conflict.
the Revolution and the founding of the United States (62). Similarly, the texts, films, art, and photographs evaluated in this dissertation play a key role in constituting an abstract public that recognizes itself as a group and other members of that public. Readers of crime narrative and fiction about the violence, and viewers of photographs, films, and art are implicitly connected to a reading and viewing public that shares the same intimate knowledge of the violence—as well as the same argot and visual vocabulary. This mutual recognition of the public by the public is precisely what the terror of narcoviolencia aims to suppress, and which the state often coopts as it claims to work on the public’s behalf.

Many of the cultural objects studied in this dissertation have elicited the vociferous rejection of the intelligentsia, certain public intellectuals, and sometimes academics as well. In magazines like Letras Libres, D.F.-based intellectuals labeled crime novels written in the North as commercial narconovelas written in poor taste, seeking to capitalize on tragedy. However, crime novels demonstrate a desire to understand invisible structures of power and common sources of suffering, to see society as a whole, to understand who the victims are, and what makes narco culture alluring and possible. Similarly, photographs of cadavers in public spaces are often viewed with disdain by elites, as a sign of a culture that celebrates death, and as an expression of the base impulses that are responsible for the violence in the first place. The state, claiming not to want to glamorize trafficking, has exerted pressure on the media not to publish such photographs. But these photographs affirm a reality that so much print denies. How can the public emerge from the disorientation of violence if it does not see it?

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8 Warner’s research builds on Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities in the argument that the community of readership is realized metonymically, and that this community is a form of the nation (Warner 63).
Furthermore, many artists’ and photographers’ work addresses the pressing question of how to capture the cruelty of the violence, but without plainly representing it in ways that reinforce its terror.

When narconovelas, cadaver photographs, and art and film elicit fury, it is because anger about the violence itself is displaced onto these cultural artifacts. Cultural expression becomes the realm in which public disagreement and discussion about narcoviolencia itself can take place. The rejection of these works responds to the fact that they expand what are considered spaces of political discussion, removing politics from the strict purview of so-called experts. Crime novels, film, and particularly photographs open different ways of understanding which experiences count as political, and whose voices the public should consider.

Ultimately, the demand for art and literature about narcoviolencia is the demand to make the violence that the public is suffering visible. This “making public” transforms the violence from a private matter, one in which victims’ families and the hardest-hit towns and cities suffer in isolation and with shame. Cultural texts consistently show families ruined by violence, suggesting the private sphere and the home are not safe spaces of refuge from narcoviolencia but are instead spaces into which such violence reaches. Cultural and artistic works also push for a broader definition of justice. That is, to demand justice for a particular individual is not only for his or her family, but is also for an entire public clamoring to know—and who deserve to know—what is happening in their society. As narcoviolencia has continued, it has slowly shifted from a private shame to public matter. Hannah Arendt argued, in On Revolution, that what triggered the French Revolution was the transformation of poverty from a private condition to one that was
taken into the streets as a common, shared source of suffering among the plurality (Benhabib 157-8). This envisioning of fear, confusion, and grief as plural rather than solitary is the work that is being achieved in the texts examined in this dissertation.

*Narcoviolencia* is at its core a violence that is intended to terrorize and divide the public. It is violence that has often successfully relegated the public to the private sphere. Arendt has written of such times in history as “dark times,” times in which tyranny and oppression remove the possibility to participate in the public world. In Arendt’s thought, in such conditions, mankind has no opportunity to strive for immortality (as the ancients did), and is instead relegated to “worldlessness,” a kind of meaningless existence in which human beings do not have the privilege, and uniquely human duty, of shaping their own world. In these conditions, what are the options for how to be in the world? In the “desert” of worldlessness, Arendt asks, how can humans remain engaged with the public realm rather than turn away from its pain to seek the “oases” of personal relationships and the private sphere? When individuals retreat from the public sphere, Arendt argues that “an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men (“Dark Times” 4-5). The question that underlies so much contemporary Mexican cultural expression is this question of how people can appear to one another as actors, reject the worldlessness that violence creates, and recuperate the shared space between them.

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9 The language “oases” and “desert” are found in Canovan 190, who cites Arendt’s “Lectures on the History of Political Theory” 024090-09. In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt also refers to tyranny as a desert: “Tyranny is like a desert. Under conditions of tyranny one moves in an unknown, vast, open space, where the will of the tyrant occasionally befalls one like a sandstorm overtaking the desert traveler” (466).
The cultural artifacts that emerge around the crisis of narcoviolencia conjure an abstract public, as a form of constituting the public at a time when forms of envisioning who this public is has been pushed out of the usual spaces that comprise the public sphere. The reason this imagining of a public is so important is because, as Arendt has argued, _plurality_ is the basis for the political. Arendt writes, “The only given condition for the establishment of rights is the plurality of men; rights exist because we inhabit the earth together with other men” (Burden of Our Time 437, cited in Canovan 191). Arendt reminds readers that the Romans used interchangeably _inter homines esse_ to mean both “to live” and “to be among men” (Human Condition 7). This conception of living as being among, appearing to, and acting in concert with others emerges in many of the texts included in this dissertation as what is difficult to achieve amid narcoviolencia, and in a country whose politics have been authoritarian for decades. At the same time, art and literature show that members of the public do live among one another, even if at this moment they are isolated by violence and social divisions.

This Arendtian vision of plurality as central to politics is important because it counters a view of power that takes the victims of narcoviolencia as a multiplicity of interchangeable human beings, grist for the machine, or for what Rossana Reguillo has termed “la narcomáquina.” Reguillo, a sociologist based at the ITESO in Guadalajara, identifies the _narcomáquina_ in contemporary Mexico as “la eliminación y desaparición sistemática de jóvenes” which is part of “un proyecto de necropoder,” referring to Achille

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10 Seyla Benhabib summarizes Arendt’s thought on appearance: “To be human is to appear in the world to others, to be present to them, to be perceived by them, to be in communication with them. For humans, being and appearance are one….Human life is life that unfolds in the world of appearances….To be alive as a human being, as opposed to being a mere body, is to act and speak with others in space and time. Being is being present, it is to appear; it is to manifest itself” (110).
Mbembe’s reformulation of biopolitics as necropolitics (“Turbulencia 67”). The *narcomáquina* destroys members of its own population, transforming innocent young people into murdered, tortured bodies. This “juenicidio” “aceita la maquinaria de la la necropolítica….No se trata de una intencionalidad explícita sino de la operación cotidiana de un sistema sustentado en la administración de la muerte” (“Turbulencia” 68).

Mexico’s *narcomáquina* first appeared with the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez beginning in the 1990s. Hundreds of women—many with similar physical features—were abducted, raped and tortured, and their cadavers disposed in public spaces. No one was ever brought to justice in these cases, as the police and prosecutors suggested that the dead women were merely prostitutes; many of them were, in reality, poor maquila workers. These murders, which occurred just as the state began decentralizing, demonstrated that some murders, no matter how public, would not be investigated, and ultimately the state was perceived as protecting the criminal organizations that carried them out. It was the first moment in which the state’s allegiance to traffickers, and the public’s vulnerability to them, became clear.

It was also a moment that marked the state’s widespread use of rhetoric that blamed victims for their own murders, and which described some citizens—first alleged

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11 Reguillo further defines the *narcomáquina* as “un poder de ocupación cuyo signo más radical es el de la transformación de la sociedad ‘desarrollista’ en una sociedad bulímica que engulle a sus jóvenes y luego los vomita: en narcofosas, en la forma de cuerpos ejecutados y torturados; en la forma de cuerpos que ingresan a las maquilas como dispositivos al servicio de la máquina; como migrantes; como sicarios, “halcones”, “hormigas”, “mulas” al servicio del crimen organizado; como soldados sacrificables en las escalas más bajas de los rangos militares” (“Turbulencia” 65). See also Reguillo, “La narcomáquina y el trabajo de la violencia.”

12 “The idea of a prostitute as an appropriate victim of sexual crime is a stereotype that was actually promoted by the administration of Governor Francisco Barrio (1992-98) and then continued when Patricio Martínez took office (1998-2004)….In both cases the government implied that it was normal that prostitutes be killed because of the nature of their work” (Tabuenca Córdoba 92-3). On the Juárez femicides, see Kathleen Staudt, Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, and remarks by Rita Segato included in Chapter Three.
prostitutes, and later alleged *narcos*—as the kind of people that the state had no duty to protect. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler considers war as the problem of understanding certain populations according to *frames* that foreclose the possibility for their recognizability and recognition. Butler writes,

> the shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as “destructible” and “ungrievable.” Such populations are “lose-able” and can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited….Consequently, when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of “the living….Part of the very problem of contemporary political life is that not everyone counts as a subject” (31).

The state spoke of those dead as essentially ungrievable, and utilized a rhetoric that spoke in terms of the degeneration of the nation which the military must guard against. In 2008, President Calderón described himself as a doctor trying to heal his gangrenous patient:

> “Llegué al quirófano sabiendo que el paciente tenía una dolencia muy grave; pero al abrirlo nos dimos cuenta de que estaba invadido por muchas partes, y había que sanarlo a como diera lugar” (Aguayo 158). The murder and disappearance of citizens was simply collateral damage in a more important struggle to beat the nation’s disease—a population “framed as being already lost or forfeited.”

In the first years of the war, the notion that most of the dead were criminals was largely unchallenged. By 2011, however, the numbers of the victims and a number of obviously innocent victims was making it clear that the victims were more than just
*delincuentes* whose deaths were ultimately a boon to society. In an effort to show that innocent people were being killed, cultural texts have represented frightening stories of ordinary middle-class, or upper-middle-class, victims of the guerra. Since statistically the victims are overwhelmingly poor, uneducated men, the cultural representation of every person in society as a potential victim can be critiqued as a hysterical reaction of the not really so vulnerable upper echelons of society. Nevertheless, the suggestion that all Mexicans are potential victims leads readers and viewers to question who are the subjects who are recognizable, what frames or mechanisms were producing such recognizability or unrecognizability, and furthermore, how to produce recognition more widely, such that all victims could be recognized as subjects. The sheer number of the victims ultimately suggested that the state was not an entity to be entrusted with the power to produce or deny this recognizability. Representing all members of society as vulnerable to violence—and therefore vulnerable to being denied recognition—ultimately becomes a call to solidarity among members of the public.

At a more abstract level, this representation of all of Mexican society as vulnerable to violence is an outcry about the lost dream of Mexico as a liberal nation whose social pact would guide it into a successful democratization. Jorge Volpi analogized Ayotzinapa in 2014 to Tlatelolco in 1968, noting that both were historical moments that ended this pact: “El 68 rompió el pacto social que el PRI tenía con el pueblo mexicano y creo que Ayotzinapa rompió la mínima relación que había entre la democracia y la sociedad, entre toda la clase política y la sociedad mexicana” (Maristain, “Volpi” n. pag.).\(^\text{13}\) *Narcoviolencia* has in many ways ended the national dream of

\(^{13}\) Pablo Piccato writes in similar terms of the Tlatelolco massacre as being understood in public memory as representative of “the erosion of the belief that first-world status was within reach” (“How to Build” 92).
progress and modernity through liberal democracy. The loss of this social pact touches everyone in society, because it diminishes the belief that society can self-determine its path and become the kind of society that the public wants, through the public’s participation and guidance.

The works examined in this dissertation go beyond demanding justice for the dead and disappeared. Many of them also indict members of society at large for turning away from the violence, for allowing themselves to ignore the proportions of the crisis. Literary fiction in particular asks what it means to live an honorable life amid *narcoviolencia*—not just for the most vulnerable members of society, but also for those who live in relative security, the presumed readers of the works of Roberto Bolaño or Daniel Sada. What are society’s elites doing while its most vulnerable sectors are, in the language of the state, collateral damage in a necessary war?

These works demand that readers and viewers begin to think about the totality of society, and to think of practices that can unite society without recurring to the state as the natural entity that can unify and govern. For decades under the PRI, the state declared itself “revolutionary” and “authentic,” manifesting the will of the people and working to achieve those goals. The state, not the public, set the agenda, because the state was presented as a natural manifestation of the people, always unquestionably “revolutionary.” 14 With procedural democratization, hope emerged that democracy would reverse this directionality, enabling the general public’s wishes to guide the state. After

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14 In *La jaula de la melancolía*, Roger Bartra writes of “the idea of the fusion of the masses with the State, of the Mexican people with the revolutionary government” (italics in original, quoted in G. Williams, 12). In *The Mexican Exception*, Gareth Williams argues that “modernity in Mexico has been predicated on the permanent application of state power in the construction of social order, rather than on the self-limitation of state power via a legal system guaranteeing individual rights and limiting public power” (11).
narcoviolencia, the state has become so deeply mistrusted that it seems impossible that it will be able to recuperate the public’s belief that the state works on the public’s behalf, and not merely on behalf of economic or narco interests. The only possible solution seems to be thinking about possibilities for social unification and governance that are not in the hands of a state, but rather in the hands of a public that sees, knows, and trusts itself.

As the reality that the state operates on both sides of the war (that it is both against the narcotics and itself narco) is acknowledged, it has been increasingly important for the public to have spaces outside the state’s control. The conceptualization of the narcomáquina makes it seem as if there is no possible space that is untouched by the narcomáquina itself. Arendt’s view is that the human condition itself is what is exterior to power, and the ultimate bulwark against oppression: the “general capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed” (Human 6).

Even if the necropolitical narcomáquina has triumphed over the procedural democratization of 2000, cultural expression evidences the human condition in its articulation of a fundamentally democratic desire for the universal mutual recognition of the public by the public, and the consistent affirmation of a shared circumstance to be changed. Cultural texts manifest this shared sense of the intolerability of the current situation. This was supposed to Mexico’s moment of increased democracy, after the 2000 routing of the PRI from Los Pinos, and its moment of increased wealth and economic stability, promised in the 1994 signing of NAFTA. The country is, by many measures, worse off than it was during the PRI years—and especially the period between the 1940s
and 1970s known both as the years of the “dictablanda” and the “Mexican miracle.” This kind of post-transition disenchantment is hardly limited to Mexico; rather, it holds true for many countries throughout Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Nicaragua, Peru) that are nominally democratic regimes, but with high rates of violence and instability. In fact, in many countries there exists the same pattern as in Mexico, in which the state’s role is uncertain, having shifted from active to passive. The U.N. Development Program’s 2005 Report on Democracy in Latin America explains that “progress has been made with respect to unjustified deprivation of freedom, torture, and political assassinations” (in Goldstein and Arias 11-12). However, the Report continues “the vast majority of violations are not the consequence of deliberate and planned actions by the state, but, rather, of its inability (or sometimes unwillingness) to enforce the effective rule of law and to ensure that it enjoys monopoly of force” (Goldstein and Arias 11-12).15

In the case of Mexico, acknowledging the disappointment arising from unfulfilled promises about the country’s liberal contract and the benefits that should flow to citizens from such a contract is important, precisely because social movements can appear when expectations about citizens’ roles in their society have been disappointed. In The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts, the political theorist Axel

15 Enrique Desmond Arias writes, “violence in Latin America reflects not so much the failure of the state, but rather the way in which the state operates in conjunction with armed actors” (132). Arias’s interpretation of the co-existence of violence and democratic practices suggests that democratic practices can take root even while surrounded by violent practices, but the situation in many parts of Mexico shows the opposite: that the introduction of democratic practices integrated narco into local and regional politics, and that from there, narco used increasingly coercive tactics to consolidate their power (on how this played out in the Tierra Caliente in Michoacán, see Le Cour Grandmaison). Scholars from the social sciences have tried to explain the increase of violence in Latin America under democratic regimes, leading to such concepts at James Holston and Teresa Caldeira’s theory of “disjunctive democracy.” They have argued that citizens in countries like Brazil have reaped few advances in terms of their own civil rights from democratization, while democratic progress occurs at the institutional level, including new political leadership, free party organization, and the functioning of legislative bodies (Caldeira 52).
Honneth argues that anger over non-recognition is what catalyzes social movements. Honneth reinterprets movements that historians have traditionally understood as motivated by class or group interests to have actually been brought about by a violation of individuals’ moral expectations about how society views them. The catalyst for struggle is the personal feeling of shame or anger at being denied recognition, and the understanding that this feeling is shared by a wider group (163-4).

This is what makes affirmations of Mexican culture and people as inherently violent, savage, or barbaric so dangerous: they perpetuate a belief in the inevitability of violence, rather than giving voice to the intolerability of the situation. As Javier Valdez argued, Mexicans deserve a different kind of country: “Si le ganamos terreno a la indiferencia y la deshumanización y nos ponemos los zapatos de las víctimas y las entendemos y reconocemos ese narco de cada día, del otro lado del espejo, eso puede cambiar. Debe. Nos merecemos otro país” (Martínez Velázquez n. pag.).

**Outline of the Dissertation**

The dissertation consists of three chapters, each concentrating on different kinds of cultural forms and attending to the reaction that they have elicited in the Mexican press and in academic scholarship (most of which has been published by Mexican scholars working in the United States). These items range in date from the earliest, *Nostalgia de la sombra* and *2666*, published in 2004, to the film *Heli*, released in 2013. These works were, then, published, read, and viewed during a concentrated moment in time, a specific historical juncture when the issue of the state’s incompetence and complicity, active and passive roles, and the identities of the victims as more than “delincuentes” were coming...
to a head. As such, they capture the confusion of living through a present that is uncertain, and a time when the meanings of terms as essential to this study as narcos, narcoviolencia, and guerra are still shifting and unstable.

In “Structures of Feeling” from *Marxism in Literature*, Raymond Williams wrote that human experiences are always being immediately converted into a finished product; things still in process are forced into wholes, and as a result, the present is always slipping away. “In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in a habitual past tense,” Williams wrote (128). Williams urges critics to be attentive to the dynamic by which new ways of thinking emerge, guided by commonly held, abstract “structures of feeling” that necessarily precede thought. What is ambiguous, delicate, intangible—what is not yet a finished product—is to be embraced in cultural production as an expression of the true present, as the feeling of a particular historical moment.

As I worked with the texts included in this dissertation, I was often reminded of the “Advertencia” at the beginning of José Carlos Mariátegui’s *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana*, in which he warns his readers that his book is “spontaneous” rather than “deliberate,” comprised of fragmentary thoughts, and that none of the essays contained in the volume were truly finished. Rather than continuing to work on the essays, Mariátegui wrote that it was more important was that his reading public could have immediate access to the ideas he was formulating (13). The works that have emerged around narcoviolencia contain this same sense of urgency, stemming from a desire to impact a political conflict that is process. They should not necessarily be understood as “finished products,” but rather as works that express the urgency and confusion of the present moment. They have often been created quickly, with the
intention of engaging readers and viewers in an immediate dialogue about the world the
works represent—a world continuous with the world in which readers and viewers live.
The same might be said of academic scholarship, especially by public intellectuals living
in Mexico—Rossana Reguillo and Sayak Valencia, for instance—whose work functions
as both scholarly analysis and as an intervention in the public sphere, a denunciation of
the intolerability of the violence, directed toward other members of the public.

Chapter 1, titled “Narcoviolencia in Mass Culture: Crime Novels and Feature
Films,” analyzes mass-market crime narrative in the form of a detective series by Élmer
Mendoza; a sicaresca novel by Eduardo Antonio Parra following a narco hitman; and the
films Miss Bala and Heli, both of which center on the kidnapping and rape of an innocent
young woman. In Chapter 1, I argue that detective novels and films bring into existence
an affective community searching to understand the structural causes behind individual
sources of grief and suffering. Crime fiction is appealing because it is able to locate
personal experiences of frustration, fear, anger within a broader political framework.
Narconovelas elucidate invisible alliances and networks, “map” hidden networks of
narco money and power, attest to the difficulty of the silence and complicity that is times
the public’s only option, and consider the illusion of power that association with narcos
offers to members of the public. As the victims of narcoviolencia have shifted from
marginalized and vulnerable populations to include different kinds of people, the films
Miss Bala and Heli can be interpreted as reactions to the broadening category of criminal
during the “guerra.” The films articulate the emptiness of this category in a regime in
which vulnerability is the rule rather than the exception.
Chapter 2, “Writing Beyond the Lettered City: Literary Fiction Faces Narcoviolencia’s Victims,” focuses on the novels Contrabando by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, El lenguaje del juego by Daniel Sada, and “La parte de los crímenes” from 2666 by Roberto Bolaño. If the novels and films analyzed Chapter 1 capture the first-person experience of fear, confusion, and anguish amid narcoviolencia, the works of Chapter 2 offer a broader evaluation of the overall problem that narcoviolencia presents to the country, and trace how narcos were able to gain so much control over the political system. These works represent the violence as emerging from the inequalities, isolation, and invisibility of neoliberalism’s peripheral spaces: rural Mexico where poppy and marijuana are grown and where other narcotics are processed, and in border cities where it is trafficked to the United States. In this sense, narcoviolencia can be understood as the newest iteration of the hardships suffered as the region attempts to integrate into global capitalism, and as long-held state narratives about modernity and progress falter. Where crime fiction places no blame on members of the public struggling to survive the violence, literary fiction sharply indicts the figure of the intellectual: the elite letrado class has realized too late their access to power has dissolved, and that their gaze has been diverted from the country’s peripheries, which can no longer be conceived of as peripheries. What possibilities does the letrado have to redeem himself from his distance from these places and from the victims during narcopower’s rise? All three novels analyzed in this chapter address the question of literature’s role amid narcoviolencia, and in different ways, the novels ask whether it is possible for literature to return to a redemptive role in society, and whether representation of narcoviolencia can truly
mitigate it. All address the issue of whether the writer, who is shown as absent from public life, can return to it.

Finally, Chapter 3, “The Contested Terrain: The Spectacle of the Violated Body in Visual Culture,” deals with narcoviolencia as a form of terrorism that functions through alienating spectacle, with bodies deprived of subjectivity and the rights sought during the 90s push for democratization. This chapter interprets images of violence in the mainstream news media, which has adopted the nota roja aesthetic; works of art photography by photojournalist Fernando Brito; and a controversial art installation by Teresa Margolles titled ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?, which was Mexico’s entry to the Venice Biennale in 2009. The chapter begins by exploring why writers, journalists, and intellectuals have failed to counter the state’s narratives about the violence, and sketches out the anxieties of the old guard of public intellectuals still grappling with the marginalization of their role in society—and the role of lettered culture—in the twenty-first century. In addition to the state’s disavowal of the violence, the lack of counter-narratives in the media has made photography of narcoviolencia’s corpses into iconic images, where viewers search for truth about the war. The artists in this chapter have produced images and conceptual pieces that work to eliminate the iconicity that usually characterizes the cadaver of narcoviolencia, in order to create a different kind of relationship between the body and power, and to resist the cruelty of the violence and anonymity of the prevalence of the corpses.

In the works I examine in this dissertation, the questions that consistently emerge center on what role members of the public can have in a society overtaken by dehumanizing violence, some of which is perpetrated by the state. In the liberal tradition,
it was expected that a critical public could restrain state power and hold actors accountable. To what extent is it possible, in the context of contemporary *narcoviolencia*, for a critical public to restrain power? What cultural spaces exist that can support the emergence of a critical public? In what voices will a public contest this dehumanizing violence? And how can members of the public emphasize their resistance to violence over their acutely felt vulnerability to it? The works presented in the following pages formulate these questions and begin to search for their answers.
Chapter 1

_Narcoviolencia in Mass Culture: Crime Novels and Feature Films_

People of a same period and collectivity, who have lived through the same events, who have raised or avoided the same questions, have the same taste in their mouth; they have the same complicity, and there are the same corpses among them. That is why it is not necessary to write so much; there are key-words.


I. Introduction

In 2011, the journalist Alejandro Almazán was participating in a panel at the Feria Internacional del Libro in Guadalajara when he remarked, “Los reporteros no hemos tenido la capacidad de enseñarle a la gente a entender el crimen y la literatura está haciendo esta parte que no cuenta el periodismo” (Aceves n. pag.). This chapter investigates this suggestion that forms of mass cultural production play an important role in how _narcoviolencia_ is understood among a public eager to understand connections between violence, _narcos_, and the state. The stories of disappearances, sexual violence, torture, and murder that emerge in mass market novels and in films are ones that are often disavowed in public discourse. Fictional storytelling provides a framework for readers to try to understand some of the initial questions raised by _narcoviolencia_: Who are the actors and what are their true interests in this putative state war against _narcos_? Who are the dead and the disappeared? What experiences of trauma and loss do members of the
public hold in common? And how does narcoviolencia impact how the public conceives of own role in society?

In this chapter I examine crime narrative in a group of narconovelas and in two feature films. The term narconovela describes a novela negra in which the criminality that serves as the motor of the plot is related to drug-trafficking. Since there is so little difference between a narconovela and the novela negra of preceding generations, more than designating a new literary genre, the neologism acknowledges the frenzied uptick in the writing, publishing, and reading of these kinds of novels in the years when narcoviolencia was becoming more pronounced.16 I use the term here, but with reservations because it is often utilized in polemical language in the Mexican press, in which narconovelas are sometimes incorrectly seen to glorify narco or to capitalize on the suffering of victims.

The works’ popularity suggests the public desire for truth and a way to understand the connections between the narco-political realm and the violence of everyday life. Narconovelas illustrate narcoviolencia as a problem of the unchecked power of traffickers, the breakdown of old rules that kept the public safe, and corruption of a state (the judiciary, police, military) that protects drugs rather than citizens. These novels contain within them the sense of the surprise, frustration, and bewilderment of the public.

16 The scholar of the novela negra Glen S. Close has argued that the Mexican narconovela and the Colombian sicaresca do not meaningfully diverge from the novela negra genre. Referring to Rafael Lemus’s analysis of narconovelas in Letras Libres, Close writes, “Neither the narconovela’s definitive characteristics as summarized by Lemus (again, “colloquial language, plastic violence, regionalist pride, populism, the picaresque”) nor the sicaresca’s nearly identical components represent a departure from the established aesthetics of the hard-boiled crime fiction….Although some critics such as Tony Hilfer have preferred to posit a diametrical opposition between detective and crime fiction, here I will continue to respect the predominant understanding of the novela negra as broad generic category encompassing both detective-centered and criminal centered subgenres, both of which may give rise to subgenres of their own” (61-2)
They mockingly reproduce or criticize the dominant or official discourses used to explain *narcoviolencia*, and instead illustrate the true positions of certain actors (for example, a memorable Narcotics commander in who drives a Lamborghini and looks for cases that will prove “rentable” in Élmer Mendoza’s novels (*Balas* 57)).

Like earlier *novelas negras*, *narconovelas* express disillusionment with abuse of power, and with the mutual dependence of the state and criminal enterprises. In Mexico, crime narrative has historically been the place where we find skepticism toward those in power, and where critical ideas about the state circulate without censorship (Piccato, “Nota Roja” 196). This holds true today as well. *Narconovelas* consist of unofficial, unauthorized, illicit stories: the truth about *narcoviolencia* takes the forms of secrets and rumors that are written down, in street language, uttered by shadowy figures of the criminal underworld. They are stories understood as containing more truth than the version of events upheld by those in power.

Today crime novels also serve as a space of communication about politics in a context in which open communication has become difficult and dangerous. As Pablo Piccato found in *A History of Infamy*, his study of midcentury Mexican crime fiction, the public’s reading of lowbrow crime fiction was a strategy for improving “criminal literacy”—its ability to understand the meanings of violence in a restrictive political system in which the police and judiciary, and institutions in general, did not lead to truth or justice (*Infamy* 193-4). “Fiction was not a way to escape uncertainty but to embrace it with irony,” and crime narrative served as a form of “required reading for understanding the broken nexus between crime, truth, and justice” (*Infamy* 193).
These novels are directed toward audiences who experience the effects of *narcoviolencia* in their daily lives, and connections between readers are generated through these texts. Opening a *narconovela* by writers such as Élmer Mendoza, Eduardo Antonio Parra, Martín Solares, Bernardo Fernández, and Juan Hernández Luna, the reader is welcomed into a literature that portrays not just the world as it is, but the reader’s world as it is. The intended reader arrives to the novel with affective investment in *narcoviolencia*. The writer alludes to a shared history and to the specifics of the ongoing conflict, assuming that the reader will be in agreement about a host of social and political issues, and utilizing humor and wordplay to reinforce the intimacy of a shared experience. *Narconovelas* have a more limited circulation than literary fiction or film, a more specific readership, meaning that less needs to be explained. For example, state rhetoric can be critiqued implicitly, because the readers are already familiar with what that rhetoric is.

Mass-market *narconovelas* are addressed to readers among whom “there are the same corpses,” as in the quotation from Jean-Paul Sartre’s “What Is Literature?” that serves as this chapter’s epigraph. Sartre’s comments indicate that not only can readers bring the same historical experience or material realities to literature, they may also bring a shared sense of shame—an interest in asking questions, but also a fear that doing so will reveal a dishonorable complicity or inaction in a wartime context. Sartre explained that when a writer is engaging his contemporaries, he has the advantage that he can choose to address his reader as he would a neighbor. So, when a French writer broaches the painful history of German occupation for a French audience, he does so knowing that he is “entre nous” (71). A Frenchman writing for an American audience, on the other
hand, would need to historicize, to explicate. And in the end, the writing would lack the intimacy of one neighbor addressing another, with language that is specific but also elliptical. If one wants to make a neighbor aware of urgent information, Sartre writes, “there is no need for a long speech. ‘Look out!’ or ‘Hey!’—a word is enough, a gesture” (71). Elliptical language can be used because the context is understood: there are “memories and perceptions in common,” “the world such as each of the speakers knows it to appear to the other” (71).

The shared histories of narcoviolencia transform individual readers into a community of readers. In affirming a shared experience, the texts work against the isolation and percepticide that is the goal of narco spectacle and terror. Jonathan Flatley has called the phenomenon by which fictional writing exposes the structures and processes that create a loss for the group that suffers it “affective mapping.” Literature, in Flatley’s model, can illustrate “the shared historicity of…affective life” and transform the reader’s melancholia, understood as a personal affliction, into a productive relationship to a political problem (84). Affective mapping “make[s] cognitively accessible the experiences of depression and despair in their local, subjective, emotional sense to allow for a self-analysis of one’s own emotional life so that one may begin to exert some agency in relation to it” (122).

The affective maps provided by crime novels allow the reader to see his relationship to broad historical forces, as well as how his situation is experienced collectively by a larger community. The reader is prompted to ask: What structures,

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17 Flatley is following Fredric Jameson’s concept of “cognitive mapping.” Flatley’s primary area of study is European modernism, and he argues that modernism is a practice that seeks to change an experience of loss into a productive relationship among people. Modernism under this conceptualization is writing that directs readers’ attention to pain that has no solution.
discourses, institutions, and processes are at work in taking something away from me?
And with whom do I share these? In prompting these questions, texts hold the potential to
cohere groups, a potential we may understand as political; Flatley argues that recognizing
a shared affect created by a broad structure lays the groundwork for that group to
recognize its own agency.

Reading narconovelas as providing “affective maps” and spaces to address
complicity is an important divergence from the way “narcoliteratura” is usually
interpreted. The dominant mode for interpreting drug themes in literature and film
derives from works that emerged from Colombia in the 1990s. Novels such as Fernando
Vallejo’s La Virgen de los sicarios (1994) and Jorge Franco’s Rosario Tijeras (1999), as
well as the films of Víctor Gaviria, function very differently from Mexican narconovelas.
Those Colombian works provide elite and middle-class readers the illusion of gaining
access to racialized urban gang culture. The Colombian narratives place the reader in an
ethnographic position from which he must attempt to comprehend and empathize with
someone different from himself: often a letrado narrator tells the story of a violent, poor,
marginalized, racialized subaltern with whom he becomes sexually involved. The
letrado’s relationship with this subaltern character gives the letrado access to otherwise
unknown spaces: the dangerous comunas. This way of storytelling is itself a
contemporary iteration of a model that is the legacy of nineteenth-century. In the
“foundational fictions” of the region, a letrado and a subaltern are romantically brought
together, with the letrado attempting to bring the subaltern under control, to civilize her
for the larger good of the nation. The Colombian novels of the 1990s have been read as
revealing elites’ nostalgia for the old, imagined capacity of the lettered political class to
enlighten the subaltern subject, thereby bettering her own life and making the nation safe from the violence of barbarity.  

In Mexican narconovelas, in contrast, there are not two disparate characters representative of distinct social classes, who cannot “see” one another and who inhabit different spaces. Narcoviolencia—and the fear, vulnerability, helplessness, frustration, and anger that result from it—are what the readers have in common. Since the poor are disproportionately vulnerable to violence, some scholars have critiqued this vision of narcoviolencia as presenting a threat to all members of the public, regardless of social class, as a kind of hysterical middle-class response. However, what is important is that unlike in Colombian storytelling, drug violence is not understood as deepening social divisions. Mexican crime narrative represents narcoviolencia as creating suffering for a single, common public. Narcoviolencia is understood in these novels and films as an expression of a necropolitical regime that has no regard for the identities of the victims. Since every citizen can be produced as an ungrievable subject, to use Judith Butler’s term, the entire population is vulnerable.

In this chapter I analyze works by two esteemed writers of low-brow Mexican narrative (perhaps a contradiction in terms): Élmer Mendoza and Eduardo Antonio Parra.

18 See Juana Suárez, Sitios de contienda: producción cultural colombiana y el discurso de la violencia on Fernando Vallejo (104-11). See Mary Louise Pratt, “Tres incendios y dos mujeres extraviadas: El imaginario novelístico frente al nuevo contrato social” in Espacio urbano, comunicación y violencia en América Latina (2002) for a critique of sexual exclusion in La virgen de los sicarios. See Jáuregui and Suárez on the trope of letrados who long for societies organized according to old rules. The narrator of Rosario Tijeras explains contemporary urban violence by describing the longstanding violent way of life, a way of life in their “genes,” among a certain sector of Colombians: “La pelea de Rosario no es tan simple, tiene raíces muy profundas, de mucho tiempo atrás, de generaciones anteriores; a ella la vida le pesa lo que pesa este país, sus genes arrastran con una raza de hidalgo e hijueputas que a punta de machete le abrieron camino a la vida, todavía lo siguen haciendo; con el machete comieron, trabajaron, se afeitaron, mataron y arreglaron las diferencia con sus mujeres. Hoy el machete es un trabuco, una nueve milímetros, un changón. Cambió el arma pero no su uso. El cuento también cambió, se puso pavoroso, y del orgullo pasamos a la vergüenza sin entender qué, cómo y cuándo pasó todo. No sabemos lo larga que es nuestra historia pero sentimos su peso” (32).
Mendoza has written a series of three novels (2008-2012) set in Culiacán and protagonized by the police detective Edgar Mendieta. Parra has written a sicaresca novel, *Nostalgia de la sombra* (2004), that follows the trajectory of a sicario (hitman) in Monterrey. I end with an analysis of two feature-length films, Gerardo Naranjo’s *Miss Bala* (2011) and Amat Escalante’s *Heli* (2013). They articulate the difficulty of understanding how narco power functions, of establishing the truth, and of recognizing what trafficking offers to those who work in its service. They also reveal the confusion and frustration of those who live with violence and uncertainty as part of their daily lives, and an anger when narco interests prevail over justice. The films, which imagine the suffering of kidnapped and tortured protagonists, explore the increased vulnerability of innocent members of the public, and the changes this has on the social fabric of the peripheral cities where narcoviolencia prevails. The films are made possible by U.S. and Spanish funding, and they circulate more widely than the narconovelas. Still, they go to lengths to represent the spectacle of narcoviolencia with visual fidelity to the images that emerge in the media and nota roja, demanding an almost masochistic engagement and creating the potential for a cathartic experience for viewers whose own world is reflected on the screen.

Despite the spectacular visibility of the destruction that narcoviolencia causes—the staged cadavers, the narcobloqueos of its highways—as a structure narcoviolencia is invisible, too powerful and enormous for the public to see. According to the novels, this invisibility generates narcoviolencia’s power, because members of the public are unable to understand their own positions in its structure. Because the public cannot see how narcoviolencia works—who the actors are, what the alliances are, and what the
motivations are behind murders—the public is endlessly caught in a fruitless process of trying to understand what is happening and why individuals are vulnerable, rather than being able to develop a contestatory response to the structure of narcopower itself. Moreover, the sense that narcopower is omnipotent at once creates a sense of helplessness among the public and makes the cartels alluring and glamorous, because association with narcos is a way to reject the vulnerability of living in territories where the state protects narcos and narcotics rather than the public.

Fredric Jameson has argued that conspiracy films and detective novels are allegories for the failure of subjects to understand the social totality of late capitalism. Capitalism is enormous, threatening, but not easily “mapped,” and the paranoia inherent in conspiracy and detective forms signals that capitalism is a problem too vast to be represented, understood, assimilated. Conspiracy thinking takes the place of understanding the totality of social conditions and according to Jameson replaces political thinking: “Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the post-modern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system” (286). Detective and sicaresca novels accomplish a task similar to conspiracy films when they place the protagonist—and the reader—in a complex web he cannot immediately understand. But rather than highlighting the vastness and ubiquity of capitalism broadly defined, the novels bring readers’ attention to the vastness and ubiquity of one part of capitalism’s (mal)functioning: drug networks.

What is at stake in the narconovelas is the question of how drug trafficking can be represented in a way that helps readers understand the complex and dynamic networks
and relations that ultimately affect them. Recently Alberto Toscano has revisited 
Jameson’s “cognitive mapping,” and analyzing texts’ demand that readers “see it 
whole”—that they “confront the complexity of that ‘it’ –be it contemporary capitalism 
and/or the political machinations of an imperial security state” (Toscano 75). Locating 
individual subjects in vast, totalizing, invisible networks is an effort to counter-totalize 
the totalization of capitalism and/or the state. Representing social totality means 
confronting the difficulty of knowing and the epistemic limitations presented by 
contemporary times. The disorientation in the texts that Jameson used as the basis for his 
theory of “cognitive mapping” are ones that, like Mexican narconovelas, emphasize 
disorientation because “among the first products of genuine striving for orientation is 
disorientation” (Toscano 65). The individual must understand how his existence is 
dictated by the trends of his time, and then locate and control the relevant “levers” that he 
must push in order to “diminish powerlessness” (Toscano 70).

The works that I study in this chapter have not all been embraced by Mexican 
critics or the U.S. academy. I study them because I believe that it is in these works that 
an important initial reaction to narcoviolencia took place. Concurrent with and even prior 
to major social mobilization and protest—such as that initiated by Javier Sicilia in 2011 
or the disappearances of the Ayotzinapa normalistas in 2014—these works offered a 
space to think about a problem denied by the state, and often denied by the country’s 
public intellectuals. They are works in which the public could recognize a nascent 
political crisis and see that other members of the public were also searching for ways to 

19 In this chapter I will explore the negative criticism that narconovelas have received generally, but 
Mendoza and Parra have also been objects of serious academic analysis by scholars such as Gabriela Polit 
Dueñas, Diana Palaversich, Miguel G. Rodríguez Lozano, Ignacio Corona (on Mendoza), and Nora 
Guzmán, Ignacio Sánchez Prado, and Hermann Herlinghaus (on Parra).
understand *narcoviolença* and for the forms in which the public could have power against new configurations of narcopower. In examining these texts in this way, I am not examining texts “as reflections or expressions of prior social forms, but rather as sites, like social situations, where multiple forms cross and collide, inviting us to think in new ways about power,” to quote Caroline Levine’s *Forms* (122).

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote, “Respect for human dignity implies recognition of my fellow-men or fellow nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or co-builders of a common world” (139). The political sphere is composed of relationships among individuals who view themselves and others as agents, who believe in a responsibility and a capacity to design the kind of societies in which they live. The *narconovelas* are directed out toward readers who could be such “co-builders of a common world” if they knew that one another existed, and if they shared a common medium through which to speak to one another. In the early years of the rise of *narcoviolença*, such forums for the exchange of ideas about violence were difficult to find.

At the same time, the *narconovelas* also describe what makes it so difficult to envision a shared potential to build the world. In crime narratives we can see how characters’ vulnerability to physical violence dissolves their own sense of agency, and generates a skepticism or distrust toward others’ agency. We can see a *narcoviolença* that appears as a superstructure in which individuals are ensnared without their even being able to locate their place within it. Andreas Huyssen reformulates Arendt’s view when he describes modernity as a time of isolation, when it is impossible to see each other as members of a shared community, or as co-builders of the world. In modern
times, Huyssen writes, the individual has lost the sense of community that existed in the past and sees his own life as irrelevant in the course of history: “It is as if modernization speaks itself as a machinery of discourses on whose grids individual subjectivities are simultaneously constituted and imprisoned, even stunted and mutilated” (Huyssen 121). How to move beyond the painful, confusing present of a regime that imprisons, stunts, and mutilates subjectivities? How to move forward in creating a community when it appears that there is none, to understand the potentialities of subjectivities rather than their limitations, and to situate the isolated individual amid sweeping historical changes?

Mendoza and Parra have produced novels that attend to how living with violence is felt, accepted, rejected, perpetuated—to what sense of vulnerability, of right and wrong, of self, of family becomes internalized by individuals in violent, risky, unjust environments. This fiction is concerned with making sense of the experience of living with violence more than with condemning party politics, democratization, economic liberalization and other changes that have enabled narcoviolencia (such condemnation is common among works of literary fiction, as I argue in Chapter 2). One can read the works of fiction being published by Mexican writers today and see necropolitics—what Reguillo has termed “la narcomáquina”—at work in the scenarios described, in which the deaths of some citizens matter, and the deaths of others go completely ignored, unpunished, and unmourned. One can see a state of exception in which the forces of the Mexican government operate with power over the citizenry they are supposed to protect, and see the concept of citizen emptied of its meaning. However, the exertion of power is only half of the equation. Power, in order to be power and not enslavement, is exerted against a subject with a will: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar
as they are “free”” (Foucault, “Power” 139). The novels provide insight into how the experience of violence is felt and how the subject struggles against subjectification.

II. “¿Qué significa escribir hoy en este contexto?”

Élmer Mendoza’s police detective “El Zurdo” models the way that investigation can transform suspicion, rumor, and public secrets into an earnest search for the truth of how and why a murder has taken place. In addition to the vastness of narcopower that makes it invisible, narcopower likewise gains power through silence. What knowledge members of the public have about narcoviolencia remains unarticulated, a kind of “public secret.” Michael Taussig has explained what he calls the public secret as a conception of social knowledge about which one knows not to know. The public secret is “that which is generally known but cannot be articulated” (Defacement 5). Taussig writes about how, living in Colombia in the 1980s, he observed “so many situations in which people dared not to state the obvious,” times when ordinary Colombian citizens found themselves in dangerous situations involving police, military, and paramilitary actors, in which corruption and collusion blurred the lines between those groups. Ordinary citizens in this

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20 Taussig writes: “This reconfiguration of repression in which depth becomes surface so as to remain depth, I call the public secret, which, in another version, can be defined as that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated, first drawn to my attention in an extreme form in Colombia in the early 1980’s, when there were so many situations in which people dared not state the obvious, thus outlining it, so to speak, with the spectral radiance of the unsaid; as when people were taken off buses and searched at roadblocks set up by the police or military, the secret being that these same police and military were probably a good deal more involved in terrorism and drug running than the guerrilla forces they were pitted against. Likewise, but in a different register, was what people in the towns and hamlets in northern Cauca, Colombia, where I’ve lived on and off since 1969, call “the law of silence,” a phrase I first heard in the early 1980’s when, side by side with the suspension of civil liberties and the imposition of military rule via recurrent “states of emergency,” mutilated corpses would mysteriously appear on the roads leading to town….We all “knew” this, and they “knew” we “knew,” but there was no way it could be easily articulated, certainly not on the ground, face-to-face.” (Defacement 5)
context knew not to know what was obvious but prohibited knowledge, and instead survived by maintaining “a law of silence.”

As I will show, Élmer Mendoza’s narratives allude to the existence of secret information that on some level is information that is already known or suspected by different characters, often by marginalized informants who spend their days in Culiacán’s streets, “nobodies” who can observe without drawing attention to themselves. This notion that the public has access to knowledge that might be true even if it cannot yet be stated is an important one, the beginning of an understanding that the public already has access to alternative explanations or narratives of events than what is provided by the state and the media.

Another crucial feature of narconovelas is the assertion that they contain that victims of deserve justice. In Mendoza’s La prueba del ácido, the primary victim, Mayra, is a stripper and occasional prostitute whose clients include politicians and narcos. She is not innocent, but El Zurdo insists that her killer must be brought to justice. He offers a rationale that responded squarely to the state’s assertion that the victims of narcoviolencia were themselves narcos, and that the high numbers of dead were evidence that criminals were being eliminated from society. The laconic character El Zurdo reacts to police and prosecutorial pressure not to investigate Mayra’s death by remarking: “Como ves, una teibolera y un sacerdote no valen lo mismo. Un taxista y un matemático tampoco, ¿y cuando están muertos, acaso no son iguales?” (132).

Mayra is actually, as we learn during the course of the novel, an ex-lover of Zurdo’s, and he is deeply affected by her death. When Letras Libres reviewed La prueba...

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21 Taussig’s formulation echoes Foucault’s concept of knowledge: knowledge is simply what is socially recognized as such, and truth is what works in society as truth (Grosz 146-7).
del ácido, the reviewer misapprehended the reason for making Mayra an ex—writing that this was a “recurso fácil que sirve para explicar por qué a un policía mexicano le iba a interesar resolver un crimen” (García Ramírez, “La vida” n. pag.). In fact, el Zurdo is represented throughout the series as committed to finding the truth, and particularly devoted to marginalized members of society. His memories of Mayra only reinforce the sense that she was a person with family, dreams, and desires, a person to be mourned. When Mayra’s cadaver is found, Zurdo is disturbed to see that one of her nipples has been sliced off—a “signature” found in so many of the Ciudad Juárez femicides of the late 90s and early 2000s. For readers familiar with the state of Chihuahua’s claims that the women murdered in Ciudad Juárez were strippers and prostitutes who should have been at home with their families, Mayra’s identity reads as a politically charged assertion that a life is a life and that all people deserve justice.22

The comments that Letras Libres published about La prueba del ácido are representative of a dismissiveness toward narconovelas in the cultural establishment. The author of the review determined that La prueba was “fallida, no ofrece al lector un buen enigma a resolver,” although, on a positive note, “cumple con las normas del género [de novela negra]” (García Ramírez, “La vida” n. pag.).23 The condescending reviews toward one of Mexico’s most successful writers of mass literature suggest certain readers’

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22 On the state’s assertions about the Ciudad Juárez victims, see Kathleen Staudt, Violence and Activism at the Border and Ignacio Corona and Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (eds), Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border. Rita Segato uses the term “signature” to refer to the signs of torture on the bodies of murdered women is Juárez.

23 Letras Libres’s review of La prueba del ácido reads: “Como novela policiaca La prueba del ácido es fallida, no ofrece al lector un buen enigma a resolver, las claves del crimen las tiene el autor y las va soltando poco a poco. Es un juego que a él solamente divierte. Como novela negra es un poco más entrenada, cumple con las normas del género” (García Ramírez, “La vida” n. pag.).
misapprehension of the role the novels play and the attraction they hold for fans of the series.

Some of the critiques leveled against *narconovelas* claim that the texts are perversely obsessed with marginality and abjection, that they are “populist,” in poor taste, that they exploit a national tragedy, and that they are not “literary” but rather commercially-oriented products.\(^{24}\) The debates around *narconovelas* have been rancorous at times, suggesting that what is at stake is not the quality of this or that novel. Instead, the debate reveals the contentiousness over the question of what counts as literature at this particular historical juncture—after the fall of the PRI, after the fall of the lettered city, and in the midst of a national crisis. These debates signal the anxiety of the literary establishment toward their role in society, at present and in the future. For what kind of audiences do writers write? And in whose service, explicitly or implicitly, do they write? Whether and to what degree must literature intervene in the public sphere? Mexico’s cultural elites have a reputation of having been coopted by the state at crucial moments in the country’s history.\(^{25}\) In 1990s, in Vargas Llosa’s famous remarks in which he referred

\(^{24}\) See Gabriela Polit-Dueñas for a summary of the debates that have taken place in *Letras Libres* and following the 2005 Feria Internacional del Libro in Guadalajara (65-6). These debates were initiated by an often-cited highly polemical *Letras Libres* article, in which Rafael Lemus defined the *narconovela* as containing “lenguaje coloquial, violencia plástica, orgullo regionalista, populismo, picaresca” (n. pag.). More recently, detractors have accused *narconovelas* of being too focused on marginality and violence; for example, the novelist and critic Valeria Luiselli has referred to: “una incomprensible y mal concebida fascinación por…lo subalterno y lo abyecto” (n. pag.). Diana Palaversich writes: “Many writers, especially those who emerged in the commercial boom, have approached the phenomenon of narco-trafficking and violence not as a national tragedy but as inspiration for an adrenaline-driven action novel, yet another sign that the literary imagination of narconovelistas is defined, as already mentioned, by action-films and media reports. Furthermore, this predilection for action-driven fiction and the perpetrators of violence is undoubtedly propelled by market demand for a ‘light’ and thus more profitable rendering of this complex topic” (“Contrabando” 33). Héctor Hoyos writes, “A growing body of Colombia and Mexican novels….present highly readable stories, which above all do not question the narratives and visual structures of the War on Drugs, itself a function of geopolitics, or of the major underlying issue that is the growing transnational gap. Questioning such things would be, so to speak, bad for business” (150-1).\(^{25}\) A tepid response to the Tlatelolco massacre in its immediate aftermath is one of the most prominent cases of such failures. The historian Nicola Miller argues that more than 1968, it was in 1976, when then-
to the PRI as “la dictadura perfecta,” he also publicly condemned the country’s intellectuals: “Yo no creo que haya en América Latina ningún caso de sistema de dictadura que haya reclutado tan eficientemente al medio intelectual, sobornándolo de una manera muy sutil” (Volpi 285). Will this moment of narcoviolencia be another moment when the elite will be perceived to be acting complicitly with the state in failing to generate a response to the violence? How will they be judged in the years after the “guerra contra el narco”?

In contrast, writers from the country’s northern states and its northern border have made numerous remarks about the impossibility of not writing about narcoviolencia, even when this means that their literature is sometimes demeaned as more “social” rather than “aesthetic.”26 Cristina Rivera Garza, who writes literary fiction and has experimented with the conventions of the novela negra (in her novel La muerte me da (2007)), suggests that the narco crisis creates an ethical imperative to write. In her book of essays Los muertos indóciles, she asks:

¿Qué significa escribir hoy en ese contexto? ¿Qué tipo de retos enfrenta el ejercicio de la escritura en un medio donde la precariedad del trabajo y la muerte horrión a constituyen la materia de todos los días? ¿Cuáles son los diálogos estéticos y éticos a los que nos avienta el hecho de escribir, literalmente, rodeados de muertos?” (19)

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26 See the discussion later in this chapter of the reception of Parra’s work.
Eduardo Antonio Parra addresses this issue similarly by posing questions about the “sensibilidad” of a generation surrounded by narcoviolencia and by the testimonies of victims and victims’ families:

¿Cómo afecta esta situación a un escritor, o a un grupo de escritores, que además, por si esto fuera poco, deben escribir sus historias después de leer en la prensa el recuento de los cadáveres del día, las notas sobre los enfrentamientos entre sicarios y fuerzas federales, los testimonios de las viudas y los deudos? ¿En qué estado de ánimo se escribe? ¿Cuál es la ‘sensibilidad’ de nuestra época?

(“Prólogo” 10)

The fact that the authors pose these as questions suggest an uncertainty about the responses at this early stage.

The crucial difference between writers like Rivera Garza and Parra and most of Mexico’s prominent writers and intellectuals is that Rivera and Parra are from the North: Rivera Garza is from Matamoros, and now resides in San Diego, while Parra lives in Monterrey. Élmer Mendoza lives in Culiacán. In her book Narrating Narcos: Culiacán and Medellín, Gabriela Polit Dueñas explains the negative attention directed toward narconovelas in venues such as Letras Libres and the Feria Internacional del Libro as stemming from these writers’ status as outsiders not because they write mass literature, but because they are northerners: they are not implicated in the same networks of the Mexico City cultural industry as are the majority of literary critics and cultural magazines (65). Moreover, narcoviolencia emerged much earlier and much more severely in the northern states. Only with narcoviolencia growing outside of the north—in Guerrero, Michoacán, Morelos, Veracruz—was it recognized as a national crisis.
However, the protests of the Mexican establishment about *narconovelas* are not unique to the Mexican cultural context. Similar concerns about the direction of Latin American literature were raised during the 1990s and early 2000s. From Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil, where growing ghettos and increasing drug and gang violence worsened public security and class relations, the estética da fome of the 1960s seemed to be undergoing a renovation.\(^{27}\) Popular films such as *Rodrigo D. No Futuro* (Colombia, 1990), *La vendedora de rosas* (Colombia, 1998), *Amores perros* (Mexico, 2000), *Cidade de Deus* (Brazil, 2002), *Ônibus 174* (Brazil, 2002), and *Secuestro Express* (Venezuela, 2005) reacted to violence in the cities. The films’ becoming international successes created concerns about what kind of images of their countries were being projected around the world; these were not “diplomatic” films that represented their countries as ideal sites for tourism or foreign investment. Among scholars, these cultural products were understood to represent the deteriorating concept of citizenship and the primacy of fear in molding Latin American subjectivities. In an influential edited volume published by Susana Rotker in 2000, this constellation of developments was referred to as “ciudadanías del miedo.”

Novels by Fernando Vallejo, Jorge Franco, and Mario Mendoza appeared as representative of a new genre of criminal novel to accompany the megacity and the neoliberal order into the twenty-first century. Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola saw these authors’ novels as

\(^{27}\) Carlos Jáuregui and Juana Suárez connect Glauber Rocha’s “estética da fome” and films such as *Tire dié* (Argentina, 1960) and *Los olvidados* (Mexico, 1950) to the “pornomiseria” of Colombian director Víctor Gaviria.
In *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*, Jean Franco wrote that violence was appearing in the post-lettered city as a puzzling and catastrophic phenomenon, as threatening to the upper and middle classes’ way of life and sense of security and order: the contemporary texts are postapocalyptic, reflecting the horror of the middle classes as their whole cultural world implodes. As the narrator of the novel *La virgen de los sicarios* tells it: “In the shipwreck of Colombia, and this loss of our identity, nothing is left for us.” (222)

The idea of cultural apocalypse is echoed in *Citizens of Fear*, for example, in which Jesús Martín Barbero laments how the city has been destroyed amid dizzying urban changes:

> Those of us who study the labyrinths of urban culture do not limit ourselves to seeing only the injustice of the incessant reproduction of crime in violence. We see something else, something that leads us to consider not murder in the city but the murder of the city. (27)

For the characters of the *narconovelas* I analyze, the city can be dangerous, but the protagonists never doubt that the city “belongs” to them. El Zurdo has networks of informants serving as his eyes and ears on the streets, and he identifies with other residents of his low-class neighborhood, called “Col Pop” for “colonia popular.”

One of the major questions that comes out of 1990s and early 2000s fiction about violence is whether or not these works of literature evidence a new ethics at work in Latin
America’s megalopolises. In the same chapter of The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City quoted above, Jean Franco addresses concerns about younger generations’ aggressiveness and apparent acceptance of violence and early death as normal parts of life. The sicario Alexis from La virgen de los sicarios or the title characters from Rodrigo D. No Futuro (1990) and La vendedora de rosas (1998) offer examples of characters with an apathetic attitude toward death. Why is it, Franco asks, that “young killers” in Latin American megacities use an excessive violence that goes “beyond self-preservation”? How could it be that they do not plan to “survive beyond the age of twenty” when, in contrast, “survival at any cost and the postponement of death …is the obsession of Western societies” (222). In this way, the sicario character “tests the limits of what is intelligible to us on the outside” (222).28 As I show in this chapter, Mexican novels like Nostalgia de la sombra are interested in the same question of what motivates individuals to join cartels or gangs that demand that they risk to their lives, particularly when they are not doing so for ideological causes in which they believe. Through the Mexican narconovelas, the reasons are made intelligible, and even sicarios and drug traffickers are revealed to be more like the reader than not.

In Violence Without Guilt (2008) and Narcoepics (2012), Hermann Herlinghaus picks up on critiques by Franco, Rotker, and Martín Barbero and introduces a series of broad theoretical claims about how “apocalyptic” texts about sicarios and traffickers

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28 Jean Franco writes: “[T]he questions raised by these texts is not due simply to the apparent rejection of accepted ethical standards, for what they emphasize is an excess of violence that goes beyond self-interest….It is this ‘beyond self-preservation’ that strikes the reader of these chronicles of violence, for the young killers are perfectly conscious that they will not survive beyond the age of twenty. This stands in stark contrast to the interests in survival at any cost and the postponement of death that is the obsession of Western societies, particularly the United States. It is precisely the ‘beyond self-preservation’ that tests the limits of what is intelligible to us on the outside” (222). Franco is analyzing here La ley de la calle and No nacimos pa’ semilla.
function. Herlinghaus, like Franco, is reacting to the surfeit of characters in Latin American literature who seem to have accepted their imminent and meaningless deaths. The conclusion Herlinghaus reaches is that the Western conception of the self cannot survive in the Medellín comunas and spaces like it—in what he terms, following Agamben, the spaces of exception. What he believes has replaced Western subjectivity and ethics is “affective survivalism.” He asserts that contemporary Latin American texts do not glorify violence at all, but rather demonstrate that where the precariousness of life is the rule, there is a different ethical code. Herlinghaus contrasts these characters’ way of life with a European and North American conception about the meaning or even sacredness of human life.

A second part of Herlinghaus’s argument, which he describes in Violence without Guilt, concerns how globalization has created “affective flows” worldwide, and specifically “affective marginalities” in the “global South.” Certain cultural and geographic territories—poor, racialized parts of Latin America—are the sites where guilt and debt (the German word Schuld, which Benjamin used in his writings, means both) are projected and where they are carried for the rest of the global culture. Herlinghaus’s theoretical method departs from a line in Benjamin’s surrealism essay: “The dialectics of intoxication are indeed curious. Is not perhaps all ecstasy in one world humiliating sobriety in that complementary to it?” Herlinghaus argues that the narratives of Latin America reflect the “humiliating sobriety” that is the dominant aesthetic-ethical mode there, while drug consumption and the society of the spectacle make North America a space of “intoxicating ecstasy.”
For Herlinghaus, North American culture does not include suffering as a defining part of experience, precisely because suffering is done for North America, on its behalf, in the global South. The quotation from Benjamin implies that drug use is the cause of affective flows: that “intoxication” (drug use) in the North creates “humiliation” (suffering) in the South. For Herlinghaus, the “intoxication” or “intoxicating ecstasy” refers to the notion of drug use as a pleasurable and hedonistic form of numbing oneself akin to binging on violent television and video games. This definition of drug use as facile retreat from reality is a limited one. (In contrast, in Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania, Avital Ronnell has written of the painfulness of a body in the throes of addiction—of a body is awoken each morning already in a state of need.)

The novels I examine do not support Herlinghaus’s claim that there is a new, different kind of ethics in Latin America because of the undeniable precarization of populations. Herlinghaus offers an astute description of spaces of exception being increasingly the norm, but I do not find any evidence that life is seen as meaningless in these spaces. In fact, I find just the opposite: there is a belief in individuals’ right to safety and justice, indignation about how the state does not protect people, and frustration, humiliation, and shame in the face of narcopower. These negative affects should be understood, following Flatley and other scholars of affect theory (Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai), as capable of generating political agency. The inclusion of murder and murderers is not a straightforward portrayal of a new affect and new ethics that provides for survival above all else. Instead, the inclusion of these characters in fiction highlights anxieties about risk, danger, and marginality and how these threaten the longstanding national objectives of modernity via development and democratization. The
violence of these narratives serves as a provocation to readers about the changes in their societies, and literature serves as a framework to think about those startling changes.

While Herlinghaus believes that texts function in such a way that they direct violence away from the global North and toward the global South, which he finds ethically problematic, other scholars have stressed that writing about otherwise invisible lives provides an inherently ethical contact with an other. Polit Dueñas interprets the entrance of narco-trafficking into the space of literature along these lines. To give an example, in one of Mendoza’s early novels, *Cada respiro que tomas* (1991), the protagonist Chuy narrates his life story using colloquialisms of the lower classes, words that readers are not accustomed to seeing written down. Polit Dueñas, referring to Levinas, argues that “[Chuy’s] vocabulary and syntax make us constantly aware of the distance that separates his world and life from ours.” (68). In this argument, it is in the reading of literature written from the perspective of a marginal subject that the reader is moved to identify with that subject, and this is understood as inherently ethically positive. This argument is similar to scholarly interpretations of Colombian cultural production. For example, Carlos Jáuregui and Juana Suárez argue that Víctor Gaviria’s films create a Levinasian imperative of responsibility before the Other by making the viewer face the “incomprehensibilidad y alteridad del Otro,” an “Otro” conceived in neoliberal urban culture as “desecho humano” (386).

When violence appears as a phenomenon that can be resolved by the identification of one human being with another, it appears less as a macropolitical problem generated by structures of power than as one that could be resolved if only members of the public were more openminded: the burden is on a single subject to
recognize and respond to another single subject. It also means that we are constantly thinking about a reader for whom the protagonists are other, rather than thinking about what characters have in common with the readers. In Mexican *narconovelas*, characters such as the prostitute Mayra are not others for El Zurdo—and by implication for the reader—despite behavior that has marked them as “criminal.” They may be “Other” for the state, but the point is that they are not “Other” for readers and members of the public. This notion of the Other is left over from a time when the exception was less prevalent, Rossana Reguillo has argued. It is no longer necessarily as productive in the current political landscape in which the war machine prevails:

*Violencias* are not circumscribable to an “other” space, to a savage and far-removed heterotopia linked to a barbarism that is the opposite of civilization. They are here, in the present, located in a complex space in which the distinctions drawn by the old dichotomies are no longer tenable…neither Foucault nor Agamben articulates epistemological coordinates capable of fully assimilating and incorporating such an excess of anomaly and exceptionality. (Reguillo “Guarded (In)visibility” 199)

III. *Narconovela as Part of the Novela Negra Tradition*

Walter Benjamin observed that a traveler reading a detective story on a train is suppressing one anxiety and reveling in another. Since travelers fear uncertainties in their journeys, they redirect their anxiety toward fictional criminals, whose fate is unrelated to their own (Mendel 9). Benjamin’s observation sheds light on how detective stories thrive on a preexisting sense of nervousness, worry, and uncertainty on the part of the reader.
And indeed, the detective story has been interpreted by scholars as a phenomenon that corresponds to social, political, and economic changes. Ernest Mandel reads the detective story as symptomatic of the rise of capitalism, a time when (1) the category of bandit or rebel shifted, becoming instead a criminal who endangered private property, and (2) when the new bourgeoisie desired “a defence of and apology for the existing social order” and sought to make the new economic order palatable through ideological underpinnings (8). The threat to the wholeness of the body was particularly troubling for readers, Mandel writes, because the body was an instrument required for labor.

In D.A. Miller’s analysis of the detective story form, *The Novel and the Police* (1988), Miller analyzes the complicity between the realist novel and the model of social surveillance developing in nineteenth-century Britain, emphasizing how the power of surveillance does not appear only as a theme in the novels but also, and more importantly, as an integral part of their technical narratives. The panoptican model at the heart of the new liberal order is thus transposed to literature through the use of an omniscient narrator who is able to reach into the most intimate spaces for the reader, through the use of normalizing and classifying typologies, and finally, through transgressive erotic desires within moralizing plots. Even if the self is private, no secret

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29 Miller’s position has been critiqued by Sedgwick as too reliant on a macro narrative by which the genealogy of the modern subject is fraught with hidden violences—and it is the literary critic’s task to expose them. For Sedgwick, “modern liberal subject” lacks nuance and is part of a paranoid turn in literary criticism. See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, Chapter Four, especially 139-40.

30 In a line of thought similar to Miller’s, Joan Ramón Resina writes: “La novela policiaca construye una imagen intelectual de la represión, pero su verdadera función represiva no residen en el desenlace anecdótico de la trama sino en la proyección de un superego capaz de disciplinar la dispersión de los elementos narrativos en la conciencia del lector. El mensaje no es tanto “el crimen no paga” como la ineluctabilidad del conocimiento—cf. el ritornello del vanidoso Poirot: “I shall know”…El género postula una transparencia absoluta, que resulta represiva en sí misma, pues, como insisten una y otra vez las novelas, todo el mundo tiene algo que ocultar. Esta transparencia, presupuesta en la perspectiva privilegiada del detective, reproduce sutilmente el panópticon de Bentham, a cuya perspectiva central accede el lector identificándose con el detective….Así [el lector] se convierte simultáneamente en vigilante en vigilado. Este desdoblamiento es el principal efecto de la ideología, la cual tiene por objeto fundar un
can remain hidden from power, which operates invisibly but unfailingly. We can conclude that there is no hidden self that is not already public, and no deception that the law does not already anticipate. All that happens is already in the domain of the public, even if we believe it to be in the domain of the private (Copjec 171-2). In Mandel’s and Miller’s readings of the emergence of the detective novel, it is clear that the genre reinforced codes of liberal, bourgeois behavior in nineteenth-century Britain.

In societies that diverge from the liberal, bourgeois models of Europe, such as twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latin American societies, the detective novel cannot be said to reinforce structures of a society of control. Instead, the detective novel has developed a range of meanings dependent on its socio-political context. Thriving in Latin America since the 1930s, the detective novel has typically responded to the social conditions and concerns lived at that moment—including the introduction of mass culture, political instability, and urban crime. In the Mexican iteration of the detective novel, authors have historically condemned state corruption and unbalanced relations of power. Less important than solving the crime and catching the perpetrator has been pointing out that the criminals are in fact the national institutions: government, police, and unions, as well as the ruling class (Braham 66). In this sense, the Mexican detective genre has long contained novels of “antidetection,” Dennis Porter’s term to describe detective stories in which attaining the knowledge necessary to solve the crime is not feasible: the classical Western hermeneutic fails to function in the local reality the novel portrays (Porter 245-259); for Porter, Kafka, James, Robbe-Grillet, and Borges are

punto de vista que trascienda la división entre lo público y lo privado. Para la ideología toda privacidad y toda particularidad son en principio sospechosas, y sólo se toleran en la medida en que pueden inscribirse en las categorías epistémicas de lo público” (El cadáver 39-40, my emphasis).
exemplary authors of “antidetection.” Persephone Braham argues that detective novels thrive during times of social change, when they serve as “a mode of reflection and judgment on a society that is declining” (17). This is consistent with Porter’s broad assertion that the detective novel is fundamentally nostalgic in nature, because it longs for the restoration of a lost order amid criminal chaos (251).

Following its initial popularity in the 1930s and early 1940s, the Mexican *novela negra* experienced a renaissance in the 1970s with writers such as Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Rafael Ramírez Heredia. And an older generation of writers, such as Vicente Leñero, Jorge Ibargüengoitia, and José Emilio Pacheco made the *novela negra* part of their oeuvre after 1968. In the 1970s, as intellectuals were scrambling to react to the PRI’s repression and violence, the writers used the genre to intensify their scrutiny of government at all levels (Stavans 121). Indeed, throughout Latin America, the detective genre proved appealing under authoritarian governments. In Mexico, the revitalization was also ushered in by the writers of La Onda, who blurred the distinction between high and low cultures, and made Mexico City the locus of criminal adventure. Detectives were not necessarily uncorruptible, as in the classical detective novel. They were sometimes violent, sometimes drinkers and womanizers, and they openly mocked the corruption of the political system (Stavans 28-9). Whereas in D.A. Miller’s analysis the detective novel buttressed a new liberal bourgeois organization of society, the detective novel in Mexico has shifted so far from that model that it became the form by which authors problematized the unjust structures of power.

Leñero, Ibargüengoitia, and Pacheco all used elements from the detective genre, though they did not consider themselves detective novelists strictly speaking. The genre
is one marked by constant evolution and displacement of the founding models (Piglia 228). It is by virtue of the genre’s hybridity that it has thrived, and it is through this capacity for evolution that we can understand the shift from the detective novel to the broader novela negra genre throughout Latin America. The scholar Glen S. Close has convincingly argued that the figure of the detective is waning, while the criminals ascend to the position of anti-heroes in Latin American fiction. In Mexico, criminals include professional assassins, heads of major drug-trafficking organizations, and common criminals.

It is important to keep this tradition of crime narrative as a place of social critique in Mexican culture in mind when reading narconovelas, because it mitigates the perception that narconovelas are a completely new phenomenon, one that has to do with publishing as a business, or one that “copies” other models of narrative. In particular, the fact that narconovelas, like the novelas negras that preceded them, are critical of the state has not been adequately reflected in scholarship. The academic Oswaldo Zavala writes of narconovelas as “literary dead-ends that reproduce the limited hegemonic vision of drug trafficking” (357). In an article subtitled “The Critical Limits of Narconarratives,” for which he won the 2015 LASA Humanities Mexico Prize, Zavala critiques Mendoza’s novels, as well as those of writers Heriberto Yépez, Orfa Alarcón, and Juan Pablo Villalobos as “commercial commodities”—and not forms of critical or literary production. Zavala writes:

First, I contend that most commercial narconarratives are formulaic texts that reinforce the mainstream media’s portrayal of drug cartels, itself partially informed by popular narcocultura. Second, I assert that most narconarratives
comfortably reproduce a mythic notion of narco mainly fashioned and
disseminated by Mexico’s governing political elites at the federal, state, and local
levels….Third, I argue that, with the exception of a few Mexican novels, only a
particular narrative trend of fiction and non-fiction published in the United States
has been able to articulate a necessary, critical, and subversive view of the official
discourse on drug trafficking and its related organizations in both countries.
(“Limits” 342)

Meanwhile, the texts that Zavala identifies as “able to articulate a necessary, critical, and
subversive view” are Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda’s *Contrabando* and Roberto Bolaño’s
*2666*, both works of literary fiction. From the United States, Zavala identifies Don
Winslow’s *The Power of the Dog* (2005), and Charles Bowden’s *Down by the River*
(2002).

Like Zavala, Christopher Domínguez Michael, a scholar at the Colegio de
México, has praised novels that sublimate political and social issues and that avoid
“cheap and commercial realism” and lauds Yuri Herrera’s *Trabajos del reino* as one such
work (quoted in Zavala, “Limits” 345). Similarly, Diana Palaversich has negatively
compared *narconovelas* to highbrow literary fiction like *Contrabando*, writing that
*narconovelas* in general “still fall short on all levels when compared to Rascón Banda’s
work: in poetical and dramatic force, ethical stand, concern for the victims, and depth and
story of the characters” (“Contrabando” 32). Héctor Hoyos has predicted that novels such
as Mendoza’s *Balas de plata* will likely be forgotten, in favor of novels like *2666*,
because Mendoza’s novels and others like them “do not question the narratives and visual
structures of the War on Drugs, itself a function of geopolitics, or the major underlying
issue that is the growing transnational gap” (152). Remarks such as these make it clear that from academia there are expectations about what a novel should accomplish in terms of the representation of and condemnation of the victimization resulting from narcoviolencia and in terms of the violence being the result of capitalism and geopolitics (and not the result of corruption or domestic politics, e.g., the decentralization resulting from the introduction of party competition).

Finally, it is worth noting that Mendoza’s novels are much less expensive than books that are imported from Spanish or U.S. publishers. The Mexican bookseller Gandhi lists the following prices for these books (in Mexican pesos): Élmer Mendoza’s Balas de plata ($149), La prueba del ácido ($188), Nombre de perro ($139); Yuri Herrera’s Trabajos del reino ($281); Don Winslow’s The Power of the Dog ($332); Charles Bowden’s Down by the River ($373); Bolaño’s 2666 ($471); and Rascón Banda’s Contrabando (not available; out of print). Mendoza’s novels, and crime fiction generally, is more materially accessible than are the works championed by academics.

Mendoza himself has spoken of his novels as “social” works, far from the kind of pure commodities Zavala, Domínguez Michael, Hoyos, and others see. Mendoza, who is also an academic (at the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa), emphasizes that his novels are an account of what is happening in the country:

Tenemos que contar lo que pasa en nuestro país. Creo que estamos haciendo literatura que no es ingenua, es social, están los elementos que intentan explicar lo que pasa en este país en esta guerra sin fronteras donde estamos inmersos (Aceves n. pag.)

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Mendoza’s works do represent an often-complicit relationship between state and *narco* actors, and the degree to which *narco* power and money have altered everyday life in Culiacán. What at least one *Letras Libres* reviewer read as problematic in Mendoza’s novels is that they are structured around a police detective who is working to solve murders during a time when there is a public perception that the state facilitates murders and cover-ups. Mendoza’s novels represent police torture and the extrajudicial murder of criminals, without *explicitly* condemning those actions. However, expecting authors to provide an outraged or moralistic critique of *narcoviolencia* is an inappropriate standard.

What *narconovelas* offer is the representation of a world of flawed actors and an articulation of how difficult it is *not* to act in corrupt and complicit ways in this environment. El Zurdo is consistently emotionally devastated in the series because he cannot necessarily act as an upright police detective, because he is not working for an honorable police force that fights criminal *narcos*; this is not the reality of the situation for a cop in present-day Culiacán. Finally, broadly, the El Zurdo series addresses how difficult, and how honorable, it is to seek justice in this new scenario.

Zavala argues that Mexican writers have taken cues from European production, writing that the *narconovela* trend was initiated by the publication of Spanish author Arturo Pérez Reverte’s novel about a female Mexican cartel leader, *La reina del sur*, in 2002:

I argue that it was only after Pérez Reverte’s *La reina del sur* that narcoliteratura became consistently relevant in Latin American literary fields, offering a bestselling formula that many authors across the continent, but especially in Mexico has sought to reproduce (“Limits” 341).
Another way to explore the distinctions between what Mexican *narconovelas* offer versus their Colombian, or Spanish iterations is to examine what makes the detective or *sicaresca* genres appealing to authors and to readers. What do these literary forms offer in the present political conditions? And what are Mexican *narconovelas* are doing differently from their Spanish or Colombian counterparts?

The noir protagonist’s existential angst is one of the genre’s conventions that has been exaggerated by contemporary Mexican writers. The protagonist in crime fiction is almost always a male who is lonely, without a wife or a mother, and is unable to live up to a past masculine ideal about masculine strength, power, and fatherhood. His distance from society enables him to see the whole society more clearly—to see society for what it is. Mendoza and Parra both write protagonists who are self-hating, paranoid, and suicidal. El Zurdo and the protagonist of *Nostalgia de la sombra*, who goes by the names Bernardo and Ramiro, are both the male subjects adrift, searching for vital connections and for meaning in their societies. They are each “a person ‘to whom something has been done,’” to quote the way Robert Porfirio describes the antiheros of U.S. film noir. Porfirio writes: “most central to this hero is the loss, and an awareness of it, of all the fixed ties that bind a man to a community” (215). The protagonists’ conversations with others remain superficial, while painful, obsessive, self-destructive thoughts remain unarticulated to others around them; they only appear to the reader in the text of the novels. The novels themselves demonstrate how experiences that are unspoken are ones that are not uncommon. The novels, then, “make seemingly discontinuous social

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32 Frank Krutnik argues that U.S. hardboiled novels and film noir respond to uncertainty about what constituted masculinity and about why traditional formulations of masculinity have lost authority in that era. Elena Gomel writes about how the “psychic dislocation” of Raymond Chandler’s well-known detective, Marlowe, allows him to view society more realistically (118).
experiences necessarily shared ones” (Thompson 176). Echoing Sartre and Flatley, the scholar Jon Thompson writes that in crime fiction “there is a move away from the solipsistic perception of the isolated, atomized individual. Alienation exists, but it is often recognized as a shared experience” (176).

Without the ability to share with others, to express one’s own suffering through language, the characters become ill. Nostalgia’s Bernardo/Ramiro spends a majority of the novel sweating and nauseous—a sensation we read about page after page—and sometimes has difficulty breathing. Being socially isolated and feeling unable to trust other people creates emotional and then physical upheaval, another convention that seems exaggerated in Latin American production. In Rubem Fonseca’s detective novel Agosto (Brazil, 1990), as the police inspector Alberto Mattos investigates a murder of political import, he regularly takes antacids and drinks milk to calm his ulcers. Mattos feels great pressure to make sense of this new reality through solving the crime and uncovering a political conspiracy, but in the end, he cannot, and he dies—not because he is killed by one of the many criminals gunning for him, but because his untreated ulcers kill him. The physical ailments that afflict male protagonists underscore how the split between one’s interior self and the public problems of violence can never remain separate. Through crime narrative, readers see the chaotic interior life of an individual against the larger social, political scenario that creates suffering at the most intimate level.

Another characteristic that narconovelas share with the U.S. film noir tradition is the exploration of the shifting boundaries and roles of the public and private spheres. Joan Copjec distinguishes between the detective novel of the Victorian era and the film noir of the 1940s by pointing out that at its core, film noir demonstrates the danger of
fetishizing the private over the public. She describes a shift in which “private space”
transformed from a residual space into a space “[we attempt to] dwell
within…exclusively” (182-3). Whereas the liberal bourgeois detective novel announced
that nothing could be private, film noir announces that privacy is the rule. Film noir
reacted against a society in which the private sphere became the only space available—in
which, to use Copjec’s language, jouissance has obscured civitas. And, furthermore,
Copjec writes, film noir warns against this increased privacy, because where the
panopticon threat of the Victorian era no longer exists, the character of privacy itself is
changed, and is no longer something to be desired.

In the narconovelas analyzed in this chapter, the private domain is the only one
available. Desperate protagonists have no community to which they can turn, and only
have access to intimate relationships to compensate for the feelings of isolation that
violence and economic precarity bring on. In the Zurdo series, the detective meets with a
psychiatrist and finally decides that rehabilitating his private, family life is the only way
out of his anxiety and depression. While in the first book el Zurdo is taking anti-anxiety
medications, by the end of the series he has renewed a relationship with an ex-girlfriend
and begun parenting a teenaged son he had abandoned. In this way, Zurdo’s nihilistic
outlook changes dramatically as he is able to see himself as a masculine family man. In
this way the male subject in crisis—because of his physical vulnerability and the
deterioration of the law protected him—can use his private life to reassert the control that
he lacks in public life. The novel Nostalgia de la sombra offers a more pessimistic
formulation. For the character of Bernardo/Ramiro, family life cannot provide a place to
compensate for the lost sense of masculine coherence and power. When work, public life, and family life are all out of control, the masculine protagonist seeks to reassert his sense of mastery through the underworld of narcotrafficking, a form of exiling oneself from the ongoing impotence, vulnerability, and humiliation of everyday life in mainstream society.

IV. The Zurdo Mendieta Series

Mendoza and Parra employ vastly different strategies to engage their readers. Parra is a provocateur whose work contains corrupt, murderous, seemingly evil characters. Mendoza, the more commercially successful of the two, holds readers’ attention through the pleasure of uncovering the truth behind a mysterious detective story; through identification with an earnest, justice-seeking protagonist; and through clever language. Mendoza’s writing makes the reader feel that he is uncovering the hidden world of police and political corruption—as if he is being let in on a secret, discovering unofficial histories and truths. The work responds to a frustration in Mexican society about what narcoviolencia indicates. The public sees the dead in the streets, but remains in the dark about the essential journalistic questions of the who, how, when, where, and why. Mendoza’s novels provide imaginary answers to these questions.

33 By “masculinity,” I refer to Kaja Silverman’s definition of masculinity as an ego that is predicated on dominance, mastery, and coherence, and which, unlike female subjectivity, denies the lack at the center of subjectivity. In her book Male Subjectivity at the Margins, Silverman writes that the ideology of Western masculinity calls upon the male subject to see himself only through the images of an unimpaired masculinity. In this way, conventional masculinity is the denial of the lack at the core of subjectivity and the masculine identification with mastery. Traumatic experiences such as war, Silverman argues, brings the male subject into crisis because the male ego is “predicated upon the illusion of coherence and control” (62).
In the Zurdo series, crimes and characters seem connected, but the surfeit of characters and the number of murders that occur during the course of any given investigation make for a complicated case, and the reader has the experience of being in a state of uncertainty throughout. Even at the end of the narratives, questions sometimes remain unanswered. These are not novels that provide conclusions that contain the violence, because the networks of power—often collusion between the state and narcos that El Zurdo uncovers—are not necessarily ended, just brought to light for the detective and the readers. This contrasts with the usual way in which a detective novel proceeds to a conclusion that provides the satisfaction of understanding and order, and that acts as “un ritual cuya finalidad consiste en impedir el contagio y expulsar la violencia; que consiste, en definitiva, en restablecer la cohesión moral de la sociedad, ubicando la violencia en un culpable” (Resina “Exorcismo” 36).

In Mendoza’s novels, while the detective may solve individual homicides, he cannot impede the networks of power that make the murders possible. Caroline Levine has described this as “casting narrative persons less as powerful or symbolic agents in their own right than as moments in which complex and invisible social forces cross,” a strategy that sheds light on the kind of violence that can be done by networks, whose power is on display in recent “network narrative films” such as *Traffic*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*, as well as the television series *The Wire* (126). Levine also argues that readings of detective novels often emphasize the establishment of closure at the story’s end, but that this ending always functions in conjunction with a long narrative middle that allows readers access to crisscrossing networks through which they see the “replaceability” of certain characters, who serve as network nodes. In the Zurdo series, even if crimes are
solved, what is truly uncovered in the course of the novel is not simply the identity of the murderer but an awareness that this power of networks supersedes the importance of individuals.

In a society in which homicide is overwhelmingly motivated by the political economy of narcotics, Zurdo’s interest is in resolving murders of the private sphere. What el Zurdo, and readers, learn during the course of the investigation is that the murders are almost never strictly murders that occur in a cordoned off private sphere. In the new reality _narcoviolencia_ presents, the borders that distinguish between public and private domains are dissolving. What first appear as crimes of passion of the private domain are actually either motivated by _narcoviolencia_ or have the capacity to disturb the networks that connect narcotraffickers and politicians. In solving the murders, el Zurdo reveals the connections in the private and public lives of police, _narcos_, politicians, and seeing these networks clearly means seeing what relationships of power are functioning in society. More than _narcoviolencia_ functioning as a cruel and anonymous _narcomáquina_, acting upon people it sees as “desechables,” the emphasis of the Zurdo novels is how the investigation can bring to light the hidden relationships and networks that sustain _narcoviolencia_.

_Balas de plata_ (2008), the first novel of the Edgar Mendieta series opens with a brutal murder. When El Zurdo arrives at the scene of the crime, he finds a corpse wrapped in a blanket. The deceased man has been castrated, his tongue cut out of his mouth, and he has been shot in the chest. When police discover the deceased’s ostrich boots (a gaudy accouterment favored by high-level traffickers), Zurdo testily demands his partner pass the case to Narcotics, and races off; the notorious detective will not squander
his skills of detection on a prosaic *narco* case. Instead, Zurdo rushes to another crime scene—this one demure by comparison. This victim, an attorney named Bruno Canizales, is found in his bed, shot in the chest.

Canizales is the son of a prominent politician who is on the cusp of winning his party’s candidacy to the presidency and is backed by the powerful Cartel del Pacífico kingpin Marcelo Valdés. At first, Bruno Canizales’s father is the primary suspect, but suspicion later shifts to Canizales’s ex-girlfriend, Samantha Valdés, who also happens to be the daughter of Marcelo. Samantha in fact believes she is the intellectual author of the murder, because she had paid a cartel *sicario* to murder Canizales. When Samantha’s *sicario* arrives to murder Canizales at his home, Canizales is already dead, a fact the hitman does not report back to Samantha.

When Marcelo Valdés realizes (incorrectly, it will turn out) that his daughter has used one of his own *sicarios* to commit the murder without his authorization, he is furious. Marcelo objects to killing those who are outside the drug trade, and to murdering for personal reasons. Here Samantha is represented as belonging to a new generation of *narcos* who are not playing according to the rules of previous generations. The boundaries designating who is a “legitimate” target have been erased, and the fracturing of cartels’ hierarchies has created uncertainty about who has authority: authorization to commit murder is no longer necessary or perhaps possible in the way it was when trafficking operated more vertically. Samantha’s hit on Bruno Canizales is particularly problematic for the Valdés family because Marcelo relies on his relationship with the candidate Canizales to conduct his business. The knowledge that Samantha murdered the politician’s son could endanger the relationships that enable the drug trade.
An important feature of these *narconovelas* is that they show readers how enmeshed individuals are the system in which they live—so enmeshed that it is difficult to grasp characters’ and readers’ place and role in that system. Zurdo believes he is a detective, when in actuality he is sometimes a dupe. The truth is always hidden by deceit and guile, and it is not just the killer who has something to hide; usually multiple characters live a double life (to the extent that several characters use two names). The novels reflect a world in which no one can be trusted, and the connections between people of different sectors—the rich and the poor, the police and the *narcos*, etc.—may not be readily apparent. In this world, suspicion is key. Survival requires a certain level of paranoia about who is an enemy and who is a friend. Zurdo can become a victim who can be lead astray by false information if he is not constantly alert to signs of the truth.

*Balas de plata* contains a number of suspects—including Canizales’s politician father and the cartel leader’s daughter—all of whom Zurdo investigates before arriving at his own girlfriend, nicknamed Goga, who is the true killer. When Zurdo confronts Goga, she responds that she was only with Zurdo to throw him off her trail, and publicly humiliates him with insults that include calling him “un novato en la cama” (250). Here, Zurdo misjudges his role in the unfolding action and fails to “see” the entire conspiracy for what it is. In this sense, Zurdo is like detective Marlowe in Raymond Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye*, in which Marlowe is actually the fall guy of the criminal conspiracy.

Mendoza used this kind plot before, in *Un asesino solitario* (1999), a novel that imagines the unfolding of events leading to the 1994 assassination of PRI candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio—a murder whose intellectual authors remain unknown. The novel follows a single character, the *sicario* Macías, (whose name evokes the disillusioned
Macías of Los de abajo). Mendoza’s Macías is commissioned to kill the PRI presidential candidate. However, in the end, Macías is both victim and perpetrator in the byzantine plot on the candidate’s life. Macías misapprehends his role in a conspiracy plot planned by unknown others—probably members of the Party—and is ultimately killed himself. Macías appears as a tragic anti-hero, a man whose desire to insert himself into national history as an agent acting with inside knowledge and of his own free will is thwarted by a larger conspiracy that makes him the fall guy.

Once Zurdo realizes that he has been duped by Goga, the reader expects for Zurdo to arrest her. Alternately, as Goga continues to insult Zurdo as a “novato,” we could imagine a scenario in which he kills her to reassert his masculine power. But instead, Zurdo does nothing while Samantha Valdés’s goons take Goga away, as Goga begs Zurdo to arrest her (“No lo hagas, Edgar, cumple tu obligación y que la justicia nos juzgue, veinte o treinta años que nos echen como quiera los pasamos” (252)). The next day, Goga’s body appears encobijada—wrapped in blankets and dumped in the street, a common indication of a narco killing. Her cadaver is made spectacularly visible, but the reasons for Goga’s murder remain between El Zurdo, the cartel, and the reader.

The novel ends with Zurdo’s partner asking him “¿hicimos lo correcto?,” to which Zurdo responds only, “No creo” (253), and showing him crying alone at home. Even though Zurdo sees himself as a member of the police and not aligned with the narcos, he ultimately cedes his own power to the narcos and allows them to punish Goga. Balas de plata’s ending suggests that in Culiacán, the cartel has stepped into the role that used to belong to the state. And Zurdo, always described as a man of the people, a man who seeks justice for the dead, is reduced to mere bystander. Even though he knows the
killing is wrong, he allows it to happen; the circumstances around him have changed him more than even he expected. Yet within the structure of the series, he remains a figure with whom the reader is supposed to identify even after complicity in this murder. It acknowledges the shamefulness of complicity with narcopower that even a man who is essentially “good,” “a man of the people,” has not been strong enough to resist it.

The novels reflect a situation in which the state no longer monopolizes violence, nor even aspires to. The power of the state is, in the novels, secondary to the power of the narcos. The novels leave the reader aware of the fictiveness of the law’s control over Culiacán. The narcos fulfill the state role as they mete out justice. This is precisely the opposite of what is found in the bourgeois European detective novel, which are structured around a contagion of violence (in which one murder leads to more) that must be stopped (Resina, Cadáver 36). Here Zurdo instead creates the situation in which more violence occurs. In fact, Joan Ramón Resina defines the detective novel as a structure in which revenge is not permitted and responsibility must be administrated through a judicial system and the “el detective representa—o recuerda—la absoluta disponibilidad de la vida por parte del Estado” (Cadáver 37).

Zurdo is not the all-seeing representative of the law that we might expect from the detective. Instead, he must be paranoid, suspicious of all people in order to survive and in order to solve the murders. The classic figure of the omniscient detective is here replaced by a panicky and paranoid detective. El Zurdo suffers greatly as he realizes that his own power is diminishing: one novel opens with Zurdo’s ambiguous, failed suicide attempt, and all refer to Zurdo’s meetings with his psychiatrist and use of anti-anxiety medications. Zurdo can no longer believe in his mastery as a detective at a time when the
law’s dysfunction is on display. Instead of embodying a tough masculine ideal, Zurdo lingers on his physical vulnerability, as multiple attempts on his life occur during the course of the novels. Here *narcoviolencia* appears to induce in Zurdo a trauma that threatens his belief in his own power, and it is this “crisis of faith” that he must confront during the series—and which ultimately leads him to re-establish his family life.34

El Zurdo does not find the killers through rationally following clues imperceptible to others. He lives in a world where the law is failing, and where also his ability to make sense of the world from a rational perspective is failing. This creates intense anxiety for the detective of the people: “Te duele tanto que jamás encontrarás al culpable,” he tells himself (*Prueba* 23). “Nada es verdad, nada es mentira,” he remarks, frustrated by his inability to find Canizales’s killer (*Balas* 257). Zurdo’s powers of detection come from accessing what others already know—or what they know without knowing. Zurdo harnesses information from regular people, investigating not as a lone scientific genius but as a detective who must collect tiny pieces of information from different characters. In *La prueba del ácido* (2010), Zurdo is able to solve the case thanks to two characters in particular: an indigent ex-drug addict and bouncer, Kid Yoreme, and the *vendedor ambulante*, El Apache, an informant who feeds Zurdo information about the comings and goings from the strip club where Mayra worked. El Apache stands out as a reliable character in a world in which so many people are untrustworthy. He has nothing to lose by telling the truth, and in this he serves as a kind of counterpoint character to the man

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34 Kaja Silverman studies this kind of trauma in the context of U.S. male subjects after World War II. In postwar U.S. films, Silverman finds a variety of moments in which male subjects return from war and suffer a “‘deep crisis of faith’ in “the dominant fiction” (67). She describes the war as a historical trauma that “brought a large group of male subjects into such an intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so withdraw their belief from the dominant fiction” (55).
who turns out to be the killer, the corrupt politician whose words are duplicitous. Kid Yoreme, who provides key knowledge to El Zurdo about the identity of the killer, has the appearance of a crazed man who roams the streets—like the protagonist of *Nostalgia de la sombra* and the character of El Chivo in *Amores perros* (2000). Both El Chivo and Kid Yoreme have actually abandoned middle-class families. Kid Yoreme’s apparent insanity and distance from society corresponds to a rare knowledge of structures of power in Culiacán—how Culiacán works, with its strip clubs, dirty politicians, and *narcos*.

For Kid Yoreme and El Apache the streets are safe havens, places where they understand the mechanisms of power in Culiacán. El Zurdo also feels best when he is working the streets. A significant portion of Élmer Mendoza’s novels chronicle the time Zurdo spends driving around Culiacán in his car. He is always going somewhere: to study the recently discovered corpse, to meet an informant, or interview a suspect. Zurdo solves the crime by circulating through the city spatially, and by entering into different worlds and environments—by mixing with members of high society and the people living at the margins. Despite the ubiquity of *narco* crimes, the cities of Culiacán and Mazatlán are familiar and comfortable for Zurdo. He eats at the same restaurant, and never gets lost, or even stuck in traffic. People may be suspect, but the city streets are a known quantity; there is no sense of the murder *of* the city to which Martín Barbero referred. In fact, in one of the novels, El Zurdo’s house is shot at multiple times from the exterior, by men armed with machine guns. Home is the dangerous space, while the city is the space where El Zurdo—with his eyes and ears of the street working for him, his reputation as a great detective proceeding him—is safe, and still belongs to him and to his informants.
In the final novel of the Zurdo Mendieta series, *Nombre de perro* (2012), Samantha Valdés hires Zurdo to investigate the murder of her lover Mariana. In the end it is the cartel, rather than the state, that acts as Zurdo’s employer. Yet within the novel Zurdo is not seen as a nefarious cartel cooperator—or a police detective who has crossed a line—but simply as the same earnest detective in search of the truth. This shift in employers reflects not only who is in power in Culiacán, but also who has the ability to employ people in Culiacán: the trafficking industry—not the state—provides jobs. And the police force is largely represented as corrupted anyway, such that working for the police is no more honorable than working for a cartel. The police and the *narcos*, the reader knows, usually work together—a collaboration foreshadowed in earlier novels with comments such as “los polis se veían contentos entre los narcos” (*Prueba* 242). Within the novel cooperation is not in and of itself negative. Each individual fulfills his calling without situating his role in the larger economics and ethics of trafficking, and without considering how the role perpetuates the violence that the city is suffering. The issue of the honorable individual’s complicity in *narcoviolencia* that is most intense in the final Edgar Mendieta novel emerges as a key critique of Eduardo Antonio Parra’s *Nostalgia de la sombra*.

V. *Nostalgia de la sombra*

*Nostalgia de la sombra* could not feel more different to a reader than the often humorous, action-packed Zurdo Mendieta series. The plot lacks verisimilitude, and yet it captures and critiques the experiences of contemporary life. In *Literaturas reales: Transformaciones del realismo en la narrativa latinoamericana contempóranea*, Luz
Horne has argued that the Latin American writers who do this are realists, even if they write in an experimental manner. In Horne’s view, realism should not refer to the style of past eras—strictly to the style of Zola or Crane, for example—but instead to a broader concept of searching for a new form that is faithful to contemporary conditions. Writers like Sergio Chejfec, César Aira, and João Gilberto Noll are by this definition realists because they are dedicated not to representing the time in which they live, but to signaling it—including its trace in their work, and producing an intervention (15).  

Parra is a prolific short story writer whose collections include *Los límites de la noche* (1996), *Tierra de nadie* (1999), *Parábolas del silencio* (2006), *Desterrados* (2013), and the novella *Nadie los vio salir* (2001). His work as also appeared in translation, with, to give one example, City Lights publishing a collection titled *No Man’s Land* (2004). Parra’s stories overwhelmingly portray the underbelly of Monterrey, imagined as cruel and perverse. It is subject matter that is horrifying and titillating at the same time, and as a result academics and critics have not necessarily embraced Parra’s literary project. In response, some academics and critics can be defensive about Parra’s writing, dwelling on how, in spite of “social” subject matter, Parra is more than a crude social realist. The UNAM professor Miguel G. Rodríguez Lozano, who publishes extensively on Northern Mexican literature, addresses Parra’s work as having “una intencionalidad estética” (30), and repeatedly employs the word “aesthetic” to describe and defend Parra’s writing.

Realism usually humanizes a character whom society views as a criminal or a degenerate, but Parra often narrates violence from the perspective—and from the bodily

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35 A parallel to this argument can be found in Anke Birkenmaier, “Dirty Realism,” in which Birkenmaier writes that novels by Fernando Vallejo, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, and Mario Bellatin “not only...insist on the historical moment and its social ramifications, but they also return to the ordering presence of the chronicler and novelist in the strong sense of the words” (490).
experience—of the victim. So his stories leave readers shocked before the sadism of the antagonist and empathetic before the suffering of the victim. As in stories by Rubem Fonseca, characters willfully humiliate weak or marginalized people, startling readers with horrific endings to otherwise mundane situations. Parra has written a story in which policemen rape a transvestite, and another in which a woman is tortured by her lover. Parra’s narrators suffer a cruel subjection at the hands of those who have power in society—of individuals who commit acts of cruelty with a lucid intentionality. Whether this kind of cruelty accompanies modernity, urban life, a new neoliberal order, Northern Mexican culture, or simply human nature is never clarified.

Parra tends to write two kinds of characters: they are either powerful and abuse that power, or they are weak and victimized. The dichotomy evokes the one famously laid out by Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad*, in which one is either the chingón or the chingado. To understand what *Nostalgia de la sombra* illustrates about narcoviolencia, the key is the willful transformation of the main character from chingado to chingón. He shifts from “Bernardo,” an underpaid, frustrated *nota roja* copyeditor, husband, and father of two to a *sicario* “Ramiro” employed by a D.F. businessman, from an important family, who has ties to drug trafficking.

The severity of the protagonist’s transformation is emphasized by the nonlinear organization of the novel. The first few pages set out the story arc in the present: a *sicario*...
by the name Ramiro receives an order from his patrón Damián to murder a woman named Maricruz Escobedo. The final pages of the novel relate how Ramiro ultimately fails in the murder attempt, and instead is himself killed by Maricruz’s bodyguard. The pages in-between narrate Ramiro’s past, and his abandonment of his past identity as Bernardo—an average guy described as a “clasemediero de mierda” (114). The odd chapters of Nostalgia narrate the present of Ramiro on his quest to kill Maricruz (and his increasing anxiety about doing so), while the even chapters narrate the story of Bernardo and how he became a killer.

As the story of how a meek copyeditor morphs into a ninja-like killer, Nostalgia de la sombra is not exactly an example of believable storytelling. This has led other scholars to interpret the portions of the novel as Bernardo’s fantasy, or as a screenplay he is writing (Herlinghaus, Narcoepics 86). Ignacio Sánchez-Prado has interpreted the transformation as what happens when violence is part of everyday life:

The world of Ramiro’s journey is complex because violence is not a product of moral choices but rather something that happens, a consistent present that becomes a constitutive part of the social tapestry in the distinct environments he navigates. (“Amores perros” 45)

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37 This is the experience of reading Brett Easton Ellis’s American Psycho: the reader is meant to be unsure as to how much of the sadistic violence occurs within the mind of the protagonist as fantasy, and how much he actually carries out (Serpell 200). Herlinghaus writes of the assault on Bernardo in the market this way: “This transformatory scene signals that Bernardo is becoming Ramiro, the murderer, while it is supposed to represent, at the same time, the first shot of the imaginary screenplay we read about above, in the second chapter. Thus, odd numbered chapters provide a glance into the novel’s present (Ramiro), while even numbered chapter help assemble a past of which Bernardo’s intended film project forms part. Plot and screenplay intersect; Bernardo progressively turns into Ramiro and thus enters the filmic script that Bernardo had begun of completing one day.” (Narcoepics 86) Herlinghaus reads the killing of Ramiro at the end as the moment in the novel when Bernardo then “returns” to the present as a father and husband in Monterrey.
In my reading, the entire novel is a fiction whose status as fiction is apparent to the reader. If we read parts of the novel as having been imagined by Bernardo, or written by him as part of his screenplay, then we dilute the extreme quality of the protagonist’s transformation, and the frustrations, anger, and conscious decision-making that motivates it. Bernardo/Ramiro is motivated by shame and rage, and his desire to be free from society through working as a *sicario* is obscured if we read violence as “something that happens” in the novel.

Bernardo is a character who is enduring the realization that society does not respect him. He hates his job as a copywriter at a *nota roja* newspaper in Monterrey, and finds no satisfaction in the little leisure time he has to participate in a home life. The financial demands of his pregnant wife and his two young children is a constant source of stress: “Victoria iba a parir uno o varios chamacos más y la raya quincenal en su bolsillo que no ajustaba para vivir” (33). The hours that he works and the time necessary to arrive via *pesera* at his job leave him with little time or energy to engage with his family. At work, Bernardo believes he is smarter, better, and worthier than his more successful colleagues, and quietly seethes. He dreams of being a famous screenwriter but sees his dreams dissipate under these pressures; there is no time for him to write the screenplay that will be his big break. His life consists of an endless cycle of work, transportation, sleep. Later, when this character, now transformed into Ramiro, visits Monterrey, he contrasts his life as Ramiro with his life as Bernardo as boiling down to a newfound freedom: “la tarde regiomontana se abre ante él en multiples opciones como no lo hacía desde un década atrás” (171).
Bernardo has dreams for himself and his family that the economy of Mexico cannot support. With such a large gap between the rich and the poor, Bernardo has found himself on the wrong side of that chasm—a chasm Ramiro describes in the novel as a “muralla entre el universo de la abundancia y el depósito de desperdicios” (143). The novel is filled with observations about class. When Ramiro sees the house in which he (Bernardo) grew up, he immediately identifies it as the home of an “obrero,” “sostenido con base de un jornal lastimoso” (179). When asked his name, Ramiro demurs: “¿pa qué sirven los pinches nombres? Nomás pa marcarte y que otros digan: Ah, simón, este güey es hijo de tal y tal, y su vida ha sido así y así, así es fácil tenerlo bien clachado, ¿no?” (194)

As Bernardo, the protagonist is a highly-strung, paranoid, perpetually suffering character. It is difficult to overstate how much of the novel includes Bernardo disparaging himself for his perceived weaknesses and expressing his desire to escape from judgment and from society. The experience of reading the innermost thoughts of a character who constantly derides himself can be uncomfortable—as if reading his thoughts violate his privacy, but the experience is not titillating; it is boring. The text refers constantly to the protagonist’s bodily sensation—thirst, heat, pain—or as Herlinghaus puts it: “We are dealing with an intimate yet nonprivate experience” (Narcoepics 89).

The climactic point in the middle of the novel is Bernardo’s transformation into Ramiro. It occurs by chance, when at a bus station, Bernardo is robbed and beaten. Bystanders watch the scene unfold but do nothing to help him. After at first not reacting, Bernardo suddenly fights back, and kills both of the assailants barehanded. He has relinquished his weak persona to become, in the novel’s terms, “an animal.” But more
than becoming an animal, he has decided not to live in fear anymore, of anything. Sánchez Prado describes the transformation as the moment when a “citizenship of fear” dissipates, and the moment when “fear stops being the element that grounds citizenship” and we see a “new formation of the urban subject” (46). This is a moment of refusal in which Bernardo realizes that he owes nothing to a society that has treated him as worthless. Living according to the rules has not gotten him anything that he has wanted in life. And with this realization, he feels he is free from any of the obligations society has put on him: to work, to care for his family. Bernardo refuses to be a party to the social contract that has failed him.

After the fight, Bernardo is Ramiro: he does not return to his job or his family. Drug trafficking and political corruption provide a space for him in society where he is needed, well-paid, respected, and can feel powerful. Rather than having envious thoughts from the margins of the newsroom, he commits murders that place him in the newspaper as the killer. The novel carries out the complex task of showing what makes drug trafficking appealing to the individuals who participate in it. The fantasy at work in this novel is the fantasy of freedom and sovereignty that is not available except through participation in the trafficking industry.

*Nostalgia de la sombra* critiques the appeal offered by narco-trafficking and cultural expressions that glamorize trafficking. The allure of violence is, as Herlinghaus has suggested, a rejection of the experience of humiliation in an oppressive system. Or as Diana Palaversich has formulated it:
The fact that the drug business is highly dangerous and may well result in violent death does not seem to deter young Sinaloans, as is evident in the popular saying “Mejor vivir un año como rey que cincuenta como buey.” (88)

How specific is this masculine desire to leave the family and enact violent sovereignty to Mexico, or to Latin America? Can it be connected to the region’s history of coloniality, violence, neoliberal exploitation, insecurity, and narco-power? Consider, for example, the similarities between Bernardo’s transformation into Ramiro and Walter White’s transformation into meth-dealer Heidelberg in the U.S. television series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Here rather than bolstering Herlinghaus’s assertion that the global North and global South are producing two completely different types of narratives, what stands out are the parallels between mainstream U.S. cultural production and a narrative written and published in Mexico.

The fantasy of forsaking what was supposed to be “the good life” of home and family for the excitement of danger and the allure of power is the subject of both the *narconovela* and U.S. television programming. Here Lauren Berlant’s critique of capitalist North American society may also be applied to Mexico. She argues that North Americans gamely struggle to achieve “the good life” because “cruel optimism” allows Americans to chase Horatio Alger dreams that include upward mobility, job security, social equality, and long-term intimacy. Berlant concludes that these are such unlikely goals that those who pursue them are indulging a kind of delusion. This delusion is allowed to take hold because their sufferers are affectively bound to the future rather than to the present. The characters of Bernardo and of Walter White are characters who undergo a transformation by which they reject the “cruel optimism” that once tethered
them to job and family. Both stop acting according to others’ expectations of them as family men hoping for a better future, and instead act according to their own desires in the present.

The promises of the good life that Berlant critiques are more clearly out of reach in Bernardo’s world. Moreover, what exists in *Nostalgia de la sombra* that is specific to twenty-first century Mexico is freedom from expectations offered only through the violence necessitated by narcotics. It is not possible for Bernardo to ascend socially and financially, because working life turns out to be for suckers. The legal, moral paths up the economic ladder to stability and leisure time are insufficient, and this disillusionment with the middle-class dream—the realization that it is impossible to achieve regardless of worthiness—is key to narcoculture’s appeal.

Without such an economic ladder, the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have argued that there is a cultural tendency toward what they denominate “casino capitalism”—an “ethos of neoliberalism that favors speculation, play and gambling over virtuous labor as a source of wealth” (14). Bernardo’s desire first to “hit it big” through selling screenplays to Hollywood, and then his decision to become a *sicario* both stem from this “casino” mentality in which the world is divided into winners and losers, and winning is associated with destiny or magic—like Ramiro’s incredible talent for killing. The wealth in *Nostalgia*, as well as the Zurdo Mendieta novels, stems from drugs and political corruption. There is no other source of wealth, power, or respect available in the novels.

It is key that Bernardo wants to be a writer but does not have the time to dedicate to it. Once a *sicario*, Ramiro spends his time in between “jobs” alone in the countryside.
He escapes capitalist time, and achieves the privacy and leisure time no longer afforded to the middle class. The figure of the abject worker/writer has been used elsewhere as a critique of the precarity created by neoliberalism (Giorgi, “Improper Selves”). In João Gilberto Noll’s *O quieto animal da esquina* (1991), we find a protagonist similar to Ramiro, in that the unnamed protagonist is simultaneously a marked criminal, a servant of the wealthy on their estate, and also a writer: when he is not working on the hacienda is given a desk and paper so he can write his poetry.

It is also notable that Ramiro uses his earnings (or better put, winnings) from his career as a *sicario* to become a homeowner, that quintessential middle-class objective that was unattainable to him through honest work. The absurdity of a college-educated man driven to work in the *narco* industry to be able to own a house serves as a critique of the lack of economic opportunity in the country. The point is not that trafficking finds its labor force in the educated and underemployed middle class. The point is that the dream of social ascent—the promise of mobility—is a dead dream. What has replaced the dream of social mobility is casino capitalism, and this is what narcotrafficking depends on.

To the extent that Ramiro considers the moral implications of being a *sicario*, the concern he expresses is whether his mark, the bank executive Maricruz Escobedo, is laundering *narco* money, “armando entuertos” (183) and “sirviendo a los meros meros” (220). Presumably, a hit has been ordered on her because she has been using her bank to move money for *narcos*, with the implication that this presumably free-willed participation in trafficking means that her murder is warranted. “Sí,” Ramiro tells himself, “la mujer debía andar en algo chueco” (19). But Ramiro cannot discount the possibility that the motive might be a romantic affair gone bad, with the hit ordered by a
jealous ex-lover or by Maricruz’s husband. Ramiro does not want to carry out the murder if it is because of a romantic dispute, and because he has no way of learning the motive behind the crime, he is endlessly anxious about whether or not he should carry out the execution. Ramiro’s internal debate about whether it is wrong or not to kill Maricruz reveals some of his earlier statements to have been pure posturing, as when he remarks at the beginning of the novel that he loves to kill because it is an act that shows the victim that “su vida tiene tanto valor como la del perro que apedreamos porque se cruzó en nuestro camino” (10).

At the same time as Ramiro’s trip to Monterrey to kill Maricruz encumbers him with questions about the moral correctness of his profession, the trip brings him painful memories of his past, and he is consumed by repetitive questions about what has happened to his wife and children. Perhaps because of this sudden burden of guilt, Ramiro bungles the assassination and is killed instead. Ramiro sacrifices himself rather than kill the possibly innocent Maricruz. Again, Ramiro is not really a new subject, after all, and not someone who truly believes that a human life is worth no more than a dog’s.

Ramiro’s fate repeats the murders of Rosario Tijeras, and Alexis of La virgen de los sicarios. The sicario who sought to prove that he is powerful, and the he has transcended society through murder, cannot be expected to live. The apparent freedom the sicario subject has when he abandons society in order to kill, does not actually free him. Ramiro himself explains this:

cualquiera pensaría que la vida de un asesino es emocionante. Falso. Que está plagada de esos placeres que se compran con el dinero fácil. Muchachas a granel,
alcohol para nadar, parrandas, orgías, lujos. Y la realidad es otra…No importa lo que haga. Siempre seré lo mismo. (114)

The protagonist of Nostalgia can be read in relation to other sicario characters, but also other nihilistic narrators of Latin American cultural production. Bernardo/Ramiro embodies both Fernando (the gramático) and Alexis and Wilmar (the sicarios) of Vallejo’s La Virgen de los sicarios. Even more than the fantasy character of the sicario, it is the figure of the middle-class man who drops out of society that serves as the character who is the greatest provocation to the reader. The gramático who narrates La Virgen, returning from years living abroad, feels shame about what has happened to his country: “Yo no soy de aquí….Me avergüenzo de esta raza limosnera” (19). In El asco, Horacio Castellanos Moya creates a similar character, referred to as Thomas Bernhard, who explains

me fui a Montreal, mucho antes de que comenzara la guerra, no me fui como exiliado, ni buscando mejores condiciones económicas, me fui porque nunca acepté la broma macabra del destino que me hizo nacer en estas tierras (21).

Bernardo does not have to become a sicario, just as the other characters do not have to leave their countries. But the question for all three is the same: will each character, faced not just with the economic instability and violence of their countries, but with feelings of shame, choose to enter into exile, in the sense of becoming outsiders to their societies. The protagonists of these other novels are men of means who can leave and they do. Bernardo, however, barely has enough money for the pesera. And so participating in narcoviolencia is his means to exile. When Ramiro dies at the novel’s end, demonstrating
he was not the new and nihilistic subject he claimed to be, we are reminded of how illusory *narcoviolencia*’s allure is. One cannot will oneself to become a *chingón*. There is no way out of the society’s expectations, no way to escape the shame that motivated Ramiro’s behavior in the first place.

We have seen that Hermann Herlinghaus argues that Latin American literature evinces a new affect and ethics in which the expectation is to die rather than live; senseless death is accepted rather than a cause for outrage, as in the North, according to Herlinghaus. But what is more uniquely Latin American about *narconovelas* is the way they critique the conception of violence as a tool that can bring individual subjects a sense of worth and power. The consistent critique within a text like *Nostalgia* is that the conception of violence as power is misguided.

Latin American intellectual discourse has seen violence as a liberating tool in the struggles to bring about decolonization and ultimately freedom, as necessary to erase shame and self-hatred in colonial subjects, and to transform oppressive structures into a reality marked by potentiality. Bernardo’s efforts to remake himself as a powerful sovereign man reads as a tragic parody of Che Guevara’s exemplar of the New Man. Bernardo has all the self-doubt, self-hatred, and rage that we think of as constituting the colonial subject’s political potential. Ramiro’s mistake is not recognizing his place in a larger structure, and so his sacrifice and attempts at self-mastery are not directed toward the creation of a new selfhood or the overthrow of oppressive structures. Ramiro uses violence in service of the kind of physical and economic violence that subjected him in the first place. In this sense, *Nostalgia de la sombra* provides a critique of a society in which violence has been detached from purpose and from the awareness of structures of
subjection. Instead, violence is about shoring up one’s self-image, and cannot achieve the desired transformation from the neurotic, self-conscious subject to the masculine, sovereign subject.

The power and the money that Ramiro achieves as a sicario does not release him from a shame and bitterness he has about his origins, his identity as Bernardo, and what society has denied to him. The man who employs Ramiro, a character named Damián Reyes Retana, is described as a member of a powerful political family and a man with an advanced degree from the University of Chicago (thereby associating him with a ruthless neoliberalism complicit in state violence, as in “the Chicago boys” under Pinochet). Not only does Damián give Ramiro his marching orders, but he also views Ramiro with disdain: “Y si seguía quejándose, Damián se burlaba, lo llamaba compadrito, provinciano, indio recién bajado de la milpa” (116). Perhaps Damián calculatingly harnesses the shame and anger latent in Ramiro so that Ramiro will be more apt to prove himself valuable to Damián.

Rather than intense feelings of shame and envy motivating political action or encouraging a feeling of solidarity with others who experience the same, within the world of the novel there is no possibility for political action. What might have been imagined in a previous era as shame that could be utilized to further revolutionary causes, is here only a self-interested, self-defeating violence. This contrast between revolutionary and self-interested drug violence also emerges in Mendoza’s novels (though, as always, with a sense of humor): “ten claro que en esta época no es moda morir por las ideas,” comments an arms dealer named Gandi (La prueba 75). El Zurdo Mendieta’s brother, we also learn, was a guerrillero. A money launderer comments, “¿Edgar Mendieta? Debe ser de la Col
Pop, allí tuve una compa, Enrique Mendieta, que fue guerrillero, ¿no serán hermanos?,” to which the arms dealer replies “Maldita la importancia que eso tiene” (La prueba 76). Many of Mendoza’s novels make reference to the guerrilleros of the 1970s and to the 1994 EZLN rebellion in Chiapas. Similarly, in Nostalgia, Ramiro picks up a copy of the progressive weekly magazine Proceso and an article “acerca de los zapatistas” (107). Leftist politics are present in the background, as the idea of guiding revolutionary principles that have not found a place in a society overwhelmed by the corruption of drug trafficking. Instead, violence, and the shame and envy behind it, are put to use by a narco-political class. Ramiro uses these feelings to attempt to murder Maricruz Escobedo, who at worst is another cog the machine of narcoviolencia, and in that respect, just like him. This representation recalls Étienne Balibar’s claim that violence is highly unpolitical under present-day capitalism, and when citizenship resists capitalism, capitalism responds not by political repression by with elimination, and that “mutual elimination” is “best” (“Cruelty” 26).

Ramiro is a character who attempts to fully inhabit the villainy borne of rage and impotence. This is his power as a character, and why it is important to read the novel accepting its entirety as a fiction; this embrace of rage, this nihilism, of exiling oneself from one’s society is real. Parra’s novel lacks verisimilitude but it is a work of realism: it contains a commitment to signaling the dynamics at work present-day Mexico, showing readers the appeal of trafficking and the way in which it consistently fails to provide the power it promises. And suggesting, that the rage of a character like Ramiro—what makes him so useful to traffickers—could lead elsewhere, as a tool in an altogether different kind of political struggle.
VI. Miss Bala and Heli

In this section, I examine two films whose representations of *narcoviolencia* overlap significantly with the kinds of representations I have described in *narconovelas*. *Miss Bala* (2011) and *Heli* (2013) portray the kinds of stories that have been disavowed in public discourse. They visually recreate scenes of *narcobloqueos* and publicly disposed bodies that resonate for viewers, showing them not just the world, but *their* world, on screen. As in the crime novels, narcopower is impossible to understand and yet everywhere. With the structure so difficult to make sense of, the films concentrate on showing how *narcoviolencia* shapes the experiences and subjectivities of those who live in the peripheral cities where it prevails.

In the films, the *narcos*, and police and soldiers in their employ dominate public spaces. *Narcos* control the streets with *narcobloqueos*; *narcos* traverse the border in private cars and planes; *narcos* enter and take over the homes of innocent citizens. There is nothing of the image of *narcos* as social bandits that has characterized some popular representations of “El Chapo” Guzmán, or even earlier, mid-twentieth-century Mexican noir, in which the criminals heroically resisted state power. There are no longer rules...

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38 Some scholars have claimed just the opposite, such as political scientist Kees Koonings’s conclusion that: “In popular culture and the imaginary, the narcos appear as social bandits, or rather as social patrons and national entrepreneurial champions, as well as icons of virtuous Mexican machismo” (275). Likewise Diane Davis warned that throughout Latin America, criminal organizations might replace the state, not just in monopolizing violence, but also in inspiring allegiance among citizens: “With the state weakened in the face of declining legitimacy, criminal networks of allegiance may start to provide new forms of welfare, employment, and perceived security, operating as the functional equivalents of states. Thus they encourage new forms of non-state sovereignty that contrast to the real or imagined communities that sustained modern nationalism and traditional patterns of national state sovereignty along the lines articulated by Benedict Anderson” (263). However, the works examined in this chapter do not provide any indication that the public feels any allegiance to or sympathy for traffickers, in spite of the fact that they provide employment in neighborhoods and regions where there are otherwise scant opportunities. Cartel leaders are portrayed as ruthless terrorists, not admirable Robin Hood-style bandits.
that govern how to survive in these spaces, dominated as they are by unpredictable sadists. The military, moreover, appears as an entity that protects drugs and the money that arises from them, and not as an entity that represents or protects individual citizens.

We can consider these films to be films of protest, in that these representations break with state-advances theories of how narcoviolencia functions, about the involvement of the state, and who the victims are. Miss Bala and Heli emphasize the public’s fear that no one has control over what might happen to themselves in a necropolitical regime like that installed by narcopower. They are works that invite the viewer to imagine the physical and psychological suffering of the films’ protagonists and to experience the feeling of helplessness when characters with whom the viewers identify are made to suffer on screen.

In operating in this way, these films stand in contrast to earlier protest documentaries—works like Lourdes Portillo’s 2001 documentary Señorita extraviada, for which Portillo investigated the Juárez femicides at great personal risk and challenged the impunity of the crimes. Miss Bala and Heli show a world in which the effects of suffering are foregrounded. A demand for justice remains implicit in the film, rather than a direct denunciation of impunity, as in Señorita extraviada. This corresponds to an understanding of narcoviolencia as a new reality in which the violation of the body and the disregard toward the victim’s guilt or innocence is not a moment of exceptionality outside the law, but a situation in which the exception has been normalized and is part of everyday existence.

Both Miss Bala and Heli contrast what the television news media represents with the lived experience of potential and actual physical victimization. In the films, those
portrayed in the media as *narco* criminals are actually innocent people who were victims of the state and/or *narcos*, or who were cooperating with *narcos* in order to survive—and not economic survival, but out of the fear of imminent death. In this way, the films critique of the category of criminal as a catchall label that is attached to people with no regard for their actual role in trafficking.

In a sense, the category of the criminal always marks the failure of the state: in the nineteenth-century imaginary it captured the failure of the state to incorporate “bandit” organizations. Amid neoliberal economic policies, Gabriel Giorgi has commented that the widespread return of the category of criminal to the city (*favela, comuna*, etc.) marks the failure of the state to provide economic opportunities:

criminality reflects upon the ultimate failure of the modern national project; the poor turned into criminals are thus the epitome of a more general condition of abandonment and precarization triggered by neoliberal rule. The criminal becomes a code figure for the new precarity, as a marker of the exceptionality, the critical emergency, the anomaly of the new precarized condition. (“Improper Selves” 72).

Amid *narcoviolencia*, the label “criminal” becomes attached to upstanding citizens to cover up the failure of the state to fully control its own territories or establish a functioning justice system, with the burden of state failure falling on victims of *narcoviolencia* labeled as criminals. If the *narcomáquina* chooses victims at random, without regard for their identities, the state apparatus compounds this victimization by declaring that victim has always been a “criminal.” This label is expected to produce the “criminals’” ungrievability, but the strategy is collapsing; in the films, many of the
“criminals” are victims with whom viewers identify. State discourse can no longer carry out the work that Giorgi describes—“cordon[ing] off precarity by tracing distinctive contrasts between the excluded and the included” (“Improper Selves” 72).

Just as the films demonstrate how “criminal” is a fraudulent category in state-media discourse, they also push for a greater nuance in how the public understands who the victims of narcoviolencia are. In academic scholarship, narcoviolencia often appears as another manifestation of a generalized global modern regime that is inherently necropolitical and for which certain populations are superfluous. This notion of superfluity first emerged in The Origins of Totalitarianism, in which Arendt saw concentration camps as the result of a regime that “strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous” (457). In her theory of the narcomáquina, Rossana Reguillo notes the similarity between contemporary Mexico and the Nazi camps, writing that “los cuerpos desmembrados que el narco…deja tirados diariamente por la geografía nacional, pierden su singularidad, al igual que con los prisioneros del campo de exterminio….La disolución de la persona es el primer trabajo exitoso de la máquina” (“Narcomáquina” n. pag.). The centrality of the concentration camp is also found in Étienne Balibar’s writings about a world is united economically but “divided bio-politically” into “zones of life” and “zones of death” (26):

In the face of the cumulative effects of different forms of extreme violence or cruelty which are displayed in what I called the ‘death zones’ of humanity, we are led to admit that the current mode of production and reproduction has become a mode of production for elimination, a reproduction of populations which are not likely to be productively used or exploited but are always already superfluous,
and therefore can only be eliminated through ‘political’ or through ‘natural’
means—what some Latin American sociologists call población chatarra, “garbage
humans,” to be “thrown” away, out of the global city. (“Cruelty” 25)

In this formulation, it is difficult to imagine what kind of subjectivities exist in these
“death zones,” and how they are shaped by the experience of violence and precariousness
within them.

These “poblaciones chatarras” are not imagined to have any defining or particular
characteristics not because they do not, but because in targeting such populations,
subjectivity is flattened: “The ‘same’ populations are massively targeted—or the reverse:
those populations which are targeted become progressively assimilated, they look ‘the
same’” (Balibar “Cruelty” 26).

In Miss Bala and Heli the victims are mostly lower-middle class. They are factory
workers, workers in the informal economy, and a military cadet, and they live in semi-
rural areas; the victims are not living in total poverty; indeed, by some social-science
measures, they would likely qualify as members of the emerging lower middle-class
benefitting from trade liberalization, since they sell imported goods and work in
automobile factories. The films raise the question of what a superfluous population
actually looks like under a regime as widespread and normalized as narcoviolencia. With
vulnerability to violence no longer just the exception, the challenge that narcoviolencia
presents now is how to visualize the public that narcoviolencia affects rather than
flattening it to be understood merely as “criminal” or “disposable.” The films resist how
the precariousness that has risen with narcoviolencia works to erase individuals’
identities.
In order to resist this erasure of victims’ identities, or the imaginary of zones of conflict as zones of pure exclusion, *narcoviolencia* is portrayed as something that can happen to anyone. The shift ignores the fact that the victims are mostly poor and rural, and not wealthy or middle-class and cosmopolitan like the consumers of films like *Miss Bala* and *Heli*. Ignacio Sánchez Prado critiques this shift when he writes that in recent years Mexican cinema has displaced drug trafficking toward “el imaginario de las clases medias” (“El narco como arte y mercancía” n. pag.). He writes that *Miss Bala* and *Heli*: son hasta ahora el producto más acabado del narco como estética y mercancía: obras de arte que han sacado al tema del narco de los registros populares y lo han transformado en códigos estéticos, a la vez que lo empacan en un producto que triunfa (merecidamente) en los festivales donde se valora, por igual, la calidad cinematográfica y la correspondencia con los estándares del bienpensantismo transnacional. (n. pag.)

A more stark example than *Miss Bala* and *Heli* of the displacement of the space of danger toward the wealthy and business elites occurs in the film *Daniel y Ana*, which explores the vulnerability of the elite to organized crime in the capital. Released in 2009, *Daniel y Ana* stars Darío Yazbek Bernal, the younger half-brother of beloved movie star Gael García Bernal. The film tells the story of two wealthy siblings in Mexico City who are abducted and forced to make a pornographic film together—a disturbing and bizarre premise, which viewers read at the outset is a “true story.” One of the theories behind the Ciudad Juárez femicides of the 1990s had been that the murders of young women occurred in the making of snuff films. Here such pornographic film purveyors are imagined not in the streets of Juárez shantytowns, but in tony Polanco, where they have
come to victimize the children of the rich, whose walled homes it turns out cannot protect them from the country’s epidemic of violence. In fact, the film shows numerous exterior shots—home, apartment building, school, stores—emphasizing the desire to wall the city and the failure of that tactic to keep families safe.

*Daniel y Ana* was responding to the new way that the elite were now also living in a culture of fear, and demonstrated the paranoid fantasies of those elite as the old barriers insuring safety crumbled. The botched kidnapping and eventual murder of businessman Alejandro Martí’s teenage son Fernando in 2008 was already a source of panic, and *Daniel y Ana* expressed the perception that violence that was no longer limited to marginalized neighborhoods and populations. Criminality had become more organized, and presented a threat everywhere.

*Daniel y Ana* has several commonalities with the later films *Miss Bala* and *Heli*, which examine how narco terror provokes profound changes in its victims, and how violence threatens the family unit. Criminal violence in all three of the movies is sexual violence, but sexual violence that affects the male characters more than their female counterparts, as the former are left trying to “be a man” in a situation in which their control over their own bodies and their capacity to protect their sisters from sexual assault has been destroyed. The woman’s body—more specifically the virginal body of the sister/daughter—figures as what cannot be protected. As in *Nostalgia de la sombra*, violent aggression provokes an uncontrollable reaction in the male victim, turning the protagonist of that novel as well as Daniel and Heli into killers. Daniel botches an attempt to murder Ana’s husband, while Heli beats to death one of the men who may have raped his sister Estela. *Narcoviolencia* produces rage, but the man’s grievances remain private.
and shameful, and his rage is never productively connected by the characters themselves to a wider social or political context.

The pretense of Daniel y Ana is that it reveals a hidden story. While Daniel and Ana’s wealthy family appears to live a life of privilege and happiness, in reality they are subject to secret violence that destroys their relationships with one another. Miss Bala and Heli can be seen to work in the opposite way. Both show viewers re-creations of images of colgados, narcobloqueos, and staged severed heads, and repeat news stories about narco executions, bombings, decapitations (Figures 2-7). They are concerned with faithfully representing the landscape has been disturbed by displays of spectacularized bodies. The narratives of the films provide the private, hidden histories to these very public forms of violence, providing histories for the victims of narcoviolencia, letting viewers know to whom the mutilated, violated bodies of narcoviolencia belong.

Miss Bala is loosely based on the story of Laura Zúñiga, the 2008 Miss Sinaloa who was arrested at a military checkpoint travelling with narco and arms; she lost her title and was pilloried in the media, even though a judge dismissed charges against her. Directed by Gerardo Naranjo, Miss Bala can be considered a “relatively elite art movie,” and is an unusual instance of co-production between Fox and Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal’s production company, Cananá (Smith 183). The camera rarely leaves the character of Laura Guerrero, a 21-year old who lives with her father and young brother and participates in the family business of selling clothing at an informal market. Looking to add glamour and excitement to their lives, Laura and her friend Azucena try out for the “Miss Baja” beauty contest. The women are caught in an antro shootout, however, and Azucena goes missing. When Laura asks a police officer for help locating her friend, the
cop instead delivers her to the *narco* responsible for the shootings. The *narco* leader Lino takes Laura, and over the next three days, forces her to commit a variety of criminal acts: she carries money to the United States, carries messages between members of the cartel, and parks a car containing dead bodies in front of a U.S. consulate. She also witnesses horrific violence, including two shoot-outs, the murder of a man by dragging behind a truck, and his post-mortem hanging from a highway overpass. There are two more crimes against her that are the most significant in the film: her rape, by Lino, and the taking over of her father’s home as a command center for the *narco* group. Laura remains in her home with her *narco* captors, while her father and brother are ordered to leave the city and never return. This portrayal of *narcoviolencia* as a conflict that quite literally invades the homes of ordinary people led Paul Julian Smith to compare the film to Cortázar’s story “Casa tomada” (186). As in the *narconovelas*, living a private life or retreating to private spaces in no way assures that one will not be dragged into the public chaos of drug violence, or that that public chaos will not enter into the formerly protected space of the private.

The film ends with Lino fixing the Miss Baja pageant so that, with Laura as winner, she is taken to meet with a military general whom Lino considers an enemy of his cartel. Lino uses the opportunity to attempt to kill the general, but Laura defies Lino and warns the military of Lino’s plans. After the failed *narco* attack, Laura is arrested, paraded in front of television cameras by the military as a captured *narco* accomplice, and finally, released onto an empty street, with no further explanation. Laura has survived her encounter with the *narcos*, but she has no home to return to and no idea where her brother and father are.
Laura Guerrero is played by the actress Stephanie Sigman, who, after the success of *Miss Bala*, became the next “Bond girl.” The film has been criticized for its use of “camera work that has no qualms about sexualizing her body” (Sánchez Prado, *Screening* 218). Laura’s beauty—once a source of pride and a resource to further herself—becomes her greatest liability. She circulates through the city of Tijuana and on the U.S. side of the border, she has cash taped to her body, she is raped, she participates in a beauty contest which has an audience staring at her in a bikini, she is handcuffed, detained, and driven around by military officers. As her body becomes more prominent, her identity is taken from her as news media show her photograph and report that she, Laura Guerrero, is a known *narco* accomplice. Smith has pointed out that the film shoots Laura from behind, encouraging the viewer to adopt her viewpoint, and making the viewer “as disorientated as the increasingly shell-shocked character who, time and again, wanders or blunders into mayhem” (Smith 185). The film shows how the *narco* encounter changes Laura from a woman experiencing her body as hers to an increasing awareness of her body as circulating as an object, and divorced from her own agency and desires. Not only her likeness but also her name are resignified as those of a criminal.

There is a similarly brutal coming-of-age for Estela, the pudgy, awkward adolescent whose boyfriend involves the family in a *narco* nightmare in the film *Heli*, directed by Amat Escalante. In comparison to *Miss Bala*, the violence shown on camera is much more extreme. Even Estela is herself a more difficult female lead, since she is represented physically and psychologically as a child, truly much more defenseless than Laura, and with none of Laura’s picaresque cleverness or determination to stay alive. Estela’s body is only in the early stages of puberty, making her rape and pregnancy all
the more horrifying. The film begins in the middle of the story, showing viewers an anonymous *colgado* and then returning to the narrative’s beginning to give a narrative to the crime and an identity to the body.

In this film, the title character is a teenager named Heli who works in a car assembly factory (one of numerous car factories in Guanajuato state in central Mexico made possible by NAFTA). Despite his age, he acts as the father for his family, which consists of his young wife Sabrina and their newborn baby. A recurring point of tension in the marriage stems from the fact that Sabrina has not been intimate with Heli since the birth of the baby, even though her obstetrician tells her she has healed and encourages her to have intercourse with her husband. In the opening scene of the film, the doctor examines Sabrina while she is in stirrups, using a camera that projects images of Sabrina’s cervix up onto a screen for the film’s audience to see. The topos of the female body as both open and wounded starts the film, and also serves as viewers’ first indication of the violation of bodies, and of privacy, that occurs throughout, and how the viewers will be implicated in this violation of privacy as we watch the injured, open bodies of various victims.

Heli’s wife and daughter live in the family home with Heli’s father and Heli’s sister Estela. Estela, at twelve or thirteen, is in love for the first time with a seventeen-year old named Beto, who is in military training. There is some tension in their relationship as well, because Estela does not want to have sex with Beto, because, she says, she does not want to get pregnant. Three short scenes give us our only insight into Beto’s life, all of them demonstrating the humiliation he suffers as part of military training: in the worst, he throws up and is forced to roll his face back and forth through
his vomit. This disturbing scene of the male body put into contact with the abject contrasts with the way we see the teenage Beto in other scenes, as he tries to impress Estela with his developing muscles. At the same time, the way the military treats Beto’s body mirrors how the *narcos* will later treat it: it is a body that can be controlled and made to suffer.

It is Beto who involves the family in drug crime: Beto hides bags of stolen drugs on the roof of Estela’s home. Heli finds the bags the next day and promptly dumps the contents into a watering hole. While Heli is motivated by a desire to protect his family, this act of disposing of drugs is also a poignant moment of decisiveness—of the attempt to refuse the incursion of the *narco* problem into his home, and one that mirrors Laura’s defiance of Lino in *Miss Bala*. The decision is one for which the family will suffer. The military raids the home, and Estela and Heli are abducted. The father is summarily executed and his body dumped on a rural road, meaning that, under the state’s own criteria, the cadaver will be classified as a *narcoejecutado*, although viewers know it the homicide was carried out by the military and that the victim was an innocent citizen; that is, neither the murderer nor the victim was a *narco*.

While the camera has until this moment followed Estela’s story of puppy love, with the abduction the camera shifts to follow Heli’s story. Masked soldiers take Heli and Beto into an unassuming lower-middle-class home where they are tortured as a group of children, taking a break from playing video games, looks on. As in *Miss Bala*, we have an uncanny home, here with the living room doubling as a torture chamber. Beto is hung by his wrists from the ceiling and beaten, and then his genitals are covered in gasoline and set on fire (*Figure 7*). This scene mirrors the scene of the gynecological exam that
appeared at the beginning of the film, with the open wound of the mother figure shifting from an amorphous male anxiety to a literal scene of realized torture. Seeing the male body violated in this way upends old codes by which the male body is understood in Mexican culture as “closed” in contrast to the “open” female body historically associated with La Malinche. The dichotomy between the body of the powerful male and the open, violable body of the female is lost under a regime like narcoviolencia that employs spectacular, sexualized violence.

Watching Beto’s genitals burn, his helpless flailing as a still live “colgado,” is painful, but the viewer’s anticipation that the good-natured, honorable Heli is about to be tortured in the same way, on screen, creates a horrifying sense of dread for the viewer. This film demands that the audience suffer alongside the characters. Indeed, the film seems intent on pushing the viewer to the limit of what he or she will be able to watch, setting the viewer up for an experience that is less dialogical than it is assaultive. The inability, or refusal, to establish parameters that would bracket the reality to the screen repeats the experience of a viewer who desires safety-insuring boundaries, which narcoviolencia likewise refuses in everyday life.

Even though the viewer is aware that he is watching a staged scene, the fact that such a scene so closely corresponds to what is happening throughout Mexico gives the

39 In Mexican National Cinema, Andrea Noble explains: “If the origins of the nation are located, following Paz, in the myth of Malinche, in the open female body, this open (maternal) body is defined in opposition to the closed male body, whereby open is to closed as negative is to positive….Such myths of origin…have been mobilized in the legitimizing processes of the Mexican state, where…following Roger Bartra, these metadiscursive structures have hindered the development of modern democracy in Mexico….In a nutshell, the degree to which the virile ‘aesthetics of closedness’ and the impermeable body are linked to power stands in inverse relation to the state’s capacity to embrace open, democratic structures and procedures of rule” (Noble 109). Here Noble argues that there was resistance to opening up Mexico to democracy because any such “opening” is understood according to the underlying representations of La Malinche, whose “opening” of Mexico to the conquistadors is linked to her rape and childbearing.
scenes “the charge of the real,” to quote Vivian Sobchack, connecting viewers to what is happening on the screen, making the world of the viewer and the world of the film characters into one continuous world and space (*Carnal* 284). The images, while the same in content as what is shown in the news, are more punishing to watch. In *Heli*, the bodies are not just bodies that suffer but subjects who suffer—people with identities whose suffering is intolerable once the viewer has established an identification with them.

Heli in fact is not burned. He is beaten and then released. The film is conventional in the sense that as the film’s hero, Heli’s body remains intact. Estela reappears weeks or possibly months later, catatonic and pregnant. The final scenes of the movie show Heli take the vigilante justice that is not available through the state justice system. Heli searches for and strangles the man he believes held Estela. The next scene shows Heli having sex with his wife for the first time since the birth of their son, further attempting to restore masculine control over his life and his body.

Despite Heli’s vigilante justice, there is no bringing back his and Estela’s father. *Narcoviolencia* is represented as destroying the authority of the father in a way that articulates a greater crisis in the authority of the law. Here, the vertical, authoritarian, and stable organization of the political sphere under the PRI and its “Pax Mafiosa” ends, with the removal of the father signaling a new sovereignty through violent power. This anxiety over the loss of the father is also present in an earlier film about violence, Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Amores perros*, in which three different father characters abandon their families. That film was made in 2000, when urban violence was increasing and as the political system was seen to be transitioning from authoritarian to democratic.
The fact that the title of the film is *Heli*, while its protagonist could more appropriately be seen as Estela, is indicative of the way that the film imagines *narcoviolencia* as a problem for masculine subjectivity that desires authority and inviolability. The violation to which Estela and Laura are subjected goes beyond their physical violation: their rapes stand the openness of the self and its most intimate secrets and desires. Through both films, the viewer is privy to the most intimate dreams and ambitions of the young women, and privy to the ways those hopes are completely dismantled by an encounter with *narcoviolencia*. It is the dream to be Miss Baja that turns into the nightmare of being Miss Bala, the criminal. The private desire to be famous and desired as a beauty contestant ends up making the character part of a humiliating public spectacle. In *Heli*, the story of a trusting young girl experiencing her innocent first love quickly gives way to his murder and her rape and pregnancy. The hopes of youthful protagonists—a belief in love, the desire to have affirmation of one’s worth—are unveiled as naïve folly. We can read these dreams being dismantled so brutally as reflective of a much broader cultural disenchantment. The hope and enthusiasm of the 1990s in democratization and economic “opening” are also revealed by *narcoviolencia* to have been based in a political naïveté, here displaced to, and articulated through, the young female protagonists.

At the same time, representing the dreams and goals of the female characters has the effect of attaching the subjected bodies of *narcoviolencia* to subjects. The bodies cannot be conceived as mere bodies that stand in for the domination of a people. Moreover, at the core of the films is the question of the identities and experiences of those victims whose subjectivities are flattened and reduced by violence—how the
identities of victims are insufficiently understood, how they lack nuance in the social imaginary. The films resist the subjectification produced by narcoviolencia, and in a society characterized by spectacularity, vulnerability, and the absence of the law. The films search for the possibilities for representing individual subjectivity, interiority, and agency in conditions in which violence acts on individuals as if they were pure objects.

VII. Conclusion

Susana Rotker concluded Citizens of Fear, her compendium on urban and drug violence in Latin America in the 1990s, by encouraging scholars to ask “what is chosen for representation and if that reinforces fear, if it helps to combat injustice or to reestablish the minimal social pact that seems to have been lost” (238). Crime fiction was one of the earliest forms through which to consider the problems presented to the public by widespread narcoviolencia, and the works analyzed in this chapter are engaged in the work of establishing a social pact by producing the recognizability of victims and illustrating how different members of the public have a shared, common source of suffering. Each of the works acknowledges the difficulty of living with perpetual violence, and in a state of vulnerability. At the same time, none of the works represent narcos in ways that reinforce fear, awe, or admiration. In crime fiction like that by Mendoza, narcos are blundering characters, fallible and often ridiculous; in Parra’s sicaresca, they are pathetic figures searching for an escape from the humiliations of daily life; while in Miss Bala, they are sadistic, opportunistic predators.

The novels and films included in this chapter articulate how violence limits the victims’ sense of agency and what it means for subjectivities to be molded by the
unending experience of fear and precariousness. Living in a time of cruel violence and changing social and political codes, the male characters in these works suffer from an acute sense of despair, and a loss of their sense of place in the world. This sense of loss is not specific to mass-media crime narrative; as I will show in Chapter 2, 2666 likewise sketches numerous portraits of middle-class characters who cannot make vital connections with others, who feel that their lives lack meaning, and who (like Mendoza’s detective and Parra’s sicario) contemplate suicide, all while they gain increasing knowledge that narcoviolencia is escalating.

Drug violence, economic disparities, and the corrupt politics of contemporary Mexico produces in characters like El Zurdo Mendieta, Bernardo/Ramiro, and Heli the acute feeling that society disrespects or misrecognizes them, and they search for ways to assert themselves in this new, disempowering landscape. In the films Miss Bala and Heli, this disrespect from society—and especially of the government and the media—toward victims of violence is framed as a threat to the common citizen. Ultimately this possibility of falling victim to narcoviolencia, and being left without any recourse serves as a warning to audiences, who inhabit the same world as the characters shown on screen. At any moment, anyone could be framed as a narco criminal, as someone whose life is not worth mourning.

The films can be seen as pressing interventions in the public sphere to the extent that the pain of this disrespect serves as a catalyst for struggle, following Axel Honneth’s formulation of societal misrecognition as the basis for social and political change. According to Honneth, it is when an implicit social contract about fairness for all in a society is widely seen to be broken, that struggles to re-establish this recognition can
begin. As Judith Butler asks in *Frames of War*, “What might be done to produce a more egalitarian set of conditions for recognizability?” (6). Perhaps this misrecognition is felt particularly acutely because the status quo during the years of PRI rule was predicated on a kind of “inclusive” clientelism: the impression of the inclusion of all groups in representation by a revolutionary government. This illusion of representation has come apart over the past years, with the introduction of neoliberal trade, political decentralization, and most importantly, *narcoviolencia*. 
Chapter 2

Writing Beyond the Lettered City: Literary Fiction Faces Narcoviolencia’s Victims

Lo matamos todos. Ustedes y yo. Lo matamos, si no con armas, con nuestra inacción y nuestra indiferencia. Cada uno de nosotros tiene en sus manos aunque sea un poco de su sangre.

– Alberto Chimal, 72migrantes.com

I. Introduction

In “La parte de los crímenes” from 2666, a self-proclaimed clairvoyant named Florita Almada goes on a talk show to “hacer público un mensaje”: women and girls are being killed in Santa Teresa (544). Despite the increasing intensity of Florita’s television appearances, members of the public ignore the message. The mother of a murdered girl laments the lack of attention paid to Florita, commenting that “Ella sabe qué esconde detrás de los crímenes y nos puso en alerta, pero no le hicimos caso, nadie le hace caso” (702).

The three works that I analyze in this chapter—Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda’s Contrabando (2008), Daniel Sada’s Lenguaje del juego (2012), and Roberto Bolaño’s “La parte de los crímenes” (2004)—are warnings like Florita Almada’s, directed to a reading public facing the new reality of narcoviolencia. The texts stage discoveries about the powerlessness of citizens, and circle around characters who experience a loss of innocence about severity of narcoviolencia and the involvement of state actors. The novels represent how long-standing economic and political structures have been
dismantled in a way that has allowed narcotraffickers to grow their operations to new proportions. In each novel, the traffickers effectively control the three cities that serve as the novels’ settings. Signs of the crisis are ignored by a public immobilized by shock and struggling to react to a state infiltrated by *narcos*.

In this chapter I argue that recent Mexican literary fiction announces the end of the liberal state with the rise of narcopower. These novels ask: what role can the intellectual have in such a postliberal society, and in dislodging the narco-state? Is there a way for the intellectual—a figure who appears tarnished for his inaction during narcopower’s rise—to redeem himself? Can literature be used to productively register its rejection of violence and the state’s role in perpetuating it? Literary fiction problematizes the lack of representation of *narcoviolencia*’s victims, of precarious populations who have remained largely invisible to the elites: the educated and upper-class inhabitants of the cities, the politicians and technocrats, the writers and journalists of the old *ciudad letrada*. But the following is unclear: Will making the suffering produced by *narcoviolencia* and the *resistance* to such suffering visible in the space of literature—or more generally, in the public sphere—finally unmask the failure of the liberal contract, the corruption of the state? And, will it set the stage for political change? In this chapter, I argue that fiction poses these kinds of questions about how to resist the subjection of a necropolitical regime, and what role representation can play in that resistance.

Whereas Chapter 1 focused on how crime narrative discredits the state’s disavowal of violence, this chapter shifts focus to *letrado* self-recriminations. Here literary fiction is concerned with this disavowal as practiced by the lettered elite. While detective novels suggest that fear of violence has shut down public protest, literary fiction
suggests that class and geographical divides are responsible for the lack of response to narcoviencia. By this I mean that violence in these novels is portrayed as having been ignored because it is perpetrated against individuals who are marginalized. Victims are often people who are invisible in the capital, and to members of the upper-middle class who are characterized as ensconced in their private lives. This chapter focuses on chasms between the elites and vulnerable victims, between the sites of political decision-making, lettered culture, and the peripheral sites of Mexican “authenticity” (and it questions what is meant by authenticity in the present circumstances). The texts illustrate how these chasms have allowed narcoviencia to flourish.

The novels ask for the intellectual class to address what is happening in the country’s peripheries because what happens in the peripheries appears as the future of the nation, as zones of violence that were once “contained” before the “guerra contra el narco” grow and shift. Considering the expanding boundaries of necropolitical power allows readers to understand Bolaño’s description of 2666 as “una metáfora de México y del pasado de México y del incierto futuro de toda Latinoamérica” (quoted in Paz Soldán 19).

II. The Letrados and Public Distrust of the State

The same kind of self-recrimination found in literary fiction appears in a trenchant piece by the author Alberto Chimal, quoted in the epigraph. It comes from a piece Chimal wrote in 2010 for the collective activist project 72 migrantes, a project spearheaded by the journalist Alma Guillermoprieto. About one of the anonymous migrants killed by the Zetas in Tamaulipas state, Chimal writes: “Lo matamos todos. Ustedes y yo. Lo
matamos, si no con armas, con nuestra inacción y nuestra indiferencia. Cada uno de nosotros tiene en sus manos aunque sea un poco de su sangre.” Chimal’s text identified the public itself—the intellectual readership of the art-activist project—as complicit in the murder. All of “us” have killed the anonymous migrant because “we,” persist in apathy. As I argued with regard to the readership of detective novels as “affective mapping,” here again the text suggests that the readership is a “we,” an audience that shares a common problem, and, here, a common culpability.

As in Chimal’s quotation, the novels condemn elites’ ignorance of narcoviolencia as a form of complicity. If the state protects the drug trade over its citizens—as these novels take pains to illustrate—then for the letrados it is no longer a matter of mitigating the state’s occasional excesses through the old channels: Contrabando in particular ridicules the bumbling intellectual narrator (named “Hugo,” like the author) who believes that his personal relationships, educational networks, and recognizable family name mean that he still has real access to the state and could therefore exert a moderating influence on it. The narrator begins as a naïve character who believes that, like him, the representatives of the state (the Chihuahua governor’s office and state prosecutor) were unaware of their own police actions against the innocent population of Chihuahua. The narrator imagines that once they know the truth, they will explain and apologize for the injustices committed against the people. More broadly, in Contrabando and “La parte de los crímenes” the intellectual finds that he no longer has any recourse in the laws that should serve him as a tool to restrain state power: the state has, in these novels, ceased to operate with respect for its own laws. He discovers that what is happening is not the
failure of governance; it is the deployment of necropolitical power, the exercise of legal and extralegal control over who dies and how.

Ironically, under the one-party system, the PRI’s Achilles’ heel was that it was dependent on the illusion of complete, uncontested and uncontestable popular support; it was this anxiety that led to the PRI’s many ills: clientelism, voting fraud, and violent repression. In the new “democratic” scenario, the state in these texts appears to have no such concern over appearances, and the state’s disregard is laid open for all to see. Because of this openness, the intellectual must recognize his new burden: to reassess his position as tacitly supporting a corrupt state if he does not realign himself with narcoviolencia’s victims.

How has it been possible to ignore narcoviolencia for so long? One answer that emerges in these texts is that the horizons of the intelligentsia are those of Mexico City, which has been among the last places in the country to experience such violence, meaning that the letrado class of the city has been insulated from it. Just as it is no longer possible for letrados to intervene with state institutions, it is not possible for them to understand narcoviolencia from the vantage point of the lettered city. The lettered elites have remained disconnected from the Northern border (where narcotics are trafficked) and its economic migrants, as well as the rural heartland (where narcotics are grown and processed) and its isolated, often racialized, rural poor. From the capital, it is possible to not see the violence that take place in these novels: in Ciudad Juárez (which

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40 “Dado que la ciudad de México es el centro geopolítico de nuestro país, el actuar de los activistas sociales que en ella habitan, juega un papel predominante en el devenir político. La capital mexicana pasó de ser considerada una ciudad violenta en la década de los años 80 a convertirse en un oasis aislado de la violencia que se vivía en el resto del país, por lo que los actores políticos habitantes en ésta, no tenían una dimensión exacta de lo acontecido fuera de la gran metrópoli” (Díaz Cepeda). Likewise, of journalists murdered between 1992 and 2011, all worked outside of Mexico City (Piccato “Ya saben” 50).
Bolaño re-writes as Santa Teresa), in the mountains of the Tarahumara (Rascón Banda’s Santa Rosa), in tiny central Mexican towns barely included on the country’s maps (Sada’s San Gregorio). As a result, the intellectual elite are not at the vanguard of the problem but rather discovering it only after narcopower has already altered the fabric of daily life throughout the country.

Correcting this complicity begins when the *letrado* leaves behind Mexico City. Indeed both “La parte de los crímenes” and *Contrabando* depict characters literally boarding planes and flying out of the upper-middle-class neighborhoods of central Mexico City (Chapultepec, Tlalpan, Coyoacán, del Valle) to see for themselves what is happening in the North. The politician character Azucena Esquivel Plata in “La parte de los crímenes” comments: “Tenía algunas ideas generales, como todos, pero creo que empecé a conocer la ciudad y el desierto a partir de mi cuarta visita. Ahora no puedo sacármelos de la cabeza” (789). Believing one understands or appreciates “real” or “authentic” Mexico from the city is no longer possible; delighting in the progress and modernity of Mexico from the city is no longer possible; making high literature from the city is no longer possible.

At the same time, there is a critique to be made of works like *Contrabando*, *Lenguaje*, and *2666* for situating the violence farther away from the D.F. than it really is, giving the impression that those who are unaware of the *narcoviolencia* are unaware because a physical distance has caused ignorance. State violence has not been strictly limited to Chihuahua, Guerrero, Oaxaca, to the poorest states with the largest indigenous or migrant populations. The intellectuals in the city could see, for example, the 2006 torture of protesters in San Salvador Atenco, Estado de México, in their own backyard.
(Ahmed “Police”). This should have been an indication of government corruption, and indeed of the return of a state power as a power to be used openly against its citizens. The self-recriminations of the elite are “we should have known,” rather than the more damning “we knew and we did nothing.”

In the three works of literary fiction I examine in this chapter, the legitimacy of the state is in question, as the works demonstrate how the state uses power against the very people it is supposed to keep safe. According to the novels, the writer must be oriented more firmly outward toward society and toward the present circumstances. He can no longer write as a form of entertainment for a certain cosmopolitan class (such as the D.F. theater-goers Contrabando satirizes) or to satisfy his own intellectual ambitions (as in the “novela mala” authored by 2666’s Sergio González). Each of the novels I examine in this chapter rejects a patrician world of arts and letters for the educated and privileged. Narcoviolencia necessitates an engagement with the public sphere, the violence, the victims.

Contrabando narrates the transformation of a D.F.-based playwright and screenwriter. At the beginning of the novel the narrator heads for a month-long vacation in his supposedly sleepy hometown so he can devote himself to writing in total isolation. The entire trip is unlike what he imagined. Just before his arrival, his cousin (the presidente municipal) and two of his colleagues have gone missing. Later, judiciales arrive in Santa Rosa looking for narcos and instead kill, injure, and rape dozens of townspeople during the course of one evening. The next day, the playwright leaves the isolated cabana on his family property and installs himself in the town’s city hall, where he and his family collect and transcribe testimonies and then “levanta[n] actas” that they
hope will force Chihuahua’s governor to acknowledge and explain what has happened (87): “levantamos las actas, describiendo las causas de las muertes y las circunstancias de cada una. Levantamos también las declaraciones de la gente que vio cómo cayeron los muertos” (87). To the family’s shock, their testimonies and letters are ignored. The narrator is eventually urged by his family to forget what has happened in Santa Rosa. His mother prohibits him from ever coming back to Santa Rosa: he should remain in the safety of Mexico City. Upon returning to his Chapultepec apartment, the playwright finds no satisfaction in the subsequent success of his play. Instead, he portrays the theater scene as a vacuous and elitist form of entertainment. The aura of the literati has vanished for him, and it seems that it cannot coexist with narcoviolencia, even when such violence is out of sight in the capital city. At the end of the novel, the writer explicitly adds that he will burn his manuscript, because it is too dangerous to publish about narcoviolencia. In real life Contrabando remained unpublished until after Rascón Banda’s death in 2008.

“La parte de los crímenes” contains a figure who parallels the playwright: Sergio González, based on the real journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, the author of Huesos en el desierto (2002), about the Juárez femicides. The character in the novel is a D.F. culture editor, who usually “Hacía reseñas de libros de filosofía…y de vez en cuando escribía sobre música y sobre exposiciones de pintura” (470). Sergio leaves this position in order to investigate the Santa Teresa femicides. At first, he is hesitant to involve himself, but feels a duty to the imprisoned Klaus Haas, who has been wrongly accused of a murder, and finds material support from Azucena Esquivel Plata, a disillusioned PRI politician who is searching for ways to reveal how much power her party has ceded to narcos in the North. Through Sergio González and Azucena Esquivel, Bolaño writes of
the possibility of an alliance between the old lettered city and the old representatives of
the PRI.

There seems to be a solution on the horizon at the end of “La parte de los
crímenes,” in spite of the repetitiveness of the crimes. The readers have at least been
given the answers as to who has committed the crimes, and they—like so many of the
characters—have their eyes open to the violence and have heard the warning that Florita
Almada has announced. The scene of the potential alliance between Esquivel Plata and
Sergio González ends the section not with the sense of guilt and impotence for which “La
parte de los crímenes” is often remembered, and not with the shame and powerlessness
with which Bolaño ends his “Chilean” novels (in a “tormenta de mierda,” in the case of
Nocturno de Chile). More broadly, 2666 takes solipsistic conference-attending academics
(the characters Pelletier, Norton, and Espinoza), and redirects their attention to Santa
Teresa, in the same kind of re-direction that occurs with Sergio González.41 The
trajectory of the intellectual seems to have been interrupted by the publicness of the
femicides. The thematics throughout Bolaño’s work that concentrate on the hypocrisy of
the intellectual, and which see literature as a call for the reader to “quítese la peluca,” are
in “La parte de los crímenes” precisely the call for the reader stop believing and believing
in a state that abets the violence.42 In this sense, “La parte de los crímenes” and
Contrabando both anticipate the 2014 protest slogan that emerged from the
disappearances of the Ayotzinapa normalistas: “Fue el estado.”

41 This is true of Bolaño’s oeuvre more broadly: “It is possible to read novels such as Los detectives
salvajes, 2666, Estrella distante, and Nocturno de Chile as texts that make a voyage from civilization to
barbarism. It all begins with poetry and literary workshops, and ends with murders, torture, and violence,
whether in the Northern desert of Mexico or in the forests in the South of Chile” (López-Vicuña 155).
42 “Quiétese la peluca” is a quote from Chesterton that serves as the epigraph for Nocturno de Chile. See
analysis of this epigraph in López-Vicuña.
Finally, *Lenguaje del juego* takes a different tact. Rather than employing the figure of the elite writer who questions his distance from the spaces of violence, *Lenguaje* emphasizes the distance of literature itself from zones of violence and precarization. Metered verse, archaic diction, and unusual syntax that mixes spoken Mexican Spanish with literary formulations emphasize the detachment of the metropolitan writer. The victims remain largely unintelligible characters, and this unintelligibility is acknowledged and foregrounded in the novel. Scenes of violence representing real life occurrences—the digging of *narcofosas*, the discoveries of mutilated cadavers, the murder of town mayors—are rendered in *Lenguaje* in a language that is detached and at times insensitive, by the *letrado* voice that remains emotionally unaffected by the events. This disjunction—the odd, inappropriate, insincere tone—establishes the distance between the word and what the word represents, literature and reality, high culture and violent subjection. Rather than using literature as a space for testimony, as Rascón Banda does, Sada’s novel nurtures a continuing sense of disbelief about *narcoviolencia* which may counteract its normalization.

As I outlined in Chapter 1, the detective novel usually affirms the corruption of the state as a historical constant, and emphasizes the continuity of narcotics as a source of income and as a source of that corruption. With a detective novel like the Zurdo Mendieta series, the detective’s goal is to be able to navigate a corrupt world and remain alive, out of jail, and with as much of his integrity in tact as possible as he searches for the guilty parties. The reader is encouraged to feel compassion for the well-intentioned detective within a corrupt system; he is a hero for being as bold as to pursue the truth. In contrast, the novels that aspire to more highbrow literary status emphasize how new the current
situation is, how unprecedented and unsustainable. While in the detective novel the characters are locals who are already cynical about the longtime corruption, in *Contrabando* and *2666* we find intellectual characters who are in the process of discovering that corruption. This sense of alarm is present not only in the works I analyze here, but also in others such as Yuri Herrera’s *Trabajos del reino* (2011) and Juan Pablo Villalobos’s *Fiesta en la madriguera* (2010), in which narcoviolența reads as a new phenomenon.

The *letrado* or the elite reader is shamed in literary fiction for having missed the narcoviolența that the poor have been suffering, and this difference—shame for inaction in literary fiction versus pride in survival in the crime novel—speaks to differing expectations about whether narcoviolența is a problem that can be resolved. I argue that literary fiction’s alarm and indignation reveal a kind of optimism. The intellectual characters, and perhaps by extension the novels’ readers, are burdened with a responsibility to act on the knowledge they now have about how narpower operates and the extent to which the state has been corrupted. *Contrabando, Lenguaje del juego,* and *2666* each paint complex portrayals of the transforming power structures of the cities in which they are set. Each novel rejects this landscape as intolerable, and in that rejection, exists the demand for a different kind of organization of power, one in which corruption and terror has ended.

The novels give the impression that narco-state violence is a phenomenon that has escalated quickly, allowing for the possibility that it is a dynamic reality that could change quickly, rather than the kind of ossified political machine that is deeply entrenched (which is how the PRI was often represented). It is clear in these novels that
intellectuals’ interventions are coming late, but these novels do not return us to the beginning of the problem of the state corruption. The scholar Sayak Valencia dates the end of the Mexican state and its metamorphosis into “una amalgama narco-política” to the end of the 1970s. At least one recent detective novel, *Los minutos negros* (2006), Martín Solares points to the 1970s as a moment when corruption at the Northern border had already transformed the police and the justice system into a shield to protect the wealthy, whose money came from trafficking. *Los minutos negros* ties together the unsolved fictional murder of four girls in Tampico during the 1970s with the murder of a journalist investigating those crimes in the present of the novel (which seems to be the early 2000s). Police and municipal government corruption allow the well-connected killer to remain unpunished, and an innocent man is sent to jail. Neither *Contrabando*, nor *Lenguaje*, nor “La parte de los crímenes” go back this far into the past, find parallels between this moment of Mexican history and the past, or refer to the state having a history earlier than the moment being narrated as an “amalgama narco-política.”

When characters in the novels begin to understand how corruption and impunity are systematic and not exceptional, it becomes clear to them that the state is not empowered with the consent of the people, the liberal contract that was so heralded during 1990s “democratization.” Actually this liberal contract has already ended, and narcopower has already filled the vacuum left by the end of the liberal state. The question

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43 Sayak Valencia writes, “desde finales de la década de 1970, el Estado mexicano no puede ser concebido como tal, sino como un entramado de corrupción política que ha seguido las órdenes del narcotráfico en la gestión del país, una amalgama narco-política que se ha radicalizado en la última década” (45-6).
44 The *Letras Libres* review of *Los minutos negros* declared the detective novel difficult to understand because of the Northern language employed in it, and generally dismissed the novel. Hugo Hiriart wrote, “Aunque su tránsito es terso, y hasta muy grato por momentos, la prosa de *Los minutos negros* no es impecable. Su estilo oscila entre cierta ambición verbal que obtiene victorias de fraseo notables, y numerosos y condescendientes acercamientos al ‘lenguaje popular’ que hacen tropezar al lector con toda clase de frases con el filo mellado que a fuerza de repeticiones oscurecen lo que debería aclarar.”
that this presents is whether there something else, another kind of contract among people, which is not under the umbrella of the state, that could emerge. This is a question that emerges throughout contemporary Latin America: in *Soberanías en suspenso*, Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott writes that in today’s fiction we can see “la necesidad de nuevas formas de contrato social capaces de contrarrestar la jurisprudencia sorda” in post-authoritarian countries (17).

The idea that the state will freely admit its own wrongdoing is quickly dispelled in *Contrabando*—in which the *actas* the narrator sends to the governor and prosecutor’s office are ignored—and in *2666*—in which murders continue unabated. Meanwhile, Klaus Haas’s lawyer cannot get Haas released from prison despite a complete lack of evidence against him. Sergio González, reluctant again and again to assist Haas, tells the prisoner to speak to his lawyer. His thinking serves as an example of the belief that the state can be held accountable. Instead, González and Hugo must come to terms with the distrust that members of the public have for the state, and distrust of continuing engagement with it.

In *Contrabando*, one such example of this distrust appears in the form of Damiana Caraveo, a character whose family is murdered by *judiciales* and who is tortured, forced to sign a confession she cannot read, and imprisoned for being a *narco*. Damiana returns to her hometown a ghost who says she died in prison, evoking *Pedro Páramo* with statements such as: “Estoy muerta, pero la venganza me sostiene….Cuando me vean pasar por los caminos, la gente dirá Allá va Damiana Caraveo, la muerta en vida” (89). Damiana Caraveo—whose name could be translated to English as something like
“Damiana whose face I see”—recounts for the narrator the violence that has been done to her, concluding “para qué la cuento, qué caso tiene. Quién me la va a creer” (22).

Damiana’s testimony at the beginning of the novel presents a letrado in the form of the narrator as finally able to “ver la cara” of an innocent victim of the state. It introduces the possibility that the letrados might be able to find an old moral authority again—the sense of honor that used to lie in its role (or at the least the role the letrados imagined for themselves) as intercessors on behalf of the masses. But here they are not intercessors who seek and ask for favor from the state; it is simply a literary representation directed toward other readers.

Damiana’s story, narrated in the first person, lays out clearly that state actors are responsible for the murder of her family (law-abiding, poor, indigenized people), and that her torture and imprisonment is a measure to further conceal the violence committed against its citizens. These statements within literature resonate strongly with the accusations that have been made in the contemporary Mexican public sphere. The belief that state itself does not care about certain kinds of citizens has been expressed by activists such as Inés Fernández Ortega. In 2002, Fernández, an indigenous woman from Guerrero, was raped by members of the military; the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered an investigation, as well as reparations and protection. In 2012, the state apologized publicly at a state ceremony, titled “Reconocimiento de Responsabilidades del Estado,” a rare and somewhat momentous event in Mexico’s ongoing “transition to democracy.” At the event, Fernández Ortega rejected the apology as insincere, making

45 By honor I refer to this idea, elaborated by Nicolás Castro Gómez, that the letrado “se veía como un profeta, llamado a “representar” la voz de los que no tenían voz….el letrado se sentía portador de una promesa. Se veía como constructor de identidades, como guía de los ciegos, como actor protagónico de transformaciones sociales” (128).
the following remarks to the audience, in tlalpaneco. The remarks were translated to Spanish as:

Escúchenme todos, hombres, mujeres y niños: los del gobierno, aunque te digan que están de tu lado, no van a cumplir, no les hagan caso. Cometieron ese crimen contra mí porque somos pobres. Y no sólo contra mí sino contra otras personas.46

This announcement crystallizes the problem that intellectuals are grappling with: What can the future of the state be when the poor see it as a duplicitous apparatus that aims to kill, torture, rape, disappear? How can the state persist when it is understood to protect moneyed interests—not only narcotics, but also business interests—over its citizens, and especially the poor? The challenge for intellectuals is to search for how to displace a state that is so distrusted and it seems to start with reckoning with the state’s lack of legitimacy, in terms of not protecting its citizens, and not being empowered through the consent of its citizens.

III. Narcovioleneca and Self-Imposed Neoliberalism

These novels have captured a moment of transition in the country, when it is unclear what the path forward from narcovioleneca will be, whether the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s will persevere, the opening of the state to political party competition will be reversed or strengthened, and what role the public has in directing the state’s agenda given the new expectation of democratic governance, and, simultaneously, the use of violence against people by the state. Will the public find ways to articulate its desires

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46 Cited in Spanish in Hernández Castillo and Mora 32. The original speech is in Me’phaa and is available at: http://tlachinollan.org/video-acto-de-reconocimiento-de-responsabilidad-internacional-del-estado-mexicano-para-ines-fernandez-ortega/.
without looking to the state? Will alternative forms of modernization and development, unconnected to neoliberal policies, emerge?47

The problem of the intellectual’s disconnection from political power and from his own role as a representative of the people came to a head far before the narco crisis. The popular perception of the state’s disregard for the poor (as evident in moments like Fernández Ortega’s statement) is a symptom of Mexico’s shift to neoliberalism. In the early nineties, a handful of unelected, unknown technocrats working at the Banco de México and the Secretaría de Economía decided to adopt aggressive neoliberal policies, which went beyond IMF recommendations, and which resulted in a decline in real wages, the weakening of unions, and the insertion of former agricultural workers into an already saturated labor market (Babb 197). At the time, Mexico’s single-party system shielded the technocrats from accountability. When a few years later Miguel Centeno published a book on the decision-making processes behind the policies, he titled it *Democracy Within Reason: Technocratic Revolution in Mexico*. The political scientists Marion Fourcade-Gourchinhas and Sarah Babb later wrote that the “weakness of democratic institutions” meant that neoliberal reforms were adopted “more quickly than would be tolerated in most full-fledged democracies” (561).

At the time, the economic policies reflected an uptick in a nationalist strain that Claudio Lomnitz has described as “see[ing] reaching full modernization and the rule of the international standard as the ultimate patriotic end” (Deep Mexico 121). In

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47 In a 2010 article on the future of Latin America, Arturo Escobar wrote: “Is it possible to think and move beyond capital as the dominant form of economy, Euro-modernity as dominant cultural construction of socio-natural life, and the State as central form of institutionalization of the social?” (Escobar 11). These are all relevant questions for Mexico, but especially the future of the state. Escobar writes that the countries that are heading toward what he sees as a “post-statist” model (such as, he argues, Bolivia) are not countries in which the state as form no longer exists, but rather the state’s “discursive and social centrality have been displaced somewhat” (Escobar 12).
Democracy Within Reason, Centeno argued that such an aggressive neoliberal agenda—an agenda that engendered significant domestic hardship—came about because technocrats spoke only to each other, and their “shared cognitive framework” and “perfectly closed logic” enabled them to ignore critical voices. Having been educated in U.S. institutions, the technocrats were so convinced of their own specialized knowledge that they disregarded contradictory perspectives. It was not that they endorsed neoliberal policies “as a direct articulation of class interests,” (191) but rather that they came to believe that “anyone who opposes [our policies] is unrealistic and simply not worth listening to” (219). Centeno denounces this dogmatic level of surety: “Their economics was capitalist, but their politics were Leninist” (228). He writes,

The key to the technocratic revolution is not necessarily the victory of a specific social or economic dogma, but rather the triumph of a worldview that is linear, formal, orthodox, and intransigent….That is, what the elite shares is an epistemological rather than economic ideology…How the tecnócratas thought was more decisive than what they thought. The elite shares a cognitive framework, a unique way of analyzing social problems, formulating solutions, and implementing policy that limits the potential for public participation and that inherently denies the inevitability of conflicting social interests. This attitude, more than any specific commitment to markets or free trade, determined the fate of Mexican democracy in the 1990s. (211)48

48 The core of Centeno’s narrative—that a closed, U.S.-educated group of elites listened only to one another, ignoring and pushing out economists with divergent views—has held in the literature since Centeno published in 1997 (see Babb, for example).
The technocrats guided economic policy without ever facing those whose livelihoods and ways of life would become obsolete with economic liberalization: as a result of the neoliberal “consensus,” Mexico lost agricultural jobs, creating an exodus from the rural countryside and into a glutted Mexico City and to the northern border, where factory work was available.

This new reality becomes the backdrop in literary fiction, not only in the sense that the novels depict the maquiladoras at the border and the illegal immigration to the U.S. following the loss of agricultural work, but also in the sense that literary fiction portrays a society in which the public’s wishes have become obsolete, and the government is detached from the governed, making it all but impossible for the outmoded letrados to shift the actions of the state. Social scientists, including Sarah Babb, have written about how the figure of the technocrat, educated in U.S. economics programs, replaced the figure of the domestically educated intellectual with a background in history and the humanities.49 This is part of a worldwide trend, by which the expert with technical knowledge replaces the “political” intellectual. To this point, Aihwa Ong observes “neoliberalism can also be conceptualized as a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions” (3).

This is why in literary fiction, narcoviolencia figures as a nationally self-imposed ill. The emphasis is not on drug-trafficking as a global phenomenon, with the U.S.

49 Sarah Babb writes: “Elite discourse in Mexico has a long tradition of ‘public intellectuals,’ whose literary fame and political involvements qualify them to speak authoritatively on a range of issues, from democracy to development to cultural affairs. More recently, however, a new sort of expert has appeared on the editorial pages of Mexican newspapers, namely, the individual with a profound knowledge of a circumscribed topic (such as monetary policy), often with a degree from a prestigious U.S. university” (207).
creating both demand and pressure to pursue the “war on drugs.” Instead, the novel’s antagonists—those intent on victimizing the innocent, protecting the guilty, and destroying spaces of “traditional” Mexico—are home-grown narcotraffickers or representatives of the state. There are no foreigners in *Contrabando* and *Lenguaje del juego*; no Americans, no reference to U.S. contacts or connections. *Contrabando* makes quite explicit the indistinguishability of *narcos* from state police: “a estas alturas no se puede saber si fueron narcos con credenciales de la Judicial o judiciales con facha de narcos” (87). In “La parte de los crímenes,” Mexican families appear as the parties responsible for the femicides: the Salazar family, the Uribe brothers, and the Negrete brothers are all implicated.

Instead of references to the international flow of narcotics, *narco* violence and state violence on behalf of narcotics commodities appears as the next phase of a misguided national plan of modernization and development. Rascón Banda parallels his rejection of *narco* terror to his father’s generation’s rejection of foreign investment in mineral and salt mining in Baja California Sur. This kind of representation supports the notion that countries like Mexico remain trapped in exploitative relationships with more developed countries, supporting assertions like Ericka Beckman’s, who wrote in *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America’s Export Age*, that throughout Latin America “yesterday’s sites of colonial extraction remain the vortexes of today” (190). Even if the trafficking represented in these novels appears as a new phenomenon, the broader concept of resource extraction is not.
Furthermore, in *Contrabando*, measures to develop the isolated Sierra—such as the construction of a highway—is precisely what allows the local *narcos* to grow their businesses:

Ahora se acortó el camino y solo se hacen dos horas en troca, en vez de un día a caballo. La gente del río podrá traer sus naranjas y sus cañas a vender a Santa Rosa, comentó mi madre. Y los narcos podrán viajar más fácilmente a ver sus siembras, agregó mi padre. (97)

Unlike the better-known literary city of Santa Teresa, Santa Rosa is a place that Beckman would refer to as a “backwater,” defined as a place modernization has been slow to reach—where the lack of roads has meant the use of horses rather than cars, and isolation has required use of the radio instead of telephone. In the present of *Contrabando*, Santa Rosa is at the beginning of a new kind of economic integration, not because the state wants to alleviate the region’s poverty and isolation, to deliver it from its backwater status, but because *narcos* need their products to reach the market. In this context, what could be interpreted as the advancement of Santa Rosa derives from and advances trafficking. The narrator writes that his town is different, that it has achieved a progress that, at first, he is cautiously optimistic about: “Sí, notaba que el pueblo ya no era el de antes, como que veía más movimiento, más dinero, más progreso” (35). It is the kind of “progreso” to which Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott refers when he writes of “el mito de un cierto ‘progreso’ regional que ocultaría, a fuerza de su insistencia, su accidentado reverso” (*Soberanías* 22).

Meanwhile, in Sada’s novel, the hopes for modernization and prosperity post-NAFTA—when the possibilities for former agricultural laborers lie in harvesting and
processing narcotics—serve as the basis for satire throughout. What buoys the economy of the town is precisely the drug trafficking that kills so many people, such that the characters reject the violence but are also relieved when the *narcos* who come to power bolster the economy by working in conjunction with the mayor:

O sea que [el narco] Flavio Benavides y su gente sí creían en el progreso, lo mismo el alcalde Juan Benito Colín. O sea: a raíz de la matanza que todo el mundo deploró, la vida de San Gregorio por fin había virado hacia un rumbo pacífico. Como que hubo un levantón nunca visto. La mercancía circulaba y el poder adquisitivo de la gente creció un poco. (88)

Later the text affirms trafficking as the only opportunity for work in these zones of the country, and the connection between violence and economic opportunity that leads to silence:

Para qué señalarlo como un capo si ha creado tantas fuentes de trabajo.

Él ha activado nuestra economía. (163)

Finally, *Lenguaje del juego* casts political parties’ promises as lies, “puras cursilerías escolares,” intended to manipulate the public (152). These are precisely the kinds of promises about the future of the country in which the state still appears as the protagonist of change, but such change is a promise that is never delivered:

La democracia era un juego, un simulacro, y esto tenía que ser más claro que el agua. También sería doloroso reconocerlo. También sería mordaz saberlo. Inútil el cambio: una falacia, una ingenuidad, un despropósito. Sólo falta agregar que el discurso victorioso del candidato conservador fue motivacional. De entre sus
In *Lenguaje del juego*, the Montaño family’s dreams of getting ahead are impossible in this context, and they appear as delusional. In fact, the narration mocks the attempts of the family to improve their economic condition: Valente’s decision to open a pizzeria when other businesses in town are already paying protection money to *narcos*, the son Candelario’s decision to work for the *narcos* so that he does not have to endure the same humiliations and hardships his father did, and daughter Martina’s decision to pursue a *narco* boyfriend who can provide for her and help her escape her parents’ home. The desire to *progresar*, to advance personally and financially, motivates decisions that result in the family’s vulnerability to *narcoviolenencia*. The conditions for the kind of progress that the family works for are simply not present in San Gregorio; the language of democracy and modernization are artifice, and believing in them leads to the family’s downfall: “El ejemplo cuadraba en Yolanda y Valente: su no progreso, su degracia, su marisma, su no saber qué podría venir” (182).

Bolaño raises a similar set of problems in “La parte de los crímenes.” The character of Dra. Elvira Campos serves as a meditation on the impossibility of contentment in upper-middle-class life in the midst of a crisis of femicide. Elvira’s home is described in detail as a newly constructed apartment building, on “una calle de casas de clase media alta donde vivían médicos y abogados, varios dentistas y uno o dos profesores universitarios” (480). The windows and balconies of her sterile apartment face away from the city and towards the beautiful mountains, landscapes that she and her lover Juan de Dios Martínez often take in. Even though she faces away from Santa
Teresa’s shantytowns and maquiladoras, Elvira’s unhappy thoughts suggest the impossibility of comfort in what Hannah Arendt called “dark times,” times in which people cannot ask anything of politics and in which people reach for each other in compensation (“On Humanity” 11-12). Elvira contemplates suicide, fantasizes about erasing herself through full-body plastic surgery and escaping to Paris, and fails to connect with Juan de Dios Martínez, whose love Elvira cannot reciprocate, because, as Arendt writes, the “warmth” of human relationships cannot replace the privilege of being burdened with having to care for the world, which is only possible when politics and the public realm is available. “La parte de los crímenes” contains this critique of an upper-middle class character’s alienation as part of a long digression in a section otherwise devoted to unveiling truths about the murder of poor young women. It is a critique of the attempt to live as if in a liberal society, and not a necropolitical one. It is about the inescapability of the new reality, and how life, love, and self are all altered by narcoviolencia, whether the elite is “facing” it or not.

IV. Aesthetic Representation as Political Representation

Writers like Sada, Rascón Banda, and Bolaño were writing against the project of the Crack writers who rose to prominence in the 1990s, coinciding with neoliberalization. Authors such as Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla eschewed domestic settings and topics as a way of rejecting the way Latin America has been exoticized and commodified through the publishing boom known as magic realism. In Ignacio Sánchez Prado’s terms, the Crack writers sought to “rescatar una noción europeísta de la alta literatura” (“Narrativa” 123). The literature that emerges around narcoviolencia shows the
pendulum swinging back to stories and realities rooted in Mexico, and not only rooted in Condesa, Roma—the toniest neighborhoods of the D.F. and also the D.F. of José Emilio Pacheco, José Agustín and Onda writers, or more recent writers focused on the middle-class experience like Juan Villoro—but rooted in liminal Mexican spaces, spaces that are not the headquarters of party power and high culture. It is possible that the realities these writers portray will be misinterpreted by an international readership who will see violence as typifying a Mexican or Latin American experience, but these representations could also work to correct the invisibility of *narcoviolen
cia’s victims.

Alongside their representations of the shortcomings of middle-class life in *narc
controlled territories, and the insulation of the D.F. intelligen
tsia, *Contrabando, Lenguaje del juego*, and *2666* represent those segments of the population most affected by *narcoviolen
cia*, effectively bringing those “true life” stories to the lettered city where they can begin to be heard. These novels are addressed more directly to the educated upper-middle class than the other works I analyze in this dissertation (more than detective novels, feature films, and published photographs). And, it is in these works in which the differing treatment of the state of the poor and of the upper- and upper-middle classes emerges most strongly. This is fiction full of stories of innocent, ordinary citizens abused by *nar
cos* and the state. *Contrabando* includes multiple testimonio-like stories narrated in the first-person, and incorporates letters and documents that the narrator finds. These are “authentic” materials that provide the wide-eyed narrator with evidence of *narcotráfico’s*

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50 See for example Sarah Pollack on the U.S. readership’s attraction to Bolaño’s *Detectives salvajes*. Pollack argues that the author’s popularity stems from his being seen as the replacement of “magical realists” such as García Márquez in presenting a stereotypical image of the region to distant reading public. See also discussion in Chapter 1 of Hermann Herlinghaus’s theory of how cultural texts project violence from the global North to the global South. Rebecca Banwell also critiques international audiences’ receptiveness to the equation “Mexico = death” along these lines (147, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation).
deleterious effects on his hometown. At the same time, there are no assurances that aesthetic representation in the space of novels will translate to political representation, or even that political representation can truly mitigate narcoviolencia.

All three of the novels hesitate before the ability of the narrator or author, or of the novel itself, to represent the subaltern subjectivities molded by poverty, injustice, and narcoviolencia. The reactions of the vulnerable are not totally comprehensible to the reader, whether in the case of Damiana Caraveo or an anonymous “vecina” described in an episode in “La parte de los crímenes,” who experiences “lo que era estar en el purgatorio, una larga espera inerme, una espera cuya columna vertebral era el desamparo, algo muy latinoamericano” (660). That is, the vecina’s experience is rendered nonpersonal; the grief is abstract—belonging to all Latin Americans—rather than an individualized grief that elicits sympathy. And yet, in each, there is ultimately a desire to make the announcement: people are being killed, the state is complicit, “we” are complicit, and literary representation has a place and a role to play. Not representing the marginalized, racialized, subaltern subjects in literature has coincided with a lack of their political representation and protection.

In this way, concern with “the connections between aesthetic/symbolic representation and political/ideological representativity,” a problem at the center of discussions of testimonio during the 1980s and 1990s, remains highly relevant in the literary fiction around narcoviolencia. The question of how vulnerable populations are represented and seen is not an abstract one; they shape whether and how public protest

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51 As Mabel Moraña has asked, writing about the role of the intellectual in contemporary Latin America: “Whose voice speaks for the dispossessed, the victims, the marginalized, the subaltern?...Is it part of the intellectuals’ mission to constitute a public voice, to administer the community’s collective memory, to decode societies’ political unconscious?” (21)
happens. In a 2016 book on the country’s political climate, UNAM legal scholar John Ackerman wrote that protest has been limited because of fractures along class divides:

Muchos ciudadanos se niegan a reclamar o protestar…porque se engañan con el cuento de que son parte de la élite o de la ‘clase media’. Tienen miedo a mezclarse con la ‘prole’ y a perder los pocos privilegios que no les son escamoteados. (Ackerman 272)

The divide between the privileged and the poor is felt by the public in general; members of the public are not eager to identify with the poor, and this intensifies the aversion to mobilizing. Class divisions, not just fear, shut down protest. Bolaño cleverly rendered this indifference among distinct groups—and the intellectual’s tendency not to distinguish among “the masses”—in a conversation in which a prostitute argues that she is a puta and not an obrera. If obreras are being killed, why should this concern be of any concern to prostitutes? Sergio had expected “solidaridad gremial” where none exists, and leaves the exchange having seen “un aspecto de la situación que hasta ese momento había pasado por alto.”

In the past the letrado class (and more recently, the technocrat class) has understood politics, economics, and history from the vantage of centers of knowledge based in the capital of the D.F. and descended from U.S. or European epistemologies, modernities, and values. The call in these novels is to understand from below. The division between center and periphery, with rights emanating from the center, is a

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52 The text reads: “exasperado [Sergio] le dijo que en Santa Teresa estaban matando putas, que por lo menos demostrara un poco de solidaridad gremial, a lo que la puta le contestó que no, que tal como él le había contado la historia las que estaban muriendo eran obreras, no putas. Obreras, obreras, dijo. Y entonces Sergio le pidió perdón y como tocado por un rayo vio un aspecto de la situación que hasta ese momento había pasado por alto” (583).
dichotomy that has become particularly dangerous: it distances those far from the center from the rights emanating from that center. Étienne Balibar writes that understanding membership in a community as being located “on the borders” rather than at the center is what is necessary to insure the rights of citizens:

the recognition and institution of citizens’ rights, which practically command the development of human rights, have to be organized beyond the exclusive membership in one community; they should be located, so to speak, ‘on the borders,’ where so many of our contemporaries actually live. Which of necessity means an unstable situation, but also very precise demands….the important question is permanent access to rather than simply entitlement to citizenship, and therefore humanity. (Balibar 28)

In these works of fiction, literature serves as a space in which the elite can reflect on its own role in how society views itself and plans its future. 2666 in particular envisions Mexican society globally, enabling readers to think about how the urban elite can interact with the rural, immigrant, precarious, border populations, and the way these interactions can occur without the involvement of the state. The character of Sergio González is telling in this regard. Having left his D.F. culture beat for Santa Teresa, he converses with mothers, prostitutes, prisoners, and maquila workers—precisely the kinds of people from whom the banking technocrats were so insulated, and the kind of people who have been demonized by the state during the “guerra contra el narco.” It is not only that a D.F.-based writer like Sergio can start thinking about how to speak to other sectors of the population, and to reveal the truth about narcoviolencia, but rather doing so appears as an unwanted, nagging moral duty. Klaus Haas appeals to Sergio several times
to take up the search for justice, literally laughing at Sergio’s polite refusal that “yo ya no escribo sobre los crímenes de Santa Teresa” (674). Sergio does not want to write and yet is called to write, next by Azucena Esquivel. The diputada has realized that she possesses only the trappings of power—but not real power itself, because her party is too ossified and too corrupt to assist her in finding her disappeared friend. A representative of the old, autocratic state joins with a representative of the old, effete lettered city. Their old positions may have been powerless against narcoviolencia, but their reactions are not to withdraw from the public sphere, but rather to adopt new positions: to leave party politics and the culture industry, respectively, and to rely even more on the power of the press. They believe in the work of unveiling the truth, in the telling of true stories, of the power of representation. They are characters who make literal Bolaño’s affirmation in Entre paréntesis that “literatura básicamente es un oficio peligroso” (24).

This alliance between González and Esquivel Plata, which Bolaño made the last scene of “La parte de los crímenes,” expresses the desire to create new relationships that are not mediated by the state. By this point in Bolaño’s narrative, the state has been portrayed as so complicit with narcoviolencia that indeed there is no longer any point for the politician or the intellectual to engage with its representatives. If the intellectual is going to maintain a role in guiding society, it must begin through his reassertion of his autonomy. Bolaño narrates a moment of transition in which the state as the form that responds to and mediates social needs is being denaturalized. Instead the political

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53 Sergio echoes the words of the Santa Teresa university rector, and twin brother of Santa Teresa’s leading narcotrafficker, when he claims that the crimes are outside of his purview. The text here reads: “Cuénteselo a su abogada, dijo Sergio, yo ya no escribo sobre los crímenes de Santa Teresa. Al otro lado Haas se rió. Es lo que todo el mundo me dice. Cuéntelo por aquí, cuéntelo por allá. Mi abogada ya lo sabe, dijo. Yo no puedo hacer nada por usted dijo Sergio. Mire por dónde, yo creo que sí, dijo Haas” (674).
relocates to civil society itself, through the multiple voices and identities in play; a national vision based in Mexico City is relocated to the parts of Mexico that have been understood as the country’s peripheries.

We can find in Bolaño’s imagined ending an example of what is being sought today, in the activist landscape: necessity leading to the forging of new definitions of politics, a politics distanced from institutional power. The novels examined in this chapter anticipate this need for new spaces of politics. The Universidad de Guadalajara-based scholar Igor González Aguirre asked, on the two-year anniversary of Ayotzinapa:

¿Sería posible que a partir de lo acaecido en Iguala logramos articular nuevos espacios para (la ampliación de) la política? ¿Desembocará esta fuerza social acumulada—sin válvulas de escape visibles—en un poderoso estallido social? (n. pag.)

Is the violence so bad, and the state so clearly implicated, that it will open up new spaces for the political, a broadening of what is understood as political, who engages in the political and what kinds of political speech and action are allowed for? Will previously invisible parts of the public begin to be “seen,” as happened with the disappeared Ayotzinapa students? And will this lead anywhere meaningful? Or is visibility and social pressure truly no match for narco power, a power that seeks only to preserve itself?

Literary fiction contains rather caustic self-indictments of letrados’ inaction in the face of narcoviolencia, but the self-flagellation present in literature does not seem to have a counterpart in the sphere of activism: the intellectual class—the class from which the novelists wrote and the class to whom they wrote—has not been the protagonist of nation-wide mobilizations. The mobilization that occurred immediately after the
Ayotzinapa massacre was set off not by organizing from the capital, but from the *normalista* networks of social organizations (Díaz Cepeda 232). Guerrero, a state whose inhabitants are among the poorest in the country, is now seen by commentators such as John Ackerman as representing “el sitio ideal para iniciar la ardua labor de reconstrucción de la patria” (273). Writing in 2016, Ackerman makes the same kind of suggestion about concentrating on the local rather than the national that all of these novels, with their highly localized settings, had anticipated in the years of intensifying *narcoviolencia*.

Bolaño’s *2666* captures the civic organizations that emerged in the aftermath of the femicides, organizations created by families of the victims. Mothers from the *clases populares* begin to enter the public sphere on their own terms, speaking in their own voices.54 Bolaño only renders this organic self-mobilization in the distance, as if his narration cannot get too close to the organizers. For example: “Pero en julio aparecieron dos muertas y las primeras protestas de una asociación feminista, Mujeres de Sonora por la Democracia y la Paz (MSDP), cuya central estaba en Hermosillo, y que en Santa Teresa sólo contaba con tres afiliadas.” (568)

The organizations are always rendered with reference to their growing numbers: “Según las autoridades no participaron más de cinco mil personas. Según los convocantes, fueron más de sesenta mil personas las que marcharon por las calles de Santa Teresa” (758).

This distance indicates the concern that the *letrado* may not be able to reclaim the old

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54 For analysis of the social movements that emerged in reaction to the femicides and the relationships between these movements and the families of victims, see Kathleen Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008) and Melissa Wright “Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico” (in *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. Ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
role he played under the PRI, able to be a spokesman for a public unable to speak for itself, because, perhaps, the public can actually speak for itself. Perhaps the people to whom the state lies “porque somos pobres” will have no use for the D.F. culture journalist or the PRI diputada, even though they are searching for new roles to play in society.

Of the three novels I analyze here, only 2666 represents this kind of potential seed of more widespread mobilization. Contrabando and Lenguaje del juego instead emphasize that the vulnerable poor have no way to respond to the narco-state power that victimizes them, placing a further burden on the reader and on the members of the public who are not themselves in direct danger. This is the question that remains open in post-Ayotzinapa Mexico: is there a way for the public to hold the state accountable? Does the public sphere matter, regardless of whether intellectuals or “los pobres” are speaking? Bolaño, Sada, and Rascón Banda heavily burden the figure of the intellectual, as if he were responsible for stopping the violence and impunity. And yet it seems like that burden is unfair, because what is unresolved is whether voices, truth, or testimony can dislodge a narco-state.

The protest that is beginning to coalesce in “La parte de los crímenes” escalated in the wake of the normalistas’ disappearances in 2014. Six months after Ayotzinapa, Rossana Reguillo wrote:

Ayotzinapa es el símbolo de que algo muy profundo se rompió en el cuerpo de la nación; después del 26 de septiembre de 2014 nada puede ser ya igual. No es que no hubiera antes esa bárbara violencia, esa descomposición de las instituciones,
The outcry resulting from Ayotzinapa has not tempered the violence. In March 2017, a mothers’ group called Colectivo Solecito de Veracruz announced that it had discovered over 250 bodies of the disappeared outside the city of Veracruz. One of the mothers, Lucía de los Ángeles Díaz Genao asked: “¿Cómo es posible que se haya creado la fosa clandestina más grande del país y posiblemente de América Latina sin que las autoridades se hayan dado cuenta? ¿Cómo?” (Gómez 25).

Narcoviolencia is still represented as the discovery of bodies, much like what Bolaño included in “La parte de los crímenes” (which itself echoed previous writings like Los huesos en el desierto by the real Sergio González Rodríguez). Narcoviolencia is the moment of discovery: of physical bodies, and of the knowledge of narcopower and state corruption. Each discovery creates sadness and horror, but for some—like in the quotation by Igor González Aguirre above—there is optimism that this incontrovertible evidence of violence against Mexico’s citizens will ultimately end it.

Even if “La parte de los crímenes” ends with the optimism of a union between Sergio González and Azucena Esquivel, the union has not emerged in real life: who are the real-life defectors from party politics and the lettered city? Thirteen years after 2666’s publication, the educated upper-class of Mexico has been made aware of the violence, of who are the victims and who are the guilty, but are still waiting for a response to emerge. Jean Franco referred to this lack of resolution within 2666 itself: “The novel does not end, so much as peter out.” (Cruel 245). 2666, Contrabando and Lenguaje were each written during an ongoing crisis, when it was not yet possible to impose meaning onto
events, to invent a narrative ending. It was only possible to demand that readers open their eyes, they recognize “the blood on their hands,” that they look to the poor and peripheries, where, to quote Bolaño again, the “incierto futuro de toda Latinoamérica” was taking shape.

V. Contrabando: A Writer Learns that “Fue el estado”

The following sections will proceed with analyses of Contrabando, Lenguaje del juego, and finally “La parte de los crímenes” from 2666. The three novels share a few commonalities in addition to the thematic ones detailed above. First, the authors of all three were in some way outsiders to Mexico City. Bolaño’s status as a nomadic intellectual is well-known: he was Chilean-born, had spent many years in Mexico, and resided in Spain when he wrote 2666. Rascón Banda and Sada were Northerners—from Santa Rosa de Uruáchí, Chihuahua and Mexicali, Baja California, respectively—who lived their adult lives in Mexico City but set many of their stories, novels, and plays in locations resembling the places where they grew up. Second, all three novels were published posthumously. Sada finished the novel before he died, though his widow Adriana Jiménez made the final corrections to the proofs and then did publicity for the novel when it was published (Monistain). Bolaño had planned 2666 to be published as a series of novels, including a final novel or “parte” that he never wrote or completed. Rascón Banda left a manuscript of Contrabando, but it is hard to say whether he intended to publish it, considered it finished, and what effect posthumous editing by Héctor de Mauleón had. Rascón Banda completed a draft of a novel called Contrabando in 1991,
though it is unclear how this draft (which was awarded a literary prize) differs from the version published seventeen years later.55

The answer to the question of why the novel was published after Rascón Banda’s death seems to be contained in the novel itself. On the penultimate page, the narrator writes: “Voy a quemar todo lo que escribí en Santa Rosa, se lo prometí a mi madre. No quiero que te desaparezcan, me dijo” (210). The novel names growers and traffickers of “yerba” and “chutama” in Santa Rosa; the fact that the novel names names makes it seem as though the text could be the kind of dangerous, accurate-to-life work for which journalists are routinely killed.56 In the press, Rascón Banda gave the impression that his works were taken directly from life: “No sé soñar, me cuesta trabajo imaginar, sólo

55 Oswaldo Zavala treats Contrabando as an artifact of 1992, the year Rascón Banda submitted a manuscript of the same name for the Premio Juan Rulfo Para Primera Novela using the pseudonym “El Traficante.” Zavala reads Contrabando as a record of that moment in the rise of narco conflict in the North. Diana Palaversich adds “the reasons for not publishing in the work in 1991 are not clear; however, in the same year Rascón Banda wrote a play, “Contrabando,” which revolves around events described in the novel” (“Contrabando” 32, footnote 2). Actually, the published play and the novel differ completely, with the exception that both include the character Damiana Caraveo. I am skeptical that without a draft of the 1991/1992 novel Contrabando we can conclude that the novel did not change—and not change significantly—between 1992 and Rascón Banda’s death in 2008. It seems unusual that Rascón Banda would have used the pseudonym El Traficante for the entry of Contrabando to the contest, if it is indeed the same work, because the published version is explicitly narrated for an intellectual and not a narco. In his Letras Libres review, García Ramírez write that the novel was rejected by publishing houses in the early 1990s, a claim that I have not been able to confirm. The assertion that the elites would not publish Contrabando at that time may reflect the intellectual class’ own guilt about past silence about drug trafficking. In a review of Contrabando published in 2011, three years after the novel’s publication and deep into the “guerra contra el narco,” Letras Libres concluded: “Nadie quería ver en ese momento lo que estaba sucediendo. Hoy ese destino ya nos alcanzó. Hoy la novela de Rascón parece escrita ayer” (García Ramírez, “Literatura,” 84). The 1991/2 draft and indications about whether Rascón Banda attempted to publish it might be contained in the author’s archives at the Centro Nacional de los Arte, though at the time of writing most of that archive was closed to the public pending the resolution of Rascón Banda’s father’s probate.

56 Contrabando anticipates the danger implied by writing about narcoviolencia that later became common, and which led to the proliferation of new forms of journalism that sought to protect the author and his sources. One such example is Javier Valdez Cárdenas, who published articles about narco crimes that omits names and other identifying details (Polit-Dueñas 79-87). In one example of Valdez’s characteristic vagueness, he published a series of articles about a figure called “El Licenciado,” who was never further identified, but who might have been Dámaso López Núñez; some conjecture that it was in retaliation for his writing about “El Licenciado” that Valdez was murdered (Guillermoprieto “Voice” n. pag.).
aprendí a contar, soy como un notario que da fe de los hechos que me duelen, me indignan o me frustran” (quoted in Licona, n.pag.).

The accusation that “fue el estado”—that murders and disappearances are crimes of the state rather than crimes committed by narcos—is presaged throughout Contrabando, in the experiences of the narrator and in the testimonies and life stories that he collects from various residents of Santa Rosa. Contrabando captures a shift in a letrado subject’s approach to narcoviolencia from a position that seeks to legitimize the state’s actions to a suspicious or contestatory approach toward state power, in which the letrado realizes that he does not have the access to state power that he once thought he had.

In Contrabando, a narrator who resembles Rascón Banda himself leaves Mexico City for a month in his hometown Santa Rosa in the Sierra Tarahumara in Chihuahua. He has writing to do, and his mother has promised him that “tendrás tiempo para escribir, tranquilamente, en la calma del pueblo” (24). He heads to Santa Rosa believing that there he can finish a film script that has been commissioned, one that is based in a nostalgic vision of the countryside, a love story “como aquellas que hacía el Indio Fernández, con hembras de a deveras y con hombres de caballo” (25). In addition to solitude, the town of Santa Rosa will also provide the narrator an opportunity to reconnect with this rural Mexico that he needs to evoke in his script.

The novel is structured with every other chapter narrated in the first person, by the writer. In these chapters, the plot of the novel is advanced. At the beginning, the writer notices a disturbing difference from the Santa Rosa that he knew in his youth. He sees two presumed narcos shot dead at the airport. He hears of a massacre at the Yepachi
ranch (where Damiana Caraveo’s family lived). And he learns that his cousin Julián—the town’s mayor—is missing. As the novel continues, it becomes clear that Julián has been abducted. The writer participates in the search for his cousin, contacting authorities who are also his classmates: “logré hablar a la Procuraduría, donde trabajan dos abogados compañeros míos” (42).

Towards the end of the novel, one of the potential reasons for the abduction emerges: a local paper has published an interview with the narrator, in which he says he has come to Santa Rosa to gather material for his writings. Some of the narrator’s family members believe that narcos disapproved of the attentions of a writer-journalist in the area: the narrator then seems to have “blood on his hands” even though he is uninvolved in trafficking. His naivete has made him a party to his cousin’s disappearance—which ends in the cousin’s torture and murder alongside two members of his mayoral staff. Later, a more probable reason for Julián’s disappearance surfaces: Julián opposed the candidate to the presidencia municipal, supported by narcos, and later, he could not be bribed to rent ejido lands to narcos who wanted to grow there (111).

Julián’s disappearance and the narrator’s possible culpability is told alongside the troubles of the town of itself. The climax of the narrative occurs in the chapter titled “Una noche en Santa Rosa,” when unknown men arrive in the town center on a Saturday night: they murder sixteen townspeople, injure twenty, rape the town’s young girls, and steal from homes. The narrator and his family at first presume the perpetrators are narcos, but instead learn that they were judiciales who believed that the town was harboring and protecting narco criminals.
The next day the narrator, his father (who serves as a “subagente” of the local Ministerio Público), and his cousin (who is a “juez de paz”), begin documenting what has happened. They use the testimonies they collect from surviving victims to demand answers from the Chihuahua state authorities, try to capitalize on all the connections that they have, and seek out both PRI and opposition officials. The narrator’s uncle Lito tries to get an appointment with el General Arámbula (“muy conocido de mi tío”), but without luck (90). The family also goes to the governor but is likewise turned away: “El gobernador tampoco pudo recibirlos pero hablaron con su secretario particular, amigo mío, a quien le entregaron una carta de mi parte” (90).

The novel represents the frenzied attempt of the family to obtain state aid and an explanation for these events, as well as their desperation as no acknowledgement, apology, or rectification comes. The family believes in a justice achieved by going to the center—to centralized power, to officials with law degrees, to the state governor, to the president even, appealing to higher and higher levels of government until justice is reached. The family is represented as members of a kind of benevolent elite that sees itself as responsible for providing “protection and tutelage” to the vulnerable townspeople (Skurski and Coronil “City and Country” 257). The real-life Santa Rosa de Uruáchic had been founded by Rascón Banda’s ancestors; Rascón Banda’s father served as the “juez de paz” while his paternal grandfather as the “juez civil” and his maternal grandfather as the “juez penal” (Licona n. pag.).

The family’s sudden impotence shocks them. The experience of demanding justice from the state, or even demanding an acknowledgement of events, and being refused is a new experience for the letrado, one that finally puts him in a position parallel
to that of Damiana Caraveo and the other townspeople. The novel narrates a
transformation within the narrator in which he relinquishes his belief in the government
and realigns himself with the people, serving them through transcribing their testimonies,
recording their stories, and adopting their same distrust of the government.

Still, the bumbling narrator is slow to adopt the sense of moral indignation
possessed by characters like Damiana Caraveo. The demand for justice emerges
spontaneously in moments of crisis among members of the public (and particularly
among women and mothers). In the opening scene of Contrabando, the narrator watches
silently as two men are shot and killed in the Chihuahua airport. The letrado looks on as
chorus of public outrage forms:

Asesinos, gritó una mujer embarazada a los hombres que apuntando con sus
armas se acercaron a revisar el cuerpo, sacándole sus documentos, su billetera, sus
cigarros, su agenda, su pasaporte, su boleto. Asesinos, les gritó una anciana de
bastón. Eran narcos, respondió uno de los hombres, que volteó y la miró con furia.
Eso no les quita a ustedes lo asesinos, le dijo una joven. Asesinos, asesinos,
gritaron otras mujeres. La gente que se juntó alrededor del cuerpo hizo coro. En
todos los rostros había indignación. Asesinos. Asesinos. Asesinos. (9)

This vision of the public whose reaction to narcoviolencia is a clear and
immediate condemnation, versus that of the state, which constantly acts to conceal and
ignore, manifest what Julie Skurski and Fernando Coronil have called “the inversion of
the geography of truth” (“Country” 257). That is, the hegemonic representations of the
pueblo often locate a nation’s moral identity in the pueblo, and in the peripheral spaces of
the nation that they inhabit. At the same time, the elite often aspire to fulfill to a civilizing
mission which operates from the “center.” Skurski and Coronil identify a contradiction in
the claim of the dominant class that the pueblo is best governed from “the city, as the
representative of metropolitan progress which derives from the center” (257), while at the
same time the dominant class also governs as the representative of “the people” who are
by the dominant class’ own definition the moral core of the nation (258). Contrabando
articulates this contradiction by imbuing the residents of the Sierra with this moral ballast
while portraying the narrator, who has been living in the D.F. for years, as a self-
appointed representative slow to understand the indignation produced by life in the
Sierra.

Contrabando alternates between the letrado narrator as the protagonist of the text
and varied residents of the town as its collective protagonist. Most of the alternate
chapters (the even ones) are intercalated episodes in which characters who have appeared
in the immediately preceding chapter give their first-person testimonies. Diana
Palaversich writes:

The greatness of the novel lies in the author’s mastery in orchestrating these
voices….in the profound emotional impact it has on the reader, elicited by the
writer’s capacity to bring us very close to the suffering of others….As a
counterpoint of voices, this polyphonic novel becomes a repository for the
collective memory of the region. (“Contrabando” 32)

In these testimonies, Damiana Caraveo gives her account of the massacre and her
Kafkaesque incarceration. As does the town’s former beauty queen, who married and had
three children with a suspected trafficker who is missing, and now lives in utter penury.
In another chapter, Hugo’s mother narrates the biographies of six Santa Rosa residents
who have died as a result of their involvement growing and trafficking. Traffickers in the area have historically been “narquillos”: peasants who through economic desperation, naivete, or opportunism have become involved in trafficking, often with a tragic result. Still, not all of the stories are serious in tone. The narrator also includes a “letter” he has found, written by an infamous local trafficker Valente Armenta, in which Armenta makes a humorous series of excuses for his quite serious crimes, including dismissing having murdered his brothers-in-law in order to take possession of their lands to grow poppy and marijuana.

In contrast, in Bolaño’s “La parte de los crímenes,” there is no such “collective memory” or collective voice of the victims. Narcoviolencia’s victims are not a coherent collective with stories to tell. Instead, in “La parte de los crímenes,” what was once the “pueblo” has broken down to a catalogue of discovered cadavers, invisible populations in shantytowns and in the garbage dump called El Chile. Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott writes that in so much contemporary Latin American literature, “la poderosa alegoría referencial del aparato literario moderno parece estar extraviada, divorciada de “El Pueblo” como sujeto-centro de la historia y del texto” (“Biopolítica” 56). For Villalobos-Ruminott, the transformation of contemporary sovereignty un-incorporates “el pueblo como identidad sintética de lo nacional-popular y [produce] su re-incorporación en un corpus asociado con el orden neoliberal contemporáneo” (“Biopolítica” 55). Contrabando represents the transformation of modern sovereignty, but it is a novel that still imagines members of the public—and victims of narcoviolencia—as subjects, and represents individual voices as well as collective ones, as in the shared cry “asesinos.” The necropolitical order that has transformed the Sierra into a violent territory has not transformed its residents into
superfluous bodies. Even if Damiana Caraveo claims that she has returned to Santa Rosa already dead, she also remains alive to pursue revenge, to tell her story to anyone who will listen. In her assertion “la venganza me sostiene,” we see a productive manifestation of ressentiment and the continued belief in her existence as an act of defiance (89).

At the same time, the novel portrays Santa Rosa as only at an initial stage of its integration into a global economy, leaving open the possibility that as its integration continues, the violence will worsen. The integration is not spurred by a benevolent state wishing to develop economic opportunities for the residents of the Sierra. The recently-constructed highways and the radio frequencies used to communicate (there are no telephone lines) are monopolized by the narcotraffickers (the chapter “Los ruidos del aire” demonstrates how narcos have interfered with the townspeople’s primary form of communication with relatives in Chihuahua City, in Obregón, in Ciudad Juárez).

In the last quarter of the novel, the apparently unmediated stories provided in the first-person by the town’s inhabitants become two works of fiction being elaborated by the narrator and included in the novel. The script Triste recuerdo is rejected by the filmmaker who had commissioned it (and Hugo laments not having asked for any money up-front). A second script Guerrero Negro is put on in Mexico City by the director Luis de Tavira. Guerrero Negro, a version of which we read within Contrabando, is not about Santa Rosa, but rather deals more abstractly with vulnerability, the effects of violence and drug addiction, and Mexico’s “resource curse” which causes it to be a site of perpetual extraction. The play takes place on a beach in Guerrero Negro, Baja California, also the location of a salt mine, which, according to the play, has exported tons of salt to Japan, for the benefit of Japanese and U.S. investors.
Once back in D.F., the production of *Guerrero Negro* provides the basis for satire of the self-important theater world, in which literary production is compromised by financial considerations. For example, the narrator remarks about the production:

Si Televisa le permite el desnudo total, Edith González será Martha, y si el productor le llega al precio, el Gato Montés será Humberto Zurita, esto si su esposa Christian Bach lo deja, porque ella prefiere que él haga *M. Butterfly*, un éxito de Broadway….como que [*Guerrero Negro*] no está a la altura de un actor como Humberto, le dijo Christian a Vicente Leñero en una cena con el productor, en su restaurante el Olivo (211)

The theater scene to which the narrator returns is one that is more interested in re-staging Broadway plays (and here, ironically, a play addressing the exoticizing impulses of the West), which has more cachet than a play written by a domestic intellectual about the economics and the desires that have produced Northern Mexico’s security crisis. Also notable is the fact that the production has entered into negotiations with Televisa, a channel perennially accused of disseminating PRI propaganda (in the 2012 elections, its support of then-candidate Enrique Peña Nieto led the #YoSoy132 movement to hold protests outside Televisa offices). In *Contrabando*, not even avant-garde theater has total creative and intellectual autonomy from the state.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator had arrived in the Sierra as a blocked writer whose participation in elite D.F. writing workshops had not cured him of his writer’s block (“cada vez que me toca el turno de lectura en el taller digo Paso como en el póquer” (134)). Within the novel, the experience of outrage, the witnessing of terror unblocks him. Violence and injustice has given the writer something to say. The narrator
fits the trope of the lost intellectual who needed experience in order to write. However, the ability to write is pyrrhic victory, since once the narrator has had this experience he no longer accepts the role of theater in his society, in which *M. Butterfly* outranks *Guerrero Negro*.

Moreover, the trip to the Sierra Tarahumara has provided the narrator with material, but ultimately the narrator leaves. Violence serves as the basis for artistic inspiration but ultimately his solidarity has its limits. At the novel’s end, the narrator stands in for an infantilized *letrado* class content to follow the rules, as the narrator himself obeys his parents’ wishes that he not contact the press and that he simply forget what he saw. “Haz de cuenta que fue una simple pesadilla,” they tell him (209). The novel ends on a melancholy note: the narrator disapproves of the role of culture in society, but is not yet ready to “grow up,” defy (parental) authority, and use his privilege in society to openly contest the abuses of power.

VI. *Lenguaje del juego*: The Limitations of Seeing *Narcoviolencia* from the Lettered City

Daniel Sada’s novel *Lenguaje del juego* problematizes this obstructed or limited solidarity with victims of drug violence that was intimated with the ending of *Contrabando*. In this section, I argue that *Lenguaje*, published in 2012, rejects the modes that had already been used to respond to *narcoviolencia* in the public sphere. This novel—which at times belittles victims, satirizes the promises of the state (and the public that believes them), and refers openly to the financial advantages of a *narco* economy—challenges whether the lettered city has anything to offer to peripheral zones of violence
and their inhabitants. We are very far from an imaginary in which literature serves as “el tónico que revitalizaría el cuerpo decrépito de nuestras sociedades y permitiría su ‘tránsito’ definitivo hacia la modernidad,” to quote Nicolás Castro Gómez on the imaginary of the late nineteenth-century letrado (17). Instead, this is a literature that knows it is politically irrelevant and a “modernity” associated with liberalism, democracy, development has already failed. In Capitalismo Gore, Sayak Valencia argues that for drug violence to end, it is precisely this liberal, developmentalist consensus that must be dismantled:

Lo que los discursos oficialistas no dicen es que en México los cárteles de la droga no podrán ser erradicados eficazmente…mientras no se deconstruyan los conceptos de modernidad y de progreso y dejen de utilizarse como directrices del discurso político y éste integre las posibilidades reales de una política geográficamente pertinente (52)

Sada’s work articulates the inability of literature to transcend the ciudad letrada in which it has become trapped, and from which it cannot articulate a discourse that counters the hegemonic discourse of the state

Daniel Sada’s oeuvre is difficult, sui generis, and critical of the role of literature in a violent society. Because of these qualities, Sada is not widely read in Mexico or in the U.S. academy, in spite of endorsements like that made by Bolaño, that Sada was “un autor radical,” whose “proyecto de escritura me parece el más arriesgado” (Entre paréntesis 313, 342). Sada seemed to take a measure of pride that his work went unread, commenting to an interviewer:

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57 See Rodríguez Lozano for biographical details and an overview of Sada’s publications and prizes. Rodríguez Lozano refers to the distaste that Sada provokes in his writing, that his “producción tiene todo
No escribo para un mercado. Escribo para lectores ideales, prefigurados en mi literatura. Exijo que me lean con atención, o si no, que no me lean. Y por estoy muy contento con los cuarenta lectores que tengo (Sada in Rodríguez Lozano 46-7).

When Sada passed away in 2011, it came to light that he had been living in a situation not only of ill health, including blindness, but also of economic precarity. His widow explained that Sada earned little money between his publications and Conaculta grants, and that later in his life he could not continue giving the creative writing classes that provided an important portion of his income. These circumstances make his insistence that he would continue writing for his forty readers seem all the more remarkable (Monistain). This description conjures, in reverse, Arguedas’s description of the already iconic Carlos Fuentes “escribiendo como a un albañil que trabaja a destajo” (Los zorros 25). It was not coincidental that Arguedas’s example of the worst kind of professionalized writer hailed from Mexico. With Fuentes the lettered city bestowed cultural capital upon a writer who examined Mexican identity as if identity and colonial wounds, and not the failures of the “revolutionary” state, were the major problems holding the country back from meeting all its (legitimate, laudable) goals of development and modernity. Sada writes from a different generation; he was five years old when La región más transparente was published. And he writes in a very different line—against

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58 The fact that a portion of Sada’s income came from awards from the Centro Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes speaks to how even though Sada’s work was deeply critical of the Mexican state in its ideals and practices, his work was in no way viewed as a threat.

59 Immediately before his death—in fact when Sada was in a coma from which he would never regain consciousness—the Secretaría de Educación Pública awarded him the Premio de Ciencias y Artes in the category of Lingüística y Literatura; the prize that year was awarded to two recipients, Sada and José Agustín. (Castañeda).
this project of modernity, against the notion of cultural-political capital, against a belief in party politics or the promises for a better future through liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{60}

*Lenguaje del juego* is self-conscious of its lettered vantage point and its distance from victims. In this, it diverges considerably from *Contrabando*, which attempts to capture and contain within it a polyphony of voices from the Sierra, characters who represent real people who articulate their suffering in a comprehensible way. Rascón Banda ventriloquizes poor, indigenized victims such as Damiana Caraveo and then returns to the safety of Mexico City. In *Lenguaje*, Sada drops the pretense of the intellectual subject who empathizes with the subaltern victim, making such empathy appear intellectually insincere and politically futile. Rather than using the first-person, testimonial-style approach of *Contrabando*, Sada mixes metered verse with stilted prose, as if the novel is regressing. No longer does the novel contain the Bakhtinian hybridity that incorporates the voices—and the laughter—of the public. The novel cannot get a grasp of what these voices sound like, and all the laughter in the novel is emitted by the *narcos*, as a triumphant sign of their total power over the public. *Lenguaje del juego* gives the sense that the elite need to account for the way that the lettered subject has cloistered himself in the *ciudad letrada*—in producing works of high culture and literally

\textsuperscript{60} Nicola Miller critiques Fuentes as a “traditional intellectual” who “adopted the cause of the masses without going so far as to be fully recruited into political militancy. Indeed, it could be argued that the assumption of the role of ‘organic’ intellectual by Spanish American intellectuals who were actually ‘traditional’ in Gramsci’s sense helped to perpetuate myths of national identity that obscured class divisions. Does this necessarily imply, then, that they should all be thought of as ‘traditional’ intellectual who, unwittingly or not, furthered the interests of the ruling class?” (24-5). Francisco Goldman contrasted Sada not with Fuentes but with the *Letras Libres* and Crack contemporaries: “I used to sense in Sada...an insecurity and discomfort around the urbane, supremely self-confident Mexico City literary types, all those *Letras Libres* and “Crack” writers who dressed and comported themselves, as my late wife, Aura, once remarked, ‘like international bankers’” (Goldman, “Sada” n. pag.).
in the comparably safe metropolises—and for the fact that he can no longer represent the crisis of *narcoviolencia* because he cannot represent its victims. *Lenguaje del juego* asks whether “literature” can or will dislodge itself from the lettered city, reorient itself toward the excluded parts of the country, and develop a new kind of language that can articulate what is happening in those areas.

There is little academic scholarship on Sada, and nearly all of it concentrates on his 600-page opus *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* (1999), a novel that examines dirty war-era disappearances in a small town in Northern Mexico and which also mixes archaic Spanish words, Mexican argot, and verse. Oswaldo Zavala writes that “Sada’s masterpiece is narrated by a voice that no longer recognizes itself or its place of enunciation” (“Sada” 75). For Zavala, Sada’s writing points to the impossibility of representation and of modernity:

Sada’s entire literary project signals the impossibility of representation. His fiction remains on the surface of language, where the link between form and rhythm defines the structure….Sada’s narrative, “the most devilishly difficult of Mexican literature” (Domínguez Michael 90) further opens important fissures in Latin American literary history, since its most important novels appear in the horizon at the end of the twentieth century as disorienting landmarks of modernity, revealing its conditions of (im)possibility. (“Sada” 76)

Zavala continues by writing that Sada refuses to satisfy preconceptions about Mexican alterity, about small-town life being either enchanting or legible in its difference. Sada has written “against” the Crack writers, but he has also written “against” the Boom authors, to the extent that the Boom was understood as this force that assimilated
excluded perspectives into Latin American modernity: “Through such aesthetic practices as magic realism, modern literature would bring ‘the other’ into the realm of representation while at the same time constitute itself as the symbolic space in which the intelligibility of the other’s voice can finally be ensured” (Dove 147).

*Lenguaje* describes violent events in ways that are both explicit and familiar to readers, but with a tone of aloofness rather than the indignation or moral scandal that emerges in “La parte de los crímenes” or *Contrabando*. In fact, the narrator sometimes writes with a tone of put-on ingenuity that parodies the naiveté of a *letrado* like *Contrabando*’s narrator. For example:

De vez en cuando allí circulaban vehículos extraños. No había pasado nada, pero ¡ojo! La tacha estaba en los alrededores, según se rumoraba de puro refilón de muertes por doquier, no tantas, pero sí. Y una aparatosas. Personas mutiladas y colgadas de árboles en lugares adonde la gente podía verlas con loco desconcierto (18-9).

The text also occasionally employs verse-like structures based on seven- and eight-syllable meters. When the military leaves San Gregorio, where it had been keeping a tenuous peace, the *narcos* return, announcing themselves by playing their *ranchera* music all night long. Sada breaks from prose to render the foreboding of violence in verse:

Música de tambora

Música para algunos humillante

y para otros festiva.

El pueblo musical de San Gregorio

a punto de peligro. (63)
There are also several points throughout the prose when the narration points out the fictionality of the story, drawing attention to an omniscient narrator’s voice. This includes phrases such as “Bueno (ejem), vamos por partes” (17); “El capítulo que aquí da comienzo trata de…” (85); “Para no alegar más la anécdota” (185); “Mejor veámoslo un poco más de reojo” (193).

I argued in Chapter 1 that Élmer Mendoza utilizes popular speech and humorous albures to create a sense of community among readers who all understand the same kind of linguistic wink; here Sada does the opposite. Despite using some words and constructions that come from popular speech, they are combined with literary constructions and outdated or made-up words that ultimately have an estranging effect. The writer of Sada’s texts—the one who utters the “ahems” but who we should not understand as Daniel Sada himself—writes from above, writes to demonstrate his superiority. The letrado has control over language in a way that perhaps serves to compensate for a lack of power in the present world. In contrast, the narcos—whose power is total—lack the capacity for language. All they do is curse—“hijo de tu puta madre”—and their language is “un enorme escupitajo” toward the San Gregorio residents (55). The narration asks,

¿O es qué ése era el lenguaje del poder, así se hablaba desde arriba para amedrentar a los de abajo, que era un lodazal membranoso al que todavía había que ensuciar con palabrío zanguango y luego con balas y muerte? (55)

The narcos have their curse words that represent their power just as the state has its own disingenuous vocabulary (e.g., “la llama de la esperanza”). The novel also has its own “lenguaje del poder,” boasting a linguistic mastery that separates the writer from the
characters. There is then, not yet any language that serves as a kind communication among the public—as a sincere articulation of anger and pain or a coherent language that helps make sense of the violence they suffer. Of all the languages that appear within the novel, that language does not; it is not a language the letrado has been able to find.

It will be helpful to have an overview of Lenguaje’s plot as my analysis continues: the novel centers on how narcoviolenecia produces vast changes in the imaginary San Gregorio, in northern or central Mexico, a country referred to in Lenguaje, as in Porque parece mentira, as “Mágico.” San Gregorio is home to 25,000 residents, has two police patrol cars, and a medical dispensary but no hospital, the narration explains. The novel makes clear that in the past San Gregorio participated in the drug economy, directed by local trafficker Virgilio Zorrilla, who figures as the late twentieth-century version of the Mexican cacique. He was despised by townspeople, but innocuous in comparison to the brutal narcotics who arrive with Flavio Benavides. When these new narcotics run Zorrilla out of town, political power also changes. The mayor is gunned down in front of his house, and a new mayor, with narco support, is installed.

The novel follows what happens to the Montaño family as a result of this transition of power. Lenguaje begins with the return of father and head-of-household Valente Montaño to San Gregorio following a lengthy period working on-and-off in the United States (requiring eighteen treacherous border-crossings). With money he has earned through agricultural and service work in the United States he promptly makes some improvements to his home, installing a toilet in the bathroom—“¡un verdadero trono!” (15)—and opening a pizza restaurant in town. The Montaño family—Valente’s wife, the lavandería Yolanda, and teenaged son and daughter Candelario and Martina—
all begin working at the pizzeria. At first, the restaurant does well. Shortly, however, *narcos* begin terrorizing patrons and refusing to pay for their meals. Then, with the *narcos’* road blockages, it becomes difficult to buy vegetables and other ingredients. *El mero-mero*, Benavides, offers to assist Valente, and the Valentes’ business becomes Benavides’s; the narration reports that 90 percent of the town’s businesses are in the same position (90).

The son Candelario, meanwhile, has run away to join the local gang (then headed by Zorrilla), which is soon absorbed into Benavides’s more violent cartel. Candelario exemplifies the themes of lack of economic opportunity that emerged in *Nostalgia de la sombra*. (In that novel, the protagonist finally attains some of the markers of a middle-class lifestyle—homeownership, leisure time—through working as a *sicario*.) Candelario reacts to the allure of narcotrafficking because he does not want to “repetir lo que hizo mi papá: el andar de ilegal allá en el otro lado, rifándosela siempre…Fueron años de friega, de mucho sacrificio” (48). However, later the narration becomes more judgmental about what Candelario receives from working for the traffickers: “ha concretado su sueño de pertenecer a la nueva clase de ricos…con el fin de gozar de privilegios y una vida opulenta” (172). Candelario shifts, as the story continues, from a character whose decisions are rational, economic, and ethically defensible ones to ones that are not: when Candelario learns that *narcos* are planning to bomb San Gregorio, he makes no attempt to warn his family.

Martina’s fate is even more extreme than Candelario’s. Anxious to move out of her parents’ home, Martina clumsily pursues a *narco* who is new to town. The two move in together, but the cohabitation is tense and the *narco* beats and finally kills Martina. He
then wraps her in a blanket (a common sign of a narco killing) and throws her down a ravine. “Cuerpo que serviría de banquete triunfal para los buitres” the text callously remarks, uninterested in grieving the teenaged Martina’s death (157).

In fact, no one in the narration is mourned whatsoever. Lenguaje del juego contains characters who are never developed in full, who always remains fictional sketches rather than individuals. The narration keeps its (and the reader’s) emotional distance from the deaths, which do not appear as important as understanding how the violence is enabled through the wealth generated by the drugs, and the consequent corrosion of the political system. In its distance from characters, the narration also rejects the sentimentality that can sometimes characterize elite liberal reactions to narcoviolencia. When the state, particularly during the Calderón administration, has argued that only criminals are dying in the “guerra contra el narco,” one of the public reactions has been the assertion that the dead are innocent, good people—not drug dealers or prostitutes but “our children.” Estelle Tarica has described this humanitarian approach as “counter-victimization”: a tactic and an ethical position that emphasizes victims’ dignity. Tarica lauds “counter-victimization” for bringing sentiments into a public sphere: “counter-victimization seeks to extend the rule of law to cover new realms of social life, proposing to turn compassion into a civil right and an obligation” (n. pag.). For Lenguaje del juego, there are no simple heroes or straightforward victims, and reverence and dignity are empty, perhaps insulting, responses. Pity is a low-stakes, facile response to distant violence. Nevertheless, both Lenguaje’s refusal of compassion as well as the discourse of “counter-victimization” represent attempts to reach the same goal: “to re-
sensitize the Mexican public and ‘debanalize’ the suffering of others,” though via radically different routes (Tarica n. pag.).

Finally, the novel ends with Candelario discovering a rival cartel’s plan to plant bombs throughout San Gregorio and “atacar al unísono por los cuatro puntos cardinales a ese pueblo….para después crear algo nuevo” (195). Adriana Jiménez, Sada’s widow, told the press that it had been suggested to Sada that he change the ending of the novel, and he had refused.61 While the rest of the novel describes scenarios that are totally familiar—the display of cadavers, the murder of the mayor—the end describes something that has not happened: the destruction of an entire town.

However, the extreme ending has the same effect as Lenguaje’s refusal of compassion toward its characters and its estranging language. Lenguaje nurtures readers’ sense of disbelief about the atrocities of narcoviolencia—readers’ sense that what is described could never take place. Such disbelief is a form of staving off the normalization of such atrocities, keeping the atrocities beyond our comprehension. The historian Saul Friedlander has written of disbelief as what scholarship should not dispel when we—scholars as well as members of the public—study atrocities. He writes of his own disbelief when he sees Holocaust photography that includes images of individuals who he knows will die. “Such disbelief is a quasi-visceral reaction, one that occurs before knowledge rushes in to smother it. ‘Disbelief’ here means something that arises from the depth of one’s immediate perception of the world, of what is ordinary and what remains

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61 Jiménez told a reporter, “No voy a decir nombres, una persona que no es de la editorial Anagrama—who publica esta obra—le pidió a Daniel que cambiara el final. Por supuesto se negó a hacerlo” (Licóna n. pag.).
‘unbelievable.’” (xxvi). Understanding the reality of narcoviolencia means living with this disbelief without “smothering” it.

It is also true that what once seemed impossible now happens all the time. Whereas before bodies were found one at a time (as in the Juárez femicides), now they are found by the hundreds—300 in the municipality of Allende, Coahuila (population 20,000), 193 in San Fernando Tamaulipas (population 30,000) to name just a few examples. Lenguaje’s ending suggests that the future will bring even larger numbers of dead to the country’s forgotten peripheries, even if that is not something that the reader can imagine.

VII. “La parte de los crímenes”

i. The Unsustainability of the Public Secret

“La parte de los crímenes” differs from the other novels included in this chapter—and indeed from most of the works included in this dissertation—in that it is not intended specifically for a Mexican audience, and in that it has gained a broad Latin American and international readership. This has meant that “La parte de los crímenes” is often not analyzed with regard to the specificities of narco-power or drug trafficking, but rather understood as a metaphorical instance of twentieth-century evil, a reading that is in line with other “parts” of 2666, which touch on the rise of Nazism and crimes against humanity in mid-century central Europe. My interpretation reads “La parte de los crímenes” not as a metaphor but rather as a precise portrait of peripheral Mexico, as an investigation of the subjectivities that are created by the terror of an increasingly visible necropolitical order, and as a search for a politically effective response.
In this section, I will argue that in addition to narrating the unabated murder of women, “La parte de los crímenes” also and more importantly narrates how the “moral scandal” of the femicides is wearing away at the public secret—the known but unstated knowledge—about the enmeshment of the state with traffickers. “La parte de los crímenes” already contains the answers about who is responsible for the crimes (the Uribe brothers) and where the murders take place (the Salazar Crespo properties). What needs to be resolved in the quasi-detective story of “Los crímenes” is not the killers’ identity, but how it is that such public and horrifying murders go unseen—how they are made invisible and inconsequential. This is a question about how a necropolitical regime fosters complicity and silence, through fear and social divisions.

Furthermore, I argue that the major change that occurs during the course of “La parte de los crímenes”—what is different at the text’s beginning than at its end—is that the silence surrounding these crimes has reached the point of unsustainability. The burden of keeping the public secret has become too onerous for some characters. This ultimately leads Azucena Esquivel to abandon her position as a silent cog in the PRI machine, and leads Sergio González to leave his position as a D.F. culture journalist. I read the alliance formed between these two characters as representing the necessity of freeing the public secret by stating it outright in the press.

“La parte de los crímenes” cover similar thematic ground as others of Bolaño’s novels. Before 2666, Bolaño dramatized the complicity of art and literature with power through characters such as Farewell, María Canales, and Carlos Wieder in Nocturno de Chile and Estrella distante. The entanglement of high culture with a necropolitical regime figures in “La parte de los crímenes” as well. Most notably, Santa Teresa’s
corrupt police chief Pedro Negrete is the twin brother of Pablo Negrete, the Rector of the Universidad de Santa Teresa. Pablo Negrete’s name appears on deeds to homes where women are murdered, one of many clues that is never followed. When the Rector is asked what is happening in Santa Teresa, he demurs, with a shrug and a smile, that it is not for him to opine: “Éste se encogió de hombros, ensayó una sonrisa, dijo que lo suyo era el mundo de la cultura y luego tosió y se calló” (742).

Multiple characters have the opposite reaction: they cannot ignore the crimes. The character Klaus Haas is repeatedly described as “moralmente escandalizado,” (604, 606) and this is the inversion “Los crímenes” relies on: making the “criminal” the ballast of morality, while the learned men of the university look away and in doing so perpetuate the murders. The text provokes a reaction similar to Haas’s in readers. The detached tone and repetitiveness of the catalogue of murdered women is intended to produce an affront to morality that brings the reader more into line with the “criminal” than the patrician intellectual whose affirmation of “culture” enables him to look away from systematic violence.

“La parte de los crímenes” is often best remembered for this morally scandalizing catalogue of the murders that occur, year after year, in Santa Teresa. The catalogue seems to defy meaning and closure, leading Hermann Herlinghaus to liken parts of the novel to medieval chronicles in which a series of extreme events (epidemic, famine, war, etc.) pose an existential threat. Like the medieval chronicle, the text does nothing to mitigate, explain, or make sense of the potential destruction of a people (Narcoepics 212). While it is true that there is no public accounting, no bringing to justice, no narrative confession of the crimes, no traditional detective story ending, neither is there a complete refusal of
narrative closure, since the narrative seems to be moving forward toward revelations that might put an end to the cycle of murders.

At a prison press conference, Klaus Haas names the killers as Antonio and Daniel Uribe of Cananea; their father Pedro Uribe owns a fleet of camiones like the ones sighted at the disappearances; and the Uribes are protected by the narcos Fabio Izquierdo and Estanislao Campuzano. Many of the bodies are found alongside the road connecting Santa Teresa and Cananea, casting further suspicion on the Uribes. In prison, Haas is protected by Enriquito Hernández, a rival of Campuzano; Haas concludes that it is because Hernández knows that Haas is Campuzano’s scapegoat. When a single journalist, Josué Hernández Mercado of the Raza of Green Valley, prints Haas’s accusations, he is disappeared, lending further credence to Haas’s accusations. Additionally, the investigation by Azucena Esquivel Plata reveals that parties are occurring at narcorranchos owned by the Crespo family, which has deep ties to the PRI, and thrown by the banker Salazar Crespo, who launders money for the Cartel de Sonora. The investigation also adds the names of businessmen and narcos who are known to attend these parties. These include Sigfrido Catalán (owner of “la mayoría de maquiladoras de Santa Teresa”), and Conrado Padilla (“empresario con intereses en Sonora, Sinaloa y Jalisco”), both of whom have “conexiones con el cartel de Santa Teresa, es decir con Estanislao Campuzano,” relationships which may explain why police are shown picking up envelopes with bribe money from the maquiladoras (785). Further party attendees include Campuzano’s lieutenant, Sergio Muñoz Otrero, “jefe de los narcos de Nogales,” and Fabio Izquierdo, “jefe de los narcos en Hermosillo,” suggesting that the cartel network reaches throughout the Mexican North (785). These accusations repeat those
made by *El Paso Times* journalist Diana Washington Valdez in her 2006 book *The Killing Fields*, in which she argued that many of the murders had occurred at parties hosted by prominent members of Ciudad Juárez society who were connected to the Juárez cartel, and protected by the Juárez police.

I repeat the names of the killers because it is easy, in the overabundance of details the novel contains, to overlook how many of the answers are actually provided within the text. Of course, these revelations are not enough themselves to stop the murders. As Herlinghaus writes, “the answers are all there; they do not have to be given, since the actual problem is not finding ‘truth’ but rather the burial of truth” (*Narcoepics* 231). In this sense, “La parte de los crímenes” shares the impetus of Bolaño’s “Chilean” novels: questioning how the elite can ignore state violence. In Santa Teresa, sexual torture and murder is both terrifyingly public and unsolved and unstopped. Why are the perpetrators of the femicides free even while they are named, and why does the state possess a largely uncontested legitimacy even while connections between the police and the narcotraffickers are known?

“Los crímenes” satirizes the extremes of this willful refusal to see the obvious truth through the misguided character of Albert Kessler, the forensic expert who represents the rise of the “technical expertise” that has accompanied neoliberalism and that has replaced the public intellectual. Kessler spends a significant last portion of the “Los crímenes” wandering the slums of Santa Teresa trying to “see” his way into solving the crimes and instead espousing a condescending and neo-imperialist vision in which he

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62 In addition to remarks by Babb and Ong quoted earlier, see also Arturo Escobar, “Latin America at a Crossroads.” Escobar identifies the crisis in “objective knowledge, reason, and science as the only valid modes of knowing” as part of “the crisis of the modern project” in Latin America (9).
finds lack of electricity, sanitation, and huge industrial parks. In fact, the distance with which Kessler sees the city only highlights the nuance with which the city is represented in other portions of the novel. Kessler considers himself to have a kind of hermeneutical authority to decipher the crimes when in reality the crimes’ authors are already within the text, given by Klaus Haas from prison. (Actually, Kessler’s presumption is shared by the academics Pelletier, Norton and Espinoza in “La parte de los críticos”: that they can decipher the secret meanings contained in the novels of Archimboldi. In both cases the narration mocks the pretense of specialized expertise.)

In contrast to Kessler’s dead-end investigation, a number of other characters’ stories signal the unsustainability of keeping the public secret of the enmeshment of the *narcos* with the state, and the culpability of both for the murders. Klaus Haas states the truth outright at his prison press conferences. Florita Almada, the clairvoyant, goes on television to warn Santa Teresa’s residents. Harry Magaña, Lalo Cura, and Juan de Dios Martínez engage in the traditional detective work. Isabel Urrea, the radio host, dies investigating a story about trafficker Pedro Rengifo. Josué Hernández Mercado courageously publishes Haas’s accusations, and later, Mary-Sue Bravo courageously investigates Josué’s disappearance. In addition to this, the novel represents the growing numbers of protesters, mothers and family members of the disappeared. Finally, Haas and Azucena Esquivel both call on Sergio González to investigate and publish about the femicides.

Esquivel Plata’s search for her disappeared friend Kelly Rivera Parker illustrates just how corroded state power has become. Salazar Crespo, the money launderer, has relationships within the Party that are “Profundas, muy profundas” (772), such that
Esquivel’s private detective tells her “no creo que me dejen hacer mi trabajo. ¿Quiénes? Su propia gente, diputada, sus propios compañeros de partido” (780).

Azucena Esquivel describes herself as belonging to part of a crumbling power structure—not only in reference to the PRI, but also in regard to her moneyed family. While her family members see themselves as one of the few “true” families of Mexico, Azucena tells them that their time is over: “se pudría lentamente mi familia,” (750), “se estaban muriendo” (751). She sends her only son to school in the U.S. and hopes that he will not return. This is a much harsher portrait of the old oligarchic family than the one provided in *Contrabando*, but what they have in common is the realization that the son of the family should not return to his home—that there is no future for him there, and that the family now fundamentally does not hold power in the way it once did.

The final pages of “La parte de los crímenes” consist of a long conversation—mostly monologue—in which Azucena Esquivel asks Sergio González to help her investigate the crimes. She tells Sergio that she will provide whatever support he needs: ¿Qué es o qué quiero que usted haga?, dijo la diputada. Quiero que escriba sobre esto, que siga escribiendo sobre esto. (788)….Ahora quiero que usted utilice todo lo que entre [el investigador] Loya y yo reunimos y que agite el avispero. Por supuesto, no va a estar solo. Yo estaré siempre a su lado, aunque usted no me vea, para ayudarlo en cada momento” (790)

This is an attempt to form a new configuration of power, which Azucena feels is necessary since no possibilities are offered by state channels: “no puedo acudir a la policía mexicana. En la Procuraduría General creerían que me he vuelto loca” (789). Here Esquivel Plata echoes the realization in *Contrabando* that the police and the
judiciary cannot offer recourse. Rather than shy away from the press, like Contrabando’s narrator does, Azucena and Sergio will use it.

“La parte de los crímenes” ends with a call for the intellectual like Sergio to stop working on his own “novelas malas” and to start publishing the public secret. This section ends then, with the assertion of the power of writing, but not a closed world of culture like that of the Rector, or even the academics of “La parte de los críticos.” Here Azucena Esquivel advocates for a writing that is public, that is directed toward the common reader who will read “al menos los titulares” of newspaper stories (789). In the role that Azucena tries to foist on Sergio, she proposes an alliance in which the pen will cease to be compromised by attachments to the state or to an irrelevant academy. It is nothing less than a way for writing and the lettered subject to be redeemed.

Bolaño ends “La parte de los crímenes” before the readers can “hear” Sergio’s reaction to Azucena’s proposal, but since Sergio González is in fact a real person, readers already know what his reaction will be. The real-life González published a series of articles about the murder in Reforma and an investigative book on the femicides in 2002, Huesos en el desierto, which has been called “el primer gran libro sobre la violencia en México” (Osorno n. pag.). We can read “Los crímenes” as an imagining of what led González to Huesos en el desierto. We also know that Sergio González escaped the fate of the other reporters in “La parte de los crímenes,” Isabel Urrea and Josué Mercado Hernández; González Rodríguez died in 2017 of natural causes, after publishing many books that investigated and denounced drug and state violence, including most recently

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63 There is no indication that what the novel describes actually happened to Sergio González, who consistently denied the accuracy of his portrayal in 2666, and which did not please him. He remarked, “[Bolaño] se inventaba cosas para ponerlas ahí y le valía madre” (Marcial Pérez “Muere” n. pag.).
El hombre sin cabeza (2009), Campo de guerra (2014), and Los 43 de Iguala (2015).

One obituary lauded him as someone who “nos expuso a los tópicos que luego serían comunes: impunidad, complicidad de las autoridades, fabricación de culpables, el dolor de las víctimas y el deterioro general de la vida pública,” precisely as Azucena encouraged the fictional Sergio González to do (Osorno n. pag.).

This ending to “La parte de los crímenes” emphasizes state corruption as the root of the femicides. 2666 has often been read as a condemnation of neoliberal policies, the weakening of the state amid the flow of global capital. And indeed, “La parte de los crímenes” can be read as part of a growing literary corpus from Latin America that contains “la posibilidad de leer los procesos biopolíticos a través de la imaginación literaria contemporánea como una cifrada crítica de la economía política del capitalismo contemporáneo” (Villalobos-Ruminott, “Biopolítica” 62). That is, “La parte de los crímenes” can be seen as exposing a ruthless neoliberalism that has created situations of precarity in certain parts of the global South. However, this kind of reading is incomplete, and does not leave room for the specific remedy to state violence—the press, with its potential for the letrado’s redemption—that the novel suggests, given that the problem is conceived as one of global capitalism. On this point I agree with Oswaldo Zavala, who argues that analyses of 2666 that assume global capital is the cause for narco violence miss the specificity of the situation in Mexico:

la lógica de la globalización asumida por los estudios culturales y por la imposibilidad posestatal como la de [Carlo] Galli, resultan insuficientes para comprender la presencia del Estado en México como la condición misma de posibilidad del narco….a pesar de los alcances globales que se atribuyen a los
supuestos “cárteles’ de la droga, el narco en México ha sido y sigue siendo un fenómeno esencialmente doméstico…. Pasar por alto esta profunda politización doméstica del narco en las últimas dos décadas es simplemente no comprender la esencia actual del narco en México (Zavala, “Razones” 196-7)

Zavala argues that 2666 represents a period during which narcos operated “bajo las motivaciones políticas de gobernadores, procuradores estatales y empresarios con el objetivo en común de construir fueros semiautónomos e independientes del poder federal central” (“Razones” 197).

Zavala’s comments can be understood as a reaction against the prevailing understanding of 2666 as metaphorical, as an instance in which Bolaño “uses” the femicides to make a point about evil in our times. For example, in “Literatura y apocalipsis,” Edmundo Paz Soldán writes, “Bolaño utiliza el hecho macabro de las más de doscientas mujeres muertas en los últimos años en Ciudad Juárez—crímenes todavía impunes—no sólo como símbolo de la violencia en la América Latina post-dictatorial, sino como metáfora del horror y el mal en el siglo XX” (19). Understanding the femicides as a metaphor means that any number of explanations for the violence are legitimate interpretations. Paz Soldán spends more time analyzing misogyny as a cause of the femicides than narco-state corruption. “Mientras haya policías como los que se reúnen en el café Trejo’s,” Paz Soldán writes, referring to an infamous scene in which cops makes a series of misogynistic jokes, “habrá mujeres muertas violadas, abusadas en los desiertos del mundo” (21).

Sharae Deckard reads Santa Teresa as the quintessential site of neoliberal exploitation, and this section of the novel as articulating the breakdown of social
relationships under “millennial capitalism,” defined as “an apotheosis of consumption that shapes societies…concomitant with an eclipse in production that erases the role of labor in the creation of value and identity” (354). Deckard writes, “Bolaño replaces the political violence of the dictator novel with the systematic violence of millennial capitalism” (354). This assertion makes the violence of the narco-state appear non-political, when in fact femicide should be understood as state violence and, in fact, the comparison to the dictator novel is quite apt. In her reading, Deckard imposes a U.S. interpretation of global society’s ills that does not take into account the situation on the ground in Juárez that Bolaño takes pains to describe accurately—and which required a lengthy correspondence with Sergio González Rodríguez as Bolaño was writing his novel.64 The murder and sexual torture of women in “La parte de los crímenes” is the product of a state that has long been plagued by weak police and judicial institutions, that has been infiltrated by narcotics money, and a political class preoccupied with private gain. A nota roja reporter tells Sergio that the state now behaves differently than at earlier points:

México había experimentado algunos reacomodos novedosos. Por una parte nunca como entonces había habido tanta corrupción. A esto había que sumar el problema del narcotráfico y de las montañas de dinero que se movían alrededor de este fenómeno. La industria del snuff, en este contexto, era sólo un síntoma. Un síntoma virulento en el caso de Santa Teresa, pero sólo un síntoma, al fin y al cabo. (669-670).

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64 See Valdés on the correspondence between González Rodríguez and Bolaño.
The murders of women—here associated with the snuff industry—are only a symptom of the government corruption. Global capital made the conditions of the maquiladoras possible and sent migrants to the border, but closing down the maquiladoras would not address the core problem: that the state protects the money generated by trafficking over the lives and well-being of its citizens. Zavala goes even further in his understanding of the state role, claiming not only that the state had been corrupted, but that local authorities actively sought to create fiefdoms that could not be controlled by the federal government.

Many interpretations of “La parte de los crímenes” ignore references to Mexican politics—the numerous comments on corruption, Azucena’s defection from the Party, the appearance of mobilizing masses—in favor of concentrating on the catalogue of cadavers. This is ironic since within the novel the cadavers themselves are misleading. Kessler focuses on deciphering the bodies and the crime scenes and comes up empty; Haas focuses on networks of power and quickly solves the crimes from prison. Again here even the best readings of “La parte de los crímenes” concentrate on the cadavers to the exclusion of the answers and solutions emerging from the text: “La sección termina con la sugerencia de que no habría una resolución posible para esas muertes” (Paz Soldán 21). This is a reading that accentuates the cynicism of “La parte de los crímenes,” and may be the effect of reading 2666 as a whole, with its recounting of World War II atrocities, and not each “parte,” as a separate novel, as Bolaño instructed his publisher Anagrama.65 “La parte de los crímenes” ends with the call for Sergio, and perhaps the reader as well, to “agitar el avispero”—to challenge power publicly.

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65 See Valdés on Bolaño’s publication instructions.
ii. “An Uncertain, Shadowy Kind of Existence”: Narcoviolencia’s Subjects

“Los crímenes” spends significant narrative energy on the lives of residents of Santa Teresa who are not in imminent danger themselves, and on parts of their lives that have nothing to do with the unfolding mystery of the femicides. Through the characters of Elvira Campos, Juan de Dios Martínez, and maestra Perla Beatriz Ochoterena, we read experiences of loneliness, characters’ reasons for contemplating (or committing) suicide, and their moments of romantic impasse. In this way, “La parte de los crímenes” shows that narcoviolencia is about more than who is allowed to live and to die, to paraphrase Foucault’s definition of biopolitics. Instead, narcoviolencia determines social relationships and what meaning is possible in a society with a degraded public sphere. That is, it is not just life itself that is at stake in narcoviolencia, but also the quality of life that is possible where necropolitics prevails. To put it another way: in Bolaño’s Nocturno de Chile, it is possible for the elite to sustain a literary party when someone is being tortured in the basement. But in “La parte de los crímenes,” it is impossible to live a fulfilling middle-class life while below in the city of Santa Teresa women’s annihilated bodies appear unrelentingly in the streets. There can be no middle-class existence that is content in the safety and isolation of its interior spaces. This is why, as Jean Franco has observed, “In this section of the novel, ‘home’ does not have the connotations of comfort and family affection” (Cruel 242). The violence that destroys the public realm also makes it impossible to retreat into the private one.

In this section, I analyze the suicide of the maestra Ochoterena, who says she cannot live amid the murders, and suicidal psychiatrist Elvira Campos, who cannot
connect with the detective Juan de Dios Martínez in spite of their bimonthly rendezvous
in her apartment. These are characters who are from different social classes than the
majority of the victims. The maestra Ochoterena is young woman from a small town who
educates herself to become a teacher, who with her limited means sends for books of
poetry and essays from Hermosillo and Mexico City, and who publishes her poetry under
a nom de plume. Like the disappeared reporter and poet Josué Mercado Hernández, she
is a low-born, self-educated intellectual—one of society’s real intellectuals, in contrast to
the university rector whose role is as a buttress to the narco-state.

Elvira Campos is the director of Santa Teresa’s asylum, and she is connected to
the crimes through her relationship with judicial Juan de Dios Martínez. Through Elvira,
Bolaño displaces the experience of living with the violence of Santa Teresa from those
most vulnerable to violence, to other members of society whose lives more closely
resemble those of Bolaño’s readership. When we read that Elvira lives on “una calle de
casas de clase media alta donde vivían médicos y abogados, varios dentistas y uno o dos
profesores universitarios,” the audience may recognize itself (480).

At the least, this life and this space may be more legible to readers than the
experiences of the maquiladora workers or the goners living out their final day in the
garbage dump El Chile. The narration describes El Chile by analogizing it to a site that
has been hit by an atomic bomb, but about which no one knows (752). Likewise, the
streets of the most humble homes in Santa Teresa appear as “agujeros negros” in the
narration: “Hasta en las calles más humildes se oía a la gente reír. Algunas de estas calles
eran totalmente oscuras, similares a agujeros negros” (791). In both its descriptions of El
Chile and the “agujeros negros,” the text explains that there are places it cannot reach or
access or explain. While the narration appears omniscient when it reaches into Elvira’s most private thoughts, in other moments it has its limitations.

Similarly, there are experiences of suffering before which the narration hesitates, or when the narration narrates its own failure. This is represented most dramatically through Juan de Dios Martínez, whose thoughts return obsessively to the suffering of the tortured girl Herminia. After examining Herminia’s crime scene, Juan de Dios experiences an inability to cry, to eat, to sleep, and finally, to speak: “se cubría la cabeza con las manos y de sus labios escaba un ulular débil y preciso” (668). In this way, “La parte de los crímenes” attempts to preserve the unnarratable, untranslatable quality of bearing witness to brutality, by recognizing that fitting such violence into language already neutralizes it.66

The narration does the same in recounting the reaction of a neighbor who is trying to reach the mother of disappeared girls, to whom I referred earlier in this chapter. Two children arrive at their neighbor’s door, explaining that their two older sisters—Herminia and Estefanía—have been taken. As the neighbor waits for the children’s parents, the text describes her frustration and anger through daydreams:

Así, mientras esperaban a que llegara el padre de las niñas, la vecina pensó (para matar el tiempo y el miedo) que le gustaría tener un revólver y salir a la calle. ¿Y luego qué? Pues aventar unos cuantos tiros al aire para desencorajinarse y gritar viva México para armarse de valor o para sentir un postrero calor y después cavar con las manos, a una velocidad desconsiderada, un agujero en la calle de tierra

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66 See Allen Feldman, “On Cultural Anaesthesia,” in which Feldman asks what strategies exist to not “diffuse” or “banish” the sensory experience of violence that witnesses, victims, survivors carry with them, and instead to accept “the vortex of history-as-pain.”
The disordered thoughts of the neighbor refuse to make the experience of fear and violence easily digestible, to fit into the normal course of everyday life. At the same time, the narration foregrounds its own distance from the neighbor when it pre-empts the neighbor’s surrealistic interior thoughts with an affirmation of the neighbor’s “desamparo” as “algo muy latinoamericano” (660). It is an experience that elicits a sense of solidarity, but the analogy also maintains a distance from the anonymous neighbor, making her experience stand in for so many other people’s experiences of helplessness.

“La parte de los crímenes” contains a number of such analogies, parallels, and displacements that represent trauma indirectly. For example, in a novel about the sexual torture of women, the only scene of violence being done to a body is the castration of a man, not in secrecy, but in full view of an entire prison. Through another kind of displacement, a dream, the policeman Epifanio Galindo discovers the repressed knowledge of his boss Pedro Negrete’s culpability (in the dream, Epifanio finds a dying pregnant coyote in the road, followed by a body hidden in the trunk of Negrete’s car (484-5)). Likewise, the narration of the experiences of the elite, like Elvira Campos, are a displacement that gives the reader access or insight into the experience of being a woman in Santa Teresa, but not direct access to the day-to-day vulnerability of being an immigrant to Santa Teresa, working in the maquiladoras, or moving around the city’s unsafe, unlit neighborhoods—its “agujeros negros.”

The obstructed romance between the detective and the psychiatrist represents a major digression from the plot of “Los crímenes,” just as the discovery of the maestra
Ochoterena’s corpse in her room, surrounded by books, does not fit the pattern of the discoveries of women’s tortured bodies around Santa Teresa. The digressions ask what is possible for these characters in their social relations and as actors in the political world. Again, it is not enough to just be alive, like the people living in El Chile. There are ways of living and being that we expect and demand. Giorgio Agamben writes in Means Without End that human beings “are the only beings for whom happiness is always at stake in their living, the only beings for whom life is irredeemably and painfully assigned to happiness. But this immediately constitutes the form-of-life as political life” (Means 4). For those who are not in imminent physical danger, what is threatened in the narco crisis is this stake in living.

The problem set out by “La parte de los crímenes” is that a certain elite, intellectual class has not responded to the femicides. It is not enough to signal that such intellectuals have blood on their hands, as in the Chimal epigraph, but also to ask why. Maestra Ochoterena and Elvira Campos are characters who serve as reminders that the intellectual class is part of society itself, and not somehow outside or above it; they are molded by the society in which they live. The scope of the novel itself—its sheer size, its hundreds of characters—reinforce the interconnectivity of the different characters and at the same time the fact that their experiences are the result of their circumstances. Elvira Campos and Maestra Ochoterena are caught up in the violence that surrounds them, and trying to get a grasp on what their lives can mean in these circumstances.

Maestra Ochoterena is introduced into the narrative when her body is discovered and detective Juan de Dios Martínez investigates. At first it seems that this will be another violent murder like all the other femicides. In fact, it is a different kind of
tragedy: the twenty-eight-year-old has hanged herself in her bedroom. Ochoterena writes in her suicide note that she cannot find a way to continue living while women are being killed:

En el escritorio de la profesora Ochoterena encontraron una carta, sin destinatario, en la que intentaba explicar que ya no soportaba más lo que ocurría en Santa Teresa. En la carta decía: ya no lo soporto más. Decía: trato de vivir, como todo el mundo, ¿pero cómo? (646)

A few pages later, Elvira Campos (who occasionally contemplates the most opportune time for her own suicide) ponders over the maestra Ochoterena’s suicide, asking:

¿Qué era lo que la profesora no soportaba?, dijo Elvira Campos. ¿La vida en Santa Teresa? ¿Las muertes en Santa Teresa? ¿Las niñas menores de edad que morían sin que nadie hiciera nada para evitarlo? ¿Era suficiente eso para llevar a una mujer joven al suicidio? ¿Una universitaria se habría suicidado por esa razón? ¿Una campesina que había tenido que trabajar duro para llegar a ser profesora se habría suicidado por esa razón? (649)

According to her own letter, Ochoterena has killed herself because it is impossible to live in a world where such crimes occur. She is one of the few characters in the novel who represents a refusal to accept the femicides around her, who will not engage in the percepticide her times demand of her. Nevertheless, Juan de Dios Martínez finds the suicide an immature reaction: “Era una carta sentida, pensó Juan de Dios, y también un poco cursi” (646). Juan de Dios cannot see Ochoterena as suffering from the same kind of survivor’s guilt from which he is also suffering.
Ochoterena’s brief portrait condenses some of the problems facing the intellectuals amid narcoviolencia. What is the purpose of literature—or poetry—in a situation of normalized, perpetual violence? Writing cannot serve as a salve that remedies the terror of violence, or that serves to insulate the writer from it. Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott has read Bolaño’s oeuvre as exemplifying the exhaustion of literature’s public function in the world during a time of “global war,” referring to Carlo Galli’s conceptualization. If in fact the old model of literature as edification or “moral exemplification” has failed, for whom is that a problem? Is it really a problem for a “campesina que había tenido que trabajar duro para llegar a ser profesora,” as Elvira’s question reminds us that the maestra Ochoterena is? Ochoterena is a not a bourgeois intellectual mourning the irrelevance of literature. She is a woman from a small town at the Sonora-Chihuahua border, who “había empezado casi desde cero…y que todo cuanto tenía lo había logrado mediante el trabajo y el tesón constante” (646).

We can read the episode of the poet’s suicide along absurdist lines to indicate the irrelevance of literature in the contemporary world, as Villalobos-Ruminott’s analysis signals. Another possibility is to read Ochoterena as a character with the makings of an organic intellectual, a self-educated woman from the rural poor, who might have taken on a leadership role the nascent protest movement “Los crímenes” reports is gaining momentum. Here we have a biography of a person who could have been a character like

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67 Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott writes of Bolaño: “His novels express the exhaustion of the modern articulation between literature and the public space of reading that granted to it a particular social function (illustration, education, moral exemplification, etc.). I call this exhaustion “co-belonging,” a sort of coexistence between literature and horror [that marks] an end to the high modernist belief in the power of literature to illuminate, represent and/or defamiliarize everyday life. There is nothing extraordinary or sacred in literature (prose and poetry) that might be considered as the salvation of humankind.” (“A Kind of Hell” 195)
the self-taught Lalo Cura, Florita Almada, or Josué Mercado Hernández, whose role in the text of “Los crímenes” could have been making the public secret of the relationship between narcotics money and the state truly public. The point should not be to mourn what literature and poetry cannot do, or can no longer do, but rather to search for what it can do in Santa Teresa.

When the narration delves into Elvira’s private thoughts, the parallels with Maestra Ochoterena emerge. Even if Elvira appears well-adjusted and content to others, the narration reveals her to be a shame-filled person who sustains herself with fantasies of escape to Paris, the sympathy of strangers, and the dream of a self-erasing full-body plastic surgery that leaves her “otra, una mujer diferente, ya no de cincuenta y tantos años sino de cuarenta y tantos, o, mejor, cuarenta y pocos, irreconocible, nueva, cambiada, rejuvenecida (669). The narration relates the unfolding of Elvira’s romance with Juan de Dios Martínez in an unflattering light, as cold and businesslike, occurring every fifteen days (as if following the pattern of the Mexican quincena, bimonthly paychecks):

Llamadas telefónicas al centro psiquiátrico sí, a condición de que fueran breves. Encuentros personales cada quince días. Un vaso de whisky o de vodka Absolut y paisajes nocturnos. Despedidas esteralizadas. (532)

This is the most developed portrayal of a romance that exists in “Los crímenes,” and it is a portrayal of a romance at an impasse. Juan de Dios wishes for more: he fantasizes about going out to dinner, meeting one another’s friends, taking a siesta together, going dancing—“Chingados, la felicidad perfecta” (532). Juan de Dios’s wishes read as the desire for the modern “cult of intimacy” that promises warmth, authenticity, and
complete closeness. After suffering the trauma of investigating the femicides—and especially the brutal murders of Estefanía and Herminia that leave Juan de Dios unable to speak—he reaches for this ideal of intimacy with Elvira. But instead, the couple’s relationship is limited to those “sterile” bi-weekly meetings for sex.

Hannah Arendt has written that in human relationships during “dark times”—defined as times in which the public realm has collapsed—people reach for one another for comfort. She warns, however, that what the “warmth” that oppressed people provide one another is illusory. What can truly satisfy people is that “light” which people can find when they appear to one another in the public sphere (“On Humanity” 11-12). This appearance in the public sphere—this existence of public selves—is what is uniquely human and what guards against “the futility of individual life”: “For the polis was for the Greeks, as the res publica was for the Romans, first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life, the space protected against this futility and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals” (Human Condition 56). For Arendt, the loss of the public sphere under modernity was precisely this loss of the public space that provided life with endurability, and therefore meaning.

In The Human Condition Arendt writes that intimate life, including passion, can only have an “uncertain, shadowy kind of existence” when it is limited to an irrelevant private realm:

the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead to an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence.

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68 In The Fall of Public Man, Richard Sennett writes that the cult of intimacy is a promise that is made to the detriment of the public sphere and sociability.
unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. (199)

For Arendt, the destruction of the public sphere—not only through totalitarianism but through more insidious forms of alienation—present the risk of altering human intimacy and sociability. Even for those characters who are not themselves living in the precarity of the maquila workers or migrants to Santa Teresa, the public realm has been so degraded that the “speech and action” that Arendt singles out as uniquely human is no longer available. Those who speak and act—Isabel Urrea, Josué Mercado Hernández—are killed. In Arendt’s thought, without the capacity for speech and action, people are condemned to “worldlessness” (“On Humanity”). What Elvira and Juan de Dios experience is not mere loneliness, but the condition of worldlessness that results from only existing in the private realm. The desire for intimacy is somewhat pathologized in Arendt’s thought as a retreat from the world and a shrinking from experience, but helps to explain the characters’ obstructed, unsatisfying relationship: the failure of Elvira and Juan de Dios’s romance is the failure of the private to compensate for the devastating loss of the public sphere.

The story that “La parte de los crímenes” tells about Elvira and Juan de Dios, and about the suicide of maestra Ochoterena, is a story about the desire to have the meaningful engagement with the world that used to characterize the intellectual’s relationship to his society, a relationship only possible in a liberal society. What narcoviolencia takes from people is the public realm, and forces them into worldlessness. The only remedy to worldlessness is not suicide. It is to resist power by trying to create
political spaces of appearance. This may be through the press, as Azucena and Sergio González, plan. Or it may be through literature, like 2666 itself.

VIII. Conclusion

Contrabando, Lenguaje del juego, and 2666 possess an urgency, a shock at a world that appears to have gone mad, which logic fails to apprehend and which the authors themselves perhaps fail to articulate. This projection of urgency may also have to do with another commonality the novels share: all were written by dying authors, and all three published posthumously. Rascón Banda had been diagnosed with leukemia in 1994, and died of the disease in 2008 at age sixty; Sada suffered from diabetes and kidney disease, and died in 2011 at age fifty-eight; and Bolaño died of liver failure in 2003 at age fifty. In this sense, what we read when we read these novels are manuscripts. They are manuscripts whose final versions were prepared by those who were not the authors.

Shoshana Felman has argued that writing about trauma is directed outward, like a message in a bottle, to another. This writing does not necessarily have an intended reader, but in reading the message, a reader becomes that intended reader and is transformed into a witness (“Vicissitudes”). The message in the bottle metaphor is not wholly appropriate for these novels. Felman was writing about personal experience and first-person testimonies. The experiences within the novels are not presented as the authors’ own. Still, there is something satisfying in conceiving of these manuscript-novels as messages in bottles, their authors dying and unsure where they would wash up, if at all. Certainly Bolaño could not have imagined the impact of 2666. Rascón Banda could not have known that his work would be edited and published, only to quickly go out of print; it
received attention by only a handful of academics. And there is no evidence that
*Lenguaje del juego* received more that the usual “cuarenta lectores” that Sada usually
attracted, though there is some hope that his profile will rise posthumously, as so often
happens with writers; his 1999 novel *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* was
re-released by Tusquets in October 2016.

Even if the authors were not writing of first-person experiences of trauma, they
were bearing witness to transformations in the organization of power in Mexico. Their
novels are their reports to their reading public. They are commentary on the uncertainty
of the future and an articulation of concerns about the future role of the intellectual as
intercessor. They do not demand the kind of witnessing that Felman writes of, but they do
make demands of the readers who pick up the books, and therefore become the intended
readers. They demand a reconfiguration of a society: the autonomy of the intellectual, an
end to class divisions that abet terror, and the denaturalization of the state as a legitimate
form.
Chapter 3

“The Contested Terrain”: The Spectacle of the Violated Body in Visual Culture

Aunque los cadáveres por homicidio representaron en 2009 sólo una tercera parte de los cadáveres por muerte violenta en el país y un discreto 3.5% del total de cadáveres, en el discurso del poder, en la opinión pública, en la mirada popular, en el imaginario colectivo representan el 100% del cadáver nacional.

– Mauricio Ortiz, “El cuerpo expósito,”
Luna Córnea 33 (2011)

I. Introduction

_Narcoviolencia_ has inundated public spaces with cadavers. Certain kinds of abject bodies—the _colgado_ hanging from a highway overpass, the head of the _decapitado_, the _arrojado_ on the side of a road—have risen to the status of icons in recent years. Even in areas where there has been less of this violence, as in Mexico City, the cadavers of _narcoviolencia_ are so endlessly reproduced in print that it is impossible to pass newspaper kiosks without looking at them. While it is true that the country’s notorious _nota roja_ publications have long published photographs of cadavers, today’s cadavers are different: they have often been tortured and staged, and they are corpses whose injuries are intended to be visible in a way that neither the _nota roja_ nor the mainstream press has ever had to contend with before. How can it be that this cruel violence has emerged as a feature of everyday life in Mexico? And why has it arisen now, after the strides the country has made toward procedural democracy and economic liberalization?
Scholars and critics have often relied on the scaffolding provided by *mexicanidad*—the elaborate national mythologies about the country’s identity—to form responses to these questions. The cultural performance of death as an “authentic,” longstanding component of Mexican identity—the idea that Mexicans have always viewed death as a source of humor rather than fear—provides an interpretive lens through which to understand extreme violence and cruelty, mitigating its horror by construing violence as a culturally-ingrained constant. Cultural explanations for *narcoviolencia* sometimes emerge in the press and in scholarship as a way to justify the state’s failure to control violence, casting the violence as the difficulty of imposing law and order on the out-of-control masses. A contemporary iteration of the old narrative of a civilizing state versus a barbarous people (and a state that acts for the good of the people, with the people failing to appreciate the state’s work on their behalf) is trotted out by an old guard of intellectuals aligned with the state. Works of art created around *narcoviolencia* are frequently analyzed according to this framework of *mexicanidad*, so that the novelty of a supposedly Mexican view of death, and not *narcoviolencia* itself, becomes the central subject of critique.69 This kind of analysis fans the flames of old divisions:

69 For example, the writer and academic Heriberto Yépez refers to “un atavismo que ha escapado de la occidentalización” in Teresa Margolles’s highly conceptual artwork (200). Writing in a German exhibition catalogue, Yépez argues, “la obra de Margolles surge, en buena medida, del sustrato inconsciente de antiguas concepciones mexicanas acerca de la muerte y el cuerpo” (204), and vaguely links “nihilistic” pre-Columbian cultures to a “popular” attitude toward death: “el narco reanimó…el discurso popular de la muerte” (204–6). Yépez attempts to explain that Mexicans’ reactions to the contemporary economic and political landscape are predicated on a strand of intrinsic nihilism: “Como sabemos, cuando los españoles invadieron México en el siglo XVI, la civilización náhuatl tenía ingredientes de creciente nihilismo…con la caída de Tenochtitlán y la colonia española, ese nihilismo se fortaleció. Sería a finales del siglo XX—sobre todo a partir de la crisis mexicana de los ochenta, cuando la inflación y la devaluación del peso alcanzó niveles estratosféricos—que el nihilismo mexicano cobró nuevas dimensiones” (206). Gabriela Jauregui (a writer, artist, and editor of the progressive publishing collective Sur+) performs a similar operation situating Margolles’s work alongside pre-Conquest notions of death: “For Margolles, everything on earth speaks of the tomb, of the crypt, of secret traces of violence. As the prehispanic Texcoco poet and King, Nezahualcóyotl sings: ‘todo en la tierra es una sepultura y nada escapa de ella, nada es tan perfecto que no descienda a su tumba.’” (180). When viewed in this way, Margolles’s pieces lend credence to the
civilization/barbarism, elites/masses, autochthonous/modern, high culture/popular culture.

In this chapter I argue that these dichotomies are not what organize representations of narcoviolencia in visual culture. Today, cultural production does not operate according to earlier codes that separated one member of the public from another. Instead cultural production represents narcoviolencia as a regime under which the identity of any given victim is irrelevant. What is new about narcoviolencia is that there is no longer a boundary that would distinguish the body of the spectator from the body of the condemned. The dead are not understood as not those who have broken the law; they are not bodies that have in some way transgressed, individuals who are inherently other. Violence permeates boundaries and attempts to eliminate spectators’ distance from brutalized cadavers. Art and photography bring scenes of torture ever closer into the space and consciousness of the viewer, refusing to establish parameters that would provide the sensation of distance or safety.

The representation of victims of drug violence as close to and indistinguishable from the spectator refutes the stance that only narcos were being killed in the war. Looking at images of the dead, the Calderón administration asked the public to see willing combatants in a drug war—to understand the dead as mercenary soldiers rather than as civilian casualties. But as the “guerra contra el narco” wore on, the public began rejecting this explanation, and the distinction between “guilty” and “innocent” began eroding. After the prominent murder of the poet Javier Sicilia’s son in 2011, it is clear representation of Mexico in the United States and in Europe as “a place of danger, of difference and of the unknown” and as evoking “fantasies of otherness” (Baddeley 272-3). The art historian Rebecca Banwell has put this bluntly: “acclaim of Margolles’s artwork denotes international audiences’ receptiveness to the visual formula Mexico = death” (147).
that many who have disappeared and died were, like Juan Francisco Sicilia, members of the public uninvolved in trafficking. Likewise, the murder of the teenaged son of the businessman Alejandro Martí in 2008 demonstrated to the public that no one stands “above” violence—not the business elites, a group that was often privileged and protected during the decades that the PRI was in power. Today the members of the upper middle class, the class producing and consuming works I analyze in this chapter, now identifies *narcoviolenza* as a problem that affects them.

This was a historic shift in public perception that the art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina described in 2009 as the realization of the non-distinction between combatants and spectators:

La diferencia del valor de la vida que hace que una sociedad tolere que las “clases desechables” se asesinen, arriba a un punto de saturación donde ya resulta imposible discernir los muertos inocentes de los culposos….la “guerra” no hace distinción entre combatientes y espectadores. (24)

Along the same lines, Juan Villoro ends his 2008 piece “La alfombra roja” with the assertion that the readers of his article are now also potential victims: “De manera simultánea, el terror se ha vuelto más difuso y más próximo. Antes podíamos pensar que la sangre derramada era de ‘ellos’. Ahora es nuestra” (n. pag.).

The impossibility of the distinction innocent/guilty points to the very structure of *narcoviolenza* itself. The anthropologist Rita Segato has written of the Juárez

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70 According to Lorena Marrón, it is this work of destigmatizing the victims of the drug war that organizes political artistic production during the Calderón administration. In her thesis *Art as Dissent in the Midst of Mexico’s Drug War*, Marrón analyzes nine artworks, asserting that they “aimed to destigmatize the victims of the drug war, those anonymous and unmourned dead bodies who became the central subjectivity in Mexican contemporary artistic production of the period of Calderón’s regime” and “[brought] to light the innocent victims who were dismissed and made invisible by the government and its egregious claim that they were enemies of the state” (23-4).
femicides—the country’s first instance of narcoviolencia, in my view—as being “crímenes sin sujeto personalizado” (Escritura 43). By this she means that the subjectivities of the victims are irrelevant, because femicide is intended to terrorize society at large, and not to punish those who are killed. Femicide’s power, Segato writes, is that it uses the death of the few to represent the domination of the many: “la muerte de estos elegidos para representar el drama de la dominación es una muerte expresiva, no una muerte utilitaria” (Escritura 22). The femicides were intended to “forjar sujetos dóciles” (Escritura 56) through demonstrating that the “el único valor de esa vida radica en su disponibilidad para la apropiación” (Escritura 36). This process that aims to dominate the public explains why expressive, spectacular violence has taken the place of “utilitarian” forms of violence. The presence of these cadavers is directed to the living in a process of “subordinación psicológica y moral” that demonstrates “control absoluto de una voluntad sobre otra,” (Escritura 21). Segato continues, “la muerte de algunos es capaz de alegorizar idóneamente y de forma auto-evidente el lugar y la posición de todos los dominados, del pueblo dominado, de la clase dominada” (Escritura 43).

Spectacular torture, stagings, and manipulations are designed to make subjects experience a fear and sense of dispossession toward his or her own body. This dispossession constitutes a kind of colonization of one’s own body, as bodies become “dark territories, sources of terror and anxiety…. occupied territories that we drag around

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71 Segato’s theorization departs from the precept that the body of the condemned person anchors the power of the sovereign, with the suffering body constituting an institutionalized spectacle of violence that testifies to the completeness of sovereign power. This body is a contemporary version of the body on the scaffold that Foucault theorized in Discipline and Punish. The body that Foucault describes is “an object, target, and instrument of power, the field of greatest investment for power’s operations, a stake in the struggle for power’s control over a materiality that is dangerous to it, precisely because it is unpredictable and able to be used in potentially infinite ways, according to infinitely variable cultural dictates….The body is that materiality, almost a medium on which power operates and through which it functions.” (Grosz 146)
with us” (Theweleit 415-6). While *narco* power is often conceived in terms of what trafficking routes are under *narco* control, *narco* power can also be thought along these lines, as an internalized domination, and of the relationship to one’s own body as what is at stake in these spectacles.

In the Juárez femicides, Segato finds that “la víctima es el desecho del proceso, una pieza descartable” (*Escritura* 25), because she is a woman, usually poor and dark-skinned. For Segato, the dead women of the Juárez femicides can be “sacrificed” in society because they are at its margins. Because of their physical features, they represent a category of the powerless, those who are excluded and made invisible. However, today, with so many different kinds of victims of *narcoviolencia*, it appears that any and every body is, or can be, a “desecho.” The random and depersonalized nature of the violence means that any body can become an object for the public’s invasive, unauthorized gaze—and that this body that can be opened up for public viewing itself serves to feminize the body. While brutal rape and mutilated nipples were the “signature” of so many of the Juárez femicides, castration has become, for male victims, a disfigurement that converts the body into a sign of alterity, and which indicts the victim as weak and womanlike. It is through castrations, beheadings, dismemberment, and other forms of torture and post-

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72 On the concept of disposability in contemporary Mexico, see also Melissa Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

73 Even the category of victimizer or perpetrator—or what Segato calls the opposite of the murdered maquila worker, a “cuerpo guerrero”—is no longer clear (Segato, “Nuevas formas”). This was suggested in the widely-reported 2011 arrest of “El Ponchis,” a homeless, drug-addicted fourteen-year-old who had already become a *sicario* known for his castrations and beheadings (Morelos Cruz). It is impossible to look at the biography of this abandoned, abused, and drug-addicted child and see him as an embodiment of sovereign power.
mortem manipulation that *narcoviolencia*’s spectacularity attempts to convert even an able, male body into an alterity.\textsuperscript{74}

In the structure of *narcoviolencia*, the body is the site from which a subject’s knowledge of his own lack of power emanates. Rather than the body being what enables a subject to move freely through space, the body fails the self: it discloses a painful lack of mastery. The body becomes, to quote Iris Marion Young on feminine embodiment, a \textit{thing} which exists as looked at and acted upon….living the ever present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations. (Young 39, 44)

The experience that Young imputes to that of being a woman extends amid *narcoviolencia*, where stagings of bodies are intended as humiliating feminizations of corpses.

The materiality of the body itself carries a heavy representational burden in the works of production I examine. At the core of the art and photography in this chapter is the eliciting of viewers’ reactions to what has been done to bodies, bodies that have both been violated and made visible in the public sphere. The spectacle of *narco* stagings are cited, reproduced, reenacted in a way that is shockingly literal or that makes use of the materiality of the *narco* murders. That is, as is the case for the films examined in Chapter 1, the art currently emerging around *narcoviolencia* is not the kind of sublimated work

\textsuperscript{74} See William Finnegan, “Crime, Drugs, and Politics” on the different kinds of physical manipulations used in Mexico. Decapitation as a common form of post-mortem staging is the subject of Sergio González Rodríguez’s *El hombre sin cabeza* (see especially p. 56). This kind of work has been well analyzed and documented in Colombia; see Uribe. See also Allen Feldman on the feminization of the bodies of male combatants in Northern Ireland.
that obliquely refers to trauma. Instead, the work immediately confronts the viewer with the destroyed, open body of narcoviolencia and compulsively repeats the cadaver’s discovery.

If the exhibition of bodies is carried out in order to forge docile subjects, then we can interpret the artwork produced at this historical juncture as reflections on how this process operates, what it means for society and for individual subjects, and how the process disturbs the organization of the public and public space. Who is most vulnerable to this violence, and to whom are these images most often shown and why? What possibilities are there in this situation for the body to be viewed as something other than a liability, what presents a risk to the viewers, and as what the viewers can be reduced to?

To explore how these shifts have been manifested, this chapter begins by investigating the history of violence against bodies in Mexico and describing the climate of the public sphere in which the image of the tortured body has risen to such importance. I proceed by studying specific objects of visual culture. First, a collection of photographs that straddle the line between drug war photojournalism and art photography, including a series by the Culiacán-based photojournalist Fernando Brito. Then, I consider Teresa Margolles’s ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?, begun in Culiacán and Ciudad Juárez and installed and performed at the 53rd Venice Bienniale in 2009.

In a visual culture that is already saturated with images of bodily violation, and in which those images of violation are marked as prohibited and taboo, these works of cultural production insist on reenactments faithful to reality and to the shock of that reality. As a consequence of this, all the works demand of the viewer a difficult kind of engagement—and in some cases, given the material, a masochistic engagement.
The works in this chapter have generated controversy within Mexico, and in general are more heavy-handed, more graphic, and include attempts to induce disgust more than any of the novels included in the other chapters. Given how closed the public sphere has been to articulations of narcoviolencia’s impact on the everyday lives of ordinary Mexicans, these works serve as demands for justice through their mere existence. When Margolles titled her installation “¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?” she was referring rather pointedly to her attempt to open public discourse. At the same time, all of the pieces included in this chapter put more images of destroyed bodies into circulation. Rather than specific demands for legal justice or political change, the works place greater emphasis on reproducing the spectacle of narcoviolencia in order to interrupt it or critique it, and in doing so run the risk of reproducing how this spectacle functions, of buttressing the conceptualization of the body as the site where power is exercised against subjects.

II. The Return of the Cadaver to the Public Sphere

It is difficult to overstate the shock that narcoviolencia’s cadavers have presented to the public. Writing in the Centro de la Imagen’s publication Luna Córnea, Mauricio Ortiz captures the horrifying possibilities for the degradation of the corpses that the public commonly encounters:

No solo cadáveres sin cabeza: cadáveres sin manos y sin pies, cadáveres envueltos en plástico, cadáveres disueltos en ácido, cadáveres enterrados tumultuariamente en fosas clandestinas a flor de tierra….los cadáveres en masa (250).
This kind of cataloguing of the different ways in which it is possible to annihilate a body recalls Bolaño’s strategy in “La parte de los crímenes”: the stunned writer records the excess of the horror and the sensation that it is endless. As Ortiz signals in the epigraph, regardless of the number of actual bodies that are displayed in this way, symbolically these are the cadavers that “en el imaginario colectivo representan el 100% del cadáver nacional” (246).

Part of the shock of the cadaver is the sudden and anachronistic quality of its appearance. The abject cadaver of narcoviolencia arrives immediately following a decades-long push for democratization. The discourse of democracy championed voting rights, civil rights, human rights. But narcoviolencia poses the bodies of individuals as fodder for power, brutally rejects identity, subjectivity, and instead seeks to demonstrate that, to repeat Segato, “el único valor de esa vida radica en su disponibilidad para la apropiación” (Escritura 36). Democratization sought the establishment of a public sphere in which rational debate guided national decisions. Fear about what can be done to the bodies of the public makes such a public sphere appear out of reach.

This tension between the desire for a modern democratic system and the continuation of brutal violence is not a particularly Mexican phenomenon. Many new democracies in Latin America have emerged from authoritarian regimes only to have levels of violence higher than during the authoritarian periods (Arias and Goldstein). Teresa Caldeira has analyzed why some societies with colonial histories may uphold some concept of political citizenship but also have high levels of violence among citizens. An idealized model in which violence is controlled by the state enabling citizenship rights to develop, is, Caldeira argues, “only one version of modernity, and
probably not even the most common one,” as the histories of countries like Brazil “force us to dissociate the elements of that history and to question their sequence” (371).

Meanwhile, the Colegio de la Frontera Norte scholar Sayak Valencia makes the more radical claim in her book *Capitalismo Gore: Control económico, violencia y necropoder* that spectacular or “gore” violence is the result of capitalist geopolitics and not at all an unintended consequence, but rather “su lado b [de la globalización], aquel que muestra sus consecuencias sin enmascaramientos” (27). Valencia writes that such violence in places like Tijuana is not only “el resultado de un proyecto—la modernidad y el Estado, que como aclara Spivak, son propiedad de Europa—incompleto y mal aplicado, sino una premonición, un panorama de la suerte en la que se desenvolverá el primer mundo futuro, dadas las lógicas globales del capitalismo” (208).

Other recent scholarship has addressed the seeming anachronism of the violence by tracing continuities throughout Mexican history, downplaying the singularity of *narcoviolencia* by finding historical precedents when violence was employed to consolidate power: during the establishment of a corporatist state after the Revolution, during the nineteenth-century incorporation of criminal organizations into the nascent state apparatus, and during Conquest and colonialism. For example, in *Nación criminal*, a book than ends with analysis of *narconovelas* and Teresa Margolles’s work, Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba begins by addressing the nineteenth-century imaginary, writing “Este libro…parte del entendimiento de que la condición poscolonial de México ha generado desde el siglo XIX una cultura criminal” (*Nación* 8). *Los bandidos del Río Frío, Astucia*, and *El Zarco* serve as examples of representations of “los factores políticos y culturales que han llevado a la imposibilidad de un Estado de derecho” that stretches into
the present (Nación 15). The anthropologist Rocío Magaña has also emphasized historical continuities in her work: “Flippant displays” of corpses are part of a “recurrent trope in the constitution of state authority, territorial sovereignty, and the binding of the national body politic,” Magaña writes (6), providing examples originating in the war for independence and in nineteenth-century conflicts between the U.S. and Mexico along their shared border.

This renewed scholarly emphasis on the moments of spectacle in national history—during the banditry of the nineteenth century, or the Revolution—provides historical parallels, but are not evidence of an uninterrupted continuity. During the “dictablanda” years of the PRI, the corpse was simply not part of Mexican political culture, except for the odd cartoon employing calaveras in its critique of the government’s policies. When the PRI employed authoritarian and violent tactics, it also concealed them. Recently discovered records show that the PRI’s internal strategy was to establish “una tiranía invisible” with the invisibility of the PRI’s methods keeping it in power (Rodríguez Munguía).

Understanding the absence of the corpse from political culture is important, because this absence in the decades prior to the narco crisis is precisely the reason the

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75 For an analysis of such cartoons, see Lomnitz, Death and the Idea of Mexico.
76 The PRI operated as—to quote Vargas Llosa—“la dictadura perfecta….la dictadura camuflada” (Volpi 285). Even during the turbulence of the late 1960s and 70s, when the state disappeared, killed, and imprisoned dissidents, it attempted to do so secretly. Rural guerrilleros disappeared, and as in the later and more widely-recognized disappearances of the Southern Cone dictatorships, the deaths of these activists were not confirmed until after the period of “emergency” ended. This was the case with the singer Rosendo Radilla, whom in 2009 the government admitted to forcibly disappearing in 1974. Finally, the state’s criminal sovereignty was invisible in another sense: the victims of the guerra sucia were often racialized, and located in poor and isolated regions of the country (many in Guerrero state). With political disappearances occurring at the nation’s fringes, the urban elite and middle class were not necessarily alarmed. In Mexico, the push toward democratization in the late 1990s opened the possibility for remains of the disappeared to be searched for seriously, and in some cases recovered. See for example the documentary film by Berenisse Vásques Sansores, 12.511 Caso Rosendo Radilla. Herida abierta de la guerra sucia en México.
cadaver elicits such horror today, when *narcoviolencia* has returned it to the public sphere, where it powerfully signifies Mexico’s failure to achieve long-desired modernity. This return to spectacular violence occurred as femicides in Ciudad Juárez and throughout Chihuahua state in the 1990s and early 2000s made the discovery of corpses a daily occurrence in zones that were presumed to be infiltrated by *narco* power. These murders coincided with the period when procedural democracy strengthened and the PRI’s power was threatened (first in multiple northern states and then at the national level as the PAN’s power grew). This was a time when the rigid, vertically organized structure of power was being leveled, not only through establishing the procedures of democracy but also through increasing decentralization, processes that along with the adoption of economic liberalization were referred to as Mexico being “opened.”

This was followed, throughout the 2000s, by an increase in tortured cadavers, mostly of men, deposited in public spaces where they could be openly viewed by a broad public. These are the cadavers that the press readily names as those cadavers resulting from *narcoviolencia*. In the parlance of the media, these murders always take place as part of an ongoing back-and-forth “ajuste de cuentas” that shows no signs of ceasing and has no rational causes. In social science scholarship and in journalism, little is known about the majority of these killings—who has carried them out or why. The government criteria for labeling a homicide as one carried out by organized crime call for applying such a label under the following circumstances: when a cadaver is discovered with signs

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77 Viridiana Ríos argues that decentralization resulting from democratization, rather than democratization of institutions itself, resulted in drug violence (24).


79 Natalia Almada’s documentary *El velador* (2011) records the use of the phrase “ajuste de cuentas” as one of the forms by which the news media explains the continuousness of drug violence.
of torture, wrapped in a blanket, left in a vehicle or public space, or following an abduction.\textsuperscript{80} These broad criteria certainly capture more homicides than are committed by
\textit{narco} actors; fail to distinguish between murders executed by powerful cartels and the
murders carried out by petty criminals; do not taking into account disappearances in
which bodies are not recovered; and do not account for the way that homicides or
disappearances may be carried out not by organized crime, but by actors such as state
police, judicial police, and federal soldiers; and fail to account for the vast array of
motivations behind such killings. At the same time, the criteria themselves reinforce the
notion that the spectacular cadavers—those with signs of torture and left in public
spaces—are created by organized crime, a label that largely refers to (though not
exclusively to) drug trafficking.

When cartels leave corpses in public spaces, drawing attention to the cartels’ own
power—rather than limiting their operations to smuggling and the pursuit of trafficking
profits by behaving in a more strictly capitalist way—they draw outrage in a way that can
threaten their operations. This breaks with the PRI’s old way of doing business: taking
bribes in return for allowing cartels to operate, on the condition that they do so invisibly
(and without selling narcotics domestically). In this “Pax Mafiosa,” which flourished
throughout the 1980s, corruption supported the rule of law (Ríos 11).\textsuperscript{81} The
decentralization of the state, and the scattering of decision-making among many different

\textsuperscript{80} There are six government criteria for classifying an organized crime homicide: use of high caliber
firearms; signs of torture; body killed where it is found, or body found in a vehicle; body wrapped in sheets,
taped, or gagged; homicide occurs in a penitentiary; special circumstances, as in abduction, chase, member
of criminal organization, or \textit{narcomensaje} present (Molzahn et al 5).

\textsuperscript{81} Kees Koonings explains that the end of PRI rule brought “the collapse of the so-called elite exploitation
model of central state extortion, protection, and control of narco organizations” (275). Today, he writes,
cartels “seek to reconfigure their once-symbiotic relationships with the state” (276)
individuals at different institutions, means that the way *narco* actors interact with the state has changed (Ríos). Today, cartels engage in these highly visible practices of terror because they intimidate other cartels and soldiers, policemen, and government agents, who must question how much value they place on their jobs versus their lives (Segato, *Escritura*). At the same time, such bloodiness discourages citizen involvement or protest, as the stakes are simply too high. The confusion created by each individual display of violence ultimately leads viewers to the same message; Reguillo writes, “las violencias en el país hacen colapsar nuestros sistemas interpretativos pero al mismo tiempo, estos cuerpos rotos, vulnerados, violentados, destrozados con saña, se convierten en un mensaje claro: acallar y someter” (Reguillo, “Narcomáquina,” n. pag.)

**III. The Politics of Not-Knowing: Journalism and Public Intellectuals**

The primacy of the image of the destroyed cadaver in Mexican culture derives from a failure to otherwise account for *narcoviolenencia* in the public sphere. Today there is a profound disconnect between the gruesome display of annihilated corpses in public spaces and certain political and journalistic discourses that aim to ignore, disregard, and erase such cruelty. The effect is to disorient the public about what these corpses mean. Bodies that have suffered torture and postmortem manipulations appear in public spaces, and their meaning is consistently reduced in the press to an unending and incomprehensible condition.

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82 These reasons cartels utilize violence so publicly were put forward by Segato with regard to the Juárez femicides. Segato argued that women’s bodies were instruments of communication that signify territorial control, with women’s bodies acting as “documents” on which sovereign power was written.
The image of the body is all the more important because it circulates in an environment in which information is scarce. Knowledge about *narcoviolen\!cia* often circulates in the form of the “public secret,” information that is known but that cannot be stated because a tacit “law of silence” prevails. Rumors told again and again become representations of reality, and the distinctions between reality and illusion, and certainty and doubt, become blurred. Terror begets more terror, creating what Michael Taussig has called “a culture of death” that operates in excess of instrumentality and market demands. Taussig writes that narrative is what can offset the fear and silence that emerge from contexts of brutality, exposing tightly-held public secrets and enabling us “to see anew through the creation of counterdiscourses” (“Terror” 470). In this section, I consider why creating the kinds of counterdiscourses that would unveil and remove the power behind official discourses and public secrets has been so difficult. Why does it seem that terror, and all its ambiguity and confusion, cannot be checked? What is necessary for the possibility of counterdiscourses to be created and circulated?

Despite the attempts of civic organizations and activists, since the 1980s, to insure a free press and an open public sphere appropriate for a democracy, the lack of information about *narcoviolen\!cia* and the fear surrounding it has made such openness impossible. What we find in Mexico today is not a national public that is constituted by reading texts of public debate in newspapers, as in the ideal models of national constitution and consolidation theorized by Benedict Anderson and Jürgen Habermas. Instead, the public is constituted by bearing witness to the imagery of *narco* spectacle that serves, more than discourse, as the basis for understanding violence. Images and not words give the appearance of containing truth about *narcoviolen\!cia*.
The *nota roja*—which publishes the most graphic images—is appealing because it attempts to reveal something about the reasons behind the violence and the parties responsible for it. In contrast, many mainstream newspapers have declined to publish photographs of *narcoviolencia*. *Excelsior*’s photography editor Elena Ayala explained the reasoning behind this decision:

> se fomenta el consumo de estas imágenes y es darle de alguna manera publicidad a la misma gente que comete el hecho. Si estamos en un país muy violento, y la violencia intrafamiliar es alta...publicar más violencia es fomentar la misma. Entonces no estoy de acuerdo en que se publiquen las fotografías de violencia. Se pueden hacer cosas en otro tono. (Meza 29)

In this explanation, the representation itself of the violence leads to more violence, rather than to the possibility of contesting it, and there appears to be no distinction between violent behavior committed by individuals in domestic settings and the violence of *narco* and state actors against citizens.

It has proven difficult for *narcoviolencia* and the free press to coexist, and several high-profile murders have pushed this into the public’s consciousness. In 2012, *Proceso* writer Regina Martínez was murdered in Veracruz, and in 2015, journalist Nadia Vera and photographer Rubén Espinosa, critics of Veracruz’s governor, were murdered in a Mexico City apartment after having fled Veracruz state (Goldman, “Who Killed?,” n. pag.). These emblematic cases of what happens to journalists who disregard warnings to

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83 Moreover, the perception that the press is not free to pursue investigative journalism was only strengthened in 2015, when a Mexico City radio station fired the country’s preeminent journalist, Carmen Aristegui, after she reported on a presidential scandal in which the first family purchased a home from a government contractor.
stop publishing on topics of state corruption and narco power incite a lower-intensity, more insidious form of censorship across the board.\textsuperscript{84}

Furthermore, the state still exerts control over the media, even though the press is by some measures “free” (Goldman “Mexico’s Missing,” n. pag.). In 2010, with the guerra contra el narcotráfico failing to show signs of being “won,” President Calderón invited owners of major news conglomerates to Los Pinos to ask them to join together to “autorregular sus contenidos” (“Medios” 22). In response, the following year, nearly all the major media outlets in the country—including Televisa and TV Azteca, the newspapers El Universal, Excélsior, El Economista, the cultural magazine Nexos, and multiple radio stations—signed an agreement called the Acuerdo para la Cobertura Informativa de la Violencia. The agreement holds that the signatories will not “convertirse en voceros involuntarios del crimen organizado” and will “dimensionar adecuadamente la información” (Rodríguez García 24). When the PRI regained control of the federal government in 2013, it likewise published a directive demanding that state governments and local media prohibit images of homicides and weapons.\textsuperscript{85}

This kind of “auto-regulation” further normalizes the grim situation described by Ignacio Corona and Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba in \textit{Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border}. Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Corona published their book in 2010 on

\textsuperscript{84} In spite of the danger, there are a handful of prominent young journalists who publish on narcoviolencia either in books, newspapers, or on the Internet: Anabel Hernández, Marcela Turati, Diego Osorno, Alejandro Almazán. Academics such as the political scientists Eduardo Buscaglia, Sergio Aguayo, and John Ackerman also publish timely scholarship and editorial pieces. Websites such as news outlets Animal Político, Sin Embargo, Horizontal and the activism site Nuestra Aparente Rendición likewise attempt to inform their readerships and draw attention to corruption and impunity.

\textsuperscript{85} In 2013, the Department of the Interior issued a directive titled \textit{La nueva narrativa en material de seguridad}, which demanded that state governments, and local press, prohibit certain images: “Las imágenes de los homicidios, las armas y pertrechos de los delincuentes coadyuvan en su beneficio,” wording that was published in the Spanish (not the Mexican) press (Prados).
media coverage of femicide; like the work of Rita Segato on femicide, most of their conclusions can be productively extended to murder and brutality against both men and women carried out nationally. Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Corona find that newspapers addressing femicide at the border adopted a “politics of not-knowing” and that the news media played down information by placing facts in the background and making the “news” about social conflict. Corona writes: “the typical journalistic treatment of the murders does not provide enough elements for rational discourse, for collective memory, or for avoiding a discourse of victimization” (109).86 Even newspapers considered to be serious publications of journalistic integrity emphasize tragic and nonsensical elements of crimes (Corona 106). In the case of femicide, the discoveries of bodies appear as repetitive events that “just happen,” as the subject is erased. A headline, for example, will declare that “la violencia se cobra dos nuevas víctimas” (Corona 116-7).

Where specific cases of narcoviolencia garner national attention, as in the presumed murder of the 43 Ayotzinapa normalistas, this “politics of not-knowing” extends up to the highest forms of discourse, with the country’s most esteemed public intellectuals suggesting that reaching conclusions is impossible—that there is simply no way to arrive at the truth with so many competing theories of the crime, conflicting testimonies of victims, perpetrators, and eyewitnesses, and even scientific evidence that can, arguably, be interpreted in different ways. For example, in his newspaper column Héctor Aguilar Camín furthers the idea that the homicides of Ayotzinapa are unsolvable, that no truth will emerge, and that this is unsurprising. Aguilar Camín is a historian, novelist, the editor of Nexos and a prolific editorialist who, while once “a voice of the

86 See also Hallin, on how journalism has tended to promote fear and extol a mano dura approach.
Left,” became in the 1990s “one of the most powerful intellectuals of the neoliberal transition” (Lomnitz “Neoliberal” 47). Aguilar Camín wrote in the newspaper Milenio:

La ciencia no está aclarando las dudas del caso de Ayotzinapa. Está agrandándolas. [...] 

Lejos de despejar las incógnitas que el caso les plantea, las conclusiones encontradas de los peritos alimentan la incertidumbre, regresan el caso a las sombras y a la elección de cada quien. Se han vuelto un surtidor de dudas más que de certezas, y pueden contaminar la credibilidad toda del caso. [...] 

La querella de los peritos ayuda a consolidar Ayotzinapa como un episodio más de esa especialidad mexicana que es creer lo que se quiere creer, en el fondo: la especialidad de no creer. (Aguilar Camín n. pag.)

Writing in the U.S. press, Francisco Goldman takes Aguilar Camín to task for these kinds of comments, writing that the latter “cleverly abets the idea of cynicism as an almost folkloric Mexican custom” (Goldman, “Mexico’s Missing” n. pag.).

This “politics of not knowing” that Aguilar Camín deployed in public discourse appears in cultural criticism as well. In his analysis of ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?, the poet Luis Felipe Fabre begins by writing of the country’s state as incomprehensible:

México sobrepasa mi capacidad de comprensión. Tal vez el error consista en querer aproximarse por medios racionales. No es posible entenderlo ¿Cómo entender el mal, la crueldad, la degradación que caracterizan el momento por el que atraviesa el país?....Y por supuesto que no se trata sólo de un momento: esto viene de antes y seguirá después.
Rather than seeking structural causes, analysis of narcoviolencia often relies on “the figure of ‘evil’” making the analysis apparently apolitical, a “politics of anti-politics” to quote Étienne Balibar (“Topography” 26). As narcoviolencia is becoming more and more systematic, affirming its incoherence means that patterns go unseen, and causality and intentionality are ignored. Ultimately this advances the perception of the nonculpability of those in power. 

Writing in Nexos, the Colegio de México scholar Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, for example, analyzes the data of narcoviolencia and ultimately blames the undeniable increase in violence on increased violence in day-to-day interactions at the local level: Normalmente vivimos—en eso consiste la civilización—bajo un pacto de no agresión, donde se han negociado los derechos de cada quien, y no hay necesidad de recurrir a las armas. Mi impresión es que en los últimos años, en el empeño de imponer el cumplimiento de la ley, en el empeño de imponer el Estado de derecho a la mala, desde el ejecutivo federal, se han roto los acuerdos del orden local y cada quien tiene que proteger lo suyo de mala manera: lo suyo es el lindero de un ejido, un estero donde desembarcar contrabando, un puesto en la calle para vender juguetes, el tránsito o la embarcación de mercancía sin pagar impuestos, la madera de un bosque, una esquina donde vender marihuana. El viejo sistema de intermediación política del país se basaba en la negociación del incumplimiento selectivo de la ley. Así funcionaban la producción, el comercio, las relaciones laborales, así funcionaba el contrabando y el resto de los mercados informales e ilegales, así funcionaba el país. Y en la medida en que funcionaba bien resultaba invisible la violencia que había detrás, pero es obvio que esa negociación de la
ilegalidad llevaba implícita siempre la amenaza del uso de la fuerza….Parece claro, sin embargo, o al menos a mí me parece claro que la crisis del orden local es el factor decisivo para explicar los niveles de violencia en el país. (n. pag.)

In this analysis of the situation, the pact of civilization has failed, the state is attempting to return to a rule of law, and unconnected individuals—trying to protect what they believe belongs to them—are creating the violence.

This denial of systematicity and the role of the state is accompanied by a defensiveness in the press by certain public intellectuals about the weight that their voices carry. Since the adoption of neoliberal policies, economics was seen to take the place of political and cultural discourse, with economics becoming “an alternative regime of knowledge and expertise that directly challenged lettered city models of intellectual practice” (Sánchez Prado “Dogma” 19). A second, later change that further disrupted the old public intellectual model and his exclusive claim to understanding has to do with the evolution of the media. Since the 1990s, the number of print and online magazines and newspapers has grown, and digital and social media (including Twitter) proliferated. Rafael Lemus has recently studied the ways that a sample of important intellectual figures (Aguilar Camín, Enrique Krauze, and Escalante Gonzalbo) reject the more horizontal, less hierarchical forms of publishing that are available online. Lemus writes that for these three authors, the opinions of the “masas” that are expressed online are uninformed, “echando mano de gruesos binarismos (voz/ladrido, salud/enfermedad, civilización/barbarie),” and discrediting writing outside of the mainstream print media “ya porque ‘amenaza’ la pureza del idioma, ya porque es ‘cursi’ y de ‘mal gusto’, ya
porque se asemeja a los rayones de los mingitorios y carece de ‘sentido’”
(“Insubordinación,” Lemus 239).

These intellectuals’ distrust and disregard of the public means that their opinions often fail to resonate with readers. Their defense of their position as the sole representative voices of the public has ironically served to further distance them from the very public they wish to address. The student-civic movement #YoSoy132 that emerged in 2012 to protest the media’s biased presidential election coverage had no interest in engaging with this category of public intellectual, which young activists perceived to be part of the state-media machine rather than allied with their own interests, and whom were not trusted to accurately portray the movement to a wider public (Lemus 232).

This level of antagonism toward the public points to a larger anxiety about what future role these intellectuals can have. Throughout the twentieth century, intellectuals were able to serve a function mediating between the state and the public, explaining platforms and policies to the public, and (ideally) voicing the concerns and desires of the public to the state. In her book In the Shadow of the State, Nicola Miller has described how instead of civil society being distinct from or acting in opposition to the state, civil society in Mexico has been a constituent part of the state, with the intellectual helping to bring civil society under the state’s umbrella (53-55, 87, 93-4). Jaime Torres Bodet (a member of Los Contemporáneos and a statesman in the mid-century) wrote of the intellectual as “a depositary for that part of a people’s historic dignity which can neither be replaced nor renounced” (quoted in N. Miller 215).

Regardless of whether the intellectual should be revered as a voice of the people or reviled as a puppet of the state, the fact of the matter is that the position of the public
intellectual to which Torres Bodet was referring no longer exists. In part, this has to do with the “technocratic turn” that privileges economic experts rather than literary ones, and in part it has to do with the fact that some public intellectuals became candidates to power themselves when the country democratized (e.g., Jorge Castañeda) (Sánchez Prado “Dogma”). Ignacio Corona wrote in 2007 of Carlos Fuentes as the last remaining “intelectual rector” in Mexican society, still frequently publishing essays to “diagramar el escenario político presente y de evaluar y sugerir programas de acción”; Fuentes died in 2012 (Corona, “Estrategias” 225-6). Ignacio Sánchez Prado, writing in 2015, marks the 2006 election as “the end point of the twentieth-century tradition of literary intellectuals with an autonomous relationship to power—the last of whom are perhaps Aguilar Camín and Krauze” (“Dogma” 35). Mexico has been experiencing narcoviolencia without the presence of the “intelectuales rectores” it had at other moments of national crisis, and also without the presence of established voices that spoke from outside of the state’s sphere of influence: Carlos Monsiváis and Carlos Montemayor passed away in 2010, and Julio Scherer García in 2015.

A discourse that denies narcoviolencia and emphasizes its incomprehensibility puts into doubt the accuracy and shared quality of the public’s perceptions about the violence, and casts the experience of everyday reality as inexplicable. Writing about prolonged economic crisis in Cameroon, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman have

87 Not all scholars would agree with Corona’s assessment of Fuentes. Nicola Miller writes that there is some ambiguity about whether to consider an intellectual like Fuentes a “traditional intellectual” who acted as an accomplice of the ruling class and who “adopted the cause of the masses without going to far as to be fully recruited into political militancy. Indeed, it could be argued that the assumption of the role of ‘organic’ intellectual by Spanish American intellectuals who were actually ‘traditional’ in Gramsci’s sense helped to perpetuate myths of national identity that obscured class divisions. Does this necessarily imply, then, that they should all be thought of as ‘traditional’ intellectuals who, unwittingly or not, furthered the interests of the ruling class?” (24-5).
described how “a large part of the population [has been plunged] into a prolonged state of anxiety and perplexity” (351). Mbembe and Roitman theorize that the incoherence of events in Cameroon creates “subjects of crisis” who experience an “unbearable discrepancy” between “publicly announced realities” and their own “unstable and uncertain” ones (342). “People ‘understand’ their lived experiences as incomprehensible,” they write, arguing that this lack of intelligibility leads to inaction and compounds the crisis (342). More broadly, the inability to understand the present has implications for how people can envision the future. Cameroon’s national identity was based on economic attributes, and bankruptcy leaves “this mode of imagining the nation in check,” contradicting a “long-standing capacity to ‘imagine’ itself in a certain manner” (339). Likewise, the perplexity that the discourse on narcoviolencia generates, contradicts the notion that the public has the capacity for self-determination—that the public can imagine itself and its future and institute the kind of society that it desires.

During past decades, the intellectuals aligned with the state advanced a cultural nationalism that saw the country as constantly, inevitably progressing, “towards the authentic,” where authentic is understood “as all that which we will be when we become what only we can be,” to quote Torres Bodet, (quoted in Miller 215). If history is conceived as an inexorable process forward through which Mexico becomes increasingly its true and authentic expression, then the rise of narco cruelty is all the more alarming, since, by this definition, it seems to be an expression of what Mexicans are, as revealing a truth about the interior “self,” the authentic hidden essence of an entire people. The promise that the state would help the people reach their destiny (often defined as modernity, and later, democracy) fueled the political system. Intellectuals of the past—
Paz, Samuel Ramos, Leopoldo Zea and those whom Claudio Lomnitz has labeled “Prophets of the Advent of Modernity” (“Times” 127)—derived legitimacy from their message that the future was coming. Fernando Coronil writes, “The legitimacy of the elites in Latin America has depended on their ability to be messengers of the future” (Coronil, “Future” 245). Coronil points out that intellectuals are not fulfilling their traditional role as “messengers of the future”: “What is rather exceptional about this juncture is not the reinscription of Latin America into History as a grand process but that now it is not clear where History is going” (“Future” 245).

The conceit of the single-party system was that no party competition was needed because the Party was seen to act on the public’s behalf, but such visible narco power means that previous presumptions about on whose behalf the government works has become an open question; it is less and less viable to presume that the state represents the public or that it works to bring the desires of the public into being, given how normalized impunity and corruption have become. In this context, what duty do the citizens in such a society have to the state? What characterizes their relationships to one another, if they are not held together by a common promise to bring about a certain kind of future? And in the case of narcoviolencia, with the state’s credibility so damaged in the eyes of the public, the threat to the intellectuals’ legitimacy goes far beyond their not being able to deliver on the old promises of modernity and the future. The state is increasingly seen as both complicit in narcoviolencia and impotent to stop it. The intellectual who adheres to official discourse about what narcoviolencia is and who its victims are appears as apologists of this state rather than a public figure who is “a depositary for that part of a
people’s historic dignity,” charged with articulating the public’s concerns and make
demands of the state (in Miller 215).

In contrast to how the state had previously negotiated relationships with public
intellectuals, Javier Sicilia’s form of engaging with other citizens offers a different
configuration of the relationship between the intellectual and the public. His Movimiento
por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad not only made demands on the state, but also spoke
directly to “the people” in an attempt to reconfigure the way citizen-strangers saw one
another. In a 2011 speech in Mexico City’s Zócalo, Sicilia pled for different sectors of
society to come together to form “a new pact” because party politicians were no longer
representing “la nación que emana del pueblo.” Such a pact would “permit[irle] a la
nación rehacer su suelo” and allow the next generation to recuperate their future:

México no puede seguir simplificándolo y menos permitir que esto ahonde más
sus divisiones internas y nos fracture [.....] es urgente que los ciudadanos, los
gobiernos de los tres órdenes, los partidos políticos, los campesinos, los obreros,
os indios, los académicos, los intelectuales, los artistas, las Iglesias, los
empresarios, las organizaciones civiles, hagamos un pacto, es decir, un
compromiso fundamental de paz con justicia y dignidad, que le permita a la
nación rehacer su suelo, un pacto en el que reconozcamos y asumamos nuestras
diversas responsabilidades, un pacto que le permita a nuestros muchachos, a
nuestras muchachas y a nuestros niños recuperar su presente y su futuro, para que
dejen de ser las víctimas de esta guerra o el ejército de reserva de la delincuencia.
Por ello, es necesario que todos los gobernantes y las fuerzas políticas de este país
Sicilia’s primary modus operandi was not publishing in newspapers and magazines, though his speeches were often reprinted in news publications. At the heart of the Movimiento was the organization of a caravan that travelled throughout Mexico in 2011, during which members of the Movimiento met with families of victims and activist groups. This was an attempt to create an alternate public life that refused the relegation to the private sphere that the spectacle of *narcoviolencia* aimed to achieve. It also refused the inclusion of the state in these discussions, or cooptation by the state. The Movimiento’s emphasis was on speaking with the public, and it was not drawn into negotiations with the state, as other protest movements have been. (In 1994, when the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional challenged the legitimacy of the state, it was drawn into just such negotiations, the San Andrés Accords, which were ultimately never adopted. In 2005-6, the EZLN re-emerged on the political scene with a new strategy: travelling throughout Mexico speaking to diverse publics about what they wanted for the nation’s future, on a kind of listening tour called “La Otra Campaña.” There are important echoes in Sicilia’s language of that employed by the EZLN, especially the notion that the representation of the authentic, legitimate “pueblo” has been highjacked by self-interested politicians, and needs to be recuperated by the “pueblo.”

Whereas the state had consistently insisted that victims of *narcoviolencia* were themselves *narcos*, the Movimiento’s activism demonstrated that individual members of the public saw the dead as fellow citizens. Individuals seeking recognition for their mourning, anger, and demand for justice could find a receptive audience with other
members of the public, if not with the state or with the old category of the state-aligned intellectuals. The Movimiento made visible the existence of a public that has questions about the legitimacy of the state’s power, and worked to redefine the public as a category independent from the state, outside of it, rather than under its umbrella and constantly mediated by it. Sicilia embodied a different type of “intelectual rector” than those of the PRI years, a kind engaged with the public in a different way and forcing into the public arena questions about what and who legitimizes the state’s use of power.

IV. The Primacy of the Image

Taken together, the state’s disavowal of narcoviolencia and “politics of not-knowing” in mainstream journalism help explain the rising cultural importance of the nota roja, and the spread of a nota roja aesthetic in photography and the visual arts. As journalistic discourse has failed to counter-narrativize narcoviolencia, the photographed images of narcoviolencia’s corpses have become one of the few sites that seems to offer insight into how narco power functions. The image is the site where members of the public can see for themselves how power acts, and specifically, how power impacts the realm of the public, as narcos take power over public spaces and use the bodies of members of the public to make their power manifest.

Viewers arrive at photography and the nota roja in search of a truth in the image. Boris Groys writes that terrorists (rather than artists), control image production around the world today, and it is the appearance of truth that makes terrorists’ images powerful:

The terrorist’s or the warrior’s image production has as its goal the production of strong images—images we would tend to accept as being “real,” as being “true,”
as being the “icons” of the hidden, terrible reality that is for us the global political reality of our time. (124)

This association of the annihilated body with the revelation of truth operates in narco spectacle. The public arrives at an image of destroyed body looking for the truth that is thought to emerge out of suffering, torture, and execution. First, truth about the reality of narco war, of who are the actors in the war, and truth about the relationships between state and narcos, between legal and illegal power, about who holds power and the relationship between power and legitimacy. Second, truth about the identity of the executed individual, often converted into an alterity through post-mortem stagings.88 Finally, and more broadly, the images relay the truth of the experience that the viewer is living: the truth of living in a necropolitical regime—the experience that is denied by the state and often the press. Thought of in this way, the photograph is not only a means of forging the docile body of the citizenry. The photograph is also the way that the subject sees his own experience of domination and of fear reflected back, and perhaps finds a sense of relief in the image of a reality that is closer to seeming true than the reality represented in the discourse of a censored media that dismisses fear. The censorship itself lends to the assumption that the images are dangerous, and contain a truth that the government does not want the public to access.

Nota roja publications such as El Gráfico, Metro, La Prensa, and El Nuevo Alarma! still publish the kind of photographs to which I am referring. These are all inexpensive dailies whose focus is metro or regional news, especially crime news. The paper with the largest circulation, El Gráfico, publishes different versions throughout the

88 See Theweleit on proto-fascistic Freikorps soldiers’ disfigurements of corpses in wartime as “corrective measures” which reveals the “true natures” of the victims” (196).
country, with D.F., Toluca, Querétaro, and Morelos editions. They are often owned by
the same news conglomerates that own the more expensive mainstream papers—*El
Universal* owns *El Gráfico*, for example—whose focus is domestic and international
politics as well as global finance. Because the *nota roja* and the mainstream papers are
directed to two different segments of the population, their readerships may develop
different impressions about the kind of violence the country is experiencing and danger
inherent in daily life in these areas.

In addition to the printed *nota roja* periodicals, the *nota roja* as a style has largely
moved to the Internet, and its most interesting, living, hybrid form can be found in
websites such as *El Blog del Narco*, as well as regional sites such as the now defunct
*Valor por Tamaulipas*, as well as pages on Twitter and Facebook. The largest site, *El
Blog del Narco*, explicitly refuses the state’s order to “autoregularse” by publishing the
most horrifying photographs of *narco* spectacle, and linking to YouTube videos of torture
sessions and executions. According to the two anonymous editors of *El Blog*, the
majority of photographs are “supplied to *Blog del Narco* by readers, who took photos of
these events in their neighborhoods on their cell phones”; the editors apologize for the
poor quality of many of the photographs, adding that often these photographs “are the
only evidence that exists of some of these atrocities” (*Dying for the Truth*, copyright
page). Even though *El Blog del Narco* is a site that is irrelevant to, or even detested, by
the elite, it formulates itself as a civic project dedicated to recording the truth, making the
recording of events in a context in which they are otherwise disavowed what creates a
sense of legitimacy. In this formulation, photographing and viewing the abject bodies of
*narcoviolen
cia* is not an act of voyeurism but an act of witnessing.
As noted in Chapter 1, the *nota roja* has historically served as the site where there is the least amount of pushback to ideas critical of the government and those in power, because *nota roja* is considered a form of popular rather than elite expression and a form of mass entertainment more than a source of credible, authorized news. The *nota roja* has long been a space that is beyond the reach of those intellectuals associated with the state, a place where doubts about the state’s discourses and accounting of events can circulate openly. The distaste toward the shocking effect of the *nota roja* aesthetic has meant that the *nota roja* is often understood as an illustration of a deep-rooted Mexican indifference toward death. Members of the elite demand the sanitization of such horrifying images from the public space on the basis that they are offensive and degrading, failing to address the weight that they carry in the political imaginary. Pablo Piccato explains this recurrent outrage toward the *nota roja*: “For cultural critics, the premise of those headlines and pictures, still common on Mexican news-stands, is that human life and dignity have no value” (“Nota Roja” 199). As Piccato goes on to explain, these kinds of judgments emerge from a tradition in which “Criminologists and public intellectuals shared a notion of Mexican modernity as economic development and ‘civilization’, which the *nota roja* undermined with its troubling portrayal of the national psyche” (“Nota Roja” 200).

This is not to say that the *nota roja* press and websites are merely providing information in service to a public, a form of “witnessing” that is inherently ethical and never exploitative. They are commercial papers and sites that aim to make a profit, and that routinely show images of the dead that victims and families would certainly never consent to being made public. Nevertheless, the *nota roja* is playing an important function
in how the public seeks knowledge about narco power. While state-allied news sources adopt “the politics of not-knowing,” the nota roja is endlessly engaged in reading the textual messages of the narcos, analyzing the violent messaging that has been inscribed on the bodies of victims, and seeking the logics behind the murders. Rocío Magaña writes about how, because they offer anonymity, online forums have become “active venues for the exchange of information, gossip, insults and the framing of rivals. The circulation and deconstruction of images is a strong component of such activity.” Astrid Villanueva Zaldo makes similar points:

La escasa legislación del espacio cibernético, el resguardo parcial de la identidad de quien suscribe y el grado de inmediatez en la difusión de la información gráfica y textual favorecen el uso de medios digitales. Un estudio formal sobre la emergencia de estas plataformas en la atmósfera de violencia generada por diversos actores nacionales e internacionales aún está por hacerse” (358-9).

As Villanueva Zaldo points out, more analysis is needed of online nota roja sources like El Blog del Narco, because these are the archives of the day that mediate how narcoviolencia is first understood. If we want to understand how narcoviolencia is changing the public sphere, we need to address how these photographs function, how they circulate and are viewed online and in social media.

Nota roja images challenge preexisting conceptions on which political or elite cultural discourses rely. Paul K. Eiss writes that images of narco murders “force viewers and readers out of the binaristic representations of the ‘war’ to ask a most unsettling question about the violence, about the narcos, and about the state itself: Who is who?” (Eiss 84). This was the question posed in 2009, when photographs of a murdered cartel
leader, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, were staged and posted to the Internet only hours after “El jefe de jefes” was killed by the Mexican Navy (the branch of the armed forces known for being the least corrupt). Photographs showed Beltrán Leyva with his pants pulled down, covered in blood and by numerous 500- and 1,000-peso bills (*Figure 8 shows the image as seen on the front page of El Gráfico*). The photographs circulated not only in the *nota roja*, but were widely reprinted in mainstream newspapers like *El Universal* alongside disclaimers. They were published in *Proceso*, the weekly political magazine alongside an article by Carlos Monsiváis. Monsiváis analyzed the photographs and asked “¿Qué hubo antes del impacto mediático?,” emphasizing how the *narco* war is a war that takes place via images (20).

The presumption was that members of the Navy staged the body in this way, suggesting that “the narcomensaje might become…a potent technique in the repertoires of all parties to the conflict” (Eiss 84). If the state was now carrying out *narco* style executions and producing *narco* style images, then it seemed as if, during the course of the war, the military had begun acting like its enemy. That is, fear of *narcoviolencia* encompasses not only the fear of *narco* criminality, but also a fear of retaliation by the state, whose tactics for preserving and demonstrating their power are indistinguishable from *narco* actors.

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89 Narcomensajes are the messages written on banners or pieces of cardboard that are sometimes left, presumably by *narcos*, in public spaces, and which often identify killings as punishment for informers or competition, or which threaten government officials who do not fall into line with a cartel’s commands (Eiss 78-9). Paul Eiss defines a narcomensaje as “bear[ing] menacing though often opaque messages from the drug traffickers, making their acts of violence at once legible and cryptic….If there is a classic example of the genre, it is the narcomensaje amid body parts: severed limbs, a head, or a cooler chest full of heads” (78). “Narcomensajes and narcomantas, while not digital in their original form, are created in the expectation of their subsequent documentation and circulation in digital form as well” (Eiss 85).
The anthropologist Natalia Mendoza Rockwell adds that *narcomensajes* and *narcomantas*—the messages left alongside publicly displayed cadavers—themselves often affirm the duplicity of the state and the misleading character of the public sphere:

Un tema recurrente en las narco-mantas, y en el universo moral y político que representan, es la distinción constante entre la verdad y las apariencias….Las mantas constantemente afirman la falsedad, la hipocresía y la duplicidad de la esfera pública. Todo lo que vemos y decimos en público, especialmente en la política, es simulacro, teatro. (29)

Because these “messages” often appear “como conversación hecha pública, como la exhibición de un secreto,” they are often considered authentic and assumed to have the same kind of truth value that photographs are assumed to have (Mendoza Rockwell 32).

V. Photographing *Narcoviolenccia*: Against the Political Sublime

The images of Beltrán Leyva lend credence to assertions by visual culture scholars like W.J.T. Mitchell and Boris Groys, who write that war today no longer simply takes place through acts of war, but also through images of war directed toward the public. This leads Groys to refer to Bin Laden as a “video artist,” and to our time as a time of “the return of the political sublime,” a time that the West has not experienced since pre-Enlightenment spectacles of public torture and beheadings (122, 126).

In 1967 Guy Debord wrote of the spectacle as an all-encompassing form of social relation in which the public sphere is mediated by the spectacle of appearances: “The spectacle isn’t the world of vision, it is the vision of the world permeated by the powers of domination” (Becker 2). The spectacle is a technology that serves to separate, in
service of capitalism’s “restructuring of society without community” (Crary 74). In this way, Debord’s account of the spectacle as a strategy to isolate subjects in service of power shares parallels with Foucault’s observations in *Discipline and Punish*, a text according to which so much analysis of *narco* power is based. In both models, diffuse mechanisms produce a subject’s interior sense of his/her isolation and consequently his/her conformity and docility (Crary 74).

Over the past fifteen years, Debord’s analysis of the society of the spectacle has acquired a new vitality and urgency: the concept of the spectacle has taken on new layers of meaning as it has been understood to play a dominant role in new, post-9/11 landscape in which “societies of risk,” born under “disaster capitalism,” prioritize “security.” Rather than spectacle being understood as what merely dulls the public into complacency in service of an intensified stage of capitalism, spectacle reemerges as a wartime tactic utilized to undermine a critical public; weaken the concept of the rights of the citizenry before the state; and destabilize sociability itself and modes of belonging in everyday life.

For Retort, the U.S.-based collective whose most prominent members are T.J. Clark, Iain Boal, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts, what 9/11 demonstrated (again) was that “control over the image is now the key to social power” (Retort 28). Retort argues that states throughout the world have put so much attention on the management of images as *the* strategy of statecraft, that the image itself has become the loaded site where the state affirms its power or has its defeat exposed in ways never so charged before. That is, spectacle arises as a tactic that states use as they employ sovereignty over governmentality, and, because of this, spectacle is a tactic that terrorism deploys *against* the state. Unlike previous points in history, now war occurs via images of acts of war, in
addition to through the acts of war themselves: “There were no cameras at Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima” (Retort 26).

The critique of “military neoliberalism” at the heart of Retort’s critique of spectacle is made with U.S. empire in mind, but its analysis offers ways to think about Mexican *narcoviolenza*. Retort argues that the state becomes paranoid and anxious when it cannot control imaging and when it suffers “image defeat” (explaining the spectacular quality of the invasion of Baghdad) (34). The Mexican Navy’s staging of of Beltrán Leyva’s cadaver, partially naked and covered in bloodied bills, also speaks to a state that has become paranoid and desperate—“flailing blindly in the face of an image it cannot exorcise”—when faced with *narco* actors who employ spectacle as a tool of war (Retort 25). More broadly, the *narco* crisis offers a demonstration of what Retort describes as spectacle that acts in service of weak citizenship and permanent militarization.

In a global society in which the spectacle is now employed by sovereign powers demonstrating their domination over subjects, the question that arises is how the spectacle can be neutralized as a sign of power. W.J.T. Mitchell writes that “We must reconceive the spectacle as the site of struggle, the contested terrain” (“Spectacle Today” 577). In the case of *narcoviolenza*, this means asking how documentary images of public cadavers can circulate in a way that enables viewers to have empirical evidence of the effects of the war, but without having to live with images that induce fear, that isolate, that foreclose the public sphere. The attempt to make the portrayal of *narcoviolenza* taboo serves the state’s interest as it limits the public’s knowledge about *narcoviolenza*. The prohibition on images of *narcoviolenza*—as put forward by the state-sanctioned Acuerdo para la Cobertura Informativa de la Violencia—has corresponded to the
increased appeal of the *nota roja* and online forums, speaking to the desire to see and comment on such images—and possibly intensifying it. On the other hand, if bodies are left in public spaces to terrorize, can photographs showing the corpses of *narcoviolencia* do something other than, or in addition to, what the corpses are intended to do? How can the staged bodies circulate in a way that does not induce fear and paranoia and close down the public sphere, but rather, be utilized to counter fear and silence? Can the cadaver photograph become an instrument in creating a different kind of power relation—in countering the isolation that is the goal of the spectacle? Within this question is the question of whether art can itself have a transformative effect on society. Or, is cadaver photography doomed to reproduce images of corporeal suffering that demonstrate the power of *narcos* and of the state over the citizenry?

In this section, I examine half a dozen images by photojournalists that have circulated in newspapers and books as representative of the public crisis of *narcoviolencia*. These are photographs taken by Mexican photographers employed by international news agencies such as the Associated Press Photo and Agence-France Press.

My discussion of these photographs sets up an analysis of several photographs by Culiacán-based photojournalist Fernando Brito, which have been exhibited internationally as art photography. These images show that the distinctions that once existed between *nota roja* photography, art photography, and photojournalism are closing. Brito’s photographs counter the predominant “strong” images that are created by *narco* spectacle as a means of creating fear, and stage the relationship between the viewer and the spectator as one of intimacy and isolation. They eliminate the space between the cadaver of *narcoviolencia* and the spectator of the photograph, and eliminate the sense of
iconicity, abjection, and alterity that usually characterize the cadaver of narcoviolencia. The attention Brito pays to the framing—and to carefully cropping out people and crime scene indicia, to capturing the natural light at just the right moment—make it clear to the viewer that the photographs are not just scenes that the photographer stumbled upon. This leads the viewer to question what is left out and what is placed inside the frame of any cadaver photograph. Overall, the photographs present themselves emphatically not as works of documentation, but rather as works of art. This act of making cadavers into art draws attention to the fact that no image of the narco cadaver is ever a mere image of documentation, because the public displays of cadavers are already themselves a form of war propaganda.

For centuries, when artists represented war, they did so to awaken audiences to the realities of events in a distant place. Today, photojournalists who capture photographs of war and atrocity are “address[ing] an audience that has been visually assaulted many times over and that lives with the ever-present knowledge of industrialized mass murder, nuclear weapons, and genocide” (Linfield 209). In this way, the challenge for the photographer of Mexican narcoviolencia is to find ways to represent a violence that is already everywhere over-represented, and to take photographs that will circulate exactly where they were taken. This is the opposite of what often happens in photojournalism, where images of war circulate far from the spaces in which they were taken, and there is still a way in which the viewer often is watching from faraway—to use an analogy of the Enlightenment philosophers, as spectators on dry land, smug as they watch a shipwreck out at sea (Jay 103-7).
In keeping with Mitchell’s assertions about the function of culture in this new era of the spectacle, we can say that the challenge for visual culture amid narcoviolencia is to produce an image that operates on the terrain of the spectacle while visualizing dead bodies in a way that resists power’s use of the body as its site of inscription. The challenge is for the photograph to create a different kind of reaction in the viewer, and potentially, to become an instrument in a creation of a different relation between the viewer, the body, and power.

In many photographic images of the corpses of narcoviolencia, the compositions center on the lifelessness of the body, setting up the dead, tortured body as in and of itself deserving of viewers’ attention. This has long been common in the photography of the nota roja. The defining characteristic of the nota roja photograph is its goal to produce a contradictory impulse in the spectator: a desire to see the image and an opposite disgust that causes the viewer to look away. The nota roja image that is most prevalent is that of the cadaver, taken in as tight a shot as possible on the wounded body’s gaping injuries, disfigurements, staging and, possibly, its face, usually disturbingly unhuman as a result of violence and of death. Photographs often show forensic and morgue workers, cordons and markers, and other indicia of a formerly “normal” zone of the city that has been transformed into a crime scene.

Though there are some classic exceptions, generally nota roja offers photographs in which the action has already passed, and the image visualizes the traces of the violent event that has occurred. We can contrast this with the ideal of political photojournalism on two counts. First, the ongoingness of the event or the potentiality of the event is the ideal content to capture in the photojournalistic image (think of Robert Capa’s Falling
Soldier). Second, the expressions of human emotion—fear, anger, surprise, sadness—are what connects the photographed subject to the spectator in photojournalism. These are part of implicating the spectator in a relationship that Ariella Azoulay has characterized as a “civic” responsibility to the individual pictured. In Azoulay’s theorization of photography of political violence, the photograph bestows on the viewer knowledge of what has happened to the photographed subject. In the $nota\ roja$ photograph, this civic duty is abrogated because the subject pictured is always deceased, and the otherness, the deadness and not the prior subjectivity of the cadaver is prioritized. One of the features that distinguishes the $nota\ roja$ photograph from the photojournalistic image or from art photography is how tightly the composition frames the wounds of the deceased and the facial expression. The $nota\ roja$ photograph is one in which violence or accident has transformed someone like the spectator into a jarring alterity. (In contrast, Mexico’s most famous photographs of cadavers, Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s $Obrero\ en\ huelga\ asesinado$ and Enrique Metinides’s $Adela\ Lagarreta\ Rivas\ atropellada\ por\ un\ Datsun$, emphasize the integrity and beauty of the dead, preserving the sense of who the photographed were in life. And even though Metinides is often thought of as a $nota\ roja$ photographer, $Adela\ Lagarreta\ Rivas$ points to the way that Metinides was engaging with different photographic conventions rather than staying within those of the $nota\ roja$.)

In Mexico today, the photojournalism of $narcoviolencia$ often shows a body that has suffered alongside the seeming indifference to the degradation of the corpse by spectators in the photographs. For example, in a photograph taken by Guillermo Arias for Agence France-Press in Tijuana in 2009, and published in the expensive photography magazine $Luna\ Córnea$, indifference seems a subject of the photograph almost as much
as the corpse itself (Figure 9). To the left firefighters—whose heavy rubberized clothes contrast with the hanging man’s nakedness—and on the right, onlookers who have stopped their car. A man has stepped out of the driver’s seat just long enough to pull out his flip-phone and snap a photo himself. We could read this man as creating documentary evidence of atrocity, as in El Blog del Narco’s explanation, but in the photograph, the act seems more like an act of insensitivity toward the victim than an act of witnessing. In the background, the photographer has captured an enormous billboard advertising a private university in Tijuana named Universidad Humanitas.

The symmetry of the image, the centrality of the cadaver, and the tautness of the rope at the composition’s center make a tense and yet undynamic image. The stillness in images of power, W.J.T. Mitchell argues, “renders history itself as an eternal, static image” (147). Writing of the Hooded Man of Abu Ghraib, Mitchell comments:

It is the frontal pose and the symmetry of the image that provide the formal conditions for its iconic power. The question then is not ‘who is the Hooded Man?’ but (to quote James Agee on Walker Evans’s photographs of sharecroppers) ‘who are you who will study these photographs…and what will you do about it? (Mitchell, Cloning Terror 135)

The photographs of such iconic displays of power serve as a demand that the viewer respond to the image.

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90 Luna Córnea is the publication of the Centro de la Imagen, which is an entity of the Secretaría de Cultura (previously part of el Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, a division of the Secretaría de Educación).
When a similar version of this photograph (Figure 10) was published in the center-left *La Jornada* the day after it was taken, the accompanying article gave this account of the victim’s injuries:

La madrugada de ayer, el cadáver mutilado de Rogelio Sánchez Jiménez, subrecaudador de Rentas de la Secretaría de Planeación y Finanzas del gobierno de Baja California, apareció colgado de un puente de la carretera Playas de Rosarito-Tijuana.

El cadáver del funcionario, quien fue *levantado* hace tres días, pendía de los barandales del Puente Panamericano, con la cabeza envuelta en cinta adhesiva y los órganos sexuales mutilados. (“Enfrentamiento”)

The specifying details contrasts with the situation described by Segato in her analysis of the Juárez femicides, in which the “expressive” violence communicated fear—but largely without photographs and without the attachment of names and identities to desecrated corpses. The identities of missing women were often never matched, or mismatched to bodies. The public naming of victims beside photographs that demonstrate torture and post-mortem disfigurement is a new development in the spectacle of *narcoviolenecia*. Today news outlets routinely show photography of, or describe, the torture done to an individual’s body, while giving the name, age, occupation, and other identifying information of a victim. The power of the *narco* spectacle is not simply the appearance of anonymous bodies, but also the abject condition, with injuries intended to humiliate, in which a known and named individual is returned to his city.

What the photographs of Rogelio Sánchez Jiménez (Figures 9 and 10) have in common with so many of the photographs of *narcoviolenecia* is the way that a body
remains undisturbed after its discovery, even when clusters of people surround it. In two photographs taken by Alejandro Cossío (Figures 11 and 12), the spectator is radically above or below the action, watching as workers react—or fail to react—before the bodies of the dead. In one of the photographs (Figure 11), the bodies are laid out haphazardly, in various state of undress and mutilation. Some face up, some down, covered in bloody rags, no faces visible. There is so much evidence of previous physical suffering in the photograph that the eye moves around the composition without fixating on any single corpse, single person, single action. The takeaway is shock before the number of dead and the way that their bodies have been scattered on the ground. In a second photograph (Figure 12), two men work together to remove the body—this photograph, unlike the previous ones, actually captures a moment in time, an action in process. Because of this action, logistical problem-solving, and interaction between the two men, this photograph is less terrifying, and less iconic, than the static images made by Arias, in which the body is simply allowed to remain suspended overhead, Christlike and outside of history.

Alejandro Cossío took these photographs as part of a series titled México en el punto de quiebre, which was published in 2011 in País de muertos: Crónicas contra la impunidad (Random House Mondadori, 2011), a book edited by the prominent journalist Diego Enrique Osorno. Cossío is a photojournalist for Zeta (the weekly magazine based in Tijuana and founded by the legendary narcotrafficking reporter Jesús Blancornelas), and won the Premio de la Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano in 2010.

In their photographs, both Arias and Cossío captured images of colgados: bodies left hanging from pedestrian bridges over streets and highways, a common way to leave cadavers in public spaces. Over the past several years, the colgado has become the icon
of *narcoviolen\text{cia}*, replacing even the image of the severed head, photographs of which many mainstream news sources were more hesitant to publish. While the term *colgado* could mean hung or hanged, very few *colgados* are actually murders by hanging; more frequently, the *colgado* is hung by the waist or under the arms for a purely post-mortem display of the cadaver. This way of displaying the body creates a delay between the discovery of the *colgado* and forensic authorities’ careful removal of the corpse, insuring that the *colgado* remains visible for much longer than if it had been left on the ground.\footnote{Despite its ubiquity, I am not aware of any scholarship that considers the significance of the *colgado*. Mexico City’s first *colgado* was a major news story when the cadaver was found bound and blindfolded, hung in Iztapalapa on October 19, 2015, and was interpreted to mean that cartels were competing for control of the entry points into Mexico City (Marcial Pérez “Cadáver” n. pag.).}

The resonance of the image of the *colgados* has to do with the way that *narco* power is not only inscribed on the bodies of the people, but also on the landscape of the cities. The state’s sovereignty is being contested on the public highways—on the stage of the state’s own public expenditure, and the kind of infrastructure project that once strengthened the legitimacy of the state. Today, the bridges and highways no longer connote the state’s capacity to bring commonly-held dreams about modernization to fruition. Rather than a highway system that striates space for the state, the roads have become the opposite: threatening to a centralized state that cannot control what happens on them, what travels on them (narcotics, arms, migrants). If cars and roads are symbols of a national first world dream, then the image of the cadaver on the roads speaks to the impossibility of that dream.

The *colgado* also dramatically stages the moment that predominates in photography of *narcoviolen\text{cia}*: the moment of the discovery of the corpse. Photojournalism and *nota roja* alike offer viewers repetitive images of the traumatic
moment of discovery, often putting the camera under the bridge and looking up, as if just arriving to the scene and capturing the first glimpse of the colgado. This perspective, which forces the viewer to look up at the image of a hanging dead man, also mirrors the iconography of Christ’s body suspended on the Cross, which, like the Hooded Man of Abu Ghraib, evokes “the dark, violent side of Christian iconography (torture and mockery)” (Mitchell, Terror 9). Here, each photograph repeats the traumatic moment when the spectator shifts from a member of society innocent of the knowledge of narcoviolencia to the moment when the domination occasioned by narco power is staged before him/her. The repetition of the moment of discovery suggests that the discovery of the corpse itself is the news, without the expectation of further investigation.

In photographs, the people who gather around the corpse almost always seem to be reacting inappropriately, with indifference, precisely because they are engaged with the logistics of the cadaver as a cadaver and are not mourning and grieving the individual killed. It is rare to find a photo, like that taken by Agence France-Press photographer Pedro Pardo (Figure 13) that depicts public grief. This photograph was exhibited in 2012 at the Museo del Chopo in downtown Mexico City as part of an exhibition titled Fotoperiodismo, and published in U.S. magazine Time at the end of 2011, as one of ten photographs representative of “the year in news.”

Taken in Acapulco in 2011, the photograph shows two civilian men reacting to a body lying in the streets, a rope suggesting that the corpse was a colgado that has recently been cut down from the highway overpass—and therefore deprived of its status as an icon. The two men lean over the body, one holding his hand to his bowed head, in grief, and another, bent over the cadaver. The caption published with the photograph notes that
the man on the ground touching the corpse is a relative of the deceased.\footnote{92} Notable in the background are five soldiers—who are mere bystanders, and are not engaged in any kind of action whatsoever—while a civilian in a car and a line of onlookers on the overpass stairs look down toward the body.

The importance of the image is not—unlike in so much photography of \textit{narcoviolencia}—showing spectators the brutality against the body of a victim. Instead, this is an image through which spectators of the photograph can in turn visualize a viewing public, absorbed by the vision of the person who has been killed. What is so unique about this photograph is the way that the viewer of the photograph can see a viewing public that is absorbed in a single experience: the painful shared experience of discovering a corpse and watching the mourning of an individual. It is a rare image in which the public is viewable, imaginable, together. The members of the public are not pretending not to see the violence happening around them, which is the act of percepticide that Diana Taylor wrote was so corrosive to the community (122-4). The isolation that the spectacle is theorized as producing here seems not to happen. A public is constituted in this moment of suffering and the photojournalist captures it for a broader viewing public.

Keeping in mind these examples of photojournalism, I now want to examine a series of photos by Fernando Brito titled \textit{Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje}. These photographs contrast with the \textit{nota roja} photographs in that they invite reflection on the

\footnote{92 The World Press Photo Caption reads: “Acapulco, Mexico. A man squats beside the body of a relative, one of three corpses discovered in a street in the La Cima neighborhood of Acapulco on 9 January [2011], the day after 15 beheaded bodies were found in the city. Acapulco, the Mexican seaside resort much favored by the 1960s jetset, has become a battleground in the wars between drug cartels that are afflicting the country. Nightclubs are closing, and tourists stay away, as the violence escalates” (worldpressphoto.org).}
image rather than producing a desire to see and an opposite demand to look away. At the same time, they contrast with the usual photojournalistic images in that they render the scene without context, action, or potentiality, and impose an artificial order that emphasizes the stillness and harmony of the natural landscape. In her analysis of Brito’s photographs, Jill Lane pointed this out: “Brito’s landscapes offer a space of rumination, a pause to be in the space of death, with these dead” (n. pag.). The non-confrontational nature of the photographs—and their beauty in some cases—invite a delicate experience and a more careful engagement with the photograph. These photographs create a desire to see, understand, and question what is inside (and outside) the camera’s frame, to ask what we see in Brito’s photographs that we do not see in others, and what is missing from the others that we can find in Brito’s.

A photojournalist for the Sinaloan newspaper *El Debate*, Brito crossed over from the world of local crime photojournalism into the world of art with the exhibition of *Tus pasos se perdieron en el paisaje*, a series of thirty-five photographs, each of a different corpse left, *arrojado*, in and around Culiacán (*Figures 14-23*). Brito was able to take these photographs during the course of his work for *El Debate*, but they were not the photographs that ran in the newspaper as the news; instead, this series was conceived of as a personal artistic project and the photographs were exhibited without contextualizing details about the victims’ identities and the crime scenes. While they were not staged, they often give the impression that the photographer was alone with the cadaver while taking the photographs, which Brito has explained is not the case, and that these images were taken only after his work as a crime photographer has been completed:
Nunca he estado solo con un muerto, no me entero antes que los demás….primero trabajo para el periódico, para la historia, y luego ya que di varias vueltas me ubico en el lugar de donde quiero sacar mis fotos y espero a que la gente salga de mi cuadro. Algunas veces puedo tomar muchas imágenes, otras solo una. (Loyola, n. pag.)

The series was exhibited at the Museo Franz Meyer in Mexico City, and awarded a prize in the 2010 Bienal de Fotografía in Mexico City (organized by the Centro de la Imagen, an entity of the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes); the series also been exhibited in galleries and cultural centers in the United States and Spain.

Each of the bodies of Brito’s photographs are cadavers left in public spaces, a fact that makes each victim a presumed narco killing according to the definitions put forth by the state. The photographs carefully frame the cadaver, which often looks like a body more than a corpse, lying peacefully in a landscape. This can be by the side of the road, showing evidence of the urban environment, or by a lake or in a cornfield—that is, in a completely natural setting that could be anywhere in the world, at any point in history. There is no spontaneity, or suggestion that the photographer is capturing a moment in time; indeed, the images appear to have been taken outside of time. The corpse just uncannily appears.

As the corpse becomes a part of the landscape, it is not shocking or disturbing in its lifelessness, nor does it demonstrate evidence of the suffering it has experienced. In obscuring from the camera the marks of torture or decomposition, Brito’s photographs distinguish themselves from the photography of the nota roja. There is no sign of what has happened, and the camera is never close enough to put the viewer face-to-face with
details that would identify the victim, give the viewer a point for identification with the
dead, or would reveal close-up the gruesomeness of the tortured cadaver. Whereas the
bodies in other photojournalists’ compositions show bodies that have been transformed
through power, these photographs are not “about” the body as an object of power. These
images are not graphic in the sense that they do not contain signs of torture or
decomposition, but also in the sense that they offer no gaze returned, no face, no
possibility of detail that connects with the viewer.

_Tus pasos_ is a series of repetitive images that reflects the repetition of the daily
discoveries of corpses that occur in Culiacán and throughout Mexico. The images do not
evoke surprise even as corpses appear in places they seem inappropriate. The presence of
cadavers in public spaces has become prosaic, and the quality of beauty and the
opportunity to pause before these cadavers gives spectators the opportunity to interrogate
their own lack of surprise, the degree to which they already live everyday surrounded by
such corpses, if not in public spaces of their cities, then certainly in the media.

The harmoniousness of the photographs gives viewers access to the suffering of
the _narco_ crisis in a way that contrasts with the terror and spectacle of _narco_ stagings. In
_The Aesthetics of Uncertainty_, Janet Wolff has argued that with art on traumatic subject
matter, “the beautiful…far from operating as inappropriate redemption or
depoliticization, can serve the important role of engaging the viewer in sympathetic, but
by no means passive, reflection on its theme” (56-7). To press this further, beauty,
stillness, and harmonious composition can be thought of as counterweights to spectacle.
The non-shocking quality of Brito’s photographs act as a strategy to nullify the “strong”
image of _narcoviolencia_.

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Boris Groys argues that terrorism provides “strong images,” just as W.J.T. Mitchell has written that terrorism (and counter-terrorism) produces its own iconography (e.g., the hooded prisoner of Abu Ghraib) that resonates with a deeply rooted Christian iconography (*Cloning*). Is it possible to counter such an icon of the annihilated body as we usually find in the *nota roja*, with a subtler, weak image of the cadaver? Groys writes,

All the political forces of the contemporary world are involved in the increasing production of the political sublime—by competing for the strongest, most terrifying image. It is as if Nazi Germany were to advertise for itself using images of Auschwitz, and the Stalinist Soviet Union using images of the Gulag. (126)

These images contain empirical truth to the extent that they document events, but Groys writes that what critics must continue to question is representation itself: “we have to differentiate between this empirical truth and empirical use of an image as, let us say, judicial evidence, and its symbolic value within the media economy of symbolic exchange” (126).

The beauty, stillness, and harmonious composition can be thought of as counterweights to spectacle—an attempt to represent *narcoviolencia* through “weak” images that capture the end effect of power against the body (death), but not the cruelty that annihilates the body and that “offends the ontological dignity that the human figure possesses and renders it unwatchable” (Cavarero 9). These are “watchable,” viewable images and *not* strong or sublime ones. The *nota roja* images and YouTube videos make us look without seeing; Barthes alluded to this when he wrote that “shock photos” were at odds with critical judgment. Brito’s photographs ask us to imagine what a viewable, “watchable” image, rather than a “shock photo” or a “strong” image of the “political
“sublime” would look like. What does it feel like not to look and look away—the contradictory pulls of the *nota roja* image—but what it would feel like to look and keep looking at *narcoviolencia*.

Hannah Arendt argued that accompanying others in their suffering is a necessary part of public life: meaningful political thought demands a confrontation with suffering, facing the painfulness of realities without consolation (Nelson). In *On Revolution*, “compassion” is of the greatest value to political thought (even though “sentimentality” is among the most dangerous—that which blinds historical actors to facts). The images of *narco* spectacle so often seem to block engagement with pain rather than facilitating the kind of engagement Arendt saw as the basis for political action. Brito’s photographs attempt to visualize *narcoviolencia* without visualizing specific bodily mutilations. His photographs reveal and hide, searching to walk the line between ethically witnessing history and becoming a spectator of pain in a way that shuts down the capacity for response. This desire to both bear witness to history and the desire not to reproduce spectacle can be found elsewhere in contemporary art. For example, when Chilean photographer Alfredo Jaar exhibited photographs of victims of the Rwandan genocide, he placed the photographs inside black boxes (Levi Strauss). The ethical demand that we see and engage with suffering and, on the other hand, the anxiety that images of suffering are disrespectful to victims and encourage voyeurism lie behind Jaar’s decision to conceal his photographs.

Brito’s photographs contrast with an aesthetic of the spectacle that would use the shocking photograph of the annihilated body as a means to *isolate* the individual. Debord originally proposed the society of the spectacle as a form of social relation: Jonathan
Crary characterizes spectacle as, “not primarily concerned with a looking at images but rather with the construction of conditions that individuate, immobilize, and separate subjects” (74). As in the photographs by Guillermo Arias, the problem of the spectacle that makes subjects into spectators and bystanders—rather than actors—emerges in Brito’s photographs. Brito has photographed around other individuals—the other bystanders who are present when a body is discovered—and the photographs make the viewer feel as if he or she is the only one present. This puts the viewer in the position of the person before the corpse. The photograph enables the viewer to have a particularly intimate experience with the corpse, rather than being a kind of photojournalism that records a moment that has already happened, whose significance in history is already assured, a situation that has already been played out.

This effect is reinforced by the consistency with which the photographs put the viewer of the photograph on the same plane as the cadaver, creating the effect that the space of the photograph is a space the viewer could walk into. The photographs differ from the one by Pedro Pardo taken in Acapulco, in that Pardo’s photograph seems to give viewers access to a scene would have gone on without us, a self-contained situation for which no beholder is necessary to bring into being. Pardo’s photograph has a closedness in this sense: we, viewers of the photograph, are privy to its contents, but it is not occurring because of us, and the grief pictured is not happening for us. In contrast, Brito’s photographs are for the spectator, in just the same way that the cadaver of narcoviolencia is left in public spaces for an audience.93

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93 This is a difference that Michael Fried has theorized as the difference between “absorption” and “theatricality” in images. In Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, Fried argues that “theatricality” occurs when a photograph looks outward deliberately to the audience with a “to-be-seenness” versus when a photograph is complete without the audience’s participation.
With no other people in the photographs, the task of mourning and remembering falls to the viewers of the photographs. Brito often photographs bodies lying not on urban streets, but in fields, atop soil, where they appear as if they are waiting to be buried. This idea that bodies are not yet buried articulates the way that the mourning of these subjects is incomplete as narcoviolencia remains ongoing, and in a state of public half-truths and secrets.

Ultimately, however, the beauty and harmony of Brito’s photographs go beyond this question of what is ethical witnessing and the possibility of the viewer to engage in a sustained, intimate experience of seeing the violence. The power of Brito’s photographs lies in their critique of narco staging as an act of the political sublime intended to terrorize an audience. Groys writes that “To say of the images produced by war and terrorism that on the symbolic level they are merely art is not to elevate or sanctify but to criticize them” (129). In using the cadavers as the materia prima for what is easily recognizable as art photography, the images remove this aura of the real and true that often places cadaver images beyond criticism and judgement, or that makes us look away from them out of respect for the dead; it gets them circulating in a way that the public can speak about them, because the photographs are recognized as something beyond evidence of atrocity. The cadavers of narcoviolencia are always spectacle—always operating beyond their value as evidence and instead operating “within the media economy of symbolic exchange,” to again quote Groys. Rather than trying to take the spectacle out of the cadaver, Brito’s photographs here emphasize the spectacle and symbolic value, and draw it out as precisely what requires critique.
VI. ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?

Like Brito’s photographs, Margolles’s installation at the Venice Biennale in 2009 is an intervention that stages the way that narcoviolencia’s corpses refuse burial and remain with the public. Even while its conceptual nature avoids the imagery of narcoviolencia—the work is able to avoid the questions of voyeurism and the unwanted gaze of the public toward an individual’s desecrated body—Margolles’s installation elicits shock and disgust in a way that mimics the nota roja or the response to the “strong” image of the political sublime.

Since the 1990s, the thread running through Margolles’s oeuvre is the eliciting of viewers’ revulsion as a point of entry to examine social and political problems: poverty, inequality, violence. Rubén Gallo has referred to her oeuvre deploying “necrophiliac aesthetics” as she has utilized the detritus of the corpse: blood, fat, water used to cleanse corpses, and occasionally body parts (a tongue, a fetus, tattooed skin) in her art (117). The corporeal material that Margolles used in her 1990s work came from the poor, the “use of bodies…highlight[ing] the persistence of poverty, socioeconomic inequality and structural instability in post-NAFTA Mexico” (Banwell 9). At the time, attention to these power dynamics set Margolles apart from other artists working in Mexico who were recipients of financial support and media attention, artists whose work “evinced the most attenuated forms of social commentary or avoided it altogether….neoformalism was the strategy of choice” (Fusco 64).

In these earlier works, Margolles used materials from the cadavers of the most vulnerable members of society: those whose bodies ended up in morgues. This part of her work was interpreted as “bespeak[ing] a sacrificial economy, where the anonymous lives
of city dwellers are violently sacrificed daily to satisfy the blood lust of an unjust system” (G. Jauregui 180). Margolles often stole from the morgue the body parts she needed for her work, or alternately paid family members of the deceased to use those body parts. For example, *Lengua* (2000) utilized the pierced tongue of a young man whose family used Margolles’s payment for funeral expenses. If we consider the acts that went into the exhibited item—the acts of theft from the morgue, the negotiations to pay desperate families for the use of cadaver parts—as part of the artwork itself, then the work articulates a divide between the shock of the cadaver and the illegal, invisible transaction that makes the art possible. The tongue on a pedestal in a gallery space provokes shock and revulsion to spectators, while the suffering of a grieving family, and Margolles’s possibly exploitative negotiation, remains invisible. The dynamic here is parallel to how the *nota roja* operates in its publication of photographs: the materiality of the cadaver shocks viewers, while “private” grief over the murder is kept out outside the pages of the paper. What is at stake in *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?* is the impossibility of continuing to understand grief as private and what should remain relegated to the private sphere.

Both before and after *narcoviolencia* became her subject matter, Margolles’s oeuvre is profoundly unified in its study of “la vida del cuerpo después de la vida del sujeto” (Yépez 204)—in its study of the body as an index marking where subjectivity once was but is no longer. In turning to *narcoviolencia*, Margolles captures the violent undoing of the integrity of the body, that is at the core of the horror of how *narco* staging exceeds instrumentality and the way that the body is divorced from subjectivity. *¿De qué?* reproduces this offense to bodily wholeness and to the identity of the subject.
¿De qué otra cosa? (Figures 24-30) consists of multiple interventions, and the core of the work is the way that it puts visitors into direct contact with the materiality of corpses, converting the absence of murdered individuals into the unsettling, undeniable presence of their material continuity. ¿De qué otra cosa? was exhibited at the Palazzo Rota Ivancich, a dilapidated palace near St. Mark’s Square in Venice, whose cracking walls and ripped wallpaper went unrestored and even uncleaned for the exhibition. ¿De qué’s? origins were far away, in the streets of Ciudad Juárez and Culiacán. Margolles began working on the exhibition in 2008, travelling to the sites of shoot-outs and killings soon after they had occurred. After murders, corpses can be removed from the streets, but there is always an abject remainder that cannot be easily collected or immediately moved away; this is the material that Margolles used in her work. She and members of her team used huge pieces of fabric to absorb blood, dust, mud, and other materials from the ground of the crime scenes, and collected shards of shattered glass left by gunfire. The fabrics were dried and taken to the Palazzo, where they were mixed with water and used to mop the Palazzo floor, continuously, during the Biennale, with relatives of victims of narcoviolen
cia asked to do the mopping. Large, reddish-brown, blood-soaked fabrics were hung on the walls, like tapestries, shrouds, or flags, and were kept continuously moist. Some were later embroidered, in gold thread, with the text of narcomensajes left at the stagings of cadavers: “Ver, oír y callar,” “Hasta que caigan todos tus hijos,” “Así terminan las ratas,” and “Para que aprendan a respetar.” Margolles also collected sound recordings of the sites where bodies were found, which were played continuously during the exhibition. Concrete mixed with dust from the crime scenes was used to fashion a
bench where visitors could sit. Finally, the glass shards were set in gold jewelry, which were locked away in a small safe installed in a wall of the Palazzo, out of sight.

¿De qué? staged a violence that is uncontainable, that flows everywhere, unstopped by boundaries and barriers, and that continues to circulate materially beyond the moment when the corpse is removed from public view. It is a violence that moves from the space of the streets in industrial Mexican cities to the interior of a palazzo home in Venice. The viewer who enters the Palazzo never consents to be put into contact with the abject materiality of narcoviolencia, but neither have the inhabitants of Culiacán and Ciudad Juárez consented for their city streets to become stages for narco spectacle.

Visitors are surrounded by the cadaver and yet it is not localizable anywhere particular in space. Even in this invisibility or condition of uncertainty, the materiality of the cadavers is meant to feel real to the exhibition’s visitors.

While there are many components to ¿De qué otra cosa?, the component that is most significant is the experience that the exhibition creates for visitors of having their space and their bodies enveloped by the corpses of drug violence. These are corpses that, having been reduced to liquid remains, have been mixed together such that there are no longer bodies of individual victims but rather a single substance that stands for the many anonymous dead. Julia Kristeva has written that cultural production that employs abjection “represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses” (208). Kristeva understands blood as an abject material that points to openness of the human body, since it can exist both inside and outside of it. The abject threatens our sense of boundaries in that it refers us to our original relationship to the maternal body in which there was no sense of self—nothing to differentiate us from our
environment or from the womb of the mother, making the category of the abject that
which exists between myself and the other that is both me and not me. This in turn
underscores the instability of the boundaries that constitute the single subject, and the
constructed nature of the self in the symbolic world. Elizabeth Grosz elaborates on
Kristeva’s theorization:

Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an
outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the
perilous divisions between the body’s inside and its outside. They affront a
subject’s aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity. They attest to a certain
irreducible “dirt” or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that
permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body….They are engulfing,
difficult to be rid of; any separation from them is not a matter of uncertainty, as it
may be in the case of solids. Body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their
control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed. In this sense, they betray a
certain irreducible materiality; they assert the priority of the body over
subjectivity (Grosz 194, my emphasis).

The way the Palazzo is staged in ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? covers the
walls and floors with the bloody mixture, turning the interior of the home into a dark,
damp space. The space “codes” the crisis of narcoviolencia through the creation of a
grotesque home in which the viewers cannot distance themselves from the all-enveloping,

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94 See the notion of “bodily cave” in Mary Russo, The Female Grotesque and on associations of the womb
with: the earth, the space of movement, the grave, the house, darkness, and dampness. Klaus Theweleit
writes about how the male soldiers of the Freikorps were terrorized by substances associated with women
and with the loss of the boundaries of the body and the ego: “all of the hybrid substances that were
produced by the body and flowed on, in, over, and out of the body…the warmth that dissolves physical
boundaries (meaning not that it makes one body out of a man and woman, but that it transgresses
boundaries: the infinite body; the body as flow)” (Theweleit 410).
damp blood. The evocation of the feminine or maternal body in Margolles’s work not only refers us to Kristeva’s theory of an unstable subjechthood, but also associates the lack of control over corporeality, with *narcoviolen*cia as a crisis that reduces all subjects to bodies and all bodies into a vulnerability that is understood as feminine, a scenario in which the body can be violated, manipulated, made to bleed.

Blood also becomes a metaphor for terror in this work. Like blood, terror seeps and flows, traversing boundaries and encompassing everything. In her work on civil war in Colombia, anthropologist María Victoria Uribe writes:

The substance of this terror is its indistinctiveness, ambiguity, and confusion. It is a sticky, slippery substance made up of interwoven rumors that circulate before and after the event, that are construed from what is heard, seen, or imagined. (91)

This flowing blood/terror also cannot be kept outside, at a “safe” distance, outside of the home, conceived of as a distant political problem. As the exhibition brings Culiacán’s and Ciudad Juárez’s “local” *narco* problem to the cosmopolitan art arena, the local/global, or peripheral/central, divides are undermined.

What *¿De qué?* has in common with many other works that respond to *narcoviolen*cia is the way that it makes the public terror of the street enter into the space of the home, eroding boundaries between the public and private as differentiated spheres of life. The blood/terror that flows in *¿De qué?* flows in the “wrong” direction. Usually, when political violence occurs, bodies are removed from the streets, from urban centers, and public view. The histories of state disappearances throughout Latin America consists in removing bodies from streets, so that the “normal” course of life can resume. Margolles’s work, like *narco* spectacle, reverses this operation, bringing the bodily
material—the decomposing, indistinguishably fragmented mixture that should have been buried—ever closer to viewers, to “civilization” or the “global North” or the “metropole” represented by Venice. Once brought into the Palazzo, blood also travels outside, as trace amounts on visitors’ shoes put the blood of the murdered on the streets of Venice: from Mexican streets, to a Venetian home, and back out again into globalized urban space. Gabriel Giorgi signals this when he writes that what we find throughout Margolles’s oeuvre is “la expansión de la muerte y de la violencia más allá de los carriles y los territorios más o menos previsibles…la dislocación de las topografías tradicionales de la violencia” (“Cadáveres” 286).

¿De qué? also articulates the “ontological offense” (to quote Adriana Cavarero) that narcoviolencia causes to the cadavers of victims. The show’s curator, Cuauhtémoc Medina, writes in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition:

La violencia…tiene su espacio último de ejecución sobre las vidas y los tejidos, las ilusiones y los terrores, la intimidad y la integridad de individuos concretos. Lo que era una persona, con una diversidad de potenciales, fallas, neurosis o destellos, queda reducida a una material infecciosa e informe….el asesinado ve interferida su memoria por la imagen amenazante de sus despojos.

(Medina 26)

Subjectivity (“potenciales, fallas, neurosis o destellos”) is reduced to materiality (“material infecciosa e informe”). Note that Medina here is describing what narco spectacle does, but he is also, indirectly, describing the operation that ¿De qué? replicates—the traumatic core of narcoviolencia that Margolles reproduces. The threat to the integrity of the body that narco spectacle usually stages is that of dismemberment,
decapitation, castration. Here Margolles similarly presents viewers with bodies whose integrity has already been destroyed. In mixing the remains and blood of different corpses, the exhibition treats cadavers and their residues as nothing more than cellular material with no regard for the person. Adriana Cavarero writes of terrorism that destroys the integrity of the body as “horrorism,” as what is intolerable to bystanders because it disregards the integrity of the human body, and classifies this as an ontological crime against the uniqueness of every human life.

Iván Ramos argues that Margolles denies subjectivity as a way of “denying her viewers a single, stable subject or figure that can serve as the locus of sorrow, mourning, or grief,” “expand[ing] conceptions of mourning beyond the limitations of the narcissism of recognition” (3). Ramos follows Judith Butler in advocating for divorcing the process of mourning, in a situation of political violence, from individual subjectivity. More specifically, in the case of narcoviolen
cia, the denial of biography can be important because its stands to mean that whether or not the individual killed was a narco is irrelevant.

It is not only that representing narcoviolen
cia’s victims in this way, reduced to a liquid mixture, circumvents how individualized subjects are mourned, but also that this way of representing the victims points to the way power views its victims, and how this view is intolerable. That is, the members of the public who are the victims of narcoviolen
cia are not understood by power as individual subjects. In their work on the Caracazo, Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski explain that what the families of victims of the 1989 state massacre could not accept was that bodies were unrecoverable. Coronil and Skurski describe how weeks after the state had buried victims in mass graves, parents
sought the recovery of the deceased only to be told that by now, corpses had disintegrated and mixed with other bodies in the graves—\textemdash that the bodies could not be individually exhumed and returned to families. Coronil and Skurski write:

Images of bodies picked up and tossed into trucks, dumped in garbage bags and buried in unknown sites by tractors, took hold of the collective imagination. Repeated and magnified in the barrios, they objectified for the poor their own erasure, the futility of attempting to establish their individual claims.

(“Dismembering” 325)

This episode points to the way that individual claims, bounded subjecthood, are not imagined for members of the masses or the people on whose bodies power manifests itself, and the way that those individual claims as bounded subjects and bodies are what people believe they deserve and try to demand from the state.

The disregard that \textit{narcoviolencia} has for the subjectivity of the individual exposes the way that violence treats “the people” or “el pueblo” as a category of bare life and disregards the political existence of that people. The possibility for subjectivity and identity is not extended to the people when sovereignty replaces governmentality as the mode by which power is exercised. There is a slippage occurring here in that governmentality is presumed to take seriously such individual claims, and sovereignty is only able to view people not as solitary subjects but rather only as a mass, as a population that may be allowed to live or to die. Giorgio Agamben addresses this distinction between the people as individuals before the law and the people as a single group with no such rights:
It is as if what we call “people” were in reality not a unitary subject but a
dialectical oscillation between two opposite poles: on the one hand, the set of the
People as a whole political body, and on the other, the subset of the people as a
fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; or again, on the one hand,
an inclusion that claims to be total, and on the other, an exclusion that is clearly
hopeless….the constitution of the human species in a political body passes
through a fundamental division and that in the concept “people” we can easily
recognize the categorical pairs that we have seen to define the original political
structure: bare life (people) and political existence (People).” (*Homo Sacer* 177)

In transporting a bloody mixture from different cadavers and different cities, ¿De qué?
emphasizes a denial of political subjectivity at the moment that “the people” become the
object of *narcoviolencia*.

If *narcoviolencia* makes the boundedness of the body impossible, what are the
implications for politics? The promises of modernity and democratization are based on an
Enlightenment logic of the individual and rights that emanate from his/her body as an
individual bounded subject. Teresa Caldeira has theorized a body created by colonialism
that she calls “the unbounded body,” defined as a “permeable body, open to intervention,
on which manipulations by others are not considered problematic” (368). She traces a
history of colonial domination in Brazil to contemporary opinions about the availability
of the body to manipulation: support for torture and the death penalty, the popularity of
cosmetic surgery and surgical interventions to prevent pregnancy, and the practices of
Carnaval. Caldeira argues that liberal citizenship requires a “bounded body,” in which the
space and integrity of the body is respected: “when the marking of bodies prevails, the
realization of civil rights is unlikely” (372). The flowing, mixing blood of ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? in particular speaks to the way in which narcoviolenencia unbounds the body. If rights cannot emerge amid the iconic abjection of the body, how can Mexican society institute the kind of rights that it desires, the kind of rights that were a major objective of 1990s democratization? Or can an alternate way of recognizing rights be developed even in this context? Can rights be understood to emanate even from a body that is violable?

Public debate in Mexico has failed to articulate the horror of this distinction between people as bare life or bodies and People as discrete political subjects, and this hinders narco power from being directly addressed in the spaces of the public sphere. In 2009 Enrique Krauze penned an article Letras Libres titled “La defensa de nuestra imagen,” in which he criticized what he saw as sensationalist media coverage of the violence. What infuriated Krauze (and others like him) was the way representations of narcoviolenencia expose the situation abroad, rather than projecting the “authentic” Mexico for foreign consumption. This is what he felt should be Mexico’s image, alongside representations of the country’s economic progress “Se ignora afuera (y a menudo se olvida dentro) el mérito de haber construido en apenas dos décadas…una economía abierta, diversificada y parcialmente moderna” (n. pag.).

Caldeira theorizes the unbounded body within the context of the megacity São Paulo, where walls are constantly being constructed to protect one’s home and domestic space from unwanted intrusion. This refers both to the walling of domiciles facing the street in middle-class neighborhoods, as well as, among the elites, the creation of gated neighborhoods and full-service condominiums whose comforts limit residents’ need to leave their enclosed communities. Caldeira draws a fascinating contrast between the paranoia toward walling the home and isolating private domestic space from action of the street and the view of the public, and societal presumptions of the availability of the body. It would seem then that isolating oneself from public space and the public gaze—indeed, from any participation in the public—is an isolation that grows out of a history and a context in which the body in public is inherently understood as available and violable, as “unbounded.”
As Krauze’s comments continue, what is evident is how in elite public discourse, “the people” are often seen as a single body rather than individual subjectivities. Krauze writes about what should be represented in the media:

El domingo pasado comí en el centro y vi a las familias mexicanas caminar plácidamente por las calles, como hace siglos. Sé que esa paz tiene algo de ilusorio, pero aquellas caras mexicanas no engañan. No son inquilinos de este país. Llevan generaciones de habitarlo y amarlo. Debemos proyectar esas caras al exterior. (“La defensa,” n. pag.)

Krauze’s characterization of the “real” Mexico strips the masses of political agency and suggests that the public problem of narcoviolencia does not affect them, because “they” (referred to in the third person) are sated in their private lives. Margolles’s intervention gets to the heart of the question about what the possibility is of political subjectivity in Mexico today, when power annihilates the subject. What reactions to Margolles’s work in the press suggested was the way that this disregard for the subject has an ideational form in political discourse, where other processes form exclusionary notions of who is allowed political subjectivity. Krauze’s comments make clear the persistence of a lettered city that understands itself as all-seeing, that feels that is understands masses from which it distances itself and yet on whose behalf it speaks.

The sole installation of ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? at an international art fair is not a coincidental feature. Taking the installation to Venice intensified the coverage it received in Mexico, since it played on anxieties about how the country is seen on the world stage. In a Reforma column, Sergio Sarmiento inveighed, “¿Para qué queremos gastar dinero en Vive México, cuando tenemos Muere México?,” referring to
the tourism ministry’s Vive México campaign and the anger that Margolles had institutional support when she was threatening an image of the country as safe for tourism (n. pag.). We should read these kinds of reactions as what the piece aimed at eliciting—as part of the piece itself. An artwork cannot have any impact on narcoviolencia itself, but it does elicit and expose the discourses that enable the narcoviolencia, and this is “what we should talk about.”

Exhibiting in Venice interrupted who made up the audience for narco spectacle and put the messaging of narco power under examination in an international setting celebrating high art. The extreme brutality of narcoviolencia that was meant to be shown to certain people in certain times and places, to insure terror, is shown to another, very different group: the cosmopolitan elite, a population not considered terrorizable, marginalizable. Coronil and Skurski write that the violence of power “t[akes] place at once as a spectacular theatrical performance and as a hidden technical operation” (“Dismembering” 334). We can think of narcoviolencia as hidden in plain sight, in the sense that it is “what no one wants to talk about,” the public secret that some do not want to project past the country’s borders. Margolles is here able to make public the “hidden technical operation” of theatrical power, to publish the public secret.

¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? would have been an altogether different work had it been staged in Northern Mexico or in Mexico City. In Venice, the emotional distance of viewers from the problem of narcoviolencia made the exhibition one that was conceptual. How acceptable—or how unacceptable—would this exhibition have been had it been staged in Ciudad Juárez or Culiacán? Would the installation itself have provided enough of an aesthetic frame to divide the work of art from the experience of everyday
life? In a sense, we have an answer to this question in the fact that Margolles has not used bodily materials in the art that she has since shown in Mexico. Other works from this period include: *Cubo* (2010), a one-ton steel cube made of scrap metal collected around Ciudad Juárez; *PM 2010* (2012), a compilation of cover art of the Juárez-based *nota roja* daily *PM*; and *La Promesa* (2012), for which Margolles purchased a vacant home in Ciudad Juárez and transported it to the museum of the UNAM in pieces. The bodily material of *¿De qué?*, and its painful message, did not return to Mexico for exhibition. The public secret was made public, but at a distance.

Staging the piece outside of Mexico resulted in Margolles’s work receiving critical and scholarly attention internationally. Zones of political conflict become the sites of artistic photographic production for cosmopolitan audiences, with viewing photographs understood as serving as a form of civic or political engagement. One aspect that makes Margolles’s work so appealing to international audiences is the way that loss and trauma are understood as constitutive of the modernity or “wound culture” in which “we” all live. Relevant here are Dominick LaCapra’s comments on the popularity or centrality of trauma in cultural production, theory, and criticism today:

> the significance or force of particular historical losses…may be obfuscated or rashly generalized. As a consequence one encounters the dubious idea that everyone is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a “wound culture.” (64)

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96 Photographers such as Sebastião Salgado, Alfredo Jaar, Jeff Wall, Luc Delahaye, and Taryn Simon, for example, have represented the suffering of people in conditions of poverty, war, and social marginalization.  
97 Mark Seltzer has argued that we—here referring to the United States, though his argument could be extended to what is generally understood as the global North—live in a “wound culture,” in which trauma and crisis have become a shared language in the media—psychological damage is probed on talk shows and “torn and open bodies” are made into a spectacle for public consumption, a consumption that constitutes a new kind of public sphere (1).
In Chapter 1, I explained Hermann Herlinghaus’s critique of the circulation and projection of violence between what he describes as the global North and the global South. He argues that “affective marginalities” can be found in the parts of the “global South,” where the “global North” projects its guilt. The global south in this way becomes the place of “humiliating sobriety” that is the obverse of the global North’s “intoxicating ecstasy.” More than the literary examples that Herlinghaus chooses (many of which are narconovelas that have limited international circulation), it is in the art world, where we can find examples that speak to the way in which the experiences of suffering that occur in the “global South” re-enter the “high” culture of the “global North.” An announcement of Margolles’s exhibition posted to the art website e-flux before the Venice Biennale used language similar to Herlinghaus’s:

The works presented at the Mexican Pavilion are a subtle chronicle of the effects of a devilish international economy: the vicious circle of prohibition, addiction, accumulation, poverty, hatred and repression that transmogrifies the transgressive pleasures and puritan obsessions of the North into the South as Hell. (“Teresa Margolles” n. pag.)

The “South” becomes a scene of a violence imposed by the North, reducing Mexican narcoviolencia to a symptom of global capitalism. The specificity of Margolles’s work as a protest response to an ongoing national-political crisis can be lost, as are the crucial rifts in between body and body politic and people and People.
VII. Conclusion

The anthropologist Natalia Mendoza refers to the “creciente desfase entre el vocabulario político del que disponemos y el tipo de procesos sociales que estamos presenciando” amid narcoviolencia (Mendoza Rockwell 32). I have argued that at this moment in which the vocabulary for an ongoing atrocity has failed to develop, the image has become the site where the public looks to find truth about what is occurring in the public realm. With state discourse and the news media providing confusing and misleading accounts, it is through images on the front pages of the nota roja, in mainstream newspapers, and on the Internet that the public has understood the narcoviolencia of the past dozen years, and where scholarship must focus its attention to better understand the effects that the violence has on the public and the public sphere, since these photographs circulate much more widely than other kinds of materials—including the other kinds of materials I have chosen to study in this dissertation. The public is not simply overwhelmed by a spectacle of violence that seeks to alienate; instead, a more delicate engagement is possible, with members of the public actively viewing images as a form of developing what Piccato has written of as “criminal literacy,” a desire to comprehend the hidden nexuses between truth and justice that state institutions have historically obscured. This is one way in which what is often interpreted as indifference to violence, or callousness toward it, can be conceived of as a more active form of opposition.

Many of the works I have analyzed in this chapter drag into the open for public debate and viewing knowledge the public secrets of narcoviolencia that have been hidden or repressed: who are the victims, who are the perpetrators, where is the state in the midst of this violence, and what are the discourses and beliefs that make this violence possible?
The photographs by Cossío, Brito, and Pardo, and the art installation by Margolles, raise the question of who the viewing public of the spectacular dead are intended to be, and how and why that public is intended to see the dead. Photographers and artists attempt to deprive the perpetrators of such cruel violence of the “terrain” of the spectacle, by creating images that refuse the iconicity and static nature of images that project power. Instead, artists like Brito and Margolles make spectacle and the use of spectacle to create the feeling of vulnerability the subject of their work.

These kinds of artistic practices provide the framework for viewers to engage with questions of how to properly mourn the dead and to reckon with the terror being committed against the public more broadly. These practices take on greater importance as it becomes clear that institutional, state-sponsored spaces and the spaces of high culture will not be the spaces in which truth about violence will emerge. It is incumbent on members of the public to engage with the effects of narcoviolencia themselves to understand the reality in which they live.
Illustrations

[Image removed due to copyright concerns]

*Figure 1.* Photograph of Javier Valdez Cárdenas, photographer unknown. Taken from “Cumplen amenaza” published in *La Jornada* on 16 May 2017.
Figure 2. A colgado from Miss Bala, dir. Gerardo Naranjo.
Figure 3. A narcobloqueo in Tijuana from Miss Bala, dir. Gerardo Naranjo.
Figure 4. The character Beto colgado, from Heli, dir. Amat Escalante.
Figure 5. The father as narcoejecutado, from Heli, dir. Amat Escalente
Figure 6. The television news, from Heli, dir. Amat Escalante.
Figure 7. Beto is tortured, from *Heli*, dir. Amat Escalante.
Figure 8. The corpse of Arturo Beltrán Leyva on the front page of *El Gráfico*, a *nota roja* publication, on 18 December 2009. Image taken from Ortiz.
Figure 9. Photograph by Guillermo Arias, as published in photography magazine *Luna Córnea*. Image taken from Ortiz.
Figure 10. Photograph by Guillermo Arias, as published in newspaper *La Jornada* on 10 October 2009. Image taken from “Enfrentamientos.”
Figure 11. Photograph by Alejandro Cossío, from his series México en el punto de quiebre. Image taken from País de muertos, ed. Diego Enrique Osorno.
Figure 12. Photograph by Alejandro Cossío, from his series México en el punto de quiebre. Image taken from País de muertos, ed. Diego Enrique Osorno.
Figure 13. Photograph by Pedro Pardo. Taken from WorldPressPhoto.org.
Figure 14. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje*. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 15. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje*. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 16. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje*. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 17. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje. Image taken from WorldPressPhoto.org. The World Press Photo caption reads: “July 31, 2010. Culiacán, Mexico. A body discovered near the town of La Campiña, after people had reported to the police that they had heard firing in the vicinity. Areas of Northern Mexico are racked by violence, involving turf wars between powerful drug cartels vying for control of trafficking routes. The death toll for 2010 was 15,237, the heaviest yet. For generations, Mexico has been a producer of and transit route for drugs. Powerful drug cartels have developed strong financial bases, and in some regions exert almost autonomous control, creating ‘zones of impunity’ for their activities.”
Figure 18. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje*. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 19. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje*. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 20. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje*. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 21. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 22. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje*. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 23. Photograph by Fernando Brito, from the series Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje. Image taken from ZoneZero.com.
Figure 24. Teresa Margolles’s installation ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? Image taken from Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina.
Figure 25. Teresa Margolles’s installation ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? Image taken from Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina.
Figure 27. Teresa Margolles’s installation ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? Image taken from Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina.
Figure 28. Teresa Margolles’s installation ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? Image taken from Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina.
Figure 29. Teresa Margolles’s installation ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? Image taken from Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina.
Figure 30. Teresa Margolles’s installation ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? Image taken from Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina.
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