From Narcoliterature to Narratives of Migration, or the Limits of Narrating Violence in Contemporary Mexican Literature

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Abstract
In the mid-2000s, the war on drugs became the dominant discourse in public debates about violence in Mexico. This discourse allowed the emergence and consolidation of narcoliterature as one of the main modes of representation to make sense of the widespread rise of violence in Mexico. As critics have pointed out, the inauguration of the cultural and political imaginary brought about by the war on drugs provided the Mexican state with the representational coordinates to justify the militarization of the country and to rationalize it as the only possible and logical strategy to confront the ever-elusive cartels. Within this context, in this article, I take the political and aesthetic coordinates characteristic of narcoliterature to argue that recent Mexican narratives on or about undocumented migration engage with violence within the representational coordinates and imperatives of the war on drugs as their horizon of ideological intelligibility. This, I argue, dehistoricizes the migrant struggle in Mexico, disconnecting it from the social and political contexts that intensified the forcible displacement of historically subordinated communities in Central America and Mexico. In this sense, I suggest that cultural and literary criticism must engage with contemporary migration narratives in Mexico as a space to reflect not only on the ongoing crises of governance and sovereignty in Mexico but, more importantly, to reveal how displacement, forced migration, and the precarization of life and labor are central to and constitutive to neoliberalism.

Keywords: Migration, Mexican War on Drugs, Mexico, Narcoliterature

> "[L]as novelas sobre el narco, felizmente, no denuncian. Los autores no proceden a manera de jueces sino de oyentes. Escuchan y registran. Escuchan y mitifican. Escuchan y ríen. Puede decirse cualquier cosa de esta narrativa salvo que sea solemne."
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> --Rafael Lemus, "Balas de salva"

> En varias oportunidades, los escritores del norte hemos señalado que ninguno de nosotros ha abordado el narcotráfico como tema. Si éste asoma en algunas páginas es porque se trata de una situación histórica, es decir, un contexto, no un tema, que envuelve todo el país, aunque se acentúa en ciertas regiones. No se trata, entonces, de una elección, sino de una realidad...
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> --Eduardo Antonio Parra, "Norte, narcotráfico y literatura"

> La dichosa palabrita [narcoliteratura] es una especie de saco, muy amplio, donde parece caber todo: novelas policiacas, biografías de capos o crónicas amarillistas, por citar tres tipos de libros que abundan desde hace unos años en las librerías mexicanas.
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> --Juan Pablo Villalobos, "Contra la narcoliteratura"

Ten days after his inauguration in December of 2006, former Mexican president Felipe Calderón implemented Operativo Conjunto Michoacán, directing the deployment of the Mexican army to the state of Michoacán, where days later, according to government reports, thousands of pounds of narcotics, firearms, and ammunition were confiscated (Herrera Beltrán). Operation Michoacán inaugurated a new aggressive strategy wherein the Mexican government attempted to extend its control over municipalities and states where cartels had openly conducted business for decades. Today, Operation Michoacán is considered the inaugural episode of what would be known as the "Guerra contra el narco," or the Mexican war on drugs, a war that has claimed the lives of thousands of Mexican citizens, as well as the livelihoods of many more (Paley).[1] Despite Calderón's aggressive strategy, one that would prove deadly and destructive, the war on drugs retroactively confirmed what had already been discursively produced by an ever-growing social and cultural imaginary that built a mythological narrative around the narco-cartels.

As the epigraphs suggest, the war on drugs has had far-reaching effects on the cultural and political imagination of Mexican society at large. On the one hand, narcoliterature, according to Rafael Lemus, is a symptom of the lack of creativity in Mexican literature, a writing practice obsessed with representing life to its every detail, while never attempting to imagine the possibility of something other than the violent reality it sets out to describe. For Eduardo Antonio Parra, on the other hand, narcoliterature is neither a thing nor a genre; rather, the literature many northern Mexican writers engage in, he suggests, is always already traversed by a social and political reality where narcotrafficking appears to intervene in all spheres of life. Writing a few years later, Juan Pablo Villalobos, invites readers to reject the notion of narcoliterature, arguing that the concept does not name something specific; instead, he suggests it is a signifier that encapsulates multifarious literary forms to the detriment of contemporary Mexican literature itself.

As Oswaldo Zavala has shown, cultural production on or about contemporary violence in Mexico has had the function of providing the ground of legibility to understand how narco-cartels operate and why the so-called war on drugs was the logical answer to contain the apparent threat that

cartels posed to Mexico's state sovereignty. Cultural production—from music, film, and television series to literature—created the discursive ground that would retroactively produce our notions of what narco-cartels do and how they behave against and respond to the state. In this sense, when Zavala argues that "Los cárteles no existen . . . Existe el mercado de las drogas ilegales y quienes están dispuestos a trabajar en él. Pero no la división que según autoridades mexicanas y estadounidenses separa a estos grupos de la sociedad civil y las estructuras de gobierno" (14), what he suggests is that drug trafficking is a palpable reality that has had deadly consequences for many Mexicans; yet that reality is founded on and traversed by how cultural production has been deployed by the media and the state in order to justify the war on drugs. What is at stake in the competing narratives that seek to define narcoliterature, its accomplishments or fallacies, is not so much whether this literature can or cannot accurately reflect reality through certain representational coordinates, but rather, how those representational coordinates captured the cultural and political imagination of violence in Mexico.

In this article, I argue that narcoliterature is a "delivery system" that, within the context of the contemporary intensification of violence in Mexico, has functioned to set the limits of how violence becomes visible and how the lives of historically subordinated populations become legible or illegible within this system. If, according to David Palumbo-Liu, literature deploys "delivery systems" that frame in advance how otherness can and cannot be imagined, then is not narcoliterature a "delivery system" that sets in advance how readers engage with narratives about violence against "othered" populations? (*The Deliverance of Others* 3) And if so, is narcoliterature a productive frame to examine other forms of violence and destitution happening in Mexico beyond and within the narrative of the war on drugs? To explore these questions, I read two Mexican novels that take up contemporary undocumented Central American migration as their central theme. Antonio Ortuño's novel *La fila india* (2013) narrates the story of a Mexican social worker and Central American woman who endures multiple forms of violence in her journey through Mexico, as she navigates bureaucratic institutions. Emiliano Monge's novel *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015) recounts the story of a group of Central American migrants kidnapped by a smuggling gang with ties to local, violent human trafficking groups in southern Mexico. The narrative strategies deployed by Ortuño and Monge to tell these stories of migration, destitution, and the precarization of life and labor make *La fila india* and *Las tierras arrasadas* relevant to discuss some of the thematic coordinates of narcoliterature and the limits of its "delivery system." How can we read literature about contemporary undocumented migration in Mexico in such a way that its political wager cannot be reduced to and narrativized as the effect of the exacerbation of violence under the logics of the war on drugs?

In the past decade, several literary critics have attempted to formalize narcoliterature as a genre that has as its central characteristic narratives that revolve around drug trafficking and narco culture. Narcoliterature, in other words, refers to narratives on or about the trafficking of drugs and the political landscape that such activities produce in the nation's social and political imaginary. Diana Palaversich, for example, provides a series of coordinates to engage with narcoliterature as a narrative genre that presents multiple, and at times competing, approaches to the representation of drug trafficking in Mexico (101). For Palaversich, the main characteristic of what she designates as narcoliterature is the rejection of the state's claim to impartiality in relation to drug-trafficking activities in Mexico. Hence, one of the distinctive features of narcoliterature, Palaversich suggests, is its critique of drug trafficking as an activity that is disconnected from the circuits of exchange and capital accumulation that inform Mexican politics (104-05). Although she privileges the term "narco-themed literature" due to the lack of consensus within criticism about the merits of the genre, Sophie Esch locates narcoliterature as an approach to narrating drug trafficking in Mexico to challenge hegemonic discourses about the narco, discourses largely emanating from the state, the media, and the narcocorrido (163). For Esch, narcoliterature engenders a space to produce nuanced critiques of the state and its relationship to the precarization of life and labor, contributing to the rise of drug trafficking and the criminalization of historically destitute populations in Mexico (164). Complementing these two perspectives, Felipe Oliver Fuentes Kraffczyk proposes that narcoliterature provides a system of relations that presents a series of codes to reflect on contemporary violence (108), rather than focus on common themes within this body of literature. Among these codes, Fuentes Kraffczyk indexes violence as a signifier of social decomposition in Mexico after the consolidation of neoliberal governance in the country (113).

While all these contesting views provide a productive ground to engage with literature as a vehicle of representation (about its accurate or inaccurate representation of reality, its capacity to engender spaces to challenge hegemonic narratives or a space to confirm them), I am more interested in thinking about this debate in relation to the horizon of aesthetic and political legibility narcoliterature has produced to theorize contemporary violence in Mexico. I argue that narcoliterature has engendered a space to reflect on the relationship between the precarization of life and labor and the rise of neoliberal securitization in Mexico. However, in so doing, narcoliterature has also captured the political imagination of how to think about and engage with forms of violence simultaneous to, and inextricable from, the rise of the neoliberal securitization of Mexico in the past twenty years or so. In this sense, my approach to the debate regarding the status of narcoliterature as a form of

hegemonic representation, aligns with what Zavala and Lemus advance in their criticism of the genre. Specifically, I am interested in thinking about how the aesthetic and political horizon set by narcoliterature continues to limit our critical approach to contemporary undocumented migration and the forcible displacement of different populations in Latin America.[2] As Fuentes Kraffczyk has pointed out, literature about undocumented migration in Mexico presents an opportunity to make visible the ongoing humanitarian crisis as well as the Mexican government's unwillingness to address this crisis and offer protection and basic rights to migrants (51). Contemporary literary accounts about undocumented migration continue to be narrativized through the "delivery systems" created for the purposes of making sense of narco-violence (Palumbo-Liu 3). This, in turn, creates a theoretical deadlock where violence against undocumented migrants is narrativized as the logical consequence of the exacerbation of narco-violence, glossing over the fact that forcible displacement and the concomitant criminalization of these migrant populations is a key strategy for the consolidation of neoliberalism and its logics of dispossession and accumulation in the region.

In *What is a World?*, Pheng Cheah proposes to think literature as a potential space of world-making that challenges the teleology of capitalist time as a form of universal reason. For Cheah, literature presents itself as a space of potential insofar as its indeterminacy, the openness of its meaning, cannot be reduced to the subject's rational attempt at calculation—which is to say that literature can never be reduced to the subject's power of interpretation (11). For Cheah, then, one of the fundamental problems of approaching literature as a space of representation within contemporary capitalist societies is that reading literature presupposes calculation as its ultimate goal. In so doing, time becomes indistinguishable from capitalist temporal processes (accumulation, dispossession, exploitation), for they appear as the only horizon within its narrative of universal teleological progress. Despite this, Cheah insists that literature's potential lies in its ability to make evident the incalculability of time, highlighting that, despite the forces of rational calculation that capitalism presents in its teleological fiction, other temporal possibilities may emerge.

In the case of narcoliterature in Mexico, and more specifically in relation to narratives on or about undocumented migration as told from its coordinates, I argue that what we are witnessing is precisely how literature can serve as an instrument of temporal closure by way of presenting capitalist time as the only horizon of legibility, as a form of reason that captures the world and forecloses other temporal possibilities. Narratives about undocumented migration, as told within the coordinates of narcoliterature, present a teleology about the world under the logics of narco-capitalist accumulation that "seeks to regulate and appropriate temporality by representing it in the image of rational activity"

(112). Narco-capitalist accumulation, then, appears as a form of reason that "appropriate[s] time in the pursuit of universal ends," in this case, the universal ends of capitalist accumulation as a form of dispossession, exploitation, and forcible displacement (199).

In what follows, I explore Ortuño's and Monge's novels as texts that navigate the tension of narrating violence within the temporality of narco-violence and its logic of accumulation in Mexico. First, in reading *La fila india,* I suggest that undocumented migration functions as a trope to critique state institutions and their failure to address chronic social problems, as well as to highlight the forms of impunity that characterize Mexico's current social order. However, *La fila india*'s approach to the issue of undocumented migration in Mexico "delivers" a novel that sets in advance the horizon of political legibility of the precarization of migrant life and depoliticizes the migrant struggle by erasing the continuities between neoliberal governance and the rise of narco-violence. Second, I read Monge's *Las tierras arrasadas* as a novel that presents a nuanced critique of the question of undocumented migration in Mexico by connecting longer histories of dispossession and exploitation to the ongoing forcible displacement of poor communities in Latin America. Despite its pessimistic view of the precarization of migrant life in Mexico, *Las tierras arrasadas* challenges facile and unproductive accounts of migration by pointing to the intrinsic connections between neoliberal governance, the rise of organized crime, and forcible displacement in the region. In so doing, what emerges is not the narrativization of violence against migrants as the logical and inescapable consequence of the current social order in Mexico, but a critical short-circuiting of the "delivery systems" that narcoliterature imposes on our political imagination, opening the possibility of generating nuanced critiques of the multiple and intersecting forms of violence pervading contemporary life in Mexico.

Surviving Violence: Untold Migration (Hi)stories in *La fila india*

Published in 2013, *La fila india* is one of the earliest literary accounts of the current and ongoing intensification of undocumented Central American migration in Mexico. At its core, the novel offers a nuanced critique of Mexico's dysfunctional bureaucratic institutions and the deep-seated corruption in governmental offices at different levels. At the same time, the novel suggests a remapping of the geopolitical space that marks the limit between Mexico and Central America through an understanding of the regimes of immigration enforcement throughout Mexico as a vertical border (Basok et al., 18). *La fila india* invokes this verticality as a way of pointing to Mexico's immigration policies and tactics of enforcement aggravating the vulnerability of migrants in their journey toward the US-Mexico border. In this sense, Ortuño's attention to producing critical mediations that center the relationship

between Mexico's institutional crises of the past thirty years, and the growing inequalities in the country, are key to the social and political context that informs the novel (Maristain). Recently, *La fila india* has been read as a text that intervenes in a critique of gendered violence, contextualizing the narrativization of Central American migration within the ongoing discussion about femicides in Mexico (Erazo 101). Other critics contend that *La fila india* serves as a "repertoire" of state power made manifest through practices of racial and ethnic exclusion while offering a space of reflection to rethink migration policy in the context of the current crisis of international human rights (Chavez Flores 40; Gálvez Cuen 17). Additionally, *La fila india* offers a series of critical coordinates to highlight how the racialization of Central American migrants exacerbates forms of vulnerability and disposability that show how discourses of mestizaje reproduce power relations in Mexico (Rivera Hernández 39). Finally, Ortuño's novel contributes to a growing corpus of literature about Mexico's southern border which challenges the victimization of migrant women, providing a space of political mediation to think how women practice forms of "dystopic agency" in their journey through Mexico (Villalobos 167).

La fila india is set in the town of Santa Rita, a fictional town located in southern Mexico. The narrative focuses on the networks of human smuggling in Santa Rita, the ties between narco-cartels and state officials, as well as the Mexican government's response to the precarization of migrants' lives. While the novel's central narrative revolves around Irma, a social worker at the "Comisión Nacional de Migración (CONAMI, a fictional version of the National Institute for Migration)," whose job is to attend to migrants' needs while under the care of the CONAMI, my interest lies in how the narrative apparatus of the novel hinges on the reproduction of a series of representational coordinates closely aligned to narcoliterature that set a horizon of legibility of contemporary undocumented migration in Mexico. To this end, my analysis will focus on the story told from the perspective of Irma and the bureaucratic, legal, and ultimately violent problems that emerge through her work within and outside the CONAMI.

The novel begins with the narration of the murder of Gloria, a social worker employed at the CONAMI, at the hands of an unidentified assailant and the subsequent investigation of the events. It is through the narration of the formal procedures of the investigation that we first come to learn about the relationship between the federal police and the people living in and in transit through the town of Santa Rita:

> La policía no era bien vista por los vecinos de Santa Rita. Si alguien se hubiera tomado la molestia de compilar un listado de quejas contra los agentes de la zona, no habrían quedado fuera de él en ningún caso: extorsiones (a comerciantes y prostitutas),

> violaciones (a prostitutas y, ocasionalmente, a cualquiera que fuera por la calle), golpizas (a los vagabundos que acampaban cerca de la estación de trenes y, de nuevo, a las prostitutas) y robo (16)

As the passage suggests, there is a generalized sense of mistrust towards the federal police in Santa Rita. Neither the natives of the town nor migrants want to establish any form of dialogue with the local authorities to either persecute the crimes committed by the police or those the police are investigating in the area. The law in the town of Santa Rita, in this sense, appears to no longer work along the lines of the legal/illegal; rather, as is the case of most narcoliterature, state authorities are depicted as always already complicit in the dissemination of violence characteristic of the war on drugs. The narrator recounts later that in reference to the murder of Gloria, the social worker at the CONAMI: "Se publicó un boletín condenatorio, pero nadie descubrió al culpable … Quién castigaría una simple muerte en medio de una masacre" (17). The novel's first rhetorical gesture is to set up a social order where violence and impunity are so ingrained in the social imaginary that the murder of a state employee at the hands of members of the trafficking gang, "La Sur," seems to be just another everyday occurrence. It is in this gesture that Ortuño's novel begins setting up the field of intelligibility of how thisnovel about undocumented migration in Mexico must be read. It advances an epistemological model about violence where Mexican citizens are killable and disposable, thus setting up how readers should read and engage with the precarization of migrant life. If Mexican citizens employed by the state are killable, the novel seems to suggest, then undocumented migrants are always already vulnerable to the violent logics of the social context brought about by the war on drugs.

As such, it is not only that *La fila india* presents Gloria's murder in the opening pages as a narrative device to comment on the senseless violence and impunity in Mexico; instead, the murder serves as a metonymy of what is to come in the rest of the novel. Gloria's murder frames the novel insofar as it presents a horizon of intelligibility of how readers must conceive of contemporary violence in Mexico. This, of course, includes how violence against undocumented migrants should be narrativized within the political horizon of the war on drugs. By presenting Gloria's murder as ground zero of the novel, *La fila india* normalizes violence against Mexican citizens, thus setting up how vulnerable populations, such as undocumented migrants, are just another casualty of the war on drugs and the logics of narco-capital accumulation in Mexico.

After "La Sur" attacks one of the CONAMI's shelters in Santa Rita, killing thirty migrants and injuring dozens more, the central offices of the CONAMI order a full investigation of the events. The CONAMI office in Santa Rita releases a series of official statements condemning the massacre.

However, the investigation never takes off as Vidal, the communications manager at CONAMI Santa Rita, constantly withholds important information from the federal authorities. Between the events at the shelter and the failed investigation, the reader learns that a Salvadoran woman, Yein, survived the attack and is now under the supervision of Irma, a social worker at the CONAMI. Yein becomes a person of interest for both the CONAMI and the local media, for it is assumed that she possesses crucial information that may lead to the capture of members of "La Sur." Nevertheless, not long after Yein becomes central to the investigation, news comes to Santa Rita that in Tamaulipas, Mexico, authorities have uncovered a mass grave with more than one hundred and forty bodies, most of them Central American migrants.[3] The director of the CONAMI in Santa Rita celebrates the news as the national and international press turn their attention to Tamaulipas. As the news of the mass grave circulates around the country, Irma narrates:

> La prensa en internet comenzó a reaccionar y en unas horas los portales se llenaron de fotografías repulsivas y detalles indigeribles sobre la carnicería. Tal como avisaron a Vidal, eran decenas y decenas de cadáveres en zanjas… Nuestros quemados habían palidecido. Se difuminaron. Apenas dos docenas de notas, entre las quinientas que saltaban aquí y allá a lo largo del día, citaban lo que pasó en Santa Rita como precedente. Quién necesitaba el contexto de nada. Total: los cuerpos extranjeros nos avergonzaban pero no demasiado. Si no sabíamos qué hacer con la mitad del país, por qué nos iban a preocupar los demás. (121)

For Irma, the discovery of the Tamaulipas mass grave represents a moment of excess. The excessiveness of the situation comes, in the first place, from the constant reproduction of lacerated, tortured, unrecognizable migrant bodies. Yet, on a second level, this excessiveness Irma refers to comes from knowing that the mass grave in Tamaulipas is just one among multiple massacres happening in Mexico under logic of the war on drugs. That is, the massacre in Tamaulipas is not only excessive due to the number of dead migrants and the forms of violence exercised over them, but because the massacre itself—as a synecdoche of violence in Mexico—serves as a horizon of thinkability of Mexico's social order under the war on drugs. The massacre in Santa Rita, Irma suggests, is a precedent of what was always already here: the narrativization of narco-violence into logic. This violence—violence that Irma attempts to make sense of—is so ingrained in the social imaginary that, as she puts it, "Quién necesitaba el contexto de nada" (121); for the only way of understanding the Tamaulipas massacre, the massacre at the migrant shelter in Santa Rita, and Gloria's murder, is always already given: the war on drugs and its regime of violence and impunity.

La fila india forecloses how we can engage with this violence by narrating undocumented migration as a phenomenon whose legibility can only become visible from within the war on drugs and its narrativization through the coordinates of narcoliterature. Irma tells us as much when, after learning about the Tamaulipas massacre, the sense of excess stemming from the events turns into cynicism, capturing the social and political imaginary that the novel attempts to reproduce. Irma remarks, "Si no sabíamos qué hacer con la mitad del país, por qué nos iban a preocupar los demás" (121). If Mexico (as an imagined community), Irma suggests, does not know what to do with half of the country, a reference to the number of people experiencing extreme forms of violence, what do we do with those outside the community (namely undocumented migrants)? The problem is not whether state institutions should be actively attempting to prevent the violence experienced by Mexican citizens and migrants alike, but how the violence both of those populations experience is rationalized through the narrative of organized crime. In this sense, the question goes beyond asking why and how this is happening, instead becoming a question of how the political imagination about violence in Mexico is compulsively reduced to the violence exerted within the logic of the war on drugs. By centering the pervasive forms of violence against undocumented migrants in Mexico, *La fila india* reproduces the narrative coordinates of narcoliterature which, in turn, reduce the migrant struggle to a problem of organized crime, governmental ineptitude, and corruption without ever engaging with forms of dispossession and exploitation that work alongside and intersect with the structures and strategies of "national security" developed within the framework of neoliberal governance in Mexico.

By taking as its wager a critique of the senseless violence against migrant populations in Mexico, Ortuño sets the stage for how *La fila india* engages with undocumented migration. Towards the end of the novel, Yein exacts revenge by detonating a bomb at a bar, killing several members of "La Sur" and the director of the CONAMI as they discussed their human trafficking business. Yein's vengeance is an attempt to take the law into her own hands, deploying a "dystopic agency" that disrupts, even if momentarily, the logic of narco-accumulation that produces migrant vulnerability across Mexico. Ultimately, Yein dies as a result of the explosion, but her revenge, Irma recounts, did the unimaginable:

> Me incliné al piso y la coloqué en mis rodillas. Quieta. Muerta. Le besé la cabeza, la apreté contra mí. Lloraba sin estremecerme. Yein se había jodido a los hijos de puta, a la carroña que la había vendido como bestia y asesinado a su marido. Hizo más de lo que muchos siquiera llegan a imaginar. No caminó atada de manos al matadero. No era sólo carne. Jodió a los buitres. (211)

Yein achieves the unimaginable as sheexacts revenge on her captors, disrupts the circuits of human trafficking, and finds agency in her vengeance. Of course, all this becomes a fleeting moment, for as the novel makes clear that the system remains intact, waiting for new actors to fill the roles left vacant by those who perished in Yein's revenge. Despite Yein's moment of "dystopic agency," the narrative circumscribes narco-violence as an obstacle that undocumented migrants must survive and overcome in their journey through Mexico, even if it means death. The novel takes up the exacerbation of violence as a way of calling attention to the lack of governmental accountability for the continued precarization of migrant life in Mexico. Yet, in such a gesture, undocumented migration becomes another instance of how to think about the logic of the war on drugs and not about undocumented migration itself. The root causes of the massive exodus of Central American migrants remain unexplored and elided as if that very violence was not the condition of possibility of how neoliberal accumulation created the very conditions that exacerbate Yein's and other migrants' vulnerability as they cross Mexico. Ortuño's novel privileges the facile reproduction of the discursive coordinates that inform narcoliterature, providing us with an account of undocumented migration in Mexico that demands to be situated within the frame of the violence exacerbated by the war on drugs instead of the neoliberal precarization of life and labor that informs both undocumented migration and the rise of organized crime in the hemisphere.

While the central thematic of *La fila india* may be the precarization of migrant life by both organized crime and state institutions (therefore revealing the intrinsic relation between these two organisms), the novel ultimately uses undocumented migration to advance a critical reflection on Mexico's social order as understood through the narrative of the war on drugs. Even when this narrative strategy may be productive to highlight impunity across governmental institutions in Mexico—which leads to extreme forms of vulnerability for migrants—it forecloses the possibility of conceptualizing violence, impunity, and migrant vulnerability beyond the critical coordinates afforded by the war on drugs. As I have been suggesting, this foreclosure is directly tied to the "delivery systems" set up in advance by narcoliterature as a narrative approach that privileges a point of view that rationalizes narco-violence as the result of organized crime infiltrating a failed state. In the case of *La fila india*, violence against undocumented migrants becomes an occasion to reflect on the logics of organized crime and their relationship to the state, when it could also challenge and reject the narrativization of the precarization of migrant life as the logical consequence of the current social order in Mexico.

Ortuño's novel reveals a theoretical impasse for how Mexican cultural production engages with undocumented migration. Rather than centering it as a space to reframe our distributions of the sensible to think about violence as a structure that produces migrant vulnerability, *La fila india* remains committed to the logics of narcoliterature, reproducing mythologies, and rationalizing violence in contemporary Mexico, disconnected from the hemispheric forms of dispossession and exploitation brought about by the restructuring of the nation-state under neoliberalism. Undocumented migration, in this sense, should not serve as another case study to understand the logic of the war on drugs but, rather, as a space to reflect how the ongoing forcible displacement of populations across the hemisphere is tied to the neoliberal logic that produces regimes of exploitation and disposability.

Migrant Futures yet to Come: Temporality and Narco-violence in *Las tierras arrasadas*

Published in 2015, *Las tierras arrasadas* recounts the story of a group of migrants who are kidnapped, tortured, and forced into circuits of forced labor by a human trafficking gang in southern Mexico. The novel presents a critical mediation on human smuggling in Mexico and a nuanced critique of the underlying motivations that drive it. This is done in a series of ever-changing points of view that attest to the forms of violence from multiple perspectives: from victims (mostly migrants) and perpetrators to local communities and federal authorities. Formally, *Las tierras arrasadas* is divided into three parts separated by two intermezzos. All three parts follow a human smuggling gang in Mexico and its internal struggle for power between the protagonists Epitafio, Estela, Sepelio, and Padre Nicho. Towards the end of the book, the reader learns that Epitafio, Estela, and Sepelio were trafficked as children and forced to work under the tutelage of Padre Nicho to become the next generation of human traffickers in the area. The intermezzos, on the other hand, present the story of Esteban, a migrant-turned-gang-member, and the story of a junkyard ("El infierno") where cadavers are dismembered and dissolved. The novel presents a series of critical mediations that blur the line between victim and perpetrator, while also providing an account of how chronic poverty, destitution, and exploitation in Mexico push vulnerable populations to become violent to survive. The writing style, characterized by narrative trepidation, makes *Las tierras arrasadas* a novel whose narrative approach repackages some of the aesthetic coordinates of the thriller. Furthermore, the text recalls the Latin American testimonial tradition by inserting throughout the narrative a series of fragments from interviews with human rights and other non-governmental organizations conducted with migrants and recorded in their official reports. These testimonial fragments provide a sense of

immediacy and urgency to the violence human trafficking gangs and organized crime exert on migrants in their journey through Mexico.

Despite the multiple points of view that constantly supersede each other to form a complex narrative structure, *Las tierras arrasadas* largely focuses on two main characters, Estela and Epitafio, leaders of the human trafficking gang, whose romantic entanglements unfold in a series of violent events that highlight the vulnerability of migrant populations and their condition as ever disposable and killable subjects. It is during the violent events that unfold around Estela and Epitafio that undocumented migration functions in the novel as an axis to show the relationship between organized crime, chronic social and economic destitution, and the commodification of bodies. In this sense, the novel puts in conversation these different vectors to generate a critical account of contemporary violence in Mexico that is nuanced. It also highlights the tensions of the political and social conditions that inform the present and the forms of state abandonment and destitution that are foundational to understanding Mexico's current social order. For Monge, the relationship among these vectors hinges on understanding the effects the war on drugs has had on immigration policymaking and enforcement, including the technologies of military securitization in the south of Mexico, and the deterioration of Mexican society due to a long history of political destitution and social precarity.

Cultural critics have suggested that *Las tierras arrasadas* provides an occasion to reflect on notions of empathy as constructed in the Mexican social imaginary by presenting a narrative that complicates and blurs the division between victim and perpetrator. Raúl Diego Rivera Hernández, proposes to examine Monge's novel through notions of vulnerability, as produced by poverty and social destitution, to probe the limits of empathy and complicate how both migrants and their kidnappers are navigating a social and political context where the precarization of life and labor in Mexico and Central America has created the conditions for forcible displacement and the emergence of violent human trafficking gangs (67). Moreover, in presenting multiple points of view, *Las tierras arrasadas* assembles a narrative that, despite centering the precarization of migrant life, rejects the banalization of violence and points to its deep-rooted origins in social and economic destitution (Calderón LeJoliff and Zárate). Finally, *Las tierras arrasadas,* Alina Peña Iguarán argues, rejects the de-subjectivation of the bodies it imagines, interrupting the horrors of contemporary violence and the regimes of signification and visibility/invisibility it produces. In so doing, *Las tierras arrasadas* denaturalizes the horrors and violence of the "narco/necro machine" and opens a space to imagine alternative social orders (142).

While all these critical engagements with Monge's novel show how regimes of vulnerability function and how violence becomes legible under Mexico's securitization regime, my interest lies in questioning how the narrativization of violence—and the lines of thought it opens to question notions of empathy, social destitution, and the possibility of imagining alternative social orders—highlights narco-capital time and opens a space to challenge its logics. In this sense, I read Monge's novel as a text that critically engages with contemporary violence by revealing its contradictions, opening our political horizon to engage with undocumented migration through a critical imagination that short-circuits the rational teleology and temporal foreclosure of narco-capital and the forms of war it engenders. This, I argue, makes evident the relationship between the regimes of national security criminalizing historically subordinated populations on the one hand, and the precarization of life and labor forcibly displacing populations throughout Latin America on the other.

The novel centers the migrant subject through depersonalized allegorical references to the pain and torture suffered by those crossing Mexico. Throughout the novel, the migrants kidnapped at the hands of the smuggling gangs are never referred to as individual subjects; rather, they are alluded to as a collective mass whose shared characteristic is their itinerancy. With names such as, "los que vinieron de muy lejos," "los hombres y mujeres que cruzaron las fronteras," "los hombres y mujeres que salieron de sus tierras," "los hombres y mujeres que escaparon de sus tierras," the novel positions undocumented migrants as populations whose only recognizable characteristic is their vulnerability and itinerant condition (13-14, 24-27). This collective naming of migrants emphasizes the history of dispossession that informs forced displacement in Central America and Mexico. *Las tierras arrasadas* is critical of the precarization of migrant life and the forms of violence that inform Mexico's current social order under neoliberal governance. By framing migrants as people who have fled their ravaged homeland, the novel suggests a history of the migrant struggle that is tied to longer histories of dispossession and exploitation that go beyond yet connect with the exacerbation of violence in Mexico under the war on drugs.

Throughout the main narrative, the novel weaves together a series of testimonies describing the forms of torture and violence that human trafficking gangs carry out on migrants. Through these testimonies, the reader learns that inside one of the trucks transporting the migrants to the gang's safe house, there is an older migrant in the group, Merolico, performing palm readings and predicting the futures of each of the migrants. Juxtaposed between the main narrative about Epitafio and Estela, as well as Sepelio's betrayal of both of them, the narrative turns to some of these future predictions:

> Me lo dice aquí esta línea… antes que mueras pasaran más de once años… habrás gozado de una vida nueva y plena… habrás vivido días de luz y calores… atrás habrá quedado este tiempo horrible y doloroso… será toda esta tristeza apenas un recuerdo… una bisagra entre una vida y otra … (117)

At first, these short episodes narrating the palm readings performed on the migrants suggest a sense of hopefulness. Despite these palm readings happening in what appears to be the beginning of their torturous journey at the hands of these human smuggling gangs, these fortune-telling performances open a space of imagination to something other than the exacerbated forms of violence that these migrants seem to encounter at every turn in their journey through Mexico. There is in these palm readings, in other words, a moment of rupture from the rest of the novel, insofar as it provides a space of intelligibility for migrants beyond their victimization. In the case of the palm reading of the particular migrant cited above, Merolico foresees that eleven years must pass before his/her/their death, and that their harrowing journey will be just a memory in their otherwise prosperous future. Thus, even if momentarily, the overwhelming sense of despair capturing the tone of the narration, allows migrant life to be something other than exploitable bodies and disposable life.

Notwithstanding, these moments give way to a largely pessimistic view of the migrant struggle, predicting futures where the very power relations that produce dispossession and exploitation remain intact. If the palm readings function as a space to rethink the possibilities of migrant life amid exacerbated violence, it only does so from locating migrant life within the narrative of neoliberal labor regimes. That is, while the palm readings rupture the victimization of these migrants to imagine futures yet to come, despite the violence they are exposed to in the present, these futures can only arrive as imagined within the narrative of neoliberal individuality and labor exchange: "Tus líneas son mucho más claras . . . tu futuro es transparente . . . te espera a ti además un buen trabajo . . . el que soñaste tantos años . . . el trabajo que has querido siempre . . . llenaras cajas con fruta" (157-58). Here, Merolico narrates to the unnamed migrant what lies ahead in their future as Epitafio's gang takes them to a safe house, a future that, among other things, is crystallized around notions of prosperity anchored in idealized job security.

> Olvidarás pronto este tiempo . . . olvidarás los días que no fueron buenos . . . enterrará una alegría la tristeza de estos años . . . enterrará el bienestar al malestar que está acabando . . . encontrarás un buen trabajo . . . encontrarás a la mujer que vienes tú buscando . . . se cumplirán todos tus sueños . . . cumplirás tú todas tus promesas. (214)

Here again, the prediction of this migrant's future hinges on a series of platitudes about job stability, heteronormative notions of family, and idealized futures where dreams become reality (perhaps a reference to the so-called "American Dream"—a discourse that elides racialized and gendered forms of labor exploitation). However, by the end of this section, all the migrants transported to the safe house, except for Merolico, are murdered in an ambush coordinated by Sepelio's men, the faction of the gang that betrays Epitafio and Estela to take over the operations. For Sepelio, the ambush represents an act of retribution and revenge for the years of humiliation he suffered as Epitafio's subordinate in the gang's ranks. Beyond the obvious narrative of power struggle between two hyperviolent men for the control of territory and authority over the gang, there are two questions at stake. Why does Merolico's imagination of the future possibilities for migrant life limit itself to narratives of neoliberal inclusion in the circuits of labor and capital exchange? What does Merolico's survival tell us about his future imaginations as narrated within the temporality of the war on drugs in Mexico?

Whereas the main narrative of *Las tierras arrasadas* focuses on the internal struggle for the control of the human smuggling network, the juxtaposition of the short episodes focused on migrants allows us to reflect on how violence against these populations is narrativized within the temporality of Mexico's current social order as informed by the war on drugs, while also suggesting a connection to longer histories of dispossession and exploitation. At the same time, these short vignettes offer an alternative to the ways in which contemporary narratives about migration can critically engage with the long histories of dispossession and exploitation in Latin America. In the case of *Las tierras arrasadas*, these futures to come—here envisioned by the performance of the palm readings—reflect a specific political imagination of what liberation looks like for these migrant populations in times of neoliberal governance. In a moment of narrative trepidation and violence, Epitafio's gang transports kidnapped migrants and subjects them to torture, rape, and ultimately assassinate them. The narrative cannot escape the logics of exploitation that inform the precarization of life and labor in Latin America. That is, if the function of the palm readings is to open a space to think the possibility of future forms of life beyond the violence of narco-capital accumulation, the political imagination opened by these moments is limited to the logics of neoliberalism. Merolico can only imagine futures for these migrants where their labor is extracted and exploited within the circuits of capital accumulation, and though he claims to see the possibility of futures outside of the violence these migrants are experiencing, these futures cannot escape neoliberalism's logics of exploitation and disposability. The only way for these migrants to overcome the violence of narco-capital accumulation, as Merolico seems to suggest, is

through their disciplining into exploitable and disposable labor within the circuits of capital accumulation in the Global North. The futures imagined for these migrants offer a false choice: be killable subjects at the hands of human smuggling gangs and the Mexican state or remain exploitable labor within the circuits of capital accumulation. *Las tierras arrasadas*, in this sense, offers a nuanced account of contemporary undocumented migration, albeit a pessimistic one, that connects the production of migrant vulnerability under the war on drugs and the dispossession and exploitation of poor communities in Mexico and Central America. Monge's novel, in other words, doesn't offer an alternative future for the nourishing of migrant life, but makes clear that the forcible displacement of poor communities across the region and the vulnerability these populations experience are connected to contemporary and historical forms of dispossession and exploitation.

What more can evidence this pessimistic, yet productive political imagination, if not the survival and ensuing suicide of Merolico? During Sepelio's ambush of Estela's and Epitafio's men, "Merolico" survives while hiding underneath the bodies of other migrants. After the gunfire ceases, Sepelio and his men find Merolico alive and decide to sell him to the two brothers, Teñido and Encanecido, in charge of dismembering and dissolving dead bodies at the junkyard known as "El infierno." After buying Merolico, Teñido and Encanecido explain to him his duties at the junkyard: dismembering bodies and burning them in barrels. Beyond the disturbing nature of the whole sequence of events presented in the novel, there is a moment of internal reflection from Merolico that highlights the pessimistic future imaginations about migrant life as rationalized within the temporal horizon of neoliberal governance and its manifestations through narco-capital accumulation. In the midst of carrying out his new duties, the omniscient narrator recounts the following sequence through the lens of Merolico:

> ¿Por qué mierdas les mentí a todos ellos?, se interroga el más viejo de entre todos los sin sombra, y al hacerlo también alza, hasta la altura de sus ojos, el machete que sostiene entre las manos. ¿Qué ganaba haciendo eso?, se machaca Merolico mientras corta su mirada con el filo de la hoja y luego lanza esta arma hacia la pila de cadáveres y restos encimados. (248)

Here, Merolico reflects on the palm readings he performed, regretting telling these migrants about futures and forms of life he knew would never arrive. Rather than making a moral or ethical argument about his decision to provide that momentary sense of relief to the kidnapped migrants amid their suffering, I am interested in thinking through his sense of pessimism as revealed in the quotation above. It is not that he regrets lying to them as he pretended to predict their future, but that he did so

despite knowing that the futures he imagined for them would never arrive. "¿Por qué mierdas les mentí a todos ellos? . . . ¿Qué ganaba haciendo eso?", Merolico reflects, as he dismembers and burns bodies, yet what emerges from such questions is the impossibility of imagining migrant futures beyond violence. With the question, "¿Qué ganaba haciendo eso?", Merolico reveals not a sense of individual guilt, but a pessimistic view of Mexico's current social order, where the precarization of life is the only available horizon for migrants. There is nothing to gain or to lose because the temporal logics of narco-violence and its forms of accumulation, as narrativized into logic through neoliberal governance, have always already decided in advance that migrant life is exploitable, killable life: life whose future cannot be imagined beyond labor exploitation and disposability. At the end of this narrative sequence, Merolico can't bear the brunt of the situation, understanding for the first time that his future, as well as the future of the migrants whose bodies he is now disposing of, were always already decided by the history of dispossession and exploitation that forcibly displaced them, turning them into undocumented migrants. Soon thereafter, Merolico commits suicide, ending his suffering and the weight of knowing from the start that there were no futures to come for him and all those migrants he made the journey with.

Even when *Las tierras arrasadas* opens a space of mediation where migrant futurities may suggest the possibility of "worlds/otherwise," it does so by also recognizing that those futures will continue to be mediated through neoliberal reason (Figueroa-Vásquez 148).[4] *Las tierras arrasadas,* I argue, centers the precarization of migrant life as an unescapable destiny for forcibly displaced populations in Latin America as a way to advance a critique of the intensification of violence in Mexico. For the novel, the war on drugs and neoliberal governance are different sides of the same coin, producing a self-evident and self-fulfilling social order where nothing is beyond it, and nothing escapes its logic. As such, the precarization of migrant life cannot be separated from neoliberal governance (state abandonment through policy-making that criminalizes the poor) and the right over life in Mexico. *Las tieerras arrasadas,* despite its pessimistic perspective, overcomes the temptation to reproduce a facile and unproductive account about undocumented migration in Mexico by centering the multiple connections between dispossession, exploitation, the criminalization of the poor and the exacerbation of vulnerability in Mexico.

Conclusion

Critical discussions on narcoliterature have demonstrated how representations of Mexico's contemporary social and political order center drug-related violence as a form of mediation to examine

the relationship between organized crime, governance, and the precarization of life. However, what critics continue to misdiagnose is how the genre reproduces a temporalization founded on the logics of narco-accumulation and hegemonic narratives about the war on drugs—the logic of rationalizing social and political life to forms of violent accumulation as the only horizon of possibility after the neoliberal securitization undergone in Mexico in the past thirty years. Contemporary Mexican literature continues to reproduce this temporalization to make sense of the intensification of violence in Mexico. Among those narratives that reproduce narco-capital time as horizon of intelligibility of violence, we have witnessed the proliferation of narratives on or about undocumented migration. These narratives, in their attempt to call attention to the precarization of migrant life, emphasize how state impunity, immigration enforcement, and organized crime work in tandem to produce migrant vulnerability. However, some of these narratives, as is the case of Antonio Ortuño's *La fila inida,* rationalize and critically engage with the forcible displacement of migrant populations in the region as a problem that is first and foremost traversed by the crisis in governance brought about by the Mexican war on drugs. That is, contemporary narratives about undocumented migration in Mexico engage with the problem of violence against migrant populations as the logical and inescapable consequence of the rise and exacerbation of organized crime and its logics of violent accumulation. As I have highlighted, Antonio Ortuño's *La fila india* remains deadlocked in the logic of narcoliterature, insofar as it reproduces a political horizon that privileges the temporalization of narco-capital as the ground of legibility of violence in Mexico. On the one hand, rather than engage with undocumented migration and the precarization of migrant life, Ortuño's novel deploys migration as a trope to comment on the overarching structure of contemporary violence in Mexico as informed by hegemonic narratives about the war on drugs and the consolidation of the Mexico's military securitization regimes. On the other, *Las tierras arrasadas* provides a nuanced critique of Mexico's current social order, making connections of how state-abandonment and the criminalization of the poor have contributed to the production of vulnerability for migrants and historically destitute populations in Mexico. Despite its pessimistic view of undocumented migration, Monge's novel offers an alternative vision of the ongoing precarization of migrant life by way of connecting histories of dispossession and exploitation as the consequence of neoliberal forms of governance. The result is a text that unearths the continuities between the rise of narco-capital time as a part of the larger temporal dynamics of global capital. In pointing to these connections, *Las tierras arrasadas* narrativizes migration as a problem that has its origin in deep-seated histories of dispossession and forcible displacement informed by regimes of accumulation characterized by the exploitation of vulnerable populations. This is the very deadlock which cultural

criticism must grapple with, for if contemporary narratives of undocumented migration is to offer a critical view of the migrant struggle, it must make clear the connections between pressures and continuities that inform, not only the rise of human smuggling in Mexico, but the precarization of life as form of governance and tactic of accumulation in Latin America.

Notes

[1] From this point on, when referring to the "Guerra contra el narco" or the Mexican war on drugs, I will use the term war on drugs. While the Mexican war on drugs and the hemispheric war on drugs led by US efforts are interrelated, it is important to establish how they are distinct. The US war on drugs was an effort that started in the 1960s as a counterinsurgent tactic to neutralize dissent against the Vietnam War and to criminalize Black and other communities of color. The strategies and tactics inaugurated during this period were integrated into a hemispheric effort to both intervene in Latin American affairs and to militarize and criminalize communities across the hemisphere that challenged US capitalist hegemony. The Mexican war on drugs has its roots in the 1970s, as part of the US Cold War efforts in Latin America, which among other things, resulted in the criminalization of indigenous and working-class political organizing. "La guerra contra el narco," or the Mexican war on drugs, inaugurated during the Calderon presidency is considered by many experts as the continuation of the hemispheric program that the US launched in the second half of the twentieth century and was congealed through the militarization of police forces and intelligence operations to criminalize and discipline dissent across the hemisphere. In this sense, while related, "La Guerra contra el narco" and the hemispheric war on drugs led by US intelligence have distinct histories and distinct goals. For a full account of the distinctions and convergences of the two, see Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism*.
[2] In the last fifteen years, there has been an exponential increase in cultural production that has provided sharp political reflections on the intensification of Central American migration in Mexico and, more specifically, the precarization of migrant life. For literature see Óscar Martínez, *Los migrantes que no importan* (2010); Alma Guillermoprieto, *72 migrantes* (2011); Juan Pablo Villalobos, *Yo Tuve un sueño* (2018); Balam Rodrigo, *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018); Valeria Luiselli, *Los niños perdidos* (2016) and *The Lost Children Archive* (2019). For films see Uli Stelzner, *Asalto al sueño* (2006); Cary Joji Fukunaga, *Sin nombre* (2009); Marcela Zamora, *María en tierra de nadie* (2010) and *El espejo roto* (2013); Diego Quemada-Diez, *La jaula de oro* (2014).
[3] *La fila india* is making a reference to the San Fernando massacres in August of 2010 and April of 2011, where Mexican authorities found a total of 265 bodies, many of them Central American. Media outlets in Mexico claimed that these tragedies were the result of an ongoing territorial war between the Gulf cartel and the Zetas (Castillo García 2010). In some other cases, media outlets reported that the victims were killed because they refused to become foot soldiers for the Zetas, or simply because they couldn't pay the territorial tax demanded by the cartels (Aranda 2010). Despite the different accounts, much of the public debate ultimately reduced the massacres to yet another instance of collateral damage caused by the so-called war on drugs in Mexico.
[4] For Yomaira Figeroa-Vásquez, "Worlds/otherwise" refers to the possibilities of "being in the world" for historically subordinated peoples in the present and future despite the forms of dispossession and exploitation they have been subject to in the past and present. Specifically, with this term, she theorizes how Black life opens spaces of imagination that engage "the apocalyptic, the ends of worlds" in order to challenge the logics of destruction of modernity, coloniality, and settler colonialism. "Worlds/otherwise," as such, invite us to understand "how people's lives matter in the present and how they are essential to the future" (2020, 148).

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