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### **Review/Reseña**

Elaine Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses & Organized Crime*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014. Diálogos Series.

### **Hustlin' with some Transnational Women (and the Emerging Drug History of Mexico)**

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You gotta love a scholarly book—and this is definitely one—that cites a documentary called *Cocaine Cowboys 2: Hustlin' with the Godmother* as a primary source (183). Elaine Carey's new book, which retrieves the careers of a trail of iconic and colorful female drug traffickers in the twentieth century, breaks new ground in the drug history of Mexico and Latin America, transnational border studies, and women and gender studies. It's also a tale well told that may capture a general audience beyond the usual academic suspects.

Recent events—the dramatic post-1980s swell of Mexican drug trafficking networks to the United States, and now the brutal explosion of drug violence after 2006 (as the Mexican state and northern traffickers

unleashed a no-holds barred drug war) have revealed how little real historical research exists on drug trades in Mexico. The escapades and escapes of figures like Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, putative head of the Sinaloan cartel (a term specialists abhor), only reinforce this loud macho big bad guy vs. bad guy or state narrative. Illicit invisible activities, of course, are specially challenging for serious historical research and must lean heavily on policing records with all their predictable biases and gaps. We are vaguely familiar with a long string of historic drug smuggling and vice trades since the early 1900s across the U.S.-Mexican border and its growing border towns: newly-proscribed patent medicines and pharmaceuticals in the teens, millions of gallons of booze during 1920s Prohibition, Mexican made brown heroin from the 1940s and beyond, marijuana from the 1930s to 1960s. It was after 1980, hyper-lucrative and distantly transshipped Andean cocaine, which finally transformed Mexico’s still traditional regional smuggling organizations into powerful, autonomous, rivalrous, and violent business empires. By the present century, the trade was dominated by a changing mix of cocaine, cannabis, and methamphetamine. One traditional theory—besides obvious “location, location, location” up against the prohibited U.S. market—is that regional pacts between smugglers and sectors of the Mexican state and military served to informally tax and regulate these contraband “plazas” (territories), at least until cocaine profits and the free trade of the 1990s broke the older equilibrium. Scholarly contributions by Luis Astorga in Mexico (a sociologist originally from Sinaloa, Mexico’s epicenter of trafficking culture) and William Walker III (a diplomatic historian unusually attentive to U.S.-Mexican drug diplomacy) were notable exceptions with their pioneer studies of Mexican traffickers and drug policies. The first deeply researched work in English so far on Mexican drug culture is Isaac Campos’ recent *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of the Mexico’s War on Drugs*, which provocatively revises much of the received mythology surrounding cannabis in Mexico and even the place of Mexican “marihuana” in the genesis of mid-twentieth century North American drug policies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Astorga, *Mitología del “Narcotraficante” en México* (México: Plaza y

There seems to be, however, provoked by the current crisis of drug-war violence, a wave of serious historical research finally underway about drugs in Mexico and Latin America, which also had to overcome the prejudice that this was just not a serious enough academic topic.<sup>2</sup> There is also a small army of political scientists and criminologists trying to come to grips with the chaotic bloodbath, corruption, and crime engulfing Mexico today, not so long ago considered Latin America's most predictable and stable PRI regime (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). It will, nonetheless, take quite some time for historical research to catch up with, much less correct, the sensationalized and mostly speculative mountain of journalistic writings about drugs in Mexico—the kind of cartel, conspiracy, and “narco-narrative” crime novels that litter Mexico's airport book stalls. Even here the “narco-cultural” product is lately improving, for instance, Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace's well-informed and critical 2015, *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the Mexican Drug War*.<sup>3</sup>

Elaine Carey's book marks another milestone on the road to serious drug history of Mexico. While the action mostly gravitates from Mexico, the book also has connections and characters extending to Shanghai, the Southwest borderlands and throughout the United States, and even female traffickers in Argentina and New York City. Her entry point is the surprisingly unstudied topic—at least by historians—of the gender of drugs: women organized all the trafficking rings she follows. The typical story, starting in the 1920s, revolves around enterprising or intrepid women who began their smuggling careers as dependent “mules” or spouses of jailed

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Valdés, 1995); *Drogas sin Fronteras* (México: Grijalbo, 2003); William Walker III, *Drug Control in the Americas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of the Mexican Drug War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See analysis of field possibilities in Paul Gootenberg and Isaac Campos, “Towards a New Drug History of Latin America: A Research Frontier at the Center of Debates,” *Hispanic American historical Review*, 95/1 (Feb 2015): 1-36; also Paul Gootenberg, “Drug Trades in Latin America,” *Oxford Bibliographies: Latin American Studies*, ed., Ben Vinson III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), for detailed but quickly dating citations on Mexican and borderland drug studies.

<sup>3</sup> Carmen Boullosa, Mike Wallace, *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the Mexican Drug War* (New York: OR Books, 2015); or Sam Quinones, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

dealers. They then stepped in and expanded, tapping close kin relationships, small cover businesses, and their intimacy with local politics to build family, cross-border, and multigenerational drug enterprises. Some of these women exploited expected feminine “wiles” and trusted mothering and matriarch roles within Mexican society to quietly blend in; others seemed to sensationally flaunt their sexual and commercial deviancy. Carey’s stories carry a strong archival and even ethnographic feel, and reflect the influence of the tough criminologists (and cops) who observe drug networks today. The book offers a vibrant sense as well of the historical role of state borders and border-crossers in defining and intensifying the illicit nature of contraband flows. For me, one of the strongest contributions of Carey’s book is the methodical way she “naturalizes” (usually a scare-quote epithet for historians) the livelihoods, social survival strategies, and business skills of women in the drug trades. After all, Carey muses, women have long been the movers and shakers in the marginalized “informal” economy, a huge category of street business in Latin America that itself begs for deeper historical research and thinking. Why not so in the emerging informal economies of narcotics? The domination of the transnational drug business today by armies of gun-toting ultra-machista drug lords obscures, perhaps, a more gender-diverse past?<sup>4</sup>

Carey’s book—which I wish was given a better historical title from the press—is largely built around a set of extraordinary female characters in the drug trades. An Introductory chapter sets the larger scene in longstanding Mexican smuggling cultures, the growing drug policy intersections of the United States and the United States of Mexico after the 1914 US Harrison Act, and the ways in which racial and gender classifications structured or sparked discourses around increasingly restricted and symbolically endangering drugs. The second chapter,

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<sup>4</sup> Two notable living exceptions today in Mexico (celebrated in everything from low-brow *telenovelas* to high-brow novels and sociological studies) are “La Reina del Pácfica,” Sandra Ávila Beltrán, daughter of generations of Sinaloan drug lords, and legendary lover of others, recently released after a long sentence, and Culiacán trafficker Teresa Mendoza, “La Mexicana,” subject of Spanish writer Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s 2002 bestselling novel *La Reina del Sur*, now a soap opera from Telemundo of the same title.

“Mules, Smugglers, and Peddlers,” mostly concerns the everyday practices and illicit frontiers (for example, selling and carrying things across the border) that were to bring women actively into the drug business. One case here grabs attention: the classy María Wendt, one of the FBN’s (U.S. Federal Bureau of Narcotics, the main predecessor to the DEA) most wanted global mules of the 1930s. Wendt used Mexico as one of her frequent stopover bases in a long international career ferrying heroin, a trade then in its infancy, between Shanghai and the United States. Mysteriously bi-racial, she cavorted with and was the instrument of a fascinating coterie of Chinese, German, and especially gangs of improbably named Jewish refugees getting by in Mexico during the 1930s.

The third chapter centers on “Lola la Chata,” María Dolores Esteves Zuleta, who rose from a humble family stall in Mexico City’s storied underclass La Merced market, to by the 1940s the status of Mexico’s most notorious heroin dispenser and boss. La Chata was the nemesis of Harry J. Anslinger (zealous head of the FBN), a subject of Dr. Leopold Salazar Viniegra (the pivotal medical figure in Mexico’s mid-century drug policy) and even became immortalized as a heroic deviant in the beat fiction of William S. Burroughs, a “junky” customer of the real Zuleta one assumes during his lengthy post-war Mexican sojourn. Besides the sensationalism evoked by her sex, La Chata’s infinite ability to elude capture, and shrewd business skills, in Carey’s eyes, helped shift Mexico’s heroin business on a more permanent footing. Chapter 4 moves to borderlanders proper in the case history of Ignasia Jasso, who was long identified as the widow of smalltime northern dealer Pablote González. “La Nacha,” as she was known, was also sought after for decades—the 1930s to 1980s—by U.S. authorities, who failed to extradite her time after time due to her protective roots in the politics and commerce of Ciudad Juárez. In another fascinating twist, “La Nacha” was racially immortalized on the Texan side of the border—where she frequently plied her transnational business—by the pioneer Chicano journalist Alfonso Salazar during and after the federal Daniels Commission anti-drug hearings of the 1950s. She was remarkable both for her complex connections on the U.S. half of the border and half-century longevity in the business, maintaining a multi-generational

business that Carey suggests laid some groundwork for the Juárez cartel of the 1980s. The final chapter of the book transcends Mexico for both little known and notorious figures of the burgeoning hemispheric cocaine trades of the 1980s. There was Helen Hernández, of the big Tijuana family coke smuggling ring, Yolanda Sarmiento (a Chilean who operated out of Argentina) and Griselda Blanco. Blanco, the infamous “hustler godmother” of Miami’s chaotic “Cocaine Cowboy” years of the early 1980s, has been the subject of many films and exposes—given her many cocaine-import, sexual, and murderous exploits.<sup>5</sup> She was seemingly the first of this book’s women to tap into systematic violence as a business tool, which only adds to Blanco’s perverse contemporary fascination. But Carey finds her quieter productive years in Queens, New York, while organizing the initial 1970s illicit cocaine trades from Colombia into the United States, of greater intrinsic interest, as well as in some sense, a climax to the book’s long lineage of matriarchal pioneering drug traffickers.

A typical reader of this book might object by asking how “representative” this cast of ladies was of their gender or of traffickers as a class. I will confess that during my own research as an historian of the cocaine trades from the Southern Andes, more than a decade ago, I mysteriously ran across dozens of women and female-led family groups who helped pioneer the early illicit business in Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina (but less so it seems in mafia-dominated Cuba). I wrote extensively about only one of them—“Blanca” (a clear trade name in the “snow” biz) Ibáñez de Sánchez—an infinitely connected upper-crust Bolivian who played a dynamic role in knitting together the new hemispheric cocaine networks of the 1950s and 60s, and who (like Carey’s characters) also enjoyed an uncanny ability to avoid capture, despite a long

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<sup>5</sup> Billy Corban, director, *Cocaine Cowboys 2: Hustlin’ with the Godmother* (Magnolia pictures, 2008); an expansion, focused on Blanco, of the more sober first *Cocaine Cowboys* film (Rakontur, pictures, 2005). Blanco is the subject of many journalistic biographies in Colombia (where, after retiring to Medellín she was assassinated in 2012) and is supposed to be played by Catherine Zeta-Jones in an upcoming Hollywood biopic.

and hot hemispheric FBN pursuit.<sup>6</sup> So, I do think there is something vital and typical of these stories in the consolidating era of the drug trades.

Carey advances a lot of specific ideas as to why women played these opening roles, some which come out of their functions as anonymous mules. This was an age before modern surveillance modes when it was considered highly impolitic or impolite to question the mores especially of well-heeled Latin women, much less subject to the routine humiliating bodily searches of the 1980s. A challenge remains understanding better if, when, and how these initiating female roles became obsolete or submerged by coercive vertical male-dominated kin and regional organizations—aka, “cartels.” Is there a definable moment of take-over or of transition to let’s say a “drug patriarchy”? Was there a gendered conflict? There is also a tension between the obscurity of successful mules (whose anonymity in crossing borders was their prime asset) or the hidden success of local front or laundering businesswomen, and the obviously extraordinary character of the notorious, internationally-targeted, highly entrepreneurial set of women Carey mostly portrays. In short, I’d still like to see that social history, as Carey herself suggests near the end, of the unknown little people who built, staffed, and operated the early illicit trades, including the purposely unknown little women. I was also looking for a more explicit analysis of the possible historical linkages between the cases and episodes she highlights, more than general insight about the roles of women in drug trades, past and present. Is it possible, for example, that the family and kin networks provided by these strong women lends an unseen coherence to the scattered borderlands pre-history decades (1910s-1970s) of Mexico’s modern drug trades of the 1980s?

Surely, the book will spark some controversy: that it transgresses historical convention by bringing many contemporary analogies and cases into the picture, or that it is geographically promiscuous, skipping across borders (and beyond Texan families) and even continents at will. However, the good flow of writing throughout the book makes these leaps of time and

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 279-81; she was finally caught in Miami in 1965, and incarcerated in the United States, but I never pursued the rest of her life story, for example, if she returned to Bolivia or the later booming cocaine business.

place fit the overall story. In its sin of topicality, I wish the book had gone further to tie into a burning gender issue today: that a huge proportion of low-level drug dealers languishing in Latin American jails are young hapless women caught as mules, subject to horrific sexual and other brutalities in the region's over-crowded medieval prison complex. Across the Americas, from Brazil to Peru and Mexico, women are the human rights equivalent to the "stop and frisk" victims, within the United States overwhelmingly poor young black and Latino males, of the hemispheric drug war.<sup>7</sup> One also wonders if the perennially unsolved sexual violence of the northern border region (the thousands of raped, disappeared, and murdered young women of greater Juárez since the drug boom) has something to do with the patriarchal shift, if that occurred, in drug trades since the 1980s and the manly pact between traffickers and local and federal police that "governs" Mexico's unruly borders. Such speculations arise because Carey's book is an important missing piece of the puzzle of Mexico's long and enduring role on the frontiers of the international drug trades.

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<sup>7</sup> Corinna Giacomello, "Mujeres, delitos de drogas y sistemas penitenciarios en América Latina" *International Drug Policy Consortium*, IDPC Oct. 2013; also see "OAS Sheds Lights on the Growing Incidence of Women in Prison in the Americas for Drug-Related Crimes," OAS Press Release, June 3, 2013; the number of women jailed more than doubled in the past 5 years.