

High Crimes: Élmer Mendoza's "Zurdo" Mendieta Series and the Psychotropic Economy

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A man walks into a bar named “El Quijote.” A singer is crooning *Under the Influence of Love*, by Barry White. After the man sits down, “Le acercaron una cerveza y un tequila doble que consumió con rapidez...” The man next to him, jonesing for cocaine, mutters about the divine vengeance that will be visited on the powerful and corrupt, including “los que fijan el precio del café y del tabaco.” By the way, El Quijote features topless dancers, and on this particular night it is especially filled with sexual tension when an alluring quartet of three cheerleaders and a transgender woman walk in. Finally, the man stumbles out and drives away, coming under the sway of a “subyugante” Rolling Stones song (*Balas* 73-75).

This scene exemplifies well the density of references and representation of intoxication that characterizes Élmer Mendoza's *Balas de plata*, *La prueba del ácido*, and *Nombre de perro*, which present to us a world—a fictional Culiacán, Sinaloa—that largely revolves around the cocaine business, but where cocaine rarely appears yet intoxication crops up everywhere. The pieces of the puzzle of each crime accumulate punctuated by endless cups of coffee, cigarettes, beers, and shots of tequila and whiskey, which the protagonist, Detective Edgar “el Zurdo” Mendieta, reverently downs “como Dios manda.” However, the panoply of intoxicants on

display in the Mendieta series is by no means limited to substances to be consumed, and their functions range from psychological survival to ego-inflation to social control. Love, sex, music, shopping, exercising violence and power, reading, and even investigating crime all appear as addictive, intoxicating activities in their own right, and begin to map out a complex psychotropic economy at play in Mendoza's novelistic Culiacán and beyond. What is more, these novels invite us to insert ourselves, as readers, into the layers of this economy that play out among the products and consumers of culture.

These facts are notable because the violence concomitant to drug trafficking and militarized interdiction in Mexico and elsewhere is often considered separately from the phenomenon of an intoxication that happens “elsewhere;” according to Hermann Herlinghaus, “narconarratives” from Latin America are characterized by an “aesthetics of sobriety.” Novels like Mendoza's, however, show that it is important not to neglect the dynamics—both global and local—of intoxication itself, pointing to an extensive and complex psychotropic economy operating in Mexico and beyond, by representing fictionally a number of patterns of psychotropy connected to the industry in illicit drugs. This study engages these works to show that (1) demand for cocaine is related to *narcosis*, in which mind-altering substances and practices are integrated into the Self in order to support an inflated ego at the expense of relationships with the Other—allowing the Self to adjust to the demands of consumer capitalism. (2) This pattern helps to create the conditions for a violent and lucrative industry in illicit drugs, which deploys its own psychotropic strategies, aimed at ensuring fear and submission among the general population, where (3) another, less organized type of psychotropy is utilized as individuals attempt to cope with stressors like fear of violence and economic pressures. Moreover, Mendoza's work is itself implicated in cultural intoxication through its insertion into literary markets, entering a fraught discussion on the politics of the representation of violence. As these connections are made visible, it becomes clear that the question of intoxication forces us to confront the limitations of disciplinary approaches, since the problems involved show the intimate relationships between culture, politics, psychology and neurobiology. Such approaches challenge the “Drug War” mentality by showing that the problem of intoxication is not an external enemy but rather is always deeply rooted in history, culture and even biology.

Mexico and the Global Psychotropic Economy

In *Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*, Hermann Herlinghaus outlines “a new narratological and certainly paradoxical interest in ‘sobriety’” (21). This conception of sobriety—a rejection of tragic formulas, of guilt, pity and fear, of heroes and villains—is, for Herlinghaus, a central aspect of Latin American cultural production dealing with narco-trafficking. The *pharmakon* is figured as being of little interest in narconarratives,¹ or indeed a distraction or an obstacle on the path to the aesthetic sobriety that is presented as instrumental in effectively laying out panoramas of avarice, violence, and survival to represent the illicit drug industry in Latin America.² In elaborating his concept of sobriety, Herlinghaus interrogates an enigmatic passage from Walter Benjamin’s essay on Surrealism: “The dialectics of intoxication are indeed curious. Is not perhaps all ecstasy in one world humiliating sobriety in the world complementary to it?” (210). He rightly points to the “humiliating sobriety” that may result from being caught in the middle of the violence “complementary to” drug consumption (and the corresponding far-off “ecstasy”), trafficking and militarized interdiction.

Herlinghaus’s project of revealing cultural representations of the underside of Benjamin’s dialectics of intoxication is well worthwhile, and he succeeds in identifying, grounding theoretically, and outlining a major tendency in narconarratives. However, following this dialectic to its sober side and remaining there, we risk being blind-sided by the return swing, when sobriety becomes newly complicit with intoxication. I argue that intoxication must not be figured as a state exclusive to the global North, even if it is clear that consumption of illicit drugs in the North is

¹ Contrasting his corpus of contemporary Latin American texts with writings on drugs from Europe and the U.S. from the eighteenth century onward, Herlinghaus argues that “whereas the ‘hero’ of the West’s narcotic literature is the ‘pharmakon’...the protagonists in narcoepics is the ‘pharmakos’...” (21). While the older tradition of drug literature showed “a fascination with narcotics and their potential to provide access to the diversity of consciousness,” the texts he calls “narcoepics” belong to a later historical moment (ours), and for Herlinghaus the violence visited on the *pharmakos*, or sacrificial victim, takes center stage, the central theme of these texts being “the heterogeneity of territories and life worlds which the war on drugs has violently affected” (21).

² In his treatment of Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*, he calls Walter Benjamin’s dialectical thought images “counter-narcotic,” and suggests that the great cultural critic’s method consisted of “dealing with intoxication in the interest of sobriety” (192). Elsewhere, he seeks to de-emphasize the intoxication inherent in Benjamin’s concept of “profane illumination,” which, for him, “in a timelier wording, has to do with worldly wisdom as an instrument for cultural and philosophical criticism...” (36). In this way, he guides every instance of intoxication, whether chemical, cultural or critical, towards a consideration of a concomitant sobriety that for him constitutes a more valuable basis for inquiry.

indeed complementary to “sobering” violence in places like Mexico. Intoxication and sobriety both fall under the rubric of the *pharmakon*, to the extent to which the dialectical movement between them is built into the poles of the term’s semantic field.³ Paying attention to distinct deployments of *pharmakon* as “poison” and as “cure” within a psychotropic economy can provide us with much insight into the psychological and even biological structures that undergird drug consumption, interdiction, and economic activity, licit and illicit, and into the interests that exploit these linkages.

The fact that the human consumption of certain psychotropic substances is widely understood as an anomalous, historical threat that can be stamped out by military force should serve to alert us as to the inadequacy of the common ways of thinking about the relationships between intoxication, history and culture. Relationships between human beings and certain plants that contain psychotropic alkaloids are so old as to be written into human physiology (Sullivan and Hagen). With the development of global trade and communication networks, modern human societies have ever greater access to not only a diversity of psychoactive substances, but also to a variety of cultural practices that must also be considered psychotropic in their own right. Daniel Smail’s *On Deep History and the Brain* outlines the concept of a psychotropic economy, in which a variety of “psychotropic mechanisms” like exercise, shopping, sex, watching television and reading novels (161), offer to change the way we feel, measurably altering neurotransmitter activity much the ways drugs do. These substances and practices are sometimes in competition with each other, in the sense that a person that wants to relax might choose between smoking marijuana and meditating, while someone wanting a pick-me-up might go shopping, or might resort to coffee or even cocaine. These are generally mechanisms of what Smail calls “autotropy,” in that they “influence the body chemistry of the self” (174). Even more important in terms of its social implications is the phenomenon of “teletropy...a category of psychotropy embracing the various devices used in human societies to create mood changes in other people” (170). Smail posits that humans share with other primates a social tendency by which dominant individuals create stress in subordinates in order to solidify their advantage (164-70). In his examples, female

³ By grounding analysis in concrete, historical moments, we can move beyond the “ambivalent, indeterminate space of the *pharmakon*” that Derrida identifies in his exploration of writing as *pharmakon* (115), to uncover definite, dialectical movement between the semantic poles of poison and cure. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, Trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University Press, 1981).

baboons and medieval castellans often used "random terror" to create a baseline pattern of stress that reaffirmed their dominance (166-70). Mexican criminal organizations tend to deploy a violence that serves a similar function, though it is not random but retaliatory and admonitory in nature. This gruesomely specialized semiotic violence uses decapitations and other mutilations, particular dispositions of corpses, and brief verbal statements to transmit messages to other cartels and to the public at large. These messages are highly effective, creating a pervasive climate of stress and fear that generally prevents people from challenging the dominance of these groups. In a similar way, the U.S.-backed militarization of drug-interdiction begun under President Felipe Calderón has led to brutal violence by government forces that has the effect of suppressing dissent among a dissatisfied populace (Watt and Zepeda 204-08). And, of course, it is important to note that the distinction between cartel and official violence is frequently unclear (or patently nonexistent), as painfully illustrated by the forced disappearance of forty-three *normalista* activists from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero in 2014.

The teletropy of fear alone, however, relies on the constant threat of violence and is thus somewhat crude compared to regimes that supply both the toxic stress and its antidote. Tipping his hat to Aldous Huxley, whose *Brave New World* constitutes an extreme formulation of this kind of regime, Smail suggests that consumer capitalism, by stimulating perpetual dissatisfaction periodically ameliorated by consumption, strings humans along within "an order of power that operates not through command-and-control, still less through surveillance, and instead directly through the nervous system" ("Neurohistory" 120). The premium placed on wealth and status in consumer capitalism tends to create a fragile sense of self that must be inflated from time to time through psychotropic mechanisms including "retail therapy" (Kasser et al. 13-14).⁴ This is precisely a dynamic of what Avital Ronell calls narcissism, in which narcissism is "recircuited" through psychotropic practices by which "the self is pumped up...by a chemical prosthesis" ("Avital Ronell Interview").⁵

⁴ While Tim Kasser and colleagues, in their theorization of the psychic costs of American Consumer Capitalism (ACC), do not use the lens of psychotropy explicitly, the phrase "retail therapy" suggests that their approach is compatible with that of this study. And though their analysis focuses on the U.S., it would be surprising if similar patterns were not taking root elsewhere alongside the increasing global projection of consumer culture. For the intoxication of shopping, see Donald Black, "A Review of Compulsive Buying Disorder", *World Psychiatry* 6.1 (2007): 14-18.

⁵ While Ronell does not offer a detailed discussion of the concept (see Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 23), I

At the same time, under consumer capitalism the ethical, economic, or emotional demands of the Other are seen as an obstacle to success, and narcissism obviates the sense of dependency on others, so that the workers who produce consumer goods, for example, have no ethical claim on the consumer. The quintessential narcissist drug is cocaine, the heavy user of which “experiences pleasurable ego expansion, increased feelings of dominance and control over self and environment,” feeling “complete unto himself” (Spotts and Shontz 131). But cocaine pumps up and insulates the self so effectively and completely that it threatens to hijack consumerist energies into its own insular cycle, becoming a “dangerous simulacrum” of licit consumption (Lenson 176). This subversion gives the impetus for the drug’s prohibition and makes cocaine addiction the most visible and controversial manifestation of narcissism, but the latter must be recognized as the fundamental problem. The *gringo* characters that forcefully make their presence felt in the Zurdo novels show no evidence of cocaine use while displaying a range of variations on narcissism, representing the confluence of demand and prohibition that shapes the psychotropic lives of Mexicans by enabling the economy of fear and greed of narcotrafficking and interdiction. By delinking cocaine use and the obsessive behavior and solipsistic attitudes associated with it, these novels allow for a shift of vantage point, allowing cocaine to appear as the symptom of a cultural tendency toward self-exaltation rather than the root cause of social problems, a tendency radiating out from the U.S. but increasingly taking root elsewhere as a cultural adjunct of globalizing economic systems.⁶ However, the totality of these novels’ *representations* of intoxication

adapt the term to refer specifically to patterns of psychotropy that support the ego-inflation of a pathological narcissism: see American Psychiatric Association, “Personality Disorders.” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fifth Edition* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

⁶ The teleotropic patterns of consumerism and the resultant narcissist mentality are rapidly spreading with consumerist culture to affect all levels of societies like Mexico’s. But among the poor these dynamics have a distinct character: the pressures of consumerism are projected into marginalized communities where they can scarcely constitute more than a taunting reminder of the impossibility of one’s participation, until the marginalized take capitalism’s spirit to heart while rejecting the norms that keep its violence invisible and systemic. Sayak Valencia uses the term *necroempoderamiento* to describe the process through which people turn explicit violence into “una herramienta para cumplir con las exigencias de la sociedad hiperconsumista y sus procesos de subjetivación capitalista.” Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore* (Barcelona: Melusina, 2010) 147-49, 192. Through this process, people enriched through narcotraffic may indeed display extremes of narcissism previously unimagined, pushing the dynamic to its ultimate consequences. In this sense, the entire economy of fear discussed previously could be seen as an outgrowth of the psychotropy of consumer capitalism, and this is hinted at in Mendoza’s novels.

should not be considered separately from their own *intervention* as cultural products in the psychotropic economy, and the nature of this intervention must be scrutinized.

The Politics of Pleasure and the Intoxication of Discovery

It has been known since Aristotle that “we delight in contemplating the most accurately made images of the very things that are painful for us to see, such as the forms of the most contemptible insects and of dead bodies,” and the Zurdo novels do not necessarily shy away from this kind of “delight” (22-3; 1448b). This fact leads to a critique of Mendoza and other “narconovelists” as literary drug pushers, producing work that is opportunistic and exploitative, giving the public what they crave: a supposedly realistic, voyeuristic look into the violent world of drug traffic. Rafael Lemus, for example, writes in *Letras libres* that literature about narco-traffic from northern Mexico in general, and Mendoza’s work in particular, betrays a violent and chaotic reality by simplifying it, creating, “con ánimo turístico...una postal del México más reciente” and that, like other sub-genres, “se explota un tema y se hace comercio.” The representation of the violence of the illicit drug industry, in his view, “[n]o está allí para sacudir al lector sino, como lo demás, para complacerlo” (40).⁷ While I disagree with Lemus’s conclusions, instead of refuting his affirmation about what Mendoza’s work does for or to the reader, I’d like to expand on just that question and explore its implications in different directions. Lemus argues that the realism he is referring to, a “docile” narco-*costumbrismo*, falsely imposes logic and order onto a reality that is ruled by irrationality and chaos; that these formulaic novels propose tidy causes and effects that provide a satisfactory explanatory framework for the violence.⁸ What he proposes instead are “antinovelas” that mimic the illogic of drug violence with “[u]na prosa brutal, destazada, incoherente... Una narrativa

⁷ Lemus’s essay was also reprinted in Viviane Mahieux and Oswaldo Zavala eds., *Tierras de nadie: el Norte en la narrativa mexicana contemporánea*. (Mexico City: Fondo Editorial Tierra Adentro, 2012).

⁸ More recently, Oswaldo Zavala has defended the use of both realist and non-realist approaches to narco-violence, proposing that to be a significant and ethical intervention in the cultural field, what is important is that a work challenge rather than reaffirm the “archive” of hegemonic discourses about drug trafficking. Oswaldo Zavala, “Imagining the US-Mexico Drug War: The Critical Limits of Narconarratives”, *Comparative Literature* 66.3 (2014): 356. Foremost among his concerns is the official discourse that criminal organizations represent an *external* threat to the Mexican people and the Mexican state, rather than recognizing the historical *interiority* of drug trafficking to society and politics (Idem, 342). The Zurdo novels live up to this challenge by faithfully portraying the narcotics industry as tightly interwoven into the fabric of Mexican institutions and, I would argue, goes a step further by laying bare the ways in which intoxication itself is interior to culture and biology, as discussed in this study.

homocida, con vocación de suicidio” (41). The fundamentals of Lemus’s critique of realism are at least as old as the Frankfurt School, but not for that invalid, and his aesthetic proposal is indeed interesting. However, Lemus’s indictment of work like Mendoza’s betrays a rigid distinction between high and popular literature, an old and stubborn dichotomy whose usefulness today is questionable at best.⁹

A novel may function in many ways, and I would make two points about those of the Zurdo series. First, novels that can be read as “popular” and “realist,” like Mendoza’s, may be valuable for elucidating a complex reality, a purpose Lemus dismisses (41). Do such narconovels simplify reality? Of course, as do all cultural products that attempt to represent reality in some way. Is there a danger in giving the illusion of a transparent, faithful and comprehensive portrait of reality? Certainly, but there may be a complementary danger in falling into the nihilism that Lemus identifies as the ethic of narco-culture but which also inheres in a critical stance that condemns any attempt to explain overwhelming violence. In Eduardo Antonio Parra’s sharp response to Lemus’s article, he reasonably points out that *norteños* live with the reality of the narcotics industry to a more intimate degree than most and do indeed understand something of its functioning and, yes, its ethical system. In contrast, he identifies Lemus’s perspective with “la visión histérica y superficial de la clase media cuya información proviene de la prensa y la televisión,” concluding that, from a distance, the narco-industry may indeed appear to be, as Lemus affirms, merely “el puto caos” (Parra 61). While Thanatos may have a solid foothold in the violence of the narcotics industry, no apparent manifestation of irrationality should be resignedly sequestered to a zone outside the (admittedly tenuous) grasp of human understanding. Novels like Mendoza’s are “didactic,” says Lemus, and perhaps they are, in the sense that they are social novels that are—much to Lemus’s chagrin—interested in showing causes and effects, and even in highlighting the shared responsibility of powerful social actors. This kind of “populist” novel, as Lemus characterizes it, may be looked

⁹ Also see Prados, who quotes novelist Emiliano Monge: “Hay dos narcoliteraturas: la policiaca y la literaria.” Luis Prados, “Más allá de la narcoliteratura”, *El País* (31 Mar., 2012): n. pag. Gabriela Polit Dueñas, for her part, sees the Zurdo series as a retreat from the accurate and challenging representation of local culture achieved in his previous work and a concession to the demands and expectations of transnational publishing (in a sense a shift from the “literary” toward the “popular”). Gabriela Polit Duenas, *Narrating Narcos: Stories from Culiacán and Medellín* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2013) 77-8. To the extent that I refer in this article to a distinction between “popular” and “literary” fiction, my intention is to refer to common perceptions rather than to accept the legitimacy of these as stable aesthetic categories.

down upon in certain academic circles, but is not for that without social value or interest.¹⁰

My second point in relation to the critique that Mendoza's realism is essentially narcotic is that Mendoza's Zurdo novels have a deep relationship with psychotropy that includes but transcends easy and pleasurable consumption. While they may not heed Lemus's call to create a prose as violent as the narcos themselves, they do bring about a seemingly self-conscious mirroring—thematically and at the level of reading itself—of structures of addiction and desire. These novels may indeed be formulaic and meant for relatively easy and pleasurable consumption by the public, as suggested by some of the slightly lurid covers. *Prueba del ácido* boasts an extreme close-up of a beautiful female mouth, slightly open, with glistening, full, pink lips, on the lower of which fresh blood is welling. *Nombre de perro* features the torso of a seated female with exposed cleavage who languidly dangles a pistol from a finger hooked through the trigger guard. These books satisfy the desires of the reader for a tough detective, a titillating love interest, plenty of clever banter and *norteño* slang, gun battles and explosions, plot twists that highlight society's sordid underbelly, and a last-minute revelation of the killer leading to a violent confrontation. Mendoza seems pretty comfortable pushing this kind of product; the Zurdo novels in some ways seem to revel in their identity as genre fiction, their prose informed by the confidence that comes with skillful adherence to a well-crafted formula.

However, textual intoxication is by no means the exclusive domain of "popular" fiction; the Zurdo novels also offer pleasures often considered to be associated with the rarefied realms of "high" literature. Mendoza's style of presenting dialog without any indication of change of speaker creates a disorienting, occasionally irritating, cognitive challenge, even alongside fast-paced action passages. More significantly, through numerous references to prominent literary works, authors, and to the study of literature itself, and through several intertexts woven into the series to varying degrees of depth, the novels give the impression that they are products self-consciously inserted into a cultural field still largely defined by the poles of high and

¹⁰ This judgment is in resonance with Mendoza's own assessment of his work's relevance, as relayed by Prados: they are "novelas que restituyen la verdad en toda su complejidad social." Luis Prados, "Élmér Mendoza: 'La narcoliteratura no es oportunista,'" *El País* (26 nov., 2012): n.p.

popular literature. They come across as works that are proudly “popular” but also aware of, and interested in, the world of canonical literature.¹¹

In this regard, the fact that Mendoza’s detective studied literature at the university is important both as an explanatory device for the literary touches interspersed into his internal discourse and as part of the conversation that the novels sustain with literary traditions and the cultural field (*Balas* 86). Literary icons from the global (Spanish Golden Age figures like Cervantes and Quevedo) to the national (Juan Rulfo), to the local (Sinaloan poet Jaime Labastida) are enlisted for everything from incidental mentions and names of characters, to poetry quotations that comment on the situations in which the characters find themselves, to minor plotlines. It is Rulfo’s work that appears most often; at one point Susana Luján is compared to Susana San Juan (*Nombre* 92), who she ends up mirroring as an unattainable lover when she abruptly moves back to California at the end of the novel. Indeed, the characters in *Nombre de perro* resonate with those of *Pedro Páramo* but also with Mendoza’s explicitly intertextual novelistic homage to Rulfo, *Cóbraselo caro*. Mendieta’s son, Jason, like Nicolás Pureco from Mendoza’s earlier novel, is a Chicano who comes to Mexico to reconnect with his family and heritage. Like Rulfo’s Juan Preciado, Jason comes specifically to meet his father, and although the tone of this reunion is much lighter, its ultimate failure when Susana departs opens the door to the despair and death that emanate so insistently from *Pedro Páramo* and *Cóbraselo caro*. In the latter work, as Oswaldo Zavala points out, “Mendoza ha convertido a todo el país en un vasto y complejo Comala” (“(Re)fundación” 57). The image is perhaps all the more apt in view of the escalation of bloodshed during the Calderón *sexenio*, which was coming to a close by the time *Nombre de perro* was published in 2012, and in that novel Mendieta’s personal struggles in the context of the state of the country evoke José Carlos González Boixo’s assertion that Juan Preciado’s personal journey is doomed to failure because of the “fracaso colectivo, social de Comala” (658-59).

¹¹ It should be noted that Mendoza’s own statements on the question of labels and genres within fiction are somewhat contradictory. On one hand, according to Gabriela Polit Dueñas, Mendoza does not believe his work to adhere to a “formula” defined by the literature of narco trafficking, nor does he see such literature as a distinct sub-genre: “Literature...is simply literature” (11). Later, she quotes him saying that he essentially plays along with the categorization undertaken by the public or critics (64-5). However, in a 2012 interview with Luis Prados, he seems to take ownership of the “narcoliteratura” label: “Es una estética de la violencia... Me gusta la palabra narcoliteratura porque los que estamos comprometidos con este registro estético de novela social tenemos las pelotas para escribir sobre ello porque crecimos allí y sabemos de qué hablamos” (“Élmer Mendoza”).

However, the presence of these subtler literary intoxications is perhaps less pronounced than the multi-level involvement of these books with structures of addiction. When the popularity of leisure reading exploded in Europe during the eighteenth century, it was recognized widely—and with a great deal of alarm—as an addictive psychotropic practice capable of dangerously “inflaming the passions,” especially those of young women (Smail, *On Deep History* 181-83). Still, even someone as tough as el Zurdo was subject to getting drawn into the romance of a classic like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which “me traía clavado” when he was a young student (*Nombre* 132), and he finds himself “atrapado” in the historical novel *Noticias del imperio* (*Nombre* 244). There are a number of ways literature may be intoxicating; Roland Barthes cites *Monte Cristo* as an example of a text that brings him pleasure, as opposed to *jouissance* (roughly translated as “bliss”), an anarchic relationship that is for him the highest calling of literature (40). Despite its association with literary classics, for Barthes “pleasure” exists on a spectrum with that of the striptease (a phenomenon not unknown to the action of the Zurdo novels), the gradual and pleasurable revelation (10). This pleasure accounts for much of the addictive quality of literature, as well as that of investigation, whether criminal or, I daresay, academic. The high we are chasing here is the addictive rush of discovery, of finding out answers to vexing questions; this is the domain of mystery, suspense, and police fiction, where a good author can stimulate desire by creating a knowledge gap in a compelling story, and then string the reader along with crumbs of information that eventually lead to a (temporarily) satisfying resolution.

The desire the reader feels mirrors that of the investigator or the character trying to solve the mystery. In this economy of intoxication, we, with Mendieta, are fed small “fixes” of information, spaced out enough for us to always be jonesing. Often, he and the reader are left waiting like junkies for the next hit while he pursues a dead end, or we overdose with him when he barks up the wrong tree and the narcos try to kill him. However, the novels eventually highlight the experiential distance between the detective and the reader as the light pleasure of reading merely has us easily turning the next page or opening the next book, whereas the compulsion of investigation eventually contributes to el Zurdo's severe existential crises as he bangs his head against his own impotence in the face of the impunity of power. This state, which will be examined in more depth later, represents the ultimate failure of the

variety of psychotropic coping mechanisms deployed, under the immense pressure of teleotropic fear enabled by global patterns of narcossism.

A Psychotropic Jungle

Throughout *Balas de plata*, *La prueba del ácido*, and *Nombre de perro*, Élmer Mendoza's narrator lavishes assiduous attention on the psychotropic lives of the characters, including their use of legal substances and practices. These practices are often linked to particular spaces; when a former lover returns from the United States for a visit, she asks Mendieta to take her to his favorite place, and he replies, "tengo dos: el Miró, donde puedo desayunar, tomar café y si está Bety, la dueña, me atienden mejor que si fuera el gobernador, o El Quijote, donde hay tortas de pierna y cerveza suficiente para embriagar a Culiacán entero" (*Nombre* 51). Indeed, as exemplified above, Quijote and Miró figure as the backdrops of countless psychotropic banquets in which el Zurdo, his colleagues and others get wired on caffeine or mellow out with alcoholic beverages and gorge themselves as they try to fit together the pieces of the crime at hand, relax or recover. It is clear that psychotropy is closely related to pleasure, and it would be only fair to say that many of these practices represent nothing more than a universal desire to seek pleasure through socially sanctioned means of psychotropy, in this case, food, alcohol, caffeine, music, and so on.¹²

Music as a psychotropic practice, though it needs no other reason than pleasure, is also perhaps the most versatile psychotropic mechanism exemplified in the Zurdo series, which is notable for its relentless soundtrack of rock and other styles of music, an aspect that recalls *onda* authors like José Agustín and Parménides García Saldaña. A chapter rarely goes by without a reference to a song, either something that the characters are listening to, or contributed by the narrator to

¹² For the psychotropic action of foods, see Bartley Hoebel, "Brain neurotransmitters in food and drug reward", *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 42.5 (1985): 1133-1150. For that of music, see Valorie Salimpoor, Salimpoor et al., "Anatomically Distinct Dopamine Release during Anticipation and Experience of Peak Emotion to Music", *Nature Neuroscience*. 14.2 (2011): 257-62. Perhaps the best example of the psychotropy of pure pleasure in the Zurdo novels is the gastronomic zeal often displayed by the characters in passages that make it clear that food maintains a prominent place in the psychotropic landscape of Mendoza's Culiacán. In these instances, the narration is clearly infected by the characters' culinary enthusiasm, and the sense of euphoria is palpable: *Nombre de perro* goes into detail enumerating various ways to serve *pescado zarandeado al horno* including, of course, alcohol pairings (87). Even the formidable *capo* Samantha Valdés is seen cooking with her mother, and we are privy to the mouth-watering details (129-30). While one might simply chalk this up to a realist attention to detail, this level of description is actually rare in the Zurdo novels, which focus more on dialogue, psychology, and the dynamics of investigation.

illustrate the situation being narrated.¹³ In the latter case, these songs serve as intertexts that reinforce or enrich the meanings transmitted through the text, and may stimulate literary pleasure in the reader, as discussed above. However, when the songs are played and heard by the characters, we get an outside glimpse of music's diverse psychotropic potential. According to Valorie Salimpoor and colleagues, listening to one's preferred music can engage the striatal dopaminergic system of the brain, producing euphoria and craving responses similar to the effects of some drugs (257, 260-62). In *Balas de plata*, Herman's Hermits have el Zurdo "patinando," and he pronounces the Rolling Stones cover of Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" "fina y subyugante," (19, 75, emphasis added). But music is also capable of more subtle, soothing effects. In *Prueba del ácido*, awake too early and depressed, Mendieta puts on Simon and Garfunkel's "April Come She Will," and "se quedó quieto, con la certeza de que el amanecer redime" (66). On the other hand, when morning does come, we see music and caffeine working together in a stimulant synergy to move the apathetic detective: "intentaba reanimarse con...*My Back Pages*...de Bob Dylan" as his housekeeper serves him coffee. When he tells her that "la vida no vale nada," she warns him that "son cosas de José Alfredo, pero no siempre tiene razón, era un hombre muy atormentado, alcohólico, enamorado y débil" (67), impressively linking clinical depression, depressing music and central nervous system depressants. Here we see condensed music's multivalent psychotropic potential, functioning alternately as stimulant, anti- or pro-depressant.

However, music can also repel and attract through its emotional appeal and be used to affect the moods of others. When el Zurdo and his old flame, Susana, hear a narcocorrido blaring from a Hummer, she comments, "que música tan fea. Deberían prohibirla," but the detective saves the day by playing "*Angel of the Morning*, con Juice Newton," on his own car stereo, which helps facilitate the lovers' excited conversation all the way back to his place (*Nombre* 158). Previously, el Zurdo had helped seal Susana's emotional attachment to him with a concretely *teletropic* use of music: "puso Air Supply, *I'm All Out of Love*, un grupo fresa que supuso le gustaría a ella y acertó. Ay Edgar, qué linda música" (55). In fact, this can be seen as an instance

¹³ Fernández Rojas y Ramírez Gil have catalogued and commented on many of the musical references from *Balas de plata* and *La prueba del ácido*. Hilda Fernández Rojas and Rogerio Ramírez Gil, "El Sherlock Holmes de la Col Pop," in M. E. Arizmendi Domínguez and I. E. Moreno Rojas, eds., *Élmer Mendoza: visión de una realidad literaria* (Culiacán: Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 2013), 37-40.

of competing teletropic forces clashing through musical vectors. Narcocorridos function to project the power of the narcos, causing awe and admiration or fear and revulsion (depending on the listener's attitude) in others; here Susana feels the latter while Mendieta endeavors to cancel this effect and create a relaxed, sensual atmosphere.

Narcocorridos project a diversity of cultural meanings, making their place in Mexican society complex,¹⁴ but as shown above they can also serve as a technology of the teletropy of fear, along with publicly displayed corpses, *narcomantas*, and so on. In *Nombre de perro*, the teenage son of feared narco la Tenia Solium specializes in creating signs to place on the cadavers of their victims, explaining their infraction and warning others to learn from their example (45). Mendoza's black sense of humor comes into play here, where childlike naïveté and creativity combine with lack of education and cold-blooded murder: the teenager's signs invariably include spelling errors, for example, "respeten culevras" (45). Still, the irony does nothing to diminish the undeniably real and deadly threat of this type of message, which contributes to a pervasive climate of insecurity that changes the way people feel and even affects their perception. The universality of fear creates a phenomenon that Diana Taylor, in another context, has called "percepticide": people willfully refuse to see or know as a means of self-preservation (119-138). After an intense street shootout between rival gangs in *Nombre de perro*, the narrator sardonically describes the aftermath: "poco a poco, vecinos atemorizados asomaron la cabeza, llamaron a la policía que vigilaba otro país, y se prepararon para decir que ellos no habían visto nada" (47). In *Balas de plata*, the body of a man related to the case el Zurdo is investigating is dumped in a parking area for tractor-trailers, and although two truckers witness this, "ni locos lo dirían. Con la policía mexicana cuanto más lejos mejor y de los matones también" (20). Thus, the climate of fear is seen to be all-encompassing in that there is no refuge in the law when the line between criminal organizations and the state is so thin, and it creates a perceptual and ethical paralysis that buttresses impunity for the perpetrators of violence.

It should not come as a surprise, then, under such conditions of extreme stress, as pleasure becomes more difficult to experience, that psychotropic practices take on more of a defensive character, deployed in a (frequently unsuccessful) attempt to ensure psychic survival and enable baseline social and economic functioning (Wills

¹⁴ For a broad consideration of the history and social function of narcocorridos, see Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, *Cantar a los narcos* (Mexico, D.F: Temas De Hoy, 2011).

and Hirky).¹⁵ Ultimately, however, the strategies of coping available to Mendieta fall short under the overwhelming weight of a sense of powerlessness and frustration in the face of unanswerable power. This psychic pattern dates back to Mendieta's history of childhood abuse at the hands of a priest, Padre Bardominos. This trauma exacerbates his existential struggles when he again faces criminal and official impunity in the context of his investigations. In addition to el Zurdo's anti-anxiety medication, his psychiatrist, Doctor Parra, prescribes romantic intimacy, but this plan backfires when one of the detective's lovers turns out to be a murderer and then the next is murdered. His anxiety becomes even worse, and even taking a double dose of his anxiolytic his sense of desperation increases: "este pinche ansiolítico me lo voy a untar en los huevos a ver si así me hace efecto" (*Prueba* 66).

Indeed, of the many psychotropic forces that are imposed on el Zurdo by himself and by others, perhaps the most powerful is the inebriating attraction of sex and love—between which this study will not venture to distinguish—and the devastating effects of their withdrawal: in other words, human beings (or at least human relationships) as intoxicants. When Dr. Parra prescribes love for Mendieta's depression and anxiety, he does not foresee that the side effects of this medication will make the cure worse than the disease. In fact, part of the formula that structures these novels is the inclusion of an intoxicating love interest for el Zurdo; in *Balas de plata* and *La Prueba del ácido* this takes the shape of an elusive or absent lover over whom Mendieta pines and ruminates. However, in *Nombre de perro*, the variation is that things look up for the detective's love life, and correspondingly, the intoxication has a different character. The intoxicant in *Nombre* is Susana Luján, a long-ago lover who, unbeknownst to el Zurdo, was pregnant with his son when she left Culiacán for Los Angeles eighteen years earlier. Now, suddenly, he has an adult son and a kind and beautiful woman has reappeared in his life. It is the kind of intoxication that has him

¹⁵ For Mendieta, for example, alcohol is an indispensable medicine for getting through the day as well as for ending it: at one point, he realizes with a sense of shock, "Uta es tardísimo y no he tomado ni una cerveza" (*Prueba* 96). His free indirect speech calls whiskey "esa brujería escocesa que lo hacía dormir lo justo" (*Nombre* 54). In the deadly context of detective work in Culiacán, Mendieta's use of alcohol functions not as an index of his moral character, as it does in much of the "hard-boiled" tradition of detective fiction (see Rita Rippetoe, *Booze and the Private Eye: Alcohol in the Hard-Boiled Novel* [Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2004], 24), but as a crude treatment for anxiety and a sleeping aid. The detective also uses tobacco to cope with stress: waiting at Susana Luján's door for his long-awaited *reencuentro* with her, he thinks, frantically "¿[Q]ué pretende, que me infarte por los nervios? Se recargó en el carro y sacó un cigarrillo... Fuego, aroma. ¿Los que prohibieron fumar pensarían en esta situación? Deben haber sido personas muy seguras de sí mismas... ¿cómo vivirían esta circunstancia?" (*Nombre* 48).

waxing poetic, though one could not say it is a pure, metaphysical love. His rekindling with Susana awakens his body as a character with whom he periodically enters into dialogue. Concerning the nature of el Zurdo and Susana's nascent relationship, his body affirms, "¿acaso crees que es tu deslumbrante inteligencia lo que la trae loquita? No señor: reconoce que soy el artífice" (133). The arguments between Mendieta's body and his reasoning mind dramatize the physiological compulsion that drives much human behavior and the ensuing internal conflicts, specifically underlining the biological underpinning of amorous intoxication.¹⁶

But in the other two cases, the detective's amorous entanglements are what threaten to throw him over the edge when his coping mechanisms fail or actually exacerbate his problems. These instances highlight the feeling of desperate impotence induced by a confrontation of one's powerlessness in the face of impunity, a feeling surely not unique to el Zurdo in contemporary Mexico. The murder of Mayra Cabral de Melo, a Brazilian exotic dancer with whom Mendieta had a brief affair, gives impetus to the events of *La prueba del ácido*. In this case, el Zurdo struggles with the intoxicating distress of *absence*, using alcohol to attempt to negate Mayra's memory and negate the sense of emptiness that increasingly consumes him. His search for consolation and answers even leads him briefly to pursue a religious palliative, when he finds himself reluctantly praying to folk saint Jesús Malverde for help. "Respiró hondo. El vacío que experimentaba era purulento. Es difícil saber cuánto estuvo allí sin moverse, intentando comprender la hendidura en que se encontraba. ¿Qué me pasa? Ni siquiera me había enamorado de ella ni la vi muchos días..." (46).

This passage makes it clear that Mayra's death has exacerbated a more fundamental existential problem that Mendieta must now face down, in the context of the limited reach of justice in the Mexican narco-state. "Yo, ¿para qué nació?" he ruminates at the granary where Cabral de Melo's body was found, "Sintió el impulso de que su vida no valía la pena. Para valer madre. Y el vacío se manifestó de golpe. Para ser una pinche sombra" (95). And later: "Mientras conducía sin rumbo experimentó el vacío: Al fin comprendo el significado de ser un cero a la izquierda, de

¹⁶ The inclusion of Mendieta's body as a character in *Nombre de perro* also suggests an interesting sense of corporeal protagonism in which the body is apparently not "simply" an object (14, 30, 49-50, 91, 133, 143). This is important in light of the apparent objectification of women as intoxicants in the narration, which does seem to feature a male gaze that sometimes unduly focuses on physical aspects of female characters (see for example *Nombre* 133). In this analysis, on the other hand, the psychotropy of sex and love is understood as a complex, intersubjective interaction of teletropy (which involves agency on the part of the "intoxicant") and autotropy (which implies self-intoxication through one's own image of the object of desire).

vivir sin sentido, de ejercer una profesión que no me sirvió para resolver el caso que más me pegó por dentro" (236). In Ronell's engagement of Heidegger's treatment of addiction and *Dasein* (being-in-the-world), she takes up his concept of *thrownness*, "an experience of nothing or nullity, an experience which Heidegger calls, 'guilt'—a radical impotence regarding the conditions of the 'there' in which one finds oneself thrown." It is an experience "of total powerlessness—powerlessness or fascination, or heady vertigo" (43-4). Mendieta's experience of an inner void and his feelings of impotence—no doubt exacerbated by the unanswerable power of the narcos—are indeed linked with a vertiginous fascination, in which his memories of Mayra, represented in the text in italicized quotations of her speech, erupt constantly into his consciousness. The state of thrownness marks a turning point at which *Dasein* may resolve upon the course of "freedom" (pursuing actions that while repetitive are at least voluntary) or, maintaining a radical passivity, may compulsively reenact its own thrownness (44).¹⁷ In this sense, Mendieta's obsession with Mayra in itself forms part of an addictive structure that is at once countered and supplemented with liberal recourse to alcohol, which serves to alternately summon and dispel her phantom (*Prueba* 57, 62, 103-04).¹⁸ In the face of his "radical impotence" in a context where the powerful habitually prey on the weak without facing repercussions, as figured by the particulars of the case at hand, he compulsively reenacts the experience of his personal and professional failures as his coping strategies become self-destructive.

El Zurdo is battered by a similar existential crisis in *Balas de plata*, which introduces the first (within the chronology of the novels) of his series of memorable lovers, Goga Fox, a married woman with a "paso perturbador que mataba... Lo aturdieron el aroma, la sonrisa, su mirada" (130). When they first meet, Goga jokingly and provocatively asks if Mendieta has tried "Gogacola...una bebida viscosa y

¹⁷ This phenomenology of thrownness and addiction has observable correlates inside the brain. Neurophysiological research has corroborated the intoxicating and addictive properties of romantic attraction, indicating that intense romantic love—as well as its loss—has been shown to activate dopamine rich areas of the brain associated with motivation and reward (Helen Fisher et al., "Reward, Addiction, and Emotion Regulation Systems Associated with Rejection in Love", *Journal of Neurophysiology* 104.1 (2010): 56. Dopamine, then, is associated with reward but also with craving, and Helen Fisher and colleagues found that rejected lovers show activation in the same parts of the dopaminergic system that is implicated in both the cocaine high and craving for cocaine (57). This fact may go a long way toward explaining the lengths of depravity reached by many a spurned lover, and Fisher's definition of romantic love as an emotional-motivational structure that evolved from a mammalian drive to "pursue preferred mates" (51) is broad enough to apply to the kind of obsessive, sexual, quasi-romantic attraction provoked in Mayra Cabral de Melo's clients.

¹⁸ See Ronell for thoughts on this function of alcohol (*Crack Wars* 5).

transparente, hay dulce y ácida,” and indeed she works on the detective like a drug, its effects pleasant or harsh depending on the ups and downs (mostly downs) of their relationship (130). Goga’s intoxication is often described in its physical manifestations: when Mendieta sees her, or anticipates seeing her, he suffers from “boca seca” and “corazón desbocado” or, in clinical terms, “taquicardia” (130-1). Physical contact with Goga intensifies these reactions: el Zurdo experiences “besos que erizaban los párpados, la piel, el vello púbico” (132). On a psychological level, *Gogacola Dulce* “[despoja del] futuro, la inteligencia,” creating a powerful addiction (he is “clavado”) (132). When they have a pleasant reunion toward the end of the novel, he asks himself, “¿Qué tiene el sexo que ata con tanta determinación?, ¿qué tiene que conecta el cerebro y afecta las conductas más elementales?, ¿cómo es que genera tanta dependencia?” (202). A vague awareness of the biological underpinnings of his experiences seems to be of little help, so el Zurdo turns to alcohol to cope with the stress of the relationship when things become difficult (134). In *Crack Wars*, Avital Ronell channels Poe and Baudelaire to ruminate on the function of alcohol: a drug that is capable of making phantoms appear or disappear, ideal for treating “something in you that must be encrypted” in the sense of “buried” (5). However, Mendieta goes even further in this direction. When, at the end of *Balas de plata*, Goga and her husband are revealed to be the killers in the case el Zurdo has been investigating (248-54), his decision to hand them over to narco-executive Samantha Valdés rather than following the legally mandated procedures—and risking them using their connections to escape prosecution—can be understood in part as a desperate attempt to annihilate his own suffering.

However, Goga also represents the impunity of power that triggers in el Zurdo a tremendous sense of weakness, connecting to his history of abuse and to his experience of the overwhelming and unanswerable power of criminal-official networks. Goga’s name alone, of course, speaks volumes. Apart from the political resonance of her last name, a connoisseur of 1960s Anglo rock like Mendoza would be well aware of the usage of “fox” to denote a beautiful woman. More importantly, though, the name Goga evokes *-agogo*, as in *pedagogo* or *demagogo*, “indicating a person or thing that leads or incites to action,”¹⁹ from Greek “-agōgos ... to lead.”²⁰ English

¹⁹ Also “denoting a substance that stimulates the secretion of something: galactagogue,” lining up interestingly with the way psychotropic substances and practices affect neurotransmitter activity. From “-agogue,” *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition* (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010).

also has "agog", meaning "full of intense interest or excitement [because of something]," reportedly from Middle French *en gogues*, "in mirth," although both etymological lines converge on the idea of an incitation or influence exercised by an agent ("Agog"). Indeed, Goga's intoxication of el Zurdo is more consciously teletropic than in any other case, in the sense that she uses it to shield herself from suspicion. Her association with Samantha Valdés and her connections make her a stand-in for the untouchable narcos, although she eventually runs afoul of them, and she participates in a constellation of teletropic forces in the service of impunity that nearly crushes el Zurdo.

This takes place toward the end of *Balas de plata*, where the intoxication of investigation discussed above becomes a driver of the novel's action when the powers that be demand that the case be suspended. Mendieta and his colleagues, though deprived of professional and economic motivations to continue, seem unable to stop investigating, el Zurdo finding himself "clavado" (242). The psychotropic and addictive effects of investigation are laid bare in a conversation between the detective and Goga: "Cuando resuelves un caso, ¿Qué sientes?... Una profunda paz... Quiere decir que ahora estás impaciente. Como perro rabioso" (202-3). As the team continues to come across new information pertaining to the closed case, he has the sensation that "el muy cabrón se está resolviendo solo" (202). Through this kind of personification, the case itself is imputed agency as an addicting force, pointing to the way the object of addiction seems to interact with the addict, often being experienced as a willing entity: "pinche caso, no quiere dejarme" (235). For his part, el Zurdo, like a struggling junky, resists the call of the case, repeatedly making remarks to the effect that "Qué bueno que suspendieron la investigación. Me hubiera vuelto loco" (201). At one point he tells his partner, Gris, that he has lost interest: "estoy harto de navegar entre intocables que infringen las leyes a su antojo. Hubo otra larga pausa. Me dejé llevar por la inercia" (233). Only a page later, however, he has to recognize that the case is still dominating his thoughts. In addition to himself, he tries weakly to convince Gris and Ortega, his forensic specialist, that they should move on (238, 242). Ortega, too, mentions the influence of inertia, a concept that becomes very suggestive when considered in the context of addiction. A type of movement neither impelled internally nor externally, in human terms inertia is synonymous with habit, through

²⁰ "< Greek -agōgos, -ē, -on, akin to ágein to lead." From "-agogue," *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (Random House, Inc.: n.d.).

which behaviors become automatic, independent of conscious control, and habit in turn forms part of the structure of addiction (Wehrenberg 31). The investigators, however, seem to locate inertia outside of human subjectivity: el Zurdo lets himself be *carried along* by it, and according to Ortega “cuando un caso no se termina hay una inercia, simplemente estamos en ella” (242). In this sense the case, as addictive agent, is an object with its own directionality and velocity and the investigators are “atrapado en él” (195).

The automatic action of habit draws one into the inertial field of the object of desire and addiction holds one there, “in the place where the distinction between interiority and exteriority is radically suspended” (Ronell 72). This position implies an interminable chase for something that is close but unattainable, since the lead is just a fix, always wearing off too soon, only the means to another lead. Ultimate satisfaction is always deferred because the difference between a lead and the resolution of a case is only a matter of degree: a resolved case is soon replaced by a new one, and the investigator is again left chasing a phantom, “elaborating [an] Other as absence” (Ronell 75). As Mendieta ruminates on the case, on Goga, and on a number of other stressors, a confluence that has brought him to “el límite,” a state of overwhelmed “indefensión,” he concludes, “Realmente es la búsqueda de un otro que no existe, y que sin embargo nos tiene arteramente contaminada la identidad” (244, 248). This is the addict “devouring, or drinking up the toxic spill of the Other” (Ronell 63). Goga offers an image of herself as a toxic phantom, a teletropic manipulation of Mendieta’s emotional and mental states that combines with the influence and impunity of the criminal-official complex to cause el Zurdo to acutely experience his own impotence. A state of thrownness exacerbated by the extreme violence of a particular social reality, a helpless and desperate state provoked by the calculated incursions of the Other, this kind of intoxication is radically distinct from my appropriation of Ronell’s concept of narcossism, where the Other is held at bay through chemical prosthesis.²¹

This pattern of narcossism is most notable in Mendoza’s work in certain *gringos* who intervene in the action of the novels. For his part, Mendieta looks on

²¹ Though distinct and in a way opposite in character, the two experiences are connected in a number of ways: for one thing, narcossism contributes to regimes of fear and stress that create crises like el Zurdo’s. However, going back to Smail’s discussion of the psychotropy of consumer capitalism, it could be that the teletropic regime of stress created by a perpetually recurrent lack of desired status goods induces an experience of thrownness until or unless the stress can be placated by consumption, whether by the abundant means of the privileged or through the redefinition or appropriation of capitalist violence performed by marginalized people who enter the drug trade as a means of *necroempoderamiento* (Valencia 147-49).

Mexico's neighbors to the north with grave mistrust. In *La prueba del ácido*, Chief Briseño notifies him that he has received an invitation from the DEA for a training course on fighting organized crime. After some consideration el Zurdo concludes, "que se metieran su curso por dónde les cupiera. Con los gringos, entre más lejos mejor, mi comandante, y con los de la DEA, ni a las canicas" (20). Later, Briseño brings it up again: "Oye, los gringos insisten en que vayas, creo que te quieren enganchar," to which Mendieta responds, "Pero por la boca, como a un pez" (80). *Enganchar* is the same word el Zurdo uses when he politely refuses the cocaine offered to him by Max Garcés, Samantha Valdés's chief of security: "No vaya a ser que me enganches y me salga más caro el remedio que la enfermedad" (*Nombre* 185). The idea seems to be that *gringos*, like cocaine, will get their hooks in you if you are not careful, suggesting an instrumental approach to relations with the Other: "Is interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends)," to quote *DSM-5* on narcissistic personality disorder. The most memorable *gringos* in these novels do indeed attempt the narcissistic construction an idealized self through psychotropic cultural practices, as they aggressively pursue their own interests with disdain or hostility toward the Other.

A prime example of this is the man el Zurdo refers to as "Arnold Schwarzenegger," who is obsessed with Susana Luján, and has followed her all the way from California, where she and Jason Mendieta have been living. He is physically imposing—"un gringo alto, fornido, con tatuajes en los brazos"—and not disposed to brook any opposition, explanation, or mitigation of his demands: his "mirada vidriosa" is a logical complement to his "aliento alcohólico," but also implies rigidity and impermeability (92). His identification with the real Schwarzenegger—who we should remember was the star of *Terminator* before he was the "governorator" of California—combined with el Zurdo comparing him with Robocop, creates the image of an unfeeling machine. When Susana tries to talk him down, he barks ("ladra"), "Tú no explicar nada" (92). His characterization as both animal and machine underscores his lack of empathy, and his attitude toward Susana, with whom he has actually had very limited interaction, show his "sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations)" (APA).

Soon a physical altercation between Mendieta and "Arnold" develops, both coming under the intoxication of adrenaline, masculine dominance and possession:

“el Zurdo y el gringo se miraron como si fueran los primeros invasores de la luna disputándose la mano de la hija del rey” (93). We would do well to remember that Arnold’s rejection by Susana may be causing a craving response in the dopaminergic system associated with cocaine use (Fisher et al. 57), and he is also under the influence of an aggressive sense of superiority, “acuciado por una rabia infinita que incluía raza, posición social e invasión de territorio enemigo” (93).²² When a neighbor shouts, “Chíngese a ese costal de esteroides mi Zurdo, usted puede” (95), Arnold’s characterization takes on an additional association: anabolic steroids are thought to cause “hostility, ...resentment and aggression” (Hannan et al. 339, 342), and this enhances the image of an obsessive, machine-like being riding roughshod over others to satisfy his desire. Just as steroids “pump up” the individual’s musculature, external chemical inputs and endogenous psychotropic processes here allow for the provisional construction of an aggressive and supremely sovereign selfhood.

Another striking case is that of Donald Simak, AKA Peter Connolly, a rabidly racist and anti-immigrant deep-cover FBI agent working in Mexico. His position toward the Mexican Other is extreme: “Peter Connolly odiaba México. No es fácil odiar un país entero, pero él se las ingeniaba y lo ejercía” (*Prueba* 85). He is obsessed with what he sees as a plague of illegal immigration to the United States: “todos esos latinos infestando sus campos, restaurantes y tiendas causarán la perdición de la nación más poderosa del mundo, ¿será posible exterminarlos, o cuando menos esclavizarlos? (...) Si no, terminaremos hablando esa jerga horripilante con que se comunican” (85-6). Simak’s intoxicating hatred of Mexicans proves compatible with an extreme anti-drug stance; as a strong supporter of Mexico’s drug war, he believes ardently in his mission to help the Mexican presidency design an anti-narcotics strategy and to facilitate an illicit supply-line of arms to the military. His internal dialogue leaves no question as to who has the upper hand in the development of drug control policy: “Es este un país asqueroso que no tiene remedio y no nos dejan más opción que manipularlo a nuestro favor” (86), implicitly connecting U.S. drug policy with its long history of military, political, and economic intervention in Latin America.

Simak, then, is addicted to aggression and violence, and his discourse of a U.S. purity threatened by Latin American “infestation” links to discourses of prohibition and the drug war and constitutes a form of intoxication in its own right.

²² See Maria Couppis, *Dopamine and the Positively Reinforcing Properties of Aggression*. Diss. Vanderbilt University, 2008. (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2008), on how the dopamine reward system reinforces aggression.

As Herlinghaus puts it, "the 'North' programmatically disavows its own need for intoxication by keeping the 'economy of the scapegoat' alive" (35). On the flipside of this is a kind of intoxication Peter Brooks has analyzed in a very different but compatible context. He uses the term "virtue tripping" to denote the inebriating effects of the renunciation of desire, "employed to the dramatization and glorification of the ego," in an assertion of "the irreducibility of the self in the face of the destructive pressures of society and the seductions of the Other" (150). In repressing desire for the solipsistic euphoria of illegal drugs like cocaine, the prohibitionist may reach a state in which "'Virtue' has ceased to be a moral imperative and has become rather a 'sentiment,' a feeling" that allows self-exaltation to the point of an "almost hysterical sublimity" (152). Brooks calls such "virtues" "ruses of the ego claiming victories where in fact it is seeking to pleasure itself with the latent content of its repressions" (153). This is the hypocritical intoxication of prohibition, a reveling in the autonomous Self in the face of the "seductions" of the foreign, racial Other.²³ This psychotropic dynamic mediates the clearly narcissistic patterns of his relationships with others (lack of empathy, manipulateness, arrogance, belief in uniqueness, grandiosity). Indeed, the figure of Simak—his intoxicated negation of the Other and his anti-drug fundamentalism—forms a condensed image of the damage done to Mexico by the combination of U.S. demand for drugs and pressure for interdiction.

Conclusion

The desires that feed the violence of the cocaine industry include not only the drive to feel the Self as powerful and autonomous as against a world full of Others through the consumption of cocaine, but also as a xenophobic, puritanical zeal for prohibition—sobriety placed at the service of intoxication—as figured by FBI agent Donald Simak. However, the narcossism of characters like "Arnold" and Simak, in which the Other is an obstacle to be removed in the ego's quest for gratification, mirrors not only the phenomenology of cocaine abuse but also the ideology of global consumer culture, where the intoxication of consumption depends on a disavowal of the conditions of production. If narcossist patterns of constituting the Self and Other underlie forces like the drive for licit and illicit consumption and for prohibition, it

²³ See Clarence Lusane, *Pipe Dream Blues: Racism and the War on Drugs* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) for a broad consideration of the relationship between race and drug prohibition.

becomes clear that they also enable the economies of greed and fear of the criminal networks (which include “official” actors) that profit from this consumption, and necessitate survival-oriented strategies of intoxication like Mendieta’s. When the latter fail, we see the inverse of narcissism, in which the Self, instead of using psychotropy to wall itself off against the Other, compulsively repeats the effects of the Other’s teleropic subversion. In laying bare the psychotropic motives behind its characters’ actions, the Zurdo novels do not relegate the drive to intoxication to the status of an exotic force exclusively inherent to *gringos*, instead sketching a psychotropic map that contextualizes narco-violence in Mexico as an important node in a vast web of intoxication. However, reading them one may sense a *directionality* to the movement of psychotropic influence, in line with the United States’ geopolitical power.

The seemingly contradictory tendencies of demand for cocaine and demand for prohibition share a basis in a narcissistic negation of the Other, whether personal, racial or national, and they all but guarantee the existence of a lucrative and deadly illicit drug industry in Latin America, a fact plainly recognized by fictional *capo* Samantha Valdés: “[Q]ue los políticos declaren es inevitable, pero que no pase de ahí; en Estados Unidos no van a regular el consumo aunque su presidente proclame que están en eso..., y mientras eso no ocurra, tenemos asegurado el mercado y el mercado manda” (*Nombre* 67). The money launderer Gandhi Olmedo recognizes this as well: “nadie va a abandonar un negocio tan jugoso y con un mercado cautivo” (*Prueba* 75). Here, the respective logics of the above-board economy and its illicit simulacrum are seen to line up disturbingly well, as they also do when large financial institutions profit from drug money. When asked whether he wants his profits deposited in Swiss banks or in the Cayman Islands, Samantha’s father, Marcelo, responds, “Estados Unidos, allí están más seguros” (*Balas* 123), paralleling Zavala’s claim that narco-trafficking is not an external threat but *internal* to state and society—here with international implications (“Imagining”).²⁴ To the extent, then, that narco violence is driven by fundamental psychic structures that are closely intertwined with the global economy, we may surmise that it will prove definitively elusive to the crosshairs of militarized interdiction.

²⁴ For examples of alleged nonfiction money laundering by major banks, see Dan Fitzpatrick, “Bank Accounts Figure in Drug Probe,” *Wall Street Journal* (9 July 2012): n.p.; Michael Smith, “Banks Financing Mexico Drug Gangs Admitted in Wells Fargo Deal,” *Bloomberg Business* (28 June, 2010): n.p.; and Jessica Silver-Greenberg and Ben Protess, “HSBC Is Deemed Slow to Carry Out Changes,” *New York Times* (1 Apr. 2015): n.p.

All the players with some kind of stake in the intoxication associated with the cocaine industry are implicated in the Zurdo novels, and virtually no one comes out clean. It is noteworthy when Mendeita's son, Jason, proclaims himself to be "el único de mi clase que este año no consumió drogas." Mendieta comments that "Es muy grave eso allá, ¿verdad?" and Jason confirms that he has not always avoided drugs: his original claim was already qualified by the clause "este año," and he admits, "cuesta dejarla" (*Nombre* 18). But the status of being "limpio de adicciones," more than being something celebrated for its own sake, appears both times it is mentioned as an angle Jason uses to try to convince his father to buy him a Christmas present (18, 159). Even abstention becomes a strategy of indulgence, sobriety serves intoxication, as one kind of consumption substitutes another. By taking a psychotropic view of drug traffic and interdiction, the Zurdo novels can delve into some of the psychic structures driving the violence and being driven by it, and by engaging questions of textual intoxication they effectively provoke broad reflection on the place of cultural production within the politics of psychotropy.

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