

READING THE NARCOSPHERE
A QUEER HEMISPHERIC CRITIQUE OF NARCO CULTURAL PRODUCTION

by

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DEDICATORIA

A mis padres

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ABSTRACT

“Reading the Narcosphere: A Queer Hemispheric Critique of Narco Cultural Production,” analyzes the emergence of contemporary drug politics (drug trade and drug war) as a dominant cultural narrative of the public sphere, producing what I call the *narco*-sphere. Drawing from theories on sexuality, subjectivity and biopolitics, I examine the intractability and interconnectedness of social relations of race, gender, and class in narco cultural production by building on critical work in social and political theory as well as narco studies. Rather than merely reflecting on the effects of the ongoing drug war, *narco* cultural texts about Colombia, Mexico, and the U.S.-Mexico border produce relations of power that while intending to critique drug culture and neoliberalism, reify complicit social hierarchies through discourses of difference that promote marginalization and exclusion of vulnerable subjects. Through readings of cultural texts such as Jorge Franco’s *Rosario Tijeras*, Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita Extraviada*, Fernando Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins*, and Luis Estrada’s film *El Infierno*, I further demonstrate how the social relations portrayed are not simply endemic to the drug trade and the drug war but instead are deployments of power in accordance with neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Through my notion of the narco-sphere and a queer critique, I offer a more incisive way to read difference within western hemispheric cultural politics.

La emergencia del narco no es ni la causa ni la consecuencia de la pérdida de valores; es, hasta hoy, el episodio más grave de la criminalidad neoliberal. Si allí está el gran negocio, las víctimas vienen por añadidura. Y con ellas la protección de las mafias del poder.

-Carlos Monsiváis

INTRODUCTION

On January 11, 2013, two young men César Rivero Mendoza (El Guayabo) and Felipe de Jesús Martínez Mendoza (El Oso) were found murdered after going to *El Living*, a gay bar in Mexico City's Zona Rosa. Whereas initial speculations assumed the murders as hate crimes since the victims had been at a gay bar the night before, others began to link the murders to the young men's possible involvement in narco-trafficking. According to online magazine *emeequis* and newspaper *Reforma*, witnesses at the scene, observed the two victims being forced into an unmarked car by individuals posing as police officers—a fact that would later prove to be crucial for the investigation. *Emeequis* writes, “La patrulla 03094, que arribó a la zona era conducida por el agente Luis Guillermo Flores Capetillo, quien iba acompañado de un hombre identificado como Alex, administrador o el gerente de Living” (*emeequis*). Accordingly, witnesses at the scene were convinced the police and the bar's manager had acted in accordance.

Months later, 13 individuals from the Tepito neighborhood in Mexico City were kidnapped from *Bar Heaven*, another bar in the outskirts of the Zona Rosa nightclub district. The kidnapping at *Bar Heaven* was repeatedly referred to as a vendetta related to narco-trafficking by multiple news sources. For example, the *Diario de Mexico* cited on Mexico City's attorney general's remarks on this case, “La pugna entre bandas antagónicas motivó la comisión del acto

ilícito, toda vez que se trata de sujetos dedicados al narcomenudeo que buscaban mantener la hegemonía en la venta de droga realizada bajo esta modalidad”, afirmó Ríos Garza” (*Diario de México*).¹ At least 5 of these kidnapped individuals were later found dead in a mass grave outside of Mexico City. As *The Christian Science Monitor* recounts, “Authorities say a mass grave uncovered outside Mexico City contained the bodies of five of the people abducted from a nightclub in May ”(*CS Monitor*). The CS Monitor further noted that the victims’ family members denied any involvement in drug trafficking,

Prosecutors have said the abductions from the Heaven bar were linked to a dispute between rival street gangs that control local drug sales in the capital’s nightclubs. However, the families of the disappeared told the *Associated Press* that the missing young people were not involved in drug trafficking (*CS Monitor*).

After this incident at *Bar Heaven* and the arrests of several suspects including local police officers and civilians, an online narco news/crime tabloid site *La Policiaca* reported that both incidents, *Living* and *Heaven* were indeed linked through one of the kidnapers, Bryan Guerrero Arroyo involved with the *Heaven* case, who was also a personal acquaintance of Rivero Mendoza and Martinez Mendoza. *La Policiaca* writes,

Así empezó a vender cocaína y tachas en antros de la Zona Rosa como el Living, Cabaretito Neón y Le Suit, donde conoció a César Rivero Mendoza “El Guayabo” y Felipe de Jesús Martínez “El Oso”, dealers del Living ejecutados con la ayuda del policía de Investigación Luis Guillermo Flores Capetillo, encarcelado por ese crimen (*La Policiaca*).

¹ Within popular Mexican discourse on the drug trade, the word “narcomenudista” is used to refer to a small time drug dealer.

The recounting of these events serves to highlight the complexity and ambiguity of journalistic narratives reporting on the same occurrences. While some articles focused on the possibility of a hate crime, other news sites speculated on the young men's involvement in drug dealing and possible links to crime organizations such as "La Unión Insurgentes." For instance, *Proceso's* article entitled "Dos crímenes de odio por homofobia en el DF" recounts "La noche del viernes 11 de enero, César Rivero Mendoza, "El Guayabo", de 17 años, y su amigo Felipe de Jesús Martínez Mendoza, de 22 años, acudieron al *Living*, el sitio de moda entre los jóvenes homosexuales de la Ciudad de México. Fueron con otros dos amigos a divertirse, bailar y socializar" (*Proceso*). While *Proceso's* article explicitly mentioned the bar as catering to young gays, other news articles avoided mentioning this detail. Likewise, this *Proceso* article did not mention or suggest the victims' possible involvement in narco trafficking. Additionally, *La Razón* explains that Rivero Mendoza and Martínez Mendoza had been falsely identified as "narcomenudistas" (small time drug dealers). In another twist of events, *La Razón* also notes that the two individuals arrested as suspects in the *Bar Living* murders were also identified as drug dealers.

Aunque en un principio sólo iban a ser acusados de lesiones y posesión de droga, la Procuraduría descubrió que ellos formaron parte del grupo que raptó a dos clientes del *Living* a quienes les cortaron las orejas y los ejecutaron con ayuda del gerente Alejandro Carreto y el policía de investigación, Luis Flores. Dos testigos que vieron el rapto ya los reconocieron (*La Razón*).

The investigation and subsequent arrest of a police officer involved in the murder of Rivero Mendoza and Martínez Mendoza coupled with the absence of queries as to why this had happened conveyed that the incident at *Living* was a random act of violence by an individual

local officer rather than an institutional structural problem. Moreover, the immersion of Rivero Mendoza and Martinez Mendoza in narratives of drug dealing and homosexuality created the rhetoric that sought to absolve local authorities from further investigating them as possibly connected to other *narco* related crimes or hate related homophobic crimes while maintaining them as separate narratives of unrelated significance. While we may never know if the murder victims from Bar Living were *narcos* or the exact motivations behind these murders, we do know, however, and most importantly that both the politics of “el narco” and liberal discourses on gay rights played an important role in how the series of events were perceived and discussed within the public sphere. By extension, this dynamic also manifests the dissonance of discourses often found in cultural production about violence, el narco, and queerness.²

More than exposing the continued violence afflicting Mexican and Latin American society, the incident at *Bar Living* is pivotal in helping to elucidate what I am calling the hemispheric *narco*-sphere. By *narco*-sphere, I am referring to the production of the drug war as a dominant narrative of the public sphere, where the public and private also converge with discourses of race, class, gender and sexuality. In the events described above, the journalistic media reporting on the crimes and its purpose to inform the public, was nonetheless influenced by existing and emergent political and social factors that were reciprocally affected by economic and state interests. The identification and subsequent description of a hemispheric *narco*-sphere aims to conceive how it is possible that within our current moment we are driven to scramble, to target, and solve the immediate symptoms of conflict, without addressing the underlying and long-lasting structural relations of economic power and social difference that have enabled and

² El *narco*, is a name given to the conglomerate of many aspects having to do with the drug trade (violence, trafficking, economics, operations etc.) and is widely used within journalistic media on the drug trade.

conducted the conflicts in such a way, in the first place. My task here is not to confirm certain cultural production as critiques of el narco, but rather to underscore how the public milieu surrounding el narco's development and cultural representation deploys gender and sexuality as instruments to carry out their respective critiques. In order to address such complex questions of difference across geopolitical borders and cultural temporalities, I propose that a reading of narco cultural politics through a queer subaltern lens where queerness signifies a relation of non-normative subjectivities that can begin to decipher the inner and subtle underpinnings of the narco-sphere.

Despite the great volume of scholarship and cultural production that highlights neoliberalism, machismo, violence and the impossibility of containing the drug trade within geopolitical borders, the precise ways in which particular symbols of inherent criminality and social aberration become attached to certain spaces and individuals goes unheeded within most *narco* culture studies. This is not to say that it is completely overlooked, on the contrary, there are several examples of scholarship that recognizes the specificities of gendered difference and el narco. For example, in her book *Narrating Narcos: Culiacán and Medellín* Gabriela Polit-Dueñas argues that narco narratives represent the misogyny of narco culture as well as the homophobic codes of violence (22). She adds,

Gender is certainly an important aspect of this corpus of novels as much as it is a necessary category to understand the profound impact that the culture of the narcotics trade has in these cities. Narco violence is encoded and even enhanced with gendered images, while gender violence (which includes but is not limited to the violence against women) becomes more and more invisible. Despite the fact that women are one of the groups most affected by the violence of narco

trafficking, their place in these societies remains underrepresented and largely ignored (Polit-Dueñas 22).

While Polit-Duenas acknowledges the importance of gender as a critical perspective, she also gestures toward the challenges presented by the lack of women authors to her analysis of narco narratives based on her methodology which focuses on author context. Conversely, as a response to the urgency of this question regardless of author and author-intent, I aim examine how gender and sexuality interact with race and class within *narco* cultural production across crucial regions of the western hemisphere. I argue that—rather than representing isolated autonomous situations in Mexico, the US-Mexico border and Colombia—the drug trade, the “war on drugs,” and its racialized, sexual, and gendered violence are in large part symptoms of a neoliberal regime exacerbating already existing asymmetrical socio-political structural relations. Representing them as independent phenomena, neglects the historical and contemporary processes that bind the capitalist neoliberal market to hierarchical relations of local, national, and transnational production and consumption. Indeed, local and global political and economic interests have historically held a profound grasp on the ways in which political discourse on the drug trade is conceived and produced within the public sphere. In recent years, the drug trade and drug war’s depiction in the global media has become synonymous with Mexico and Mexican Society in an almost identical fashion to the way in which Colombia became stigmatized in the 1980s and 90s as the only spaces with a drug problem insofar as being producers and traffickers. These discursive connotations, as I’ve stated effectively attest to the strategic formation of the hemispheric *narco*-sphere. Manifestly, the *narco*-sphere provides a perilous discursive convergence of narco cultural politics and a multiplicity of violence that targets the bodies of vulnerable subjects. Narco cultural politics, or the cultural politics of the narco-sphere, refers to

the ways in which individuals and/or groups engage with the relationship between the political and cultural affairs of the narco-sphere. This dissertation is thus an examination of the confluence of the public sphere across the hemisphere and its *narco* cultural politics as a result of private and public socio-political interests in the neoliberal era---where the dominant regime of power focuses on the management of the population.

I would argue that because it poses a challenge of representation—as Gabriela Polit-Dueñas argues—narco culture including narco narratives offer an interstice from which to view society (5). In other words, el narco and its cultural production have arrived at a key moment of revelation and introspection, a moment characterized by a heightened visibility and elicitation for new paradigms for examining political and economic structures. An analysis of narco culture and *narco* cultural production does not exclusively refer to the depiction of consumption and trafficking but at the same time engages the social context that the drug trade together with prior political and economic interests has assisted in creating, a social space inclusively constitutive of all cultural, political, and economic relations of power. Having this in mind, I seek to examine the relationship between narco cultural production and biopolitics. Biopolitics is the management of the population through various individualizing techniques. In *The History of Sexuality*, French theorist Michel Foucault begins to elaborate on this notion of biopolitics as a system of power that emerges in the eighteenth century and centers on the administration of life but is above all concerned with the body as a focal point. Foucault writes:

In any case, the purpose of the present study is in fact to show how deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the

historical are not consecutive to one another, as in the evolutionism of the first sociologists, but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective (Foucault 152).

As Foucault mentions, the body becomes increasingly important as the biological and historical interface of life. By operating on the body, mechanisms of power are enabled to regulate “functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures” to curb the more abstract concepts associated with life (152). For this reason, the deployment of sexuality as Foucault indicates, emerges shortly thereafter more concretely in the nineteenth century as one of the most important bio-techniques used in the management of life (141). The administration of life is essentially propelled through the intent to normalize life and the aspects associated with life such as sexuality. In this sense, to normalize is to eliminate elements considered as potential social risks that deviate from the standard, whether they are social criteria associated with nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, class and/or sexuality. Normalization as a key characteristic of bio-techniques becomes crucial to the production of the aberrant subject, a relation that is perfectly exemplified through the work of queer theorists stemming from poststructuralist thought, that like Foucault, aim to undo notions of truth and traditional logic by questioning the idea of the normal (Sullivan 39). The *norm* is thus produced and deployed as the aberrant subject is simultaneously created. In other words, the idea of the norm cannot exist without a notion of the aberrant to antagonize it and affirm it as the norm, resulting in the creation of relations of dominance. As Foucault further explains:

If the development of the great instruments of the state, as institutions of power, ensured the maintenance of production relations, the rudiments of anatomo- and

bio-politics, created in the eighteenth century as *techniques* of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions (the family and the army, schools, and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective bodies), operated in the sphere of economic processes, their development, and the forces working to sustain them. They also acted as factors of segregation and social hierarchization, exerting their influence on the respective forces of both these movements, guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony (Foucault 141).

According to Foucault, techniques of power became implemented within a multitude of social institutions in order to ensure that their economic and political interests were reproduced. As such, segregation and social hierarchies as the effects of power can be understood here as integral to the maintenance of the relations of domination through the production and maintenance of public spheres of influence. As Foucault also establishes biopower has been a crucial force in the consolidation of capitalism. Foucault writes:

This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes (Foucault 141).

Here, Foucault understands biopower not as necessarily fundamental to the emergence of capitalism but indeed requisite to its growth and sustainment. If capitalism and biopower are intimately interlinked in the social and political change that has affected western society, then neoliberalism holds an exceptional place in this equation as the prevailing ideological framework within the hegemony of capitalism. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey writes,

“The capitalist world stumbled toward neoliberalization as the answer through a series of gyrations and chaotic experiments that really only converged as a new orthodoxy with the articulation of what became known as the ‘Washington Consensus’ in the 1990s” (13). In this passage, Harvey is referring to how neoliberalism developed as virtually the only response to the crisis that arose in capital accumulation during the mid-1970s (13). As Harvey further suggests, neoliberalization can be interpreted under the terms of the re-establishment of capital accumulation and the restoration of the power of economic elites or as a *utopian* project for the reorganization of international capitalism (19). Accordingly, the restoration of the power of economic elites has been a dominant characteristic of neoliberalization on a global scale (Harvey 19). But what exactly is neoliberalism and how has it affected the status of contemporary western society, namely the United States and Latin America. First of all, Harvey explains neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey 2). Thus the neoliberal state emerged as a response to the failures of past capitalist policies. Harvey argues:

The restructuring of state forms and of international relations after the Second World War was designed to prevent a return to the catastrophic conditions that had so threatened the capitalist order in the great slump of the 1930s. It was also supposed to prevent the re-emergence of inter-state geopolitical rivalries that had led to the war (Harvey 9).

He notes that the first implementation of a so-called neoliberal state was in Chile after Augusto Pinochet's coup of President Salvador Allende in 1973. The coup was later proved to be backed by US private corporations, the CIA, and the U.S. Secretary of State at the time, Henry Kissinger (Harvey 7). US dominated implementation of neoliberal policies in the rest of Latin America followed shortly in the form of lending at high interest rates and the possibility of debt deferment in return for openness to neoliberal reforms such as more relaxed trading tariffs and more privatization. Using Mexico's economic default in the 1980's as an example, Harvey explains the difference between the older liberal agenda and the new neoliberal framework. He writes:

What the Mexico case demonstrated, however, was a key difference between liberal and neoliberal practice: under the former, lenders take the losses that arise from bad investment decisions, while under the latter the borrowers are forced by the state and international powers to take on board the cost of debt repayment no matter what the consequences for the livelihood (Harvey 29).

Clearly, a measure that was imagined as a bailout for the Mexican economy resulted in long-term increase in economic inequality adding to Mexico's history of social inequality. The neoliberalization of Colombia happened along these same lines, however, the point of entry consisted of US military assistance and financial support in order to combat the "terrorism" and "drug trafficking" of the guerrillas and cartels (Harvey 165).

These steps laid the ground for more recent trade agreements between the United States and Colombia like the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement also known as CTPA sanctioned in 2006 (Ahumada 223). The CTPA was an effort by the governments of the United States and Colombia to compensate for the failure of previous free trade agreements with South America and intended to facilitate trade between Colombia and the United States, which would

eventually lead to economic growth for Colombia (Ahumada 228). Whereas the further liberalization of Colombian markets would ultimately in greater measure benefit the United States, supporters of the treaty championed Colombia's relative economic potential. Detractors of the treaty, mainly the democratic faction of U.S. Congress on the other hand, was discouraging of granting a treaty to a country who in their opinion had such an underhanded record of human and labor rights violations (Ahumada 239).

The 1990's in this regard marked a particular moment of recognition, the realization that many western societies had undergone a powerful political and economic shift. Although the shift had occurred decades earlier it was only until this moment when the effects of this change for some, became more difficult to ignore.³ The failure of previous economic systems in Latin America and the unrestricted capitalist market policies implemented as early as the 1960's and their unmediated economic trade had begun to unfold havoc on several countries by the 1980s and early 1990s. As mentioned, the subsequent economic recessions and market crashes across the globe were met with neoliberal policies and trade agreements intended to function as solutions to the crisis of capitalism. In his book, *The Silent Revolution: The Rise and Crisis of Market Economics in Latin America*, Duncan Green points out that the economic crises of neoliberalism only aggravated the preexisting problems produced by the ISI model in Latin America in the first place. Within most Latin American countries, the shift away from ISI (Import-Substitution-Industrialization) was prompted by the very failures of ISI and neoliberal efforts to keep the state out of economics, which simultaneously promoted private sector growth and foreign investment (Green 16). He writes,

³ One of the first significant indexes of neoliberal policies was the Border Industrialization Program of 1965 with the establishment of the first maquiladoras along the U.S.-Mexico border (Schmidt Camacho 256).

Countries undergoing import substitution were dogged by the economic consequences of inequality, which the model further exacerbated. Only a small proportion of the people in most Latin American republics actually functioned as consumers for the new industries---the great majority were too poor to buy anything. In all but the largest countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, the domestic market was therefore too small for fledgling industries to achieve the necessary economies of scale (Green 25).

Yet the economic crises and conditions of some Latin American countries should also be understood in terms of the impact of the dramatic increase in the already existent economic gaps between the rich and the poor. Both Colombia and Mexico have suffered from economic crises that have led them to negotiate foreign aid and transnational neoliberal trade agreements. Mexico sought foreign trade agreements during the early 1990's and Colombia required the help of the IMF at the end of the 1990s (Green 236). Green further adds crucial insight regarding the influence of local political elites in the neoliberalization of the Latin American markets. Duncan Green affirms,

Critics of neoliberalism often talk as if Washington, The IMF, and the World Bank have single-handedly imposed neoliberalism on uniformly reluctant continent. While the Fund has undoubtedly played an import role, it would never have been possible without the support of local economists and politicians, the preexisting crisis in import substitution, and the perceived lack of alternatives (Green 31).

In addition to indicating the fundamental role of national elites in the historical economic dynamics of these countries, I take this as a gesture toward the historic disregard of the masses

by local elites while insuring and protecting their economic interests in foreign investment. The paradox of liberal ideological discourse captured within neoliberalism is that while neoliberalism encourages individualistic entrepreneurship and so-called “free markets” it simultaneously hinders small businesses and makes it practically unfeasible to earn a living wage as a worker which produces a cycle of dependence and poverty. Although not exclusively at fault, these factors have undoubtedly led to the rise of the drug trade across the hemisphere since the early 1960s.

By making reference to the drug trade or drug trafficking, I aim to indicate the transaction involved in the production, transportation, and consumption of drugs as a commodity fetishism as conceived by Marx. It is for this reason that I include and emphasize the United States, Colombia, and Mexico as focal points in all stages of the hemispheric drug trade. Although exact causes are difficult to pinpoint, there have been many attempts to do so. Possible reasons for the rise of narcotrafficking throughout Latin America have been researched for quite some time in fields such as anthropology and sociology. For instance, in “Narcotrafficking, Migration, and Modernity,” anthropologist Victoria Malkin explains how narcotrafficking is indeed a significant source of income in large regions of Latin America but also indicates that it does not necessarily always flourish in the poorest regions (101). This point serves to note that economics in the purest sense cannot fully account for the development of narcotrafficking in Latin America. Yet certain economic policies have undoubtedly had a significant effect on Latin American society. Malkin notes:

While narcotrafficking plays a growing role in Mexico’s political and economic life, it is local political and economic structures alongside local history that will determine whether and how it takes a hold of an area. Rural poverty has been

increasing throughout Mexico. Changes in agrarian policies have provoked widespread structural changes. Since 1994 the Mexican government has encouraged the privatization of communally owned ejidal and abandoned the previous model of state-sponsored agricultural production. These changes envision agricultural producers, using their comparative advantage to compete in a global context. The success of these reforms has been less successful (Myhre 1998), and rural poverty has increased throughout the country (Malkin 102).

By mentioning 1994 as a pivotal year, it is clear that Malkin is making reference to NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and the agricultural transformation it helped produce where local Mexican farmers were less able to compete with cheaper imports from large international corporations due to the elimination of many of the tariffs that had protected local Mexican farmers from the US agricultural industry.⁴

In this case, Malkin's study zeros in on some of the transformations in the state of Michoacán. A mostly rural region, Michoacan had not been historically associated with narco trafficking in comparison to other Mexican states like Sinaloa but since the late 1990's, it has emerged as a hotspot for narco trafficking. Malkin explains:

State intervention and capital investment laid the social and economic foundations for the emergence of narco trafficking...Narco traffickers follow an economic logic that has flourished in the region and is reinforced by the current neoliberal policies, which reward entrepreneurial solutions. The economic risks and the organization of the narco trafficking industry fit into the local history of a

⁴ The North American Free Trade Agreement abbreviated as NAFTA went into effect on January 1, 1994 between the United States, Canada and Mexico and consisted of several manufacturing, transportation, and agricultural free trade reforms between the three countries.

boom-and bust economy. This history permits the drug trade to be seen as another example of a large-scale export-based industry that generates easy money, of then through corrupt schemes, and resonates with the income-earning strategies that the residents have already experienced. The particularly fluid networks and the large number of impoverished day laborers in the region ensure a labor supply (Malkin 120).

Appropriately, Malkin highlights how in many ways the drug trade follows the logic of neoliberal entrepreneurship and the idea of a free market despite dealing with prohibited substances. While late capitalism as I've suggested is not the absolute cause of drugtrafficking it has undoubtedly been a powerful factor in the emergence of the drug trade in Mexico, Colombia and the United States. Accordingly, state policies implemented to facilitate free trade have been in part responsible for the intensification of drug trafficking within recent decades. That is, and considering the history of narcotrafficking in these regions dating back to the early 20th century and beyond economics alone—there are cultural factors where racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies interplay with the economic politics that have created the ideal setting for drug trafficking to flourish and contribute to the further social changes of these regions. Neoliberal trade agreements such as NAFTA and the United States-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA) have indeed had a profound effect on the expansion of drug trade networks within the western hemisphere but they have also combined with other longstanding social conflicts in contributing to the shaping of socio-political transformations. As Malkin explains, the existence of trading routes and the newly abundant labor supply in Mexico all contributed to the intensification of narcotrafficking in Mexico during the 1990s. Likewise, the U.S. and

Colombian government crackdown on Colombian cartels also had a role in the increase of drug trafficking in Mexico. Malkin states:

Mexico emerged as a primary transit route for Colombian cocaine as other routes were blocked. Some 50 to 70 percent of all cocaine entering the United States is through to pass through Mexico. (Dermota, 2000, Masing 2000) Mexican and Colombian traffickers consolidated links when law enforcement made previous routes more difficult and costly to use. Mexican cartels have been increasing their power ever since (Andreas1999) (Malkin 110).

Malkin suggests that the drug trade relationship between Mexico and Colombia was strengthened during the 1990s precisely because of the war on drugs in Colombia. Although Colombia never lost its prominence within the hemispheric drug trade, it did lose some ground to Mexico during this time of heavy military intervention and violence (Polit Dueñas 35).

I mention this shift in order to highlight how the drug trade has been historically conceived as a problem intrinsic to Latin American countries and as a phenomenon that only comes into the United States through its southern border and thus must be combatted through anti-drug policies and military intervention abroad. As Froylan Enciso explains in “Regimen Global de Prohibición, Actores Criminalizados y la Cultura del Narcotráfico en México durante la Decada de 1970,” already in the 1950s, the United States blamed the increasing consumption of drugs within its borders on the rising supply coming from Mexico (597). Drug trafficking in Mexico was produced as a problem by the United States through the prohibition of narcotics as well as through the criminalization of individuals who participated in their transportation and dealing. Enciso writes:

Esta actitud estadounidense se explica, en parte, por su política interna; la derecha se radicalizó luego de los movimientos progresistas de los años sesenta. En su campaña, Richard Nixon, candidato conservador del Partido Republicano, dijo que la marihuana, el hachís, y el LSD eran “maldición moderna de la juventud (Enciso 599).

As promised during his campaign President Richard Nixon delivered a series of anti-drug efforts during the 1970s including the creation of the DEA in 1973 (Cooper 865). In his article, Enciso emphasizes that the number one goal of United States drug policy during this period was prohibition. He writes, “Es conveniente aclarar que Estados Unidos no quitó nunca el dedo del renglón y, aunque con matices, no abandonó la idea de empujar un régimen global de prohibición de las drogas” (Enciso 605). Led by the United States, the war on drugs was aimed to be a war of prohibition and criminalization on a global scale, however, it mostly focused on the western hemisphere where its closest suppliers were located. Despite collaborating with the United States government on many levels of combating drug trafficking, the Mexican government nevertheless also aimed to implicate the United States as a responsible party not only as a consumer of drugs but also as a supplier of participants via dealers. Enciso claims:

Por un lado, el gobierno mexicano buscó dejar claro que compartía el enfoque estadounidense; por el otro lado trataba de colocar la idea de que era una responsabilidad compartida, y no solo porque en Estados Unidos hubiera consumo intenso de drogas, sino porque muchos de los involucrados en actividades criminales eran estadounidenses. El argumento mexicano de que los estadounidenses eran también traficantes de drogas tuvo gran fuerza, entre otras

cosas, porque en México no había organizaciones criminales tan sofisticadas y flexibles como ahora (Enciso 603).

The series of anti-drug rhetoric and policies which included Operation Cooperation and Operation Intercept among others would later come to be known as one of the first phases of the war on drugs.⁵ It was precisely during this time that prohibition and criminalization succeeded at becoming the dominant discourses on drugs within the western hemisphere. President Nixon's war on drugs was later continued most notably under President Ronald Reagan and George Bush's administration. The criminalization of drugs and drug use reached a new height under Reagan whose domestic drug policies moved away from treatment and rehabilitation (Nunn 388). In "Race Crime and the Pool of Surplus Criminality: Or Why the "War on Drugs" Was a "War on Blacks", Kenneth B. Nunn writes that most of the anti-drug policies of the 1980s and 1990s in a way targeted low income African American communities through supply reduction strategies. Nunn writes:

The Reagan administration embraced a supply-reduction strategy focusing on interdiction, seizure and criminal prosecution, rather than a demand-reduction strategy that focused on public education and drug treatment designed to reduce demand for illegal drugs (Nunn 388).

Nunn's assertion is in line with Frank R. Cooper in "The Un-Balanced Fourth Amendment: A Cultural Study of the Drug War, Racial Profiling and Arvizu", where he highlights the ways in which the war on drugs was essentially a war on the racialized poor in the United States because antidrug policies were intimately tied to law enforcement and inherently biased investigative

⁵ *Operation Intercept* was launched in 1969 by President Nixon to stop the flow of drugs through the United States-Mexico border. It later became *Operation Cooperation*, to recognize the Mexican government's cooperation in the anti-drug effort lead by the United States (Craig 577).

techniques like racial profiling (852). Although the social and health effects of drug use were used as a ruse to increase government spending on anti-drug resources, Nunn adds that in 1982, when the drug war was initiating, the recreational use of illegal drugs was actually declining (389). Nevertheless, drug use year after year was increasingly produced as a social threat by a number of political campaigns and the mainstream media. Words like “epidemic” and “plague” were part of the rhetoric used to create fear among the public (Reinarman & Levine 55). The United States’ drug policies championed at home and abroad manifested the significant shift of the discourse on drugs toward the criminalization of drug users and drug dealers but did so by focusing on certain groups. For instance, the “crack scare” of the 1980s as it came to be known, for the most part targeted black and Latino neighborhoods. In “The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare,” Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine explain that crack received a disproportionate amount of attention in relation to other drugs especially because of the population that was most known for consuming crack cocaine. Reinarman and Levine write:

Crack’s pharmacological power alone does not explain the attention it received. In 1986, politicians and the media focused on crack---and the drug scare began---when cocaine smoking became visible among a “dangerous” group. Crack attracted the attention of politicians and the media because of its downward mobility to and increased visibility in ghettos and barrios. The new users were a different social class, race, and status. Crack was sold in smaller, cheaper, precooked units, on ghetto streets, to poorer, younger buyers who were already seen as a threat (Reinarman & Levine 47).

Reinarman and Levine add that in the election year of 1988, Congress voted for more antidrug laws with long prison terms, death sentences and increases in funding for law enforcement and

prisons (49). Black and Brown subjects, youths in particular, were made to be seen as inherently criminal and degenerate. Women of color were especially scrutinized and scapegoated, as they were seen as responsible for failing in their presupposed role as caretakers of the family. Canonical sociological texts such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* also known as *The Moynihan Report* from 1965 were influential in demonizing black matriarchy as being at odds with dominant society and as such the source of social problems affecting African American communities (Moynihan 18). Cultural studies scholars like Roderick Ferguson have emphatically condemned how *The Moynihan Report*, virtually "presented the grammar of state and citizen formation as the one most appropriate for decolonizing subject, a grammar that insisted on the disciplining of gender and sexual nonnormativity" (Ferguson 28). The discursive criminalization of those that deviated from notions of whiteness, heterosexuality, maleness and middle-class status deemed as the social "norm," became a new way to manage the antidrug movement and hence another way to administer society. Reinerman & Levine explain:

During the post-Watergate rebuilding of the Republican Party, far right wing political organizations and fundamentalist Christian groups set about to impose what they called "traditional family values" on public policy. This self-proclaimed "New Right" felt increasingly threatened by the diffusion of modernist values, behaviors, and cultural practices—particularly by what they saw as the interconnected forms of 1960s hedonism involved in sex outside (heterosexual) marriage and consciousness alteration with (illicit) drugs (Reinerman & Levine 57).

As Reinerman & Levine explain, these emergent conservative views were a backlash against

modernist cultural practices that focused most notably on sex and drugs. Sex and drugs were certainly the main concern but it was their affective nature of desire and pleasure that seemed the most alarming to the political elite (Foucault 152). One of Foucault's most fervent claims is precisely that sexuality is not silent but is on the contrary always present as another instrument to consolidate power (141). The backlash on the publicity of desire and pleasure and the policies that resulted were concerned with the most vulnerable groups of society—the working class, people of color, women, and queers, groups that were already highly scrutinized and policed. Because drugs were articulated by the state and mainstream media as a social illness and then conceived to be habitually present within poor neighborhoods of color, these groups were further produced as culturally deficient in the best scenario and inherently racially deviant in the worst scenario. The war on drugs followed the logic of many other policies of neoliberal and biopolitical nature implemented during this period such as the involuntary sterilization of women of color, which at the same time increased social inequality through the reproduction of the cycle of poverty by criminalizing and disenfranchising communities of color.⁶

In the present, dominant discourses in relation to drug trafficking still position Mexico and Colombia at the center of the drug trade as a global problem and as a social ill that does not emanate from within US borders or at the very least is perceived as characteristic of immigrant and poor neighborhoods. In this view, the discourses on the war on drugs in Mexico and Colombia have manifested many of the same characteristics of deviance and criminalization of certain groups as shown within the war on drugs in the United States. Since the resurgence of the drug war in Mexico in 2006, reports alleged it was only affecting those directly involved in the

⁶ As Angela Davis points out in “Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights” during the 1960s and 1970s the US government knowingly participated in the mass involuntary sterilization of women of color (Davis 363).

drug trade. It became evident that and within the social imaginary created by the dominant narratives, narcotraffickers had a clear profile, a profile that becomes targeted while others go unnoticed. For example the white-collar drug kingpins that are assumed as businessmen or the politicians themselves who benefit from drug policies just as much as they depend on the drug trade's continued existence. As a result, the emergence of the *narco*-sphere is not only produced through the neoliberal political economy of drug trafficking but through the systematic criminalization of "drugtraffickers" and subjects framed as the scapegoats for "social immorality" and thus constructed as expendable. In other words, the *narcotraficante* and its various modes have come to be constituted in mass media as embodying all that is damaging to western society.⁷ Hollywood is filled with images that present the narcotrafficker as the stereotypical Latin American and quintessential bandido that is inherently corrupt, while mass media outlets in Latin America, have often distinguished between the old view of the narcotrafficker as originally poor and the emergent narcotrafficker as racially inferior. The presumed social decadence becomes of western hemispheric society thus becomes projected through a focus on perceptions of an assumed intrinsic racialized criminality of the lower working class as well as the supposed sexual and gendered deviance already presumed within criminality itself. According to Mark Edberg in *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, drug-traffickers "for the most part" are from a working-class background "from the subaltern strata" (105). Aside from his

⁷ The myth surrounding the *narcotraficante* is stereotyped as the poor working class now turned powerful drug lord. The myth also imagines the *narcotraficante* that wears cowboy boots and hats with humble beginnings in the Mexican countryside. Since the onset of the war on drugs and the incorporation of ex-military (Zetas), the *narcotraficante* has acquired a more obvious racial profile due to the widespread belief that the Mexican military is comprised by indigenous from southern Mexican states.

loose utilization of the “subaltern” his argument’s fallacy is further evinced by his endnote explanation. The endnote attached to “for the most part” explains, “I say ‘for the most part’ because, as I have mentioned, there is that subset among the more privileged for whom the narco-trafficker life has an appeal, for its thrills, its danger, its opportunity to make a name—or a ‘legend’—for oneself outside the approved social boundaries of the elite as a rebel of sorts (Edberg 165).” Edberg aims to map out the construction and representation of the *narcotraficante* but fails to engage in a more meaningful analysis of the *narcotraficante* as discourse. Edberg’s claim is an example of how the *narcotraficante* as a hegemonic discourse remained largely unexamined until recently. The question looms, who is qualified to be categorized as a *narcotraficante*? Evidently, the criminalization associated with the *narcotraficante* is strictly reserved for the “poor Mexican”. Correspondingly, in his notable work on *narcotraficante* mythology, Astorga observes that *narcotraficantes* are seen as criminals and not ever seen as business men, thus suggesting a professional distinction based on perceived social class (Astorga 24). This also means that the typical business man is not ever perceived as the narco in the same way. It is a distinction that clearly echoes blue-collar versus white-collar criminalization. Edberg’s aforementioned book, for example, features a cover with the outline of Chalino Sánchez, the Mexican narcocorrido singer dressed in his typical rancho aesthetic. This detail becomes important because it recreates a significant link; the “rancho” aesthetic that has been historically associated with “rural peasants” in narcocorridos becomes the aesthetic of the *narcotraficante* in general and correspondingly becomes an anthropological trait.⁸ Thus, this

⁸ The narcocorrido among many of its characteristics, champion’s the rags to riches narrative of narco-traffickers. According to Valenzuela, the narcocorrido’s primary function lies in its role in the reproduction of popular myths, which create a collective imaginary (64).

association contributes to the unfeasibility of detaching the *narcotraficante* from its alleged “rancho” rural mythological origin and its consistent stereotypical representation in cultural production. This representation is also exemplary of the homologous relationship between the *narcotraficante* and male masculinity. Analogous to the myth of the Mexican narco, the Colombian narco is also portrayed with a lower working-class economic background yet understandably does not exhibit the same aesthetic qualities and styles. While most portrayals within a Colombian context see drug dealers coming from two distinct drug cartel strongholds, the Antioquia region (Medellín) and the Caribbean (Cali and Cartagena), they are viewed as peripheries in relation to Bogotá. Medellín becomes the focal point of poor and rural mestizo migration from the isolated zones of the Antioquia countryside seen as a contamination of the “white” city with catholic values and the Caribbean ports function as Colombia’s primary physical and symbolic contact with the exterior. An emblematic parallel that corresponds to the Caribbean’s association with poverty and blackness heightened by the nation’s refusal to see its African populations as anything else but foreign.

The imaginary of the narco-trafficker within society already perceived as criminal through class difference becomes the subaltern non-normative subject within the *narco* as a result of their production as twice abject through their inscription as sexually deviant. Mainstream cultural production further aids the deployment of the general view of the drug cartels as misogynist and chauvanistic, where they are portrayed through an uncomplicated narrative as perverse predators of women. Cultural production, especially colombian narco cultural prouduction like “narco novelas”, document how drug cartel leaders continuously pursue beauty queens as their romantic and sexual interests. Although it is true that Latin American beauty queens have both willingly and unwillingly become the lovers and wives of some cartel

king pins, this narrative of women as victims becomes exhausted when conceived as an exclusive effect of narco masculinity and sexuality that reifies the victim/perpetrator binary of the narco-sphere. As evinced, this manifold abjection is due precisely to the integral role of sexual discourses of deviance within contemporary society at large related to patriarchal and racial capitalism—not unique to the drug trade or drug culture but consistent with contemporary western society.⁹

As a result of the political economy and political and cultural discourse of drug trafficking, the United States, Colombia, and Mexico have been further culturally and socially linked. Owing to a record of international trade, more recent free market measures, and drug policies and military interventions, Latin America and the United States have for long shared public spheres in common. While there is more than one public sphere, one of the dominant hemispheric public spheres in the late 20th century and beginning of the 21st century has emerged and developed almost entirely under the conditions of the war on drugs, effectively producing a narco-sphere. The narco-sphere represents neoliberalism's cultural and political attempt to externalize el narco, where neoliberal discourses refuse to recognize el narco as the ideal execution of its principle, a deregulated free market. At the same time, the relationship between neoliberalism and el narco is founded on a confrontational rejection of queerness. In other words, both neoliberalism and el narco attempt to disavow non-normativity within their own realm.

⁹ According Robyn D.G. Kelly, Cedric Robinson developed “racial capitalism” to understand the history of modern capitalism, where “capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of “racial capitalism” dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide. Capitalism was “racial” not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society. The first European proletarians were *racial* subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.) and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery *within Europe*” (Kelly).

However, as they are inextricable—as in one the other—the irresolvable queerness of el narco despite neoliberalism’s denial, paradoxically evinces neoliberalism’s own queerness. By problematizing heterosexuality and heteronormativity and by building on notions of the public sphere, subjectivity, and Latin American cultural production through critical queer interventions that index the deployment of gender and sexuality—my dissertation dialogues with the current debates on the biopolitics of the drug war and the significance of narco cultural studies as an ever-evolving field.

Chapters

In the first chapter, I outline the merging of the public sphere with dominant cultural narratives of the drug trade and war on drugs has melded into the *narcosphere*. I also lay out how a queer of color and subaltern critique of the narcosphere aid a nuanced queer reading of the hemispheric post-national and postcolonial moment. Chapter 2 interrogates Lourdes Portillo’s documentary *Señorita Extraviada* which denounces the feminicides on the U.S.-Mexico border and the Colombian sicairesque fiction *Rosario Tijeras*—where I argue that feminist narratives and/or critiques are necessary and important counterparts to the way in which a queer critique sees the discourses of racialized non-normative gender and sexual subjectivities. Through an analysis of these cultural texts, el narco is revealed as an easily identifiable scapegoat and as part of a larger legally sanctioned network of neoliberal global economics at the expense of lives made to be replaceable and thus as disposable in explicitly gendered, racialized, sexual, and classed ways. In the final chapter, I contend that Fernando Vallejo’s *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (Our Lady of the Assassins) from Colombia and Luis Estrada’s *El Infierno* (Hell) from Mexico project homosexuality as pivotal to the representation of the drug trade and the war on drugs. I examine how these cultural texts once unpacked as products of the hemispheric narco-sphere

reveal decisive contradictions in their social critiques of the drug trade and neoliberalism at the expense of reifying political institutions and discourses complicit with the structures they aim to dismantle. With the present work, I hope to make significant contributions to the fields of queer Latino/a and Latin American studies as well as hemispheric narco cultural studies.

Chapter 1: Queering the Hemispheric Narcosphere

The hemispheric narco-sphere is comprised of two interweaving major conceptual parts: the public sphere and narco cultural politics. I will begin by discussing the former as basis for what constitutes the theoretical underpinnings of the narco-sphere. Though a definite notion of the public sphere is difficult to decipher due to its abstract characteristic and wide range of contesting views, the conception of the public sphere that I deploy in this dissertation is consistent with its formation as a discursive political arena by philosopher Jürgen Habermas. As one of the most notable scholars on this topic, Habermas focused much of his work on theorizing the public sphere. Developed in the second half of the 20th century, Habermas' theories on the public sphere are crucial to understand the transformations of social order that had become evident during this period. In "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," Habermas defines the concept of the public sphere as a realm of social life. He writes:

By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion---that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions (Habermas *Encyclopedia* 49).

Habermas does not simply equate the public sphere to a body of people---the public sphere can only be formed when participation occurs via a process of expression of public opinion.

According to Habermas, the public sphere emerges during this period as an equal playing field. Equal in so far as the public sphere was particular to bourgeois society, a sector closed off to the rest (*Encyclopedia*, 49). He explains:

Society, now a private realm occupying a position in opposition to the state, stood on the one hand as if in clear contrast to the state. On the other hand, that society had become a concern of public interest to the degree that the reproduction of life in the wake of the developing market economy had grown beyond the bounds of private domestic authority. *The bourgeois public sphere* could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated “intellectual newspapers, and in moralistic and critical journals, they debated that public authority on the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatized yet publically relevant sphere of labor and commodity exchange (Habermas, *Encyclopedia* 52).

In this newly formed space, the bourgeoisie hashed out matters related to publicity in a private matter, such as issues related to labor and commodity exchange. They did so in places like coffeehouses and salons and in spaces like newspapers and journals. As a product of bourgeois society and the transition from feudalism and the rule of monarchies to democratic control of state activities, the public sphere manifested a wealth of bourgeois ideologies (Habermas, *Encyclopedia* 51). Namely, engagement in the public sphere was reserved only to those subjects with male bourgeois status and therefore exclusive to those who were considered as bearers of full citizenship. This speaks clearly to the fact that although the emergent public sphere presumed a certain openness and accessibility that had not existed within feudalism it conversely manifested the limitations of democracy. These fundamental exclusions lie at the core of

dominant discourses of contemporary mainstream public spheres that are characterized by this type of restricted access that purport legitimacy for the maintenance of society's status quo. Though this is not to say, that minority subjects did not or do not in the present have any participation in these social realms. In an earlier work, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" published in 1962, Habermas historicizes the changes of the public sphere, indicating that there was a conjured distinction between two parts of the public sphere, the political public sphere and the literary public sphere. Despite being officially excluded from the political public sphere women, apprentices, and servants had more participation in the literary public sphere, which was comprised of writers and critics more specifically (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 56). Although the ideological parameters of these distinctions can be further discussed, what is clear is that both the literary and political tended to distinct mechanisms of the public sphere. As Jim McGuigan observes in *The Cultural Public Sphere*, "The literary public sphere was not about transient news—the stuff of journalism---that is the usual focus of attention for the political public sphere. Complex reflection on chronic and persistent problems of life, meaning, and representation—characteristic of art—typically works on a different timescale" (15). However this division became increasingly blurred and rendered as indistinct as the bourgeois gained more political control. Habermas elaborates,

As soon as privatized individuals in their capacity as human beings ceased to communicate merely about their subjectivity but rather in their capacity as property-owners. Desired to influence public power in their common interest, the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm. The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized

individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 56).

Habermas elaborates further on the conflation of both the political and literary realm in his encyclopedia article. Here, Habermas writes, “In the transition from the literary journalism of private individuals to the public services of the mass media the public sphere was transformed by the influx of private interests, which received special prominence in the mass media” (*Structural Transformation* 53). As the public sphere developed under bourgeois society, it began a particular transformation owing to the amplified infiltration of political economic interests. The literary public sphere substantially inclined the political public sphere as much as the political public sphere impacted the literary. Although always significant, media increasingly became an important component of the public sphere. In the present, we can say that newspapers and magazines, radio and television comprise the journalistic media aspect of the public sphere (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 49). To this, we can add the advent of social media and the internet not only as a platform for these sources but also as a content generator. On this note, Habermas discusses how the public sphere in this sense could be said to have undergone a transformation that rendered the initial bourgeois model almost obsolete. He writes:

With the interweaving of the public and private realm, not only do the political authorities assume certain functions in the sphere of commodity exchange and social labor, but conversely social powers now assume political functions. This leads to a kind of “re-feudalization” of the public sphere. Large organizations strive for political compromises with the state and with each other, excluding the public sphere whenever possible. But at the same time the large organizations

must assure themselves of at least plebiscitary support from the mass of the population through an apparent display of openness (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 54).

Habermas refers to this process as a re-feudalization, because the claim to openness and democratic access becomes compromised as soon as participation in the public is carried out mostly by the dominant social powers. This exclusion, under Habermas' definition contradicts one of the primordial characteristics of the bourgeois public sphere, which is to grant access to all that were considered "citizens." But, if as Habermas contends, and the bourgeois public sphere was fundamentally transformed and no longer feasible; then a new model of the public sphere must attend to the ways in which the public body and public opinion have been modified by current social systems of political economy and citizenship.

Critiques and elaborations on the public sphere have indeed taken up these specific concerns to formulate new understandings of a currently relevant public sphere. For example, queer and feminist scholars such as Nancy Fraser and Lauren Berlant have undertaken further work on articulating how a conception of the public sphere must take into account the neoliberal cultural discourses that structure it at same time that it deploys them. In "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to a Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Fraser accordingly calls for the consideration of the ways in which society has been irrevocably altered within late capitalism and advocates for a post-bourgeois model of the "public sphere" that takes into account these changes (111). While Fraser agrees with Habermas in recognizing the "public sphere" as initially a site of discursive interaction, she also wants to push the model forward by critiquing assumptions and omissions, and account for the possible existence of multiple public spheres (110) She points out that in fact the bourgeois "public sphere" as conceived by

Habermas was constituted by the “official” exclusion of most sectors of the general population (Fraser 118). Fraser specifies,

Women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation on the basis of gender status, while plebian men were formally excluded by property qualifications. Moreover, in many cases women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds (Fraser 118).

The criteria for marginalization from the public sphere was of course not arbitrary, it was on the contrary, based on specific requisite norms of racial, ethnic, gender and class dominance. Fraser is keen on arguing that these exclusions are not insignificant and therefore should not be taken lightly. She writes, “The question of open access cannot be reduced without remainder to the presence or absence of formal exclusions. It requires us to look also at the process of discursive interaction within formally inclusive public arenas” (Fraser 118). Hence, the official exclusion of these groups did not simply demonstrate the inequity of these spaces—it categorically manifested the privileging and deployment of select discourses—namely, the interests and issues of bourgeoisie masculinist ideology (Fraser 137).

In a major contribution to the theorization of the public sphere, Fraser is clear on emphasizing the existence of multiple public spheres rather than one. Fraser specifically distinguishes between weak and strong public spheres in order to indicate the level of impact on state politics (Fraser 134). In her reading of Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere, Fraser notes the substantial implication of a separation between civil society and the state, which she indicates as promoting a *weak public sphere*, where a supposed independence of public opinion would be threatened if it also constituted decision-making (Fraser 134). This is because in the initial

conception of the public sphere, a strong public sphere could not exist only because as soon as the public sphere constituted a decision making process it would become null and would stop serving its purpose as mediator. Conversely, Fraser clarifies this matter and at once complicates it by making reference to the crucial emergence of parliament. She writes,

With the landmark development in the history of the public sphere, we encounter a major structural transformation, since a sovereign parliament functions as a public sphere *within* the state. Moreover, sovereign parliaments are what I shall call *strong publics*, publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision-making. As locus of public deliberation culminating in legally binding decisions (or laws), parliament was to be the site for the discursive authorization of the use of state power. With the achievement of parliamentary sovereignty, therefore, the line separating (associational) civil society and the state is blurred (Fraser 134).

Essentially, parliament or any sort of legislature constitutes a strong public sphere as it is directly involved in policy making. But rather than disavowing the notion of the public sphere in its entirety as conceived by Habermas, the blurring between civil society and the state in the development of the public sphere aids the unveiling of societal transformation in so far as it exposes the expansion of the relationship between private interests and state power. Furthermore, the elimination of such a distinction is important because it also allocates knowledge of the politics that drive the ways in which a post-bourgeoisie model of the public sphere now functions.

Like Fraser, in *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Berlant similarly highlights how the contemporary “public sphere” is instrumental in

the circulation of liberal ideologies within dominant discourses in late capitalist society (9). Both Berlant and Fraser emphasize the discrepancy in the criteria of what is deemed as private matters worthy of public discussion. In other words, certain private practices become increasingly scrutinized when associated with particular non-normative groups, which become the subjects of public political debate more often than matters pertaining to the political affairs dealing with the ruling elite. Berlant gestures to the significant shift between the public and private where she explains how “personal” private affective experiences in an assumed social antagonism with the public, construct ideas of American citizenship in the present. In view of this collapse between the private and the public, Berlant argues for an appreciation of the public sphere as an “intimate public sphere,” where citizenship, formerly perceived as part of public life, is now contingent on “personal acts and values” such as sex and sexuality carried out through the mass mediation of right wing liberal discourses (5). In this work, Berlant questions why sex and sexuality have come to bear the burden of outlining “proper citizenship” (6). Berlant’s project asks why conservative politics consistently contradict the core of their beliefs when there are issues at hand related to intimacy.

It asks why a conservative politics that maintains the sacredness of privacy, the virtue of the free market, and the immorality of state overregulation contradicts everything it believes when it comes to issues of intimacy. It asks why the pursuit of some less abstracted and more corporeal forms of ‘happiness’---through sex and through multicultural and sexual identity politics---has come to exemplify dangerous and irresponsible citizenship for the some and utopian practice for others (Berlant 6).

Berlant’s interrogation behind such a focus on intimacy and the corporeal; raises inquiries that at

the same time reveal intentions that are very much in line with Foucault's observations on the relationship between biopolitics and sexuality. Moreover, Berlant's discussion communicates the relevance of such a political relationship in the present and the need to integrate a conception of the public sphere that incorporates the centrality of individualizing techniques of sex, sexuality, and sexual behavior. Such an acknowledgement of the significance of sexuality would not only amplify our knowledge of the "intimate public sphere" it would also expose the process involved in the shaping of views on sexuality frontally with the interplay of race, class, and gender within the public sphere. Yet it goes beyond knowing the characteristic of such socio-political relationships, it comes down to knowing their effects. The merit of concepts such as "exclusion" and "marginalization" and making them explicit is to elicit a certain cognizance about an assumed threat, a lurking risk for the dominant. In many ways, "proper citizenship" can anchor more abstract notions of proper ways of belonging and being contingent on other agents. As Berlant also claims there has been a resurgence or push back on the part of the conservative spectrum who want to reaffirm their dominance. She explains,

This is what continues to fuel a state of sexual emergency, through homophobic and racist policies in the state and federal system, along with various forms of defensiveness, rage, and nostalgia among ordinary citizens who liked it better when their sexuality could be assumed to be general for the population as a whole (Berlant 17).

This is certainly true when discussing liberal discourses on rights and citizenship concerning LGBT communities, but it also highly relevant in light of immigrant right discourse and the push back it has also received from conservative right wing factions. Push back often materializes in violent ways that are promoted and enacted by sectors of the population deemed as normative

and in a position of dominance that feel threatened by the incursion of new players in the political arena. The most obvious examples in recent history in the so-called “western developed world” has been the push back of nationalist movements evinced in the triumph of Trump’s America and Brexit. Hence, the political and economic interests of the dominant become reproduced as the norm through the public sphere to keep the presumed threat of being overpowered by non-dominant groups seemingly under control. The key here has been to pit marginalized groups against other groups by banking on the already existent anxieties toward difference which has been essentialized to facilitate the scapegoating for resource scarcity and desire to eliminate groups that compete for the same resources. The question that arises, almost immediately, is how exactly can the public sphere be so determining for politics.

This question is better addressed through an analysis of the cultural materialism described by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*. Within Marxism, ‘the base’ is conceived as consisting of the forces and relations of production while ‘the superstructure’ is viewed as containing other networks and relations of society (art, culture, law, media, social institutions), in sum these are the relations not having to do directly with productive forces. While this relationship is often described as reciprocal the leading view recognizing the structural hierarchy of the model places the base as dominant. In his essay “Base and Superstructure,” Williams laments that certain factions of Marxist critics have wanted to emphasize the autonomy and complexity of the ‘superstructure’ by analyzing Marx’s definition of the superstructure when in fact it is much more important and significant to undertake an examination of the ‘base’ as defined by Marx himself. Williams develops this claim by explaining that Marx’s notion of the base has often been misread:

By extension and by habit, ‘the base’ has come to be considered virtually as an object (a particular and reductive version of ‘material existence’). Or, in specification, ‘the base’ is given very general and apparently uniform properties. ‘The base’ is the real social existence of man. ‘The base’ is the real relations of production corresponding to a stage of the development of material productive forces (Williams 81).

Williams’ reading of Marx in this instance is emphatic on pointing out that ‘the base’ must be conceived through its specific historical context and should not be reduced to a category (81). He clarifies, “We can add that while a particular stage of ‘real social existence’ or of ‘relations of production,’ or of a ‘mode of production’, can be discovered and made precise by analysis, it is never, as a body of activities, either uniform or static (Williams 82). In this sense, the proposal of a continuous dynamic variation of forces between relations of production and social relations is central to Marx’s sense of history (Williams 82). Williams adds:

It is only when we realize that the “base,” to which it is habitual to refer variations, is itself a dynamic and internally contradictory process—the specific activities and modes of activity, over a range from association to antagonism, of real men and classes of men---that we can begin to free ourselves from the notion of an ‘area’ or a ‘category’ with certain fixed properties for deduction to the variable processes of a ‘superstructure (Williams 82).

Above all, I interpret Williams’s clarification as highlighting the level of consequence of ‘the base’ as evincing itself as unstable and most importantly for the determination of ‘the superstructure’ and cultural relations within it not as secondary to the economic “base” structure, but precisely as having the potential for reaffirmation and/or dissension to in turn affect the

“base’s” process. ‘The superstructure’ would in this context, consist of political society and civil society, where the state would integrate the political and the public sphere, the civil respectively. Within current neoliberal society, ‘the superstructure’ is designed to protect the capitalist economic base wherein the base reproduces the same relations of production. It is then arguable that if the specifics of the economic ‘base’ cannot exist without the work of the superstructure to sustain it, then the superstructure determines the economic base as much as the base determines the superstructure. Reciprocity is additionally instrumental to conceive how the public sphere, is neither absolutely dependent on economic conditions nor is exclusively dependent on the state’s political relations and relations of production. That is, because its parameters have been transformed, as a cultural and social discursive realm, the public sphere is conditioned by the state and economic bases insomuch as the public sphere itself also designs the conditions for the forces of state and economic production.

Accounting for the political and economic shifts of society, the most adequate conception of a current public sphere according to British scholar Jim McGuigan would need to explain the prevalence of affective approaches of public popular engagement that respond to the imminence of life concerns. McGuigan refers to such an idea as the ‘cultural public sphere.’ He explains,

In the late-modern world, the cultural public sphere is not confined to a republic of letters-the eighteenth century’s literary public sphere---and ‘serious’ art, classical, modern or, for that matter, postmodern. Rather, it includes the various channels and circuits of mass popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life. The concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic

and emotional) modes of communication (McGuigan 435).

In view of ever-increasing mass popular culture and entertainment, the implication of such an interaction of mass media with traditionally artistic cultural production on a global scale and its affect on political discourse within the public sphere cannot be disregarded. In spite of the emphasis of these discussions as pertaining to the United States and Western “developed” societies such as the United Kingdom, the emergent parameters of the ‘public sphere’ are crucial for meaningful engagements of the public sphere within contemporary neoliberal reflections. Thus, what we truly have in our midst is an intimate cultural public sphere with global reach and of course, considerable hemispheric relevance.

The current hemispheric cultural public sphere has indeed been produced and shaped through shared economic and political histories but also through the extension of neocolonial mass flow of information, narcotics, weapons and people across geopolitical borders. Marta Tienda and Susana M. Sanchez point out that immigration to the United States has definitely increased---and leading among that movement is immigration from Latin America. Latin American migration, specifically immigration from south to north into the United States, clearly indicates the movement of people across geopolitical borders but it is a trend that is particularly revealing about the factors that have led to such a boost in immigration within recent decades. Tienda & Sánchez write, “Latin Americans have been a major driver of this trend, as their numbers soared from less than 1 million in 1960 to nearly 19 million in 2010” (48). Whereas many factors have contributed to this upsurge of migration, economic factors would seem the most palpable catalyst. Tienda and Sánchez in this sense are adamant about the social and economic causes of the increase in migration. They write, “Migration is part of the multiphase demographic response to unequally distributed social and economic opportunities that is

simultaneously determined by micro-and macro level forces” (Tienda & Sánchez 60). Moreover, the flow of capital through transnational private investment has proven to benefit the economy of many Latin American countries on a macro level yet it has had detrimental effects on a micro per capita level. This is evinced by the increased direct flow of capital from migrants in the United States through monetary remittances to Latin American countries. In the specific case of Mexico, almost certainly due to its proximity to the United States, there is a long history of U.S. relations. From the annexation of almost half its territory by the United States via the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Gadsden Purchase to the more recent neoliberal trade agreements, imperialist foreign policy has dictated much of that history (Tienda & Sánchez 49). Consequently, presence of Mexicans in US territory dates back to this instant, shortly thereafter immigration from Mexico to the United States was encouraged through guest worker programs to satisfy the demand for labor (Tienda & Sánchez 49). Since then, Mexican immigration to the United States has been a constant, and therefore a constant of political discussion. Currently, Mexican immigration has been largely fueled through a combination of economic need and the urgency to flee state-sanctioned and/or drug related violence

As opposed to Mexico, Colombia does not have the same established history of immigration, but it does, however, share similar contributors that set the ground for emigration. In recent years, Colombia has been the main source of migrants coming to the United States from South America. Tienda & Sánchez state,

Colombia was the largest single source of immigrants from South America throughout the period. Stimulated by prolonged political instability, armed conflict, and drug violence amid sporadic economic downturns, Colombian emigration gained momentum over the latter half of the twentieth century. The

early waves largely involved upper-class professionals with the resources to flee, but as the internal armed conflict escalated, members of the working class joined the exodus (Tienda & Sánchez 56).

Migration from Colombia is understandably tied to political and economic factors on a local and global level. As stated, Colombia's entry into the neoliberal market was sparked through military intervention and economic aid intended to combat drug cartels. Whereas migrants who left Colombia at first sought refuge from mass poverty, subsequent migrants sought to escape from drug violence in addition to state, paramilitary, and guerrilla violence related to the drug war. While I have only briefly mentioned migratory flows involving Mexico, Colombia and the United States, the movement of people is unmistakably a considerable force of social impact throughout the hemisphere.

The implication of the flow of information in view of the magnitude of the effects of migration—cannot be overstated, when considering the mass transmission and exchange of customs, feelings, opinions, and ideas. Accordingly, the booming industry of Spanish language media and Spanish language broadcasts in the United States is clear evidence of this impact. Since its inception this industry has undoubtedly helped develop and maintain lines of communication between the United States, Latin America and the rest of the world. The emergence of enhanced technology such as the Internet and telecommunications has only added to this development by creating new communication avenues and strengthening existing ones to establish and integrate local and transnational horizontal networks.¹⁰ The contention here is not

¹⁰ Examples of horizontal networks of communication include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In “Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society” Castells writes, “The communication foundation of the network society is the global web of horizontal communication networks that include the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many both synchronous and asynchronous. Of course, the Internet is an old technology, first deployed in

only that there is a patent mass flow of media across the hemisphere but precisely that this mass flow has formulated a transnational public sphere where political institutions, states and interest groups contest control and domination of public opinion (Castells, 80). As Manuel Castells asserts in “The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance,” the globalized world that we live in as a result of the transformation of socio-political order implies a global public sphere, “that is largely dependent on the global/local communication media system” (89). Because the public sphere is instrumental in social politics as a whole, including state policy, the manner in which the public sphere is constituted and manages will dictate the structure and dynamics of any given society (Castells 80). As such, the existence of global public spheres and other transnational public spheres, such as the hemispheric public sphere function to construct and reconstruct ideas on a transnational social level.

The narco-sphere acts as a hemispheric public arena of political discourse that is at the same time cultural as it is intimate, where certain private matters become the subject of public discussion. The narco-sphere in theory, initially imagined as a separate entity from the state, is nevertheless always subject to the state’s control and hence the permeation of capitalist interests within the state. Under the terms of this intimate cultural public sphere, the narco-sphere is both a producer and product comprised both by cultural media and journalistic media that mediate discourses, which shape the politics of society. What is at stake, ultimately, is the negotiation of our political conceptions of social reality vis-à-vis the hemispheric drug war and its effects. For this reason, I aim to discuss the conception of a neoliberal hemispheric *narco*-sphere, where racial, class, gender and sexual discourses are organized and are reproduced within cultural

1969. But it is only in the last decade that reached out throughout the world to exceed now 1 billion users” (Castells *Communication* 246).

production and interrelate with other sectors of society. The narcosphere and its narco cultural politics in this view are as defined cultural, political and economic interactions that must not be recognized simply as causal but as mutually correlational processes of variation that complement each other. Yet this complexity would be incomprehensible without understanding how the bias of media functions whether it is through coercion or deliberate intent. Pinpointing the existence of the narco-sphere helps us see how cultural media representations have the power to critique, counter or reaffirm the subjection of non-normative sexual, gendered, racial, and class expressions to the strategic and regulatory scrutiny of neoliberal governmentality.

I have borrowed *narco*-sphere as a term from journalism, in particular from an online blogs/forums for commenting and reporting on the *narco* news bulletin as a critical response to commercial media (*Narcosphere/Narconews*). I use this term because of the centrality of journalism within the public sphere and also in part due to the fact that some the very first critical publications on the *narco* were from journalists covering the drug trade since the early stages of its transformation into a neoliberal global market. The *narco*-sphere owes much of its force to the crucial role of the journalistic media and mass media in shaping and propagating biopolitical narratives on the drug trade, drug war, narco culture, criminalization and violence within the public sphere. Yet this is precisely why the *narco*-sphere's trajectory does not solely emerge from these journalistic perspectives, it is intimately tied to and determined by popular narratives, the global neoliberal political economy as well as national cultural and state politics.

The *narco*-sphere is an adaptable milieu where existing narratives become re-written and re-inscribed under the guise of the drug trade and drug war according to the desires of the dominant economic and state powers. An earlier version of the narco-sphere emerged in Mexico and Colombia as a rural *narco*-sphere and idiosyncrasy, which eventually gave way to the

inclusion of an urban narco-sphere precisely as both local and transnational media attention to the urban metropoli became magnified with the increase of economic and political stakes in the drug trade and drug war. In this view, the rural *narco*-sphere has conditioned everyday reality in many rural regions since the emergence of larger scale drug trafficking in the late 60's, on par with the rise of neoliberalism. Thus the *narco*-sphere that began as a principally rural has expanded to be inclusive of an urban geography that developed in the 1990's. Consequently, particular regions, countries like Mexico and Colombia and certain groups like racialized poor populations across these geopolitical borders have come to be profiled and generalized as narco-traffickers through the *narco*-sphere in many cases as the only entities involved in the profiting of the production and transportation of narcotics where the success of the drug economy is in effect premised on a variety of factors and participants. There are many questions that arise and rightfully so. Among these questions is certainly a very important one. If we assume that there is indeed a narco-sphere ruled by discourse of the drug war and drug trade with hemispheric, cultural, and private implications then how exactly did we get to this point?

While many of the recent debates on the drug war and drug trade within the narco-sphere have focused on a U.S.-Mexico context, it would be implausible to conceive such a transformation of the public sphere without seriously considering crucial events in the interplay between other significant geopolitical spaces implicated in the narcotics economy's production and transportation. For instance, Colombia has held a significant role within the globalized drug trade and particularly as a site of *narco* cultural production. Many scholars have argued that Plan Colombia, NAFTA, and the subsequent militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border have provided the perfect labor conditions for the rerouting of main drug-operations from Colombia to Mexico. The suppression of the drug trade in one region as it happened in Colombia and the simultaneous

upsurge in another region as in Mexico, labeled as the balloon-effect by experts such as Ioan Grillo, serves to indicate that the drug trade is much more complex and therefore more difficult to eradicate precisely because of the diversity of components (Grillo 50). Despite the fact that Colombia's most intense moment in terms of the extension of drug trade operations and intensity of the drug war happened during the 1980s y 1990s, the drug trade and drug war is still a highly relevant and influential factor in everyday life and in the perception of Colombian society on a local and global level. Because of news of the Colombian cartels and the Medellin cartel with Pablo Escobar flooded the mainstream media in the United States and Latin America, Colombia became essentialized as emblematic of the drug. While media attention to Colombian cartels reached an ultimate highpoint with the death of Escobar in 1993, media focus on Mexico's drug trade initiated more closely when

Mexican drug kingpin Rafael Caro Quintero was suspected of the murder of U.S. DEA agent Enrique Camarena Salazar in 1984 (Polit-Dueñas 46). Recent local and international media attention has targeted the capture of El Chapo Guzman head of the Sinaloa cartel in 2014 and his subsequent escape from prison in 2015. Indeed, these are some of the more shocking headlines but local and national medias across the globe are constantly producing news on drug violence, drug busts, as well as the travel advisories issued by the U.S government that intend to keep American citizens away from regions perceived as dangerous due to drug violence. While the mass media and the dominant journalistic discourse within the narcosphere have for the most part focused on underscoring the extent of events perceived as related to the drug war, alternative journalistic media as well as cultural production and criticism have been inclined to highlight the nexus between social institutions and the sources and effects of the drug war. While the mainstream media across the hemisphere shies away from questioning the state's political and

economic investment in the drug trade, some journalists' in local presses and online blogs have continued to expose the *narco* often having to self-censor for fear of retaliation. Because of the consistent threat to journalists particularly in Mexico, many online news reports about el narco are often redacted and then retracted. A sign that the ephemeral aspect of news has taken a more temporal turn where flash news reporting is a tactic used to expose facts yet maintain a low profile for precaution in view of increased vendettas. Although it is difficult to know exactly how many journalists have been murdered due to the content of their reporting in relation to the state corruption, their deaths are often too suspicious to be considered coincidences. According to the *Committee to Protect Journalists*, since 1992, 81 journalists have been murdered in Mexico and 83 in Colombia (*Protect Journalists*). Despite the dire risk that the profession in this context entails, journalists continue to expose the links between the state and organized crime. Anabel Hernández, for example has gone into partial hiding after receiving death threats for exposing the alliances between the Mexican government and the drug cartels in her 2010 book *Los Señores del Narco*---where she most notably demonstrates the association between Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman Loera and the Salinas de Gortari administration (65).¹¹ Most recently, photographic journalist for the left-leaning political magazine *Proceso*, Ruben Espinoza Becerril was assassinated in his Mexico City apartment along with political activist Nadia Vera after both fled Vera Cruz following death threats. Alternative media and US based outlets like *Vice News* reported on these assassinations and have consistently documented and laid out details about the possible link between the violence of the war on drugs and the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa students by the Mexican government (*Vice News*, Hernandez and Del Pozo).

¹¹ Leader of the Sinaloa cartel, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman Loera is considered one of the most powerful men in Mexico. He has escaped twice from a high security Mexican prison, most recently in July 2015.

In this same vein, Curtis Marez in his excellent book, *Drug Wars: Political Economy of Narcotics*, focuses on a critique of political economy within the “drug wars” while also emphasizing how the media in particular has been manipulated by the United States’ government to conceal the inadequacies of its drug policies within the United States and abroad for the benefit of capitalist gain (5). Marez argues,

Representations of the war on drugs are also complicate by the participation of capitalists, for whom the drug trade has been immensely profitable. The aerospace industry (which supplies drug enforcement planes, helicopters, and other technology) chemical companies (which produce the poisons that are dropped on drug fields), and the prison industry directly benefit from the drug war and hence actively lobby for tits continued expansion. Capitalists profit from the drug war in other ways as well (Marez 5).

Marez’s study is indeed highly perceptive of the economic and mediatic relations of power involved within the deployment of the war on drugs. While Marez employs a cultural studies critique, others like literary critic Gabriela Polit-Dueñas prefer using literary studies to gain access to an understanding of *narco* culture and politics. In *Narrating Narcos: Culiacan and Medellin*, Polit-Dueñas argues that her approach through contextualizing the particular social aspects of spaces in Mexico and Colombia linked to narco-trafficking from which narco novels emerge, is the most adequate manner to analyze narco literature. Polit-Dueñas writes, “Although the news constantly reminds us that narco trafficking is a global phenomenon, its human dramas, its cultural and social effects can only be understood when examining local context” (2). Others like Mexican sociologist, Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo emphasize the need for an interdisciplinary approach to detect ideologies on organized crime (9). In *El crimen como*

realidad y representación. Contribución para una historia del presente(*Crime as reality and representation: a contribution for a history of the present*) [My translation]. Escalante Gonzalbo further describes organized crime as symbolic and based on a discursive representation by the state where notions of corruption and complicity are obscured. Escalante Gonzalbo is adamant about how the public discussion within Mexico in recent years has lost all complexity and has become monotone (10). That is, discussions within the Mexican public sphere have become monotone in particular since the war on drugs was declared.

A key historical moment within Mexican narco cultural politics comes in 2006, when former Mexican President Felipe Calderon declared war against drug cartels suggesting that the basis of Mexico's many socio-political conflicts was indeed the drug trade. Although the war on drugs had been a reality of U.S./Mexico politics since the late 1960's and since the 1980's in the case of U.S./Colombia, Calderon's avowal gestured a shift in drug politics on the national and transnational level that some experts have argued sought to rid powerful drug cartels of their competition instead of eradicating the drug trade all together. In their book *Los Saldos del Narco: El Fracaso de Una Guerra*, Rubén Aguilar V. and Jorge Castañeda affirm that in regards to assessing the success of their respective drug wars, Mexico and Colombia are not the same (145). The authors indicate that Colombia has never had entire control over its geopolitical affairs and has had a long history of internal turmoil due to numerous guerrilla and paramilitary groups.¹² The guerrillas, namely FARC became some of the most important targets of anti-

¹² Guerrilla movements have had a significant presence in Colombia political life since the 19th century. Most recently groups like Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), Movimiento 19 de abril (M-19) have been active since the 1960's.

narcotic measures.¹³ Likewise, in *Narrating Narcos*, Gabriela Polit Dueñas references the ways in which some scholars have differentiated Colombia and Mexico by citing how the state has figured distinctly in the drug trade within each context. The difference in the case of Mexico was the strength of state, which aided the solidification of the drug trade while in the case of Colombia it was precisely the weak and decentralized state that facilitated the emergence of the drug trade. What this visibly points to is to the fact that state's relative strength and centralization is not necessarily linked to the emergence and growth of the drug trade. The state would be an ever-present factor, through the local elite's control of local economy or the private illicit operations in complicity with foreign economic and political interests where the state was a factor of broader economic global inter-dependence. As mentioned, the United States government intensified its rhetoric on drug policy abroad at the same time that it deployed its domestic war on drugs during the 1980s, a racial and class war that resulted in the criminalization of poor people of color. Although distinctions are valid and important to note, the correlation between these spaces is much more complex and indispensable to the relationships Mexico/United States and Colombia/United States within the context of the western hemispheric narcotics economy. A theorization of the *narco*-sphere requires that we look at Colombia, Mexico, and the United States as historically central sites of *narco*-society particularly since the second half of the 20th century.

As Aguilar and Castañeda show, the efforts of Plan Colombia in the 1990's were characterized through their intent on cutting production and supply but doing almost nothing to cut the demand for narcotics in the United States, a main consumer. U.S. monetary aid under

¹³ Plan Colombia in the 1990's, included significant US financial aid to combat the drug operations in Colombia. Colombia tried to extend this aid to anti-guerrilla operations through the guerrilla's ties to the drug trade (Marez 7).

Plan Colombia was to be directed at anti-drug operations, however, the aid also eventually expended for anti-guerrilla operations through Colombia's focus on FARC and other smaller insurgent groups' ties to the drug trade (Aguilar V. and Castañeda 145). Unfortunately, rather than eliminating drug trafficking, the "war on drugs" in Colombia became a struggle for power and control of the drug trade. As Curtis Marez points out, "Far from stopping the flow of cocaine, U.S. drug-war assistance has supported right-wing paramilitary groups in Colombia that openly participate in drug traffic" (6). Marez adds "With U.S. support, Colombia goes after small producers as part of an effort to terrorize Indians and mestizo peasants and prevent them from opposing the powerful" (7). Certainly, the strategic targeting of small producers, indigenous and mestizo peasants in Colombia renders visible how the drug trade and drug war across national borders have become both a justification and a means for the further subjection and extermination of already marginal populations. In other words, the state has used the anti-drug trade rhetoric as a justification to ratify drug policies and consent for the drug war, which in turn has served as a means to target certain groups deemed as disposable. Colombia's historical unrest in the vast country side, its decentralized government as well as continued efforts by the government to suppress the labor organizing have undoubtedly contributed to the rise of narco-trafficking alongside the logic of neoliberal entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, much of scholarship does not account for the interplay of multiple social relations.

As a result, the conception of current phenomena within the western hemisphere is produced through the lens of the drug war's interests as a fixed perception pertaining to the ostensive "criminality" and "decadence" that is inherent to the drug trade. While some critiques of the presumed "decadence" of society through the nostalgic and patriarchal views of family and morality are in this sense often carried out at the expense of non-normative bodies and

subjectivities, others like Sergio González Rodríguez have incisively critiqued the violence of contemporary narco society rooted in patriarchy and neoliberalism. Although most studies that consider media and cultural production make references to mysogyny and homophobia they do not consistently integrate a critique of gender and sexuality within their analytical approach. For instance, Polit Dueñas makes references to how extreme violence is often portrayed through gender violence. Polit Dueñas writes,

Because the narcotics trade is overwhelmingly a masculine world, the stories I analyze show the devastating aspects of an extremely misogynistic culture. Duels over honor---so inherent to the narco culture---impose an aesthetic that constantly undervalues the feminine. The codes of violence---which certainly have concrete references---are extremely homophobic” (Polit Dueñas 22).

She observes how representations of enhanced violence are made through gender differences and become naturalized. While Polit Dueñas expresses the rampant gendered nature of violence in narco narratives and the lack of women’s participation in their cultural production, her study as she suggests is more concerned with an analysis of the representation of narco trafficking than with the discursive reproduction and reification of those images. To conceive relations of gender and sexuality as central to an analysis of media and representation as well as discourses on criminality in relation to race and class within narco cultural politics, would be to delve into a more critical debate on what precisely constitutes the role of power in the organization of society and el narco.

Bearing in mind these present connections, an adequate analytic requires a deliberation on how citizenship and personhood have come to be qualified in the organization of western society and the narco-sphere. I come back to Foucault’s theorization on the power over life in

The History of Sexuality in order to emphasize how citizenship is now significantly defined through sexual subjectivity. That is, the role of sexuality is made intelligible within this shift toward biopolitical discourse, through the recognition that the management of the population is exercised through technologies that function to individualize life (Foucault 139). Foucault explains:

Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species. It was employed as a standard for the disciplines and as a basis for regulations. This is why in the nineteenth century sexuality was sought out in the smallest details of individual existences; it was tracked down in behavior, pursued in dreams; it was suspected of underlying the least follies; it was traced back into the earliest years of childhood; it became the stamp of individuality---at the same time what enabled one to analyze the latter and what made it possible to master it. But one also sees it becoming the theme of political operations, economic interventions (through incitements or curbs on procreation), and ideological campaigns for raising standards of morality and responsibility (Foucault 146).

Since the 19th century, sex and sexuality became fundamental avenues and techniques for identity and subjection under the emergent regime of power over life. In this sense, the liberalization of sexual subjectivities parallels the timeline of liberalization that occurred within western economic structures and the consolidation of capitalism. This is significant because it resulted in a complex matrix of hierarchical social relations where the prominence and increasing visibility of sexual expression allowed for increased consumerism and at the same time for this very same reason permitted increased and different forms of subjection. The individualizing visibility of sexuality made it at once explicit and hence the target of efforts to normalize

sexuality through “righteous” notions of morality and responsibility. It could be said then, that to individualize necessarily means to differentiate from an assumed norm and almost always implies the intent to disregard. As Foucault indicates, these “campaigns for raising standards of morality and responsibility” were ideological and thus functioned on a socially discursive and productive level. As a result they directly influenced social relations and public policy. Examples of these moralistic campaigns in the present range from the very anti-drug propaganda of the 1980’s and 1990’s to the sexual abstinence campaigns championed by conservative interests groups (Doan and Williams 29).¹⁴ These of course are intimately tied to each other as manifested for instance in the early anti-aids movements, which urged moral responsibility against promiscuous sexuality and drug use because they were deemed as risky behaviors that brought disease unto themselves and others (Patton 58).¹⁵ Those that are assumed to participate in behaviors designated as risky are instantly labeled as deserving to be shamed and shunned from mainstream society. Unsurprisingly, as biopolitical techniques of management, sex, sexuality, and the use of narcotics remain discursively intertwined because they express narratives of consumption that go hand in hand in the capitalist market economy. It is hardly contestable that within the neoliberal era of capitalist hegemony, consumption is simultaneously expected in the population but highly policed and scrutinized within specific groups or individuals, yet it is also real that other groups rather than figure as subjects become the objects that are themselves

¹⁴ In *The Politics of Virginity: Abstinence in Sex Education*, Alesha E. Doan and Jean Calterone Williams point out how the Christian Right in the 1990s began to build support for abstinence only education in the US as a way, they argued, would eliminate the need for welfare (Doan and Williams 29).

¹⁵ Cindy Patton notes, “Some people are quite happy to blame the liberal society that is imagined to have permitted homosexuality to flourish, as well as homosexuals themselves, for “causing” AIDS. AIDS, and to a lesser extent cancer, show in relief the persistence of moralized ideas about disease and the stigmatizing mechanisms they trigger (Patton 58).”

consumed through exploitative labor and fetishizing practices. The determining factor for pinpointing the intersection of subject/object difference constantly eludes definition. This is purely because the subject/object dichotomy does not sustain the integral variability of the politics of life and citizenship. Accordingly, there is always something that escapes it and cannot be entirely deciphered. To sum up, the variability of the politics involved in the concept of life and citizenship immediately points to discourses of difference that have a determining stronghold on notions of nation or any group and exclusion as its compulsory counterpart. It is not only necessary to recognize the different possible grounds for inclusion and exclusion from discourses of personhood and citizenship, but that both are essential to any concept of identity and belonging (Gopinath 7). As the discourses on sexuality and narcotics are revealed here as fundamental in the narco-sphere's process, particular ideological discourses on gender, class, and race are also exposed as integral to the manner in which biopolitical techniques such as sexuality have historically been deployed within the western hemisphere to determine the boundaries of qualified personhood. In particular, racial discourse was instrumental in the creation of the caste system and the hierarchical organization of colonial America that was vital for the mercantilist economic frame.

For instance, in *Race and the Education of Desire*, Ann Laura Stoler recognizes the underlying racial implications of Foucault's theories of power and sexuality and the role of biopolitics in the context of Western Europe's colonies abroad. To illustrate, she writes, "critiques of the essentialist underpinnings of racial and sexual identities are so well incorporated into intellectual and political agendas, few have drawn directly from him" (Stoler 25). Stoler holds that race had been "systematically embraced" already in the 17th century together with other distinctions of religion and culture, which undergirded much of the governing strategies of

social administration (27). She explains that the status of race changes in the 19th century in the sense that is no longer simply embraced it is now primordial. Stoler stresses:

[R]ace becomes the organizing grammar of an imperial order in which modernity, the civilizing mission and the “measure of man” were framed. And with it “culture” was harnessed to do more specific political work; not only to mark difference, but to rationalize the hierarchies of privilege and profit, to consolidate the labor regimes of expanding capitalism, to provide the psychological scaffolding for the exploitative structures of colonial rule (Stoler 27).

As Stoler asserts, race was one of the most commanding forces used to mark difference and justify arrangements during the colonial era but continue to be relevant considering that such systems of social classification have remained virtually unbroken. In suggesting that these systems have remained intact, I am not suggesting that the discourses of race and class as well as gender and sexuality have remained unchanged, but rather that they continue to be central particularly because they are in fact able to be transformed and adapted to support the political interests required for rationalizing biopolitical methods and hence the continual growth and sustainment of capitalist hegemony.

In this context, the work of Giorgio Agamben is also crucial for conceiving the links between biopolitics and the qualifications of citizenship in western society particularly within the latter half of the twentieth century. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, Agamben describes the figure of the *homo sacer* as critical to understanding the continued debates on what constitutes the transformation of the subject into citizen and how contemporary capitalist regimes dictate and manipulate the discourse of human rights and citizenship as ways to carry out biopolitical projects of population management and economic control (127-128). Agamben

excavates classical law in order to bring forth the *homo sacer* as an important figure and basis for the arrangement of ancient western society. In attempting to describe the *homo sacer*, Agamben distinguishes between two types of life, qualified life and bare life. Within this framework of classical law, the *homo sacer* as unqualified political life is indeed different from both *bios*, life that is considered qualified within the socio-political realm and *zoē*, bare life that was viewed as traditionally reserved to the private realm. Unlike *zoē*, the *homo sacer* is bare life that can be killed without being thought of as a sacrifice (Agamben 82).¹⁶ Because the killing of the *homo sacer* is not considered a sacrificial loss within society, it is not punishable. It would seem then, that the driving force behind the theorization of the *homo sacer* is the ability to kill and dispose of bare life with impunity.

Agamben's elaboration of Foucault's work on biopolitics and Carl Schmitt's theories on jurisprudence and sovereignty, has the purpose to demonstrate the connection between "subjective technologies" and "political techniques" to unveil "the intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power" (6). Agamben keenly argues,

What this work has had to record among its likely conclusion is precisely that the two analyses cannot be separated and that the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constituted the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.* In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception. Placing biological life at the center of its calculations, the modern State

¹⁶ Agamben outlines the distinction between *bios* and *zoē*, where *zoē* refers to simple "natural life" (all living beings) and *bios* refers to qualified life in so much as it is a politicized individual or group (Agamben 1).

therefore does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond (derived from a tenacious correspondence between the modern and the archaic which one encounters in the most diverse spheres) between modern power and the most immemorial of the *arcana imperii* (Agamben 6).

The most important guiding fact of biopolitics for Agamben is manifested through the existence of bare life as integral to the political domain and as requisite notion for the state to affirm its power. Bare life must exist and must be continuously discriminated and disregarded as life that does not deserve to live because it bears no political worth in this relation (Agamben 139).

Agamben further contends:

The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoe/bios*, and exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion (Agamben 8).

Given that the relation linking qualified life and bare life is decided by a constant oppositional difference--- the *homo sacer* penetrates within the politics of western society at the very occasion in which bare life is presumed excluded within this relation. Unable to be fully contained within this relation, bare life *Zoē* or becomes the *homo sacer* through the specific circumstances dictated by the deployment of dominant discourses of the public sphere (Agamben 143).

The *homo sacer* is revealed as a meaningful figure once again as the basis for unsheathing the ways in which enduring and emergent patterns of social organization in Latin America and notions of life and citizenship in the transition to biopolitical neocolonial/neoliberal

political regimes are hinged on the same notions of inclusive exclusion (Agamben 8). The hemispheric drug war as biopolitics operates on this level of specific social antagonisms and historical political exclusions. The narco-sphere in this regard produces the anti-drug discourse as well as the class, gender, sexual, and racial rhetoric of criminality and aberration that intends to rationalize the construction of specific life as life that does not deserve to live, which in turn excuses violence as a state mechanism of power toward the population. Hence, within the narcosphere's realm of public cultural intimacy, the notion of "bare life" is indispensable to the propagation of contemporary neoliberal and biopolitical regimes and the killing with impunity of life with marginal status that is not deemed as qualified political life.

The significance of bare life and the *homo sacer* is directly linked to the biopolitics of the state of exception. Agamben explores the importance of this relationship in his subsequent work, *The State of Exception*. He claims that,

One of the elements that make the state of the exception so difficult to define is certainly its close relationship to civil war, insurrection, and resistance. Because civil war is the opposite of normal conditions, it lies in a zone of undecidability with respect the state of exception, which is the state power's immediate response to the most extreme internal conflicts (Agamben, *Exception 2*).

Through the use of the United States Patriot Act issued in 2001, Agamben explains how law is manipulated and used to suspend the status of an individual as a person (State of Exception 3-4). In this context, Agamben observes how the state of exception is in fact not an exception, which would indicate the temporary suspension of civil laws and protections, but is rather a normalized and sustained paradigm in the name of state sovereignty (Agamben, *Exception 2*). The state of exception's rash summoning whenever it is deemed required by the state denotes its always-

present status. Agamben contends that the emergence and progression of “global civil war” has led the state of exception to become a continual and dominant form of government (*Exception* 87). Agamben explains that,

The normative aspect of law can thus be obliterated and contradicted with impunity by a governmental violence that---while ignoring international law externally and producing a permanent state of exception internally---nevertheless still claims to be applying the law. But if it is possible to attempt to halt the machine, to show its central fiction, this is because between violence and law, between life and norm, there is no substantial articulation (Agamben, *Exception* 87).

In this way, Agamben clarifies that because there is no “substantial articulation” between “life and norm” and “violence and law” the state of exception is not essentially permanent precisely because we are able to see its artifice based on fallacious associations. Agamben explains:

Bare life is a product of the machine and not something that preexists it, just as law has no court in nature or in the divine mind. Life and law, anomie and nomos, auctoritas and potestas, result from the fracture of something to which we have no other access than through the fiction of their articulation and the patient work that, by unmasking this fiction, separates what it had claimed to unite (*Exception* 88).

Bare life’s relation to the mechanism of the state of exception can only be one of causation since the notion of bare life is a fiction created by the state of exception itself. It could be said then that for Agamben, the sovereign’s power over life and death wields biopower (Morgensen 33). The justifying rhetoric of the state of exception is used to explain the use of force in order to back the

preservation of the state or circuitously by guaranteeing private interests where bare life is the cite for the exercise of the exception of western politics and the narcosphere.

It would be implausible to conceive western hemispheric politics and the state of exception without considering the U.S.-Mexico geopolitical border as a clear example. In fact, several scholars have made explicit the link between bare life, the state of exception and the U.S.-Mexico border. In his reading of Luis Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* on the story of the Wellton 26 who were abandoned and found dead, Abraham Acosta argues that Urrea's narrative reveals the state of exception that characterizes the U.S.-Mexico border and in particular the Arizona/Sonora border region as the most harsh and desolate stretch of land. For Acosta, this particular stretch of the border rather than the more policed regions of the border constitutes a real zone of indistinction that renders life as bare (225). He writes,

Thus conceived the events named after the Wellton 26 reveal a critical demonstration of the U.S.-Mexico border's juridical form; their errant itinerary serves to trace this border's innermost workings and processes. Urrea's narrative thus doubles as an attempt to critically grapple with the state of exception that exists along the southern Arizona border, where abandonment and not the application of law is sovereign, ultimately resulting in the deaths of the Wellton 26 (Acosta 225).

Here, abandonment indicates the fact that they were left on their own lost to die and that they were not ever considered as a sacrificial loss by either the United States or Mexico. Acosta thus explains that *homo sacer* does not belong to neither realm of zoe or bios. He writes:

If for Agamben, the sovereign constitutes the point of indistinction between zoe and bios because they are both incorporated within a state of exception (i.e. the

juridical order as both the inside and outside), for *Homo Sacer* the effect is inverted: *Homo sacer* belongs to neither the sphere of zoe nor the sphere of bios (neither inside nor outside the juridical order). In other words, *Homo sacer* represents the limit figure in which zoe and bios constitute each other in including and excluding each other. As a result this doubly exceptional status, *Homo sacer*, being neither animal nor citizen, lives in banishment amid the juridical order, as life belonging neither to zoe nor bios, as a form of life that can be killed but not sacrificed (Acosta 225).

Yet Acosta's claim in "Thresholds of Illiteracy" on the value of Urrea's narrative goes beyond this point in order to signal how the U.S-Mexican border is not necessarily exclusively at the margins of United States. The U.S.-Mexican border marks a zone that is indistinguishable from each other, "between the outermost limits of each sovereign sphere, one meeting the other at the most uneven and incomplete margins of the other's own territorial claims (Acosta 226)." Acosta adds:

Thus conceived, the biopolitical structure Urrea presents constitutes a radical unworking of a conventional and uncomplicated colonial binary, one in which Mexico constitutes the outside/zoe to the United States as bios. Rather The Devil's Highway figures a doubly marginal void of political space in which both the United States and Mexico, individually and internally, manifest their own topological orderings and exclusion (Acosta 226).

Acosta's assertion not only attests to the conception of the *homo sacer* at the limits of sovereignty but that the importance of such a figure paradoxically stretches beyond single nation state sovereignty and nation state juridical orders. The *homo sacer* breaks with the colonial

binary of colonizer/colonized and demonstrates how there is no substantial difference between the relationship that the United States and Mexico have to migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. In other words, we cannot see the political and economic responsibility of the United States without conceiving the role of the Mexican state in fundamentally contributing to the creation of the conditions that have marginalized subjects and produced individuals with the necessity to migrate. The *homo sacer* is thus pivotal to conceive the status of global civil war and political and economic refugee crisis that hinges on the machine of the state of exception as Agamben proposes. What is also clear is that a manifest connection between the *homo sacer*, bare life and the state of exception can be identified within and beyond the geopolitical U.S.-Mexico border in other realms where the application of law is null. Through a reading of the hemispheric *narco-sphere* and its cultural production I hope to evince precisely how discourse on the drug trade and drug war have also been used to uphold the state of exception within western politics in addition to revealing the inner workings of biopolitical discourse in Latin American states.¹⁷

However, in order to develop a significant analytic of the hemispheric narco-sphere, it is imperative to think critically about the colonial binary by further examining the historical and political assumptions that undergird such a relationship. It should be noted, for example that the economic politics of the modern drug trade are indeed hardly unexpected, given that the established economic interests of global political relations date back to colonial and nation-building periods of former colonies in Latin America. In her book, *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America's Export Age*, Ericka Beckman suggests a clear link between two

¹⁷ In the case of Mexican cultural history, Gareth Williams argues in *The Mexican Exception* that, “The social pact and the application of the law do not give us insight into the historical interactions and structures of Mexican society. Rather, it is conflict and the state of exception that reveal how society functions (G. Williams 4).”

important “moments of accumulation” in Latin America, the export boom at the end of the 19th century and the present neoliberal drug trade (xxiv). Beckman reminds us that once again in light of the post-1989 world, the “free” circulation of capital is pervasive and neoliberal economists have since the 1990s increasingly promised economic growth via foreign investment and natural resource specialization only to collapse again” (xxviii). She writes, “In Colombia and Mexico the narcotics trade serves as but the latest articulation of a long history of export commodity booms, creating unprecedented amounts of wealth and with unprecedented levels of violence (Beckman xxiv).” Her study analyzes and reveals how the discourses on capitalist finance and the export of raw commodities emerged as prominent during the second half of the 19th century via the literary production of this era. Beckman thus argues that the intellectual production of Latin America’s lettered had a consensus on the desirability and inevitability of “progress” and “civilization” which would be reached through economic liberalization. In this view, *Capital Fictions* not only positions literature and cultural production as fundamental to the realization of present day capitalist modernization and economic inequality but as a result also notes the importance of Latin America’s lettered elite in this process of creating an ideological economic narrative that promised the prompt materialization of wealth (Beckman ix). Beckman adds:

For while openly cognizant that Latin America’s declared trade advantage in natural resources was itself a disadvantage within the global system of trade, liberals displayed utter confidence that, in the long run, the region’s nations could overcome temporal and material barriers to become wealthy beyond their greatest expectation (Beckman 16).

That is, the extraction of “legal” commodities such as sugar, tobacco coffee and even rubber from colonies and former Latin American colonies for the consumption by the metropolis was

presented as necessary for the accumulation of wealth but it also involved the violent participation of the colonial and imperial authorities just as much as it required the complicity of local elites (Beckman 170). Beckman's work clearly proves this point. Although the dominant economic models in Latin America have changed from the period of exports and import substitution, the implementation of neoliberal measures more recently could not be possible without the support of a national ruling elite. While it is certain that colonialism dictated much of the social and cultural development of nation-states in Latin America, as a formal governmental relation it does not suffice to express the intricate private and unofficial relations of dominance and marginalization constructed on perceived notions of citizenship such as race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic class outside the formal application of law. This is precisely the intervention of postcolonial studies, in that it grants us the possibility to conceive the relationship of various levels of structural socio-political and discursive powers. Postcolonial theories in this way complicate the colonial binary that presupposes a unilateral oppressor/oppressed relation of dominance by laying claim to subalternity as an approach to conceive both colonial and national discourses of difference and denial of humanity.

By summoning subalternity I am referring to the particular theoretical considerations within subaltern studies, which developed out of postcolonial studies---a field that despite its focus on heterogeneity is at its core emphasizing the interrogation of the normative progressive narrative that assumes that former colonies would follow and achieve Euro-American nation-state modernity (Guha 43). In this context, the Subaltern Studies Group intended to excavate the histories of the most oppressed and marginalized groups of South Asian British Colonies by taking up Antonio Gramsci's notion of the subaltern as a means to critique the historiography of the hegemonic nation-state. In his piece "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial

India,” from *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha explains the defining role that the Indian elite had in shaping national historiography. Guha clarifies that both colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism, “originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively” (37). Indeed, what is made clear through Guha’s conceptualization is the importance of the local elite in participating and fomenting the transition from colonial to neocolonial forms of domination. In this way, Guha’s statements can be said to be in line with Frantz Fanon’s interpretation of the role of the national elites not as anti-colonialists wanting political and economic independence but as an additional stratum of oppression. In “The pit falls of national consciousness,” from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that the goal of national elites, “has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neocolonialism” (152). Like Fanon, much of postcolonial thought is concerned with the role of the national elite as instrumental to the survival of colonial power. In particular, Guha designates this national elite as “dominant indigenous groups” which included the all-India, regional and local levels. Referring to the regional and levels of the elite, Guha writes:

Taken as a whole and in the abstract this last category of the elite was heterogeneous in its composition and thanks to the uneven character of regional economic and social developments, differed from area to area. The same class or element, which was dominant in one area according to the definition above, could be the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the

rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants all of whom belonged, ideally speaking, to the category of “people’ or ‘subaltern classes’ as defined below. It is the task of research to investigate, identify and measure the specific nature and degree of the deviation of these elements from the ideal and situate it historically (Guha 44).

If for Guha the regional and local elite “differed from area to area” and could be deciphered based on local economic histories, then the subaltern is defined in contrast to the elite. Hence Guha maintains, “The terms ‘people’ and ‘subaltern’ have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite” (Guha 44). The purpose of naming the subaltern for Guha is to conceptualize a method to unravel and illuminate the subjugated histories of those marginalized through colonial and nationalist discourse. For example, in one of his later works “Chandra’s Death,” Guha asserts that reading documents such as ekrars, “as an archive is to dignify them as the textual site for a struggle to reclaim for history an experienced buried in a forgotten crevice of our past” (*Chandra* 39).¹⁸ It is worth highlighting, however, that it is at the point of describing the subaltern classes where we see conflicting theories of subalternity. Given that there is no consensus on subalternity, I specifically draw from the explanation proposed by one of the foremost scholars within the field, Gayatri Spivak. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak declares that in using “the subaltern” she means,

[A] person at the ground level of society who is already a victim of patriarchal practices. As long as we think of World Trade, we can cite homeworking, sweated

¹⁸ An ekrar refers to the “deposition made before a representative of the state’s legal system by the defendants” (Ganguly 217).

labor, child labor, things that are easy to oppose. As we move into globalization as financialization, global universalist feminism works for imperialism by an unexamined enthusiasm for credit-baiting of the gendered subaltern: so called women's micro-enterprise (Spivak *Postcolonial* 102).

For Spivak, patriarchy is a decisive factor in determining the social oppression of the subaltern beyond the class politics of the social strata of colonialism and national independence. That is, the subaltern would entail a person at the margins of society as a result of a multitude of oppressive systems, including economic class and gender. In this context, Spivak aligns Guha and the subaltern studies group more closely with a critique of economic classes yet is incisive in emphasizing that a Marxist methodology is not a suitable analytic for the intricacy of the subaltern and its implications. Spivak consistently argues that in most cases gender is what determines an experience of oppression. For example, Spivak claims:

The pattern of domination is here determined mainly by gender rather than class. The subordinated gender following the dominant within the challenge of nationalism while remaining caught within gender oppression is not an unknown story. For the (gender-unspecified) 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been left traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual (Spivak, *Postcolonial* 272-273).

Spivak is additionally disparaging of Guha's rigid investigative approach deeming it as essentialist and taxonomic (*Postcolonial* 271-272). Spivak explains:

In subaltern studies, because of the violence of imperialist epistemic, social, and disciplinary inscription, a project understood in essentialist terms must traffic in radical textual practice of differences. The object of the groups investigation in this case not even of the people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite---is a *deviation* from the *ideal* the people or subaltern---which itself is defined as a difference from the elite (Spivak *Postcolonial* 271-272).

Similarly, in “Deconstructing Historiography”, Spivak employs a critique of the subaltern studies group and their anti-humanist approach to questions of subaltern histories and subaltern consciousness that while she deems as problematic due to methodological contradictions sees them as offering “critical moments” of transgression (*Deconstructing* 21). Spivak writes;

Because of this bestowal of a historical specificity to consciousness in the narrow sense, even as it implicitly operates as a metaphysical methodological presupposition in the general sense, there is always a counterpointing suggestion in the work of the group that subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the elite, that it is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive. It is, for example, chiefly a matter of ‘negative consciousness’ in the more theoretical of these essays (Spivak, *Deconstructing* 11).

Spivak continues by explaining that this ‘negative consciousness’ operates not through the subaltern but instead through the oppressor (*Deconstructing*, Spivak 11). Subaltern consciousness is “irreducibly discursive” when the intellectual insists on interpreting it. In “National consciousness and the specificity of (post)colonial intellectualism,” from *Colonial Discourse, Postcolonial Theory*, Neil Lazarus agrees that Spivak’s theory of subalternity is not

quite about a ‘negative agency’, “but a theory of the way in which disenfranchised elements of the ‘native population are represented in the discourse of colonialism. The subaltern is for Spivak not a colonized person but a discursive figure in a series of more or less integrated dominant cultural texts (Lazarus 205). Contextualized within Spivak’s work, this notion of the subaltern gestures toward a caution of the intellectual’s insistence on the intent of representing subaltern history and insurgency. She writes:

One might say that the epistemic story of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured. As I have argued in the previous chapter, today’s cultural studies should think at least twice before acting on a wish to achieve that impossible seam, endorsing Sartre’s imperial conviction: There is always some way of understanding an idiot, a child, a primitive man or foreigner if *one* has sufficient information (*Postcolonial Spivak* 208).

What this statement points to specifically is the assertion that there are things that the intellectual cannot know and should not pretentiously assume to know. Particularly when writing about an abstraction such as consciousness and assuming that there is only one “pure form of consciousness” (Acosta 52). Thus, the conception of subalternity that I deploy in this project looks to avoid such assumptions and instead focus on reading the discourses conceived through class and gender as difference specifically in relation to elite and dominant groups both nationally and transnationally.

In view of the then emergent field of subaltern studies, Latin Americanists also engaged in theoretical discussions about the applicability of postcolonial theories within a Latin American context. In their founding statement the Latin American Subaltern Studies group writes, “The

concept and representation of subalternity developed by the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group does not gain currency until the 1980s; but Latin American Studies has been involved with related issues since its inauguration as a field in the 1960s (LASG 112).” Another similar example is Mabel Moraña’s “El Boom del Subalterno,” where she assesses the relationship between hybridity and subalternity within theorizations about Latin America. According to Moraña the “boom of the subaltern” is the dissemination of ideological production where the subaltern is a homogenizing and essentialist category (229). Aside from loosely interpreting the concept of subalternity, Moraña’s explication echoes that of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group and their insistence on claiming precedence in theorizing notions similar to the subaltern within Latin American cultural and literary studies, therefore impeding a distilling of the productive aspects of subalternity through its dismissal as not offering groundbreaking analytics for a Latin American context. Yet the most important problem in Moraña’s argument for this discussion is as Acosta has pointed out, “the categorical rejection of a question that poses an intellectual’s complicity in the reproduction of unequal relations of power” (57). Specifically, Moraña’s conceptualization of subalternity as a hegemonic and homogenizing narrative perceives subalternity as occupying the latter of a presumed north-south geopolitical relation where she as a person from the south and an intellectual cannot be a subaltern (Acosta 57). This assertion in itself negates the complexity of subalternity’s relational consequence, a negation contingent on the assumed logic that speech/non-speech determines non-subaltern/subaltern (Acosta 58).

Conversely, scholars such as Joshua Lund have critiqued the persistent use of hybridity deeming it an exhausted theoretical approach in so far, as it has been theoretically inscribed in racial hierarchies and hetero-normative hegemony that ultimately reify the problem they

intended to resolve. Lund argues *The Impure Imagination*, that the discourse on hybridity has been tirelessly conceptualized within Latin American thought as inseparable from narratives of race to the extent that they can no longer be detached from each other. Lund asserts:

[T]o theorize hybridity is to operate within a discourse of race. I announce this rule immediately, and even somewhat polemically, for a reason: in spite (or because) of the obviousness of the relationship between hybridity and race, in Latin Americanist criticism that relationship has sunk to the level of the implicit, whereby its force has gone underestimated, and in some cases disavowed. This structural condition has frustrated the emergence of an effectively critical theory of hybridity in Latin American writing, to the point that failed theories of hybridity are now constitutive of the basic concepts of Latin Americanist literary and cultural studies. In what sense do these theories ‘fail’? In the sense that, despite repeated claims to the contrary, they can never succeed in going beyond the discourse of race in which they dwell (Lund 3).

As Lund contends here the discourse of hybridity has not been able to effectively move beyond its racial implications. Moreover, mestizaje and hybridity have been indeed imbricated by racial, sexual, and gendered hierarchies that have historically privileged heterosexuality in an effort to maintain the dominance of local, state, and colonial social relations of power. In particular, discourses of miscegenation such as mestizaje in Mexico or even *misturação* in Brazil promoted compulsory heterosexuality through hetero-normative biological reproduction as modes of racial mixing. Yet it is the very engagement in racial discourse that cements race as a valid category and poses the main theoretical problem that accompanies hybridity. Subalternity in contrast does not consist of the same racial and hetero-normative implications, this is not to say, however, that

race, sexuality, and gender do not influence subaltern contingency. As I have noted previously, my reading of subalternity through Gayatri Spivak's theorization in critical postcolonial studies advances a less taxonomic way of understanding relations of power as almost always already being imbricated by structural sexual hierarchies of difference. Spivak writes, "it is well known that, for reasons of collusion between re-existing structures of patriarchy and transnational capitalism, it is the urban sub-proletarian female who is the paradigmatic subject of the current configuration for the International Division of Labor (*Deconstructing* 29). Moreover, as Spivak cautions, critics should not frame sexual difference as only one more element that decides "social organization of production" but rather sexual difference and gender oppression index "crucial structural issues of power" (*Deconstructing* 30). Spivak's reference to Indian women's condition and contextualized within colonial histories suggests at large the ongoing production and reproduction of women specifically as surplus labor through the structural permeation of patriarchy across models of feudalism, imperialism, and late capitalism that in turn correspond to the consistent "subject-deprivation" of the female across different temporalities and contexts. This theory of the subaltern develops an analytic beyond notions of nation-state sovereignty and thinks through the production of difference in the neoliberal reorganization of society as a critical lens for the *narco*-sphere, cultural production and western politics.

However, subalternity facilitates a reading of the *narco*-sphere to the extent that despite conceiving patriarchy as foregrounding in the inequality inscribed in western society's structure, it does not specifically address the intimate cultural relation between gender and sexuality as social constructions. Conversely, queer theory attends to the particular play between gender and sexuality as categories created to reproduce and exalt discourses on normative ways of being. As one of the central scholars of queer theory alongside Judith Butler and Eve K. Sedgwick,

Michael Warner describes queer theory as developing during the early 1990s from the work of radical feminists and radical social theory as a response to the limits of Gay and Lesbian studies (xxvi). Queer theory as a result can be interpreted as disidentifying with the binaries implicit within Gay and Lesbian studies among other problematics.¹⁹ For instance Gay and Lesbian studies was theoretically inscribed as identity politics, in so far as sexuality and in particular homosexuality figured prominently and almost exclusively in its scholarship. In other words, its fundamental problem was that tolerance and the celebration of diversity was at the core of gay and lesbian studies rather than questioning the cause of these labels in the first place. Due to the historical fusing of gender and sexuality within dominant heteronormative narratives of social being and desire, queer theory works at extricating them from each other while upholding the significance of their close bond in order to bare them as classifications of social artifice. Judith Butler has indeed written extensively on this relationship. Butler argues that gender and sexual desire have been woven together as a cohesive corresponding unit, but on the contrary are divergent:

The notion that there might be a “truth of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine” where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female” (Butler 24).

¹⁹ I use José Esteban Muñoz’s definition of disidentification, which acknowledges that minoritarian subjects cannot completely escape the dynamism of hegemonic discourses and thus create a model that engages the useful aspects of a discourse. In this case, queer theory could be said to disidentify with Gay and Lesbian studies just like queer of color critique does not fully disengage with queer theory (Muñoz 5).

In other words, due to “regulatory” discourses there is a reduction to binary labels of masculinity and femininity as opposing expressions that correspond to equally reductive opposing labels of sexes, male and female. Butler accordingly writes,

The disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain. The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another (Butler 184).

Despite discourses that have assumed heterosexuality as the requisite sexual behavior for normative masculinity and femininity—gender and sexual object choice as a result of their intricate relationship never quite line-up in a predictable way. To demonstrate, anything deemed feminine within hetero-patriarchal normativity among male-identified individuals is then also deemed as homosexual—thus negating the complex structures of desire. The questioning of the “body” as an already inscribed ground surface is central to Butler’s claim in *Gender Trouble*, that gender identity is not an essential mode of being and rather a learned behavior based on political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex (175). Butler then concludes not only that gender is indeed produced through social performance, but also that it in fact has greater implications to the structure of gender as a social signifier. She writes:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performance means that the very notions of essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 192).

Through the revealing of gender as ritualized social behavior and its less than intrinsic correspondence to sexuality, we see how Butler builds and contributes to Foucault's work on the regulatory discourse of power that also renders sexuality as a device for special interests.

While queer analysis has largely focused on notions of gender and sexuality as these observations suggest, queer theory also aims to interrogate the idea of social identities in general, Nicki Sullivan points out in "A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory," that queer scholars such as David Halperin and Michael Warner claim that queer is not an identity but a positionality that is at odds with the normal and the dominant" (43). Sullivan expounds on Warner's view of queer as not simply resisting the norm, but more importantly, consisting of a protest against the idea of normal behavior (50). In the introduction to the edited volume *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Warner maintains that because queer contests the very idea of the normal, "Queer, therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics (xxvi)." As Warner contends, it would be indeed difficult and even incongruous to specify or attempt a universalizing concrete subject of queer theory. Through these elucidations, queer theory is presented as an anti-dogmatic critical lens counterpart to subalternity.

Although queer theory aimed to be less prescriptive than gay and lesbian studies staying true to its poststructuralist emergence in regards to the social categories it was interested in contesting, class and race for example remained relegated within much of the scholarship invested in queer theory. Additionally, one of the most common critiques of queer theory hinges on its emergence from within a Euro-American context, which at once holds many different meanings. On the one hand, scholars interested in conceiving gender and sexuality in a hemispheric/global context worried about the potential untranslatability of certain notions and undergirding implications of queer as an all-encompassing lexicon for the west, as historically based on a Euro-American experience where upper middle class whiteness prevailed. On the other, there was a fear of reproducing colonial discourse through the dominance of intellectual production from the global north. Yet the latter narrative would be mistaken to dismiss queer theory altogether since it would effectively overlook its critical multivalence.

In this light, scholars within the last decade or so have increasingly engaged questions of queerness within colonial discourse and a global postcolonial context. For example, in his book *Spaces between US: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*, a important contribution to the field of critical indigenous studies, Scott Morgensen carries out a critique of sexuality centers on how certain discourses of sexuality have connoted the circulation of homonationalism, that is, how notions of Euro-American centric queer modern sexualities have actively participated and reproduced colonial discourse.²⁰ Morgensen begins by establishing that multiple forms of colonization including settler colonialism conditioned modern sexuality

²⁰ In her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar describes homonationalism as biopolitical projects of U.S. exceptionalism that are deployed to distinguish upright “properly hetero,” and now “properly homo” (Puar 3).

through techniques of biopower (32). I am particularly interested in Morgensen's demonstration of how certain political movements on sexual diversity deemed particular sexual and gender practices within native and indigenous populations as primitive and natural such as *berdache* and re-inscribed them as their own in order to justify their claim to national belonging unwittingly perpetuating colonial discourse²¹. Morgensen argues, "Embracing a primitive sexual nature linked to roots within Native culture articulated the defense of modern sexual minorities with normative assertions of settler citizenship" (45). These observations demonstrate the import of emphasizing a critical view on how sexual discourse is deployed in the interest of creating and sustaining relations of power beyond sexuality, even when these discourses are claimed as queer and as politically radical. Moreover, what Morgensen's critique demonstrates in this case is the potential conflict of an uncritical conception of queerness exercised by queer theory and politics within scholarship and activism.

Edited volumes such as *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the afterlife of colonialism* and *Post-colonial, queer: Theoretical Intersections* have sought to engage queer studies and colonial discourse in a global context. In *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the afterlife of colonialism* and *Post-colonial*, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin f. Manalansan IV illuminate some of the problems of a globalizing teleological discourse of queer modernity (1). In the introduction to the anthology, the authors seem to at times conflate queer and gay as one. This is most likely due to their effort to provoke critical questions and considerations on queerness'

²¹Berdache is an "orientalist term [that] arose first to condemn Middle Eastern and muslim men as racial enemies of Christian civilization, by linking them to the creation of *berdache* (in translation) "as kept boys" or "boy slaves" whose sex was said to have been altered by immoral male desire" (Morgensen 36).

colonial and neocolonial relations of power without necessarily, as they claim, attempting to resolve their complexity. They write,

This anthology on queer globalizations is our insistent attempt not to answer the white scholar's query, deflecting thus his colonizing gaze. It is our ethical refusal to provide a grammar that could make the complexity and density of the cross-cultural interactions generated by our present global condition immediately transparent and universally legible (Manalansan and Cruz-Malavé 4).

The authors' claim here, at first appears to reproduce the narrative of scholarship that hastily dismisses queer theory as colonizing discourse by claiming that they refuse the development of a grammar to read queer across different global contexts. Manalansan and Cruz-Malavé nevertheless maintain:

While globalization is seen to liberate and promote local sexual differences, the emergence, visibility, and legibility of these differences are often predicated in globalizing discourse on a developmental narrative in which a premodern, pre-political, non-Euro American queerness must consciously assume the burdens of representing itself to itself and others as "gay" in order to attain political consciousness, subjectivity, and global modernity (Manalansan and Cruz-Malavé 5).

What their argument suggests instead of dismissal is that their view is aligned with critical aspects of queer theory that refuse such prescriptive limits of queerness as exclusively "gay," advancing their contention on the existence of multiple and alternative modes of modernity (Manalansan and Cruz-Malavé 9).

I am not claiming a queer universality, but rather I am interested in a mode of analysis that questions dichotomies that destabilizes the fixed essentialisms and assumptions of the queer global north and abolishes the hegemonic reference point to begin with. In *Post-colonial, queer: Theoretical Intersections*, editor John C. Hawley writes that queer critics at times, “find themselves resistant to the seemingly deeply ingrained homophobia of much postcolonial culture and discourse; many of those in postcolonial studies decry gay/lesbian studies as “white” and “elitist” (1). Once again some of the common critiques of queer theory become highlighted but also see how postcolonial theories have ineffectively addressed the hetero-normativity of their disciplinary studies. This is not to say that heteronormativity is implicit to postcolonial theory in the same way that it became clear to be within theories of hybridity and mestizaje that were preconditioned on biological reproduction but rather to point out that subalternity has the capacity to be critical of hetero-normative discourses. It is precisely the malleability of queer theory that enables it as an analytic, but is guilty at times of a historical amnesia that postcolonial theory can help ameliorate (Hawley 4). Quoting Jagose, Hawley writes,

Despite its increasing popularity in academic departments, queer theory resists becoming a normative discipline. As Jagose puts the question, ‘it is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics’ (1). But it is precisely this troublesome central feature of queer theory that suggests its possible utility in approaching sexualities that are less obviously binary than those in cultures in which “gay” and “lesbian” make compelling (political, public, private) sense” (Hawley 4).

As Hawley points out the utilization of queerness here is referring to more intricate notions of sexuality than simply homosexual/heterosexual, which enables perceptive readings of non-normative being across cultural texts. Yet the focus of such an analytic remains on the explicitness of sexual discourse. Engagements of queerness in a global context and postcolonial discourse have proven to be complicated, precisely because they must conceive the consequence of sexual discourse as a technique of marginality on multiple levels of domination. As a result, the main query that arises is how to address colonial and neocolonial sexual discourse while registering its interplay with gender, class, and race every step of the way within a neoliberal post-national context?

The answer to this question lies somewhere in the midst of queerness and subalternity, perhaps in the implications of a notion such as a queer diaspora. Queer diaspora is a concept deployed by scholars who are first invested in complicating the theoretical approaches to queer postcolonial studies before attempting to abruptly resolve it without attending to key theoretical insights. Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Culture* conceives queer diaspora through her refusal to dismiss queer theory and thus linking it to postcolonial studies by addressing the "elision of queer female diasporic sexuality and subjectivity" (19). In order to do so, Gopinath contends that her deployment of queer diaspora "embraces diaspora as a concept for its potential to foreground notions of impurity and inauthenticity that resoundingly reject the ethnic and religious absolutism at the center of nationalist projects" (7). Conversely, Gopinath deploys queerness in order to challenge the "implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic" of diaspora (10). By bringing queer theory and diaspora together, Gopinath seeks to highlight the imbrication of gender and sexuality for a critique of nationalistic discourse. Gopinath writes, "The critical framework of a specifically

queer diaspora, then, may begin to unsettle the ways in which diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand, and processes of globalization on the other” (10). It is noteworthy that Gopinath’s strategic use of a queer diaspora not only carries out a critique of the compulsory heterosexuality of the nation but also succeeds in a simultaneous critique of globalization through the unpacking of the interests of transnational capitalism (Gopinath 11). Gopinath is clear in outlining that her use of a queer diasporic lens is facilitated through a queer of color critique that further enables an analysis that conceives race, colonialism, migration, globalization, and that works against the homonormativity of “gay” as a universal/globalizing label (10).

Similar to Gopinath, Marcia Ochoa also engages queerness and queer diaspora within Latin America through a queer of color critique. In “Queer Diaspora: The Hemispheric Look and Latin American Queer Studies”, in *Queer Cartographies: Sexualities and LGBT Activism in Latin America*, Ochoa advances notions of queerness as significant for a global transnational process against the resistance of many critics of queer theory’s Euro-American centrism by citing the centrality of an analysis of racial and class discourse emerging from a queer of color critique. She writes:

La multidimensionalidad de queer es lo que se pierde al considerarlo como otro concepto colonizador más —se imagina una coherencia de la categoría que en realidad no existe—. La dialéctica es entre queer, categoría totalizadora de la alteridad sexual, o queer, categoría que reúne múltiples posibilidades (Ochoa 253).

Ochoa acknowledges that the hesitance to seriously consider queer theory by Latin American scholars might be due to queer theory’s delay in addressing the racialization of sexuality as well

as its unfamiliarity with ethnic studies in the United States and *third world feminism* in Latin America (Ochoa 253). Both Gopinath and Ochoa demonstrate how a queer of color critique poses as a possible bridge to the theoretical gap conceived between queer theory and postcolonial studies to think through the subjection of non-normative bodies in global politics that examines explicit and implicit relations of power to render them visible within *narco* cultural production. Although I engage some of the critical aspects of queer diaspora, in particular to contest ideas of nation and examine the cultural politics of *narco* cultural production, diaspora in my reading of Gopinath, is deployed to synthesize cultural practices as resistance to narratives of national belonging and the very existence of “nation.” I am more interested in the relativity that queer subaltern grants to unpack biopower on a hemispheric level.

Queer of color critiques developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a contestation to queer theory in order to challenge the discourse that had not been overlooked within queer theory to think about U.S non-normative populations produced through racialization and social class discourse and its subsequent considerations by scholars such as Ochoa and Gopinath. For instance, in her now classic text “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”, Cathy Cohen urges us to rethink “queer” beyond the common queer/heterosexual dichotomy as “inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality (441). Cohen is emphatic in the need to conceive the non-normativity of queerness beyond homosexuality and instead to think about queerness as difference from the dominant modalities of white and upper-class heterosexuality given that sexuality is produced and organized in much more complex ways than paradigms of duality. As an example, Cohen outlines how the sexuality of racialized working class women has been subject to regulation and has been produced as sexually and

racially deviant through narratives of the “welfare queens” for the purpose of sustaining heteronormativity and its white supremacist ideologies (453). Cohen writes,

As we stand on the verge of watching those in power dismantle the welfare system through a process of demonizing poor and young women of color---many of whom have existed for their entire lives outside the white, middle-class, heterosexual norm---we have to ask if these women do not fit into society’s categories of marginal, deviant, and “queer” (Cohen 458).

Cohen clarifies that she is not intending to homogenize nor glorify the experience of poor women of color, but instead wants to move away from traditional notions of identity as an analysis in favor of an intersectional critical politics of “race, class, gender, and sexuality and the relative power and privilege” of dominant status as a man and/or white and/or upper middle-class and/or heterosexual” (480).

Likewise, in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson further highlights the need for a critique of political economy that also considers a critique of hetero-normativity. Ferguson clarifies:

If racialization has been the “site of a contradiction between the promise of political emancipation and the conditions of economic exploitation,” then much of that contradiction has pivoted on the racialization of working populations as deviant in terms of gender and sexuality (Ferguson 15).

In distilling particular aspects of Marxist analysis of capital and by building on the work of cultural materialists such as Raymond Williams and Louis Althusser, Ferguson is able to examine how the existence of a surplus labor population is precisely the same cultural space from which a critique of capital and the state can emerge (5). For Ferguson,

[A] queer of color analysis has to debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another. As a queer of color critique challenges ideologies of discreteness, it attempts to disturb the idea that racial and national formations are obviously disconnected (Ferguson 4).

More importantly, Ferguson argues that because a queer of color critique challenges ideologies of nation it is necessary lens to examine the heterogeneity of culture and in particular, literary and cultural texts as a sites of material struggle (3).

Cohen and Ferguson's analysis contributes to our understanding of how certain populations have been historically sexualized as non-normative so as to justify the economic exploitation of these populations across colonial, national, and neocolonial spaces. As Phillip Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz and Trish Rosen in "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender: An Introduction," agree and write, queer theory "is an articulating principle functioning in, across, between, and among various social domains and political experiences, and it is therefore consciously provisional and dynamic, strategic and mobilizing, rather than prescriptive or doctrinal" (1). Queerness is understood as a relational critical lens "that is calibrated to account for the social antagonisms of nationality, race, gender, and class as well as sexuality" (Harper Et al 3). The work of Cohen, Ferguson, Phillip Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz and Trish Rosen demonstrates how a queer of color critique, considers not only sexuality, but in fact the inseparability of the play between sexuality, class, gender, and race as well as affective discourse and materiality. Hence, a queer of color critique offers a threshold for thinking through a radical queerness that is not premised on a presumed identity but rather operates through its respective context.

Conclusion

My articulation of queerness throughout this project draws from this queer of color scholarship in order to propose that both queer and subalternity function concurrently as a critique of the different processes involved within *narco* cultural production and transformation of the public sphere, while allowing a reading of queerness as a multiplicity of nuanced modes of non-normative expressions across multiple histories of domination, including colonial, national, and international neoliberal contexts. A queer subaltern critique works at disrupting binaries such as man/woman, masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual, exclusion/inclusion, colonizer/colonized, and producer/consumer---thus allowing the exposure of the irreducibility of socio-political relations across the hemispheric *narco*-sphere. Queerness becomes intertwined with a notion of subalternity that thinks and links sexual and gender difference as an undergirding factor within late capitalist subjection. In this manner, I conceive queerness as relational to what is deemed as the sexual norm according to the interplay with racialized, gendered and/or class based discourses. This and as able to account not only for social antagonisms but also as recognizing the limitations of representation and the certainty of intellectual truth---a move toward notions of perceptibility and imperceptibility. Accordingly, I am not necessarily referring to queer and subaltern as identifiable and tangible subjects but rather as discursive bodies and sites of relational significance that at any given moment can catalyze and manifest material effects. This imagined subject cannot be completely deciphered due to its variability; it can only be interpreted and represented to a certain extent.

While it would be implausible on many levels to explain the causal entirety behind the escalation of the drug trade and violence in the last few years, I propose that a reading of the *narco*-sphere through a queer critique renders it as intelligible and exposes it as advancing the

logic of post-second world war neoliberal bio-political projects of regularization of war such as the war on drugs. It will evince how the *narco*-sphere has aided the ambiguity of current socio-political conflicts and the justification of how certain groups are treated as invaluable within certain spaces while others are dispensable and consumable. This categorization is discernible in the discursive exploitation and disregard of undesirable individuals through the violence against certain groups based on their creation as socially aberrant markers associated with gender, sexuality, class, race, and citizenship status for the benefit of the global capitalist market. In other words, violence prompted by homophobia, racism, classism, and misogyny becomes masked as drug trade and drug war violence. The *narco*-sphere in this sense, is both a discursive site and an interpretive lens that filters, layers, hides, and/or illuminates information, a lens for reading society with the potential to redirect attention away from and/or draw attention to state and economic apparatuses across socio-political relations. In other words, the *narco*-sphere hides as much as it renders visible. It is ubiquitous, it penetrates and diffuses through and from civil society and the state. The *narco*-sphere is both the process involved in our conception of current society as well as our position within it.

For this reason, media conditioned by state politics that act on behalf of private interests, both in journalistic terms and media as cultural production within the hemispheric *narco*-sphere have created a nebulous and perplexing mass of information that complicates the deciphering of their magnitude and impact in western hemispheric politics. The configuration of a neoliberal *narco*-sphere signifies a variety of social transformations. It signals to how narratives of the drug trade and drug culture have at the very least effectively diverted the accountability of governments (Mexico, Colombia, and the United States) away from longstanding issues like Femicide, guerrilla struggles, the discrimination and displacement of indigenous communities,

and widening economic gaps that have led to increased migration. In addition to deflecting accountability, the *narco*-sphere's smokescreen has in effect advanced the continuity of this marginalization within the purview of colonial and national legacies of economic inequality, misogyny, institutional sexism, and judicial impunity with its rhetoric of justification.²² The *narco*-sphere has obscured the density of socio-political relations and process through an askew presentation of the drug trade and its effects where discursive strategies have come to characterize western politics of making an individual marginal and ultimately killable—social and political strategies that have been articulated by scholars as specific manifestations of biopolitics. It is through a queer subaltern analysis that we can initiate a reading of the hemispheric *narco*-sphere and also begin to decipher the crucial social relations that have determined the dynamics of persisting colonial and neocolonial relations. A queer subaltern framework intends to credit the dynamism of power relations within the neoliberal turn without discounting the residual and emergent modes of society's historical organization. A queer subaltern critique is thus not only appropriate but perhaps the only way to read the bio-political effects of the neoliberal *narco*-sphere and its cultural production.

²² Since NAFTA, the number of women (mostly maquiladora workers) who have been murdered in Mexico exceeds 700 women; many have argued that femicide in Mexico is a result of misogynist, racist, and classist discourse on the part the Mexican state that fails to adequately investigate the murders. Neoliberal policies blatantly facilitated state and private encroachment on indigenous land, which led to the uprising of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) (Zapatista Army of National Liberation).

Chapter 2: Femicide at the Limits of the War on Drugs

To examine gender and sexual violence is to undertake specific ethical implications attached to power, subjectivity, vulnerability, and victimhood. Accordingly, recognizing and accepting the implicit limitations of cultural representation impedes a false notion of truth and social justice. That is, the complexity of cultural representation here, brings to surface; on the one hand, the unfeasibility of “accurate” cultural representation in so much as representation is subjective interpretation and on the other, how representation unravels the possibility for subjection through the power of discursive production. By discursive production, I am referring to the political burden that is imposed on subjectivities and bodies in order to carry out an academic exercise. In recognizing these limits, my goal is to underscore the cultural stakes of social vulnerability to numerous imposed powers of a political system in the hope of honoring those who have been brutally wedged within the narco politics of the neoliberal machine and its residual and emergent techniques.

Although neoliberalism and narcotrafficking are themselves interrelated and important factors, both operate vis-à-vis patriarchal, classist and racist ideologies that organize western hemispheric society. While I observe that the patriarchal structure of el narco mobilizes misogyny and homophobia as ways to reify its hierarchies, condemning the misogyny of el narco, does not necessarily imply a critique of the cultural nuances of western politics which have expedited misogyny and homophobia to flourish. Likewise, neoliberalism could not maintain itself without the persistence of misogynist and hetero-patriarchal discourse of both transnational and local elites that have produced poor racialized populations across the globe and have made them collateral damage in the name of “industrialization” and “modernization.” Indeed, gender and sexual “difference” become imbricated in the social organization of

populations and more precisely in the marginalization of populations within these “modernizing” discourses. The shift toward a “progressive” social and economic approach is seemingly contradicted by the conservative moralistic dogmas on gender and sexual that operate violence in marked zones of capitalist production. Yet this brutal violence is part of a systemic means through which the imminent possibility of death is a strategic exercise of power over an already racialized and economically disenfranchised population.

Reading the hemispheric narco-sphere through a queer lens is to re-examine and unpack the dominant cultural narratives of gender and sexual violence linked to the drug trade. Gender and sexual violence as well as other types of violence should not be viewed as exceptional occurrences, but rather as integral to western society’s order, where violent events or instances (including el narco) are points of escalation in the deployment and circulation of power driven by private and public state interests. That is, violence must be historically, politically, and culturally contextualized within the relations of power that create difference. For the murdered women of Juarez, Mexico, their victimization spurs from their increased vulnerability as targets of gendered, class, and racial policing in the face of massive accelerated socio-economic transformations. Since the early 1990s, more than 400 women have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico alone. In the present, many of these crimes remain open and unsolved. The lack of local and federal government response to these murders has outraged both local and transnational civil and human rights organizations. Inadequate forensic technology, the drug trade, machismo, economic interests, and the complicity of local and state police are cited as some of the theories behind the unresponsiveness of investigative practices. Though Ciudad Juarez is certainly one of the most well-known cases, the magnitude of gender and sexual

violence, is not exclusive to the U.S. Mexico border, nor is it only a question of violence against women.

By gender and sexual violence, I am specifically referring to violence enacted as a reaction against groups perceived as gendered and sexually “deviant” based on assumed norms. While much cultural production linking gender and sexual violence with the drug trade represents this connection in a border context, this violence permeates borders and is prominent across the hemisphere. However, just as Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso notes in the edited volume *Vidas y territorios en busca de justicia*, engaging in a discussion of violence against women inevitably prompts at the very least, a mention of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Monárrez Fragoso comments, “Hablar de violencia contra las niñas y las mujeres invariablemente nos remite a Ciudad Juárez, México, y en específico el tema del feminicidio y de ahí a la palabra *justicia* (13). I would add that because of its place as a hub of neoliberal and transnational trade—
—an examination of gender and sexuality as it relates to el narco also elicits a discussion of Ciudad Juárez and feminicide.

The depicted gender and sexual violence in narco cultural production is not entirely exclusive to the drug trade, but instead a condition endemic to the neoliberal era and its public sphere. The central issue pertains to how the narcosphere constructs and frames the drug trade as a powerful force within contemporary society as if it were unequivocally and indisputably responsible for the enduring and escalating violence, corruption, and displacement of populations. In other words, dominant discourses of public discussion that have circulated most notably around the drug trade function as diversions from the old and new culprits of contemporary society’s structure. This is not to say, however, that the drug trade and drug war are not central to contemporary ubiquitous violence. The drug trade is not the source but is

instead a symptomatic condition of contemporary western politics, product of neoliberal policies and the simultaneous strategic retracting of the state---a result of long-standing and emergent political and economic power dynamics that continue to organize society. In brief, my analysis delves into the depictions of violence enacted against subjects produced as racially aberrant, gendered, and sexually “deviant” that do not necessarily illustrate the consumption and trafficking of drugs but instead engage the social setting that neoliberalism, together with long-lasting political interests and the drug trade have assisted in creating. In this chapter, I focus on fictional and non-fictional accounts of gender and sexual violence. I will begin with a brief overview of Sergio González Rodríguez’s *Huesos en el desierto* and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* as crucial textual accounts of gender violence on the U.S.-Mexico border. I will subsequently situate the devising significance of the production of a surplus labor population for understanding the socio-political conditions of the drug trade logic and then segue into a discussion of two earlier cultural texts, Lourdes Portillo’s documentary *Señorita Extraviada* which also denounces the feminicides on the U.S.-Mexico border and the Colombian sicairesque fiction *Rosario Tijeras* as a novel that intends to give prominence to women characters within narco narratives.²³ This chapter, thus interrogates the cultural narratives that focus on the groups most vulnerable to narco violence, precisely because they have been produced as marginal and as exemptions both within drug trafficking in the U.S., Mexico, and Colombia as well as hemispheric society. I maintain that feminist critiques to gender and sexual violence linked to el narco serve to evince how the neoliberal drug trade has generated a zone of heightened gender and sexual violence as a result of civil impunity granted by patriarchal and economic institutions.

²³ Taking from the picaresque, *sicaresque* tradition refers to literary category of Latin American fiction that narrates the lives of *sicarios*.

However, I argue that feminist narratives and/or critiques are necessary but counterparts to the way in which a queer subaltern lens traces the discourses of racialized non-normative gender and sexual subjectivities in a postcolonial context that takes into account the role of local elites, the gendered international division of labor, and the present post-national moment. Through this critique, el narco is revealed not as the only significant player in the escalation of a specific type of violence but more importantly as an easily identifiable scapegoat, part of a larger legally sanctioned network of neoliberal global economics at the expense of lives made to be replaceable and thus as disposable in explicitly gendered, racialized, sexual, and classed ways.

Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) is undoubtedly one of the most prominent narrative depictions of gender and sexual violence on the U.S.-Mexico border. Bolaño's novel is largely influenced by the author's encounter with Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez's and his chronicle, *Huesos en el desierto* (2002), is a crucial journalistic account of the mass murders of women in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua and compelling interpretation of possible factors that have led to such a degree of violence. While the influence of González Rodríguez's work on Bolaño's conception of gender violence on the U.S.-Mexico border is conclusive it also suggests the importance of journalistic media in shaping the public sphere. That is, journalistic media as the forefront of information dissemination conditions the rhetoric and particular language that is deployed and circulated with the public sphere. Despite not having absolute dominion---considering the social and cultural play of the public sphere, it holds a central role in the construction of the ways in which we discuss our social world.

In *Huesos en el desierto*, González Rodríguez emphasizes the extent of gender violence as a product of gendered aggression and patriarchy in Mexican culture as well as the

intensification of narcotrafficking in recent years. In the prologue to the third edition, González Rodríguez writes,

En la última década, aumentó como nunca la delincuencia y el crimen organizado, lo que se entrelazó con la agresión tradicional de los hombres contra las mujeres, además de que el narcotráfico implica una estructura patriarcal y caciquil cuyo accionar se funda en el uso cotidiano de la violencia que ejerce incluso contra mujeres y niños (González Rodríguez III).

For González Rodríguez, the status of women in Ciudad Juárez, México represents the result of a perfect storm—the combination of the maquiladora industry, neoliberal policies, and the existence of traditional misogyny within the patriarchal structure of Mexican culture as integral to the organization of Narcotrafficking. Moreover, according to González Rodríguez the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez are directly related to the economic power of narcotrafficking through indirect operations such as money laundering (IV). Through this economic influence, narcotrafficking has had the ability to corrupt the federal government and its politicians by converting them into beneficiaries of drug profits. This assertion targets narcotrafficking as an important element central to political corruption in Mexico and is an example of how narcotrafficking has infiltrated the highest political ranks including the Mexican presidency.²⁴

González Rodríguez, however also considers a wider approach to the problem by situating critiques of gender violence on a global level. He explains that the crimes have also revealed two occurrences on a global scale, “Más allá de las cifras, semejantes crímenes dejan

²⁴ In 2005, several news outlets including *La Jornada* reported that the president of Mexico at the time, Vicente Fox had the admitted narco organizations had infiltrated the presidency (Castillo García *La Jornada*).

traslucir dos hechos de análoga gravedad ahora y hacía el futuro: la inadvertencia o amnesia global ante un fenómeno extremo de signo anárquico; y el impulso de normalizar la barbarie en las sociedades contemporáneas” (González Rodríguez 12). Accordingly, viewing social conflicts simply within national spaces assumed to be isolated and closed off to transnational influence is not sufficient as a critique of contemporary society. With *Huesos en el desierto*, González Rodríguez’s contributes tremendously to framing of the Juarez murders on a local and global level. Conversely, González Rodríguez’s further suggests that these crimes signal to an increased anarchical tendency and the normalization of barbarity across the globe, where societies have reached a level of utter disorder. Suggesting disorder, however, affirms the state of social and political conditions as characterized by lawlessness, chaos, and barbarity as emergent phenomena of arbitrary disarray without historical bearing and political foundations. Despite González Rodríguez’s intent to elucidate this as a global trend, his argument replicates the Latin American tropes of “chaos” and “barbarity” in order to explain the Mexican political landscape.²⁵ Narco violence, state violence, and gender violence are all involved in an inseparable but complicated relationship within the strategic defense of society’s status quo through the marginalization and removal of “non-normative” and “undesirable” bodies. While the local contributing feature is the political corruption and misogynist tendencies of Mexican organized crime, the global factor points to the neoliberal economic models that have created impoverished industrial zones along the U.S.-Mexico border where the economic maquiladora model reigns (González Rodríguez 30). Gonzalez Rodriguez’s work in *Huesos en el Desierto* is a

²⁵ For instance, Domingo F. Sarmiento’s *Facundo* and Esteban Echeverría’s *El matadero*—two works recognized as part of the Latin American literary canon—contend with the binary opposition between “civilization” and “barbarity,” where the former represents Euro-centric ideals of “progress” and the latter Latin American “backwardness.”

pivotal cultural and journalistic narrative that foregrounds the ways in which narco-trafficking alongside the greater integral socio-cultural relationship between gender, class and the violence of economic and political structures is interpreted and conceptualized. Thus, laying the ground work for his own work later and for other subsequent scholarship.²⁶

Building on *Huesos en el desierto*, Bolaño's novel is a series of five interconnecting parts including the part titled "La parte de los crímenes" consists of a similar narrative style to *Huesos en el Desierto*. The one-by-one detailed account, chronicles several cases of murdered women in the fictional border town of Santa Teresa in Sonora, echoing what has happened in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua since the early 1990s. *2666* imparts gender violence as a social problem and presents certain situations that suggest some of the possible factors and conditions that have led to its existence and intensification. In "La parte de los crímenes," Bolaño depicts the forensic descriptions of the crime scenes as cold and desensitized where police carrying out the investigations have sexist dismissive attitudes toward the crime victims (692). One notable example,

Quién chingados inventará los chistes?, decía el judicial. ¿Y los refranes? ¿De dónde chingados salen? ¿Quién es el primero en pensarlos? ¿Quién el primero en decirlos? Y tras unos segundos de silencio, con los ojos cerrados, como si se hubiera dormido, el judicial entreabría el ojo izquierdo y decía: háganle caso el tuerto, bueyes. Las mujeres de la cocina a la cama, y por el camino a madrazos. O bien decía: las mujeres son como las leyes fueron hechas para ser violadas. Y las

²⁶ Other works by González Rodríguez includes *El hombre sin cabeza* (2009), where he alludes to the decapitated bodies and details an account of the intensified violence that erupted in Mexico since the mid 2000s with former President Felipe Calderon's "war on drugs."

carcajadas eran generales. Una gran manta de risas se elevaba en el local oblongo, como si los policías mantearan a la muerte (Bolaño 691).

Alluding to the sheets (mantas), used to cover deceased bodies and also used by the cartels to send public messages and threats—Bolaño directly links the sexist police talk as an example of the cultural and judicial cover up for impunity. In this way, Bolaño takes the analysis of sexist behavior under patriarchy to the day-to-day demeaning and dehumanizing practices and rhetoric that encourage and enable certain behavior to flourish and produce violence. The role of language and its precision become key within the text not only within the discourse surrounding the off-record police conversations but also through the narration of each crime's detail. For instance, one passage from “La parte de los crímenes” which exhibits this precision is in regards to one of Bolaño's case descriptions. It reads:

La mujer se llamaba Isabel Cansino, más conocida por Elizabeth, y se dedicaba a la prostitución. Los golpes recibidos le habían destrozado el bazo. La policía achacó el crimen a uno o varios clientes descontentos. Vivía en la colonia San Damián, bastante más al sur de donde fue encontrada, y no se le conocía un compañero fijo, aunque una vecina habló de un tal Iván que iba mucho por allí, y al que en diligencias posteriores no se pudo localizar. También se intentó dar con el paradero del afilador de cuchillos, llamado Nicanor[...]pero los esfuerzos fueron en vano. O cambió de oficio o se desplazó del oeste de Santa Teresa a las zonas sur y este o emigró de ciudad. Lo cierto es que no se le volvió a ver (Bolaño 448).

This passage reveals many layers of factors deemed as possible explanations for the victimization of women on the border. First, the text explicitly states how the victim was a said to be a prostitute to make reference to the dominant narratives that declare victims as prostitutes

and hence less valuable to a society that warrants ridding itself of “undesirables.” Second, these sexist assumptions meshed with police apathy are evinced through the particular usage of words such as “achacó” as a way to indicate the unreliability of police investigations. Although the word translates as “to attribute,” the word in Spanish has a connotation of inaccuracy and faultiness, which confirms a strong lack of follow-up in each investigation. Moreover, the passage is tied together through the mentioning of the “afilador de cuchillos” a potential witness and lead in the investigation who worked as a knife sharpener and the sarcastic but revealing tone that unveils the brutality that everyone is aware of but does not want to discuss. That is, the text offers a critique of how all possible important leads, even the most obviously indicative hint “el afilador de cuchillos” somehow vanishes and thus consistently results in unsolved cases. These instances make a case for how both González Rodríguez’s *Huesos en el Desierto* and Bolaño’s *2666* are essential an analysis of gender violence on the U.S.-Mexico border. In this sense, *Huesos en el desierto* and *2666* integrates a larger body of scholarship that critiques femicide and el narco through a feminist lens, which is understood as offering critical insight into the specific ways in which women are particularly vulnerable within a transnational Mexican patriarchal society.

Recognizing the pervasiveness of gender and sexual violence, scholars and activists alike have repeatedly and urgently attempted to identify its causes. For instance, Monárrez Fragoso asserts,

Reconocer el sufrimiento que causa la violencia, desde los diferentes feminismos y otras epistemologías del conocimiento, es reconocer la injusticia, y al mismo tiempo implica reflexionar sobre sus causas estructurales que afectan a las mujeres y aportar elementos que transformen esta atrocidad que organiza la vida

social y la política sexual de mujeres y hombres en el espacio geográfico
(Monárrez Fragoso 13).

While different types of feminist analysis and epistemologies have been used to critique gender violence as Monárrez Fragoso asserts most concur on the importance of considering structural elements that organize the sexual politics of people in a given space. The concept of *Femicide* for example has been one approach to addressing systemic factors as indexing the structural prevalence of violence against women rather than as random acts of individual violence. As a critical lens, *Femicide* attempts to encapsulate how the murder of women is a systemic issue foregrounded by a history of prejudice and hostility toward non-dominant sexual and gender expression. In *Femicidio: Making the most of an empowered term*, Pascha Bueno Hansen affirms that “the term femicidio recognizes women as subjects, and more important, reveals them as subjects with the right to freely exercise their sexuality. Women’s sexual expression is exactly what the murder of women due to their gender extinguishes in order to maintain patriarchal power and control” (304). As Bueno Hansen assesses, *femicide* describes a strategy to enact control over the expression of women’s sexuality due precisely to their condition as women.

While femicide highlights aspects of gender and sexual violence that are represented within narco culture, it’s specificity critically overlooks the way in which the brutal dominance carried out against women is connected to the violence against other non-dominant sexual and gendered subjectivities. This is of course due to the notion of heteronormative heterosexuality as requisite in western society, which together with the loathing of racialized subjectivities imposes the conditions of violence that targets those perceived as non-white non-heterosexual men, women and transgender women of color. Historically, femininity has been “otherized” in

opposition to masculinity within the social production of gender. Hence, contempt for what is perceived is as feminine emerges within the context of masculine heteronormativity that remains positioned as the dominant concept of society that essentially shapes how femininity becomes viewed as deficient and undesirable, yet paradoxically an “object” of desire. In other words, by heteronormative heterosexuality, I am specifically meaning the alignment between heterosexuality and the division between masculinity and femininity, where femininity is made to hold a subordinate place. As Lara Coleman writes,

Gendered identities do not form a simple (masculine/feminine) binary but, as products of power-laden social practices, are multiple, contradictory, and open-ended, existing in hierarchical relations with one another in which gender is interwoven with class, race, and sexuality (Coleman 205).

As a result of the way in which class and race fundamentally transform gender and sexuality, classed and racialized femininity become vulnerable targets for politics as an exercise of war in contemporary western society, be it the “war on terror” or the “war on drugs.” The transformation of gender by other corresponding relations of power, however, is not limited to a labeling of multiple oppressions but rather about signifying a difference in experience as a direct consequence of how gender is conceived through race and vice versa.

As Judith Butler remarks in her “Preface” to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, responding to some of the critiques the book received, we cannot only speak of gender but must incorporate the ways in which race alters the conception of the theoretical points of gender (xvi). She writes,

I would note here not only that racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender in ways that need to be made explicit, but that race and

gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies. I would therefore suggest that the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race. Many of the debates have centered on the status of “construction,” whether race is constructed in the same way as gender. My view is that no single account of construction will do, and that these categories always work as background for one another. Thus, the sexualization of racial gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once, and the analysis surely illuminates the limits of gender as an exclusive category of analysis (Butler xvii).

Butler is not interested in ranking race or gender over the other and is also keen on affirming that they are not simply analogous social relations. I would then also add that the interactions of gender and sexuality with race are indeed conditioned by social class as well. As Butler explains, the ways in which these social constructions relate to each other and continuously transform each other need to be made explicit. In view of the multiplicity of cultural rhetoric at work within the narcosphere, looking at gender solely is not adequate to grasping the gravity of political marginalization and exclusionary citizenship. In this regard, as Butler suggests, multiple lenses at once are needed but in this specific case are essential to an analysis for notions of citizenship across the implications of sex, sexuality, race, class and gender amidst the hemispheric flows of people, capital, and commodities. That is, if the U.S.-Mexico border is one material manifestation of the regulations that manage transnational trade of commodities, it also represents the regularization of human movement for hemispheric labor markets. Beyond any anti-immigrant rhetoric and xenophobic policies, commodities and labor are two sides to the same coin—parallel entities that function on supply and demand.

Migration and the displacement of people in the present are the result of a wider global trend fundamental to late capitalism and neoliberalism where populations have been forced out of their homes and livelihoods resulting in a surplus of laborers. The surplus of laborers as result creates the devaluing of laborers in the global market of commodities. Whereas the nature of this historical process within capitalism is not a new phenomenon, the socioeconomic consequences of current modes of capitalism have incurred specific transformations imbricated by contemporary discourses of gender, race, and sexuality. In “The So-Called Primitive Accumulation: Chapter XXVI The Secret of Primitive Accumulation,” Karl Marx explains that a fundamental characteristic of capitalism is the freeing up of labor. Marx claims that in order for capitalism to exist and then develop as it did it needed certain ideal conditions. That is, capitalism required that in the process of primitive accumulation, laborers be freed of their attachment to the land and the means of production. Marx writes:

Free laborers, in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen, &c., nor do the means of production belong to them, as in the case of peasant-proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own. With this polarization of the market for commodities, the fundamental conditions of capitalist production are given (Marx 432).

The newly freed laborer had less control over their livelihood in the sense that they did not own or form part of the means of production. Wage laborers became alienated from the product of their labor. By explaining the process of primitive accumulation, Marx also highlights the mobile nature of free labor. He argues, “To become a free seller of labor-power, who carries his commodity wherever he finds a market, he must further have escaped from the regime of the

guilds, their rules for apprentices and journeymen, and the impediments of their labor regulations” (433). Marx’s insight into the laborer “who carries his commodity wherever he finds a market,” highlights how the free labor power that capitalism needs is essentially migratory. Hence, the free laborer as a necessary requirement for capitalism to flourish; offers a compelling case for how the present form of capitalism has produced a new stage of internal and transnational migrant labor that continues to reproduce the free labor power that it needs for self-preservation. For example, Marx argues that capitalism in Europe needed colonialism for its development. He stresses:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production (Marx 435).

Just as capitalism required primitive accumulation to grow, it also needed European colonialism, the slave trade, and the extraction of goods from the rest of world. Indeed, Marx’s assertion here points to racial capitalism as a system of classification that would dictate the production of class in the United States and other former colonies. In fact, both migratory free labor power and new forms of colonialism together continue to be instrumental for the sustainment of capitalism. David Harvey for instance, writes that, the “spatial-temporal fixes” that lead to imperialism were a direct result of class struggle. He writes,

[T]he turn to a liberal form of imperialism (and one that had attached to it an ideology of progress and of a civilizing mission) resulted not from absolute economic imperatives but from the political unwillingness of the bourgeoisie to

give up any of its class privileges, thus blocking the possibility of absorbing overaccumulation through social reform at home (Harvey 69).

As Harvey illustrates, the imperial system propelled during the 19th century in this regard was prompted by the unwillingness of local elites to give up privileges and therefore reproduced social hierarchies through the establishment of relations of economic and political domination elsewhere. So despite the centrality of economic priorities for the elite, their fundamental desire to harness power is what dictates much of economic policy along with the cultural media institutions that ensure a level of compelling justification to avoid relinquishing dominance. As Harvey further highlights, accumulation through dispossession has been the way in which capitalist policies and regulations have combatted the challenges of the inability to expand territorially in contemporary times (64). Accumulation through dispossession is exactly that, the manipulation of financial regulations to accumulate by legally dispossessing. Such tampering includes,

Stock promotions, ponzi schemes, structured asset destruction through inflation, asset stripping through mergers and acquisitions, the promotion of levels of debt encumbrancy that reduce whole populations, even in the advanced capitalist countries, to debt peonage, to say nothing of corporate fraud, dispossession of assets (the raiding of pension funds and their decimation by stock and corporate collapses) by credit and stock manipulations (Harvey 74).

This means that the lower and working classes globally who make up the majority of the population have been further subjected to increased financial scrutiny and forced into more debt. However, in order for this system to work, “markets in general and capital markets in particular had to be forced open to international trade – a slow process that required fierce US pressure

backed by use of international levers such as the IMF and an equally fierce commitment to neo-liberalism as the new economic orthodoxy” (Harvey 77). Countries in Latin America succumbed to the pressures of the leading global economic powers by consenting to free trade agreements, which effectively reduced fair trade. A process that was made possible in part because the governing elite in these countries were also not willing to redistribute wealth and cede any of its privileges. As Harvey also notes “the new imperialism” involved a sharp shift toward finance capital that would increase the mobility of capital across geo-political borders to fund wage laborers that had been dispossessed from the means of production in their respective industries by the same free trade policies that were now granting them employment. Wage laborers in the U.S. for example are forced to compete with the exploitation of cheaper wage laborers in other countries. He writes,

This could be used to attack the power of working class movements within expanded reproduction either directly, by exerting disciplinary oversight on production, or indirectly by facilitating greater geographical mobility for all forms of capital. Finance capital was therefore central to this third phase of bourgeois global rule (Harvey 77).

Harvey’s observation suggests nothing else but the move toward further polarizing the international division of labor and indicates the economic norm set in place since the 1960s, where labor in developing countries is consistently accumulated and devalued in order to facilitate outsourcing of labor as a means of reducing cost of production. Marx’s take on “primitive accumulation” and Harvey’s articulation of “accumulation by dispossession,” both elucidate the inner workings of the cycles of capitalism and its self-preservation, but their frames of analysis also foster queries about the specific details involved in the organization of labor and

society. In other words, how social discourses of power such as gender, race, and sexuality all mark the production of subjectivity in the creation and amassing of ideal wage laborers.

In “Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women’s Rights in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico,” Alicia Schmidt Camacho writes that scholarship has not sufficiently engaged with the transformations that occur in states that “unloose migrants into the post-national field” (257). In this sense, we might ask what are the processes at the core of migration, beyond the lack of economic opportunity? To this effect, Schmidt Camacho adds; “The processes of denationalization occurring in migrant’s countries of origin help determine the political disposition of migrants in the transnational circuit” (258). For Schmidt Camacho, the problems that migrants face from the onset are determined by the foreign and domestic forces that have funneled populations out of one state into another. In particular, forces such as the racial and gendered divides of social classes which remain central factors to migrants’ experience and to their mobility within the global labor market. Difference in one state’s context may very well be coded distinctly for a world market, but it is still conditioned by the very same political parameters that gave way the production of a migrant labor force. For example, after the migration boom to the urban centers from the Mexican countryside during the middle of the 20th century, the country’s migration has been characterized by an internal migratory flow from Mexican southern states to northern states, where some decide to stay and others continue into the United States. In Colombia, migration has also followed the rural to urban trend to cities such as Medellín and Bogotá, particularly as a result of the civil war commonly known as “La Violencia.” In the last few decades under neoliberalism, these migration trends have only intensified. In some ways, both countries share racially coded geographies revealed in their migratory patterns, where rural poor populations are imagined as non-white indigenous and

mestizo in order to frame nationalistic notions of inherent belonging to justify the continued displacement of “undesirable” groups. Yet as indicated, the displacement of poor populations is undergirded by racialized and gendered discourses that position women of color as the most susceptible. It is no coincidence, then, that many women of color, created as the “ideal worker” within the globalized division of labor, are forced to mobilize and migrate for the prospect of survival beyond national borders. Specifically, poor women of color are targeted because they are assumed first hand as embodying devalued labor in addition to being perceived as less worthy of training for skilled labor where they are also envisioned as subservient and therefore as more manageable workers. This would explain why analysis has shifted as Shilyh Warren comments in “The Mysteries of Voice: Love and Transnational Identification in *Performing the Border*, *The Price of Sex*, and *Señorita extraviada*,” “the ground of analysis from so-called patriarchy to globalized capitalism’s gendered divisions of labor” (122). This question brings me to how some scholars have engaged in this conversation, treating capitalism and patriarchy as fundamentally integrated. For instance, in “Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism,” Grace K Hong expounds on the social specificities of what Marx and Harvey’s concept of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession---the ways in which class marginalization is carried out through gender and sexual oppression. Hong writes, “Racial capital transitioned from managing its crises entirely through white supremacy to also managing its crises through white liberalism, that is, through the incorporation and affirmation of minoritized forms of difference. This meant normalizing racialized populations once positioned as entirely non-normative” (Hong 90). Hong cites middleclass Asian Americans as an example of a group that was previously considered as perverse and with time became integrated into the homogenous notion of the nation (90). Expressly, as liberalism normalizes

one group, it simultaneously rejects another on different grounds. For this reason, complex social arrangements are increasingly more palpable. Hong insists,

It is thus the postcolonial moment, the decolonizing moment, in the mid-twentieth century, rather than the eighteenth century as in Michel Foucault's periodization, that brings about the possibility of affirming and managing minoritized (racialized, sexualized, gendered) life. In the wake of the liberation movements of the mid-twentieth century, we have seen a new form of power that affirms racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference yet levies death and destruction to poor, racialized, sexually "deviant" populations. In this era, we see subjects with access to capital and citizenship in ways previously unimaginable (Hong 91).

As Hong states, gender and sexual differences increasingly become taxonomic practices for the ways in which control and removal are exercised on poor populations. While Hong argues for the mid-twentieth century as the pivotal moment for the management of minoritized populations, I also suggest that the current era signals to the ripening of methods to adapt capitalism to cultural and social processes. The distinction from one historical moment to the other, thus rests on how liberal discourse uses specific subjectivities to exercise power. Most importantly, Hong's contention is precisely the irony of dominant discourses of diversity that affirm difference in order to use it as a way to assert and reproduce social hierarchies of labor to the extent of extermination. Due to their classification as surplus labor through strategic alienation by the profit-seeking logic of neoliberalism groups that are created as "poor, racialized, sexually "deviant" populations" are produced as disposable life. In this way, the economic conditions, the increasing production and subsequent persecution of vulnerable populations, as well the prevalent discourse of the western global north as exceptional safe-haven places continually

function to impulse migration. With this in mind, Hong's assertion certainly extends to the ways in which power is exercised on poor populations during the journey to find work and within the work place itself, be it public or private. The upsurge in specific types of migrant labor mentioned here is syphoned to fulfill the requisite surplus labor of neoliberal market demands. In other words, migration and surplus labor are directly connected to the production of surplus life, life that can be eliminated without real cost.

The gendered racialization of poor populations carried out through the interaction between cultural and political rhetoric, embeds cultural myths within and between national contexts on a hemispheric level. Schmidt Camacho refers to the process where particular groups of women on the U.S.-Mexico border are discursively framed as disposable bodies of labor as a "social fantasy." Schmidt Camacho writes, "Precisely because the *femicidio* entails a social fantasy that certain women are made for killing, the movement for justice entails reversing the interpellation of poor women as subjects ineligible for the protection of the law" (272). Nevertheless, ineligibility for protection is revealed as an imaginary and is thus contingent on the distinction between qualified and unqualified life based on the abstract notion of proper citizenship. Similarly, in her work on gendered violence in capitalist zones of so-called "development," Melissa W. Wright also notes the critical repercussions of reproducing this myth (Schmidt Camacho 272). In *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, Wright explains this discursive asymmetry through the myth of disposability and its relevance to the U.S.-Mexico border especially post-NAFTA. Wright expounds:

The myth of the disposable third world woman revolves around the trials and tribulations of the central protagonist ---a young woman from a third world locale---who, through the passage of time, comes to personify the meaning of

human disposability: someone who eventually evolves into a living state of worthlessness. The myth explains that this wasting process occurs within the factories that employ her, as she, within a relatively short period of time and at a young age, loses the physical and mental faculties for which she was initially employee, until she is worth no more than the cost of her dismissal and substitute (Wright, *Myths 2*).

Wright's claim suggests that the myth of disposability emerges when young women's living worth is believed to wane at the moment in which their ability to perform at high pace also wanes, therefore culminating the cycle of surplus labor into surplus life. This dissolution is premised on the perception of women's labor power as already devalued and conceived as untrainable. Wright holds,

In the maquilas, managers depict women as untrainable laborers: Mexican women represent the workers of declining value since their intrinsic value never appreciates into skill but instead dissipates over time. Their value is used up, not enhanced. Consequently, the Mexican woman personifies waste in the making, as the materials of her body gain shape through the discourses that explain how she is untrainable, unskillable, and always a temporary worker (Wright, *Still Life* 455).

While Wright's case study points particularly to the transnational maquiladora on Mexican soil, the link between worker turnover and human disposability is clear. Wright insists that the, "myth of a disposable third world woman worker travels outside of the global factory system and interacts, often in extremely cruel ways, with other stories that degrade women especially those who work for low wages around the world (*Myths 72*). Wright's observation traces women's

manifold subjection on the one hand through labor exploitation and on the other suggests the cruelty of the gendered and sexual exploitation of migrant laborers. Both “myth” and “social fantasy” describe women’s vulnerability to social material subjection precisely because of the discursive construction of women, particularly poor women of color as absent of human value once their labor power is gone. Although Wright’s claim makes a case for how the passage of time allows for the process of dehumanization of laborers within the factory, the production of transnational free labor is itself from the beginning premised on disregarding and reducing a group of the Mexican national population in this case into relevantly less important than other groups. That is, the free labor that comes into the transnational factory was already understood in this way to begin with, as unwelcome excess “unqualified” life within the breadth of local and national spaces. Factory workers in industrial zones of the U.S.-Mexico border are thus hired as a result of their position within the transnational political economy only to be further subjected and demeaned without legal consequence. In this way, the creation of myths regarding racialized and gendered subjects is at once related to discourses and myths on criminality often conveyed through narconarratives, where el narco is summoned as the essential cause of dissolute perversion. That is, as racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies are conceived as surplus and expendable commodities through neoliberalization, they are further intertwined in the discursive milieu of narcotrafficking and its position as an “illicit” approach to global trading in order to justify war tactics. Whereas some narco narratives engage in this dominant narrative, other narco cultural production employs a critical lens on how the social political climate of unbalanced western politics has laid the ground work for el narco and these cultural myths to develop.

El narco is amplified as an implicit cause of gender violence particularly in zones associated with narcotrafficking, due to claims that sex and human trafficking, rituals, and a

culture of hyper-consumerism are associated with its setting despite not being exclusive narco practices. While limited to overall observations—some studies on gender and sexual violence acknowledge the role of el narco, just as studies on the drug trade note the occurrence of gender and violence. For instance, María Socorro Tabuenca Cordoba states in “Representations of Femicide in Border Cinema,” that gender crimes are enmeshed within a network of “druglords, pimps, and whores” (95). Tabuenca Cordoba reference to the drug trade suggests its importance, however, does so only in passing. The relationship between gender crimes and drug trafficking is made explicit on general terms. Similarly, Howard Campbell notes in *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez*, that feminicides in Juárez is, “a phenomenon that overlaps with the general phenomenon of drug killings since some of the female victims were killed by drug traffickers. According to some scholarship, many of the killings have resulted from drug traffickers and hit men sacrificing young women in sex rituals to celebrate successful smuggling operations” (167). Campbell’s assertion exhibits how sexual and gender violence often become clouded within narco-trafficking narratives thus hindering the ability to distinguish and expose its specificities. This is not to say, however, that drug trafficking in U.S.-Mexico border has not been a significant direct factor in gender violence. Yet the unbeknownst interweaving of these narratives as one through general references eludes the complexity of their interplay in a given time and place. While I am not contesting the reliability of this contention, I am however interested in identifying how the basis of gender violence is lost and considered as simply another crime where the victim for example happens to be a poor racialized woman. In contrast, uncritically attributing certain gender and sexual violence to the drug war as an afterthought elides their specific gendered and sexual characteristic, which dismisses its urgency.

In effect, scholarship has linked gender violence and feminicide to the notion that violence is a manifested backlash against women for their entrance into the workforce and public sphere and against the intrusion of external liberal behaviors and morality. Within this view, violence is enacted as a reaction to the globalizing influence of neoliberalism and maquiladora industry, particularly from the United States. Conversely, others like Deborah M. Weissman is disparaging of such claims. She contends,

Gender relations in Mexico have not been static. Rigid characterizations of the responses to women's employment deny the possibility of variety of reactions to women's increased role in the labor market, including those that have led to waning machismo. Backlash theories tend to eclipse other studies of gender relations that suggest that men accept women as co-workers and recognize the importance of the contributions of women's wages. If, in fact, gender backlash contributes to the murders of women, there has been little effort to consider how the dynamic is produced or to examine the way in which both men's and women's identities are constructed in current economic conditions (Weissman 231).

Weissman's claim advances an analytical lens that reads changing gender relations and changing labor markets beyond the over-simplified notion of women entering the workforce at higher rates. Moreover, Weissman, adds that gender relations need to be examined within their specific contexts. She writes, "Without attention to context and absent sufficient interrogation of underlying social structures, backlash theories reflect the type of totalizing thinking about gender violence that stereotype men as universal perpetrators of violence and women as universal victims without agency" (Weissman 232). On this same note, Ileana Rodríguez pinpoints the links between gender violence that has existed in the private sphere and the increasing visibility

of the violence of the public sphere. In “Femicidio, or the Serial Killings of Women: Labor Shifts and Disempowered Subjects at the Border” from *Liberalism and its Limits*, Ileana Rodríguez argues,

We all know that domestic violence is also political; it endorses the putative right of men’s ownership of women’s bodies---one that leans heavily on male entitlements and presumes women’s unmanageable emotional states of being. However, my claim is that public violence is a phenomenon of an altogether different nature: it reveals a socio-psychopathology that ultimately claims ownership of the social body at large, and that, as in the case of femicidio, deeply enjoys the maiming, torturing, killing, and kidnapping of women. Whereas in domestic violence the relationship is reputedly one on one, in public violence there exists a concurrence of organized groups and all kinds of public institutions (Ileana Rodríguez 159).

For Rodríguez, public and domestic violence share many common denominators that correspond to men’s power over women but have a fundamental difference—public violence operates on an institutional and collective level. As we see here, gender violence is not only deeply connected to a number of institutional and structural modes of sexism, it is also a question of how sexism interacts with psychological concerns and disperses through the overlapping private and public spaces. It is undeniable that the prominence and increasing visibility of sexual expression that organizes social life in many sites allows for the continuation of subjection through a multiplicity of forms; the perpetual promise of the good life, subjugated life, and death. Even in the best of scenarios, for the most vulnerable, subjection has everything to do with the

erosion of life that deliberately leads to death. In effect it is what Lauren Berlant refers to as a slow death. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant writes:

The structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations---is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an unsettling scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all (Berlant *Cruel* 102).

That is, the slow destruction of life that doesn't immediately lead to death is more often than not more productive for newer models of capitalist accumulation that need living laborers in the present only if barely to keep generating dividends. Berlant thus views this particular form of death not as being an exception but rather as part of ordinary life. She adds:

The very out-of-scaleness of the sensationalist rhetoric around crisis within the ordinary measures the structural intractability of a problem the world can live with, which just looks like crisis and catastrophe when attached to freshly exemplary bodies. While death is usually deemed an event in contrast to life's extensivity, in this domain dying and the ordinary reproduction of life are coextensive, opening to a genealogy of a contemporary way of being that is not just contemporary or solely located in the United States, but takes on specific shapes in this time and space (Berlant, *Cruel* 102).

Berlant's conception of *slow death* is revealing of the ways in which contemporary societies have imposed methods for attrition on individuals corresponding to their production as non-normative and replaceable labor. As Berlant states this is not something that can be solely said of the United States. I would argue that this is certainly accurate across the hemisphere. For instance, *slow death* expresses one of the fundamental catalysts and motors behind el narco in the

sense that it operates at the interstices of contemporary living. That is, the contemporary milieu that has given rise to el narco functions on the one hand, on the idea of gradual death with the eminent threat of sudden death and on the other, luxurious living regarded as “prohibitive” but inevitably brief—which in many ways resonates with the classic leitmotif of *carpe diem*. This frame of thought, however is by no means exhaustive of contemporary living but illuminates possible reasons why some opt to directly participate in the political economy of el narco. Hence, the politics of gender and sexual violence need to be explicitly situated in relation to el narco as a product and process of contemporary politics of living.

Accounting for gender and sexual violence in its complex relationship to el narco as historically systemic calls into question the idea of violence as arbitrary individualized acts and instead uncovers its structural characteristic in order to demonstrate how it can function as biopolitical techniques through subjective mechanisms. While there is significant overlap between gender violence and el narco these two entities are often conflated as the same mechanism. This is not a coincidental confusion, however, the misconstruction arises precisely because el narco and gender violence are two distinct but mutually reciprocal converging systems. As evinced, throughout this dissertation, any examination of el narco demands for an interrogation of sexual and gender violence that not only accounts for their distinctions but for the specificities of their relationship. Sayak Valencia’s work, for example has been crucial to highlighting the determinant role of capitalism and misogyny in promoting the particular violence that has spread throughout Mexico and other Latin American countries. In her essay, “Capitalismo gore: narcomáquina y performance de género” Valencia is interested in a critique that blends an analysis on capitalism, violence, and the performance of masculinity. Valencia affirms that drug-trafficking has in effect re-written contemporary cultural politics. She writes,

“El narcotráfico ha reconfigurado política, social, económica y culturalmente, aquellos territorios en los que se inscribe. En la actualidad México se erige como epítome de dicha reconfiguración” (Valencia). As Valencia states, this has occurred in other places, but in the few years Mexico is the most prominent personification of this shift. While I agree on the radical social transformation the latest phase of drug-trafficking has meant for the Latin American economic, political, and cultural landscape—I insist on the importance of making legible the historical context that has given rise to this transformation. Nevertheless, Valencia also elaborates on this point. Valencia writes,

A la vinculación entre la performance de género y la construcción del estado mexicano, como un estado machista, debemos agregar las demandas económicas del capitalismo contemporáneo que exige a todos los individuos ser hiperconsumidores para considerarles legítimos y pertinentes dentro del entramado capitalista g-local. Además también debemos considerar el colonialismo que subyace en la idiosincrasia mexicana, donde hay un deseo de blanquearse a través del empoderamiento económico (Valencia).

Valencia’s analysis encapsulates a myriad of considerations that refer to “capitalismo gore” as a system founded by the patriarchal and machista Mexican state, the economic demands of capitalism, and the persistence colonialism made evident through the desire to access whiteness through economic power. As a counter offensive and social resistance to *capitalismo gore*, Valencia proposes *transfeminismo*. She argues,

El transfeminismo, propone nuevas teorizaciones sobre la realidad y la condición de las mujeres dentro de ésta pero no sólo de las mujeres sino de las distintas corporalidades y disidencias, que marchen a la misma velocidad y ritmo que los

tiempos actuales y que tomen en cuenta las circunstancias económicas específicas de los sujetos dentro del precariado laboral (y existencial) internacional que nos equiparan a tod@s porque nos hacen devenir mujeres, es decir distribuyen los antiprivilegios y la violencia tanto económica como física y simbólica a todos los cuerpos, ya no sólo a los biológicamente femeninos (Valencia).

Valencia gestures toward Emi Koyama's concept of *transfeminism* as the answer to contrast *capitalismo gore* because it provides a critique of political economy while addressing how subjects who embody and articulate non-normative social and biological notions of gender and sexuality resist the impositions of narco violence and capitalism. Yet as Valencia's argument is compelling it lays the ground work for further considerations. On the one hand, how to read cultural texts vis-à-vis el narco without imposing a mechanism of subjectification and on the other the importance of including racial discourse not only within the racial implications of economic power but made explicit in the gender and sexuality power grid. I look to be in conversation with this scholarship by expanding on these points explicitly through an analysis of hemispheric cultural production. Because the narco-sphere is not merely self-serving nor unilateral or unifunctional, narco cultural production and *narco-culture* as discursive creations of the *narco-sphere* are highly dynamic reciprocal cultural processes. Through an analysis of cultural production that decidedly engages with el narco as a cultural and socio-political entity— I help to elucidate how power is exercised through racial legacies, gender, and sexuality as well as their respective alignments in order to advance a better sense of the socio-political implications of the relationship between social institutions, narco cultural politics and the politics of gender and sexuality.

Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Señorita Extraviada* (2001) comes a few years prior to the publication of *Huesos en el desierto* and *2666*. Along with striking images of Juárez's geographical and cultural terrain, the documentary features interweaving official and intimate narratives via interviews with some of the victims' family members, community organizers, and local law enforcement to explore the ideological discourses of the U.S.-Mexico border landscape and their role in the murder of women. Overall the film highlights considerable information on the backdrop of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, as a border town regarding the importance of narcotics as well as NAFTA and the transnational maquiladoras that employ migrant workers from Mexico's poorest regions as well as Central America. As one of the first prominent depictions of femicide, *Señorita Extraviada* sheds light on the complex network of factors thought to be at the heart of this violence. However, more than simply giving background and contextualizing the economic politics of Juárez, Lourdes Portillo elucidates vital bits of information that connect one possible factor to the other. The audio-visual narrative, in this sense works together to present a wide view of how cultural discourses of class and gender interact with the materiality of socioeconomic and political factors to bring about the reproduction of gender violence on the U.S.-Mexico border.

In the film's introduction, the narrator states that the city of Juárez lends itself to illicit opportunity while also making note of the stark division between poor and more affluent sections. I take the narrator's comment on "illicit opportunity" as suggesting that Juárez as any other U.S.-Mexico border city is a site of constant crossing with an implied anonymity. The film portrays how Ciudad Juárez fits the mold of many neoliberal cities but nevertheless has a unique position as metropolis on the U.S.-Mexico border. As Shilyh Warren observes in her film analysis "The Mysteries of Voice," "A mournful but simple piano melody sets the mood for the

combination of images, which poses a question about the relationship between disappearing women and the urban environment they inhabit and then leave behind” (137). The film indeed illustrates how the city manifests obvious signs of industrialization through its numerous maquiladoras and the effects of exponential and uneven development suggests a direct relationship to the disappearance of women. In view of this unplanned urbanization, the film focuses on Lomas de Poleo, an economically distressed area on the city margins of Ciudad Juárez. Many of the murder victims had lived in Lomas de Poleo and presented a particular profile; poor, slim, and dark-skinned with shoulder-length hair (Walker 98). Identifying such a pattern makes a strong case against any explanation based on arbitrary assumptions about the causes behind such violence. Chosen specifically as ethnically distinct and economically disenfranchised—young and dark-skinned poor women were more vulnerable to becoming victims because as activist Judith Galarza denounces they were assumed as unable to fund or sustain an investigation that would lead to an arrest. Hence, the visual network of images, voice-over narratives, and interviews presented in the documentary identify and condemn the gendered and classed discourses of difference within Mexican and transnational political economy.

Examinations of *Señorita Extraviada* have often approached their inquiries from a feminist and economic critique that highlights the emotional scarring the disappearances have had on the victims’ families. For example, Alejandro Enríquez contends in his essay “*Lourdes Portillos’s Señorita Extraviada: The Poetics and Politics of femicide*” that the film creates a nexus between patriarchy, sexism, machismo, and transnational capital to forge the criteria for reproduction of violence (125). Enríquez maintains,

The film furthermore connects these trends—via the murders of young women—to the immense political interests of the Mexican government to protect this

(however problematic) resource for jobs, and it links the drug trade violence on the south side of the border to the insatiable North American appetite for illegal drugs. It also exposes how mass media coverage of these crimes perpetuates the sexist idea that the victims of these crimes are at fault because their new "affluence" due to salaried labor has corrupted their morals (Enríquez 125).

Enriquez on one side clearly stipulates how Portillo's film ties a feminist lens to a critique of political economy and on the other, sees the film as bringing to light a relationship between transnational drug trade between the U.S. and Mexico and gender violence on the U.S.-Mexico border. Nevertheless, the conditions of such relationship between gender violence and the drug trade once again seem to escape discussion. Similarly, Rita González in her essay "The Said and the Unsaid: Lourdes Portillo Tracks Down Ghosts in *Señorita Extraviada*," describes Portillo's film as a feminist work precisely because it elects to project an intimate view of the victim's condition against the backdrop of a neoliberal economy. González affirms "Señorita Extraviada's feminist film-making methodology eschews an antiseptic and distanced inquiry. Instead, Portillo directs the camera to move alongside the young women of Juárez as they travel through the chaotic border city" (González 235). The film is conceived as feminist two-fold due to its cinematic technique and content. That is, *Señorita Extraviada* does not only pursue the recognition of the urgency to find answers to the disappearances of women in Juarez but does so through an underlying commitment to the intimate as political. Gonzalez also adds that Portillo's film acts as a feminist counter-narrative to local and international media accounts of gender violence in Ciudad Juárez. She writes,

Charles Bowden, author of *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (1998), wrote an article for Talk magazine in which he focused perversely on the sexuality of

the young women of Juárez, describing in detail their ways of dressing and making themselves up. Feminist activists in Juárez, as well as scholars like Fregoso in the United States, point to the “yellow” journalistic coverage that focuses on sensational facets, such as links to narcotrafficking and prostitution rings, rather than on the large-scale social, economic, and environmental problems of Juárez (González 238).

Gonzalez’s claim touches on several important aspects. She deploys a direct critique of sensationalist media accounts exhibited by many journalists including Charles Bowden. Gonzalez is not alone in her sentiments on this type of media exposure and is later echoed in much greater detail by Sandra K. Soto’s essay “Seeing Through Photographs of Borderlands (Dis)order,” where Soto critiques Bowden’s construction of Juarez as the epitome of violence which may not only essentialize and generalize but also “denies the politics and limits of representation” (Soto 425). By underlining Fregoso’s argument, González confirms a key argument in my conception of the narco-sphere where the journalistic coverage with a few exceptions has often banked on sensationalist news and strayed from investigating reporting on societal problems at large.

As I’ve suggested previously, scholars including Alejandro Enriquez, Rosa Linda Fregoso, and Shilyh Warren agree that the film can be interpreted as calling for a critical engagement of love as political commitment to the human plight of the victim’s families for their daughters (Warren 141, Enríquez 125). By citing Rosa Linda Fregoso, Warren argues that Portillo’s work is “guided by a principle of love, she tells us—not as the romantic glue of the couple but as the affective cohesion of political commitment” (141). Hence, appeals to the emotional attachments of the viewer acts as a useful register that re-valorizes emotions such as

love as feminist praxis. But as Warren also reminds us love has an especially significant place within queer theory especially Lauren Berlant. Warren writes “Love—in the sense of a radical kind of “being with,” in Berlant’s words—is one way to theorize the desire and longing for an alternative political future and the messy affective networks that might possibly conjoin human forces to build a newly just world” (142). Longing for an alternative future indeed entails the process of imagining a future, however it obliges determining the specificities of present conflicts. On this same note, *Señorita extraviada* presents a window to something else to make possible a queer analysis that provides a wider register of possibilities and responsibilities. That is, while scholars have pointed to the manifold ways in which *Señorita extraviada* exemplifies how femicide on the U.S.-Mexico border has come to be; key moments in the film provide the occasion for making sense of something that at first seems nonsensical.

Among the interviews that *Señorita Extraviada* features is one with the at the time governor of Chihuahua Francisco Barrio who served from 1992-1998 and who expressly labels the victims as sex workers. The governor’s claim is constituted by a two-fold assumption that collectively blames victims for being at certain places and hanging out with certain people “se mueven en ciertos lugares y frecuentan a ciertas personas.” Such a generalizing characterization of all victims as sex workers or “loose” women is based on the presumption that because of this, women are less valuable and somehow rationalizes and exonerates perpetrators from civil and legal consequence. Whether or not the victims were sex workers is not the most important revelation, what is more is the exposure of the impunity that ensues from the murder of someone who is perceived as explicitly sexual and therefore as “deviant.” The governor’s claim is immediately followed by the assistant attorney general’s remarks on a practical solution that would involve a self-imposed curfew. According to the assistant attorney general, Jorge López

the curfew would naturally divide good people from bad people, where the good people after a certain hour would stay at home with their families while bad people would be out on the streets. Yet Lopez is unable to uphold his practical solution when faced with the question on how young people and young women who work extended hours at the maquiladoras around Ciudad Juarez must be out at night unable to exercise any self-imposed curfew. As a response, López suggests that because it's obvious how people who are going to work dress and travel, nothing will happen to them. Lopez's statement unveils and reifies the rhetoric of civility which creates a false notion of well-being for those that would hypothetically follow moral and civil codes of conduct to compel the population to "conduct" themselves in a certain way. As Michel Foucault reminds us "conduct" and "counter-conduct" are essential components of governmentality in the sense that one cannot exist without the other. In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault writes "This notion of conduct, with the field it covers, is doubtless one of the fundamental elements introduced into Western society by the Christian pastorate" (*Security* 193). Historically, within a European context, these resistances were linked to conflicts between the bourgeoisie and feudalism as well as women's revolts. Foucault writes, "You also find revolts, or resistances of conduct linked to the completely different but crucial problem of the status of women. These revolts of conduct are often linked up with the problem of women and their status in society, in civil society or in religious society" (*Security* 196). As the subject and body where "conduct" is most policed and where "regulation" is pursued and ensured through security, the population seeking to rebel against this "order" are women. "Counter-conduct" here accurately refers to resistance that is not necessarily a political revolt in such strong concrete terms, but also more than simple disobedience which Foucault describes as "the struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others...to avoid a certain substantification allowed by the word

“dissidence” (*Security* 201). The key here is that groups are disciplined to say the least, for not conducting themselves in a way that has never been accessible to them. Their exercise of counter-conduct in many cases is a means to exist and the only accessible way to carry themselves. Through the sequence of testimonies by the governor and attorney general, Portillo’s film captures the socio-economic and cultural production of poor racialized women as failing to be “conducted” and thus as disposable—a process that is reproduced and ratified through the legal system.

Up to this point the presence of morality and family values is salient from a variety of perspectives within the film itself and its criticism. Much of what is known comes from the inclusion of victims’ families within the documentary and their efforts to find their love ones in order to counteract the perception of morality expressed by Chihuahua’s political elite with their own family values. As Soto argues;

If the agents of transnational capitalism make a scramble to the border to increase their profits by cutting labor costs, that scramble is, in a sense, followed by a second race as a host of concerned Americans head south, driven by a passionate commitment to ring a shrill wake-up call about the murders and disappearances of women in Juárez, sex trafficking, drug trafficking and narco-executions, gangs out of control, corrupt politicians, and the brutality of the paramilitary border apparatus. The resulting visual archive (many of its pieces macabre) can make the border seem like a social space saturated through and through with misery, hostility, broken families, hopelessness, and abject poverty —(Soto 419).

Soto succinctly summarizes the presumptions under which a sort of “savior complex” by the international non-profits is exercised. Soto clarifies, “I question the kind of work performed

when a representation's mode is documentary (the unveilings of truths that are hidden); when an implicit binary opposition of order and disorder uncritically organizes this representation; and when a return to the family ideal seems the only available recourse against the threat of nihilism" (420). Whereas *Señorita Extraviada* does not uphold a notion of order and disorder attuned to the geopolitical division of U.S.-Mexico, Soto's reference to family values does, however resonate with the significance of the family within the film. Soto thus cautions a nostalgic fallback to traditional family values. My intention here is not to invalidate the families and their pain but to inquire about those individuals without the institutional support of an apparatus such as the family. This includes both groups from Juarez and newly arrived groups to northern border cities in search of work, contextualized within the more recent economic transformations and the historic displacement of rural poor and indigenous populations in Latin America. Beyond the immediacy of what *Señorita Extraviada* portrays, what place do these groups hold within the social and political imaginary of family values as a refuge for gender and sexual violence vis-à-vis the production of a neoliberal surplus labor population? The family is an institution that is not always a safeguard but on the contrary the space and place of violent oppression. Through the privileges granted to the nuclear family within a narrative of resistance and denouncing, what of the violence inflicted on the nameless, unidentified, and above all unclaimed. The intractability of their subaltern condition through the dominance of the family exacerbates their production as disposable, unveiling how the conception of "desechables" within contemporary neoliberal biopolitics functions primarily on condition of those already conceived as "desachables" within colonial and nation-state imaginaries.

As we learn that many of the victims were in fact employees of the maquiladoras, we also know that even within this space of replaceable labor and life, a hierarchy remains—a detail

that claims more importance as we learn through activist Judith Galarza that maquilas in Juarez enjoy a position of privilege and untouchability within Mexican politics through their nexus with transnational capital. The maquila is a microcosm of Juarez and the Mexican cultural and political landscape as it exhibits the gender, sexual, racial and of course class power relations of society at large. One of the focal stories comes through with the interview of Silvia's mother, one of the victims, who retells the traumatic experience she lived as a victim of human and sex trafficking when she had first arrived in Juárez. As a young woman and while pregnant with her daughter Silvia, she had been unsuspectingly sold to a group of men by one of her acquaintances. This moment in the first few minutes of the film proves central to reality of women's participation as perpetrators and facilitators of physical and institutional violence. Additionally, this instance indexes interrogations of historical moments and their timelines. The mothers traumatic story of being kidnapped with the complicity of a young woman who she considered a friend marks this a problem prior to the film's immediacy and to the known boom of drug trafficking. While we cannot know for certain the reasons behind individual women's active participation in maintaining this power structure, their role is of utmost importance and can be traced and linked to the complex arrangement of power and economic pressures. *Señorita Extraviada* repeatedly exhibits narratives where women are complicit to the violence enacted on other women. In another case featured in the documentary, María shares the trauma of being repeatedly attacked and sexually assaulted while in prison after being arrested under dubious charges. María and her husband had been arrested due to a land dispute with neighbors when they had first arrived in Ciudad Juárez to settle on the outskirts of town. As we listen to her story we realize that sexual assault is normalized as commonplace and sustained by law enforcement in manifold ways, where they themselves perpetrate violence and trauma. She describes in detail

that a policewoman was also one of her aggressors. María's experience exemplifies the misogynist discourses complicit with the converging systems of law enforcement and judicial impunity that enable both men and women to rape and murder those conceived as dispensable in the context of Mexican society affected by both local and global factors. Towards the end of the film we learn that the police officers involved in abusing María were arrested but subsequently acquitted, thus providing further evidence that the judicial system as subject to maintaining a fragile notion of sovereignty cannot afford to offer legal recourse. Portillo includes stories like these in addition to the women that pose as recruiters for the maquila and instead lure women and facilitate their disappearance to underline the complex power arrangements of gender and sexuality and to delineate their interaction with the vast web of the elements of capital. That is, as spectators we might not know who hires these women or under what circumstances they operate whether it is through coercion, money, survival or all of the above, but can be certain that these domains are a result of structural interplay.

Despite credible evidence that has proved otherwise, the local police insisted that the Egyptian national, Sharif Sharif was the mastermind of the murders and had ordered murders from his prison cell as the head of the "Los Rebeldes" gang and a group of maquila bus drivers. The discourse behind this official government narrative tying both groups to Sharif Sharif at once alludes to the elite's investment in circulating the notion of a foreign force coming into the domestic national space and corrupting society. It signals to the denial of the political elite to recognize the existence of a problem that far from attempting to resolve something they have had part in creating—want to instead make hidden and unintelligible. The film makes el narco an explicit player that hovers as a ghostly narrative throughout and becomes more real toward the end of the film. During the beginning scenes, Portillo's narration positions Ciudad Juarez as one

of the major crossing routes used to transport drugs into the United States, one of the world's largest consumers. Drug violence during the 1990s was ubiquitous but less discernible and has since then undergone a surge in the last 10 years, with the onset of the Mexican "war on drugs" and the territory disputes between the Gulf Cartel, Juárez Cartel, and the Sinaloa Cartel. *El narco* comes in to focus through a scene that insinuates the relationship between the disappearances and the mass graves and through Sharif Sharif's lawyer Irene Blanco. Toward the end of the film, Blanco tells of her skepticism about the official narrative—which she believes is an attempt to disregard the real problem, "el narco" by blaming Sharif Sharif. Blanco's doubt is sparked by the continued disappearances in spite of her defendant's incarceration. This testimony certainly evokes the confidence that in fact "el narco" is responsible. Blanco's declaration seemingly undoes the outlined network of causes the film projects throughout its duration. This moment however, does not necessarily invalidate the film's work, on the contrary—*Señorita Extraviada* confronts the sexist cultural and institutional discourses with the neoliberal policies and capital that drive el narco and las maquilas. The film paradoxically tackles and presents the interactions of multiple factors beyond the delimitations of quantifiable culprits that tell us there is no one explanation. *Señorita Extraviada* remarkably transcends as a paragon, an exact picture of complexity and confusion—the forced ephemeral embodiment of the narcosphere.

In comparison to Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada*, Franco's Rosario Tijeras, not only differs as literary fiction but as a direct engagement of drug trade culture in Medellín, Colombia. Authors like Mexican Cristina Rivera Garza and Colombian Laura Restrepo are among the few women writers of narco narratives to have garnered critical recognition and acclaim, yet women protagonists have for some time figured prominently within narco literature across the hemisphere. Two prime examples of this type of fiction with female protagonists are Arturo

Pérez-Reverte's *La Reina del Sur* (2002) and of course Franco's *Rosario Tijeras* (1999). Despite the ample visibility of women characters within narco narratives, they are often type-casted as powerless victims or as hyper-sexualized and vengeful. The former was inspired by the narco corrido "contrabando y tración" or better known as "Camelia la tejana" where Pérez-Reverte portrays the story of a young narco girlfriend from Sinaloa who after the death of her boyfriend and sexual assault by his enemies becomes a powerful drug lord in Spain. The latter is a noteworthy example of this type of narco-narrative emerging from Colombia. Franco's *sicaresque* like others are highly invested in a representation of the violence of narco society and its intimate relationship with "las comunas," the shantytowns of Medellín. The city of Medellín has historically been conceived as a cosmopolitan city and epitome of progress that Colombia desired to boast about both in its domestic nationalism and its image to the world. This very notion of modernity and progress is at the core of the inability for some to explain the causes of such violence. That is, how can a city with such a cosmopolitan outlook be plagued with "barbaric" narco and guerrilla violence. To this effect, Nicholas T. Goodbody in his essay "La emergencia de Medellín: la complejidad, la violencia, y la différence en Rosario Tijeras y La virgen de los sicarios," writes that as opposed to sociological studies that intend to find direct linear causal relationships, *sicaresque* novels like *Rosario Tijeras* and Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* expound the different elements of this seemingly chaotic setting. He writes,

Este género literario no sólo va más allá de una explicación de las causas y las consecuencias de la violencia en Medellín, sino que también revela la medida en que la interpretación analítica abarca una visión limitada de la ciudad. Dicho de otra manera, la novela *sicaresca* no cuestiona nuestra capacidad de entender a

fondo el proceso de la violencia, la cadena de acciones que la generan; más bien, niega la existencia de esta cadena. Nos obliga a reconocer la complejidad de Medellín, su carácter emergente y la conexión inextricable entre la ciudad, la violencia y la novela (Goodbody 442).

The sicairesque novel offers a deeper insight into the complexities of Medellín's urban im/materiality. In other words, they pose openings into viewing both the nuance and obvious interactions between the tangible and discourse. Goodbody insists, "podemos decir que la ciudad no es la suma de una progresión lineal de acciones humanas que traen como resultado la pérdida de cualquier rasgo de lo rural; más bien, es un juego constante que surge de las interacciones que existen *entre* los seres humanos" (444). Thus, difference is produced by way of these non-linear interactions between humans through social relations that conceive difference as aberration and subsequently uphold the notion of "norm" with violence accordingly. Thus, if violence expresses instances of escalation in relations of power; then racialized gender and sexual violence uphold the organization of global capitalism as well as the production of a surplus labor population to ensure its dissemination of which el narco becomes a replicant.

Franco positions gender and sexual violence as central to *Rosario Tijeras* plot's development in so much as Rosario's character and subsequent life is delimited by the trauma of sexual assault. The novel is narrated in retrospect by Rosario's friend, Antonio as Rosario agonizes in a hospital bed after being shot. We learn that as an 8-year old, Rosario is raped by her mother's boyfriend and kicked out of her home by her mother because she refuses to believe her and does not care to engage the issue (Franco 178). The graphic manner in which the scene is described could be argued as necessary in order to demystify gender and sexual violence and expose its brutality but on the other hand, it's narration repeats the scene of violence and

reproduces it as spectacle. As Guy Debord would agree, the violent scene replaces the corporeal and commodifies it for consumption as text (35). Hence, the underpinnings of the spectacle for consumption, bank on the same principle of the initial catalyst that dehumanizes by objectifying sexual and gender difference along with its trauma. This traumatic event in Rosario's youth is positioned in the novel as setting in effect the desensitized and detached demeanor in which she confronts life as well as the people she meets.

Through Rosario's character and her relationships, we can unveil significant social dynamics, specifically Colombian notions of race and class including the intertwining registers of gender, sexuality, and class. The novel narrated through Antonio's perspective, a white upper middle class Colombian loves and desires to be with Rosario, who in turn is interested in his friend Emilio who also belongs to the Medellín upper class. As a working-class woman, Rosario is already positioned as vulnerable to be viewed as an object of sexual of desire within a hetero-patriarchal society. The gender and sexual violence that she experiences from her own community is subsequently followed by the structural and symbolic violence of being viewed as an object of desire not only by powerful drug lords but also by her two wealthy friends, Antonio and Emilio (Franco 24). While Antonio and Emilio both desire Rosario, Antonio is perfectly content and satisfied through his voyeurism of his friend's sexual intimacy with Rosario. In many respects, their relationship as does the representation of women in drug culture, echo Gayle Rubin's now classic piece on the traffic in women used to build solidarity and social organization (45). Antonio and Emilio's friendship during the time they share with Rosario is strengthened by their individual bonds with her, through the sexual and emotional exchange between all three of them. In the end, however, Rosario cannot escape death—she is not meant to survive as a sicaria and as a laborer on the ground of the global neoliberal structure—while

Emilio and Antonio are able to continue their lives unblemished despite sharing time and space with Rosario. Antonio and Emilio's experience thus speaks to the set of social relations that undergird Antonio and Emilio's relative position in Colombia and global society as perceivably white, male, and heterosexual. Social relations within that interact with contemporary politics that secure their power. The novel therefore acts as an allegory of the relations that bind Colombian and hemispheric society in last instance, where alligences between the elite, not only withstand the incursion of el narco but thrive because of it.

Among the many rumors about Rosario's character, according to the narrator, some claim she likes women, has breast implants and that she might even be a man. After stating these rumors the narrator proceeds to dissipate them, "Junto a las tetas y culo artificiales, mentiras, porque yo se las toqué, una sola vez, una sola noche, y nunca antes ni después tocaría algo más real, más de carne, más hermoso; junto a la Rosario que era hombre, mentiras porque no existía nada tan mujer" (Franco 91). The narrator here objectifies Rosario's body and clings to the notion of gender authenticity to vindicate the value of Rosario as a person. As mentioned, the problematic way in which Rosario is viewed by the hetero-patriarchal male gaze is but one of the ideologies that circulate within *Rosario Tijeras*. Through her characterization as a native of the Medellín "comunas," Rosario can be read not only as a working-class woman but as non-white according to the Colombian racial imaginary. Even within the representation of reactionary heroine roles, racialized working class women are still ultimately perceived as prized objects of desire, a matter that is clearly tied to the ideology of women as marketable commodities, such as the underlying logic of beauty queens and beauty pageants that we see for example in the Mexican film *Miss Bala* (2012) by Director Gerardo Naranjo. Social and geographical mobility as well as bodily transformation is key for the survival of many women within contemporary

hemispheric society. This is the case of several recent Colombian television narco-dramas like *Sin Tetas no hay Paraíso* (2006), *“Las Muñecas de la Mafia”* (2010) by Caracol TV. Women’s bodies become framed as optimal for sexual labor even if the labor they perform is not necessarily explicitly sexual, for instance drug mules—where the non-normative and non-dominant vision of the body is overwhelmingly used as a vehicle for traffic. Their labor is based and largely conditioned by their production as different. What I describe above is in effect not exclusive to narco-cultural production but rather becomes magnified within it, wherein narco culture gains by following the logics of racial and class essentialisms imbricated by gendered and sexual dominant discourses.

Rosario Tijeras emphatically narrates many of the contemporary issues in relation to Colombia not only through Rosario’s character but also through its portrayal of Medellín. Colombia’s social and political landscape has indeed undergone a transformation within the last decades as a result of increasing neoliberal economic policies, narco drug cartels and military securitization. Thus the urban geography of Medellín and human geography of Colombia as a whole have quickly and significantly changed—a fact that the Colombian elite, according to the representations in narco narratives, disparages. Antonio, the narrator in *Rosario Tijeras* personifies Medellín at the end of the 1990s as a woman, in order to capture the complexity of its geography. Yet he does so through a metaphor that is in the end misogynist. He narrates, “Medellín es como esas matronas de antaño, llena de hijos, rezandera, piadosa, y posesiva, pero también es madre seductora, puta, exuberante y fulgurosa (Franco 117). This representation follows the trope of land as a woman described through the virgin/whore or mother/whore dichotomies that can also be conquered, colonized, and owned.

These gendered reflections by Antonio also allude to and interact with social changes in urban geography are also in relation to the mobility of certain individuals. That is, the rural working classes of Colombia migrated to the outskirts of Medellín in the second half of the 20th century leading to the development of “las comunas,” working class neighborhoods that sprung up on the mountains surrounding Medellín. Through the economic access that el narco granted the inhabitants of “las comunas” they finally had the ability to navigate the spaces and neighborhoods of Medellín that were previously exclusive for the Colombian ruling class. Rosario meets Antonio and Emilio as a result of this new urban circulation of capital and people. At the time of their first encounter, Rosario is an escort for high ranking drug traffickers and her ex-boyfriend is a *sicario* who works for narcos and has a new found economic ability to go the exclusive clubs where Antonio and Emilio hangout. To demonstrate:

Cuando Emilio conoció a Rosario, ella ya no estaba con Ferney. Hacía tiempo que había abandonado sus barrios y su gente. Los duros de los duros la habían instalado en un apartamento lujoso, por cierto muy cerca del nuestro, le dieron carro, cuenta corriente y todo lo que se le antojara. Sin embargo, Ferney seguía siendo su ángel de la guarda, su amante clandestino, su servidor incondicional, el reemplazo de su hermano muerto (Franco 21).

Rosario Tijeras can also be understood in the context of alliances between the Colombian elite and the emergent narco class and the mingling of these two groups due to the drug cartel’s operational structure that obliges certain economic and geographical mobility. This event, however, also signals to the deeper and particular nature of sexual subjection as integrated by multiple assumptions that are produced through social class relations. This scene demonstrates subjective violence but it is also in wider terms representative of elitist structural gender

violence. In other words, this scene does not represent an isolated case detached from its social context nor is it exclusive to the narco cartels. Hence it is important to recognize once again that the narco cartel social structure is but one more added layer to the existent and enduring structural violence of hemispheric contemporary society. It encapsulates the transition from oligarchical families holding all economic power to the incursion of drug lords in the political and economic national and transnational landscape. Rather than displacing the elite families of Latin America, narco cartel lords made partnerships with the elite ruling families, where the elite ruling class functioned as lenders and political liaisons for the drug cartels. Forrest Hylton describes this as particularly true of Colombia despite the early hesitance on the part of Medellín upper-classes. He writes,

The glitzy tastes and brazen violence of this new-rich *clase emergente* were in dramatic contrast to the penny-pinching piety and conservatism of Medellín's traditional oligarchs...As cocaine money helped fuel a real-estate and construction boom in which local capital, freed from industrial development, could make more lucrative investments, the economic and political clout of the cartel was bolstered by a broader alliance with the old oligarchy" (Hylton 78).

Despite its disfavor with the emergent class and its taste, the elite class benefited by maintaining relative political and economic control and in return drug cartels gained easier channels to carry out a wide range of drug operations. To the extent that the drug trade and drug cartels were perceived as alternative options for access to capital and power, the elite were able to absorb them. Whether the reasons behind the rise of drug trade are intelligible or not, the ruling elite has undoubtedly benefitted from its existence, but yet would still prefer not to deal with or admit drug trafficking as a legitimate legal sphere of economic and political exchange. That is, the

dissonance of the narco-sphere functions precisely through the branding of only certain individuals already marginalized within society as narcotraffickers and as undeserving of the good life, reserved for the political ruling elite.

Throughout the novel, Rosario refers to her two friends Emilio and Antonio as *maricas* (faggots) when they do not perform to her expectations of masculinity. For example, in one scene, Rosario shouts “-¡Estoy hecha! –nos dijo ella-. Andando con semejante par de *maricas*. Esa noche pensé que hasta ahí habíamos llegado con Rosario. Me equivoqué. No sé cómo logró que no le cobraran el muerto, y nosotros nunca supimos en qué momento descartamos el sueño y nos volvimos parte de la pesadilla” Rosario labels Emilio and Antonio as “*maricas*” because they are shocked by the revelation that she has killed” (Franco 37). In another instance, Rosario also refers to men who are too romantic or display a certain kind of emotions as *maricas* (Franco 77). Rosario’s character as a working-class Colombian woman holds a social disadvantage but she also participates in the reproduction and circulation of homophobic discourse. The utterance of this discourse unveils how cultural production can be critical on the one hand of a specific social hierarchy while simultaneously being in accordance with another social arrangement. Hence the representation of a homophobic discourse here stages the classist hetero-patriarchal ideologies present in society. While Rosario’s character crystalizes women’s visibility as narcos and assassins with agency and not simply as victims it also demonstrates the complexity of relations of power accentuated by the anxieties of the breakdown in rigid notions of gender and sexuality. More than a simple insult, Rosario’s words are packed with legacies of gender and sexual oppositional binaries in Latin America but also with emergent notions of performance of masculinity in the face of social and political transformations that have led to a sense of instability and imminent death. This instance in the novel echoes Berlant’s notion of *slow death*

in contemporary society and Valencia's performance of masculinity within el narco. Since Rosario perceives Antonio and Emilio's lack of desire for confrontation as a deficient masculinity she wants to insult their masculinity by calling them "faggots". Rosario's actions express class-based expectations of masculinity relayed through the use of the word "maricas." At this moment in the novel expectations of narco masculinity for both men and women are made explicit. More than revealing and confirming the conflation of gender performance and sexuality, where a sign of weakness cannot be associated with masculine performance, these instances demonstrate the distinct way in which masculine affect is read consistent with social class affect. Rather than purely pointing to certain behaviors like non-confrontation as something feminine, masculinity here becomes entirely associated to a certain gender performance tied to the working-class and sicario affect.

Rosario's sexual assault, which drives the plot, is nonetheless a recurring trope within countless narco-narratives and crime narratives---where the main character, a woman is conditioned by a traumatic event and becomes a ruthless criminalized subject. In *Rosario Tijeras*, the narrator details, "A Rosario la vida no la dejó pasar una, por eso se defendió tanto, creando a su alrededor un cerco de bala y tijera, de sexo y castigo, de placer y dolor (Franco 15)." This passage indeed describes the way in which the text positions Rosario as a reactionary sexualized figure in relation to her life's trauma. We learn that at the age of 13 Rosario gets revenge for her sexual assault by killing the second person that tries to sexually assault her and that later she becomes an escort/companion to some of the powerful drug lords of Medellín (Franco 158). As Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky makes clear in "Towards the Latin American Action Heroine: The Case of Jorge Franco Ramos' *Rosario Tijeras*, the novel follows the haunting but clichéd storyline of the vengeful victim of sexual assault ---the rape-revenge

genre, “where women can be tough and manly only by having first been destroyed by men” (25). Within narco narratives, Arturo Perez-Reverte’s *La Reina del Sur* also exhibits this same plotline where the protagonist Teresa becomes a merciless narco-trafficker after she is sexually assaulted by a hitman.²⁷ This recurring plot structure dialogues with sexual objectification and social alienation that does not conceive women as heroines outside of a reactionary model always in relation to the dominant and oppressive force. In this regard, the discourse of women as encompassing a set of relations within narco cultural production becomes constrained to a representation of gender and sexual violence that lacks critical rigor beyond narratives presenting the ways in which racialized working class women are sexually objectified.

However, while this incident in Rosario’s life becomes viewed as part of a Colombian narco imaginary, its place in a timeline of events complicates this violence as purely narco. In other words, the sexual violence that Rosario is subjected to as a child falls outside the immediacy of el narco. This moment in the novel is thus a narrative strategic point that although part of a clichéd catalyst of the plot demonstrates this violence as semi exterior to the immediate gender and sexual violence that is certainly present in el narco. Conversely, Rosario’s violent demeanor may be interpreted as an exercise of hegemonic masculinity by way of the gun as a signifying the phallus. However, the text also grants the possibility for alternative readings of gender and sexual politics in the novel. For example, Pobutsky tenders a more flexible analysis of Rosario’s character. Drawing from Elizabeth Hills’ connections between Deleuze’s “Body without Organs” and heroines, Pobutsky writes,

²⁷ Television shows like Argentine series and its Mexican remake *Mujeres Asesinas* demonstrate how women’s roles are type-casted as violently reactionary within Latin American cultural production and is an issue that extends beyond narco cultural production.

Hills does not read the gun in a woman's hand as a fixed referent for the phallus, but rather as a part of a new dynamic connection, "a woman's hand forming an assemblage with a gun" (44). This ever-becoming aggregate of distinct forces, that neither imitates nor becomes a man, goes beyond the dichotomous argument of gender binaries, thus opening the way for a new perspective, outside of the masculine/feminine dichotomy (Pobutsky 27-28).

Pobutsky's observation certainly complicates a reading of Rosario's gender and sexual subjectivity. Consequently, for Pobutsky, Rosario does not want to emulate maleness, albeit she is both feminine and masculine. While Rosario may not necessarily exhibit masculinity in all realms, her performance does not fall outside norms. On the one hand, her performance of masculinity is a result of a need to exercise violence that is contingent on self-defense within the context of contemporary Medellín and on the other, her femininity is attached to a sexual appeal that lures men to their death bed, alluding to tropes such as the femme fatale and man-eater. Nevertheless, intimacy and publicity converge through a mixture of both sex, sexuality, gender and violence in public, where intimacy and its implications affirm the suggested discursive and convoluted interplay between structural and cultural domains manifested by the narco-sphere. While criticism of *Rosario Tijeras* often resorts to its characteristic as a popular narrative, for mass consumption, the novel in effect illustrates gender and sexual violence as power dynamics preexisting el narco as a cultural phenomenon and makes narco cultural politics more intelligible—key points that reiterate relations that prompted el narco but still function in the terrain reconfigured by el narco.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a note by Nicholas T. Goodbody regarding sicaresque narratives. He writes, “Por otra parte, la novela sicaresca nos sumerge en dicha complejidad a tal punto que nos causa un sentimiento de desorientación, no sólo la sensación de ser incapaces de entender las fuerzas abstractas que motivan los actos violentos que vemos, sino también el inquietante presentimiento de que estas fuerzas ni siquiera existen” (Goodbody 452). Although this claim makes specific reference to sicaresque narrative, it is telling of how neoliberalism rejects el narco and how narco-sphere discourses project a notion that el narco is somehow a separate universe that occasionally collides with ours, when instead they are all one in the same a non-linear assemblage of networks and interactions between power relations. Recognizing the power and at the same time limitations of representation aids the process of understanding how cultural production and criticism as well as their treatment of racial, gender, and sexual narratives can reify certain power structures while attempting to represent or critique others.

Chapter 3: Narco-Criminality and Sexual Publicity

In light of the timely and on-going conversations on sexuality, masculinity and violence in scholarship on Latin America, this chapter analyzes their confluence within Colombian and Mexican narco cultural imaginaries. Expressly, I contend that Fernando Vallejo's *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (Our Lady of the Assassins) from Colombia and Luis Estrada's *El Infierno* (Hell) from Mexico project homosexuality as pivotal to the representation of the drug trade and the war on drugs. I will examine how these cultural texts once unpacked as products of the hemispheric narco-sphere reveal decisive contradictions in their social critiques of the drug trade and neoliberalism at the expense of reifying political institutions and discourses complicit with the structures they aim to dismantle. Although Vallejo's *La Virgen de los Sicarios* published in 1994 and Luis Estrada's *El Infierno* (2010) reflect different historical moments and geographical sites of the "war on drugs," they elicit important questions about the critical function of sexual, gendered, and racial discourse in critiques of capitalism and the war on drugs. In other words, relations of power within *el narco* are not exempt from historical processes. This chapter thus interrogates the parameters and underpinnings of the visibility of homosexuality in narco-narratives and the moralistic perspective of the narcosphere that further aids the fragmentation of vulnerable subjects.

Some critics like Cristo Figuero Sanchez cite, *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994) as one of the first narco narratives, but others such as José Cardona López refer to an earlier Colombian novel as the pioneering narco narrative (Duarte 148). Published during the height of Pablo Escobar's cocaine empire in the mid-1980s, *El Divino* (1986) by Gustavo Alvarez Gardeazabal highlights how the incursion of drug trafficking in Colombia began to transform its rural social landscapes much earlier than it transformed its urban geography. As one of the first novels to

zero in on the drug trade in Colombia, *El Divino* is a skillful portrayal of how the small town of Ricaurte harbors an inner conflict of desire in the simultaneous veneration and rejection of gay drug lord Mauricio Quintero also known as “El divino” Mauro named after the local Christ deity “El Divino” (Duarte 148). Indeed, Colombian society is depicted as being troubled with the societal implications of the neoliberal drug trade by holding ethical reservations about the resulting reorganization of power relations but hoping to enjoy the economic benefits of the drug trade. Although many in town feel uneasy about Mauro’s occupation, others are more worried about his “unnatural” desires. These judgements are only assuaged through people’s recognition of his power and “divinity” as a wealthy narco patron. Rather than sidelining homosexuality as a representation of stereotypical homophobia in Latin America, *El Divino* and *La virgen de los sicarios* position homosexuality as central to drug trafficking as an intervention in moral assumptions of Colombian sexuality and masculinity. As one of the foundational narco narratives, Alvarez Gardezabal’s novel segues into the boom of narco narratives at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st while evincing the multifarious relationship between sexuality and gender and its palpable yet unpredictable complexity within contemporary narco cultural politics. While narco narratives and narco culture are often envisioned as representing a hetero-masculinist and patriarchal space perceived as foreclosing queerness, Alvarez Gardezabal’s novel daringly presents how the nexus of drug trafficking and homosexuality is precisely the ideal avenue as we later see with Vallejo and Estrada’s work to read the complex socio-economic processes of contemporary Latin America.

Homosexuality within narco-narratives or literature in general is of course never uncomplicated. Discourses of homosexuality over and over again combine in some way or another, religious sin, psychological illness, and comic relief as a way to shame its presence

within a given context. But just as same-sex desire is exemplified as deviant and undesirable, it is also vindicated and favored in others in the name of sexual diversity as in Alvarez Gardezabal and Vallejo's novels. Even so, *La Virgen de los Sicarios* willingly or not, finds significant pitfalls by creating an image of narco sexuality that is constricting and devoid of critical perspectives of how relations of power are reciprocally marked and influenced by such a limiting image. All this works in favor of the narcosphere's function, where neoliberal discourses refuse to recognize el narco as the perfect execution of its ideology by hiding behind gay and women's liberal rights discourse invested in championing western notions of civility and proper citizenship within contemporary politics.²⁸ While the proponents and supporters of this historical shift may presume of good intentions, there is a strong neo-colonial character attached to antagonizing Latin America as not fully or properly developed and as being plagued with homophobic and misogynist criminal organizations. At the same time, el narco is framed as wanting to remain at odds with sanctioned neoliberalism by laying claim to hetero-masculinity and hypermasculinity outside of liberal political correctness. Nevertheless, el narco paradoxically remains in-tune with neoliberal discourse as an extension and as a space where vulnerable groups circulate and negotiate survival and become further criminalized and marginalized as inherently deviant populations.

Almost a decade after *El Divino*, drug trafficking, religion, and homosexuality again appear at the forefront of Fernando Vallejo's *La Virgen de los Sicarios*, but in this case as way to present an utter rejection of the global impact of neoliberalization and the drug trade on the urban

²⁸ Here, I am referring to rights discourse concerning representation, labor, marriage, and property all marked by the homonationalist contemporary moment which as such is defined as, "a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality" (Puar 337).

stage, in the Colombian metropolis Medellín. *La Virgen de los Sicarios* in the present remains a prime example of contemporary Colombian narrative both applauded and criticized for its rendering of the violent effects of the drug trade during the 1990s. *La Virgen*, often referenced as a sicaresque narrative due to its similarity to the rogue and adventure like narratives of the picaresque novel.²⁹ As an account of the period after the murder of Pablo Escobar believed to have been orchestrated by the rival Cali cartel “Los Pepes” as well as the DEA and the CIA, *La Virgen* depicts the violence that ensued over territory disputes and jobless assassins formerly employed by Escobar.³⁰ Vallejo’s novel is comprised by a stark life and death division associated with the juxtaposition of things the protagonist, Fernando, (a gay upper-middle class Colombian who returns after years of being away living in Europe) likes and dislikes. While his dislikes and lovers are eventually killed off in some way or another, he on the other hand remains physically intact. Fernando’s initial inability to understand the transformations of Colombian society that he perceives at the beginning of the novel turn into a desire to eliminate these deviations from what he deems as a desirable norm. While Fernando initially shows discomfort rather than disapproval for the violent murders, he eventually become unfazed by Alexis’ actions.

Together with Jorge Franco’s *Rosario Tijeras*, *La Virgen de los Sicarios* received noticeable criticism for what decriers perceived as perpetuating the hyper-commercialization of

²⁹ Sicaresque or sicaresca was coined by Colombian writer, Hector Abad Faciolince in 1995 to express the boom of novels depicting the drug war and urban violence in Colombia. (Cabañas 11)

³⁰ According to Forrest Hylton, Pablo Escobar’s killing was a joint effort among various parties including the U.S. government, the Cali cartel, and some of Escobar’s ex-associates (*Makeover* Hylton 83).

Colombian literature that exploits marginal groups through the framing of Latin American cultural difference for a foreign readership. As Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola writes,

El mercado editorial, que es obviamente partícipe de las políticas económicas globales, perpetúa la comercialización de estos márgenes y promueve cierta exotización de una realidad latinoamericana “cruda” dirigida a un público más atento e instruído en cuestiones socio-políticas de América Latina y ansioso de leer algo nuevo. (Herrero-Olaizola 43)

For Herrero-Olaizola, narco narratives represent a new crude literary current similar to “Dirty Realism” that appeals to foreign readers looking for something fresh far removed from their reality. Noting the publishing industry’s interest in commodifying local culture for global consumption, he is also adamant in claiming that the success of narco narratives lies in the representation of urban marginality, where women and minorities are presented as the protagonists (Herrero-Olaizola 46). Moreover, according to Herrero-Olaizola identifying narco narrative’s success is as important as recognizing how this literary genre adapts to market trends. Herrero-Olaizola argues,

En este sentido, no sólo se trata de situar el éxito de autoras latinoamericanas en dicho mercado (Isabel Allende, como el ejemplo proporcionado por Masiello), sino también de pensar en cómo el género se adecúa a las nuevas tendencias del mercado. No debe sorprendernos, por tanto, el éxito de la narrativa colombiana si pensamos en los sicarios homosexuales Alexis y Wilmar (*La virgen*) y en su hipersexualizada asesina Rosario (*Rosario Tijeras*), o en la angustiada y delirante Agustina (*Delirio*). (Herrero-Olaizola 46)

According to Herrero-Olaizola some concrete examples of how contemporary Colombian literature has cashed in on the latest sexual trends are the gay *sicarios* in Fernando Vallejo's work and the hypersexualized protagonist of Jorge Franco's novel. However, what is lacking from Herrero-Olaizola's articulation on the capitalist marketing of marginality is the recognition of the pivotal relationship between the elite and marginality, the margins exist as such because there is an elite sector of society that has produced marginality both through political economy and cultural discourse.³¹ That is, the elitist gaze of the characters themselves in the case of *Rosario Tijeras* or *La Virgen de los Sicarios* and readers alike reflect and augment this social polarization by normalizing marginality as inherently hyper-sexual and consumable. In fact, Herrero-Olaizola's thoughts on gender and sexuality end there. Aside from the premise that explicit sex sells and highlighting how the margins of gender and sexuality within the popularity of narco culture in particular sell more, Herrero-Olaizola's observation does not make an incisive critique of such success. Most notably, it tells us very little about the socio-political impact of circulation due to these particular selling points. But what exactly about sexual and gender margins is so appealing to the market—and considering the influence of cultural production, how does narco cultural production help understand the relationship between the public sphere, war on drugs, and contemporary political discourse?

Indeed, sexuality and gender emerge as the ideal mechanisms for policing and scrutinizing el narco as ways to make stronger points about how certain “social ills” will lead to other “morally decadent” practices. As a space viewed as “deviant” and criminal, el narco is

³¹ In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams highlights the controversial properties of the term *elite*, “elites do not *represent*; they either express or use other interests (whether for their own selfish purposes or not is of course controversial, because proponents of the theory claim that their real purposes, as *elites*, are the necessary best directions of the society as a whole).

often interlocked with practices that from an elitist patriarchal and moralistic point of view are also perceived as “deviant.” This type of rhetoric on drug culture aims to justify the “criminality” of drugs and hence legitimize the war on drugs. Despite the fact that under the hex of post-racial discourse and liberal pink-washing, it often appears that social transformation is leaning toward parting ways with traditional and institutional values at the same time that it moves away from established hierarchies, underlying social asymmetries have not disappeared nor do social changes always indicate significant progress.³² Nevertheless, more visibility within narco narratives does not indicate social equality or justice on any register, be it social class, sexuality, gender, or race—but rather openings for dominant discourses to essentially confound criminality and violence with non-normative-sexuality and *el narco* as social aberrations.

Representations of the drug trade aside from interrogating the paradoxical and intimate relationship with religion have responded by consistently seeking comparisons that amply describe its social significance. In his work on, “El cartel de los sapos,” another popular Colombian narco narrative, Mauricio Duarte, notes that,

In Colombia a variety of terms have been used to speak and write about narcotrafficking. Some familiar ones are “illness,” “business,” “phenomenon,” “scourge,” “industry,” “problem,” and “tragedy.” In addition, these terms have to do with the effectiveness of drug trafficking in accelerating the production and accumulation of capital (Duarte 145).

³² Jasbir Puar defines pinkwashing as made possible through neoliberal homonationalism but must be contextualized within historical factors, “Historically speaking, settler colonialism has a long history of articulating its violence through the protection of serviceable figures such as women and children, and now the homosexual. Pinkwashing is only one more justification for imperial/racial/national violence within this long tradition of intimate rhetorics around “victim” populations” (Puar 338).

Specifically, Duarte stresses the rhetoric of disease and bacteria that narco narratives like *El cartel de los sapos* have employed in order to frame el narco as having the ability to spread and “contaminate” institutions and individuals. Language is of course key to effectively pathologizing el narco as an infectious affliction that equates el narco with a sickness that poses an exterior threat to the well-being of hemispheric society. However, it is no coincidence that the same kind of rhetoric has been historically used to designate the margins of sexuality. For example, as HIV became stereotyped as a gay disease it quickly turned into a means for pathologizing homosexuality as a contagious sickness that needed to be contained. As Susan Craddock observes in *City of Plagues: Disease, Poverty, and Deviance in San Francisco* citing Richard Poirier,

With the added clarity of hindsight, it seems apparent that limiting epidemiological focus to a still marginalized population served to place palatable limits (for those outside gay communities) on a disease terrifying both for its symptoms and for its lack of medical prevention or cure. For many commentators on the AIDS epidemic, the epidemiological history of the syndrome cannot be understood outside homosexuality’s concomitant criminalization and pathologization. As Poirier notes, the fear was/is one not just of physical but of moral contagion from the gay community (Poirier 1991, 139). A new disease thus intensifies constructs of homosexual pathology, presenting an authoritative tool to reinforce socially constructed boundaries between the normal and the deviant.

(Craddock 144)

As illustrated by Craddock, a false sense of security against homosexuality also implied a false sense of immunity to contracting HIV. Significantly, this pathological association between AIDS

and homosexuality contributes to the criminalization of marginality and punishing them for their sexual practices. Among the most affected in this sense, are poor and racialized gay communities. Sexuality as I've mentioned is also integral to class-based and racial essentialisms meant to categorize, disregard, and oppress certain groups of the population. In a way, the viral metaphor of homosexuality is congruent with elitist assumptions of the inherent predisposition of the lower-class toward deviance which in turn justifies their position within society. Hence, viral and bacterial metaphors serve to elicit a sense of menacing exteriority for both el narco and non-normative sexuality that is alien to a normative, seemingly healthy and law abiding society.

As Duarte also notes, narco-narratives are the object of a literary studies trend that examines how biopolitics unravels both within society and drug culture. He writes,

In this culture disseminated by the media, social ascent through bullets and sudden downfall are characteristic of those whose great accomplishment is essentially “the savage reduction of the value of human life” and who therefore become the heroes of *narcocorridos*. Something similar has occurred in literature, with some books creating characters that, examined through a biopolitical lens, exemplify a posture of extermination (Duarte 147).

As Duarte notes, these discourses of biopolitical extermination are in effect disseminated by the media, but “this” culture would suggest that it is only within narco culture that the reduction of life is carried out when in fact the political threat of “extermination” is the ultimate element that governs society as a whole. It is no coincident that Vallejo is also a biologist. However, Duarte insightfully adds, “If there is anything inherent to both crime and fiction it is the malignant externality with which they have been conceived and the risk they imply to order and national advancement” (153). Vallejo’s work unquestionably obliges conversations on the implications of

crime in fiction and its power over cultural processes. Specifically, *La virgen de los sicarios* demonstrates how narco narratives is not “exceptional” fiction about an exceptional case but instead a paradigm of literature grappling with neoliberal western political dynamics of which the drug war is one manifestation.

While Fernando has nostalgic ties to his catholic upbringing, his tie to religion in the present comes as a result of his love affair with one of the many young sicarios that venerate the virgin Mary Help of Christians (María Auxiliadora).³³ Although homosexuality and the drug trade indeed coalesce to propel *La Virgen de los Sicarios*' plot across Medellin's city landscapes, as the novel's title prescribes, religion by way of urban pilgrimages to see the virgin also stimulates Fernando's movement through the city, first with Alexis and then with Wilmar. Religious allusions within the novel seemingly undermine the absolute perception of criminality and violence as “sinful” within the sphere of Catholicism. As Leticia Nini Villaseñor observes, “The perceived abandonment of God Leads to a hybridized form of religious devotion among the people of Medellín. This new religious system is a fusion of murder and salvation (two opposing variables within the Catholic Church) that bestows the *sicarios* with a certain duality as both the angels and avengers of *señora Muerte*” (19). Faced with imminent death, the novel zeros in on how Colombian *sicarios* repurpose a catholic idol as a last hope for survival even without salvation. For instance, Fernando sarcastically cites how sociologists claim that *sicarios* who are followers of la Virgen María Auxiliadora pray for good aim and to be able to kill before getting killed.

³³ The Virgin Mary Help of Christians (Maria Auxiliadora de los Cristianos) holds a prominent role within Catholicism as one of the main renditions of the Virgin Mary working tirelessly in favor of the salvation of Christians and against Christian non-believers.

Qué le pediría Alexis a la Virgen? Dicen los sociólogos que los sicarios le piden a María Auxiliadora que no les vaya a fallar, que les afine la puntería cuando disparen y que les salga bien el negocio. ¿Y cómo lo supieron? ¿Acaso son Dostoievsky o Dios padre para meterse en la mente de otros? (Vallejo 20).

The resignification of “la virgen” to their own purpose would seem to be in contrast with sanctioned beliefs of institutional Catholicism, where a young assassin and sex worker is a devout follower of a catholic icon. However, if virgins and saints have been historically perceived as helping those who have been marginalized from social welfare, then it falls under this logic that *sicarios* could find recourse in Catholic symbolism. We see a similar religious repurposing within Mexican narco culture albeit with a slightly different connection through folk saints. For example, symbols like la Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde have been adjudicated holy and divine attributes and whose followers often participate or are somehow influenced by el narco and organized crime.³⁴ Spiritual iconography within narco culture outwardly complicates the traditional opposition between criminality and religion by seemingly subverting the supposition of Catholicism’s moral and righteous brandishing and is further evinced with the refuted claim that only the morally good and law abiding poor can use these icons in seeking salvation. As a result, the religious discourse to encourage certain conduct and make the population complacent retains the stronghold on the population through its adaptation to sustain the “criminal deviance” of marginal groups, first for refusing to adhere to religious devotion and subsequently for doing so. The religious focus of Vallejo’s novel thus gestures to the implicit

³⁴ Whereas “La Santa Muerte” developed from catholic and indigenous religious syncretism, “Jesus Malverde” emerged as a regional folk tale that symbolized the heroics of narco retribution from both the Mexican state and the rich (Herlinghaus 50) (Cabañas14).

complicity of all, public and private institutions in the demise of Colombia. Yet within this condemnation, women are also accused and subsequently disparaged as the bearers of decadence. Villaseñor considers,

The novel indicts both women and the Catholic Church as the masterminds behind Medellín's descent into bare life. In this manner, God and women work hand in hand: God orchestrates the murders and violence carryout by the *sicarios*, and some allow this state of exception to continue through their steady reproduction of life. (Villaseñor19)

As Villaseñor points out women more than anyone else hold a primary role within Fernando's conception of the demise of Colombia. Fernando denounces, "Pero aquí la vida crapulosa está derrotando a la muerte y surgen niños de todas partes, de cualquier hueco o vagina como las ratas de las alcantarillas cuando están muy atestadas y ya no caben" (Vallejo 102). In Fernando's mind, women are subhuman beings that cannot stop themselves from reproducing *sicarios* and are doing so at a faster rate than they are being killed thus creating a population surplus which justifies and thus enables the social cleansing to persist. While *La virgen de los sicarios* may seek to critique these emergent techniques of extermination, its effectiveness remains in doubt precisely because of the novel's plot and stylistic traits. As the only narrator, Fernando's first person account exhibits a disdain for women that is almost too cliché to be taken as a satirical reflection of Colombian society's misogyny. As Gabriela Polit Dueñas argues in "Sicarios, Delirantes y Los Efectos Del Narcotráfico En La Literatura Colombiana,"

Resulta imposible leer con ironía los párrafos en los que Fernando habla de lo femenino con desprecio, de la mujer con asco, sobre todo de su función

reproductiva, como si las mujeres fueran hermafroditas que se reproducen solas y fueran únicas responsables de la pobreza (Polit Dueñas 132).

But as Polit Dueñas also suggests Fernando's aversion is not only directed at women, but femininity in general, "Es tan recalcitrante su odio por todo lo que se parezca a una mujer..." (131). The frailty of its critique of neoliberalism and its effects by echoing the misogyny of homosociality in homosexual spaces in which Fernando navigates is only enhanced by the novel's singular narrative perspective. That is, while *La Virgen* intends to undertake a satirical approach to the violent rule of law in Colombia's drug war---Vallejo's critique seems to be undermined not only by the crudeness of the sexist violent imagery but also by the egotistical nihilism of Fernando's all powerful elitism, leaving little room for radical interpretations of the narcosphere.

Villaseñor further agrees that *La Virgen* manifests Giorgio Agamben's conception of "bare life" corresponding to the "state of exception" where, "the human body now becomes a disposable commodity at both the physical and metaphysical level with the suspension of law and diminishment of citizenship and individual rights." (Villaseñor 14) While Villaseñor's claim stands true for how the *state of exception's* structure with its suspension of juridical order at the limits of law and the world painted by Vallejo correspond in a "new juridical category of life devoid of any value render the citizens of Medellín *homines sacri*," there is no specificity as to the structure's processes and effects in the different levels of Colombian society (14). For instance, Villaseñor further adds "In the intensely graphic scenes that Fernando depicts, Medellín is stripped to a state of bare life in which all of its inhabitants are *homines sacri*---bare life situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law" (15). Conversely, the *state of exception* here also has its limits in the sense that it

is subject to each society's cultural and political conditions. That is, within Colombia and specifically within *La virgen de los sicarios*, the "state of exception" is characterized not by a free for all process but instead by following historical trends of social formation which don't necessarily adhere to a completely new "blacklist" of subjects left to die. Racialized and gendered poor subjects are still killed but not considered as a sacrificial practice precisely because they are subjects without "qualified" value in relation to standards of Colombian citizenship. Could it then be, that ultimately *La virgen de los sicarios* unravels how the victims in this political regime of violence and reduction of life are the same precarious subjects of Colombia's past, only through different rhetoric and methods? Despite countless references to how Medellín has slipped into violent chaos, murder and violence remain structural outcomes of society's organization, where certain spaces and bodies are anticipated enactors and receptors of violence. In the case of *La Virgen*, the *sicario* and the *comuna* become the most obvious embodiments of this violent relationship previously represented by the "peasant" and "the countryside." While not all of Medellín's inhabitants and not all of Colombia is in the same state of precarity, vulnerability is also not absolute.³⁵ For instance, Gabriel Giorgi notably argues that in fiction such as *La Virgen de los Sicarios*, the trope of the criminal forges a static conception of precarity. Giorgi argues,

The criminal becomes a code figure for the new precarity, as a marker of the exceptionality, the critical emergency, the anomaly of the new precarized condition. However, by doing so, the criminal predetermines the meanings of the precarity it wants to represent: the rhetoric of criminality tends to trace a sharp

³⁵ Gabriel Giorgi defines precarity as the "shifting territory, in which the individual and the collective, the ontological and the social, or the singular and the common can no longer be clearly differentiated and distributed" (Giorgi 71).

distinction and a stark contrast between two “sides” of social life---between the figure of the criminal and the figures of the disciplined citizen and worker, between the excluded and the include, between the poor and the precarized and the “normalized” individual. The connection between criminality and precarity creates a mechanism that inscribes precarity by limiting its reach and its meanings to a certain class, group, zone, social category (Giorgi 72).

This absolute contrast that Giorgi describes is clearly exemplified by Fernando and Alexis’ relationship that by representing opposing sides of the social spectrum impedes a less prescriptive matrix of power relations. Concisely, the current neoliberal condition of denationalization and state reduction cannot be summed up as absolutely individual nor as common, it is in the end a product of the public sphere, between and within individualized and generalized dispositions of power. Giorgi thus insists,

This mechanism therefore ends up, most frequently, creating imaginaries of precarity that revolve around the gap or the divide between classes (included/excluded), zones (favela/city), and subjectivities and communities (criminal/worker, citizen). Such imaginaries suffocate the potential rearrangements of bodies, identities, and territories that can derive from a cultural and political reflection on precarity. If the cultural inscription of “criminal violence” registers and channels a denouncement of the new inequalities... it relies upon a social map organized around the distribution of the powerless as opposed to the privileged. Such a map may mitigate—even normalize—the dislocating impact of precarity upon existing identities, spatial trajectories, territorializations, and modes of subjectivation; it tends to reinforce perceived topologies of

inclusion and exclusion, and the identities and the grammars of violence projected by those distributions (Giorgi 73).

For Giorgi, fiction such as *La Virgen* rather than critiquing how neoliberalism has transformed subjectivity, focuses instead on confining the corruption of society to the figure of the *sicario* from the identifiable zone of the “comunas” (73). In addition to reaffirming existing social assumptions of criminality it also negates a critique of the elite on the most basic level. By focusing on the figure of the criminal that emerges from poverty it suppresses the role of the national and local elite as opposed to the misery of the poor revealed as part of the “natural order of things.”

As an educated and wealthy Colombian ex-patriate Fernando consistently critiques the emergent global popular culture and makes remarks about the “non-perverted” Colombia of the past. Fernando’s nostalgia in part fuels his critique of neoliberalism and the elements of globalization associated with this economic and political system. As Fernando begins to travel through the streets of Medellín, he recalls that as a child he often rode in his father’s old car on the verge of breaking down which he now compares to Colombia’s situation:

Recuerdo que íbamos de bache en bache ¡pum! ¡pum! ¡pum! Por esa carreterita destartalada y el carro a toda desbarajustándose, como se nos desbarajusto después Colombia, o mejor dicho, como se “les” desbarajustó a ellos porque a mí no, yo aquí no estaba, yo volví después, años y años, décadas, vuelto un viejo, a morir[...] ¿Pero por qué me preocupa a mi Colombia si ya no es mía, es ajena? (Vallejo 9)

According to Fernando, Colombian society is broken yet he makes sure to distance himself from it by claiming no responsibility, because he, unlike the people who remained in Colombia, was

not there when it all happened. Fernando's disclaimer, however exemplifies the self-imposed exile of the wealthy who not only had the economic mobility to flee the country but also somehow managed to maintain control of their Colombian assets and status while the economic gap widened and the war on drugs unfolded. As Giorgi suggests "las comunas" represents the attempt to contain the association between "poverty" and "criminality to a specific zone or body, where everyone else is exempt from this malady. When faced with the reality of "las comunas" Fernando again restates a disclaimer for Colombia's decadence:

Las comunas cuando yo nací ni existían. Ni siquiera en mi juventud, cuando me fui. Las encontré a mí regreso en plena matazón, florecidas, pesando sobre la ciudad como su desgracia. Barrios y barrios de casuchas amontonadas unas sobre otras en las laderas de las montañas, atronándose con su música, envenenándose de amor al prójimo, compitiendo las ansias de matar con la furia reproductora. Ganas con ganas a ver cuál puede más. En el momento en que escribe el conflicto aún no se resuelve: siguen matando y naciendo (Vallejo 39).

The repeated references to killing and reproduction once again allude to the poor as disposable yet in this case they are believed to be disposable precisely because they are replaceable by the next generation. This statement inscribes yet another racially and social class charged stereotype on the higher reproductive rates of non-whites and the lower-classes. Fernando, however, does not abandon this thread, he returns to discuss "las comunas" continuously throughout *La Virgen*. He insists,

Podríamos decir, para simplificar las cosas, que bajo un solo nombre Medellín so dos ciudades: la de abajo, intemporal, en el valle; y la de arriba en las montañas, rodeándola. Es el abrazo de Judas. Esas barriadas circundantes levantadas sobre

las laderas de las montañas son las comunas, la chispa y leña que mantienen encendido el fogón del matadero. La ciudad de abajo nunca sube a la ciudad de arriba pero lo contrario sí: los de arriba bajan, a vagar, a robar, a atracar, a matar (Vallejo 117-118).

Even as Fernando views the emergence of “las comunas” as determinant in the “massacre” he describes; the most significant problem is revealed at the moment when said “degeneracy” permeates beyond its confinement. The true tragedy in Fernando’s eyes arises when “impoverished criminals” make themselves visible, at the point in which the “criminal” physically and symbolically confronts the presumed “pure” and “normal” subject by leaving their “comuna” of “upper” Medellín and roaming the streets of “lower” Medellín. No longer possible to ignore, the “normal” citizens of Medellín are faced with the poor mestizo and indigenous classes who made their home in the “comunas” having migrated from the countryside as a result of decades of abandonment by the state, violence, and the lack of infrastructure and resources. Consequently, Medellín and Colombia are engulfed by their own creation. The Colombia of the past that Fernando mourns as he remembers it, essentially, never existed. In other words, it only existed for himself and a small privileged sector of the population.

While Fernando’s conception of poverty and the popular classes cannot be detached from his individual psyche it is also a product of his privilege in the context of Colombia’s racial and class politics. Without placing fault on either individual circumstances or systemic factors, Fernando must be read as a product of a structure that intends to minimize the national elite’s visibility and hence complicity in the current state of Colombia. This systemic element not only functions through direct economic means such as a long history of land expropriation but through cultural discourses of innate racial and gendered hierarchies in order to justify social

classes. For example, Fernando's insensibility and utter disregard for the poor and the masses is exemplified in his distaste with popular and mass culture which in the end is determinant between those who are left unbothered and those who must die. Two notable examples are the working-class taxi driver and the "punk" neighbor who is a drummer. As a response, the young sicario Alexis eliminates threats to the narrator's comfort, as a way to please him. Alexis kills the taxi driver because he refuses to turn down his Vallenato (Traditional Colombian folk music), which Fernando can't stand and then kills the drummer instead of telling him to stop "¡Tas! Un solo tiro, seco, ineluctable, rotundo, que mandó a la gonorrea esa con su ruido a la profundidad de los infiernos" (Vallejo 37). Indeed, these very same discourses dominate judgements of taste within the public sphere which often become ways to further proscribe the *nouveau riche* narco profile for their lack of good taste. Though narcos are profusely present within different sectors of society, the image of the "narco" criminal dramatically projected is the poor young man from the slums with a kitschy taste that is somehow above all innately predisposed for theft and violence.

The incongruity however lies in the fact that Fernando desires and takes lovers from the very group he conceives as delinquent, yet the fact that he views them as untainted by heterosexuality absolves them in Fernando's eyes to a certain extent. Indeed, same-sex desire is not limited to narrator's relationship with the young *sicario* Alexis, but pervades within and throughout the affective attachments in the novel's social fabric and worldview. From Fernando's perspective, same-sex desire and love is not only central but the only saving grace and liberating action amongst the dark and oppressive forces of contemporary society. Because of this, Fernando's lovers are in part saved from his own judgement but are only ephemerally

saved from death as both Alexis and Wilmar are killed thus fulfilling the ultimate prospect of vulnerability and precarity.

While Fernando consistently signals the state as being responsible, *La Virgen de los Sicarios* exhibits how violence is carried out through the state and beyond the state's immediate dominion via classed, gendered, and sexual relations of power; carried out as performative public violent acts of an urban drug war where the interests at stake are mainly resource extraction and exchange of materiality, for example cocaine and the bodies of subjects themselves. Biopower is exercised on the entire population but impacts specific bodies through racialized and sexualized discourses of normativity that create social difference. As biopolitical warfare, the "war on drugs" has evinced how the commodification of bodies is manifested by gender and sexual violence enacted not only on women and gender non-conforming feminine subjects but also on masculine presenting *sicarios*. The hypermasculine male bodies of the *sicarios* are placed at the center of social cleansing both as enactors and receptors of biopolitical extermination as they cannot overcome their own status as disposable subjects. The bodies of young poor and racialized Colombian men, however, already represent an expendable figure far before becoming the more easily disregarded *sicario* serving the facilitation of drug trade flows. As Ashley M. Caja notes in her analysis on the disposability of men in *La virgen de los sicarios*, the novel intends to disassociate heterosexuality from masculinity but in the end still frames masculinity as violent. She writes,

Dominant masculinity is associated with the heterosexual male, and the narrator's rejection of reproduction, and women as its symbols, is an effort to reclaim masculinity for homosexual men. Alexis is a hypermasculine character, yet Fernando lauds him as perfect since he has never had contact with a

woman... Nonetheless, the novel's understanding of masculinity is problematic, as performing masculinity is synonymous with performing violence (Caja 49).

As instruments of narco violence, the *sicarios*' hypermasculinity is illustrated as the one of the main causes. This would be in reference to the fact that none of the *sicarios* perform a stereotypical femininity associated with homosexuality. As Caja expresses despite the novel's effort to break with the exclusive association between heterosexuality and masculinity, the link between the performance of masculinity and the performance of violence perpetuates a narrow possibility for masculine expression. Moreover, this fact derails the novel from executing a convincing critique of power and subversion of social order within neoliberalism. The problem with this type of violent masculinity however reaches beyond the performance of power and aggression but expressly because it resorts to essentializing lower-class masculinity as inherently violent rather than as a result of historical and political processes. Despite exhibiting an outward performance of masculine empowerment, the *sicarios* presented within the novel are subject to their precarity in relation to white upper-class masculinity. Hence, the disposability of *sicarios*, Alexis and Wilmar is manifested at the exact moment of their relation to Fernando. After Alexis is killed, Fernando tries to find his killer but eventually gives up once he meets Wilmar not knowing that he is in fact Alexis' killer. While Fernando is with Wilmar he mistakenly refers to him as Alexis and describes him in the same ways he described Alexis, "¿De qué le estaría dando gracias Alexis, perdón, Wilmar a la Virgen?" (Vallejo 137) Fernando's confusion exemplifies how the *sicario*'s expendability is not exclusive to the turnover relation of a lover but also corresponds to Wilmar's position in a sequence of one an identical profile after another—a young assassin and devout follower of La Virgen Maria Auxiliadora at the margins of Colombian society.

The novel exalts homosexuality while criticizing notions of marriage and normative nuclear family but does so specifically and deliberately once again at the expense of women. He comments, “Es de poca caridad, ya sé, exhibir la dicha propia ante la desgracia ajena, contarle historias de amor libre a quien vive prisionero, encerrado, casado, con mujer gorda y propia y cinco hijos comiendo, jodiendo, y viendo televisión” (Vallejo 33). While this portrayal of homosexuality destabilizes sexual norms, the narrator’s perspective on Colombian society and homosexuality are deployed as a result of assumptions and actions stemming from his position as part of the elite. Expressly, the novel only truly normalizes Fernando’s homosexuality while the *sicarios* are portrayed as hypersexualized and hypermasculine bodies for sexual and *narco* consumption. The *sicarios*’ queerness is contingent on their non-normative sexual expression against racial and class norms as it is on their status as hitmen within el narco and its oppositional relationship with legal trades sanctioned by dominant neoliberal market discourse.

As a direct vector of social organization both as category and as a catalyst for action, sexual desire drives the demand and conditions for social interactions. For instance, *La Virgen*’s plot is driven by the narrator’s simultaneous desire for Alexis and his desire to eliminate things and people that irritate him. Likewise, Alexis works to please Fernando who has now in many respects become his benefactor. I use the word “works” to connote the labor within Alexis and the narrator’s relationship. Fernando meets Alexis at a party at his old friend José Antonio’s apartment which also functions as a brothel where older men like the narrator can pay for the sexual services of younger poor men. The narrator jokes about the scandalized comments that others might say if they found out he was sleeping with alleged criminals, “Y que se ganaba José Antonio con ese entrar y salir de muchachos, de criminales, por su casa? ¿Que le robaran? ¿Que lo mataran? ¿O es que acaso era su apartamento un burdel? Dios libre y guarde” (Vallejo 14).

This statement exemplifies Fernando's general sarcastic tone and the way in which the novel banks on dominant presumptions of social deviance tied to poverty, masculinity, and sexuality. However, there is no certainty on the extent of the narrator's belief in these suppositions. After their sexual encounter in the apartment's butterfly room, the narrator hands Alexis money which Alexis accepts, "Toma' le dije cuando terminamos y le dí un billete. Lo recibió, se lo guardó y siguió vistiéndose" (Vallejo 22). At this moment Alexis and Fernando culminate the money for sex exchange which subsequently conditions their relationship. As a *sicario* and as a sex worker, Alexis embodies the labor and economic confluence of the drug trade, sex, and sexuality. While sexual pleasure involved in the exchange remains an important consideration, this exchange is nevertheless conditioned by specific power relations to the extent that the *sicarios'* sexual and economic desire is intractable since the narrative is never told from their perspective. Alexis and later Wilmar hold an unfixed place as lover, servant, and employee. As free labor that circulates to where work is available, the *sicarios* do the "dirty" work of "social cleansing" including killing each other that is encouraged by the wealthy and facilitated by the state.

As the one who dictates which groups get to live and which do not, Fernando is also revealed as immune to death and as personifying "qualified" life that cannot be sacrificed within the social and political realm of Colombia depicted by the novel. Fernando thus holds a position of immunity and impunity that will never be accessible to neither Alexis or Wilmar. Evidently, as a gay wealthy white Colombian antioqueño, Fernando retains his privilege at every moment of his interactions with the *sicarios* Alexis and Wilmar who are already marked as deviants and expendable. Although Medellín has transitioned into a regime of neoliberal governance, many of the same power relations are intact. In this manner, Fernando is legible as embodying the negotiation that occurred during the early periods of the drug trade in Colombia between the

drug cartels and the oligarchical families of Colombia that refused to lose control. At the same time the dominant discourse never ceased to harbor a double-standard disdain for drug traffickers and cartel leaders. This double-standard held by the deep-rooted elite of course never stemmed from a real belief in the drug trade as morally wrong but from an interest to restrict access to wealth and a refusal to accept drug traffickers as legitimate capitalists. This notion echoes David Harvey's outlining of primitive accumulation, where he notes that not only early capitalism itself was fundamental in the development of European colonialism but specifically how the elite refused to give up ground in the distribution of local wealth. Now in the present frame of neocolonialism, the elite still refuse to lose any status (Harvey, *Accumulation* 69). This refusal is of course manifested in many ways. The drug war in Colombia functions as an extension of the power and reach of the neoliberal and neocolonial regime that uses and discards what it considers to be waste to maintain a specific order in society. The *sicarios* are consumable both as real material bodies and as characters of fiction, because as marginal surplus subjects they are already perceived as "criminals" and therefore viewed as deserving to be objects of sexual desire and "dirty" laborers of violence that can and must be killed. In this way, narco-narratives such as *La virgen de los sicarios* allow the audience to distance itself from the reality of contemporary politics by placing the blame on *el narco* and the groups that are always already suspect, "los/as siempre sospechosos/as."

Indeed, there are some who are always profiled as suspect even within an already highly incriminated space like *el narco*, a hellish place reserved for the subaltern, judged and prosecuted in many ways by the "divine law" of Mexican neoliberal society. *El infierno* comes as the third and final installment to Estrada's film trilogy which aims critiques at the corruption of one of Mexico's foundational political parties in *La ley de Herodes* (1999) as well as neoliberalism and

globalization in *Un mundo maravilloso* (2006). In this same vein, *El infierno* directed by Mexican Luis Estrada was released in 2010 which also marked the 200-year anniversary of Mexico's independence. Sponsored by government funds dedicated to the promotion of films related to the bicentennial celebration, the film's front cover art flaunts a sign that reads "2010: nada que celebrar" as a critique to the neoliberal and neocolonial condition of Mexican society even after two centuries of reaching independence from Spanish colonial rule. *El infierno* with its dark political satire, as expected caused controversy within Mexico as it directly tackled violence, government corruption, and the complicity of law enforcement in Mexico's narco society. *Televisa* who had also agreed to back *El infierno* unsurprisingly eventually pulled its financial and promotional support for the film (*Noticine Chávez*). *Televisa's* backtracking was attributable to the film's ability to cause intense pressure on an already frail political system in the months prior to the 2012 notorious election of Enrique Peña Nieto as president—successor to Felipe Calderon who in 2006 made the decision to ignite the intensification of the ongoing "war on drugs".³⁶ Due to its relative recent release, *El infierno* has considerably less scholarly criticism than for example, Fernando Vallejo's novel. Criticism has often stressed *El infierno's* satirical representation of cliché Mexican narco-masculinity, political corruption, and raw depiction of violence of the drug war where beheadings have become common practice (Biron 186) (Price 271). As noted earlier, biopolitics has in recent years become an important critical lens for read social transformations and dynamics. Hector A. Reyes-Zaga contends that their

³⁶ On July 7th 2012, exactly a week after the presidential elections, the world witnessed as thousands took to the streets throughout Mexico in a mass mobilization to denounce what they believed to be a fraudulent election. After a count and subsequent recount, the Federal Electoral Institute (el IFE) sustained that Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) was the "president elect." Protests to Peña Nieto continue even as recent as Mexico's 2016 independence celebration.

significance is due to role of on narco-narratives and narco films such as *El infierno* in denouncing neoliberal structures that shape the public sphere. He writes,

Although this type of literature might appear opportunistic in the current Mexican political and social situation and as promoting social dissolution and advocating crime, it not only contributes to the reproduction of the current violent Mexican imaginary but also appears to question the neoliberal political and economic decentralization that makes human beings disposable—an assault that appears to be aimed not only at traditionally unprotected social conglomerates (indigenous people, drug addicts, prostitutes, street children, etc.) but also at nearly all of society (Reyes-Zaga 190).

Reyes-Zaga recognizes that narco narratives and narco culture as a whole are subject to a diverse range of readings and interpretations including their understanding as a reproduction of a violent imaginary of Mexico, yet he also acknowledges that these works interrogate biopolitics as forces that transform human life into superfluous life. Whereas Reyes-Zaga makes the effort to specify some of the groups most vulnerable to the corrosion of life's value, he leaves out queer and trans populations and also defaults to the claim that it affects all human life. This argument nevertheless loses a situated specificity through its inability to merge individual and more common exercises of biopolitics. In other words, the discursive placeholder for the vulnerability or precarity of relational hierarchies, does not minimize or erase the historical vulnerability of some, especially when we consider that depictions show certain non-normative bodies are killed with impunity more often than others.

While *El infierno* and *La virgen de los sicarios* indeed signal to different historical moments regarding narco violence, the U.S. sponsored “war on drugs” and the popularity of

narco culture, both pursue the visibility of homosexuality and the publicity of sexuality in general, consistent with hegemonic contemporary social politics. As Laura G. Gutiérrez states in *Performing Mexicanidad* “sexual permissiveness in cultural representation and in public discourse has found a sort of ally in neoliberalism in the context of Mexico” (7). Whereas *La virgen de los sicarios* presents male homosexuality as the norm, *El infierno* portrays homosexuality as common but as an aberration on par with the perceived “moral decadence” brought on by the drug trade and the current stage of U.S.-Mexico “war on drugs.” After all, as Reyes-Zaga also suggests, *El infierno* is itself a representation of the “social decadence of a country run by crime and drug trafficking” (189).

After living in the United States for over 20 years, the protagonist Benny (Damián Alcázar) is deported back to the small fictional town of San Miguel Arcángel and finds himself in the middle of a brutal war between Don José Reyes (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) and his twin brother Francisco Reyes (Ernesto Gómez Cruz). The film suggests that Benny (Damián Alcázar) doesn't consider crossing back into the US due to immigration policies that have not only increased deportations but have also carried out the militarization of the border resulting in harsher border crossing routes in desolate terrain. As Roxanne Lynn Doty poignantly notes of the U.S.-Mexico border, there is a profound anxiety attached to the power of human mobility to consistently perforate porous borders that are presumed as impermeable (599). Doty relates:

Nowhere is this more powerfully exemplified as in the US border control strategy of 'prevention through deterrence', which was put into practice in the 1990s and which remains the cornerstone of US border enforcement policy. The result in too many cases has not been deterrence but tragedy and a skyrocketing death rate of migrants crossing the US-Mexico border in increasingly dangerous and remote

areas (Doty 599).

However, despite the film's critique of the U.S. immigration policies, U.S.-Mexico political-economic relations and the Mexican government's role in the drug trade---the portrayal of the effects of drug war is at the limits of reifying hegemonic discourses of racialized and classed-based notions of gender and sexuality. Present in key scenes throughout the film, these discourses unwittingly or not reaffirm complicit dominant narratives of deviance and criminality that aim to categorize which subjects are condemned and which subjects can be murdered without legal consequences.

By making reference to the *plaza* disputes between Mexican rival cartels and the destabilization of major cartel leadership, *El Infierno* exhibits how the escalation of the Reyes rivalry and the business partnership between Benny (Damián Alcázar) and El Cochiloco (Joaquín Cosío) helps to create a visualization of the narcotraficante as working-class, hyper-masculine, and violent.³⁷ The film's narrative and imagery in this way reproduce essentialist characteristics of hyper-masculinity as inseparable from *narco*-identity, ultimately conflating the two. For instance, Benny (Damián Alcázar) and El Cochiloco (Joaquín Cosío) just as the rest of Don José's (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) original group are showed wearing extravagant kitschy cowboy attire associated with ranch and rural terrain but also traditionally linked to a worker aesthetic. In addition, Benny (Damián Alcázar) and El Cochiloco (Joaquín Cosío) are portrayed as the stereotypical misogynist and chauvinistic womanizers---a portrayal that becomes exhausted when conceived as an exclusive effect of narco-masculinity and sexuality. In this same vein, women are unsurprisingly barely in the film only to appear as the archetypal prostitute and

³⁷ The "Plaza" or territory disputes for control of traffic routes and markets were said to be the cause in the rise of violence due to the confrontations between rival cartels (Ravelo 30).

cantina waitress viewed as sexually promiscuous within Mexican cinema. This may in fact nevertheless signal an attempt to emulate the sexual objectification of women and feminine presenting subjects within *el narco*. This representation as a critique, however, is too simplistic, as it does not go beyond mirroring and into a rumination on a contrary image that would question and offer alternative embodiments of feminine presenting groups.

Expressly, repetitive representations of drug-traffickers as working class elides the multiplicity of groups implicated in the drug trade either directly or indirectly. The waging of war on drugs continues through the reproduction of the Mexican drug-trafficker stereotype which doubly inscribes groups identified as such as sexually aberrant due to the central role that sexual discourses of deviance play within notions of “working-class criminality”. That is, the interest in maintaining focus on narco trafficking by private and public sector groups is fueled by investments in biopolitics. The drug war kills two birds with one stone, a figure of speech appropriate to describe how the war not only assuages the decried “negative” effects of illicit drugs by right-wing groups and at the same time conducts social cleansing by killing those suspected and condemned of being the cause of those negative effects. Meanwhile, drugs continue to flow across the hemisphere’s borders, reaping economic gains for the appropriate parties accordingly.

As the war between the two Reyes brothers continues to escalate, Don José Reyes (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) hires three more hit men: el sargento, El sardo, and sargento’s nephew. El sargento and the two other hit men represent the *zetas*, Mexican ex-military who joined the ranks of the Mexican drug cartels. At one point, El sargento refers to himself as “Benito Juárez” and to Benny (Damián Alcázar) as el “güero” which placed together position him as the “indio” within the political and historical racial dichotomies between southern and northern Mexico. Crucially,

within the centralist view of Mexican identity and politics, both the north and the south occupy geopolitical peripheries. Yet within this division, the importance of the Mexican south constructed as indigenous falters to that of the industrialized north which is aided by its perceived “whiteness” and proximity to the United States. Contrary to its alleged purpose, mestizo discourse that traditionally dominated racial politics within Mexico has not only excluded indigenous groups and interests but does so against the backdrop of genocide.³⁸

Additionally, El sargento’s representation exposes the popular discourses about the racial and geographic makeup of the Mexican military assumed to be integrated for the most part by Mexicans from southern states. El sargento is not interested in personal relationships and his involvement in drug trade is presented as materialistic and exclusively financial. El sargento and his business partner El sardo perform the most expressive violent acts that his “norteño” counterparts are hesitant to carry out, signaling to narratives about the *Zetas* being one of the sources for the escalation of violence.³⁹ However, El sargento’s and El sardo’s performance of violence cannot simply be read under these prescriptive terms but rather must be situated as a manifestation of the distinct historical disregard and economic exploitation by the Mexican state toward indigenous populations. As ex-military, both El sargento and El sardo display how the

³⁸ Racial discourses of “whitening” in cities like Guadalajara although considered part of the western region but often labeled as part of the north demonstrates conscious efforts to neglect the heterogeneous makeup of all Mexican regions. Diana Michele Negrín writes that “*Blanquismo* sought for the genetic and cultural whitening of the population through racial miscegenation” (Negrín 100). In reality, *blanquismo* just as the efforts to contain indigenous groups to certain locations through forced removal, sought to eliminate non-european whites from the Mexican political sphere.

³⁹ For instance, Patrick Corcoran argues that the *Zetas* were a major factor in the increased violence in city of Torreon, Coahuila beginning in 2007. He writes, “The reason for the increase in violence is simple: the arrival of the *Zetas* in 2007, after years of the local drug trade having been controlled by more subdued capos from Sinaloa.

Mexican military actively recruits from the most impoverished regions of Mexico looking to fill their ranks with disenfranchised individuals deemed less valuable citizens than the rest, which is in many ways similar to the profiled recruitment of the United States military.⁴⁰ On a level, the film's explicit depiction of this aspect of the drug war signals to the militarization of both sides through the formation of the *Zetas* cartel and the Mexican military's effort to combat drug-trafficking. *El infierno*, however also relates deeper assumptions about the groups more likely to enlist in the military as violent savages willing to carry out killings, torture, and decapitations without hesitation. Thus, *El sargento* and *El sardo* express a military exercise of racialized masculinity alongside and against their economic and political circumstances with its conflicts and contradictions.

As typical of hyper-masculine and homosocial spaces, homophobia is unsurprisingly present and exercised through Mexican idioms and double-meaning language. This homophobic speech throughout the film is coupled with homosexual subjectivities exemplified on one account through the character of J.R./Jose Reyes Junior (Mauricio Isaac) who is Don José Reyes' (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) closeted gay son. I take J.R.'s name to be both a play on the word *joto* and also as symbolizing the *narco* juniors, who are the second-generation narco-dealers who enjoy the economic benefits of the drug empires their parents have built. Alejandro Gutiérrez from *Proceso* writes that there is nothing that overtly distinguishes these juniors from other

⁴⁰ Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* editor Marco Antonio Gómez Lovera writes that as of 2015 the salary for an infantry soldier was \$10,309.89 Mexican pesos roughly equivalent to \$520 a month in 2016 (*Excelsior* Gómez Lovera). These numbers suggest that most military recruits are disproportionately from the Mexican working class at least as a result of their enlistment. Given that Mexico's poor classes have been historically made up overwhelmingly by the country's indigenous and mestizo population it isn't unfounded to note that middle and upper class white Mexicans are a minority within the Mexican military.

juniors, that is, the children of Mexican wealthy business moguls and politicians. A. Gutiérrez describes:

Nada parece diferenciarlos de otros juniors: estudian en el extranjero o en costosas instituciones privadas, conducen autos de lujo y visten ropa de marca; viajan y gastan el dinero a manos llenas... Atrapados en la esfera de las empresas criminales de sus progenitores, muchos de estos jóvenes se ven involucrados, de una u otra manera, en tareas propias de la organización, como controlar y dirigir operaciones de trasiego, comercialización, lavado de dinero y, sobre todo, de encubrimiento (Gutiérrez, *Proceso* 22).

J.R.'s (Mauricio Isaac) character embodies this second generation wealthy narco-trafficker as well as the extent of visibility of non-normative sexuality within Mexican narco culture. *El infierno* does not counter-position homosexuality against masculinity, instead homosexuality is presented within these narco-masculinities as an added level of sexual aberration. That is, *El infierno* renders narco-sexualities, both heterosexuality and in particular homosexuality, as deviant and criminal peripheral sexualities that correspond to the narcotraficante's illicit lifestyle. The film thus manifests the notion of homosexuality as permissible within narco culture as long as traditional gender performance is not compromised in public. In other words, as long as male narcos relatively perform "masculine" traits they will not be shunned as homosexual if their non-normative desires or acts are not made public. For instance, in one scene J.R. (Mauricio Isaac) performs a perceived masculine gender role in front of his father Don José (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) by being assertive and enacting power over his employees. Don José (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) is pleased with his son's performance and tells him *Así me gusta hijo pórtese como todo un hombresito*. [*That's the way I like it, act like a real man.*] Masculine performance remains

privileged regardless of private sexual practices where non-normative sexuality becomes a problem if and only when it is exposed as public through explicit sexual acts. In their essay “Sex in Public” Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner state that “There Is Nothing More Public Than Privacy” to connote how intimacy is always a matter of public treatment. They add,

Heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy. We want to argue here that although the intimate relations of private personhood appear to be the realm of sexuality itself, allowing "sex in public" to appear like matter out of place, intimacy is itself publicly mediated, in several senses (Berlant and Warner 553).

That is, the heteronormativity of the public sphere mediates intimacy beyond sexual acts to frame a view of non-heterosexual behavior as non-normative and outside of social membership. This only differs slightly from the strict patrolling of gender and sexual norms within the scope of the Mexican public sphere. Liberal human rights discourses that call for anti-discrimination and openness of “coming out” overlook the risk of violence against non-normative bodies that express non-normative genders and sexualities that certain visibility entails within particular spaces. These illuminations emphasize the constant within narco-narratives where queer subjects are for the most part represented as external threats to national cultural cohesiveness. These observations further highlight the double bind of the formation of queer subjectivity and queer subjects. For instance, Judith Butler’s description of the term ‘subjectivation’ is helpful in the sense that she explicates this term as carrying a paradox; “assujettissement denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency” (83). Within the *narco*-sphere, on the one hand not being “out” conjectures subjection to the normative

discourses and the psychological violence of the US-Mexico drug war as well as society as a whole. On the other, being “out” as a queer subject, produces an increased vulnerability not only to normative liberal rights discourse but also to an added level of violence. That is to say, queer subjectivity within the *narco*-sphere constitutes fluid sensibilities, queerness is negotiated and navigated stealth, which gives rise to the possibility for the expression of self not as a queer subject in the western traditional sense but through an abundance of queer modes of being.

During the pivotal scene of the film *J.R.* (Mauricio Isaac), *La Muñeca* (Alfonso Figueroa) and El Sargento’s nephew are inside a motel room having sex when they are caught off their guard and are killed by the rival cartel. Aside from *J.R.* (Mauricio Isaac) who can be read as a gay character, it is unclear if the other two involved willfully consented to sexual relations. This ambiguity signals to their non-normative relational queerness and racialized queerness. As for Sargento’s nephew, he remains nameless in the film and is in a subaltern relation to Jota R’s position within the drug cartel and Mexican society at large. At this point, El Cochiloco (Joaquín Cosío) makes a homosexual innuendo “nos agarraron comiendo camote” which translates to [They caught us eating sweet potato] but “camote” here acts as a phallic reference in order to explain why they were ambushed so easily. This moment serves as a demonstration of how non-normative sexualities are vulnerable to being “criminalized” and subsequently disciplined and punished as culprits. Their deaths confirm to some extent the ‘kill the gay trope’ of visual culture in Television and film. This visualization desensitizes the audience’s ability to sympathize against this type of violence because it has repeated to point of normalization. Just as the *sicario* in *La virgen de los sicarios*, the *narcos* personified in *El infierno* are killable without sacrifice and because they are viewed as criminals expelled from normative society, there is no real legal

implication. That is, based on their profile as *narcos*, their killing is socially acceptable---an acceptance that acts as the basis and precondition to legality.

As news of the men's murder is revealed, the most visible outrage comes through Jose Reyes' reaction to his son's death, the narco junior's life in this sense is deemed as more valuable than that of the other men. J.R.'s queerness is projected differently from the others because of his economic status and rank within the cartel. His gendered performance is consciously masculine only in the presence of his father. Yet his character is read as queer precisely because of a stereotypical view of feminine gender expression associated with homosexuality that is only confirmed through the scene where he is killed in the hotel room. The other men involved have a less significant role in the film but are interpellated as queer subjects within the same scene. The scene functions as the staging of simultaneous existence as queer and violent nonexistence by way of exposure. The segment of the film only confirms why queer subjectivities as such endure as nuanced modes that work alongside and against violent mechanisms and discourses of governmentality. Strategic negotiation of sexual and gendered embodiments according to different contexts, can be subtle and imperceptible to many readings, often escaping interpretation of a queer *being* that often implies other methods of subjection. The production of queer subjectivity and the limits of a queer subject within the *narco*-sphere are notions that must be contextualized within the specific neocolonial conditions and political strategies that have created the *narco*-sphere in the first place.

The exposure of homosexual acts within the narco-masculine imaginary of the film along with the emphasis on the excessive sexual practices of El Cochiloco (Joaquín Cosío) and Benny (Damián Alcázar) constructs their sexualities as socially deviant but commonplace nonetheless within the presumed immorality and decadence, characteristic of the *narco*-society. Hence,

adding historical and cultural conceptions of sexually deviant behavior to what is already perceived as a chaotic narco-society. *El Infierno* thus reaffirms the homophobia and misogyny of dominant discourses by placing and subjugating particular homosexual narratives within an already narrow view of narco-trafficking cast as criminal. Alternatively, the film's ethos would be outstanding if homosexuality was emitted from a different positionality. For instance, envisioning Damián Alcázar's character Benny as gay, while not detached from a violent masculinity entails another set of implications of queerness and social power in relation to the overall framing of the world the film captures as the foreclosure of queer life. Nevertheless, the *narcotraficante* as a persona embodies the "chaos" and "absurdity" perceived as being created by political corruption and neoliberalism which positions the narco-society through stereotypes of violence and sexually aberrant practices as the most evident site of social decay.

Conclusion

While *El Infierno* represents many elements of *narcotráfico* that facilitate a critique of neoliberal political economic structures just as Fernando in *La Virgen* is critical of globalized mainstream culture; the discourses that emerge indicate deeper implications of elitist national and neocolonial discourses of racial, class, gender and sexual hierarchies as well as the encouragement of employing measures to maintain them. This last bit certainly echoes, Carlos Monsiváis' persuasive observation on the elitist and dominant conceptions of el narco,

Ante el auge relativo del narco en parte del campesinado, la pregunta inevitable es: ¿tienen opciones? Al reiterarse la conducta se prueba que no, a menos que se acepte la perversidad intrínseca de los campesinos, hipótesis hecha posible por la manía particularmente clasista y racista de la case gobernante (*Hipotesis 25*).

Monsiváis' affirmation on the elitist and classist take on el narco speaks on multiple levels. On the one hand, the ruling and dominant class hypocritically denies their involvement in *el narco* either directly or indirectly and on the other, they self-righteously reject that el narco is a result of the historically profound social asymmetries they themselves have contrived. As I've noted, the reproduction of different modes of 'being' as deviant and non-normative participates in the greater production of difference as inherently criminally and perverse therefore exposing the strategic dehumanizing of groups as an organizing grammar of contemporary western politics beyond the immediacy of el narco.

CONCLUSION

The present study has examined how relations of power within narco cultural production are an outcome and at the same time reciprocally constitutive of a set of long-standing and emergent socio-economic and cultural politics. Because of the economic and political discourse of drug trafficking, the cultural link between the United States, Colombia, and Mexico has also expanded—resulting in a shared public sphere. Narco cultural texts in this sense, are dynamic agents that manifest and transmit discourses constructed and deployed to uphold a network of hierarchies. Through my conceptualization of the *narco*-sphere and a queer critique, I determine a more insightful way to read social difference within western hemispheric cultural politics. In other words, by interrogating narco cultural production through an analysis of race and class and by building on notions of the public sphere and subjectivity through critical interventions that index gender and sexuality—this study contributes to current debates on the biopolitics of the drug war by emphasizing its significance as a project put in effect to ensure economic profit and perpetuation of the structures necessary to do so.

Chapter 1: Queering the Hemispheric Narco-sphere

This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for *Reading the Narcosphere: A Queer Critique of Hemispheric Narco Cultural Production*. Chapter 1 is crucial to understanding how economic structures and social discourses are mutually integral and thus are inextricable from each other. I show this by outlining how Jürgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere is further developed by the critical interrogations of Nancy Fraser and Lauren Berlant to evince the collapsing of public and private affairs into one realm, the public sphere as we know it today. The narco-sphere is the point where that public sphere becomes mediated specifically by the political interests behind the drug trade and war on drugs and thus where sexual and gender

discourses are mediated and continuously transformed by race and class. Cultural production about the drug trade and the war on drugs has been an avenue to simultaneously profit from the representation of a commodity, that is now consumable but also an avenue for social criticism and commentary. As cultural texts, narco visual and literary narratives are not exempt from reproducing relations of power, but are active participants of the journalistic and popular media as well as part of cultural and official state discourse that forms and circulates within the narco-sphere. However, the formation of the narco-sphere effectively distorts a clear conception of the causes of the drug trade and drug violence as inherent disposition from racialized and classed bodies. Drawing from theories on sexuality and biopower, I show that the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class and their relationship to narco cultural production must be read through a lens that can bear witness to their intractability instead of attempting to simplify their totality.

I show that the theoretical racial and class underpinnings of a queer of color fill the gaps afforded by historically US centric notions of queer theory and the queer erasures of subaltern and postcolonial studies. Rather than emphasizing a theoretic impasse, the merging of queerness and subalternity brings out the implicit possibilities of both. A queer critique thus advances a reading of the hemispheric narco-sphere by deciphering crucial social relations that have determined the dynamics of persisting colonial hierarchies without overlooking the evolving modes of society's organization by registering power relations within the neoliberal and post-national moment. My deployment of queerness is both contextual and comparative as it expounds the limits of current narco cultural studies to comprehend narco culture and complicate its place within society. I examine queer and use queer to examine the narco-sphere, not only as 'subject' but through non-normative embodiments, practices, and 'ways of being' that escape concrete interpretation and decoding. In sum, my intervention in the field of Latin American

cultural studies and specifically Latin American narco cultural studies is that the narco-sphere, which has emerged from the drug war's discursive dominance— has overshadowed factors that led to their emergence in the first place. My second major contribution is that a queer subaltern critique provides the analytical lens to recognize that while intending to critique neoliberalism and corruption as factors that have led to the drug war, explicit representations of gender and sexuality in these texts knowingly or not reaffirm repressive and ideological institutions and reify assumptions that correspond to racial and social hierarchies in the Americas.

Chapter 2: Femicide at the Limits of the War on Drugs

In Chapter 2, I emphasize how gender and sexual violence within narco cultural texts should not be viewed as exceptional occurrences, but rather as integral to society's order, where violent events or instances (including el narco) are points of escalation in the deployment and circulation of power driven by private and public state interests. A queer analysis here complements feminist approaches to examining the implications of gender violence along the border and its specific connection to the drug trade. This section of the dissertation highlights films and texts such as Lourdes Portillo's documentary *Señorita Extraviada* and Jorge Franco's *Rosario Tijeras* to bare labor, violence, femicide, and el narco as connected through an intricate and intimate link that cannot be understated or simplified. By reading gender and sexual violence alongside el narco, I extricate misunderstandings and breakdown generalizations that dictate their relationship as causal. As we can see in both texts, gender and sexual violence are deeply immersed within a set of assumptions that often remain unexamined. For example, I question an institution often deemed as a safe-haven, by destabilizing the fixed essentialisms and assumptions of "the family" as an ideal heteronormative aspiration and as the guardian of moral codes within narratives of

violence and on the other by locating how these assumptions negate that it can be a place and source for injury. The delineations of the timelines exhibited by these narco cultural text serve as an exercise that traces sexual violence against women and the ways in which it has been historically facilitated by the repressive and ideological apparatuses of capitalism like the police, patriarchy, and the family even before the advent and manifestation of the drug trade and its effects. However, these conditions are undoubtedly aggravated by the higher economic stakes of the drug trade. Not one factor is responsible for the escalation of conflict and violence but more accurately explained through multiple circumstances owing to among other things the divestment from small-scale agriculture across the globe and the patriarchal organization of industrial labor. That is, while the drug trade and war on drugs have indeed transformed social relations, they do not operate in a vacuum—which is contrary to claims by official state discourses in Mexico, Colombia, and the U.S. Rendering these distinctions visible and the way in which they work together and often against each other is to actively disarm the narcosphere’s hegemonic power over the unchallenged cultivating and eventual disregard and disappearance of life as labor not deemed as qualified.

Chapter 3 Narco-Criminality and Sexual Publicity

In the third and final chapter, I describe how Fernando Vallejo’s *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (Our Lady of the Assassins) and Luis Estrada’s *El Infierno* (Hell) envisage homosexuality as pivotal to conceptions of the drug trade and the war on drugs. While the insinuations to sexual acts between men indeed figures significantly in these texts, I prove that the ways in which they choose to do so are influenced by racial and class-based nuances. I establish how these cultural texts once unpacked as products of the hemispheric narco-sphere reveal incongruities in their critiques of the ‘war on drugs’ and neoliberalism through exercises

that further concretize political institutions and discourses complicit with the structures they strive to undo. For example, Vallejo's novel *La Virgen de los Sicarios* exhibits the nostalgia for a time before the drug cartels penetrated Colombia's social fabric yet revels and indulges in its benefits. The deeply rooted elitist and patriarchal convictions of Colombia are manifested exquisitely by Vallejo's *novel*—where the rich classes represented by Fernando, disregard women and consume the sexual and violent labor of the poor (represented by Alexis and Wilmar) even if these relationships may be considered in some instances as antagonistic to the nation's heteronormative collective identity. While Fernando's conception of poverty and the popular classes cannot be detached from his individual psyche it is also a product of his privilege in the context of Colombia's racial and class politics. Fernando must be read as a product of a structure that intends to dismiss the Colombian elite's visibility and complicity in social and cultural processes. This systemic element not only functions through direct economic pursuits and political channels such as a long history of land expropriation, mass rural exodus and urbanization but through cultural discourses of innate racial and gendered hierarchies that justify social categories of life.

This chapter ends with an examination of Luis Estrada's *El Infierno* which frames poor and racialized populations of Mexico as sexually aberrant on the one hand to emphasize the moral decadence of the drug trade and on the other, with the incursion of the *zetas*, to signal them as culprits responsible for the violent escalation of the drug trade. I reveal how *El Infierno* renders narco-sexualities, both heterosexuality and homosexuality, as deviant peripheral sexualities that correspond to the criminality of narcotrafficker. The publicity of sexual acts between men within the narco-masculine imaginary of the film, adds to historical and cultural conceptions of sexually aberrant behavior to what is already perceived by many as a chaotic

narco-society. Yet, the perceived disarray exhibited by the film is in fact a product of organized relations. Ultimately, *el Infierno* repeats the homophobia and misogyny of dominant discourses by subjugating queer subjectivities within an already constricted outlook of narcotrafficking as illegitimate. I conclude by calling attention to the *narcos* personified in *El Infierno* as killable without sacrifice. Because they are viewed as rightfully expelled from society, there is no real legal implication, which further permits the war on drugs to go unhindered. That is, based on their profile as *narcos*, their killing is deemed as socially righteous, where this moral approval pre-exists any civil legality. Just as the elite structures of power need the “war on drugs” to assure its self-preservation, the war on drugs needs the narco-sphere to function and justify its existence.

Limitations and Further Research

This study is both urgent and powerfully relevant in view of the critical events unfolding within today’s society. The governing elite in the United States, Mexico, and Colombia revel in a myriad of political jargon and divert attention away from the hypocrisy of negotiating trade deals while simultaneously condemning the building of a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border in Mexico’s case. Similarly, the Colombian government has requested more aid from the US to support a peace deal between the state and FARC compromising of their own interests by ensuring that some of that aid would be used to fulfill the mitigation of cocaine production. It has never been more clear, that policies that dictate everyday life across the hemisphere are a result of the discursive rhetoric set in to play within this shared public sphere.

While this study advances many investigative threads and contributes to the fields of Queer Latino/a/x and Latin American Cultural Studies, given its scope it also harbors and encounters limitations. The unanswered questions of this work bring forth strands of inquiry to

follow and develop as opportunities for future studies. The most notable consideration overlooked is gender and sexual violence and the subjection that targets trans as gender non-conforming individuals as they relate to drug culture, war on drugs, and the narco-sphere. In many ways, this inattention on my part is due to the absence of documentation prompted by the neglect of trans groups and gender-non conforming and to the scarce representation within narco cultural texts. This raises the question of whether it becomes a key point of inflection for the narco-sphere and the way it functions or if it continues through the same configuration? Future research in this regard must examine how trans subjectivities are interconnected and interpellated by the narco-sphere.

Secondly, considering hemispheric outlook toward the drug war, how can we integrate other territories with a similar trajectory and relationship to the drug trade on a global scale? With the global character of the drug trade and hispanism, the Philippines undoubtedly comes to mind with its legacies of Spanish and US imperialism. How might a queer reading of the narco-sphere be transformed in the Philippines with a different but similar political and cultural landscape? The third and final major limitation of this study is the theoretical deadlock of reading queerness as discursive relation when there is a concrete motive or intention. More precisely, can this understanding and deployment of queerness be a method to interpret self-narratives? What are the theoretical underpinnings of self-representation and their place within the narco-sphere? How can a queer subaltern lens elucidate its specificities? Research that expounds on this notion can examine the emergence and significance of counter publics within the hemispheric *narco* sphere. A project that can deal with the ways in which cultural production (performance art, visual art, literature, and film) has confronted and contested the socioeconomic interests behind drug politics as a dominant narrative of the public sphere.

As I've mentioned, the "war on drugs" has simultaneously reified and functioned under assumptions of racialized and gendered notions of class and sexuality in the depiction of subjects as non-normative and criminal on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border—the material but porous barrier of boundless substance flows that at once is intended to securitize and regularize human entry. In view of the narcosphere, narco-culture has flourished and often inadvertently aided in inscribing certain groups as criminally "deviant" and therefore as expendable, however counter-publics have also emerged as ways to contest the bearings of violence and social power within narco politics. While the drug trade and its effects extend beyond the United States and Mexico, what would a study of the work of Mexican and U.S. artists through the inclusion of self-narratives and self-representations look like? How might these artistic works be viewed as constructing pockets of resistance through counter-narratives and counter-conducts within a U.S.-Mexico political imaginary problematize hegemonic narco discourses of being and experience in the interplay with gender and sexuality as the grammar of contemporary western politics? If artistic expressions not only question the consensus on what is normal or moral, can they more importantly undo the very idea of normativity and morality in their specifically racial and classed associations to drug culture? This research can thus make a significant intervention in scholarship on the drug war and the present importance of cultural expressions that create alternative spaces and alternative actions by offering thresholds for interrogation of power and violence vis-à-vis contemporary political structures.

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