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Narcoaesthetics in Colombia, Mexico, and the United States

Death Narco, Narco Nations, Border States, Narcochingadazo?

by
Miguel L. Rojas-Sotelo

The production of the visual artists Juan Obando (Colombia), José Ignacio García (United States–Mexico), and the Narcochingadazo collective (United States–Mexico–Colombia) under the umbrella of what they call “narcoaesthetics” is linked to contemporary democratic processes in Colombia and Mexico and the implementation of branding techniques aimed at offsetting these countries’ bad image due to the drug issue. From a decolonizing reading of their work a definition of “narcoculture” emerges that, along with other cultural forms, complements an understanding of the ways in which the narco phenomenon is reshaping the region after the consolidation of the late phase of modernity.

La obra de los artistas visuales Juan Obando (Colombia), José Ignacio García (México–Estados Unidos) y la colectiva Narcochingadazo (Estados Unidos–México–Colombia) pertenece a la categoría de lo que ellos llaman la “narcoestética” y está vinculada a procesos democráticos contemporáneos en Colombia y México, al igual que a la aplicación de técnicas destinadas a contrarrestar la mala imagen de estos países en el tema de las drogas. Una perspectiva decolonizadora nos brinda una definición de “narcocultura” que, junto con otras formas culturales, ayuda a entender las maneras en que el fenómeno del narco está remodelando a la región después de la consolidación de la última fase de la modernidad.

Keywords: Juan Obando, José Ignacio García, Narcochingadazo, Colombia, Mexico

In an attempt to inform a definition of “narcoculture” from a visual arts perspective, this article examines the production of a group of contemporary visual artists working on themes related to the drug trade in relation to the consolidation of the democratic process and nation-branding techniques in contemporary Colombia and Mexico during the period 1990–2010. The work of Juan Obando (Colombia), José Ignacio García (United States–Mexico), and the Narcochingadazo collective (United States–Mexico–Colombia) revolves around tensions between an isolated practice of postconceptual, relational, and/or socially engaged art and one resulting from the particular socioeconomic contexts in which they live and work. “Narcoaesthetics” is the term used by these practitioners for “the visual expression of the drug trade” (Obando),

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“an all-American creation” (García), and “the aesthesis of the sublime/addiction” (Narcochingadazo). These definitions call attention to the debates regarding decolonizing aesthetics (Arriarán and Hernández, 2011; Rojas-Sotelo and Ferrera-Balanquet, 2011), and they must be approached not only literally but also visually; they problematize the production of culture linked to the drug issue from an empirical perspective. Allowing space for their voices and images is a formal decision that will resonate across the pages of this text. If aesthetics, in the Kantian canon, is the study of forms (the logic, metric, and structure of visual languages) and/or expressions of the sublime (abstract beauty), then narcoaesthetics is both the objective study of practices related to the drug issue and the way it produces moments of sublimation. In an effort to decolonize aesthetics, the reading of the works discussed in this article will focus not on static objects but on dynamic events-actions. The aim is to bring “aesthesis”—the senses and their effects—into the discussion rather than adopting a purely formal approach, thus introducing subjectivity to the practice and reception of the artworks (Mignolo, 2010; Palermo, 2009).

Instead of speaking of drug trafficking, I will speak of the “drug issue” as something that is desired and consumed but, paradoxically, banned and that reproduces the structures of the plantation system and the commodification of endemic species to satisfy First World markets. A neocolonial policy on the botanical riches of the Americas is currently framed by free-trade agreements and military programs such as Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative, connecting the drug issue to the long colonial tradition of market control over the products of the South. Looking at it from a cyclical perspective obscures the responsibility of the consumers, evidencing an extension of the colonial matrix of power that is exacerbated by the globalization of economies and the consumption of popular culture around the globe.

Material culture around the drug issue is widely produced and consumed in the form of novels, films, TV series, popular music, and the visual arts. This production denotes an actualization of the cultural base and the values the region is known for. The continent is facing the emergence of addict nation(s), narco nation(s) with drug borders, a narco-economy, and a narco-politics that have contributed to a narcoculture that, after more than 40 years of the so-called War on Drugs, is present throughout the hemisphere.¹

DEATH NARCO/NEW LORDS: CHANGING IMAGINARIES FOR NEW ICONS

The work of the Colombian visual artist Juan Obando is media-supported and propaganda-oriented. Using radio, video, online actions, active live performances, sound, prints, and visuals, he raises radical political and social questions. On one hand, his work is shaped by Colombia’s recent history of cultural exchange and processes of acculturation. On the other hand, he is driven by cultural resistance to develop event-actions in which symbols, slogans, and media products embrace the mestizo and hybrid character of Colombian popular culture.

Obando (2011) argues that his work focuses on the aesthetics of cultural decolonization. “It aims at exposing and questioning the role of cultural consumption

Figure 1. *Dead Druglords III*, live performance in the Boots Contemporary Art Space, 2009, featuring Juan Obando as Johnny Medejan and Esteban García as Snebtor.

within the so-called global economy, while defying preconceptions about (inter) national identities.” This is a decolonizing practice that embraces endogenous cultural formations that, having been erased, are now being reinscribed through interaction with the colonial matrix of power. Narcoaesthetics, in Obando’s case, is a by-product of the late phase of colonialism present in the form of a global trade that has established a space of subjectification among some sectors in the South.

A materialization of narcoculture takes place in Obando’s collective performance piece *Dead Druglords* (Figure 1). It is a nightlong action that resembles a rave in which DJs, live mix-music, visuals, a piñata, and active participation by the audience are the tools. Actually, the term “narcoculture” was coined by the media and the cultural elite during the height of the drug wars in Colombia (the late 1980s to mid-1990s) to describe the cultural practices of the lower-class/newly rich drug lords.² The drug business arose from a lower-middle-class background to a position of power through consumption. Narcoaesthetics has been adopted as part of the national imaginary via popular culture, with both resistance and assistance from the cultural elite (Rincón, 2009).

This is evident in recent films and TV series, many adapted from novels and/or printed testimonials such as Barbet Schroeder’s *La Virgen de los sicarios*, Víctor Gaviria’s *Sumas y restas*, Felipe Aljure’s *El Colombian Dream*, and Emilio Maillé’s *Rosario Tijera* and in recent TV series and (narco)telenovelas such as *El cartel de los sapos*, *El capo*, *Las muñecas de la mafia*, and *Pablo: El patron del mal*. Moving from a perspective of the clash of classes to the complicity of many sectors of the society, these audiovisual products function as cultural markers, indicating a normalization and acceptance of the phenomenon among all sectors of society. Current productions are derived from earlier ones that also migrated from print books to the screen, such as Juan Gossaín’s

La mala hierba and Gustavo Álvarez Gardeazábal's *El divino*, in which the culture of excess of the drug trade (marijuana and later cocaine) became part of the narrative of the country (as other drugs did in the early 1900s case of rubber exploitation in the jungles of Putumayo, as exposed in José Eustasio Rivera's 1924 novel *La vorágine*).

Emerging from the so-called subculture of the trade, as presented by Alonso Salazar's *No nacimos pa'semilla*, at first these narratives found some resistance from sectors of the economic and cultural elite, but recently these elites have been capitalizing on the issue. Narcotelenovelas, narcoseries, narcomusic, narcoarchitecture, and cosmetic surgery (an entire industry has boomed in the region in the past two and a half decades) are being produced and consumed openly in Colombia and are being remade and exported for Latino/a audiences in the South and the North (Cabañas, 2011). These expressions are similar to the ones presented in the gang, mafia, and crime movies and TV series widely consumed in the North since the genre was created in the 1950s. Obando comments that for many decades "Colombia was exposed to the spectacular practices of the international drug trade" (2011: 2). The country experienced a violent aesthetics of excess and a taste for tacky neoclassicism—baroque and rococo styles consumed in a paroxysm of the eclectic—that was postmodern at its core but also decolonizing in its actions, originating in precarious, marginal contexts but gradually taking center stage.

Dead Druglords is a phantasmagoric reminder that, through the use of sound, video, sculpture, and performance, memories of a recent past can be revisited. It opens with the entrance of *los mágicos*³ to take center stage in a sort of ritual, turning on the sound system and "commanding the audience to follow them into a state of loudness, extravagance, and audiovisual narco-tropical decadence" (Obando, 2011: 3). Involving a mix of popular and techno music called mashing (reminiscent of hybridization and mestizaje), the ritualistic event establishes a tension between nationalism and acculturation, illustrating the complex relationships proposed in Obando's notion of narcoaesthetics. The piece works via interaction; the experience is shared and charged with meaning, seeking to make evident a contemporary issue of American identity (South vs. North) via participation and catharsis. Interaction here is unidirectional but intensely engaging. Amplifying the imaginary of the magicians invites everyone to the banquet of the global economy. The garments of the protagonists (narco-dresses) signify the triumph of the marginal over the system.

In 1989, *Forbes* estimated Pablo Escobar to be the seventh-richest man in the world; in 2012 Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the Mexican drug lord, was 1,153 on the same list (but 55 among the most powerful) while the Mexican media mogul Carlos Slim was number 1. When the margins are too close to the centers, a war is unleashed. The visible heads of drug trade organizations have been persecuted inside and outside of Colombia for the past two and a half decades (see Rojas-Sotelo, 2010). Local enforcement and international agencies are intent on confronting and defeating them, in many cases compromising their own mission. After decades of policies of control, Colombia continues at the top (with Peru now) as producer and exporter of cocaine. The multibillion-dollar trade enters every space of the national and local socioeconomic system. The culture of the trade is materialized along the way. Individuals and criminal

organizations rise and fall. Dead magicians become part of a pantheon of anti-heroes that is a source of urban legends that transform local cultural practices. "The 'Dead Druglords' are always ready to expose new audiences to their narcotic ensemble. As leaders in the business of pleasure, the duo's mission is to export themselves to the entire world. Back from the dead, they will know no frontier, they will obey no law, and they will put more bodies on the dance floor than the war on drugs has put in the body bags" (Obando, 2011: 4).

NARCO NATIONS/DRUG BORDERS/BORDER STATES: BRANDING THE NARCO NATION

Branding is the application of marketing techniques to a specific product, product line, or brand (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000: 1–6). Nation branding is the application of such marketing techniques to the advancement of a country. Juan Obando's work involves such techniques but is affected by the local news and the impact of the national imaginary on a discourse of national unity. The image of a nation-state "and the successful transference of this image to its exports is just as important as what they actually produce and sell" (True, 2006: 74). As Obando (2011: 7) explains,

In 2005 the Colombian government created "Colombia es pasión," a country brand that uses millions of taxpayer dollars to create, promote, and distribute a tourist-friendly image of Colombia via video campaigns, popular music, consumer products, and strategic alliances between Colombia and U.S. corporations. It soon became the propaganda front for the highly corrupt right-wing government of Colombia and the most oppressive logo in the history of the country.

In fact, the government of Colombia has invested large amounts of money to be featured as a new tourist and investment destination in some of the most respected newspapers and magazines in the West. The cover of *BusinessWeek* for May 28, 2007, asked "What's the Most Extreme Emerging Market on Earth?" and in an article entitled "An Improbable Journey from Crime Capital to Investment Hot Spot: Can This Boom Last?" Roben Farzad identified the terrain for capital investment in Colombia. (The article started with "You going there to get some kilos?")

The *New York Times* has featured Colombia as a safe, affordable, and sound destination (national parks, cities, festivals, the coffee region, etc.) several times in the past decade. On February 12, 2006, its travel section contained "The Coffee Trail" and "Bogotá Is Not Just for the Brave Anymore." In March 10, 2009, there was a real estate article entitled "For Sale in . . . Colombia." In early 2010 readers of the *Times* were asked to choose destinations in an interactive feature called "Tell Us the Best Places to Go in 2010," and Colombia was ranked second. On January 7, 2010, in an article entitled "31 Places to Go," Colombia was number 26. On July 27, 2010, the *New York Times's* "Frugal Traveler," Seth Kugel, published "Old Friends, White Water, and Roasted Ants in Colombia." Other news outlets such as *El País* (Spain), the *Daily Telegraph* (UK), and the *Global Post* were also targeted by the country's branding agents and published

propaganda about it. What is interesting is that all these articles begin by acknowledging Colombia's violent past and the advances in security that it offers today. According to Obando (2011: 8),

Although this brand seems to be targeting First World tourists, its real function has been to create national pride while wearing sombreros and white shirts with the brand's logo. "Colombia es pasión" is marketed as a unique value that only Colombians possess, while the national geography is presented not only as a "gift from God" but as a common construction for which Colombians must take credit and that they must defend by all means necessary. Ironically, Colombia's most valuable natural areas are now owned by international corporations and military controlled by American troops.

The development of branding has polarized the country, making reconciliation impossible. The participation of the military and the security apparatus (which has been involved in serious cases of extrajudicial executions, human right abuses, phone tapping, intimidation, extortion, corruption, etc.) has been key in positioning the country's image. Colombia's long history of violence has not reached the state of total degradation via a military dictatorship, and, as Obando says, "this oppressive process of branding has created a social situation in which people feel a thorough unidirectional hatred" (10). It makes the military solution the only one possible for the leftist drug-and-terrorist militias and everything associated with them (human rights defenders, union leaders, indigenous leaders, independent journalist, relatives of victims, leftist intellectuals, etc.). In this narco nation, exclusion is not enough; disagreement is also antipatriotic.

DEMOCRATIZING A NARCO NATION

At the height of the drug wars in Colombia, a social revolution was also taking place. After the assassination of three presidential candidates in 1989, a student movement forced a vote to change the outdated constitution. Many saw an opportunity to capitalize on dissatisfaction with corrupt politicians, certain factions of the armed left, and the magicians. A new constitution was drafted and approved in 1991, replacing the conservative one signed in 1886 after 13 civil conflicts following Colombian independence in 1810. The biggest change was the recognition of Colombia as a multiethnic and pluricultural society (taking away the monopoly of the Catholic Church as the spiritual engine of the nation) and decentralization of public administration, giving more autonomy to the regions versus the urban centers. During the drafting there was demobilization and the surrender of two extreme factions of the armed left—the M-19 and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (Popular Army of Liberation—EPL), and the drug lords stopped their narco-terror campaign when they received a guarantee that they would not be extradited to face justice in the United States.

Thanks to the new constitution, by 1995 a draft of a new "general law of culture" was also in preparation. The draft was taken under the protection of a group of politicians from the Caribbean coast (well known for their corruption,

Figure 2. Juan Obando, *Tropikopf* (left) and *Tropical Insignia* (right), 2009.

right-wing alliances, drug trafficking, and leverage in the Senate), and in 1996 under the narco-mandate of Ernesto Samper (1994–1998)—accused of having been elected with money from the Cali cartel—the law was passed. With it, the country not only deconstructed the monolithic notion of high versus low culture but also gave a central role to cultural products coming from the margins of the nation—allowing narcoculture to be recognized and established rather than stigmatized and rejected. The new law gave special attention to the Caribbean in the definition of national identity. Since then, vallenato (a Caribbean rhythm) has become the national music and the *sombrero vueltia'o* (a hat worn by peasants and cattle ranchers of the northern coast, the birthplace of the most vicious paramilitary units and the cradle of drug trafficking) has become a popular national symbol, replacing the Juan Valdez logo created by a marketing agency in New York City 50 years ago.

Obando's work deals with this identity in formation. His *Tropical Insignia* and *Tropikopf* (Figure 2) summarize the centrality of what he calls a Caribbean/Nazi ideology that seems to rule contemporary politics and culture in the country. His images use the famous hat along with the condor, the national bird and a symbol of the Andes. On one hand, the discourse celebrates cheap nationalism via the inscription of mestizo crafts derived from indigenous weaving into the national imaginary; on the other, it targets the most vulnerable segments of the population. Both themes were part of the two presidential terms of Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010), who, being from the interior of the country, Antioquia, had the full support of the politicians, cattle ranchers, and agro-industrialists of the Caribbean coast.

Obando's (*new*) *Druglord Cartel* (Figure 3) presents one of the latest aspects of the drug issue in Colombia—deterritorialization. For the past decade and a half (1995–2010) local paramilitary/political drug lords have implemented a "land reform" from below. Today, privileged landowners (3 percent of the population) own over 70 percent of the arable land while 57 percent of farmers barely survive on just 2.8 percent of the land (Iyyer, 2009: 37–38). An estimated 4.5 million Colombians (10 percent of the population) have been internally displaced (Aber, 2011; Albuja and Ceballos, 2010: 34; Moloney, 2011). A cash crop is replacing the diversity of the tropical jungle in the Pacific and Caribbean coastal regions. African (oil) palm has emerged in the political arena as the crop of the future: the oil is easy to harvest and transport and is being marketed as a "clean biofuel." The so-called pacification of the country under Uribe, with

Figure 3. Juan Obando, *(new) Druglord Cartel*, 2010.

his *mano firme, corazón grande* (strong fist, big heart) policies, has created a new monster, the so-called *bandas de crimen organizado* (organized mafias). Paramilitary squads were legalized under the protection of large segments of the Congress and the executive. The indictment of almost 60 percent of the Congress for links with the paramilitary forces (Valencia, 2007; Verdad Abierta, 2010) took the nation by storm. It is mostly representatives of the Caribbean and Pacific states who have been prosecuted. African oil palm is being planted on the traditional lands of the Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups of the Pacific in Chocó and especially the Atrato River basin and in large parts of the great western plains, another hot spot of paramilitaries. The communities displaced now live in the poorest parts of urban centers in Barrancabermeja, Medellín, and Bogotá, while the mafias have democratized/legalized their business, from drug trafficking to illegal mining, controlling not only land but also the informal economies of urban centers (extortion of small business, monopolization of street markets, and the operation of parallel public transit). Considered the success story of the continent according to U.S. State Department standards, the new mafias are diversifying their portfolios in a multilayered criminal organization that is now moving into global markets.

The “Colombia es pasión” branding campaign, which was designed by David Lightle, an international consultant in national branding (and the creator

of campaigns for Taiwan, New Zealand, and Australia), was aimed at sending a message of a postconflict and post-drug-war moment in the country. A narco-economy had infused the tourist, agro-industrial, and financial sectors, producing a narcoaesthetics that was being widely produced and consumed. Marca País (Branding Colombia) has replaced the old campaign and is now a vice-presidential office with its own budget.⁴ Meanwhile, Obando's own branding campaign addresses the negative spaces of the official narrative of a country in transformation.

NARCO NATION 2.0: THE DRUG BORDERS OF AMERICA

José Ignacio García (personal communication, 2011) argues that "America's addiction has created a 'Narco Culture.' California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas are the Narco States of America. These are states of the southern U.S. border. The Narco Phenomenon is now an urban culture, part Mexican, part American, and part Drug Cartels. . . . Simply stated, it is a Modern-Day Wild West." García's work embodies life along the southern border. His detailed and meticulously crafted visuals encapsulate the power struggle across the narco states and their border towns on both sides of the divide. His *Narco Nation* collection (Figure 4) is a visual narrative of a contact zone in which the nuances of the complex social and cultural issues of narcoculture are in tension. In his branding campaign García tackles, on one hand, migration, law enforcement, and free trade and, on the other, cultural hybridization, popular material culture, and transnational cultural consumption. California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas are border territories with a culture of their own. "You don't have to work hard to get what you want. You can be a vulture, a snake, or a coyote. It's dirty money, but it's consistent work," argues García. The same can be said of the states of Baja California, Sinaloa, Durango, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas in Mexico. These areas are under the control of various cartels fighting to establish their hegemony in the production and distribution of drugs across Mexico.

With the election of Vicente Fox on July 2, 2002, Mexico supposedly took a significant step toward democracy. The defeat of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party—PRI), which had ruled Mexico since 1929, was a product of a long struggle undertaken by several sectors of Mexican society. Political parties, social and cultural movements, and civil society at large were key factors in achieving democratic change. The role of the 1999 movie *La ley de Herodes* by the Mexican director Luis Estrada has also been considered as a trigger of the democratic change (Velazco, 2005: 67). After about a decade of democratic transition, Mexico is a democracy threatened by organized crime, endemic corruption, and the return of the old party. Culturally, it has moved to a more globalized space in which its products (from food, popular music, media and communications, and film to literature) flow across the continent and do well in the Latino markets of the North. However, the most marketable cultural products have as a source the recent increase in violence related to the drug issue, in the form of *narcocorridos*, *narcochurros*, *narcotelenovelas*, and films. In the visual arts an emergent scholarly production points

Figure 4. José Ignacio García, *Narco Nation* (top), *Narco State* (Texas), *Narco State* (California), *Narco State* (Arizona) (center), *Narco Roach Flag* (bottom).

to the centrality of the drug issue in the hemisphere (Barajas, 2011; E-misférica, 2011; Rojas-Sotelo, 2007; Rueda Fajardo, 2008; Wario, 2004).⁵

García's work can be compared to that of filmmaker Luis Estrada, who with his 2010 film *El infierno* gave the figure of the drug dealer a public image in a very blunt, raw, and compelling way. While García works in the real context of the border on a visual culture connected to its landscape, in which vultures, coyotes, rattlesnakes, roadrunners, highways, and images from both sides (cowboys and *charros*, Aztec and Christian imaginaries, revolutionary and right-wing ideology, rural and urban settings) are collapsed. Estrada takes on the failures of the state in addressing some of the systemic problems of the past, now actualized in the drug wars. The film recreates (as did his celebrated *La ley de Herodes*) in the allegorical space of the nation the sociocultural landscape of the drug trade: an overexposed landscape in which sand and sky merge, towns lost in postrevolutionary time live alongside contemporary media and

Figure 5. José Ignacio García, *Kingpin*, 2010 (left) and Damián Alcázar as Benny in Estrada's *El infierno* (right).

consumerist culture, old and new Mexico collide in the politics of the local, where the big bosses are also the political, social, and cultural icons, and localism and neoliberalism clash with extended notions of nation and state. In the film, the "kings," replacing the political lords of the PRI, are the new entrepreneurs of the Fox/Calderón days. In García's work *Santa Muerte*, *Santo Narco*, and *Narco-Claus* are embodiments of enduring institutions (the Church, the state, the North) that have reshaped cultural traditions in the new territory.

In Estrada's film, the celebration of the country's bicentennial and the centennial of the Mexican Revolution is the pretext for a black comedy in which satire and direct criticism underline the failed project of the nation. Whereas in García's collection a set of new symbols emerged in form of flags, shields, iconographic images of new saints, and a pantheon of heroes of an imagined border nation, in Estrada's film the narrative takes the hero (Benny) through a transformation in which his subaltern subjectivity (coming after 20 years working as a humble undocumented worker in the North) is reshaped via his best childhood friend, the philosopher El Cochiloco. El Cochi says that they live in the best of all possible worlds and simultaneously in hell. Benny's transformation into a narco's dream-image restores his masculinity in a hypermasculine realm in which drinking, doing drugs, being successful with women, and spending without limit are the norm. Following his brother's example, Benny becomes the archetype of the drug dealer (Figure 5). Wearing expensive boots, bright belts, colorful shirts, jewelry, sunglasses, and a hat, Benny becomes a real *bandido* (bandit).

Estrada's film also recognizes aesthetically the B-movie industry of *narco-churros*, also called narco-cinema and/or experimental Mexinema, in which

cheap films about the lives of narcos are made almost on an industrial scale along the border for the immigrant market in the North (Loyola and Martin, 2010). In the film, Estrada brings in one of his most celebrated stars, Mario Almada, who has been in more than 300 films and at least 1,000 B movies, to play El Texano. Aesthetically, narcochurros are informed by gangster, mafia, and action films but produced on a fraction of the budget and in series. They feature real locations, nonactors, and, in many cases, real stories, some derived from *narcocorridos*. Narcocorridos (popular ballads about the epic stories of narcos) are central to both García's and Estrada's work. García's comments on each piece function as bicultural and bilingual lyrics: "Santo Claus—abominable snowman—urban legend"; "worth your weight in gold—Santa Muerte, black woman magic"; "\$anto Narco, selling your soul . . . crossing the line." Here the words "reinscribe globalization from the margins" and the margins into the global (Cabañas, 2008: 520). In Estrada's film, the presence of street musicians, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, playing throughout the film is a symbolic link between sight and sound.

According to Estrada, the film is a contemporary version of Diego Rivera's 1946–1947 mural *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*, in which people and institutions are represented in a summary of the history of Mexico in three parts (Méndez, 2010). At the center La Catrina (La Santa Muerte) connects the 150 portraits, past and present. In a sense, *El infierno* brings together the traditions of the Mexican political graphic cartoons of José Guadalupe Posada and satire in Mexican muralist and modern art. At the same time, the cinematic is present in each of García's pieces, which, confined to poster-like (and poster-sized) visuals, mix image and text, including many untold stories of the trade throughout the border states. Each piece refers to the long tradition of Mexican graphic design connected to the revolutionary and postrevolutionary era of the 1920s and 1930s. It comments on the history of Mexican cinema and its ties to Hollywood, from the Golden Age of the 1950s to this century's New Mexican Global Cinema.

García (personal communication, 2011) offers the following comments on *El infierno*:

In the early 1980s Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, a native of Sinaloa, Mexico, was a drug lord known as "El Padrino" (Spanish for "The Godfather"). He started off in a small way by being a smuggler, carrying marijuana and opium into the United States, and was the first Mexican drug capo to link up with Pablo Escobar and the Colombian cocaine cartels. Later El Padrino decided to divide up the trade among the family in Tijuana, Sonora, Juarez, and the Gulf of Mexico—all U.S. border corridors. Today the world has changed. New cartels have emerged, and all of them are fighting for limited territory with new rules of the game. After 40 years, the drug flow continues relentlessly from Mexico. The price of drugs is falling. . . . But the drug dealers live like kings, and among their people they have respect and power. They are folk heroes, too—part Pablo Escobar, part Robin Hood, and part Billy the Kid. America has turned a duplicitous eye to decades of drug use and abuse. Everyone knows how bad it is, but no one seems to care. Thousands of addicted souls are left numb and restless. Countless lives have been destroyed—all victims of an apathetic world. But if America is not provided with the drugs it wants, it will knock on other doors. So the narcos continue to supply them. Defeat after defeat has not slowed the narcos or caused them to retreat.

Estrada is the most important filmmaker working from and about Mexico today.⁶ His films are part of a genre informed by and stylistically close to the work of the Coen brothers, Akira Kurosawa, Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, and Robert Rodríguez. García's work is informed by traditional printmaking, local B movies, global cinema, and popular culture, mediated by the use of computer graphics and the geographic context of the border.

NARCOCHINGADAZO: BEYOND THE NARCO NATION

The drug issue has hemispheric implications; communities in the diaspora face not only stigmatization but also the trauma of its experience. The Narcochingadazo collective⁷ critically engages with the contextual reality of Latin America from the perspective of the diaspora. Under the Mérida Declaration of 2009 and the general call to act "against the oligarchies and their official celebrations," the collective has produced a series of event-actions in connection with the national celebrations of independence and the revolution during 2010 and 2011 in the context of the drug wars. As material culture has changed as a result of the drug issue, resistance emerges in the form of aesthetic/political actions that the Narcochingadazo collective aims to amplify.

The Mérida Declaration recognized the courage and perseverance of acculturated Yucatec Maya adults in their journey toward becoming literate Maya-speakers.⁸ It emerged from a collective writing exercise of a literacy class and was read in Yucatec Maya, Spanish, and English on the local Maya-speaking radio station, Radio XEPET, using a female voice, Jasmín, as the voice of the Maya in Yucatán. A short video of three members of the class reading the declaration was produced and posted online as part of the Narcochingadazo project. The declaration has become the cornerstone of much of the work of the collective, always alert to the possibility of developing venues for the silenced voices of indigenous and Afro-descendants suffering the collateral damage of the drug wars, forced displacement (due to land disputes among cartels and developers), and historical marginalization. Exploration of the contents of the declaration reveals the subconscious of the participants in the exercise, a context in which coloniality, corruption, repression, and fear are identified as part of the drug issue's transformation of their territories and a collective will that connects times and spaces, histories, and geographies emerges (Rojas-Sotelo, 2013).

In November 2010, the Narcochingadazo collective produced an insert for a cultural publication in Colombia known as *Calle 14*. The poster-sized print was directed to the governments of Colombia and Mexico. Using public images taken from the presidential web sites of the two countries and news from media outlets, the poster anticipated "good news": the restitution of land to indigenous groups and displaced and migrant populations and the signing of a treaty legalizing the drug trade between Colombia and Mexico. The 2,500 copies printed were distributed as part of the events connected to decolonizing-aesthetics exhibitions and academic events in Bogotá and in Durham, North Carolina. An installation/altar was created in the Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá and later in Durham to celebrate the fulfillment of the promises. Finally, to mark the emergence of new territories, a group of flags

and a shield were produced that imagined new hemispheric nations, given that another history is possible.

The idea of linking intensely local urban art forms with conceptual and politicized global networks is not random. The goal is in part to help generate an international university of the street and the countryside, a university whose ways of making things public is not defined merely by peer-reviewed publications, a university whose art forms are less bound by the invisible class dividers that depoliticize campuses and artists on misleading premises of quality and autonomy. The Narcochingadazo collective positions itself against the habits of historical privilege afforded by race and class segregation.

The collective also works toward the legalization of migration, international work, and the drug trade across the hemisphere, at the very least attempting to give these social phenomena a more complex cultural voice. By organizing film festivals, academic events, curricular material, community workshops, exhibitions, and actions across the Americas, the collective is keeping a channel open. This does not mean that the collective identifies with the violence of drug bosses or the corrupt politicians above them—the “new capitalists” who brought neoliberalism to places like Colombia in the late 1980s. They want legalization because, beyond the recent war against terror, border control (control of population flows and labor markets) and the war against drugs (monopolization of the markets for illicit substances and weapons) are the two main post-cold-war ideological justifications used by the United States and its various allied national elites for oppressing Latin American and Latino/a people.⁹

CONCLUSION

Narcoaesthetics has moved from a peripheral sphere of cultural production to a central position that reflects the changing nature of culture in the Americas. A material culture related to the drug issue that presents a wide spectrum of products underlining the cultural routes of globalization has emerged. The trade has entered every area of national, regional, and local sociopolitical and economic life. A new pantheon of antiheroes is a source of new national narratives. Juan Obando, José Ignacio García, and the Narcochingadazo collective are some of the many visual artists working in this context.

Obando's event-actions are series of cathartic live acts, alternative music, free distribution of images and sounds, online video performance, commercial practices, media interventions via zines, posters, graphics, T-shirts, CDs, stickers, online forums, blogs, etc. García's *Narco Nation* collection and related work, videos, objects, shirts, and paraphernalia connect the dots between high and popular cultures along the border. His giclées offer access to a world that would otherwise be obscured by a culture of violence and corruption. The powerful commentary of visuals and text allows a double reading of the issue and opens the way for participation through empathy. The Narcochingadazo collective calls for utopian solutions that are achievable in the best of worlds. Some of them are even under consideration, among them legalization and a change of direction in the war on drugs and comprehensive migration reform. Others are starting to take effect, such as the restitution of lands to displaced people in certain parts of Colombia.

Narcoculture allows us to hear the voices of the wounded, such as that of the poet Javier Sicilia, leader of the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad. He calls across the anguished landscape of Mexico and Central America for justice and dignity for the hundreds of thousands of dead and disappeared in the past decade and those yet to come in this ongoing business of death. Meanwhile, nations are wasting great sums in developing exoticized and fictionalized branding campaigns to make more noise in the congested lines of the globalized media and try to counteract a reality that cannot be contained.

NOTES

1. President Richard Nixon first used the term "War on Drugs" on June 17, 1971.
2. The narcoculture was first described in an article by the Colombian journalist and writer Gustavo Álvarez Gardeazábal (1995), in which he wrote of a new revolution in Colombia comparable to the French, Russian, and Cuban revolutions that he called the "narco-revolution." Álvarez was indicted and sentenced to six years in prison during the late 1990s for money laundering while he was governor of the state of Valle del Cauca. He still writes and comments on national radio and TV about Colombian culture and politics.
3. *Mágico* is the Colombian term for drug lords, who create fortunes out of nothing.
4. See <http://marcapais.gov.co/>.
5. In the visual arts in Mexico, there is no strong tradition with regard to this issue. The exhibition entitled "Narcochic-narcochoc," curated by Marco Granados for the Musée International des Arts Modestes Sète (France) in 2003, explored the figure of Malverde, the patron saint of traffickers, and the relationship between the popular, political, and economic spheres in urban centers and the impact of the mobilization of rural communities. Among the participants were Teresa Margolles, Francisco Larios, Octavio Castellanos, Einar de la Torre, Jamex de la Torre, Luis Romero (Watchavalo), María Romero Salas, Alfredo Salazar, Eduardo Sarbia, and Jeanne Susplugas. The case of Colombia is different; although there are not many publications on art and drugs, there is a long tradition of work on art and politics and on art and violence.
6. Despite some criticism for being an intellectual elaboration of the deep crisis Mexico is facing, *El infierno* won 9 out of 14 nominations for the Mexican Film Awards and a Cuban award for the most relevant film of the year. The film was banned by many distributors and had to be released city-by-city, often in the presence of the director. It had a small theatrical run without success in the United States in 2012.
7. The Narcochingadazo collective consists of the visual artist and activist Pedro Lasch (Mexico) and me, and we work with artist collectives in Mexico, Haiti, Colombia, and the United States.
8. Yucatán has 1.2 million Maya-speakers, representing 59.5 percent of the state's population (INEGI, 2010). INDEMAYA, an organization that seeks to preserve the Maya language and culture, has launched a program for teaching the language and a web site (<http://www.indemaya.gob.mx>) for teaching it online. More formal classes have also been organized through education-at-a-distance programs at the University of Mérida (see the Mérida Declaration and the Narcochingazado insert at <http://www.1810-1910-2010.com/blog/declaracion-de-merida-en-maya-yucateco/>)
9. This section of the paper is a collaborative written exercise with Pedro Lasch.

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