

## Introduction

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Perhaps there aren't 271 neighborhoods in Medellín. Perhaps there are more, since this list does not include the cemeteries. It wouldn't be crazy to include them. For a while now the customs and practices in the cemeteries have changed so much, that now they are more like neighborhoods, or amusement parks; especially those where the low-income groups have their way, their effusive rituals contrasting dramatically with the sparingness, the subtle crying, the sunglasses, and the urge to rid themselves of their dead ones as fast as possible, that characterize the high-income groups.

—Ricardo Aricapa, *Así es Medellín*

It's a sunny day in Culiacán, but it doesn't look like it; the clouds are like lead, hot and painful, they rain down projectiles. They cover the *culichi* sky.

In barely a week and a half, the balance is about forty executions, among them ten local and federal agents, one of them decapitated, four journalists injured by people in uniform, and more than ten narco messages placed in different places around the city.

It is the war, terror. Psychosis adorning the spring *culichi* sky, devastating the streets, firing up corners, houses, stores, parks. Fear as a way of life: did you hear the shooting last night, one woman asks another, next to a group of kids that look like their grandchildren. They eat ice-cream at the ice-cream parlor.

—Javier Valdez Cárdenas, *Malayerba*

## Walking a Tightrope

This book is an analysis of narratives on the culture of narco trafficking set in Culiacán, Mexico, and Medellín, Colombia, published over the past twenty years.<sup>1</sup> These two cities have experienced severe violence as a result of the expansion of the traffic of illegal drugs, and they have also been vastly explored and represented in works of fiction. To write this book, I crossed the line that unites and separates the actual cities from the cities created in fiction, conducting interviews with writers, journalists, lawyers, cultural promoters, painters, chroniclers, photographers, activists, professors, university students, booksellers, readers, and other people connected to Medellín's and Culiacán's artistic and cultural scenes. This book is a literary and cultural analysis but it also tells stories about the people I met and their experiences as witnesses

and readers. Both *paisas* and *culichis* guided me in their hometowns and informed my observations and analyses.<sup>2</sup>

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 contexts. I decided to look at the concrete problems authors face when representing crime and violence, and when writing about collective fear and trauma. This is why I have focused on the works of writers from Culiacán and Medellín, two cities that occupy a privileged place in the emergence and development of the illegal drug trade within Latin America. Along these pages I trace some similarities between the works of *culichi* and *paisa* writers and the way they represent narco trafficking, but it is mainly in the differences of their approaches that the unique situation of each city as well as the original contribution of their works becomes apparent.

For *culichi* and *paisa* writers, the history of narco trafficking is first and foremost a *personal history*. The narcotics trade is the backdrop of one or various losses—many intimate ones—it is the cause of threats and even physical wounds. The anecdotes in their books are based on their own experiences, those of close friends and family, or those recounted secondhand by acquaintances. For these writers, violence is something more than the sound of bullets or the images of dead bodies that appear on television and in the local newspaper. Just as the writers' daily experiences are embedded within the culture of narco trafficking and its violence, so is the process of representing them.<sup>3</sup> An important part of this process is the impact their work has among their immediate readers: friends, acquaintances, family members, and colleagues, the people who inspired the characters in the novels and who every so often are their foremost critics.

To give an account of this process, I visited places and met people who inspired the characters of the works I studied. My analyses stem from a double perspective: one from the distance common to any anonymous reader; the second from someone haunted by her own experiences in the scenarios and the atmospheres described in the books previously read. As I wrote this book, I kept in mind the dialogues with the writers and with some of their friends, the exchange of ideas with *culichis* and *paisas* who recognize in these authors the local literary voices that gave me a deeper insight into the impact of narco trafficking and the difficulties of its representation. Those experiences made it clear to me that the so-called narco narratives could not be wholly understood

without knowing the writers' personal trajectories and the evolution of their work. Likewise, it would be hard to appreciate these representations without fully acknowledging the impact the narcotics trade has had within the cultural scenes of these cities.

Authors from Culiacán and Medellín write about violence and narco trafficking because these phenomena have defined life in their hometowns over the past decades. Their works either enhance or contest the rhetoric of easy stereotyping that traditionally stigmatizes Medellín and Culiacán as the bedrocks of narco trafficking. In either case, unfortunately, the writers' success (understood as greater visibility in the editorial market, higher number of sales, and so on) or lack thereof is more often than not linked to the way they have represented the phenomenon.

### **Reading the Narcotics Trade Worlds**

Within the Latin American cultural scene, it is not unusual that a political or social phenomenon propels the development of a literary genre, or that it motivates artistic manifestations. It may even become the foundation for certain cultural tendencies.<sup>4</sup> Such is the case with narco trafficking. When examining its impact in literature, the Mexican writer Jorge Volpi stated that "the 'narco literature' has become the new paradigm of Latin American literature (or at least Mexican and Colombian); where before there were dictators and guerrillas, now there are drug dealers and corrupt police; where before realism prevailed, a new hyper-realism has emerged, fascinated with portraying the uses and customs of these new antiheroes" ("Cruzar la frontera," 10).<sup>5</sup> What Volpi sees as a paradigm of literary production, some critics perceive instead as trends for commercial distribution. The critic Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola has studied extensively the way in which Latin American literature has entered into circuits of exchange of commercial and symbolic objects in international markets. By studying commercial tendencies at different historical moments, he shows how the strategies of global marketing have transformed Latin American art into a label. Such was the case for magic realism during the years of the boom and the urban realism or "realismo sucio" so popular recently.<sup>6</sup> In his analysis Herrero-Olaizola sheds light on the logic of Spanish-based publishing houses and explains the emergence and commercial success of these labels. Narco narratives could be considered one of them.

However accurate Volpi's and Herrero-Olaizola's perspectives are, narco trafficking cannot be conceived exclusively as either a paradigm of

production or as a label for easy marketing. It is necessary to go beyond these frameworks and explore the impact narco trafficking has on the production of literature in several regions of Latin America—especially in those areas that are most affected by its violence. It is also necessary to recognize that the phenomenon generates complex and diverse situations that vary from region to region, as do the language that names them and the way these situations are represented.

There is little doubt that the U.S. rhetoric on the war on drugs, the Mexican and Colombian official discourses, the governmental policies, the media coverage, and even the promotion carried out by the publishing industry give the impression that narco trafficking is a Manichean universe and that the violence is usually driven by criminals and is combated by security forces. Corruption would be the ingredient that broke the balance. But these realities are much more complicated and literature provides a window into the nuances within this world, by showing that the boundary between the good and the evil is anything but clear. Literature offers insight into local idiosyncrasies and morals as well as a broader point of view regarding the various activities linked to the narcotics trade, such as planting, harvesting, processing, trafficking, money laundering, and killing. In literature we learn that fear is felt not only toward the assassins but also toward the sinister figures that negotiate with the authorities. The different types of crimes related to narco trafficking become exemplary events through which we can explore at a local level the sociological and psychological aspect of a cultural universe.<sup>7</sup> In literature, crimes can also be ingenuous and liberating, and even the worst acts of violence can be described with humor. A serious exploration of *culichi* and *paisa* works calls into question some of the global myths about narco trafficking as well as our common assumptions regarding the marketing of those works and the impact this has in local cultural fields.

To understand literature in this broad sense does not mean that I read novels as historical documents of a presumed banality of evil, or that the narcos follow a historical path, or as the writer Juan Villoro stated, that some critics treat these characters with the “anthropological empathy of those who interpret crime as a form of tradition” (“La alfombra roja,” *El Malpensante*).<sup>8</sup> Rather, my reading is aimed at tackling what I consider a narrow understanding of the cultures of narco trafficking, showing that its development has altered the perception of certain practices that were previously—at least locally—not conceived of as crimes.

Through an examination of Medellín's and Culiacán's literary archives, I analyze discursive universes that offer alternative insights about the origins and development of illegal drug trafficking within labyrinths of local memories, stories of human dramas, and even the scars of traumatic experiences. Memory, in this case, is conceived of as a record of patterns of socialization shared by a group of people over time, which defines their collective identities (Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 130). As a discourse of memory, literature provides an alternative perspective on our ordinary perceptions of narco cultures and brings us closer to paisa and culichi realities, both as locations of violence and as imaginary places created in fiction.<sup>9</sup> Reading these works from this multilayered perspective leads me to describe how the demands of editorial policies affect and sometimes shape local cultural fields.

In Culiacán and Medellín I established dialogues with firsthand readers, often friends or acquaintances of the authors. We usually talked about the history of the drug trade and eventually about the way local authors have dealt with it. I realized that when I asked about a particular event linked with the narcos, many people answered borrowing their descriptions from the ones found in a given novel (i.e., *eso lo cuenta fulano en su novela*, so-and-so tells that in his novel), as people tended to remember not the events but how they were told. In other words, they remember not what they witnessed, but what they read, recognizing themselves in the words of others. This way of talking about the novels showed how much they follow, enjoy, and believe in the stories written by local authors. In this collective process of recognition and identification with the works, they render these authors legitimate. This legitimacy is eventually institutionalized (i.e., by publishing houses, reviews published in local newspapers or magazines, public readings) as instances and events that constitute the cultural field.

As Pierre Bourdieu has explained, what defines the cultural field is a particular form of (collective) belief concerning what constitutes a cultural (literary, artistic) work and its aesthetic and social value: "Cultural production distinguishes itself from the production of the most common objects in that it must produce not only the object in its materiality, but also the value of its object, that is the recognition of artistic legitimacy" (*The Field*, 164). Literary critics hardly ever look at the local constitution of this legitimacy in the local cultural field and miss an important element in the local reception of a book. Looking at the cultural

field, I believe, is especially important when dealing with contemporary works. Snapshots from my fieldwork illustrate this collective manifestation of recognition.

During my first visit to Medellín in 2009, I heard several rumors about the writer Fernando Vallejo's current visit to his hometown. Even though Vallejo has lived in Mexico for more than twenty years, many paisas consider him to be one of the best local writers. The rumor that Vallejo was hanging out in downtown Medellín produced smiles among many of the people I met. More than the rumors, what really caught my attention was the celebratory tone among those who shared and spread them. According to the people, what best characterizes Vallejo's style are his irreverence and bluntness—both considered typical characteristics of the paisa idiosyncrasy. In the subtle spread of rumors that waver between reality and imagination, I recognized the compelling presence of Vallejo in the local cultural scene. The prevalence of the rumors that showed the eminence of his presence certainly modified my views on his work, giving me a new grasp of the author's ability to articulate shared emotions through a language and sense of humor very unique and common to paisas.<sup>10</sup>

The same thing happened when I entered the restaurant La Mariposa Amarilla for a typical *norteño* breakfast in Culiacán with the writer Élmer Mendoza. The owner of the restaurant greeted us warmly. He shared with Mendoza a particular passion for literature. The name of the restaurant, the owner explained, was an allusion to *Cien años de soledad*. It was evident that Mendoza enjoyed a special consideration from our host, who defined himself as one of his followers, had read all of his books, and enjoyed his stories as well as the language of Mendoza's characters. Mendoza is considered the most prolific and versatile culichi writer; he is described as the best local author when it comes to narrating the intricacies and the local culture around the traffic of illegal drugs.

Back in Medellín, I had a similar experience with the people at Palinuro, the bookstore co-owned by the writer Héctor Abad Faciolince, where we met to talk about his work. Before meeting Abad, people spoke to me about him with affect and deference—feelings that had nothing to do with authority or social or economic hierarchy. Rather, it was admiration for his life and work. Abad's father had been killed by the paramilitary in the late 1980s, and he has written about this personal loss

both in fiction and in his autobiography. People who talked to me about Abad showed they were drawn to his stories, to the way he explores and represents his sorrow, his sadness, and the fact that he has survived those losses—these are things common to many paisas. When I told Héctor Abad that his bookstore Palinuro was exactly how I had imagined the bookstore La Cuña that appears in his novel *Angosta*, he replied that the bookstore existed first as an idea in the book and that the actual store Palinuro opened later, in 2004. I then realized that in these places, as Jorge Luis Borges would say, reality also imitates fiction.

Anecdotes such as these filled my notebook, providing additional elements to my reading.<sup>11</sup> As I got to know the environments where the novels were written, I realized that not only was I visiting the scenarios where the novels took place; I was also observing the broader social configurations that preceded the creative act, its dramas, its tragedies, and even its playful aspects. The drug trade may have generated realities suitable for writing fiction, but it does not make novels. Instead, each narrator tells, recreates, imagines, and describes events related to the traffic of illegal drugs and its characters in ways that are transformed by his imagination. In the end, they are writers because their versions of the events are easier to remember (and even to celebrate) in their literary form. Their books constitute works of collective catharsis with which local readers identify. These works could either be ironic and humorous or dramatic and realistic, but they become the most accepted description of a shared experience. These authors are recognized as such within the cultural universes they inhabit because they are the local storytellers.

Walter Benjamin has stated that experience shared via word of mouth is the source for the greatest storytellers. The best writers are those who follow closely the oral versions of the stories (“The Story Teller,” 84). For Benjamin, the weight of a good story is measured vis-à-vis the value of a shared experience. The mechanical reproduction of art leaves little room for storytellers because the devaluation of shared experience renders their voices obsolete. Obviously Benjamin’s concerns evolved during the European interwar period, when the experience of trauma and the clash between premodern and modern ways of production and its subsequent effects in the creation of art and culture demanded new ways of approaching cultural objects. Nonetheless, his nostalgic idea of the storyteller is a good starting point to understand the place some culichi and paisa writers occupy in the respective cul-

tural scenes in which they write. I argue that given the traumatic events they write about, they are the local storytellers par excellence and that their literature becomes a discourse of memory.

There is another reason why literature, conceived as a discourse of memory, is worthy of careful exploration. The widespread and at times extreme violence experienced in Culiacán and Medellín has created burdens that are often socially, culturally, and psychologically difficult to handle. Years ago when visiting Culiacán, Juan Villoro described that he was shocked by the indifference he felt among many *culichis* toward the violence that surrounds them: “That which hurts us sometimes obliges us to look away: ignominy stimulates principles of negation by which it can be overcome, making indignation convert itself bit by bit into indifference, an annoying but acceptable characteristic of custom” (Villoro, qtd. in the prologue in González, *Sinaloa, una sociedad demediada*, 19).<sup>12</sup> Artists—and writers especially—have an important role to play in communities that live under circumstances in which it is conspicuously difficult to deal with and process violence, in places where fear, trauma, and the harshness with which corruption works and the subsequent impunity of perpetrators predominates. Writers are able to conjure up this cruel reality and interpret it, conferring upon it new meanings, giving life to anonymous victims, and even adding humanity to the numbers used by the media to report casualties. Writers—and artists in general—may help communities process the effects of violence, providing clues for understanding the social decay and chaos that such violence unleashes. Their stories may be alternative versions of realities otherwise unbearable.

In this book I describe the universe that contains the analyzed works and yet exceeds them, seeking to understand the world of the authors, their intimate references, the institutions in which they work, the milieu of their local readers, the environment and the people who inspired their characters. “Literary works,” writes Pierre Bourdieu, “must be reinserted in the system of social relations which sustains them. This does not imply a rejection of aesthetic or formal properties, but rather an analysis based on their position in relation to the universe of possibilities of which they are a part” (*The Field*, 35). I do believe that by examining closely the local universes and analyzing the consecration of local storytellers (and describing the production of belief), I give a fair account of the unspoken ways in which these communities of readers,

intellectuals, artists, and others identify themselves with the narratives about the local expansion of the narcotics trade. This radical contextualization of cultural works has allowed me to conceive of literature as a window into the heterogeneous and complex universes that are affected by the traffic of illegal drugs, offering a broad view of its impact in Medellín and Culiacán.<sup>13</sup>

Literary critics know that visiting places known through fiction and speaking with authors does not necessarily improve our textual analyses. By establishing a relationship with local authors, I knew I could compromise my readings and ran the risk of writing too cautiously about their works. I feared I would write eulogies or simple corroborations of the events and anecdotes described in their works. Aware of the risks, I wrote this book walking the thin tightrope that unites and separates reality from fiction, assuming the challenge of finding a balance between the analyses of the aesthetic proposals of each work and an adequate consideration of the author's experiences within his cultural field.

The advantage of taking this risk is that by paying close attention to the cultural universe of the authors, this book offers new insight into the role of literary criticism and ethics as well as insights about the challenges of representing violence. In an article written in 2000, the critic Idelber Avelar offered a reading of Borges's "El etnógrafo" to establish what he thought was the real challenge of an ethical reading within Latin American literary criticism.<sup>14</sup> Avelar stated that the only way to talk about ethics within literary criticism is by acknowledging the specific national contexts where the works are produced, and he recognized that the best way of gaining such an understanding is through ethnographic research. Although his is a theoretical reflection on the limits of ethics in literary criticism and does not offer a methodology to accomplish such a task, I see my work in *Narrating Narcos* as a concrete example of Avelar's ideas. By reading these books within the context in which they are written and by including ethnographic observations, this book contributes to the debate on ethics.<sup>15</sup> Not only do I place the work of authors in their immediate environment, considering the impact the works have in the local societies, but I place the role of the critic closer to the society she is looking at. I do believe that as a reader of contemporary narratives, I have to understand the situations, the pressures, and the recognitions authors experience in their hometowns. An assessment of the legitimacy of the representation of violence, or lack thereof,

should be based on an understanding of local standards and political conditions as well as the immediate circumstances in which the work was produced.

It is important to recognize that although most of the writers I analyze here share with narcos a place of origin and write within a cultural environment directly affected and influenced by the codes imposed by the narcotics trade (i.e., the experience of violence, the firsthand knowledge of the place where a shooting took place, the local gossip about any of the events related to the narcos), they do not necessarily belong to the same semiotic universe. They may have different education, belong to a divergent social class, and, most important, dwell within quite contrasting sociosymbolic spheres. The latter is the main difference between the production of *narcocorridos* and the works I analyze in this book.

Writers and composers of narcocorridos share the semiotic universe with narcos, as Luis Astorga has stated (*Mitología*)—the songs are produced within the same world and therefore reflect their common values and perspectives. The writers whose work I analyze in this book do not. These authors have what I would call an everyday connection with the world of narcos, which are a set of relations that every inhabitant of these drug-producing communities has: they know where a capo lives (in Culiacán everyone knows a narco), they recognize their bodyguards, they may know who their lovers are as well as their compadres and friends. This notion stresses the existence of local social networks, the importance of shared spaces, the common codes of living in those spaces, sometimes the uses of language, and even the existence of shared memories. These everyday connections are also what allow readers to identify with the stories written by local authors.

The importance of these everyday connections was obvious when I gathered the reactions of several culichis about *La reina del sur*, Arturo Pérez-Reverte's celebrated 2004 novel on narco trafficking. Pérez-Reverte was already a well-respected author when he published this novel, and *La reina* had great commercial success in metropolitan areas. For most of the culichis with whom I talked, however, Teresa Mendoza, the protagonist—a Culiacán-born young woman whose boyfriend is killed by their enemies and who, after being raped, escapes to Spain and becomes a prominent and successful narco trafficker herself—is an improbable local character. Her story is closer to a Hollywood tale than to the culichi reality. However, this did not stop locals from talking about it or from pointing out the Buelna market as the place “where

Mendoza started.” Nor did it preclude certain sympathy for Pérez-Reverte, who, after barely fifteen days in the area (as was repeatedly made clear to me), wrote an internationally recognized novel in which Culiacán appears as an important location. But their favorable reactions had more to do with the novelty of a foreigner with the fame and prestige of Pérez-Reverte writing about Culiacán than with their possible identification with the story. Most of them told me that they could not recognize the characters described in those pages, let alone imagine Teresa Mendoza as a local narco. Actually, very few locals seemed to be persuaded by the story. While we can argue that Pérez-Reverte had some success in Culiacán, it is clear that his success owes little to an everyday connection to Culiacán and much more to the commercial appeal of drug trafficking as a literary theme. That is why the novel does not say much about the culichi culture and the impact the traffic of illegal drugs has in Culiacán, while it tells a great deal about the city’s stereotypes and the impact those stereotypes have in metropolitan areas of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Understanding the complex backgrounds in which the works are created and initially consumed is one end of the tightrope I have walked writing this book. The description of these backgrounds defines one side of it. To learn about a social phenomenon through literature however, presents other limitations. In 2007, when talking to culichi authors, I mentioned that the formula that defines their work is the literature of narco trafficking; they did not agree. Literature, the writers Élmer Mendoza and César López Cuadras asserted, cannot have labels. It is simply literature. Their response shows the arbitrariness of tagging northern—or border—literature as a literature about narcos or narco narratives. Their strong reaction against branding their work is more than understandable, considering that their literature is defined simply because they are writers from Sinaloa. This became evident in the heated debate that arose in Mexico following the 2005 publication of an article in *Letras libres* in which the writer Rafael Lemus dismissively described northern literature as literature about narco folk.<sup>17</sup> In a similar fashion, *paisa* novels produced in the 1990s were labeled as novels of *sicariato* or *sicaresca*.<sup>18</sup>

Mendoza’s and López Cuadras’s remarks added an additional challenge to my research endeavor. When I asked López Cuadras how he would define literature of narco trafficking, he replied: “This literature has produced a series of clichés where there are pistols, police, blood . . .

all the ingredients people love, so the topic becomes an excuse to give the publishers, and the market, what they want.”<sup>19</sup> López Cuadras told me that he writes about fathers, brothers, and husbands who happen to work in the drug trade because it is part of their world, part of their horizon, but that the drug trade is not the principal subject of his literature. “Literature is within you”—he insisted—“reality does not make novels.”<sup>20</sup>

López Cuadras’s comments suggested that I should begin my analysis by learning about local authors, their narrative styles, and by being more aware of the aesthetic proposals in their books. Rather than the local drug trade, he suggested, my point of departure should be literature, specifically Sinaloan literature. In the course of our conversation, the old debate about form and content subtly arose. It was a mistake on my part—local authors seemed to say—to begin my research looking on the content (that is, narco trafficking) without paying attention to the literary form. For better or worse, however, narco trafficking led our dialogue about literature because the narcotics trade has imposed itself in such an imperious way in cities such as Culiacán, that even conversations about art creation and art criticism appear necessarily filtered through discussions about the legitimate—or not so legitimate—forms of its representation. This is exactly what I consider to be the effect of the narco within the cultural field. Although this influence may not always be evident in the works themselves, it unquestionably determines how the works are created, how the artists position themselves in the given field, how they respond to the demands imposed by local readers, and, eventually, to the requirements of international publishing markets.

### **The Limits of Narco Trafficking**

In *Mitología de narcotraficante en México* (first published in 1995), Luis Astorga wrote about the limitations of the term “narco trafficking” (*narcotráfico*). Astorga asserted that narcotráfico, as in a performative act, creates the reality it describes.<sup>21</sup> It is a universalizing term that constructs a crime by naming it. It redefines activities and local practices by giving them values different from what they originally had, and by attributing to those practices stigmatizing connotations. For example, criminalizing the growth and commercialization of marijuana, poppy, (and coca in the case of the Andes) modified local knowledge, ways of social organizations, and even ways of consumption that were not previously associated with discourses of national security. This process,