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#narcomachine maps

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How shall we map and measure the hemispheric gravity of the present wars on drugs, in Mexico and beyond? One project of the civil society initiative “Nuestra Aparente Rendición,” ([NAR](#), *Our Apparent Surrender*) offers a “Latin American Map of Our Future,” a continental reflection on periods of extreme violence in countries across the Hemisphere, many of which continue to suffer a “spiral of insecurity and social cruelty in which they seem definitively and unfortunately immersed.”¹ This ghastly map covers 18 countries and chronicles experiences from the Southern Cone dictatorships of the 70s and 80s, the Central American wars of the 80s, to the contemporary violence at the US-Mexico border. “*Their past is our future*,” says curator Lolita Bosch, speaking of Mexico and the unparalleled violence that President Calderón’s war on the narcos has wrought since it began in late 2006. Bosch tells us, urgently, that Mexico’s current crisis has already claimed more lives than the dictatorships of Argentina and Chile combined.

Rossana Reguillo, renowned anthropologist from Guadalajara, Mexico, with whom we have been so pleased to co-edit this issue of *e-misférica*, tells us that the very word “narco” invokes a complex sociopolitical and cultural terrain that

vastly exceeds the death-machine that daily produces victims in increasingly spectacular and brutal forms. In the months leading up to this publication, we have learned from and with her as well as the vast number of collaborating scholars, artists, and activists, that “narco” names the breakdown of the social fabric as we know it: the rise of authoritarianism, the erosion of civil society, the deterioration of human rights, the transformation of cities and towns into ghost regions and theatres of war, and the rise (or return) of “expressive violence”—lethal violence with no utilitarian end other than to represent its own power, which Reguillo analyzes at length in her essay for this issue. At present, Mexico is the most visible site of that *narco-machine*: President Calderón’s militarized war against the drug cartels has resulted in at least 47,515 deaths;² beheaded and mutilated bodies hang from bridges alongside infamous “narcomantas” in Tamaulipas or Monterrey; corpses are dumped *en masse* on a highway in Veracruz or Guadalajara; severed heads arrive by the bagful in Acapulco or Mexico City;³ Central American migrants are found in mass graves (*narcofosas*); and news of kidnapping, corruption, and the changing battle lines between drug cartels appear daily in the press, whose reporters—as well as photographers and social media correspondents—are themselves targets of summary execution.⁴ Human rights activists, among them leading figures in the struggle to end *feminicide* in Ciudad Juárez, are not spared.⁵

In her opening essay, Rossana Reguillo names this dystopic concert of forces and elements the “narco-machine,” and offers us an anti-guide to that machine, a primer that attempts to discern its logic, language, and social grammar, identifying its primary modes of address and redress. As Paul Gootenberg has elsewhere argued, the subject of drugs requires such discursive engagement, alongside structural analysis, because the designation of any substance as “illicit” is a performative act of the State. The “illegality” of certain stimulants and commodity drugs (but not others: cigarettes, alcohol, valium) is *made* through state discourse, and States therefore “must actively mystify illicit drugs in order to fight them” (31). The prefix “narco,” then, does not name a shadowy illicit world of drugs that contrasts with and encroaches upon a licit world of governance and rule of law. Rather, the narco-machine encompasses all of the processes by which the boundaries between the licit/illicit and legitimate/illegitimate are established and sustained; it encompasses the relations between the state, traffic in illicit substances, and the borders (geographic, ideological, social) created and disturbed by their deadly embrace. The narco-machine both destroys and produces worlds: as Gustavo Blázquez writes in this issue, “the narcotic machine makes us see and makes us speak. It contributes to the sedimentation and fracturing of discourses and practices; it articulates experiences, creates subjects, and enables agency.” The narco-machine produces paradoxes: the State’s claims to exceptional authority seem to rise in direct proportion to its diminishing capacity to proffer the very protections over human life and basic liberties it is meant to guarantee; the more it extends the arm of its “law” over civil society, the greater the impunity that shadows it.

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Maps created by the media to illustrate the battle lines between rival cartels (a newly booming genre: narcocartography) routinely superimpose the cartels' zones of control over the borders of Mexico's regional states, giving image to the spectral presence of the cartels as para-states. Some maps allow users to turn those "state lines" on or off, a flickering that conjures the uncertain connection between nation, state, and para-state: suddenly the city of Guadalajara, for example, is not in the State of Jalisco but lies in the center of "Sinaloa Cartel;" what was Jalisco is a patchwork of "Sinaloa," "Zetas," and "Familia Michoacana." If the lines were to flicker off, and stay off, what nation or state would that map depict? What place would it be? ("I no longer know where I am writing from," confesses Isabel Vericat.) As the lines that delineate the logic of the state flicker, the citizens of those erstwhile states are less certain where and how to anchor claims for security or justice, how to hold fast the ties that otherwise bind them to the social and political meanings of the place that they live and belong. The citizens are rendered, in a word, less *citizen*, and more *stateless*. Yesterday's citizens—de-territorialized while staying in place—become more like those vulnerable and stateless migrants whose lives are so imperiled by the narco-machine. The past of the migrants is our future, Mexicans might say.

As many have noted, maps of drug trafficking produced in the United States usually stop at the northern border of Mexico, rarely giving image to the smuggling, sale, consumption, and criminalization of drugs in the US itself, despite readily available facts that these are the prime engines that fuel the hemispheric, (indeed, global) narco-machine. Gootenberg notes, "the trade is North American 'demand'-driven, yet the drugs trail mysteriously stops at the border, where they are apparently dumped, with no one of note ever implicated in the domestic political economy" (25). If we envision such a map, we see that the relevant model for Calderón's war is not only President George Bush's "war on terror," but also Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs.⁶ Reagan's War on Drugs began the sweeping criminalization of drug use and sale in the United States, the radical expansion of the law enforcement apparatus, and a weakening of civil liberties for those suspected of drug involvement (disproportionately Black and Latino males), and has justified direct US military intervention in anti-narcotics ventures across the continent. This war—which has continued unabated to the Obama administration—has done little to diminish the drug trade, but has put over 30 million people behind bars since 1982, the vast majority youth of color with minor offenses. As Michelle Alexander argues well, that war has been a war on people of color: "In some states 80 to 90 percent of all drug offenders admitted to prison have been African-American, and when released they find themselves ushered into a parallel universe where they are stripped of many of the rights supposedly won during the civil rights movement" (2010a).⁷ What map could link the castaway boys of Medellín, Córdoba, or Culiacán to the young men locked up in prisons across the United States? What map could link the erosion—evisceration—of civil rights in US black communities to the erosion of rights in, say, Ciudad Juarez? Our past is their future; their past is our future.

Collectively, the writings and works assembled here illuminate the complexities of this fragile "drug-induced" agency, analyzing and chronicling the uncertain subjects, subjectivities, and

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codes of action that are ensnared in the narco-machine: drug users and narcomules (Blazquéz), the coyotes (Marroquín), assassin boys and adolescent fathers who have survived the street (Alarcón); sons who confess their fathers' sins (Osorno); inner city native youth behind bars (Buddle-Crow); violence as it punctuates daily life (Tercero). These are all, to extend Cristian Alarcón's title, "visitations to the machine." They are all the more harrowing in their continental reach, demonstrating as they do that Mexico has no monopoly on the narco. Hailing from Manitoba, Medellín, or Córdoba, and all connected to the otherwise invisible sale and consumption of drugs in the United States, they demonstrate again that the narco-machine challenges state-centered geographies while at the same time providing the framework for each state to stake, again and again, its claim to be the sole purveyor of legitimate violence. The narco-machine threatens to destroy the State and also renews its reasons to exist.

This issue of *e-misférica* is perhaps the most difficult we have produced, exploring as it does the poetics and politics of narco-death-in-the-making. It does not offer answers; there are no easy exits from the machine. Many contributors reflect on this very fact: the narco-machine makes us forget where we are, but also shakes the analytical and aesthetic moorings that help us recover. Some throw down new critical anchors, proposing new modes of analysis: gore capitalism (Valencia), narcopolitics (Garriott), or expenditure and human sacrifice (Park and Gómez-Michel). If larger strategies of exit are not clear, many propose tactics to gain ground in the meantime, querying the limits and opportunities offered by film, visual art, the novel, music, or performance art. Pedro Reyes turns guns into shovels, literally. Isabel Vericat shouts in the digital plaza. Guillermo Gómez Peña writes a letter to the *capos*. Violeta Luna stages a requiem. Others risk intimacy with the violence of the scene itself to capture its vivid immediacy: Alarcón's *crónicas* and Brito's photographs—postcards, landscapes, snapshots that offer a micro-cartography of life and death inside the narco-machine.

Notes

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http://nuestraaparenterendicion.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=30&Itemid=10

² This is the most recent figure provided by the Mexican Government. Others believe the number is considerably higher. See: "Contabiliza la PGR 47 mil 515 muertes por narcoviolencia durante el sexenio," *Proceso* (11 enero 2012), <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=294489>; "Maquilla" gobierno de Calderón cifra de muertos por guerra antinarco: PRD," (12 enero 2012) <http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?p=294667>

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http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?page_id=278958&a51dc26366d99bb5fa29cea4747565fec=290766&rl=wh; “Mexico Updates Death Toll in Drug War to 47,515, but Critics Dispute the Data,” *New York Times* (January 12, 2012: A4.)

³ “Mexico: Severed Heads Found in Capital.” *New York Times*, (October 4, 2011: A11) <http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?p=292893>

⁴ See: “2 Mexican journalists found slain,” (1 September 2011) <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/sep/01/world/la-fg-mexico-dead-20110902>; “Mexican journalist, family slain,” (20 June 2011) <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/20/world/la-fg-mexico-journalist-killing-20110621>; “Protestan en Juárez por asesinatos de 50 periodistas en el país este sexenio,” (30 September 2011) <http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?p=282877>

⁵ Desde el exilio Norma y Malú Andrade piden seguridad (3 enero 2012) <http://www.cimacnoticias.com.mx/site/11122001-Empezar-de-nuevo-d.48585.0.html>

http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2011/12/second-mexican-peace-activist-killed-in-two-weeks.html; “Poet Susana Chavez’s Death Sparks Outrage in Juarez,” (18 January 2012) http://www.alternet.org/newsandviews/article/441114/poet_susana_chavez's_death_sparks_outrage_in_juarez/#paragraph3

⁶ In the U.S., the two Wars have been merged, most recently in the “Enhanced Border Security Act” (HR 3401) which allows

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“counterinsurgency tactics” to be used against “the terrorist insurgency in Mexico waged by transnational criminal organizations, and for other purposes.” The Act defines “terrorist insurgency” as “the protracted use of irregular warfare, including extreme displays of public violence utilized by transnational criminal organizations to influence public opinion and to undermine government control and rule of law...” See <http://www.hcfa.house.gov/112/HR3401.pdf>. See J. Jesús Esquivel, “Aprueba subcomité de EU aplicar tácticas de contrainsurgencia terrorista en México,” *El proceso* (15 diciembre 2011). <http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?p=291407>

⁷ See also Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010).

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