MI REY, EL NARCO: MASCULINITY IN MEXICO'S NARCO CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

NASHALY RUÍZ-GONZÁLEZ. Mi Rey, El Narco: Masculinity in Mexico's Narco Culture. (Under the direction of DR. JÜRGEN BUCHENAU)

This thesis analyzes two works of narco culture: Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* and Luis Estrada's *El infierno*. In these works, the themes of masculinity and its relationship to honor and power were found to be prevalent. This thesis will dissect how masculinity manifests itself in works of narco culture in order to understand the interactions between characters in works of narco culture and the power structures that narcos build within these works, in addition to seeking to understand how honor as it is determined by public perception motivates the actions of male characters in works of narco culture.

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DEDICATION

Para los hijxs del cañaveral, en el nombre de Agüeybaná. Te amo, Borikén.

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CHAPTER I: NARCO CULTURE: THE INTERSECTION OF POPULAR CULTURE AND THE WAR ON DRUGS

The figure of the narco, or drug trafficker, is one that has found itself prominent in popular culture across genres and mediums. In 1974, a group of braceros who called themselves "Los Tigres del Norte" recorded a ballad named "Contrabando y traición" about Emilio Vareda and Camelia "*la Tejana*"—a pair of traffickers driving across the U.S./Mexico border with marijuana stuffed in their tires. Once their contraband was sold, Camelia shot Emilio in the back and sped off with the money. This ballad, the first recorded narco corrido, would go on to become an immediate success.[1] However, it is important to note that "Contrabando y traición" did not create or even popularize the tradition of the corrido. The corrido is a longstanding tradition in Mexico, popular since the Mexican-American War, and defined by anthropologist Mark Cameron Edberg as "a discursive form through which heroic values and the situations that frame them have been articulated."[2] The most popular of the corridos, or rather the category that sees the most creative output, are *trágicos*, or corridos about tragedies that include "violent confrontation between rivals."[3] The genre of the narco corrido, however, dates to the twentieth century—according to Ramírez-Pimienta, it was Rafael Caro Quintero's case against the Drug Enforcement Agency's (DEA) own Enrique "Kiki" Camarena that

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[1] Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 175.

[2] Mark Cameron Edberg, *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 1.

[3] John Holmes McDowell, *¡Corrido!: The Living Ballad of Mexico's Western Coast* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 1.

sparked interest in the drug trafficker as an antihero worth immortalizing in lyric.[4] Nonetheless, the narco corrido persists as a popular reimagining of the corrido that has become "commodified," which implies that these corridos are a direct result of the market demand for them and the revenue that they glean.[5]

Narco corridos, however, are only one element in a greater category of cultural production that has become known as narco culture. For the purpose of this thesis, narco culture is defined as elements of popular culture, such as film, television, or music, that place the figure of the narco in the center. The narco figure centered in these cultural productions is one that journalist Ioan Grillo, who works out of Mexico City, describes as the "*padrino mafioso*," a "gangster godfather" that embodies a rags-to-riches story.[6] This thesis explores the intersection of narco culture and the War on Drugs through the lens of cultural production. The subsets of narco culture that will be more closely analyzed for this thesis are narco-literature and narco cinema. Although narco corridos hold significant value in their contributions to narco culture, especially since they allow people to make connections between violence and the War on Drugs, narco literature and narco cinema are more inclusive genres.[7] The literary and visual formats allow for the audience to experience how these elements of narco culture interact with each other, especially since

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[4] Juan Carlos Ramirez-Pimienta, *Cantar a los narcos: voces y versos del narcocorrido* (Mexico City: Temas de Hoy, 2012), Kindle location 72 of 5224.

[5] Mark Cameron Edberg, *El Narcotraficante*, 2.

[6] Ioan Grillo, *El narco: En el corazón de la insurgencia criminal Mexicana* (Barcelona: Ediciones Urano, S.A., 2012), Kindle location 3880 of 7086.

[7] Shaylih Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco Culture in the US-Mexico Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 87.

narco corridos are usually included in the aforementioned genres. As such, this thesis will utilize Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* and Luis Estrada's *El infierno*, to explore the relationship between narcos and their power structures through the greater concept of *machismo* as it exists in Mexican culture. Ultimately, Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* and Luis Estrada's *El infierno* demonstrate how narco culture mirrors *machismo* through its use of honor and violence in a male-dominated environment.

This thesis will define *machismo* as a male-centered societal phenomenon in which males are granted a superior place in the societal hierarchy. This superiority places the male figure above its feminine counterparts. Historians Víctor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein recognize that *machismo* may be utilized as a means through which to understand societal interactions in Mexico, particularly because of its relationship with Mexico's culture. Macías-González and Rubenstein also tie *machismo* to honor as it is defined in the context of colonial Latin America, which will be explored later in this chapter. As such, this thesis will explore the interactions between feminine and masculine figures in narco culture in order to contextualize them within the societal hierarchy that *machismo* proposes.

Trabajos del reino and *El infierno* are contributions to narco culture that demonstrate how *machismo* interacts with power structures through their characters' interactions and the relationships that the characters have with each other. The first chapter of this thesis will focus on Yuri Herrera's novel, published in 2004 before the War on Drugs was officially declared, which narrates a *corridista*'s journey from a busker to a close confidant of a powerful drug lord in a city that closely resembles Ciudad

Juarez.[8] In this chapter, I will explore literary representations of narco power structures and their interactions with questions of honor in terms of legitimacy, masculinity, and violence. The world that Yuri Herrera builds is one that is male dominated, proven by the fact that few female characters exist. In this narrative, he toys with questions of succession and legitimacy, driven further by the way in which he treats his characters, calling them by title instead of by name, and by his story building—his story takes place in a palace within a dilapidated kingdom run by a powerful king, instead of a small town. Violence becomes an issue within Herrera's novel when the king's honor starts to come into question—unfortunately, violence is perceived as the solution to the king's legitimacy issues as he starts to face public dissent.

Meanwhile, the second chapter of this thesis will focus on Luis Estrada's film, released in 2010, which also demonstrates a "rags-to-riches" story of a man deported back to his hometown who finds himself sucked into drug trafficking for financial gain. In this chapter, I will explore cinematic representations of narco power structures and their interactions with questions of honor in terms of loyalty and violence. Estrada's film relies heavily on the use of kitsch violence to deliver its comedic intentions, but the kitschy violence that he chooses to display is one that comes as a direct result of the desire from male characters to protect their masculinity in an environment that is also male-dominated. Furthermore, not only is Estrada's film male-dominated, but the female characters whom he chooses to include are characters that are depicted as needing male guidance—particularly from narcos—in order to survive under their present

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[8] Sara Carini, "El trabajo, al lector: Nuevas formas de representación del poder *en Trabajos del reino* de Yuri Herrera*," Ogagia* 12 (July 1, 2012): 50.

circumstances. It is through the characters' interactions and their violent reactions to what they perceive to be a lack of loyalty that we can see *machismo* reflected in the film.

Although these cultural productions are different mediums, both of them thrive on a male-dominated environment typical of a *machista* culture—furthermore, critical ideas that support or underpin *machismo* function as recurring themes in both of these works. One of those ideas that will be explored throughout this thesis is the importance of honor in a male-dominated society. This thesis will utilize historians Lyman Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera's definition of honor as it was exported to colonial-era Latin America. It is important to note that, although this definition of honor is one that dates back to colonialism, honor is a societal construct that shaped Mexico's culture well past colonialism.[9] This definition establishes honor as a concept facilitated by nobility, faith (in this case, Catholicism), "pure blood lines," and lifestyle, among other things.[10] According to Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera, honor is a concept utilized to justify a hierarchy established by those in a position of power—furthermore, honor is a concept dependent on public perception. As such, it is important for those that consider themselves honorable to publicly defend themselves from dishonorable accusations or dishonorable acts. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates the lengths to which fictional narcos will go in order to defend themselves from public scrutiny, perceived or otherwise. However, it is also important to note that honor has the potential to be

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[9] Víctor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 8.

[10] Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 19.

recovered—Macías-González and Rubenstein specify that, as long as the community is in compliance and collectively "pretends ignorance," illicit behavior could be made licit.[11]

Honor is also intricately woven into the violence that narcos, and even government officials that have found themselves in the crossfire, enact. Amalendu Misra, a professor of philosophy and religion at Lancaster University, establishes a narrative in which death is defined categorically—within narco violence, there exist deaths that can be placed into a category that is deemed "good" and deaths that can be placed into a category deemed "bad." For example, "war deaths" and "murders" are further divided into "killings" and "homicides," with killings being a more desirable way for one to die because it is not a pre-meditated manner of death.[12] These categories are further defined by the acting agents in the act of violence, meaning that the person that committed the act of violence is just as important as the act itself. Misra's breakdown of the philosophy behind narco violence is pertinent to this thesis as it discusses honor because these manners of death can affect how one is perceived post-mortem. This is further proven by the concept of "corpse messaging" that Misra introduces—for example, when someone is killed because they have been unfaithful and had sexual intercourse with the wife of another cartel member, they are to be castrated in addition to being killed, further damaging their reputation and tarnishing their honor after they are unable to defend themselves from such accusations.[13]

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[11] Victor M. Macias-Gonzalez and Anne Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern* Mexico, 7.

[12] Amalendu Misra, *Towards a Philosophy of Narco Violence in Mexico* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4.

[13] Amalendu Misra, *Towards a Philosophy*, 2-3.

Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* and Luis Estrada's *El infierno* do not, however, limit themselves to portraying only how narco culture mirrors *machismo* through the themes of honor and violence. These cultural productions, although different in medium and execution, also provide a different perspective to an even greater phenomenon that has been plaguing Mexico since the 1970s—the War on Drugs. In order to understand the impact that these aforementioned works make, it is important to understand the tumultuous history of drug-related violence that Mexico has experienced, particularly because cinematic representations of narco culture make these violent images easily accessible.

Initially declared by United States (US) President Richard Nixon, the War on Drugs affected Mexico as a source of marijuana making its way into the United States. Mexico's response to mounting pressure from President Nixon was the launching of Operation Cooperation, which allowed Mexican officers to destroy marijuana crops without the use of harmful herbicides.[14] However, this operation—later renamed Operation Condor—did not experience its projected success. Instead, it allowed for drug cartel leaders with sufficient monetary influence to remain untouched during marijuana and poppy eradication efforts. According to Mexican poet Boullosa and historian Mike Wallace, Operation Condor succeeded in eradicating competition within the narco industry and allowing financially stable cartels to flourish.[15]

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[14] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War"* (New York: OR Books, 2016), 27.

[15] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History*, 32.

In the year 2000, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI)—Mexico's dominant political party—lost the presidential election for the first time in the party's existence. The defeat of the PRI appeared to highlight the full democratization of the country. For the first time in over seventy years, the winner of the presidential campaign belonged to a different party. Vicente Fox, the winner of the election and member of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN), did not have an anti-drug platform before or immediately after he was elected to office—instead, his efforts were focused on the promotion of democracy in Mexico. Unfortunately, once Fox assumed office, cartels found themselves at risk of falling apart, as the coming to power of a new party endangered the relationship that they maintained with the prior government. That relationship had allowed them to move freely throughout the country, particularly with the plaza system, which allowed narcos to pay to traffic contraband through areas that were protected by organizations such as the federal police or the army.[16] Crime saw itself in favor of traffickers due to the corruption and low wages that, in conjunction, allowed them to pay off government and state officials for their own benefit, and cartels were able to extort the new government's weakness as much as possible.[17] This democratization of Mexico, and the ensuing chaos, started the initial turmoil that later led to an escalation of cartel activity during Felipe Calderón's presidency as cartels struggled for power and control of the plazas that they were accustomed to using for their trafficking routes. According to Peter Watt, a lecturer in Hispanic Studies, and Roberto Zepeda, who holds a

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[16] Peter Watt and Roberto Martínez Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism, and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 57-58.

[17] Peter Watt and Roberto Martínez Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico*, 57, 143.

doctorate in politics and specializes in Mexico, the collapse of the plaza system gave way to an increase in drug-related violence as cartels fought over territory that was once regulated with bribery.[18] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace provide an example of rival cartels using banners accompanied with the corpses of cartel members to announce new ownership of plazas in key locations.[19]

However, it is important to note that the decentralization of the government is not the only factor in cartel escalation following the fall of the PRI. Vicente Fox himself initiated some confrontation with cartels, although their presence was not the focal point of his presidential campaign. In an attempt to appease the desires of the United States, Fox declared war against the Arellano-Félix brothers—the "drug lords 'most wanted' by the USA".[20] This declaration came in light of the fact that the Arellano Félix brothers had tortured and murdered a DEA agent, Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, igniting rage from the United States in the 1980s, after President Nixon had already declared a war on drugs in the United States.[21] Fox's efforts to apprehend the Arellano-Félix brothers were not without their results. During his presidency, he managed to replace Mexico's police force, the Federal Judicial Police (Policía Judicial Federal, or PFJ), with the Federal Investigations Agency (AFI) in an attempt to reduce rampant corruption throughout the country. With his creation of the AFI and the continued militarization of Mexico's drug war efforts, Fox was able to apprehend and kill the Arellano-Félix brothers—

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[18] Peter Watt and Roberto Martínez Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico*, 150.

[19] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History*, 130.

[20] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History*, 68.

[21] Ioan Grillo, *El Narco*, 66.

unfortunately, his successful efforts in the drug war paved the path for cartels to come together and overcome their differences in favor of presenting a stronger, unified front against a government set on their destruction instead of bargaining with them. This unified front, named The Federation, set its sights on expansion via Ciudad Juárez—a city that would become a hub of violence as the drug war continued to escalate—and on the elimination of the Gulf Cartel, made possible by some of the arrests during Fox's administration. This idea of expansion employed by The Federation caused cartel violence to escalate as cartels fought amongst themselves with sophisticated firearms, creating a "hyper-violent" environment that Fox's successor would unfortunately inherit.[22]

Once Vicente Fox retired from the presidency in 2006, Felipe Calderón took his place—once again, a member of the PAN assumed the Mexican presidential seat. Unfortunately, in addition to inheriting the hyper-violent cartel activity left behind by Fox's war against traffickers, his presidential victory was due to a very slim margin that some perceived as fraudulent—Calderón won his seat in the presidency by a margin of .56 percent.[23] Even before his swearing-in ceremony, Calderón held a press conference in which he openly and loudly declared war against drug cartels throughout Mexico. If we follow Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace's narrative, such a declaration was an attempt to distract from low polling numbers and demonstrate that Calderón was capable of having a strong hand in Mexico's government—a government increasingly overwhelmed by cartel violence. Calderón did, however, admit that this war would be responsible for

[22] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History*, 79.

[23] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History,* 84.

taking "time, money, and even lives"—more so than the wars that were declared in the 70s and after, which encompassed lives that had already been lost.[24] According to Ted Galen Carpenter, who is a senior fellow of defense and foreign policy studies, 51,000 lives have been lost since Calderon declared his war against drugs in 2006.[25]

Calderón managed to surprise the Mexican public with his decision to wage an actual war. Not only did Calderón fail to mention any intent to fight against cartels during his presidential campaign, which was largely focused on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), but he also failed to mention any intent to further militarize cartel and drug eradication efforts. Calderón received the full support of the George W. Bush administration—much like the PRI working hand in hand with Nixon in the 70s—to initiate a militarized effort to eradicate the cartels.[26] Calderón even attempted to make himself relatable to the troops, donning a military uniform and promising a pay raise to those willing to support him.[27] Soon after his swearing in to office, Calderón brought in 5,300 troops to begin what became known as the Mexican War on Drugs.[28]

Initially, Calderón's efforts proved successful. His troops managed to seize copious amounts of money, cocaine, and traffickers. The Federation, which previously saw itself feuding with the Gulf Cartel, reached a peace agreement and cartel-related

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[24] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History,* 86.

[25] Ted Galen Carpenter, *The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Danger to America* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2012), 45.

[26] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History,* 88.

[27] Ioan Grillo, *El Narco,* 113.

[28] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History,* 86.

deaths started to drop.[29] However, this reprieve proved to be temporary as activity resumed beyond its previous capacity in the year 2008. The efforts to fight against cartels caused cartels to fight against each other, which would later "bring on an escalation" of the efforts to fight against cartels in a vicious cycle with many casualties.[30] Scholars attributed Calderón's "intense pressure" to exacerbating the situation between cartels throughout Mexico.[31]

Ciudad Juárez, a border town near El Paso, Texas, suffered some of the brunt of the war on drugs. Conveniently located, Ciudad Juárez is home to one of the most valuable *plazas*, allowing for easier access to the U.S. target consumer. It is also the home of various factories, called *maquiladoras*, that employ thousands of women .[32] Unfortunately, these women often find themselves in the crosshairs of cartel retaliation, contributing to the drug-related casualties across Mexico with a series of femicides.[33] According to González Rodríguez, 20 percent of the 30,000 deaths experienced after Calderón's declaration of war until 2011 occurred in Ciudad Juarez.[34] González Rodríguez rebukes the idea that there is a state presence in Ciudad Juarez, attributing the ensuing chaos to rampant lawlessness. Elected law officials in Ciudad Juarez felt unsafe enough to sleep across the border "to avoid assassination," which would seem to explain

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[29] Ioan Grillo, *El Narco,* 116.

[30] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History,* 96.

[31] Ioan Grillo, *El Narco*,117.

[32] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History,*107.

[33] Sergio González Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2012), 80.

[34] Sergio González Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine,* 40.

why citizens of Ciudad Juárez felt unsafe in the ensuing chaos.[35] According to Boullosa and Wallace, Ciudad Juárez's murder rate "was declared the highest in the world," resulting in many vacancies throughout the city as people fled to preserve their safety.[36]

Watt and Zepeda argue that the reason behind the hyper violence experienced throughout Mexico after the war on drugs is the prohibition of narcotics trafficking. Due to the fact that cartel activity is inherently illegal, there are higher stakes and rewards for those involved: often people living in desperate poverty. Although PAN's presidential victories had weakened the plaza system established in the 1970s and upheld by the PRI, cartels still struggled to maintain control of those plazas in order to traffic their goods with ease.[37] Unfortunately, because the PRI was largely in control of the plazas, cartels found themselves fighting each other for control, as opposed to being able to easily pay off the police officer in charge of the plaza at stake. Carpenter also argues that Calderón's war allowed for a scramble in which dominant figures in Mexico's existing cartels lost the dominance that put them in a position of leadership, allowing for others to step in and assert their dominance. Unfortunately, those attempting to overthrow the existing power structure in Mexico's cartels are *sicarios*, or hitmen, only familiar with violent intimidation techniques and lacking a businessman-like approach to cartel negotiations.[38]

In order to make connections clearly between the politics behind the war on drugs and the importance of narco culture, one can look at Shaul Schwarz's documentary *Narco*

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[35] Ted Galen Carpenter, *The Fire Next Door*, 50.

[36] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History,*116.

[37] Peter Watt and Roberto Martínez Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico*, 228.

[38] Ted Galen Carpenter, *The Fire Next Door*, 48.

Cultura (2013), which demonstrates the intricate relationship between narco-culture and the War on Drugs fought throughout Mexico and how narco-culture has become commodified for its audience. *Narco Cultura* (2013) is a documentary that juxtaposes the sensationalism of narco-culture with the War on Drugs as it is experienced by citizens living in Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican border city wracked by cartel-related violence, by following the lead singer of Mexican-American corrido group Los Buknas de Culiacán, Edgar Quintero, and Ciudad Juárez crime scene investigator, Riccardo "Richi" Soto. As Schwarz interviews Quintero about his song-writing process, Quintero admits to having never experienced narco-violence himself and taking inspiration from a popular blog titled "Blog del narco" for his explicit corridos. This blog, published online and in print by a group of fugitive journalists, serves as an anonymous and unfiltered news source to which witnesses can send videographic or photographic evidence of narco-violence in Mexico, without the fear of repercussions, violent or otherwise.[39] Interestingly enough, the goal of the writers of "Blog del narco" is to "put a halt to the glamorization of drug kingpins by Mexican children, young adults, and the entertainment industry."[40] The glamorization of drug cartels, perpetuated by Quintero's corridos, is one that he is able to experience himself once he actually travels to Mexico. Far from reinforcing Soto's perspective, Quintero is brought from party to party and asked to sing his corridos to narcos in person, at their beck and call. Furthermore, he takes instructions from the narcos he works for regarding the content of the music that he records—narcos provide

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[39] Fugitive Reporters of "Blog del Narco," *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2013), Kindle location 266 of 6564.

[40] Fugitive Reporters of "Blog del Narco," *Dying for the Truth,* Kindle location 281 of 6564.

information such as aliases, preferred weaponry, and rivalries and Quintero is responsible for weaving the information that the narcos provide, and only that information, into a catchy corrido. It is not difficult to imagine this relationship, particularly when narco-culture is financed by the narco dollar.[41]

Meanwhile, Soto experiences narco culture in an entirely different way. Residing in what Ainslie refers to as "ground zero for the Mexican government's strategy against the drug cartels," Soto is responsible for following up on attacks on residents of Ciudad Juárez, even as members of his task force fall victim to drug-related violence or extortion.[42] He makes his way through the city attempting to console grieving citizens while maintaining his morale in stark contrast to Quintero's experience of lavish parties and never-ending music. It is important to note that it is not only members of his task force that the audience sees fall victim to drug-related crime—Soto is responsible for taking care of civilians whose family members have been casualties, even if they themselves were not directly affiliated with any cartel activity in Ciudad Juárez. Although this thesis does not utilize *Narco Cultura* (2013) as a focal point, it does clearly demonstrate how narco culture interacts with the ongoing war on drugs and provides a clearer perspective into the city that Yuri Herrera presumably bases his novel on while including elements from both narco culture and the politics behind the War on Drugs.

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[41] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco Cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico's B-Filmography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4.

[42] Ricardo C. Ainslie, *The Fight to Save Juarez: Life in the Heart of Mexico's Drug War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 7.

The following chapter will explore Yuri Herrera's interpretation of a border town under the influence of a powerful cartel leader known only as el Rey in his novel *Trabajos del reino*. Herrera's novel, centered primarily around male characters, demonstrates how narco culture interacts with *machismo* in Mexican culture through the themes of honor and violence.

CHAPTER II: CORRIDOS DEL REINO: THE CORRIDISTA'S GOSPEL IN YURI HERRERA'S *TRABAJOS DEL REINO*

In order to explore the relationship between narcos and the power structures that they create in Mexican culture, this chapter utilizes Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino*. *Trabajos del reino* is Yuri Herrera's first novel, published in 2004 in Spanish. This novel explores the dynamics of a power structure that allows for the poor to rise, so long as they maintain loyalty to the source of their income and newly-found social status—drug traffickers, or narcos. *Trabajos del reino*'s protagonist, Artista, creates an oral narrative of his rise to influence, demonstrating how violence can both provide comfort and cause ruin. More importantly, *Trabajos del reino* demonstrates the influence that *machismo* holds over Mexican culture, particularly as the characters navigate the concepts of honor and power in a patriarchal environment and a hierarchy that a king creates in his favor.

Trabajos del reino is identified as a narco novela, although Yuri Herrera specifies that his goal was not to write a novel that made its depiction of drug trafficking and narcos explicit.[43] As such, Herrera opted to forego the usage of the word "narco" and use "Rey" instead to refer to the male figurehead that dominates most of the novel, putting the character that enables the protagonist's experience in the highest position available within the narrative. Sara Carini proposes that this hierarchy that Herrera creates, however, is one that only works within the walls of el Rey's kingdom. According to Carini, the power structure that el Rey creates is functional as long as his subjects do not find themselves able to experience an alternative. Once they are able to explore and find

[43] Sara Carini, "El trabajo, al lector: Nuevas formas de representación del poder *en Trabajos del reino* de Yuri Herrera*," Ogagia* 12 (July 1, 2012): 54.

pleasure in the presence of other people, the illusion of power and grandeur starts to fall apart—the man introduced as an authority figure becomes "fragile and weak."[44]

In order to maintain the idea that el Rey is an irreplaceable authority figure, el Rey becomes dependent on cultural productions—he is able to manipulate the masses into believing that there is no better alternative by producing propaganda in his favor. Using cultural productions, he can develop his own cultural narrative of life in his kingdom and dissuade his subjects from looking for a more favorable alternative.[45] El Rey also perpetuates the idea that division within his people is undesirable because his citizens are worthless without him—each character is named after their profession, equating their value to their title. Consequently, el Rey holds the most power in his title alone. The Joyero, a jeweler that does not feature predominately in the novel, goes as far as to state that the only value of the court is to give el Rey power over themselves and others.[46]

Artista, who is initially introduced as "Lobo," has not always experienced a lavish life of riches. He has, however, inherited the means by which to find his way and carve a path to financial freedom; he inherits an accordion, the tradition of the *corrido,* and becomes a ballad singer known as a *corridista*.[47] *Corridos* are ballads, originally made

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[44] Sara Carini, "El trabajo, al lector," 56.

Original Spanish: "Frágil y debil."

[45] Rafael Acosta Morales and Miguel A. Cabañas, "The State and the Caudillo: Legitimacy in Yuri Herrera's Trabajos del Reino," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (March 2014): 181.

[46] Rafael Acosta Morales and Miguel A. Cabañas, "The State and the Caudillo," 184.

[47] Yuri Herrera, *Trabajos del reino* (Spain: Editorial Periférica, 2010), 10.

famous for their use in spreading news during times of war.[48] However, in the 1970s, Los Tigres del Norte popularized a different kind of *corrido*. Their hit, "Contrabando y traición," showed the *corrido*'s new purpose—to tell the tale of drug traffickers and their feats in a new genre called *narcocorridos*.[49] This genre exploded in popularity, earning a feature in Shaul Schwartz's documentary, *Narco cultura* (2013). In this documentary, Schwartz demonstrates the gritty process of creating *narcocorridos* as he thrusts a group of *corridistas,* Los Bukanas de Culiacan, into the spotlight. Much like Herrera's Artista, Los Bukanas de Culiacan make a living by profiting off the tales of narcos—general information is provided to them, such as feats, weapon usage, or rivalries, and the *corridistas* must weave a lyrical narrative that places narcos in a positive light, regardless of the dangers that accompany the profession. It is the *corridista'*s role to be careful with their narrative, lest they find themselves on the receiving end of the narco's wrath. Although Herrera's novel is presented in a written format, it does demonstrate how different aspects of narco culture interact with each other by demonstrating the cultural influence that *corridos* can have.

Lobo quickly finds himself in good graces after performing a *narco corrido* for el Rey, who he claims is the type of person who can change lives quickly.[50] This description of el Rey is one that aligns with Drug-War journalist Ioan Grillo's description of narcos

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[48] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War"* (New York: OR Books, 2016), 91.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Yuri Herrera, *Trabajos del reino*, 20.

as godfather figures who embody a "rags-to-riches" story.[51] Artista, as Lobo is christened once he is blessed by el Rey for his good work, comes to be a part of el Rey's entourage, where loyalty plays the most important role. During the course of the novel, el Rey is presented from the Artista's perspective. Although we come to know how the members of his court and the general population feel about him, we are privy to that information due to how Artista presents it to the reader. The Artista's loyalty to el Rey marks his narrative and defines how it is that he presents him to his audience. The Artista's perspective of el Rey is one seldom marked by negativity—from the moment that he sees el Rey in a canteen, he is aware of the power that el Rey holds in his being, adorned with jewels and protected by others. The Artista understands that el Rey is one of those people who has the ability to give life a purpose to those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for a post in his grace.[52] El Rey, from the moment that he is introduced into the novel, is distinguished from other male characters as a character that exudes dominance, if only in his demeanor. This characterization of him becomes more important as the novel progresses and Herrera continues to explore how masculinity plays into the relationships the characters have with each other.

The image that el Rey emits from the canteen is one that could be defined as royal due to the lavish regalia that he is described as wearing and the multiple people surrounding him to provide a layer of protection against enemies. This image is one that the Artista is only able to recognize because of films—the only place in which he has

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[51] Ioan Grillo, *El narco: En el corazón de la insurgencia criminal Mexicana* (Barcelona: Ediciones Urano, S.A., 2012), Kindle location 3880 of 7086.

[52] Yuri Herrera, *Trabajos del reino*, 20.

been able to witness someone with the same power or the same amount of importance in a similar setting. The fact that the Artista is only able to recognize the image of el Rey due to films, which are often the product of the financial support of the narcos who are the subject matter and use melodrama as a tactic to guarantee popularity, highlights the importance of the other components of narco culture and the different contributions that exist outside of *narcocorridos*.[53] Nonetheless, Ryan Rashotte argues that the voluntary and unintentional glorification of narcos through entertainment media, such as in *corridos* and films, promotes the normalization of a culture that includes homicide, femicide, and torture, to name a few components.[54]Just as *Trabajos del reino* works to incorporate *narcocorridos* into a literary manifestation of narco culture, it also makes connections with the importance of narco cinema, which will be further explored in the next chapter of this thesis.

Although Herrera's novel is not intrinsically violent, there are instances from the beginning of the novel that demonstrate el Rey's ability to be a violent individual—for example, when we meet the Artista and his pay is denied, el Rey demands fair payment for the person who provided endless entertainment for him. However, not only is el Rey denied, but the drunk who denied him makes an insinuation about a secret that the King is attempting to keep—one that the *Artista* might now be privy to and one that will affect the public's perception of him as a masculine individual. El Rey, his expression dark,

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[53] Fugitive Reporters of "Blog del Narco," *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2013), Kindle location 124 of 6564.

[54] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico's B-Filmography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.

does not hesitate to press a firearm against the drunk's stomach and fire, effectively killing him and later threatening his companion in a crude display of power and disregard for life, particularly the life of someone that expresses dissent or defiance. This is only a peek at how erratic el Rey's behavior can be when crossed—something the protagonist experiences later. It is this initial encounter that sets the stage for how important honor is throughout the novel—the characters that Herrera introduces who inhabit the kingdom built by el Rey follow his commands without hesitation, aware of the dangers of crossing the person that made their lives meaningful.

However, el Rey is not the only one capable of violence in the kingdom—there are multiple occasions in which the corpses of members of the court are found, always with the murder weapon nearby, and one instance in which the bullet-ridden corpses of members of the court are displayed in newspaper articles.[55] Unfortunately, violent or graphic reportage is not uncommon in the realm of the narco—journalists like those fugitives who host "Blog del narco" display graphic images to rouse reader attention, often attributing these corpses accompanied by "narco banners," or "large handwritten signs," to specific cartels.[56] Furthermore, the violence exhibited in this manner does not serve to establish authority between el Rey and his subjects, like el Rey's impulsive murder of a man who defies his wishes. Instead, the corpses of his supporters are demonstrated as a blatant attempt at usurping his power—they are presented as a lack of loyalty within his circle and indicate the presence of a traitor, which causes sentiments in

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[55] Yuri Herrera and Lisa Dillman, *Kingdom Cons* (London: And Other Stories, 2017), Kindle location 847 of 1102.

[56] Fugitive Reporters of "Blog del narco," *Dying for the Truth,* Kindle location 226 of 6564.

opposition to el Rey to stir, indicating the beginning of the end of the blind faith with which subjects follow el Rey.

Once the Artista begins his life with his new identity, he establishes himself in the palace using his musical talents. He comes to know the people who have been affected by el Rey's presence and generosity—people who seldom have anything negative to say themselves. Each character, named after their profession in the same way that the Artista is christened, has their place in the kingdom, made so by el Rey's will. Artista, relentlessly singing praises, does not make it easy for those in the kingdom to forget that it is because of el Rey that they live in luxury—his narratives remind the other characters that they must be thankful for what they have, lest their riches be taken away. He continues to write and sing his *narco corridos*, telling the story of those around him and honoring their accomplishments, while at the same time reminding them who the source of their well-off lifestyle is—in essence, he lets el Rey's subjects know that, without el Rey, they would still be living a life of squalor; therefore they should maintain their loyalties where they are.[57] All of the inspiration that the characters draw on during their daily life, all of their bravery and their willpower, is a directly attributed to el Rey. The Artista's *narco corridos* are meant to honor el Rey and to tell the truth about the extent of his power or of his history—something that comes back to hurt both characters later on in the novel. However, it is through the Artista's *narco corridos* that we learn more about the participants in the kingdom and their roles in preserving the integrity of el Rey. It is important to note that the Artista's *narco corridos*, although entertaining for most of the characters in the novel, reinforce the power structures that el Rey has created within this

[57] Yuri Herrera, *Trabajos del reino*, 28.

environment, in which he is the sole male figurehead. El Rey's priority throughout the novel is upholding his honor through the image that he creates as a male provider who is able to not only elevate the status of his citizens merely with an interaction or two but is able to transform poverty into riches. The idea that el Rey is the sole male figurehead reflects the ideals of *machismo* as it is defined by history professors Víctor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein because el Rey is placed in the most superior position in a hierarchy that he has created.[58] From his position, el Rey has the ability to manipulate the lives of others because of the influence that he holds over them. Consequently, his subjects aid in upholding the hierarchy that he has created uniquely in his favor.

Although there is a Journalist present in the kingdom, deserving of the attention of the Artista, he is one of the only characters to adamantly deny having a *corrido* written about his role within el Rey's domain. The Artista's responsibility with his *narcocorridos* is to tell the whole truth about the kingdom—as long as it puts the ruler in a favorable light, and even if some details have to be exaggerated. However, there is another character responsible for telling a favorable truth sprinkled with harmless, little white lies—the kingdom's Periodista.[59] Following directions, the Periodista "maintained el Rey's good name," dispelling any negativity present around him or attempting to defame his character.[60] It is due to the fact that he has to protect his credibility that the Periodista denies a *narcocorrido* from the Artista—a *corrido*, telling the truth about his actions,

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[58] Víctor Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 2.

[59] Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 237 of 1102.

[60] Ibid.

would make his reportage lack the credibility it needs to maintain el Rey's image and the loyalty of the public consuming the Periodista's works. Following his logic, it is counterproductive for the general population to be privy to the extent of his involvement in the kingdom because it would create room for questions of accountability. A lack of accountability is precisely what inspires others to create authentic news sources—the *Artista'*s *corridos* in Herrera's novel and the very real "Blog del narco," which has inspired a book titled *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War*, explain that people on the payroll of a kingpin "spinning the news" is what motived the creation or popularity of anonymous reportage.[61] Proving the point of the fugitive reporters, Herrera's Periodista is not only responsible for lying to create a wholesome image of el Rey—he is responsible for spreading propaganda promoting el Rey in a positive manner, as he is assigned the task of spreading the Artista's *corridos* with a network of contacts. This network of propaganda, in existence on *el Rey*'s orders, subliminally maintains the loyalties of those outside of *el Rey*'s court, particularly because they are only exposed to positive messages regarding the force that governs them.

The general public initially rejects the Artista's *corridos*, which are a part of the network of propaganda and the components of narco culture. The Periodista's contacts are relentless in their denial—not because of a lack of talent on the Artista's behalf, but because of the implications of putting music glorifying el Rey on the radio waves. The content of the *corridos* is undesirable and draws negative attention—particularly from the

[61] Fugitive Reporters of "Blog del narco," *Dying for the Truth*, Kindle location 235 of 6564.

"gringos" that have a say in the media that is displayed.[62] El Rey is unsurprised by the revelation, aware that those outside of the kingdom "mustn't be seen speaking well of [him] to the people."[63] He then relies on other methods to spread his word—the streets, overflowing with pirated discs. Reminiscent of the fact that it is the people who spread a *corrido* and give it its popularity, the Artista finds that el Rey has lived up to his promise of spreading his gospel as he comes across vendors selling discs with his music on them. Pirated media is not a particularly new concept, as explained by Ryan Rashotte in his study of narco cinema—although not specific to *corridos*, Rashotte states that "89 percent of narco DVDs sold in Mexico are bootlegs," making bootlegging a popular venue of spreading media relevant to drug traffickers.[64] The presence of *corridos* and false journalism in the novel is not merely indicative of a form of entertainment that may be enjoyed by the general population, but rather they are indicative of the reach that el Rey has within his circle of influence. El Rey has created a social sphere in which he is the one that decides what is legitimate and what is not, in addition to deciding what is able to reach the population he is governing. *Corridos* and journalism, in this context, aid in creating and upholding the image that el Rey so desperately needs in order to keep his kingdom afloat—the image of a hyper-masculine figure who is able to provide for all of his population. Since honor is dependent on public perception, el Rey is able to maintain his honor in the eyes of his citizens due to the constant propaganda flowing through the kingdom that paints him in a uniquely positive light.

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[62] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 403 of 1102.

[63] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 43 of 1102.

[64] Ryan Rashotte*, Narco Cinema,* 5.

However, honor does not limit itself to the idea of public perception—Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera's definition of honor also includes the importance of ties to the divine. This relationship with the divine and its implications are not forgotten by Herrera, especially when one considers that the Artista is not the only one spreading the gospel of el Rey. Briefly, the reader encounters the presence of the Padre, a character who represents faith and el Rey's relationship with the Catholic Church, further strengthening his image as a figurehead. The Padre allows the existence of a relationship between religious life and the life of the characters in the kingdom who are at the mercy of el Rey. Not only is it the Journalist's and the Artista's job to maintain el Rey's image, it is also the Padre's responsibility to provide a positive, almost godly representation of el Rey to those who follow his faith. The Padre's presence, however brief, strengthens the idea of el Rey as a divine figure who is providing the poor with a means with which to absolve their sins. This relationship with the divine, however, is not without its shortcomings. Just as the Artista benefits from his relationship with el Rey, the Padre must also receive a reward in exchange for his work maintaining el Rey's honor. The Padre offers his services, such as blessing and burying the dead, to el Rey and his court and in exchange receives funding, which he uses to build churches and other places of worship that will allow him to "get the poor hooked on heaven."[65] During the single encounter with the Padre, el Rey asks him to bury a member of his court that has been found murdered, a reasonable request for a man of faith. However, the Padre is unable to restrain himself or his greed and reminds el Rey that he still needs income for his "ranchito," which is not a

[65] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 297 of 1102.

religious institution.[66] This relationship with the church is not uncommon, as demonstrated in other works, such as Sabina Berman's *El narco negocia con Dios*. Berman's play demonstrates the intricacies of power and faith by presenting a narco who bargains with God to make decisions that will absolve him of his sins, regardless of his intent to continue committing them or not. Nonetheless, there are differences between Berman's narco, Ramón, and Herrera's king. The role of faith in Herrera's novel is subtle, hidden between lines and wordplay, while Berman's play demonstrates clearly how the narco uses faith to his benefit. Ramon claims to be a religious man in the moments that he is not participating in business or work, strengthening his claims with the fact that he has "*construido cinco—cinco—iglesias*" to excuse his erratic behavior.[67] While Herrera's king has never verbalized his desire to commit a sin, Ramon bargains with God to determine the value of a sin—a pre-meditated murder—and comically establishes with Him that the death of another character is worth two chapels.[68] In Herrera's novel, there is a total absence of God, and every bargain is made with the Padre.

The Padre's legitimacy further comes into doubt when he states that the assassinated member of the court, Pocho, "probably deserved" his brutal demise.[69] His statement further strengthens the idea of the divinity of el Rey*,* as is present in the Artista's reaction. Angered by the Padre's callousness, he remembers the significance of

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[66] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 310 of 1102.

[67] Sabina Berman, *El narco negocia con Dios* (México, D.F.: Ediciones El Milagro, 2013), 79.

[68] Sabina Berman, *El narco negocia con Dios*, 90.

[69] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 310 of 1102.

el Rey—witnesses him as someone who has sacrificed himself to bear a cross for his kingdom, giving his subjects a home and a place in the world in the midst of their misery, reminiscent of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. El Rey almost seems to replace God for the members of the court and inhabitants of the kingdom, demonstrated in the subtleties in Herrera's writing. The English translation of the novel stylizes el Rey's name with a capital "K," as that is his official title and post throughout most of *Trabajos del reino*. To reinforce this sentiment, another king is introduced—a rival kingpin, whose name is stylized with lowercase letters to emphasize his status as an illegitimate ruler. The Artista, disturbed at having to pledge false loyalty to someone to please his *Señor*, reminds "himself that to lie for Him was worth it," stylized as if one were speaking of God.[70] In addition, once the Artista becomes a part of the court, el Rey is no longer solely referred to as the "King"—instead, he is also referred to as "*Señor*," which is a term usually utilized in prayers to God. The *Señor* also makes himself responsible for the wellbeing of the general public of the novel, providing a monthly audience in which peons are able to request el Rey's charity. Although the time for the audience is limited, el Rey seems never to refuse the requests of his people, which include medicine, justice, or financial help, requests that are usually directed to divine beings. El Rey's presence, his radiating divinity established by those around him, is also believed to work "miracles" that cause his people to fall at his feet to kiss, embrace, and adore him.[71] El Rey is not only a male figurehead and a Robin Hood figure throughout the entirety of *Trabajos del reino*, but he is also a heavenly father to most of the population. Herrera creates a

[70] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom* Cons, Kindle location 667 of 1102.

[71] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 423 of 1102.

character that the population seems to be entirely dependent on, even if this dependency is created by pre-approved propaganda on behalf of loyal subjects. This propaganda, however, continues to uphold the power structures that el Rey has constructed within his sphere of influence—a power structure in which he is the ultimate authority and all others must adhere to actions approved by him. Rafael Acosta, a Spanish professor at the University of Kansas, describes the narco as a "guarantor of social order."[72] This social order, in addition to placing el Rey at the center, works to favor those around him in order to maintain his positive image.[73]

The miracles that el Rey works include a transformation of the people around him—his subjects, coming to ask for charity, for example. The Artista makes it a point to mention that the people and their dedication to el Rey awe el Rey's Joyero, although outside of the palace, their presence would have been unnoticeable. Dressed in rags, the subjects make an effort to look their best, believing that el Rey is more likely to reward those with good posture or kempt hair.[74] However, el Rey is capable of changing more than just the appearance of his subjects—he is capable of changing the entire atmosphere of the kingdom, particularly in the architecture that he utilizes. The descriptions of the palace that the Artista provides are descriptions of grandeur—he describes columns, statues, paintings, and furs, admiring the fruits of el Rey's labor. This extravagant architecture is not uncommon in what Ioan Grillo calls "narco-tecture," a phenomenon

[72] Rafael Acosta Morales and Miguel A. Cabañas, "The State and the Caudillo," 180.

[73] Rafael Acosta Morales and Miguel A. Cabañas, "The State and the Caudillo," 184.

[74] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 423 of 1102.

that allows for a luxurious style reminiscent of narcos.[75] Grillo presents the narco as a benefactor of the arts, promoting his influence with his structural style in addition to his *corridos*. As such, it is worth mentioning that the Artista recognizes that these luxurious buildings are a direct result of el Rey's presence—the location in which the palace is built was formerly "a hellhole of waste and infection," which demonstrates el Rey's transformative properties and far-reaching influences.[76] Interestingly enough, Sara Carini points out that Herrera's kingdom closely resembles Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican border town parallel to El Paso and one largely affected by the War on Drugs.[77] Oscar J. Martinez, a professor of history at the University of Arizona, describes Juárez as "the epicenter of the war" due to its "strategic point as a major smuggling corridor."[78] Juárez suffered multiple consequences due to its strategic location, including corruption of the police and law officials and an increase in feminicide, the targeted murder of women, many of whom were sexually abused prior to their deaths and then mutilated post-mortem.[79] Additionally, Acosta praises Yuri Herrera for his representation of a narrative that describes life in a Northern border town without relying on the perspective of a narco, but rather the perspective of bandits surviving along the border.[80]

Although some of Herrera's characters do suffer grisly deaths, Herrera creates the

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[75] Ioan Grillo, *El Narco*, 173.

[76] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 115 of 1102.

[77] Sara Carini, "El trabajo, al lector," 50.

[78] Oscar J. Martinez, *Ciudad Juárez: Saga of a Legendary Border City* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 193.

[79] Oscar J. Martinez, *Ciudad Juárez,* 190.

[80] Rafael Acosta Morales and Miguel A. Cabañas, "The State and the Caudillo," 180.

illusion of a safely guarded community within el Rey's palace. The palace itself further demonstrates el Rey's divinity by providing his subjects with a gated paradise in which they are able to live free of poverty, illness, or need in a "heavenly" refuge, so long as they have his permission and so long as they maintain their loyalties to him. Outside of the outlandish construction of the palace, the Artista is able to explore a part of the palace in which the "King's collection" resides—a garden flush with wild life, in which there "were snakes, tigers, crocodiles, an ostrich and, in a bigger cage, almost its own garden, a peacock."[81] Reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, el Rey's collection is apart from the rest of the palace, almost untouchable in its essence. These extraordinary pets seem to be a trace of Pablo Escobar, who was the "king of cocaine" during his time as a drug trafficker in Colombia, and his legacy.[82] Inspired by the Ochoa brothers, who established Hacienda Veracruz, Escobar created an environment in Colombia in which various exotic animals were capable of existing and even thriving. This environment was dubbed "Hacienda Napoles"—an open-range symbol of power and status that was open to the public, allowing for those to come and witness the extent of Escobar's influence.[83] Herrera's Garden of Eden is also a manifestation of el Rey's power—one that begins to fall apart as his image crumbles and his prized possession, his peacock, suffers a grisly demise, "its throat slit."[84]

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[81] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 363 of 1102.

[82] Catalina M. Jaramillo, "Pablo Escobar: Zoomania in the Narco Imperium. The Glorification of the Cocaine Network," *The Design Journal* 20 (July 2017): 4698.

[83] Catalina M. Jaramillo, "Pablo Escobar," 4699.

[84] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 485 of 1102.

Surprisingly, it is not false kings or bad publicity that crumbles the image of Herrera's King. The honor of el Rey lies in the hands of the women of the kingdom, fleeting in their presence, who contribute to his fall from grace. The role of women in the novel is minor, particularly as Herrera builds an environment dominated by the male presence and by displays of exaggerated masculinity, such as el Rey shooting dead a bar patron for making a reference to his personal life, or the false king using corpses as an intimidation method.[85] Margarita Raillard, a professor at Universitè Grenoble Alpes, discusses the implication of these women as a manifestation of drug-related violence along the U.S.-Mexico border. She names them as "victims of the patriarchy" due to their non-presence and the fact that their names are not professions like the other characters, but rather titles based on gender.[86] The Artista often describes his encounters with someone known only as the Niña, who he shared a bed with during the early stages of his stay at the palace. The Niña leads the Artista to her, singing praises of el Rey and how enjoyable the palace is, repeating that el Rey saved her from a miserable fate. Although the Niña does not find herself in a precarious position or a victim of feminicide once she decides to part ways with the kingdom, her characterization is reminiscent of the women that are victimized in Ciudad Juárez—the real women of Juárez often find themselves

[85] Yuri Herrera, *Trabajos del reino*, 12.

[86] Margarita Remón Raillard, "Glances Across the Border Between Mexico and the United States through the Mexican Literature of the New Millennium: David Toscana (El ejército iluminado, 2006) and Yuri Herrera (Trabajos del reino, 2004 and Señales que precederán el fin del mundo, 2011)," *ILCEA* no. 18 (2013): 14

victims of feminicide after being used for sexual satisfaction by narcos.[87] The Niña, although not explicitly a sex worker, shares intimate encounters with the Artista and later refers to him as a client, implying that she is present to provide sexual satisfaction for the men that el Rey brings into the kingdom. Regardless, she instructs the Artista on the way of life in the palace—shows him how to eat, for example—and in return he writes her a *corrido* and teaches her how to write. Unfortunately, it is the Artista's gifts to the Niña that give her the tools with which to wreak havoc upon el Rey's reign. Once the Artista presents his corrido to the Niña, we begin to see a hint of dissent within the palace walls. Her reaction to the *corrido*, full of anger and resentment, implies that the Artista is someone useless—"a clown," only there to serve others at their request as they rejoice in their own incredulity.[88] The Artista, confused and taken aback at her bitter reaction, questions the happiness she expressed during his first night at the palace—happiness that she declares is meant for "customers," just as he begins to find happiness in the arms of another woman known as the Cualquiera, or the "Commoner," as the English translation refers to her.[89] The Artista's experience with the Niña is his first experience with someone who openly expresses distaste and resentment for el Rey, which puts in question the loyalty that people maintain within the palace walls.

Just as the Niña undoes el Rey, the Cualquiera undoes the Artista. The Cualquiera, whose name was assigned by the Niña in a fit of jealousy, entices the Artista with her body—like the serpent tempting Eve. She expresses interest in a *corrido*, although she

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[87] Oscar J. Martinez, *Ciudad Juárez,* 192.

[88] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 485 of 1102.

[89] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 755 of 1102.

also declares her reluctance to share the truth with anyone living in the palace. As she spends time with the Artista, they learn about each other's backgrounds and what led them to become part of the kingdom—the Cualquiera expresses her close ties to el Rey, who receives services at the hands of the Bruja, who is also her mother. At this time, the Artista learns that the Cualquiera is forbidden fruit—his affections and advances have not been approved by el Rey, who maintains close ties to her family. Due to the Niña's declaration of the Bruja's daughter as a Cualquiera, the Artista was led to believe that his interactions with her would be meaningless, or barely an afterthought in el Rey's mind. However, their close relationship and the Niña's meddling are the beginning of the end. The Cualquiera's loyalties shift, and instead of maintaining her place as a woman meant for el Rey, she opts for the Artista instead. This shift in romantic interests indicates a shift in the dynamic shared by male characters in the novel—when the Cualquiera is presented with the option of two seemingly virile men, she does not opt for el Rey, who has embodied a generous and patriarchal figurehead throughout the novel. Instead, she opts to place her interest and affection on a character whose entire position is owed to el Rey. Despite el Rey's seemingly limitless supply of propaganda, his image starts to tarnish once the Cualquiera makes the decision to pursue another man, putting el Rey's honor at stake.

After the Artista has already established a relationship with the Cualquiera, the Bruja, widely detested in the kingdom, presents the Artista with a crudely written note which he recognizes to have the sloppy handwriting of the Niña. The note declares the Cualquiera as "useless"—useless because of the Artista, who allegedly impregnated her as they explored each other's bodies during their encounters. Surprisingly, the Bruja is

not angry and claims to have the solution to the problem. The problem that the Bruja presents leads back to the secret that the Artista was made privy to at the beginning of the novel—the secret that el Rey felt necessary to kill to protect. Overwhelmed, the Artista seeks the Niña to demand the truth or to demand to know how she is aware of such a feat but finds nothing but "a couple of left-behind dresses."[90] In his desperation, he hides the Cualquiera away from the prying eyes of the kingdom and the grasp of the Bruja, unaware that he is making his situation more precarious by ruining the Bruja's solution to the issue that has arisen. In this context, honor is a fragile concept that is easily tarnished with the introduction of an illegitimate child, much like Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera propose that it is in most literary iterations.[91] In their discussion of honor, Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera propose the idea that honor is "dynamic and malleable," with solutions available for issues that would otherwise be perceived as being a means to an end.[92] They specifically reference the question of illegitimate children and the fact that they are brought up as legitimate children in order to eliminate suspicion and allow the men the opportunity to redeem themselves socially.

Unfortunately, the Artista, who only has adoration and respect for el Rey, is called to an audience in which the impact of his actions is revealed. The Artista's latest song has put el Rey's reputation at stake, revealing his greatest and most emasculating secret—infertility. El Rey, although residing in a paradise where there is seemingly nothing amiss, is unable to have a proper heir to take over for him when the time comes. His

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[90] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 725 of 1102.

[91] Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, *The Faces of Honor,* 14.

[92] Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, *The Faces of Honor*, 14.

weakness, the one weakness that can keep his people from believing that he is the "badass" that he claims to be, has been made public knowledge due to the corridos that the Artista sings for him.[93] According to el Rey, it is not enough for him to merely act masculine or to look masculine—his citizens, the ones for whom he plays the role of godfather, must also believe that he is a masculine figure, or a "badass" as he refers to himself. The Bruja's solution, which is to pass off the Cualquiera's child as the true heir of the kingdom, is thwarted by the Artista's decision to hide the Cualquiera away from their reach. El Rey lashes out against the Artista, destroying his accordion and calling him only "a thing that gets smashed," like other dissidents—like the drunk from the Artista's first encounter with el Rey.[94]

At that point, el Rey becomes only "a man with no power over the terse fabric inside [the Artista's] head."[95] Although the Artista later has the opportunity to return and serve a different king, he refuses, as he is now aware of the kingdom's cons and how the consequences outweigh the benefits. Rashotte recognizes the censorship that producers of *narco corridos* (as well as narco cinema) are under—the introduction of the narco dollar as financial backing makes it difficult for these content creators to express a legitimate narrative.[96] As such, the Artista stayed entirely at the mercy of el Rey until the moment that his work threatened el Rey's status. Through his threats, el Rey effectively frees the Artista from his confines and makes it possible for him to continue his work elsewhere,

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[93] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom* Cons, Kindle location 755 of 1102.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Yuri Herrera, *Kingdom Cons*, Kindle location 834 of 1102.

[96] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema*, 10.

uncensored. The violence that el Rey intends to enact upon the Artista is enough to turn the tides of the Artista's loyalty and push him to stay away from the kingdom, regardless of its riches, because he is now aware of the consequences.

Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* demonstrates the intricate relationship between masculinity and power structures through its depiction of a narco kingpin's interactions with the population he claims to serve. As long as the kingpin manages to maintain an honorable image, particularly one of a masculine figure able to provide for his citizens, he is able to uphold the power structures that he has built that benefit him. Unfortunately, when his masculinity is questioned and his honor is tarnished due to public perception, the carefully constructed power structures start to fall apart and allow for either a shift in power or the destruction of that system. Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* also utilizes its narrative to demonstrate the lasting impact of masculinity in Mexico's culture, especially as it permeates to narco culture and incorporates itself into the existing and newly-created power structures. Furthermore, the perspective that Herrera provides from the point of view of a character lower on the social hierarchy allows the audience to experience shifts in power from a less favorable point of view.

CHAPTER III: LOS REYES DEL INFIERNO: CLASHES OF MASCULINITY IN LUIS ESTRADA'S *EL INFIERNO*

This chapter analyzes a cinematic representation of narco culture, that is, the culture that surrounds or highlights the lives of drug traffickers—a culture that has dominated different facets of pop culture, manifesting itself in different ways such as music, literature, and cinema. Through narco cinema, the spectator and the general population can bear witness to a visual representation of a narco's daily life that incorporates all, if not most, aspects of narco culture, such as narco corridos.[97] Ioan Grillo, a prolific journalist who focuses his work on the drug war in Mexico, writes that narco culture "exalta a los narcotraficantes y […] es responsable por mucha violencia."[98] Grillo explains that the image of a generous father remains at the center of narco culture—a figure that has overcome life as a peasant, has achieved riches and is predisposed to distribute his accumulations amongst the people that helped him to succeed.[99] This chapter utilizes *El infierno* (2010), a film directed by Luis Estrada, to demonstrate the importance of this generous father figure and the relationship between masculinity and power structures in narco culture.

Luis Estrada explores the concept of masculinity in narco culture through the film *El infierno*, which incorporates various traces of the perhaps dramatized daily life of

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[97] Ryan Rashotte, "Narco cultura," in *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Popular Culture*, ed. Frederick L. Aldama (New York: Routledge, 2016), 402.

[98] Ioan Grillo, *El narco: En el corazón de la insurgencia criminal Mexicana* (Barcelona: Ediciones Urano, S.A., 2012), location 3875 of 7086.

[99] Ioan Grillo, *El narco*, Kindle location 3875 of 7086.

narcos in Mexico and reflects the elements that make up the narco cinema genre. Luis Estrada presents the narcos in his film through the eyes of his protagonist, Benny—a man desperate to provide for his family through any means necessary. In turn, Benny showcases the narcos as strong, male providers who are willing to make the sacrifices they must in order to protect themselves, their families, and their honor.

In order to better understand the implications of *El infierno*, it is important to consider narco cinema as a cinematic genre. Narco cinema, one of the branches of narco culture, demonstrates narcos and their splendor in visual form—surrounded by money, violence, and pleasures. Ryan Rashotte, who is the author of the only comprehensive study focused on narco cinema, defines it as movies that have been distributed directly via discs—not films that have been released in a cinematic theater.[100] These films are usually created with a small budget—the money that directors and producers receive oftent comes from narcos who are featured in the films.[101] This funding source determines the content of the films, since it is very difficult to create a cinematic work that demonstrates a point of view that affects the benefactor negatively. This is further demonstrated by Shaul Schwarz's documentary, *Narco Cultura,* which shows how narcos exchange money with content creators.[102] Additionally, the budget of these movies allows for them to be produced in large quantities with ease—these movies are produced

[100] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico's B-Filmography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

[101] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema,* 4.

[102] Shaul Schwarz, *Narco cultura* (2012; New York: Ocean Size Pictures, 2014), Netflix.

during the course of a month, and the directors have the ability to work frequently, producing up to ten movies a year.[103]

Rashotte argues, along with various journalists, that narco cinema is a money laundering tool for drug traffickers, and that it also serves to distribute propaganda in favor of the cartels.[104] Producers of narco films frequently claim that they suffer from extreme censorship on behalf of drug traffickers and Mexican social media—however, this censorship does not refer to the presentation of graphic images that demonstrate violence in an extreme manner. In fact, this censorship refers to the themes present in this genre of cinema when they are related to drug traffickers highlighted on the silver screen. Film directors, fearing for their well-being and under the pressure of securing the flow of funds that allow these films to be produced, favor themes emphasizing dignity and respect for narcos instead of themes that show their flaws. Additionally, some directors have decided to cease production of narco films due to the fear that they might end up victims of narco violence if they produce something that the narcos could consider inappropriate.[105] Nonetheless, there also exists pressure on behalf of the Agreement on Informative Coverage of Violence, "an editorial manifesto" that highlights the need for sensibility when dealing with themes of drug trafficking and requests that journalists dedicate themselves to reporting on facts regarding narcos—additionally, this agreement attempts to prohibit propaganda from the cartels present in cinematic adaptations through prohibiting language used by drug traffickers and prohibiting the image of the narco as a

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[103] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema*, 5.

[104] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema*, 4.

[105] Ryan Rashotte, "Narco cultura," in *The Routledge Companion,* 400.

hero.[106] Censorship against the positive image of narcos is an attempt to control representations of narcos that are readily available to the general public—representations that, often, demonstrate narcos as virtuous figures and the government as the principal enemy.[107]

Apart from characteristics related to distribution and production, Rashotte specifies that actors in narco films are not simply actors and actresses, but rather people living out their daily lives on the screen. What this means is that, if there is a character who plays a narco in the film, the possibility of this actor being a narco in his day-to-day life is very high—this is also the case with other characters, such as prostitutes or police.[108] These characters personify tropes present in narco cinema that set the genre apart from films that simply feature drug traffickers as characters. These tropes include kitschy violence, or violence that is dramatized with the intent of inciting shock within the audience, and hyper-masculinity, which are elements that have become the backbone of narco cinema and maintain its presence in entertainment circles.[109] It is necessary to address that even though Luis Estrada's *El infierno* includes many narco characters, the film does not fulfill the requirements of narco cinema that Rashotte highlights. Rashotte explains that *El infierno* should not be considered a narco film due to its film budget, the caliber of actors that it uses, and the international recognition that it has gleaned. In fact, Rashotte classifies films like Estrada's as part of a genre that he labels "new narco

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[106] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema*, 8.

[107] Ryan Rashotte, "Narco cultura," in *The Routledge Companion*, 399.

[108] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema*, 4.

[109] Ryan Rashotte, "Narco cultura," in *The Routledge Companion,* 402.

cinema"—this genre is theoretically composed of professional-grade films that use the same themes to highlight or criticize narco cinema.[110] Although the film does not fulfill the parameters of "traditional narco cinema," it will be included in this analysis of narco culture due to the themes it explores.

Just like corridos that make their way to the general public through the radio or repetition, Guadalupe Pérez-Anzaldo argues that narco cinema also reaches the youth of Mexico relatively quickly. Although *El infierno* uses the same cinematic tropes as narco cinema, Pérez-Anzaldo explains that Estrada does not use dramatized violence to promote images of successful narcos, but instead to warn Mexico's youth about the results of the War on Drugs that does not discriminate in regard to its victims.[111] Even though Estrada includes graphic scenes, the violence shown is often directed toward narcos or those related to them. On those occasions when narcos are unable to murder or hurt their victims directly, they are satisfied with being able to hurt their family members, even if they have nothing to do with their family member's drug trafficking escapades.

The visibility of the aforementioned themes can be interpreted as a type of glorification of the narco lifestyle. In fact, Rashotte discusses the idea that narco films and their representation of kitsch violence contribute to the normalization of violence in Mexico, although they do not glorify narcos directly.[112] Violent scenes that often include torture, dismemberment, or decapitation help to desensitize the public—an audience that

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[110] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema,*159.

[111] Guadalupe Pérez-Anzaldo, *El espectáculo de la violencia en el cine mexicano del siglo XXI* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Eón, 2014), 214.

[112] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema*, 9.

already experiences violence through the war on drugs, which extends the durability of the genre of narco cinema.[113] Although it is important to note that some academics argue that the use of violence in cinematic adaptations can help keep the general public from getting involved in illicit trafficking schemes, it is important to consider how violence relates to ideas of masculinity and power structures within these films.[114]

Masculinity and "machismo" dominate narco cinema. When women are portrayed in these films, they exist for the sole purpose of advancing the plot of the film. They are secondary characters, present to highlight the male protagonist—the women in Estrada's film, for example, contribute little in the way of dialogue or conflict resolution. Instead, they exist in a context of sexual satisfaction or in a manner that allows their male counterparts to display their prowess in a way that highlights their masculinity. O. Hugo Benavides describes the woman as a tool or a commodity of sexual desire, available as a prize for the protagonist who can win her favor through confrontation.[115] There exist many ways through which women can advance the plot of the film—they can be victims of murder and provide the hero with a motive for vengeance or they might need a sacrifice from him. Interestingly enough, Benavides also describes women as the cause of the death of one or many cartel members within these cinematic representations.[116] Rashotte also discusses the use of women as plot tools throughout his comprehensive

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[113] Ryan Rashotte, "Narco cultura," in *The Routledge Companion,* 403.

[114] Guadalupe Pérez-Anzaldo, *El espectáculo de la violencia,* 214.

[115] O. Hugo Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 125.

[116] Ibid.

study, referring to the condemnation of Mexican cinema's showcasing of "sexist depictions of women" including, but not limited to, women being a part of prostitution, rape, or spontaneous sex.[117] During the course of *El infierno*, there are very few women who find themselves in a meaningful role. They play characters dependent on men whose efforts at improving their quality of life are in vain—these characters exist for the sole purpose of advancing the goals of men. They are unable to provide for their own homes or families—they constantly find themselves at the mercy of the men around them and their financial resources. For example, Lupita, a leading woman in Estrada's film, is a victim of prostitution before she begins her relationship with the protagonist. After the protagonist, Benny, has established himself in her life, he removes her from her role as a prostitute only to engage in spontaneous and gratuitous sex with her and other prostitutes in the film, prioritizing male sexual gratification throughout the film and continuing to minimize the role of women. While the role of women is drastically limited in film, men are highlighted at the peak of masculinity and play various roles: bosses, narcos, providers, lovers, and fathers—who demonstrate a mobility that is not extended to women.[118] They have the ability to provide everything and at the same time destroy it—an ability that they show off during the film. Men who deviate from this masculine image by displaying femininity within these films—such as homosexual men—are assassinated and used as a warning to be heeded.

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[117] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema,* 143.

[118] Claudia Elizabeth Puente, "Masculinidad y Violencia en el Nuevo Cine Mexicano: Las peliculas de Luis Estrada," *La palabra* 28 (2016): 59-72, https://doaj.org/article/41fc48f66e2c40b8b8056ee76175f714.

Estrada's film also employs the use of kitschy violence, which allows the director to advance the plot of the film because of the way that it is woven into the characters' livelihoods. Characters in Estrada's film are forced to execute horrific acts of violence, such as dismembering fellow cartel members or punishing traitors, in order to prosper in the environment in which they find themselves. Narcos in *El infierno* have few options for survival—they are in charge of torturing their adversaries, cutting off their fingers or ears and throwing these extremities towards the audience and forcing the spectators to fulfill the role of witnesses of narco violence. Sometimes, violent scenes can even be comic in nature—for example, when the protagonist finds himself in a situation where he is forced to cut off someone's ear as punishment, he throws the severed ear at the floor in disgust and adamantly wipes his hands off. However, during the course of the film, the violence reaches a point in which cutting off fingers and ears is no longer sufficient to get the message across. Bit by bit, the audience experiences how violence escalates in a narco environment—Estrada includes decapitations, scenes with bloody corpses ridden with bullets, and the dismemberment of characters who were not loyal to the protagonists of the film. Violence is not only used in this manner to shock the audience, but also to reinforce a power structure built by narco characters in which honor is a valuable commodity. When Benny finds himself in a situation where he needs to dismember a fellow narco for snitching on their boss, he carries with him a message of dominance from the narco kingpin he works for. This kingpin, Don Reyes, demonstrates this show of power in order to protect his honor and masculinity—it is his responsibility to maintain his image intact to dissuade competition from rivals and to prevent further betrayals.

Violence in Estrada's film is cyclical—those involved in drug trafficking who do not survive leave family members in their wake that are predisposed to take up arms in order to find vengeance or fulfillment. Additionally, within this cinematic narrative, there is no way to free oneself from drug trafficking that is not by way of death—the narcos in charge of the town the characters live in, the protagonist, his best friend, brother, and nephew all end up dead or involved in an escalating situation, walking on the same path without the ability to find a better future or means of survival.

Additionally, according to Pérez-Anzaldo, Estrada critiques the Mexican government throughout his film, making it clear that the film is meant to be a social critique related to the success of narcos and the relationship that they have with the government. The narcos in Luis Estrada's film are responsible for appointing government officials introduced throughout the movie and controlling their actions—they even assume total control of the town hall—even though they complain that they look like politicians. As such, Estrada demonstrates how narcos create power structures that benefit them. The Reyes, who are the aptly named kingpins in Estrada's film, use violence as a display of power in order to maintain these power structures, in addition to using money to fulfill the role of the godfather that Grillo brings up and provide for the citizens that follow them. The topics of social and political critique in relation to corruption as it is shown in *El infierno* were previously "intocable," which causes controversy when one works with Estrada's cinema.[119] *El infierno* premiered during the Bicentennial Celebration of Mexican Independence and the Centennial Celebration of the Mexican Revolution—a celebration that Estrada critiques inside the film due to the fact

[119] Claudia Elizabeth Puente, "Masculinidad y Violencia," 59-72.

that the narcos assume complete political power during the celebration of the bicentennial anniversary and are later massacred in a violent and graphic scene.[120] Mexico's previous president, Felipe Calderón, insists that the film contributes to the defamation of Mexico's image and its national spirit. Meanwhile, Estrada maintains that the film deals more with the causes of violence than violence itself—causes like corruption, which he demonstrates in the *El infierno* universe when he gives the narcos the power of the law.[121] Ironically, the film received funding from the very Mexican state that it critiques due to the fact that it was funded by the Mexican Institute of Cinematography.[122] Nonetheless, instead of using the funds received to create a work celebrating Mexico's successes, Estrada decided to provide a critique of the state of Mexico as a country—a state that does not merit celebration due to the number of people who have fallen victim to narco violence.

El infierno also clearly deals with themes of honor—a theme often present in narco cinema. The characters in the film have to maintain a strict loyalty to the narcos who establish the law of the land in order to uphold their honor, which is dependent on public perception.[123] Those who are capable of executing a betrayal find themselves at a hair-raising end and become victims of the same dramatized violence that sets this genre

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[120] Guadalupe Pérez-Anzaldo, *El espectáculo de la violencia,* 211.

Original Spanish: "estrenada durante las celebraciones del Bicentenario de la Independencia y del Centenario de la Revolución Mexicana."

[121] Jo Tuckman, "Mexico's Drug War Captured in Film Comedy Named Hell," accessed April 14, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/11/mexico-drug-wars-film-comedy.

[122] Guadalupe Pérez-Anzaldo, *El espectáculo de la violencia,* 211

[123] Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, *The Faces of Honor,* 19.

apart. Even if the characters are close in rank to narco bosses or have a previously clean record of following orders, mercy is never applied to acts of treason. Those characters who are punished, who are now only considered insects or roaches, are shot in the back after attempting to run or find themselves tortured and at the brink of death. It is difficult to be unfaithful in the universe that Luis Estrada cultivates, especially since narcos have connections to every authority figure present throughout the film. For example, when the protagonist attempts to report the narcos to the police, he finds that those men whom he should be able to trust are actually spies for the narcos, turning in those who betray them or who seek help from law enforcement agencies that appear legitimate.

Characters in Yuri Herrera's *Kingdom Cons* (discussed in the previous chapter) suffer a similar fate. Herrera's Rey, much like Don Reyes, is preoccupied with the public's idea of him as a superior and overtly-masculine figure. El Rey, however, is able to depend on the Artista throughout the majority of the novel to maintain his image and therefore protect his honor—it is not until the Artista presumably betrays him that the public's image of him begins to deteriorate and el Rey finds himself in a position to punish those who have betrayed him or may be able to betray him.

Nonetheless, those who fall victim to narco violence due to their treason are the men of the film—the women are free of culpability, perhaps due to their role as submissive characters incapable of acting on their own free will. The only occasion in which a woman finds herself a victim of violence directed by treason is when she is replaceable and the only way of enacting a punishment for a male character. Although the wife of the narco boss—the narco in charge of all others—betrays him and commits adultery, she does not suffer any consequences until the end of the film, and only suffers

them by chance. Her death, violent and abrupt, has nothing to do with her infidelity, but rather with her physical position in relation to her husband during an attack on him. Herrera's women find themselves in a similar position—the Niña, for example, is able to escape the kingdom before el Rey realizes that he has been betrayed, and the Cualquiera is smuggled away from the kingdom before anyone else is able to identify her as being pregnant with an illegitimate heir.

Benjamín García, who is known as "Benny" throughout the duration of Estrada's film, is a man with humble intentions. He travels to the United States to fulfill his dream of earning money for the family he has left behind in Mexico—in particular, he wants to save up money for his brother, whom he promises that he will send for so that he can also prosper in the United States. Deported back to Mexico after spending twenty years in the United States, he finds his family in pieces and himself without a penny in his pocket to show for his twenty-year long departure, stripping away some of his masculinity, given that he intended to work in the United States to send money to his home. His mother finds herself continuously suffering from poverty, and his brother, who passed away waiting for Benny to send for him, infiltrated the narco world as "El Diablo," managing to prosper in his own way until he fell victim to the same violence that he inflicted on others. Although initially Benny cannot believe what has happened to his brother and finds it difficult to digest that he willingly became deeply involved in drug trafficking, he finds himself following his little brother's footsteps. Benny's decisions continue the cyclical nature of violence in the film—regardless of how they find themselves under these circumstances, men in Estrada's film are unable to escape the narco lifestyle. Even though Benny has spent twenty years in a foreign land, he immediately faces an

introduction to the narco lifestyle upon arriving in his hometown of San Miguel Arcángel—although he is not immediately forced to join a cartel, he does immediately experience violence in the form of mutilated bodies strewn across the town.

Once he arrives in Mexico, Benny finds himself without money and with the hopes and expectations of what is left of his family on his shoulders—namely the hope that he will have the finances to demonstrate that he worked while he spent time in the U.S. Nonetheless, Benny attempts to work and lead an honest life, fixing tires with his godfather until he becomes privy to the fact that his brother has left behind a widow, Lupita, and a son. Lupita very quickly becomes Benny's lover—given the circumstances, Benny promises her that he will find the means to provide for her and her son so that she can leave her profession as an escort. Benny's position as the sole provider for his family is one that also traces back to the themes of masculinity and honor within the film. Women are incapable of overcoming their circumstances without help from their male counterparts and find themselves in professions that are less than desirable in order to survive, if they can find an income at all. For example, Benny's mother continues to live in poverty because neither of her sons is able to help her financially, while El Diablo's widow has to turn to a life of sex work in order to survive after his death. Her home reflects her less-than-desirable circumstances, particularly due to how neglected and empty it is. Benny, as such, feels the need to become a provider for Lupita, especially because she is the mother to his deceased brother's son. In his family dynamic, Benny adopts the role of the generous godfather, working to bring riches not only to his new lover, but to the family he abandoned while he traveled through the United States. His family is able to depend on him and he is able to uphold his masculinity and honor, which

were at risk due to his mother's spreading the idea that he was unable to send a single *peso* back home to support his family, even though he was supposedly working in the United States to bring his brother with him.

However, Lupita and Benny maintain a very superficial relationship in the eyes of the spectator. Benny promises her a world of financial gain only minutes after having met her—interestingly enough, he promises her these things while they are in the midst of sexual intercourse and she, excited by his statements, accidentally calls him by his late brother's name, El Diablo, demonstrating that their relationship is superficial even to her. Even though it is true that Benny immediately looks for the means to provide for her with the limited resources that exist in San Miguel Arcángel, Benny makes similar promises to an escort whom he finds during a night out with his friend. Both of the women that Benny sleeps with motivate him to reach his goals, but he does not maintain a meaningful relationship with either of them. Even though he continues to live with Lupita and help her with her son, and even holds a vigil for her once she dies, the moments that he spends with her as a couple are few and far between. If anything, Lupita exists almost exclusively to allow Benny the means with which to show his potential as a provider.

Benny tries to find honest work in the town that he lives in, but the limited resources leave him without money—much like when he arrived from the U.S. and was stripped down, his last dollar stolen from him. Initially, Benny finds monetary refuge in his best friend, El Cochiloco. He helps Benny with his *ferias*, which are small amounts of money. However, the *ferias* loaned to him by El Cochiloco are not enough to sustain Benny and his family. Facing the detention of his nephew and without the means to pay for his bail, Benny finds himself in the kingdom of the narcos, begging for handouts with

guidance from El Cochiloco. El Cochiloco guides Benny through the Hell that is the world of drug trafficking, teaching him the steps that he must take in order to be successful and pointing out that he does not have to be afraid of going to Hell because they are currently inhabiting it.[124] For instance, El Cochiloco teaches him how to please the narcos by showing him how to take part in violent acts, such as torture, and how to display corpses throughout the streets of Mexico. Bit by bit, Benny becomes used to this lifestyle and even more used to the monetary gain that it includes. El Cochiloco himself is an exemplary man, incorporating himself in the narco lifestyle easily while working to support his large and growing family and maintaining his loyalty to the Reyes, who fund his lifestyle and allow him to be the provider his family needs.

The Reyes—Don José Reyes, Doña Mari Reyes, and Jesús Reyes—are the narcos in charge of San Miguel de Arcángel. Already, from their names alone, the viewer can infer that the Reyes are not only royalty, but divine royalty. Paul Julian Smith is quick to point out the irony in naming the narco family after the Holy Family and their ranch from which they operate as "Little Corner of Heaven."[125] Apart from their names, the Reyes set themselves apart with their ability to provide large quantities of money for those who work for them, completely embodying the generous godfather role Grillo identified as a common theme throughout different manifestations of narco culture.[126] The riches that the family own are displayed from the second that the audience is introduced to them,

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[124] Paul Julian Smith, *Mexican Screen Fiction: Between Cinema and Television* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 176.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ioan Grillo, *El narco,* Kindle location 3880 of 7086.

primarily through the "*narcotectura,*" that is, the mansions and material goods that make up the narco lifestyle, that are abundant in their home—an *hacienda* from which they manage their operations and where they receive the poor citizens of San Miguel Arcángel who seek their mercy. Nonetheless, their riches are not limited to their own material displays, but rather the material displays that their narco employees are able to afford thanks to their funding, such as lavish cars, ornate articles of clothing, and even entire businesses.

These financial displays of power are not limited to their effect on small, low income communities, but rather extend their reach to those who have direct influence over the political climate of the areas dominated by narcos. The Reyes, with their limitless influence, bestow positions of power—such as the mayor's seat—to people who promise their unwavering loyalty. Additionally, the Reyes control the armed forces of the small town they inhabit, in spite of their illegitimacy—they control the police, the federal government, and the narcos, all of which enforce the law that the Reyes have established. The Reyes, understandably, do not allow the people on their payroll to forget who it is that put them in such a position of power, and have no qualms about assassinating or exercising violence upon those who betray them. The role of this malicious family and its political influence is one of the characteristics that brings to light the full scope of corruption not only in a fictional environment, but also in Mexican society, which Estrada criticizes through this film.[127] The influence that the Reyes hold even extends to religious figures and beliefs—they often enjoy the company of a reverend, especially once they bury their dead, and later ascend him to the position of the Pope. The Reyes are

[127] Puente, "Masculinidad y Violencia en el Nuevo Cine Mexicano," 59-72.

able to create these power structures that benefit them because of the public's perception of them and because of their influence. Don Reyes is presumably able to use financial compensation in order to ensure loyalty within his circles, but he is also able to uphold his own image by publicly punishing those who wrong him and rewarding his best men. Yuri Herrera's Rey employs a similar strategy, promoting those who uphold his image within his kingdom and publicly punishing dissenters.[128]

Initially, Don Reyes appears as the bountiful godfather that Grillo describes. He receives Benny immediately but warns him that he needs to maintain his loyalty in the right places—one of the themes that Rashotte identifies as the backbone of narco cinema.[129] Immediately, Don Reyes displays his power in front of Benny and Cochiloco—when his son defies him and contradicts his statements, José physically attacks him various times for embarrassing him. Nonetheless, although it is clear that Don Reyes is the leader among the narcos he employs, Doña Reyes is the one that demands control and respect from José. She threatens him in front of the others for hurting her son, demanding that he apologize. Doña Reyes is the only female character throughout the film who demonstrates the ability to wield such power over a man. Her word, it seems, holds plenty of weight as her demands for vengeance motivate Don Reyes and the rest of the narcos to commit acts of violence—for example, once her son is assassinated by their rivals, Doña Reyes demands the literal heads of their enemies as recompense. However, it is important to note that Doña Reyes' power does not make her immune—when the Reyes face their death at the hands of Benny, Don Reyes

[128] Yuri Herrera, *Trabajos del reino*, 12.

[129] Ryan Rashotte, *Narco cinema*, 10.

immediately uses her as a human shield, sacrificing the woman that has supported the kingdom that he has built and has presumably helped him overcome his circumstances. Additionally, although Doña Reyes is able to express her desires, it is Don Rey who must give the final word. Doña Reyes, even with the power that she holds throughout the earlier parts of the film, ends up in a similar position as the other women of the film—replaceable and useless, considering that she could not protect her husband from death.

The money that the Reyes provide Benny comes with a moral cost, the demand for loyalty and work, that is hard both physically and emotionally. The jobs that Benny has to complete for the Reyes are not simple acts of manual labor like the honest work Benny was completing with his godfather at his mechanic shop. The Reyes demand that Benny act as a drug trafficker, even though he looks physically uncomfortable in his role when he starts working for them and completing the tasks asked of him. Benny is not only responsible for trafficking drugs, but for sending messages on behalf of the Reyes—these messages, however, are messages that are sent by inflicting physical harm upon others. He, together with El Cochiloco, assassinate traitors that dare to work for the Reyes and their rivals at the same time and share private information, sometimes torturing them and many times displaying their bodies with what have become known as *narcomantas*, or cardboard signs that announce declarations or warnings on behalf of the narcos that committed the violence.[130] The *narcomantas* are one of many aspects of narco culture that Estrada highlights in his film—showing how common it is to find mutilated

[130] Fugitive Reporters of "Blog del Narco," *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2013), Kindle location 124 of 6564.

bodies with these signs on the streets of Mexico following increased drug trafficker activity and critiquing the circumstances under which this violence occurs.

However, these grisly jobs allow Benny to put together enough money to make his family's dreams come true. Although he does not take his lover and her son to the U.S., Benny showers them in riches and pays off Lupita's debt to the brothel she works in, which allows her to move freely. He also updates his godfather's mechanic shop by building him a better one, which seems almost pointless because his godfather states that they do not have the clients to make the upgrade worthwhile. Benny himself enjoys the riches that he is earning and purchases a new wardrobe, jewelry for himself and his lover, and a customized pickup truck from which he does most of his work. Perhaps the most impressive purchase of all is the lavish grave he purchases for his brother, which is made entirely of marble and plays narco corridos in memory of El Diablo, incorporating various facets of narco culture into one shot, both music and architecture. The monetary compensation that Benny receives from the Reyes allows him to improve his own image and his own standing within his family and his sphere of influence. Although his mother thought of him as a lesser man for abandoning his family and not sending them any money, her perception of him improves once he is able to affect her living conditions and provide for her in the same way that the Reyes are providing for him.

However, all of these riches come at a moral price for Benny that he does not realize until later. He starts to lose sight of what he considers his priorities and invests his money in material goods that will not stand the test of time—his dream of returning to the United States and taking his family with him seem forgotten while he experiments with the splendor that working for a narco brings. Unfortunately, Benny only remembers the

superficial promises he has made when he is experiencing the negative consequences of working for narcos, such as the possibility of the persecution, capture, torture, or murder of his colleagues. For example, Benny is visibly shaken when he is arrested and interrogated by a federal officer, and when his best friend, El Cochiloco, is murdered shortly after the death of his oldest son as a consequence of a misunderstanding following the assassination of Jesús Reyes.

In this manner, the acts of violence that occur during the course of *El infierno* that give Benny innumerable riches are also the acts of violence that condemn him. Although he has been able to provide financially for his family, fulfilling the dreams of his relatives, Benny's emotions end up taking priority above all else once he finds himself in a position where he has to choose between his family or the narco lifestyle. Benny is completely complicit in the hunt for the traitor that snitched and allowed Jesús Reyes to be assassinated—the search for the traitor seems almost routine, as there have been previous instances of Benny and El Cochiloco hunting down people who are indebted to the Reyes and hurting them as a warning. However, the circumstances change when Benny is told how his brother, El Diablo, was killed at the hands of the Reyes, and that the traitor they are looking for is none other than his own nephew. El Diablo, the man that indirectly opened the doors to the drug trafficking realm for Benny, committed what could be considered the deepest act of treason imaginable in a society that values masculinity as much as it does—he slept with Doña Reyes on numerous occasions, betraying the trust that Don Reyes put in him. Don Reyes, infuriated by this act of treason on behalf of a man made rich by his hand, demands the assassination of El Diablo—

unfortunately, all of Benny's colleagues are aware of how his brother actually died, and none see fit to tell him, lest he attempt to betray the Reyes as well as an act of vengeance.

As he becomes a victim of narco violence, Benny attempts to rectify his actions as much as he can. As Pérez-Anzaldo argues, Benny, like Estrada himself, attempts to prevent Mexico's youth—or San Miguel Arcángel's youth, in the form of his nephew—from involving itself more in drug trafficking and from getting involved in either side of the War on Drugs through his cinematic reach.[131] While attempting to avoid the repetition of his brother's narrative, Benny helps his nephew escape and captures the only narco who knows the true identity of the traitor—Huasteco, who swears that he has no intentions of divulging this information to the Reyes. Later, Benny attempts to trade the information that he has on the Reyes for immunity and legal protection, without realizing at first that the federal agents recording his confession actually work for the Reyes, demonstrating how far the Reyes' power reaches. Benny is consequently kidnapped, tortured, robbed, and left for dead on his brother's grave—this sequence in the film shows the extent of government corruption by displaying how federal agents can come to work for narcos and how minor agents can be bought with more monetary incentive, particularly because Benny was able to offer a high enough bribe to be taken to his brother's grave.

The cycle of violence continues. Benny finds Lupita decapitated in her bed as a warning to him which ultimately advances the plot of the film by allowing Benny to have another reason for revenge against the narcos who brought him these riches to begin with. Once he experiences the violent consequences of retracting his loyalty to the Reyes—

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[131] Guadalupe Pérez-Anzaldo, *El espectáculo de la violencia,* 214.

consequences that he had no problem executing when they were not aimed at him or his family—Benny dedicates himself solely to violence. He hides himself at his mother's house, recovering his strength and preparing for the moment when he can take revenge against those who handed him his fortune in exchange for his unwavering loyalty, his own honor completely destroyed as he is labeled as a traitor and as he has lost the woman who gave him the incentive to become a provider.

It is during the celebration of the Bicentennial of Mexico's Independence, where the Reyes are worshipped and Don Reyes is named mayor, that Benny decides to take action. Much like how the Reyes assassinated their enemies by showering them with bullets, Benny shoots at the Reyes from the audience in front of them, killing them and their colleagues in an exaggerated display of violence and without giving them the opportunity to escape. The violence that the Reyes commit during the course of the film—and even before, starting with the death of El Diablo—ends up causing their own downfall and the downfall of the kingdom that they have built in Hell. Unfortunately, the cycle continues—at the end of the film, the audience is privy to the return of Benny's nephew, now known as El Diablito, to San Miguel Arcángel. He has just returned from Arizona to visit the graves of his family members—graves all entirely built from marble—but he ends up assassinating a group of men, demonstrating how difficult it is to escape the violence. It is clear to see that, following acts of betrayal, San Miguel Arcángel quickly becomes a town characterized by the seemingly unending violence wrought by the Reyes and their narcos. Much like how Boullosa and Wallace establish that Ciudad Juarez's murder rate rises exponentially during the declaration of the War on Drugs, murder rates in San Miguel Arcángel rise quickly as rival narcos fight each other

and as the Reyes' narcos fight amongst themselves.[132] Much like in Ciudad Juarez, narcos are not the only ones exposed to this cyclical violence—when Benny murders the Reyes and their accomplices on the celebration of the Bicentennial, he does it in front of hundreds of civilian witnesses, exposing them to the intricacies of narco politics and simultaneously putting them in harm's way.[133] The comparison to Ciudad Juárez in border narratives is nothing out of the ordinary, as witnessed by Rafael Acosta Morales' comparison of Herrera's fictional town to Ciudad Juárez in the previous chapter.

Narco cinema allows for the general public to have access to a visual representation of the daily life of drug traffickers. Although Luis Estrada's *El infierno* has reached international recognition, it is a suitable example of the genre and the tropes that it employs. More importantly, it demonstrates how important the themes of masculinity and honor are in these cultural productions. Estrada's protagonist, Benny, is almost entirely driven by his desire to be seen as a capable male provider for his family, particularly because of his lack of success prior to his deportation from the United States. El Cochiloco, although a minor character, is able to demonstrate his masculine prowess by providing effortlessly for his large and growing family. Meanwhile, women play a minor role throughout the film, their purpose one of motivating male characters to reach their goals or uncover their true potentials, whether that be as paternal figures, financial providers, or narcos. However, Estrada manages not only to demonstrate the importance of masculinity in narco culture, but also to display how it interacts with existing power structures and how displays of masculinity and the perception of honor can affect

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[132] Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History*, 32.

[133] Oscar J. Martinez, *Ciudad Juárez,* 194.

established power structures. Honor, although not explicitly referenced in the film, drives the actions of the characters as they struggle to save their reputations and change public perceptions of themselves.

CHAPTER IV: MASCULINITY AND NARCO CULTURE

Narco culture is a phenomenon that encompasses many different types cultural productions—it does not limit itself to music, but rather extends itself to literature and film, among other mediums. Although the method of presentation may vary, the narco remains at the center and is highlighted as a predominant and influential figure. This figure can be interpreted as a provider—a man that brings others up in socioeconomic status due to his own influence. He is also a patriarchal figure that revels in his masculinity and treasures the public's perception of him and his honor and who works to maintain existing power structures that work in his favor. In order to explore *machismo* and its relationship with honor and power, this thesis utilized Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* and Luis Estrada's *El infierno*.

Although these two works vary greatly—particularly because *Trabajos del reino* is a novel published before the War on Drugs was declared in 2006 and *El infierno* is a film produced in 2010—they encompass similar themes and show their protagonists going through similar journeys. Herrera's protagonist, a poor *corrido* composer called Artista, is able to elevate his status through that of el Rey's, a narco kingpin that favors his music and invites him to join a kingdom that he has created. Meanwhile, Estrada's protagonist, a recently deported citizen of Mexico named Benny, is able to elevate his own status through the Reyes, a powerful narco family that holds power in the town where they reside.

Both of these works demonstrate the value of masculinity as their characters explore what it means to be masculine in narco culture. Herrera's Artista, although not a narco himself, helps el Rey create a masculine image of himself with the *corridos* that he

distributes throughout the kingdom. These *corridos*, hailed as the truth in the kingdom, promote el Rey as a merciful father that is able to transform lives and spaces with his influence. It is this image of el Rey that upholds the hierarchy that he has created that places him at the center—once his masculine image deteriorates due to the public's change in their perception of him, el Rey loses legitimacy and finds the kingdom that he has created crumbling.

Meanwhile, the role of masculinity is central to the events of *El infierno*. Benny, the protagonist, is fueled by his desire to rectify his image as a failure by finding the means with which to provide for his elderly family members and his brother's widow. Once he is able to establish a steady source of income, albeit through drug trafficking, his image transforms from one of a pitiful man to one that is the embodiment of masculinity—he is able to provide not only the necessities for his family, but also luxuries like new electronics, updated businesses, and marble tombs. Along with this newfound masculinity, Benny now holds power that he did not before especially over the women in his family who are now entirely financially dependent on him. He also holds power over other people, narcos and civilians alike, as he exercises the narcos' wills and enacts violence upon their enemies.

However, he is not the only masculine figure predominant throughout the film. Estrada includes El Cochiloco, Benny's best friend and an exemplary man, particularly because he is the one that introduces Benny to the business of drug trafficking and is able to provide for his large and still-growing family through his employment. Additionally, the narco kingpin, Don Reyes, is a pivotal character in Estrada's narrative. Without Don Reyes, none of the male characters would be able to fulfill their roles as men because it is

Don Reyes who acts as their merciful godfather, providing them with employment and the means with which to provide for their families.

Women are basically absent from both of these cultural productions. In Herrera's novel, women, like the male characters, are referred to by their title. However, there exists a clear distinction between the titles that male characters are called and the titles that female characters are called. While men are referred to by their occupations, such as the case of Artista and Periodista, women are referred to as "Niña," "Bruja," and "Cualquiera," which are descriptive terms that have nothing to do with an occupation. Women in *Trabajos del reino* are robbed of a viable identity even through work and exist primarily to advance the goals of the male characters. For example, Niña's role is to teach Artista about the kingdom and Cualquiera's role is to give el Rey a legitimate heir. The reader knows very little of them outside of their interactions with male characters.

El infierno is not dissimilar in this regard. The women in this film exist exclusively to advance the goals of the male characters. For example, it is Benny's mother's disappointment in him and his lack of financial success that push him to find work initially, although he attempts to work through honest means at his godfather's tire shop. Later, when he discovers that his brother left behind a widow and son, he is more motivated to find a stable source of income that not only can sustain his mother, but also the family that his brother left behind. Even though Doña Reyes looks to be in a position of power over the narcos her husband employs, her authority needs to be validated by Don Reyes before the narcos that work for them take action.

Lastly, honor plays a significant role in defining the power dynamics within both works. Honor, largely impacted by public perception, is what grants legitimacy to the

men in both of these cultural productions. In addition to using women as motivators, the creators of these works also use the idea of honor to push their male characters to complete their goals. For example, although Benny wants to provide for his brother's widow because he feels responsible for his brother's fate, his honor is also one of his motivators—his image when he arrives in his home town is of a financially unreliable man whose family is unable to depend on him. As he becomes a narco, he works to rectify his image in the eyes of his family and the society that he is a part of. Honor also becomes a valuable commodity as he delves into his work for drug traffickers, punishing those that tarnish the image of the Reyes and working to recuperate his brother's honor by enacting vengeance on those who killed him.

Although both of these works vary in their means of publication and distribution and the time period in which they were created, they share similar themes that are prevalent throughout narco culture. Through *Trabajos del reino* and *El infierno*, one can bear witness to the interactions between *machismo* and honor in narco culture and how these two concepts affect the power structures that are built within these cultural productions.

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