

## THE COLOMBIAN NARCONOVELA BY TOBY MILLER

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Colombia's *narcotraficantes* [*narco-traffickers*] emerged as a consequence of many complex factors. Washington supported the trade in drugs during its war in Vietnam as a means of funding proxy local actors, who quickly perceived potentially powerful market forces at play among the US military, and fuelled a demand that was soon repatriated. At the same time, the Global North counter-culture's laughable fantasy of alternative consciousness was flowering, and Peace Corps veterans developed a taste for Colombia's "Santa Marta Gold" *mariguana*.

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The country also boasted favorable climatic and agricultural conditions; industrial capacity, based on generations of *coca* production; proximity to US ports; experienced smugglers of contraband to pitiful nicotine addicts; ease of transporting powder by contrast with weed; interest from Italian-American *Mafiosi*; and lack of interdiction, facilitated by police for sale.

Throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s, *narco*-trafficking challenged the Colombian state and placed the informal sector at the heart of the economy: the Medellín cartel's head, Pablo Escobar Gaviria, was the world's seventh-richest man in 1989, and even became an elected official.

He specialized in populist gestures, such as paying for the importation of exotic animals to a zoo, establishing himself as a benefactor to the poor, upgrading stadia, inviting football stars to play at his ranch, and providing children with sports gear.

Such supposed civic-mindedness normalized the *narcos* as Robin-Hood figures—romantic scions who rejected an always-already corrupt state and turned crime into

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unbelievable wealth. They embodied social mobility in a nation where the prospect of uplift via education and industriousness is minimal, and life chances are dominated by birth. Popular reason came to embrace the spectacular bling of the *narcos*, even as their violence, both systematic and casual, terrorized entire cities.

As a consequence of state interdiction and US intervention, the principal site of spectacular, overt *Mafia* violence has shifted west, to Mexico. Today's Colombian *narcos* launder their money rather than parading it. Their infiltration of society has become more embedded and less terrifying.

Of all the stories that could be told about decades of conflict in Colombia, about the nation's harsh treatment of women, grotesque rural inequality, and racial discrimination, only the pro-capitalist violence of the *narcos* has been glamorised on TV.

The *narconovela* tells stories in soap-operatic/*telenovela* form via high-production values that focus on the violence and gender relations of *narco*-trafficking, most notably in Mexico and Colombia. I have been working on the

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Colombian variety with two colleagues at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Marta Milena Barrios and Jesús Arroyave.

The past fifteen years have seen numerous Colombian *narconovelas*, such as *Pasión de gavilanes* [*The Passion of the Hawks*] (2003), *La viuda de la mafia* [*The Mafia Widow*] (2004), *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* [*There's No Paradise Without Breasts*] (2006), *Soñar no cuesta nada* [*Dreams Are Free*] (2007), *Los protegidos* [*The Protected*] (2008), *El cártel* (2008) and *El cártel 2* (2010), *El capo 1, 2, and 3* (2009, 2012 and 2014), *Las muñecas de la mafia* [*Mafia Dolls*] (2009), *Pandillas, guerra y paz* [*Gang War and Peace*] (2001-2004 and 2007-2008), *Rosario Tijeras* (2010), *La bruja* [*The Witch*] (2011), *La mariposa* [*The Butterfly*] (2012), *La ruta blanca* [*the White Road*] (2012), *Escobar, el patrón del mal* [*Escobar the Drug Lord*, but more accurately translated as *Escobar, Head of Evil*] (2009-12), *La prepago* [*Pay-As-You-Go*] (2012), *Los 3 caínes* [*The Three Caines*] (2013), *Alias el mexicano* (2013), and *La viuda negra* [*The Black Widow*] (2014).

*Sin Tetas no Hay Paraíso* sold abroad and as a format, and was made into a celebrated feature film (underwritten by state subvention).

*Escobar: El Patrón del Mal* turned the genre into a bountiful biopic. The Netflix series *Narcos* (2015-), shot in Colombia, soon followed.

*Narconovelas* have generated significant controversy. Critics denounce them for sexism, violence, lawlessness, a fetishization of luxury, and historical inaccuracy. The Venezuelan and Panamanian establishments (repressive *Chavistas* in Caracas and repressive *derechistas* [right-wingers] in Panama City) have sought to ban them for glorifying cruelty and drugs.

Light-skinned, heteronormative, male perspectives dominate Colombian *narconovelas*, across both production and representation, despite the country's demography. Our work is especially concerned with gender issues. The genre offers a site where women may pursue power, autonomy, riches, and pleasure through sex and *clientelismo*—but they rely on influential men, and their own mastery of corruption and management of misogyny.

The desirable female body in *narconovelas* is surgically sculpted, light-skinned, voluptuous, thin, and perennially sexually available, in

keeping with the horrendous data on sexual violence in Colombia. The genre's success indicates an ongoing fascination with the abject, the cruel, and the spectacular. In *Las Muñecas de la Mafia*, a mafioso tattoos his girlfriend's bottom with his name. In *El Capo*, a drug lord yells at his wife that he has had sex with over three hundred women—just because he can.

Defenders of the *narconovela* argue that its excesses and violence are products of a society that excludes many viewers from power, comfort, and pleasure—fantasies that they see on-screen.

Series such as *Sin Tetas no Hay Paraíso* are said to criticize the violent misogyny they portray, even as they offer audiences the risky pleasures of *narco* luxury and taboo-breaking. Their incarnation of *machismo* invites spectators to debate inequality and display, much as Warner Bros. gangster films did in the 1930s. One moment responds to the mass unemployment of the Depression, and the prohibition of alcohol, by heroising gangsters; the second reacts identically to the destabilization of globalization and the prohibition of drugs.

*Narconovelas* embody and stimulate dreams, desires, and identifications, at the intersection of reality and the screen. The fact that their hyper-masculine violence relates so clearly to Colombia's social world is in itself a sign that a nation consumed by a virtual civil war for six decades still needs a critical catharsis to transcend its history of violence.

Here's the thing: virtually everybody I know in Colombia has suffered personally from the kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder of the *narcos* and their kind.

So next time you fancy ingesting some white powder, or settling into a night watching Netflix *Narcos*, do ponder the words of Kissy Suzuki in *You Only Live Twice*: 'Think again, please.'

Your pleasure comes at the cost of someone's else's torture and death.

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