

Drugs And Addiction In The Work Of Carlos Velázquez

Brandon P. Bisbey
Northeastern Illinois University

Abstract: Coahuilan author Carlos Velázquez is one of the latest in a long line of Mexican writers who have portrayed intoxicated and addicted subjectivities in their country. Velázquez in particular centers addiction as part of a critique of the effects of neoliberal capitalism in northern Mexico. His work politicizes addiction by invoking the importance of social structures in its genesis through grotesque and dark satire as well as a self-conscious dialogue with metropolitan cultures that echoes that of much Latin American literature. In this way, his work transcends facile divisions between the “producing” Global South and “consuming” North and lays bare the essential relationship between capitalism and addiction in a manner that foregrounds Southern subjectivity and demands a say in the definition of what drugs, intoxication and addiction mean.

Keywords: intoxication; addiction; drugs; Mexico; drug trafficking; Carlos Velázquez

In his influential study *Narcoepics* (2013), the German scholar Hermann Herlinghaus argues that Latin American literary production that deals with themes related to drug trafficking can serve as a starting point for developing a more critical global consciousness about the effects of the consumption, prohibition, production, and trafficking of mind-altering substances. Beginning with the offhand observation made by Walter Benjamin in one of his essays on hashish that intoxication in this world might have a counterpart of humiliating sobriety in another, Herlinghaus examines works ranging from Alonso Salazar's journalistic biography of Pablo Escobar to Roberto Bolaño's posthumously published opus *2666* as examples of an aesthetics of "sobriety" that focuses attention on the social effects of the production and trafficking of psychoactive substances in Latin America. The intoxication of the Global North, in other words, is counterbalanced by the humiliating sobriety experienced in the Global South, a result not only of recent drug trafficking but also of the entire history of Western colonization. A perspective of sobriety, in Herlinghaus's view, is the moral corrective to the self-centered consumption that has led to so much misery and exploitation and the neocolonial perspectives that blame the South for exporting corruption to the North. Apropos of this, Herlinghaus leaves to the side the Global North's canonical literary discourses that focus on intoxicated and/or addicted subjectivities, such as the well-known works of Thomas De Quincey, Charles Baudelaire and William S. Burroughs, in order to focus more closely on Latin American discourses that highlight the social effects of the global drug trade. This perspective, while certainly illuminating, is not without problems.

For example, Joseph Pateson has recently argued that a major problem with Herlinghaus's approach is his insistence on maintaining a dichotomy between intoxication and sobriety (12-17). As Pateson astutely points out, it can hardly be argued that there exists any human state of consciousness free of psychoactive influences, whether they be drugs, food, or physical or mental activities—including the consumption of cultural products like literature (3). Because of this, any attempt to define sobriety will necessarily result in the construction of a privileged "sober" position whose own involvement in intoxication is disavowed. To overcome this problem, Pateson argues for theorizing not from the dichotomy of sobriety/intoxication but from within intoxication itself or, as the historian Daniel Smail calls it, psychotropy. As such, Pateson studies discourses on drug trafficking and consumption in Mexico with a view as to how differing modes of psychotropy relate to the construction of subjectivities under global capitalism.

In his recent book *The Urge: Our History of Addiction*, the psychiatrist and bioethicist Carl Fisher makes a similarly universalist argument about addiction. Inspired by the Buddhist notion that all human suffering derives from a common "addiction" to the self, as well as recent neuroscientific and psychological research, Fisher argues that addiction is probably best considered as a spectrum of common patterns in human behavior rather than a discrete, easily identifiable illness caused by particular chemicals. In other words, addiction is likely a human universal, but one that is greatly conditioned by the cultural context in which it appears. Modern addiction arises with the commodification of psychotropic substances in the early modern period, and the ways that we have defined it and attempted to treat it have been limited by the injustices and systems of oppression that operate in modernity.

I follow the thinking of both Pateson and Fisher here by examining how one Mexican author, the Coahuilan short-story writer Carlos Velázquez, employs addiction to represent the effects of the trafficking and consumption of licit and illicit substances in northern Mexico in his fiction and autobiographical writing. In particular, Velázquez's focus on drug use in Mexico presents a challenge to Herlinghaus's intoxication/sobriety dichotomy and the way it tends to reinforce a

cultural distinction between “producing” and “consuming” countries, a division that ultimately privileges subjectivities from the Global North. This is due, in part, to the close relationship between intoxication and the modern subject. The autobiographical narratives of addicted authors like De Quincey that Herlinghaus eschews are arguably central to the very notion of modern subjectivity. For example, Alina Clej maintains that the addicted, Romantic subjectivity expressed in De Quincey’s writings about his laudanum consumption is one of the most important models for modern Western subjectivity writ large, as his frustrated attempts to establish an authentic, autonomous artistic expression through intoxication embody some of the key conflicts of modernity (vii-viii).

This is relevant to literature on drugs from Latin America because the appropriation of Romantic tropes from the Global North is central to the expression of post- and decolonial sensibilities in contemporary Latin American culture. For example, Lidia Santos argues that *cursilería*, or the failed attempt at Romantic elegance, is above all an expression of a sense of marginalization from discourses of modernity (75). For Carlos Monsiváis, *cursilería* is a central aspect of Latin American sentimental education, and the almost parodic reiteration of Romantic tropes that it entails is something like a traumatic repetition of the longing for a full-fledged subjecthood first described in Romantic terms--not “failed elegance” but rather “la elegancia históricamente posible en el subdesarrollo” (64). According to Antonio Cornejo Polar, such longing is an obstacle to the acceptance of the essential, unresolvable heterogeneity of Latin American culture: “we introject as our only legitimacy the monolithic, strong, and unchangeable image of the modern subject, based on the Romantic ‘I,’ and we feel guilty before the world and ourselves, when we discover that we lack a clear and distinct identity” (*Writing in the Air* 9).

What all of this means is that while Herlinghaus may be correct to suggest that writers like De Quincey are not directly relevant to most contemporary experiences with drugs in Latin America, he also misses an important point about how Latin Americans relate to the type of intoxicated subject position such writers enact. Latin Americans do not only produce and traffic drugs, they also consume them, and their reflections on this consumption necessarily involve a dialogue with the ways drugs are used in metropolitan cultures with colonial relationships to the region. In the case of Carlos Velázquez, we find an author whose focus on various forms of consumption and addiction, and on the parodic reinscription of countercultural narratives from drug literature and pop music and culture, communicates a decolonial, if ultimately pessimistic, regional perspective. This makes his work part of a longer tradition of Latin American works that make drug consumption a central theme.

Just in Mexico there is a rich tradition of literary portrayals of intoxicated subjectivities dating back more than a century. In *fin-de-siècle* Mexico City we find the Baudelairian reflections of the modernist writers Bernardo Couto Castillo and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, followed by the experiments with intoxicated writing undertaken by Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano and Jorge Cuesta, both members of the *Contemporáneos* group whose heyday was in the early decades of the 20th century (De la Garza). Another important moment in the portrayal of drug consumption in Mexican literature came with *la Onda*, the movement of young writers in the 1960s who combined formal experimentation with countercultural references, in particular rock music and the consumption of drugs like cannabis, amphetamines and psychedelics. The use of such drugs plays a central role in many works of José Agustín like *De perfil* (1966) and *Se está haciendo tarde (final en laguna)* (1974), in *Pasto verde* (1968) by Parménides García Saldaña and in *Larga sinfonía en D y había una vez* (1968) by Margarita Dalton (Adams,

Patteson, Viera). In the 1970s several novels centered subjectivities that are more socially marginal than the middle-class kids portrayed by the *Onda*, like Armando Ramírez's *Chin-Chin el teporocho* (1976), which represents the use of drugs in the working-class barrios of Mexican City, and *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (1979) by Luis Zapata, whose protagonist/narrator is a queer sex worker who also suffers from various addictions.

The portrayal of socially marginal, addicted subjectivities continues in the 1980s and 1990s with, for example, the street child who hallucinates while inhaling glue fumes in Enrique Serna's *Uno soñaba que era rey* (1989), with the failed writer/alcoholic policeman in *El miedo a los animales* (1995), also by Serna, or with the morphine-addicted photographer who works in an insane asylum during the Revolution in Cristina Rivera Garza's novel *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999).

More recently we find texts such as *Cocaína: manual del usuario* (2006) and *Canción de tumba* (2012) by Julián Herbert, which reflect on the author's own cocaine addiction, *Al otro lado* (2008) by Heriberto Yépez, whose protagonist is a petty criminal on the US-Mexico border who is addicted to a drug metaphorically composed of waste, and the graphic novel *Uncle Bill* (2014) by Bernardo Fernández (BEF), which deals with the complicated relationship between William S. Burroughs and Mexico. Like these last few authors, Velázquez was born in the 1970s. A centering of his own social context—the northern Mexican city of Torreón, Coahuila—distinguishes his work, along with a self-conscious dialogue with pop culture texts from the Global North and the recurring topic of addiction.

By “addiction” I mean the metaphor of slavery that is commonly used to express anxiety about dependence on the psychoactive effects of a substance or behavior and the relationship of this to the notion of free will (Sedgwick 132-33). The social construct of addiction has its origins in the early modern period, when the commodification of drugs new to Europeans (like tobacco) fueled economic and “psychoactive” revolutions in the West (Courtwright, Ortiz). Since then, there has been a complex relationship between the economic and cultural manifestations of the compulsion to consume that we call addiction. For example, Susan Zieger has argued convincingly that the use of the concept in 19th-century medical and literary discourse in the Anglosphere served, among other things, to disavow white participation in chattel slavery and to sublimate anxieties about the cultural effects of imperial expansion.¹ A key example of the latter is De Quincey who, according to Clej, attempted to constitute intoxication and addiction as ex-centric perspectives capable of transcending capitalism, but ultimately succeeded only in commodifying his own subjectivity in the burgeoning literary market, thus establishing a model for future “intoxicated” writers (vii-viii). Alethea Hayter's classic study of opium use by Romantic writers highlights another important element of such addiction—it appears to be as much about searching for negative affect as about seeking pleasure or avoiding pain. Avital Ronell has ventured a possible explanation for the masochistic aspects of addiction by interpreting it as a form of Lacanian *jouissance*—an expression of a drive that goes beyond the pleasure principle in the search to satisfy the unfillable, constitutional lack at the center of human subjectivity (60). The psychoanalyst Rik Loose, who also interprets addiction as a problem with the administration of *jouissance*, argues that contemporary treatments for it fall short because they are complicit with a society that commands us to enjoy through consumption and recoils in horror when this command is realized through addiction (278).

As we can see, medical, literary, philosophical and psychoanalytic discourses have defined and portrayed addiction in ways that express

1. See Zieger Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

anxiety about the dialectic between individualized subjectivity and the injunction to consume in capitalism, pointing out the ways that the expansion of our economic system depends on the exploitation of human beings' innate sense of dissatisfaction or lack. Another expression of this dialectic has been the ambivalent definition of addiction as a disease that is somehow also the result of a personal moral failing or inherent inferiority on the part of its victim. This view has been challenged by Canadian scholar Cara Fabre in her approach to addiction as a form of "social suffering"—that is, a form of individual suffering whose ultimate causes can be found in the way that systems of oppression (capitalism, patriarchy and settler colonialism in her case) intersect and act upon subjects (4-5). This perspective is meant to counter dominant discourses of addiction that have tended to attribute the effects of systemic oppression to individual weakness or genetic inferiority, with ruinous consequences for oppressed groups such as women and people of color.

An example of this is the neocolonial drug policy of the US, a legal expression of fears of contamination by an undifferentiated mass of intoxicated, non-white subjects, which has been echoed in the Mexican elite's own policies regarding drug consumption within their borders.² A recent expression of such anxieties focuses on the oft-stereotyped figure of the violent, macho northern Mexican drug trafficker or *narco*. As Sayak Valencia has argued, such "monstrous subjects" are the embodiment of the ultimate logic of neoliberal capitalism in the Global South (what she calls "Gore Capitalism"): their only route to the plain existence that can only be achieved through consumption is spectacular violence (309-11). As Patteson points out, these subjects are not so much examples of "humiliating sobriety" as of a form of intoxication that serves to strengthen and reify the self in opposition to others (36-37).

By "neoliberal capitalism," I mean the currently dominant global economic system (capitalism) as it functions under the influence of the currently dominant theory of political economy (neoliberalism), which "proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2). In neoliberalism, the role of the state, which should be minimal, is to "create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices." In Mexico, the neoliberal turn since the 1980s has included, among other things, the negotiation of free trade agreements such as NAFTA, economic deregulation, the privatization of state-held industries, and the reduction of social services provided by the welfare state, all of which have contributed to "a polarized income distribution, falling wages, increased precarious jobs, rising inequality, and extreme violence" (Laurell 246).

As we will see below, the work of Carlos Velázquez centers addiction as part of a critique of the effects of neoliberal capitalism in northern Mexico. In this case, addiction can be understood as a form of suffering potentiated by capitalism's imperative to consume and aggravated by its structural inequalities, that involves not only the consumption of drugs but other forms of intoxication as well. In a recent interview, Velázquez cites Mark Fisher's argument in favor of politicizing contemporary mental illness as directly caused by capitalism (González). Fisher observes in contemporary young people a state that he describes as "depressive hedonia," in which subjects find themselves unable to do anything except pursue pleasure (22). This describes perfectly the state in which many of the characters in Velázquez's short stories find themselves, as well as the state in which he often finds himself in his more autobiographical writings. In these narratives the social positionality of the narrators and characters - that is, how they are

2. See Carl Fisher and Zieger, Chapter 6 on the US drug policy in the 20th century, and Toner and Campos on alcohol and cannabis in Mexico, respectively.

positioned in society with regards to their nationality, social class, race, gender, sexuality and other aspects of their identities—relates directly to their patterns of consumption and addiction. Much like Fabre, Velázquez politicizes addiction by invoking the importance of social structures in its genesis. He does this through a grotesque and dark humor very much in line with Mexican popular tradition, where humor can be seen as a coping mechanism (Barajas), as well as a through self-conscious dialogue with metropolitan cultures that echoes that of much Latin American literature (Alonso 20). Thanks to this, Velázquez’s texts present the possibility for theorizing Latin American culture through intoxication and addiction, rather than in opposition to them.

Running from *la malilla*: Addiction in Velázquez’s Fiction

Velazquez’s short story collection *La Biblia Vaquera (Un triunfo del corrido sobre la lógica)* (2008) exemplifies his postmodern or, more rightly, dismodern, narrative style.³ In this collection, the “Biblia Vaquera” itself is a floating signifier that appears in several different guises, depending on the story. It also appears playfully translated into several different versions in English (the Country Bible, the Western Bible, etc.), which hints at the untranslatability of northern Mexican and US culture. In “Burritos de yelera” the main character (named la Biblia Vaquera) is a burrito vendor famous for his ability to outdrink all contenders: his record is eighteen double shots of sotol in one sitting⁴. The cantina where he sells burritos organizes a drinking contest that becomes a major spectacle and object of betting for local drug traffickers. Things go badly when La Biblia’s wife, tired of her husband’s neglect and mistreatment, conspires to have him lose and feeds him a poisoned burrito. However, she herself is also betrayed by the narco with whom she had made the deal.

We might read this story as a brief allegory of the “psychotropic economy” of northern Mexico and as a satire of the social values of masculinity that fuel it—the glorification of alcoholism, self-destruction, failure and neglect of familial duties. A “psychotropic economy” is one based on the altering of consciousness through psychoactive substances as well as “psychotropic mechanisms” that produce similar effects in the brain. The aforementioned mechanisms can include things such as watching TV and films, reading, listening to music, eating, shopping, sports, having sex, among others. While psychotropic economies are partially independent of financial markets, they also interpenetrate them (Patteson 5-6; Smail 161-62). In this case, a psychotropic economy is portrayed in which the financial power of cocaine trafficking is clear, but in which alcohol, food and gambling are equally central and socially problematic, related as they are to a grotesque parody of toxic masculinity. Similar themes reappear in “La condición posnorteña,” in which a man who is apparently addicted to buying luxurious cowboy boots sells his wife to the devil so that he can acquire a pair made of Biblia Vaquera skin. As we will see below, the theme of the broader psychotropic economy appears in several of Velázquez’s works in relation to addiction.

In the story “El diler de Juan Salazar,” Velázquez effects a dismodern *norteño* rewriting of the story of William S. Burroughs’ accidental killing of his wife Joan Vollmer in Mexico.⁵ Here Juan Salazar, a famous northern Mexican singer whose heyday was in the 1960s and 70s, is transformed into a queer, heroin-addicted jazz musician (he plays the Biblia Vaquera) who reenacts the shooting of Joan Vollmer with his lover John Vollmer. The parodic recycling of Burroughs’ writing and life story, scenes from David Cronenberg’s film *Naked Lunch* (based on Burroughs’ novel of the same name), and northern Mexican pop culture references translates counterculture references from the Global North into the author’s cultural milieu, thus establishing an ironic connection between two regions whose production and consumption of both culture and

3. The Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra coined the phrase *desmoderno* (a combination of *desmadre* and *moderno*) to signify the particular way that postmodernity is experienced in Mexico and other parts of the Global South that have always been excluded from narratives of modernity as its constitutional others (25, 240n17). This describes perfectly the style of Velázquez, with its constant references to international pop culture and parodic reinscriptions of typical aspects of northern Mexican culture.

4. *Sotol* is a local distilled beverage made from various desert plants that is similar in taste to mezcal. Along with the burritos, a food commonly sold out of ice chests outside of bars, concerts and sporting events in Torreón, it is an element that denotes the regional context of the story.

5. Burroughs lived in Mexico City from 1949-1952. In 1951, he accidentally shot and killed his wife while attempting to shoot a glass off of the top of her head in a drunken game of William Tell.

substances are anything but equal. The following exchange between Juan Salazar and Herbert Huncke (a poet, addict and friend of Burroughs from New York), both of whom speak like contemporary *norteños*, exemplifies this style:

Juan Salazar, el exponente más aventajado del dilercorrido, miraba con ternera las luces del metro de Nueva York

[...]

-Pinche güerco. Tenía finta de confiable.

-Te lo advertí Juan —dijo Herbert Huncke—.

Ese dilercillo se vuelve puras charras

[...]

Sin mirar a los travestis, sotol en mano, más vale, sintió un fuetazo de azul centrífugo en las corvas. Era la hangover: el síndrome de abstinencia. Pero no quitó, siguió indiferente, como en las praderas lo hacen las palomas, a la espera de un dilér que siempre está por aparecer y nunca llega. (83-84)

This self-conscious refashioning of Northern countercultural narratives will be revisited by Velázquez later, especially in his more autobiographical texts, where his own positionality becomes an important focus.

The short story “No pierda a su pareja por culpa de la grasa” from the collection *La marrana negra de la literatura rosa* (2010), also includes a reference to withdrawal and introduces two themes that will often be associated in Velázquez’s fiction: addiction and obesity. Tino, the narrator and protagonist, is the overweight adopted son of a wealthy couple and is married to Carol, a manipulative and abusive woman from a working-class background who constantly berates him about his weight, initiates him in the use of cocaine, and convinces him to rob his own mother to subsidize their growing addiction. The story includes an almost poetic description of the experience of withdrawal reminiscent of English-language writers like Burroughs or Irvine Welsh:

Conozco a la malilla. La malilla es como el barrio, te traga. Es el dolor que te ataca cuando se acaba la cosa. Ahora lo siento. Es una pureza fría que se encariña a tus corvas. Rechinidos en las articulaciones, cada uno parece una uva arrancada con desparrajo al racimo que son mis nervios. Y el puto dolor de cabeza. Que no soporto ni el sonido de las manos de la sirvienta limpiando frijoles (20).

I would argue that this description of *la malilla* is central to Velázquez’s appropriation of a Northern, intoxicated subject position in this story, since the narration of the horrors of withdrawal is often central to narratives of addiction, beginning with De Quincey.

Driven to extremes in order to stave off the *malilla*, Tino and Carol only reign in their habits when she becomes pregnant, and then only for a short while. Despite her condition, they both begin to use again, and Carol convinces Tino that they should rob his mother (who is blind) of all the money she keeps in the house. During the robbery Carol attempts to murder the old woman by stabbing her, after which the couple escape to a motel. Tino, who is distraught, learns that his mother has survived, turns Carol in to the police, and absconds with the money. In the dénouement we learn that Tino and Carol’s child was born deformed (with no eyes), that Tino’s mother uses her wealth to make sure that Carol is fed nothing but tamales in prison (a hated food she associated with her working-class background), and that Tino has had liposuction, is thrilled with the results, and is planning a life of crime in order to bankroll his desire for more plastic surgery:

Cuando me dieron de alta se me caían los pantalones. Era talla cuarenta y dos. Ya no era gordo. Nadie podría decirme nunca más Gordo Patineta.

Después de la operación me quedaron doscientos mil pesos. Lo suficiente para vivir un par de meses y planear mi siguiente atraco. No me iba a conformar solo con una liposucción. Quería una rinoplastia. Y que me quitaran la papada. (33)

In these closing lines of the story, we find the dark humor and cruel irony that characterize so much of Velázquez's work, along with a metonymic connection of one addiction to another—Tino has gone from stealing checks to support his cocaine habit to robbing people to support his insatiable need for plastic surgery. To hear him tell it (and he is hardly a reliable narrator), Tino learned everything by being Carol's reluctant and codependent accomplice. What cannot be denied, however, is his willing participation in the psychotropic economy that surrounds him in a desperate attempt to give meaning to his life through consumption, no matter the cost.

There is a similar, if more direct, critique of consumerism in the story "Despachador de pollo frito" from the eponymous collection (2019). The main character here is also an overweight man whose search for satisfaction in life leads him to excessive consumption, in this case of fried chicken.⁶ Mr. Bimbo is a young man whose adoration of mass-produced junk food leads him to the extremes of legally changing his name to that of the brand of bagged bread and baked snacks, of hoarding a historical collection of Cheetos packages, and of dedicating his life to Kentucky Fried Chicken, where he works: "Mr. Bimbo amaba KFC. Así como otros aspiran a cuidar plantíos de marihuana en California, formar parte de la franquicia había sido su sueño desde que lo llevaron por primera vez a los seis años por el paquete infantil con juguete incluido" (104).⁷ The connection between drugs and junk food is not coincidental, as Mr. Bimbo indeed seems to suffer from an addiction to fried chicken skin, which he eats constantly, and is unable to moderate his consumption despite clear deleterious effects to his health: "Su mandíbula no descansaba. Friería pollo, trapeara o atendiera la registradora lo veías masticando" (109).

Mr. Bimbo represents, in fact, the grotesque embodiment of the total victory of consumer society's injunction to enjoy (Loose 278), the ultimate consequences of the logic behind the business plans of corporations like Yum! Brands (the current parent of KFC). His entire life revolves around massive consumption of the product, to the extent that he both purchases it and works for the corporation in a perfectly contained circle of psychotropic reward for generating profit. Mr. Bimbo's manager, delighted to have someone so dedicated to promoting the brand, allows him to eat as much chicken as he wants, but a new boss, Evaristo, soon arrives. As the reader soon learns, Evaristo hates Mr. Bimbo because he reminds him of his own son—an overweight, teenage anime fanboy. A complicated conflict ensues involving, among other things, a forcible tattooing of Mr. Bimbo by the other employees of KFC, the revelation of his birth name, and an avocado pit inserted into the rectum of Evaristo's son. The story ends with Mr. Bimbo attempting to spoil Evaristo's participation in a sport fishing tournament by allowing himself to be eaten by sharks, but he is rescued and is hailed as an eco-activist by the press for disrupting the tournament.

Mr. Bimbo is a Rabelaisian caricature of total identification with the brands produced by the global junk food industry, an addicted subject who sees his life only in terms of his ability to consume.

6. The title of the story is a play on words: *despachar* means to dispatch, produce, deliver or prepare, but informally it can also mean to eat quickly. Therefore the *despachador* refers both to the protagonist's job as well as the fact that he consumes massive amounts of chicken.

7. Ironically, he changed his legal name from Zenón to Mr. Bimbo to avoid schoolyard taunts of "Zenón, el niño chichón." He proudly wears the name Mr. Bimbo, however, another nickname given due to his love of Bimbo donuts.

Neither he nor Evaristo are capable of perceiving the systemic origins of their own problems—Mr. Bimbo tries to fill the lack at the center of his existence with food; Evaristo's son has been made into a similar consumer by the very corporations Evaristo works so hard to serve; the two of them are only able to express their frustration through conflict with each other. The very last lines of the story find Mr. Bimbo cutting off pieces of his own flesh to feed his pet piranha, allegorically enacting the continued cost of lives from the Global South in Gore Capitalism.

Another story from this collection, “La vaquerobvia del apocalipsis (Cagona Star)” includes a similarly allegorical critique of Gore Capitalism. Meneses, a “vaquerobvia” (a gay man who bottoms but ironically effects a masculine “ranchero” style) suffers from ulcerative colitis which is aggravated by receptive anal penetration, his favorite sexual activity.⁸ The plot revolves around Meneses's inability to find a form of libidinal enjoyment external to a psychotropic economy dominated by the addictive consumption of crack cocaine (“la piedra”), which I interpret as an allegory of neoliberal capitalism in northern Mexico. His friend and coworker La Monalisa, a *travesti* who ironically always plays active roles in sex, continually pushes him to smoke crack and to recognize the centrality of that drug, “la única religión verdadera,” to their economy and culture (58). For example, when Meneses is beaten in the street by a vagrant who wants money to buy a rock, Monalisa chastises him for his aloofness to the importance of the drug:

¿Ves por qué odio la piedra?
¿Odio?, y... la piedrita qué culpa tiene, dijo la vestida
ofendida.
Mi agresor era un adicto. ¿Sabes cómo me dejé de pegar?
Cuando le ofrecí para la piedra.
Te lo dije, pero no me pelas. ¿Tú crees que el presidente, el
Papa, las madrecitas, mandan en este sucio país? No,
chulis, a esta sociedad la rige la piedra. Si hubieras puesto
más atención te habrías dado cuenta de lo que te
esperaba. (61)

The plot comes to a grotesque climax when Meneses allows a well-hung *cholo* to penetrate him despite his fears about his colitis because, as the *cholo* explains, the crack rock (which has made him horny) demands it:

La piedra manda.
Ay, bendita piedra, les tira los dientes pero cómo los pone
jarisios (68).

Not surprisingly, Meneses suffers a hemorrhage and ends up in the hospital where he has rectum removed and is given a colostomy bag. In other words, he loses the one body part that was absolutely central to his sexual pleasure. He laments this to Monalisa when she comes to visit: “No entiendo, tanto cabrón que anda fumando piedra y no le pasa nada y a mí que lo único que pedía era que me la metieran me ha ido peor” (72). Meneses suffers in a system that does not appear to permit any other form of pleasure beyond the consumption of crack and that, significantly, seems to punish nonnormative sexualities despite its superficial permissiveness.

While Monalisa celebrates the *vestidas'* love of crack as a habit that brings them closer to Amy Winehouse, one of their idols, Meneses, who works at the meat counter in the grocery store, compares it to the leftover loose ends of meat that he sells to the poorer customers: “Ay, pinche pedacería [loose ends], es como la piedra,

8. The traditional, gender-based theory of sexual orientation in Mexico associates anal or oral penetration with feminization and an effeminate self-presentation (Carrillo 60-61). Several characters in the story ironically invert these associations of masculinity/effeminacy with sexual roles.

bufó, es el alimento del pueblo” (66). Like the loose ends of meat, *la piedra* represents the crumbs of the drug trade, a cheaper version of a commodity destined for the enjoyment of wealthier consumers than the working class in northern Mexico. Read as an allegory of consumption under neoliberalism, it underlines how the imperative to enjoy in consumer society can take on violent, oppressive forms in the Global South.

“Un Hunter S. Thompson del Subdesarrollo:” Velázquez on his own consumption

While Velázquez’s fictional work uses dark humor and grotesquerie to portray addiction as part of a satire of the effects of neoliberal capitalism in northern Mexico, his more autobiographical texts tend to focus on his own experience of consumption in the context of the Mexican drug war, with an ironic perspective on his positionality as compared to that of his countercultural influences from the Global North. While his focus on the internal struggles of addiction and the social effects of drug trafficking are similar to much English-language writing on these topics, his strongly regional identification roots his narratives in a particularly Latin American perspective, one that emphasizes the colonial nature of discourses of modernity and the subaltern position of Latin America in the global psychotropic economy. It is useful to consider his collection of *crónicas El karma de vivir al norte* (2013) and his autobiographical essay *El pericazo sarniento (Selfie con cocaína)* (2017) together, as their respective and often overlapping emphases on the effects of the drug war and the personal experience of addiction complement each other.⁹ Together they provide a perspective that transcends the producer/consumer dichotomy inherent in Herlinghaus’s insistence on sobriety as an organizing principle in thinking about drugs in Latin America by speaking from addiction on the effects of both trafficking and consumption in the context of northern Mexico. Velázquez begins his addiction memoir *El pericazo* with a quote from Hunter S. Thompson:

“Lejos de mí la idea de recomendar al lector drogas, alcohol, violencia y demencia. Pero debo confesar que, sin todo eso, yo no sería nada”. Es una coincidencia escalofriante que lo haya pronunciado el año de mi nacimiento [1978]. Cuando leí esta declaración de principios me sentí plenamente identificado. Sin las drogas no sólo no me hubiera dedicado a escribir, sino que jamás me habría sentido un ser humano. (13)

This citation illustrates what will be two central themes in both nonfiction books: Velázquez’s narration of his life and times through the parodic appropriation of counterculture subject positions based on narratives from the Global North; the representation of his own addiction as a form of social suffering, that is, as a rational adaptation to social circumstances beyond his control and that have left him few options (Fabre 4-5).¹⁰

Both of these themes appear in the section of the book titled “Miedo y asco en Lima,” wherein Velázquez spends four days in the Peruvian capital during a literary event and ingests a heroic amount of the relatively cheap, pure, and plentiful cocaine available there. Citing the Urugayan writer Gustavo Escanlar, Velázquez compares his cocaine habit to a toxic relationship that one is never able to leave, and describes the addictive fantasy of limitless pleasure that assaults him when he first tries the high-quality cocaine of Lima. He realizes, however, that this fantasy must come to an end. He resists the temptation to bring some back on the plane in a bottle of nasal

9. The titles of these two books are indicative of Velázquez’s identification with global countercultures and his irreverence towards the literary tradition. The first is a tribute to Argentine rocker Charly García’s song “El karma de vivir al sur,” while the second is a parody of *El periquillo sarniento*, the first Mexican (and Latin American) novel.

10. I can find no indication anywhere that this famous quote of Thompson’s was uttered for the first time in 1978. I believe, therefore, that it is an example of Velázquez’s creative rewriting of counterculture texts in order to make them more relevant to his personal experience. He effects a similar rewriting of Burroughs in his other nonfiction book, as we will see below.

spray (which would have been a very Thompson-esque behavior) because he is afraid of being caught at Mexican customs: “Como se trata de territorio federal, si me llegaran a atrapar me podrían elegir para poner un ejemplo. El negocio es nuestro. Si desean consumir, no lo transporten desde Sudamérica. Vayan y cómprenlo en Tepito” (177). He recognizes that despite his relative and fleeting privilege in Peru, where he stays in the same hotel as the Rolling Stones, he is still a denizen of the Global South and will soon return to Mexico, his consumption regimented as always by the imperatives of Gore Capitalism: the social ravages of neoliberalism, the violence of the black market and state corruption.

This emphasis on the context of his consumption is related to Velázquez’s tendency to portray his drug use as a necessary coping mechanism that he refuses to give up. In this sense, despite multiple references to Thompson and other writers on drugs like Luke Davies, William S. Burroughs and Irvine Welsh, Velázquez’s self-presentation most closely resembles that of Charles Bukowski in his semi-autobiographical novels and poetry.¹¹ In Bukowski’s novel *Ham on Rye*, the protagonist/narrator Hank, the victim of constant physical abuse at the hands of his father, describes his first time getting drunk as a revelation:

Never had I felt so good. It was better than masturbating. I went from barrel to barrel. It was magic. Why hadn’t someone told me? With this, life was great, a man was perfect, nothing could touch him [...] I thought, well, now I have found something, I have found something that is going to help me, for a long long time to come. (95-96)

In *El pericazo*, Velázquez describes his first experience with cocaine as an impoverished adolescent in eerily similar terms:

Todo ese aburrimiento que había experimentado desde la infancia desapareció en un segundo. Me sentí vengado. De qué, no lo sé. De lo que sea. Sentí que por fin el mundo había saldado sus cuentas conmigo. Toda mi frustración se desvaneció. Como todos los idiotas que se meten coca, me la creí. Me convencí a mí mismo de que no era un pobre pendejo. De que era distinto a los del barrio. De que haría algo con mi vida. (37)

Beyond this particular passage, Velázquez’s style in this book resembles Bukowski’s in its first-person narrative form, its violent rejection of décor and good taste, its identification with working-class culture, experiences and values, its self-pitying pessimism, and its rejection of discourses of recovery as irrelevant and alienating.¹² Like Bukowski, Velázquez identifies as an addict who does not want to give up the one thing that helps him endure his hardscrabble existence.

Even Bukowski, however, enjoys the privilege of constructing his subjectivity from his position as a white US citizen. Velázquez, on the other hand, emphasizes how his national origin, place of residence, social class and race affect his own attempts to construct an intoxicated subjectivity. *El pericazo* ends with a highly ambivalent recapitulation of the author’s relationship with cocaine—while he is afraid it will lead to an early death, he cannot imagine any other way of coping with life. Quitting cocaine would be like losing his legs, he writes, but he cannot imagine for himself a Hollywood redemption like that of Lt. Dan in *Forrest Gump*, “Porque yo sin coca lo que sentiría es lo mismo que Maradona en USA 94 cuando le cortaron las piernas” (207). In this metaphorical reference to the Argentine star’s disqualification from the 1994 World Cup for doping, Velázquez juxtaposes a Hollywood happy ending with the story of a Latin

11. At one point, he describes himself as partying on the weekends like a “Hunter S. Thompson del subdesarrollo” (153).

12. In the poem “cleansing the ranks,” Bukowski expresses pity and disdain for the adherents of Alcoholics Anonymous, who in his view are not even worthy of the title “alcoholics” in comparison to him and his decades of inebriation: “some people just fail at everything and what I am talking/about here is the reformed alcoholic: you can’t be /reformed if you were never really one. // one thing that makes it all so dull and/terrible: they all still claim to be alcoholics even after/they’ve stopped. // this is immensely resented by the true of the / tribe” (*On Drinking* 209). Compare this to the disdain Velázquez expresses towards a friend who had achieved sobriety through AA: “A mí me cagaba la madre que me sermoneara. [...] No era el primero de mis allegados que se volvía doble A. Y a todos les retiraba la palabra. Por aquellos días mi alcoholismo era militante. Estaba tan sublimado por el trago que consideraba mis enemigos a todos los que se pronunciaran en su contra” (92).

American figure of working-class origin, a famous loser whose glories have been dulled by his own failures and addictions. He thus re-centers his context once again as fundamental to his experience of addiction as a form of social suffering under neoliberalism in northern Mexico.

Velázquez's positionality is also central to the narratives in his book *El karma de vivir al norte*, which is specifically about the effects of trafficking on Torreón, Coahuila, during the most violent years of the Mexican drug war for that city (approximately 2007-2012). One *crónica* in particular, "La narcozona (el ex norte)," exemplifies how the author recycles intoxicated narratives from the Global North in the portrayal of his own context:

William Burroughs sostenía que el mal se encontraba en este continente antes de la llegada de los colonizadores, ingleses o españoles. En base a esa teoría denominó a un espacio geográfico como la Interzona. Un territorio en el que lo maligno no estaba supeditado exclusivamente a la conducta humana, sino que era inherente a la tierra. Sus coordenadas abarcaban desde la Ciudad de México hasta Panamá. Pasajes de su obra se desarrollan dentro de esta geografía. (49)

Like the citation from Thompson mentioned above, this one involves some creative paraphrasing. In the section of *Naked Lunch* where this idea is expressed, Burroughs mentions "settlers," not colonizers, and makes no reference to their national origin.¹³ "Interzone," which is the main geographic entity of *Naked Lunch*, is modeled primarily on the International Zone of Tangiers, where Burroughs lived from 1954 to 1958. Although certain aspects of Interzone were inspired by Latin America, I have been unable to find any reference to its geography being located between Mexico City and Panama in any work by Burroughs. Velázquez's rewriting of Burroughs highlights his appropriation of counterculture texts in order to speak about his own experience: Burroughs' "America" (clearly a reference to the US) becomes the hemispheric América, Anglo settler colonialism is expanded to include all colonizers, and Interzone becomes Mesoamerica. Finally, Interzone is trumped by an even more horrific geography: "Así como el Yage (ayahuasca) sería suplantada por la meta azul de Heisenberg, como droga para poseer el control absoluto, la Interzona sería suplantada por otra entidad más diabólica aún: la Narcozona" (50). The yagé that Burroughs sought in Colombia as a cure for addiction and the evils of modern society, which he claimed was being used by the CIA and KGB for mind control experiments, is replaced by the methamphetamine manufactured by the character Walter White in *Breaking Bad*. Absolute control comes not only from the manipulation of thought through chemical means, but also through control of the market. At the same time, the horrors described in Burroughs' work pale in comparison to the violence of contemporary life in northern Mexico under Gore Capitalism: "Habíamos superado *El almuerzo desnudo*, la region había mutado. Había dejado de ser el norte, para convertirse en el ex norte: la Narcozona" (50).

13. "America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting" (12).

While this comparison might bring to mind Herlinghaus's juxtaposition of Northern intoxication and Southern humiliating sobriety, it is worth remembering that Velázquez never interprets these horrors in a "sober" fashion, but always through intoxication, a view from the periphery of a consumerist society whose injunction to enjoy depends on the neocolonial exploitation of subjects willing to sacrifice their own lives and those of others in order to participate more fully in the global psychotropic economy. This is clear in the penultimate *crónica* of the book, "If you tolerate this your children will be next," in which he narrates a terrifying encounter with a *sicario* who drives a taxi he takes with his five-year-old daughter: "El morro olía a sangre seca. Era moreno. Enflaquecido por la droga. No debía de tener más de diecisiete años. Iba hasta el culo. De *piedra*, coca, mota. De todo. Mi hija estaba despierta. Y el ojete nos venía espiando por el retrovisor" (177). This young man whose job, it is soon revealed, is to murder and mutilate on behalf of his cartel, is precisely the kind of "monstrous subject" described by Valencia—one systematically alienated from the "good life" and for whom the commodification of death provides an opportunity to construct an identity based on violent, masculinist consumption (309-11). The "owners" of such dehumanized killers reward them by letting them run around the city terrorizing the population, "[e]n una yonka, un taxi o cualquier carro. Y sin duda eran responsables, en parte, de tanto desaparecido. Qué podía anhelar un batillo así, me preguntaba. Salir a la calle como un azteca a arrancar corazones y cabezas" (177). Such monstrous subjects are clearly intoxicated, addicted to various sorts of drugs but also to the psychotropic mechanisms of torture and murder, the consumption of bodies through the exercise of violence.

The title of this *crónica* comes from a song by the Welsh rock band Manic Street Preachers that references volunteers from Wales who fought the nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. The song's title, in turn, is taken from an English-language Republican propaganda poster featuring a photograph of a dead child superimposed on a background of a sky full of bombers. In Velázquez's Torreón, the child placed in imminent danger by the drug war could be his daughter but also the *sicario* himself, both of whom are victims of a psychotropic economy in which the drive to consume supersedes the value of human life. After barely escaping from this situation, with his daughter safe in bed, Velázquez repairs to the kitchen of his house where he breaks down in sobs and drinks an entire bottle of vodka so that he can sleep. In other words, the only mechanism he finds readily available to cope with the effects of the psychotropic economy in his milieu is another commodified intoxicant. It seems that neither the state nor any element of civil society are willing or able to help alleviate his suffering.

Conclusions

In his study of Mexican humor *Sólo me río cuando me duele*, the cartoonist Rafael Barajas "El Fisgón," taking a page from Freud, argues that in Mexican popular culture dark humor often functions as a coping mechanism, a way of processing a feeling of helplessness in the face of a terrible reality. The title of the book is a play on this idea: an old joke has a wounded macho saying that it only hurts when he laughs ("solo me duele cuando me río"), presumably at death itself. For Barajas, whose own political cartoons satirize violence, corruption and impunity, the reverse is true—Mexicans laugh precisely because they are hurt. This seems to me to be the main function of humor in the fictional works of Velázquez—a dark, grotesque satire of the ways in which addiction is central to the ravages of Gore Capitalism in northern Mexico. At the same time, Velázquez's more autobiographical works, while not devoid of

humor, are much more focused on his personal experiences with the horrors of both addiction and the social effects the psychotropic economy in northern Mexico. Here, his dialogue with countercultural drug texts from the Global North assumes a central role, particularly in his ironic reflections on the limitations that his citizenship in the Global South imposes on his participation in the sort of intoxicated subjectivity that is foregrounded by the counterculture. In no case do Velázquez's narratives express much optimism for his region or for himself. Rather, we often find rabid despair and solipsistic ruminations very much redolent of the work of writers like Burroughs and Bukowski. His work is important, however, in its challenge to dominant discourses about drugs and trafficking, including many, like Herlinghaus's, that are well-intentioned but nevertheless reiterate an artificial division between an intoxicated North and a sober South that is thereby excluded from theorizing through intoxication. It lays bare the essential relationship between capitalism and addiction in a manner that foregrounds Southern subjectivity and demands a say in the definition of what drugs, intoxication and addiction mean.

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