

# Narrative Flight: Comics, Cartels, and Crowds Across 40 Years of Crisis in Mexico

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## ABSTRACT

*In 2015, drug trafficker Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán’s escape from prison provoked a fan frenzy that played out in public demonstrations as well as social and mass media. In this article, I argue that this episode must be understood as symptomatic of a long-term transformation of Mexico’s public sphere. The waves of economic crisis that began in the late 1970s unmoored personal desires and aspirations from the promises of the nation-state. The public sphere filled with dispersive tendencies; fiction and fantasy began to take unpredictable directions. To grasp this unmooring, I propose the idea of crowd-texts: circulating texts that interpellate their readers as fundamentally crowd-like in their unruly flight from the narrative teleologies that had sutured the nation. The first crowd-text I examine is a 1982 issue of the comic book *La Familia Burrón* (The Burrón Family). Set in the year of Mexico’s most emblematic currency devaluation, the comic puts an at once ironic and utopian spin on the crisis. In the 1990s and 2000s, similar dispersive tendencies can be found in the narcocorrido, a popular ballad-form dedicated to the exploits of drug traffickers. These songs, I argue, took narrative flight into openly violent terrain, where the rising institution of the cartels could, for many, supplant the expired promises of the nation-state. By comparing comic book and narcocorridos as popular representations of Mexico’s economic and public security crises,*

*I show how these texts interpellate their publics as dispersive crowds, thus revealing a deeper crisis in the progress-oriented temporality of the Mexican nation-state and its public sphere. [Keywords: Crowds, publics, public sphere, fiction, comics, narcocorridos, Mexico]*

Long before his 2017 extradition to the United States and his subsequent trial in New York City, drug trafficker Joaquín Guzmán Loera, also known as “El Chapo” (the Shorty), was a well-known public figure in Mexico. In the 1990s, popular musicians sang of him as “a famous trafficker whom the whole world comments upon” (Los Tucanes de Tijuana 1995a).<sup>1</sup> When Forbes listed him amongst “The World’s Most Powerful People” (Forbes 2009), the fact was oft-repeated common knowledge. Upon El Chapo’s second escape from a maximum security prison cell in 2015, however, a new furor broke loose. From headline news to Facebook memes to coffee break chit-chat, the country swirled with commentary. *Rolling Stone’s* publication half a year later of Sean Penn’s (2016) interview with El Chapo set the whole affair firmly in the realm of celebrity stardom; after that, the revelation of the trafficker’s amorous cell phone chats with actress Kate del Castillo (Marín 2016) was mere icing on the cake.

Throughout this episode ran aftershocks of a previous installment: a certain nervous anticipation of the reappearance of crowds (e.g., *El Debate* 2015). Upon El Chapo’s capture in 2014, the media had focused, as much as on El Chapo himself, on a series of demonstrations held by his supporters (e.g., Cobos 2014). These reports evoked old stereotypes of crowds as unreasoning masses; taking up their tone, readers called the demonstrators “proof of the degradation of society” and “a risk for the country” (appended to Cabrera Martínez 2014). This leitmotif of crowds, I would suggest, condenses a broader unease over El Chapo’s stardom and its implications for the public sphere. Whatever they may have meant in situ, the demonstrators served to objectify and externalize readers’ own fascination with El Chapo; as textual figures, they acted to purge the public of its own crowdly proclivities, its own succumbing to the mass media charade. El Chapo, that is, did not just generate a few physically assembled crowds. Instead, via narratives that drew the national public into vicarious enjoyment of his flight, he threatened to turn it into a kind of crowd itself.

This article takes El Chapo and his portent of crowds as symptomatic of a long-term transformation of Mexico's public sphere. To understand the affective energies that so urgently latched onto him, I trace a speculative route through Mexico's last few decades. In the post-World War II years of prosperity, the nation-state provided a narrative frame of collective progress within which personal desires and aspirations for upward mobility largely fit. When economic crisis hit in the early 1980s, though, the public sphere began to fill with dispersive tendencies. Unmoored from the promise of the nation-state, fiction and fantasy began to take unpredictable directions. In the first half of the article, I unpack these dispersive tendencies via close reading of a 1982 issue of the comic book *La Familia Burrón* (*The Burrón Family*; Vargas 1982). In the second half, I turn to the *narco-corrido*. While the *corrido* is a popular ballad form dating back to the 19th century, the *narco-corrido* is specifically dedicated to the exploits of drug traffickers. In the 1990s, this subgenre emerged as a major site for the narrative production of futurity. As the cartels slowly supplanted the expired promises of the nation-state, the desires of a mass public spun off-center from the state set the scene for El Chapo. They also set the scene for an even deeper dispersion into fantasies of violence and death that arose in a second epochal moment of crisis: the so-called "War on Drug-Trafficking" launched by President Felipe Calderón in 2006.

### **Crowds, Crisis, Fiction, Fantasy**

In the literature on publicity, narrative has a distinguished pedigree on the side of nation-building. In both Jürgen Habermas's (1989) and Benedict Anderson's (1983) foundational studies, novels weave together interdiscursively with other written genres to form the reflexive heart of national public spheres. From this perspective, national consciousness emerges out of "an institutionally structured, self-reflexive appropriation of the metalinguistic potentials of narration" (Lee 1997:321)—the specific linguistic devices that novelists developed to project a new form of subjectivity and to ground it in the realist representation of national space-time. The texts I examine here, in contrast, tend to reveal the fictive, constructed nature of social realities; in the process, they open imaginative possibilities that had seemed foreclosed. Such texts, I contend, encourage dispersion: flight from the narratives of progress that would consolidate the nation.

Collection and dispersion—anchoring and unmooring, order and disorder—are poles that have long played a constitutive role in thought on the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> Their paradigmatic expression is the stable, rational public versus the unruly crowd (e.g., Tarde 1969). This pair, of course, has historically calqued order and disorder onto class difference. As in the online comments disparaging El Chapo’s fans, textual publicity tends to be associated with enlightened elites, and the rowdiness of crowds with plebes. The conceptual pair of publics and crowds, however, also tends to calque order and disorder onto another opposition: that between mediation and materiality. If narrative tends to be seen as standing on the side of order, this is because it has been ideologically linked to the disembodied abstraction of textually mediated publics, and decoupled from the embodied particularities of physically assembled crowds.<sup>3</sup>

Yet collection and dispersion need not always be aligned in the same way with these other binaries. In Elias Canetti’s (1962) canonical text, for instance, crowds encompass both moments: some crowds mass up, irresistibly drawn together, while others flee with equal impetus, as from a theater on fire. In this article, I aim to show that the dispersion paradigmatically associated with crowds can (and perhaps always must, in part) be achieved through processes of textual mediation. Indeed, physical crowds were not the starting point for classic crowd theory. Instead, it arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to new forms of mass mediation (Mazzarella 2010:706; the classic example is Le Bon 1896); at this point, crowds emerged as the public’s uncanny other—sometimes frighteningly concrete, but at other points a much more ephemeral and yet no less disturbing potentiality within the public itself. A quick comparison of John Locke and John Stuart Mill can illustrate. For Locke, in the 17th century, “the giddy multitude” (2003:250) was clearly counterposed to the enlightened citizens whose measured deliberations would steer the polity clear of war. Almost 200 years later in the mid-1800s, Mill saw “that miscellaneous collection of a few wise and many foolish individuals, called the public” (1989:24) as the readership his own texts were condemned to, and this crowdly, heterogeneous public was, Mill feared, his society’s new tyrant. The need for separation between “wise” and “foolish” here is as pressing as it is impossible. As crowd theory proper emerged a few decades later, it continued to twine crowds and publics together as unnervingly intimate opposites. The textual circulations that should consolidate a rational public seemed increasingly to bear within them the potential

for dispersion and disorder, which the materialization of physical crowds could but confirm.

Crowds, then, should not be understood as primordially embodied, though a great deal of emphasis has very productively been placed on this dimension of their existence. Instead, this article takes crowds as a conceptual starting point for grasping textual invitations to dispersion or narrative flight. Physical crowds do appear, peripherally, throughout the argument. In the case of *La Familia Burrón*, there is the crowd on the airplane and the offstage crowd of bottle cap seekers, as well as the real-life crowds that, at the time, protested the government's ineptitude in the face of economic crisis (Lomnitz 2003a). In the case of the corridos, there is the crowd of cartel recruits represented in the songs, as well as the extratextual crowds of concert-goers, always imagined to include a good number of recruits. But though physical crowds can be one form of uptake to textually encouraged dispersion, they should not be understood as defining it. Take Walter Benjamin's (1968) classic work on the topic. Certainly, the experience of the *flâneur* in the urban crowd is key—yet this experience comes very much through poetry. According to Samuel Weber, Benjamin finds in Charles Baudelaire's poetry "an alternative to the formed and mobilized masses of the political movements of the Thirties" (1996:97). Here, the specific poem in question does not just describe an encounter in a crowd; it is itself an ally of and substitute for the dispersed crowd, providing, like it, an exit from fascism's totalized society.<sup>4</sup>

Although one of the basic anthropological critiques of the political philosophy of the public sphere has been its inattention to the processes of circulation that constitute publics in practice, I concentrate in this article on a textual analysis that highlights logics and techniques of dispersion that, in contrast to narrative's cohesive potentials, have been neglected. I examine narrative flight as characteristic of what I call *crowd-texts*: circulating texts that address their audiences as fundamentally crowd-like, unruly, dispersed in their intentions, subject to their own passing impulses, and verging upon or even morphing into embodied crowds. Crowd-texts form publics in Michael Warner's now-classic sense of "social space[s] created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (2002:90). In his terms, they would form counterpublics, but the political potentials—the mayhem—Warner still anchored in corporeal encounter must be conveyed or stimulated, much as William Mazzarella (2013:3) suggests in his work on the "sensuous incitement" of film, by the textual medium itself.<sup>5</sup> In the

cases I examine here, what seems to exceed cerebral reason in the text is borne by language, but also, crucially, by the visuals of the comic book and the musical sonority of the corridos.

In contrast to the classic nationalist texts examined by Anderson, Habermas, or Lee, *La Familia Burrón* relies, as surrealist techniques do, on the disruption of realism.<sup>6</sup> Elements redolent of fantasy interpellate the comic's readership not as a staid public, but as a disembodied crowd. In the issue I examine, the key textual figure on which narrative flight hinges is the counterfeit, which works to unhitch money's transformative powers from the state and to reharness them—if only in make-believe—to radically democratic ends. Narrative flight, however, need not depend on surrealism. As Derrida suggests, literature is at heart a “counter-institutional institution” (1992a:58), for its very definition is that it “allows one to say everything” (1992a:36). Unlike *La Familia Burrón*, narcocorridos are trenchantly realist, but they pretend to articulate a reality censored by the dominant society (Yeh 2015). In the corridos of the 1990s, drugs played a role parallel to that of the counterfeit in *La Familia Burrón*. They seemed, at that time, a miraculous catapult to fame and fortune that practically anyone, with a little luck and daring, might avail themselves of. Later, however, as the drug economy grew both increasingly restrictive and increasingly violent, death began to replace drugs as the main textual figure articulating the impulse towards dispersion, the momentum of narrative flight from not just established social identities but, now, life itself. Drugs still play a prominent role, but now directly through the alteration produced by substance use, rather than indirectly through the wealth they enable.

Like the draw towards dispersion Benjamin felt in Baudelaire's poetry, these texts' pretension to “say everything”—to realize themselves as literature in Derrida's sense and, hence, to exit identity and institutionality—emerged and grew under particular historical conditions. After World War II, Mexico enjoyed an extended period of prosperity known as the “Mexican Miracle,” which, like other oil boom economies, took its first hit in 1976. The currency devaluations of 1982 and 1994 stand as bookends to a long decade of crisis. At the beginning of 1982, the peso was at \$26 to the dollar (Lustig 1998:24); by the time it stabilized in 1995 around \$6.3 to the dollar (1998:194), it had lost three decimal places. Savings evaporated, and the nascent middle class felt itself go up in smoke (Lomnitz 2003a). For them, much as Sarah Muir describes of Argentina's middle classes during economic crisis in that country, a “sentimental structure of

inevitable national failure” (2015:315) took over. 1982 in particular marked, as Claudio Lomnitz argues, a “crisis of historicity”: “The ways in which people had framed the past and the future...were no longer operative for large segments of the population” (2003b:65).

In 1982, Mexico defaulted on its international loans, and the government embarked full-steam upon the route then called technocracy—today, neoliberalism. One after another, the core institutions of the revolutionary state were dismantled and the national economy thoroughly reformulated. In 2000, an opposition party came to power for the first time in 70 years; along with economic stability, the “transition to democracy” spawned an all-too-brief period of national optimism. In 2006, though, Felipe Calderón won the presidency by the narrowest of margins. Confronted with serious accusations of electoral fraud and massive mobilization against him, he responded with a militarized *mano dura* (hard hand) campaign known as the “War on Drug-Trafficking.” Over a decade later, the public security crisis continues to rage; the yearly number of homicides have risen to two and sometimes close to three times what it had been.<sup>7</sup> The violence has been such that it was able, in public discourse, to overshadow almost entirely the 2008 global financial crisis.

Between the economic crisis of the 1980s and today’s public security crisis, another sort of crisis has been underway in Mexico: a crisis of the national public sphere, as the site where “we” takes shape and articulates, by degrees, myriad impulses and projects of smaller scale. Paul Eiss has located what he calls the *narcomedia*—traffickers’ use of mass and social media to reach a broad public—as “the focal point of a radical questioning, even erosion, of the functioning and role of the government, the press, and the public sphere in Mexico” (2014:95). Here, I want to suggest a creative side to such crisis: that it can provide an opening for narrative-cum-imaginative possibilities precluded where lines of futurity are more tightly regimented. With the unmooring that occurred in the 1980s, linear temporalities of progress that had drawn national and personal futures into some semblance of co-ordination were severely disrupted. The charge of expectation and affective investment these narratives had borne, though, did not simply dissipate—instead, it caromed off in new directions, and the nation was retemporalized into a multiplicity of divergent personal futures.

Janet Roitman has argued that the word *crisis* serves pragmatically to mark a “radical temporal distinction” (2014:28), or break, that ultimately lays the ground for the reinstatement of a teleological temporality; for

Joseph Masco, it is a conservative term, “a means of stabilizing an existing condition” (2017:65). The sense that Mexico’s public sphere is in crisis has indeed fueled state, civil society, and personal attempts to rebuild both the institutions and the sensibilities of liberal publicity—recall the indignation over El Chapo’s fans. The rhetoric used is remarkably classical, echoing Immanuel Kant’s foundational vision of the “freedom to make *public use* of one’s reason” (1970:55) as the basic motor of political modernization.<sup>8</sup> Comic books and narcocorridos, however, do not address themselves either to those who might want to kick-start liberal publicity or to those who might take refuge in the negative modes of stabilization that Roitman, Masco, Muir, and Lomnitz all describe in distinct guises. Instead, they frame their publics as decidedly non-elite, decidedly non-middle class. More importantly, despite this class-marked address, they often seek—as I will show—not the consolidation of identity but its undoing.<sup>9</sup>

Read as crowd-texts, comics and corridos problematize collectivity where crisis has become permanent. To do so, they exploit the nature of crowds as a recurrent if mutating crisis for liberal publicity, from its theoretical foundations to its contemporary manifestations in practice. In eschewing “teleological solace,”<sup>10</sup> however, they do not shut down temporal horizons, producing the “contemporaneity” (Mbembe and Roitman 1995:323) or the “present saturation” (Lomnitz 2003a:132) often associated with economic crisis. Instead, they open a multiplicity of life and futurity unmoored from, though still energized by, the anchoring form of the nation-state. To grasp this unmooring, let us turn to *La Familia Burrón*.

### **The Economic Crisis According to *La Familia Burrón***

*La Familia Burrón* is a classic in Mexico. The work of legendary cartoonist Gabriel Vargas, it was first published in 1948 and continued until 2009, reaching runs of half a million (Sánchez González 2015). Readers I have encountered speak of it with intense affection. A young executive from a provincial, middle-class background shared fond memories of sneak readings at his grandmother’s—his parents had prohibited him the comic due to its low-class coarseness. My colleague Gail Mummert, who with her husband Sergio Zendejas introduced me to the Burrón family and generously lent me their collection, described bonding with her mother-in-law over the cartoon, as the older woman taught her the ins and outs of Mexico City slang. (Sergio remembers their peals of laughter from the

other room.) Similarly, another, newly-wed colleague absconded with Gail and Sergio's collection for bedtime reading with her husband, a recent immigrant to Mexico.

This intimate, nostalgic enthusiasm fits well with the recent recuperation of comic books as a cherished element of national popular culture. A commemorative newspaper article, for instance, lists the famous authors who have "paid homage" to *La Familia Burrón*, and states that the "golden age" of Mexican comics begins and ends with it (Sánchez González 2015). A few decades ago, though—as the young executive's testimony indicates and Anne Rubenstein (1998) explores in depth—comic books were more often perceived as a threat to national mores and a corrupting influence on their supposedly uneducated readership.<sup>11</sup> After all, this was Mexico's first mass reading public, regularly reaching between 5–10 million people as early as the 1930s and 1940s (Bartra 2001). As Armando Bartra (2001) puts it, comics constituted an "art of crowds [*muchedumbres*]"; they were far freer, more "excessive [and] delirious," than their North Atlantic counterparts (such as Marvel Comics).

Comic book readers may not have been as exclusively lower class as the censors imagined, but the world *La Familia Burrón* represented was. The series is set in a Mexico City *vecindad*, an iconic urban working-class living arrangement where families share a central courtyard and plumbing facilities—Oscar Lewis (1961) made the *vecindad* internationally famous with his "culture of poverty" thesis. The Burróns' circumstances are a cut above those of their neighbors (Mr. Burrón is a barber with his own modest shop), but as soon as one moves outside their apartment, its bare minimum of middle-class decency gives way to frank material deterioration. The bodies depicted, their clothes, their talk, all bespeak urban poverty. Borola (Mrs. Burrón) insists she has an upper-class background, but her speech too is of the *vecindades*, full of slang and vivacity, and her brother is a professional thief who occasionally takes the series on excursions into Mexico City's criminal underworld.

It should be no surprise, then, that in the early years of economic crisis, *La Familia Burrón* took the privations of Mexico City's popular classes as its main theme. Moreover, the comic continually located these privations in their national historical context. The issue from April 30, 1982 is exemplary in this sense (Vargas 1982). The plot revolves around Borola's frustrated desire to travel abroad. One day, she finds out that some neighbors—practically the poorest in the *vecindad*—are planning "a long trip

around the marble [i.e., the globe].” Green with envy, Borola runs to her husband to beg him to likewise take the family traveling: “It’s not the same to say, ‘I went to Europe’ as ‘I went to Uruapan [a small city in western Mexico]’” (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Regis: “We’ve got marvelous sites here, but we don’t know how to take advantage of them.” Borola: “Vanity doesn’t let us go on vacation within the country; everybody prefers to feel like an international traveler.”

Borola: “It’s not the same to say, ‘I went to Europe’ as ‘I went to Uruapan.’” Regis: “That’s how it is: even though we have mountains, jungles, deserts and a marvelous ocean right here, we like going abroad.”

Borola, however, does not succeed in convincing don Regis (an affectionate yet respectful nickname), and so decides to visit the other family to find out how they plan to pay for the trip. They invite her into a room full of bottle caps (Figure 2). When Borola ridicules them, they show her the newspaper, which reads, “Starting today, the buncha fat cats that make up the financial group Bank Rupt agreed to give the value of one peso to each bottle cap, thus shoring up our degraded currency that nobody wants even to play hopscotch” (Figure 3). Back home, Regis explains: “The bad Mexicans changed their pesos to dollars, and their money multiplied. The good Mexicans kept their pesos, their pesos got devalued, and now bottle caps are worth more” (Figure 4). Despite this very rational



**Figure 2:** Neighbor: "Let's see, take a gander at the money I've got. You think it ain't much?"  
 Borola: "Money? It's caps from bottles of beer and soda."



**Figure 3:** See text for translation.



**Figure 4:** See text for translation.

explanation, Borola is gripped by enthusiasm and rushes out in search of bottle caps. Her search is, however, fruitless, for she is the last to hear the news, and all the bottle caps have already been snapped up.

From a classic liberal perspective, a modern public sphere is inherently cosmopolitan. In Kant's (1970) early formulation, the public sphere depends on circulations of texts and people across borders, but at the end of the day those circulations must submit themselves to the interest and authority of the state. The attraction of the foreign must never overflow into a future beyond national boundaries. In the first moment of the cartoon, doña Borola's desires are consistent with this imperative. They are born of her immediate surround and promise to return to it, for the only thing she wants, really, is to transfer her feeling of envy to her neighbors by showing off her own mobility. The productivity of the cosmopolitan, however, resides in the danger of its play with the foreign: with the possibility of exiting the nation and its status system forever.

Between Borola and her desires, both the crisis itself and Regis's economic reason intervene. He grasps both the domestic and the national situation. Don Regis is paternal authority as it should be, but, as always in *La Familia Burrón*, his impetuous and flamboyant wife leaves him in the dust (not for nothing is she twice as tall as he is). She responds with her own modality of practical reason: let's see how the Joneses think they're gonna pull this off. The pile of hoarded bottle caps might seem at first like a cruel joke at the expense of the poor and ignorant, and Borola, with a loud guffaw, does not hesitate to put herself quickly on the side of those in the know. Her neighbors, however, level the playing field by showing her the sacred and incontestable words of the newspaper. At this point, we enter ambiguous terrain. If a moment before we laughed with Borola, now we laugh at her. How can it be that, at the very moment of the collapse of the state authority that guaranteed Mexico's currency, Borola should fail to hear the sarcasm and go on accepting literally the authority of the press as anchor of public communication? We, the readers, like her husband, know better. But the comic book's plot does not, finally, support this interpretation.

Regis's reason is trampled to the ground; his explanations have no effect upon his wife. But when Borola returns home that night, her exhaustion and failure do not vindicate her husband's good judgment. To the contrary, Regis confirms that what the newspaper says is true. Borola has joined a human mass, a reading public that has understood and acted

upon the news in the same way she did, and that is right to have done so. Just off-page, the crowd appears as an outgrowth of newspaper reading, and all expectations as to the moral value of reason and unreason are reversed. Our expectations as readers are reversed—we did not know better after all, when we read the news as sarcasm and laughed at Borola’s ingenuousness. Literalism may be a stock weakness of the poor in Mexico, but *La Familia Burrón* does away with that stereotype, playing upon the reader’s own familiarity with it, and knocking the struts out from under any smug superiority we may have felt. The comic has led us, as readers, onto terrain explicitly counterposed to Regis’s reason and that engulfs it, resetting the terms of reality.

The apparently fantastic possibility that bottle caps do stand in as money, then, comes as a vindication of the crowd, with its impulsive desires and actions. The possibility does not just reverse reason; it reverses the crisis, turning it into an opportunity for democratized wealth. Devaluation morphs into revaluation: the currency is no longer coins but bottle caps, no longer controlled by the fat cats of Bank Rupt, but available to anyone able to read the newspaper and grasp the fantastic nature of the politico-economic situation into which the country has been plunged. Though a playful suggestion within the pages of a comic book, the conversion of the bottle caps into currency reveals a deeper truth about the devaluation. To illuminate the economic crisis as portrayed by *La Familia Burrón*, I turn to a short story by Baudelaire.<sup>12</sup>

In “Counterfeit Money,” Baudelaire narrates the encounter of two friends with a beggar; the narrator’s friend gives him an uncommonly generous donation. In response to this unexpected act, the narrator remarks, “Besides feeling surprise, there’s no pleasure greater than causing it” (cited in Derrida 1992b:32). The friend answers, tranquilly, that the coin was counterfeit. The narrator is scandalized; a long paragraph ensues in which he describes how his “miserable brain” suddenly begins to produce, one after another, all the scenarios this false gift might result in. “Might it not multiply into real coins? Could it not also lead him to prison?” But this “reverie” is broken by the friend’s words: “Yes, you are right; there’s no pleasure greater than that of surprising a man by giving him more than he expects.” At this, the narrator’s indignation reaches a peak: “I saw then clearly that his intention was to do good and at the same time good business; to earn 40 cents and the heart of God; attain paradise on the cheap;

in sum, to pick up for free certification as a charitable man...I will never forgive him the ineptitude of his calculation.”

The counterfeit—*moneda falsa*, it is literally called in Spanish, “false coin”—is dangerous because it seeks to generate something from nothing. It threatens the system of equivalences that upholds society understood as a circle of exchange. If the narrator is scandalized, it is because the counterfeit coin is an affront to this system. It must be extirpated. But it is too late; it is already in circulation. In face of this fact, one may follow the anxious, conservative option, attempting to re-stabilize the system by means of indignation and censure. There is, however, another possibility: that of freeing oneself to reverie, the sudden and uncontrollable surge of speculation. The narrator attributes to the counterfeit coin an unpredictable productivity; the alternatives present themselves to his mind in fantastic array. In the hands of the beggar, the counterfeit represents a reserve of potential, of different narratives that all might equally come to be.

In *La Familia Burrón*, the bottle cap is a coin that does not hide its falsity but puts it on display. It puts on display the falsity of real money. The menace of the devaluation is the menace of the counterfeit, but on a mass scale. It is not a man on the street who has passed a counterfeit coin to a beggar, but the government itself that has passed worthless money to the people as a whole. *La Familia Burrón* doubtless lodges this accusation. The astute, Regis says, did exactly what Baudelaire’s narrator imagined: by the simple trick of converting them to dollars, the “bad Mexicans” multiplied their pesos—their “false money”—into real coins. But at the same time that it accuses, *La Familia Burrón* also presents the other option, that of narrative proliferation—only here the rampant stories are not confined to the brain of a narrator, but slide into the events of the narrative itself.

If the peso is real money that in reality is fake, the bottle cap is fake money that comes precipitously close to eliminating the boundary between the real and the make-believe—it comes close to making fantasy come true. In the moment of the devaluation, when the possibility of realizing all kinds of desires is cut off, the possibility emerges of articulating others, that before were fantastic too. When could the inhabitants of a Mexico City *vecindad* ever vie for the status plus of a trip to Europe? The devaluation destabilizes the national social system, including all sorts of social differences, hierarchies, and established boundaries—like those of the economy of cosmopolitan status that sustain whatever pretense Mexico has had of a liberal public sphere.<sup>13</sup> From a socially marginal perspective,



Figure 5: See text for translation.

these emergent gaps can represent a positive possibility. *La Familia Burrón* is quick to take advantage of them.

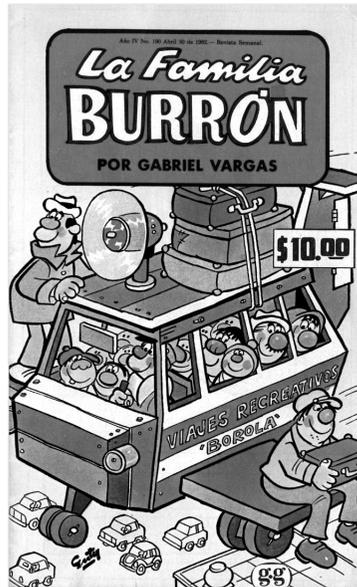
This issue ends with two suggestions, not explicitly related to each other. The inside of the back cover (Figure 5) steps out of the narrative frame to directly address the reader:

Now more than ever, let's put a brave face on hard times, or, what's the same, to endure this galloping inflation we've got to be optimistic and what better [way to do that] than by reading the episodes of *La Familia Burrón*. We believe that if you do, you'll forget about the economic crisis we're sunk in down to our footsies. Don't forget, your rag comes out every Friday.

At the height of the crisis, at least the regularity of "your rag" can be relied upon. In popular language, *La Familia Burrón* shoots for something like the narrative "accompaniment" that the media provided the middle classes in this very crisis (Lomnitz 2003a). But instead of citing statistics and expert pronouncements, *La Familia Burrón* accompanies with fiction. Instead of inciting readers to take up discourses of critique themselves (Muir 2015),

the comic invites them to “forget” their situation by substituting the memory of the crisis with the memory of “your rag.” *La Familia Burrón*, however, does not distract from the crisis at all: it mentions it non-stop. Rather, the “forgetting” it proposes is analogous to Baudelaire’s reverie: the comic draws its public into letting its imagination loose in the direction of the fantasies provoked by the counterfeit.

The front and back covers portray what does not fit in the narrative itself, but that follows directly from this proposal to “forget.” They portray the narrative carried to its final and, even within the world of the comic, not fully articulable consequences. What if Borola had collected her bottle caps? What if she were able thus to take to Europe not just her family but



**Figure 6: The side of the airplane reads, “‘Borola’ Recreational Trips.”**

the entire vecindad or, even, a crowd of strangers? On the front cover, we see a troupe of people piled into an airplane cobbled together of scrap wood, flying merrily through the skies (Figure 6). The desire to travel is no longer a matter of social distinction; instead, the small craft overflows with a motley, anonymous crew. The jam-packed airplane annuls the consumerist logic of distinction that the story began with. On the back cover, we see the result: chaos in the Louvre (Figure 7). Mrs. Burrón paints a



Figure 7

moustache on the portrait of a lady; Mr. Burrón, furious, tries to stop her; the other museum-goers can only gape in astonishment. The counterfeit's conversions (now of gender) proliferate; contagiously, they destroy all symbols of value.

In the image of the packed airplane, the crowd that rushed out after bottle caps—a reflexive play upon the comic book's own reading audience—returns in a utopic vision of shared seizure, by jimmy rigged means, not just of the symbol of status that flight is, but of the experiential pleasures it offers. These are all the more intense, all the giddier, for being realized in a group. For the reader, it is narrative that offers a taste of this collective flight, and an exit from the distinctions that undergird liberal publicity in Mexico. *La Familia Burrón* thus tells a tale that verges into crowds at its edges, as a utopic potential of joyous rioting it cannot quite reach but nonetheless suggests, offers to the reader, invites him or her towards. In this sense, it is a crowd-text: a performative invitation to inhabit the crowd, if only by losing oneself imaginatively, for a moment, from the strictures of status, social difference, authority of all sorts, and reason.

## The Security Crisis According to Narcocorridos

In *La Familia Burrón*, the proliferation of narrative possibilities—of chaos, of the gesture of occupying, if only imaginatively, a social role not one’s own—is ludic and innocent, but the same tendency can take sinister forms. The joyful mayhem of the comic book, I suggest, evolved into the violent mayhem represented in and by narcocorridos—the oldest form of Eiss’s “narcomedia.” Like comic books, the narcocorrido is a popular genre both in terms of its massive circulation and its reflexive insistence that it speaks above all to Mexico’s popular classes (Yeh 2015). Like comic books a few decades ago, narcocorridos have been the object of scandal and censure (see Astorga 2005). It is daring to point out, as María Luisa de la Garza has, that “the differences between today’s hated corridos and yesterday’s venerated corridos are not so great” (2008:5)—the latter being venerated, again like comic books, as authentic popular culture, though of a much earlier era.

Unlike comic books, however, much of the scandal derives from the belief that narcocorridos are commissioned by members of organized crime. Even so, these songs cannot be reduced to their function in legitimating drug trafficking and cartel violence, as if they were nothing but propaganda paid for by criminal patrons. They are ubiquitous in public spaces across Mexico, they mix company on recordings and in concert with romantic songs or corridos about migration, and their public massively exceeds those directly involved in trafficking. In the 1990s, for example, Chalino Sánchez’s corridos detonated a new wave of Chicano pride in California (Quinones 2001:11–12). The genre’s powers of attraction are diverse, going far beyond those of organized crime.

Beyond the imaginary of a direct connection with organized crime, the accusation that narcocorridos foment violence rests on the image of a listener who takes their stories of success, betrayal, vengeance, and honor with naïve literalism.<sup>14</sup> The public vulnerable to their fantasies seems unable to distinguish between reality and fiction, rushing out like Borola to seek the riches unexpectedly represented as within reach. This power to stimulate a sense of self-transformation is no longer simply a moralizing discourse from without, but may be taken up by listeners. When a friend posted Figure 8 on Facebook, it gleaned humorous recognition, as her friends either teased her for acting thus or laughingly admitted that they felt the same way. Corridos’ YouTube comment sections are full of similar remarks.



**Figure 8: Top: “I’m going to listen to narcocorridos; what could go wrong?”  
Bottom: “All the way, motherfuckers, zero fear.  
I’m gonna abduct you with my whole posse;  
we’re 100% pumped.”**

Once, however, the idea that corridos could provide plots for one’s own real-life future was not so ridiculous. Howard Campbell’s (2010) collection of testimonials on trafficking in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez area primarily includes stories from the 1990s; these tales paint a scene of great institutional openness, where opportunities for individual entrepreneurship abounded. Though corridos on trafficking had been around for a couple of decades (Herrera-Sobek 1979), they acquired their moniker and came into their own as a subgenre in the 1990s (Ramírez-Pimienta 2011). This was also the period in which drug trafficking emerged as a widely available imaginative alternative through which the desires and aspirations once attached to the nation-state might be fulfilled.<sup>15</sup>

Many narcocorridos from that time insist on an upward mobility that may be unexpected but is not undeserved:

Era muy pobre allá en Tierra Blanca  
*He was very poor there at Tierra Blanca,*  
Y hacía mandados para comer,  
*And he ran errands in order to eat*  
Hasta que un día le fiaron droga  
*Until one day they gave him drugs on credit,*  
Y poco a poco empezó a vender.  
*And little by little he began to sell.*  
Tenía valor e inteligencia  
*He had bravery and intelligence*  
Y se hizo rico en un dos por tres.  
*And he became rich in no time at all.*  
(Los Tucanes de Tijuana 1995b)

These were stories of great traffickers like El Chapo, self-made men who rose despite their humble origins: “my business is dangerous, I know, but hunger brings out your courage” (Los Tucanes de Tijuana 1997). According to the moralizers, anyone hearing these stories might think, “That could be me.” Baudelaire played with the chaotic proliferation of narrative possibilities, but only within the enclosed ambit of his narrator’s brain; *La Familia Burrón* dared to take a similar gesture into the events narrated and, in its most extreme form, the pictorial representations on the cover. With narcocorridos, such fantasies of transformation threaten to pass over to the world in which narration takes place.

In a moment in which drug trafficking seemed to make possible radical shifts of fortune, narcocorridos articulated desires previously unimaginable. These desires are not far from Borola’s desire to travel; they are desires normally censured since they are, finally, profoundly transgressive—like Borola’s vandalism in the Louvre. Similarly to the characters in the corridos, she takes the place of the rich, but not to become like them. Instead, she does so simply to transmit the chaos of transfiguration, by painting a moustache on a solemn female portrait. The corridos, though, represent this unrestrained transmission of chaos as violence. Alongside the transformation from poor to rich, the other major transformation they dwell on is death. The man from Tierra Blanca, for example, ends up riddled with bullets. He takes his leave from beyond the grave: “they assassinated me, I don’t know why, and I don’t know either who did it.” This excessive and senseless violence takes the place of the ludic rioting on *La*

*Familia Burrón's* cover. As the narcocorrido genre developed, death and not wealth would turn into its maximal figure of fascination.

Since the “War on Drug-Trafficking” broke out, the positive qualities of earlier narcocorridos have been more remarked upon. “Those ones had values!” I have heard Mexican colleagues exclaim. Much as narcocorridos could seem like evil incarnate in comparison to older corridos, a new subgenre has made the songs of the 1990s and early 2000s seem almost wholesome by comparison. These are the “twisted” (*alterados*) or “sick” (*enfermos*) corridos that began to circulate in 2006, when the “War” began (Amaya 2013:518–521, Ramírez-Pimienta 2013, Muehlmann 2014).

Unsurprisingly, the new *corridos alterados* lend themselves to reading in terms of the transformation of Mexico’s political economy of violence. Most are no longer praise-songs for *capos* (strongmen) but celebrate middle- or low-ranking hitmen. The weapons mentioned are no longer AK-47s, but bazookas and grenade launchers. Confrontations are no longer man-to-man, but between commandos, mini-armies that “control” the territory. The songs’ whole language is militarized; personal heroism has not disappeared completely, but it cannot relinquish for an instant the acknowledgment of subordination to an organizational hierarchy. And if older narcocorridos only half-ironically spoke of traffickers as self-made “businessmen” (*empresarios*), the new ones reflect the professionalization of the field with their generous references to formal education. In “The School of the Anthrax Virus,” the protagonist, who “was trained to kill, kidnap, [and] torture with style and class,” founds an “academy” where he gives “bachelors’ degrees in weaponry, business deals, and account adjustment [i.e., revenge murder]” (Calibre 50 2011). “With good excellence in the certificate...we have now graduated” and “we are diploma-holders in sick business,” proclaims one song (Alto Rango 2019); another is titled “Postgraduate Instructor” (XMrGomeZx 2011).<sup>16</sup>

Sarcastically, the songs appropriate the prestige of education only to destroy and discard it. With their macabre skill set, the hitmen have forcefully opened a positive possibility of advancement, and their songs link this to what hurt the middle class most in the economic crisis: the devaluation of the educational degrees that had cost so much effort, and that now guaranteed nothing (Lomnitz 2003a). Carrying this devaluation even further, twisting and transforming language itself, these songs’ ironies are, though infinitely more aggressive, analogous to Borola’s appearance in the cultured sanctuary of the Louvre.<sup>17</sup>

At the height of their popularity, corridos alterados were associated particularly with the Anthrax, a group of hitmen operating in the state of Sinaloa, and anthrax is the main metaphor giving the musical subgenre its two names (*alterados* and *enfermos*). A violent disposition is rendered as an illness or “alteration” (*alterado* refers to emotional alterations like upset or rage, but also, we shall see, to drug use), a contagious “virus” transmitting an incurable condition.<sup>18</sup> Echoing classic crowd imagery, the songs describe how the virus extends itself; there are always “more soldiers waiting to be recruited” (Silva 2011). Wealth is no longer the principal object of interest, but a compulsive violence closely linked to a fascination with death. Whether chaos is ludic or sinister depends on one’s point of view: this music is implacably upbeat. “Hymns of violent joy,” Mariana Martínez Esténs (2012) has called them. What Borola does in the Louvre, it must be remembered, might not seem so amusing if its transgressive implications were not cushioned by its categorization as comic book fiction—that is, if one were actually to imagine hordes of readers rushing out to disfigure all the icons of Western high culture. In the end, the logic of contagious chaos is a matter, as in *La Familia Burrón*, of alteration in a literal sense, of becoming *other*. Instead of occupying a different social role, however, the corridos alterados dream of a supreme and almost unimaginable alteration: the transformation of the hitman into death itself, as the most alter other there is.

The “virus” fosters this always incomplete alteration. If the transformation from poor to rich in *La Familia Burrón* or the older narcocorridos was unstable and ambiguous (the point was not to become like the rich, but to enter their spaces transgressively, to appropriate what was theirs), how much more so is the transformation wrought by the Anthrax. The infection opens the subject to a force independent of any author, that cannot be captured or fixed in a permanent manner: though one may become death’s agent, one is always exposed to becoming instead its victim. It is not by chance that some music videos show hitmen wearing ski masks emblazoned with death-skulls. There is nothing unusual in anthropomorphizing death—least of all in Mexico—but these songs insistently posit it as an independent actor: “death accompanies me” (Los Buitres de Culiacán 2007), “death goes about in a man’s hands,” “death has bribed me” (Caro 2012).<sup>19</sup> The hitmen do not control death exactly, rather, they let its strange force run through them. Thus, to a certain extent, they can confuse themselves with it: “if I run into the opposing band, I bring them

bad luck, as if I were a black cat representing death” (Silvestre 2011), or “death is hooded,” where lines before it was the hitmen who were hooded (Silva 2011).

Corridos alterados, however, do not just evoke alteration through referential language. “Kíkiri fua” (La Edición de Culiacán 2012) is a fast-paced, exuberant ode to marihuana.<sup>20</sup> In Spanish, *quiquiriquí* is the conventionalized sound of a rooster’s crow, and *gallo* (rooster) is slang for a joint. With this onomatopoeic wordplay, the title foreshadows the mimetic logics that will prevail by the song’s end. *Fua* likewise refers to the narrator’s joint (“I take out my fua”), but this reference comes from a video that went viral in 2011, when television news cameras captured a drunk hilariously expounding upon his inner power—his fua—with which he can even revive the dead (Nayaritenlinea.mx 2011). As he repeatedly screams, “Fua! Fua!” (directing it, for instance, at an imaginary corpse), it becomes clear that the sound conveys the power itself breaking loose from his body. It is, he tells his interviewers, “that which projects itself towards the universe”—and he points to the sky with an energetically extended arm. “Kíkiri fua” merges this projection with the trope of getting high as flight. Here, the narrator’s gallo is the “inner power...that projects me and sends me flying.”

The lyrics sprinkle in references to drug use as *loquera* (madness), but they push most the metaphor of being *avionado* (literally, airplaned), with phrases like “I turn on the engines and lift into flight in my spacejoint [*gallo espacial*].” Both tropes, though, are variants on the idea of drug use as an altered state, made explicit when the narrator demands that the dope be brought out “*p’andar alterados*” (so we can get altered). As with Borola, fantasies of individual flight turn collective when the narrator declares, “we’re all going to end up stoned.” This point becomes the hinge, though, for an unexpected flip. Moments later, in the refrain, comes the parallel line, “we’re all going to dance this catchy rhythm called ‘Kíkiri fua’.”

Taking the title at its word, the machine of flight is no longer the joint but the song, and “we” are to be transported in our bodily movement at the very moment of listening, as a pulsating crowd. The second time around, the refrain takes off, accelerating uncontrollably, and the singer catches his breath to remark, “*se me fue el avión*”—literally, the plane got away from me, though the phrase also plays on alteration in that it is a common way of saying one was distracted. The remark seals the substitution of song for smoke. “We” who listen are the ones flying now, joint or no joint. Like drugs, like violence, music as this song represents it potentiates a

collective power of transport. Here, the “sensuous incitement” (Mazzarella 2013:3) to flight depends on tropes carefully woven in the lyrics, but it is brought home by the mimetic powers of music, as its tempo spins madly out of control.

“Kíkiri fua” takes us musically into the alteration of marihuana, but “El taquicardio” (El Komander 2012a) draws us towards death itself. The title refers to a person suffering a cocaine-induced tachycardia, and the lyrics describe in gripping detail the bodily alteration he undergoes: his numbed jaw, fingers “rigid as stones,” eyes turned back in his head, chills and cramps, tremors shaking his body, nose bleeding... “but in truth, I love it; it seems like I’m flying.” The song’s mimetic devices are simpler than “Kíkiri fua’s” and consist essentially in its tight, driving pace, the way it plunges so relentlessly through the harmonic changes as the narrator pushes himself to the brink of overdose (halfway through, he has to send for more cocaine), and the effects of the accordion.

The accordion squeals high, it dips and dives, it takes ornamentation beyond anything the Baroque imagined in repeated, insanely prolonged trills. Its other main device is a shimmering tremolo that exploits the accordion’s nature as a reed instrument based on the principle of breath. These devices, I would suggest, musically express the madness of the narrator’s loquera, his feeling of being “*muy alterado*” (very altered). If the accordion gives sonic form to his flight, it is appropriate that the song should close with it, as a reprise of the main melody disintegrates into a light stepwise figure and we are left floating as the accordion drifts away, high and dreamy.

In both these songs, drug use is recreational, but elsewhere El Komander poignantly describes it as work-related. The narrator of “El cigarrito bañado” (“The Doused Cigarette”; 2012b) smokes to control his fear as he patrols the city. He speaks of fright and panic with a candor unimaginable in earlier narcocorridos. Marihuana soothes his nerves, but it is also a war tactic in itself. When he is visibly high, others know he is “*bien enfermo*” (real sick) and stay away. Thus, the alteration of death that might come of one’s work as a foot soldier crosses and melds with the alteration of drugs represented in “Kíkiri fua” and “El taquicardio.”

In the corridos alterados, *La Familia Burrón*’s invitation to break boundaries and become other reaches an extreme. Read across genres and through the narcocorridos of earlier decades, death here appears as the reification of a contagious force of chaos that erupted when national

teleologies and their capacity to interpellate Mexican publics first tottered with the economic crisis of the 1980s. This is not the only development born of that unmooring, to be sure. In *La Familia Burrón*, crowds appeared as a promise, a potential the text sought to actualize; corridos show a tighter link with extratextual crowds. Indubitably, they help inspire the organized, corporate crowd of the cartels—the delirious “we” made sickeningly other by “our” collective enterprise.<sup>21</sup> This crowd, however, is inseparable from—and, in concerts, materially commingled with—a wide halo of listeners, not directly involved in the business, but who fantasize violence and death vicariously through this music.

## Conclusion

Calling their public into flight, crowd-texts show that rioting can be literary as much as physical—and that to be physical, it very often must be literary too. Mazzarella takes up Durkheim’s concept of *mana*—which he glosses as “supernatural force or efficacy”—to ask after “the mana that infuses an urban crowd or even...a television audience or an internet public” (2017:2). For Durkheim, one key to the “collective effervescence” (1995:216–225) of ritual lies in the *churinga*: a sacred stone with a totemic image engraved on it, emanating what is ultimately the group’s own force back to it. To return to my opening example, El Chapo evidences the slow, decades-long dispersion of the national public. For it, he acted as a *churinga*, remagnetizing scattered energies. It is no coincidence that his most thrilling exploit should be his repeated flight from the all-too-literal clutches of the state. In the absence of any effective totalizing figure in formal politics, El Chapo may have been the closest thing around.<sup>22</sup>

In the devaluation, the socially necessary fictions sustaining the nation-state began to show as such. They were fetishes in the theoretical sense, promising more than they could give, commanding affective investments, luring with expectations for the future, and at the same time endowing the nation-state with social reality, sustaining it temporally as a collective project. As happens with fetishes, the revelation of their nature as artificial and, even, jimmy rigged provoked a release of the energy invested in them. They were revealed as something humbler than what they seemed—but in turn, the potentials of the artificial and the jimmy rigged seemed greater than ever.

According to the Real Academia Española, the word *fetische* (fetish) entered Spanish from the French at the close of the 19th century.<sup>23</sup> Like *fetish*, its root is the Portuguese term *feitiço* as transformed by its use in Africa and then popularized in Europe (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988). The direct analogue of *feitiço* in Spanish, though, is *hechizo*. Cut off from the history that gave *fetische* its rich and ambivalent powers, *hechizo* nonetheless embodies an intriguing duality. Like the Latin *facticium* from which all these words derive, *hechizo* has the utterly banal and literal meaning of “something made.” In Mexico, the word is redolent of the pragmatics of tinkering, and tends to bear a sharp consciousness of the economic necessity that often spurs such making. It can refer simply to the handmade, but more often means something closer to “hand-cobbled,” and conveys distance from the propriety of the manufactured. The *hechizo* is thus not just germane to Mexican popular material worlds—such as Borola’s *vecindad*, which provides an ever-crumbling backdrop to the family’s adventures—but practically characterizes them.

At the same time, *hechizo* is well-known as a term from the fantasy-world of children’s fairytales (more or less the same ones popular throughout Euro-America). Here, it refers to a spell, such as a fairy godmother might cast.<sup>24</sup> *Hechizo* thus spans the mundane materiality of economic privation and fictional power at its most strikingly fantastic—though cordoned off, to be sure, in the innocuous genre of bedtime stories. It is between these two realms, I would suggest, that both *La Familia Burrón* and *narcocorridos* take shape as crowd-texts. Their sense of fiction—itself a fabrication revealing itself as such—attempts to bridge the gap. Fiction here is like the airplane in which Borola and her friends fly to Europe, *hechizo* in both senses: a cobbled-together, fairytale fantasy, transporting the collectivity to unknown places in unexpected ways.

When national fictions fell apart in the wake of economic crisis, the energies invested in them flowed toward fiction in the explicit sense, the powers of which were now out in the open and, seemingly, up for grabs. As carefully crafted personal and familial futures collapsed, fiction’s creative potentials seemed not just the only resource left, but a resource democratically available in novel and exciting ways. Straddling *hechizo*’s two senses, fiction helped open a newly myriadic future distinct from the narrative teleologies that had sutured the nation.

Like Baudelaire’s counterfeit, the devalued peso set loose a proliferation of fantastic, *hechizo* narratives. The state’s control on generative

power seemed broken, and the sense began to circulate that something could be generated from nothing. Gustav Peebles (2008) has described how, in the 19th century, private hoards were consolidated into giant national hoards. In *La Familia Burrón*, the cartoon imagery of the hoard suggests the devaluation was effectively a decentralization of the national hoard. Without diminishing the fetish properties the hoard acquired with nationalization, the devaluation made it seem like anyone could put their hands on a hoard as lustrous as the national one had been. A surcharge of fetish power entered into circulation. Even a bottle cap could become a coin. In this light, *La Familia Burrón* echoes James Siegel's (1998) description of a family caught counterfeiting in 1990s Jakarta. They didn't seem to realize there was anything wrong with what they did; counterfeiting was a matter of "creating a sort of authority for oneself" (1998:57).

This unmooring of authority and generative power continued in the corridos that boomed with the drug economy of the 1990s, as inflation continued and another round of devaluation struck. With the drug boom, it indeed seemed possible to generate something from nothing, to become rich as if by miracle. At first, drugs seemed a kind of bottle cap, an alternative currency breaking boundaries and opening narrative possibilities that anyone, it seemed, could seize. As the drug economy became more corporatized, though, it realized economic fantasy less and less, at the same time that it became more violent. The concept of contagious chaos and transgressive transformation became more extreme, and the menace of death began to replace the fantasies of wealth.

If corridos seem to present patterns for possible futures, this is because—in contrast to comic books—the genre has a long tradition of being understood as veridical (Yeh 2015). As *Los Tigres del Norte* (1997) famously put it, "I like corridos because in them the pure truth is sung." These realist pretensions buttress the historical trajectory I have described, over several decades, where crowd-texts invite their audiences into flight beyond the epistemological boundaries hemming in fiction and fantasy. Seen in this light, the relation between economic and security crises cannot be reduced, as is sometimes said, to lack of opportunity having created a generation of youths open to the offers of organized crime. Instead, it takes shape at the level of crowd-texts: representations of transgressive desires that invite their publics into dispersion from established identities. It was this historical link, I would suggest, that let 2008 appear in Mexico

not as economic crisis but as a crisis of public security. The violence, though far darker, is not unrelated to Borola's rioting in the Louvre. ■

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>All translations from Spanish are my own.

<sup>2</sup>In focusing on collection and dispersion in particular, I am indebted to Sánchez (2016), who reframes liberalism-cum-republicanism in Latin America in terms of repeated efforts to still restive crowds. Thus, collection and dispersion alternate temporally for him, rather than facing off in the opposition between established society and those excluded from it.

<sup>3</sup>On abstraction and embodiment, see Warner (2002:159–186).

<sup>4</sup>From contrasting theoretical perspectives and writing of radically different contexts, Vicente Rafael (2003), Pablo Piccato (2010:129–156), and Francis Cody (2015) all richly unravel the complex interrelations between media forms and physical crowds. Earlier work on the United States has also framed crowds as intimately imbricated with the Independence-era formation of a national text-based public (Lee 1997). In each case, textual publics and physical crowds exist in complementary tension as twinned ways of constituting “the people.”

<sup>5</sup>Warner's main example of a counterpublic is the She-Romps, who met for private orgies, and whose intrusion into the male-dominated, disembodied realm of textual publicity was promptly policed.

<sup>6</sup>This is not to say that Mexican comic books did not use a dense thicket of reflexive strategies to bind the worlds they narrated to readers' lives, for example, asides from the author, reader contests, stories based on autobiographic sketches submitted, and more (Rubenstein 1998:19–27).

<sup>7</sup>For analyses of the statistics up to 2009, see Escalante Gonzalbo (2009, 2011). For statistics up to 2014, see Berber Cruz (2016).

<sup>8</sup>Despite this rhetoric, projects for liberal publicity should be read in the context of Mexico's neoliberalization. Burdening the public with responsibility, these projects seek to regiment unruly impulses back into a collective form. Their promises of satisfaction, however, ring thin given current socioeconomic conditions, and so they end up more coercive than enticing.

<sup>9</sup>Dispersion, I should note, poses a clear challenge to neoliberal governmentality and self-making, but its ultimate effects for neoliberal economic projects are not conclusive. Neoliberalism creates zones of deregulation in which the cultivation of self-management is not a priority (Ong 2006), and in such contexts, subjectivities thrown into dispersion may be primed for productive projects like, most notably here, the labor of violence so key where sovereignty has fragmented.

<sup>10</sup>David Rojas, personal communication.

<sup>11</sup>Rubenstein (1998:45) cites two statistical studies of comic book audiences in the 1950s; both disproved the idea that readers were overwhelmingly uneducated. By the 1970s, Rubenstein notes, not much had changed: “roughly a third of the population admitted reading at least one comic book per week, and the audience was split more or less evenly between men and women” (1998:177). The surveys were located

in Mexico City, where comics were available at any corner newsstand—though this literature was common across the nation (Rubenstein 1998:181).

<sup>12</sup>“Counterfeit Money” was first published in *Paris Spleen* (Baudelaire 1947). My reading of it hews closely to Derrida’s (1992b), and I have preferred the translation as he cites it.

<sup>13</sup>As Canetti notes, “An inflation cancels out distinctions between men which had seemed eternal” (1962:187).

<sup>14</sup>Compare Mazzarella (2013) on the importance to publicity of the figure of the hopelessly susceptible media consumer: “what the pissing man sees, the pissing man does” (2013:104).

<sup>15</sup>Ramírez-Pimienta makes this substitution explicit. The emergence of a public receptive to narcocorridos was an effect, he writes, of the popularization of the idea that traffickers “well might be what the country needed to get out of the economic crisis” (2011:14).

<sup>16</sup>I was unable to locate proper bibliographical information for this song and have cited a YouTube video from its apparent year of publication.

<sup>17</sup>Recall too such scenes as that in Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo*, the iconic novel of the Mexican Revolution, when the revolutionaries install themselves in a luxurious home. Their appropriation of the objects that surround them is primarily destructive; they break, burn, or otherwise violate their own booty with furious disregard.

<sup>18</sup>Anthrax is actually produced by bacteria.

<sup>19</sup>Lomnitz notes that the “autonomization of death,” where it appears “as an independent actor,” is fairly recent in Mexico (Flacso México 2016).

<sup>20</sup>My thanks to Germán Leyva Valdez for introducing me to “Kíkiri fua.”

<sup>21</sup>For Canetti, armies are seldom properly crowds. Yet the cartels as corporations must keep foremost the desire for growth and the spirit of contagion that characterize crowds. As Canetti notes, “an army, itself as large as possible, is bent on creating the largest possible heap of enemy dead” (1962:71).

<sup>22</sup>This situation has changed with the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president.

<sup>23</sup>The Academia has on file only one instance prior to 1897. See [web.frl.es/fichero.html](http://web.frl.es/fichero.html).

<sup>24</sup>Today, the spells of witchcraft have other names, and *hechizo*’s use in fairytales is strongly inflected by its romantic poetic usage as *enchantment* or *charm*.

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### Foreign Language Translations:

Narrative Flight: Comics, Cartels, and Crowds Across 40 Years of Crisis in Mexico

**[Keywords:** Crowds, publics, public sphere, fiction, comics, narcocorridos, Mexico]

Fuga narrativa: historietas, cárteles y muchedumbres a lo largo de cuarenta años de crisis en México.

**[Palabras clave:** muchedumbres; públicos; esfera pública; ficción; historietas; narcocorridos; México]

叙事之旅: 漫画, 贩毒集团, 与群众跨越墨西哥四十年危机之行旅

**[关键词:** 群众, 公众, 公共领域, 小说, 漫画, 毒枭民谣, 墨西哥]

«Наступит день — я своей дочери про это расскажу»: Сербские женщины, молчание и политика жертвенности в Сараево.

**[Ключевые слова:** Босния-Герцеговина, этничность, национализм, поствоенный, Сараево, сербы, молчание, жертвенность]

Voo Narrativo: Histórias em Quadrinhos, Cartéis, e Multidões ao Longo de 40 Anos de Crise no México

**[Palavras-chave:** Multidões, públicos, esfera pública, ficção, histórias em quadrinhos, narcocorridos, México]

رحلة سردية: كاريكاتير، كارتلات، وحشود على مدار 04 عامًا من الأزمة في المكسيك  
حشود، الجماهير، المجال العام، الخيال، كاريكاتير، أغنيات المخدرات الشعبية، المكسيك