



*The State's Construction Of Subjectivity:
A Literary Analysis Of The
Contemporary Narco-Novel Perra Brava*

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Introduction

Perra Brava, written by Orfa Alarcón, is a Mexican narco-novel that will act as the focal point of this essay. Perra most often translates to bitch or female dog, and most of the time women are the ones who are on the receiving end of this epithet. Brava means the one who is ready to fight, however, this does not mean the ‘fighting bitch’ or the one who is always fighting, but the one who has the attitude of a bitch and is willing to fight for what she wants and deserves. This title, then, exemplifies the type of literature that gives the reader a glimpse into what the narco world is like. In this essay, the narco-novel will function under a similar premise that is laid out by the sicaresca novel. Perra Brava further emphasizes the power dynamics of both intimate and public relationships. Focusing on Julio, the sicario,¹ and Fernanda, his naïve girlfriend, the novel ventures to interrogate the nature of narco culture. At the same time, it uses a fictional framework to provide an ending that would not be possible in the real world as way of satisfying the falsely perceived reality of the narco world held by common readers. Although a face value reading may at first seem like a romanticization of the narco world, further inspection will reveal a critique of this culture by focusing on the actions of the main actors involved. Accordingly, in Perra Brava, Orfa Alarcón incorporates how subjectivity, sexuality, and identity have been manipulated (by the state) in order to manufacture a population that is unconsciously subservient to it.

Within Latin America, there are numerous countries that are continuously impacted by the War on Drugs, a campaign launched by the United States to combat drug trafficking. Considering the longstanding effects of this campaign that are still apparent today, this paper will focus on Mexico, their government, their politics, and drug trafficking through a close reading of Alarcon’s Perra Brava. The fact that individuals in an impoverished country choose to partake in the illicit trafficking of drugs is no accident, as people of such countries are often under certain social and economic constraints. In the case of Mexico, failed neoliberal policies, the expansion of globalization, and the economic crisis pushed the country over the brink—a response that was ultimately born out of desperation.

Background

¹ As a sicario, he is the assassin for the cartel he is working for.

Before the advent of cartels in Mexico, Colombia was one of the first countries to have individuals establish illicit drug commerce as a legitimate organization, with cocaine as their primary source of trade. Though these operations were not recognized as legitimate by the Colombian government, they were validated through widespread production and consumption in and outside the country. However, government intervention in the realm of drug trafficking led to the demise of the Colombian drug organizations. Accordingly, Mexico was able to fill the power vacuum of the international drug business.² At the same time, Ronald Reagan had just won the U.S. presidential election and was able to successfully launch the War on Drugs, which shifted the discourse surrounding the issue from the mere consumer to the countries where the drugs were being produced.³ However, this strategic enterprise “has helped consolidate the transnational drug trade” that the Mexican government is trying to stop in the first place.⁴ However, the U.S. was not the only nation that attempted to engage the narcos in a war. In 2006, Mexican president Felipe Calderón, after having just been elected, passed aggressive policy that targeted some of the most powerful cartels in the country.⁵ Calderón was attempting to stop the proliferation of drug trafficking. What those good intentioned anti-drug campaigns and policies failed to recognize was that they were exacerbating the problem for the citizens trapped between the state that promoted those policies and the cartels who fought back. This led to the creation of a narco Mexican culture.

The Impacts of Power on Molding the Individual

Illegal trafficking of drugs dictates how the everyday life of a citizen ought to be lived. Culture can be the safeguard and only form of expression for a group of people. It can be influenced by politics or political ideologies, but there is always some truth that can be revealed as a criticism of what the social and economic conditions are for people. Because Mexico has some of the most prominent criminal organizations in the world, these groups have been able to

² Howard Campbell, "Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican "Drug War": An Anthropological Perspective," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (2014): 60.

³ Cabañas, "Imagined Narcoscapes," 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ Campbell, "Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican "Drug War"," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (2014): 61.

infiltrate the most important aspects of society, including government, law enforcement, and schools. When the citizens interact with those institutions, it is likely that they are being exposed to some facet of the narco world without having to directly purchase or consume the drugs that are being produced. In some ways, the identity of individuals is molded by those outside interactions, and the way they come to express this is through music, film, and literature. With regards to literature, the sicaresca novel was popularized. They are a “new cultural form that seeks to explain the complexity of urban violence.”⁶ This cultural phenomena arose in Colombia, but the genre can be applied to novels that have derived from other places as long as they follow a formula in which “the assassin appears at the narrative center [but] the ultimate goal is to view mainstream society from a distance.”⁷ Thus, it serves as an attempt at framing what narco relationships might be like.

For the most part, assuming and believing that citizens, at least in democratic societies, are free to make decisions at their own discretion is easy. However, this claim dismisses any notion that the ways in which individuals act, if not predetermined, are heavily influenced by factors such as the state or society. Although individuals may not actively think about how the state interacts with them on a microlevel, it is evident that citizens inevitably fit a role that is in the best interest of serving the state and society. The effects of an authoritative figure of government can take the form of structural violence that oppresses the citizens who are most vulnerable. Structural violence is manifested in and perpetuated by systems that are closely intertwined with the state, such as neoliberalism. Mexico’s shift to neoliberalism meant they would be on the same playing field as developed nations, so they instituted policies that promoted free markets with little government regulation. With the absence of regulation, there were not enough safeguards to ensure that the consumer was protected. Individuals were left to fend for themselves, and if they were not prosperous it became their fault. Neoliberalism, then, represents the shift of focus from the government to the individual, and it is the individual who needs to change their circumstances, and it is here where structural violence finds its breeding ground. The interconnectedness of the

⁶ Cabañas, "Imagined Narcoscapes," 11.

⁷ See above.

state and neoliberalism is important because they work together to preserve the stability and power of one another. One of the ways in which preservation can occur is through the restriction of behavior between laws, or the implicit fabrication of the perfect subject to the state. This happens, first, through the recognition of who can be a subject, and therefore a citizen, and then through the allocation of power to a certain group (often power that can be used over the group that does not have power) that will help in maintaining the order that has already been established. Alarcón includes elements of violence and control utilized by those in power, both narcos and the government, to display how it can be transformative in both character and action on the individual level.

Women as Represented Subjects

The novel is narrated through the lens of Fernanda, a young woman from Monterrey who comes from a troubled family. As the protagonist of the novel, she functions as a conduit through which power discourses are probed; because she experiences a significant change in attitude by the end, she ultimately comes to represent the discernable effects of being immersed in the realm of narcos. Before continuing with the discussion of Fernanda, however, it is important to begin with a brief analysis of the Mexican state and society to determine the kind of influence it had over the characters in the novel. Mexico, like most countries, is dictated by the patriarchy; men are the heads of government just like they are the heads of the household. The implications of this are that men control both the private sphere (the home) and the public sphere (society). Women are excluded from holding any power. This characterizes women as a group of people with less power and leverage in society, meaning that they cannot influence the very same structures that rule over them.

Furthermore, this structure of power is based on a specific identification of gender because power is allocated through that, which then determines who will be included as a legitimate member of society. This automatically creates the first system of roles in society that is attributed to how men and women should act. The representation of women becomes essential for the state because not only does it serve as a form of legitimacy, but it is also able to construct what it means

to be a woman under that system of government. Perra Brava establishes Julio as the man who sets the rules for Fernanda, who is able to show her off as a trophy, and who is able to elevate himself above the rest of his peers because of the power he holds. Conversely, Fernanda's only choice in the matter is to obey whatever he says. Michel Foucault contends "that juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent."⁸ If the state did not produce its subjects in this manner, it would destabilize the framework that men have used to maintain their power in the first place. The effect of this, then, is that it creates a duality of power where men are the only ones authorized to exercise power while excluding women from that use, despite the fact that women are the ones who are at the receiving end of how that power is exercised. This power dynamic is able to be sustained because it is acknowledged and accepted by the subjects it was able to create since they (women) want to be represented and accounted for.

The way in which this representational framework is actualized is through the discourse that the state employs. In Mexico, political discourse is dominated by narcotics, more specifically, the "internal politics of drug gangs (narcos)"⁹ or narcopolitics. However, governments are not the only ones who have agency over their citizens. The group with agency is the one that has a better political strategy, and crucial for that strategy to work is a persuasive linguistic discourse. Narcos are effective because they are able to "generate a political or quasi-political discourse in the form of narco-propaganda"¹⁰ For example, they may blame the government for the terrible economic conditions, and then frame themselves as the ones who will bring economic opportunities to the country. Nonetheless, this discourse does not rise to the level of being a political ideology. The narcos of Mexico are not a political party, as the closest they get to the government is by being affiliated with them in illicit ways, i.e. ways that would deem the government corrupt. What the War on Drugs has revealed is that they are always resisting government authority.¹¹ Because the consequences of neoliberalism consisted of destitution and economic catastrophe, drug trafficking was able to spread since it provided individuals with an easy avenue towards economic

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Great Britain, Routledge, 1990), 2.

⁹ Melissa W. Wright, "Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border," *Signs* 36, no. 3 (2011): 719.

¹⁰ Campbell, "Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican "Drug War"," 62.

¹¹ See above.

opportunity. With the decline of the left-wing political parties and the rise of right-wing political parties, the narcos saw an opportunity to fill a power vacuum where they were able to create the perception of a legitimate source of resistance.

Furthermore, gender in the Mexican “government’s portrayal of narcos holds together around a binary of masculine rationality in contrast to feminine irrationality.”¹² What is rational is what is considered practical under this new narco neoliberal economy, and what is practical is the active participation of men; men are the ones committing the violence, selling the drugs, and dictating who else gets to participate, whereas the irrational woman will have a more passive role of domesticity where she never directly participates but is still able to enjoy the monetary gain of her husband. This is the case with Julio, who reeks of money and blood while Fernanda is able to live without ever having to see any of the murders. This then perpetuates the idea the maybe the narco is the hero, because not having to see the crime provides the necessary tools to have a successful denial of a person’s wrongdoing.

Now, what this means for Fernanda is confusion, instability, and inadequacy. The analysis, then, has to focus on three levels of autonomy: the body, mind, and behavior. The novel begins with “Supe que con una mano podría matarme.”¹³ This first sentence represents Fernanda’s recognition of the physical power that Julio has over her body. In recognizing this, she simultaneously accepts her position as the subordinate. Ideally, any woman in her shoes could, at the same time, recognize that it might not be the healthiest relationship for her. However, in the same paragraph, Fernanda concedes any concern that may arise from knowing that she could be killed effortlessly by Julio. In fact, she says “Me excitan las situaciones de poder en las que hay un sometido y un agresor,”¹⁴ and thus, allows the reader to then safely assume that she views the treatment of Julio as something positive. Her relationship with Julio serves as a reflection of her lack of power in society as a woman. It is clear that Julio, an abuser, feels sexual gratification from inflicting pain onto Fernanda and feels power when inflicting pain onto civilians or individuals who have wronged the narcos he works with. Further, Fernanda’s feelings of

¹² Wright, "Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide," 721.

¹³ Orfa Alarcón, *Perra Brava*, (México: Planeta, 2010), 11.

¹⁴ See above.

inadequacy stem from her relationships with her family, especially the one she had with her father, which also resembles a power structure similar to Julio's. Growing up in a family where there was always conflict between her mother and her alcoholic father began to manifest an anxiety within her. Confusion from the role that she played in her family not as a daughter, but as a means to the desired ends of her parents to resolve the conflict is obvious when she tells us that her father would flood her with gifts and money as a way of expressing affection and love. This behavior became normalized, ultimately reflecting the way Julio communicates his love for Fernanda—i.e., by buying her cars, clothes, houses, etc. For Fernanda, her relationship with Julio serves as a way to relieve the anxiety from the absence of her father. So, it makes sense as to why she is so inclined to have pursued someone like Julio.

The Birth of a New Self

Fernanda's gender identity and personality undergo a fundamental change of character because it is something that can never be subjective.¹⁵ The first stage of this transition begins when she directly interacts with the police. This is significant because police are the enforcers of the law, and without a law enforcement the state would not be able to exist. Upon finding the severed head in the back of the car, they could have taken her to jail, but it can be assumed that the reason why she ends up in the house of a politician is because Julio knows the right people. Additionally, Fernanda is not the only one who experiences a fundamental change in character. Julio goes from being a man that previously could not express how he feels to someone who is willing to say "perdóname, princesa"¹⁶ to Fernanda after she interacts with the police. Julio could have punished Fernanda for being so careless, but instead he shows the first signs of caring, which catches Fernanda by surprise, and it forces her to reject him, as that is not how the Julio that "she knows" would have responded.

With the drastic character change in both Fernanda and Julio, the dynamic of their relationship also changes. Their relationship was able to thrive and continue because it was

¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 141.

¹⁶ Alarcón, *Perra Brava*, 83.

sustained by violence, dominance, and fear. The minute that Julio decides to show his affection for her, she is cold, bitter, and disconnected when his hands “empezaron a acariciar mi cuello en un acto de cariño que me hizo temblar.”¹⁷ There are three reasons as to why she wanted the tough, masculine man with the power that Julio originally presented himself as. The first reason being that in a society where her subjectivity is defined by the power structure of the state, she cannot bear making any decisions independently, as she does not have the appropriate agency that Julio does as a sicario working in the narco world. The second reason is that she needs someone to replace the role of her father figure that has created an empty gap inside of her (recall the dreams where all she sees is her father). The last reason is that she needed someone to maintain her security. At the display of his fondness towards her, he begins to concede the ideal standard of masculinity that had previously allowed him to contain any feelings of sentimentality from being expressed. Masculinity is the dominant gender performance in a “neoliberal social structure, which creates a social ecology in which men are driven to hypermasculinity, exaggerating the violent, authoritarian, aggressive aspects of male identity in an attempt to preserve that identity.”¹⁸ Participating in that hyper-masculine violence allows for the stability of the neoliberal and power configuration of narcopolitics to be perpetuated. When Julio begins to act in contrast to that model of violence, it signifies that Julio may be experiencing anxiety and disintegration from the identity that is used as a tool by the state, for he is no longer an adequate contender of that role when he forfeits his masculinity.

Through Julio’s growing weakness, Fernanda finds the necessary fuel to elevate herself to a higher status in relation to those in the community and in the cartel. She does so by using Julio’s prestige in the narco world. She knows that if anything happens, he will be there to pick up the pieces for her. She attributes this to the fact that she is Julio’s property; Fernanda has always acknowledged and accepted that her existence had been reduced to nothing more than property, so embracing this fact means that she can begin to focus on how to gain autonomy after it has

¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸ Mercedes Olivera and Victoria J. Furio, "Violencia Femicida: Violence against Women and Mexico's Structural Crisis," *Latin American Perspectives* 33, no. 2 (2006): 106.

been stripped away from her. In a way, she has transformed Julio into the instrument that will help her achieve her ends. Where Julio used to be the one who terrorized civilians in their neighborhoods, Fernanda has now assumed that role, as there begins to be a significant lack of violence for which she is still hungry, except now she can fulfill her needs as the one who inflicts that violence rather than the one who receives. Here, Fernanda does break what would be considered the normative way of behaving for a woman in a patriarchal society. This is the ultimate signifier that Fernanda has been reborn. It is at this moment that she steps into her body because she knows that “Sobre mí estaba Julio, y sobre Julio no había ley.”¹⁹ This marks the end of her transition into the being that has control over her thoughts and actions.

With her newly obtained self-determination, she can begin to exercise her authority in the public sphere. Fernanda’s first act of violence occurs as she is driving home from school with her best friend Dante. While they are on the road, another driver aggressively pulls over into the lane that Fernanda is driving on and cuts her off. She says that “la vieja con rulos en la cabeza haciendo jetas, manoteó y me indicó a señas que no fuera tan imprudente.”²⁰ In what seems like an unexpected fit of rage from such a minor (and common) interaction on the road, she begins to follow the driver who had cut her off. She removes her glasses so that she can “verla bien,”²¹ and in her head she is thinking, “Peugeot mata Atos, pero BMW mata Peugeot. En cuanto pude, con el semáforo aún en rojo, di vuelta.”²² As she is following her she turns to Dante, asks him to open the glovebox, and requests that he hand her what is in there, never specifying that it was a gun. He hesitates before handing it to her, and once the gun is in her hands Fernanda quickly pulls up to the other driver, yelling at her to roll down her window. Once the other driver looks over, fear penetrates the driver, causing them to lose control of the car and crash into a tree. Dante, who has just witnessed everything, is left speechless, shocked, and confused. Despite everything that had just occurred, it is evident that Fernanda does not feel any guilt or remorse for what had just happened, even though she was the cause of the accident. The motives for why Fernanda chose

¹⁹ Alarcón, *Perra Brava*, 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

²¹ See above.

²² *Ibid.*, 108.

to harass the other driver are questionable; it was not about a bad encounter that she had with another driver. Recall that the first thing she mentions about the other driver is the type of car that they are driving. The models of the car are so significant for Fernanda because they represent class, power, and status, and she cannot think in terms that are not exclusively capitalist. In threatening and eventually hurting the other driver, Fernanda used the car (the material good) as a way to prove and legitimize that she had the authority to commit that sort of violence towards the other driver. In saying that the BMW beats the Peugeot, she is affirming the fact that people with material goods that are worth less than hers are not allowed to inconvenience²³ her, as it undermines her sense of entitlement. The neoliberal society in which Fernanda subsists has forced “individuals to believe that their relative worth is reflected in their accumulation of wealth and capacity to consume.”²⁴ Thus, Fernanda has a “self-worth that is highly dependent upon external praise and circumstances,”²⁵ which has caused her discontent every time someone else neglects to show “respect” for her. Hierarchies do not allow for the existence of equality among individuals, especially when power is predicated off of wealth. Furthermore, it is the reason why Fernanda fails to understand why her behavior was problematic to begin with, because it is always under a competitive framework.

With her agency now secured, she begins to test and push the limits of her power. She calls el Chino, one of Julio’s workers, and tells him that she needs him “para un acto vandálico.”²⁶ When el Chino asks her what their endeavor is about, Fernanda responds with “Me quería robar una cosa,”²⁷ but she further affirms that “Lo mío es mío, aunque ya no lo”²⁸ then asks him if he will help her in seeking revenge and when he says no, she tells him to get out of the car. She then goes to burn the house of the woman that Julio had been having an affair with. On her way home, she thinks to herself “me sentía pura y simplemente la dueña absoluta de

²³ It can be inferred that Fernanda perceived the behavior of the other driver as a way to elevate themselves above Fernanda, especially when the other driver looked at Fernanda in a disapproving manner, and thus, causing a disruption within Fernanda.

²⁴ Tim Kasser, and Steve Cohn, and Allen D. Kanner, and Richard M. Ryan, “Some Costs of American Corporate Capitalism: A Psychological Exploration of Value and Goal Conflicts,” *Psychological Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (2007): 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁶ Alarcón, *Perra Brava*, 196.

²⁷ See above.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

todo: lo que yo quisiera, estirando la mano lo obtendría.”²⁹ It becomes evident that Fernanda, from now on, will have to do more than just hurt people in order to be satisfied and accomplished; she will have to actually begin killing those who threaten her and, in a way, the blood of those who have died will be what resolves her own insecurities. At this point, Fernanda has instituted the politics of the narco into her thoughts and her actions where the only rational response is to take the life of those who owe her something. She then approaches the house and sets a fire that injured two adults and killed Julio’s son. When she confesses to Dante that it had been her who had set fire to the house, Dante tries to warn that “nadie se mete con el hijo de nadie,”³⁰ although, like earlier, she fails to recognize that she has done anything wrong. Fernanda has internalized the narco ideology, taking it to the extreme where she commits an act of terror on Julio’s son. Julio, having nothing more to offer, has lost the most important person in his life. Killing his child was essential for Fernanda to disrupt the power he still held over her.

Julio, upon hearing the news that his son has died, goes home to confront Fernanda. The necropolitical act upon killing his son was broadcasted on the news, essentially made public. It serves the purpose of revealing the identity of the victims to Julio but serves the greater purpose of instigating fear to the general community when the first thing they hear in the morning is that someone, again, has been murdered. She knows that Julio has all the strength to kill her with his bare hands, but she sees that not even he wants to touch her anymore. It now appears that Julio does not want to exercise any control over her, perhaps bending his sadist tendencies when he is overcome by other feelings and urges, those of care and love for his child. Ironically, it is Fernanda who threatens to hurt him. Julio asks her: “crees que yo soy como tú?”³¹ In killing his son, she pushes Julio over the brink and, in the meantime, Fernanda knows that she has him “en la palma de la mano”³² because she has taken the only thing that Julio had ever really cared about. This isolates him in a state of desperation and hopelessness where he realizes that there is no solution to his anxiety except suicide. Like in a cultural setting, where citizens in a group have

²⁹ See above.

³⁰ Ibid., 200.

³¹ Ibid., 203.

³² Ibid., 202.

some agency over expressing how narco discourse and actions have affected them (as a whole), this scene of the novel unveils how narco and necropolitics can affect an individual, pushing them to the extreme of thoughts, feelings, and actions. Fernanda is slowly getting closer to him, thinking it will be the last time she can touch him because she thinks that she is the one that is going to be shot, but as she takes the last step towards him, he shoots himself in the head, splattering blood all over her.

Julio had the power to kill Fernanda, but killing her would not have resolved his increased anxieties, especially as his masculinity has been further deviating from the cherished masculine standards. Knowing that he would not have been able to perform his assigned role, particularly because he was willing to love and care for a child in a way that he had not been able to express to anyone he had ever been intimate with, taking his own life was the only way he was going to be able to escape the constant pressures and expectations that he had initially executed so well.

From *Narco* to *Narca*: Conclusion

Julio's suicide at the end can be interpreted as the consequences of all the events that unravel throughout the novel. His suicide at the same time represents the values of both the narco realm in relation to neoliberalism and toxic masculinity and how upholding those values to the core of their reality. His suicide is the systematic failure of a state that forces its subjects to comply with its discourse on human relations, not just to one another but to themselves. Furthermore, as it unveils the inadequacies of performing the desirable subject of the state, with a state that flourishes and runs on a politic of death, perhaps Julio was just another subject that has been necessary in that reproduction of death, and the reason that Fernanda lives is because she is able to, not only play by the rules of the game, but win.

Lastly, this novel is a testament to how narco trafficking in Mexico has affected men and women alike. It reveals the failures of the state to find solutions to the problem and shows how this problem could be larger than what a state and its population can handle. What novels like these prove is that there is "epistemic and real violence [that] are centerpieces of drug trafficking

and its main representatives.”³³ The line between what we know and what is factual has been blurred by both the dialogue and information that the state and narcos choose to engage in and expel. It is demonstrative of how it is not the fault of one singular group, but the product of a series of relationships and interactions. At the core, the battle between the state and the narcos has weakened the citizens trust and hope for the future as it perpetuates endless terror and brutality. Although narcoculture does not provide any solutions, it does provide some sort of criticism and insight into what it is like to live in a country where every facet of society has been polluted by money and corruption. In the end, the problem is not that the countries who are producing the drugs fall victim to the consumption of them; in reality, the consumers of those drugs who reside across borders are not the ones who are targeted. But if they were, it would become really hard for a business that relies on a neoliberal platform to subsist. The novel represents the struggle between those who are subjected to control of the narcos from two perspectives, that of the woman (who is also subject to societal norms) and of those working in drug trafficking. It is not a romanticization of narcos but is demonstrative of how cruel and destructive that world can be for everyone living in close proximity to it. Both Fernanda and Julio are testimonies to the influence and tragedy of a circumstance they may have been coerced into by the discourse utilized by them.

³³ Cabañas, "Imagined Narcoscapes," 6.

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