

It's a Living: Hit Men in the Mexican Narco War

REBECCA E. BIRON

REBECCA E. BIRON teaches in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Program in Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College, where she chairs the Program in Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies. She specializes in Latin American literary and cultural studies, Mexican studies, and gender studies. She is the author of *Elena Garro and Mexico's Modern Dreams* (Bucknell UP, forthcoming) and *Murder and Masculinity: Violent Fictions of 20th-Century Latin America* (Vanderbilt UP, 2000). She is also the editor of *City/Art: The Urban Scene in Latin America* (Duke UP, 2009).

HIT MEN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MEXICAN DRUG WAR engage in paid labor at the extreme end of capitalist exploitation. By “extreme end,” I mean the period of late hypercapitalism in which transnational profit seeking trumps national as well as international regulatory systems designed to serve broad social stability. I also mean the outer limits of how capitalist interests use (up) human beings; the *sicarios*¹ enact on the bodies of their victims the logical end point of dehumanizing economic relations. The *sicario* not only makes a living by killing; he also “makes a killing” when he is particularly successful at profiting monetarily from the calculated risks he takes. Living people are the raw material for the work of *sicarios*, and dead bodies are the product. This destructive productivity sustains a thriving drug industry and its offshoots; it justifies and promotes growth in related fields such as law enforcement, transportation, communications, weapons trafficking, and socio-politico-economic networking. When making a killing through literal killing seems the most rational and accessible employment option, then killing becomes a way of life: “it’s a living” in both senses of providing wages and structuring life.

It might be profitable in a different way to examine how recent Mexican narratives featuring *sicarios* reveal the shifting notions of work, life, and ethics that support global capitalism. I focus here on two texts from 2010, one a *testimonio* and the other a fiction film.² *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin* offers the first-person account of a real-life assassin’s experiences (Molloy and Bowden). The unnamed narrator graduates from working in adolescence as a low-level drug mule to undergoing police training, becoming a *sicario*, and finally rejecting that life. This printed

text presents Molly Molloy's direct translation of a filmed interview with the anonymous ex-*sicario*. The interview took place over two days and was released as a documentary directed by Gianfranco Rosi and titled *El sicario, room 164*. In the documentary, the informant wears a black veil over his face while he speaks fluidly and animatedly about his career as an assassin. Molloy and her coeditor, Charles Bowden, supplement their translated transcription of conversations from the documentary with details taken from additional interviews that they conducted with El Sicario.³ In contrast, the fiction film, *El infierno* (written and directed by Luis Estrada), depicts its protagonist's trajectory from unlucky, unskilled migrant laborer to informally drafted *sicario* and finally to heroic avenger.

These two texts concerning different types of *sicarios*, one professionally trained and the other a man who comes to the job through personal accidents and calamities, present complex analyses of *sicario* work. Each text grapples with two competing assessments of the meaning of this work. One assessment appears in both texts. It positions *sicarios* as rational actors in a global market. This approach blames the amorality of globalization for dehumanizing workers to the point that they abandon the concept of right and wrong. Decrying the primacy of market logic over morality, it holds that *sicarios*—both as workers and as killers—represent the final step in the complete instrumentalization of human life. It explores the economic causes of the dehumanization of individual *sicarios* as well as the complex psychological and social breakdown this process eventually produces for them and their communities.

The other assessment in *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin* focuses on the question of professionalism. This way of telling the story does not contradict the dehumanization narrative. Rather, it shifts the terms of value by emphasizing the creativity, dedication, discipline, and seriousness of *si-*

cario work. It appreciates the work of assassins as productive of meaning, granting the workers a personal stake in their product. It rehumanizes the *sicario* by replacing morality with professionalism. Instead of seeing assassination as work that inherently victimizes its practitioners (as well as their victims), this view considers how *sicarios* are victimized by the degradation of their professional status when amateurs gain easy access to that form of work. In Mexico since the election of President Felipe Calderón in 2006 and his subsequent escalation of the war on drugs, this argument goes, murder has been cheapened to the point that it loses its status as labor and product; it has become simply a way of life.

For its part, the fiction film *El infierno* also rehumanizes the *sicario*, but without appealing to professionalism. This text expresses no nostalgia for an earlier period in Mexican history when murder for hire was more disciplined and targeted than in Calderón's war on the cartels. In a social field where paid murder as a way of life numbs sensibilities and negates noneconomic forms of value, killing for purely symbolic, ethical, or expressive purposes becomes a revolutionary act that celebrates the human in different terms. *El infierno* ironically defines humanization through an explosive, uncontrolled violence turned back on the employers of the *sicario*.

These texts raise urgent questions regarding the autonomy of workers; the effects of market forces on individual identity; and concepts of responsibility, futurity, and the human. After contextualizing these narratives within the contemporary Mexican narco war, I examine *El Sicario's* and *El infierno's* explanations of what motivates *sicarios* and how their work produces its instrumentalizing effects on them. Then I draw from Hannah Arendt's distinctions between labor, work, and action to explore the key differences between these two texts regarding responsibility and futurity. Finally, I discuss the connection between the subject-producing

aspects of *sicario* work and Alain Badiou's concept of the human.

Drug cartels have been active in Mexico for decades, operating generally in a managed relationship with the governments of the Partido Revolucionario Institucionalizado that ruled the country for over seventy years until Vicente Fox of the Partido de Acción Nacional won the 2000 election. The contested and statistically indeterminate election of Calderón in 2006 threatened the legitimacy of the new president, and he made a show of force by mobilizing the federal army against drug cartels just ten days after his inauguration. Eventually deploying up to fifty thousand troops in this domestic militarization, Calderón's escalation of the war on drugs, backed by the United States, has exponentially increased the murder rates in Mexico since 2007.⁴ Discrepancies between official government statistics, local news providers, international human rights agencies, and nongovernmental organizations make it difficult to quantify the deaths associated with the drug war, but claims range between forty and fifty thousand deaths from January 2007 to October 2011 ("Van 43 mil muertos"). Murders in Ciudad Juárez, which numbered 307 in 2007, jumped to 1,623 in 2008, 2,754 in 2009, and 3,211 in 2010 (Bowden, Preface x).

Even where the numbers of homicides are uncontested, the causes and perpetrators remain difficult to identify. Some attribute the increase in killings to the cartels, while others blame the government and the military. Yet others point to a general cheapening of life and increase in unorganized criminality.

Calderón's war on drugs has produced not only a geographic spread of violence but also a decentralization of criminal organizations that renders them more locally integrated, flexible, and unaccountable (Maerker). The differences among the types of murders, motives, and victims might suggest that quelling the violence requires careful distinctions to be made. But the sheer numbers of deaths,

combined with the minuscule numbers of prosecutions for murder, overwhelm such systematic thinking (Bowden, *Murder City* 234).⁵

Meanwhile, on the streets of Ciudad Juárez, Monterrey, Reynosa, Veracruz, and other towns and cities, tens of thousands of people have been shot, raped, beheaded, dismembered, or dumped unceremoniously in mass graves, or their body parts have been displayed symbolically in key public places. These postings offer up a strange blend. Medieval warnings on city walls mix with a twenty-first-century commodification of the human that takes logos spray-painted on bodies as a useful public relations tool to establish market dominance in the same terms as territorial dominance.⁶ No one knows who the combatants in the war really are, because so many signs point to the cartels' presence in governmental bodies and to a police and military presence in the cartels. Police, army, and cartel recruits come from the local communities; they are not clearly defined groups that can be excluded from "the people."

In a compelling narrative about the apparent lack of direct cause for the increase in homicides, Ed Vulliamy argues:

On the surface, the combatants have the veneer of a cause: control of smuggling routes into the U.S. But even if this were the full explanation, the cause of drugs places Mexico's war firmly in our new postideological, postmoral, postpolitical world. The only causes are profits from the chemicals that get America and Europe high.

The "causelessness" and the "savagery" of "Mexico's war" are correlated:

[T]he greed for violence reflects the greed for brands, and becomes a brand in itself. . . . Narco-cartels are not pastiches of global corporations, nor are they errant bastards of the global economy—they are pioneers of it. . . . Mexico's carnage is that of the age of effective global government by multinational banks . . .

kept afloat by laundering drug and criminal profits. . . . So Mexico's war is how the future will look, because it belongs not in the 19th century with wars of empire, or the 20th with wars of ideology, race and religion—but utterly in a present to which the global economy is committed, and to a zeitgeist of frenzied materialism we adamantly refuse to temper: it is the inevitable war of capitalism gone mad.

What in other sociopolitical contexts looks like evil individual agency—one person whacking off another person's head, for example, wrapping it in a towel, and later tossing it into the middle of an engagement party on the other side of town—now is understood as caused by late capitalism, or the cultural industry of marketing through violence, or police-military collusion with transnational cartels.

Even if these abstractions are the cause, each killing remains stubbornly material and specific. Individual people kill others in relatively direct confrontations. Shooting, strangling, stabbing, burning, amputating, and torturing require significant physical strength and skill. Add to that the disposal of bodies (whether publicly for messaging or clandestinely for ensuring impunity), and the job of the *sicario* involves complex combinations of logistic and management tasks with the need for stamina and coordination. The psychological profile of successful *sicarios* might seem to allow for psychopathy insofar as a lack of empathy facilitates the work of killing; however, the cartel structure demands that *sicarios*, unlike cartel bosses, exhibit high levels of self-control and submit to hierarchical authority, which psychopaths cannot tolerate for long (Hare). A career *sicario* must demonstrate fellow feeling in the structures of the drug industry and a lack of it when conducting an assigned mission. If he generates or defines his own missions, then by definition he becomes a liability to the organization he is paid to serve.

These issues figure centrally in *El Sicario* and *El infierno*. With their focus on the *sica-*

rios as workers, these stories foreground the themes of guilt and responsibility in a socioeconomic context that questions the distinction between individual and collective or between morality and economic systems. Especially when read as texts about work, *El Sicario* and *El infierno* meticulously enmesh their characters in meaningful political and social systems at every turn.⁷ They do not present their characters as *homo sacer*, except in the sense that Slavoj Žižek describes when he writes that “we are all *homo sacer*” (100), with the understanding that certain lives make that more explicit than others. The actions that *sicarios* take at the limits of life—although not necessarily at the margins of politics and economics—make visible the real contours of those systems. The protagonists of these two texts meditate extensively on the psychic and emotional costs of their work; they also reflect on the community costs. Their shock value depends on exposing the blindness of readers and viewers who maintain the illusion that contemporary global economics does not radically displace the conventional morality of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.”

That blind spot protects those who cannot imagine the *sicario* as fully human. Either he must be coldly rational, such that murder and torture carry no particular affective weight for him, or he must be pathologically sadistic, such that they give him pleasure. Charles Bowden expresses this view in peculiarly national terms that assume two clearly demarcated forms of life on either side of the United States–Mexico border. He reflects on his interviews with *El Sicario*:

Like most stories people make of their lives, his account is a journey from innocence to sin and then on to redemption, in his case by being born again in Christ. But it is his story—it is a Mexican life, not an American life. . . . I believe he is going to be a part of our future. Killers like him are multiplying. The global economy has brought ruin for many, and he is a pioneer

of a new type of person: the human who kills and expects to be killed and has little hope or complaint. He does not fit our beliefs or ideas. But he exists, and so do the others who are following in this path. (Preface ix)

By asserting that “we” have beliefs and ideas that cannot comprehend this “new type of person,” Bowden implies that the *sicario* represents some other species, morally distant from “us” and unheard of in history. But the globalized economy in which we all participate economically supports *sicarios*; and as their name demonstrates, *sicarios* and comparable figures have existed since biblical times.

Bowden also seems to assume here that moral outrage has national boundaries. This assumption protects belief in the reality of the invisible border between “a Mexican life” and “an American life.” Yet the story *El Sicario* tells reveals that this belief is nothing but a wish. *El Sicario* shows that the work of killing is profitable in Mexico because of two major factors: life in “America” is defined by consumption rather than production, and the border is thought in terms of illegality and threat rather than legality and cooperation.

El Sicario and *El infierno* directly address the question of why individuals accept work as *sicarios* in this context. They represent their protagonists as rational actors, although both texts also suggest that this rationality is exercised in coercive situations that the *sicarios* do not understand until later. These men take on the job of assassin for a combination of motives including the promise of cash in amounts out of scale with their communities’ standard of living and a rise in social status. This representation raises questions about labor in the Marxian sense. The capitalist is the cartel or the government-cartel alliance, and the worker kills to earn a wage that, while acceptable to him as an individual, is worth less than the profit that accrues to the capitalist by way of the killing. According to *El Sicario* and *El infierno*, compensation comes in vari-

ous forms: salary, payment per job, housing, transportation, weaponry, sexual services, drugs, and a sense of personal empowerment. The expenditure of effort by the *sicario* includes his training, his time, his physical labor, and his psycho-emotional adjustment to violence. His work also costs him in terms of the anxiety, stress, and fear that accompany lethal physical confrontations and his status as outlaw and enemy. The job inevitably exhausts the *sicario*, regardless of (or because of) his success in performing multiple high-risk missions.

This pattern of social elevation followed by exhaustion structures the narrative in *El Sicario*. With an extraordinary fluidity that contrasts with his twenty years of having kept silent about his career as an assassin, *El Sicario* talks about his entry into the profession as the result of methodical grooming by cartel and law enforcement bosses. The organization of themes in the written text reflects the arc of the speaker’s life as he sees it: child, teenager, man, child of God. Framing that structure, the text opens with *El Sicario*’s narrative reenactment of a scene that, in real life, took place in the very hotel room in which the documentary is filmed. In the written text and in the documentary, *El Sicario* recalls for the viewers or readers an instance in which his bosses ordered him to detain and torture a man, then release him alive. That demonstration prefigures *El Sicario*’s story about his own path through the *sicario* experience as a psychological and economic form of kidnap, torture, and release.

He recounts that when he was a bright and successful high school student from a destitute family in Juárez, “a person” invited him and his friends to a party to show them “that we could drink and have fun, and what’s more, that we could have money and maybe even a car” (58). This person lent him a car and paid him fifty dollars a week if he would drive across the border to El Paso for drug drops. *El Sicario* emphasizes that he did not

have a license and did not even know how to drive. The “person” arranged for him to learn to drive and then to get a license in half an hour. In his account, he sought not to find out about the business that was seducing him; he simply wanted the perks being offered him:

It was about this time—when I was sixteen—when I got into my first dance hall. . . . It was splendid! I would drink two or three pitchers of beer, maybe twenty-five dollars worth, and then I’d leave a thirty-dollar tip, more than the cost of the drinks I bought. . . . I learned the power of having money, that with money I could do anything. (67)

The adult *sicario* attributes his attitude as a youth to his longing in childhood for attention from parents who did nothing but work and never had time to spend with their children or the ability to accumulate even enough money for basic entertainment. He understands that as an adolescent he was easily seduced into enjoying the superficial exercise of power through showing off disposable income among relatively poor people.

Later, although he did not meet the qualifications for entry into the police academy, his cartel connections arranged his acceptance. This clandestine deal making opened his eyes to the fictional nature of the distinction between legality and illegality in relation to profits. While undergoing the six-month police training, he spent every weekend in cartel-funded houses and parties, where he acquired a taste for hard drugs and prostitutes. This access to pleasure and power paid better than “honest” police work, 1,000 dollars versus 150 pesos a month: “No one was ever going to pay us as much as they, the narco-traffickers, were paying. We were being trained.” This passage refers to several forms of training. The young men learn to value dollars over pesos, in a nod to the drug trade’s international reach. They learn to value the highest bidder over all other concerns of service, honesty, or honor. They also learn, at public expense in the police

academy, “how to use weapons . . . how to conduct surveillance, how to read license plates, how to recognize faces, how to pursue people in urban car chases without losing them . . . skills that the narco-trafficking organizations were willing to pay a lot of money for. . . . They could just take advantage of the training provided by the government and then recruit cadets like us to do their work” (74). “Cadets like us” refers, then, to talented, skilled young men who are both naive and cynical enough to be easily bought with short-term perks: “Always, always, always, they made us feel that we were important to them. They never asked us for much in return at this time. They always wanted to make us happy: with money, drugs, and women” (75). When El Sicario graduated from the police academy, out of two hundred graduates, he was one of about fifty officers who were already loyal to drug-trafficking organizations. They used police vehicles and privileges to move marijuana, cocaine, and heroin through the cities of the state of Chihuahua.

During his career, El Sicario rose in the ranks to coordinate a team of four people skilled enough to carry out high-profile assassinations for up to \$45,000 per job. In chilling detail, he explains how to make street traps out of cars in order to kidnap drivers; how to shoot precisely into a car in order not to make a mess; how to torture with electric cables, acid, or fire; how to interrogate; how to keep someone alive and suffering, but just barely, for months; how to mutilate bodies to remove any identifying traces; how to arrange body parts to convey messages among narcos.

El Sicario explains that while this work paid him well, it cost him his autonomy and his future. Surprisingly void of commentary on the moral problem of committing murder, his description of his first murder, when he was eighteen years old, emphasizes his disassociated state due to intentional lack of sleep in combination with heavy alcohol and cocaine consumption: “I never doubted at the

moment I got the order, I never doubted, I just pulled the trigger. I could not even think. I did not know the person, it was not a family member. For me, it was nobody. I simply obeyed an order" (106–07). Curiously, although nothing in the text so far has indicated that this man ever had dreams other than of material wealth, this moment in his *testimonio* turns to the ex nihilo invention of nostalgia:

I did not fully realize what I had done until two or three days later when I was finally sober. I realized how easy it was that the drugs and the world that I was in were controlling and manipulating me. I was no longer myself. I was no longer the young person who had had a strong desire to serve my society. I was no longer the man who wanted to get married and have a family. I was a person who was nothing but the things that I was commanded to do. I followed orders. (107)

In this postcareer explanation of his experience, El Sicario notes that his reputation in the crime organization improved dramatically when he did not hesitate in this first test of his blind obedience and ability to kill in cold blood. That success, based on self-erasure, struck him as highly ironic. On that irony he formulates his retrospective interpretation. First money seduced him. Then training and drugs numbed him. Finally, the threat of death at the hands of his employers traps him in their service.

Narrating his past from the vantage point of having left the profession, El Sicario makes contradictory claims that show he still fails to understand the full effects of *sicario* work. On the one hand, he suggests that his Christian conversion allowed him to see the evil in it and therefore reject it. On the other hand, his detailed account of how he left the profession indicates two different reasons for his departure. At one point during his life as a *sicario*, he stops consuming drugs and alcohol. He claims that he was motivated by seeing "Christ Loves You" on billboards and by self-

revulsion when he woke from a nightmare to find that he was strangling his wife in bed beside him. He could no longer compartmentalize his work and his affective life. However, his account does not clearly establish cause and effect in relation to his new sobriety. Even though he says that clearheadedness actually helps him work sharper and faster for a while, he was gradually demoted in rank because his employers were suspicious of his sobriety. He felt undervalued as a worker when they assigned him the lowly jobs of collecting money or serving as a lookout: "And you realize now that . . . instead of being the Eyes, you could be earning \$5,000 to execute somebody. You could be getting paid \$25,000, \$75,000. . . . And now you realize that to everyone—to the organization, to the bosses—what you really are is *nothing*" (199–200). His injured pride permitted him to defy his bosses by stealing money from them. For that they had him kidnapped. He escaped, but this breach of mutual trust leads to his seeking escape from the whole profession.

Now, in the present of his *testimonio*, he lives in hiding and works at an evangelical church on the United States side of the border. Although he says he has found a new life through Christ, his language about money, respect, and the price of obedience from his days as a *sicario* echoes in his religious discourse, too. He has replaced obedience to drug lords with obedience to the Lord; he has replaced the power that comes from money with the power that comes from moral certainty; he has replaced his role as a cog in the corrupt Mexican system with his role as exile from nation and profession.

Unlike *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin*, with its depiction of expensive recruitment and training, the feature film *El infierno* tracks the rise (which is simultaneously the fall) of an everyman, Benjamin, in the ranks of the local drug industry in the deserts of northern Mexico. The film emphasizes the hapless involvement of nice

guys with few skills, little cunning, and no opportunities for economic advancement. El Benny spent twenty years trying to earn money in the United States but is deported after having no success. In the opening scenes of the film, on his journey back to Mexico as a defeated man in his forties, he is robbed repeatedly. When he arrives home in anticipation of a loving reunion with his family, his mother hits him and calls him “Hijo de la chingada.”⁸ She informs him that his younger brother, Pedro, was murdered during his absence, and she accuses him: “If you had kept your promise [to earn money and return for Pedro], he would still be with us” (my trans.).

With this guilty verdict weighing on him, Benny goes to the nearby town, San Miguel Arcangel, to seek work and to find out more about his brother’s death. The first thing he sees in town is a drive-by shooting that leaves a young man dead in the road in broad daylight. Benny reacts with horror, and his shock intensifies when some female passersby do not seem to react at all. They simply pronounce, “We’re in the middle of a war,” and they take the victim’s watch from his body (my trans.). This scene establishes for Benny and the film’s spectators alike the reality that in some zones in northern Mexico, death has become a way of life—so normalized and banal as to elicit little reaction.

Benny soon discovers that Pedro was a local celebrity, known as El Diablo, for his prowess as a *sicario* caught up in the territorial battle between the two wealthy Reyes brothers for control of the local drug trade. Pedro fathered a son with a local prostitute. Benny immediately falls in love with her and hopes to serve as a father figure to his teenage nephew. Benny is forced to borrow money from an old childhood friend of his, now called El Cochiloco, to bribe the local police after they jail the nephew on trumped-up charges. El Cochiloco coerces Benny into working as an amateur *sicario* or thug to repay the debt. Benny’s sincere motives stem

from simple affect: he just wants to help his nephew and court his dead brother’s wife.

However, he quickly learns to enjoy the access to cash, prostitutes, and cocaine, all of which seem new to him. His real training begins when he faints on seeing his boss cut out a bound man’s tongue, chainsaw the man’s hands off, and then shoot the man point-blank in the temple without breaking a sweat. Benny shows signs of posttraumatic stress but gradually learns to use alcohol and cocaine to self-medicate. He also begins to enjoy the fear he and his partner incite in town. He exudes a conflicted happiness with their victory over danger in every killing. The montage of all the ways they torture, maim, and murder their victims expresses a dark pleasure—for both the *sicarios* and the film viewers—in the variety and creativity of their methods; it visually cites well-known crime scenes from real life, which are comically accompanied on-screen by cheerful *norteña* music.⁹ The uncomfortable humor relies on the juxtaposition of familiarity and horror.

In contrast to El *Sicario* in the testimonial text, Benny never relinquishes his sense of self, his desire for love, or his plans for the future in order to succeed as a *sicario*. His greatest joy resides in his ability to impress his lover with his earnings. He buys her gifts and secretes a stash of money in hopes of taking her and her son to the United States to escape the violence. He decides to leave the profession only when his nephew gets involved in the feud between two local drug lords, in revenge for his father’s death. Benny finally realizes that the role of *sicario* for the local drug lord offers only a dead end for him and his family, so he informs on the boss to the regional authorities. They, of course, turn out to work for the same boss, or the same cartel, and Benny learns that escape is not possible; there is no life available to him untouched by the violence of the drug war.

The principal push factors in both El *Sicario*’s and Benny’s acceptance of the role of

sicario stem from a lack of other options for economic stability combined with fragile social interdependencies. Both texts suggest a third motive as well, although they also back away from its explanatory potential. *El Sicario* as a testimonial text flirts with the idea of the assassin as psychopathic and hypermasculinist, but the first-person narration locates that possibility in the drug-fueled distortions of affect produced through the emotionally deforming effects of intensive military and police training and desocialization. As narrating subject, El Sicario rejects that formation when he claims that by sheer force of will he became sober. In addition, although he tells about murders, tortures, and rapes of women, he carefully marks violence against women as unacceptable to him personally. He claims that he finally becomes nonviolent through reflection and Christian conversion. In *El infierno* Benny enjoys his newfound power through violence and threat, and the montage of his and El Cochiloco's inventive types of murder and mayhem ironically and darkly reads like the high jinks and capers of a more lighthearted buddy film. However, Benny's genuine devotion to his family ensures that the sadistic element of his job remains fundamentally foreign to him. Neither of these texts provides a convincing depiction of the happy meeting of personal mental illness with the exigencies of drug trafficking. This discomfort with, rather than celebration or romanticization of, the elements of hypermasculinity and psychopathy that accompany these types of assassinations privileges the process by which the rational decision to rent out one's time, effort, body, and loyalty for a salary along with perks (women, drugs, local power) becomes an irrational enslavement.

This transformation constitutes a narrative that is in no way original to *El Sicario* and *El infierno*. It structures Mafia and drug-dealer movies from *The Godfather* (1972) to *Scarface* (1932 and 1983) to *Sumas y restas* (2004). It also appears in the definition of

other types of sellouts, like talented young college graduates the world over who can be bought with tempting salaries to give up their idealistic dreams of improving the world to work in consulting jobs for transnational banks and financial corporations. Once in Manhattan, wearing the suit or the fantastic shoes, they cannot imagine doing any other job for less money. They are in, and they are caught. They convince themselves that there is no direct connection between a salary based on global banking rules and wars for oil around the world, global poverty, famine, and daily violence. In the Mexican context of 2010, when the *sicario* text packages this narrative in the distant, secret experience of criminals only partially or imaginatively revealed, the middle and upper classes of the so-called legitimate economy on both sides of the border catch glimpses of the violent effects of their own labor, but they can safely—if uncomfortably—project the psychic, emotional, and physical costs onto the image of the inherently violent brute.

In *El infierno* even Benny participates in this denial while he works as a *sicario*. He shows confusion on finally meeting El Cochiloco's family, ensconced in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. In his well-appointed home, with its granite kitchen counters and his brood of well-mannered and well-dressed children, El Cochiloco expresses surprise at Benny's surprise. He finds it entirely logical to separate his own desire for domestic security and prosperity in conventional bourgeois terms from the vicious work he performs to support it. When Benny and El Cochiloco fail to prevent the murder of their boss's adult son, the drug lord has El Cochiloco's eldest son, a twelve-year-old boy, shot in revenge. This violation of the division between personal and professional life precipitates Benny's decision to turn himself in to the authorities as informant. He now understands the folly of his idea that he could work temporarily as a *sicario* and then escape with his

earnings to fund a happy domestic life unaffected by that work.

Although the Mafia or gangster plot about how *sicarios* become entrapped is central in *El Sicario* and *El infierno*, both texts put it into tension with different narratives. In *El Sicario* a story about professionalism competes with the confessional and Bildungsroman requirements of *testimonio*. In *El infierno* a story about transcendence and radical liberation competes with the predictably linear, character-based plot. These less conventional narratives hold that violence is not only work the *sicarios* choose to do, after calculating costs and benefits, but it also pervades the social field in spite of the efforts by governmental and criminal organizations to channel it into profit-making enterprises.

In *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin*, the speaker bemoans a loss of professionalism among *sicarios* since around 2003 when he noted the first clear collisions between cartels and the military:

If the highest destructive force in your country, the most powerful institution in the country—the Mexican Army—is mixed up in the narco-trafficking, what is a simple citizen supposed to do? . . . What can a policeman expect when a narco asks the question: “What do you want? Silver or lead? *Plata o plomo*?” Either you take the money we offer and join us, or you die. What do you do? What do you do when the whole country is invaded, infiltrated completely? (171)

This description posits that no one chooses to work for the cartels but that everyone does work for them, by default. You must accept their payment regardless of your personal convictions, dreams, or identity as long as you live in the political and economic spheres they touch. We pay you or we shoot you. Your choice, which is no choice.

In concert with the notion of a completely infiltrated social field, *El Sicario* elaborates a notion of self-determination

by appealing to the authenticity of his profession. Curiously, he repeats this appeal at various moments in the *testimonio*, such that readers cannot ascribe it to focalization through his past self or to his present views. It weaves through his teleological narrative of sin and redemption as a counternarrative in an entirely different register of values:

To be a sicario during that time became a real profession. But like I told you, it isn’t like that any longer. Now you can look on the Internet and find . . . someone advertising: “You want to kill someone? I’m a sicario. I will do it for you for \$5,000.” . . . This started to happen a lot and then what? You would see cars all shot up like a pincushion. . . . [T]his is not the work of a sicario. This is the work of imitators. The sicario knows his job. He knows exactly when to strike, he knows his objective. And the sicario would never, never advertise or publicize his work. He is someone who is always among the people. He has relationships with the people. He could be playing baseball with his kids or he could be attending a meeting in the town council at city hall. He knows how to behave, he knows how to dress. He knows how to conduct himself, he knows how to talk. He is well educated. This is what the narco-trafficking organizations know, and this is what they are willing to pay for by cultivating people in many places and for years, to ensure that their work is properly carried out. (189–90)

This nostalgic sense of quality, discipline, and distinction seems out of place in the arc of the rest of the *testimonio*, with its focus on the deception and manipulation involved when the cartels groom their potential employees. This passage speaks in another voice, through full identification with an idealization of the *sicario* as a model citizen and worker. Thus, it emphasizes the tension between the narrative of the worker corrupted by his work, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a different story about the worker whose professional excellence *in itself* constitutes a defense of values and order even when the profession is that of murderer.

Another passage nuances the speaker's position yet again. Now he underscores the loss in recent years of reliable codes of conduct and rules of business that made the professional *sicario* role possible: "Times have changed. . . . Before, the different cartels that were working in the country respected the codes and arrangements that had been established. Now, there are no codes, they are all lost. Now it is just: You owe me, you pay me" (108). Although he abandons both profession and country, El Sicario still defends the civilizing value of murder as work in his *testimonio*. Lowered wages evidence the literal cheapening of his profession, and the loss of professional standards, hierarchy, and meaning-bearing distinctions evidence its figurative cheapening. Both losses of value signify a new level of social disorganization in the proliferation of easy violence on the streets and the lack of stable hierarchies of authority.

The breakdown of stable state-narco pacts threatens the rules of trade that made *sicarios* valuable in the first place. Whereas Villiamy argues that the primacy of the global market reduces people to rubbish or to fair game to be targeted by any sort of violence with impunity, El Sicario defends the role of the professional, true *sicario* in making death meaningful. According to El Sicario's critique of violence in Mexico since Calderón's election, we are all better off when murder is just paid work. This view preserves a sense of order, even if a corrupt order, against the post-2007 situation in Ciudad Juárez that Bowden describes, where "[v]iolence is now woven into the very fabric of the community and has no single cause and no single motive and no on-off button. Violence is not a part of life, now it is life" (*Murder City* 105). If just anyone can kill over just anything, then the moral dilemmas and personal costs that create a tortured subjectivity out of the *sicario* life dissolve into nothing. Where murder is a form of life, there is no work for a *sicario* to do.

This observation raises questions about the relation between paid murder work as subject-producing and as death-producing. This relation does not correspond to the difference between a *sicario* and his victims. Speaking from his postconversion exile, El Sicario remains devoted to the distinctions on which legitimacy, morality, and security are based; his faith in the goodness of order and codes leads naturally to his defense of *sicario* professionalism over rampant, unskilled murders. By defending the professionalism of true *sicarios*, the nonfictional informant of *El Sicario* asserts his own agency, in the past and toward the future. Even though now he sees his murders as sins, his pride in his high-quality execution of that work constitutes his sense of agency and identity. Even though he rejects the *sicario* life in favor of religion, he speaks to us through his *testimonio* as El Sicario; there would be no international interest in his life story without the appalling secrets he reveals. El Sicario cannot conceive of subjectivity outside of subjection to some kind of authority higher than himself in a preordained symbolic system, whether the cartel system or evangelical Christianity.

In contrast to the real-life Sicario, the fictional Benny explodes the order of things in the conclusion of *El infierno*. In a final cleansing of the town's corrupt authorities, Benny guns down everyone assembled on the dais for the 2010 independence celebration, including the mayor (the remaining Reyes brother), the mayor's wife, the priest, and police officials. He uses the skills, insider knowledge, and trappings of his work as a *sicario* to attack the defenders of a system in which assassinations and profits hold the only meaning that matters. This act transforms Benny into an avenging angel going out in a blaze of apocalyptic glory.

This event transcends instrumental logic and capitalist values. But its transcendence is singular and fleeting. The final scene shows Benny's nephew, El Diablito, returning to the

town after time away in hiding. He replicates Benny's memorial gesture of building ostentatious funereal monuments for his mother and uncle beside the one Benny built for the boy's father, Pedro. Then El Diablito goes on an apparently independent shooting spree. The same violence for material gain and revenge continues in shorter and shorter cycles, which will lead to depopulation and degradation of their home. San Miguel Arcangel falls to the legacy of El Diablo, rendering regular life a kind of hell—*el infierno*.

El infierno posits that in the context of a general loss of human value relative to the market, violent death becomes the only subject-producing agent (although only for those privileged enough to be memorialized). When Benny massacres all the corrupt public leaders on the Independence Day dais, he ceases to be a *sicario* because he turns his death-dealing skills to poetic rather than profitable ends. Indeed, in that moment he becomes fully Mexican. That is, he becomes Mexican in the sense that he triumphantly declares his independence and simultaneously, paradoxically, in the sense that El Sicario means when he says, "[T]he whole country is invaded, infiltrated completely." In his apocalyptic gesture, Benny does not distinguish among the military, the cartels, the Church, and the government.¹⁰ Along with all of them, he exists through and as violence. Benny's liberation from the bondage of *sicario* labor requires his all-out appropriation of the surplus symbolic value of assassination. Through that appropriation, he transcends the logic of work and enters the realm of being. In the aesthetic force of Benny's apotheosis, that transition occurs beyond good and evil; no language other than self-sacrificing violence can express this everyman's *grito de la Independencia*.

In the testimonial text and the fictional film I have discussed here, the work of *sicarios* structures forms of life for individuals, for the working classes affected by the drug trade, and for society more generally. It also

offers a dark kind of liberation. This combination evokes Marx's writing in *The German Ideology* about labor as a commodity and a social practice, as well as Antonio Gramsci's idea that modern state and class relations constitute a state of mind as much as a social structure. El Sicario uncomfortably rejects a life that he cannot really escape, demonstrating the fact that *sicario* work defines sociality for him even when (or especially when) he believes he has exempted himself from it. In contrast, Benny's embrace of pure destruction at the end of *El infierno* demonstrates the horrific grandeur of turning a *sicario*-based state of mind toward personal liberation.

The question of what we are being when we do things motivates Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, and her exploration sheds light on the subject-producing effects of *sicario* work. Arendt divides practical life into three modes and types of being in order to understand their interactions: labor (*animal laborans*), work (*homo faber*), and action (*zōon politikon*). In her analysis, labor is those repetitive tasks required to sustain life. It produces consumable commodities but no lasting things; it helps to maintain objects but does not produce them. Work is the making of durable things that provide humans with a sense of permanence in the world.¹¹ Action for Arendt equals freedom. No occupation or profession falls into this existential and political category. "Action for Arendt is reserved for largely unforeseeable encounters in which one suddenly confronts oneself and others with unpredictable results" (Higgins 276); action combines singularity with theatricality, the emergence of the new with its communicability among people: "This beginning is not the . . . beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself" (Arendt 177). Arendt explores the interactions among labor, work, and action, showing that "while there are forms of collaboration between work and action and between labour and work, there are none between labour and

action" (Higgins 290). That is because she defines the human not in the maintenance and protection of bare life but in our relation to mortality and natality. Through action we are born into subjectivity.

The *sicario* poses an exceptional case for Arendt's thought. According to her schema, we would say that the *sicario* performs mere labor when he kills to sustain an industry and a social order, as well as when he kills to earn a wage. This activity does not rise to the status of work because it contributes nothing to human permanence; in fact, it intentionally works against permanence. However, *El infierno* suggests that the *sicario* figure can provide an imaginary pathway straight to action from labor in Arendt's sense. Unlike El Sicario, whose professionalism and eventual conversion lock him into labor only, Benny declares full ownership of his own labor when he turns it to the open-ended, noninstrumental purpose of speaking back (in a hail of gunfire) to an economy based on death. Of course, his speech results in more death. But in the moment of its delivery Benny's action rends the social fabric in which murder for hire makes sense by making (or preserving) money.

Reading *sicarios* as end-point examples of global finance work also evokes Alain Badiou's treatment of good and evil in *Ethics*. Badiou critiques the discourse of human rights by revealing its reliance on a notion of people as primarily victims. The idea of human rights, while a powerful concept that remains strategically necessary in concrete political or legal terms, offers a limiting and contradictory category for our understanding of what matters in being human. In concert with Giorgio Agamben's discussion in *Homo Sacer* of the contemporary state's separation of bare life (*zōē*) from life understood as layered, social human existence (*bio*), Badiou argues that human rights discourse also threatens to reduce our notion of human value to the defense and protection of bare life. Its appeals to the primary maintenance

of physical life and physical well-being risk limiting our notion of the human to an image of naked vulnerability to the elements or to cruelty. Badiou thus asserts that the good does not emerge in reaction to evil. Rather, the good constitutes the realm of the fully human as four "fields of truth"—art, science, love, politics—the forms of thought or action that not only transcend the merely physical nature of being alive but also rely on communication and mutual understanding.

Murder as work eliminates mutual understanding, but, as El Sicario shows, it also upholds a certain ideal of communicative possibility. In promoting one-way communication through messaging based on fear, however, it turns human lives into ciphers, or symbols with no intrinsic meaning. Additionally, the proliferation of murder as labor eventually exhausts its own communicative capacities by cheapening life, whether that of the *sicarios* or of their victims. That cheapening gradually pervades the social field such that murder is no longer costly. As a result, real *sicarios* are no longer needed; their work becomes obsolete. In the end, as *El infierno* imagines things, when the *sicarios* turn on the cartel leaders and their powerful allies, well, "that's life" in at least two ways. It offers a deserved and predictable outcome, which in *El infierno* takes the form of poetic justice for those who reduce all value and values to capital and raw power. And in a social field where murder has become a way of life "that's life" also refers to perhaps the only way in which the fully human—understood as radical freedom and creative performance—comes alive . . . when the *sicario* kills his capitalist bosses.

NOTES

1. *Sicario*, the Spanish word for an assassin, derives from the Latin *sicarius*, which refers to a man wielding a dagger, or *sica*. It was applied to the Jewish Zealots, who "in the decades immediately preceding the destruction

of Jerusalem . . . attempted to expel the Romans and their partisans from the country, even resorting to murder to attain their object. Under their cloaks they concealed 'sicae,' or small daggers, whence they received their name; and at popular assemblies, especially during the pilgrimage to the Temple mount, they stabbed their enemies, or, in other words, those who were friendly to the Romans, lamenting ostentatiously after the deed, and thus escaping detection (Josephus, 'Ant.' xx. 8, § 10; idem, 'B. J.' ii. 13, § 3)" (Gottheil and Krauss). The English word *assassin* as well as the Spanish word *asesino* (more aligned with the English murderer) derives from medieval Latin *assassinus* and Arabic "*ḥaššāš* and *ḥaššīš*, lit. 'a hashish-eater, one addicted to hashish,' both forms being applied in Arabic to the Ismāhīli sectarians, who used to intoxicate themselves with hashish or hemp, when preparing to dispatch some king or public man" ("Assassin").

2. *Testimonio* refers to a Latin American tradition in which a scholar or professional author produces a first-person narration based on interviews conducted with an ethnically, economically, or otherwise marginalized and disempowered speaker. The speaker's firsthand account of her or his life experiences usually concerns events of political urgency and constitutes a form of narrative agency through the solidarity between speaker and writer.

3. From here on I will refer to the informant in *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin* as *El Sicario*, to differentiate him from *sicarios* in general.

4. A \$1.4 billion contribution from the United States government, approved by George W. Bush in 2007 as part of the Merida Initiative, supports Calderón's plan. Charles Bowden, a reporter and creative nonfiction writer from New Mexico, summarizes the situation: "Put simply, the United States took a Mexican institution with long ties to the drug industry—the army was a partner in the huge marijuana plantation in Chihuahua, Rancho Búfalo, of the mid-1980s, and it was a Mexican general who became the drug czar in 1997 until it was discovered he worked for the Juárez cartel—and bankrolled it to fight the drug industry" (25; my emphasis).

5. It is instructive to review the range of public opinion displayed at *nomassangre.org*, a site dedicated to the discussion of how civil society could end the violence in Mexico.

6. Some of the most recent news reports include headlines such as "Dismembered Bodies Found All Over Juárez" (Martínez-Cabrera and Borunda); "In Revenge, Fetus Removed from Pregnant Woman before She Is Burned Alive" ("Por venganza, sacan a mujer embarazada el producto y la queman viva"); "Eight Bodies Tossed onto Highway in Veracruz" ("Tiran ocho cadáveres en carretera de Veracruz"). See *blogdelnarco.com* for a compilation of news reports of this type of violence in Mexico.

7. These texts differ from the melodramatic conventions of the *novela sicaresca*, a neologism coined by Héctor Abad Faciolince to describe the narratives based on

the Colombian drug war of the 1980s (Jácome; Abad Faciolince; Fernández L'Hoeste). The term is a play on the Spanish genre of the *novela picaresca*. While displaying similarities in plot and characterization (especially of drug bosses) with Colombian texts like *La virgen de los sicarios* (Vallejo), *Rosario Tijeras* (Franco), *No nacimos pa' semilla* (Salazar), and *El pelaíto que no duró nada* (Gaviria) and with the Mexican *Sicario: Diario del Diablo* (Ronquillo), *El Sicario* and *El infierno* resist in multiple ways the glorification or celebration of *machista* self-sacrifice to the drug trade.

8. "Son of a bitch." La Chingada is also another name for La Malinche, Cortéz's indigenous mistress, accused in legend of having betrayed the Aztecs by providing translation services to the Spanish conquistadors. *Malinchismo* colloquially refers to various types of selling out to foreigners for profit or to preferring foreign styles, products, and ideologies over Mexican ones.

9. I am grateful to Laura Gutiérrez for alerting me to the regional specificity of the music in the film.

10. Although we never see Benny shooting random bystanders, his assault on the public figures standing on the platform above the crowd elicits their attempt to fire back into the mass of people among whom he stands. This scene isolates Benny as avenging angel and (anti)hero while also making clear that everyone is equally vulnerable once violence becomes the only available language for expressing subjectivity.

11. "Her distinction between labour and work does not map on to our distinctions between skilled and unskilled labour, intellectual and manual labour, or blue-collar and white-collar professions" (Higgins 283).

WORKS CONSULTED

- Abad Faciolince, Héctor. "Estética y narcotráfico." *Revista número 7* (1995): ii–iii. Print.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- . "Sovereign Police." *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. 103–07. Print.
- Archibold, Randal C., Damien Cave, and Elizabeth Malkin. "Mexican Leader Wants Drug War Set in Law." *New York Times*, 16 Oct. 2011: A5+. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 1958. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998. Print.
- "Assassin." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford UP, 2011. Web. Nov. 2011.
- Badiou, Alain. *Ethics*. New York: Verso, 2001. Print.
- Bowden, Charles. *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields*. New York: Nation, 2010. Print.
- . Preface. Molloy and Bowden vii–xiv.

- Fernández L'Hoeste, Héctor. "From Rodrigo to Rosario: Birth and Rise of the Sicaresca." *Revista de estudios hispánicos* 42.3 (2008): 543–57. Print.
- Franco, Jorge. *Rosario Tijeras: Una novela*. 1999. New York: Siete Cuentos, 2004. Print.
- Gaviria, Víctor. *El pelaíto que no duró nada*. Bogotá: Planeta, 1991. Print.
- The Godfather*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, James Caan, and Diane Keaton. Paramount, 1972. DVD.
- Gottheil, Richard, and Samuel Krauss. "Sicarii." *Jewish Encyclopedia: The Unedited Full Text of the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia*. Kopelman Foundation, 2002–11. Web. 6 Nov. 2011.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. Ed. Joseph A. Battigieg. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.
- Guerrero Gutiérrez, Eduardo. "La raíz de la violencia." *Nexos en línea*. Nexos, 6 Jan. 2011. Web. 10 July 2011.
- Hare, Robert D. *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of Psychopaths among Us*. New York: Pocket, 1993. Print.
- Higgins, Chris. "Labour, Work, and Action: Arendt's Phenomenology of Practical Life." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44.2–3 (2010): 275–300. Print.
- El infierno*. Dir. Luis Estrada. Perf. Damián Alcázar, Joaquín Cosío, Ernesto Gómez Cruz, Elizabeth Cervantes, and María Rojo. *Bandidos*, 2010. DVD.
- Jácome, Margarita. *La novela sicaresca: Testimonio, sensacionalismo y ficción*. Medellín: Fondo Editorial Universidad EAFIT, 2009. Print.
- "Killings Grow More Gruesome as Mexican Drug Cartels Try to Out-Shock." *The National*. Abu Dhabi Media, 10 Oct. 2011. Web. 15 Oct. 2011.
- Maerker, Denise. "The Other Anti-crime Strategy." *Borderland Beat*. Borderland Beat, 6 June 2011. Web. 10 July 2011.
- Martínez-Cabrera, Alejandro, and Daniel Borunda. "Dismembered Bodies Found All Over Juárez." *El Paso Times*. MediaNews Group, 26 Oct. 2011. Web. 27 Oct. 2011.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. Ed. C. J. Arthur. New York: International, 1970. Print.
- McQuillan, Colin. "The Political Life in Giorgio Agamben." *Kritikos* July (2005): n. pag. Web. 10 Oct. 2011.
- Molloy, Molly, and Charles Bowden, eds. *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin*. New York: Nation, 2011. Print.
- "Por venganza, sacan a mujer embarazada el producto y la queman viva." *El diario.mx*. El Diario, 26 Oct. 2011. Web. 27 Oct. 2011.
- Ravelo, Ricardo. *Los capos: Las narco-rutas de México*. México, D.F.: Random; Mondadori, 2005. Print.
- Revelles, José. *El cártel incómodo: El fin de los Beltrán Leyva y la hegemonía del Chapo Guzmán*. México, D.F.: Random; Mondadori, 2010. Print.
- Rodríguez Castañeda, Rafael, ed. *El México narco: La geografía del narcotráfico, región por región, estado por estado, ciudad por ciudad*. . . . México, D.F.: Planeta Mexicana, 2009. Print.
- Rodríguez Nieto, Sandra. "Cuestionan estadísticas idea de feminicidio." *El diario.mx*. El Diario, 22 Oct. 2011. Web. 23 Oct. 2011.
- Ronquillo, Víctor. *Sicario: Diario del Diablo*. México, D.F.: B, 2009. Print.
- Salazar, Alonso. *No nacimos pa' semilla: La cultura de las bandas juveniles en Medellín*. 1990. Bogotá: Planeta, 2002. Print.
- Scarface*. Dir. Brian De Palma. Perf. Al Pacino, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Steven Bauer. Universal, 1983. DVD.
- El sicario, room 164*. Dir. Gianfranco Rosi. Les Films d'Ici and Robofilms, 2010. DVD.
- Sumas y restas*. Dir. Víctor Gaviria. Perf. Juan Uribe, Alonso Arias, María Isabel Gaviria, and Fredy York Monsalve. Latin Cinema Group, La Ducha Fría, Latino, and ATPP, 2004. DVD.
- "Tiran ocho cadáveres en carretera de Veracruz." *El universal.mx*. El Universal, 20 Oct. 2011. Web. 22 Oct. 2011.
- Vallejo, Fernando. *La virgen de los sicarios*. Madrid: Punto de Lectura, 2006. Print.
- "Van 43 mil muertos en lucha a narco: DEA." *El universal.mx*. El Universal, 14 Oct. 2011. Web. 16 Oct. 2011.
- Vulliamy, Ed. "Ciudad Juarez Is All Our Futures: This Is the Inevitable War of Capitalism Gone Mad." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 20 June 2011. N. pag. Web. 25 June 2011.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. New York: Verso, 2002. Print.