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## Shaylih Muehlmann. When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

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**Shaylih Muehlmann. *When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.**

“That the United States and Mexico continue to impose a ‘war’ that has been such a spectacular failure is also enormously lucrative for both the countries and the markets involved” (p. 14). *When I Wear My Alligator Boots* explores how the Mexican *narco*-economy impacts and shapes the everyday lives of poor people on the northwest Mexican margins through a variety of local voices and perspectives that animate this lively and insightful book. Through Andrés, Paz, Cruz, Lupita, Celia, and many others who graciously shared their experiences, analyses, and insights, Shaylih Muehlmann has expertly woven together an exploration of the impact of the narco-economy on ordinary people in otherwise mundane settings as they struggle to get by. In so doing, she adds to a small body of literature that provides deeply embedded, first-hand accounts of the Mexican narco-economy at the personal and community levels. Her work underscores the power of an ethnographic approach to dig intensely into the worlds of people living in poverty and their complex relationships with the illicit drug trade. She reveals how the drug trade creates webs of penetration into communities and regions in ways that touch just about everyone, be it through direct employment, a jailed son or daughter, or cooking food for the local capos at a restaurant.

Key themes, roughly following the sequencing of chapters, include womens’ lives; the shaping of male identities; *corridos* (popular folk ballads); addiction; money laundering; the calculation of risk; and the ever-shifting guise of *narcos* through clothing and other trappings. Muehlmann points out that women are largely rendered invisible in most narco-analyses,<sup>1</sup> as are children. Because women are more economically marginal and vulnerable than men (and children even more so), the incarceration or death of a husband, brother, or other male kin may, for women, mean not only loss of income but also added expenses for food, protection, and other services during their loved one’s incarceration, not to mention emotional heartbreak. Women may also find themselves in danger as of result of their relationships to males involved in the drug trade. For example, women may be incarcerated if a drug stash not belonging to them is found in their home. And, of course, women often find themselves in situations where economic necessity outweighs risk, and they wind up operating as drug or money mules. Far from ignoring the role of women, Muehlmann, flips the discussion of the role of women in the drug trade on its head by engaging in a fascinating examination of the less-often discussed narco-wives who are seduced by the prestige, power dynamics, and lifestyle involved in the drug trade. Like their male counterparts, of course, many of these women wind up in jail or worse.

Men are equally exploited, for their labor is cheap and expendable. Like women, men are often drawn, willingly or otherwise, into the narco-economy not only out of sheer economic necessity but also because of webs of kinship or friendship that coax participation. Indeed, I know of a particular case in which a woman in a narco-town is regularly harassed by local cartel operatives and is used as a bargaining chip to exploit her migrant husband, who works as a farmworker in the U.S. and sometimes as a low-level cartel operative. If such men are caught (and this one eventually was), there are more in the queue to take their place. Muehlmann makes clear that she sees the massive “reserve army” of the poor in Mexico as a byproduct of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and neoliberal policies in general that have led to

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast, women are not rendered invisible in popular film, however. They are typically portrayed as full of agency as they confront and survive many forms of exploitation. Here we might include such recent Mexican films as *Miss Bala* (2011) and *Heli* (2013).

massive rural (and also urban) unemployment. In the process, she says, the male identity as the dominant bread winner has been destabilized. That narcos are also thought of as machos, thus, becomes attractive as a further lure and leads to an overcompensation in what she refers to as the “pufferfish syndrome,” as men, unlike women, tend to exaggerate their roles and activities as narcos.

Muehlmann next addresses the pervasive popularity of *narco-corridos*, or “drug ballads,” which constitute a sub-genre of Mexican northern ballads, a form of traditional folk music. Narco-corrido lyrics often refer to particular events and places; like ganster rap in the U.S., the lyrics of narco-corridos tend to speak approvingly of illegal activities. Muehlmann explores these songs not only as non-state-dominated accountings and the music of the poor but also a form of narco-propoganda by and among its “in crowd.” She comes to understand the songs through her interlocutors as a kind of visceral embodiment of the emotions associated with involvement in illicit activity; the rhythm and lyrics of the songs represent the emotional rush of such involvement—through a powerful and accessible pop culture format.

Drug addiction among traffickers themselves and in the local Mexican population is yet another dimension that is not often engaged in narco-analyses. While the U.S. is clearly the major market draw for traffickers, the fact that product (particularly methamphetamine, aka *cristal*) is available and cheap along drug corridors has led to a considerable rise in addiction in Mexico. Muehlmann brings great humanity to her discussion of addicts and how their lives unravel, as well as the stigma that accompanies addiction (women being far more stigmatized than men, not surprisingly).

As an economic anthropologist, I found the penultimate chapter on money laundering and the physicality of money to be perhaps the most intriguing chapter of the book. Her description of how fishmonger Don Emmanuel laundered money through multiple, geographically dispersed bank accounts set up through (often quite complicit) others based upon kinship and friendship illuminated a remarkably complex and sophisticated system. Further, Muehlmann critiques much recent analysis on the nature of contemporary money as abstract and virtual. In the narco-economy, unlike in other economies, she argues, the physicality of money is paramount; weight and volume are key (especially for money mules, who have to tote the stuff around). She also argues that drug money is infused into all dimensions of the legal economy, from restaurants to churches to security forces, all of which benefit or receive supplemental income from it. Drug money is an important engine in the global capitalist economy, and one wonders what would happen to that economy if the drug money spigot were suddenly shut off.

Finally, Muehlmann ties up the book with an equally fascinating meditation on the concept of risk and the complex calculations and rationale of risk assessment in different subject positions relative to the narco-economy. Her portrayal of the pervasiveness of the narco-economy is extremely apt—everyone in one way or another is part of it. There are no true in / out boundaries, as exemplified by her analysis of subcontracting and loose networks that are fluid and often fluid, opportunistic, and reactive to immediate need. Having cited David Graeber on the antiquity of credit and debt as the earliest form of “money” in pre-monetized societies, one interlocutor notes that debt always “keeps you sucked in” under conditions of poverty and uncertainty. Interlaced into the chapter is another cultural effect of the narco-economy: how people dress. The stereotype of the boots, cowboy hat, and massive ornate belt buckle no longer holds. Narco-towns where I have worked are dominated by folks in tennis shoes, polo or button down shirts, and baseball caps. Indeed, one noteworthy narco-migrant came back and purchased a ranch in a region that was long dedicated to dairy farming. He took up a legitimate and

traditional form of making a living through which locals gained social status (albeit through a rather significant shortcut). Not only did he take on the job of ranching, however, he also swapped his baseball cap and tennis shoes for cowboy boots and hats. Taken together, his change in livelihood and attire amounted to a sort of “sanitizing,” a retro-reinvention of himself so that he would fit in with traditional norms and values.

Muehlmann’s shares with readers deep a frustration and despair over the Mexican “drug war.” Though not cited in the book, she provides estimates as high as 130,000 dead, with another 27,000 having disappeared since late 2006. Government figures are, of course, much lower, at around 60,000+ (Molloy, 2013). Molly Molloy refers to this disparity as the “Mexican undead,” a play on words meant to indicate that by underestimating or underreporting the numbers of casualties of the drug war, the government can effectively deny not only the deaths but also the very existence of a multitude of “undesirables.” She argues convincingly that security forces are using the “drug war” to camouflage a campaign against anyone labeled as undesirable, a tactic seen elsewhere in Latin America, and tantamount to social cleansing (cf. Arias & Goldstein, 2010).

In closing, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots* is an accessible, well-written book that mines the complexity of the narco-economy as it plays out in an ordinary, rural, poor community where globalization has rushed in with tremendous power and fury. At the book’s end, Muehlmann beseeches the reader:

Think of Andres bearing up, trying to breathe under all the weight [of the money strapped to his body] at the military checkpoint, or of Paz slipping her last wad of cash into the guards hand at the jail. Remember Lupita, stuffing her baby’s diapers with hundred-dollar bills... And don’t forget Cruz [a meth addict], out there in the desert on top of his bulldozer [which he guarded for someone else for a few pesos], counting his way through earthquakes. Rather than regret their actions, they just try to do whatever they have to do, and try to do it well. (p. 190)

Put in terms of a well-worn local phrase, “*puro pa’delante*” (always strive forward). Muehlmann has brought great empathy and humanism to her analysis, and this book should be read by anyone interested in global drug trafficking and its pernicious effects. Her work tells the story of not only the human resiliency of the many who must endure it but also the deep toll it takes on those involved and the many losses they must also endure.

### References

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