

## Gilmer Mesa's *La cuadra* as Narco *Decameron*

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...tengo fe que al otro lado te veré  
 reserva mi lugar y nos tomamos un café  
 brindamos con los que estemos y nos acordamos  
 de los buenos momentos cuando nos embriagamos  
 mientras tanto desahogo este llanto  
 elevando una oración  
 que ahora se convierte en canto  
 un brindis por los que ya no están  
 los que no volverán allá nos veremos más tarde...

“Brindo por ellos” Kiño and Thiago  
 (soundtrack of the series *La vendedora de rosas*)

The 14<sup>th</sup>-century *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio frames its hundred tales within one overreaching narrative wherein to escape the Black Plague, ten folks gather in a secluded villa outside of Florence and for a fortnight entertain themselves with storytelling. The framing story casts a dark shadow on the entirety of its parts with the horror of devastating pandemics: Boccaccio's introduction depicts a city ravished by uncontrollable disease, from the initial symptoms of death-carrying boils to the stench of decaying cadavers piling up with no proper burial, parents abandoning their children in fear of contagion, husbands forsaking wives, no one left to tend to the ill and to mourn the dead. As Boccaccio put it, laws, both human and divine, dissolved; some chose seclusion while others gave into unbridled debauchery; social order has collapsed and the world has run amok.

Gilmer Mesa's 2016 novel *La cuadra* contains the Medellín besieged by the Medellín Cartel within a couple of narrative frames not so distant from Boccaccio's rhetorical device, wherein society as a whole crumbles under a soaring contagion.<sup>1</sup> This essay argues that, similarly to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the microscopic lens applied in *La cuadra* unveils human tragedy of macroscopic proportions. Zeroing in on the deeply personal and intimate lives of local characters who might have never even heard of Pablo Escobar, *La cuadra* reflects on a society caught off guard vis-à-vis the explosion of drug trafficking. Loosely rooted in Jungian-style analysis, and in particular in elemental family archetypes, this essay examines the breakdown of fundamental relationships and the abandonment of values and morals.

First, the very title *La cuadra* [The Block] locks the story within a small section of Aranjuez, a northeastern *comuna* of Medellín, a neighborhood where Mesa grew up (and lives

to this day), and from which the Medellín Cartel recruited legions of *sicarios*, including the infamous Prisco brothers (marginally veiled here under the name Risco).<sup>2</sup> Drawing from the life stories of people who inhabited this densely populated space, Mesa's novel suggests that a block like his infected by the narco was replicated infinitely throughout the *comunas*, devouring relationships and lives, in the process undoing the social fabric of Colombian society.<sup>3</sup> In an autobiographical, barely fictionalized fashion—albeit hued with affection and nostalgia—the narrator weaves a tale of a barrio which could be homey and hostile, a juxtaposition of an idyllic public space for children and the arena of a rude awakening for pre-adolescents whose horseplay turned into rape and murder, largely due to the underhanded grooming provided by Escobar's most ferocious hitmen, their local protectors.

The second framing device are the contours of an old photograph taken by the narrator twenty-five years earlier, never shown to us but described in detail at the onset of the book and brought up at its end, where cheerful youngsters pose on Halloween, some in costumes, others not, all eagerly awaiting candy and fun—entertainment provided and financed by shady neighborhood benefactors Amado and Reinaldo Risco, “una especie de caudillos que presidían cualquier evento, desde un matrimonio hasta una entrega de trofeos en un torneo de fútbol callejero” (Mesa 113). They presided over a community that was de facto ignored by the state until Escobar escalated the violence to the point where crime-infested barrios could no longer be swept under the rug.<sup>4</sup> This invisible photograph captures an innocence frozen in time, a nostalgic return to fleeting happiness, so much more unattainable because everyone in it, including the narrator's older brother Alquívar, perished as victims and victimizers of their own neighborhood, killers and the dead whose memory flickers

back to life through the narrator's affective recollections. In *La cuadra*, crudeness and lyricism are interwoven and navigated with dexterity, moving from poetic to the banal, from nostalgic to gut-wrenching, and in the process leaving the reader nonplussed but also struck to the core by the tragedy of the innocence lost. The haunting photograph whose subjects are today's ghosts provides a fodder for stories on what it was like to grow up at the peak of Escobar's terrorism, where his ire swept away youth from both sides of the law, dividing to pulverize everyone in his way.

Even though Escobar is never once mentioned in the novel,<sup>5</sup> it is precisely the capo and the ominous Medellín Cartel that constitute the final and the weightiest frame reminiscent of *Decameron*, in the same fashion that the Black Plague polluted Boccaccio's urban society. Boccaccio's imagery was at times criticized for its explicitness, but how else to illustrate horrors of the disease and human response to it—even most sordid or hedonistic—if not by telling it how it was? That the plague spread like wildfire was conveyed well in a vignette where rags from a cadaver almost became food for stray pigs, had it not been that the animals themselves dropped dead after the initial contact with contaminated clothes. The terror of unstoppable contagion and blurry boundaries between men and beasts announce catastrophe of epic proportions. Likewise, Mesa's prose gives an insight into social pandemonium on a massive scale. The life circumstances of Mesa's characters were not perfect, yet the protagonists' physical proximity to the narco forces magnified the violence they grew to live and reproduce. The final nail to the coffin was the demise of the narrator's beloved older brother and the toll it took on his family.

I chose as an epigraph a song that toasts to the dead brotherhood because it is the fallen brothers—be it by blood, or friendship—whom Mesa eulogizes the most. The entirety of the novel consists of a collective *Bildungsroman*, where everyone's final destination is their ruin. Like Boccaccio's tales centered on human folly and the wheel of fortune, on misadventures, misguided passions, loss, and gain, here, too, Mesa evokes instances of a fundamental desire for love and the protagonists' rude awakening to harsh reality, followed by anguish and violence. *La cuadra* may be delivered with nostalgic affection, yet it is unmistakably about evil, of how good intentions go wrong, how the code of bros before hos kills intimacy; how delinquency, like the plague, spreads uncontrollably and the boys become thieves, rapists, and fortuitous assassins. The evil is imperceptible at first, gratifying and almost innocent when the youth receive assignments as simple as spraying graffiti with messages of “extraditables = comida. Sapos = muerte” (142) in exchange for truckloads of food for their struggling families. Yet it is also the beginning of the end, because someone must follow up on the threats they have just painted on the walls, and the ghastly task turns out to be their responsibility:

En medio de la alegría que da el estómago lleno y la despreocupación del despilfarro, a la gente se le olvidó que a la sentencia le faltaba la mitad más negra, ya los extraditables habían allegado la comida, ahora faltaba que los sapos se murieran y como solos no se iban a morir, había que matarlos... Fui testigo de la cara de espanto con que salieron casi todos los citados al saber que tenían que matar a sus familiares, a sus vecinos y a los amigos de sus padres de toda la vida...en la vida de esquina de barrio nada es gratis, siempre se paga, en esa junta infernal quedó exterminado para siempre el último vestigio de inocencia que albergaran la cuadra y sus habitantes. (143)

If Boccaccio's hell on earth unveiled itself through the imagery of ravenous hogs dying from instant contagion, here it is the realization that this is no longer fun and games, and that the boys' mentors just condemned them to violence and premature death.

Various narrative frames notwithstanding, Mesa's novel suggests an approach grounded in simplicity rather than complexity, in elemental archetypes much like Jungian universal patterns derived from the collective unconscious. Jung's psychoanalytical focus lies in the role of a parent in the psychological maturation of a child. Behind real individuals there exists an inner psychological structure, Jung argued, which influences how we experience our parent, and which provides a blueprint for how we experience life in a patterned way. For example, both mother and father can appear in diametrically opposite roles, as prohibitive and castrating or else all-permissive and weak. Similarly, here, underneath the intricacy of the novel's socio-cultural context, there emerges an underlying pattern enabling us to understand how its protagonists navigate human relationships and how they operate in the external world. It appears that their decision-making is motivated by foundational conflicts and deficiencies, wherein the microcosm of each protagonist reflects society as a whole, and where Mesa's community can be read via individual dramas confined to each character's home. Thus, if Mesa's take on the Medellín of the 1980s comes comprised within the parameters of a proverbial city block, his stories can likewise be contained within a framework of a curious patchwork family, with all accounts revolving around archetypal-like figures of a mother, a father, a brother, and a girlfriend, where the last one suffers frightening consequences of her weaker status. If aside from the parental figures, Jung spoke of the child who longs for innocence and rebirth, or a hero-defender who brings about salvation, Mesa's embodiment of a brother exhibits these nascent qualities, albeit truncated early on and buried under the rubble of narco pandemonium. This essay is not a Jungian reading per se, but its interdisciplinary cultural reading can benefit from the employment of archetypes to give shape to chaotic life

circumstances of the novel's protagonists. The Decameron plague translates in *La cuadra* to violence as the principal contagion which seeps into every crease of the social fabric, deforming all families into tragic and twisted caricatures.

### Mother

Like many well-known stories about Colombian *comunas*, *La cuadra* gives an insight into a society of largely dysfunctional families whose sole caretaker (and not always a good one) is the mother. In his examination of literary figures of *sicarios*, Óscar Osorio makes a note of the preponderance of degenerate or absent mothers (with the concomitant nonexistence of father figures) whose neglect contributed to children's delinquency in Colombian novels such as Dussán Bahamón's 1988 *El sicario*, Alberto Vázquez-Figueroa's 1991 *Sicario*, Fernando Vallejo's 1994 *Our Lady of Assassins* (*La virgen de los sicarios*), and Jorge Franco Ramos's 1999 *Rosario Tijeras* (16). Libardo, aka El Animal, the anti-hero of Víctor Gaviria's 2016 film *La mujer del animal* set in the 1970s, is a vicious hoodlum from the *comunas* who rapes and enslaves local girls as if in a misdirected retaliation against his brutish and unloving mother. Libardo's arbitrary discharges of rage stemming from violent childhood and maternal abandonment convert all women into targets of abhorrent abuse teetering on femicide.<sup>6</sup>

Adam Baird's sociological study of Medellín gangs confirms that "fatherless households are the norm" (114). It has been amply documented how *sicarios'* mothers—often the only factual family the youth could claim—are venerated by their sons. As Alonso Salazar and Ana María Jaramillo commented on the real-life socio-economic circumstances of Medellín's juveniles back in 1980s, "la madre mantiene el papel central en las relaciones familiares...sobre todo en los estratos populares, donde el madrosterismo y las madres cabeza de hogar han crecido significativamente. En el discurso del *traqueto* y del *sicario* esta imagen de la madre (...) aparece como (...) la justificación, real o simbólica, de las acciones delincuenciales" (116-117). Curiously, the idealization of the maternal figure comes with the simultaneous reinforcement of sexist attitudes in men and, building upon the rural customs from the Antioquia region, it has ingrained itself in narco culture (Jaramillo and Salazar 122). The worship of the mother accompanied by objectification of all other women—a haphazard logic at first sight—corresponds to what Jaramillo and Salazar describe as matriarchy at home and patriarchy practiced in the streets (116-117).

Attention has been drawn to how in some cases the juveniles' mothers take on a position of a near-divinity—"La fusión Madre-Virgen es sagrada para el *sicario*" (Rincón)—. Hence *sicarios'* particular devotion to María Auxiliadora of Sabaneta, the celestial mother figure, who as Lucía Garavito

asserts, substituted in the Antioquian churches, homes, and street chapels El Sagrado Corazón, the heretofore reigning figure preferred by the conservative privileged. This transition in tastes signals the new, long-lasting hold that the margins and the underworld would exercise on popular culture for years to come (43).<sup>7</sup> María Auxiliadora of Sabaneta, everyone's spiritual mother, is the same divinity whose statue of natural size the Risco brothers ordered constructed in their barrio, and by which they would officiate, while giving out food and wads of cash on Halloween (Mesa 139).<sup>8</sup> That Fernando Vallejo, the literary provocateur par excellence, depicted an unremorseful slaying of a pregnant mother in *Our Lady of Assassins* constitutes an inverted testimony to the sanctity in which the mother is held.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, in Gilmer Mesa's novel mothers often determine the course of protagonists' lives, albeit usually for the worse. Kokorico, the only innately evil character from the narrator's group of friends, grows into an embittered criminal because his cold, despotic parent denied him love, favoring his siblings instead. Even Kokorico's flight from home, the silent protest of a powerless child, makes no impression on his mother who never once invites him to return (Mesa 23). Worse yet, his family makes every effort to avoid their own neighborhood so as not to cross paths with the unwanted offspring who now inhabits its streets. Embittered by maternal rebuff, Kokorico joins the gang and channels his anger into a life of crime, henceforth becoming Reinaldo Risco's bodyguard and his preferred *sicario* tasked with killing high-level officials at the mere age of fifteen.

But his hurt over maternal rejection cannot be quenched with random killings, and Kokorico sets out to burn up his entire family, having previously locked his house from the outside. As the flames devour the building, people's screams reach the neighbors who manage to evacuate them. For this act, Kokorico brings upon himself a death sentence because even the most hardened criminals equate attacks on one's mother with unforgivable depravity, regardless of her virtues or faults: "entre los bandidos se toleran cosas imposibles como latrocinios, asesinatos, violaciones y hasta traiciones, pero cualquier ofensa por exigua que sea contra la madre es el mayor agravio imaginable" (Mesa 36). Thus, the same people who took Kokorico under their wing in the first place, gave the order to put him down. He knew it was coming, but like every other death in his life, he took this one stoically. One could say that Kokorico was abandoned twice, first by his family by birth, and then by his family by fate: *la cuadra*.

The mother-son conflict emerges yet in another tale. Mambo's entire universe revolved around his hard-working single mother. From the start, he took up the role of the surrogate husband, cleaning the house and cooking dinners for her, even though kids made fun of him. This idyll ended when the mother fell for a certain Conrado, brought the man home, and began to cater to his needs, though he turned out

to be a good-for-nothing moocher. This relationship put an end to Mambo's happiness, and the most domesticated of the childhood gang joined the streets to object to the unworthy intruder. Like Kokorico, Mambo began to work for the local bosses, but his life took an even worse hit the day he found out that Conrado had murdered his mother in a fight, cut up her body, and attempted to bury it in Mambo's backyard. This is when adolescent Mambo begged the Risco brothers to keep Conrado alive in jail so that *he* could be the perpetrator of the ultimate revenge. Fast-forward to his arrival in prison at eighteen, and Mambo corners Conrado in a bathroom only to methodically cut him into pieces, starting with each finger, then the toes, and then longer limbs. Only a torso was found in the bathroom, together with the head placed on the side; Mambo flushed down the toilet all the other remains of his enemy, the way Conrado had destroyed his childhood bliss.

In both instances, mothers symbolize nurture and affection which when denied (willfully or by life circumstances), sends the youths straight onto the path of crime, much like Luis Buñuel's paradigmatic 1950 film *Los olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned*), a tale of juvenile delinquency in urban squalor exacerbated by maternal neglect. As in Buñuel's film, the adolescent protagonists start with good intentions, desperately wanting to belong. Mambo wanted to keep his mother for himself, with no outsider sharing their household, while the wicked Kokorico battled the ghosts of rejection: "nunca dejó de pensar en su miserable niñez, eso lo sé con certeza porque él mismo me lo contó, odiaba su niñez y a toda su familia y esa sería a la postre su ruina" (Mesa 30-1). Kokorico kept tabs on his family, sending them money each time they were in need (Mesa 31). Even his final act of violence hints at unmet needs exacerbated by a constant drug intake when, prior to setting his home on fire, Kokorico caressed the front door longingly, pining for something that never was: "caminó hasta su casa, se acercó a la puerta de entrada y la acarició con la cara poniendo la mejilla contra la madera, sobándola de arriba abajo cansinamente, sin dejar de sonreír un solo instante" (Mesa 34). The narrator's accounts suggest the boys' innate kindness that could have grown if appreciated more by their mothers, and crimes that could have possibly been prevented had they been more loved. They also attest to the pivotal role mothers play in the youths' *Bildungsroman*, the love-hate relationship that contorts their male-female relationships later on.

### Father

Though not every family in *La cuadra* lacks a father figure, no real father stands out as a role model for the boys. Conrado, Mambo's deadbeat stepdad, turns out to be a thief, a cheater, and a murderer while Kokorico's alcoholic dad plays no role in his life. Even the narrators' two loving parents seem unable to prevent the older son from morphing into a thug.

Yet there is a father figure looming over the entire neighborhood, the Risco brothers whose presence and involvement with all social events made them role models not only for the impressionable young but for the adolescents' trusting families as well. Reinaldo would pay for the funerals of his foot soldiers, gestures for which the parents were eternally grateful, although, ironically, these premature deaths were the brothers' doing in the first place (Mesa 133). In an interview with Santiago Serna Duque, Mesa recounts the impromptu judicial functions that the Prisco brothers performed in the neighborhood, reuniting families and punishing domestic violence: "iban a las casas a poner la cara por los maridos apóstatas o ponían en orden a los manes que le pegaban a la mujer" ("Aranjuez").

In the absence of the state, of civic structures and close parental care, the gangs which controlled the streets served as mentors and providers, watching the children grow and employing them for petty jobs, to eventually ensnare them into crime—each time more serious—as they themselves received directives from the Medellín Cartel: "paulatinamente el barrio se convirtió en un cuartel de un ejército de jóvenes al servicio del cartel en constante reclutamiento" (Mesa 133). The destabilization of values is in many ways the central theme in Boccaccio's *Decameron* as it is in Mesa's *La cuadra*, where nothing can stop civilizational disintegration. The old moral paradigm fades away, and in the face of a spiritual void, many abandon themselves to wanton desires and mayhem. In an interview with Nahuel Gallotta, Mesa bemoans the criminal structures that hold entire neighborhoods captive through intimidation, drug addiction, and systematic exploitation of local businesses. He contrasts them with populist crime bosses of yesteryear (pre-Escobar), the men who held more cloud and respect than the state owing to their paternalistic conduct:

Antes, ser bandido era un oficio: el barrio era sagrado y no se permitían los robos, y se colaboraba con el vecino. Con billetes, con camiones repletos de comida, con ropa. El bandido era un señor amable; ni siquiera se lo veía borracho. Todos seguían ese código. Para el vecino, ellos eran más confiables que la Policía, a la hora de resolver un conflicto barrial. Ellos no dejaban que los jovencitos fueran muy adictos.

These traditional networks of reliance and loyalty to the criminal bosses backfired once the illicit structures initiated war on the state and utilized impressionable youth. The mechanism of transformation was simple: local benefactors were the natural go-to anytime kids were in need. The street was the boys' second, often first home, and the Risco brothers were the owners of the world spreading outside of their overcrowded households. Concerning the historical figures of men who initiated youth into crime, Salazar and Jaramillo mention a certain Caliche from Aranjuez whose sudden enrichment enabled him to fix up his home, buy a



better motorcycle and the best clothes, and even do the same for his buddies (63). Needless to say, he was soon recruiting local kids and organizing hits without having to do the jobs himself.<sup>10</sup> In a similar fashion, the social role of a prohibitive progenitor, an embodiment of domestic authority disappears in Mesa's *La cuadra*. Traditional mentors are replaced by fathers of instant gratification rather than discipline, men who tease with fun and transgression only to sink the children before these can comprehend their own puberty. Kids are led on, because flashy neighborhood parties sponsored by the criminal bosses and dreams of one day making it big are but one face of the new social order. In a hierarchy based on prize or punishment, the punitive response to perceived infractions is death, thereby setting the stage for pervasive paranoia among the boys, where mistrust, false affective relationships, and the higher echelon of power are the only valid denominator. These "cutthroat affiliative exigencies" cause "romance, friendships, and loyalties [to] take a back seat to an absolute submission to Escobar's governance and his code of vengeance, where 'acting like a man' includes stoicism in the face of loss, even of one's life" (Pobutsky, *Pablo Escobar* 77). *La cuadra*, like *Decameron*, chronicles a moral crisis of vast proportions, the abandonment of previously cherished values, and the ensuing nihilistic attitudes that give birth to more disasters.

The radical changes that have taken place in the era of post-modernity, where culture has shifted from a society oriented around law and prohibition to one that commands *jouissance*, is articulated in Todd McGowan's *The End of Dissatisfaction*. Building predominantly on Jacques Lacan (for whom desire cannot be achieved, and thus the commended enjoyment is forever illusive), McGowan identifies various social ills reflective of this societal shift, including an increase in violence, widespread cynicism, and a pervasive disconnect, apathy, and loss of meaning. McGowan's society of enjoyment has a father figure less visible yet more omnipotent. Whereas previous paternal authority founded on prohibition had to maintain at least the pretense of infallibility and integrity to hold onto power, the father who commands pleasure is openly on the side of enjoyment, thus not striving for flawlessness (McGowan 46). In other words, he can be corrupting and criminal, converting school and traditional family into ineffective institutional relics.

The narrator in *La cuadra* traces the history of the Risco family, how they immigrated from the countryside, how the brothers' early predilection for crime made them seasoned criminals by the time they reached adulthood, how Reinaldo was the more measured of the two whereas Amado was a psychopath who randomly killed for fun, and how the substantial size of their extended family enabled them to form a fiercely loyal gang with no need to recruit from outside (Mesa 114). Finally, Mesa recounts how the boss of the bosses (read: Escobar) came personally to Aranjuez to make a deal that would honor the brothers' already high

standing within the echelons of banditry. This is how, in the long run, the capo sealed the deal on recruitment for his war on the state: "a este aciago encuentro le debemos que todas las familias de esta ciudad o por lo menos de este barrio hayan sido tocadas, así sea tangencialmente, por la muerte" (Mesa 131). In the end, it was Escobar himself who turned into the invisible father figure for the youth, with the Risco brothers as the facilitators of his maniacal will.

Kids joined the gang for reasons as simple as food or merely not to let down their clique. Consistent with the centrality of law-breaking to the gang's hegemonic masculinity, the youngsters were taught that asserting manliness through muscle and illegal enterprise was their only way out of the cycle of poverty in which their families have been locked for generations. Yet this violence was not just about money, nor was financial enrichment an end in itself; it was an upsurge of warrior ethos that grew to surpass the desire for material wealth. After all, few became richer, and the majority died or continued to live with their mothers. Even such titles of the 1990s as Gaviria's *Rodrigo D: no futuro*, his *El pelaito que no duró nada*, or Salazar's *No nacimos pa' semilla* attest to the youth's readiness to go out with a bang, emblematic, of course, of the fleetingness of their existence. Gaviria to this day ponders on the absurdity of their code of thug masculinity which

condenaba a los pelaitos a morir muy jóvenes. Cómo sería el aislamiento de estos muchachos, que en 1987 y 88 las voces de los malandros del Cartel de Medellín se impusieron sobre ellos como un peso paternal que les indicaba el camino. Cómo sería de honda y abrumadora la exclusión de esta juventud que entendió lo de "probar finura" como una forma de estar en el mundo, algo en sí mismo muy infantil e ingenuo en este circuito social. No sé por qué ellos, en un momento, escogían ese rumbo de ser guerreros si sabían que los llevaba a una muerte prematura. (Serna Duque, "Publiqué")

Similarly, Salazar and Jaramillo contend that conflicts among gangs did not stem as much from business exigencies as from questions of honor, and that youth from the *comunidades* emulated a model from the underworld, "tradición del guapo que no se 'arruga,' que no le teme a la muerte" (Salazar and Jaramillo 123). Migrants and sons of migrants from the rural zones of bloodshed and displacement, they witnessed abuse, dysfunction, intolerance, alcoholism, and gratuitous violence early on. Thus, while brutality was part of their legacy and family history, drug trafficking only redirected and reinforced this discontent and violence. As Vallejo put it in *Our Lady of the Assassins*, not without his characteristic sarcasm, "humble folk who brought their customs with them from the countryside, customs like...stealing from the guy next door and fighting to the death with him with machetes over peanuts...after the machete came the knife and after the

knife the bullet” (27). Escobar facilitated youths’ self-realization by turning them into terrorists who, for the first time, confronted the elites as a force to reckon with, acquiring a recognition that was previously denied to them (Aristizábal 46, 54). Of course, there had been various criminal groups before in Colombia, but none this young and so lethal.

### Brother

Though the totality of Mesa’s novel can be seen as an ode to his fallen brother, Alquívar, the idea of brotherhood reverberates on several levels. It portrays Reinaldo Risco protecting his psychotic brother from self-destruction, it esteems Alquívar for purposefully shielding the narrator from delinquency,<sup>11</sup> it reveals how the narrator clandestinely gave room and board to Kokorico when the latter lost his home, and it recounts the story of Chicle and Calvo, two social outcasts who grew close through their shared passion for music: “la amistad salsera de estos dos fue el encuentro de dos soledades que se comunicaron cantando con las canciones de otros lo que nunca aprendieron a decir con las propias palabras” (Mesa 154). Growing up in the streets largely unattended, they replayed all types of emotional constellations: from violence and bullying to affection, friendship, and short-lived fraternal love.

Calvo, the much younger boy approached the older Chicle, a homeless loner, to talk about the music he was listening to on his boombox. Soon they were making cassettes and playing them for hours on end, talking about music and enjoying each other’s company to the beat of salsa. They disengaged emotionally from the ever-growing chaos in the barrio, finding happiness in each other’s company. Soon they began to work together because Calvo, indebted to the Risco family for taking him in when his own family had abandoned him, was repaying the favor by working as a hitman, whereas Chicle had to dispose of cadavers so that police would not descend upon their neighborhood. The duo’s bliss did not last long however, because Chicle grew addicted to crack cocaine (*basuco*) and, to feed his habit, he sold his boombox, started to steal in his own neighborhood,<sup>12</sup> and failed to appear where fresh cadavers were dropped, thus enraging his bosses.

The death sentence was to be executed by his best friend Calvo, who found Chicle turned into a miserable junkie, and out of respect for his only friend, he ruefully confessed to his assignment. Moved to tears over his killer’s predicament, Chicle professed his deep love for the boy and to keep Calvo’s conscience clean, he snatched his friend’s gun and shot himself in the mouth. Prior to his suicide, rather than accusing Calvo of duplicity, Chicle lamented his killer’s impending loneliness: “Niño, a mí me vale mierda morirme, hasta mejor, yo aquí no estoy haciendo nada, mi vida es pura mierda, pero lo que sí me da tristeza putamente es dejarte solo, vos has sido lo mejor de esta puta vida conmigo” (Mesa

164). To this, Calvo tearfully embraced his buddy professing love for the man he was about to kill: “hermano, yo a vos te he querido más que a nadie en mi vida, más que a mi hermano de verdad, mi llave” (Mesa 164). Their friendship notwithstanding, the two acted out the orders to kill one and destroy the other.

At the very core of this moving vignette resides the criminal code of honor which held the directives of local crime bosses above all intimate allegiances. Though male camaraderie was essential to the narco milieu, it remained unquestionably subordinate to the higher echelons of criminal hierarchies. We may ask why Calvo would kill the only man he loved rather than run away with him? After all, there was nothing holding the two in their neighborhood, since they had no family or place to call their own. It is as if the narco plague was a life sentence, like a fatalistic destiny they could not evade. Perhaps Calvo knew that his own days were numbered, and that Chicle was beyond rescue, or perhaps every small neighborhood in the city was steeped in the same bedlam, making it impossible to break away. This is how Alquívar revealed his despair to the narrator following his first killings on Riscos’ orders: “¿cómo vive uno con esta maricada?, yo lo que tenía que hacer era nunca haber empezado, no creérmelas, ¿pero ya qué?, ya uno está es llevado del hijueputa y vos sabés que de esta mierda no se sale sino con los pies por delante” (Mesa 176).

Since Alquívar’s childhood and youth coincided with Riscos’s growing muscle in the neighborhood, his entry into their gang proved inevitable and automatic despite his parents’ best efforts to the contrary (Mesa 173). Initiated into murder following a youthful stint painting graffiti for the gang, he joined the ranks of the *sicarios* together with Mambo and Kokoriko, and soon betrayed his friend Culey by setting him up for murder. A vicious gang rapist himself, Alquívar initiated his younger brother into this practice when the latter was barely twelve. In other words, the reader sees a far more menacing image of Alquívar than what his younger brother spells out in his moving recollections. The narrator’s love for his brother prevents him from being entirely objective, and only sporadic comments on the older brother’s notoriety among the gangsters reveal the true scope of his criminality (Mesa 177). In the end, Alquívar’s death discouraged the narrator from continuing on the same path; looking at the pair of glitzy jeans laid out to dress the cadaver, the same pair his brother had stolen from a chain store shortly before his death, the narrator comes to terms with the absurdity of delinquency and the terrifyingly finite quality of death: “Aquí se termina toda la ambición, la ostentación de las ropas y las cosas materiales, el boato de las marcas, del dinero, de los objetos, para esto es que se juega uno la vida, robando, matando, delinquiendo, para que lo obtenido se pudra a la par con uno dentro de un cajón, vida puta” (Mesa 181). If Boccaccio’s storytellers, albeit briefly, fled the city to hide from the contagion, Mesa’s narrator resolves to keep his distance from

the neighborhood through self-isolation. The trauma of his brother's demise forces him to clearly see the magnitude of advancing catastrophe and the dissolution of morals that results only in despair and death. The youth's aspirations are castrated from the get-go by surrounding circumstances, by a criminal code of honor that surpasses affection, and by the death wish they embrace. Becoming the plague of their own neighborhoods, they eliminate the only lives that might have mattered to them. Women in particular suffer the brunt of the abuse, as boys play out with them their nascent sexuality through the already mastered brutality and (self) destruction.

### Girlfriend

With the exception of the nuanced ties of brotherhood, the family relations described thus far are not synonymous with affection, but rather with potency of the emotional bonds that motivate one's actions for the worse. Things only get crueler for girlfriends, because the gang ethos presupposes gender subordination, where women are placed at the center of male fantasies, all the while echoing Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of kinship wherein females are objects of exchange. Mothers may be venerated by the killers, but potential sexual partners are subjected to pitiless exploitation.

Kokorico's awkwardness with girls made him devise a devious practice that spread throughout the *comunas*. The so-called *revolión*, a staged seduction of an unsuspecting girl acted out by one attractive teen with the sole purpose of carrying out a brutal gang rape after a month or so of courting, converted local girls into the targets of an unprecedented sexual aggression. Since the fifteen-year-old Kokorico, a natural sadist, was too ugly to attract someone on his own, he convinced Johan, a weak-willed handsome teen who was courting Sandra to share her with others in an impromptu gang rape: "Vea, monín, le tengo el parche armado, una chimba, para que pongamos a perder a Sandrita" (Mesa 46). Caught off guard, at first Johan meekly attempted to shield his girlfriend, yet his submission to the cutthroat pressures of the brotherhood eventually made him succumb to their diabolic scheme: "¿Cómo así marica? ¿Pongamos a perder? ¿Quiénes? ¿Y por qué? ... No te entiendo ... ¿Vos sos güevón? ¿Y a vos quién te dijo que yo le quería hacer esa mierda a Sandrita, home?" (Mesa 46-47). Despite his sincere affection for Sandra, Johan repudiated weakness and a perceived masculine failure by setting up his unsuspecting girlfriend for a brutal attack.

It is particularly difficult to read the graphic scenes of sexual assault delivered in a harrowingly direct and confessional manner. First comes the heartbreak of Sandra's realization that her budding romance was a farce, and that Johan, her knight in shining armor, has just led her to the proverbial slaughter. The twelve-year-old narrator, himself a virgin, witnesses the destruction of Sandra's pristine body

and her spirit by a dozen voracious boys, who like a pack of wolves tear her apart to play out their brutal pornographic fantasies. Goaded by Alquívar, the narrator rapes her too, feigning orgasm to put an end to what brings him discomfort rather than pleasure. At stake is his honor, and the pre-teen knows better than to refrain from partaking in the destruction of the weak. We, the readers, are forced to watch despite our instinctive aversion to suffering. Witnessing Sandra's destruction in such an uncompromising, almost participatory way lays bare the boys' culpability as it also underscores the matter-of-fact banality of evil.<sup>13</sup> Once the gang grows tired of brutalizing her flesh, Sandra is thrown into the street and her family leaves the neighborhood days later. This was but the first instance of a *revolión*, popularized and promptly exported to other neighborhoods:

El revolión se hizo norma en la cuadra y trascendió el barrio en poco tiempo, otros combos lo implementaron y hasta los bandidos en serio, los mayores, lo usaron con muchachas que tenían entre cejas y como forma de escarmiento para las más disipadas y taimadas... Fueron muchos años y muchas mujeres abusadas, destruidas por nosotros por el solo hecho de existir. (Mesa 58-59)<sup>14</sup>

Sandra and other young women stood no chance against this brutal cult of brotherhood; they were victims of their own beauty, the boys' budding sexuality, and a callous gang ethos. What appeared particularly merciless was that the gang members took time courting their targets, thereby making the attack significantly more painful as an emotional, as well as physical, betrayal. The complexity of this time-consuming hunt implies the predetermination and pleasure derived from the chase and from societal scorn waiting in the wings, because the girls' acceptance of a presumed tryst would draw automatic victim-blaming from the community. Rather than rebuke male teens for sexual assault, the neighborhood condemned the victims for allowing themselves to be vulnerable with a boy in the first place.

éramos intocables en la cuadra, ellas tenían que continuar su vida cargando con este recuerdo y con el estigma de ser consideradas las puticas del barrio, porque... aun entre las mujeres mayores y las madres de los bandidos, que siempre supieron lo que sus hijos hacían, se decía que bien merecido se lo tenían por busconas y casquilleras, así funciona la lógica barrial y machista auspiciada y dimensionada en gran medida por la misma insensatez de las mujeres y sobre todo de las madres (Mesa 41).

Such was the case of Claudia, a beautiful teenager whose boyfriend, Denis, handed her over to his entire gang in an onslaught that left her pregnant, emotionally broken, and condemned by the community. Fast-forward more than a decade, and it is Claudia's son Denis, the product of that rape

whom she poignantly named after her boyfriend, rapist, and traitor, who murders his own father at the age of thirteen. Before Denis's body is removed, the never-healed Claudia rushes to whisper in the cadaver's ear, "nos vemos en el infierno, mi querido malparido" (Mesa 85), spilling out the years of hatred and resentment she had carried with her since the fateful attack.

Salazar and Jaramillo's assertion that gang violence in Colombia is essentially limited to men killing men ("Son hombres matando hombres" 118) fails to address the predicament of the opposite sex. True, women are largely absent from criminal organizations, especially in comparison with Mexican narco structures, yet they suffer the brunt of raging violence as the trophies of the so-called warriors. Criminal male identity presupposes a primitive virility, prowess, and homosocial camaraderie solidified via the scapegoating of women. Hunting, males' primordial occupation, takes on a disturbing new meaning in this jungle of cement, where predatory teens engage in stalking and preying on girls. Impressionable men like Johan, as well as the narrator, his brother and apparently many others, yield to aggressive behaviors in their own pursuit of top-dog masculinity. As Mesa comments, in his barrio "siempre se está en un examen y la hombría es una de las asignaturas más importantes, no basta con ser ducho en el crimen, también hay que comportarse firme con las mujeres y si no la hombría no está demostrada completamente" (44). Baird confirms the pervasiveness of sexual assaults in the *comunas*, though he treats the phenomenon rather cursorily, focusing on other types of interactions between men and women, especially extramarital mistresses, the so-called *mozas*. Yet one of his female interviewees presented under an alias Diabilis confesses to having been gang-raped. Her friend reveals that Diabilis was further humiliated by having her clothes taken away, so that she would perform the infamous walk of shame by crossing the neighborhood streets desecrated and stark-naked. Another one of Baird's female subjects relates how she left the gang life after she was gang-raped following a grooming period with one man, whom she considered her boyfriend and trusted fully (127-8).

Gender is central to the construction of social reality and the gang ethos, where young males hunt and their female counterparts—trophies and signifiers of masculine capital—are the hunted. Victims of sexual assault are the keystone around which gang members perform violence for one another and where male bonding takes place. Defiled and depersonalized, victims of rape are no more than the glue that brings boys together and gives rise to the sexual memories they replay collectively. The objectification of the victims provides a sense of togetherness against the proverbial intruder who, much like Borges's "La intrusa," when obliterated, generates a sense of a restored brotherhood. It is a sinister take on the maxim "the family that plays together, stays together," and theirs is a family that rids itself of morals, taboos, and empathy. In the end, although the "girlfriend" category

plays a pivotal role in the novel, it never fully materializes because young females are inevitably marked as intruders, and as such they are assailed in the process of the boys' ascent to hegemonic masculinity.

Though men destroy women mercilessly in the novel, there are no winners, and eventually all pay the highest price; their world disappears, and other families come to inhabit the vacuum. Unlike the acclaimed Colombian narco novels that capture the narco phenomenon from the perspective of the well-to-do voyeur—*Our Lady of the Assassins* and *Rosario Tijeras*—*La cuadra* illuminates the profound social chaos from within, delivering heart-wrenching stories of youth who were dealt a bad hand, and whose working-class neighborhoods morphed into breeding grounds for hitmen literally from one day to the next. If the *Decameron* depicted a society decimated by the Black Plague and in transition from feudal structures to an emergent mercantile society, in *La cuadra* it is the transition into an unprecedented urban violence and a harrowing record of how the narco epidemic affected an entire generation on a social, moral, and personal level. Mesa's novel has been called historical and testimonial fiction ("La palabra"), because it unearths how narco structures took over, and how young people from the *comunas* were given the rope with which to hang themselves. It is not much of a stretch to compare violence to infectious disease, since both seep insidiously into bodies and minds, only to explode like contagion and in the process devour entire communities, leaving destruction in their wake. Violence, like the Black Plague in the *Decameron*, holds ghastly consequences, creating a spiral of victims and victimizers, mercilessly obliterating both marginalized communities and the privileged. Mesa's novel constitutes a visceral critique of social pathology and cultural malaise lived from within, from its nascent moments to the very end, when no one was left unscathed.

Reading Mesa's prose against sociological scholarship not only confirms the testimonial nature of his account, but also provides a real depth to what ethnographic studies and statistics can only hint at: instances of love, pain, and profound disappointments with reality. The brutality of his tales is tempered with lyricism, and the humanity of each character reveals itself in all its intricacies and contradictions. Mesa's characters, both victims and perpetrators of violence, were simple people marginalized by global, neoliberal economic forces and a classist, sexist society. The street level violence in which they partook or suffered from was, in fact, the physical enactment of these exploitative processes, though the reign of drug-trafficking took violence to a new level, obliterating affection and basic regard for one another. It is this violence that decimated the nation much like the Black Plague took over medieval Europe. At the heart of *Decameron* and *La cuadra* there arises an epistemological crisis: how to describe and understand what happened? Aside from the experience of deep trauma and helplessness in the face of the unknown and the unpredictable, these stories seek



to reconstruct social relationships, and to find an enduring pattern of ethical response to a crisis. In the end, though Mesa's protagonists were primarily motivated by revenge, a desire for non-violence constitutes the underlying message in the novel, while its author pines for a bygone era and for his fallen friends. This call for peace, compassion, and empathy, with a concomitant desire to examine the past

candidly reverberates through other recent cultural initiatives in Colombia, undertakings that strive to address history upfront, to pay homage to the victims, and to partake in the discourse so that popular television, narco tourism, and other forms of mercantilism hawking Medellín's lurid past do not monopolize history.<sup>15</sup>

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### Notes

1. Mine is by no means a first comparison of narco literary production to Early Modern literature. For example, Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste’s compelling analysis of Vallejo’s *Our Lady of the Assassins* reads the Medellín of the 1990s as Dante’s *Inferno*.
2. Escobar’s *sicarios* responsible for the assassinations of top public figures such as the Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla (1984) and *El Espectador* publisher Guillermo Cano Isaza (1986), among many others.
3. As the narrator points out bitterly in the epilogue, “este barrio y esta cuadra apenas son una gota de agua en el mar de podredumbre que herrumbra a toda la humanidad” (191).
4. Gustavo Duncan (who wrote for *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo*) stresses Escobar’s role in drawing attention to the poor who had been ignored by the state prior to the eruption of narco violence: “el gran cambio, sobre todo político, es que en los años 70 el Estado no llegaba a muchos lugares, porque no le interesaba y el narco obligó, por el desafío que representaba y de manera espontánea, sin proponérselo, obligó al Estado a llegar a muchos lugares y a resolver situaciones que no había resuelto” (Aristizábal 53). Similarly, Omar Flórez Vélez (mayor of Medellín between 1990–1992, who himself was from Aranjuez)

recounted how Medellín's *comunas* were systematically ignored and vilified by the city: "el Estado y la sociedad se tienen que ganar a esta juventud que está abandonada! Una juventud abandonada y estigmatizada" (Aristizábal 153).

5. In an interview with Christopher Tibble, Mesa admits to purposefully omitting Escobar's name in his book for a number of reasons, from avoiding the commercialization of evil, to steering clear of sensationalism and selling out through the Escobar brand ("Tampoco quería aprovecharme de un nombre que a mí personalmente no me suena bien, no como a mucha gente que ahora participa en esa nueva idolatría de su figura... Ponerlo ahí era contaminar la novela de amarillismo"). The insistence on leaving out Escobar's name, even when the text patently refers to him, seems to exemplify the reaction among the intellectual elites to Escobar's media popularity. In the same vein, Aristizábal prefaces her *Medellín a oscuras* by stating that "Este no es un libro sobre Pablo Escobar" (9), when de facto the capo casts the shadow over her entire project.
6. For more information on violence on women from Colombian *comunas*, see Pobutsky's "Victor Gaviria's *Mujer del animal*."
7. See also Adriana Jastrzebska (81) and Juan Carlos Hernández Palencia. As for the mother/saint fusion in popular culture, Salazar and Jaramillo draw attention to the popularity of virgin-themed tattoos in jail, with an accompanying phrase "God and Mother" ("Dios y madre"), and a preponderance of virgin imagery in car ornaments (124).
8. "La cuadra': una novela de barrio que es también una historia del país," an interview with Mesa by César Augusto Jaramillo Zuluaga, includes a photograph of this very chapel constructed by the Prisco brothers.
9. In his peregrination with Alex, the narrator describes how his boyfriend/sicario eliminates passers-by indiscriminately. He talks of the bullet "taking out in its careening towards the other side of the street, a pregnant woman with two little kids, who'd be having no more, thus cutting short what was promising to be a long maternal career" (Vallejo 49).
10. Baird's study (conducted between 2007 and 2012) reveals that not much has changed in the attitudes of gang youth and their scant opportunities for social ascent. Sayayo, one of his interviewees who became a gang-banger at fourteen, responded citing Escobar when asked about whom he admired as a child: "When I was a kid I admired Pablo Escobar... Round these neighborhoods the chances of you becoming a professional, a lawyer, and doctor are real slim...round here people paint the houses of the rich. The difference between the two is huge" (117).
11. Yet Alquívar did not protect the narrator from committing rape, encouraging him instead to abuse Sandra sexually. This further puts in question the narrator's objectivity when it comes to his older brother.
12. Aristizábal quotes anthropologist Gustavo Muños, who speaks about the double morality among the poor, where you do not steal from your own neighborhood, but it is socially accepted to rob elsewhere. Chicle signed his death sentence by violated this rule.
13. In another interview with Jaramillo Zuluaga, Mesa addresses the reasons behind constructing the rape accounts in the first person: "Ahora, cuando llegué al capítulo cuarto –*El revolución*– no tenía definido si hacer la novela en primera o en tercera persona. Me pareció que era necesario en primera como una manera de responsabilizar a los personajes de la historia, y al autor mismo, por las formas oscuras con que se atacan a las mujeres en esta ciudad" ("Las grandes").
14. To be sure, in his conversations with Víctor Gaviria, Gilmer Mesa finds out that the *revolución* was not idiosyncratic of his neighborhood but had been practiced around the *comunas* under the very same euphemism at least as early as the 1970s (Serna Duque). In fact, Libardo (Tito Alexander Gómez), the protagonist of Gaviria's *La mujer del animal*, muses to himself that three schoolgirls who are crossing his path are in need of a *revolución*. His comments are to be taken seriously since he viciously rapes every girl he fancies with no one to stop him.
15. I am referring here to the construction of the Museo Casa de la Memoria in Medellín after 2010, the destruction of the Monaco building (Escobar's former residence) in February 2019, and the opening of a commemorative park with interactive walls in its place in December 2019 (though for Mesa this act constitutes a cheap populist show that wastes taxpayer money [Serna Duque]). Another example is Claudia Mora's 2018 film *Matar a Jesús* shot in Medellín, whose protagonist plans to kill the *sicario* who murdered her father in front of her eyes, only to give up on retaliation once the hitman lies helpless before her, asking to be killed. Hauntingly, similar to Mesa's subject is Robinson Úsuga Henao's 2017 testimonial novel *A un hermano bueno hay que vengarle la muerte*, which also mourns the death of a brother who in contrast to Alquívar was abusive and brutal towards the family.