Over the past two decades, dozens of novels and short stories portraying the inner workings of drug trafficking in Mexico have been written
by well-known authors and circulated by some of the largest publishers in the Spanish language. One may be surprised to learn that many of these works are written in a mode of contemporary pastoralism that emphasizes the relationships of human beings with their natural environment. Rather than token references to nature, I am talking about a literary projection of the ecological ramifications of drug trafficking and the attempts by the state to suppress this industry. The term narco-pastoralism refers to a prominent narrative discourse in narcoliterature that locates contemporary drug trafficking within the broader context of contemporary environmental destruction, but which also employs certain conventions typically associated with the pastoral mode to lament the social and ecological impact of the Mexican drug war. In particular, these novels evoke the image of the noble campesino, the idealized rural inhabitant of a once peaceful and cohesive agrarian society. The rhetorical force of each author’s condemnation of drug trafficking and violence frequently involves the extent to which the character of the noble campesino has been displaced, aggrieved, violated, or eliminated. Such a study orients a discussion of these works away from the common critical questions regarding the genre’s artistic legitimacy that too often distract from a serious consideration of the social and literary value of this writing. The following ecocritical analysis of narcoliterature will focus on Leónidas Alfaro’s *Tierra Blanca* (1996), Gerardo Cornejo’s *Juan Justino Judicial* (1996), and Elmer Mendoza’s *El amante de Janis Joplin* (2001), three novels that feature rural communities in conflict with the increased presence and power of drug cartels. This essay will argue that contemporary Mexican literature of drug trafficking and violence often constitutes a unique form of environmental writing through an engagement with various elements of the pastoral tradition.

Various forms of pastoralism in Mexican and Latin American letters can be found in works by some of the region’s most celebrated colonial and nineteenth-century Romantic authors as well as in a variety of regionalist and *costumbrista* texts published during the early twentieth century. Examples of a vulnerable and even defenseless peasantry find expression during nearly every period of Latin American literary production, so the noble campesino who falls victim to larger political and economic forces in Mexican narcoliterature represents a type of discursive continuity especially with certain past strains of Latin American social realism. John Ochoa summarizes the pastoral ideology that pervaded many of the novels that focused on the Mexican Revolution (1910–17) as well as works published by succeeding generations of Mexican writers struggling to understand the conflict’s lasting social and political impact:
The imaginary the Revolution generated was certainly preindustrial: it is full of peasant heroes, and its battles are set against a backdrop of the vast rural and desert landscapes of northern Mexico and abandoned haciendas. The relationship to an Arcadian countryside extended to one of the most visible official projects of the Revolution, and part of its official narrative: one of its most emblematic efforts concerned land reform, which would eventually lead to the creation of the small-scale and preindustrial farms, the garden-like ejidos, which were, fundamentally, pastoral efforts [...]. (319)

As literary characters, the noble “peasant heroes” to whom Ochoa refers above were instrumental in setting up a contrast between the modest requirements for individual rural survival and the systematic dispossession of ancestral lands that took place during the Porfiriato. As the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) consolidated power over an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society, a kind of pastoral nostalgia for a simpler rural existence emerged. Using Agustín Yáñez’s 1947 novel Al filo del agua as a primary example, Ochoa describes the incorporation of pastoral nostalgia into dominant discourse emanating from the urban centers of political power:

The Revolutionary government’s attempt to inscribe its mythology within a pastoral Golden Age, to tie it to rural orchards and farm towns, was an attempt to create a closed narrative, a self-enclosed garden of symbology. And narrative mythological containment is, of course, not new to the PRI. Its porfirista predecessors, for instance, had also resorted to similar measures, with its imagery of folksily dressed regional police, the rurales, enforcing the pax porfiriana. (320)

More than fifty years after the publication of Al filo del agua, we are confronted with narconovelas that plant a similar “garden of symbology” in the rural communities of northern Mexico where the presence of drug trafficking has been most felt.

It is important to note that contained within a literary projection of Mexico’s drug war are frequent factual references to the environmental impact of drug trafficking. Mexican narcoliterature frequently engages issues of environmental degradation, habitat loss, deforestation, land rights, endangered species, natural resources, sustainability, and the disruption of traditional agrarian society. It is commonly recognized that various forms of organized crime and the Mexican government’s use of the military to rein in the power of cartels have had serious
detrimental effects on the natural environment. The extent of ecological damage has been difficult to measure given the clandestine nature of cultivation and the secrecy with which eradication operations occur. In one of the few research articles that study the ecological impact of the drug war, Rosa del Olmo acknowledges that observers can provide only broad estimates of the damage. What can be known with a degree of certainty, however, is that “illicit drug production has various ecological impacts depending on the phase of production and the type of drug” (270). The bulk of scientific studies and anecdotal media coverage examines cocaine and heroin production in Colombia, but one can reasonably assume that similar effects are felt in Mexico as well. The list of environmental effects is long and includes deforestation, erosion, water contamination, and the destruction of unknown species of flora. Runoff of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, sulfuric acid, acetone, quick lime, and kerosene pollutes soil, rivers, and ground water (271). With regard to eradication efforts, Colombia and Mexico have used toxic chemicals, primarily paraquat, in aerial fumigation since the early 1970s despite widespread concerns for the safety of those directly exposed to the herbicide.

In addition to the spread of environmental pollutants, drug trafficking accelerates processes of deforestation and habitat loss in ecologically sensitive areas of Latin America. A report published in October 2012 documents the destruction of habitat in Guatemala’s Maya Biosphere Reserve (Allen). Although the forest has been under threat by logging and oil drilling for years, destruction of the Western half of the Reserve has increased during the past decade as drug traffickers clear land to build airstrips and roads in order to transport goods northward. Using cattle ranches as a front for laundering Mexican drug money, gangs carve out sections of the forest for grazing, a business referred to in Guatemala as narcoganadería. Tragically, environmentalists working to prevent deforestation caused by the drug trade have met violent deaths. In November 2012, Juventina Villa Mojica, leader of the Organización de Campesinos Ecologistas de la Sierra de Petatlán y Coyuca de Catalán (OCESPCC), and her son were murdered by a group of heavily armed individuals after she and her organization had fought the expansion of marijuana and poppy fields in the mountains of Guerrero (Giles Sánchez). Her predecessor, Javier Torres Cruz, had met the same fate only six months earlier as well as Villa Mojica’s husband, Rubén Santana Alonso, in February 2011 (“Environmentalist Murdered”). Other members of OCESPCC have been kidnapped, and their whereabouts remain unknown. In addition to drug traffickers, local police have been implicated in the violent repression of the environmental organization (“Ejecutan en Guerrero”). The fear that has been
generated by this “dirty war” in Guerrero has resulted in whole populations relocating to other villages within the region. The influx of displaced residents puts greater pressure on natural resources and the ability of these poor communities to provide for basic needs (Reyes Maciel).

Tierra Blanca

Leonidas Alfaro’s career as a novelist is often considered within the context of Literatura del Norte, a category of works by northern Mexican writers that have enjoyed an increase in critical attention and commercial success since the early 1990s. Most of Alfaro’s eight novels are set in his native Culiacán, Sinaloa and feature characters and themes closely associated with this region of Mexico. Tierra Blanca, an early exemplar of what would eventually become known as the narcomovida, takes a sympathetic and, at times, sentimental view of the root social causes of drug trafficking. Set in the 1960s and early 1970s, the novel begins as corrupt police working in consort with drug traffickers frame the noble Don Pedro, a humble father of nine children who supports his family on the meager salary of a night watchman. His incarceration and subsequent death at the hands of prison guards leaves the already poor family in desperate straits. Recalling the words of his father, “primero comer, que ser cristiano” (38), Gumersindo, the eldest child, decides his only way out of a life of poverty and injustice is to pursue employment within the drug trade. The rest of the novel tracks Gumersindo’s rapid ascent through the ranks of “la organización” accumulating wealth and power along the way. Gumersindo’s contradictory story of a victim of drug violence who turns to organized crime for survival is clearly an example of what Gabriela Polit-Dueñas, in her assessment of life in Culiacán, means by a “violent society where quite often it is not easy to determine the side of victims and that of the victimizers” (561). As opposed to anonymous criminals, Alfaro humanizes many of those taking part in drug trafficking. In addition to Gumersindo’s tragic circumstances, the personal histories of other characters demonstrate how an economy supported by drug trafficking provides the opportunity for marginalized individuals trapped in a life of poverty and exploitation to achieve a level of independence and self-respect. If novels like Elmer Mendoza’s Un asesino solitario or Jesús Alvarado’s Bajo el disfraz represent the psychology of drug trafficking, Tierra Blanca represents the sociology of it.

The setting of the novel alternates between Culiacán and the remote mountains of northeastern Sinaloa, a region of northern Mexico dubbed the “trángulo de oro,” for its favorable conditions for the
cultivation of marijuana and poppies. The narrative frequently pauses to contemplate the stunning mountain scenery of the Sierra Madre Occidental:

[L]os cansados viajeros divisaron a sus pies, cientos de metros abajo, un extenso valle en el que como pequeños muñecos se veía a tres vaqueros arrear una veintena de equinos. A la izquierda, sobre una breve loma, estaban las instalaciones de un rancho que a la distancia también parecía de juguete. Los solferinos resplandores conferían al magnífico paisaje tonalidades que iban del verde claro y brillante, de los bosques que tenían enfrente, hasta el casi negro de la vegetación que se extendía como un manto bajo los peñascos de un rojizo que remataban las montañas por donde el astro se ocultaría momentos más tarde. (72)

The breathtaking views of small rural hamlets nestled within picturesque valleys conceal the region’s bustling production and distribution of narcotics. At first, the novel casually equates this activity with other forms of rural agriculture and the rhythms of the growing season, harvest, and the dormant periods that intervene:

[L]a llegada de sus huéspedes temporales era señal de que el ciclo había llegado al punto de la cosecha de amapola y marihuana que se extendía hacia los meses de marzo y abril. Para ella, tener una vaga idea del lugar de las faenas agrícolas y el uso que se diera a los productos eran puntos menos que interesantes, lo que verdaderamente le importaba eran los jugosos ingresos que obtenía en ese lapso. (63–64)

In contrast to the noble campesino of the past, within the confines of the verdant hills of the Sierra these “huéspedes” (guests) take no pleasure in their geographical surroundings nor show any appreciation for the craft of agriculture. Only an insatiable, anti-pastoral thirst for “los jugosos ingresos” explains their presence within this bucolic setting. The novel’s portrayal of Gumersindo’s initial difficulties in acquiring the skills required of rural living exploits the urban/rural dichotomy, but it also provides the occasion to blur the lines between human and animal. As smugglers approach the guarded fields, they verbalize their arrival in code by mimicking birdsong. Human intruders are referred to as “animales de dos patas” (80) while Gumersindo soothes his saddle sores with an ointment made to treat donkeys and mules.
However, the novel quickly counters this narrative of agrarian harmony. Supplies ranging from chemical fertilizers to vinyl tubing to gasoline are introduced into the otherwise bucolic setting. Guards brandishing R-12 assault rifles create the incongruity of modern weaponry and fertile landscapes. The region’s local inhabitants are frequently coerced into either dealing with or working for the traffickers. In their haste to harvest their most recent crop, members of a cartel demand the labor of local families:

Roberto, acompañado de Zenón y diez más, todos armados, iniciaron un ominoso peregrinar hacia las rancherías cercanas. En cada una de las humildes viviendas a las que llegaron se repitió la escena: golpes fuertes en las puertas y gritos para amedrentar a sus moradores. En cuanto abrian, primero era el ofrecimiento de jugosa paga y si no era aceptada se imponía la amenaza. Los rancheros, tragándose su cólera en silencio, terminaban por aceptar incluyendo en la leva a sus esposas e hijos, si ya tenían edad para blandir un machete. (90–91)

In addition to subverting the democratic process or undermining the rule of law, the actual cultivation of narcotics taxes the natural environment and destabilizes rural society. In referring to the “campesinos serranos, gente de un mundo olvidado” (197), Alfaro condemns the larger social indifference that feeds injustice and impunity. As readers, the level of our visceral disgust with the intrusion of drug traffickers reflects the extent to which these intruders are seen as having irrevocably destroyed a previously harmonious, peaceful, and just agrarian society. In other words, the effectiveness of the novel’s condemnation depends upon the classic pastoral image of an idealized agrarian past.

The representation of nature, however, is not limited to the mountains. Within the city limits of Culiacán, the novel includes surprisingly numerous references to aromatic flowers, crystalline rivers, and abundant wildlife. Such descriptions go beyond the occasional description of a manicured garden or public park that is typically incorporated as an accent to the urban tableau. In most cases, an untamed natural environment forms the backdrop to the semi-urban, underdeveloped qualities of Tierra Blanca, the section of the city where Gumersindo and his family reside. His memories of time spent with family and friends constitute an obviously symbolic association between nature and lost innocence:

Al conducir por la ribera del Tamazula, recordó su infancia, cuando en compañía de su hermano Juan Antonio y
otros amigos recorría aquellos lugares en donde la flora y la fauna les permitían disfrutar la naturaleza en plenitud: bañarse en las cristalinas aguas, cazar con arpón bagres, mojarra y los impresionantes cauques; correr a campo traviesa [sic] para atrapar lagartijas, ardillas, conejos y liebres. De los frutos recordaba la guayaba, el arrayán, el mango, el tamarindo, etc. (113)

However, a closing thought to this particular recollection redirects this passage toward an elegy to urban sprawl, habitat loss, and environmental degradation: “En ese momento se dio cuenta de que la ciudad devoraba rápidamente aquel paraíso” (113).

Juan Justino Judicial

Upon his recent death, a press release by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes called Gerardo Cornejo (1937–2014) “una de las voces más importantes de los llamados narradores del desierto o del norte de México” (INBA). Cornejo’s literary pieces range from novels and short stories to chronicles and poetry. Although his first novel, *La sierra y el viento* (1977), remains his most celebrated work, *Juan Justino Judicial* (1996) is increasingly read as a foundational text of the narconovela genre in Mexico. The novel is narrated in three distinct modes consisting of a conventional omniscient narrator, the voice of Juan Justino, and the phantasmal voice of his conscience set off in the text by italics. Cornejo also experiments with narrative time in which events in the novel resist a strict chronological progression, told and retold by the three narrative voices at different stages in the plot. Cornejo labels his work a “novela corrido” since Juan Justino, in his narrative segments, is attempting to rewrite the text of a popular but unflattering corrido based on his life. Epigraphs for most chapters consist of a specific stanza from the corrido and serve as the basis for the events that the ensuing chapter describes. By the end of the novel, Cornejo achieves a hierarchy of textual veracity, at the top of which resides the unmediated but silent, tormented conscience of Juan Justino. The remaining narrative modes—omniscient narration, the corrido, Juan Justino’s public voice—represent only partial and misleading representations of the misdeeds, injustices, and atrocities committed by drug traffickers and judiciales alike.

The eponymous protagonist, Juan Justino Altata Sagrario, is born “chiclán” (with one undescended testicle), in the fictional Mexican state of Once Ríos, a thinly veiled representation of Sinaloa. His perceived deformity drastically alters the course of his life from his earliest beginnings: “Dicen que desde la hora y punto en que Juan Justino
Altata Sagrario se asomó a este mundo, su desventura fue descubierta” (7). According to a phallocentric code of social behavior, his “missing” testicle is equated with a compromised virility: “le falta la mitad de su varonía” (8). A conversation following the birth between Doña Ninfa, the Tarahumaran midwife who delivered Juan Justino, and the boy’s father reflects a concern for the social burden that the child will bear. Indicative of life within the small mountain town of Pinalto, Juan Justino’s father applies a kind of folk wisdom that compares human and animal behavior: “no acabalo bien a bien porque es que la cosa tiene gravedad si yo he visto que los animales chiclanes andan sobre las hembras de la misma manera que los completos” (9). Doña Ninfa counters this optimism by drawing a clear line between the natural world of animals and the cultural world of human beings: “Sí pues, pero ellos [los animales] no lo saben. Y luego no viven en un pueblo donde …” (9). No sooner does Juan Justino begin school than his secret is revealed in a humiliating and physically abusive fashion forcing him to spend his childhood and adolescence at home.

As a social outcast, Juan Justino receives some schooling from his mother while spending much of his time performing typical rural tasks. His first sexual experience unexpectedly interrupts a day of work herding sheep along a mountain stream. While his sheep graze, Juan Justino takes a break from tending to his herd by floating face up in the stream along the banks. Suddenly in the distance, a mysterious woman appears along the edge of the water:

[L]os movimientos de aquella delicada criatura femenina que se abría paso por entre los batamotes de la ribera y se dirigía hacia él con los labios entreabiertos y el camisón transparente pendiendo apenas de los botones terminales de sus dos pechos erectos. La sorpresa lo hizo incorporarse a medias y a tiempo para ver cómo, con una inhalación anhelante, ella levantaba su dorso y hacía caer la delicada tela que flotaba por unos momentos en el aire y luego iba a posarse sobre las leves ondas de la corriente. Quiso advertirle algo, pero desistió temiendo que su voz ahuyentara aquel hechizo. Dejó entonces que ella pusiera el dedo sobre los labios indicándole el abandono de las palabras y de sí mismo mientras que con delicada pericia le untaba los pechos en su muslo izquierdo, los subía hasta surcar con los pezones el incipiente pelillo de sus ingles y sin detenerse a dar respiro a sus asombros hurgaba en su sexo y comenzaba un jugueteo frotatorio que lo convertía de inmediato en un mástil muscular. (15)
The patently male voyeuristic fantasy appropriates the elements of this bucolic setting into a form of erotic pastoralism. Aroused by the sexual display before him, Juan Justino achieves an erection and masturbates. With his fears of sexual dysfunction dispelled, Juan Justino is emboldened to confront the children who had teased and tormented him since a young age.

Seeking redemption from his peers, Juan Justino arranges to prove his newly discovered sexual health by penetrating a sheep in the presence of other boys. His plan goes horribly wrong:

> Resulta, se piensa, que cuando le arrimaron a la borrega, no lo hicieron como lo hacían todos los pastores, es decir, con las patas traseras bien atadas y la cabeza inmovilizada con la otra cuerda. Por eso fue que cuando Juan Justino se puso en posición de penetrarla, la borrega dio un salto defensivo y con las dos pezuñas juntas, vino a golpearlo directamente en lo que en ese momento descubrió como lo más delicado y lo más doloroso de todo su cuerpo. (17–18)

It would be hard to find a more anti-pastoral act than the violation of a sheep by its own shepherd. As opposed to the noble campesino living in concert with his surroundings, masculinity exists in irreconcilable conflict with nature. Prostrate and writhing in agony for hours, Juan Justino is finally rescued by his sister Fidelia. Sufficiently recovered from the initial pain, Juan Justino returns home after nightfall convinced that the other boys had victimized him yet again. Rejected by his social group and repelled by the natural environment of Pinalto, Juan Justino has little choice but to descend the mountains and seek employment in the low-lying fields of Costa Verde. Ultimately, the drive for revenge and cruelty that he carries with him out of the sierra will manifest as a ruthless and infamous judicial.

Juan Justino Judicial goes to great lengths to delineate the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of space. A slew of binary differences are graphed onto the highlands/lowlands dichotomy. Far from an Arcadian vision of rural living, the mountains are depicted as sleepy, premodern, insular, superstitious, and poor. The coast is a bustling sphere of itinerant farm workers, brothels, cantinas, banks, and highways to and from the US/Mexican border. The norm of subsistence farming in the mountains contrasts with the large-scale, capitalist, export-oriented agricultural system of Costa Verde upon which Juan Justino initially depends for survival. The long hours of arduous manual labor and low pay are made more demanding by a torrid climate, squalid living conditions, and “aquel aire espesado de insecticidas y fertilizantes”
Worse still, field workers prove vulnerable to the machinations of swindlers, thieves, drug traffickers, and the police. In their efforts to add greater numbers to their fold, both cartels and judiciales “recruit” unsuspecting laborers through various forms of coercion. Juan Justino had already grown desperate in his life as a farm worker by the time the judiciales forced him to assist in their operations.

Targeted for his knowledge of the sierra, Juan Justino guides groups of judiciales on raids of drug traffickers in remote regions of the state’s highlands. But it is his impulse to cut off a testicle of detained suspects that propels Juan Justino’s ascent through the ranks of “law enforcement,” earning him the grim moniker of Teniente Castro. However, scenes of graphic violence are far outnumbered by references to the relationships between humans and the natural environment in either their most intimate or estranged forms. For example, the novel contrasts modes of modern transportation of the coast with the kind of foot travel in the mountains that requires a higher level of topographical knowledge: “Se sabe bien que hasta donde nace el agua nunca sube el camino por eso tomó el rumbo de Pie de la Cuesta en un viejo costal de fierros que arrastró su zangoloteo por los polvos y hoyancos de cuanto camino encontró transitable. Su ruta comprendía paradas en todos los pueblos y rancherías del pie de monte, por eso se llevaba el doble del tiempo necesario para llegar a sus destinos” (59–60). The judiciales, however, require no such subtle reading of the terrain: “Para las cuatro de la tarde ya han subido hasta la meseta porque el ‘cazanar-cos’ equipado no les falla ni en las peores cuestas pedregosas. Pasan por Corral de Piedra y ya cuando está clareando surcan con las llantonas gordas el lodo de la única calle de Pinalto” (28).

Near the end of his life, Juan Justino travels to the most remote regions of the sierra in search of traditional healers in hopes of finding relief from the excruciating pain in his groin, symptoms resulting from the injury sustained as an adolescent. He eventually encounters Doña Ninfa, who reveals the mythical dimensions of his medical condition:

El último Altata alzado defendía la tierra de su raza. La defendía terco y echaba camino abajo a los blancos robatierras. Les metía respeto con el tanto valor que tenía. Pero una mala vez, agarró a uno de los brujos cristianos, éos que vienen siempre dando bendición a las cabronadas que nos hacen, y lo sacó a varejonazos de la sierra. El barbudo entonces le echó maldición encima. Y era de que sus hijos nacieran descompletos de la varonía hasta la quinta parentela de engendración con fin de que no
The disclosure of a curse spread out over five generations presents a more complex and engrained chain of cruelty and violence that was originally only understood as beginning with the birth of Juan Justino. This revelation broadens the novel’s scope beyond contemporary drug trafficking to a consideration of social conflict rooted in the colonial legacy of the indigene/European encounter, land rights, and dispossession. The temptation to apply, for example, a psychoanalytical interpretation of the text based on Juan Justino’s partial castration is tempered by the need to account for human control of the natural environment as a central driver of the novel’s action.

El amante de Janis Joplin

More than any other Mexican author, Elmer Mendoza has been associated with narcoliterature since the early 1990s. His collection of short fiction entitled Cada respiro que tomas (1991) has been followed by nearly a dozen novels, most of which deal with organized crime in and around his native city of Culiacán, Sinaloa. The hallmark of Mendoza’s narrative technique is unmediated first-person discourse saturated with slang, regionalisms, and the jargon of the profession. Although the unusual plot twists, a wide-ranging cast of social actors and diverse cultural settings in El amante de Janis Joplin, the novel relies heavily on a pastoral discourse throughout the work. The novel begins in the small mountain town of Chacala, Durango, where the feeble-minded David Valenzuela lives a humble life as the village tontolón. Although a series of unfortunate, random events will ultimately separate David from the sierra, the novel’s characterization of David rests upon the notion that individual identity is permanently tied to the cultural and physical space of one’s upbringing. David functions as the stereotypical Serrano, the dimwitted, primitive, poor, vulnerable, gullible greenhorn who ventures out of the hills against his will only to be spellbound by the modern world: “el impacto con la gran urbe lo dejó pasmado: Dios mío, ¿qué es esto?, edificios, tráfico, neón y la prisa de la gente por las calles” (46). David’s character provides multiple opportunities for others to project a variety of essentialist qualities, stereotypes, and regional prejudices onto the whole of rural mountain society:

El pueblo era un mechón mal penado. (12)
Pueblo chico infierno grande [. . . ]. (17)
Identifíquese, pero David no traía identificación, ¿para qué quería identificación allá en la sierra? (27) [Mi primo es un campesino, vea sus manos: como dice Atahualpa Yupanqui, los callos son su credencial y la renueva dos veces al año. (29) Un trato es un trato, Los serranos son muy vengativos, Pero también son derechos [...] (36) Se había iniciado con el mezcal más traicioner del mundo, que es el que se hace en Chacala, un mezcal que te deja escupiendo las copas de los pinos. (80-81) Son semillas de pino, como David es sierreño, quiere sembrar pinos en todas partes, Está reloco el güey [...] (146) Su resquemor provenía de que en la sierra cada asunto tiene su modo y hay tratos que son difíciles de sostener [...] (223)

Many of these passing references assert an ingrained, premodern, folk ethic necessary for social cohesion within the sierra. Complementing this rural social compact are images of local inhabitants living off fertile land, forests, and free ranging animal life. David retains an image of his noble father “rodeado de ciervos y otros animales” (112). His first love, Carlota Amalia, is the embodiment of this natural environment: “Carlota Amalia desprendía todos los olores suaves de la sierra: el de la noche, la hora dúctil en que el viento es un habitante más, la tierra húmeda, los encinos, la secreta fragancia de los pinos al mediodía” (211). The source of her attraction extends beyond her sheer physical beauty to include the sensorial comforts of the ecosystem from which David emerged.

David’s lack of intelligence is exacerbated by a debilitating, demonic voice that frequently imposes on his consciousness. A bucktooth mouth consistently agape rounds out the image of a twenty-year-old simpleton who is ultimately victimized by circumstances beyond his control. The novel replicates circumstances seen in Juan Justino Judicial in which a young Serrano is banished from his idyllic rural surroundings to the unfamiliar city after a single moment of misfortune. At a casual social gathering in town, David makes the mistake of dancing with the aforementioned Carlota Amalia, the girlfriend of the jealous Rogelio Castro, who happens to be a member of a local drug trafficking family. As the couple dances, Rogelio suddenly appears brandishing a gun. In self-defense, David hurls a stone at Rogelio’s forehead, killing him instantly. The precision with which David is able to kill Rogelio comes from his primitive but deadly skill for hunting deer and other animals with nothing but stones and a throwing arm that eventually
draws the attention of professional baseball scouts. In an effort to head off an inevitable blood feud with the Castro family, “la más sanguinaria de la región” (16), David’s father negotiates an arrangement in which his son must immediately and permanently abandon Chacala. David is sent to live with relatives in Culiacán where he becomes a reluctant but dominating pitcher on his uncle’s baseball team, Los Tomateros de Culiacán. On a trip to Los Angeles, David signs a minor league contract with the Dodgers, and stumbles into a brief sexual encounter with Janis Joplin in her hotel room. His opportunity for fame and fortune quickly unravels after an evening of heavy drinking that results in the voiding of his contract with the Dodgers. David arrives back in Culiacán penniless, but delusionally obsessed with returning to California to pursue a romantic relationship with Joplin.

Meanwhile, the Castro family reneges on their agreement, murders David’s father, and sets out to find David and avenge Rogelio’s death. Similar to events in Tierra Blanca, drug traffickers fail to respect the established codes of serrano behavior and honor, represented starkly by the unjust killing of the nobel campesino, David’s father. This shocking affront to a romanticized notion of rural social cohesion appears intended to decry the social transformations of the Sinaloan highlands brought about by the drug trade. The rest of the novel continues the story of a hapless David unwittingly drawn into drug trafficking and falsely and tragically implicated as a leader of a leftist insurgency. After narrowly escaping an attempt on his life by a member of the Castro clan, David flees to the coastal community of Altata, Sinaloa where he joins a cooperative of fishers. Danilo Manzo, a humble shrimper, takes David on as his apprentice. On one level, the fishing cooperative adds to the list of guilds and groups constituted by a set of collective objectives such as cartels, the police, the military, and leftist rebels. However, the novel returns to the pastoral mode of representation when depicting life within the seaside village. An uncomplicated camaraderie among the members of the cooperative is described in tactile language:

La Gallera, un galerón de seis por quince metros, alumbrado por un par de focos lagañosos, era el encanto de la raza. Allí bebían cerveza, sudaban, jugaban baraja, ponían apodos, relataban historias de tormentas y alucinaciones, siempre presididos por un abanico que no le echaba viento a nadie. (102)

Life in Altata features displays of sensuality among human beings and a synchronicity with the natural realm. In contrast to the lawlessness and corruption that characterize the behavior of narcotics and police...
alike, most of the cooperative appear to respect “la veda,” the seasonal moratorium on the harvesting of seafood. While he awaits the fishing season, David bides his time in the company of Danilo’s daughter Rebecca, whose unbridled sexuality appears in keeping with the kind of primal impulses that animate this brand of pastoralism:

[L]a mujer se dedicó a examinarlo con una mirada lasciva. La hija del pescador era una morena escul-
tural, de piel bronceada, que usaba ropa estrecha,
sin brasier, y maldita la falta que le hacía. [ . . . ]
[P]ara sorpresa de David buscaba rozarlo con los pechos cada vez que podía. [ . . . ] Rebecca despedía
un intenso olor que lo doblegaba, un aroma hasta entonces desconocido [. . . ]. (81–82)

Frequent passages such as these work on the senses and engage the reader at a higher level of awareness for the most basic aspects of interaction between the human and natural worlds. Rebecca’s advances typically take place under moonlight, floating quietly on the water. David opts to sleep in the hull of a small boat, staring into the sky above: “El cielo era una casa, se veía igual que en la sierra: espléndido, casi podía tocar las estrellas” (87). Trolling for shrimp in the early morning is hard work, but it is filled with an air of tranquility and simplicity, providing a respite from the turmoil of Culiacán and the opportunity to reconnect with familiar images that order his sense of space:

Se desplazaron tranquilos frente al puerto dormido, apenas iluminado. Rodearon Atamiraco hasta llegar mar adentro. David observó la oscura inmensidad con respeto místico, Qué enorme, pensó, alzó los ojos hacia su vieja conocida: La Vía Lactea, la parte más luminosa entre la constelación del Cisne y la de Sagitario. Se ve tan cerca como en la sierra. Continuaron en la misma dirección hasta que las luces de Avándaro se perdieron a lo lejos. (74–75)

Moments demonstrating David’s fascination with celestial bodies, constellations, the Moon, and the Milky Way abound throughout the text. As a child, his cousin Chato had piqued his interest in the rudiments of astronomy, leaving an indelible impression on his imagination. The cosmos is both a source of both mystery and familiarity for David. The enduring awe with which he observes the heavens, the farthest reaches of the natural environment, challenges the hierarchy of human intelligence as conceived in the novel. Despite a barrage of insults denigrating both his mental capacities (“el tonto del pueblo”) and his physical
appearance ("Bocachula"), David retains a degree of intellectual dignity as the sole character attuned to the most profound dimensions of existence.

The pastoral spell of Altata is broken when a group of fishermen discover a corpse deposited in the mangrove swamps of Altamira. David immediately identifies the body as his cousin Chato, who had spent the final years of his life leading a guerrilla movement and eluding capture by the military. Similar to how the Castro family had violated the serrano ethic of oral agreements bound by word of honor, the dumping of Chato’s body into the sea defiles the fishing community of Altata. The brutality of Chato’s murder is tempered by the cooperative’s response of solidarity with David as nearly all accompany him in his grief while preparing the body for proper burial. The fishermen solemnly look on as Chato’s family arrives in Altata to take possession of the body: “Estaba cubierto con una sabana de flores moradas, los pescadores se quitaron los sombreros” (135).

The time period of the late 1960s and early 1970s in which El amante de Janis Joplin is set further orients the novel toward an environmental analysis. In addition to the extensive treatment of both traditional agrarian and seafaring communities, the novel goes out of its way to explore an emergent environmental consciousness through the character of María Fernanda, David’s cousin. Although the depiction of María Fernanda’s engagement with the environmental movement at times approaches a good-natured caricature of the strident activist, the urban context within which environmental concerns are expressed establishes regional differences in the ways that individuals imagine relationships between human and nonhuman nature: “María Fernanda [ . . . ] lo ponía a leer propaganda ecologista: Salvemos al mundo, Sandy [David], salve-mos los ríos, y le dejaba material de lectura como para tres años, donde se hablaba de la depredación de los ríos” (63). For his part, David barely shows any interest in the issues of conservation and environmental protection: “¿qué le importaba el estado deplorable del Quemé que bajaba de los montes Atakora, cuya contaminación estaba impactando la vida de los baribas?” (63). María Fernanda’s fondness for natural remedies, and commitment to a vegetarian diet and the defense of animal rights inject into the novel the discourse of modern transnational environmentalism, notable mostly for the irrelevance with which it is perceived by those around her. However, Mendoza does not mock environmental concerns nor does he leave these issues tied up in the rhetoric of activism. Instead, the text provides an example of real environmental degradation within the hills of Sinaloa, which serves to justify María Fernanda’s ecological concerns: “¿No has matado otro venado?, Ya casi no hay, los gomeros y los pintos se los están acabando” (31).
As was the case in the United States and Europe, environmental activism was only part and parcel of a larger process of consciousness-raising that defined this particular period of Mexican history. The increase in recreational drug use in the United States stimulated narcotics production in Mexico at roughly the same time that armed insurgencies born out of violent government repression of social protest movements formed in different parts of the country. In many ways, leftist ideology and the business model of the burgeoning drug trade make competing claims for control of the natural environment. During an exchange between two old friends, Chato, the insurgent, and Cholo, a rising star in the local cartel, debate Mexico’s economic future:

Cholo, tú no sabes de estos pedos, tú eres narco, cabrón, tú no podrías entender que queremos un sistema más justo, un gobierno del pueblo y para el pueblo, Pues se van a pelar la verga porque no van a conseguir nada, ¿Quién lo dice: el gobierno, los banqueros, la industria?, Lo digo yo, carnal, no sé ni madres de política, del imperialismo ni de esas madres, pero no van a ganar, me corto los huevos si ganan, Vamos a ganar, Cholo, el futuro es nuestro, Van a ganar pura verga, antes de que este país se haga socialista o comunista o lo que sea, te apuesto mis huevos a que todos se hacen narcos como yo, la raza no quiere tierras, Chato, ni fábricas, ni madres: la raza quiere billetes, quiere jalar la bofa y andar en carros como éste, ¿a poco no?, la raza quiere pistear y andar en el refugio, estás perdiendo el tiempo vilmente, Es tu visión y no me extraña, siempre has sido un pequeño-burgués, pero deja que yo haga mi lucha, es mi sueño, cabrón, ¿qué sabe un pinche narco de sueños?, Pues yo duermo muy bien, No seas pendejo, Cholo: mira esas tierras tan bien cultivadas, mira ese empaque tomatero, ¿sabes de quién son?, Creo que de los Ritz, Por poco tiempo, pronto pasarán a ser propiedad de la comunidad [...]. (150)

Cholo’s admitted ignorance of politics is borne out by his disregard for the crucial role that land reform and control of natural resources have played throughout Mexican history. His failure to recognize these issues as central factors related to economic development is made even more egregious by the fact that his livelihood is inextricably tied to access to arable land. Both the revolutionary and the narco engage in the expropriation of nature, the former through social revolution, the latter through extralegal maneuvering and intimidation of the peasantry.
One can debate which is the nobler cause, but both the socialist and the narco-capitalist differ little in their anthropocentric management of natural resources.

Within the field of ecocriticism, Greg Garrard has detected a note of ambivalence in ecocritical analyses that encounter the persistence of the pastoral mode within texts that nevertheless have been recognized for a more complex treatment of ecology: “ecocritics have tended to be highly suspicious of pastoral, albeit unwilling to dispense entirely with the implicit critique of contemporary society it may offer” (55). Despite the deployment of a rhetorical discourse rooted in a tradition famous for its objectification of nature, texts like those studied above bring to the fore examples of environmental destruction, a casualty of the drug war too often obfuscated by incessant reports of graphic violence and sensational accounts of wealth and opulence. Often overlooked as a key stage within the process of drug trafficking are its inherently rural origins. While popular images of the narco are closely associated with modern urban areas, the cultivation of cannabis and poppies continues to be an agricultural and rural endeavor. A common misconception is that areas of cultivation are situated in isolated, unpopulated, and remote mountainous regions. The novels discussed here expose this misconception and denounce the effects of cultivation on the lifeways of small rural communities. They also attribute the disruption of traditional agrarian life to certain sociopolitical conditions that allow gangs to operate within these communities with impunity. As we have seen, the pastoral trope of the noble campesino works to condemn the Mexican political system, regional and cultural prejudices and social apathy.

Notes

1. In addition to the three works analyzed here, authors such as Homero Aridjis, Bernardo Fernández, Luis Felipe Lomelí, Rafael Ramírez Heredia, Eduardo Antonio Parra, and Victor Hugo Rascón Banda, among others, combine the thematics of drug trafficking and organized crime with concerns for the natural environment.

2. Terry Gifford divides the pastoral tradition into three broad categories. First, the literary convention of an idealized countryside populated by love-struck shepherds traces its roots back to the bucolic poetry of Theocritus, which is further developed by Virgil. Over the centuries, the notion of the pastoral has evolved to contrast an agrarian existence with life in an increasingly urbanized society such that forays into the countryside acquire certain ritual qualities for those seeking out the restorative benefits of closer contact with the natural realm. In more recent times, Gifford has shown that the pastoral
has acquired a pejorative meaning for critics like Raymond Williams and Leo Marx who challenge the depiction of rural life as an object of nostalgia, an idealized depiction of harmonious human relations within a benevolent natural environment at the service of those fortunate to inhabit its spaces.

3. In constructing an environmentally based critique of drug trafficking, narroliterature reanimates a pastoral discourse that has characterized some of the region’s most canonical texts since the colonial period. Gabriel García Bajo has studied Sor Juana’s engagement with the pastoral mode while Veronika Ryjk has argued convincingly for a pastoral reading of Balbuena’s Grandeza mexicana: “Para demostrar la superioridad de la capital mexicana el poeta se aparta de la realidad de la Nueva España y se sirve de los motivos bucólicos que forman parte de los viejos tópicos literarios europeos. Lo interesante es que en el caso de la Grandeza se trata de una trasplantación del espacio pastoral a la ciudad” (594). A range of novels, short stories, and poetry exists in which the countryside provides an idyllic setting for harmonious social relations (see Franco 74–91). And when nature poses greater challenges to human survival, a variety of characters stoically endure as in the gauchesque poetry of José Hernández (Argentina), or in the elevation of traditional indigenous life in the indigenista novels by authors like Jorge Icaza (Ecuador) and Ciro Alegría (Perú) just to name a few.

4. According to Beezley and MacLachlan, “the amount of property converted from traditional village ownership to new commercial enterprises during the Porfiriato amounted to an astonishing 127,111,824 acres—well over half of the nation’s arable lands” (4).


6. As opposed to the historical moment in which the novel is set, Tierra Blanca has been incorporated into the city of Culiacán and no longer constitutes the underdeveloped outskirts of the city.

7. In fact, at the time of its publication, it would have been unlikely to refer to Cornejo’s novel as a narconovela since such terminology had barely begun to circulate within literary circles.

8. At least one observer has characterized Juan Justino Judicial as “una novela muy sinaloense” (“Presentación”).

9. Since the author replicates phonetically the spoken speech of rural northern Mexico, much of the dialogue in Juan Justino Judicial does not conform to standard grammatical and orthographical conventions.

10. Judicial is a term used in Mexico to refer to a member of the Federal Judicial Police.
11. Many of the textual citations in this essay will display Mendoza’s frequent disregard for standard punctuation and capitalization.

12. Tontolón is an augmentative for tonto or fool and could roughly translate to idiot as in “village idiot.”

13. In her own analysis of El amante de Janis Joplin, Diana Palaversich characterizes the rescripting of social roles thusly: “The old-time hacendados and their peones are being replaced by new narcocaciques (narcochiefs), who instead of raising cattle grow opium and marijuana and move around in jeeps and airplanes, their faithful peasants turned into paid killers. This creates a curious social milieu, a hybrid of premodern and postmodern traditions” (91).

Works Cited