

Long Live the Border: the American-Mexican Frontier and Its Beneficiaries

Agnieszka Kaczmarek

UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES IN NYSA

Keywords

Ed Vulliamy, *Amexica*, American-Mexican border, beneficiaries, business

Abstract

In her acclaimed book *Borderlands / La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa calls the US-Mexican border ‘an open wound’ which has continually been festering since the grinding poverty of the Third World began to clash with the growing domination of the First. The recently deepening wound is clearly connected with the gradual acceleration of brutality in the borderlands, being the repercussion of President Felipe Calderón’s 2006 decision to declare war on cartels. Yet, with its adjoining territories, the border is tantamount to the source of inexhaustible income falling not only to drug trafficking organisations but also to various lawful businesses and innumerable individuals. With a focus on Ed Vulliamy’s *Amexica: War Along the Borderline* (2010), and references to other sources, the article aims to examine who gains from the grave situation in the US-Mexican borderlands by showing that the beneficiaries are remarkably diverse.

Long Live the Border: the American-Mexican Frontier and Its Beneficiaries

When reading Ed Vulliamy's *Amexica: War Along the Borderline* (2010), the work that inspired this article, one can see no optimism for any possible future improvements of the American-Mexican border's critical situation. On the contrary, Vulliamy depicts tragic events that show the quantitative and qualitative escalation of violence in northern Mexico as well as on the frontier. The observable gradual acceleration of brutality is clearly connected with President Felipe Calderón's (2006-2012) 2006 decision to declare war on cartels, whose repercussions presented in Denis Villeneuve's *Sicario* (2015) illustrate only the tip of the iceberg. Admittedly, drug trafficking organisations, resembling international corporations, constitute the main beneficiaries of the uncontrolled bloodshed, but there are other businesses, as well as individuals, that enjoy substantial and unimaginable benefits due to the violent conflict. With a focus on Ed Vulliamy's *Amexica: War Along the Borderline* (2010), and references to other sources, the article aims to examine who gains from the grave situation in the US-Mexican borderlands by showing that the beneficiary groups are remarkably large and diverse.

The outcome of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that officially ended the US-Mexican War, the border, measuring over three thousand kilometres, is considered as the world's busiest commercial border (Vulliamy, *Amexica* xxxii). In a 1999 report compiled by the US General Accounting Office, it is documented that "in fiscal year 1998 approximately 3.9 million trucks entered the United States from Mexico, a 30-percent increase from fiscal year 1996" (United, *US-Mexico Border* 29). On the archived website maintained by the White House, it is revealed that, under President George W. Bush's administration (2001-2009), 4.3 million truck crossings were registered annually ("Quick Facts"), and, as Tony Payan notes, "[a]ccording to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 11.3 million trucks... crossed the US-Mexico border in 2015" (29-30). On the aforementioned White House website, the cross-border commerce between both countries is estimated at more than 650 billion dollars a day, although it is not stated what percentage of this colossal sum of money contributes to the considerable increase in US profits. Nevertheless, implemented in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which has allowed the commerce between the two neighbours to skyrocket, has also raised new business opportunities for drug trafficking organisations. As United Nations' reporter Raymundo Ramos ac-

knowledges, “smuggling is closely tied to NAFTA. We supply the US with goods, and we supply the US with drugs, through the same corridor, aboard the same trucks” (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 230). Therefore, the US-Mexican border invariably remains “*unaheridaabierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldúa 3). As read in Don Winslow’s historical thriller *The Power of the Dog* (2005), chronicling the three-decade US war on drugs, “[l]and can be burned, crops can be poisoned, people can be displaced, but that border isn’t going anywhere” (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 6), as it remains an inexhaustible source of income for all parties concerned.

With the United States as the primary donee operating legally on the market, illegitimate Mexican cartels, as well as those booming in other Latin American countries, clearly appear to be the major contraband “masters of the border” (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 6). While giving testimony before the American Senate Judiciary Committee on Crime and Drugs in March 2009, Anthony Placido, an assistant administrator for intelligence in the US Drug Enforcement Administration, stated that the narco-business leading cartels are involved in was appraised at \$323 billion annually (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 7), a figure that seems to be an underestimate, even a few years ago, if compared to the amounts of money present in the Wachovia case discussed below. In order to illustrate the possible range of cartel profits in realistic terms, it is more illuminative to quote another congressional testimony delivered one year later by Kevin Perkins and the above-mentioned Placido, in which it is conceded that “from January 2007 through December 2009, the price per gram of cocaine increased 72 percent from \$98.88 to \$169.93” (Perkins and Placido). The scope of the constantly increasing wealth is also vividly pictured by *The New York Times Magazine*, in an article by Patrick R. Keefe, who uses very simple mathematics to show how much money *one* cartel is likely to earn when smuggling only *one* kilo of cocaine to the United States:

The Sinaloa cartel can buy a kilo of cocaine in the highlands of Colombia or Peru for around \$2,000, then watch it accrue value as it makes its way to [the] market. In Mexico, that kilo fetches more than \$10,000. Jump the border to the United States, and it could sell wholesale for \$30,000. Break it down into grams to distribute retail, and that same kilo sells for upward of \$100,000 – more than its weight in gold. And that’s just cocaine. Alone among the Mexican cartels, Sinaloa is both diversified and vertically integrated, producing and exporting marijuana, heroin and methamphetamine as well. (Keefe “Cocaine Incorporated”)

Successfully controlling corridors located along the border from San Diego on the Pacific coast to the Arizona-New Mexico corner, the Sinaloa

cartel, whose total assets cannot be estimated, is nowadays the borderlands' black market leader (United, 2015 *National* 1). Yet, it is clearly not the only drug trafficking organisation fighting for hegemony in different border *plazas*, geographical areas of influence into which the boundary, as well as any other fiercely contested territory, is divided. As different maps show, other Mexican tycoons interested in capturing and recapturing new and old *plazas*, marketplaces like any other, include Los Zetas, Juarez, and Gulf cartels, which in turn have actively penetrated the New Mexico and Texas borderlands (Sheehy xxvi-xxvii; United, 2015 *National* 1). With a view to eliminating the indescribably cruel Los Zetas from the market, two mortal enemies, the Sinaloa cartel and the Gulf cartel, had even resolved to join forces by 2011, forming *Carteles Unidos*, United Cartels (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 17), whose name ironically reflects the driving force of the legally sanctioned economy, the United States. And the US-Mexican frontier obviously constitutes only a gate to countless *plazas* in Mexico's influential neighbour. According to the *National Drug Threat Assessment 2011*, the US territory is nowadays almost entirely controlled by the Sinaloa cartel, with other criminal organisations competing for access to distribution in the country's selected regions (United 7). It is additionally worthwhile to underline that, nearly a decade ago, in a report entitled *National Drug Threat Assessment 2009*, the National Drug Intelligence Center concluded that Mexican cartels posed the most serious hazard to American safety (United iii). In the *2015 National Drug Threat Assessment Summary*, it was restated that "Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) remain the greatest criminal drug threat to the United States; no other group can challenge them in the near term" (United v).

Whereas incomprehensibly high revenues generated by cartels constitute one reason for the constant massive and bloodthirsty fights aiming to assert dominance over contested territories, the Western world's willingness to live while intoxicated demonstrates why their profits have been growing as well. According to the *National Drug Threat Assessment 2011*, "[o]verall demand is rising" (United 1). In 2009, almost 9% of US citizens aged 12 or older, i.e. 22 million Americans, took illegal narcotics (1). The 2014 report recorded 27 million illicit drug users, accounting for 10% of Americans (United, *Behavioural Health* 1).

Inflows from the production and sale of narcotics explain only part of the cartel incomes. In order to generate larger profits, drug trafficking organisations have taken over the lucrative business of smuggling migrants, known as *pollos*, which in Spanish means chickens. According to Alex Nowrasteh, in 2012, Mexican migrants intending to enter the US illegally on foot were forced to pay \$4000, whereas those opting for boat transportation were compelled

to expend \$9000 (6). For unauthorised immigrants from other Latin-American countries, the smuggling fee fluctuated between \$7000 and \$10000 per person. In addition, there has been a steady rise in the prices since the 1990s, owing to the enforcement of anti-immigration laws and increased border militarisation. Furthermore, it is likely that not all coyotes, as human smugglers are called, work for cartels, yet, even though they ply their business independently from drug traffickers, narcos exercise power through taxation, demanding approximately between \$50 to \$80 from coyotes for each of the pollos, who are, in effect, the main contributors to mandatory tariffs (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 58). The host of the Community Center for Assistance to the Migrant and Needy, Marcos Burruel also mentions that Altar, one of the Mexican towns where migrants gather before crossing the border illegally, constitutes a target area for bajadores, rip-off crews, who simply take advantage of the situation to rob would-be immigrants of their valuable belongings (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 58). Paradoxically, in the aforementioned Altar, located roughly sixty miles from the frontier, many also earn a living legally through the illegal human trafficking business. To meet customer demands, numerous local stores offer all the paraphernalia essential for the nightmarish border crossing, selling black clothing, backpacks, and torches, together with prayer cards decorated with the Virgin of Guadalupe or Saint Jude the Apostle, the patron of the hopeless and lost causes (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 56). And if the cause is not lost, and coyotes successfully guide pollos through the line, the group of beneficiaries expands with immigrants' families who additionally stimulate their countries' economies with American dollars sent home by undocumented aliens residing in the United States.

Sometimes the ordeal of illegal border crossing does not end in a safe arrival at one of the American towns. Making use of drug distribution networks, not only do cartels deal with the cross-border transfer of unauthorised migrants, but they also kidnap their customers after successfully eluding border patrols in order to maximise smuggling transaction profits. In *Amexica*, Vulliamy relates the story of Vicente Sánchez Morín, whose kidnappers demanded a ransom of \$3000 from his brother, giving him a week to buy Morín's life (64). The death-or-life transaction was not, however, finalised as the drug/migrant drop house was raided by the Phoenix' (Arizona) police department, in the city rising to fame as "the kidnapping capital of America" (Millman "Immigrants Become Hostages"). What may be surprising is that Morín, having personally experienced the risk of deportation and death, is determined to resume the gruelling journey across the border, again jeopardising his life, bearing the smuggling transaction's escalating costs, and, at the same time, enriching border conflict beneficiaries (Vulliamy, *Amexica*

65). It is worthwhile to mention that, in the event of cross-border failure and an alien's tragic death, Mexico is obligated to cover the costs of a coffin and its transportation to the migrant's country of origin.

In the opinion of Julián Cardona, a photojournalist documenting the escalation of violence in Ciudad Juárez, the infamous border town regarded by many as one of the world's most perilous places, cartels operate as multi-levelled enterprises subcontracting services. Therefore, apart from "bosses, managers, middle management, line workers," there are also "accountants, bankers, shippers—they are all part of the [production] process, but they never meet each other and most of them are not directly employed by the corporation" (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 111). Reporter Ignacio A. Álvarez, who decided to leave Ciudad Juárez to protect his family, additionally remarks: "like a good capitalist, the cartel outsources, puts contracts out to tender, gives other people a chance to compete in order to reduce its own costs" (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 112). Clearly, the guardians of public order on both sides of the frontier have always been tempted by additional salaries. As Vulliamy notes, just within three years, from 2001 to 2004, almost seventy American public employees of different ranks serving in the army, border patrol units, penitentiaries, and administration were found guilty of close collaboration with cartels (*Amexica* 76). With reference to Mexican law enforcement organisations, where chaos intermingles with profits, the situation is definitely more critical since "the municipal police can be working for one cartel, the state police with another, and the *Federales* with yet another" (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 4). Hired to use refined methods of torture so that the tormented do not lose consciousness while suffering, doctors, together with medical students, may earn, willingly or unwillingly, supplementary financial benefits for mutilating cartels' victims with extreme cruelty (32). Less suspected of any criminal activity at border checkpoints, women involved in streetwalking change their occupation because drug smuggling is considered to be "a more dignified profession than prostitution" (10). And art students' talents have been valued too, as they are sometimes commissioned to prepare narcomantas, banners used by cartels to spread intimidation or information concerning, for instance, possible employment in drug lords' private armies (269).

Although the vital issue relating to the corruption of individual US law enforcement agents should be tackled in the struggle against drug trade organisations, both legal and illicit arms trafficking, sanctioned by the American inclination toward gun possession, appears to voice a more serious cause for concern. Out of the four states bordering Mexico, only California requires a gun permit, after the customer's firearms eligibility is checked and all le-

gal in-state transactions are registered (Harris 3, 11; Haughey “The Costs of Owning a Gun”). Neither Arizona, New Mexico nor Texas demands firearm registration or permission to acquire any kind of gun, thereby facilitating the flow of weaponry across the border. Of paramount importance is also the fact that over 90% of the arms intercepted in the war against cartels had been bought in the United States, as revealed in 2008. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the majority of seized weapons are tracked down to the border states, the areas where straw buying enables state residents to regularly increase their family budgets by approximately \$40 per gun transaction and obtain marijuana as a gift (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 256-257).

In addition to a large number of licensed gun retailers, outnumbering libraries and museums in Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico (Ingraham), admission-charged gun shows provide cartels with golden opportunities to re-arm their units. Sometimes held close to the frontier, just a few miles from criminal headquarters, the events offer would-be customers – legal and illegal – a wide range of firearms, including narcos’ favoured weapons, semi-automatic AR-15 and AK-47, whose fully automatic versions are forbidden in the US, but whose conversion is not troublesome with a fifteen-dollar manual which is on sale as well. It is hard to believe that the publisher of the AR-15 manual “produces this book for informational and entertainment purposes”, especially if on display tables there are also ammunition bags with a slogan used by Los Zetas and wallets with the image of Santa Muerte, the narcos’ patron resembling the Grim Reaper holding a scythe in one hand and the globe in the other (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 252-253).

The parody observable at American gun shows is continuously staged on the very border between the First and Third Worlds. A Mexican human rights activist working in Reynosa, on the frontier with Texas, Mario Treviño shares with Vulliamy his direct observations on the situation at the town’s border post:

What you see on the bridge [over the Rio Grande] is a circus... The soldiers standing there – it’s a farce. Everyone knows the drugs go north and the guns come south across the bridge all day. People who earn hardly any money can get a hundred dollars cash for bringing a gun over for the Zetas. (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 263)

Following the story related by another human rights organisation’s employee who preferred to remain anonymous, one needs to ask who really controls the border. As Vulliamy’s informant reveals, in the spring of 2009, Los Zetas simply barricaded a few international bridges in the Reynosa-McAllen region, showing their strength not only to other cartels but also to the United States’ officials (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 273).

When discussing the American-Mexican border and its beneficiaries it is obligatory to mention maquiladoras, industrial plants producing and/or assembling duty-free components for export mainly to the United States. Part of the 1960s Border Industrialization Program initiated on both sides of the Rio Grande when the US authorities ended the Bracero Program, maquiladoras, to put it straight, since their very beginning, have been genuine eldorados for their executive boards, whose members live comfortably in developed countries. For their employees, on the contrary, maquiladoras have always been synonymous with unimaginable physical and mental exhaustion, cheap labour costs, and femicides, the mass killings of women for which Ciudad Juarez is, for instance, especially notorious. To report these enterprises' revenues generated for over fifty years now is beyond this article's scope and aim, nevertheless, it is sufficient to adduce the wages paid by factories where inhumane working conditions, sexual harassment, lack of injury benefits are the norm rather than the exception, and where it happened that workers had "to apply for toilet paper, being allowed one piece per go" (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 200). Interviewed by Vulliamy, Reynaldo Bueno Sifuentes speaks of \$80 a week including overtime (*Amexica* 212); Leticia Ramírez earns \$50 a week for a ten-hour shift from Monday to Friday (208); in Piedras Negras, the Mexican sister city of Eagle Pass, Texas, the Lear Corporation offers \$46 for a fifty-hour week (209), beggarly wages by Western standards, but real bargains for Mexicans, who earn much less in the south of their country.

How highly lucrative the maquiladora business proves to be is distressingly obvious in Chad Broughton's 2015 *Tale of Two Cities* on Galesburg, Illinois, and Reynosa in Mexico. In the American town of the Rust Belt, workers of Maytag, a home appliance plant, used to make \$15 an hour before the factory was closed down in 2004 and relocated to the Mexican border metropolis, where maquila breadwinners began to earn \$1.10 an hour, approximately the rate offered to American assemblers when the plant opened in 1950 (Broughton 5, 173). Yet, the interested parties involved in the maquiladora business are not only the US and Mexico. According to Evelyn Hu-DeHart, quoting a 1990s' source, "[i]n addition to North American corporate owners, other large *maquiladora* owners came from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and assorted European countries, such as Germany" (246). To put it briefly, these factories appear to be a globalized issue, although public opinion as well as numerous academic sources usually associate them with American-Mexican borderlands. The report cited by Hu-DeHart mentions approximately two thousand seven hundred maquilas in Mexico. With a cross-reference to *Here Is Tijuana!* (2006), Reimer documents that there

are over five hundred such plants in Tijuana, a Mexican border city pressing itself against the San Diego area (20).

Another economic sector earning considerable revenues due to the borderlands' critical situation is the movie industry depicting the conflict on screen. Just to exemplify the vast proceeds of one film production, Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000), starring Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Benicio Del Toro, grossed over \$207 million worldwide (with \$124 million in the US), quadrupling its estimated budget of \$48 million ('Box Office/Business for *Traffic*'), although Barry Diller, the executive of USA Networks films which bankrolled the film, did not believe that *Traffic* would meet its costs (qtd. in Baker 128). Directed by Denis Villeneuve, the recently shot *Sicario* (2015) has so far grossed \$84 million worldwide, with \$46 million domestically, on a budget of \$30 million ('Box Office/Business for *Sicario*'). Perhaps it would be possible to simply accept the round-number incomes if it were not for the distorted pictures both celluloids attempt to sell the audience at such a handsome profit. As Beckham asserts, widely popular and critically acclaimed, *Traffic*, still in 2000, offers

Soderbergh's stereotypical portrayal of Mexico as a lawless, premodern, last frontier; his representation of Mexicans as savage, barbaric, and corrupt; his implication of Mexico as the agent of America's woes; and his election to omit any facts that might portray an America that is responsible for its own problems. (140)

Unfortunately, in the 2015 *Sicario*, the message that the United States shares the guilt for the border area's complex situation is imperceptible, although already in 2009, when interviewed by MSNBC Television, President Obama openly admitted: "It's really a two-way situation here. The drugs are coming north, we're sending funds and guns south" (qtd. in Vulliamy, *Amexica* 22). It is also difficult to give credence to the film story about a gullible Phoenix-based FBI agent, for *Guardian* film critic Mark Kermode "*Sicario*'s most believable character" (Kermode "*Sicario* Review"), who is incognisant of CIA black operations blessed by government officials that let intelligence operatives conduct secret missions without playing by the book. And, even if both movies raise a few relevant queries – for instance, *Traffic* asks about American family values again and again, and in *Sicario* Villeneuve deliberates on whether the end justifies the means (*Traffic*; *Sicario*) – in the context of the last US presidency campaign, it seems noteworthy to highlight that *Sicario*, shaping public opinion in a way, indirectly suggests the further militarisation of the border, announced by President-elect Donald Trump, which has not solved border-related problems but exacerbated them. As Jennifer Reimer

writes, according to numerous sources, the suggestively named Operation Gatekeeper, the Clinton administration's programme to curtail undocumented immigration at the US-Mexican boundary, "has not stopped migration; it has only driven migrants to take increasingly desperate and riskier measures, resulting in an increased number of crossing-related deaths" (24).

Another entertainment branch taking advantage of the continuously unresolved border conflict is the market of computer games. Discussing narco presence in capitalist culture, in *Amexica* Vulliamy mentions *Call of Juárez: the Cartel* (xl), a 2011 first-person shooter game which, in one of its first trailers removed from the internet, sold a racist, nefarious message to would-be customers still having an opportunity to cast themselves in the role of lawless Drug Enforcement Administration agents. In the trailer it was possible to hear:

We don't claim to be honest. We don't pretend to fight fair. Hell, we don't even trust each other. But in the war against the Mexican mob, we are the closest thing to the law. As the cartels line their corrupt targets, we line our own. There is a shit load a money here we can split it three ways, and no one will ever know... Welcome to the new Wild West. ("Call of Juarez")

Prequered in *Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood* (2009), the story about the new Wild West was developed by Techland, a Polish company with offices in Wrocław, Warsaw, Ostrów Wielkopolski, and Vancouver, cooperating with Ubisoft, a French corporation that placed this video game on the North American market (*Techland*).

Equally controversial is *Border Patrol*, a game in which a user turns into a marksman, or markswoman, whose objective is literally to shoot as many illegal migrants as possible, aiming at particular characters, Mexican Nationalist, Drug Smuggler, and Breeder, when they run across the border. Although easily available online free of charge, the game paradoxically contributes to the debate on the considerable costs generated by pregnant Latinas crossing the border so as to give birth to so-called "anchor babies" who are entitled, as American citizens, to various benefits such as free K-12 education, sponsored by US taxpayers (Bender 116). According to Pew Hispanic Center statistics, "of the 340,000 babies born to undocumented mothers in 2008, some 85% of the parents had been in the United States for more than a year, and more than half for at least five years" (Bender 116). Moreover, either as renters or homeowners, migrants are obliged to pay property tax and other levies that, as a matter of fact, "help finance local schools" (Bender 116). In addition, "[t]he U.S. government routinely deports undocumented parents of U.S.-born children, likely on the assumption the parents will take their child

with them” (Bender 116). Thus, the anti-immigrant advocates’ argument that a large number of Latinas overburden the counties’ budgets – a stereotype the online computer game fossilises – is rather far-fetched because Latinas help American counties’ authorities run their administrative regions simply by paying taxes.

In addition, another beneficiary of the real-life drama taking place on both sides of the border is the music industry supporting the production of *narcocorridos*, narco ballads which, since the 1930s, have portrayed the drug trafficking underworld, frequently lauding individual drug lords or depicting contracted murders. Despite the impossibility of national legislation against the airing of *narcocorridos* due to the right to freedom of speech, selected Mexican states forbade the songs’ broadcast (Summers and Bailey “Mexico’s Forbidden Songs”; Fernández and Finch 258), which obviously, with access to the internet, has not constrained their presence in the public domain. In the United States, with the rapidly growing Chicano population, which is more affluent than their Mexican relatives, the recording industry continues to thrive and shows no signs of decline, especially in the south of California. In *El Narcotraficante* (2004), Mark Edberg claims that “the Los Angeles area could be characterized as a “hot spot” with respect to the popularity of *narcocorridos*, not only because many are produced there, but also because they are very popular in clubs and on radio stations serving the near-majority Hispanic population” (26–27).

One of the bands that have contributed to the spread of this music style since the early 1970s is Los Tigres del Norte (The Tigers of the North), Californian San Jose-based musicians originally from Mexico. On their official website the artists promote themselves as “storytellers for multiple generations of Latin immigrants”, who “have also taken it upon themselves to express their love and respect of women in their songs and to never glorify “narcotic” themes” (“Biography”). As Fernández and Finch note, the group shot to fame in 1972 when they recorded *Contrabando y Traición* (“Contraband and Betrayal”), also known as *Camelia la Tejana*, nowadays regarded as the first *narcocorrido* hit (254–255), a slushy romantic song about a Chicana from Texas, who, after successful drug-smuggling into the United States, shoots her partner Emilio when he decides to abandon her for another woman (qtd. in Edberg 55). Although recorded in the early 1970s, the song clearly amused the audience in the late 2000s, gathered at an Indian casino, the property of the Tohono O’odham tribe, which certainly benefited financially from providing the stage on which Los Tigres presented themselves “in flagrant red silk emblazoned with shameless gold” (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 79). Surprising as it may seem, staging concerts at Stanford University and Sonoma State University

in August 2016, the musicians generated some profits too, as, in the case of the Stanford performance, ticket prices ranged from \$30 to \$65, and for the Sonoma concert participants paid between \$25 and \$80 (*STANFORDLIVE; Los Tigres*). Thus, it is possible to conclude that, with almost forty records, fourteen films, and five Latin Grammy Awards, the band, nowadays, considerably influences the Chicano music arena by narrating Latin immigrant stories, but the fact remains that every album released by Los Tigres repeatedly consists of two or three narcocorridos (Fernández and Finch 255–256), which have helped the musicians thrive by capitalising on the border areas' complex situation.

As Chris Summers and Dominic Bailey claim, in 2004, the American market for Mexican regional music, including narco ballads, was estimated at 300 million dollars a year. Nevertheless, unofficial individual proceeds from writing the songs may turn out to be much higher. Instructed what story a *corrido* should relate, a songwriter receiving a commission from cartel paymasters may earn from \$7000 to \$30000 for composing a brand-new song, not to mention occasional bonuses to salaries in the form of a car (Denselow “Narcocorrido, the Sound of Los Angeles”; Hodgson “Death in the Midday Sun”; Summers and Bailey “Mexico’s Forbidden Songs”). And, even if incarcerated, singers and *corrido* writers, often drug peddlers themselves, seize the opportunity to pocket a few dollars for penning or performing a narco-corrido (Hodgson). Yet perhaps more disquieting than the financial inflows are motives for commissioning a narco ballad, since, as Mexican journalist Gilberto Casto admits, “[p]eople kill just to have a song written about them” (qtd. in Hodgson). It is also possible for a *corrido* writer to be smuggled across the border free of charge if he promises to compose a song about the smuggler after the successful crossing (Summers and Bailey).

Having conducted field observations in the Los Angeles/Tijuana and Juárez/El Paso areas, Edberg concedes that narco ballads are not only easily available in these regions' music stores, but are also commonplace in the jukeboxes of American and Mexican cantinas and narcobars, locally known pubs popular with outlaws on both sides of the border (47, 99). In addition, the scholar reports, “[w]alk along Avenida Juárez when the traffic is heavy, or come to a spotlight in many border towns, and you may hear narcocorridos blasting from the radio of a truck next to you” (Edberg 66). Popular in the border states, this type of music is becoming more and more audible in other parts of America, migrating with Latinos to regions located further from the Rio Grande. According to recording industry representatives interviewed by Edberg, there is also a rising demand for narcocorridos in Florida, the Chi-

cago area, in Midwest cities, and in the Northwest (67), the US regions where one finds headquarters of selected cartels.

Surprising as it may seem, one of the Mexican beneficiaries appears to be the local community of El Alberto, the three-thousand populace living over one thousand kilometres from the American-Mexican border. As presented in a *Vice* documentary posted on YouTube in May 2012, since 2004, the El Alberto dwellers have participated in the organization of Parque EcoAlberto, a collaborative venture whose main tourist attraction is the Caminata Nocturna, the Night Walk, a simulation of the illegal border crossing experience (“Illegal Border Crossing in Mexico” *YouTube*). For 250 pesos, the equivalent of \$15, Night Walk participants run in the desert, flee through a concrete tunnel, and crawl under wire fences, hiding when necessary from fake border patrol agents or drug cartel traffickers, who try not to be too violent. Instructed by a coyote, a professional human smuggler who leads groups, the participants are, however, reminded that what they experience is in fact “5% of what a real migrant goes through” (“Illegal”).

In the eyes of the local authorities, the Night Walk project has come under criticism for training would-be migrants. An active participant in one of the walks and contributor to a weekly *This American Life* radio programme, James Spring regards the controversial undertaking as “the Mexican telenovela version of the border crossing, a dramatic re-enactment” (“Flight Simulation”). And, although it cannot be denied that some of the Caminata partakers plan unlawful migration, Spring asserts that the majority of the participants are university students and middle-class employees, unlikely candidates for illegal immigration. In effect, those who participated with Spring in the walk comprised a group of Mexico City sales representatives, who had come to El Alberto with a view to developing team spirit. Furthermore, the organisers stress that the attraction aims at increasing public awareness about the illegal border crossing drama. In an introductory speech, a coyote sensitises walk participants: “We want to tell you that the night is to honour and pay tribute to all of those that have been migrants” (“Illegal”). By trying to influence young Latinos to stay in Mexico so as to reinvigorate their country’s economy, and not that of the United States, the business owners also perceive their venture as “a new kind of tourism”, “socially conscious”, which additionally invigorates El Alberto, a ghost town before the business was open (“Illegal”).

In a 2011 article, opened with a reference to the discovery of another mass grave in Mexico, James Petras, professor of sociology specialising in Latin American and Middle East politics, emphatically asserts:

Every major bank in the US has served as an active financial partner of the murderous drug cartels – including Bank of America, Citibank, and JP

Morgan [since 2013, the largest bank in the world and in the US], as well as overseas banks operating out of New York, Miami, and Los Angeles, as well as London. (Petras “Imperialism: Bankers, Drug Wars and Genocide. Mexico’s Descent into Inferno”)

Clearly, it is impossible to give the exact amount of money laundered by banks, yet according to the US General Accounting Office, the total sum could stand at \$100 billion in the United States and globally range from \$500 billion to \$1 trillion (qtd. in Levy). As described in Vulliamy’s *Amexica*, in the 2010 trial against Wachovia, the US’s fourth largest banking company up to 2008, now part of Wells Fargo (the third largest), it was proven that, between 2004 and 2007, one financial institution alone had laundered over \$370 billion wired by the customers of Mexican casas de cambio, currency exchange houses (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 316). Thus, the aforementioned US General Accounting Office statistics seem to have been underestimated. The case came to light after the 2006 interception of the Sinaloa cartel’s plane purchased with money transferred through Wachovia accounts (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 307). Of great importance is the fact that the bank consciously failed to monitor and report clearly suspicious transactions although its UK and North Carolina supervisors had been notified of procedure violations by Martin Woods, Wachovia’s anti-money-laundering officer employed in its London branch to investigate such cases. As the company’s business correspondence reveals, after informing his superiors about the possible frauds, Woods was advised “to develop a better understanding of Mexico” and his warnings were simply ignored (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 311). Despite a long list of evident regulation infringements cited by Vulliamy in *Amexica* (317), the bank “paid federal authorities \$110m in forfeiture” and a \$50 million fine, farcical penalties which accounted for less than 2% of the bank’s 2009 revenue (Vulliamy, “How a Big US bank Laundered Billions”). Furthermore, the Miami district court agreed to defer persecution for a period of twelve months on condition that Wachovia’s new owner strictly adhered to the banking rules for a year, which the institution obviously fulfilled (Vulliamy, *Amexica* 318–319). It is also necessary to stress that, in the court’s settlement, not a single individual was pronounced guilty and the only felon appeared to be the bank, which, as a matter of fact, ceased to be a novelty long time ago. In Steinbeck’s classic travelogue, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), in the dialogue between land owners and tenant men, we read about the shift of legal responsibility from individual lawbreakers onto impersonal financial institutions:

We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man.
Yes, but the bank is only made of men.

No, you're wrong there – quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it. (Steinbeck 39)

In conclusion, the list of the beneficiaries prospering thanks to the US-Mexican borderlands' grave situation appears endless. Apart from independent coyotes and straw buyers, it includes, among others, individual corrupt police officers, border patrol agents, penitentiary workers, accountants and selected doctors, medical and art students. Among the small and medium-sized businesses, one can point out American gun retailers, gun shows, Indian casinos, and Mexican local stores selling paraphernalia needed for illegal border crossing. In addition, the list comprises segments of the entertainment industry such as film and music, as well as maquiladoras, which boost other areas of the US and Mexican economies at the expense of their employees. With fortunes amassed mainly by drug and human smuggling, cartels are obviously high on the list, so, as the saying goes, "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States" ("Pobre México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos") (qtd. in Broughton 7). However, not only do lawful American financial institutions launder cartels' illicit profits but so do overseas banks, whose chief executives dwell, for example, in London. Mexican maquiladoras have their head offices not only in the United States, but also in Germany, Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan. In cooperation with their French partner, the Polish firm has also capitalised on the border drama by creating the new Wild West computer game. With headquarters in different corners of the globe, legal enterprises representing diverse economic sectors are direct or indirect beneficiaries of the progressive brutalisation of public life along the frontier. For this reason, perhaps we should say: "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States and to other parts of the world".

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: the New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Baker, Aaron. "Remade by Steven Soderbergh". *The Philosophy of Steven Soderbergh*, Palmer and Sanders eds, The UP of Kentucky, 2011. 121-142.
- Beckham, Jack. "Placing *Touch of Evil*, *The Border*, and *Traffic* in the American Imagination." *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2005. 130-141. web.b.eb-scohost.com. Accessed 15 July 2016.
- Bender, Steven. *Run for the Border: Vice and Virtue in U.S.-Mexico Border Crossings*. New York UP, 2012.

- "Biography. *Los Tigres del Norte*." lostigresdelnorte.com/main/about. Accessed 21 July 2016.
- "Box Office / Business for *Sicario*." www.imdb.com. Accessed 28 July 2016.
- "Box Office / Business for *Traffic*." www.imdb.com. Accessed 28 July 2016.
- Broughton, Chad. *Boom, Bust, Exodus: the Rust Belt, the Maquilas, and a Tale of Two Cities*. Oxford UP, 2015.
- "Call of Juarez: the Cartel Trailer." callofjuarez.ubi.com. Accessed 5 July 2014.
- Denselow, Robin. "Narcocorrido, the Sound of Los Angeles." *The Guardian*, 28 March 2012, www.theguardian.com. Accessed 22 July 2016.
- Edberg, Mark. *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. University of Texas Press, 2004.
- Fernández, Celestino, and Jessie K. Finch. "The Role and Meaning of Border Corridos: the Case of Narcocorridos." *The Shade of Saguaro / La Sombra del Saguaro*, Prampolini and Pinazzi eds. Firenze UP, 2013. 249-262.
- "Flight Simulation." www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/520. Accessed 28 July 2016.
- Harris, Kamala. *California Firearms Laws Summary*. California Department of Justice, 2016, oag.ca.gov. Accessed 7 Dec. 2016.
- Haughey, John. "The Costs of Owning a Gun: a State-By-State Permit Breakdown." *Outdoor Life*, 27 March 2013, www.outdoorlife.com. Accessed 7 Dec. 2016.
- Hodgson, Martin. "Death in the Midday Sun." *The Observer*, 19 Sept. 2004, www.theguardian.com. Accessed 22 July 2016.
- Hu-DeHart, Evelyn. "Globalization and Its Discontents: Exposing the Underside." *Gender on the Borderlands: the Frontiers Reader*, Castañeda, et al. University of Nebraska Press, 2007. 244-260.
- "Illegal Border Crossing in Mexico." www.youtube.com/watch?v=BH_Z5BEZ5ts. Accessed 25 July 2016.
- Ingraham, Christopher. "Where Gun Stores Outnumber Museums and Libraries." *The Washington Post*, 17 June 2014, www.washingtonpost.com. Accessed 7 Dec. 2016.
- Keefe, Patrick. "Cocaine Incorporated." *The New York Times Magazine*, 15 June 2012, www.nytimes.com. Accessed 3 Dec. 2016.
- Kermode, Mark. "Sicario Review – Emily Blunt's Star Quality Lifts Mexican Drugs Thriller." *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2015, www.theguardian.com. Accessed 2 Aug. 2016.
- Levy, Steven Mark. *Federal Money Laundering Regulation: Banking, Corporate and Securities Compliance*. Wolters Kluwer, 2016.
- "Los Tigres del Norte." www.lostigresdelnorte.com. Accessed 21 July 2016.
- Millman, Joel. "Immigrants Become Hostages as Gangs Prey on Mexicans." *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 June 2009, www.wsj.com/articles. Accessed 2 Aug. 2016.
- Nowrasteh, Alex. "The Conservative Case for Immigration Tariffs." *OnPoint*, no.177, 7 Feb. 2012. 1-10, www.cei.org/sites. Accessed 25 Nov. 2016.

- Payan, Tony. *The Three US-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security*. Praeger, 2016.
- Perkins, Kevin and Anthony Placido. "Statement Before the US Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control." Congressional Testimony, US Congress, 5 May 2010, www2.fbi.gov/congress. Accessed 3 Dec. 2016.
- Petras, James. "Imperialism: Bankers, Drug Wars and Genocide. Mexico's Descent into Inferno." *Global Research*, 19 May 2011, www.globalresearch.ca. Accessed 7 July 2016.
- "Quick Facts about the U.S.-Mexico Border." *The White House*, n.d., georgewebush-whitehouse.archives.gov. Accessed 26 Nov. 2016.
- Reimer, Jennifer. "Tijuana Transa: Transa as Metaphor and Theory on the US-Mexico Border." *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-33, escholarship.org/uc. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016.
- Sheehy, Finbarr. *Amexica: the US-Mexican Borderland*, map. *Amexica*, by Ed Vulliamy, Vintage Books, 2011. xxvi-xxviii.
- Sicario*. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, Lionsgate, 2015.
- STANFORDLIVE. Stanford University, 2016, live.stanford.edu/calendar/august-2016. Accessed 21 July 2016.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Reader's Digest Association Limited, 1994.
- Summers, Chris, and Dominic Bailey. "Mexico's Forbidden Songs." *BBC News Online*, 3 Oct. 2004, news.bbc.co.uk. Accessed 21 July 2016.
- "Techland." company.techland.pl. Accessed 10 Aug. 2016.
- Traffic*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, USA Films, 2000.
- United States, Department of Health and Human Services. *Behavioural Health Trends in the United States: Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. Government Printing Office, 2015, www.samhsa.gov. Accessed 7 Dec. 2016.
- . Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration. *2015 National Drug Threat Assessment Summary*. Government Printing Office, 2015, www.dea.gov. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.
- , ---. National Drug Intelligence Center. *National Drug Threat Assessment 2009*. Government Printing Office, 2008, www.justice.gov. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.
- , ---. National Drug Intelligence Center. *National Drug Threat Assessment 2011*. Government Printing Office, 2011, www.justice.gov. Accessed 27 June 2016.
- . General Accounting Office. *US-Mexico Border: Issues and Challenges Confronting the United States and Mexico*. General Accounting Office, 1999, books.google.pl/books. Accessed 26 June 2016.
- Vulliamy, Ed. *Amexica: War Along the Borderline*. Vintage Books, 2011.
- . "How a Big US bank Laundered Billions from Mexico's Murderous Drug Gangs." *The Observer*, 3 April 2011, www.theguardian.com. Accessed 11 July 2016.