

Diego Mauricio Cortés

ESCOBAR'S NARCOS AND WHITENESS: FANTASISING OF THE AMERICAN DREAM BY FETISHISING LATINX AND LATIN AMERICANS

This article explores the resurgence of Pablo Escobar's legacy through Netflix's Narcos, examining its intersection with US white racial ideologies and the American Dream narrative. Through the portrayal of Escobar as a morally complex antihero – a powerful yet criminal figure – the series allows US audiences to engage with fantasies of wealth and power that defy moral and legal constraints, while Escobar's Latin American identity distances white audiences from his criminal actions. By contrasting Escobar's character with morally righteous DEA agents, particularly Steve Murphy, Narcos reinforces white supremacist ideologies and saviourism, perpetuating stereotypes about Latinx identity and Colombian corruption. Using theoretical frameworks of Orientalism, fetishism, and disavowal, this article argues that Escobar's dual role as both hero and Other fulfils US desires for antihero narratives without compromising white identity. Additionally, the factors enabling the production of an “authentic” Escobar series – including the global rise of streaming platforms, improved safety in Medellín, and extensive documentation on Escobar's life – position Narcos as a seminal text in global narco-media. By catering to US cultural aspirations, Narcos epitomises the commodification of Latin American stereotypes, revealing much about contemporary constructions of white identity and escapism.

Keywords: *Narcos*; media representation; whiteness; Orientalism; fetishism and disavowal; war on drugs; Colombia

Introduction

Many media critics, some of them Colombians like me, have responded to the recent resurgence in the global popularity of Pablo Escobar (1949–1993) and the resulting stereotype that associates Colombians with cocaine trafficking (e.g. Albarrán-Torres 2021, Britto 2016; Cepeda 2021; Giraldo Luque 2018; Pobutsky 2013, 2020; Rincón 2024; Ruiz 2023). Escobar's renewed prominence is primarily attributable to *Narcos* (2015–2016), the first successful non-English-language series in the United States produced by Netflix, the US streaming platform with the most subscribers (Wayne and Uribe Sandoval 2023). *Narcos* presents a version of Escobar's rise and fall tailored for Euro-Western audiences. Dubbed in the USA as

“the world’s greatest outlaw”, Escobar led the Medellín Cartel, a criminal organisation that flooded Miami streets with cocaine while terrorising Colombia with targeted assassinations and car bombs. These actions killed thousands – approximately 5,500 at the peak of violence from 1988 to 1993 (Revista Semana 2018). Escobar’s opposition to extradition – a national policy that sent drug traffickers to the USA to face persecution – primarily drove his wrath. *Narcos* retells this dark chapter of Colombian history from the fictionalised perspective of a white DEA agent, Steve Murphy – played by Robert Boyd Holbrook, an actor who considers Escobar as “the Michael Jordan of criminals” (Holland 2016). Murphy is depicted as audacious, morally upright, and passionate for justice, and the US anti-narcotics agency is portrayed as the all-powerful leader of Colombia’s fight against Escobar. This good-US-police-versus-bad-corrupted-Other modern Western (Rincón 2018) amplifies previously constructed ambivalent images of Escobar as both a shrewd, family-oriented Robin Hood type of philanthropist and a cold-blooded, ambitious criminal entrepreneur who rose from poverty despite Colombia’s social exclusions (Rincón 2024). Criticism of the *Narcos* version of the Escobar story has focused on issues of representation. For instance, scholars have pointed to the series’ trivialisation of Escobar’s story in its narrative and promotional campaigns, its glorification of the USA’s role in the war on cocaine, and its claim to authenticity despite temporal and historical inaccuracies. In this essay, I propose to shift the gaze from what *Narcos* portrays and omits about Colombia and the War on Drugs to why the *Narcos* version of Escobar is so appealing to US whites, the racial group of *Narcos*’ leading producers and its primarily targeted consumers.

According to Doug Miro (2022), *Narcos*’ co-writer and co-executive producer, the significant success of this “true crime” series motivated the production of a third season (2017) on the Cali Cartel – Escobar’s rivals – and the spin-off *Narcos Mexico* (2018–2021). Miro’s co-productions also include *Griselda* (2024), a six-part Netflix series on the life of Griselda Blanco (1943–2012), a violent member of the Medellín cartel responsible for cocaine distribution in the USA who gained notoriety for rising to power in this male-dominated criminal underworld. This other American Dream story features two Colombian stars who have previously played into negative stereotypes associated with the illegal drug trade, prostitution, and crime. One of them is Sofia Vergara, who stars as Griselda Blanco and also serves as this series’ co-producer. Vergara first gained fame playing a trophy wife from “the number one village in all Colombia for all the murders” (Zornosa 2024) in the eleven-season ABC comedy *Modern Family* (2009–2020). *Griselda* also features Karol G, a reggaetón singer whose music often exploits narco-culture through explicit lyrics and lavish aesthetics. In her five-minute cameo, Karol G plays a fictional character named Carla, representing a sex worker recruited by Blanco as a cocaine smuggler. Vergara’s and Karol G’s presence lends an air of authenticity to this “biographical crime drama”, as Netflix labelled *Griselda* in a promotional interview with Eric Newman (*Gold Derby* 2024), another producer of *Narcos* and *Griselda*. These misleading authenticity claims have been crucial to the success of these narco-series. For instance, Miro credits *Narcos*’ success to its authenticity, which he claims stems from filming in Colombia at the actual locations where the events occurred.

I argue that what white audiences find in *Narcos*' "authentic" Escobar is the opportunity to fantasise about achieving remarkable socio-economic success – a central aspiration of the American Dream. But, at the same time, Escobar's "Latinidad" allows them to distance themselves from his criminality, enabling white audiences to preserve their sense of moral superiority and righteousness. *Narcos*' audacious Murphy reinforces this notion of white superiority by ultimately defeating the powerful Escobar despite the pervasive corruption of the Latino characters, including his Mexican American DEA partner Javier Peña. To support my thesis, I draw on Said's (1979) Orientalism and Freud's fetishism and disavowal (Hall 1997) to analyse *Narcos*' narrative in contrast to other media portrayals of Escobar's life, especially Murphy and Peña's memoir *Manhunters: How We Took Down Pablo Escobar* (2020) and the Colombian television series *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal* (2012). This analysis helps explain not only how the representation of Latin American criminals like Escobar contributes to the construction of white supremacy but also how such representations offer white audiences a means to escape the burdens of that demanding racial identity.

In addition to theorising the white fixation for Escobar, this article discusses four factors that enabled Miro and his media partners to produce an "authentic" Escobar more than twenty years after his death. These four factors are the emergence of streaming television, improved security conditions for foreigners from the Global North in Medellín, Escobar's birthplace and primary operation hub, a prior overexposure of Escobar's life by himself, his family, and his inner circle, and the extensive documentation of Escobar's story across various media agendas. One example of this documentation is *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal*, a successful 116-episode television series (later reduced to 76 for international markets) produced by Caracol Television. As occurred with *Narcos* and many other narco-related productions, media critics have questioned *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal* for trivialising narco-violence and promoting narco-culture (Pobutsky 2020, 40). However, unlike *Narcos*, *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal* presents Escobar's rise and fall in a less glamorous light, emphasising his crudeness and lack of refinement. This series also paid more attention to the lives of some of Escobar's victims and the Colombians who contributed to defeating Escobar's empire and downplayed the role of the USA in the fight against Escobar. Despite its narrative and thematic differences, *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal*'s success in production and profit demonstrated to *Narcos*' US producers the viability of an ambitious, multi-episode series focused on Escobar's life.

Analysing the reasons for the popularity of *Narcos* and the factors that enabled the production of such a series remains relevant nearly ten years after this series' premiere, particularly given Escobar's ongoing status as a global media commodity (Franko and Goyes 2023). This commercial prominence has inspired a long list of post-*Narcos* productions aimed at Western audiences. The list includes, among others, documentaries (e.g. *The Rise and Fall of Pablo Escobar*, 2018), films (e.g. *Loving Pablo*, 2018), videogames (e.g. *Narcos*, *The Rise of the Cartels*, 2019), books (e.g. *Manhunters*), series about Escobar's associates (e.g. *Paraiso blanco*, 2023, and *Griselda*, 2024) and series exploring the cocaine business of the 1970s–1980s (e.g. *Hotel Cocaine*, 2024). This popularisation of Escobar and numerous other narco-

stories through commercial media warrants attention, as it underscores the fictitious nature of US representations of the war on drugs, despite authenticity claims made by producers like Doug Miro and Eric Newman. Analysing these producers' narco-series is a timely contribution, especially given that, as Zavala (2022) explains, US narco-series such as *Narcos* serve as critical references for anti-drug policymaking that has criminalised Latinos and victimised white consumers.

Following this introduction, this article proceeds with three sections providing a theoretical foundation for understanding the popularity of *Narcos* as a phenomenon revealing the fantasies and aspirations of white audiences. These sections explore prior theoretical insights into Escobar's popularity, discuss how *Narcos* intersects with concepts of Orientalism, fetishism and disavowal, and examine whiteness as an ideological constraint. Next, two sections present media analyses that address *Narcos*' questionable authenticity and its glamorisation of Escobar. This article concludes by explaining the factors that made it possible to produce an "authentic" series on Escobar's life for a US audience two decades after his death.

Theoretical views on media representations of Escobar

As previously mentioned, Escobar's revival through *Narcos* and subsequent media productions for commercial gain has sparked an intense debate regarding the content of these portrayals. For instance, Colombian historian Britto (2016) criticises *Narcos* for echoing the DEA version of the war on Escobar. This version enhances the USA's "world police" image by magnifying the role of US law enforcement, downplaying Colombian counterparts, and obscuring the complicit role of US bankers and consumers in Escobar's rise. This perspective overlooks the fact that the most significant economic beneficiaries of cocaine trafficking have been in the Global North, particularly the USA (Organization of American States 2013).

Giraldo Luque (2018) presents various responses to *Narcos* in a 10-chapter edited volume, which includes an interview with Escobar's son, Juan Pablo. This work brings together scholars concerned with the potential impact of *Narcos*' misrepresentation of Colombian history. For instance, Mulor Vicedo (2018, 156), Fernández Rovira and Giraldo Luque (2018, 161, 164–165, and 181), and Alcaide López, Pons Pie, and Riu Puig (2018, 216) critique the show's marketing for perpetuating the outdated association of Colombians with cocaine trafficking, a lingering stigma since Escobar's era. This campaign included a controversial billboard in Madrid's Plaza del Sol, one of the city's main squares, with the slogan "Oh, Blanca Navidad" alongside the *Narcos* and Netflix logos. Juan Pablo Escobar points out the privilege of *Narcos*' producers in profiting from his father's image with little backlash, contrasting this with the criticism he has faced for referring to Escobar's legacy even when his intent was to condemn it. Despite these criticisms, Mejía Quintana (2018) and Rincón (2018) argue that *Narcos*' narrative is not solely a product of US media fantasies but also has roots in Colombian narcoculture.

Aldona Pobutsky (2020) analyses Escobar's legacy in Colombian culture, concluding that Escobar's life has become a significant aspirational symbol in this country. She explains that Colombian narcoculture involves the normalisation,

romanticisation, and transformation of the flamboyant narco lifestyle into a societal ideal. This aspirational fantasy encompasses a broader social system, including drug barons, small-scale traffickers, gunmen, cocaine mules, high-end prostitutes, and silicone-enhanced trophy women (2020, 3). This imagined life blends Colombian cultural elements with US popular cultural influences, including Hollywood-like violence, Tex-Mex bravado, and Miami's luxurious opulence (2020, 3). Similarly, Colombian media scholar Omar Rincón (2013) argues that the excess, luxury, and ambition found in the US "way of life" serve as major inspirations for Colombian narcoculture, where wealth and power are extravagantly displayed.

However, this US-inspired Colombian narcoculture has also faced resistance. For example, the 1980s and 1990s punk rock and heavy metal scene in Bogotá and Medellín provided platforms for youth to express their rejection of the narco world (Hortua 2013). Anti-narcoculture movements include media productions like *Las víctimas de Pablo Escobar* (2012), which challenge the narratives exploited by US and Colombian narco-series, such as the myth of narco-philanthropy (Pobutsky 2020, 4). Actions resisting narcoculture also include protests against the banalisation of violence, as seen in the 2019 demolition of the Monaco building, Escobar's home until his Cartel Cali enemies bombed it in 1988 and which was later converted into a controversial narco-tourism site following the success of *Narcos*. Civil society sectors demanded that the ruins be preserved as a memory of the narco wars to honour the victims and prevent history from repeating itself (Rueda and Ortiz 2024). Ironically, reports surfaced that companies linked with drug trafficking supported the political campaign of Medellín's mayor, Federico Gutiérrez, who ordered Monaco's demolition (Vorágine 2023). This case exemplifies the Colombian elite's "forgive and forget" attitude towards Escobar's inconvenient memory, as his persona represents their entanglements with the narco world.

How did Escobar become so globally famous in the first place? Colombian media scholar Catalina Uribe Rincón (2024) argues that Colombian print news initially created Escobar as a "persona" – a mythical public figure with a life of its own. This mythical persona owes much to 1980s Colombian journalistic routines of fast-paced publication, lack of access to complete information, a fascination with the extraordinary, and a cultural value placed on transparency. These practices first depict Escobar as a socially conscious millionaire with political aspirations and later as a powerful narco who jeopardises not only the weak Colombian establishment but also the powerful US empire. This "narco Robin Hood" image attracted US media attention, and further amplified Escobar by bombastic reports, such as his inclusion in *Forbes* magazine's list of the world's richest people for seven consecutive years. US media continued inflating the Escobar legend through films, books, and television shows even before *Narcos*. One such production was *Medellin*, a fictional film about Escobar's life, which featured Sofía Vergara as a "Village Girl" and was inserted into an episode of HBO's comedy-drama *Entourage* (2004–2011). According to Cepeda (2021), Escobar's "accidental persona" became the main script for Global Colombianidad, or regimes framing representations of Colombians. Through her analysis of the music video *Medellín*, a collaboration between Madonna and the Colombian reggaetón star Maluma, Cepeda illustrates how Colombian commercial artists also capitalise on narco stereotypes. I argue

that this monetisation also becomes evident in the ways Sofia Vergara and Karol G exploit the “cunning hot whore” stereotype in *Griselda* and their other entertainment productions for white audiences. These portrayals perpetuate reductive, hypersexualised images of Colombian women, further entrenching problematic tropes linked to narcoculture for commercial gain.

Ruiz (2020, 2023) offers a compelling analysis of US narco-media, such as *Narcos*, and other successful productions, like *Miami Vice*, *Weeds*, and *Breaking Bad*. He argues that these shows reinforce stereotypical tropes about people of Latino origin. Simultaneously, Ruiz suggests that adaptations of Pablo Escobar’s life align his story with US values of ambition for success, effectively turning him into a twisted role model. This paradox raises an intriguing question in Ruiz’s work: how do we reconcile the contradiction in Escobar’s portrayal for white audiences – as both a symbol of Latino criminality and an object of admiration?

Orientalism, fetishism, disavowal, and *Narcos*

To resolve the paradoxical role of Escobar as a symbol of Latino criminality and object of admiration for white audiences implicit in Ruiz’s work (2020), I analyse *Narcos*’ popularity following Albarrán-Torres’s (2021) employment of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1979) complemented with the concepts of psychoanalytic fetishism and disavowal (Hall 1997). According to Said, dominant representations of the East in the Western world respond more to the latter’s imperialistic imaginaries than to the former’s historical reality. Thus, Western artists have produced and reinforced racially charged stereotypes, such as the French superiority over Middle Eastern colonised subjects – e.g. Antonine Jean Gros’s *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* (1804). Those images unveil producers’ and consumers’ dreams, aspirations, and prejudices with detrimental consequences for those misrepresented.

Hall (1997) explains Freud’s fetishism as the “substitution of an ‘object’ for some dangerous and powerful but forbidden force” (264). This fetishist desire also involves disavowal, through which “powerful fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied” (1997, 267). Hall shows that fetishism and disavowal in the media help producers and audiences to disassociate themselves from illegal and unethical actions that compromise their alleged puritanical core values. This process is made possible by casting, for instance, Black and Latinx characters in amoral criminal roles. Like Said’s observations, those representations of the Other correspond more to the white producers of Hollywood and streamed television productions like *Narcos*.

This theoretical combination unveils that *Narcos*’ Escobar responds to two contradictory forces that are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, Escobar reproduces white supremacy by contrasting white American law enforcers’ courage and “high moral standards” – represented in *Narcos* by Steve Murphy and his wife Conny – in their fight against the “world’s most powerful criminal”. As *Narcos*’ Steve Murphy discusses in various scenes, defeating Escobar in corrupt Colombia pushed brave and morally upright white American law enforcers into

several ethical conundrums. Murphy's dilemmas included dealing with Escobar's madness and the moral inferiority of the corrupt Colombian police and his Mexican American DEA partner, the womaniser Javier Peña. The contrasting representations of the "righteous" Murphy and the evil Others align with the historical narratives of white self-victimisation (Horwitz 2018), moral exceptionalism (Uhlmann, Poehlman, and Bargh 2009), and self-assumed racial superiority (Brantlinger 2007). In addition to underpinning white supremacy, this type of representation justifies prejudice against Latinxs and Latin Americans, continuing the racialisation of drug-related crises, from marihuana in the 1920s (Marez 2004) to opioids in the 2010s (Netherland and Hansen 2016).

On the other hand, Escobar's self-made entrepreneurial success allows white audiences to fantasise about the unlimited socio-economic upright mobility promised by the American Dream – a myth shaped in the nineteenth century by Horatio Alger, whose stories depict economic prosperity as the natural and legitimate consequence of personal audacity and supernatural blessing (Quart 2023). However, Escobar's "brownness" permits audiences to disavow Escobar's crimes, protecting white identity's "purity" (Berthold 2010). This process of fetishisation and disavowal has become more necessary for the survival of whiteness, considering that the post-Reagan neoliberal economy has reduced possibilities for upright mobility through legal means despite the increasing popularity of "idols of promotion" or social media celebrities famous for easy economic success (Duffy and Pooley 2019). According to Miro (2022), *Narcos* intentionally highlights Escobar's values that resemble those of US audiences, such as strong family bonds, philanthropy, anti-establishment politics, ambition, and audacity to become an empire-maker, reinforcing the audience's emotional affinity with him. Erick Newman discusses using a similar narrative strategy to gain public attraction for *Griselda*, a character he deems representative of the US desire for wealth and power (Gold Derby 2024).

Whiteness as an ideological restraint

Whiteness, as conceptualised by various scholars, is not merely an identity but an ideological construct that positions itself as the norm by contrasting with the Other – often depicted as victimiser, exotic, incomplete, or deviant (e.g. Dyer 2017; Fanon 2023; Wynter 1979). This construct is woven into US media representations, which frequently rely on stereotypes that fit white imaginaries regarding Latin Americans and Latinx people (e.g. Marez 2004; Valdivia 2010). Aparicio and Silverman (1997) describe this process as "tropicalization", where people of Latin American origin are reduced to simplified, ideological fictions marked by gender, race, nationality, and culture. In the case of Colombians, US media has long "tropicalized" us as corrupt and violent drug traffickers – a trend beginning before Escobar's reign with *Scarface* (1983) and continuing through the decades with several media productions, including *Narcos* and, most recently, *Griselda*. These portrayals have contributed to the normalisation of negative stereotypes, such as the "bad hombres" rhetoric embraced by the MAGA movement (Gerke and Gonzalez Rodríguez 2021).

In analysing these media portrayals, we must consider how they serve to reinforce white identity, not only through contrast but through the identification with the deviant “Other”. Toni Morrison suggests rerouting “the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers” (1993, 90). This approach inspires a critical question: what do “authentic” and “based on a true story” narratives like *Narcos* reveal about the formation of white identity in the USA?

By rerouting the analysis from the “observed” to the “observing”, we can trace various conflictive imaginaries in *Narcos*. Since Richard Nixon’s declared it in 1971, the War on Drugs has shaped racial relations at the national and international levels like no other political event. However, US narco-media, such as the *Narcos* saga and *Griselda*, are not primarily about the history of the War on Drugs. These productions are driven by quest need for profit and respond to white audiences’ entertainment and identity needs. Among these needs is the constant necessity to reaffirm racial superiority through contrasting representations with a “deviant” Other – as Ruiz (2020, 2023) shows in detail. However, these series also serve as daydreams that help to alleviate the constant push for economic success, moral uprightness, and racial superiority embedded in the US white identity. These racial identity burdens stem, in significant part, from the US Christian Puritan tradition. This tradition demands the manifestation of faith through economic success, piousness, rational self-control, patriarchalism, and the suppression of mysticism and sensorial religiosity (Bercovitch 1975). Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) exemplifies how these expectations are a burden by depicting the US annexation of the Philippines as a sacrifice made in the name of civilising the inferior Other.

Ironically, the complex demand for economic success is a key factor that has contributed to the US becoming the world’s leading world consumer of stimulant drugs like cocaine and amphetamines. This demand has, for instance, driven US students and white-collar workers to become the world’s main abusers of Adderall, an amphetamine-based cognitive enhancer (Rolland and Smith 2017). The blockbuster *Limitless* (2011) reflects this belief in mental stimulants as a pathway to wealth and achievement.

US white identity’s normative understanding of success, gender, and sex has pushed for the development of escape outlets, including the Punk (McDowell 2017) and Queer movements (Moussawi and Vidal-Ortiz 2020). US society has created other venues to escape its puritan rigour. They include “sin city” tourism, from prostitution in Las Vegas, NV (Fox 2007), Windsor, Canada (Karibo 2015), and Medellín (Aïdi and Fabry 2024) to the zoophilic “donkey show” in Tijuana, México (Madrid 2008). The imagined amorality of these and other “frontiers” (or territories outside of US “normality”), such as Colombia as portrayed in *Narcos* and the fictitious film *Medellin* in *Entourage*’s “Welcome to the Jungle” episode, comes from the imperialist geographical reasoning that upheld US expansionism, as documented by the scholar of religion, Amy DeRogatis (2003).

Media and entertainment offer accessible vehicles for white escapism via the fetishisation of the Other. Beyond narco-media, this fetishisation includes white producers’ representations of Blackness, from the pre-Jim Crow Blackface minstrelsy (Lott 2013) to commercial Hip-Hop, a commodity conspicuously consumed by

white audiences (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 2012). As discussed by Esquivel-Suarez (2023), US Black rappers, such as Wiz Khalifa, Jay-Z, and Kanye West, juxtapose their Black American hustler's image with Escobar's criminal entrepreneurship ethos to empower their gangster branding. In sum, like commercialised Black Hip-Hop – with its portrayal of aggressive hypersexual men, promiscuous women, and opulent lifestyles – *Narcos* allows media consumers to fantasise about achieving success through criminal means, in line with the get-rich-fast ideals of US capitalist culture.

***Narcos'* dubious authenticity**

Despite its producer's claims of authenticity, *Narcos* prioritised white entertainment over historical accuracy. This is evident when cross-referenced with *Manhunters*, the memoir by former DEA agents Steve Murphy and Javier Peña. According to this account, Peña arrived in Colombia in 1984, whereas Murphy arrived only in 1991. This timeline discrepancy makes it impossible for Murphy to have participated in key events of Escobar's rise and fall as portrayed in *Narcos*. These events include Escobar's election to the Colombian Chamber of Representatives in 1982, the assassination of Colombian Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla in 1984, and siege of the Palace of Justice in 1985. Though Peña stayed in Colombia longer than Murphy, *Narcos* positions Murphy as the main character and narrator, underscoring the series' intent to attract white audiences by placing a white character as central to Escobar's death.

Manhunters reveals other fictitious elements in *Narcos*, especially those related to Steve Murphy. The list of fabricated events includes Murphy's bachelor lifestyle in Miami and his dramatic meeting with his future wife, Conny (Episode 1); Conny's volunteering at a clinic for the poor in Bogotá (Episode 2); the killing of Murphy's cat by Escobar's hitmen (Episode 2); Conny's and Peña's interaction with a member of the leftist guerrilla group M-19 (Episodes 5 and 6); shootouts between Murphy and Peña and Medellín Cartel members (Episode 7); Murphy's adoption of an orphan whose parents were killed by Escobar (Episode 7); and Murphy's kidnapping by Escobar's rivals (Episode 10). These fictional additions, far from being non-ideological enhancements for entertainment, reinforce the moral uprightness, benevolence, and compassion of Steve and Conny Murphy, perpetuating white saviourism and justifying US vigilantism in Latin America. *Narcos* further reconstructs whiteness by contrasting the archetypical white US Murphys with the sexually promiscuous, corrupt, and cold-blooded Latino and Latin American characters.

Concerned with the accuracy and implications of orientalist portrayals, Said (1979) explains that the Western (mis)representation of the Orient conforms to situations – sometimes imagined, sometimes grounded in history – viewed through the imperialist ideological lens (93). These atemporal and essentialised Orientalised narratives reinforce “imaginative geographies” that draw an essentialised division between the “enlightened” West and the “benighted” East (90). Building on this argument, Bebout (2016) describes how films like *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) cement whiteness by constructing México as a lawless and savage “infernal paradise” with the ability to draw out such characteristics in the psyche of the

law-abiding white audiences. *Narcos* similarly caters to white US audiences by reproducing moral superiority and racial distinctness, positioning US whiteness as morally superior through the contrasting representation of the white Murphys with the Latin American Others amidst Colombian infernal chaos.

Steve Murphy's Mexican American partner, Javier Peña, serves to delineate the racial divide within US society itself. Depicted as a womaniser with easy connections to the Colombian underworld, the "asshole" Peña (Episodes 1 and 8) is morally ambiguous, engaging in illegal activities like paying criminals for information and bribing corrupt Colombian officials. He also indulges in sensual pleasures, such as sleeping with female informants and drug traffickers' lovers. In contrast, Murphy is a family-oriented and devoted husband who maintains a one-woman lifestyle. A similar racial differentiation appears in *The Infiltrator* (2016), a based-on-a-true-story film about an undercover operation targeting Escobar's money laundry network. Robert Manzur (Bryan Cranston), a white secret agent and faithful husband, contrasts with Emir Abreu (John Leguizamo), his "tropicalized" (Aparicio and Silverman 1997) Latino duty partner. Abreu is much less audacious and rational than Manzur and has a temper, taste, and manners like that of low-rank criminals. This prudish representation of white US law enforcers is somewhat ironic, considering real-life examples of misconduct of US law enforcers abroad.¹

According to *Narcos*, Murphy's progressive adjustment to the corruption in Colombia was slow and difficult. After several failures in their pursuit of Escobar, Murphy realises that his adherence to legal procedures is a disadvantage in Colombia, where "nothing goes down the way you think it will" (Episode 10). It takes him eight episodes to begin adopting rougher tactics with criminals and locals who need "white education", such as a taxi driver who overreacts to a minor automobile incident (Episode 8). In moments of moral doubt – like when confronted with pictures of a mission's "collateral victims" – the cold-blooded Peña is there to counsel Murphy to "shred" his regrets (Episode 9).

Narcos constructs the Murphys' high moral and personality standards in contrast to those of non-white characters early in the show. Steve and Conny's first appearance is at their apartment, caring for a baby whose parents were killed by Escobar (a fictional situation). The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) calls Steve to inform him that Escobar's hitman, Poison (a fictional character), will be at a local bar at a specific time. Murphy decides against his initial macho urge to confront Poison himself – even though "he would love" to do it – because the "DEA is restricted in a foreign country". He leaks the information to Horacio Carrillo, a fictional character who is the head of a unit within the Colombian police and usually meets Peña in a bar for drinks. Murphy's information helps Carrillo and other Colombian police officers to gun down several of Escobar's associates, but also many innocents. Later, in a monologue, Murphy is apologetic his role in this carnage, discussing his frustration at being unable to bring Escobar to justice and adding that criminals like Escobar "do not play by the rules" (Episode 8). Like the morally conflicted whites from the USA in treacherous Mexico described by Bebout (2016), Murphy explains in his deep, masculine voice:

I made a promise to myself that when the time comes that I could strike a blow against Escobar, even if it meant breaking the rules. Oh, I was

gonna do it. You wanna tell me a good guy wouldn't have pushed the buttons on these motherfuckers? You want to call me a bad guy? Fine. But if you do, it just means that you haven't met enough bad guys yet to know the difference. There's one thing I've learned down here in Colombia: good and bad are relative concepts.

Narcos also reproduces whiteness by contrasting the Murphys with the local police. Steve and Conny's family values, altruism, and awareness of "right and wrong" starkly contrast with Colombian moral corruption. Even the fictional Horacio Carrillo, one of the few local policemen who refused Escobar's bribes, violated the law by killing civilians and torturing Escobar's associates, causing moral dilemmas for a tough but reflexive Murphy (Episodes 1, 4, and 8). *Narcos*' representations of the Colombian police are dramatically different from those in *Manhunters*, which describes the professionalism in the hunt for Escobar of many members of the Colombian ad hoc group Search Block, commanded by Hugo Rafael Martínez Poveda (who inspired the character Horacio Carrillo). Even though Colombian police corruption was a problem and its collaboration with the paramilitary group Los Pepes against Escobar was polemical, to say the least, Murphy and Peña's memoir explains that the DEA's disorganisation, the arrogance of Joe Toft – DEA's head in Colombia – and the ego-driven competition between this federal agency and the CIA represented a significant impediment in Escobar's hunt.

Fulfilling the demands of whiteness through the Other

The moral distance between *Narcos*'s archetypical white Murphys and Escobar is clear. *Narcos* shows how Escobar killed foes and allies not only in his fight against extradition but also in his pursuit of money and power. According to *Narcos*, Murphy and Peña's DEA finally defeated such a powerful criminal, demonstrating that not even the "greatest outlaw" has a chance against US white masculine power. Several questions emerge, even assuming that the white audience's attraction to *Narcos* was just a call for justice. Why does Escobar's fame overshadow that of Murphy, Peña, or any other US law enforcers involved in his death? What can explain the obsession of the morally upright US society, not only with Escobar's fall but also with his life, making him a legend?

Unlike in Colombia, where the series was unpopular, mocked, and rejected as an accurate representation of Escobar's tale by both common viewers and media scholars (see Giraldo Luque 2018), *Narcos*' Escobar gained global recognition. Portrayed by Wagner Moura – a stellar Brazilian actor who did not fully achieve a convincing portrayal of Escobar's accent or mannerisms – *Narcos*' Escobar became the face of the drug lord persona in various products beyond the series, such as the videogame *Narcos*, *The Rise of the Cartels*. This version of Escobar became an iconic figure not just because *Narcos* nurtures white "moral superiority" by contrasting Escobar's evilness with Murphy's and the DEA's righteousness. This happened because *Narcos* frames Escobar's story as an ambivalent symbol of danger and criminality but also of the success and wealth promised by the American Dream.

Narcos' intention of framing Escobar's story as an ambivalent symbol of the American Dream begins with its series intro. This intro provides *Narcos* with a sense of glamour and nostalgia, combining images of cocaine, with people at exclusive locations, beauty queens, piles of US dollars, shots of Escobar at his lavish Hacienda Nápoles, Ronald Reagan on a TV screen, and a BMW set on fire. Rodrigo Amarante's slow and intense bolero "Tuyo", sung in a melancholy voice musicalised with instruments often used in soft Brazilian music, such as a clarinet bass, acoustic guitar, bass guitar, castanets, cabasa, maracas, and viola, enhances the atmosphere of sophistication suggested by these images. This glamorous intro sharply contrasts with *Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del Mal*'s opening, which begins with the quote "quien no conoce su historia está condenado a repetirla" [those who do not know their history are condemned to repeat it], followed by actual footage from Escobar's terrorist attacks and images of this series' clumsy Escobar (played by Colombian actor Andrés Parra) alongside some of his high-profile victims. The rap song "La última bala" (The Last Bullet) by Yuri Buenaventura also starkly contrasts the glamour conveyed by *Narcos*' "Tuyo".

From the series' first episode, *Narcos* displays the bravery and audacity needed to succeed in the capitalist world. In it, the police stop Escobar while he leads a caravan of trucks carrying smuggled TVs. They allow Escobar and the caravan to proceed after he introduces himself authoritatively, identifying all policemen by their names, telling them he would be a future president of Colombia, and warning them about his business approach: they should either accept his bribes or face his gunfire – "¿plata o plomo?", an infamous phrase popularised after *Narcos* by many, including the US hip-hop artists Fat Joe and Remy Ma in their 2017 album. Inspired by a less dramatic scene from *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal* (Episode 1) – where Pablo is depicted as bold but less aggressively and assertively – this *Narcos* fictitious initial scene sets a tone for the rest of this series: Escobar was an influential boss with eyes "everywhere" (e.g. Episode 1).

Narcos remarks that Escobar was the prominent commander of everyone involved in the cocaine world in the 1980s, including police agents, migration agents, gunmen, and guerrilla fighters (e.g. Episodes 2, 3, and 4). In addition, the series portrays him as someone with so much money that he has to hide his millions in odd places (e.g. Episode 2). The series highlights his cunning and boldness in achieving any goal, including becoming a Colombian parliamentary representative (Episode 3). *Narcos* shows how this cold criminal had no remorse for killing anyone who stepped in his path, including high-profile politicians (e.g. Episode 5), business partners (e.g. Episode 9), and innocents, including dozens aboard a commercial airliner (Episode 7). This criminal's only vulnerability was his love for his family, a weakness that ultimately allowed the DEA to end his reign of terror – according to *Narcos*' version of the events.

As Miro explains, *Narcos* used Escobar's dedication to his family to produce emotional affinity. He describes how the series' last episode (Episode 10, season 2), which focuses on Escobar's final days, was designed to upset people. Two fictitious scenes highlight Escobar's love for his family. The first scene (0:00–2:19) shows an overweight and aged Escobar hidden from the authorities while dreaming of his inauguration as president of Colombia. He is awoken by the voice of his

family singing “Happy Birthday” over the phone. The second scene (28:20–31:35) shows Escobar sitting on a bench in a public park in the daytime – despite an intense police search for him – while daydreaming in the company of his cousin Gustavo Gaviria, killed by the police in an earlier episode. Escobar expresses his love for his cousin in this daydream and demonstrates his bravery and ambition despite the circumstances, stating his desire to rebuild his empire.

Other US productions feature US characters with a similar “boss” aura to *Narcos*’ Escobar. *American Made* (2017), starring Tom Cruise as Barry Seal, depicts Seal not as a disloyal snitch as portrayed in *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal* but as a cunning US pilot who deceives Escobar and US authorities for his own gain. This film is so fictionalised that its director, Doug Liman, called it “a fun lie based on a true story” (Berman 2017). *Narcos* also presents Seal in a glamorous and hypermasculine light, introducing him surrounded by naked women on a silk-covered mattress (episode four). This fantasised version of Barry Seal, along with Escobar’s *Narcos*, exploits the rugged masculinity already celebrated in US society through other mediatised iconic idols, like John Wayne, Oliver North, Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, and Mel Gibson (Du Metz 2022).

Escobar in *Narcos* symbolises the achievement of the American Dream. His race differentiates him from other self-made, ambitious, and megalomaniac US entrepreneurs, from the ostentatious Donald Trump and Elon Musk (South African but made in the USA) to the more discreet Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. *Narcos* shows that even a “nobody” from the Global South with no inheritance and political connections can “make it”. As mentioned, Escobar’s US values and Latinness make him a comfortable fetish for white America, allowing them to fantasise about obtaining wealth and power through illegal means, deluding guilt, and preserving their moral purity – the bedrocks of self-proclaimed racial superiority.

***Narcos*, why in the mid-2010s?**

As discussed earlier, four factors facilitated Escobar’s resurgence in the USA via *Narcos*. First, the disruption caused by streaming television in the mid-2000s opened the US media market to new media producers, including Netflix. This former DVD mail rental company entered the streaming business by following HBO’s model for cable television, investing in high-quality, innovative productions with morally ambiguous characters to brand itself as a premium series producer (Flamand 2022). Netflix’s innovations include high-end programming in languages other than English, with a predominantly non-white cast, as seen in *Narcos*. Before Netflix, the US audience’s aversion to subtitles led most US commercial filmmakers to avoid producing content in foreign languages. This was the case with *Escobar: Paradise Lost* (2014), an English-language fictional thriller about a Canadian surfer (Josh Hutcherson) who falls in love with Escobar’s (Benicio del Toro) niece (Claudia Traisac). The same approach was taken with *Loving Pablo*, a film based on a book by Virginia Vallejo, a Colombian news anchor and Escobar’s lover in the 1980s. Despite its all-Hispanic cast, including Spanish actor Javier Bardem as Escobar, the film was produced in English. However, despite being more transcultural than these previous US productions featuring

Escobar, *Narcos* continues to magnify the roles of US individuals and institutions involved in Escobar's life. Yet, *Narcos* represents a novelty with its high-quality production, foreign-language dialogue, and majority non-white cast, which would have been improbable before Netflix. For instance, Mark Bowden failed to find a producer for a film based on his bestseller book and primary source of inspiration for *Narcos*, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw*, ten years before the release of this Netflix series (Ruiz 2023, 188).

Second, after high levels of violence during the 1980s to 2000s, Colombia's overall situation improved in the 2010s, particularly in Medellín. The city became a tourist hotspot – with both positive and negative consequences, including infrastructural development, gentrification, and increasing gender-based violence linked to sex tourism (Naef 2018, 2023). Medellín's urban renaissance made it safer to film in a location where Escobar's story took place, enabling *Narcos* to label itself as "authentic".

Third, *Narcos*' producers benefitted from the extensive documentation available on Escobar's life, which is unparalleled compared to other criminals of his era. This documentation includes thousands of journalist reports from the Colombian and US press, the bestselling books *La parábola de Pablo. Auge y caída de un gran capo del narcotráfico* (Salazar 2018) and *Killing Pablo* (Bowden 2007), and many other memoirs on Escobar (e.g. Mollison's *The Memory of Pablo Escobar*, 2009) and the 1980s cocaine-trafficking world (e.g. Gugliotta's *Kings of Cocaine*, 1989). This list also includes efforts made by Escobar and his family to shape their image. This effort is reflected in *Los archivos privados de Escobar* (2003). This documentary contains testimonies from Escobar's relatives with photographs taken by his photographer, Édgar Jiménez, aka El Chino, who also released a book in 2021 (Buitrago 2021). This extensive material has fuelled a boom in mainstream US commercial media focused on Escobar, from the fictionalised *Narcos* to documentaries made by major US media producers, such as National Geographic's *Pablo Escobar: Man versus Myth*. The money-making machine based on Escobar's persona also inspired spin-offs about his associates, rivals, and emulators, including *Narcos*' third season, *Narcos Mexico*, *Paraíso Blanco*, *Hotel Cocaine*, and *Griselda*.

Lastly, the success of *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal* demonstrated the viability of a fictionalised series about this infamous criminal. Released three years before *Narcos*, this series tells Escobar's story based on Salazar's (2018) *La Parábola de Pablo*. This bestseller was adapted by Camilo Cano, son of Guillermo Cano, who was assassinated on Escobar's orders in 1986, and Juana Uribe, daughter of Maruja Pachón, who was kidnapped for seven months on Escobar's orders in November 1990. Unlike Miro's *Narcos*, these writers emphasised Escobar's coarseness, focusing on his victims' stories and their families' faiths. *Pablo Escobar: El patrón del mal* also gave much less attention to US characters and depicted them in a far less glamorous fashion. For instance, the first US white character to appear in this series is "Harry Bill", representing Barry Seal, who was killed after snitching about the Medellín Cartel trafficking cocaine and their ties to Nicaragua's Sandinistas (Episode 17).

Conclusion

The resurgence of Pablo Escobar's mythos, primarily through Netflix's *Narcos*, reflects the powerful interplay between media representation and white racial

identity. *Narcos* taps into the American Dream narrative by presenting Escobar as both a dangerous criminal and an aspirational figure, combining themes of ambition, cunning, and family loyalty with violent criminality. This portrayal resonates with white US audiences, allowing them to indulge in fantasies of socio-economic success unrestrained by moral or legal boundaries. At the same time, Escobar's Latin American identity provides a buffer for white audiences to distance themselves from his criminal actions.

Through this dual lens, *Narcos* capitalises on both white supremacist ideologies and escapist fantasies, fulfilling desires for complex antiheroes without compromising white moral superiority. Steve Murphy, representing white saviourism, embodies how valour and righteousness are attributed to the US, contrasting with the moral corruption assigned to Latinx and Latin American characters. This contrast reinforces racialised stereotypes against Colombians and perpetuates a simplistic binary of good versus evil, where US law enforcement emerges as heroic within a chaotic Colombian backdrop. The supposed authenticity of *Narcos* – a claim bolstered by its on-location filming and historical references – makes its narrative appear credible despite its dramatised depictions and chronological incongruencies.

Framing Escobar as an emblem of the American Dream introduces further complexity. Although illegal, his rise from poverty to immense wealth mirrors the themes of audacity and self-made success central to US cultural mythology. As streaming technology and platforms like Netflix began reshaping viewing habits in the mid-2010s, *Narcos* was primed to capitalise on Escobar's legacy. The show resonated as Netflix expanded, popularising high-quality, morally ambiguous narratives. This shift allowed an international story like *Narcos*, with a non-white cast and significant Spanish-language dialogue, to achieve mainstream success in the USA, setting a precedent for other narco-series, such as *Narcos'* third season, *Narcos Mexico*, and *Griselda*, and further integrating Escobar into a global cultural referent of the capitalist framework. The popularity of these forms of escapism reveals that contrary to Kipling's famous poem, "The White Man's Burden" is not the duty to civilise "the half devil and half child" Other, but the pressure to succeed in a socio-economic system where wealth defines one's value.

White US producers, Colombian artists, and others will likely continue profiting from Escobar's legacy at the expense of perpetuating stereotypes against Colombians as long as capitalist values prevail. An example is Spanish author Santiago Alonso and his new book, *Desmontando las narcoseries: Los mitos del Cártel de Medellín* [Dismantling the Narco-Series: The Myths of the Medellín Cartel]. Alonso, who describes himself as a fan of the Escobar series, aims to challenge Netflix's version of the story by revealing "what is fiction and what is not" (Hernández 2024). He adds that "In Medellín, people have pictures of Pablo Escobar in their homes as if he were the Virgin Mary". Alonso further noted that he struggled to find any Colombian who would speak negatively about Escobar. This is just one example of how global audiences indulge their fantasies about Pablo Escobar based on US-produced "fun lies based on true stories" like *Narcos* and *Griselda*, often excusing this "guilty pleasure" by claiming that the reverence for this criminal stems from Colombians and not from their own values and aspirations.

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Note

1. For instance, a 229-page document released in 2012 presents hundreds of acts of misconduct by Secret Service agents while in service between 2004 and 2011, which include prostitution and sexual assault (*The Guardian* 2012). One of the most publicised cases involves twelve secret service agents, from mid-rank to seasoned members like Jonathan Dach, a white Yale law-school student. They hired and later refused to pay sex workers when serving President Barack Obama's delegation to the 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia.

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Diego Mauricio Cortés is an Assistant Professor in Global Media at the School of Communication and Journalism, University of Oregon. His multidisciplinary research explores a variety of topics related to whiteness, indigeneity, media, and Christianity in Latin America and the United States.
