

SOBRE LAS VÍCTIMAS (ON VICTIMS):
TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY DRUG
VIOLENCE AND NARCO CULTURE

by

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To my mother, Shannon, for all her support.

To my grandmother, Edna, for her insight and wisdom.

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The University of Texas at Dallas, 2018

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Since the militarization of Mexico's "war" on drugs in late 2006, violence has escalated to extreme levels. Contemporary narcotic trafficking in the Western Hemisphere serves as a crucial topic for Latin American scholars due to the severity and grotesque nature of the associated brutality. In addition, Central American refugees fleeing northward from violence perpetuated by transnational criminal organizations demands social attention. Employing an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates the perspective of victims—frequently migrants, women, and other marginalized Latin Americans swept up in narco culture—this thesis seeks a greater understanding of the violence and culture that surround twenty-first-century drug trafficking. It highlights scholarship that, despite its different academic fields, adopts an approach in some way focused on violence, culture, or victims. In exploring theory from Performance Studies, it engages with recent research pertaining to the performative qualities of narco violence and argues that a victim-centered framework—one that deciphers performative violence's messages

within the context of the victims' suffering—offers a compassionate perspective and sheds light on the language of violence. This thesis also explores ethical victim representation in documentaries that provide the victim's perspective or "voice." In *Señorita extraviada* (2001), Lourdes Portillo facilitates empathy for victims without perpetuating graphic images by featuring photographs of victims alive and well, rather than their gruesome remains. Finally, this thesis analyzes an unpublished collection of recent drawings by inmates near the U.S.-Mexican border, many of whom are trapped in the gang lifestyle. Much of this artwork features images of the Mexican Revolution and a glorified indigenous past. Applying previously discussed assertions regarding messaging and patterns, it argues that, despite the artwork's haphazard and surreal nature, it speaks a "language" of violence that echoes themes expressed by earlier Mexican intellectuals. Although this thesis makes distinct claims regarding scholarship, performative violence, victim-centered documentary film, and even artwork drawn by gang members, all assertions address and support one main argument—that academics and society at large will gain a deeper understanding of the crisis that twenty-first-century narcotic violence presents by approaching this tragic topic within the context of those who experience its brutality.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis would fit well into an edited book featuring warriors and cultures of violence—not because it focuses on the aggressors, but ironically, because it privileges the victims. One of my most interesting history classes explored warrior studies through a cross-cultural comparison of European medieval knights and Tokugawa period samurai. Thus, as I developed an interest in modern Latin America, and in light of the trafficking crisis developing at the border, I focused on the cartels and gangs who profited from narcotics. From the *sicario* hitmen of the Juárez and Sinaloa cartels, to transnational enterprises like MS-13, to U.S. distribution gangs like *Barrio Azteca*—in essence, the modern-day Latin American “warriors”—these soldiers of vice and criminality identify with a culture of violence that defines their occupations, associations, and very existence.

But one trip to Mexico changed my perspective and I am grateful for this opportunity. While visiting an Ixtepec shelter with a group of students, I asked if any migrants wanted to share their experiences regarding the violence they encountered while traveling north from Central America. One wheelchair-bound man volunteered to tell his horrific experience in which gang members attacked his party. They slashed his legs with a machete and demanded his cell phone so that they could call his relatives for ransom money. As he recounted his narrow escape from the extortionists, a small crowd of men formed just outside of the shelter’s mess hall, nodding in agreement and briefly interjecting their own stories and brushes with death along their journeys.

But it was another story that forced me to reconsider what victims endure—as opposed to what “warriors” or perpetrators inflict. Before the man finished his story, a volunteer at the

shelter notified me that a young woman had quietly come forward, requesting to share her tragic experience away from any men and in private. The volunteer escorted the women from our group to a small, cramped, austere room towards the back of one of the rustic buildings. As everyone gathered around, the woman, probably in her early twenties, shared a horrific experience on her journey in which a group of men beat her and raped her with live Tasers. As she spoke, she shook uncontrollably, cried, and even expressed guilt over what had happened, despite that she was a completely innocent victim. Our group could do nothing but listen, powerless to take away her pain. Her misery was very real, incredibly shocking, and beyond heartbreaking.

In addition to the physical and emotional torture both migrants experienced, I was uncomfortable with the way this scenario played out—the manner in which the two migrants shared their specific accounts. The man in the wheelchair told his story outside in an open area of the shelter with other men sitting around, sharing experiences, and reassuring him. Though she herself requested to speak in private, the young woman shared her story inside a dimly-lit room, shaded from the hot sun, but stifling with humidity and heat. Her guilt accentuated an imagined quarantined status and very real isolation. The behavior associated with one story spoke to fortunate survival and the other, social shame influenced by gender. This situation forced me to question the relationships between violence, victims, and culture.

Because of the opportunity to go to Mexico, visit shelters, and bear witness to testimony, I made the decision to switch my focus from narco “warriors” who inflict violence to the victims who endure it and the culture that perpetuates it. Unfortunately, due to the amount and severity of narco-related violence in Mexico, brutality frequently pulls focus away from those individuals

who live in or near a trafficking environment. But, this impulsive reaction to focus *only* on violence—though not without its usefulness—does not embrace the topic as a whole. In employing an approach that highlights victims and culture, I hope to reinforce an alternative framework in drugs and violence discourse that highlights complexity and sheds light on marginalized perspectives.

In approaching this topic from alternative angles, I employ a broad definition of victim. In narco culture, frequently the lines between “good” and “bad” blur or completely fade. For example, if members of a cartel assault a local business owner for failing to pay extortion, he is a victim. But, if that same business owner, in frustration, physically expresses his anger at home by harming his wife, is he less of a victim? Likewise, in the U.S. many adolescents join street gangs—which distribute narcotics for cartels—in order to gain protection, to fulfill a need to belong, or simply to make more money. Although their criminal actions do not speak to innocence in the eyes of the law, arguably these gang members who become tangled in a web of violence stand as victims of circumstance. Therefore, when employing a victim-centered approach, I point to a very messy definition of victim, in which individuals subscribe to the very culture that victimizes them.

This thesis, then, seeks a greater understanding of the victims, violence, and culture that surround twenty-first-century drug trafficking, though it does not necessarily address these terms in that order, because their conversations overlap. The drugs and violence topic has many aspects that extend beyond one academic field. As such, I employ an interdisciplinary framework to explore narco culture’s visual brutality and unfortunate victims. Although, I make distinct claims regarding scholarship, performative violence, victim-centered documentary film,

and even artwork drawn by gang members, all assertions address and support one main argument—that academics and society at large will gain a deeper understanding of the crisis that twenty-first-century narcotic violence presents by approaching this tragic topic within the context of those who experience its brutality.

Contemporary narcotic trafficking in the Western Hemisphere serves as a crucial topic for Latin American scholars due to the severity and grotesque nature of the associated violence, along with the high number of victims in Mexico and Central America. In 2007, Mexico's militarization of its "war" on drugs—an integration of tanks, heavy artillery, and armed soldiers into an already volatile scenario of fluctuating cartel leadership—escalated violence to an extreme level.¹ The Igarapé Institute² reports that "43 of the 50 most murderous cities in the world last year [2016], and eight of the top ten countries, are in Latin America and the Caribbean...Conflicts between gangs, corruption and weak public institutions all contribute to the high levels of violence across the region."³ When taken into account that these areas are not formally recognized war zones, the amount of violence and number of victims are staggering. In addition, this violence is gruesome. Murderers leave corpses on display in order to "intimidate, dehumanize, and dominate" public opinion.⁴ They hang battered bodies from city bridges, publicly threaten social leaders who call for change, and release filmed footage of bloody

¹ Paul Gootenberg, "Blowback: The Mexican Drug Crisis," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 43, no. 6 (November 2010): 7, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2, 2016).

² According to their website, the Igarapé Institute is an "independent think and do tank devoted to evidence-based policy and action on complex security, justice and development challenges in Brazil, Latin America, and Africa. The Institute's goal is to stimulate debate, foster connections and trigger action." See "About Igarapé," Igarapé Institute, accessed July 21, 2017, <https://igarape.org.br/en/about/about-igarape/>.

³ "The World's Most Dangerous Cities," *The Economist*, March 31, 2017, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/03/daily-chart-23>.

⁴ Howard Campbell, "Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican 'Drug War': An Anthropological Perspective," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (March 2014): 60, doi: 10.1177/0094582X12443519.

executions over the Internet.⁵ Despite that it has already attracted significant publicity, the gravity of this particular violence continues to demand scholarly attention.

In addition, the consequences of bilateral responsibility between Mexico and the U.S., including the allocation of funds appropriated for counter-trafficking, render drugs and violence a crucial topic. Since its 2008 inception, Mérida Initiative funding—U.S. support directed, in part, toward Mexico’s military and law enforcement for the purposes of combating narcotic trafficking—carries human rights stipulations; however, high-profile events, such as the disappearance of forty-three students in Iguala, and rising homicide rates speak to ongoing violations.⁶ Developments regarding law enforcement agency cooperation across borders and questions on how current and future U.S. administrations will address funding to Mexico make the issue of drugs and violence pertinent to international relations and hemispheric cooperation.

Finally, the global significance of Central American refugees fleeing northward from drug violence demands social attention. Many humanitarian organizations refer to mass migration as an urgent global concern.⁷ An influx of violence in Central America related to criminal gang activity has triggered many refugees to flee north in hopes of escaping

⁵ For photographs and references to digital media pertaining to narcotic violence, see Blog del Narco, *Dying for the Truth: Undercover inside Mexico’s Violent Drug War* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2013).

⁶ Eric L. Olson, “The Mérida Initiative and Shared Responsibility in U.S.-Mexico Security Relations: How a Longstanding Initiative Has Shaped Cross-Border Cooperation,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 2017, <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/after-the-storm-in-u-s-mexico-relations/the-m-rida-initiative-and-shared-responsibility-in-u-s-mexico-security-relations/>.

⁷ See Christine Lagarde, “Migration: A Global Issue in Need of a Global Solution,” *International Monetary Fund Blog*, November 11, 2015, <https://blogs.imf.org/2015/11/11/migration-a-global-issue-in-need-of-a-global-solution/>; Sam Jones, “One in Every 113 People Forced to Flee, Says UN Refugee Agency,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/20/one-in-every-113-people-uprooted-war-persecution-says-un-refugee-agency>; and Zach Dyer, “Migration Is One of the Most Challenging Issues of the 21st Century, Says UN Official,” *The Tico Times*, September 19, 2014, <http://www.ticotimes.net/2014/09/19/migration-is-one-of-the-most-challenging-issues-of-the-21st-century-says-un-official>.

persecution.⁸ “Since 2008, UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] has recorded a nearly fivefold increase in asylum-seekers arriving to the United States” from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador and “a thirteenfold increase in the number of requests for asylum from within Central America and Mexico—a staggering indicator of the surging violence shaking the region.”⁹ In these countries, women frequently fall victim to gang violence in their communities, as well as domestic violence in their own homes, forcing them to flee for safety.¹⁰ Narcotic violence serves as an important topic for our society, because it touches on global migration concerns and gender issues that impact Latin American lives.

This thesis explores twenty-first-century narcotic violence and its cultural impact within a framework that incorporates the perspective of victims—frequently, migrants, women, and other marginalized Latin Americans swept up in narco culture. In chapter one, I highlight scholarship that, despite its different academic fields, adopts an approach in some way focused on narco violence, culture, and victims. In chapter two, I discuss Performance Studies theory. I then narrow this focus to twenty-first-century narcotic violence and engage with what Andrew Lantz refers to as “performativity.”¹¹ I incorporate Lantz’s work, because it represents some of the most recent research pertaining to the performative aspects of this violence and its cultural implications. He explores the ritualistic patterns of this brutality and offers significant

⁸ In my own research in Ixtepec, of those migrants interviewed, they most frequently expressed fear regarding Los Zetas, MS-13, and uniformed officials, though the identity of those agents or their organization was unclear.

⁹ “Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico,” forward by António Guterres, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, March 30, 2016, 4, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/56fc31864/women-on-the-run-fullreport.html?query=women%20on%20the%20run>.

¹⁰ “Women on the Run,” 4.

¹¹ Andrew Lantz, “The Performativity of Violence: Abducting Agency in Mexico’s Drug War,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 253-269, doi:10.1080/13569325.2016.1148019.

contributions regarding cartel objectives to intimidate the public and usurp state power.

However, I argue that a more victim-centered framework—one that deciphers performative violence’s messages within the context of the victims’ suffering—sheds additional light on the language of violence.

In order to better understand victims and violence in narco culture, I look to documentary film and artwork. In chapter three, I explore how Rebecca Cammisa’s *Which Way Home* (2009) and Shaul Schwarz’s *Narco Cultura* (2013) contribute to the drugs and violence discourse. These films provide the victim’s perspective or “voice.” Yet, depicting victims of violent crime presents challenges for filmmakers; by showing the body, they risk perpetuating the cartels’ objectives. I address the issue of ethical victim representation in Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita extraviada* (2001) and argue that, by featuring photographs of victims alive and well as their families remembered them, rather than gruesome images of violence, her film allows viewers to develop empathy for victims without perpetuating graphic images. In chapter four, I analyze artistic interpretations of narco culture in the drawings of gang-affiliated convicts near the border. This artwork frequently features metaphors of the Mexican Revolution or a glorified Aztec past. Rather than represent haphazard and surreal images of violence, these drawings speak a “language” that echoes themes previously expressed by earlier intellectuals.

According to Jean Franco, “[n]either cruelty nor the exploitation of cruelty is new, but the lifting of the taboo, the acceptance and justification of cruelty and the rationale for cruel acts, have become a feature of modernity.”¹² Keeping in mind the recent escalation of narcotic

¹² Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 2.

trafficking's brutality, scholarship that addresses its violence, victims, and culture stands as an essential part of Latin American research.

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW OF DRUGS AND VIOLENCE

On December 1, 2012, Felipe Calderón's government came to an end. His presidency bears the burden of more than 80,000 people killed in the "war on drugs," over 20,000 disappeared, around 200,000 driven from their homes by the violence, and hundreds of thousands of victims of kidnappings, extortion, and general violence. Mexican society and the international community will not allow the terrible events of these last six years to be forgotten.¹³

A Tangled Web of Violence

Violence influences narcotic trafficking discourse in multiple ways. Violence is such an integral part of trafficking—particularly in the twenty-first century—that most scholars address drugs and violence together in the same conversations. Authors who publish incriminating evidence risk physical retaliation, death threats, and falling victim to the brutality they uncover and analyze.¹⁴ As a result, personal fear for oneself and one's family sometimes hinders what scholars publish, dictates how they approach their evidence, and influences which aspects they choose to emphasize. In the twenty-first century, drugs and violence are nearly inseparable and, in exposing criminal activity, authors take risks.

Many authors write narco scholarship in response to violent actions and with a sense of urgency. The 2007 escalation in violence prompted scholars in a variety of different fields to analyze the U.S.-Mexican drug trade, despite the dangers associated with researching illicit

¹³ Anabel Hernández, *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and Their Godfathers*, trans. Iain Bruce and Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Verso, 2014), 8.

¹⁴ Hernández, *Narcoland*, x.

activity. The rising death toll south of the U.S. border firmly establishes the topic's relevancy and often looms in the narrative's background, regardless of the scholarship's focus. Because authors are trying to make sense of ongoing and imminent brutality, they frequently call for prompt action or seek some type of immediate relief.

Many scholars employ one of two approaches when exploring drugs and violence. The first method frames this topic socially, from the top down, examining the structure and organization of larger groups or entities. Political scientists, sociologists, criminologists, and even economists often structure their assertions around the interaction between cartels, the Mexican state, and the U.S. government. These authors frequently source statistical data, while seeking to clarify a broader quantifiable picture. The second method examines this topic from the bottom or "ground" up, shedding light on how narco trafficking and violence impact individuals and communities. This cultural framework frequently sources eyewitness accounts and informant interviews. Anthropologists, historians, and journalists seek better understanding through personal stories, religion, music, and art. Of course, many scholars incorporate both approaches, regardless of their field.

The bulk of this research stands as contemporary, interwoven, and complex. Narco scholarship is easy to identify upon sight, but despite common patterns, each work's framing of violence, victims, and culture is unique. For the scholars below, culture, victimization, or gender frequently serve as topics or as methodological points of entry regarding the narcotics trade and assist me as academic points of reference by which to engage in my own analysis. Pertinent to my own work, below I review narco scholarship from different academic disciplines, which highlights culture and victims ensnarled in a tangled web of violence.

On Culture and Victims

Rather than analyzing key decision makers or events, much of this scholarship focuses on how organized trafficking influences the surrounding culture. A cultural approach serves scholars looking to understand drugs and violence with potentially less chance for dire consequences that naming primary actors might trigger. *Narcocultura*—the print media, music, entertainment, and religion developing amid drugs and violence—provides a point of entry by which scholars may assess events with potentially less fear of personal retaliation. By examining the cultural consequences of trafficking, scholars can extrapolate as to what instigated such artistic and social expressions.

In addition, focusing on victims, rather than key players or criminal organizations, serves scholars in the wake of scarce or missing written evidence. I include in my review how authors frame gender, because women are frequently victimized in narco trafficking and the surrounding culture. By its very nature, illicit activity takes place “under the radar” and perpetrators refrain from documenting their criminal actions. Some scholars, such as journalists, rely on their own investigations, informants, and personally recorded testimonies, rather than official records. In fact, even the term “official” raises eyebrows, because several authors accuse law enforcement agencies and governments of complicity or even outright participation in criminal activity. Therefore, many scholars conduct fieldwork rather than seeking out what little reliable written documentation exists. They frequently include women in their discussions highlighting their marginalization.

Historical monographs represent a smaller portion of drugs and violence scholarship, perhaps due in part to the recent nature of the escalation of violence. Paul Gootenberg’s *Andean*

Cocaine offers a grand trajectory of the drug's history, from the coca plant and its cultural significance for the Peruvians, to cocaine's molecular discovery and implementation in medicine, and finally to its status as money-making recreational narcotic.¹⁵ In *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War,"* Mexican poet and playwright, Carmen Boullosa, along with her husband, American historian, Mike Wallace, discuss the U.S.'s role and responsibility in the drug trade.¹⁶ Using the 2014 disappearance of forty-three students in Iguala, Mexico as a point of entry, they provide a very broad, yet limited perspective of the key events leading up to this tragedy that reads more like social commentary calling for changes in international relations than a monograph. Some mainstream authors targeting the general public focus on events of the past, particularly with biographies and stories of vigilantism.¹⁷ But, the unreliability of written sources may deter some historians who are accustomed to archival work, and the personal danger in researching illicit activity remains a topic of concern.

In *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs*, historian Isaac Campos traces how the perception of marijuana in Mexico changed over time from a utilitarian plant grown for its fiber in the colony to an "indigenous 'narcotic' causing madness, violence, and mayhem" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁸ Published in 2012, *Home*

¹⁵ See Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, *A Narco History: How the United States and Mexico Jointly Created the "Mexican Drug War"* (New York: OR Books, 2015).

¹⁷ See Mark Bowden, *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (New York: Grove Press, 2015); Gabriel García Márquez, *News of a Kidnapping* (New York: Vintage International, 1997); and Joseph Wambaugh, *Lines & Shadows* (New York: Marrow, 1984).

¹⁸ Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 2.

Grown won the Best Book Prize from the New England Council of Latin American Studies and received an Honorable Mention for the Bryce Wood Book Award from the Latin American Studies Association. According to Campos, in 1920 the Mexican government banned marijuana, nearly twenty years *before* the United States passed similar laws.¹⁹ Campos asserts that historians have not given Latin American drug laws enough attention and have wrongly situated the war on drugs as stemming solely from the U.S.²⁰ He claims that late twentieth-century militarization began with early twentieth-century prohibition—in Mexico, not in the U.S.²¹ Consequently, the negative perception of marijuana as a “Schedule 1” narcotic and its resulting prohibition did not originate with the U.S., but rather were “home grown” in Mexico.²²

This controversial assertion—that Mexico influenced the U.S.—challenges traditional claims that America, with its wealth and stronger military power, manipulated Mexico. To prove his assertions, Campos chronologically follows how attitudes toward marijuana changed: first, Mexicans respected the plant for its material properties, then reluctantly accepted it as an indigenous hallucinogen, and finally labeled it as a dangerous narcotic that induced fits of madness and violence. He analyzes how these ideas influenced Mexican national law, which in turn, shaped U.S. legislation. Campos does not reveal any new, recently uncovered sources, but rather reinterprets previously studied evidence.

Although he offers a new historical perspective, I focus on *Home Grown*, because of Campos’s methodology and sources. He frames his argument through a transnational lens that

¹⁹ Campos, *Home Grown*, 4.

²⁰ Campos, *Home Grown*, 4.

²¹ Campos, *Home Grown*, 4.

²² Campos, *Home Grown*, 5.

focuses on Mexico's and the U.S.'s prohibition legislation, but he also highlights social reactions with particular emphasis on cultural symbolism. In looking to print media consumed by the working classes in the form of turn-of-the-century "broadsheets and chapbooks" for the illiterate—many of which contained characters connected to marijuana—he examines Mexico's social perception of the drug.²³ Campos emphasizes the significance of popular reaction and goes so far as to relate culture to symbolism, meaning, and messaging.²⁴ By analyzing the broadsheet drawings of characters who used marijuana, Campos discerns the visual symbols that communicated marijuana's cultural meaning and assesses how the lower classes interpreted these graphic messages. Thus, as a historian, Campos adopts a cultural framework in order to better understand the history of marijuana's illicit status and negative reputation.

In *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime*, historian Elaine Carey highlights women's roles in twentieth-century narcotic trafficking by chronologically tracing the change over time in how women participated in the U.S.-Mexican drug trade with emphasis on gender identity and cultural perception.²⁵ Despite the lack of scholarship pertaining to women, she argues that they have played an active role in narcotic trafficking "despite their fetishized representations in popular culture" and their portrayals as "secondary characters" who take a

²³ Campos, *Home Grown*, 156-157.

²⁴ Campos, *Home Grown*, 157-158.

²⁵ Elaine Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers: Mules, Bosses, and Organized Crime* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014). For additional information on women and trafficking, see anthropologist Howard Campbell's *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 40-52 and 60-75. Although he details the history of key female traffickers, he also conducts interviews with women bosses and directly challenges single-sided assessments of women in other scholarship, such as Charles Bowden's *A Shadow in the City: Confessions of an Undercover Drug Warrior* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005). Also see Campbell's "Female Drug Smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gender, Crime, and Empowerment," *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2008): 233-268.

back seat to their male counterparts.²⁶ She points to a new generation of academics, in particular “anthropologists, criminologists, and sociologists,” that have incorporated women into their examinations of the global drug trade.²⁷ Although she cites twentieth-century historians, including Paul Gootenberg and Isaac Campos, she also includes anthropological and ethnographic studies by Howard Campbell, Oscar Lewis, and Elijah Wald (discussed below). Carey employs a transnational, interdisciplinary, gendered approach and argues that women successfully functioned as smugglers and profiteers amid a global narcotics trade dominated by men.

Much of Carey’s scholarship sheds light on the depiction of women in film, literature, and music, culturally enriching her historical study. Carey explores how “narconarratives”—stories of “deviancy” about narcotics—and *narcocorridos*—traditional *norteña* ballad music that boasts violent lyrics about traffickers—both “change over time to reflect shifts in laws, technology, and politically and criminologically infused popular interpretations.”²⁸ While Carey discusses cultural concepts of symbolism and messaging like Campos (dubbed “open secrets”), she appropriately notes that men in the drug trade, including federal agents, are “celebrated in song, literature, film, and other media,” while, “the victimization of women and children remains tangential to the encomiums of performative masculinity.”²⁹ Therefore, Carey explores both cultural perception and victimization, adding acute levels of social complexity to her gendered approach.

²⁶ Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers*, 2.

²⁷ Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers*, 3.

²⁸ Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers*, 5.

²⁹ Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers*, 13.

Both Campos and Carey enhance their discussions of drugs and violence by including popular culture evidence, either through print media, literature, or film. Carey takes cultural analysis one step further and assesses how gender influences popular depictions of strength and victimization. Their cultural approaches help fill in the “gaps” of missing or unavailable evidence—a common barrier for any historian, but perhaps more so for those scholars studying narcotic trafficking, due to its illicit and risky nature. For these historians, cultural approaches that recognize gender prove as useful methods of analysis.

Although Campos and Carey discuss violence as a form of intimidation, neither scholar touches on publicized violence—for example, public hangings and filmed decapitations—to the extent of journalist Anabel Hernández. In *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and Their Godfathers*, Hernández provides the culmination of five years of investigative journalism at great personal risk to herself in order to deliver a near 400-page, gritty account of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century drug trafficking.³⁰ In 2012, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers awarded her the Golden Pen of Freedom in Ukraine and, in 2014, she was awarded the Hans Verploeg Memorial Fund Award for journalistic heroism.³¹ Hernández makes bold claims about major players and political initiatives from the 1970s onward. First, she argues that, in order for “semi-illiterate peasants” like Joaquín Guzmán or “El Chapo,” the Sinaloa Cartel’s leader, to have accumulated such authority, “businessmen, politicians, and policemen, and all those who exercise everyday power from behind a false halo

³⁰ Hernández, *Narcoland*, 5. *Narcoland* was originally published in Spanish as *Los señores del narco* in 2010.

³¹ Hernández, *Narcoland*, inside cover.

of legality” must have directly contributed to their successes.³² While Hernández points the finger at cartel leaders, she also identifies politicians, social elites, and business organizations on both sides of the border—those she dubs “the true godfathers of *Narcoland*”—that have either directly contributed to narcotic violence through trafficking, or indirectly, by facilitating shipments or laundering money.³³ Second, she claims that the “war on drugs” under the Calderón administration was “fake” and, in fact, sheltered the interests of the Sinaloa Cartel, thus firmly establishing criminal ties to the Mexican government.³⁴

I include *Narcoland* in this review, because it represents one of the most cited works on narcotic violence.³⁵ Hernández does not frame her assertions around “big-picture” political initiatives like Campos and Carey, but rather focuses on more localized events (like the Camarena Affair and the murder of Cardinal Posadas) through “on-the-ground” research in the form of interviews and personal accounts, including those of victims. She frequently references her own interviews with undercover informants, cartel members, hit men, DEA agents, priests, and U.S. government officials. Hernández builds on the work of other published journalists, including those whose investigations got them killed.³⁶ In addition, she frequently cross-references the evidence that her interviewees provide with other sources in much the same way scholars confirm their written evidence. Due to its numerous interviews and eyewitness

³² Hernández, *Narcoland*, 6.

³³ Hernández, *Narcoland*, 6.

³⁴ Hernández, *Narcoland*, 7.

³⁵ Hernández is cited multiple times in Boullosa and Wallace, *A Narco History*; in Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London: Zed Books, 2012); in Ioan Grillo’s *Gangster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields, and the New Politics of Latin America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); and in Michael Deibert’s *In the Shadow of Saint Death: The Gulf Cartel and the Price of America’s Drug War in Mexico* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2014), among others.

³⁶ Hernández, *Narcoland*, x-xi.

accounts, Hernández offers an edgy, front-line investigation that serves scholars—not as secondary source commentary, but rather as primary evidence—providing contemporary, first-hand reports surrounding narcotic violence.

Because Hernández highlights unfortunate female inmates in the Puente Grande prison, rather than simply discussing El Chapo's incarceration, she approaches drugs and violence with a compassionate, gendered perspective. Her chapter, "The Lord of Puente Grande," details El Chapo's time in the Mexican prison and, more importantly, sheds light on the horrific experiences suffered by the female inmates. The women Hernández describes did not reside in any separate building or wing, which left them vulnerable to the sexual whims of the men, including El Chapo.³⁷ Zulema Yulia Hernández, a young inmate, was subjected to two abortions after getting pregnant by El Chapo to avoid political scandal for the federal prison; later, she attempted suicide.³⁸ Like other women in Puente Grande, male inmates and prison officials abused her.³⁹ This subjugation and lack of proper medical attention took its toll: "through the bars of her cell she would open her legs and display herself. It was perhaps a last act of revolt. They had reduced her to this: a piece of meat available to the highest bidder."⁴⁰ Like Carey, Hernández provides a gendered perspective by highlighting the victimization of women.

Another journalistic account, Michael Deibert's *In the Shadow of Saint Death: The Gulf Cartel and the Price of America's Drug War in Mexico*, reports on cartel dynamics, turf wars,

³⁷ Hernández, *Narcoland*, 125.

³⁸ Hernández, *Narcoland*, 125.

³⁹ Hernández, *Narcoland*, 125.

⁴⁰ Hernández, *Narcoland*, 126.

and extreme violence.⁴¹ Resembling Hernández in both style and approach, Deibert assesses blame to specific politicians, law enforcement organizations, and cartel leaders. He also relies heavily on interviews and eyewitness accounts, building on the work of previous journalists, including Hernández herself. Published four years after *Narcoland*'s initial Spanish publication, *Saint Death* serves as a limited continuation, picking up where Hernández left off.

Deibert illustrates the complications a territory war and its extreme violence perpetuate for the surrounding culture. He emphasizes brutality and drives home the urgency of the situation for certain parts of Mexico by zeroing in on the gory war between the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas.⁴² As such, he discusses violence much more than any of the previous authors. In graphic detail, he relates the 2011 Veracruz massacre in which thirty-five “bound, tortured, and semi-nude bodies—including those of twelve women” all carved with a large “Z,” were dumped in the streets as a warning message.⁴³ He goes on to assert how cartels employ such public displays of violence as forms of communication and how the Internet and websites like Blog Del Narco play a significant role in disseminating graphic images; however, he does not analyze the violence itself other than its gruesomeness.⁴⁴ Deibert carefully weaves into his narrative how narcotic violence impacts language and religion. He explores the vocabulary resulting from such extreme brutality by highlighting recent “neologisms”: “from *narcocorridos* (narco songs) to *narcomantas* (narco banners) to *narcobloqueos* (narco blockades)” and finally “*narcofosas*

⁴¹ Michael Deibert, *In the Shadow of Saint Death: The Gulf Cartel and the Price of America's Drug War in Mexico* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2014).

⁴² Deibert, *Saint Death*, xiv.

⁴³ Deibert, *Saint Death*, 187.

⁴⁴ Deibert, *Saint Death*, 188-189, 200. For more information on filmed executions by cartels, see Alfredo Corchado's *Midnight in Mexico: A Reporter's Journey through a Country's Descent into Darkness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).

(narco graves).”⁴⁵ In addition, he makes several references to the narco “saints,” Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte, as omens of trafficking’s cultural impact.⁴⁶

Although Deibert discusses victims, he lacks Hernández’s empathetic framing of gender. In his chapter, “The Ghosts of San Fernando,” Deibert stresses the transnational nature of narcotic violence by exploring how cartels target migrants from Central America, Ecuador, and Brazil, passing through Mexico.⁴⁷ However, he overlooks the disadvantage many women face in a country and culture characterized by *machismo*. For example, he refers to Zulema Hernández as the “sometimes mistress” of El Chapo and “an active participant in the drug trade.”⁴⁸ Deibert does not explain to what extent she helped Guzmán in his illicit activity—only that she “was found dead in Mexico City, the letter ‘Z’ carved into at least three different parts of her body.”⁴⁹ Keeping in mind Anabel Hernández’s tragic account of the brutality experienced by Zulema and other women in El Puente Grande, one questions why Deibert even points out her complicity. Although his assessment of Zulema’s relationship with El Chapo may or may not hold true, emphasizing the violent way she dies ignores her painful experiences in prison as a woman.

Other authors besides journalists also conduct interviews and explore various aspects of narco culture. Elijah Wald’s *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and*

⁴⁵ Deibert, *Saint Death*, xiii.

⁴⁶ Deibert, *Saint Death*, xvi-xvii, 6-7. For other works on Jesús Malverde, see Chapter 11 in Sam Quinones, *True Tales from Another Mexico: The Lynch Mob, the Popsicle Kings, Chalino, and the Bronx* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001) and Chapters 2 and 5 in Shaylih Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Deibert, *Saint Death*, 129. For a more in depth look at migrants and cartel violence, see Óscar Martínez’s *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (London: Verso, 2013). A highly respected journalist for *El Faro*.net, Martínez continues his investigations with El Salvadorians and Hondurans targeted by cartels south of the Mexican border in *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America* (New York: Verso, 2016).

⁴⁸ Deibert, *Saint Death*, 75.

⁴⁹ Deibert, *Saint Death*, 75.

Guerrillas employs an ethnographic approach, exploring the people, music, and culture in Mexico surrounding the drug trade.⁵⁰ *Narcocorrido* serves as a staple, primary source for academics studying drugs and violence; because it was published in 2001, it offers a “slice of life” perspective on narco trafficking before the 2007 escalation in violence. One might expect academics to shy away from this type of relaxed, “travel log” research; however, scholars including Elaine Carey, Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallace, Howard Campbell, and Mark Edberg cite his work.⁵¹ Wald takes a “ground-based” approach to collecting evidence—he hitchhikes across Mexico.⁵² He interviews popular song writers, musicians, and random fans—individuals who both produce and consume *narcocorridos*, the “ballads of the drug traffic.”⁵³ He argues for the cultural significance of this music in that the “corrido world provides a street-level view of all the surreal juxtapositions of modern Mexico: the extreme poverty and garish wealth, the elaborate courtesy and brutal violence, the corruption and craziness, sincerity and mythologizing, poetry and excitement and romance.”⁵⁴

During his travels, Wald explores how violent drug trafficking supports local artists, which allows him to emphasize the complexity of narco culture. In his chapter, “Sinaloa Legends: Narcoculture, Violence, and Jesús Malverde,” Wald travels to Culiacán, the capital city

⁵⁰ Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas* (New York: Rayo, 2001). In 2001, an accompanying CD of the same name with featured music was released through Fonovisa. For other works on *narcocorridos*, see Mark Cameron Edberg’s *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004) and James Nicolopoulos, trans. and ed., *The Roots of the Narcocorrido* (El Cerrito, CA: Arhoolie, 2004) with accompanying CD.

⁵¹ Carey cites Wald in *Women Drug Traffickers*; Boullosa and Wallace cite Wald in *A Narco History*; Campbell cites Wald in *Drug War Zone*; and Edberg cites Wald in *El Narcotraficante*.

⁵² Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 6.

⁵³ Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 2.

⁵⁴ Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 6.

of Sinaloa, infamous for its narcotic violence.⁵⁵ Despite its drug connections, he finds a city rich with “novels, symposia, exhibitions, and sociological studies devoted to regional crime,” in part, funded by the narcotics trade and wealthy drug lords.⁵⁶ His story illustrates how the prosperity of trafficking—which takes lives and threatens citizens—also provides artistic and academic culture. In addition, Wald explores narco culture’s paradoxical nature by relaying his experiences with the followers of Jesús Malverde. A Robin Hood-type hero, *El Bandido Generoso* serves as the unsanctioned patron saint of narco traffickers seeking safe passage and profitable dealings.⁵⁷ Rather than leave customary tokens of gratitude, pilgrims have adopted unconventional rituals—many visitors hire *mariachis* to sing narco corridos at his alter, while other worshipers leave beer, narcotics, and even firearms.⁵⁸ Thus, Wald’s discussion of Malverde reveals the complex duality of *narcocultura*; one might expect a saint to exemplify purity and peace, yet Malverde’s followers bring symbols of violence that demonstrate “an alternative blend of sanctity and criminality.”⁵⁹

Whereas Wald examines songs, anthropologist Hugo Benavides analyzes popular melodramas and how they relate to Mexican culture and border identity in *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America*.⁶⁰ Benavides defines *telenovelas* as “soap operas” that frequently depict emotional plot lines and controversial situations such as “illegitimate children, misplaced identity...and the ever-productive notion of forbidden desires,

⁵⁵ Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 47.

⁵⁶ Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 56.

⁵⁷ Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 61-62.

⁵⁸ Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 62.

⁵⁹ Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 62.

⁶⁰ O. Hugo Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas: Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

sexual and otherwise.”⁶¹ Narco-dramas display the same heightened emotion and scandalous situations as in other *telenovelas*, but focus specifically on the violent nature of the drug trafficking world. His bibliography yields such authors as Benedict Anderson, Samuel Beckett, Michel Foucault, Jean Genet, and James C. Scott. Although he frequently speaks in generalizations and his text lacks footnotes, he provides valuable insight regarding melodrama and performed violence on television.

Benavides analyzes how depictions of violence on the screen impact perceptions of victimization along the border. He structures his discussion of fictional violence around symbolism, much the same way Campos frames his assertions around print media and its cultural perception. Narco-drama violence represents “primal” expressions of power and identity, because it “serves both as the figurative symbol with which to express the profound vulnerability of life along the border, but also because, like all symbols, it is able to express almost infinite numbers of effects and meanings without being easily depleted.”⁶² Therefore, in these *telenovelas*, various acts of performed violence explain the helplessness some individuals in the volatile urban areas along the border region experience and justify their perceived identification as victims. He does not apply these assertions to the more recent escalation of violence, because most of his research was complete when Mexico’s situation deteriorated.

Benavides also analyzes narco-dramatic interpretations of gender; however, rather than discussing the victimization of women, he explores their roles as aggressors. He dedicates a full chapter to Teresa Mendoza, the protagonist in Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s novel *La Reina del Sur*,

⁶¹ Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas*, 1-2.

⁶² Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas*, 121.

later made into a *telenovela*. Both the book and the narco-drama depict Teresa as a strong, cunning woman who, through wits and drive, rises to power as a trafficker. According to Benavides, as objects of men's desire, both fictional and real-life women "figure as the most powerful of subjects, leaving behind their stereotyped positioning as objects. Just as in real life, women in the narco-drama wield an enormous amount of power, equal to or even beyond men's..."⁶³ Thus, Benavides lends significant authority to women, both in *telenovelas* and in "real life." Carey and Hernández would probably disagree with his assertion regarding women's power. Although Carey highlights powerful, historical women, she points out that these notoriously fierce traffickers represent the *exceptions* to narco culture and not necessarily the norm. Certainly, Hernández's discussion regarding the extent to which men abused the women in Puente Grande would raise doubts as to how much power women in narco trafficking really wield.

Conclusions

The scholarship discussed above exemplifies how academics have approached the U.S.-Mexican drugs and violence topic. It is far from an exhaustive list but provides frameworks relevant to my own research. Instead of focusing on key players or events, many authors explore culture and victims. Campos and Carey highlight change over time and include popular culture and gender in their assertions. Hernández and Deibert provide front-line perspectives, focusing on violence and victims, including women. Finally, Wald and Benavides explore music, television, or culture amid growing narcotic violence. Cultural perspectives and those

⁶³ Benavides, *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas*, 125.

approaches that incorporate victims offer ways to explore drugs and violence in the wake of limited written evidence. Taking a cue from these authors, I too frame my discussion around cultural evidence and victimization.

CHAPTER 2

VICTIMS AND VIOLENCE

...And then, there is the fear generated by your exhibitionist cruelty. In the map of organized crime that now comprises more than half of Mexico's territory, the civilian population wakes up everyday to fear; fear of being kidnapped or having a relative kidnapped; fear of going out and becoming a victim of random violence; fear of being robbed, beaten up, shot at, mutilated, raped. The gruesome images that document and (indirectly) perpetrate this fear appear daily in the front pages of the newspapers and comprise half of the national newscasts. Some of your legendary "revenge" YouTube videos became more popular than those showcasing beheadings by Al Caeda. Your sadism is carefully staged but who are you performing for?

--Guillermo Gómez-Peña: An Open Letter from an Artist to a Mexican Crime Cartel Boss⁶⁴

The 2007 escalation in violence captured the media's attention, acquired international exposure, and, tragically, obtained a wide viewing audience through the Internet. As the violence gained momentum, so too did the publicity, which prompted performance artist and activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña to write his (part fictitious, part all-too-real) "Open Letter from an Artist to a Mexican Crime Cartel Boss," quoted above, in which he questions the brutality's performative qualities.

Despite ample quantitative data on narco-related violence in Mexico, analytical scholarship exploring the cultural implications of its visible nature remains arguably nascent. The first wave of scholarship that addresses this escalation went to print around 2009. Most of

⁶⁴ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "An Open Letter from an Artist to a Mexican Crime Cartel Boss," In These Times, February 7, 2011, http://inthesetimes.com/article/6849/an_open_letter_from_an_artist_to_a_mexican_crime_cartel_boss.

this work represents government reports, other agency-funded research, and the scholarship of those academics seeking to quantify and categorize extreme violence.⁶⁵ Over the next few years, academics with a cultural focus contributed fieldwork and offered scholarship that defines the perpetrators and their actions within the political context of propaganda and terrorism.⁶⁶ Because this extreme violence gained notoriety only within the last decade, scholarship pertaining to the performative nature of narco violence remains in its earlier stages.

In the first part of this chapter, I explore performance theory and its verbiage in scholarship as it pertains to violence. I then formulate my own definition of performative violence in narco culture. In the second part, I engage with Andrew Lantz's interdisciplinary scholarship from 2016 on the performativity of drug violence, because his research represents some of the most recent work pertaining to this brutality, its performative aspects, and its cultural consequences. Lantz notes that much of this violence forms a "language" through representative patterns that speak to intimidation and social control. He includes in his discussion such terms as *message*, *performativity*, and *spectacle*, which in his work represent overlapping concepts. Although these valuable contributions offer a greater understanding regarding the nature of extreme narco violence, they remain limited, because he structures his assertions around the actions and objectives of the cartels. I argue that by incorporating an additional framework—one

⁶⁵ See June S. Beittel, "Mexico's Drug-Related Violence," Congressional Research Service, Report for Congress, R40582, May 27, 2009, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40582.pdf>; Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, "Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 1 (2010): 145-178, doi: 10.1080/09592310903561668; George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010); and Carlos Martin, "Categorization of Narcomessages in Mexico: An Appraisal of the Attempts to Influence Public Perception and Policy Actions," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 1 (2012): 76-93, doi: 10.1080/1057610X.2012.631459 among others.

⁶⁶ See Campbell, "Narco-Propaganda," 60-77; and Howard Campbell and Tobin Hansen, "Is Narco-Violence in Mexico Terrorism?" *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 33, no. 2 (2014): 158-173, doi: 10.1111/blar.12145.

that interprets this extreme violence within the context of the victims' suffering, as opposed to the aggressors' motivations—this extra perspective offers new interpretations regarding narco violence that shed light on deciphering this visual brutality.

On Performance

Performance Studies—an interdisciplinary curriculum focused on “behavior,” “artistic practice,” “fieldwork,” and social “advocacies” and that frequently recognizes a cultural disparity in power—has gained momentum among scholars studying Latin America within the last thirty years.⁶⁷ Angela Marino describes the recent evolution of this approach as a “turn”; performance as a method of analysis attracts scholars interested in behavior and action, and reflects a shift in focus from the immobile object to an embodied “process.”⁶⁸ These theories had roots in performance art, but began incorporating ideas from other disciplines from the 1970s onward.⁶⁹ Marino credits Richard Schechner for his pioneering work in building on anthropological ideas to merge performance with social activism.⁷⁰ Thus, she highlights the interdisciplinary nature of performance studies and its connections to political resistance.

The performance turn had a significant impact on Latin American Studies, because it privileged actions and ritualistic behavior as evidence over written documentation. Borrowing theories from Judith Butler and J. L. Austin, some scholars recognized that “the loci of critical

⁶⁷ Richard Schechner, “What is Performance Studies?” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 5, no. 2 (2013): 2, http://rupkatha.com/V5/n2/02_What_is_Performance_Studies_Richard_Schechner.pdf. Here, Schechner offers a comprehensive definition of “performance” as “a ‘broad spectrum’ or ‘continuum’ of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet [sic].” (p. 2-3)

⁶⁸ Angela Marino, “The Performance Turn,” in *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Culture and Power*, ed. Juan Poblete (New York: Routledge, 2018), 146.

⁶⁹ Marino, “The Performance Turn,” 146.

⁷⁰ Marino, “The Performance Turn,” 146.

intervention are an ever moving target and better approached as relational and interdependent acts.”⁷¹ This framework impacted how Latin American scholars approached research in their various fields, because it introduced new possibilities in analyzing customs. Textual information was no longer the only form of viable evidence. Performance Studies recognizes that “[t]he knowledge transmitted in the gestural, the communal, spatial and temporal experience requires different kinds of analysis and approaches.”⁷² Thus, through performance theory, cultural and social practices such as funeral processions, parades, and political rallies have developed new meaning for Latin American scholars.

Performance theory offers additional insight regarding twenty-first-century drug trafficking due to the performative nature of some narcotic violence. Diana Taylor has noted the possibilities that performances in Latin America provide for scholars, particularly when written documentation is scarce.⁷³ Taylor, founding director of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, argues that scholars who employ performance as a point of entry shed light on overlooked events and unrecognized ideas: “[s]o if America *is* not a performance, it can be analyzed *as* one.”⁷⁴ While Performance Studies encompasses a variety of topics, in another work, Taylor extends her theories specifically to violence in that “[t]rauma, by nature, is performatic.”⁷⁵ Jean Franco discusses the brutal characteristics of rape that took place in Guatemala and Peru during the 1980s and 1990s; although she does not employ the terms

⁷¹ Marino, “The Performance Turn,” 147.

⁷² Marino, “The Performance Turn,” 147.

⁷³ Marino, “The Performance Turn,” 147.

⁷⁴ Diana Taylor, “Remapping Genre through Performance: From ‘American’ to ‘Hemispheric’ Studies,” *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (October 2007): 1417-1418, http://townsendgroups.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/taylor_pmla.pdf.

⁷⁵ Diana Taylor, “Trauma and Performance: Lessons from Latin America,” *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (October 2006): 1675, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1674>.

performative or *performance*, she structures her discussion around ritualistic behavior and advocates for human rights.⁷⁶ Performance Studies theory contributes to the drugs and violence discussion, because much of the violence after the 2007 escalation took on “performative” qualities.

Carleen Basler, Thomas Dumm, and Austin Sarat explore how various academic fields interpret the performativity of violence and the extent to which its framework fits within a political context. Although they do not limit their discussion to Latin America, they connect performances of violence to “[j]ustice, power, repression, revolution, all key concepts of political theory.”⁷⁷ These authors frame violence within the context of law, state repression, civil resistance, and even war—on the whole, public displays of violence—but also acknowledge private scenarios in acts of personal crime.⁷⁸ Thus, at times, their interpretations of “performances of violence” teeter very closely to the more traditional concept of performing or *committing* acts of violence.

When Basler, Dumm, and Sarat incorporate verbiage analogous to Performance Studies theory into their discussion regarding violence, they gain more traction. They emphasize the performative nature of violence through its “elaborate rituals and enactments.”⁷⁹ Thus, violence connects to performativity through its physical conventions and patterns—it is simultaneously “gruesome” and “theatrical.”⁸⁰ In addition, these authors highlight the extent to which violence

⁷⁶ Jean Franco, “Rape and Human Rights,” *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (October 2006): 1662-1664, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.5.1662>.

⁷⁷ Carleen Basler, Thomas Dumm, and Austin Sarat, “How Does Violence Perform?” in *Performances of Violence*, ed. Austin Sarat, Carleen Basler, and Thomas Dumm (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 2.

⁷⁸ Basler, Dumm, and Sarat, “How Does Violence Perform,” 3-5.

⁷⁹ Basler, Dumm, and Sarat, “How Does Violence Perform,” 2.

⁸⁰ Basler, Dumm, and Sarat, “How Does Violence Perform,” 2.

“communicates” perceived danger and shifts in power, which speak to “displays of force” or dynamic tensions between organization and chaos, as well as civility and deviance.⁸¹ Violence functions much the same as language in that “passionate utterances...can lead to violent acts, especially when the means to voice the passion are thwarted or suppressed.”⁸² Therefore, they interpret performative violence within the context of *ritual* and *language* and how society interprets the display of organization and power.

Anthropologist Howard Campbell illustrates the performative nature of narco violence near the U.S.-Mexican border in what he names “narco-propaganda.”⁸³ His article serves as an example of what Basler, Dumm, and Sarat reference in that Campbell focuses on the ritualized actions of cartels to intimidate or persuade the public through propaganda, “a distinctive form of communication and discourse.”⁸⁴ Like the authors above, he frames violence within a political context in that brutality and communication serve as the “quasi-ideological expression of criminal organizations that...have taken on many functions of the state” and argues that the cartels “should therefore be treated analytically as political entities and their narco-propaganda as a powerful new form of political discourse.”⁸⁵ Violence serves these criminal organizations (Campbell only occasionally employs the term *cartel* and then, only with quotation marks to denote its problematic appropriation) through ritualistic actions that communicate messages intended to promote their own cause or purpose against the Mexican state.

⁸¹ Basler, Dumm, and Sarat, “How Does Violence Perform,” 2.

⁸² Basler, Dumm, and Sarat, “How Does Violence Perform,” 3.

⁸³ Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda,” 60.

⁸⁴ Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda,” 61.

⁸⁵ Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda,” 60.

Despite that Campbell refrains from calling narco-propaganda violence “performative,” the similarities to the above interpretations are striking. Campbell distinguishes narco-propaganda violence as public and defines it as “spectacles of symbolic/orchestrated violence.”⁸⁶ He also employs terms which speak to the aforementioned display of power, such as “sensational public executions,” “gaudy shows of destructive force,” and “stylized violence.”⁸⁷ He goes on to explain how narco-propaganda violence demonstrates ritualistic patterns in its meaning in that certain mutilations communicate why the cartel attacked; for example, a victim found with the hands removed indicates that the individual took money or drugs.⁸⁸ According to Campbell, “[t]he ritualized presentation or spectacle of dead bodies is such a common and patterned phenomenon that a whole vocabulary has emerged” classifying the victims.⁸⁹ Here, my point is not to bring attention to the different descriptions of bodies, but rather his specific terms, *ritualized*, *spectacle*, *patterned*, and *vocabulary*, which I interpret as performance theory’s references to language and communication. Thus, despite that Campbell does not employ the term *performative*, he frames his argument about narco-propaganda violence within a political context that speaks to the ritual and language of performance.

My approach to drugs and violence fits neatly into Performance Studies conversations and, throughout the following chapters, I employ the expression *performative acts of violence*. Keeping in mind the scholarship above, here, I define performative violence in narco culture. This visual violence gained momentum after 2006 in response to Calderón’s military initiative

⁸⁶ Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda,” 64.

⁸⁷ Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda,” 65.

⁸⁸ Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda,” 66.

⁸⁹ Campbell, “Narco-Propaganda,” 66.

against the cartels, engaging the state in a war for territory and power. Vicious attacks, particularly cruel in nature, are frequently carried out in public for the community to witness; if they are perpetrated elsewhere, they often result in the display of abused corpses in highly visible places. This description speaks to brutalities such as visibly sodomized bodies hanging from expressway bridges, corpses left in telephone booths used as canvases for communicating threats, and terrorist-like executions performed on camera. Aggressors frequently film their executions and order media outlets to broadcast the footage. These publicized images frequently form ritualistic or repeated patterns that communicate why the victim was murdered. I categorize this violence as performative, because it is specifically intended, or “performed,” for public consumption and for the purpose of establishing political dominance. The fact that it is meant to be seen defines it.

Intimidation and Social Control

Looking to his recent interdisciplinary scholarship on the performativity of drug violence, Andrew Lantz begins his discussion with one incident of overtly flaunted brutality—La Familia Michoacana’s alarming exhibition of severed heads at a Uruapan nightclub in September 2006.⁹⁰ In a dramatic display of cruelty, members of La Familia burst onto the dance floor and tossed down five human heads along with a message stating that their cartel did not harm honest citizens and executed only with “divine justice.”⁹¹ Garnering the attention akin to a shocking publicity stunt, the cartel introduced themselves to the community as a brutal and “just” force with which to reckon.

⁹⁰ Lantz, “Performativity,” 253.

⁹¹ Lantz, “Performativity,” 253-254.

Using this tragic account as an example, Lantz frames his assertions regarding narcotic violence around the perpetrators of violent crime and argues that cartels use horrific acts to control citizens and to establish themselves as the acknowledged governing body. In addition to frightening nightclub patrons, Lantz emphasizes the cartel's motivations to contest the Mexican government's authority.⁹² He asserts that many cartels have developed into what Michael Warner calls a "counterpublic" in that they have established their own goals and methods apart from or against general consensus.⁹³ As a counterpublic group, these organizations can operate outside and above the law, redrawing the lines between right and wrong, good and evil.⁹⁴ Their brutal actions intimidate citizens, while usurping the powers of the established regime.

In addition, Lantz argues that cartels exercise control over the population through "corpse messaging," which entails placing notes around or on a victim.⁹⁵ Leaving messages "on scraps of cardboard, spray painted onto body-bearing blankets, or carved into the victim's skin itself," the cartels reduce flesh to a morbid canvas, horrifying witnesses.⁹⁶ Frequently, they construct a message as if the victim was personally addressing viewers—to the effect of *I did something bad, so this is what they did to me*—which not only serves as an eerie "voice" from beyond the grave, but also validates the cartels as a reigning entity that enforces "fair" justice.⁹⁷ By abandoning these bodies in places the community would normally interpret as safe zones, like parks, playgrounds, and bus stops, the cartels demonstrate their "biopolitical sovereignty," as the

⁹² Lantz, "Performativity," 254.

⁹³ Lantz, "Performativity," 254. See Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-90.

⁹⁴ Lantz, "Performativity," 256.

⁹⁵ Lantz, "Performativity," 254.

⁹⁶ Lantz, "Performativity," 261.

⁹⁷ Lantz, "Performativity," 258.

ultimate judges in determining who perishes and who survives.⁹⁸ Thus, Lantz frames his assertions regarding extreme acts of brutality within the context of cruel (yet, sometimes charismatic), rogue groups that simultaneously intimidate the general population and take control of the state's powers through a gruesome visual language.

Lantz characterizes horrifying acts of brutality in terms of implicit, visual patterns that not only intimidate the public, but also validate cartel power. Because the cartels' control over society depends on coercion, the visual impact of torture and mutilation plays a significant role in maintaining dominance. To that point, dissemination of these gruesome images, either through the Internet or media outlets, helps support and perpetuate the cartels' social control.⁹⁹ This visual cruelty has given rise to "a new language of torture and execution methods," recognizable and understandable to the communities that witness such horrific scenes.¹⁰⁰ He goes on to explain how this "language"—communicated, in part, through corpse messaging—depicts horrific acts that speak to the cartels' force, but also the victims' alleged crimes that supposedly incurred such brutal punishment. For example, if the victim reports or "points out" illicit activity to the police, the perpetrators remove a finger; likewise, a missing tongue signals that a victim talked too much.¹⁰¹ This unspoken, yet all too visible pattern of violence reinforces the cartels as political entities that not only enforce their law, but visually define justice with their own gruesome vocabulary.

⁹⁸ Lantz, "Performativity," 256.

⁹⁹ Lantz, "Performativity," 260.

¹⁰⁰ Lantz, "Performativity," 261.

¹⁰¹ Lantz, "Performativity," 261.

Lantz's interpretations of performative violence center on the will and actions of the perpetrators who visually intimidate the public and dominate the government through grotesque messages. In employing the term *performative*, Lantz refers to the works of J. L. Austin and Judith Butler to define it as "the capacity of semiotic expression (in this case, corpse messaging) to produce extra-semiotic results (the exercise of sovereignty and social control)"; he also notes how bodies are frequently staged, contributing to "spectacularity" or their shocking visual nature.¹⁰² Although he employs *performativity* intermittently throughout the article to imply a display or exhibition, his discussion of language and torture directly follows his assertions regarding performative violence. These grotesque images of corpse messaging speak to a "macabre theatre" that visually communicates the accused's crime through his or her bloody punishment: "the message is the body, and the body is the message."¹⁰³ Thus, Lantz frames his interpretation of performativity within the context of how the cartels *stage* bodies and establishes firm connections between performance and the visual language of corpse messaging. He situates the performative nature of violence as a visual tool of cartel propaganda and social control.

Victim Agency

Lantz connects performative corpse messaging as visual propaganda to the "appropriation" of victim agency.¹⁰⁴ As with all violent crime, victims lose agency in that perpetrators compromise their safety and overpower their will. But victims of corpse messaging endure this loss of agency in multiple ways. Beheadings or facial mutilations erase the victim's

¹⁰² Lantz, "Performativity," 256. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); and Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰³ Lantz, "Performativity," 261.

¹⁰⁴ Lantz, "Performativity," 261.

visual identity, and by extension, their existence.¹⁰⁵ In addition, due to the effaceable nature of corpse messaging in which the body visually “speaks” in the first person voice on behalf of the perpetrator, the victim is robbed of all intention and motivation.¹⁰⁶ When cartels leave signs either with or on bodies, they “engage in acts of ventriloquism, hijacking their victims’ agency and voice...” rendering their victims as mere puppets or “props” in a play for power.¹⁰⁷ In objectifying their victims’ bodies for propaganda, cartels “abduct and exploit” agency to visually support their dominance over the government and the public.¹⁰⁸

Regarding the scholarship discussed in the first chapter, many of the authors focus on victims, which not only provides additional evidence and strengthens their arguments, but also speaks to the author’s compassion toward victims and dedication toward introducing marginalized perspectives. For example, Hernández provides a more empathetic view of Zulema than Deibert, because she reports on the physical pain and mental anguish the girl endured at Puente Grande. Rather than only discussing El Chapo’s incarceration, her gendered perspective offers more empathy. An approach that highlights victims offers some compassion, instead of mere analysis.

Because Lantz’s scholarship frames corpse messaging and performative violence within the context of cartel intimidation and social control, his conclusions reflect an approach that privileges the perpetrators’ objectives. He provides substantial evidence regarding La Familia’s threatening tactics to intimidate nightclub patrons in throwing severed heads onto a dance floor.

¹⁰⁵ Lantz, “Performativity,” 261.

¹⁰⁶ Lantz, “Performativity,” 261.

¹⁰⁷ Lantz, “Performativity,” 261-262.

¹⁰⁸ Lantz, “Performativity,” 263.

He makes logical arguments regarding how the cartels assume the role of the government, not only by acting as judge, jury, and executioner, but also by taking on social responsibilities that benefit the community. And his assertion regarding corpse messaging as a tool that robs victims of agency by visually “speaking” for them makes good sense. His arguments express a rational approach regarding horrific acts of violence, and consequently, the objectives of aggressors committing atrocity.

Although I agree with these assertions, an *additional* approach to this violence—one that focuses on the victims—offers a more compassionate perspective and a more nuanced interpretation of performative violence and its language. Lantz himself questions “what kind of agency a corpse possesses,” which has significant merit, because it places the victim at the center of the performative violence discussion.¹⁰⁹ Although emphasizing the cartels’ motivations for corpse mutilation contributes to performative violence scholarship, by focusing on the victim—in essence, the “actor” that “speaks” the language—one gains greater understanding about messaging.

Adopting this victim-centered approach, I question how the body’s appearance influences the level of communication expressed through corpse messaging. Here, I go back to Lantz’s assertions regarding victim identity. As discussed above, when perpetrators remove victims’ heads or mutilate their faces to such a degree that even relatives no longer recognize them—Lantz references how some cartels completely remove the facial skin from the head—they demonstrate their power over the victim’s existence by removing his or her visual identity.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Lantz, “Performativity,” 263.

¹¹⁰ Lantz, “Performativity,” 261.

Therefore, to what extent does this mutilation impact the body's ability to communicate, if viewers, confronted with a vision of distorted horror, cannot recognize the victim? What types of messages—if any at all—do viewers garner through corpses they barely recognize as human beings? Although Lantz employs the term *performativity*, he does not differentiate *performance* from *spectacle* and the extent to which each interpretation may impact messaging. Nor does he explore the possibility that viewers may not understand messages, because they cannot identify what they see.

Performance versus Spectacle

I extend Lantz's discussion to argue that cartels take part in at least two types of narco violence—*performance*, which communicates the implicit language through the body that Lantz frequently describes; and *spectacle*, which does not communicate patterns or meaning beyond gruesome carnage. Using Lantz's own analogy to a theatrical performance, if the *audience* (or viewers) cannot understand (or abduct agency from) the *actor* (or victim), the message the corpse communicates becomes distorted. I differentiate *performativity* as those scenes of violence in which the viewer may recognize some sense of humanity, and consequently, comprehend a type of message associated with the victim from *spectacle* or more brutal images of violence in which the victim's identity has been compromised to the point that clear communication is no longer possible. *Spectacle* is carnage—nothing more.

This perspective centered on the victim's appearance certainly does *not* refute Lantz's assertions regarding the reasons cartels display bodies; however, categorizing *performance* and *spectacle* leads to additional interpretations regarding the language communicated in corpse messaging and the dissemination of violent images through the Internet. For example, if a

website posts a crime scene photograph of unrecognizable corpses subjected to torture, the grotesque mutilation speaks to *spectacle*; yet, when those same corpses are depicted in another photograph that features curious bystanders at the scene trying to capture the gruesome images on their cell phone cameras, the combined images of unidentifiable, mutilated bodies together with recognizable individuals who retain agency and identity speak to a complex message akin to *performance*. A victim-centered approach highlights how the media reinforces the *performativity* of violence by publicizing images of people showing interest in *spectacle*.

But, as much as I argue for theoretical consideration, my limited experience with victims prompts me to ask a critical question—to what extent does all this theory (corpse messaging, *performativity*, and *spectacle*) allow scholars to overintellectualize narco violence? Certainly, when looking at the broader, political picture (the top-down approach), which frames performative violence as a bloody competition for power between the cartels and Mexican state, the context of intimidation and social control makes good sense. Cartels use performative violence and the resulting photographed or filmed images to assert dominance on multiple levels.

However, when explored at an individual or personal level (from the bottom up), these theoretical considerations lose some relevance, which might explain why a well-seasoned anthropologist like Howard Campbell does not specifically cite performance studies theory in his discussion of narco-propaganda violence. Particularly with individual victims or when only small groups of viewers witness the violence, the political messages communicated through brutality lose clout. In addition, if survivors gain the opportunity to tell their personal stories after the violence, their pain has the potential to overshadow any broader cartel objectives. For those viewers who bear witness to victim testimony, complex messages of intimidation and

social control deteriorate into nothing more than the brutality of a person being forced to submit for the sake of submission.

As an example, I go back to the story of the young woman in southern Mexico that I discussed in my Introduction. At a migrant shelter, she shared her own victimization story with the female members of our group. Over the course of about one hour, she explained in detail how a group of men wearing unidentifiable uniforms accosted her while she was traveling north. She sobbed as she spoke and contorted her body as if she were trying to hide or avoid physical blows. She explained how they sexually assaulted her with fully-charged Tasers and that, when they electrified their weapons, the uniformed men laughed at her involuntary convulsions and continued to rape her repeatedly.

Having witnessed first-hand how she related her personal trauma—her terror, her anguish, and her guilt—I find it difficult to apply theory to this violence beyond labeling it as brutal, sadistic pleasure. In a small, dark room in which she would only talk to other women, she never spoke of a political agenda, a specific cartel message, or the war on drugs. She never mentioned intimidation, social control, or victim agency. There was little *performativity* to the violence, because the pain she experienced superseded any message beyond vicious cruelty.

Although corpse messaging, *performativity*, and *spectacle* allow scholars to explore and analyze narco violence, a constructive victim-centered approach should value testimony as evidence, regardless of theory. Therefore, I define and differentiate *performance* from *spectacle* with caution for fear of overthinking narco violence or giving perpetrators too much cerebral credit. Those situations of violence committed privately can lack *performativity*, because they speak to the perpetrator's sadistic gratification—not political communication. Sadly, after

speaking with many individual victims, their personal stories highlight the simplicity of violence as mere brutality and the main objective of perpetrators as sheer cruelty.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue for a method of framing narco violence that centers on victims, rather than cartels. After reviewing theory from Performance Studies and defining performative violence, I analyze Lantz's recent scholarship, because he makes valuable contributions to narcotic violence discourse regarding performativity, implicit messages, and language. I illustrate how an additional viewpoint focused on victims sheds light on new possibilities for interpreting and categorizing this brutality. Ultimately, although differentiating *performance* from *spectacle* allows scholars to apply performance theory to narco violence, personal testimony of survivors supersedes theoretical considerations, particularly when discussing individual victims.

Focusing on victims also contributes to drugs and violence discourse in other ways. Most narco scholarship that addresses extreme drug violence begins with the militarization of Mexico's drug war in late 2006 as a point of reference. Although Lantz discusses an increase in drug trafficking in the 1980s, fluctuations in Mexico's economy in the 1990s, and a change in administration with the new PAN government in 2000, he attributes the escalation of violence to Calderón's militarization that "threw Mexico into a state of violence unsurpassed since its revolutionary era."¹¹¹ Lantz is not alone in his point of reference, and indeed, the violence associated with cartel trafficking increased substantially after Calderón's executive orders.

¹¹¹ Lantz, "Performativity," 255.

However, an approach that emphasizes the plight of victims would potentially have an impact on how historians frame their narcotic violence scholarship. Despite my own usage of the date above, I question 2007 as the customary starting point for the escalation of performative violence. As examined below, nearly a decade before Calderón's executive decision to militarize the war on drugs, Juárez families complained to authorities about the disappearances of their daughters, sisters, and mothers who worked in or around the *maquiladoras*. Lourdes Portillo's documentary, *Señorita extraviada* (2001), highlights the women's tragic abductions along with the state's lack of initiative to investigate. Although Portillo does not depict physical acts of violence, she offers images of witnesses who tearfully testify to kidnappings, rape, and other horrific acts being filmed and photographed. Despite that most scholars frame their discussions pertaining to narcotic violence within the context of the 2007 escalation, these extreme levels of brutality *did* indeed exist prior to the militarization of Mexico's war on drugs. Clearly, the violence was not as visible or as publicized in the late 1990s when the documentary was filmed as it would be nearly a decade later. However, taking into account the victims' perspectives and families' testimonies—as opposed to analyzing verifiable cartel activity—the traditional starting point for the so-called “escalation of violence” could potentially shift back at least ten years. Consequently, the spark that ignited this explosion of violence would no longer stem from Mexico and Calderón's executive orders, but rather with U.S. investment in the border factories and NAFTA. Thus, focusing on the victim's perspective and framing the escalation of performative violence in Mexico at least ten years earlier would influence historical and political arguments.

As discussed in chapter one, a major issue that confronts scholars seeking greater understanding of narcotic violence stems from lack of written evidence. Seeing value in Portillo's *Señorita extraviada*, in the next chapter, I explore documentaries as visual sources that speak to victim representation. The filmmakers below contribute to drug violence discourse, because they frame their arguments with the perspectives of victims in mind.

CHAPTER 3

DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE VICTIM'S VOICE

I came to Juárez to track down ghosts...and to listen to the mystery that surrounds them.
--*Lourdes Portillo, Señorita extraviada* (2001)

As discussed in chapter one, a framework that incorporates a cultural approach or that focuses on victims serves as a useful point of entry in drugs and violence scholarship and also demonstrates compassion. However, although some authors highlight the high number of trafficking-related fatalities in Mexico, mere statistics do not offer the victim's perspective. And, while many journalists and ethnographers interview victims and later publish their reports, their tragedies are inevitably reworded and reinterpreted by the authors and the readership. The first line of dialogue from *Señorita extraviada* (quoted above) emphasizes the goal of Lourdes Portillo in filming her documentary—she traveled to a border city full of violence to “listen.” *Listening* implies hearing the victim's perspective in their own words and voice.

Here, chapter three explores how documentaries contribute to the drugs and violence discourse by offering the victims' perspectives on film. Frequently adopting an ethnographic focus, documentaries offer the eyewitness testimony of victims and their families. Many films provide a “voice” to victims of violent drug crime or at least shed light on those who have been silenced by the trafficking system. Although these films do not provide a written argument that one finds in a scholarly essay, framing techniques and editing choices form visual assertions regarding drugs and violence. While viewers should always question motivations and funding—

much the same as with *all* scholarship—documentaries provide valuable evidence and the frequently absent voice of victims.

Of course, documentarians engage in their own scholarly discussions apart from narcotic trafficking. Ethically depicting victims of violence presents challenges for filmmakers in that they risk exploiting individuals who have already suffered physical or emotional pain. First, I argue that two films—Rebecca Cammisa’s *Which Way Home* (2009) and Shaul Schwarz’s *Narco Cultura* (2013)—offer substantial contributions to the drugs and violence discourse in the way that they highlight victims’ perspectives, though not without issues. Next, I continue my discussion of victimization with Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita extraviada* (2001) in order to explore how the filmmaker ethically portrays victims of violence. I argue that, because Portillo offers photographs of the victims the way their families remembered them, rather than images of their gruesome remains, *Señorita extraviada* fosters compassion for victims, and, at the same time, does not propagate images of graphic violence.

Which Way Home offers the perspective of young migrants—in their own voices—traveling north through Mexico to the U.S. Funded in part by a Fulbright Award, *Which Way Home* earned a nomination for Best Documentary at the 2010 Oscars and won various other film awards. Cammisa follows separate groups of young Central American and Mexican unaccompanied children, ranging from ages nine through seventeen. At various points along their journey, an off-camera voice questions the young migrants, allowing them opportunity to explain personal motivations for leaving their homes, as well as to relate their fears while traveling. The viewer never sees the interviewer. One of this movie’s greatest contributions, those people directly involved in the migrant crisis—the children fleeing poverty, the families of

victims who died on the journey, and the priests who coordinate care at shelters—serve as the camera’s subjects. *Which Way Home* sheds light on a frequently overlooked population amid an international crisis.

Cammisa’s framing and editing choices visually connect children with the dangers they face while traveling north, yet the film does not depict graphic violence. The opening scene ominously sets the tone that some children do not survive their journeys by juxtaposing images of a distant corpse floating in the Rio Grande with children on the Mexican side of the border watching its recovery. Cammisa physically positions the camera alongside of the children, empathetically offering their perspective, as opposed to a U.S. point of view had the film recorded the shot from the river’s opposite side. Just as the camera captures U.S. officials pulling the body from the river, the frame cuts to young boys watching the scene as a Mexican official explains that several children trying to swim across the river to the U.S. side drowned the previous week. This editing allows Cammisa to communicate the tragic fate of many children migrants without showing the horrific way in which they perish.

Her choice to film children and allow them to tell their tragic stories in their own words drives home the significance of migration, poverty, and drug violence. While the film features several different narratives, the main trajectory follows two young boys—Kevin and Fito, ages fourteen and thirteen respectively—as they travel across Mexico. Although the boys are not victims of performative violence per se, they complain that they are attacked and beaten by drug smugglers and even corrupt Mexican police.

Because the children witness hidden brutality, through their testimony, Cammisa’s film highlights violence that might otherwise remain obscured. In one scene, a visibly upset Kevin

(who forces himself to smile through tears) explains why he gave up on his journey to the U.S. While traveling on a freight train, he peers through a hole in the side of his box car to witness the brutal gang rape of a mother and her daughter by fifteen men. He is very specific about many details. Because Cammisa captures him sharing this experience, she sheds light on violent acts that might otherwise go unacknowledged. Thus, viewers bear witness to brutality without actually seeing graphic images. Kevin confesses that this experience was a turning point for him in that he no longer wishes to risk the journey. His story highlights victimization on multiple levels—he himself is traumatized by seeing the ordeal and we never learn the tragic fate of the mother and daughter. Therefore, Cammisa compassionately highlights not only the unaccompanied children, but also the crime that might otherwise remain hidden.

Like many of the scholars discussed in chapter one, Shaul Schwarz employs a cultural approach in *Narco Cultura* in order to examine the escalation of violence in Juárez and its impact on victims. An official selection at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, *Narco Cultura* follows two narratives: that of Richi Soto, a crime scene investigator in Juárez; and of Edgar Quintero, the lead singer of the (then up-and-coming) narco corrido band, BuKnas de Culiacán, in Los Angeles. One of the greatest strengths of this film, Schwarz blends both story lines, alternating the dangerous conditions Soto must face investigating gruesome narco-related deaths in the “murder capital of the world” with Quintero’s desire to write narco corrido lyrics depicting such murders.

Much like Wald’s exploration of narco corridos, but with Deibert’s journalistic edginess, Schwarz highlights the duality or paradoxical nature of narco culture: the CSI’s daily fear of being executed when retrieving a body contrasts with the singer’s abject fascination with cartel

murders; the ridiculously high number of killings in Juárez seem absurd across the border from El Paso, one of the safest cities in the U.S.; and the border community's hatred for the cartel violence conflicts sharply with their love of the narco corrido lyrics featuring the same brutality. In fact, Schwarz includes many shots of the border's fence, visually contrasting poverty on the Mexican side, with prosperity in El Paso.

Narco Cultura incorporates the perspectives of victims, including children, amid the extreme violence in Juárez. Much like *Which Way Home*, the opening segment depicts shots of the border, quickly followed by children witnessing the aftermath of death. Two young Mexican boys looking through the border fence tell the camera how safe it is in El Paso and that they dream of better life where they live in Juárez. The film then immediately cuts to the scene of a recent nearby murder. As a woman wails in the background, three young boys look on while discussing how the victim was shot with an AK-47. One boy, quite causally, adds that his uncle was shot on his way to church and that he choked on his own blood. Although the boys are distraught, the viewer can discern from their demeanor that murders take place regularly in their neighborhood. Like Cammisa, Schwarz communicates that children lose safety and stability amid trafficking violence.

However, rather than focusing only on unknowing children, Schwarz highlights the complexity of narco culture through CSI Soto and problematizes his perceived innocence. As the camera follows Soto, the viewer learns that he must wear a ski mask while working. Because Soto is a city official investigating murder, the cartels target him. He tells the camera that three of his colleagues were murdered and near the end of the film, another officer is tragically gunned down. His boss receives death threats and, during filming, resigns from his post. However,

adding a layer of complexity, Schwarz interviews a journalist who accuses Soto's crime lab of taking bribes from cartels. Although several scenes depict Soto as a targeted victim merely trying to do his job, a credible newspaper accuses his agency of complicity in the very crimes he investigates. Therefore, Soto's victimization remains ambiguous.

Schwarz also frames a tattooed convict—a murderer—as a *victim* of narco culture's influence. In a nameless Juárez prison, a young, tattooed inmate (probably in his early twenties) tells an off-camera interviewer how he became swept up in the gang lifestyle working for the cartels. When asked if he has ever tortured anyone, he confesses that he has and goes on to graphically describe how he beat a man to death with a club. He expresses genuine fear of his associates and remorse in that his actions still haunt him. During the interview, the camera reveals brief flashes of the prison's deplorable conditions, communicating that this inmate is indeed serving hard time. Although the viewer does not learn his sentence term or whether he will return to the gang, the filmmaker's message is clear. Despite his crimes in killing a man over drugs, this young inmate is a victim of his environment.

Unfortunately, because Schwarz does not offer any representation of the inmate's victim, the film communicates a lack of compassion and moderates the brutality. Although this inmate's story probably represents others in similar situations and speaks to how environment influences criminal behavior, some type of victim representation—either through photographs or interviews with the family—would have provided more empathy toward the man who suffered the brutal attack. Because the film offers no evidence of the victim's existence, this man's identity and agency become lost, upstaged by the graphic way in which he died. Without an empathetic symbol of the victim, the film downplays the violence he endures.

Most notably, *Narco Cultura* not only emphasizes extreme violence, but frequently features *how* that brutality is captured on film. Several scenes include images of taped beheadings posted to the Internet; multiple shots feature onlookers recording crime scene bodies on their cell phones; and one lengthy segment depicts the documentary's crew visiting a movie set during a narco drama filming. This choice to feature the "film within a film" or the camera as its own subject speaks to an emphasis on narco violence's performative nature and explores the complexity regarding the relationship between viewer and victim.

Yet, graphic images of victims, particularly after a violent crime, raise questions regarding filmic representations of those who suffer. Albeit brief, the film features fatalities at crime scenes, including charred remains, gunshot wounds, and most disturbing, the body of an executed boy abandoned in a quarry. Schwarz presents the boy's image (who appears to be about the same age as either *Which Way Home*'s Kevin or Fito) within the context of one of Soto's crime scene visits. As a truck races to the victim, a narco corrido plays over the police radio in the background—a gruesome "calling card" offered by the cartels to signal a recent execution. In the next frame, the camera lingers over the boy's limp body—his bloody head swarming with flies—as investigators swing him on to a tarp for transportation. This image is cold and tragic. The vivid framing is disturbing. And the film offers no explanation about his murder, his life, or the family he leaves behind. Although his image blatantly speaks to Juárez's atmosphere and even the circumstances surrounding most murders at the time of the documentary's filming, one questions whether showing his corpse in full frame highlights performative violence, or merely privileges its visual effect.

How do documentary filmmakers ethically and empathetically portray victims of narco violence? To explore this topic, I examine Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita extraviada* (2001) as a model of ethical victim representation. Because Portillo highlights photographs of the victims while they were alive and well, rather than showing the graphic aftermath of violence, viewers gain greater empathy for the victims.

Ethical representation is a broad and complex issue that draws not only on scholarship from film studies, but also from other fields such as feminist theory and anthropology. Janet Walker and Diane Waldman summarize the extensive topic of representing subjects ethically in documentary film in the introduction to their 1999 book, *Feminism and Documentary*.¹¹² They structure their discussion of ethical representation around the relationship between filmmaker and subject—what they name “Self/Other”—and call for the application of more feminist theory in documentary studies.¹¹³

Walker and Waldman praise feminist theorists for their recognition of the “politics of people filming people” in that they acknowledge the power dynamic between filmmakers and subjects; however, they note that this idea did not develop as rapidly in other fields.¹¹⁴ They begin their review of ethical representation with *image ethics* and a 1976 article in which Calvin Pryluck notes a “power imbalance” between the person filming and the person being filmed, as well as “moral and ethical dilemmas” and the “rights of subjects.”¹¹⁵ Later, Brian Winston

¹¹² Janet Walker and Diane Waldman, “Introduction,” in *Feminism and Documentary*, ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1-35.

¹¹³ For Walker's and Waldman's literature summary, see “Filmmaker/Subject: Self/Other,” pages 13-19.

¹¹⁴ Walker and Waldman, “Introduction,” 13.

¹¹⁵ Walker and Waldman, “Introduction,” 13-14. See Calvin Pryluck, “Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filming,” in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

explores similar concepts in regard to filmmakers and their subjects in his work, “The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary,” published in the volume named *Image Ethics*.¹¹⁶ Walker and Waldman praise this compilation of articles for its perspectives on the “moral accountability” of documentary filmmakers to the people that they film.¹¹⁷ However, the discourse generated by the topic of image ethics limits itself both in its theoretical construction and in its documentary subject matter. They emphasize it inevitably privileges the very imbalance of power (between filmmaker and subject) that it seeks to apprehend and that it ignores a whole category of documentaries in which the gap between filmmaker and subject is filled when both parties have similar backgrounds and comparable social goals.¹¹⁸

Like the field of image ethics, *new ethnography*—represented by the works *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (by George Marcus and Michael Fischer), as well as *Writing Culture* (edited by James Clifford and George Marcus)—presents similar theoretical “pitfalls” regarding the power negotiated between filmmaker and subject.¹¹⁹ Here, Walker and Waldman turn to the feminist viewpoint highlighted by Frances Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen in “The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective,” which, first, acknowledges the Western imperial influence of the “self” in relationship to the “other,” and, second, admonishes the resulting power differentiation by emphasizing the

¹¹⁶ Walker and Waldman, “Introduction,” 14. See Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby, eds., *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹¹⁷ Walker and Waldman, “Introduction,” 14.

¹¹⁸ Walker and Waldman, “Introduction,” 14-15.

¹¹⁹ Walker and Waldman, “Introduction,” 15. See George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, eds., *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) and James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

common interests of women as both directors and subjects.¹²⁰ They argue that a feminist perspective which simultaneously embraces both individuality and group shared experience—in essence, the experience of being of the female sex—offers scholars an opportunity to examine ethical representation in documentary film. Those documentaries in which the filmmaker has a culturally and socially vested interest in the subjects or subject matter offer more ethical representations.

Señorita extraviada serves as good model in which to explore the ethical representation of subjects (or, in this case, of victims)—not necessarily because of its subject matter, but because its filmmaker was culturally inseparable from her subjects. This film highlights femicide in and around Ciudad Juárez in the late 1990s. The term *femicide* represents the kidnapping, torturing, and murdering of women, in part, *because* they are women. At the time of its 2001 release, few people understood the severity of this violence. Consequently, the film focuses on the girls' disappearances, not the violence they experienced after their abductions. Furthermore, on the whole, the murders were not performative in nature in that their graphic images were not broadcasted, published, or circulated for public consumption. However, this film is key to my discussion, because Portillo, a Latina filmmaker, shared the same ethnicity as the missing women's families and shared a common interest with them to find answers. In fact, Portillo so strongly believed in raising social awareness about these atrocities that she refinanced her house to complete the film.¹²¹ This shared interest between filmmaker and subjects lessens

¹²⁰ Walker and Waldman, "Introduction," 15-16.

¹²¹ Rosa-Linda Fregoso, "Transforming Terror: Documentary Poetics in Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada* (2001)," in *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 234.

the power differentiation between the “self” and the “others,” and consequently, *Señorita* serves as a good model of ethical victim representation in documentary film.

In *Señorita extraviada*, Portillo compassionately depicts victims by repeatedly showing photographs of the vibrant girls prior to their abductions. In order for the filmmaker to accomplish ethical representation, the audience must connect with victims who are no longer visible. Portillo successfully encourages empathy through lively or smiling photographs of the victims prior to their disappearances. She offers many flattering pictures of women as their friends and families remembered them. In fact, occasionally a family member holds the photograph for the camera’s lens, thereby personally “introducing” their loved one to the viewer. This technique of presenting the victim visually drives home the fact that these women were real people—mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and neighbors.

In addition, Portillo offers ethical representations by depicting scenes in which the victims’ families plead for answers or mourn for their loved one’s loss. The parents of María Isabel Nava explain to the camera that the authorities did little to acknowledge their daughter’s abduction. Viewers bear witness to their frustration and despair. During their interview, images of María’s photographs remind viewers that she was a vivacious girl—not a mere statistic. Sadly, after her body is discovered, the camera captures her funeral and viewers see firsthand an outpouring of grief by the community. Although María’s casket is open, a photograph occupies the space where her body should rest—probably the only alternative for the family, due to the condition of her corpse. These scenes of grief, intermingled with smiling photographs of the girl, help viewers emotionally connect to the victim, empathize with the family, and come to understand María Isabel Nava as an individual. In sum, through photographs and the family’s

testimony, Portillo offers a respectful portrayal of a victim that speaks to an ethical representation.

Portillo's filmic choices encourage viewers to focus on the victims and not the violence. She does not offer gruesome crime scene photos or footage as a medical crew gathers evidence. Such images depicting the aftermath of brutality would risk sensationalizing the violence and privileging the act over the victim. Graphic images of women's mutilated corpses would dehumanize victims by reducing them to mere flesh and bones. In addition, these scenes would risk desensitizing viewers to images of violence. Portillo's techniques that offer ethical representations of the women—either through photographs or the testimony of family members—direct viewer focus toward the victims, rather than the brutal violence they suffered.

Documentary film contributes to drugs and violence discourse, because it frequently highlights the victims' perspectives. Cammisa's *Which Way Home* focuses on unaccompanied migrant children, who, in fleeing violence, fall victim to smugglers, corrupt police, and the other physical dangers. *Narco Cultura* interprets victims in a much broader sense; Schwarz not only focuses on children living amid extreme violence in Juárez, but also CSI city officials and even the perpetrators themselves. Filmed over a decade prior to the other documentaries, *Señorita extraviada* highlights feminicide at the same border Schwarz explores, but offers examples of ethical victim representation. Regardless of their focus or technique, these films highlight the frequently overlooked perspectives of victims—allowing them a voice—and demonstrate the complexity surrounding drug trafficking violence.

In Rosa-Linda Fregoso's 2015 article "Transforming Terror: Documentary Poetics in Lourdes Portillo's *Señorita Extraviada*," Portillo herself describes *Señorita extraviada*'s poetic

construction as one of “witnessing and denouncing.”¹²² Fregoso highlights how the film conceptually (or non-visually) bears witness to the individual atrocities endured by the victims, and also denounces the state’s irresponsibility regarding their investigations.¹²³ According to Fregoso, “[i]n *Señorita Extraviada* testifying to the truth of an occurrence involves the recognition of *both* the literal plight of border women who have been murdered and disappeared *and* the general (symbolic) consequence of feminicide for the social world in which we live.”¹²⁴ Thus, through documentary film, Portillo makes significant contributions to the drugs and violence discourse; she demonstrates responsibility to individual victims by empathetically sharing in their suffering, as well as to society by highlighting the greater cultural problem of violence against women.

¹²² Fregoso, “Transforming Terror,” 238.

¹²³ Fregoso, “Transforming Terror,” 238-239.

¹²⁴ Fregoso, “Transforming Terror,” 238.

CHAPTER 4

***“ES MEJOR MORIR DE PIE QUE VIVIR TODA UNA VIDA ARODILLADO”* AND OTHER MESSAGES IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY GANG ARTWORK**

In the chapter above, I highlight how some documentary films provide a “voice” for victims. I look to visual evidence and victims in this chapter as well, but in an entirely different context: I analyze the drawings of gang-affiliated convicts, many from the El Paso border region, along with their artistic interpretations of narco violence.¹²⁵ Thus, as discussed in the Introduction, I define *victim* comprehensively in that I extend my interpretation of the term to individuals who, either through socio-economic hardships or simply poor judgement, have become ensnarled in gangland and narco culture. In so doing, I do not imply *innocence*—inmates serving prison sentences are guilty in the eyes of the law. Nor do I compare victims, like Central American migrants fleeing trafficking violence, with convicts in the U.S. Clearly, individuals who endure narco brutality, performative violence, and personal abuse exemplify a different level of victimization than I speak to here. In widening my concept of victimization to include prison inmates, my purpose is not to overshadow the previously discussed victims of violent crime, their physical pain, and personal anguish.

Given the deteriorating circumstances in some communities along the border, I interpret participation in gangs and incarceration, in part, as an indication of greater social ills—lack of opportunities due to economic status and racial discrimination, the absence of suitable role models for adolescences, and living amid a culture that glorifies violence. Most of these inmates

¹²⁵ Private collection of inmate artwork, anonymous owner, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2010-2012.

do not represent the upper ranks of cartel leadership. They do not reap the “rewards” of commanding a transnational economic enterprise. Rather, they are foot soldiers in the “war” between traffickers and law enforcement. For example, in El Paso, after several *Barrio Azteca* gang members turned up with critical wounds, law enforcement officials assumed they had a gang war on their hands. However, they later discovered that this violence was not inflicted by a rival gang, but rather by higher ranking *Barrio* members as a type of violent punishment. In considering a gang member as a type of victim of narco culture’s debilitating influence, I hope to shed light on the gravity of trafficking’s far reaching effect.

This artwork provides significant opportunity to analyze artistic interpretations of narco violence. This collection belongs to an anonymous owner who accumulated the illustrations from 2010 to 2012 through the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.¹²⁶ It consists of twenty-four pencil sketches, etches, and ink renderings of assorted sizes (most measuring fourteen by eleven inches) and on various canvases. Many artists used illustration board, but others used handkerchiefs or cardboard—probably whatever they could acquire while incarcerated. The inmates’ identities remain unknown, other than the fact that they were all men and, indeed, convicted for a crime; however, due to much of the artwork’s content, the viewer may make logical assumptions regarding the artists’ criminal affiliations or incarceration history. For example, some illustrations feature numbers or emblems designating identification with a specific gang. Also, many sketches include images of narcotics, like syringes or marijuana leaves. Taken within the context that the artists are convicts, these symbols of gang life and

¹²⁶ The owner requested that I not use a name.

images of drugs speak to trafficking, distribution, or, in the least, consumption. Certainly, this small sampling of art does not represent the totality of criminal creative expression, but it does serve as a suitable springboard with which to explore aesthetic images of narco culture and violence.

Regarding performative violence, to what extent do visual messages change when expressed artistically on paper, as opposed to physically on the body? As discussed above in chapter two, some of the brutality erupting from drug trafficking demonstrates visual patterns and a “language” that communicates planned intention. Lantz argues that performative violence produces graphic images of pain that speak to the cartels’ objectives to dominate the public and government. Although the drawings in this collection do not depict mutilation (though some renderings show torture), they do “speak” a visual language akin to performative violence in which certain objects form patterns and represent motivations. By their very nature as artwork, these sketches were drawn with the intention of being seen. The artist created them for visual consumption; therefore, they offer additional insight into performative violence.

But why does so much of this artwork focus on the Mexican Revolution and a glorified indigenous past? Many drawings feature revolutionary war generals or Aztec warriors. The above quote taken from a convict’s rendering (discussed below), highlighting Emilio Zapata, illustrates the violence and fatalism echoed today in the actions of reckless cartel and gang members. Keeping in mind this aesthetic fascination with a reinterpreted past, I look to literary evidence, seeking a better understanding of narco culture’s artistic imagery and symbolism from a historical and cultural perspective. This chapter engages popular twentieth-century literature—Mariano Azuela’s *The Underdogs*, José Vasconcelos’s *The Cosmic Race*, and Octavio Paz’s *The*

Labyrinth of Solitude—for its intellectual interpretations of post-revolutionary Mexico. Like the aftermath of performative violence on the body, initially, the convicts’ artwork may present as haphazard, grotesque, and surreal; however, I argue that many of the drawings demonstrate similar patterns and symbols, connecting to performative violence stylistically, while echoing themes previously expressed by earlier intellectuals. The above works of twentieth-century Mexican literature, which reflect disappointment in the war’s violence, disillusionment in its failed social reform, and a fascination with a conquered Aztec past, now, in twenty-first-century narco culture, translate to violent imagery and symbolism in gang artwork.

Excessiveness, Extravagance, and Distortion

As discussed in chapter two, I apply the term *performative* to much of the cartels’ brutality in that their violent acts are meant to be seen by the public and other criminal organizations. The performative aspects of this violence gain more relevancy when one considers widespread dissemination through visual media. The fact that this violence is “performed” for visual consumption defines it.

Here, I draw attention to the excessiveness of narcotic violence, because overkill and disfigurement contribute to its performative nature—in essence, what Lantz names “corpse messaging.” The exorbitance of this violence turns heads, attracts attention, and gains publicity. In addition, much of this violence results in monstrous images of mutilation. Performative violence is, in part, “performative,” because it produces images of excessive hyper-violence, resulting in distorted images that demand attention.

While they may not depict actual murders or executions, many illustrations in this collection *stylistically* reflect performative violence’s excessiveness through extravagance and

distortion. Much of the artwork is surreal. Excessive aspects manifest through visions of cash, gold, cars, and objectified, half-naked women, speaking to a dreamlike world of indulgence and riches acquired with a quick gun and illicit activity. Many of these illustrations portray their subjects through a surreal lens, exaggerating some objects to a bizarre excess that distorts reality. Realistically smaller objects—like cards, dice, or billiard eight balls—loom disproportionately large in the drawings, pulling focus. Prison bars twist and bend, while clocks make an appearance nearly everywhere, communicating how the artist obsesses over serving time. These *patterns of extremities* allow the artist to blend normally happy images, like clowns, with symbolic images of death, like skulls, lending to a nightmarish world of distortion. Like the aftermath of brutal violence on the human body, images that should seem familiar to the viewer, now horrify. Although these drawings may not depict realistic images of performative violence, they communicate its excessiveness stylistically. Thus, just as twenty-first-century cartel violence frequently demonstrates overkill rendering the human body disfigured, so too does this gang artwork express overindulgence, exaggerated perspective, and distorted reality.

Figure number one—several female clowns surrounding a tattooed and armed bandit—exemplifies the extravagance and distortion representative of performative violence’s excessiveness through exaggerated images of guns, money, and women.¹²⁷ This pen and ink drawing measures approximately fourteen by eleven inches on illustration board. The figure in the middle wears a bandana over his face like an outlaw and extends one of his two revolvers toward the viewer, ready to shoot. This perspective renders the gun excessively large compared

¹²⁷ See Figure no. 1 in Appendix.

to other objects, highlighting the significance of violence. His deviant image, together with the ghostly face frozen in a silent scream to the right, speak to violence and pain. One hundred-dollar bills decorate the drawing's lower half, symbolizing the gangster's dream of extreme wealth. Perhaps even the beautiful women surrounding him represent excessive desire, given his implied *machismo*. These exaggerated images of guns, wealth, and women communicate criminal extravagance.

Distortion of familiar objects contributes to the illustration's surrealism. Five beautiful faces wearing clown make-up adorn the background, while eerie disembodied eyes peer through haze to stare directly at the viewer. One clown to the right frowns while several others shed tears as smoke escapes their mouths. Clowns—which usually smile in cheerier images—here, cry and smoke, presenting the viewer with a distorted reality. In addition, the warped prison bars to the left along with the mislabeled clock contribute to the feeling of a surreal dream. By emphasizing guns and cash, as well as distorting images of clowns, this piece communicates characteristics that parallel the excessiveness and distortion of performative violence.

Figure number two—a large cross surrounded by skulls, drugs, and women—also demonstrates extravagant excessiveness through over-the-top images of death, drugs, and brutality.¹²⁸ The artist completed this ink rendering on a fourteen by fourteen-inch handkerchief. One of the most striking features of this piece is the overwhelming number of individual objects thrown together. Seven misshapen skulls surround a large, cracked cross, reminding the viewer that death looms everywhere. A tombstone to the right displaying the text “RIP Marisol”

¹²⁸ See Figure no. 2 in Appendix.

perhaps signifies the death of someone important to the artist. A large hypodermic needle (itself, bent and misshapen) points directly at the tombstone connecting intravenous drugs with mortality. To the left, a marijuana leaf divides a cross and, near the top, a female clown (similar to image number one) smokes a joint. Finally, a bleeding woman bound in shackles and restrained with barbed wire communicates pain. These images pertaining to death, drugs, and torture stylistically coincide with much of the excessiveness of narcotic violence.

Distortion and disfigurement in this image render recognizable objects as bizarre, mirroring the aftereffects of some narcotic violence. A large cross dominates the illustration's center. This religious icon juxtaposes objects of moral vice—cards and dice for gambling, an automatic gun, and symbols of incarceration—to produce a confusing, surreal effect. Even the skulls themselves appear disfigured: two retain eerie eyes, another has tusks, and a third bears sharp fangs. The prominence of a large cross amid symbols of drugs and violence, as well as disfigured and surreal images of death, speak to the distortion affiliated with the aftermath of performative violence.

Imagery, Identity, and Ink

The violent images in these illustrations merit discussion, because they speak to cultural expressions of criminal identity. Many of these drawings potentially served as preliminary tattoos or “ink,” designating criminal identification or gang loyalty. Due to the personal nature of tattoos and that the skin itself serves as the canvas for such artwork, the images in this collection lend clues pertaining to identity, kinship, and ethnicity. These illustrations probe how convicts, potentially involved in drug trafficking, identify themselves and their gangs or “communities.”

Benedict Anderson describes the nation as “an imagined political community”; he employs the term *imagined*, because, although no physical lines delineating community exist, people in even the smallest of nations perceive an established cohesion or unity with one another.¹²⁹ Therefore, despite the fact that each person will never meet or get to know everyone else in her or his country, each person identifies herself or himself as part of a greater national whole. He goes on to say that “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”¹³⁰ In other words, all communities interpret themselves on their own terms and in their own distinctive ways.

While his discussion focuses on nationality, one can extend this definition of “imagined community” to criminal organizations, in which gangs and cartels imagine and define themselves in the style or language of violent images. These groups conceivably interpret themselves as “communities” who convey their narco “imagined” identity through images of violence. Violent images take form in a variety of ways, from a filmed execution to an ink tattoo with misshapen skulls. In addition, Anderson claims that one of the ways by which to gauge a nation is the extent to which its citizens are willing to die for a patriotic cause.¹³¹ In the criminal community, visual violence not only serves to intimidate those individuals who witness such horrific acts, but this brutality also identifies the criminals who perpetuate violence as devoted, “patriotic” members, willing to sacrifice personal safety for their gang or community/nation. Gangs frequently demonstrate their loyalty by dying for their “colors.” Thus, through images,

¹²⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 6.

¹³⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

¹³¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

illustrations, and ink, criminal organizations, including those connected to narcotic trafficking, identify themselves and their community through violence.

The artistic expressions that develop from narco culture also offer insight into interpretations of ethnic identity. Because many gang members involved in drug trafficking align themselves with other individuals from the same neighborhood or of the same nationality, their tattoos and graffiti often serve as visual, artistic evidence as to how they identify themselves both with and within their own ethnic community.¹³² Just as graffiti denotes gang territory, tattoos offer symbolic images of events and people important to the owner. This artwork merits academic discussion, because it corresponds to expressions of personal identity, frequently ethnic in nature.

Extending Anderson's definition to these artists who conceivably interpret their gangs as "communities," objects in drawings form patterns and combine to create a violent, visual language that communicates identification with a criminal lifestyle. Because the illustrations in this collection lend clues as to how convicts interpret personal, gang, and even ethnic identity, seemingly haphazard objects in this artwork adopt deeper symbolic meanings. For example, both illustrations above contain images of clowns shedding tears. According to law enforcement organizations, tattoos of crying clowns designate the carefree idea of enjoying a wild lifestyle in

¹³² Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), Organized Crime Section, "Tattoos and Their Meanings," May 2008, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/CBSA-TattooHandbook.pdf>. Accessed Feb. 1, 2018. The CBSA frequently categorizes or describes different gangs according to ethnicity, speaking to how each gang identifies itself through its tattoos. See "Russian Prison Tattoos," 3; "Irish Mafia," 4; and "Asian gang tattoos," 5. The ethnicity of Latino gangs is frequently evident by their names; for example, see "Mexican Mafia," "Almighty Latin King Nations," "Sureños," "Nortenos," and "Texas Chicano Brotherhood," 5. This document restates and reinforces publications from other law enforcement agencies; however, many other handbooks are categorized as "law enforcement sensitive" and are not intended for the public.

the present, fully acknowledging that it will lead to disaster in the future: “laugh now, cry later.”¹³³ Likewise, a spider web, as in the second image (and other illustrations discussed below), denotes either jail time or being ensnared in the gang’s violent way of life.¹³⁴ Regardless of the specific objects or meanings, these images speak to a visual language of criminal identity that merits attention.

Soldiers, Warriors, and Women

When reviewing this collection, images of the Mexican Revolution and of indigenous Latin American civilizations repeatedly stand out, forming a pattern of historical representations in this artwork. Several illustrations depict generals, soldiers, or Aztec warriors. These personas—the revolutionary rebel or indigenous Indian—appear as a man, or ironically, a semi-nude, voluptuous woman. For example, figure number three includes Emilio Zapata in the upper left-hand corner next to the text, “*Es mejor morir de pie que vivir toda una vida arodillado*”; however, the primary object in the center—with a sombrero, rifle, and ammunition belt similar to a revolutionary war soldier—is the half-naked *prieta linda*.¹³⁵ Figure number four offers the up-close faces of three women surrounding a scantily-clad woman in a full-feathered, Aztec headdress.¹³⁶ Although the drawing is not completely finished, outlines of Aztec stonework divide the faces.¹³⁷ Guns and skulls decorate both drawings speaking to violence and strife. Figure number five depicts a male and female Indian in addition to another woman—again

¹³³ CBSA, “Tattoos,” 81.

¹³⁴ CBSA, “Tattoos,” 77.

¹³⁵ See Figure no. 3 in Appendix. I have spelled “*arodillado*” as it appears in the drawing.

¹³⁶ See Figure no. 4 in Appendix.

¹³⁷ Some illustrations in this collection are incomplete. As contraband, they were probably confiscated unexpectedly, and the artists were not able to finish their work.

shirtless, and again, wearing a sombrero and ammunition belt similar to a revolutionary war soldier.¹³⁸ Although incomplete, the artist offers interpretations of the revolutionary and indigenous past highlighting femininity.

Here, gender merits a brief discussion. While these half-naked females probably speak to mere sexual obsessions of men who, in prison, live without the company of women, this imagery yields a feminized and objectified interpretation of Mexico's past. *La prieta linda* lounges seductively in front of the Mexican flag as if simultaneously both defending and representing the nation. The eagle and serpent of the Mexican flag adorn the illustration's upper right-hand corner. Ironically, although the saying next to Zapata shuns living one's life in submission, *la prieta* is indeed on her knees, communicating passiveness and surrender. Similarly, the semi-nude, Aztec women in figures number four and five rest in arguably submissive positions—one woman closes herself off by crossing her arms and pinching her knees together, while the other lounges back with her legs wide apart. In the least, the artist has objectified them. Coupled with objects associated with Mexico, like the flag, eagle, or revolution, the artist symbolically associates the women with the country. Regardless of the artists' original interpretations, their gendered illustrations arguably depict the country's past through a supposedly passive, voluptuous female.

Gender aside, these extravagant, surreal, and historical interpretations artistically expressed by the criminal community do not present as haphazard images without meaning. Seeking greater understanding of these artistic representations of Mexico's history, here, I look

¹³⁸ See Figure no. 5 in Appendix.

to literary interpretations of the country's past; much of this imagery directly connects with themes in earlier literature. The following discussion, then, compares the acclaimed, twentieth-century works of Mariano Azuela, José Vasconcelos, and Octavio Paz to modern-day images of gang artwork and explores different interpretations of Mexico and its people. Though the artists' plans for this artwork remain unknown, quite possibly some images represent preliminary drawings for tattoos, connecting their images to personal, community, and ethnic identity. Linking visual symbolism to literature highlights how these seemingly chaotic images of violence actually demonstrate earlier themes expressed by Mexican intellectuals.

The Revolution's Ruse

In 1929, Anita Brenner, author of *The Wind that Swept Mexico*, released a glowing review of Mariano Azuela's *The Underdogs*, which speaks to its importance as a great literary work in Mexican history.¹³⁹ She compares this novel to José Clemente Orozco's artwork, which she describes as "dramatic, rapid, passionately realistic."¹⁴⁰ Brenner depicts *Underdogs* as "[f]ull of pain, grief, great compassion"; she claims "[e]ach picturesque brutal scene flashes hundreds of similar scenes in the minds of Mexican readers, for of all these extraordinary pictures, there is not one that is extraordinary to any resident during the revolution, nor is any one in the vivid range of common experience omitted."¹⁴¹ Therefore, Brenner, a contemporary intellectual, saw artistic truth in Azuela's work, specifically in how he graphically describes the

¹³⁹ Mariano Azuela, *The Underdogs: Pictures and Scenes from the Present Revolution with Related Texts*, trans. by Gustavo Pellón (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 117.

¹⁴⁰ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 118.

¹⁴¹ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 118.

revolution's brutality. According to her review, his portrayal coincides with actual events to the point that his vivid imagery will remind many Mexicans of their own experiences.

The Underdogs provides a first-hand interpretation of the Mexican Revolution; although it is a fictional novel, the author acquired personal experience in the war. Mariano Azuela (1873-1952), a doctor, novelist, and very briefly, a politician, wrote *The Underdogs*—originally published as *Los de abajo*—while traveling with one of Pancho Villa's leaders.¹⁴² This gave Azuela an up-close view of the revolution's atrocities. Because he tended to the wounded, he was probably left with vivid images regarding the gruesome impact of combat on the human body. In fact, many characters in the book suffer from horrific wounds, graphically described in gory detail. After Azuela fled to the United States, in 1915 the *El Paso del Norte* newspaper published *The Underdogs* in installments; later the short novel was released as a paperback.¹⁴³

The Underdogs speaks to Azuela's disillusionment in the rebels' wanton violence and in the revolution's failure to benefit the peasants. Early in the novel, Azuela describes Demetrio, the protagonist, as “[t]all, strong, red-faced, beardless,” conveying an indigenous heritage; his “white cotton shirt and trousers, a wide-brimmed straw *sombrero* and *huaraches*” paints the labor-worn picture of the rural *campesino*.¹⁴⁴ When intoxicated soldiers intrude upon his home, kill his dog, and harass his wife, Demetrio does not shoot the soldiers, despite his wife's pleas.¹⁴⁵ He merely leaves the farm—soon burning to the ground—to fight in the revolution.¹⁴⁶ In the beginning of the story, Demetrio does not handle this potentially volatile situation with violence.

¹⁴² Azuela, *The Underdogs*, xi-xii.

¹⁴³ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, xii.

¹⁴⁴ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 1.

¹⁴⁵ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 1-3.

Yet as humble as his origins are, when he rises in the ranks of the revolutionary army, his morality descends to that of the soldiers who drove him from his home in this first episode. Both Demetrio and his group of fighters demonstrate abject violence and cruelty towards *campesinos* who have no choice but to endure their aggressions. Well after Demetrio has left his wife and child, he marches his rebels towards a town where he plans to ambush a group of Federal soldiers. As his men approach the village in the middle of the night, they coerce a peasant, “barefoot and with a poncho to cover his bare breast,” into helping them locate the enemy.¹⁴⁷ Despite his entreaties to be left alone as a “poor day laborer,” for the sake of his children, the men force the peasant to guide them to the barracks.¹⁴⁸ After he leads the rebels to the Federals’ quarters, he grovels before Demetrio to be released; however, one of the men cruelly responds by striking him with his gun.¹⁴⁹ This action conjures the image of a poor, begging *campesino* on his knees. As they advance towards the barracks, the rebels themselves are ambushed by rooftop gunfire and the day laborer, tragically caught in the middle of the bullets, “opened his arms and fell over backwards, without uttering a cry.”¹⁵⁰

Thus, through this scene, Azuela demonstrates that the revolution used senseless violence against the very people it was supposed to help. He portrays the revolutionary soldiers as cruel men who not only endanger the peasant (indicated by his lack of shoes and meager clothing), but also physically bully him, resulting in his death. The very man whom they should protect in the name of the revolution falls dead, caught in the war’s crossfire. The particular way he dies—

¹⁴⁷ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 32.

¹⁴⁸ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 32.

¹⁴⁹ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 32.

¹⁵⁰ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 32.

with his arms stretched open—calls to mind the image of Christ, drawing spiritual parallels with blameless innocence and sacrifice. This imagery communicates the message that the revolution surrendered its once honorable motives and betrayed the people it was supposed to help. In essence, the war was a ruse.

Azuela continues to reinforce this message of betrayal later in this same scene when the rebels, including a blood-thirsty man named Pancraccio, indiscriminately slaughter Federal soldiers, despite learning that some of the men were mere simple folk who had been forced to join the army. Just before Demetrio and his men approach the Federal barracks, their guide begs them to spare his brother's life; he claims that his brother was forced to join the Federal army and that many of the other conscripts will jump at the chance to desert the Federals and join the rebels.¹⁵¹ But on Demetrio's command, the rebels unleash a barrage of explosions upon *all* the unsuspecting soldiers, who "were no more than rats scurrying inside a trap"; when the rebels run out of fire power, they draw their knives and chaotically massacre everyone.¹⁵² Despite the guide's pleas to spare his brother, "[w]ith a swipe of the blade Pancraccio has sliced his neck, and two scarlet sprays gush as if from a fountain."¹⁵³ This graphic image of decapitation drives home the message that, because of its brutality, virtually no one—particularly the peasants—benefited from the revolution, despite its once noble purpose. Men are senselessly sacrificed for a revolution that grants little advantage.

¹⁵¹ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 33.

¹⁵² Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 35.

¹⁵³ Azuela, *The Underdogs*, 36.

Azuella also communicates this critical assessment that the revolution failed through Demetrio himself. The beginning of the novel depicts a nonviolent and even protective Demetrio, who looks after his wife and child. But as Demetrio becomes more entrenched in the war, his indifference to brutality grows, much like the soldiers who forced him to flee his home. The revolution transforms the once humble Demetrio into a hardened warrior, and in doing so, betrays his loyalty to its cause. In the final scene in which his band is ambushed, Demetrio watches helplessly as several of his men “fall like sheaves cut by a sickle...Venancio falls by his side, his chest horribly torn by a machine gun, and Meco falls over the edge and rolls to the bottom of the abyss.”¹⁵⁴ Sadly, this once proud man cowers alone, in which *he* is the one now caught like a rat in a trap. The revolution’s violence helped him to gain nothing.

The Underdogs’s violence connects to symbols of revolutionary imagery in figure number three, “*La prieta linda*,” discussed above. This pencil etching on illustration board measures ten by fifteen inches and certain shaded areas are so heavily coated with pencil lead that they reflect light. Clearly, this artist took a good deal of effort in creating this work. In the lower left-hand corner, rebels with rifles perched at the ready ride a locomotive to their next battle. The bugle directly behind and above them signals a call to arms for the revolutionary cause. In the upper left-hand corner, Emilio Zapata stands, gun at the ready, behind a scroll stating, “it’s better to die standing than live your entire life on your knees,” speaking to an existence of violence and struggle. In the upper right-hand corner, an eagle perched on a cactus grasps a serpent in its beak, emblematic of the Mexican flag. And, indeed an image of the actual

¹⁵⁴ Azuella, *The Underdogs*, 87.

Mexican flag waves in the background behind a half-naked woman. The voluptuous *prieta linda*, ready for battle in that she has a rifle strapped to her back and wears an ammunition belt across her chest, gently holds a single rose. Although the picture yields no images of bloodshed, these objects speak to the violent Mexican Revolution and its social struggles.

At first glance, these images might communicate mere nostalgia for Mexico's past; however, keeping in mind Azuela's disappointment in the war's reforms, this illustration arguably expresses a similar social message to the historical novel through images of the *campesinos*. While the drawing does not claim outright disillusionment towards the war, its ethnic subtext expresses an ongoing social cause that would not be needed had the actual Mexican Revolution accomplished its goals. Above the men sitting on the locomotive, two silhouettes of *campesinos* plow the fields under a gigantic sun. They stoop over rows of crops and a bird, possibly representing the spirit of the Mexican eagle, flies high overhead, as if leading them away from the fields. This image of peasants working the land speaks to ethnicity, because the war was supposed to bring equitable land reform to the indigenously-mixed poor. Another *campesino* designated by his loose, white clothing slumps in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture with an overturned bottle of tequila. Perhaps he represents one of the silhouettes working in the sun, because now, under the moon, he passes out, drunk on his liquor. He does not appear to be enjoying the fruits of his labor, so one might assume that the revolution has not yet delivered on its promises. It is, so to speak, still in progress. Upon closer inspection of the *campesinos*, viewers might interpret this picture as an ethnic or social call to arms for a revolution or struggle in progress.

This call-to-arms interpretation develops more traction when one considers the significance of *La prieta linda*, the beautiful, dark-skinned woman beckoning in the center. Unlike the other historical images of Zapata, the rebels on the train, and the *campesinos*, her half-naked image bears little resemblance to the revolution's *soldaderas*, the women who fought in the war. For this reason, she is less historical in nature, and thus more *iconic*—embodying a greater idea than what she visually represents. The fact that she is dark skinned, like the *campesinos*, suggests that she is *mestiza*. Much larger in size than the other images, she seems to summon the viewer to join her and the rebellious cause for which she stands. Thus, she welcomes her fellow *mestizos* to join her in a war—not of the past, but ongoing and in progress—for a better life.

When viewed within in the context of Azuela's novel, objects such as the rifles, soldiers, and *campesinos* take on new meaning to express a modern-day, political struggle of violence relating to social reform. Is it a stretch to image how a convict, particularly if he is affiliated with a Latino gang, might see himself swept up in a modern-day struggle that mimics the violent Mexican Revolution? As *Underdogs* demonstrates about the war's soldiers, the lines between patriotic heroes and opportunistic bandits frequently blur. Perhaps this artist interprets his own struggle and crimes (including his resulting time in prison) as a revolutionary stand to obtain what should be, from his perspective, rightfully his. At the very least, the violent imagery, including guns and soldiers at the ready, probably appeals to the criminal lifestyle of gangs who would rather “die standing” than live on their knees.

Interpreting the Indigenous Past

Although lacking *The Underdogs*'s fascinating characters and gripping drama, *The Cosmic Race*, by José Vasconcelos, serves as another work by which to interpret this collection's artwork. It offers additional insight regarding twentieth-century interpretations of post-revolutionary Mexico, with particular emphasis on ethnicity. Vasconcelos's 1925 essay, originally published as *La raza cósmica*, prophesizes about a glorious future for Mexico and Latin America, in which a "fifth race"—the biological result of all the world's races intermingling—welcomes in an age ruled by beauty and love.¹⁵⁵ In this futuristic "Aesthetic" or "Spiritual" epoch, people of Mexico will lead the world in ushering in societies organized around and consumed by artistic beauty and imaginative energy: "[j]oy, love, and fantasy, that is, creativity, will be the predominant ingredients of human life."¹⁵⁶ *The Cosmic Race* offers significant clues as to how a prominent intellectual interpreted twentieth-century Mexico and its future.

José Vasconcelos stands as one of Mexico's most diverse intellectuals and politicians. Born in Oaxaca in 1882 and of "white," non-indigenous ancestry, as a young man he showed much interest in philosophy and the mysticism of other regions, though later he would practice law.¹⁵⁷ Vasconcelos developed a flare for politics, opposed Porfirio Díaz, and frequently fled to the United States or Europe in fear of persecution by different administrations.¹⁵⁸ He briefly served as Mexico's Minister of Education, a position he used to initiate great reforms for public

¹⁵⁵ José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La raza cósmica*, trans. by Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), x.

¹⁵⁶ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, ix-x.

¹⁵⁷ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xx-xxii.

¹⁵⁸ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xxii.

schools, and promoted the Mexican muralist movement, providing “public art for the masses.”¹⁵⁹ Later, he ran for presidential office, but was not elected.¹⁶⁰ An accomplished author of several essays, Vasconcelos died in 1959.¹⁶¹

In the introduction to his translation of *The Cosmic Race*, Didier Jaén notes how the idea of the fifth race took hold among the Chicano community. Many early Chicanos interpreted “an exaltation of their own values in this concept of the Cosmic Race, and identified with it the concept of ‘La Raza,’ giving it new life...”¹⁶² Therefore, the Chicano movement connected with the Cosmic Race in that it provided a representation of how they—*La raza*—understood themselves. *The Cosmic Race* served as an ethnic focal point or lens by which to develop their own identity as Latinos.

Considering that some critics accused Vasconcelos of racial tendencies towards the indigenous, one might find surprising the Chicano movement’s identification with his work. Antonio Sacoto claims Vasconcelos “finds no value at all in pre-colonial cultures...he looks with disdain upon the mixture of races, and the mestizo must abandon his ancestry, his Indian roots, if he wants to survive the advance of progress...”¹⁶³ According to Sacoto, Vasconcelos’s assertions speak to a *mestizo* culture that must forget its native heritage and scorn all that is indigenous in its past, rather than embrace or celebrate it. However, Jaén points out that, in the prologue to the essay’s 1948 publication, Vasconcelos emphasizes the spirituality of racial mixing, which

¹⁵⁹ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xxiii.

¹⁶⁰ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁶¹ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xxiv.

¹⁶² Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xv-xvi.

¹⁶³ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xviii.

stresses the Indians' importance as an essential part of a greater *mestizo* whole.¹⁶⁴ According to Vasconcelos, the Spanish conquest of the Indians enabled the natives to know Christianity; therefore, the combination of Spanish and Indian blood—framed in the context of Catholicism—allowed the natives to “advance” beyond their origins and develop into the *mestizo* race.¹⁶⁵ In other words, this *mestizo* race does not replace or, more importantly, *erase* the indigenous heritage of Latin Americans, but instead, incorporates it, owns it, and celebrates it as part of a greater Latin American (and religious) whole.

Keeping in mind Jaén's interpretation, which does not view Vasconcelos as “anti-Indianist,” but rather an author who deduced his conclusions from mysticism, one can understand the Chicano fascination with the “advanced” and spiritually progressive Cosmic Race.¹⁶⁶ For some Mexicans, celebrating their Aztec past might prove their own—the *mestizo* 's—spiritual evolution as a collective people. Their distinctive characteristics, Vasconcelos might argue, have evolved through and because of the indigenous ancestry. The greater the depictions of the Aztecs, the more pride some Mexicans may feel as their descendants, and ultimately view themselves as all the more “advanced.”

Some of the collection's artists that identify with their Latino heritage do indeed incorporate ancient indigenous symbolism into their work. Figure number six, depicting three Indian women, measures ten by fifteen inches on illustration board.¹⁶⁷ Despite that the artist used only pencil lead, this piece shows significant depth and perspective: three indigenous

¹⁶⁴ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xviii.

¹⁶⁵ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xviii.

¹⁶⁶ Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, xvii-xviii.

¹⁶⁷ See Figure no. 6 in Appendix.

women—interestingly, light-eyed and light-skinned—in headbands and headdresses dominate the image. The scantily clad woman on the left bears tribal face and body paint; another woman in the center, framed at the head and shoulders, wears Indian feathers as well as jewelry with ancient carvings. She is an image of beauty and flowers surround her face. To the right, another Indian woman stands, but with significantly less adornment and with scratches on her face as if she has been in a fight. Above her, the partially obscured face of an Indian man looks on. The entire background is covered in lush tropical foliage; carved stonework, statues, and a temple peek through. At the top, the artist's name borders the woman's face. While the artist does not name the indigenous people, his archaic images communicate an ancient Latin American culture.

Because the Aztecs—as well as *all* indigenous Latin American cultures in their traditional, ancient form—remain firmly in the past, they offer a pliable image for modern-day Latinos by which to project and express notions of ethnic identity. The three beautiful women may represent a glorified past that will later be incorporated into the greater *mestizo* whole. Thus, logically, the *mestizo* race that later develops from this proud indigenous culture must also be glorious. Another interpretation is that these three women are the same person and that she represents the Indian people at different points of the conquest; once, the proud warrioress on the left, when she lets down her hair in the center and welcomes the white man, she becomes the woman on the right, battered and abused. Regardless of the interpretation, the artist connects very strongly to this culture, because he incorporates his name in bold letters above the image in addition to the more traditional signature in the lower right-hand corner. These indigenous personas provide a malleable image with which to express cultural identity.

Although it does not offer overt indigenous imagery, figure number seven associates the violent Mexican gang lifestyle with symbolism akin to the spiritual mixing of the Cosmic Race.¹⁶⁸ In this ink rendering, a man and a woman stand side-by-side in the center as a couple. In the upper right-hand corner, a woman wearing a bandana, frequently designating gang affiliation, sheds a tear, perhaps for a lost loved one or her significant other in prison. Another face appears directly below her and, as with figure number six, these women may all be the same person. A swan, a sunset, and flowers surround all three faces, communicating a sense of peace. To the left, the man's side of the picture is far more violent. One hundred-dollar bills and coins signify the gangster lifestyle of extravagance and quick cash. The partial image of a bandanaed *vato* smoking a cigar (or joint) appears below a stopwatch; interestingly, the face of the clock is distorted into a coiled snake. To the far left, a prison watchtower and cell bars signify that this artist is serving his sentence or "doing time." Although the face in the upper left-hand corner is not necessarily indigenous, it does resemble the shape of an ancient Toltec stone head. A cracked skull appears where its nose should be and a graveyard with crosses looms above. While this picture does not explicitly claim or communicate affiliation with a futuristic fifth race, it does illustrate how symbols of the indigenous past blend together with violent imagery of the gang lifestyle in the present to depict a new type of spiritual union between Latinos.

Mi Vida Loca

Fully acknowledging that one could write page after page analyzing *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and only scratch the surface, for this discussion, I focus only on Octavio Paz's

¹⁶⁸ See Figure no. 7 in Appendix. The skyline at the bottom represents the El Paso mountains (designated by the star in the center.)

interpretations of the Aztecs.¹⁶⁹ One of Mexico's most influential twentieth-century intellectuals, Paz offers a glimpse into interpretations of Mexico and its people at a later period in the century than the previous authors. More akin to Vasconcelos than Azuela in that he provides a critical essay instead of a novel, Paz offers clues as to how an intellectual interpreted the Aztec past at the time of *Labyrinth*'s publication in 1950 which, in turn, sheds light on violence and identity in the collection's artwork.

Paz's interpretation of the Aztecs' downfall at the hands of the Spanish conquerors speaks to an indigenous culture tragically resigned to its violent fate; he frames his assertions regarding the Aztecs' defeat within the context of their "fascinated acceptance of death."¹⁷⁰ In several parts of *Labyrinth*, Paz speaks of the Aztecs with reserved reverence. For him, the Aztec past serves as a point in time on which to look back and connect to modern culture. As such, Paz offers his historical interpretation of Mexico's conquest. He attributes the fall of the Aztecs to their own acquiescence from feeling betrayed and abandoned by their gods.¹⁷¹ He claims the Aztecs were a relatively new civilization "in their youth," as opposed to a more ancient society like Rome when it fell to the Germanic tribes.¹⁷² Because "fascination with death is not so much a trait of maturity or old age as it is of youth," the young Aztec civilization developed a "death-wish," in that it embraced its violent demise.¹⁷³ According to Paz, the Aztecs fell, in part, because of their youth and pessimistic fatalism.

¹⁶⁹ See chapter 5, "The Conquest and Colonialism," in Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, trans. by Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1985).

¹⁷⁰ Paz, *Labyrinth*, 96.

¹⁷¹ Paz, *Labyrinth*, 93-94.

¹⁷² Paz, *Labyrinth*, 94.

¹⁷³ Paz, *Labyrinth*, 94, 96.

Paz places significant weight on the Aztec's fatalism to the point that he connects it to the very beginnings of the Mexican people. He claims that "[t]he drama of a consciousness that sees everything around it destroyed—even the gods—appears to preside over our whole history" and goes on to discuss how, after the fall of the Aztecs, other indigenous cultures also welcomed their sad fate.¹⁷⁴ Therefore, this fatalism is directly connected to the Mexico of today, because the Aztec "death-wish" ushered in the age of Spanish conquest, which gave birth to a new civilization of *mestizos*.

Paz's assertions of a "death-wish" and youthful, "fascinated acceptance of death" symbolically appear in much of this artwork. For example, the crying clowns in figures number one and two speak to a carefree life of crime now in which one will inevitably pay later—a pessimistic fatalism that the artist will end up dead or in jail. Figure number seven also communicates this same resignation. Here, one hundred-dollar bills and stacks of coins connect to the extravagant lifestyle of crime; however, the cemetery in the upper left-hand corner speaks to death and the tower underneath implies spending time in prison. Thus, Paz's claim of fatalism applies to these artists who depict images of death and incarceration.

Although figure number eight initially presents as a chaotic collage of nightmarish memories, upon closer inspection with insight from Paz, a variety of violent images symbolically connect the ancient Aztecs to both death and jail time.¹⁷⁵ To the left, a menacing stone sculpture—presumably Aztec in origin, due to the inclusion of other Mexican symbols in the picture—perches above a calendar communicating that this artist is serving time in prison. The

¹⁷⁴ Paz, *Labyrinth*, 96.

¹⁷⁵ See Figure no. 8 in Appendix.

stone head emerging from the mouth of a creature resembles the statue of an ancient Aztec god. In the center background, steps leading up to a temple resemble an Aztec pyramid. The temple rests just behind a small demon who jealously guards the key to a jail in the lower right-hand corner. Perhaps the demon speaks to an afterlife in hell. Just behind him, a distorted skull—the symbol of death—is partially visible. The vague shadow of a clock face casts across the demon’s body to reinforce the concept of “doing time.” A marijuana leaf separates the key to freedom and the cell lock. Images of the Aztec culture along with fatalistic symbols designating death and time in prison speak to a gang culture that connects its identity to an indigenous past through images of violence.

In addition, figure number eight blends the ancient Aztec past with the Mexican Revolution to express a visual interpretation of gang life and ethnic identity. To the left, a voluptuous woman wearing a *sombrero* and an ammunition belt looks away from the viewer’s gaze. Like *La prieta*, she bears little resemblance to a historical rebel, because she wears only a small halter top. However, her hat, gun belt, and *serape* symbolically represent the revolution. To the far right, another woman sheds a tear—a reoccurring image in gang artwork. Perhaps she misses the bandanaed *vato* just behind her (with the blade of a machete), because he is in prison. Interestingly, just as the woman on the left wears items from the revolution, so too does the woman on the right—her safari hat resembles the one worn by Pancho Villa. Along the bottom of the entire picture, the frequently repeated representation of Mexico’s eagle and serpent speak to the artist’s nationality, or perhaps, ethnicity. These images define him and his lifestyle through a reimagined indigenous and revolutionary past.

Imagery of the Aztec past, the Mexican Revolution, and the haphazard, dangerous nature of the gang lifestyle—referred to as *mi vida loca*—all fuse together in figure number eight. In the upper left-hand corner, a black widow spider lurks above the woman. A snake bears its fangs in the lower right-hand corner, ready to bite. These images symbolize a dangerous life in which death can strike at any moment. Playing cards sticking out of the woman's hat signify the artist's criminal and risky lifestyle that is always a gamble. And across the entire picture, smaller symbols remind the viewer that the artist is incarcerated for his crimes: the barbed wire fence, a watchtower, jail bars, and representations of time. This ink drawing glorifies violence and interprets *mi vida loca* through metaphors of a reinvented Mexican past.

Thus, these illustrations represent the crazy, criminal, and deadly life of a gang member who, much like Paz's interpretation of the Aztecs, has a "death-wish" or a youthful, "fascinated acceptance of death." These artists express themselves through imagery associated with both the revolution and the ancient Aztec (or indigenous) past in order to articulate a violent gang identity that, in many instances, also speaks to ethnic identity. Whether consciously or not, these artists employ images of the past in order to communicate their violent identity in the present.

This chapter examines a small collection of twenty-first-century artwork by Texas convicts with insight from twentieth-century Mexican authors in order to better understand narco culture and drug violence. At first glance, many drawings offer chaotic images of violence thrown haphazardly together; however, I argue that many of the illustrations exhibit similar visual patterns, connecting to performative violence stylistically. Although this artwork presents distorted images of the revolution and indigenous past, several illustrations echo themes previously explored by earlier intellectuals. Azuela's frustration with the revolution's violence

and his disappointment in the war's reforms, along with Vasconcelos's and Paz's interpretations of the Latin American indigenous peoples, directly connect to violent imagery and symbolism in this artwork. Are these artists really disillusioned with the revolution's reforms? Do they relate to the fifth race and the spiritual unity behind the *mestizo*? Or, do they simply want to distract themselves from their incarceration? While the viewer will never know what each artist was trying to communicate through his images, these illustrations stand as good primary sources by which to explore how convicts and gang members interpret themselves. In the very least, this artwork contributes to the greater discussion regarding images of violence that are meant to be seen and supports a deeper understanding of narco culture.

CONCLUSION

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach regarding twenty-first-century narcotic trafficking, this thesis simultaneously engages with, and brings into conversation, three terms—victims, violence, and narco culture. In my discussion, I form independent arguments pertaining to the scholarship of drug trafficking, the performative aspects of its violence, the voices of victims in documentary films, and the historical arguments in gang artwork; these assertions all speak to a paradoxical culture in which brutality physically victimizes individuals yet captivates communities and society at large. I argue that, due to the recent hemispheric crisis that has developed from the drug trade, Latin American scholars will expand and enhance their interpretations of twenty-first-century narco culture by framing this topic within the context of victims who endure its violence.

This topic is visual by nature. Much of what pertains to the victims, the violence, and narco culture itself centers around graphic images. Note the scholarship. Many authors who address this topic focus on visual evidence; they discuss graphic scenes of violence that terrify communities or interpret narco culture through visual media and artwork. From Hernández and Deibert, who describe shocking scenes of brutality, to Benavides, who looks to *telenovelas* about narco heroes, these authors focus on what they see and how those images impact society. Even Wald, who studies narco corridos, emphasizes the flashy and extravagant lifestyle to which the singers wish to aspire, speaking to the visual nature of many *norteña* music bands. Note the visual qualities in the violence itself. Lantz makes poignant assertions regarding corpse messaging pertaining to graphic images of torture and mutilation. I contribute my own argument

regarding *performance* and *spectacle*, due to the widespread distribution of graphic images on the Internet.

Because this topic is visual by nature, evidence that highlights images—but that does not feature gruesome morbidity—contributes to a greater understanding. Documentary filmmakers make valuable contributions to drugs and violence discourse. In Cammisa’s moving depiction of unaccompanied children traveling north, young boys and girls cry for their mothers and tearfully confess to being abandoned or attacked. Their pictures and voices present the viewer with *real* emotion, arguably more moving than words in a book. Schwarz does well to highlight the extravagant lifestyle of narco corrido bands but offers questionable images of corpses. And Portillo successfully depicts missing women by offering photographs and images of their families seeking answers. Because narco culture and its violence are graphic, documentaries offer valuable contributions in that they directly confront viewers visually.

The drawings of gang-affiliated convicts—artistic interpretations of narco culture—connect to narcotic violence stylistically. These drawings “speak” a graphic language akin to performative violence in their exaggerated and surreal compositions. Although they might appear random, they express disillusionment in social reforms and fascination with an Aztec past—ideas previously explored by Mexican intellectuals. The drawings of inmates offer visual evidence of the crazy life to which gang members subscribe in narco culture. Considering the substantial number of gang members who adorn themselves with tattoos similar to these drawings, these young “warriors” physically identify with images of violence by imprinting them on their own skin. Thus, convict artwork and gang tattoos exemplify the complex relationship between identity, violence, and narco culture through visual images.

Although acknowledging the visual nature of this topic may not alter society's approach to the drugs and violence crisis, it may impact scholarship. Moving forward, academics might consider more visual sources. Yet, seeking out and employing such sources carries enormous responsibilities. At the same time that these sources further the understanding of narcotic trafficking, when framed inappropriately, they easily communicate a violent language of pain and desperation. Graphic photographs of performative violence help scholars determine cartel objectives, but when circulated throughout the Internet, aggravate a volatile situation and ignore victims' pain. Although the documentaries discussed above offer valuable insight, many mainstream movies contribute to graphic images of violence. And while artwork or tattoos can lend insight into gang culture, they can also boast gang affiliation and past felonies. In recognizing the visual nature of drugs and violence, one must also accept the responsibility incurred in drawing attention to it.

APPENDIX

IMAGES OF GANG ARTWORK



Figure A.1: Female Clowns



Figure A.2: Skulls and Crosses

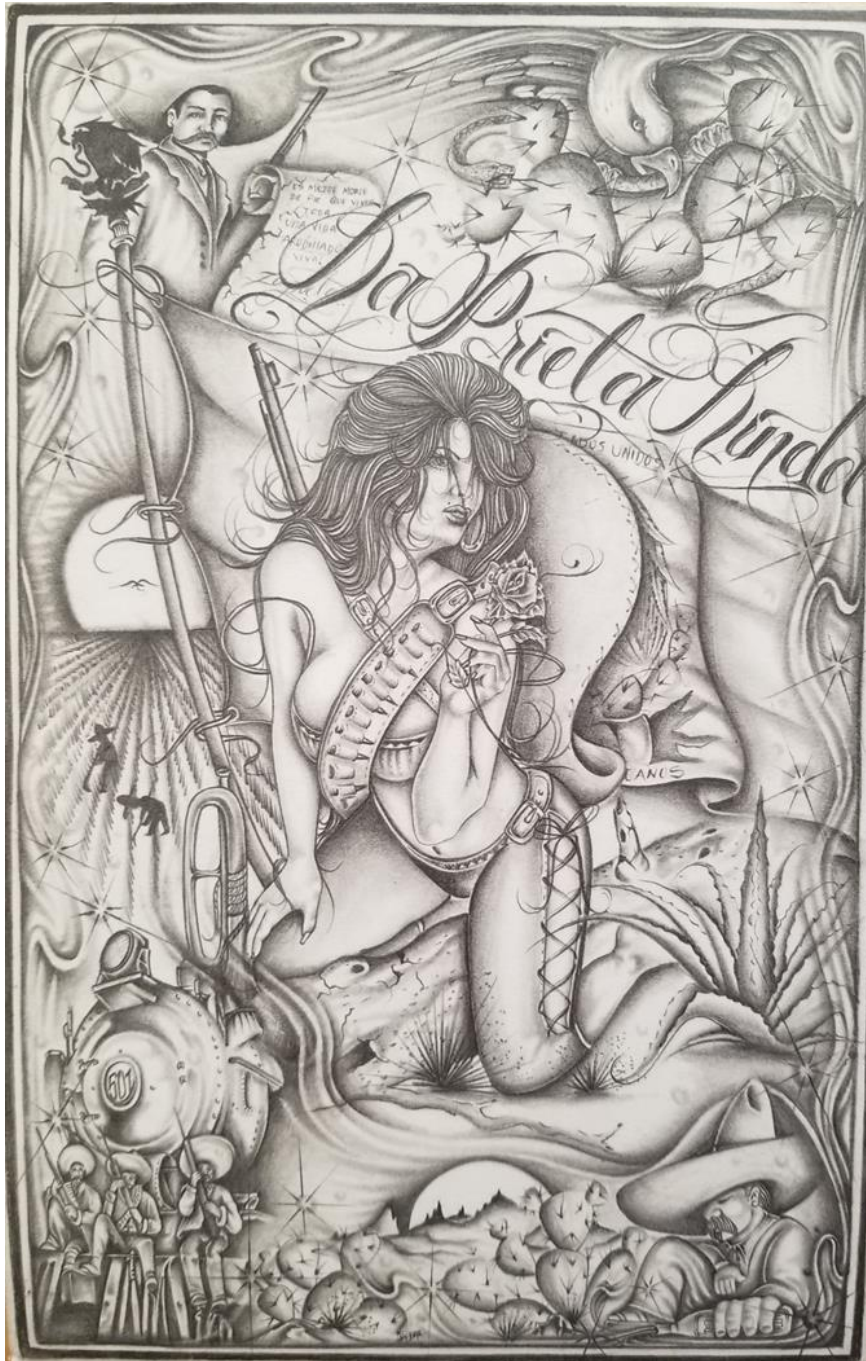


Figure A.3: *La Prieta Linda*



Figure A.4: Woman in Feathered Headdress



Figure A.5: Women and Aztec Warrior (unfinished)



Figure A.6: Three Indigenous Women

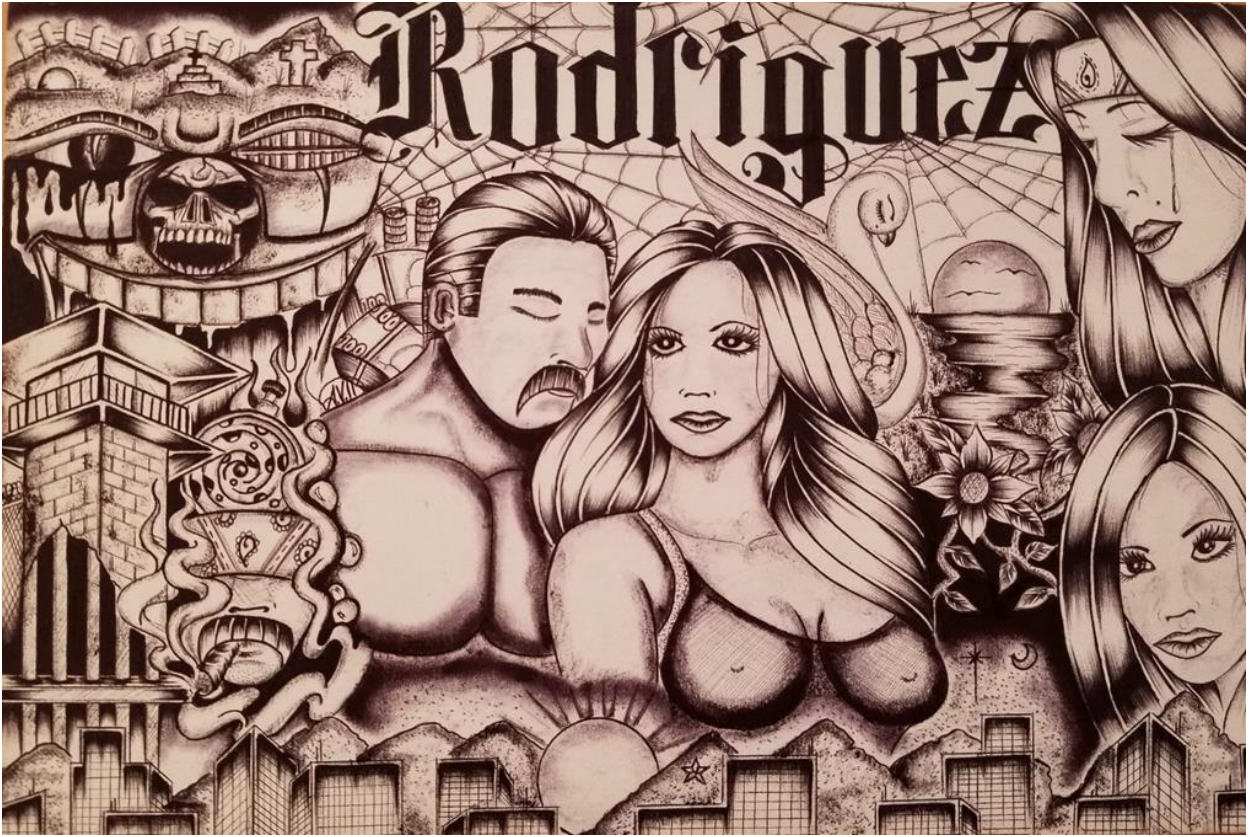


Figure A.7: Rodriguez Pair



Figure A.8: Mexico's Past and *Mi Vida Loca*

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Laurel Kirk was born in Decatur, Illinois and attended high school in nearby Monticello. She graduated *summa cum laude* and from the Honors Program at Eastern Illinois University with a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and minors in Chemistry and French. At Eastern, Laurel earned the Talented Student Award, a paid internship, for two consecutive years. She has certified in several stage combat weapons with the Society of American Fight Directors, and participated in workshops in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and Chicago. In 2010, Laurel attended Northern Illinois University as a post-baccalaureate student where she studied History and Latin. Although she was accepted to their graduate program and offered a university fellowship, she decided to attend the University of Texas at Dallas in 2015. Serving as a Teaching Assistant for five semesters and a summer, Laurel takes pride in connecting with students, encouraging diversity, and fostering interest in Latin America. Laurel and her two cats, Augustus and Nero, live in Plano, Texas. They all dearly miss Tiberius who passed away during the research phase of this thesis.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

Graduate student at the University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson TX

August 2015-May 2018, MA in Latin American Studies (expected graduation, May 2018)

GPA-4.0

Post-baccalaureate education at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb IL

August 2010-May 2014 (part-time)

Emphasis in History and Latin

Honors Program classes

GPA-4.0

BA, Theatre Arts; Minors: Chemistry and French, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston IL

August 1990-May 1994

Summa cum laude

University Honors Program

GPA-3.91

Teaching Assistantships, Honors, & Awards

Teaching Assistantship, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, HIST 3398, *Colonial Latin America*, Fall 2017

Teaching Assistantship, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, Study Abroad in Oaxaca, Summer 2017

Teaching Assistantship, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, HIST 1302, *American History*, Fall 2016 &

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Teaching Assistantship, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, HIST 1302, *American History*, Spring 2016

Teaching Assistantship, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, HIST 1301, *American History*, Fall 2015

Teaching Assistantship, Northern Illinois University, 2014 (declined)

University Fellowship, Northern Illinois University, 2014 (declined)

Student Director, play fully budgeted in regular season, Eastern Illinois University, 1994

Talented Student Award (paid internship) Eastern Illinois University, 1992 & 1993

Research Interests

Modern Mexico and Central America; Narco Culture; Borderland Gang Culture; Documentary Film; Gender

Languages

English (native), Spanish (basic), Classic and Early Modern Latin (basic), French (basic)

University Employment & Service

Assisted in the coordination of events, guest speakers, booths, posters, and brochures for the

Center for U.S.-Latin America Initiatives, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, Fall 2017

Photography contributions to Study Abroad brochures, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, 2016

PHI ALPHA THETA member (National History Honor Society), Univ. of Texas at Dallas

Bibliography work for *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, edited by Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014)

Living History actor (community outreach program in which actors researched historical figures and performed improvisational monologues for local schools), Eastern Illinois University, 1992

ALPHA PSI OMEGA Secretary (Theatre Honor Society), Eastern Illinois University, 1992-1994

Prevention Workshop group leader/director (community outreach program for adolescents), Eastern Illinois University, 1993

Dean's Curriculum Committee Advisor, Eastern Illinois University, 1993

Professional Development

Dueling Arts International Theatrical Combat Workshop, University of Hawaii at Mānoa, 2003

Society of American Fight Directors Winter Wonderland Workshop, Chicago IL, 2002

Los Angeles Fight Academy Hollywood Clash Workshop, Hollywood CA, 2001

Society of American Fight Directors Winter Wonderland Workshop, Chicago IL, 2001

Elgin Community College Theatre Dept. Stage Combat, Elgin IL, 2001

Society of American Fight Directors National Stage Combat Workshop, Univ. of Nevada, 1994

Production Assistant for various production companies, Chicago IL, 1996