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AGNES MONDRAGÓN CELIS OCHOA

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For Steven

&

For all the Mexican journalists and their loved ones

who have been victims of violence

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Introduction:

The Contradictions of the Drug War

On September 26, 2019, a couple of months into my fieldwork, I attended the protest commemorating the fifth anniversary of the forced disappearance of 43 students from the Isidro Burgos rural teachers' college in the village of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. That date had become one of yearly commemoration and demands for truth and justice as this massacre had come to epitomize the violence that has swept Mexico in recent years. As has become customary in anti-violence protests, the parents of the victims marched at the front, bearing the images and names of their children in signs that they held close to their bodies (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Protesters Holding Signs with the Images and Names of the Missing Students, March of September 26, 2019, Mexico City (Photo by Author)

Groups of students from the Ayotzinapa college and other rural teachers' colleges from around the country marched behind them, chanting slogans in what sounded both like a well-rehearsed martial-like choir and, as a friend of mine pointed out, a collective lament. Many of these young men and women, as well as the protesters that marched behind them, held signs made on large pieces of cloth that bore the slogans that have come to define this struggle: "*No estamos todos, nos faltan 43*" (We're not all here, 43 of us are missing); "*Ayotzinapa vive, la lucha sigue*" (Ayotzinapa lives, the struggle goes on); and, "*26 de septiembre no se olvida. Ni perdón ni olvido*" (September 26th is not forgotten. Neither forgiveness nor forgetting; Figure 2). I was struck by the presence of that last slogan, which had been borrowed from the commemoration of the student massacre in the square of Tlatelolco in 1968: "*2 de octubre no se olvida.*" (October 2nd is not forgotten).

As I watched the demonstrators march, the resonances with the protest of October 2nd became more explicit, through signs, for instance, that read: "*Somos nietos de la Revolución, hijos del 68, hermanos de los 43*" (We are the grandchildren of the Revolution, children of '68, siblings of the 43; Figure 3).

Figure 2: Protesters Holding Signs in the March to Commemorate the 43 Missing Students (I), September 26, 2019 (Photo by Author)

Figure 3: Protesters Holding Signs in the March to Commemorate the 43 Missing Students (II), September 26, 2019 (Photo by Author)

A few days later, I observed how the protest of October 2nd had in turn integrated the images and slogans of the Ayotzinapa struggle. Not only did I see that same sign again (see Fig. 6), but also the faces of the students who had disappeared in images carried by the demonstrators. In other words, I observed how these protests were actively fusing together—that is, making an interdiscursive connection between—the Ayotzinapa and Tlatelolco events as two instances of the same thing: a history of repression and popular struggle (see Escalante and Canseco 2019) (see Figs. 4, 5 and 6).

Figure 4: Protester Holds a Sign Reading: "*¡Hasta la victoria siempre! 2 de octubre no se olvida*" [Always forward to victory! October 2nd is not forgotten] in the October 2nd March, Commemorating the Tlatelolco Massacre, Mexico City, October 2, 2019 (Photo by Author)

Figure 5: Protesters Holding Dove-Shaped Pieces of Paper with the Faces of the 43 Ayotzinapa Missing Students in the October 2nd March (Photo by Author)

Figure 6: Signs displayed in October 2nd March (Photo by Author)
Note: In the yellow circle is a sign also displayed in the September 26th demonstration (see Figure 3).

However, these two events belong to starkly distinct moments in Mexican history. The one that took place in 1968 belongs to the "dirty war" —the persecution on the part of the military and the political police of leftist movements, from guerrillas to student mobilizations. The one of 2014 is embedded in the "war on drug trafficking," which is marked by *de facto* control by criminal organizations of towns and villages throughout the country and the use of the state's security forces to combat them. To make an association between Tlatelolco and Ayotzinapa—as was not only occurring in this protest but also in Mexico's public sphere more broadly (Escalante and Canseco 2019)—the role of organized crime in the disappearance of the students was conflated into and as the problem, or an extension, of the state itself, its participation being largely ignored. This, apparently, was not lost on the protesters, or at least on the one who painted a graffito on the metal door of an ice cream shop during the October 2nd march that read: "*El narco no existe, es la policía*" (The narco doesn't exist; it's the police) (Figures 7 and 8).

Figures 7 and 8: Graffito Painted on Public Space in the March of October 2nd (I & II) (Photo by Author)

From the available information and known patterns of the drug war, we might have expected protestors to have framed the forced disappearance of the students as an issue of failed disciplinary power (Mitchell 2006: 177-8)—that is, that a group of soldiers failed to carry out their duty of combatting drug trafficking organizations and protecting civilians, and instead colluded with those organizations. The soldiers, on such an understanding, exerted violence to eliminate the obstruction that the Ayotzinapa students represented to what seemed to be a drug trafficking operation of some magnitude. Indeed, as investigative reports suggest, one of the buses that the students had hijacked to ride to Mexico City—as they did every year to attend the October 2nd march—was meant to transport a shipment of heroin to the United States (Informe Ayotzinapa 2014).

Yet this was not how protestors understood this event.[1] Instead, following its resonances with the memory of Mexico's authoritarian past, the students' disappearance was taken to be a matter related to sovereignty—of the state's security forces exerting violence over their citizens to force them into subjugation, to eradicate a popular rebellion and the political dangers it posed to the hegemony of the regime, as was the case five decades ago. Why might that be the case? An event like Ayotzinapa, I argue, may have come to be seen as a citation of Tlatelolco, or a repetition in the psychoanalytic sense, because an unresolved violence that haunts them both resonates strongly between them. In other words, the ghost of unsettled state violence that Tlatelolco has

[1] For Mexican publics, at the center of the Ayotzinapa event is the fact that the military was involved in the forced disappearance of 43 young men, while the participation of drug trafficking organizations is largely ignored. As the years go by and more knowledge comes to light, the participation of more members of the Armed Forces has become clearer, not only by their presence among the perpetrators of the violence but also by their participation in hiding and manipulating evidence. Moreover, forced disappearance is a practice that is constantly carried out by members of organized crime but was also resorted to by the state during the dirty war, particularly in the state of Guerrero, where Ayotzinapa is located, as well as the town of Iguala, where the crime took place. Why not, then, follow such strong resonances when making sense of this event? What is the difference between an act carried out by the military as an organized institution (in an act of repression) and one orchestrated by a group of differently organized soldiers (in collusion with organized crime)? Under what circumstances are they or are they not *the same thing*?

come to signify is the means through which an event like Ayotzinapa has been rendered intelligible.

As James Siegel argues, "[e]ach act of large-scale violence raises up various specters from the history of the nation" (Siegel 1998: 2). "The explanation of why Indonesians murder those like themselves," he goes on to say, "has to take account of these specters" (Ibid). As I argue in this dissertation, Mexican publics are doing precisely that: accounting for the mass murder of Mexicans by those like themselves by attending to the symptomatic traces that haunt this violence (Gordon 2008[1997]: 17). For Avery Gordon, haunting is "that moment… when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed… It is this sociopolitical—psychological state…" (Ibid: xvi). In other words, understanding and *condemning* the Ayotzinapa event as a repetition of Tlatelolco is a way of illuminating the cracks at the foundation of the drug war. The forms of knowledge production explored in the following chapters are collective instances of reckoning with these cracks.

Given the drug war's scale, internal distinctions, violence, and features of entities like "the state" and "the drug world," the war largely resists being captured epistemically. This resistance stands at the center of how it is experienced, understood, and acted upon. It *is* its epistemology—one of murk (see Taussig 1987). And much of what this murk has cultivated is a profound distrust towards official discursive constructions of the war, in which violence, from early on, came to be "explained through an account that is almost abstract, stereotyped, reiterative, and impossible to verify, according to which 'cartels' compete against each other and are the only actors, or at least the only actors with initiative, and in which victims remain anonymous, although more or less explicitly associated with organized crime" (Escalante 2012: 40, trans. by author; see also Schedler 2018).

Yet, capturing the drug war epistemically became politically crucial, as it came to underpin how the state's legitimate authority and sovereign power would be perceived. The present work explores the drug war through this dimension. It frames such a war not as a militarized confrontation between the state and criminal organizations, but rather as a conceptual struggle about what shape these two entities have taken or lack, when and how they are perceived to be smeared together or separated in the context of the war, and thus partake in defining this ongoing event of mass violence.

It does so by exploring how the official discursive construction of the so-called war on drug trafficking falls under the pressure of its own contradictions—the ways in which the drug war unfolds in a contrary manner to the purposes it is meant to serve. The first of these contradictions, as we saw from the Ayotzinapa case, is that the state always risks imposing its violence upon those it claims to protect. By this I do not only mean punishing criminality through the state's sovereign power, but also victimizing others as a result of the enemy being an invisible and moving target. The second is the pervasive indistinction between the state and the criminal organizations it combats, which results from the latter's presumed, enormous corrupting power and embeddedness in social life, which is often more profound than the state's. The third relates to the discursive construction of the state's enemy—the figure of the drug trafficker—which, rather than being subjected and mobilized to justify the war, has become a seductive autonomous cultural force that the state is unable to control.

This dissertation attends to how these contradictions become intelligible and thus objects of critique. It explores how this is done through conceptual operations that privilege appearances, resonances, affective dispositions, and forms of mystification, as well as modes of address that favor the negative—indirectness, displacement, haunting, fantasy. In so doing, I argue that this

context of warfare sharpens certain features of the ways in which contemporary governance has come to be thought of in increasingly pervasive ways.

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This dissertation thus contributes to the study of the affective formations of state authority. This approach has studied the state as an ideological project (Abrams 1988) or a fetish (Taussig 1992, 1997), emphasizing how it may materialize through narratives that arouse terror as much as desire (Aretxaga 2005). Representations of the state may be constructed vis-à-vis a set of criminalized enemies (Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Zulaika and Douglass 1996), whom it may emulate, becoming hardly distinguishable from them (Aretxaga 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, 2016; Siegel 1998); or consolidate power by mobilizing its enemies' representations to justify forms of state violence (Asad 2007; Morris 2006), seeking to recruit its citizens' affective dispositions (Masco 2014: 7). The state may articulate dramatizations that put forth a set of fantasies, seeking to force subjection to its alleged truth (Apter 2005; Mbembe 2001; Wedeen 2015) or construct itself as a larger-than-life entity through spectacles of violence (Hansen 2001). Building on those insights, this thesis approaches the relation between the state as its criminalized enemies as a deeply problematic and ongoing process, rather than a *fait accompli*. Indeed, depending on the perspective from which it is seen, the state ends up appearing as too close, even fused together with its enemy, or sometimes not close enough—that is, not partaking in its charisma—or overshadowing such an enemy altogether, being ascribed the entirety of the violence. If, as Begoña Aretxaga argues, "the power of the state relies on the subjective meanings that people attach to it, on the hopes and fear of the magical power people attribute to it" (Aretxaga 2005: 106), the state can feel grand and overpowering, but also wretched and withered, polluted and defeated.

The counterpart of this dimension of state authority is the mass mediated construction of the criminal. Works on the politics of representation of criminality have highlighted how its antagonism vis-à-vis the state may contribute to its idealization and make it an object of collective admiration (Benjamin 1978; Hobsbawm 1981). Representations of criminality may embody fantasies of justice, revolutionary energies, and convey the people's communicative force (Siegel 1998), particularly in the Mexican case (Lomnitz 2005; Yeh 2017), while erasing the self-interest and predatory quality of these characters (Blok 1972; Joseph 1990; Roitman 2006; Vanderwood 2004). This dissertation contributes to the study of these forms of representation by exploring the ways in which the drug world becomes a fetish (Taussig 2004), not unlike the state, constructed out of a multiplicity of elements: fantasy, speculation, and endless layers of talk. It draws on studies on the performative power of violence (Aretxaga 2005; Luna 2018; Taussig 1987) to explore how narratives are constitutive of the figure of the drug trafficker, which then becomes an ideological problem for the state. It explores the implications of the fact that criminality is crafted both as a political enemy and a commodity. In so doing, this dissertation departs from studies that analyze how projections of an enemy deploy and maximize state power (Masco 2014) and argues how this projected enemy may exert an overpowering cultural force.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to anthropological work on knowledge production. This work has shown how mass violence may produce a space of epistemic murk, where "an unstable interplay of truth and illusion" dominates (Taussig 1987). Previous studies on Mexico's drug war have pointed to the epistemic murk at its core as they explore the mismatch between instances of violence that constitute it and the stories in the press that represent and circulate it (Escalante 2012, 2019; Schedler 2018). Alternately, many studies have sought to refute misconceptions

around drug trafficking by exploring localized practices of specific organizations and their articulation to political, economic, and everyday life (Blazquez 2021; Le Cour Grandmaison 2021; Mendoza 2017; Muehlmann 2014). In turn, this work delves into the different shapes that such epistemic murk takes and the forms of knowledge production and circulation that emerge in and from them. It suggests that, in the drug war, knowledge is produced and travels in a variety of "genres"—public secrecy, conspiracy theory, fiction, myth, spectacle—that work their way through and around this epistemic murk. Following Michael Taussig (1987), I don't mean to imply that Mexico's (or any) public sphere could or should otherwise be marked by perfectly transparent forms of communication, but rather that the fictions that define public life in the context of drug warfare in Mexico have a sharpened sense of fantasy and affective force for Mexican publics (see also Aretxaga 2004).

These fictions engage in crucial epistemic and political work, as we shall see below. It is, for example, through a collective sense that something is off, or by being drawn into a structure of feeling (Gordon 2008: 18) that the drug war comes to be sensed, and ultimately defined, as something different than how it was originally set up: not only by experiencing its violence and fear firsthand or through intimate accounts, but also as part of larger publics that feel interpellated by the violence it sees taking place all over Mexican territory. This dissertation explores how such publics partake in various ways in a field of representations where the meaning of the drug war is at stake, and in so doing follows how this meaning is constructed by tracing its circulation. As Stanton Wortham and Angela Reyes argue, "[r]ather than understanding meaning as fully locatable in preexisting definitions or speaker intentions, the meaning of a sign depends in substantial part on how it is taken up by subsequent speakers and utterances, on how it is metapragmatically construed, explicitly or implicitly, in subsequent

discourse" (Wortham and Reyes 2014: 61). Selective animations of the past (Wirtz 2014: 4) or specific resonant qualities are weaved interdiscursively (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Nakassis 2013b; Woolard 2016) and attached to these entities (Wortham 2006; Nakassis 2016). This dissertation explores the multiple, simultaneous, clashing, and contradictory ways in which ideas of the state are put forth in a variety of "genres," media, purposes, and how they interact in the messy discursive field that is the drug war.

By "genres" I refer to the distinct textual patterns (indeed, templates) through which knowledge of the drug war is crafted and circulated, which vary according to the scale, viewpoint, and ends to which each instance of narrative that I explore here is constructed. These genres do not appear in isolation but are rather entangled with each other (Briggs and Bauman 1992), produce mirror images of each other, or come to be combined as they are mobilized towards different projects: persuasion, entertainment, exposure, and so on. For instance, an analysis of representations of drug traffickers that stem from ostensibly true story-based narratives of them (Chapter 3) or objects that used to belong to them (Chapter 4) demonstrates that the objects of these representations are always already a product of fantasy. The very notion of a non-mythical truth seems to be a performative product of (always mythical) knowledge production, rendering the boundary between "fact" and "myth" impossible to draw. In other words, the "true" object of these narratives seems to recede infinitely, standing always already out of reach, always defined by layers of talk around it. However, these narratives' performative power is politically relevant. The bandits they depict, and thus help constitute along with a vast cultural industry, come to be a visible face of the state's enemies in the drug war.

These genres also reveal the affective dispositions that these forms of knowledge production cultivate, convey, reveal, or respond to. As chapter 2 explores, the Secretary of Defense's Drug

Museum, built for the troops' indoctrination and open to a limited public, finds itself in a complicated position in terms of ideological power. On the one hand, the propagandistic discourse it deploys to legitimize the Army's combat of the drug war produces counter-discourses that mirror its structure as they negate it. Indeed, while the Army accuses its detractors as engaging in a false discourse that conceals the reality of a legitimate struggle against organized crime, conspiracy theories have emerged arguing that the drug war is a false discourse concealing the reality of military violence against its own citizens. On the other hand, this discourse's aim to desensitize the troops against the allure of the drug world risks having that allure overpower its framing in the museum and exerting an autonomous force. As a result, then, the museum limits its access to those it deems capable of resisting this force (like experts on the subject) or in great need of an ability to resist it (like those who will be fighting in the name of the state).

Finally, these genres illuminate the interplay of concealment and revelation—and thus of indeterminacy and certainty—that are at play in these forms of knowledge production and circulation. For example, Chapter 1 explores the ways in which journalistic work is disrupted by the arrival of criminal organizations and the distinct rules of secrecy and exposure they impose. These rules, however, are not rendered explicit, but are rather subjected to their discovery, which often occurs through missteps. Moreover, the boundaries between the inside and the outside of local criminal organizations become extremely difficult to draw, as its members collude with local authorities in undisclosed ways, recruit local youth for low-level work, and consider their kinship relations relevant to their public image.

But before delving into these forms of knowledge production, let us first look at the event that originated them.

The "War on Drug Trafficking"

Tomislav Lendo, President Felipe Calderón's (2006-2012) head speechwriter, told me that Calderón had never declared a war on drug trafficking [*guerra contra el narco*], even though he had gone down in history precisely for doing so in 2006. It seemed to me that, in retrospect, the Calderón administration regretted having deployed what became an infamous strategy, but one that became unstoppable once it was set in motion. Many consider that the drug war was an attempt to legitimize an administration whose electoral victory had been strongly contested. As legal scholar Alejandro Madrazo points out, Calderón's speeches at the time mentioned a war explicitly a few times (Madrazo 2016: 35) and otherwise resorted heavily to a martial language to frame the military effort he launched: "Today in 2010, like in 1847 [War of Reform]… or in 1810 [Independence War], or in 1910 [Revolution], Mexico also faces enemies who wish to impose their perverse rules, terrorize Mexicans, paralyze authority and subdue us all to their will with their violence" (Ibid: 36, translated to English in original). This discourse, through the interdiscursive connections it makes between all these military endeavors, gave shape to a large-scale propaganda campaign that sought to align Mexican publics with the drug war as it depicted criminal organizations as threats to the Mexican nation (Ibid). In his speeches, Calderón expelled members of organized crime from the political community by stating that "The adversaries of society are criminals [and] not some Mexicans against others," and who therefore "threaten the security and peace of our people," which then requires the state's defense (Ibid: 36-37, translated to English in original). This discourse accompanied the increasing deployment of the Army and the Navy, alongside an ever-changing federal police corps, to combat drug trafficking organizations throughout the national territory. But this idea of the Mexican nation, imagined here as that community whose well-being would depend on the free play of state authority

against criminals, would become one of the most strongly challenged contentions as its members became victims of the war's violence.

This war is, of course, neither new nor specific to Mexico. It is part of a much older policy, first articulated in discourse in 1968 by Richard Nixon in the United States (Youngers and Rosin 2005). Some years later, in 1986, President Ronald Reagan declared that drugs constituted a threat to US national security (Ibid). While within American territory this policy has been marked by a more punitive law enforcement, militarized policing, and increased levels of imprisonment, in many parts of Latin America the drug war has taken the form of a true military conflict, which has aimed at obstructing the supply of drugs to the United States by making it more difficult and dangerous (Ibid).

The war on drugs—the global warfare effort that Mexico's war on drug trafficking derives from—is modeled after US understandings of warfare (see Masco 2014): drugs are perceived as an outside threat, and while they do not constitute an organized army that can be identified or defeated, they become the object of military efforts abroad (Isacson 2005: 16-17). The war on drugs has in some ways embedded itself into older practices through which the Mexican state has sought to eliminate the growing and selling of drugs. For instance, the Mexican Army has carried out eradication practices in poppy and marijuana fields since the 1940s (Freeman and Sierra 2005: 343), but the form of its involvement in the combat against drug trafficking has transformed over time. There has been a longstanding joint anti-drug effort between the US and Mexico, which was hampered at times in earlier decades by a historical resistance on Mexico's part to US interference in its internal affairs. From at least the 1980s, a stronger militarization of anti-drug operations in Mexico was both influenced and actively promoted by the United States, who provided equipment and weapons for military efforts (Ibid: 343-4). In that decade, as a

result of US intervention, Colombian drug trafficking organizations were no longer able to transport their cargo through the Caribbean or Florida, so they resorted to the border between Mexico and the US as a contraband route (Ibid). The participation of the Mexican Armed Forces in these tasks increased gradually through the 1990s, in part because of chronic problems of corruption within the police forces, which were thus deemed incapable of undertaking those tasks by themselves. While the US influence is clear, the latest transformations in the Mexican state's combat against drug trafficking at the turn of the 21st century have also resulted from changes in trafficking practices themselves and domestic politics. Old-time, low scale marijuana smugglers began partaking in, or being replaced by, larger drug trafficking operations. A process that anthropologist Natalia Mendoza (2017) calls cartelization began taking place: "the move from a local and relatively open organization of drug trafficking to a monopoly controlled by regional organizations and sustained by a salaried "bureaucracy" in charge of managing violence" (Mendoza 2017: 17), in uncanny resemblance to a Weberian notion of a state.

Homicide levels began increasing starkly in 2007, during President Felipe Calderón's administration (2006-2012), who greatly expanded the deployment of military forces, initially in his home state of Michoacán and later in the states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and San Luis Potosí. Since then, violence has spread throughout most of the national territory. A historic low national homicide rate of nine per 100,000 people in 2007 had almost tripled by 2011, with 24 homicides per 100,000 (Hope 2013). From January to June 2021, the homicide rate was of 13 per 100,000 (INEGI 2022), which would amount to close to 26 homicides per 100,000 for the whole year. While initially concentrated in certain regions of the country, different states have become sites of gruesome violence at different moments.

Dimensions of Epistemic Murk

As the ethnographic record shows, the patterns by which criminal organizations operate in different states in Mexico are distinct, not only geographically, but also over time. For example, the criminal group *La Familia Michoacana* (The Michoacán Family) introduced itself to that state's population by combining a moral discourse that circulated through public events, speeches, and flyers with spectacles of violence, such as the severed heads they threw on the dance floor of a club in the town of Uruapan in 2006 (Le Cour Grandmaison 2021: 165), an event that President Calderón mobilized in favor of the militarization of the state. The cartel's boss, Nazario Moreno, was also their spiritual leader, and produced abundant religious-political propaganda (Peña 2020). The *Caballeros Templarios*, or Knights Templar, who split from *La Familia Michoacana* and later took control over parts of the state between 2011 and 2013, not only shared its predecessor's propaganda strategies, but also became greatly invested in establishing strict social and moral controls through the threat and use of violence, surrounding social relations with suspicion and anomie. This organization would ban certain public activities in parks and establish itself as a mediator of personal problems among residents, as well as controlling agricultural activities and public administration tasks (Le Cour Grandmaison 2021). Their control over the state ended with an uprising of community self-defense militias, the *Autodefensas de Michoacán*, who fought them between 2013 and 2015. As of 2022, a new criminal group, the *Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (Jalisco Cartel, New Generation) is attempting to take control.

If Michoacán's cartels work through a surfeit of metadiscourse—produced by and about them—in a public of their making, Tamaulipas evinces the opposite. This state was controlled for many years by a criminal organization called the *Cartel del Golfo* (Gulf Cartel), and then by

the Zetas, which split from and waged war against them. As scholar Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera argues, the Zetas operate as a business whose activities include "kidnapping for ransom, extortion, migrant smuggling, trafficking in persons, weapons smuggling, video and music piracy, illegal mining and logging, iron ore exporting, and the smuggling of hydrocarbons and their derivatives…, among others" (Correa-Cabrera 2017: 1). This organization seems much more invested in silencing than spectacle: as the deputy director of a national political magazine, whom I call Ramón, told me, Tamaulipas is a zone of silence. His magazine pulled its state correspondent several years ago, when it became evident that it was no longer safe for her to report from there. The few academic works on drug war violence in Tamaulipas explore it through rumors that circulate around it (Luna 2018) or use mainstream and social media as sources of information, alongside interviews (Correa-Cabrera 2017).

Comparing these two regions reveals a number of problems that an approach at the so-called war on drug trafficking must confront. A first problem is that the distinctions between organized crime in different states illuminate the problems underlying the attempt to construct a unified narrative around the war. Another issue consists of the internal variation within organized crime businesses themselves and their embeddedness in local economies and everyday lives (Muehlmann 2014). Rather than a distinct (or distinguishable) entity, organized crime involves not only famous kingpins, but also "the businessmen who launder their money, the addicts who consume their product, the mules who carry their money and drugs through borders and military checkpoints, and the men and women who serve out the prison sentences when the capos' operations go awry" (Ibid: 7). Ultimately, as anthropologist Shaylih Muehlmann argues, a dividing line between the "in" and "out" of the trade cannot be drawn. This may even produce

anxieties stemming from not knowing whether one is "in" the line of fire at any moment (Luna 2018).

Moreover, local operations of criminal organizations and their relationship to each other and to the state are often surrounded by secrecy—a secrecy that is enforced through violence. For instance, as I explore in chapter 1, the threat and practice of violence against journalists on the part of local criminal organizations and authorities has done much to dissuade journalistic knowledge production about these entities and their relations.

Another epistemic difficulty emerges out of the qualities that spaces of mass violence acquire: "a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation" (Taussig 1987: 5). Violence may exceed not only an intelligible aim (Balibar 1998), but also efforts to narrativize it (Esch and Stoller 2014). Attempting to reach forensic truths in contexts like these is an impossible task (Taussig 1987: 121). For instance, as anthropologist Sarah Luna argues, in sites of active warfare between the state and crime in Mexico, such as Reynosa, Tamaulipas, the interplay of truth and illusion at work (Ibid) may take shape through the "circulation of rumors, threats, and the occasional display of dead, mutilated bodies, sometimes with messages attached," which repeated over time has the effect of amplifying criminal organizations' power: "Narcos' imagined omnipresence ha[s] a disciplining effect" (Luna 2018: 66, 69).

Given the vast scale of the drug war, its representations, as I will explore here, often encounter the problem that David Graeber found with ideology: "one in which actors find it almost impossible to distinguish their own particular vantage on a situation from the overall structure of the situation itself" (Graeber 2002: 60; see also Jameson 1991). Yet, the war as a whole is often invoked and politically contended over, as we shall see. The same occurs around

perceptions of the entities we call "'the state'" and "'criminal organizations'" or "'drug trafficking organizations'" (both of which I use interchangeably here, following conventions in Mexico's public sphere, although their operations exceed the realm of drug trafficking). As Philip Abrams' classical text argues, the idea of the state is a mystification, "the unified symbol of an actual disunity… the mind of a mindless world" (Abrams 1988: 79, 82). In other words, a set of largely uncoordinated practices carried out by a vast group of people—bureaucrats, police officers, soldiers—come to be seen from certain standpoints as parts of a monolithic identity with volition of its own. This is done even by the state's operatives themselves, not only for ideological purposes, but also because in some sense it is only possible to operate from day to day by imagining a coherent order to which one's actions are addressed. The precise ways in which this volition is given content in publics' imaginations is, in principle, open. Shaping the Mexican state through its past of repression in the Ayotzinapa case is but one example of how this occurs in the drug war. The present work explores different instances in which the state is depicted and imagined in relation to criminality.

The drug world is shaped by a similar quality to the state. As Michael Taussig argues, "[drugs] are *fetishes*, which is to say substances that seem to be a good deal more than mineral or vegetable matter… [and which] play subtle tricks upon human understanding" (2004: xviii). Given the regime of prohibition that hangs over drug production and trade, and the massive profit they thereby promise, drugs arouse great desire and produce enormous danger: "[t]hey are luxuries for which people are prepared to be decidedly foolish about" (Ibid: 119). This dissertation explores how the figure of the drug trafficker and his (heavily masculine) world become fetishized through narratives, images, commodification practices, and material traces as the embodiment of capital accumulation and transgressive power.

Finally, the distance between the instances of violence that constitute the drug war and the sites where they are transformed into discourse, especially when they are condensed into the "war on drug trafficking" as a unified phenomenon, also contributes to make of the war's representability an obscured totality: that is, the war *is* consistently represented as a unified object, *as* a totality. And yet, it is a totality which seems to elude efforts to represent it as a whole in a way that properly accounts for all its features. Indeed, the drug war as a unified object of representation, which is the focus of much of this dissertation, has been a crucial political issue since its inauguration in 2006, when it went from being a marginal set of anti-drug operations to being situated at the center of Mexico's public life. As we noted above, the war's baptismal moment is marked by the launching of President Calderón's propaganda campaign and military deployment, initially delineated as a patriotic battle against an evil enemy. Soon, however, Calderón's discourse on the drug war came undone from all its sides under the pressure of the war's contradictions.

Repression and its Lookalikes

A first contradiction consists of the state's use of its Armed Forces against members of its own population, as I mentioned above. On one level, the problem is juridical—that is, whether members of drug trafficking organizations should be the object of state violence, instead of undergoing the normal judicial process—and as such is riddled with indeterminacy when it becomes an empirical issue: the state's security forces can only exert lethal violence under certain conditions. Press scandals have emerged from instances where these restrictions have been violated, and this fact has made its way into the public sphere, such as in the Tlatlaya case. In this incident, which took place in the municipality of Tlatlaya in the state of Mexico in 2014, a group of soldiers executed 22 persons (that is, killed them while they were unarmed), apparently

after they had surrendered, and altered the crime scene to make it look like a confrontation (WOLA 2015). This event illustrates that what becomes scandalous in the public sphere is the fact that soldiers exerted extra-judicial violence against these persons, regardless of whether they were criminals or not. Part of the issue is that putting the Army, whose members are trained for warfare, in charge of policing tasks has these effects as a necessary possibility. This does not mean, however, that the military's involvement in public security tasks *in general* is universally condemned, but instances like Tlatlaya illuminate this strategy's fundamental flaw for many.

The meaning of organized crime, given its internal variation and the different scenarios in which it appears, is then situated in a tension between perpetrator and victim of violence. On the one hand, as I mentioned above, criminal organizations operate as *de facto* authorities in some parts of the country, exerting violence with impunity and terrifying populations. On the other hand, victimhood largely renders a person's criminality irrelevant, as a death is added to the war's casualty figure that erases all differences between different kinds of victims—over 350,000 in total and over 95,000 missing persons as of April 2022 (UN 2022). Homicide and disappearance figures have become a major rhetorical criterion to evaluate the drug war—their continuous increase signaling the war's failure—along with the intensity of instances of murder of considerable scale or brutality. As I have discussed, members of the state's security forces have sometimes been responsible for this violence, not only in moments of confrontation, in response to armed attacks, but also against unarmed civilians, and ultimately people entirely unrelated to the drug trafficking business. This has led the figure of homicides *in general* to become an issue of national concern and to condemnation of the state not only because of its incapacity to provide security for its population—by allowing drug trafficking organizations to engage in brutal acts of violence—but also because it sometimes appears as a perpetrator.

Moreover, official accounts of events and agents of violence have often been found to be lies, further cultivating skepticism among Mexican publics. In this space of epistemic ambiguity, a position has often been taken, which then informs sense-making practices that, as I explore in chapter 2, connects the dots through resonances, blind spots, and fetishization. As numerous journalists with whom I spoke to mentioned, a means through which they expressed their distance vis-à-vis state discourse was by refusing to use the terms it uses, such as *abatido* (taken down, a euphemism for an alleged criminal being killed during a clash with the state's Armed Forces) or *ejecutado* (executed, used for victims of deadly violence on the part of alleged criminals). In the most radical cases, as that explored in chapter 2, suspicion extends as far as the concept of *cárteles* themselves. This suspicion may go beyond the observation that cartels may sometimes be umbrella terms that encompass different small criminal organizations operating in the same area, in some form of both arrangement and competition (see Mendoza 2017). Indeed, it has shaped alternative narratives that have gone as far as denying altogether the existence of organized crime and attributing all the violence to the state, not just in the Ayotzinapa case, but in the drug war as a whole. Thus, epistemic ambiguity produces the conditions for radical positions that, in their attempt to highlight a crucial aspect of the war, become oblivious to its other dimensions.

State Making as Organized Crime

A second contradiction is also instantiated by the Ayotzinapa event with which I opened this Introduction. While the first contradiction focuses specifically on the moments in which state officials exert deadly violence against innocent civilians, harming those it was meant to protect, this contradiction pertains to the indistinction between the two sides of the war, which defeats the idea of a war from the start. These two contradictions may occur simultaneously, and sometimes

depend on each other, but must be separated for analytical reasons, since they pose distinct problems. The likely instance of collusion between the police and military with the local criminal organization, which was brought to its most tragic extreme in the Ayotzinapa case, is a commonly experienced feature of the drug war in everyday life in some parts of the country (Chapter 1) and emerges every now and then in press scandals (Chapter 3).

The relation between the state and criminality is not new, neither in Mexico nor in theorizations of the state (Tilly 1985). In Mexico, the blurry boundary between both is a longstanding presence in the public imagination. For instance, the regime that emerged out of the 1910 Revolution, led by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI, which ruled the country from 1929 until 2000 through a combination of cooptation and repression, appropriated and incorporated an even older figure of the criminal into its public image and practices. Around the 1940s, *pistoleros* were integral figures to the regime, solving politicians' petty conflicts through targeted murder (Piccato 2017: 169). They were easily identifiable through their demeanor: Texan hat, suit, raincoat, a barely hidden gun—inspired by the American urban gangster of the time—sometimes a woman by their side, and always a *charola*: a police, military, or intelligence agency badge that signaled his employment as bodyguard and enforcer for figures such as drug traffickers and politicians, and therefore his legal immunity (Piccato 2017: 162-3). The imprint of the revolutionary legacy of criminal abuse of power was clear in *pistoleros'* methods (Ibid 168): their impunity was part of what allowed these figures to boast about their exploits. This visibility alternated with invisibility, marked by the impossibility of knowing whether their murders had a political nature. What *pistoleros* epitomize is the kind of relationship that existed between politics and business in Mexico's post-revolutionary regime: "a system in which multiple players conducted a variety of illegal activities under different sorts of official

sponsorship," which demonstrates not only the absence of institutional justice, but also the way this absence was mobilized through much of the 20th century (Ibid: 189).

A similar figure were *caciques*, who were informal local authorities situated at the crossroads of landowning elites and peasants, and of the central government and villages (Friedrich 1965). Remarkably similar to Sicilian *mafiosi*, they would mobilize their position for brokerage, exploitation of resources, and violent competition for land (Blok 1974: 8). In the public imagination, a *cacique* was seen as

> the hero and the scoundrel who acquired wealth and power without being coopted by the elite; the thief who displays his booty openly; the murderer who challenges his rivals to provide evidence of his wrongdoing without making any claims of innocence. He provides a way for thematizing, symbolizing the excess of power as a spectacle through which a complex network of complicities is displayed (de Vries 2002: 920).

During the years of the post-revolutionary regime, *caciques* were liminal figures, both insiders and outsiders who helped shape a fetishized state by operating as brokers of sorts between an imagined center of decision-making and its peripheries. *Caciques* are situated in a liminal position, their power displayed through performances of masculinity, extra-legality, and often conspiratorial stories about their access to the center (de Vries 2002). As such, they helped delineate a division like that between the sublime and profane dimensions of the state analyzed by Hansen (2001). These figures appropriated images and symbols of power and political discourses to extend imaginations of power through them (de Vries 2002). As contemporary studies on drug cartels point out (e.g., Le Cour Grandmaison 2021), some of these organizations have established themselves as substitute brokers between the same central political power and its peripheries. This suggests that they might be occupying the role that *caciques* used to inhabit during the 20th century, appropriating a preexisting ambiguous position of extralegal power.

The collusion between state and drug trafficking organizations that characterizes the present moment has certainly altered the idea epitomized by *pistoleros* and *caciques* that the state used to exert control over illegal practices of power. Now, many of those practices are carried out by external actors who have come to colonize this power, as it were. This is suggested by the idea of collusion between the state and other organizations, rather than the former practices of peripheral state representatives. This collusion, however, is by no means a clear-cut relationship. In a general and abstract sense, it is known to all, and an oft-discussed feature of the drug war, but in a concrete and localized way, it is often difficult and dangerous to discover. As I explore in chapter 1, in places that are controlled by criminal organizations, much of the knowledge that is produced and circulates to make sense of the local arrangements between these organizations and local authorities occurs through public secrecy and the conscious decision not to know more. As a result, local embodiments of the state and organized crime appear simultaneously as always already at a distance, marked by opacity, and intimately close, materializing in unexpected forms and places, while their intertwinement is deduced from their effects.

Another form in which this collusion has become well known has been through press scandals involving high-ranking officials, often those precisely in charge of combatting drug trafficking. This has been the case recently with two main figures—Genaro García Luna (who I discuss in chapter 3) and Salvador Cienfuegos. García Luna was President Calderón's Secretary of Public Security, his right hand, and one of the orchestrators of the war on drug trafficking. Salvador Cienfuegos was Enrique Peña Nieto's (2012-2018) Secretary of Defense, a general himself. It was the US state who investigated and arrested these two Mexican officials but was only able to imprison García Luna. In this context, the US has an ambivalent meaning and value in terms of the production of (truthful) knowledge about the drug war: it can be seen as either an

external and thus impartial prosecutor of drug traffickers or through the prism of Mexico's age-old distrust of US meddling in its affairs, depending on the political circumstances of the moment. García Luna's upcoming trial, in Brooklyn in late 2022 or early 2023, promises to be the spectacle that Joaquín el Chapo Guzmán's trial was in 2019: with gruesome tales of his violence, impressive accounts of the size of his business, and outlandish (but perhaps partly true) declarations about the extent of his corrupting power, which implicated former presidents Calderón and Peña Nieto.

Thus, it is through what literary scholar Timothy Melley calls a dialectics of secrecy and spectacle (2012; see also Debenport 2010; Jones 2014) that knowledge about collusion between these supposed enemies circulates. This interplay of revelation and effacement, as well as of distance and intimacy, complicates access to and renders organized criminals and colluded local authorities blurry. Meanwhile, as I analyze in chapter 3, the affective dimensions of this knowledge production and its limits are sometimes mobilized in quite deliberate ways. For instance, the spectacular quality of scandals of corruption has been marshalled towards the production of commodified knowledge, via the promise of intimate access to the lives and relations of famous kingpins and corrupt high-ranking politicians. Longstanding forms of folk cultural production, in the form of ballads and B-films (Rashotte 2015) has grown in recent years into a massive culture industry that includes music, film, television, fashion, social media, and so on.

As I explore in chapter 3, *narcoseries* invite viewers to be a part of what appears to be a backstage account of the *reality* of the drug war—one that fills in the narrative details—as fundamentally a network of corruption at the top. In alleging to offer access to an inaccessible realm, *narcoseries* circulate knowledge through an inverse form of public secret: instead of

information that everyone knows, and knows not to discuss publicly, these fictional narratives are incessant discussions of that which no one really knows but can imagine.

Perhaps precisely due to its reaffirmation of embodied experience, journalistic knowledge, and other genres of talk, this knowledge is often taken to be capturing an overarching feature of the drug war. In informal conversations about it, for instance, one could easily hear someone commenting offhand, "*son los mismos*" or "they are the same" about state officials and drug traffickers. What becomes excluded from these narratives, due to their utter lack of resonance, are the instances of real difference, even opposition, between these types of texts, almost as if that were never, or couldn't be the case (see Chapter 3).

In contrast, this association between politicians and corruption is so engrained in the public imagination that it allows for the formation of other narratives that bring it further into the realm of speculation. For example, one of Correa-Cabrera's arguments in her work on Tamaulipas and the Zetas mentioned above conjectures who might be benefitting from the Zetas' distinct forms of operation and the violence it has produced, concluding that it includes "corporate actors of the energy sector and the US border security/military-industrial complex" (2017: 12). Her theory shapes the drug war after the way in which many saw the US war in Iraq, where the winners, and therefore those deemed to be *truly* behind the warfare effort, were energy companies. In other words, given a lack of empirical access, the epistemic gaps might be filled with conspiratorial models of warfare conjured in and for other contexts. Her inspiration may perhaps derive from the American origin of the war on drugs and the resonances it produced for her informants and herself to make sense of the Zetas' remarkable capitalist expansion in the region and the massive power of the drug fetish, to which I turn next.

Surplus Criminal Charisma

A third contradiction results from the state's discursive construction of the criminal organizations it combats. President Calderón's propagandistic construction of drug cartels as powerful entities that would justify and legitimize the use of the state's full force against them ended up producing adverse effects. For instance, as I explore in chapters 2 and 4, the transplantation of an American model of warfare into Mexico's national space demonstrates how the practices of othering that are so crucial to this model of warfare gain no traction in the case of Mexican drug traffickers. Instead of subsuming criminals under the state's dispensation (Mazzarella 2013), this propaganda has worked to their fame. The figure of the drug trafficker latched onto and built on a figure of charismatic criminality that has a long history in Mexico, and which mobilizes cherished national ideas about social justice and revolutionary power, as well as capitalist desires of upward mobility and sumptuous consumption.

Banditry in Mexico is as old as the nation itself and has always been surrounded by myth. These myths have also been central in forging the idea of the state. Bandits have been particularly visible during moments of turmoil: Independence (1810-1827), the War of Reform (1857-1861), and especially the Revolution (1910-1924). They have always inspired a combination of fascination and fear. The tragedy of their lives and deaths, as well as the autonomy, freedom, carefree masculinity, and even the spirit of protest and defiance they embody has enhanced their mythical existence (Vanderwood 1981). During the 19th century, bandits allied with the government, including the Army, or opposed it when it best served their interests. The government, in turn, persecuted or recruited bandits as federal policemen around mid-century as a forced acknowledgment of their *de facto* power in some regions. The tumult of civil strife during that century helped banditry flourish. In certain cases, their power grew to the

point that some were able to establish a system of extortion on regional commercial transportation, in collusion with authorities and dissuading judges to condemn them out of fear (Ibid).

The Porfirian dictatorship (1876-1910), an oppressive regime of heightened classism and racism, saw the emergence of numerous bandits who were celebrated for mocking and challenging authority. These include *Chucho el Roto* (Vanderwood 1981, 2004), described in Chapter 4. Newspapers were crucial in enhancing these bandits' charisma, not only by amplifying rumor, but also by glorifying these characters themselves (Ibid; Pérez Montfort et al 1997). They celebrated their astuteness, cynicism, and ability to escape the government. Either the details known about their life or the mystery surrounding them enhanced their fame. A vast amount of popular cultural production, including films, television series, comic books, and songs glorifying these figures was produced, even throughout the 20th century (Vanderwood 1981, Pérez Montfort et al 1997). Even serial murderers of women, like *el Chalequero,* became the object of great public attention during this time, transformed as well into heroes of sorts for escaping the authorities. Often, the trials of these figures, defined as "no vulgar criminals" were a cause for public entertainment (Pérez Montfort et al 1997).

The Mexican Revolution,[2] however, shifted the relation between the state and criminality in the public imagination. Bandit-turned-hero Pancho Villa was only introduced into the national pantheon in 1965, after much government reticence and even though he was the source of public fascination due to his involvement in the Revolution (O'Malley 1986). The press made Pancho

[2] Arguably the most important political event in Mexico in national history, which went from 1910 until 1924, the Revolution began with the overthrowing of the Porfirian dictatorship and is composed of several episodes of armed struggle by different fronts around the country. They represented a range of political stances—from moderates (Venustiano Carranza) to anarchists (the Flores Magón brothers), including fighters for peasant rights (Emiliano Zapata) and figures with less clear political positions (Pancho Villa).

Villa a spectacle by publishing all kinds of fantastic and speculative stories about his feats, which made him "less than human, more than human, a "force,"" "the Centaur of the North, but never just a man" (Ibid: 87). Tales also circulated about "his cruelty, his appetite for women, his erratic temperament, his audacity in battle." He came to embody the notion of patriarchy, an officially sanctioned feature of national identity in the post-revolutionary regime (Ibid: 7, 87). This patriarchy not only articulated gender relations, but also class relations and understandings of Mexicanness (Ibid, Frazer 2006): while Mexican elites considered bandits' masculinity to be degraded, popular ballads and legends, even before the emergence of revolutionary *corridos*, made bandits a trope of idealized masculinity (Frazer 2006: 8). To this day, Villa remains associated with class struggle, as well as with heightened masculinity, as do many other bandits whose lives and struggles have been narrated by Mexicans since Independence (Ibid). This is visible in social movements around the country, who often bear Villa's name as their banner.

The structural appeal of the figure of the bandit in contemporary Mexico stems from its opposition to state power and its illegitimate violence (Benjamin 1978) and the ways in which it can embody ideas of rapid social mobility, transgression, social justice (Hobsbawm 1981), a stance against the US's oppressive colonial power (Frazer 2006; O'Malley 1986) and revolutionary energies (Yeh 2018). Indeed, as Rihan Yeh argues,

> In Mexico, the association between banditry and the revolutionary energies of the *pueblo* is not just an academic but a popular notion. It is not hard for people to see their own struggles "against the law, against the rich, the powerful" (Foucault 1977:67) dramatized in the criminal; Mexico too has its "nationalist tradition of breaking the law in the name of a morality higher than that enshrined in the law" (Chakrabarty 2007:54). In such a context, the criminal's violence may become more legitimate than the state's (Yeh 2018: 143-144).

Regarding drug traffickers, sociologist Luis Astorga argues that the distance between them and their symbolic production by the end of the 20th century was already such that the only way

of approaching this subject was in a mythological way, whose antipodes were marked by legal codes, on the one hand, and ballads about drug traffickers, on the other, and which constituted forms of condemnation and apology, respectively (Astorga 1995: 12). These ballads, called *narcocorridos*—whose name is taken from revolutionary troubadour songs, *corridos*—have long partaken in circuits of publicity around them. They recirculate what has already been published in the press, radio, and television, as well as their visual aesthetics and objects of consumption: cars, weapons, clothing, gestures (Ibid: 37). Astorga defines ballad composers as the creators of myths around traffickers: as those whose work condenses their "vision of the world, their philosophy, their social odysseys, their way of life, and the transformation of stigmas around them into their emblem" (Ibid: 38). However, it is not clear to Astorga to what extent ballad composers are truly close to traffickers. He defines the discourse contained in these ballads as the opposite of official discourse—the former portraying them as brave, fierce, and astute, and the latter as uneducated, dirty, trashy. *Narcocorridos* also challenge official discourse by discussing instances of collusion (Ibid: 41, 81-82), but largely attribute value to drug traffickers by standing up to power.

The fetish of Mexico's drug trafficking cannot be easily demystified, and thus becomes an object of concern, as I explore in Chapter 2, or is mobilized for capitalist (Chapter 3) and political purposes by means of spectacle. For instance, as I explore in Chapter 4, the value of luxury objects that index drug traffickers' charisma is rechanneled into much-needed infrastructure for Mexico's poorest communities in order to boost the president's populist project. In other words, the present administration is no longer invested in subjugating the charismatic power of criminality, but rather sees more value in attaching it to its own public image.

Methods

I originally set out to study the forms of mediation of the drug war—the circulation of representations of the practices and events that constitute such war beyond the place and time of their occurrence. While this is still part of what this dissertation does, its shift to knowledge production aims to redirect attention to these narratives themselves—both to where they come from and what they do in the world, particularly their epistemic and political work.

The ethnographic research for this dissertation was carried out over the course of 14 months between 2016 and 2019 in and around Mexico City. It investigated different instances of discourse about the drug war, tracing the processes through which they came about and the effects they produced. A handful of them came to be at the center of this dissertation's analysis: the account of a displaced journalist, the Secretariat of Defense's *Museo de Enervantes* or Museum of [Enervating] Drugs, the theory about the drug war constructed by a former journalist and current literary scholar, the creation of *narcoseries*, the auctions of former property of famous drug traffickers towards the construction of the state's public image, and protests by victims' relatives.

The instances of discourse occurring in these sites seek to illuminate the discursive fields around the drug war through their most lucid moments and the political stakes of turning the drug war into discourse in these ways. It does not, however, convey the experience of being exposed to the war's most immediate effect, which is its violence. Several admirable and important works on this localized dimension (Blazquez 2021; Le Cour Grandmaison 2021; Mendoza 2017; Muehlmann 2014) have been carried out or are in the works. This dissertation, rather, has attempted to articulate the scale of embodied interaction with the national scale in which the drug war has a particular kind of purchase. Thus, even if the drug war is apprehended

in partial ways—as it always is, inevitably—I am interested in the moments when it is apprehended as an object with implications for the nation, which implies a shift of perspective, oriented towards a national community and its state. This work thus explores how events of the drug war that occur across the country became connected to embodied experiences and thus objects of common interest and discussion in Mexico's public sphere. Of particular relevance for this dissertation has been understanding what happens in a kind of conflict in which the two sides are utterly indistinguishable and how it shapes processes of sense-making around it.

During my fieldwork, I explored different sites where talk about the drug war occurs, which have different degrees of centrality in the following chapters, from constituting the main object of analysis to its background. These include engagements with over thirty journalists from around the country (including the states of [Estado de] Mexico, Guerrero, Michoacán, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Veracruz, in addition to Mexico City), from a single interview to a long-term relationship; an archive of presidential speeches from the last three administrations (2006 to the present) and other forms of official discourse, such as itinerant exhibits, documentaries, press conferences, and a leaked internal database of armed confrontations between the police and alleged criminals; interviews with actors, producers, directors, screenwriters, prop specialists, and other staff involved in the creation of *narcoseries* (located in Mexico City, Miami, and Bogotá), as well as visits to studios and locations; an internship at freedom-of-speech NGO Article 19 and interviews with employees of the federal government's Protection Mechanism for Journalists and Human Rights Defenders; participant observation in anti-violence protests, as well as workshops and conferences by and for journalists; interviews with employees and visits to the Institute to Give Back what was Stolen from the People and their auctions at *Los Pinos* Cultural Center; and, finally, countless formal and casual conversations with ethnographic

interlocutors and relatives, friends, neighbors, acquaintances and even strangers about experiences of violence occurring all around the country. Talk about the drug war has become a constitutive part of Mexico's public life, its intensity perhaps following the war's shifting geographical patterns over time. In conversations, the drug war is elicited with incredible ease. Everyone has a story to tell, having been exposed in one way or another to the surge of violence in the public space and to the myriad forms in which this violence is represented. Even sites as unrelated as the metrobus that I often rode to move across Mexico City displayed in a little screen the faces and biographical information of dozens of men (and on occasion women) among the nearly hundred thousand persons who have gone missing—many, if not all, surely victims of forced disappearance. The spaces and dates of their disappearance spread across the national territory and went as far back as 2010, but they were all still displayed as a public service announcement for the millions of Mexico City's commuters in 2019 and 2020. Indeed, even if Mexico City has not been a hotspot of violence as have other towns and villages of the country—although it has not been immune to it either—it plays a particular role in public discussion. It is a site where discourse takes on a self-consciously "national" aspect, since Mexico City is the center point of the imagination of the nation and the nodal center of the state. Thus, Mexico City is a crucial site in which the drug war is imagined as scaled to a national level because it is less pressing in everyday experiences, yet always visible.

Chapter Overview

This work is organized as follows. Chapter 1, "Space of Avoidance," explores how, amid organized crime's takeover of a small rural town, avoidance has become an emergent practice for local journalists to stay as free of danger as possible. I theorize avoidance as the practices that seek to minimize both encounter with and talk about what criminals and authorities wish to keep

out of the public eye, which implies seeking to elude any potential encounter with an "other" that one cannot readily discern. It analyzes how knowledge circulates (or not) in this space of avoidance through rumor, public secrecy, and silence. It explores the space that opens up through this avoidance as a gap that comes to be filled in different ways, as I examine in the following chapters.

Chapter 2, "Propaganda, Suspicion, and Seduction," discusses the two main limits that state propaganda on the drug war encounters by exploring a peculiar instance of it, the Secretary of Defense's *Museo de Enervantes*, or Museum of Drugs, which is meant for the indoctrination of young soldiers and a limited public. First, it explores how this propagandistic discourse opens up the possibility not only for widespread skepticism, but also of its most extreme version, outright conspiratorial thought that frames the state as the sole criminal. Second, it examines the fraught ideological strategy to contain and subjugate the seduction of its enemy in the drug war.

Chapter 3, "Hanging on the Nails of Reality," discusses how both the drug world's seductive force and the promise of access to the concealed dimension of the drug war are mobilized through commodified entertainment in the form of *narcoseries*. This chapter explores how the patterns of communication at play constitute the inverse of the public secrecy: abundant talk on that which is always already beyond everyone's access. Despite claiming an evidentiary basis, the knowledge that this talk circulates weaves fiction and fact together in inseparable ways.

Chapter 4, "The State as Generous Bandit" explores another form of mobilization of the drug fetish, this time in the service of the current administration's populist project. It examines how, aware of the power of discourse and its affective force in the drug war, President López Obrador deploys state spectacle to rearticulate the signs that index the state's relation to criminality to redirect their appeal.

The Conclusion further explores the politics of revelation and concealment underlying these public forms of knowledge production and circulation.

Chapter 1:

Space of Avoidance

It's not only what you publish anymore; it's what they think you know.

I met Rosalía[1] by chance at an event in Mexico City organized by a journalistic collective on the coverage of contemporary events, including the caravans of migrants that had started making their way through Mexico into the United States. In the Q&A, Rosalía grabbed the microphone and spoke about a kind of migration that the event did not address but which, in her opinion, also merited journalistic attention—forced displacement, which, she mentioned, she was living in the flesh:

> It's not the same thing to move around, come and go because you choose to, as being displaced [and] under the Protection Mechanism for Journalists [and Human Rights Defenders], and finding many people who have also migrated against their will… many people who are also migrants and don't know what to do now.

After the event was over, I introduced myself and my research interests to her, and we went to a nearby café to talk more. She had fled San Martín—the small rural town where she had lived and worked as a journalist for decades—a few weeks earlier, after her close friend and colleague, Jorge, was murdered. We had a long conversation over pastries and tea, until I had to leave for another interview on the other side of town. This was the first time of several that I listened to the set of intertwined stories about Rosalía's life as a journalist in San Martín, which is also a story about the emergent patterns of avoidance that have come to define everyday journalistic work in towns that have been overtaken by organized crime.

[1] All the names of persons and places (including aliases), as well as some of the circumstances around certain events have been anonymized.

A few months later, Rosalía and I were sitting at one of the dozen tables in a large conference room at the Secretariat of the Interior's Office in downtown Mexico City. We were attending a meeting for which Rosalía was summoned after being a beneficiary of the federal government's Protection Mechanism for Journalists and Human Rights Defenders for several months. This Mechanism consists of a set of protective measures that an office at the Secretariat of Interior deems necessary after an evaluation and offers to journalists and human rights defenders, as well as their families, whose lives may be in danger because of their work. What originally surprised me about the Protection Mechanism was that many of the aggressors that it protected journalists and activists from were themselves public officials, mostly municipal authorities. These were more numerous than the expected aggressors, members of criminal organizations (Article 19 2020). Defining an aggressor, however, was not always quite as simple. Naming someone as the aggressor and writing it down in a form as part of a bureaucratic process means having to simplify what is likely a complicated situation in order to deal with large amounts of data. The knowledge thus gathered pointed hazily to both the existence of authoritarian practices of censorship and the effects of the presence of organized crime, and myriad potential forms of interaction. The existence of the Mechanism was then an implicit admission of this fact.

The meeting was held to assess the protection plan Rosalía was under, the threats to her security, and the plans for the near future. She invited me to tag along because she thought it would be helpful for my research and she could use the company. The meeting began when one of the half dozen public officials present introduced themselves and their colleagues, representatives of federal government offices, such as the Secretariats of the Interior, of Citizen Security, and of Foreign Affairs, and public autonomous institutions, like the National Human Rights Commission. These officials were there to listen to the analyst's description of the case

and evaluate the appropriateness of the suggested solution. The analyst, a young officer in charge of documenting and following up on Rosalía's case, described it for all attendees: that she had been working as a journalist for this amount of time, in these outlets that publish news of this kind in this and that media. She entered the Mechanism this year and did it through these means. As I saw at other such meetings I attended as a volunteer in freedom-of-speech NGO Article 19, accounts of beneficiaries' cases follow a format: a description of the aggressions that a journalist has suffered and an evaluation of the ways in which their security and freedom of speech might have been affected, as well as their vulnerability at that moment. The likelihood of their suffering harm in the future is also assessed. Part of this information came from the journalists' own testimony, which the analyst then tried to corroborate online, as they pointed out. If they found no proof, they mentioned they accepted such a testimony in good faith. The whole process seemed highly bureaucratic: formulaic, matter-of-factual, delivered to a rather bored audience of a handful of low- to mid-level public officials who would be in a dozen such interviews throughout the day. These meetings were oriented at solving a problem: keeping the beneficiary in question safe, while using the scarce monetary resources efficiently. It was to these ends that information on the dangers that journalists and human rights defenders were exposed to circulated within the halls of the federal government.

The Protection Mechanism has been heavily criticized by many, partly because it is unable to fulfill its mandate of keeping all journalists and human rights defenders alive. It is flawed for a number of reasons I cannot get into here, which are both technical and political. But it illuminates a paradox that drives the entire unfolding of the drug war in Mexico's public sphere, as we will see throughout this dissertation—the simultaneous awareness, explicit recognition of the state's role in the violence and a concealment and negation of it.

It was not these bureaucrats' place, of course, to become emotionally affected by the beneficiaries' tragedies, but their coldness was not lost on people like Rosalía, whose livelihood in the following months or years depended on them. Someone working in the Mechanism that I knew from before did express to me their frustration and heartache when I interviewed them. The Mechanism is an office within a branch of the Interior Secretariat that works on the roughest dimensions of the war on drug trafficking, the effects of its violence. Other bureaucrats in the Mechanism may share the pain of what they see, but the mood of that meeting, and the others I attended, was dry and businesslike, much like the processing of paperwork.

The analyst ended her intervention with a description of the security measures that were in place. Those may include things like additional security infrastructure in beneficiaries' homes or offices, safe transportation services, panic buttons, and police surveillance, among others. Rosalía was given a "refuge," an apartment in Mexico City to live in. This showed how the Mechanism's work is paradoxical, since the act of protecting journalism that they engage in sometimes implies displacing journalists, like in Rosalía's case, from the sites where they do this politically crucial work. Many of them lacked the possibility of finding work as journalists in Mexico City, which is a much more competitive market. As a result, the measures devised to sustain this work resulted in its scarcity.

After the analyst finished her description and it was time for Rosalía to speak, she mentioned that she wanted to clarify a couple of points.

> For instance, [in response to] what you were just saying, that my writing does not seem to affect anyone… I want to note how once, for instance, I wrote an article in which I involuntarily angered one of the bad guys from the area [*los malosos de ahí*] because I criticized the local public transportation system, whose manager was, [unbeknownst to me,] related to him. So, it's no longer only what you write. It's that those guys might wake up in a bad mood. It's not only what you publish anymore; it's what they think you know. It's not where you are, but where they are and where you might run into them. So, we must delete pictures, avoid those

> people, do a lot of things… We must avoid describing their activities, since criminals are totally immersed in local authorities' offices and people's businesses. It's no longer [just the consequence of] writing about *narcos* and drugs. It might help to keep that in mind while evaluating the work we do. Our surroundings are risky even if we write an article on a wedding, which also happened to me. I ended up not writing that article because I went to a wedding, took a lot of pictures and followed the story, and it turned out that the groom was [a high-ranking criminal who was also related to a local authority]. We obviously couldn't publish [a story] about that wedding.

Rosalía's words challenged the narrowness of the understanding of the dangers around journalism that underlies the Mechanism's operations. In many cases, what journalists write is indeed what puts them in danger. In cases like hers, however, their writing is no longer what matters as a public act, but what others think they may know. In other words, refraining from writing may not necessarily free them from danger. The problem with San Martín, and many other small towns around Mexico that have been taken over by criminal organizations, is that knowledge about who are criminals and who are in their relevant (professional and kinship) networks of relations is always partial. This leads to circumstances like the one Rosalía describes: the journalist writes and then discovers the identity of certain traffickers from their writing's fallout. The trafficker reads and then discovers that a journalist has violated a set of implicit rules by publicizing their affairs—in the case of the transport system, by sullying their kin's reputation, and by extension their own; in the case of the wedding, it might have been by exposing their relations to local authorities or just publicly discussing their life at all.

The protection plan that the analyst had proposed included extending her stay at the refuge for several more months. Rosalía agreed with this by pointing out how she remained in danger even after having left San Martín. As is usually the case, judicial investigations on Jorge's murder were stalled. Apparently, they were also heavily manipulated. The alternative version about such details, which rang truer for Rosalía and others, made its way through rumor to her.

This rumor and its circulation put Rosalía in danger, putting pressure on her to publicly say things or accusing her of saying things she never said:

> I've found it strange that people are telling me things… I shouldn't know, in case they were true, since I have no way of verifying them… I don't think they're true, [but] I might be resisting to acknowledge them… I've been hearing several other versions on it, which I'm not supposed to know, but people tell them to me: one tells me, then another one, and then someone else sends me a message… I don't know why they want me to know all that. ["To terrorize you?" asks one of the public officials, to which Rosalía responds,] …or probably because they thought I'd publish them…, perhaps they thought that's how I would react. It's people I thought I could trust who are sending me these messages, but I don't… I also fear that some people are telling others that I said things I didn't say. I'm worried about [how] that [might affect my safety]. In San Martín, it's easy to say, 'Well, she was involved in those things and saw that coming [getting hurt].'

Possessing this knowledge was dangerous. It did circulate, however, and that circulation could be partly animated by the morbid details of violent death that it included and the urge to discuss them. This reminded me of an anecdote that my mother told me: an event of violence had taken place one evening in my father's hometown, which both my parents were visiting. They were having breakfast the next morning at a restaurant with several of my father's childhood friends, one of whom worked in forensics. He had taken a photo of one of the victims with his phone, too impressed by what he had seen. He couldn't help but show it to my mother, who happened to be sitting next to him that morning. My mother then relayed this to me, impacted by what she had been shown. I remember it because it also made an impression on me. The affective intensity fueled this story's circulation.

The other reason was, or so Rosalía feared, that as a journalist she was expected to make public what everybody already knew but was only relaying implicitly and indirectly, as the public secret (Taussig 1999) that it was. From the stories I heard, I think I had a fairly good idea of that public secret: what all the narratives were pointing to as the obvious conclusion. The officers at the meeting did not fully understand this pattern of secrecy—that is, that she was

disclosing information to them only because she needed to make her dangerous condition clear, but that they could not just recirculate this information. It was important that they understood this pattern to offer Rosalía adequate protection. After explaining this to them and insisting on it, they finally yielded. The analyst reread the revised protection plan and the meeting was over.

This exchange between Rosalía and the Protection Mechanism's officers, and the broader story of which it is a part, illuminate the conundrums involved in the need for knowledge to circulate in new ways. As is narrated in a common genre of journalistic work, the arrival of criminal organizations in towns like San Martín implies the establishment of a large drug cartel as a *de facto* political power through both its articulation with and combat of local authorities, which is then often threatened by the subsequent arrival of other such organizations who may seek to appropriate the turf through warfare, unleashing waves of violence. Journalistic works have published detailed accounts of the criminal organizations operating in the area where San Martín is located and similar places: this is usually a story of the handful of large-scale criminal organizations that have whole regions of the country under their control, who rise and fall over a few years, sometimes break into parts, or have new organizations emerge out of them, like small and short-lived empires. To discuss such developments is not my intention here, but rather to explore how Rosalía *avoided* writing about organized crime *as much as she could*, even though this attempt was always already fraught, largely because the boundaries of organized crime cannot be really drawn (see Muehlmann 2013). Of course, not *everything* about the local presence of organized crime is dangerous to discuss—more than just present, organized crime is embedded in local social life and takes myriad forms. While it might often be discussed as a as a specific group or type of people, it is a set of practices.

Secrecy and avoidance mediate Rosalía's story at almost every instance of its circulation, from the interactions that marked the events that she reported, to her act of reporting, and to my recirculation of it in this text, for example. What Rosalía did discuss publicly were the events of violence that had already claimed the lives of people close to her—events that, she felt, had to be denounced, but also in which the threat *had already been enacted*, as it were, and could then be spoken of more openly. In Jorge's case, some pieces of information, like the fact itself of his murder, made national news, as the murder of a journalist always does in Mexico. Other details were trickier, but still discussed by NGO Article 19 officials and journalists who reported on Jorge's death. But certain information still carried danger in its circulation and was thus the object of Rosalía's and others' profound suspicion and caution.

Apprehending and circulating knowledge about criminal organizations is a question of scale—of knowing what kind of audience one can address and how—but also of visibility, in the sense of "a complex system of permission and prohibition, punctuated alternatively by apparitions and hysterical blindness" (Gordon 2008 [1997]: 17). For instance, the relation between the state and organized crime is, on one level, known to everyone—they *are* colluded without a doubt—while, on another level, it is only discerned through its effects in partial and largely speculative ways. My discussion, thus, is partly about the pall cast by the ambiguous, yet definite knowledge of the potentially ubiquitous presence of organized crime, including its collusion with the state, that makes the domain of journalistic practice in towns like San Martín always fraught with the possibility of misstep. Further, this chapter is less about the knowledge gained than about how such discernment occurs or not, not only on the part of journalists but also of organized crime and local politicians. It is about the learning process of what to try and discern and what to leave alone, as well as what it means to be at the expense of violent actors

who are also groping in the dark. It explores the *avoidance* that has come to define much of the relation between journalists, on the one hand, and local authorities and organized crime, on the other. It is, finally, an attempt to explain that the possibility of discussing the dangers present here requires disclosing them, which is precisely what we can't do, so it will require taking some detours (Gordon 2008[1997]).

Following Russell's notion of attenuation, I analyze avoidance here as the practices that seek to minimize both encounter with and talk about what criminals and authorities wish to keep out of the public eye, which implies predisposing oneself to the potential encounter of an "other" that one cannot readily discern (Russell 2020). Avoidance is also a resource one needs to use in writing to point both at the patterns and the implications of the relationship between disclosure and risk. Finally, this chapter examines how these practices end up situating organized crime (and its relation to the state) in an ambiguous position: in one sense, as always already at a distance, and in another, in some form of intimacy, always marked by opacity and materializing in unexpected forms and places. This lack of boundedness and access, standing at the intersection of revelation and effacement, opens the possibility for shaping ideas of the state and organized crime in all kinds of fantasy-ridden ways, as I further discuss in the next chapters.

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I went to Rosalía's refuge several times to hang out with her, most often to have lunch and chat. She would cook the groceries she had delivered every couple of weeks, and I would bring drinks and dessert. There was sometimes someone visiting in her house too, a friend from elsewhere in the country or from Mexico City. I also went with her to several public events, like when she presented a short poetry book she wrote and another one where she collaborated. She also invited me to her state's Congress one day, where many of her colleagues had a meeting

with state legislators with the aim of negotiating a law for the protection of journalists that has not yet been passed. Her apartment was comfortable, located in a middle-class residential area, close to a subway station. It had everything one might need—a large sectional couch, a coffee table, a large TV with internet in the living room, a dining table and four chairs in the dining room, a fully equipped small kitchen, a washer/dryer, two bedrooms, one bathroom. At some point, she rescued two dogs and was relocated to another apartment because the one she lived in had a no pet policy. The apartments lacked any decoration, but Rosalía managed to get ahold of some ornaments, including two oil paintings that a friend had given her and that she had hung on the walls.

Rosalía's telling of her story when I came to visit her was partly an academic and journalistic endeavor in which she was engaging with and for me, and partly a set of conversations that constituted our friendship, which allowed her to unburden herself emotionally somewhat. Along with that story, I also learned about other aspects of her life, as one gets to know a friend over time. Some aspects of the stories she told me are filled with context and some of them are lacking. I didn't want to press further, even though things were sometimes confusing, since it was not clear to me, at least not at first, what she wanted and did not want to discuss. Most of the story became clearer over time, particularly after another journalist, Mariana, turned part of it into a long investigative piece about Jorge's murder and the circumstances that led to it. I had met Mariana elsewhere and learned about her project to create an archive of the work and context of murdered journalists, since it often gets lost and forgotten—most murdered journalists worked for local outlets and their names only circulate nationally because of their deaths. Rosalía wanted to preserve Jorge's memory and work, so she collaborated with Mariana for that purpose. I benefitted from attending their first meeting, where Rosalía not only retold her long and layered

story, adding and omitting details, and where Mariana, in good journalistic fashion, asked much bolder and direct questions than I did. This was partly because our goals were different—hers were to find facts about an event that involved Rosalía, so she asked the questions she needed answers to, which Rosalía, as well as other people she would later interview, answered or not. Mariana approached this event from a position in which public secrets were not an object of interest—they are rather useless for someone who needs journalistic, provable truths, and I am unsure to what extent she was initially aware that there were things that couldn't be said openly. In its final version, though, her work ends up participating in their circulation when, for instance, she points out that no one wanted to talk to her about organized crime and includes in her work what I consider to be interviewees' deflections to some of her questions. For its part, my inquiry was more open ended, emerging from Rosalía's subjective experience of the fallout of her colleague's murder and her interest in making parts of it publicly known because of their journalistic and political relevance. What interested me, and much of what Rosalía conveyed, rather than the story of what happened, were the messy and disorganized ways in which the new rules of concealment and revelation in San Martín's public sphere presented themselves to her. Affectively, more than any other way, she apprehended the parameters of non-knowledge that she needed to map for her protection.

Florencia

In our first conversation at the café after the journalists' event, just as we found a table and sat down, Rosalía began telling the story of the death of another journalist, Florencia. Let me begin by putting Florencia's death in some context. According to NGO Article 19, from 2000 to March 2022, 153 journalists were murdered in Mexico for professional reasons,[2] a figure that

[2] https://articulo19.org/periodistasasesinados/

places Mexico as the most dangerous country in the world to practice journalism. The year 2000 is the starting date for this count because it marks the transition from one-party rule (by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional,* PRI) to electoral democracy. This transformation is particularly relevant since, as Ramón, the deputy director of a leading news magazine told me, "When the PRI regime faded away, a void was created that was filled by local powers and organized crime. Previously, the PRI was present in the whole national territory, which gave it great political control… [during the authoritarian period,] the PRI would control and contain [all other powers]. Organized crime was probably there too, but it was the state who called the shots." Indeed, as political scientists Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley argue, Mexican drug cartels went to war in the 1990s-early 2000s because party alternation in state and local governments meant the loss of informal protection networks, which led cartels to create private militias to defend their turfs and conquer others. This led to the outbreak of large-scale violence (Trejo and Ley 2018: 902). As this occurred, Ramón continued, "the press went from being subjected by the governor's centralized control to realizing no one was controlling it any longer, which left journalists exposed to the pressures, threats, and aggressions of the *de facto* powers that were thereby unleashed, as [they] were no longer controlled by the PRI. As the PRI lost power… the press won in freedom, but also became more vulnerable… so, when the drug war was declared, journalists were left exposed, especially those outside Mexico City."

If turf wars raised the levels of violence, the drug war declared by the state deeply exacerbated this problem. According to the Executive Coordinator of the Protection Mechanism for Journalists and Human Rights Defenders, 252 journalists have been killed since 2006 (Damián 2022). This figure contrasts with the one put forth by Article 19, which counts 137

murders during the same period.[3] To an extent, all such figures are speculative, based on the documentation of previous murder threats and other information they gather with and about journalists, but are almost never backed by a judicial process that could establish forensic truths about these events. This is partly why these figures vary, depending on the source: determining whether a journalist was murdered is a difficult call.

Rosalía made that call about Florencia as an act of speculation. This is Rosalía's account:

> I was the director of public communication of the municipality where I used to live, San Martín, and in charge of transparency [the Mexican version of FOIA]. Florencia began requesting information about the state's and all the municipalities' public communication offices, about money… I go online and see that she's writing about organized crime in the region where I live. I wonder, 'Why is she getting involved in those issues?' and well, I start reading and notice that all that she is saying is true, because we live there and know that [criminal] structure. But why is she publishing it? I start to follow her newspaper and its publications, and, at some point, it announces the upcoming presentation of a book where she participated… Her newspaper also denounces an aggression to its office: men entered, beat them up, destroyed computers… and suddenly an article shows up [elsewhere] mentioning that a woman reporter had committed suicide in a hotel in the state capital, hanging herself with the curtain cord. I think, what freaking kind of cord can take that much weight, but that's what the article said. Unfortunately, given the kind of work that Florencia did, this event went unnoticed: there were no protests, no one said anything, no one complained, no one was even surprised… 'Well, if that's what she worked on, she brought it on herself,' they responded. Moreover, [the scene of her death was staged]. As I investigate the event and reach out to her partner to interview him, the first thing he says to me is, 'I will begin by telling you that she did commit suicide, but it was an induced death,' as if he were pinching me in the arm, as if saying 'understand what I'm telling you,' emphasizing it. So, how do you understand what an 'induced suicide' is? He went on, 'She was pressured too much, she went through too horrible things and couldn't handle it.' So I thought that he was also made to believe that [she killed herself, even though] he supposedly participated in that investigation as well… After what he told me, I detoxed from the whole thing. I tried to move away from that whole story, especially because I still worked in San Martín, I still lived there, so I thought, 'The less I know about that whole mess, the better'. Some of my colleagues also told me, 'Just leave that alone, don't get more involved'.

[3] https://articulo19.org/periodistasasesinados/

Florencia participated in two books that make public how that collusion plays out in the region where she and Rosalía lived and worked. “I heard versions,” Rosalía tells me, “that some people tried to get ahold of [one of] the book’s original files [before it was published], but by then they had already been shipped abroad for editing. State officials try and intercept it, but they fail and a few days before that book comes out, Florencia is ‘suicided.’”

Rosalía proposed to add Florencia’s profile to a book that was in the works at the time, which gathers the profiles of the journalists that had been murdered from 2000 up to that point (several such works that memorialize murdered journalists have emerged in the past few years. Mariana’s is another one of them). The book’s editors agreed to include Florencia. When the book was published, both in print and online, Rosalía noticed that two paragraphs of Florencia’s profile, which she had written, had been deleted. The editors explained that it had been done for her security, since those phrases pointed a finger at public officers as responsible for Florencia’s death.

The profile that Rosalía wrote honors Florencia’s memory by speaking of her professional life, her ethics, political struggles, and the injustice of how her death was depicted. It was perhaps because her death is spoken of as a suicide that it would have been all but forgotten if it weren’t for Rosalía’s efforts. It did not circulate as the violent death of a journalist investigating *narcopolítica*—the collusion between state officials and organized crime—as has been the case with many of her colleagues around the country. In some well-known cases, like that of Chihuahuan journalist Miroslava Breach, who worked for the national newspaper *La Jornada*, the connection between her murder and publications was made very clear by the perpetrators, who left a sign on the crime scene. In contrast, in Florencia’s case the goal appears to be the opposite. Everyone around her seemed to take the cue and remained silent to protect themselves.

Through publicity or silence, however, the effect is the same—to dissuade those who might be tempted to anchor the idea of *narcopolítica* to specific names and places.

There is total silence. What does one do? One keeps quiet.

Mariana, Rosalía, and I were having coffee in a small, quaint café in early 2020 in southern Mexico City, where Mariana had convened a meeting after I had introduced them both over WhatsApp to talk about Jorge's case. Rosalía invited me to tag along, so we met near her house and made our way together to the café. We found a table, ordered coffee, and began chatting. Mariana asked Rosalía for permission to record the conversation, and after Rosalía agreed, I also pulled out my phone and turned on the recorder. At this point, Rosalía was used to me doing this, and understood it as part of a job that was similar to her own. Like in our earlier conversations, Rosalía began discussing Jorge's murder within a much broader context of violence against journalists in San Martín and its environs. As she recounted that day, violence was a marginal affair in San Martín before the arrival of organized crime. Large-scale violence began around the mid 2000s. At the time, she had been working as a local journalist for several newspapers in San Martín and nearby towns for years. She recalled that she had been invited to work as director of San Martín's public communication office [*comunicación social*] when the drug trafficking problem started getting serious. "The people who worked there before were no longer able to withstand the pressures from the *narcos*, the frequent deaths, the killings, and so on, so there was a need for someone to take that job… besides the fact that there were many news articles that depicted my region in a very bad light." Mariana asked, "Didn't the *narcos* threaten the public communication office when you were working there?" To which Rosalía replied, "Never, never. They would just let me know when I couldn't show up at an event." "How?" "They would just say, 'This and that elected officials [or candidates] will be on tour. You have to stay in the

office.'" "Who would say that?" "The folks in charge of logistics… Amidst so many deaths, people show you [how to deal with all this]." Thus, Rosalía's avoidance of a space and the witnessing of relations and practices which criminals and local authorities meant to conceal became a collective, logistical endeavor underpinned by a tacit understanding.

In some cases, this overlooking became an act that explicitly conjured out of existence, as it were, what it was merely ignoring. At some point, journalists from the state capital showed up in San Martín and wrote about certain details of the presence of organized crime in that town, which Rosalía denied. As a result, she was accused of defending criminals. "But I wasn't defending the bad guys," Rosalía points out, "I'm simply saying that they have their own issues and conflicts and when they are going to have a shootout, they find a spot for it and let us know: 'Leave calmly, there's gonna be trouble here soon, there's gonna be a clash here,' like mom and dad when they have a fight and tell the kids to leave,'" a peculiar comparison that illuminates the extent to which both criminals' position of authority had been established and how their public acts of violence were expected to be avoided as a matter of course. "And, obviously, these are elementary practices of conservation, of survival. I see [the violence around me], so I think, 'Something's happening here, I'd better keep quiet, I know that I shouldn't meddle in these things—neither as resident, public officer, nor as journalist or as anything.'"

Even if she bended reality a bit in her writing, Rosalía's choices were different from other journalists in Mexico who find themselves up against the influence of criminal organizations and their interests to control the circulation of information about specific events of violence. For instance, some journalists, particularly those covering the *nota roja* or *fuente policiaca* (lit. the police source, or the coverage of crime scenes, especially those occurring in public space), find themselves at the crossfire of turf wars. In some cases, criminal organizations attempt to control

what journalists write, instructing them through a combination of bribes and threats (del Palacio 2018: 91; see also Contreras 2016). If those journalists are situated in a territory that is fought between different criminal organizations, they may find themselves at the mercy of violent actors with conflicting interests, which might lead to their murder. In contrast, Rosalía learned what not to know and the information she shared with me, one example after another, showed how she learned about how non-knowledge was to suffuse public life.

For example, she told me about several moments that taught her how to deal with events of gun violence in San Martín and its surroundings. Even if she is not a crime journalist, the ubiquity of these events led the newspaper she worked for to initially consider them of public interest, which then needed reporting, but information about it had to be obtained in oblique ways. For instance, when the two of us were once talking after lunch in her apartment, she recounted: "There was once a shootout in a nearby village, with more than 20 dead." I asked, "Who did you ask, how did you find out about it?"

> I hear from residents, people who live there that I've known for a long time, the doctor, a local authority, the lady at the small diner where I eat every day. I ask, 'What happened?' 'Oh, it was horrible, I hid in here, but Doña Fulanita's son was killed.' 'Oh my, was he involved in all that? No, the poor soul was feeding his cows.' Or in the taxi, 'Oh it's so hot today, oh my!' You must do it that way [inquire without being explicit] because you never know who you're talking to… So that article about the nearby shooting that left more than 20 dead, I sent it, but no one published it. I was asked to write it, and I wrote it with the data that the witnesses gave me. Obviously, when I got there, there were no more bodies left, because they have a very efficient cleanup mechanism. Both sides do, the Navy or the police and organized crime.

Almost in passing, Rosalía here compares and equates criminals and the state, situating them in opposition to each other (the Navy, by the way, carries out the same tasks as the Army and the National Guard, both inland and around bodies of water). This opposition contrasts with the ways in which they are opaquely fused together in her comments above, where *the folks in*

charge of logistics, who worked for the local government, were the ones relaying messages from traffickers. "Each one picks up their dead and [gets rid of] them as if nothing had happened. We have indications that there are many *narcofosas* (narco-mass graves) or clandestine mass graves up there in the mountains. One passes by and suddenly someone mentions, 'Look, there's a *narcofosa* there,' [which often leads one to immediately change the subject:] 'Oh, what a nice natural landscape,' or folks mention 'This is where they killed so-and-so,' you get the full *narcotour*…" Now the state and criminal appear as mirror images of each other by discussing how they *both* engage in the practice of cleaning up and disposing of bodies, filling up mass graves whose names attribute their existence only to *narcos*. *Narcofosas* thus appear as materializations of the suffusion of non-knowledge: folks know that there are people buried there. Some might know some of those who might be there, but not others. It is unclear who killed them and perhaps why, but the fact that these things were meant to be kept undisclosed is rendered clear.

In April of 2022, the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances published a report after a visit to Mexico, expressing concern about the nearly 100,000 cases of forced disappearance that were officially registered (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). At a different scale, then, the issue of forced disappearances is discussed openly and heavily. Similarly, in other parts of the country, the search for loved ones in *narcofosas* is a very public practice. As opposed to the other cases where forced disappearances took place, such as Guatemala and the Southern Cone, as well as Mexico in the 1960-70s, this is at the center of Mexico's public sphere *while it is taking place*. But the openness of this discussion is highly dependent on the context.

Rosalía continues: “Besides, that’s the best thing you can do, avoid going when the corpses are still there. [You must] wait until they clean it all up… none of what happens in this region shows up in the news. There is total silence. What does one do? One keeps quiet.” Rosalía thus explained her own and others’ management of space to avoid untimely encounters when the evidence of the homicides committed was still present. Time had to be given to render this evidence invisible before occupying such spaces. What followed was not exactly acting as if nothing had happened, but rather engaging in an interplay of acknowledgment and explicit avoidance of the sites where those and all the other bodies of shootout victims had been taken.

Early on, however, the parameters of publicity around these events were unclear: “So,” Rosalía tells me, “I sent my article and when I realized it wasn’t published, I called them and asked, ‘What happened?’ And they tell me that they got a report from a government institution saying that the shooting took place in another jurisdiction…” This was probably true, since this town is on the border between two states, but it was also an excuse not to make the event public. Rosalía was not told explicitly that the reason was the event of violence itself and those involved in it, but it was clear enough. “When I realized the extent of the collusion between the state and municipal governments, the Navy, and the police,” she said, forgetting to mention ‘the bad guys,’ as she called them, or calling them ‘the state’ instead, in a Freudian slip, “[it becomes clear to me how] it’s useless to write, inquire, expose, because you expose yourself. There is nothing to do here… The criminals have us [journalists] very well identified, they keep an eye on us, they know where we go, who we mess with… we can move freely because they know we are careful.” There is thus a non-knowledge that is constantly promoted by the knowledge that organized crime might be there guarding its potential disclosure. In other words, this vague

knowledge/anticipation/speculation prevents any possibility of delving into the specifics of what takes place in public space and would then constitute public knowledge, mediated by journalism.

Exposing others thus implies exposing oneself, so what one does is conceal both. Thus emerge the implicit rules of the local public sphere: "I realized I had nothing to do but comply with the new social order, the one imposed by them, the real authorities, when I was covering a political campaign in the mountains and, at some point, I see the candidates greet a man. I start taking pictures and a huge man approaches me with a uniform that is supposedly a federal police uniform—although there are no police cars or anything nearby—and then another man holding a grenade launcher on his shoulder shows up too." It is not only that the *true authority* of narcos is recognized by people like Rosalía, but also that this authority mobilizes institutional signs like a police uniform and the power inherent in it (Siegel 1998: 59). This was not a *real* police uniform, as Rosalía points out, but the authority that underlies the right to emulate these signs is backed by both the grenade launcher that the other man is holding and their relationship with elected officials. Like Siegel's notion of the *palsu*, or the counterfeit, these men "draw on the power of reference of the marks they imitate" (Ibid), the signs of state authority that they are already profoundly intertwined with anyway.

Rosalía was unaware that this was not an event that was meant to be publicized: "The candidates are greeting those men [who are] wearing hats, I'm taking pictures, and folks turn around and stare at me, everyone starts gesturing at me, but not saying anything, just gesturing at me to stop taking pictures, to leave." Just like the people around her were trying to make her understand what was going on without speaking, she referred to the traffickers in her conversation with me in equally roundabout ways, as 'those men wearing hats.' It was very clear to me who she was talking about—the stereotype of the drug trafficker as the hat-wearing

rancher is ubiquitous. Her reference to these men as such invited me to situate myself in that scenario, trying with her to read what was happening: ranchers, candidates, handshakes, gestures to stop documenting it. "The candidates finally turn around- [and] one of the guys says 'You all didn't say you were coming, we were about to fuck you over [*ya nos los íbamos a chingar*]. Next time let us know in advance, see what was about to happen.' I go back to the car and delete everything. What can you do? Keep quiet, that's it. That's how you realize who's in charge and what they need. They are minding their business, I am minding my own… why publish this, what would one solve with that?"

Rosalía seems to be trying to justify her decision to abide by these new rules, as if she had to give a reason for not upholding the journalistic value of publicity above anything else. However, she does seem to find a niche for denunciation: "But I did publish, for instance, about the police… When their alleged persecution of the bad guys began, there were many police deaths. [For instance,] when they killed two policemen in the neighboring town, the police entered San Martín, supposedly looking for the bad guys, but what they really did was break into everyone's houses… they took valuable things and arrested people, young people, women… besides, in this town everyone knows each other. So, when [folks in the village] say, 'They took Perenganita's son,' 'Perenganita's son? But he's a saint!' 'Well, they took him and say he's a *narco*.' 'They're crazy!' Or '[they took] Fulanito.' 'Oh, yes, Fulanito [is indeed a *narco*], there's no use trying to help him.'" Rosalía identifies these conditions as those that led to the exacerbation of violence. "Why? Because the criminals that arrive in San Martín begin recruiting local people… by word of mouth: suddenly you're wearing a nice watch, a phone, [you say] 'I started working there' [and others reply:] 'Put in a good word for me.' It became the fashionable job, the job that gave you status." Thus, as opposed to the vague allusion to the foreignness of the "men wearing hats"

above, Rosalía describes how criminality begins embedding itself among the local youth, which becomes a publicly known fact. Besides the subtle signs of affiliation that these luxury objects constitute, rumors enable locals to keep track of this embeddedness of criminality in their community. These contrast with the ill-informed response of the police and its targeting of the guilty and innocent alike, which at least initially could make its way to the news.

But even the circulation of rumor has limits, upon which Rosalía once stumbled. As she recalled later in that conversation, one day some violent event had taken place,

> and I began asking my friends later at a dinner party about it, 'What happened? Why did they kill him?' and so on, and one of them starts talking: 'Well, this happened, and this *narco* did this…' and he starts mentioning drug traffickers' aliases and this man approaches him and says, 'Shh!' and puts his arm around me and tells me, 'Keep quiet, keep quiet.' And I ask, 'why?' 'This is what my grandmother used to say when we were meddling where we shouldn't.' So we all changed the subject immediately…

Rosalía retold a version of this story to Mariana when the three of us met at the café. She also made implicit reference to it in a book chapter she wrote. However, she never said anything about who this man was. He could have been a member of a criminal organization who was kindly cautioning folks not to say things in public that could get them into trouble or someone who had learned through personal experience or someone close to him. To me—and I think to Rosalía too, hence her constant reference—this man embodies relations to organized crime in San Martín: the need to reckon with their unexpected materialization, to anticipate that they might be eavesdropping on any conversation, imposing silence and avoidance. Criminality had become fetishized out of fear and the impossibility to give it a proper dimension. At the same time, this materialization was friendly and intimate—*he puts his arm around me and tells me 'keep quiet'… this is what my grandmother used to say.*

Rosalía went on to describe another way in which the specter of organized crime materialized:

> [Something else they do] is send you liquor bottles or invite you somewhere. Someone tells you 'There will be a party,' and you show up [at a house] but there's no party, there's nothing, and suddenly someone offers you a liquor bottle, and a man approaches and asks you 'How are you doing?' 'Fine, thank you,' and someone is grilling meat over there and [otherwise] there's just you, and the man says, 'Let's pour you a glass.' A well-dressed young man, you see that he's wearing American sportswear, right? Well shaved, clean, but a total rancher, and two huge fuckers are standing behind him."

The figure of the anonymous rancher is present here again, this time failing in his attempt to properly display a wealthy urban demeanor. Contrasting his anonymity—which could be just the way she presents him to me—is the knowledge that he and his men have of Rosalía.

> "And one of them says, 'Boss, the lady only drinks tequila, what kind would you like?' 'No, thank you, I can drink this, don't worry.' 'No, no, bring her tequila.' 'No, this is perfect, don't worry.' And we start drinking, and the owner of the house we're in is there. You can see that he's nervous, rushing from one end to the other, saying 'The sauce is ready,' or whatever, going from one end of the house to the other. And, the man asks me, 'What do you think about the situation?' 'It's good.' 'Listen, the article you wrote about […] was great… But he never looks at you in the eye. I drank the whole bottle of whiskey that was there. They served me the meat, no one else ever showed up, so at some point I say, 'Well, I must head out, thank you so much.' 'We can take you, where are you headed?' 'No, thanks, I have to deliver my notes [to the newspaper].' 'No, stay, they're bringing another bottle, other friends are coming.' 'No, thank you so much, sir, I have to go hand in my notes. Since [the newspaper I work in] is a daily, I really gotta send them, but thank you, really, next time.' 'Ok, have a good night.' That's it. The whole thing was just to tell me, 'You wrote such a nice article!'

This anecdote was particularly confusing to me. I wondered if she knew in advance that there wouldn't really be a party, and if she then considered that her attendance was not optional, if she knew (of) the man that had summoned her, and why he would go through that trouble to praise an article of hers that seemed to have nothing to do with him. The point of the story, however, was not to disclose any of those things to me, but rather to show me how "the bad guys" made

their authority felt: everyone is deferent to him, both Rosalía and the owner of the house are eager to please, afraid. The 'boss' can use other people's homes, can summon folks at will, and comment on public forms of writing. He also appears as wanting to be a patron, a promoter of the kind of journalism that Rosalía produced, and who mixed some sort of kindness to the fear underpinning his authority. There is once more here a (less successful, it seems) gesture of intimacy—a home-cooked meal, attention to Rosalía's taste in alcohol, a ride back home. There is also, in Rosalía's account of this event, a careful calculation of the minimal context that she can offer to give some sense to her story.

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In San Martín, the epistemic murk (Taussig 1987) that surrounds organized crime and their webs of relations from the standpoint of people like Rosalía could lead to the misattribution of intention. She showed me this by recalling how a friend of hers who had worked at the community radio station [*radio comunitaria*] had been murdered years back by a member of a criminal organization. At first, everyone thought that the murder was a deliberate act to silence the radio hosts—they had every reason to believe so, since it had occurred so many times before around the country, even if the radio broadcast no politically sensitive content. She later learned, thanks to one of her colleague's investigations, that it had been a mistake: members of a criminal group that had recently arrived at San Martín were trying to make their way into the radio booth. They had the intention of claiming their power over the town through the radio waves but did not know how to operate the equipment. Rosalía's friend and others arrived when they heard noises coming from the radio booth, and when they saw armed men inside, they tried to flee, but one of them was shot and killed.

According to rumors she later heard, this mistake was severely punished because the killer had "heated up the turf" [*calentó la plaza*], leading others to believe, perhaps, that some sort of fight over the territory was still taking place. As this anecdote shows, there is always an excess to the possibility of controlling the circulation of information about violence—and on violence itself, to begin with—even on the part of members of criminal organizations themselves. There is always the possibility for misinterpretation that results from chance and the need to always draw conclusions out of incomplete knowledge and expectations shaped by fear.

Jorge and the Aftermath

The story around Jorge's death was the last and most consequential one for Rosalía, bringing her to Mexico City as an exile, and marking explicit limits to the possibilities of journalistic work in San Martín. Jorge did not write about organized crime either, but he did critical journalism, possibly angering some powerful and violent people with his work.

When he found out he was in danger, Jorge reached out to the Protection Mechanism for Journalists and Human Rights Defenders but did not go through with the whole process. This is not uncommon. Another journalist who worked in a nearby town, who had been threatened and brutally attacked by different local authorities for exposing their illegalities, explained to me why he made a similar decision:

> The Protection Mechanism gave me a panic button. They gave me the option of relocating me in another state, but I had to refuse, because my child goes to college here and my spouse works here too, so they would have to leave their lives behind. I am also a public employee in [a nearby city], so we would all lose our source of sustenance if we leave. I thus requested another option. So, the Mechanism supplied me with police surveillance—their cars parked outside my house for three months, but that caused a lot of fear among my family and neighbors. They wondered why, they thought that someone was going to come and kill me, so that stopped.

For journalists' aggressors, protection measures could often be read instead as a provocation, so they end up summoning the danger they are trying to avoid. When I attended meetings to discuss cases of other journalists, I also observed that it wasn't always clear whether the police officers that were assigned for their protection were not on the side of the aggressors. There are blinds spots as to how rogue, as it were, the local authorities are, which make it hard to discern who federal authorities can trust and how effective their threats of punishment could be. This leads the Mechanism to act in ways that are sometimes counterproductive.

I don't know why Jorge decided not to continue with the procedure to receive protection from the Mechanism, but perhaps some of these were his reasons. In any case, he opted for a different solution, to go and talk directly to the local criminal bosses with the aim of getting some clarity about the threats he had been receiving, which, he and others guessed, came from them. The haziness of these threats was emotionally taxing to him—they did not make clear what he could and could not do. The local criminal bosses reassured him that he had nothing to fear from them, and yet he was murdered shortly afterwards. The question of who and why they did it has been discussed in largely unsaid ways, which mirror the haziness of organized crime's public presence and its relationship with political power. This relationship was depicted to me in myriad ways, beyond those discussed above—in romantic terms between specific members of each entity, as organized crime being the armed division of local authorities, or through anecdotes of violence by organized crime against the local police. This relationship is kaleidoscopic.

Soon after Jorge's murder became public, Rosalía got a phone call from the Protection Mechanism: "They call me and tell me that they're taking me out of that place… They ask me how I'm doing, if I'm ok, if I want them to come fetch me. They activate a cautionary protocol, and ask 'Do you need someone to go and keep you company? Please do not show up at the

funeral.' I obviously wanted to go, but my family, my colleagues tell me not to do idiotic things."

When she arrived in Mexico City, she was received by officers from the Protection Mechanism, who got started with the incorporation process right away: as Rosalía recalled, they mentioned, "'Ok, tell us. Write here.' I wrote. 'What is a normal day for you like? Who do you spend time with, who do you work with, what have you published? Sign this.' 'Why?' 'You're in the Mechanism now. Your refuge is available.' 'Why me?' 'Because of your closeness with Jorge, because you both worked together. While we find out what happened, you're in the Mechanism."

Rosalía ended up staying in the refuge for a couple of years, but she hasn't been able to go back to San Martín, since violence has been exacerbated even further and people are fleeing in larger numbers than ever before. "Those who have stayed have had a very rough time," she once told me. "Violence has gotten much worse, even though it does not appear in the media. And it seems that the future will be even worse, so I will have to wait very long before I go back or probably forget about that region for good."

She sent me a social media post to give me a sense of the local conditions of violence. The post was an instance of rumor—made anonymous in several ways, as it circulated laterally (see Yeh 2018), to avoid the dangers of being seen as personally possessing dangerous information. The post was both a denunciation and a warning—two mutually exclusive aims, to an extent, because those being denounced were also the ones deemed dangerous. This post, along with all the other moments where Rosalía discussed Jorge's case and Mariana gathered and organized the information into her piece, fell just short of making specific accusations. What one could deduce from all these instances of talk, however, was fairly clear. Neverthelss, if asked explicitly,

Rosalía and others would deflect the question. Interestingly, what she ended up making explicit through this form of concealment and revelation were the practices through which organized crime operated in San Martín's public space, themselves practices of concealment and revelation.

I initially read the partial disclosure that Rosalía engaged in in the stories she told me as establishing an insurmountable distance between me and the object of my analysis, as an obstruction to knowledge. However, they ended up being/revealing the conditions of possibility for her to convey knowledge to me and other members of a broader audience. Rosalía ended up pointing me to a method that resonated with Avery Gordon's attention to haunting: "a case of inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiraling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential" (Gordon 2008[1997]: 25). Rather than trying to chase the ghosts that the characters in her stories were, I was led to shift the gaze and pay attention to what following the traces of the ghosts meant—what implications an attention to absence had, and how these had presented themselves to Rosalía in what appeared to be messy ways. Rather than an always incomplete story, this was a story about knowledge suffused with non-knowledge, and how an interplay of both defined the rules of public life in San Martín.

Conclusion

Unlike existing scholarly work on violence against journalists in Mexico (e.g., Contreras 2016; del Palacio 2018), Rosalía's case shows how one need not engage with organized crime as a journalist to have it radically transform one's labor and the public sphere that one helps give life to. Ultimately, however, it meant having to leave San Martín and even worrying from the distance about the circuits of communication that involved her, or even claimed to involve her. This illuminates not only how the death of a journalist is not the end of a silencing effort but

rather one that reverberates. While Rosalía had learned to keep quiet in San Martín as much as she could, she remains a potential node of communication that is still under threat. At the same time, Rosalía was interested in conveying some of what she had experienced to a broader audience, not just the public officials that used this knowledge to devise forms of protection for her while in exile, but also people who would circulate it in public ways.

What she engaged in to balance her simultaneous need for concealment and publicity, and what I sought to emulate in this chapter, is what Zempléni calls secretion: the exhibition of signs of secrecy without the disclosure of secrets (1996, cited in Jones 2014: 56). The counterpart to this form of narration was a practice of avoidance—that is, attempting to minimize both encounters with and talk about what criminals and authorities wish to keep out of the public eye, which implied predisposing oneself to the potential encounter of an "other" that one cannot readily discern (see Russell 2020). Over time, Rosalía came to understand the patterns of avoidance that were expected of her. Such patterns, illuminated by the instances through which she came to understand them, were the knowledge she conveyed to me about what life as a journalist had become in San Martín. Following Gordon (2008[1997]), instead of cleaning out the messiness, the dead ends, the detours into others' stories, Rosalía demonstrated to me how the negative was the knowledge I was after.

In addition to Rosalía, I spoke to dozens of journalists during my fieldwork, employed in local and national outlets, doing work at the Estado de México, Guerrero, Mexico City, Michoacán, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Veracruz. Most of the stories they told me were about the many forms of violence they had suffered. I was particularly struck, for instance, when I visited a local newspaper office in a city in southern Mexico that had a heavy bulletproof door at the entrance and story upon story of armed attacks and threats to the journalists working there, who

nonetheless continued doing their job (some of them, at least). Another journalist I met and spoke to periodically during my fieldwork over the phone and online would tell me about his recently interrupted journalistic work as he was getting used to his new life in exile, far away, as he put his evidence together to plead his case of political asylum (evidence that consisted of his much-loved journalistic work). Despite the numerous security protocols with which journalists carry out their work, some parts of the country, as Ramón, the deputy director of the news magazine I mentioned earlier put it, lack the basic security conditions to do journalism. As a result, in Ramón's words, "We have information gaps, zones of silence and untold tragedies, either because they are unknown or because telling those stories is too complicated."

I thus learned that if I wanted to know about the ways in which drug war violence had transformed journalism in Mexico—which was the question that initially animated much of this research—I could not, or would not, do so by shadowing journalists. Journalism was clearly a kind of work that was being dissuaded, and which was distancing journalists from their object of inquiry. Thus, what became the object of my own research is what happens in the gap between the journalistic object of inquiry and its communication, in that space of that avoidance. As this chapter shows, what occurs in this gap is an interruption that is then channeled in other ways: in talk about silence, about violence, in memorials remembering murdered journalists, in warning signs, in friendship conversations, in bureaucratic arrangements to protect strangers from poorly understood dangers. In these conversations, though, organized crime (and the state that it articulates with and incorporates into) appears ghostly, sometimes far removed, and other times close and intimate.

In other instances of public talk about the drug war, such as the one I will explore in the following chapters, a (larger) distance between the object of inquiry—what organized crime is

like, what they do, what is their relation to a state that purports to combat it—and the discourse produced about it brings in all kinds of other things: fantasies, conspiratorial narratives, historical resonances. These become the genres that instantiate the roundaboutness of the circulation of knowledge in this context, shaping the representational practices that come to fill the gaps left by the space of avoidance that Rosalía and others draw.

Chapter 2:

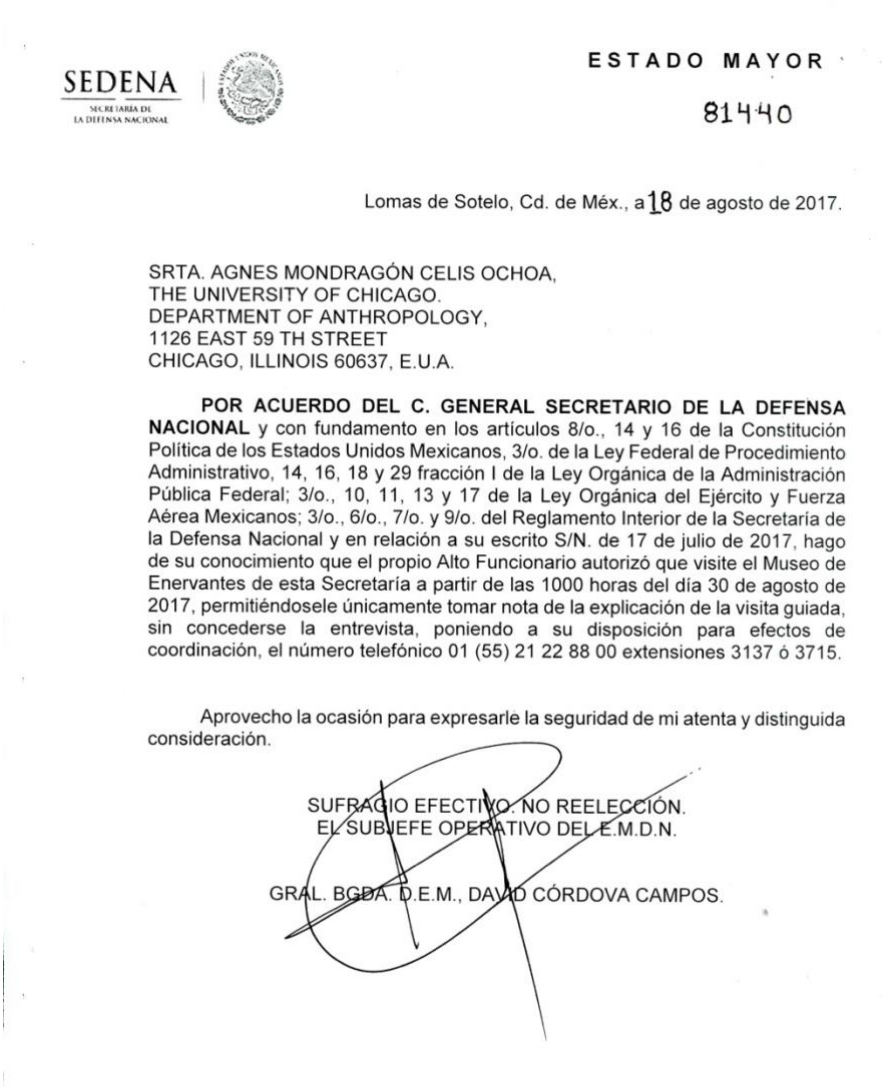
Propaganda, Speculation, Seduction

If a localized context like San Martín is marked by opacity, talk about the *narco* as a national phenomenon has deep epistemological difficulties. As we saw in the Introduction, ethnographic work on localized instances of criminal organizations shows regional variations throughout the country (Mendoza 2017; Le Cour Grandmaison 2021) and the oblique ways in which organized crime is often apprehended and studied (e.g., Correa-Cabrera 2017). These features point to the complications of thinking about an encompassing term like *el narco*. Yet, the *narco*, as a unified concept, has been an object of endless talk since the launch of the *guerra contra el narco* [war on drug trafficking]. This concept quickly became contentious as its definition was both politically crucial and hopelessly opaque, particularly after President Calderón (2006-2012) deployed the Army in 2007 to combat it—a conflict which subsequent presidents, despite their best efforts, have been unable to deescalate. The Museum of Drugs, at the heart of a military facility in Mexico City, is a peculiar instance of how the state defines (its relation to) the *narco* in propagandistic discourse that is aimed for the indoctrination of the troops. The museum is engaged in rendering a single coherent idea of an enemy in what is otherwise a difficult-to-untangle mess of different state and private interests and practices. In addition to the troops, the museum gives access to a restricted public, which includes specialists in drug trafficking, some journalists, and foreign military personnel. Why might it be restricted in these specific ways? This chapter will explore what kind of anxieties might be underlying these partial forms of disclosure the museum engages in and how they relate to its display of the Army's enemy in the drug war.

To give the reader a sense of how this museum's discourse is embedded in public discussions, this chapter will explore this exhibit in dialogue with a fellow visitor's uptake, former journalist and literary scholar Oswaldo Zavala. Zavala's thoughts on the museum, and the broader theory on the relation between the state and criminality in which it is embedded, are relevant because they emerged out of what has become a widely shared position of skepticism towards official discourse. His theory has influenced a group of investigative journalists who work on the drug war, some of whom he has helped train and some of whom he has engaged with in ongoing discussions. His position is more radical than that of most of his former colleagues, but this radical quality makes it an illuminating counterpoint to the museum. Placing these two discourses in dialogue will offer a sense of how the museum's narrative produces, responds to, recoils from ongoing discourses about the place of the Army in the drug war and, by extension, of the drug war as a legitimate endeavor.

The Nation's Army

One weekday morning in January 2020, I arrived at the visitors' entrance of the Mexican Army's facility located in the First Military Zone to visit the *Museo de Enervantes*, or Museum of, literally, Enervating [Drugs,] a rarely used term that is perhaps military lingo. Bordering the state of Mexico and near some of Mexico City's wealthiest neighborhoods, the museum is located within an immense and highly securitized complex of buildings that includes a military school of nursing, a hospital, a medical school, and a health sciences center. It is located a few hundred meters away from an even larger military training facility. When I arrived at the gate, I was asked by an armed soldier about my appointment, and just as I was looking for my official admission letter, I was allowed in through a metal detector (Fig. 9).



SEDENA
SECRETARÍA DE LA DEFENSA NACIONAL

ESTADO MAYOR

81440

Lomas de Sotelo, Cd. de Méx., a 18 de agosto de 2017.

SRTA. AGNES MONDRAGÓN CELIS OCHOA,
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY,
1126 EAST 59 TH STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637, E.U.A.

POR ACUERDO DEL C. GENERAL SECRETARIO DE LA DEFENSA NACIONAL y con fundamento en los artículos 8/o., 14 y 16 de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 3/o. de la Ley Federal de Procedimiento Administrativo, 14, 16, 18 y 29 fracción I de la Ley Orgánica de la Administración Pública Federal; 3/o., 10, 11, 13 y 17 de la Ley Orgánica del Ejército y Fuerza Aérea Mexicanos; 3/o., 6/o., 7/o. y 9/o. del Reglamento Interior de la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional y en relación a su escrito S/N. de 17 de julio de 2017, hago de su conocimiento que el propio Alto Funcionario autorizó que visite el Museo de Enervantes de esta Secretaría a partir de las 1000 horas del día 30 de agosto de 2017, permitiéndosele únicamente tomar nota de la explicación de la visita guiada, sin concederse la entrevista, poniendo a su disposición para efectos de coordinación, el número telefónico 01 (55) 21 22 88 00 extensiones 3137 ó 3715.

Aprovecho la ocasión para expresarle la seguridad de mi atenta y distinguida consideración.

SUFRAGIO EFECTIVO. NO REELECCIÓN.
EL SUBJEFE OPERATIVO DEL E.M.D.N.

GRAL. BGDA. D.E.M., DAVID CÓRDOVA CAMPOS.

Figure 9: Official Letter of Admission to the Museum of Drugs (Photo by Author)

Notes: Official letter of admission, which reads: "As per the General Secretary of National Defense's agreement and based on articles … of [the Constitution, several laws, and the Secretariat's Guidelines] and in response to your letter from July 17, 2017, the High Officer himself has authorized your visit to this Secretariat's Museum of Drugs… where you are only allowed to take notes of the guided tour [and] cannot carry out the [requested] interview…

I had received the admission letter a few days before in my email inbox, about a month after having sent a formal letter of request that explained that I wanted to visit the museum as a PhD anthropology student working on drug war-related issues. It was the third time I had requested a visit and the third time it was granted to me, although without the interview with the curator I

had requested three times before. Perhaps there was no professional curator who devised the museum's arrangement, but I was not allowed to speak with anyone about the museum's organization in any case.

From the gate, I was led through a hall to Module 4, where I found two soldiers manning the front desk in front of a couple of computers and people in civilian clothes sitting in the waiting area. A military woman in camouflaged clothes studied my official ID, took a picture of me, and asked if this was my first time in the museum. It was my third—I had visited the museum in the summers of 2016 and 2017. She then gave me a visitor's ID, with which I entered through a turnstile. The officer in charge of my visit was already waiting for me, dressed in a military office uniform like most officers working there. After greeting me, he took me through a large patio area surrounded by buildings that seemed to house administrative offices and we entered one of them.

My guide led me to the elevator and we rode up to the 7th floor, as we made our way to a quite secretive military institution. This museum is hardly an object of public knowledge. Most of the non-specialists I've spoken to about the museum in Mexico were hearing about it for the first time from me. Outside the military it is mostly those professionally interested in drug trafficking and its combat who are aware of its existence. I stumbled upon the museum online while doing informal research during my first summer of preliminary fieldwork. Sporadic press reports, both by Mexican and foreign news outlets published roughly in the past decade and a half, speak of the museum mainly through the objects it houses, especially weapons with precious metals and stones embedded in them that belonged to high-ranking, well-known drug traffickers, and which have been seized by the Army. Those reports reveal scant information about the museum's history.

When my guide and I stepped out of the elevator and walked toward the museum's entrance, I was given an official welcome by another soldier in office uniform who asked if I wanted to do the whole tour again. He was aware that I was visiting for the third time. On our left-hand side, a green wall with the names and dates in golden letters of the soldiers who had died combatting drug trafficking since 1976 stood under the phrase, also in golden letters, "They gave their lives in fulfilment of their duty [*Dieron la vida en cumplimiento de su deber*]" and the national coat of arms. At every visit, I have seen new names being added (Fig. 10).

Figure 10: Soldiers' Memorial (Photo by Author)

Facing this memorial at the museum's entrance invited me as a visitor to shift my viewpoint in a way that is otherwise difficult. Much of what circulates in the news about the Army's involvement in the drug war has been marked by scandals involving extrajudicial violence. As mentioned in the Introduction, in 2014 news broke that a group of soldiers had murdered 22

unarmed people who had surrendered in the southern town of Tlatlaya. Later that year, the massive scandal of the 'disappearance' of the Ayotzinapa students broke, an event in which members of the Army participated. It is thus in a context of widespread distrust of the Army's illegitimate involvement in the drug war that this museum opens its doors to visitors like me. As I also pointed out in the Introduction, the public imagination that frames readings of these events (and which those events end up reaffirming) is of the Army as a monolithic repressive body that produces victims. It is much rarer to encounter representations of *soldiers as victims* as in this memorial.

As we entered the space that houses the museum, two more soldiers in camouflaged clothes were waiting for us inside. One of them was holding a camera and, as during my two previous visits, started taking numerous photos of me from the moment I arrived, and did not stop until I left. The photographer followed me closely with his partner, only occasionally reading the exhibit signs or looking at his phone, but hardly ever interacting with me. While other visitors I have spoken to have gone through the same procedures during their visit—a tour guide from start to finish, a solo visit or with a small group—not everyone has pictures taken of them.

The whole tour to which the soldier referred began with the projection of a short video in a small room with a few dozen seats and a large screen (Fig. 11). Against a backdrop of optimistic and hopeful music, the video presents the following text, phrase by phrase, over the course of two minutes:

> The motherland is loved for her greatness. / She is loved because she is ours. / United for our nation, /we pledged unswerving loyalty / to Mexico and its people. / Our passion is / to serve Mexico. / Being a solder is a question of honor, principles, and values. / It is a vocation; it is doing what we love the most: / serving Mexico. / It is always being loyal. / SEDENA [Secretariat of National Defense][1]

[1] Se ama a la patria por su grandeza. / Se le ama porque es nuestra. / Unidos por nuestra nación, / juramos lealtad inquebrantable a México y a su gente. / Nuestra pasión es / servir a México. / Ser militar es cuestión de honor,

Figure 11: Stills from Introductory Video (Source: SEDENA)

Note: Stills from the video showing, from left to right, a girl wearing a traditional skirt and holding the flag; men and women wearing typical clothes and doing folkloric dances around the flag; male and female soldiers in battle, and a soldier holding a baby (Photos by Author)

Interspersing these phrases are shots of indigenous old men and women in rural settings wearing traditional clothes, groups of soldiers in gala uniforms marching, then in combat clothing pointing long guns somewhere outside the frame, with tanks behind them, then rescuing babies and children (from natural disasters, it is implied), and in a soup kitchen. Bird's-eye views of their facilities follow, and then military air operations are shown. Two female soldiers appear doing the military salute before a final image appears of the Mexican flag slowly fluttering in the wind.

This video suggests how the museum aims to inspire some attachment to the Mexican nation in soldiers that is in indirect discourse with a well-known pervasive corruption among the ranks. To do so, it resorts to the longstanding association between this institution and the Mexican nation that Mexicans are exposed to from a young age. For instance, on Mondays, all schools in the country, from kindergarten to high school, both public and private, religious and secular, carry out a martial-style ceremony called 'honors to the flag' [*honores a la bandera*]. A group of six excelling sixth-year students are chosen to escort the flag for the year during this ceremony,

principios y valores; / es vocación. / Es hacer lo que más amamos. / Servir a México. / Es ser siempre leales. / SEDENA.

which they do in a well-rehearsed, carefully choreographed martial march, before hoisting it in the flagpole for the week. The rest of the students stand respectfully in line and salute the flag with their right arm posed horizontally across their chest, their fingers pointing left and the thumb underneath. During this ceremony, the national anthem, which also features military and warfare themes, is played and sung by all.

Another idea contained in the video that has long been cultivated is the Army's first responder tasks during natural disasters. Before the advent of the drug war, the Army's public image was mostly defined by these tasks, which has helped give the military a positive reputation. Also underlying this favorable image of the military is a disavowal of the Army's history of repression during the 20th century. Public memory of this is riddled with tensions. On the one hand, it is well known that military repression in Mexico was considerably smaller and less visible than in other Latin American countries. Mexico even received numerous exiles from military dictatorships in the region and from Francoist Spain, a fact that underpins an image of the country as friendly with leftist struggle. On the other hand, the student massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968 that I discussed in the Introduction is the quintessential instance of the PRI regime's repression and, as we saw, a public memory powerful enough to shape drug war instances of violence in its image. Meanwhile, very little is publicly discussed, if at all, about guerrilla movements throughout the country during the second half of the 20th century and the violence with which their members and numerous innocent victims were met.

Although entirely implicitly, contained in this video is also the idea that, if the Army is aligned with the nation and is fighting criminal organizations, then the latter are the nation's enemies: they are not only outside the nation, but are a threat to it. Indeed, as legal scholar Alejandro Madrazo argues, President Calderón's quite explicit depiction of these organizations

was not as criminals who must face the law, but rather as enemies who must face sovereignty (2016: 33). Calderón softened this discursive construction of the enemy towards the end of his administration (Ibid). President Peña Nieto (2012-2018) abandoned it entirely, except for his persecution of Joaquín "el Chapo" Guzmán, after the latter escaped from prison. President López Obrador (2018-2024), for his part, has entirely changed this discourse, coining in its place the phrase *abrazos, no balazos* or 'hugs instead of bullets.' Chapter 4 analyzes this discursive transformation more closely.

What was not minimized, however, but has rather increased, is the military presence in national territory, which has been accompanied by an increase in military propaganda. The video I saw on my January 2020 visit was different from but remarkably similar to the one that was shown to me during my first and second visits. It was a different version of the same theme, which in fact circulated broadly as part of a heavy pro-military publicity campaign launched in 2011, briefly interrupted in 2018 (when the former administration ended) only to begin once more in early 2020. The video displayed at my third visit had been produced by government officials but emulated the former administrations' campaign, which had been outsourced to a private company. This award-winning campaign, which raised SEDENA's [the Secretariat of Defense] publicity expense from around 5,000 USD in 2006 to over 2 million USD in 2011, is rare in its permanence throughout three otherwise utterly distinct administrations from different parties and ideological fields. The campaign took the form of high-quality television and radio spots, itinerant interactive exhibits throughout the country, mostly aimed at children, and more recently social media ads. López Obrador's administration vouched to drastically reduce expenditures on official publicity—whose stark increments had been heavily criticized—but clearly saw the advantages of continuing a publicity campaign about the Army. Such a campaign

has aimed to shore up the military's long-held positive reputation against its damaged public image in the context of the drug war. The Army's moral authority as a defender of the nation is being used to cleanse it not only of the stains produced by the scandals of violence and human rights violations, but also, more generally, of its out-of-placeness as it carries out public security tasks that correspond to civil authorities.

The video that inaugurates the visit seeks to pre-frame the museum within this larger publicity campaign. As one quickly learns from the guides, the museum was conceived in the 1980s and is still used for the training of young soldiers in the combat of the drug trade. While it primarily remains so, the opening of their doors to specialized academics and journalists posits the museum as an object of propaganda for a slightly larger public. Back in the entrance hall after the video screening, one can see on one side a large mural that, the guide explains, was painted by a retired general, and which depicts the same theme as the video: national symbols, the people, and the Army's heroic combat against the drug trade.

Cartels Don't Exist

After watching the video, we stepped into the first of the halls—a series of rooms with white walls, low ceilings and no windows, which circuited back to the main entrance. The exhibit displays a quick historical tour that starts with drug consumption among ancient civilizations worldwide, up to the times of tolerated drug consumption during the Mexican Revolution at the turn of the 20th century. It situates the beginning of drug trafficking per se in the 1920s "with the illegal trade of drugs, carried out by Chinese immigrants who settled in the state of Sinaloa." Then, it states, "production grew in the 60s, when drug consumption became fashionable with the 'hippies.' This phenomenon led public security forces to directly combat the growing of

marihuana and poppy" through the first of a series of military operations until the turn of the 21st century.

The choice to begin the museum with this history points to the transformation of the social, legal, and cultural condition of drug consumption and production over time, from being framed in the 20th century as a relatively minor affair, a problem attributed to foreigners—Chinese growers and American consumers—to its transformation into a crucial national issue, inserted in large-scale criminal networks and countered with strong policies of criminalization. This is at the heart of Oswaldo Zavala's argument: How, he wonders, did drug traffickers go from being mostly harmless local actors to national threats?

His answer is that they did not, that drug cartels are nothing more than the state's discursive creation. His theory dates to his time as a journalist in the 1990s at the local newspaper *El Diario de Juárez* in that border city, located in the state of Chihuahua. His boss was journalist Ignacio Alvarado, with whom I also spoke. As Zavala recalls, Alvarado "was the first one to tell me, 'Cartels don't exist, that's nonsense… [Reproducing this term] is playing along with official discourse, which is not verifiable. You can't really tell me where the cartel is. Have you ever seen a cartel? I've seen five armed dudes there; I don't know if that's a cartel. I won't accept that word.'" Zavala goes on to say,

> [Up until the late nineties,] the idea of drug trafficking as a threat to national security did not exist. The *narco* was spoken of as a rural folkloric thing, as a curiosity… I imagined the *narco* at the time as [is shown] in films by the Almada brothers: as gruffy cowboys that have no choice [but to work in this business] to save their families [from poverty], so they take the risk and are killed in the end. Around [19]96, the FBI gives this press conference [just across the border, in El Paso] on [now-deceased famous drug lord] Amado Carrillo out of nowhere… I go back to the office with that info, and they ask me where it came from. 'The FBI gave it to us,' I replied. I wrote the article and it appeared on the cover: name, photos. Some outlets didn't publish it, but [we did]. Later, I realized that the press conference took place seven days before a high-level meeting where [the Americans] would force the [Mexican] government to accept the [national]

> security logic… What they wanted was that we accepted the warfare logic that was coming… having the *narco* as the new national security threat, and since it had worked in Colombia… So, how do you explain [to] a Mexican president that his *narcos* are a threat to national security? [He would reply:] 'What are you talking about? They are my lackeys, they do as I say! Of course they aren't.' They have a lot of trouble trying to sell that in the eighties. After the murder of [DEA officer] Enrique Camarena [in Mexico, allegedly by drug trafficking organizations], the discussion begins… national security discourse becomes institutionalized and what they need now is a well-defined enemy, so they use Amado Carrillo… they have to use him as their new piñata… There were some shootouts for about 3 months in Juárez after Carrillo's death, but there was no violence in Mexico [in that magnitude] until 2007 [when the drug war started].

From a viewpoint of the drug war through the juxtaposition of drug traffickers imagined as folkloric characters, on the one hand, and the FBI's naming of them as a massive criminal threat, on the other, one can see the rationale for a skeptical position. This raises, however, the issue of the blind spots in Zavala's position and the assumptions underlying it, which we will explore throughout this chapter. Meanwhile, however, let's consider certain elements of official discourse that come across as untrustworthy, and thus reinforce that skeptical position. For instance, Zavala mentions the issue of rising violence levels to prove that President Calderón's justification for the drug war was false. A key event that catalyzed that president's decision to deploy the military, initially in his home state of Michoacán, was that on September 6, 2006, five human heads were thrown on the dance floor of a bar in the town of Uruapan. For Calderón, this was an instance of the concerning increase of violence in the region and the country more broadly, which made it necessary to combat criminal organizations by force. In a famous article, however, renowned sociologist Fernando Escalante demonstrated that this concern with rising levels of violence, which the press was animating, had no base in the figures, which showed, on the contrary, that the number of homicides nationwide had declined systematically in the period from 1990 to 2007 (Escalante 2009). By January of 2011, however, Escalante wrote a sequel to his article that addressed the stark escalation of violence in 2008 and 2009. In it, he pointed out

two important things: first, violence had increased especially in sites where important police and military operations were taking place; and second, the reported deaths were explained away in the press by attributing them to a fight among drug criminals. Indeed, as Escalante later elaborated (2012):

> between 2007 and 2012, communiqués appeared in the Mexican press almost daily about massacres, shootouts, attacks. They were generally explained by a generic allusion to organized crime. Sometimes, the competition between two concrete groups was mentioned and the events were attributed to one or the other. But the names of the victims or any proof of the accusation that they were "members of organized crime" rarely appeared… (Escalante 2012: 40).

Anthropologist Natalia Mendoza (2017) captured the transformation of drug traffickers from rather irrelevant local actors to regional drug organizations, and some of the patterns of the rising violence that accompanied it, through an ethnography in the northern town of Altar, Sonora, during fieldwork carried out in 2005 and then in 2011. Her term "cartelization" describes "the move from a local and relatively open organization of drug trafficking to a monopoly controlled by regional organizations and sustained by a salaried "bureaucracy" in charge of managing violence" (Mendoza 2017: 17). The transformation from 2005 to 2011 was not only marked by a stark increase in homicides and "disappearances" in the Altar desert region and Sonora more generally, but also by the advent of spectacular violence and social relations marked by suspicion and distrust (Ibid). Cartelization implies the "displacement of 'old guard' independent traffickers, the incorporation and professionalization of youth in structured and hierarchical regional networks" (2017: 217). As regional organizations have privatized border crossing routes, formerly independent drug traffickers must leave the business or become subordinated to them. These organizations now also charge fees to undocumented migrants who travel through these routes. While describing how the fee collection is organized, an interlocutor of Mendoza

points out that “no one knows exactly who put [the collector] completely in charge of migrants in the region… some say it was the governor himself.” (2017: 221). As Mendoza argues, this shows “to what extent what people in Altar call ‘the mafia’—that structure of fee collectors, watchmen, and hitmen—is an external imposition that nonetheless requires local young men as middlemen and operators in the town,” as well as organized cooperation on the part of the police (Ibid). This also shows that, from a local viewpoint, criminal organizations are marked by secrecy and opacity. They seem to be compartmentalized in their operations and that lack of knowledge substituted by speculation.

While Mendoza’s work strongly challenges the theory of the non-existence of drug cartels, it does point to a degree of unknowability about the reasons behind the ever-growing homicide figures in a country whose judicial system is completely overwhelmed. Her work also shows that all perspectives on the drug war are riddled with blind spots. What Zavala chooses to do in such a position is connect the dots that are available to him and make epistemic choices. He did not observe, and thus denies the political-economic transformation of criminal organizations that Mendoza describes. What he is left with is the discursive construction of drug trafficking as an enemy that requires the full force of the state, and takes it as if it were a discourse made in isolation.

An aspect of the drug war on which he relies heavily to construct this position is the war’s origin in an American model of warfare. As Zavala points out, the war stems from an American drug policy that dates to Nixon’s declaration of a “war on drugs” and all the forms of military collaboration between the US and Mexican governments ever since, such as the Mérida Initiative, for instance, through which Mexico had received by 2017 close to 3 billion USD to combat criminal organizations. From this, however, he leaps to the assertion that “this security

policy [like American war models] is a warfare discourse that manufactures enemies, constructs antagonisms, divides the world into the armed forces who are engaging in just battle [on the one hand] and the range of domestic enemies that are constructed by the insertion of this discourse [on the other]." This is, of course, a resonant form of thinking about American warfare policy and the forms of xenophobia that it both relies on and reaffirms in public culture. In his book, *Los cárteles no existen* [Cartels Don't Exist, 2018], Zavala draws a genealogy connecting the US's anti-communist struggle with the hemispheric war on drugs, a political configuration that, he argues, is exported to Mexico through imperial power. He even attributes the orchestration of what he takes to be a fake drug war to the state's unbothered exploitation of natural resources (Zavala 2018). While I cannot delve into a discussion on the plausibility of this assertion, a version of which is shared by a small group of scholars and journalists (Alvarado Álvarez 2014; Paley 2014; Correa-Cabrera 2017), I wish to point out the conceptual operations at play. Consider, for instance, how his theory mirrors oversimplified explanations put forth by some about the Iraq War, transplanting it as if were perfectly replicable elsewhere, without nuance. A pertinent distinction to draw would be one between the importation of a warfare *model* and the *entire* warfare effort. The complexities of imperialism and the Iraq war would also have to be unpacked further (see Harvey 2003). What we will observe most closely in this chapter (and throughout this dissertation) are the ways in which the state's enemy materializes.

For Zavala, official discourse doesn't shape an already existing entity as its enemy, but rather summons it into being. Zavala writes, "the alleged security crisis that according to [President] Calderón justified the 'drug war' is based primarily on a discursive strategy without material support" (2018: 14). This is a seductive but tricky assertion. What kind of *material support* might be required here? To an extent, of course, the *naming* of the state's enemy has

performative force—it inaugurates this quality in it, but it doesn't produce anything ontologically, as Zavala seems to be suggesting. The question is, then, what is the difference between what already existed and what is brought into being?

As part of his evidence, Zavala's book mentions a 1994 Time magazine interview with Gilberto Ramírez Orejuela, who argued that '"the Cali Cartel," which he allegedly led, simply does not exist. "It is an invention of the DEA […] There are many groups, not just one cartel. The police know this. The DEA knows it too. But they prefer to invent a monolithic enemy" (2018: 6). Zavala also cites an interview that journalist Ioan Grillo did with Colombian narco-lawyer Gustavo Salazar, who stated that "Cartels don't exist. What exists is a collection of drug traffickers. Sometimes they work together and sometimes they don't. US prosecutors call them cartels to make their cases easier. It's all part of the game" (Ibid). However, one can argue, as I do in Chapter 3, that criminal organizations are similar objects to the state: networks of relations and practices that are only *attributed* uniformity and agency, as Philip Abrams (1988) famously argued (see also Taussig 1992). What the interviewees point out is that the notion of cartel consolidates different criminal groups or fleeting associations into larger, more permanent criminal organizations. It does not imply that criminal organizations are altogether nonexistent.

This is, however, what Zavala argues. As he tells me,

> Something interesting happened to me with [journalist] Pablo Ferri. He published a chronicle, he spent some time with soldiers in [the border state of] Tamaulipas during their alleged combat of *narcos*. The chronicle narrates how the captain of the group and the other soldiers tell him stories of skirmishes with supposed traffickers, all that. He takes notes and suddenly there's a van that stops very abruptly in the middle of that plain where they're all walking, close to the border. The soldiers stand by as someone gets out of the van and starts running. The soldiers start shooting that person. No one is shooting back, but the soldiers shoot. After a while they stop, and two women and a girl get out of the car. Then, Ferri says, 'no *narcos*, no weapons, no nothing. A *pollero* [transporter of undocumented migrants] who ran away, two migrants and their daughter,' who, luckily, they didn't kill. And afterwards the soldiers even harass them, threatening

> to call migration, asking why they are over there… So Pablo records that and ends up writing that the fight against the *narco* continues.

Zavala finds the link to the article on Twitter, framed by someone else as a great example of journalistic work on drug trafficking. He engages in an argument with Ferri, urging him to "note the contradiction between what you are seeing as a journalist and… how you frame the event you're witnessing… And of course," he adds, "this is not more than an anecdote, but it should at least get you to reconsider to what extent you interiorize or legitimate what the soldiers are telling you, while what you're seeing is something else." He tells me he ends up convincing Ferri who, like other journalists, ends up changing his stance. When I spoke to him, Ferri had a more moderate position on the matter, shaped by his own investigative journalism, but he had taken Zavala's point to distrust the state's discourse. He was, for instance, one of the journalists that uncovered the killings in Tlatlaya mentioned above, helping to publicize that the Army's account of the matter—which stated that the victims had died during a shootout—was a lie. The soldiers had killed them when they were unarmed and defenseless. In our conversation, Ferri used this to exemplify why the state shouldn't be taken at its word when it reports on events of drug war violence. It may not only hide that it exerted such violence illegally, but also aggrandize the criminal profile of those arrested. He also referred to the case of a man whose arrest had been recently publicized by the public attorney's office of a northern state. The man was alleged to be the leader of a large drug cartel in a big city, but this allegation cannot be easily confirmed. While early in the war journalists would get their information about its violent events through official reports issued by the military or the police, it eventually became clear to many of them I spoke to, like Ferri, that it was best to search for information on their own.

The issue, then, as described by Ferri, was that the facts on the ground were often distorted to make it seem as if every instance of state violence was within the parameters of what was legal

and justified, and that the state was making progress. This fact then raises a number of questions—for instance, how can we know if the object/victims of the state forces' violence are indeed members of organized crime? In other words, how can we know that the Army is not killing innocent civilians with the excuse of combatting drug traffickers? And even if they all were criminals, is this violence justified?

In a context in which the only approach to a phenomenon occurs through isolated instances, which are often known through others' accounts, and where knowledge is compartmentalized on all sides, one is forced to make an epistemic choice. For Zavala, the choice was to decide that the state's combat of drug cartels was *never* true. An initial position of suspicion—*I have seen cases in which the state has lied*—slips into speculation—*the state always lies; in fact, it is lying about everything*—because thinking otherwise implies believing that the state is telling very consequential truths—*this bloodshed makes sense because we're destroying drug cartels.* From this, Zavala deduces a theory of the state: "the peak moment in the history of our security apparatus, in which they have the most power and can produce the highest degree of lethality, in which they have militarized- have occupied the national territory, practically totalizing social space." At this point, then, organized crime appears to be completely out of the picture, but rather than disappearing, it has been folded into a fetishized, hyperpowerful necropolitical state.

The Wild Zone of State Power

The Army is aware of the issue of illegitimate violence that animates suspicion. It was raised since the moment when violence became hypervisible in the public sphere. The next hall of the museum is, in fact, dedicated to seeking to demonstrate the legality of these military undertakings. That this is displayed in the form of a museum exhibit may remind the visitor that this place is primarily meant for the education of young soldiers—a demonstration of the legality

of an endeavor in which they will soon partake. The issue of extrajudicial violence, however, has become a big point of public debate. This is perhaps one of the reasons why those in charge of the museum might have been interested in opening it up to a slightly broader public, thereby intervening in this debate.

When President Calderón first deployed the military, he faced the problem that this institution was not legally entitled to carry out public security tasks. This situation remained unchanged until 2019 when, during López Obrador's administration, a constitutional reform passed that created the National Guard and allowed the president to use the Army and Navy for public security ends, although for no more than five years. The National Guard, which became the security corps in charge of fighting organized crime, was originally agreed in Congress to be a civil institution, formed by both former military personnel and members of the now-extinct Federal Police, but led by a civilian. While the National Guard becomes firmly established as an institution, the Army and Navy will also be in charge of public security. This measure responded to the fact that, when elected, López Obrador faced two great demands. The first was to demilitarize the country, which he had promised to do over a six-month period. This helps explain his *hugs, rather than bullets* discourse mentioned above. The second was to put together an effective (ideally incorruptible) federal police corps, as his predecessors had tried to do and failed. He must also have faced great pressure on the part of the Armed Forces, who had been carrying out public security tasks on shaky legal grounds for 13 years. As of February of 2022, the president has appointed a military head of the National Guard and become unprecedentedly close to the Armed Forces, although for reasons not necessarily related to the drug war. While he has empowered the military more than any of his recent predecessors, the discourse of *hugs*

rather than bullets remains. So, there is a tension between the near absence of official talk about the military combat of criminal organizations and its reality on the ground.

Amid glass cabinets that contained international and national laws and regulations—which were updated to the administration underway, along with their distinctive logos—I asked the guide about the new legal framework of the combat against drug trafficking. My guides in the previous two visits had expressed a concern about the precarious legal grounds on which the Armed Forces' actions stood at the time, which was accompanied by the wish to eventually, gradually, have the military withdrawn from public security tasks. They had also emphasized the fact that such tasks stemmed from a command by the civil government. The fear, it seems to me, mainly resulted from a foreseen accountability about illegal events of violence. Before the recent reforms, the legality of the Armed Forces' combat against drug trafficking was unclear at best. As per the exhibit, which didn't yet include those changes, the legal framework was composed of: constitutional Article 16, which states that "anyone can detain a person while committing a crime or immediately thereafter, taking them directly to the nearest authority…,"[2] and Article 89, Fraction 4, which states: "the President of the Republic is authorized to make use of the entirety of the Permanent Armed Force, that is, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, for domestic security and the external defense of the federation."[3] The text of three jurisprudences aimed to show the legality of the military's support of civil authorities. A sign entitled "Presidential Vision [*Visión Presidencial*], 2013-2018," was hung in this hall during Peña Nieto's presidency, showing a picture of the former president receiving a military salute from a high-ranking military officer and discusses that government's aim to "reestablish legality in an integral effort… to

[2] Cualquier persona puede detener al indiciado en el momento en el que esté cometiendo un delito o inmediatamente después de haberlo cometido, poniéndolo sin demora a disposición de la autoridad más cercana…
[3] Es facultad del Presidente de la República disponer de la totalidad de la Fuerza Armada Permanente, o sea del Ejército, de la Armada y de la Fuerza Aérea para la seguridad interior y defensa de exterior de la federación.

contain criminal organizations with the aim of reducing the violence they generate / strengthening national unity, guarding the territory and guaranteeing domestic security, so as to build a country with a solid rule of law… and a strict respect of human rights."[4]

Another picture of the president and an excerpt of a speech in which he vows to bring about the gradual withdrawal of the Armed Forces used to be displayed in this hall. In early 2020, a cryptic new "Public Security Plan [*Plan de Seguridad Pública*]" was displayed, which consisted of "rethinking national security and reorienting the Armed Forces," while admitting that "it is still necessary to make use of the military institutions in the preservation and restoration of public security and the combatting of crime, following constitutional Article 89 and with special attention and compliance with human rights..."[5] A sign schematizing the "National Plan of Peace and Security 2018-2024" was then hanging by its side, whose Fifth Mandate is to "reformulate the combat against drugs [*reformular el combate a las drogas*]," vaguely suggesting the inadequacy of the current arrangement.

The legalization of public security tasks performed by the Army, however, does not solve the problem described above, which remained a source of anxiety even at my last visit. In the first two, which took place during Peña Nieto's presidency, certain signs—like an excerpt of a presidential discourse at the museum's entrance, in large golden letters, opposite the nationalist mural—and my guide's words, clearly emphasized that the Army was following the president's commands in its combat of organized crime, and thus transferring responsibility of the whole

[4] Restablecer la legalidad en un esfuerzo integral… para contener a las organizaciones criminales, con el fin de reducir la violencia que éstas generan. / Fortalecer la unidad nacional, salvaguardar el territorio y garantizar la seguridad interior del país para construir un México que cuente con un sólido estado de derecho… y un estricto respeto a los derechos humanos.

[5] Repensar la seguridad nacional y reorientar las Fuerzas Armadas. / Es necesario seguir disponiendo de las instituciones castrenses en la preservación y recuperación de la seguridad pública y el combate a la delincuencia, en el marco de lo dispuesto en el artículo 89 de la Constitución y con especial atención a la observancia de los derechos humanos…

endeavor to him. Perhaps because legality was no longer a concern, the anxiety that my third visit's guide expressed was different. In his view, there are civil organizations in the country that, financed by organized crime, produce false testimony about the military to force them to retreat from public security roles. This alleged false testimony, he went on to say, is about military violations of human rights that delegitimize the Armed Forces' combat of drug trafficking. Indeed, human rights violations have been the rallying point of important groups of activists that, with widespread support, have long pushed for the return of the military to the barracks. I was surprised by my guide's framing of the issue, which seemed to emulate President López Obrador's often conspiratorial discursive style. In my guide's opinion, there was a deliberate effort to sully the military's reputation. This opinion echoed Zavala's point, but in the opposite direction. While Zavala saw the drug war as a false discourse that concealed the *reality* of military violence against its own citizens, my guide saw activist NGOs' platforms as false discourse that covered the *reality* of lawful and legitimate struggle against organized crime.

Both are partial views of a complex, heterogeneous reality, which they both consider to be univocal and filtered through the malicious *intention* of someone—be it NGOs or the state—to hide the truth. Put together, however, these views illuminate a structural contradiction of the drug war. This war has taken us from a context of law enforcement, where punishment would traverse the usual judicial channels, to one of war, which suggests a conflict between the state's sovereign power, fighting on behalf of the Mexican nation, and an (external) force that threatens this sovereignty. But the readily visible side of that force are armed Mexican citizens, often working as fee collectors, watchmen, and hitmen, following Mendoza's discussion above (see also Muehlmann 2014). As a result, the state ends up exerting lethal force against those it claims to protect. I do not mean to argue that criminal organizations do not threaten the state's sovereignty,

but rather that the relation—or the distinction—between the threat to this political authority and the everyday criminal practices of those who end up being the targets of state violence is an unresolved problem.

This disjunction is somewhat captured by an anecdote that Zavala told me: "In academic congresses, I have spoken to scholars who tell me, for example, 'I have been in Tamaulipas, I have seen [members of the] Zetas [drug cartel]!' And I respond, 'but what have you *really* seen? A young man who told you he was a *zeta*? … What did you verify beyond the anecdote of a young man telling you he was a *zeta* and had a gun? Because I can also buy a gun and say that I am a *zeta*. Does that make me one?'" Of course, drug cartels are not visible, exposed, and clearly bounded objects, like a pen or a pair of shoes. And considering that a self-identified *zeta* is ultimately performing state discourse, as Zavala argues, would lead one to wonder about the motivations. But, without going as far as refuting a cartel's existence because it can't be visually captured, we can indeed question how the state publicizes knowledge about those drug cartels and, especially, the kind of menace that they constitute to merit the deployment of the state's sovereign force. This is perhaps another way of posing the question mentioned above—*who*, indeed, is the object of the state's violence?

The museum never quite defines its enemy in the "drug war" as a group of people or political entity. As we went through the hall, my guide made reference to a sign hanging on the wall that listed the "current threats to national security," which read: "Drug trafficking, terrorism, illegal arms trade and money laundering are, among others, the current threats to national security and the cruelest sources of violence. International drug trafficking seeks to: […] corrupt authorities,

reveal the state's lack of capacity, weaken the credibility of institutions, put national structures at risk…"[6]

The threat is then defined as an abstract phenomenon whose most relevant feature is its insidious power. State sovereignty is then understood here as the state's ability to remain free of such power and its capacity to infiltrate and rot it. The effects of this opaque power are difficult to render intelligible, to outline into discernible and consistent practices. This power doesn't have a territory or a particular form. It takes other forms and territories parasitically, rotting them from within. It thus calls for a radical response while the target is unclear.

What that sign also implies is that the primary victim is the state. This aspect of the problem is certainly not unimportant, but, from this description, and the entire museum, certain elements are missing that have been at the center of the controversy surrounding the Army's participation in the drug war—the violence *itself* and all the victims it has claimed. Recall that part of President Calderón's justification for the drug war were rising levels of violence. It quickly became clear, however, that a militarized combat could only increase these levels—ultimately, as I mention throughout this dissertation, rendering the relation of the victims with organized crime irrelevant. A political cartoon that came out during Calderón's administration describes the irony well. Dressed in an ill-fitting military suit (as he once did in an event), Calderón appears working on the finishing touches of a drug war ad that originally said, "so that drugs won't reach your children," adding at the end of the phrase, "we are killing them" (Fig. 12). Challenging the idea put forth in the video early in the visit, this critique is situating the drug war's victims as *the children* of the national public—the ones the military allege to be protecting.

[6] Amenazas actuales a la seguridad nacional: El narcotráfico, el terrorismo, el tráfico ilegal de armas y el lavado de dinero son, entre otras, las amenazas actuales a la seguridad nacional, así como las más cruentas fuentes de violencia. El narcotráfico internacional pretende: …corromper a las autoridades / evidenciar la [in]capacidad del estado / debilitar la credibilidad de las instituciones / poner en riesgo las estructuras nacionales…

Figure 12: Cartoon by José Hernández for *La Jornada* (Source: La Jornada)

As mentioned above, this issue points to a contradiction in the relation between state and violence that the drug war accentuates: what Susan Buck-Morss (2000) calls the state's wild zone of power, a power exerted above the law. As Buck-Morss argues, we might begin by considering that state violence is legitimate because the state's sovereignty is founded upon the popular will. But when the police, for instance, exert violence over those who challenge the existing law (by, for instance, trying to instate another law), a distinction between this sovereign power and the people whose will it claims to embody appears: "As sovereign of the collective, [the state] has sovereignty over the collective, with the right to order to their death the very citizens in whose name it rules" (Buck-Morss 2000: 8). The victims of the drug war that the cartoon points at do not only shed light on this wild zone, but also on the fact that the violence

exerted thereby is not *necessarily* responding to challenges to the existing law. It may be in principle, but in practice it is unclear who is falling victim to this violence. This structural opacity poses a problem in terms of sovereignty and the collectivity that underpins it. As Buck-Morss argues, following Schmitt, the act of identifying the enemy is the quintessential sovereign act. Naming the enemy, moreover, calls into being the people that such an enemy is antagonizing. The problem, then, is not just that it is extremely difficult to determine who is an enemy and who belongs to the people in the case of the drug war, but also—as we shall see—that those deemed the enemies have strong claims to their belonging to the people, which then challenge this sovereign act of violence as legitimate. What happens when this sovereign act on the part of the state is flawed because of the blind spots it faces? In other words, what is to be done when what *in principle* is a sovereign act is in practice random violence? And, in addition, when it cannot really be carried out felicitously in the name of the Mexican nation?

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Let's move on to the next hall. In it, we are presented the technoscientific aspects of poppy and marijuana growing and smuggling and the Army's counter-practices as both complex logistical and intelligence operations. The hall shows how those plants have been bred to enhance the production of narcotics, the routes and modes of their transportation—the objects in which they are smuggled, as well as the technologies and routes used to carry them over land, on the water and in the air—and the means through which drugs are identified and confiscated. There are images hanging on the walls that showcase moments like the eradication of a marijuana plantation (Fig. 13), the finding of a clandestine lab or of large amounts of drugs hidden in the back of a trailer (Fig. 14).

Figure 13: Image of Eradication Practices of a Marijuana Plantation (Photo by Author)

"November 8, 1984
As a result of the operations of eradication that personnel of the 5th Military Zone carried out in the *ejido* 'El Búfalo' in the state of Chihuahua, large-sized marihuana plantations were found in non-traditional growing areas that were artificially irrigated." Photo by author

Figure 14: Image of a Clandestine Lab (Photo by Author)

"February 17, 2016
While patrolling the village of Los Becos in Culiacán, Sinaloa, personnel from the 20th Infantry Company confiscated 30 kgs of methamphetamine (crystal) and an additional 1380 kgs of methamphetamine (crystal) in 130 coolers and 4720 liters of acetone in 29 containers." Photo by author

Amid these images, a series of handwritten letters written by poppy or marijuana growers and addressed to soldiers involved in eradication tasks are displayed in a glass cabinet. A bribe of around $500 USD and a sign with one of the texts typed is located alongside some of them, framing the text as "anonymous message, found on September 13, 2002, by an operations battalion belonging to the 4th Armored Regiment, while carrying out operations of illegal crop eradication in the state of Michoacán" (Fig. 15).

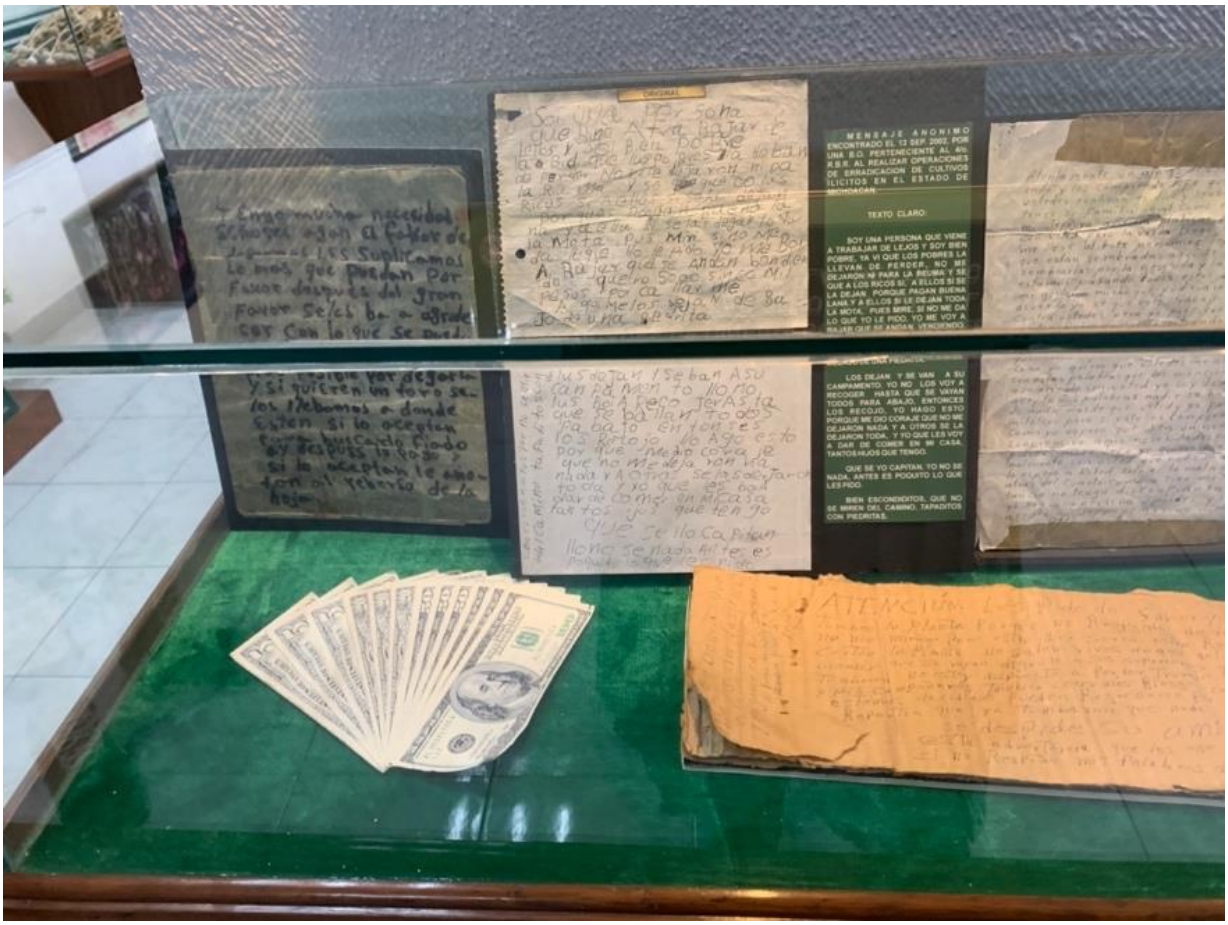

Figure 15: Handwritten letters by poppy or marihuana growers (Photo by Author)

The text on the white sheet in the middle reads:

> Your attention please: I kindly request that you don't chop off my plants, because I won't be responsible for what happens then. You all can't see me, but I'm very close, you are surrounded. If you chop off the plants, you won't make it out of here alive. I suggest you tell your superiors that you've already chopped them off. I'm not willing to lose work I've done. I know that my partners and I are at risk with you all, but we've made up our minds. You can go back to where you came from. Report to your superiors now that you've chopped the plants off, that's not really asking for much. Sincerely, your friend.
> [P.S.:] This warning is a man's thing. If you don't respect my words, you're all dead men. I don't mind if I also die. [The plants] are very pretty, don't you feel pity? Put yourselves in my shoes, if they were yours too, you would also give your life for this.[7]

[7] Atención: Les pido de favor que no tumben la planta porque no respondo de lo que pase. No me miran, pero estoy muy cerca, están rodeados. Si cortan la planta, no salen vivos de aquí del cerco. Les aconsejo que se vayan. Díganles a sus superiores que ya la tumbaron. No estoy dispuesto a perder trabajo. Yo sé que yo y mis compañeros también corremos riesgo con ustedes, pero estamos decididos. Pueden regresarse por donde vinieron. Reporten que ya tumbaron, que nada les cuesta. Se despide, su amigo. [P.D.:] Esta advertencia que les hago es cosa de hombres. Si

A second one, written on the piece of cardboard below, reads:

> I come here to work from far away and am very poor. I've noted that poor people stand to lose. You all didn't even leave me enough [marihuana] to cure my rheumatism, and I know that rich people do get to keep it, because they give you all a good amount of money, and they do get to keep all the pot. Well, look, if you don't give me what I'm asking for, I'm gonna blow the whistle and say that you're taking bribes. I want 5,000 pesos [250 USD] for my silence. Leave them here, under a little rock. Leave them and go back to your camp, I won't go and take them until you all go back down there; I will take them then. I'm doing this because I'm angry that you left me nothing and you left others everything, and what am I going to feed all my children? What do I know, Captain, I don't know anything, I'm asking for so little. [Leave the money] well hidden, so that it can't be seen, well covered in little rocks."[8]

From the standpoint of an external visitor, the exhibition of these letters was extremely puzzling. It wasn't until I tried to inhabit the position of a member of the troops that the reason behind their presence became clear. The ideological work carried out by the exhibit does not shy away from the issue of corruption, but rather addresses it through some of the ways in which it might materialize in the field. As an act of propaganda aimed at a broader public, however, this might easily constitute proof of the Army's corruption. This is perhaps one more reason for the museum's restricted access.

A noteworthy feature about these letters is the unexpected affective position that they seek to put soldiers in, and from which the museum seems to be trying to desensitize them. The call to corruption is not made by a powerful and insidious enemy, as depicted earlier, but rather by abject peasants, desperately trying to secure their survival by convincing the soldiers not to chop

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no respetan mis palabras, dense por muertos. No me importa si yo también me muero. [La planta] está muy bonita ¿qué no les da lástima? Pónganse en mi lugar. Si fueran ustedes, también darían la vida por ello.

[8] Soy una persona que viene a trabajar de lejos y soy bien pobre, ya vi que los pobres la llevan de perder, no me dejaron ni para la reuma y sé que a los ricos sí. A ellos sí se la dejan porque pagan buena lana y a ellos sí les dejan toda la mota. Pues mire, si no me da lo que yo le pido, yo me voy a rajar que se andan vendiendo. Quiero 5000 pesos por callarme, aquí me los dejan debajo de una piedrita. Los dejan y se van a su campamento, yo no los voy a recoger hasta que se vayan todos para abajo, entonces los recojo, yo hago esto porque me dio coraje que no me dejaron nada y a otros les dejaron toda, y yo que les voy a dar de comer en mi casa, tantos hijos que tengo. Qué sé yo, Capitán, yo no sé nada, antes es poquito lo que les pido. Bien escondiditos, que no se miren del camino, tapaditos con piedritas.

down their crops. These peasants, moreover, are speaking to someone in comparable conditions. For instance, another one of these letters begins by saying, "Kindly, [from] a friend of yours. I understand you, I get you, boss, that the work you carry out is hard and you work to provide for your family, just like us… believe and understand me, because I understand how you all suffer, and I would like to help you all like I'm hoping you'll help me…" A relation of empathy is sought by mobilizing a shared condition of precarity and the allure of money to increase a soldier's low wage. The work that these letters are doing, however, is only prefiguring the complex ideological work that the next hall seeks to undertake.

The Threatening Seduction of Narcoculture

The following hall, called *Narcocultura*, features dozens of golden, diamond-embedded guns, high caliber weapons, grenades, jewelry, and clothing that belonged to famous drug lords that cabinet after cabinet exhibit, along with abundant paraphernalia. The museum, according to the guide, has so many seized weapons that they do not know what to do with them, so they choose the flashiest ones to display (Fig. 16). At first sight, it seems that the aim of this display is to boast the Army's successes by showing the size of the booty—a rather archaic notion of military success that displays splendor as part of the Army's legitimation. This is, however, not splendor in the abstract, but rather the splendor that the drug trade indexes in the abundant cultural production around it. This hall, as my guide told me, is the main reason why this museum is not open to the public. I was told during my first and second visits that there were plans to open it up, but in the third one I was informed that those plans had been cancelled. They want to avoid the museum becoming an "apology for crime [*apología del crimen*]." It is not only that these objects risk projecting an aesthetic and cultural power that defies the army's curatorial

aim, but that they most clearly instantiate the vulnerability of the museum's project of depicting the Army's enemy as an undesirable, morally defective phenomenon.

Figure 16: Guns Displayed at the Museum of Drugs (Photo by Author)

Instead of being assessed as emblems of the Army's struggle, they can easily slip into becoming indexes of a poorly known, but greatly intriguing drug world. For instance, a fellow anthropologist I spoke to about the museum told me that the reason for his visit was that they had on display some paraphernalia that belonged to his object of study, drug lord Nazario Moreno. This former leader of the cartels *La Familia Michoacana* (The Michoacán Family) and *Los Caballeros Templarios* (The Knights Templar) was worshipped as a saint after his death. The museum contained a large statue of a Knight Templar, a sword that had belonged to Moreno, and two booklets, one titled "Code of the Knights Templar of Michoacán" [*Código de los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán*] and a second one titled "Codes and Values" [*Códigos y Valores*] (Figs. 17 and 18). As he jokingly told me, he had to feign attentiveness through the first few halls, only to conceal his great interest in these objects. While my colleague's case is, of course, quite unique, it does illuminate the risk and the soldiers' concern mentioned above: the museum being *the place that houses drug traffickers' spectacular paraphernalia*. Moreover, for a non-

knowledgeable public, the little information about their lives might be overwhelmed by this extravagance.

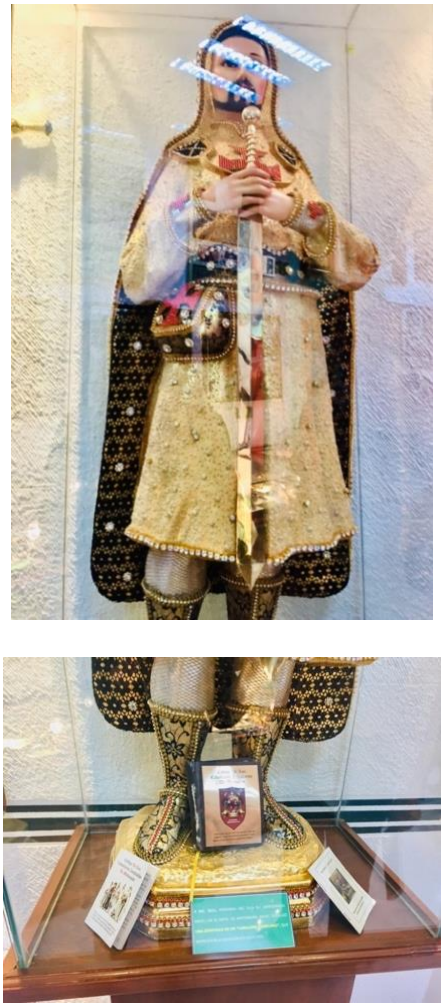

Figure 17: Statue of a Knight Templar, with Two Booklets by its Feet (Photo by Author)

Figure 18: Image of Santa Muerte (Saint Death) and a sword attributed to the "Mason Knights" [*los Caballeros Masones*] (Photo by Author)

In addition to these objects, the hall features a pair of ornate saddles, a mannequin wearing a stereotypical *ranchero* outfit—silk shirt, jeans, cowboy boots and hat, woven belt with a large buckle, several large golden chains, alligator leather vest, moustache. There is also a wooden door with a carved cowboy holding a rifle, behind which is a painting of the interior of a drug trafficker's ranch. A stuffed lion and tiger are also exhibited, along with a heavily ornamented

table and chair with Santa Muerte themes and a metal plaque celebrating a *Comandante Tiburón* [Commander Shark], member of the Gulf Cartel, "*en reconocimiento por las Aguas del Golfo*" [As an award for the Gulf Waters], whose meaning is unclear. Also on display are more discreet pieces of clothing with the Gulf Cartel logo sewn, as in the uniform of a company employee.

Narcocultura as depicted in this hall embodies a cultural order that organizes its own way of life, forms of social mobility, political ideology, aesthetic conventions, religious worship, and so on. As a result, *these* can become the objects exerting a power independent not just of the museum, but also of the state. They may be suggesting a form of sovereignty that not only claims *de facto* power through the exercise of violence, but also instantiates a project of value independent of the state that attracts and organizes publics' fantasies (see Mazzarella, Santner and Schuster 2020). This is not just at the heart of the museum's problem, but also a fundamental problem of the drug war.

The solution devised for the museum consists of only granting access to "educated" visitors—specialists in the drug world, a select group of reporters, and foreign soldiers—that is, people that are acquainted with all the dimensions of the drug world, not just the shiny side that dominates popular culture (see chapter 3), and who are perceived to have expertise and a properly cultivated sense of critical distance. It is not just that the soldiers in charge of the museum fear that the "uneducated" might engage in a mimetic relation to these objects (Mazzarella 2013), but also that the museum itself might be helping to promote this relation by indexing the drug world through the objects that anchor these glamorized worlds (see Chapter 4).

For instance, these objects are drawing on an ideology that underpins state legitimacy. A couple of them bear the name and/or image of revolutionary heroes Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata or commemorate the centennial of the Revolution. Also, a couple of guns bear the quote,

also attributed to Zapata, *Prefiero morir de pie que vivir de rodillas*, or "I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees" (Fig. 19).

Figure 19: Gun with Inscription that Commemorates the Revolution (Photo by Author)

This quote and the figure of Zapata—as opposed to the more controversial bandit Villa—embodies the revolutionary tropes of social justice and land distribution that are so central to the Mexican nationalist sentiment that served as a pillar of the political regime which ruled post-revolutionary Mexico throughout the 20th century. And, besides this appropriation of nationalistic ideology, the objects displayed in this hall appeal to notions of social justice more generally. For example, an object resembling a tombstone, confiscated from a drug trafficker, is

displayed on the floor against the wall, reading: “Justice without power is empty. Power without justice only produces violence. We must be strong to defend the most vulnerable” (Fig. 20).

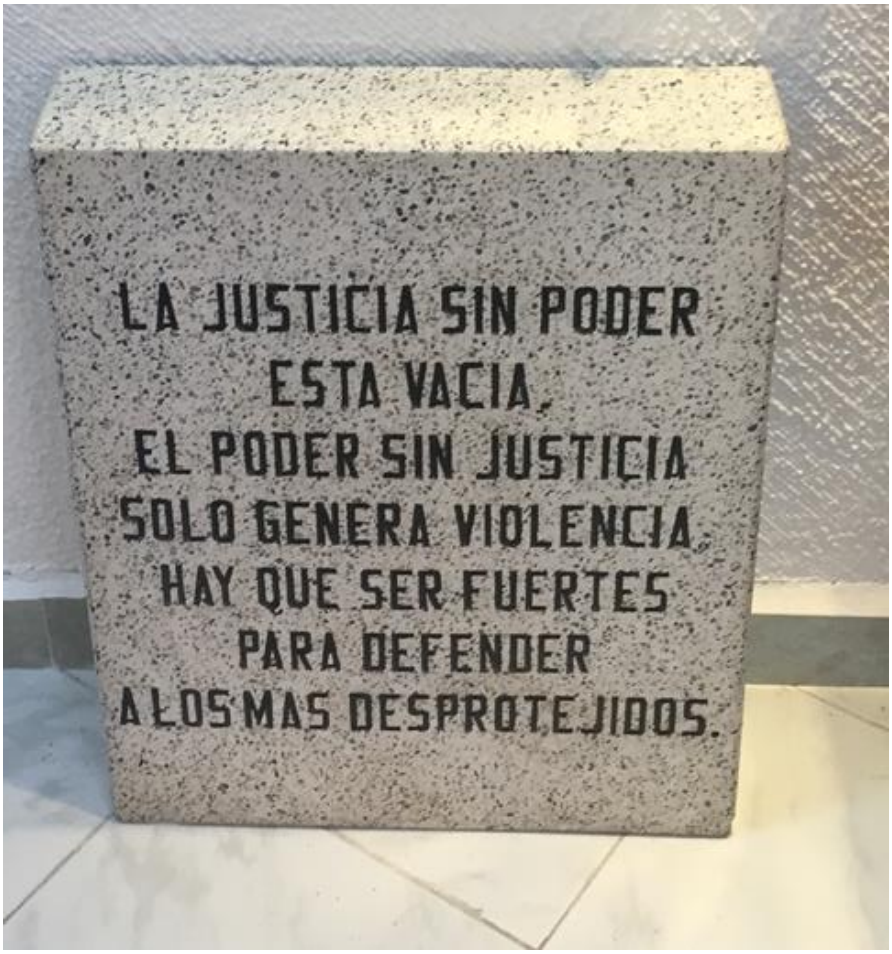

Figure 20: Tombstone Exhibited at the Museum of Drugs (Photo by Author)

Through these objects, kingpins appear to be actively seeking to become populist embodiments of 20th century official nationalist ideology. That they may get to do so in compelling ways is certainly made easier by the fact that these foundational events of the Mexican nation were outside the law, crafted by warriors and a bandit or two.

But the museum – and the army’s curatorial discourse – strikes back. It does so by putting the aesthetics of *narcocultura* back in its place, as it were. Several signs hanging on the wall offer textual analyses of different aspects of contemporary drug trafficking: *narcojuniors* (young

generations of drug traffickers and the distinct ways in which they manage their organizations), arms trafficking, and so on. One of the aims of the text displayed is to disenchant drug traffickers' fame by portraying it as the product of a deliberate self-promotion, rather than a mass appeal that emerges organically. For instance, under the title *Los narcocorridos,* or drug trafficking ballads, a sign located on top of the guns' cabinets reads:

> The illegal drugs trade is a social reality. For this reason, some composers have taken this criminal activity as a subject and created *narcocorridos*: chronicles of adventures, treason, misfortunes, murders, love, and other deeds by individuals dedicated to this activity. Some *narcocorridos* are composers' initiatives. However, most of this music is written on demand and its radio transmission is financed by the drug trafficker himself, eventually having his "deeds" and himself achieve longed-for popularity and mythification.[9]

This and other signs seem to be in implicit dialogue with the seminal work of sociologist Luis Astorga on what he calls the "mythology of the drug trafficker" (1995). As I pointed out in the Introduction, Astorga asserts that there is a mythical quality in folk representations of drug traffickers in objects like *narcocorridos*. The museum seems to be speaking back to Astorga and the two antagonistic discourses that he theorizes, folk musical production and official discourse, not only by elaborating profoundly on the state's side of the story but also by looking critically at the other side. As Astorga points out, the depiction of the drug traffickers' world is put forth by composers of drug traffickers' ballads [*corridos de traficantes*], about whom, Astorga warns, it would be important to know more so as to assess their closeness to traffickers (1995: 38).

[9] El tráfico ilegal de drogas es una realidad social. Por ello, algunos compositores han tomado como temática esta actividad delictuosa para crear los narcocorridos: crónicas de aventuras, traiciones, infortunios, ejecuciones, amores y demás hechos de individuos dedicados a esta actividad. / Algunos narcocorridos son iniciativa de los compositores. Sin embargo, gran parte de esta música se escribe por encargo y su transmisión en la radio es financiada por el propio narcotraficante, hasta lograr que sus hazañas y su persona logren la anhelada popularidad y mitificación.

For Astorga, drug ballads construct "social archetypes" through mediatized images (1995: 13):

> According to the odysseys narrated in *corridos*, [these] characters are men and women with attributes such as bravery, fierceness, courageousness, astuteness, etc. This, regardless of their activities and position vis-à-vis legality, or perhaps precisely because of them, makes [these women and men] worthy of respect and of having a place in [public] memory, in the pantheon of distinguished traffickers (1995: 40).

While Astorga argues that "it is very likely that some *corridos* are made at the request of someone interested in "immortalizing" a certain image of themselves (1995: 37), for the museum, as we saw above, *most of this music is written on demand and its radio transmission is financed by the drug trafficker himself*. This signals the difference in the ideology of media effects and circulation that each puts forth. For the museum, the cultural production that emerges from the drug world is not only false because it projects idealized versions of drug traffickers, as Astorga suggests. It is not even created nor does it circulate organically, but rather in entirely artificial ways. In the museum's ideology, then, drug traffickers not only lack the desirable traits that this cultural production attributes to them; they can't inspire any kind of admiration.

Since drug traffickers are themselves among the "uneducated," the museum goes on to argue, they don't know better than to pursue wealth through easy, illegal, and violent means, which by themselves produce the collapse of this illegitimate effort:

> …drug traffickers, most of whom are originally from the countryside and have a low educational level, are markedly obsessed with social climbing… Heavily decorated houses, luxurious new cars, yachts, green gardens, exotic animals, and other artificial goods are expressions of this artificial lifestyle, whose boisterous climbing is only comparable to the easiness with which it, sooner or later, falls apart.[10]

[10] Los narcotraficantes, en su mayoría originarios del campo y de bajo nivel educativo, tienen una marcada obsesión por el ascenso social… residencias con recargada decoración, autos de lujo de modelo reciente, yates, verdes jardines, animales exóticos y demás bienes materiales son expresiones de esta artificial forma de vida, cuyo estrepitoso ascenso es equiparable solamente a la facilidad con que tarde o temprano se derrumba.

In a way, the museum puts forth a kind of mass society ideology critique. Following Debord (1995), we might interpret the museum as arguing that this paraphernalia constitutes the spectacle that epitomizes capitalist success. This spectacle, however, is empty and artificial, as its fleeting existence, materialized in kingpins' arrests, demonstrates (Fig. 21):

Figure 21: Images of Arrested Kingpins at the Museum of Drugs (Photo by Author)

Immediately afterwards, however, the museum admits to the power of *narcoculture*:

> Drug trafficking has gone beyond organized crime and created a subculture, with its own literature, fashion, icons, music, and even "saints." / This alternative culture's ramifications disrupt political and economic systems and pervert the cultural and social sectors, where *narco* and society increasingly mix and interact. / Commercial cinema and music… are the main media that spread and praise the drug trafficker's philosophy, creating an unmistakable stereotype. / Drug trafficking and its false culture are permeating the collectivity's subconscious; dangerously, its features are increasingly accepted and even adopted by society, which doesn't seem to realize the seriousness of the problem.[11]

In this way, the museum displays and analyzes the fetishization of the drug business. For Michael Taussig, "[drugs] are fetishes, which is to say substances that seem to be a good deal more than […] vegetable matter. They come across more like people than things, spiritual

[11] El narcotráfico ha dejado de ser algo más que el crimen organizado y ha dado lugar a la formación de una subcultura con su propia literatura, moda, íconos, música y hasta "santos." / Las ramificaciones de esta cultura alternativa trastocan los sistemas políticos y económicos y pervierten los sectores sociales y culturales, donde narco y sociedad se mezclan y conviven cada vez en mayor medida. / El cine comercial y la música con sus películas y narcocorridos son los principales medios para propagar y exaltar la filosofía del narcotraficante, creándoles una imagen estereotipada inconfundible. / El narcotráfico y su falsa cultura están permeando el subconsciente de la colectividad peligrosamente, sus rasgos son cada vez más aceptados y hasta adoptados por la sociedad, que no parece percatarse de la gravedad del problema.

entities that are neither" (2004: xviii). It is not just the quick and abundant wealth, or the transgression and violence that the drug trade signals (Taussig 2004), but their enshrinement in a cultural order. This order endows certain practices and identities with value, such as the stereotype of the drug trafficker, for which it relies on its seductive power. This seduction seems to be based on a short-cut to power and wealth through violence, which, by a Weberian definition, can only legitimately be exercised by the state. In so doing, this order mimics and doubles legitimate projects, such as state sovereignty and aspirational consumption. This is why the museum calls *narcocultura* a "false culture:" it has wrongly ascribed value to things that, it contends, should not be thus valued.

The power of narcoculture is problematic even within the space of the museum itself. The officers in charge of it are aware that the museum must show these material expressions of *narcocultura* to carry out the ideological work it intends, but that its aesthetic potential is difficult to tame. The audience must then be restricted, on the one hand, to the troops it is primarily aimed at, who *must* be desensitized from the fetish of *narcocultura*, and on the other hand, to people professionally engaged in its subject matter, journalists, and members of foreign militaries, who are expected to be immune to this fetish. The capacity to evade this seduction seems to depend on being able to occupy a demystified position—seeing, as Debord's critique argues (1995), the spectacle of *narcocultura* for what it truly is: an illusion, false consciousness. We are expected to know that drug traffickers *are not really like that*; that this cultural production, in fact, operates very similarly to propaganda. This is perhaps why the museum tries to find an origin point for it in the traffickers that pay to produce and circulate their own ballads. Zavala is suspicious of narcoculture in a similar but (again) opposite way, attributing it to the state's discursive creation of its enemy. But this enemy is too out of control, mobilizing not only

nationally cherished ideas of social justice but also the seductions of capitalist consumption where they are otherwise so far out of reach.

Recalling the description of organized crime from a couple of halls back, as an abstract power that gnaws and rots the state from the inside, the last hall may then be an attempt to prevent future contagion from this power. Following philosopher Roberto Esposito's notion of *immunitas,* we might argue that the museum reproduces *narcocultura* in a controlled environment to protect the troops from its power, not through "a strategy of frontal opposition, but of outflanking and neutralizing. Evil must be thwarted, but not by keeping it at a distance from one's borders; rather, it is included inside them" (2011: 14). Here, then, the problem is posed somewhat differently from the imagined uneducated person's dazzlement that I discussed above. One is expected to acknowledge and observe the seductive power in its material anchors and to demystify it through the museum's framing. One might also consider the letters and the money display in the cabinets as an example of how this is done. As Esposito argues, "The route to be taken can only pass through the same object that it intends to deconstruct; not by negating it, but rather by deepening the internal contradiction" (22). At the heart of the *narcos'* power, *narcocultura* is indeed a force to be reckoned with.

Conclusion

Engaged in a dialectics of secrecy and publicity, the Drug Museum's access to a restricted public seems to be an attempt to extend the Army's ideological work addressed to its own members by partaking in public discussions about its involvement in the drug war. This institution's longstanding reputation as the embodiment and protector of the nation, which has largely succeeded to elude its history of repression, is now involved in controversy around the war. This has resulted from the Army's out-of-placeness while performing public security tasks.

As opposed to its public campaign, which merely reinforces the relation between the Army and the nation, the museum delves into (its relationship with) the enemy it is up against. This, however, is a risky move.

If placed in dialogue with its most distrustful, even conspiratorial critics, the official discourse displayed in the museum appears to be incapable of resolving two main contradictions of its participation in the war. The first is that, by fighting this war, the state's Armed Forces exert violence on those they are meant to protect. The problem is not only that the popular will and the sovereignty it underpins become detached as the state exerts violence against those challenging the law (Buck-Morss 2000). It is also that we don't know if, or who among its victims, were *really* challenging the law. The second one is marked by the resistance that the construction of the state's enemy faces. This finds expression even within the space of the museum. The museum's aim is to produce and engage with demystified publics that can deal with *narcocultura* and not be dazzled by this false shine. The *narcocultura* hall, and the dozens of shiny objects it contains, risk overpowering the framing that seeks to contain them. These objects anchor how the drug world mimics and doubles legitimate projects, such as state sovereignty and aspirational consumption. In so doing, the museum illuminates not only the complications of the ideological dimension of the drug war, but also how the drug war is, in and of itself, an ideological problem.

The next chapter will explore how the affective force of *narcocultura*, which the state tries so hard to contain here, is given free reign as it becomes commodified into televised shows that have expanded this formerly localized, low-brow cultural field into a transnational industry. It will explore how value is extracted from the fantasies emanating from the ever-present gap between the drug war and its knowledge production, as well as the ethical dilemmas that emerge.

Chapter 3:

Hanging on the Nails of Reality

The previous chapter explored how *narcocultura* constitutes a powerful cultural force that the state is at pains to subjugate and control, even within the space of its own propaganda. This chapter will dissect this cultural force. Originally a more localized form of cultural production, mostly in the form of ballads on drug traffickers, *narcocultura* has in recent years become a transnational cultural industry, not only in the realm of music, but also in television, fashion, and beyond. One of this industry's most lucrative genres is that of *narcoseries*: television shows that claim to depict the intimate lives and networks of famous drug traffickers, especially their relations of corruption involving high-ranking public officials.

One of the most famous examples of *narcoseries*, which will be the object of this chapter, is *El Chapo*, which was produced by Story House Entertainment at Univision and is distributed by Netflix. The first chapter and the following 33, over the course of three seasons, begin with a legend that reads, first in English and then in Spanish: "The following program is inspired by and discusses newsworthy events concerning one of the most notorious criminals of our time, Mexican drug kingpin Joaquín "el Chapo" Guzmán, a matter of utmost public interest and concern. Some of the supporting characters and incidents are imaginary or are a composite created for dramatic purposes in telling this important story."

As the legend warns us, a story constructed out of *newsworthy events* is juxtaposed with *imaginary supporting characters and incidents*. From the start, then, the show alerts us to a space of ambiguity between what claims an evidentiary status and what is imaginary. An intimate account of someone's life, when transformed into a serialized story that must follow a specific

structure, must be partly composed of fictional pieces, particularly in a case like Guzmán's, whose story of criminality and persecution has been particularly difficult to access.

Such a space of ambiguity also resonates with older instances of *narcocultura,* such as the ballads about drug traffickers (or *narcocorridos*) and their mythical quality (Astorga 1995), as explored in the previous chapter. Thus, we can add a layer of myth to the fictional dimension with which *narcoseries* are pre-framed from the start. Indeed, for *El Chapo* to have become a Netflix show, Joaquín Guzmán already had to be *one of the most notorious criminals of our time*, so that the show's title would by itself be suggestive to potential viewers.

But, as the initial text on the screen also anticipates, the show begins by emphasizing its foundation on *newsworthy events*. The opening scene is of a well-known moment in el Chapo's public life: the camera is closely facing President Enrique Peña Nieto's (2012-2018) computer screen as he famously tweets: "Misión cumplida: Lo tenemos. Quiero informar a los mexicanos que Joaquín Guzmán Loera ha sido detenido." [Mission accomplished: We got him. I want to inform all Mexicans that Joaquín Guzmán Loera has been detained.] Then follows real footage of news anchors around the world—Mexico, the US (CNN and NBC), France, the UK, Spain, Japan, Chile—informing of el Chapo's recapture (Fig. 22). These scenes, besides pointing to the journalistic truthfulness of the story, are also emphasizing el Chapo's political relevance. Afterwards, footage of his arrival at prison (repeatedly displayed in the Mexican news at the time) is shown: el Chapo emerges from an armored vehicle parked at the Attorney General's Office hangar in Mexico City's airport, escorted by three soldiers. One of them grabs and tilts his head from behind toward the press cameras and then back and downward. The scene then cuts to state officers taking Guzmán's fingerprints and blood samples inside the prison's facilities. At

this point, scenes of the journalistic footage begin interspersing with fictional ones, featuring an actor closely resembling el Chapo (Fig. 23).

Figure 22: Stills from Footage of News Anchors around the World Informing of Guzmán's Second Capture during Minute 1 of *El Chapo*'s First Episode (Source: Story House/Univision)

Figure 23: Stills from Footage of Guzmán (Source: Story House/Univision)

Note: He first appears escorted by soldiers (left), then in an unclear image of Guzmán or actor Marco de la O as blood samples are taken (center), and de la O posing as Guzmán (right), during minute 2 of the same episode.

The fictional scenes ultimately take over, as the character, now wearing prison clothes, is walking through the halls of the Altiplano Prison. Then, the intro—also interspersing journalistic and fictional images—explicitly marks the beginning of the show and the episode, after which the viewer is taken to el Chapo's story, mixing scenes from different moments in a timespan that traverses three decades, from the 1980s to the 2010s. As we shall later see in more detail, the series will go on to narrate Guzmán's rise in the drug world, as he becomes the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, and finally his arrest. The story, following the genre's structure, will be largely organized around Guzmán's relation with other key figures in the drug trafficking business, on the one hand, and top public official Conrado Sol, based on former Secretary of Public Security Genaro García Luna and other high-profile politicians on the other hand.

As Luis Zelkowicz, the Miami-based Venezuelan head screenwriter of another massively famous *narcoserie* (titled *El señor de los cielos*, or The Lord of the Skies/Heavens) told me in an interview, *narcoseries* hang their fiction on the nails of reality. This chapter will explore what this phrase might mean—that is, how *narcoseries* engage the cultural construction of the drug world through a fragile relation to reality, in a space of ambiguity, and to what effects.

Perhaps we could begin by getting rid of the notion of reality from the start, since it could distract us with the claim that there is an end point of bare facts out there that we could get to. As I mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter 2, the drug world is a fetishized world, where inanimate substances appear animate, giving their traders enormous power or taking it from them (Taussig 2004). Just like the state, as classically theorized by Philip Abrams, "is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice" (1988: 82) but the mask itself, the drug world *is*, from certain viewpoints, its mystified representation. This mystification is at the heart of *narcoseries*. These shows do not depict the everyday life of the peasants who grow the crops, the hitmen involved in turf wars, or even the local leaders of criminal organizations in different towns and villages. Rather, these are the stories of the exceptional characters that made it to the top of criminal organizations and thus came to embody transgressive and sensational paths of social mobility and capitalist accumulation. For instance, el Chapo made it to Forbes magazine's rankings at least twice, first as the 701st richest person in the world in 2009, and second as the 67th most powerful person in 2013, where he is described as the CEO of the Sinaloa Cartel and the source of his wealth is labeled as "drug trafficking, self-made."[1] The show *El Chapo* is about this character, *one of the most notorious criminals of our time*, the one who inspired the sale of garments bearing the number 701 in his honor in his home state of Sinaloa and beyond.

[1] https://www.forbes.com/profile/joaquin-guzman-loera/?sh=4e2cc53d6778

This chapter will thus dissect *narcoseries* as key instances of a kind of cultural production that helps constitute the drug war from a viewpoint that is not only partial and specific, but also about the discursive construction of the drug world, rather than about the drug world itself. We shall examine how this occurs by peeling the layers of *narcoseries* and observing how the journalistic forms of knowledge production that underpin them are always already at arm's length, even if they stand on a promise to get close to these characters and offer access to what is concealed and intimate around them. Ultimately, then, *narcoseries* illuminate a form of knowledge production in the drug war that constitutes the opposite of the public secret: constant talk of that which is always already beyond reach. As this talk becomes commodified, it reveals the ethical conundrums around the ways in which this epistemic gap is filled.

The Genealogy of *Narcoseries*

This remarkably successful genre in Mexican television arrived from Colombia, a country ravaged by drug trafficking-related violence during the 1980s and 1990s, but where mainstream entertainment media forms on the drug trade first emerged in the late 2000s. The commercial success of these Colombian shows led networks elsewhere on the continent to produce their own versions, sometimes interdiscursively related through the historical and fictional characters featured, and even some of the actors playing them.

Narcoseries also draw on and often include other representations of drug traffickers in Mexican popular culture: *narcocorridos*, as previously discussed, and *narco cinema* (Rashotte 2015), straight-to-video, low-budget B-films on the same theme, based on and often including *narcocorridos* in the films themselves. Often dismissed as low-quality media forms, B-films on drug traffickers are part of a highly lucrative industry (see Figs. 24 and 25). Although *narcoseries* are not directly inspired by these films, several of my interlocutors working on either

kind of media form mentioned the closeness between the two. A narco cinema and telenovela actor, for instance, described *narcoseries* as serialized versions of these films. Both media forms usually center on outlaws, often enacting vengeance for wrongdoings.

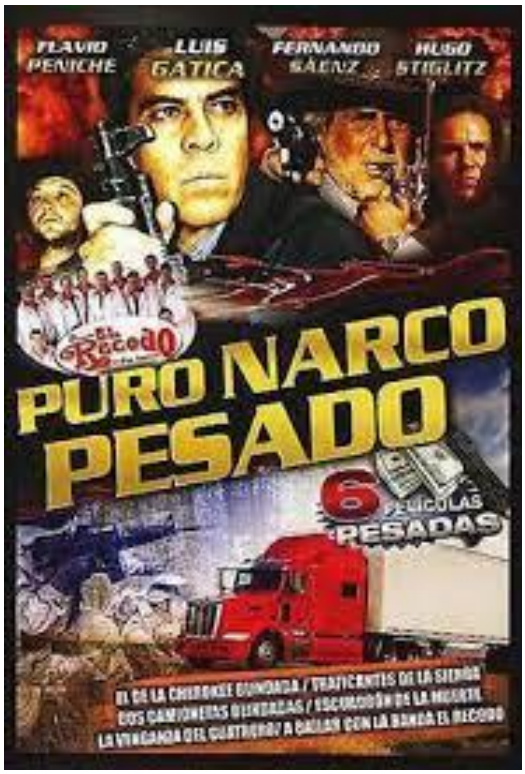

Figure 24: Cover of *Puro Narco Pesado* (Source: ebay.com)

Note: This includes 6 more films, whose titles appear below: *The Man with the Bulletproof Cherokee*, *Mountain Traffickers*, *Two Bulletproof Vans*, and others.

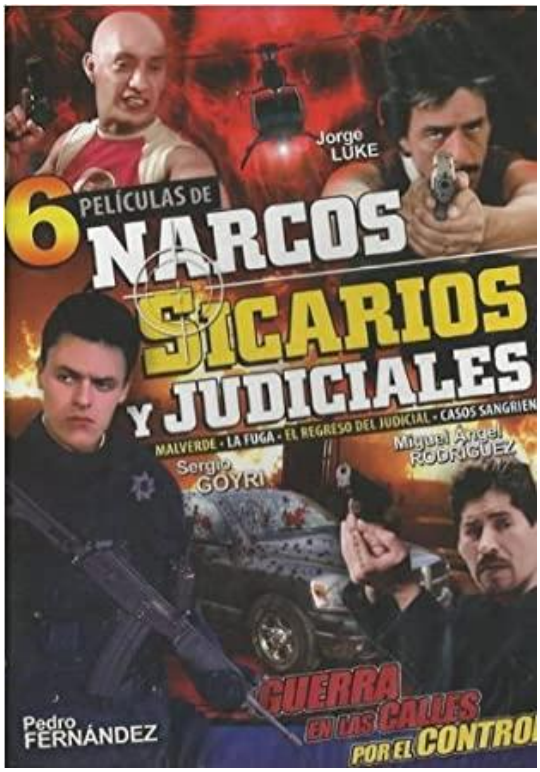

Figure 25: Cover of *Narcos, Sicarios y Judiciales* (Source: amazon.com)

Note: This DVD cover is directly advertising that it contains "6 films about *narcos*, hitmen, and policemen" and in smaller font lists: *Malverde*, *The Escape*, *The Return of the Policeman*, and two more titles.

As is well-known to be the case for *narcocorridos*, there are rumors that kingpins often commission narco films (Rashotte 2015). Like those ballads' long history of censorship, which dates to at least the 1980s in Sinaloa (Astorga 1995), these films were banned during Felipe Calderón's presidency (2006-2012), when the drug war was launched. All these forms of cultural production, including *narcoseries*, have been condemned for constituting "apologies for crime" (*apologías del crimen*)—that is, for praising and then inciting publics to admire organized crime.

Narco cinema creators complained to me that *narcoseries*, initially produced outside of Mexico—and still involving creators from all around Latin America—were not subjected to that censorship and were thus allowed to flourish. Telemundo and then Univision, US Spanish-speaking networks that were then rather marginal for Mexican publics at the time, pioneered these shows, which, as opposed to their Colombian counterparts, have been broadcast at the same time as the drug war has unfolded in Mexico. From those networks' initial productions, a segmented *narcoseries* market has gradually emerged. On one end of the spectrum are lower-budget telenovela-style shows, with much romantic drama involving numerous fictional characters over hundreds of episodes, like *El señor de los cielos* (Fig. 26). On the other end are higher production quality series with more political drama, spanning over a dozen episodes per season, and which more closely recreate the press-based criminal biography of well-known kingpins, their business operations, and the networks of corruption that supported their organizations, like *El Chapo* (Fig. 27).

Figure 26: Cover of *El señor de los cielos* (Source: Telemundo)

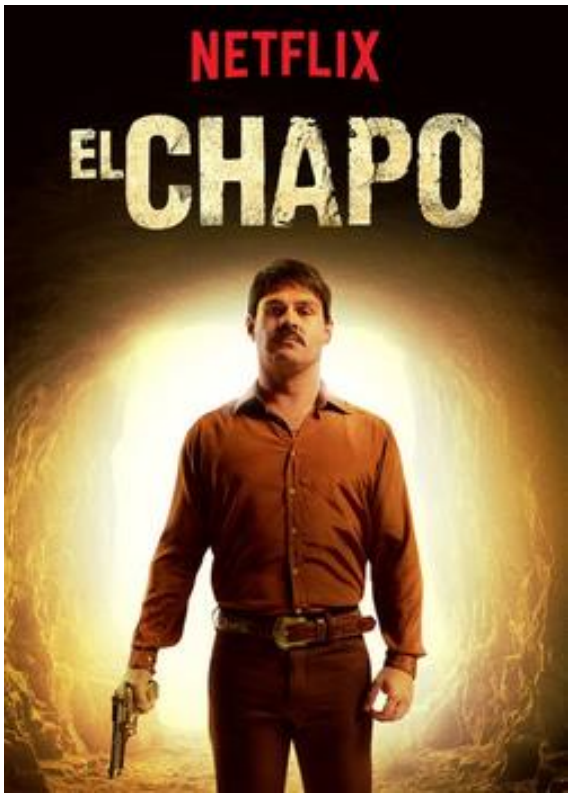

Figure 27: Cover of *El Chapo* (Source: Netflix)

Narcoseries circulate across multiple television networks, streaming platforms, and pirate DVD stands in informal commercial sites throughout Mexico and beyond. In my conversations with their creators, the term *narcoseries* was often taken to be somewhat derogatory, with which the makers of the higher-end versions were more reluctant to associate, since it points to how these narratives are taken to exalt crime. Perhaps as a result, some *narcoseries* creators were careful to trace their antecedents in our conversations to a couple of groundbreaking telenovelas from the 1990s, *Nada Personal* and *Demasiado Corazón*, which were the first to depict and denounce drug-state corruption in fictionalized television during Mexico's transition to democracy and liberalization of the public sphere, which coincided with economic liberalization and a significant growth of the drug business. As their creators told me, these shows were celebrated because they radically broke with the rosy genre of telenovelas produced by the giant monopoly, and close ally of the state, Televisa. By situating these rogue shows as their predecessors, my interlocutors sought to transfer their prestige and political undertones to *narcoseries*. As Carmina, a celebrated playwright and screenwriter for *El señor de los cielos*, told me, narrating the stories contained in *narcoseries* can also be seen as a public accusation: "after all, they are talking about how drug trafficking has totally infiltrated the state." As we have seen throughout this dissertation, this infiltration is a central feature of the drug war, constantly experienced and discussed by publics in both personal and mass mediated ways. What *narcoseries* then promise is to look closely into the networks of corruption that define state-trafficker relations but that publics only get to glimpse at. That they do so from a viewpoint that is deemed problematic by many is not coincidental. As we shall see, it seems to successfully cater to publics' longstanding dispositions towards the protagonists of the drug war.

El Equipo: Failed Propaganda Precedes *Narcoseries*

The first time I heard that there had been a TV show on the Federal Police I was extremely surprised: unlike the United States, TV shows on the police are all but unheard of in Mexico, surely due to this institution's longstanding abysmal reputation. In the summer of 2017, I was talking to a TV and film director I will call Andrés at his kitchen table about a series that he worked on at the time that loosely fits the *narcoseries* genre, based on a Colombian novel and series called *Rosario Tijeras*. I knew Andrés and his family from before, so he was one of my first interlocutors, who I hoped would help me get better acquainted with the world of *narcoseries*. At some point during the conversation, as he learned more about my research interests, he mentioned *El Equipo*. He lamented almost as he began talking about the show that it did not get the space and audience it deserved, and that in turn *narcoseries*, the shows that had publics admiring criminals, had quickly become so popular. In 2011, when *El Equipo* aired, *narcoseries* were just about to burst into the scene.

El Equipo was broadcast over a three-week period in Televisa's (Mexico's main television company) main channel during primetime. It starred a group of four federal police officers (three men and a woman) who solved cases through intelligence operations. I never gained access to the show beyond excerpts of chapters available online and a reel that Andrés showed me from his computer: a high-quality short video of the main actors in a training session at the then recently inaugurated Federal Police facilities. The reel was energetic and fast-paced, edited to the rhythm of hypermasculine Rob Zombie's *Dragula*. Production quality was certainly not the show's problem. Andrés then put me in contact with one of the show's screenwriters, who I will call Pedro. From my conversations with both, it became apparent to me early on that *El Equipo* sought, rather unsuccessfully, to emulate the US's long tradition of shows featuring heroic police

officers who solve crimes and fight for justice. The show did so in a moment in which the police's reputation had both sunken even lower than usual and had become politically more sensitive, five years into the war on drug trafficking. As Pedro described it to me,

> [the show told] thirteen stories of success of the Federal Police: the arrest of this and that drug lord, which required intelligence work, a tremendous structure of intelligence and investigation that existed back then… People didn't know there were success stories… of a well-equipped, well trained police force.

Pedro told me that he had been given access to a vast amount of information about police operations that no one else had. The show was based on thirteen real-life arrests of high-profile criminals. Pedro had requested specific famous cases and had been given in return a bunch of files, some of which were of the ones he had asked for. He spoke about these cases to police officers involved in them during a series of meetings where he could ask whatever he wanted and they would choose what to respond. He never learned his interlocutors' names nor was he able to record anything. Pedro seemed proud of the work he had done and emphasized how he had depicted the police officers in his show in nuanced ways: for instance, one of them was unfaithful, another one was addicted, and a third one was corrupted. The show was thus, he argued, not an attempt to clean the police's reputation, as critics had pointed out. The problem was that the idea itself of members of the Federal Police successfully carrying out intelligence operations conflicted enormously with stereotypical but widespread ideas of the Mexican police officer: unsophisticated, heavily underpaid, hopelessly corrupt.

Although Pedro didn't consider the show to have been a failure, he told me the story of how Televisa ended up all but sabotaging it. Instead of airing its 13 hour-long episodes one night a week, as was originally planned, the producers were told at the eleventh hour that it would be aired every day in half-hour episodes for 26 days. Perhaps Televisa wanted to distance itself from a show that ended up being the object of strong criticism. One form that such criticism took

was skepticism: “It turns out now that the police are the good guys,” journalists argued cynically, as Pedro recalled. As he acknowledged, the police are known as the ones “to whom you give 1000 pesos and they then set you free or from whom you buy drugs, or who you pay to kill someone else.” This is why, he lamented, “they criticized us *a priori*, because those who didn’t see [the show] didn’t know that the only thing we wanted to do was to talk about thirteen stories of success, because there are, there were [such stories],” he told me. A series starring cops, however, found no resonance in a country where trust in the police was nonexistent (see Animal Político 2011).

Ultimately, the strongest criticism against the show was that it was requested and paid for by the government. Genaro García Luna, President Calderón’s Secretary of Security—the man at the forefront of the state’s combat against drug trafficking—was the one who commissioned *El Equipo* and who supervised its creation. García Luna had created the Federal Police, a revamped version of this federal institution, and seems to have attempted to use televised fiction to enhance its reputation. This was found to be unacceptable. Journalists were so predisposed against *El Equipo*, Pedro complained, that they launched an investigation even before it aired, showing the vast amount of money from the federal budget that was spent on this show, including 52 million pesos (close to 3.5 million dollars around 2011) allegedly paid to Pedro. He published a letter in response to that news article, arguing that he had not received that amount of money, but did admit to me that the show’s bills did include it. He explained it as the need to officially allocate money that was used in ways that could not be disclosed for security reasons.

In addition, the show was punished for presenting false stories. “In *El Equipo*, everything is false,” journalists accused without even seeing it, Pedro lamented. The problem was that, even though the stories were true, they were not believable, especially because it was the state which

was trying to put them forth. The factual quality of these narratives was taken to be a lie, overpowered by the prevalent disposition to take the police as always already corrupt, even irredeemable.

Movie-Worthy Journalism

What, in contrast, became an instant success, and an unexpected source of revenue for journalists, were *narcoseries*, which showcased precisely this idea of the corrupt state. For instance, at a panel in the Latin American Conference of Investigative Journalism (*Conferencia Latinoamericana de Periodismo de Investigación*, COLPIN), held in Mexico City in late 2019, journalist Gerardo Reyes began his talk entitled *Periodismo de película,* or Movie-Worthy Journalism, asking his fellow journalists: "How many times have we heard a colleague saying that they have a story that looks like a movie and that, if they sat down to tell it, to write it, it wouldn't come out as good as… reality?" Reyes is a renowned Colombian journalist who heads *Univisión Investiga*, Univision's journalistic investigative unit. In contrast to most panels, in which his colleagues talked about the methods, results, and dangers of their investigations, Reyes presented to his audience a different way of mobilizing their vast journalistic knowledge about cases of crime and corruption. He went on to discuss his own work, which consisted of drawing

> a chronology, which was the basis of one of the series for which I collaborated, *El Chapo*, for Netflix, in which… almost every month I would hand the scriptwriters a day-by-day, month-by-month description of el Chapo's life, Mexico's life and the life of drug cartels. This is why I was telling you all that this is an activity that [gives] the impression of reconstructing a story but seeing it not just from the character's viewpoint… but rather from all the relations between this character and their immediate world and their country or the outside world.

Reyes then explained the different degrees to which journalists could collaborate in this type of project by supplying diverse kinds of information. During the Q&A, a member of the audience asked him if anyone had ever sued his team for the way they had been depicted on

television. Reyes replied that the relation between journalists and screenwriters is "dialectic and sometimes controversial and uncomfortable":

> I'll tell you about a concrete case. When we had conversations [with the screenwriters] about el Chapo Guzmán, there were two clear positions. The screenwriters tried to show a character with a Robin Hood bent, who helped people, built schools, gave medicine to the poor, and, of course, jobs. Our experience of several years covering el Chapo's organization and himself taught us that this is a myth. We once learned that el Chapo's mother had to beg him several times to help build a school that was falling apart, and [the community] ended up collected money in the region to rebuild the school [without his help]. This presents a dilemma about the limit of the stories you have, which have parts that you couldn't research. The screenwriters solve that. How much of that can be irresponsible or not, they say that they solve that by presenting the drama with the warning that it is loosely based on reality or based on real facts and does not exactly correspond to the [real] story.

Sometime after the conference, I had a conversation with Reyes about his investigative and advisory work for *El Chapo*. He recounted that he and his colleagues first became interested in researching about Joaquín Guzmán because very little was known about him, despite his fame. An initial journalistic product made by Reyes and his team, which later became a major input for the show, is a documentary that aired on Univision called *El eterno fugitivo* (The Eternal Fugitive, 2013), made after his second escape. From the onset, the documentary shows how it centers around the dialectic of spectacle and secrecy (Melley 2012) that surrounded Guzmán. In the first minute of the documentary, foreshadowing its content, el Chapo is introduced as a world-class criminal: "the DEA's Osama bin Laden, the world's most powerful kingpin, the Mexican Pablo Escobar… who built a global empire through bullets and blood… Chicago's public enemy number one… surrounded by a Robin Hood aura." While the documentary states quite explicitly that Guzmán's famous generosity is nowhere to be seen, he and his colleagues find countless references to it in people's narratives in Badiraguato, Sinaloa, el Chapo's downtrodden rural hometown, which then fill some of the documentary's content. Rabin, one of

Reyes' colleagues with whom I spoke, remembers him wondering, "But what did he give them?" when people repeatedly mentioned this generosity. Still, Badiraguato is shown and spoken of as "a town that admires and protects him" from law enforcement: "many people see him not as a bad person, but rather as a hero," the narrator goes on to say. Moreover, "for the members of *Los Orejones de la Sierra* [a *narcocorrido* band], *narcocorridos* that glorify el Chapo Guzmán are the most often requested in parties. Here, they admire a man who left extreme poverty to become the richest and most powerful drug trafficker in the world." This extraordinary example of social mobility is perhaps much of what underpins Guzmán's mythical dimension, which is then extended through folk music to encompass its publics. Thus, it is already *talk about* el Chapo that circulates in this documentary about Guzmán.

As Reyes told me and has mentioned in other interviews, in the extensive research he and his team had done in Sinaloa for the documentary and the show, he fell just short of interviewing Guzmán, since the latter's condition was that he would have a say on *El* Chapo's script, which Reyes and his team could not accept. They thus gathered their information through others: people close to the kingpin and other journalists who had done their own research, some of whom were in a similar condition themselves, as we will see shortly. The information they gathered was then always mediated by others' reported speech or material proof—or even lack thereof, as the case of his alleged generous banditry shows. Reyes's research then relied, for instance, on "a very good source, whom we never identified [publicly], but who saw [Guzmán] at least once or twice a week."

Thus, Reyes and his colleagues' research on el Chapo was always already about hearsay on this famous criminal, mediated by secrecy and mystery and, despite evidence to the contrary,

always about a generous bandit, like an urban legend that is always a couple of degrees of separation from the subject of the tale.

The same thing occurred with other sources on which the show *El Chapo* relied. Another one of them was a book called *El más buscado*, or *The Most Wanted* (2012), that was also ambiguously situated between facticity and fiction, written by renowned journalist Alejandro Almazán, who also worked as a consultant for the show. As Almazán told me, his advisory job went as far as replacing the show's bible, the outline that is commonly written at the outset of a series, which they had no time to sketch. The show had originally been Reyes's idea, which he pitched to Univision's then newly created producing company Story House. Almazán was of interest to Reyes and his team because his book disclosed so much personal information on el Chapo that they thought, Reyes told me, that the kingpin himself had spoken to him, even though Almazán had decided not to reveal this information.

When Grijalbo, the book's publishing house, reached out to Almazán asking him to write el Chapo's biography, he rejected it out of fear. Writing a piece of fiction instead was a solution that did not make him accountable for the truthfulness of what it contained. Yet, the fact that certain things were true was implied. The main character's name, Chalo Gaitán, referring to el Chapo Guzmán, signals this ambiguous relation to the real figure. This use of similar sounding names and aliases is also abundant in *narcoseries*, and the reason I heard for it was always the same—a flexible indexical relation that allowed for manipulation. Underlying truths were expected in Almazán's book because of his vast experience reporting in Sinaloa, el Chapo's and his cartel's home state (2012). His journalistic expertise lent credibility to his fictional account. As he told me, his writing relied heavily on what he had learned during long years of journalistic research, as well as specific investigations he later conducted. He contacted people in Sinaloa to

tell them he was writing a novel and wanted to know certain things about Guzmán. He told me that he ended up meeting with one of his sons.

Almazán's book relied on fiction not only for security purposes, but also to condense an argument about the state and criminality in the drug war informed, he told me, by his years of journalism: "The kind of story I wanted to tell, let's see, this man is gonna get away with it, he is, because crime always wins, or at least in this country it always wins." Note how this generalization resonates with the criticisms made of *El Equipo*, as discussed above—*the police are always already criminal, in Mexico crime always wins*—and how it circulates through Almazán's account of his acquisition of knowledge over time, a fact he expected me to accept unproblematically, and which effortlessly came to be at the center of a fictional tale expected to be fundamentally true.

In Almazán's opinion, the confrontation between the state and crime wasn't a confrontation at all. As he mentioned, this is what he and his colleagues had induced from their professional experience: "It was very difficult for us as a generation [of journalists] to add two plus two and understand the narco-state's structure," he said, recounting his early career as a reporter of drug trafficking-related matters. "We didn't understand it… As Mexicans, we have trusted the Army or the Navy, but then you realize that it is basically them who have operated all this violence thing, well, drug trafficking, in Mexico. We discovered it little by little… We eventually understood that the state practically controls drug trafficking, that crime and the state are part of a whole business machinery in which everyone participated, from the drug dealer, the hitman, to the secretaries of national defense, policemen, etcetera."

As he put it, Almazán's book is fictitious "in its structure, in its story, because I had to create a story and dangers for my characters, but I do believe that what it tells about his life contains

evidently real parts, just inserted in fiction. And since fiction gives you that freedom, then you embellish it." A key instance of this embellishment is when the character of el Chapo appears talking to President Calderón. For him—as for many others—the former president was a symbol of what happened in Mexico during the inaugural sexennial of the drug war: "I am one of those who think that we can't understand all the violence without considering Calderón. I decided to make almost a villain out of him, to make him a friend of the villain… [Calderón's Secretary of Public Security] García Luna [who commissioned the show *El Equipo*, as described above] is [also] in *El más buscado*. In fact, I kill García Luna… because it seemed to me that that man is the one who has caused all the evil [in the drug war], so he deserves to die. In my story, he deserves to die." Almazán spoke of how he created this story as if carrying out an epistemic practice akin to what Saidiya Hartman (2008) calls critical fabulation. For Hartman, given the insufficiency of information in the archive, the historian is confronted with the ethical question of using fiction to fill in the blanks. Almazán chose to use fiction not only to reaffirm the state as the villain in the drug war, but also to imagine some moral accountability ("In my story he deserves to die"). But Almazán's book was made of one fabulation stacked on top of another: the fictional Chalo Gaitán on top of the mythical Chapo Guzmán, on top of the narco-state.

One continues to see fabulations piling up as one keeps digging into the show's journalistic sources. Another journalistic work that *El Chapo* drew heavily on was reporter Anabel Hernández's 2010 non-fictional book *Los señores del narco*, whose English translation was published in 2013 under the title *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and their Godfathers.* Her book's immense success was the reason why Grijalbo, its press, commissioned Almazán to write *El más buscado* (2012). The show *El Chapo* drew heavily on *Los señores del narco* for its representation of Conrado Sol, a character based primarily on Secretary of Public Security

García Luna (who appears as the villain in *El más buscado*) and the protection he allegedly offered Guzmán and the Sinaloa Cartel for long years. Hernández's book is surrounded by secrecy—confidential documents that are only vaguely alluded to, anonymous sources making scandalous declarations—and often reads like a detective novel, with sudden twists and dramatic punchlines:

> In May 2006, at the Nikko Hotel in Mexico City, I met a DEA agent who confirmed my growing conviction that Joaquín [el Chapo] Guzmán and the drug trade were essential to understanding a key aspect of corruption in Mexico, perhaps the most important aspect of all: the one that involves top government figures putting prices on the country's millions of inhabitants, as if they were heads of cattle (Hernández 2013: 4).

As in this passage, Hernández indulges in flights of fancy that, in contrast to the show and Almazán's book, are *not* meant to be fictional, but still mobilize the narco-state trope heavily, even bringing it to a new dimension. Indeed, the idea of *top government figures putting prices on the country's millions of inhabitants* frames the drug war squarely as a necropolitical conspiracy, where Mexico's entire population becomes a dehumanized but remunerable target of orchestrated state violence. This idea contrasts with more commonsensical ways of understanding the problems of the drug war, like the infiltration of wealthy and hyperviolent criminal organizations in the state through bribes and the threat of violence. Imagined in these terms, the violence perpetrated by these two colluded groups can be rendered somewhat intelligible, at least in broad strokes. Seen, in turn, through Hernández's theorization, the mass violence observed is more puzzling: why would the death of millions of Mexicans be profitable for top government figures?

These conspiratorial statements are closely knit together with information already circulated by the press in this book, which is narrated in the same matter-of-factual tone that suggests all the data has an authoritative origin. The book recounts Guzmán's long public history, from his

first capture in 1993 to the time of her writing in 2010, before he was recaptured. It recounts well-known scandals involving kingpins that are also surrounded by conspiracy theory, which are unsolved stories involved in mystery: the allegedly political murder of a high-ranking priest in 1993 and the use of Guzmán as a scapegoat or the CIA's involvement with Mexican drug trafficking organizations as part of the Iran-Contra affair. All of these are spoken of as if they constituted incontrovertible truths.

Something constant throughout the book is a gesture of unmasking what Hernández takes to be a false discourse: the state's framing of the drug war as a confrontation between two opposite sides. Meanwhile, a truth that lies behind is revealed: the collusion of the state with organized crime. The corrupt politician at the center of her narrative is, again, former Secretary of Public Security García Luna—the man who commissioned *El Equipo* and whose fictional character is killed in Almazán's *El más buscado*. Her alleged revelation of the truth about the collusion between this officer in charge of the drug war and the Sinaloa Cartel is an act of connecting dots that brings together information that is publicly accessible and already circulating—such as the stark difference between arrests of members of the Sinaloa cartel vis-à-vis other criminal organizations (see Beith 2011)—with an image of an omniscient Mexican state with *perfect* knowledge, and it seems, an intimate collaboration with the leaders of *all* criminal organizations. As Hernández states, for instance "[s]ince 2007, the government has known the exact addresses of Mexico's main drug traffickers and their relatives. In some cases, they have telephone numbers, bank accounts, and other valuable details that would allow them to take successful, targeted action" (241-2).

Her book's main argument is condensed in a quote of a former criminal, Guillermo Ramírez Peyro, during a testimony, "The Mexican government, the police, the military: they are the

cartel," an assertion which Hernández describes as of "unquestionable exactitude" (2013: 195). "At the same time," she goes on to say, "the rules governing the relation between drug traffickers and the government [is defined as follows:] public officials became employees of the drug traffickers, and their armed wing" (Hernández 2013). By referring to instances where rival cartels made public accusations about the government's collusion with the Sinaloa Cartel and "documentary evidence," in abstract, Hernández argues that the state apparatus was used as El Chapo's army (Ibid: 197, 210). Her evidence includes García Luna's "inexplicable wealth." While the clearly insufficient substantiation of spectacular assertions like this—that the state apparatus served as el Chapo's army—may raise skeptical questions, the reader may resort to external evidence that might rescue her credibility. For instance, in 2019 García Luna himself was arrested in the United States, precisely for his association with the Sinaloa Cartel, which she denounces in her book years before. The book is then left in a status of irreparable epistemic ambiguity. Moments of fetishization—such as when the state becomes perfectly omniscient, absolutely corrupt, or systematically necropolitical, as if it were a machine—could mark the limits of its facticity. The state is, for instance, in a position of *perfect identity* with an army-like criminal organization: *The Mexican government, the police, the military: they are the cartel*. This, Hernández tells us, is of *unquestionable exactitude*. Moreover, she situates herself in a privileged position to unearth what appear as both world-shattering truths and information she might have expected her readers to already know. Indeed, what Hernández ends up circulating is a revamped version of the same trope that Pedro complained to me about—*the state as always already corrupt*. At the core of her argument is a slippage between the corruption of a high-ranking officer and several of his men and the subordination of the state to organized crime. Like Almazán's comment on the narco-state structure mentioned above, Hernández traverses the

space between the idea of a state polluted, infiltrated by organized crime and the notion of a state fundamentally, inherently criminal. In so doing, Hernández, like Almazán, is mystifying the idea of the state by attributing it purpose, a common interest, unity, and morality (Abrams 1988). And yet, something as serious as García Luna's arrest attests to some truth at the heart of her revelation, which had not been truly granted the status of facticity until then.

The last source for *El Chapo* I will discuss here consists of circulating knowledge about other politicians who, alongside García Luna, would serve as inspiration for Guzmán's fictional counterpart, whose name is Conrado Sol. Almazán had no shortage of instances of this figure in Mexican politics to resort to, which included men who have continued to hold positions of power because the accusations of corruption against them remained in the ambiguous space of rumor or a couple of press exposés. As he recounted, the screenwriters had already come up with the character of Conrado Sol when he started working with them at Story House. They wanted Sol to serve as a wild card who could move across the show's seasons and constitute el Chapo's antagonist. As Almazán told me, this character had to constitute "an allegory of the Mexican politician, or of Mexican politics." In a separate conversation, Ocaña, one of Reyes' colleagues from Story House that also worked on *El Chapo*, echoed this point: "The important thing is the system. It is a corrupt system that works in the way we narrate in the series, in the way shown by Conrado."

Since the screenwriters were not well acquainted with Mexican politics, they asked Almazán for examples. He came up with several corrupt politicians from the period that *El Chapo* is situated in, from the 1980s to his final arrest in 2016. He began with the stories of Emilio Gamboa Patrón and Manlio Fabio Beltrones. Both PRI-affiliated politicians have been involved in numerous scandals of corruption, the former most notably in a case of child prostitution and

torture, and the latter in one of collusion with kingpin Amado Carrillo in the 1990s. Neither of these scandals amounted to much and both men remain active in politics.

Genaro García Luna would appear then, and afterwards Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong and Jesús Murillo Karam. Osorio Chong, former governor of the state of Hidalgo—several of whose collaborators from that period have been accused of collusion with the Zetas cartel—was Secretary of the Interior during Peña Nieto's administration, having to account, among other events, for el Chapo's escape from prison in 2015. Jesús Murillo Karam was appointed Attorney General of Mexico for the same period but was forced to resign after the massive scandal of the 43 teaching college students who disappeared in the southern state of Guerrero, in the infamous Ayotzinapa case.

In sum, then, the different kinds of input for *El Chapo* mixed factuality with its opposite in different ways. In the case of Reyes' documentary, the persistent elusiveness of Guzmán was supplanted with the legend and hearsay that circulated in his hometown. In Almazán's book (2012), this same elusiveness, along with the fear of a misstep in his revelation of intimate details about Guzmán, led him to explicitly resort to a mix of fiction and fact. For its part, Hernández's book was ostensibly factual, but peppered with constant acts of ideation of an omniscient, necropolitical, criminal state fetish. Finally, the public knowledge around the criminal scandals of the group of politicians that Almazán mentioned to the show's screenwriters had its own kind of epistemic ambiguity, as it surrounds these characters without really being proven or refuted, without much consequence other than reinforcing ideas of these men's (and by extension the state's) criminality. All these forms of knowledge production, however, would serve as the material for the telling of Guzmán's and Sol's story in *El Chapo*.

The Parameters of Fiction

In the show's dramatic arc, Conrado's rise in politics is depicted as parallel to, and often in alliance with, el Chapo Guzmán's ascent in the drug trafficking world. The latter's life is narrated from his humble origin in rural Sinaloa (a context already marked by the rules of a normalized criminal life that is seen as a successful path of social mobility), a disproportionately violent treatment during his imprisonment, to the top of the criminal world, and then to his arrest. Guzmán's limitless ambition—which leads him to both commit brutal acts of violence and to quickly rise in the business—is showcased in the first episode. In the early 1990s, when he is still in a mid-rank position, he seeks to take over part of the trafficking of cocaine across the border with the US with an underground tunnel he had commissioned—a novelty at a time when much of the transport was carried out by air. Disobeying his superiors, who refuse to grant him that route and mock his subordinate position, he visits Pablo Escobar in Colombia, offering to transport cocaine in both a larger amount and shorter timespan than Amado Carrillo, the Mexican kingpin who carried out those tasks at the time. Escobar accepts to give Guzmán a chance, disbelieving that he is capable of such a feat. Guzmán ends up succeeding, managing to bribe all the necessary officers, taking back his load when it was confiscated, and making it to the endpoint at the last second, to everyone's surprise. It is this rogue, adventurous attitude, the show suggests, that led him to succeed—an attitude that somewhat resonates with the figure of the rogue law enforcement officer that ends up bringing justice against all odds in US crime fiction. This success is the beginning of a lucrative career that has ups and downs, as he is imprisoned twice, escapes twice, and not only ends up leading the Sinaloa Cartel, but manages to ally his organization with the state's security forces through Conrado Sol to defeat his rival cartels. In sum, in *El Chapo*, Guzmán embodies capitalist success, power and fame.

Meanwhile, Conrado Sol operates in a grey zone between state-sanctioned and extra-judicial violence, often carried out for private ends. Early on, it becomes clear that Sol is willing to do anything to ascend politically and ultimately gain the presidency. He kills his boss, who is also a criminal: we see him murdering the journalist who wrote an exposé on his rape of a woman years earlier. Sol allies with Guzmán for mutual benefit; the former seeks to gain a good reputation in the eyes of the presidents he works for, proving how he is a necessary figure to do the government's "dirty work," which refers to reaching agreements with drug trafficking organizations, as the federal government is believed to have done before the drug war. Sol and Guzmán help each other by going after cartel leaders that are Guzmán's enemies and help Sol demonstrate that the government's drug war is producing results.

In sum, the relation between Guzmán and Sol is marked by tension—attempts of arrest and escapes, which culminate in a final capture—and cooperation, all defined by the concealment of the real handling of drug trafficking through backstage negotiations between the boss of the Sinaloa Cartel and the Secretary of Public Security, under the guise of an armed confrontation. This relationship and the two characters that constitute it are the show's rendition of the relation between drug traffickers and the state, which draws on the media objects described above. *El Chapo* then draws on the mythical, fictional, conspiratorial, and rumor genres that pepper the narratives that it recirculates.

It thus becomes clear how *El Chapo*'s creators are not so much adding a fictional component to a factual narrative as they are adapting a story traversed by myriad genres to the needs of a serialized entertainment commodity. The tensions between the team of journalists that had done the research for the show and the screenwriters that I began describing above stemmed from this process of adaptation, but showed how the different kinds of representations that each group was

advocating for were already present in the previous narratives. For instance, as Tomás Ocaña, one of Reyes' colleagues, told me, a major point of disagreement with the screenwriters was about putting Guzmán at the center of the plot. Ocaña and his colleagues considered that doing so necessarily meant creating a hero, "or that's what the screenwriters said, because we believe that an anti-hero could have been created instead… Our greatest battle was about idealizing the figure of el Chapo." However, as Ocaña and several screenwriters for other *narcoseries* told me, a rapport between the main character and the viewer is necessary to have an audience at all. The screenwriters defended their decision to place el Chapo affectively close to the viewer, Ocaña said, because "if he were instead an odious character that no one could approach and the only thing the viewer wants is that he dies, loses, or is captured, viewers would be less likely to have a sustained interest in the protagonist." But el Chapo as a glorified figure, as the obvious hero of the tale, was there from the start. It even animated Reyes, Ocaña, and others to do research on him in the first place, and perhaps to an extent predetermined what a show about el Chapo could look like.

Another point of dispute was violence. Reyes told me that he and his team repeatedly insisted that el Chapo's violent side had to be shown, since "part of the myth was that he was pacific, he didn't look for trouble, and that in contrast to the Zetas [drug cartel] and other violent drug traffickers, he was a guy who fixed things peacefully, which is completely absurd, false." They clashed with the screenwriters around that because, as Reyes said, investigative journalism taught him that what can't be proven should not be said and, as they had reported in their documentary, the myth about el Chapo wasn't true. The screenwriters would respond that what they were working on was not a documentary, but a dramatized series. And on that point, he mentioned, they had arguments that the screenwriters ended up winning. "The show's

philosophical orientation, if one can call it that, or cinematographic and dramatic [orientation], was theirs, based on abundant information we gave them, and they made the decision on how to direct it."

When I asked Gerardo about a concrete example of the screenwriters' victory in the battle over Guzmán's moral representation, he remembered moments where he was tortured in jail during his first time in prison (1993-2001). "We have no proof of that happening… there are, I think, two episodes dedicated to el Chapo as though he were a South American political prisoner [at the time of the military dictatorships of the 1970s], lying on the ground, beaten up, abandoned by the prison's authorities, and that is entirely the [screenwriter] team's creative contribution." These three early episodes (7 to 9 of the first season) also have the function of beginning to construct the state—embodied at this point by the prison's workers, but later by Conrado Sol—as a morally rotten villain: in addition to the unnecessary violence that Guzmán and other prisoners receive, we learn that he manages to bribe the chief guard, making the prison guilty of two grave sins at once. While this excessive violence was never exerted, the state may not be innocent: Guzmán was not imprisoned in 1993 only for drug trafficking, but also for the murder of a high-ranking priest, Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo. Rumor has it that this murder was political, orchestrated by then President Salinas, and that Guzmán was framed. *El Chapo*'s account of the story by taking this rumor seriously brings Hernández's take to the screen, and it does so in resonant ways, as we will see shortly.

Another mythical quality of drug traffickers recirculated in *narcoseries* is their hypermasculinity. For example, from the first few episodes, we learn that Guzmán has two wives who accept the polygamous relationship. They meet a couple of times and are polite with each other and loving with Guzmán. He also has a girlfriend who takes risks for him affectionately.

While in prison, he sees a young woman he finds attractive and has her sent to his cell to have sex with her without her consent. Later in the series, he meets a woman that is much younger than him, rigs the beauty pageant in which she is competing for her to win, and ends up marrying her—a rendition of the easily identifiable story of his current wife, Emma Coronel, a protagonist in el Chapo's press stories of the past few years. This last relation most clearly enables Guzmán's fictional character to perform as a loving family man, who worries and takes risks for his wife and toddler twin girls, in addition to the pain and vengefulness with which he reacts to his brother's death and the love and guilt he expresses towards his mother elsewhere in the show.

In contrast, Conrado Sol's only affective relationship is with a male sex worker called Franco. Whenever Franco rejects payment for his services or there is clear indication of intimacy between them, Sol insists on maintaining the relation transactional. Moreover, he carefully hides his queerness from the public, knowing that it will irredeemably damage his presidential aspirations. At some point, Sol agrees to marry a female senator to perform as a heteronormative, thus presidentiable, couple. When a scandal emerges that threatens his fake wife's reputation, she menaces to expose his queerness, and insults him with that. This leads Sol to murder Franco to prevent his secret from going public.

Guzmán and Sol are thus defined by an implicit set of oppositions: protagonist/villain, peaceful/violent, straight/queer, hypermasculine/feminized, normative/deviant, direct/devious. For Cultural Studies scholar Chris Richardson, a set of oppositions like this is not only aligned with broader cultural discourses that, first, associate masculinity with power and domination, and femininity with inferiority (Drucker 2015, cited in Richardson 2020: 74), but also one that "equates criminality with gender and sexual non-conformity" (Richardson 2020: 83). Further, the sexual characteristics of these two characters are emphasized when placed alongside each other.

As is the case with queer villains in American popular culture, their femininity affirms heterosexuals' masculinity (Wald 2015: 36, cited in Richardson 2020: 63). In the case of a show like *El Chapo*, in which both protagonist and antagonist are criminals, the effect is largely a hierarchical relation between the two—another way of conveying the idea that Anabel Hernández and Alejandro Almazán put forth in their work.

Anxious Uptakes

El Equipo and *El Chapo*, including all the journalistic work that the latter draws on, are thus competing narrative fictions about the non-public aspects of the war on drug trafficking, the former much less successful, as we have seen, than the latter. For instance, as Silvia, a retired accountant and longtime militant of the left once told me, she considered *El señor de los cielos* to be telling "the history of Mexico." She referred to the example of the priest's murder mentioned above (which appears in this and other *narcoseries*, in addition to *El Chapo*) to make her point: the fact that it was the rumor instead of the official account of the murder that was depicted signaled to her that this series intended to show the truth behind the state's lies. She took this to be a general feature of the story the show told. To be clear, I don't mean to assume that this account is false (or true, for that matter); what I mean to show is the set of operations carried out by *narcoseries* creators to produce truth effects, or, more specifically, to resonate with their public's ideas about truth. The Mexican state often lies, as it likely did by framing Guzmán for the priest's murder. Deceptiveness (specifically about its collusion with organized crime) is taken to be the defining feature of the state, and a dramatized disclosure of this feature as a revelation of truth is what *narcoseries* offer.

These narratives are then an example of what Eve Sedgwick (2003) defines as a paranoid form of inquiry—an overdetermined form of knowledge production that anticipates what it will

find, even closing possibilities of conceiving other scenarios, organized around the aim to never be surprised, (Ibid: 133) to always be in the know about what the state seeks to conceal from the gullible. Under this form of reading, as we have seen repeatedly, the state is always already the utmost criminal. For the spectator to always be demystified, the state must always be unsuccessfully concealing its fundamental criminality. From the discussion of *El Equipo* above, we can see how this fundamental criminality was always already there as an idea that could only be reinforced. *Narcoseries* are thus the culture industry's response to the resonance of this kind of narrative, offering audiences one variation after another of the same story.

The flip side of the form of reading that *narcoseries* offer is, as we have seen, the way in which drug traffickers end up appearing on the screen. Indeed, what has made these shows highly controversial in Mexico's public sphere is their glamorous representation of organized crime—because it is these figures who are the state's enemies in the drug war. State officials have expressed deep anxieties about such a depiction. For instance, in 2016, the presidents of the Radio and Television Commissions at the Senate and Congress, Zoé Robledo and Lía Limón, denounced in a communiqué that *narcoseries* violated several telecommunication laws and the Constitution, especially affecting children since they promote "apologies for violence and make drug trafficking and its activities look like aspirational lifepaths." They called for censorship or a D rating, which would only allow for its broadcast past midnight. The restriction was enforced. President López Obrador (2018-2024) has also been critical of these shows. In 2019, during one of his regular tours around the country, he stated: "in TV series, those dedicated to such activities [drug trafficking], with a bit of fiction and reality, project an image of luxury… luxury residences, brand-new cars, good-looking actors and actresses… with power; series where [drug traffickers] had chiefs of police, even army officials, well, even the president subordinated to

them! Much power. [These shows are,] then, an apology for illicit activities, but that, as I said, is one side of the coin, a completely ephemeral side… The other side is the suffering of people". For his part, Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard (2018-) has lamented that, as high-profile officers of other states, the image of Mexico that circulates abroad the most is that of *narcoseries* (Reporte Indigo 2019).

The representation of the state's enemies in the drug war as desirable figures was certainly not lost on *narcoseries* creators. Most of the couple of dozens of them that I spoke to expressed their anxieties to me in one way or another. For instance, one of the directors of *El señor de los cielos* told me how he got into trouble by sharing with an indiscreet journalist his condemnation of how it represented drug traffickers. In his opinion, "those men cannot be [depicted as] handsome and elegant, because we're then telling people that this is a [desirable] lifepath. And that worries me because I live in a country that is consumed by drug trafficking."

Two producers who have worked on several *narcoseries*, who I will call Luciana and Maru, told me this story separately: in a shooting on location, they found themselves one evening surrounded by fans, including an 8 to 10-year-old girl and boy. The kids told them that they watched the show, even if it aired late at night. At some point, the girl pulled out a bag of cookies and offered one to the boy: "Do you want a cookie?" "No," he replied, "I want a gun." They stared at each other and wondered, "What are we doing? What are we doing? This is horrible." After telling the anecdote, Luciana reflected, "You do wonder whether what we're doing is in fact an apology for crime." Almazán also told me that once a boy who worked as a hitman only agreed to an interview because Almazán had written *El Chapo*. Like Luciana and Maru, he wondered about his responsibility as co-creator of this show.

Some members of the public have a similar position. In informal conversations about *narcoseries* I had during fieldwork, people often condemned these shows on the same grounds: in sum, the criticism was that it invited the viewer to sympathize with criminals, and that was not only morally wrong, but also socially problematic. For instance, as a member of the audience in a conference at a Mexican university where I presented a version of this paper mentioned,

> I would like to say something in relation to *narcoseries*: inside the Penitentiary Center, and in relation to violence, I'd like to argue that [these shows], beyond entertainment, are also a bridge that induces many people who are not involved in drug trafficking into it, they want to be like their protagonists, so rather than producing less violence, [these shows] cause more of it. They also make public security and our authorities look inadequate.

The problem is, then, not an issue of narrative fiction, but rather of public security.

Conclusion

To this kind of accusation, Carmina, the writer for *El señor de los cielos* we briefly met at the beginning, retorted by asking, "Would interpreting a serial killer mean… that I am telling people to kill? It's absurd. I think it's absurd… The thing is that this is sensitive because it's immediate, because we're living it." Indeed, as she points out, the relevant relationship is not between viewers and what they see on the screen, but rather *how* the screen is seen to mediate the relationship between those viewers and the drug war: how it establishes a relation between the narrated and narrating worlds (see Nakassis 2020). As I have shown throughout this chapter, it is not *narcoseries* in isolation that mediate this relationship between drug traffickers and politicians, on the one hand, and their televised representations, on the other. *Narcoseries* are but an instance in a broader field of knowledge production about the drug world. And, while the media objects that constitute this field claim at least some evidentiary status, this evidence appears to be always beyond reach, in such a way that this field's object of knowledge ends up

being largely about the myths, fictions, and conspiracies that surround *narcos* and their stories. In other words, *narcoseries* (and all the works they draw on) help constitute the drug world by relying heavily on fantasy. Without really constituting an ideological project, but rather a form of capitalist value production, *narcoseries* become an ideological problem for the state, as these attractive, powerful figures of *narcoseries* are in fact the enemies against whom the state is waging war, while the chronically corrupt, even subordinated politicians depicted in them are the ones spearheading such a war.

The following chapter will explore how, instead of being suppressed, this ideological power is mobilized in favor of President López Obrador's populist project, as if saying, If you can't beat [their affective power], join them.

Chapter 4:

The State as Generous Bandit

On a Sunday morning in January 2020, I attended an event under a white canopy set on a wide patio, surrounded by a vast garden at Los Pinos, the luxurious former presidential residence in Mexico City. Following what his populist predecessor, President Lázaro Cárdenas (Knight 1998), had done in the 1930s with the Chapultepec Castle, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), in office since December 2018, opened Los Pinos to the public early in his administration as a gesture of breaking away from the materiality of corruption of his political predecessors. Both sumptuous buildings are located on an axis that traverses Mexico City from the center towards its west end, across wealthy neighborhoods and government buildings. Defying its placement in this corridor of wealth, Los Pinos was reframed by AMLO as a property of the people, returned to its rightful owners, and is now serving as a welcoming destination for families' weekend strolls, like the Chapultepec Castle has long been. Police and military officers from the army base next door, instead of guarding the president, are now involved in the logistics of family-friendly events, such as art exhibits, concerts, fairs and, especially, the INDEP's—the Institute to Give Back what has been Stolen from the People or *Instituto para Devolver al Pueblo lo Robado* — "auctions with a social sense."

Rows of soon-to-be auctioned cars were exhibited in Los Pinos' patio area surrounding the canopy: Aston Martins, Lamborghinis, and Ferraris, while heavily bulletproofed black Suburbans were placed alongside, all bearing signs that listed their information and initial price. As an INDEP employee once told me, the selection of cars displayed aims to attract the most attention. Families passing by, making their way to another event at the premises, often slow

down or stop altogether to look closely at the cars, admiring them, taking selfies next to them, and peeking through the windows. And indeed, I once heard a boy tell his father, as he walked past an orange Camaro, "when I grow up, I will buy one of these."

Formerly the virtually unknown SAE (*Servicio de Administración y Enajenación de Bienes* or Office for the Management and Transfer of Goods), a federal government office in charge of auctioning off confiscated goods, liquidating non-productive public companies, and similar tasks, the INDEP is now a rebranded version that heavily publicizes a selection of its auctions. Those auctions are meant to be a spectacle of redistribution and an instance of AMLO's broader political project. Echoing Los Pinos' own transformation from ill-funded state-property into state-maintained public commons, these auctions offer up ill-gotten private property like these vehicles to produce resources to be given back to the "people" in the form of rural roads, scholarships, or musical instruments, among other benefits. For his part, AMLO has defined his administration through what he has called *austeridad republicana*, or republican austerity, to contrast it with the squandering extravagance of former politicians.

But, while the president carefully describes the INDEP's confiscated goods as originating from acts of corruption—somewhat alluded to by the Suburbans, which used to transport public officials—and *delincuencia común* or petty, common criminality, many attendees, particularly the press covering these events, focus on the cars and houses which originated in organized crime. In contrast to the president's and the INDEP director's silence, journalists circulate juicy information about these goods' origins. News headlines on the auctions include: "*Narco* cars auctioned at Mexican presidents' former house;" "Amado Carrillo's (The Lord of the Skies) House in Pedregal [Neighborhood] to be Auctioned;" "House where El Chapo hid is sold for over 2M pesos [100,000 USD]."

As the institute's director, Ricardo Rodríguez, told me a few months after this auction, and as he repeatedly mentioned during interviews with the press, AMLO likes to speak of the INDEP as the *Chucho el Roto* Institute, referring to a late-19th century bandit who, legend has it, stole from the rich and gave to the poor. As mentioned in the Introduction, *Chucho el Roto* is part of a long history of charismatic criminality in Mexico that now also includes drug traffickers. The drug world's charisma draws from a longstanding history of banditry that embodies notions of social justice, critiques of and challenges to state authority, and even concrete ties to the Mexican Revolution, post-revolutionary official ideology, and revolutionary energies more broadly (Giron 1976; O'Malley 1986; Yeh 2018). Folk representations, which have long circulated in the form of music, film, journalism, and televised and literary fiction, celebrate both old-time bandits' and new drug traffickers' feats through a discourse that challenges official versions of criminality, articulating publics around forms of class-based critique, fantasies of social mobility, and accusations of official corruption (Astorga 1995; Yeh 2018).

While drug traffickers' Robin Hood quality is disputed in the ethnographic record and journalistic accounts (e.g., Mendoza 2012; Stevenson 2015), this myth surrounds the drug world, as it does in other cases of charismatic criminality (Hobsbawm 1981: 140-162). This charisma, however, is in tension with the horror and indignation caused by the drug world's violence, particularly since the outset of the drug war in 2006: the news, official media, and works of fiction periodically report and discuss the hundreds of thousands of deaths and forced disappearances that the drug war has caused, as well as the numerous massacres that have claimed dozens of victims in single acts of terror. Meanwhile, widespread corruption and acts of violence involving public officials have produced and reinforced ideas of the Mexican state as itself a criminal, ultimately indistinguishable from the enemy it alleges to be combatting.

As I argue throughout my dissertation, these heteroglossic representations are politically consequential notions that play a central role in Mexico's "war on drug trafficking." Beyond its being a military confrontation, I reframe the drug war as a struggle over representation and affective potency, which plays out in the form of mass-mediated meaningful action that resonates with Mexican publics (or fails to do so).

The spectacle of INDEP's public auctions, which this chapter analyzes, is an instance of the state's attempts to transform widespread ideas and affective stances around drug trafficking toward itself. AMLO's administration seeks to seize and mobilize the charisma and fantasies of social justice surrounding the drug world and substitute them for the ideas of corruption and non-charismatic criminality that characterize the state. While it does so, however, it must be careful to disavow unwelcome ideas, such as the horror and indignation of the drug world's violence. This spectacle must therefore invoke the drug trade in oblique and selective ways to advance the president's populist project.

Recent social scientific works on populism have explored its intimate relationship with democracy (Arditi 2004; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Samet 2019b; Seo 2019). The notion of "the people," crucial to a populist formation, is formed through dis/embodied practices of mediation (Cody 2015; Mazzarella 2019; Samet 2019a) in and around a public or crowd (Cody 2015; Tambar 2015) or the relation between a leader and a collectivity (Knight 1998; Michelutti 2013; Moffitt 2016). A populist formation may articulate around a signifier—a vague, "empty" notion that can encompass the vast multiplicity of unfulfilled demands of its members (Laclau 2005)—as well as through a morally and affectively charged opposition to a disdained collectivity or otherness (Chakravartty and Roy 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser et al 2017; Samet

2013). The latter may take the abstract form of crime or criminality and/or their embodiment in criminals or criminalized populations (Hall 1978; Mazzarella 2019; Samet 2019a, Taussig 2005).

A key element of populism is the mobilization of affective potentials into an ideological project (Mazzarella 2013, 2017, 2019; see also Nakassis 2013a). Since state spectacles are often used to "revise resonant symbols so as to convey current political messages" (Wedeen 2015: 13), they provide a productive platform for populist performance (Moffitt 2016). However, the precise ways in which spectacle operates to advance a populist project remains understudied, particularly in anthropology. This chapter argues that a key element in the relationship between spectacle and populism is indexicality, since attending to the specific ways in which populist signifiers are rendered concrete in spectacle illuminates that such signifiers may have more complex and variegated meanings and affective forces than the ones needed to convey a message. Populist spectacle thus becomes a semiotic and affective problem: how to harness some of those meanings and their affective potency while disavowing others.

This chapter explores how a solution to such a problem is attempted by analyzing the semiotic operations that aim to activate an appealing but ambivalent figure, the drug trafficker, to enhance the relation between AMLO and his "people." The populist invocation of criminality I explore below puts forth a set of cautious performative maneuvers that seek to exploit its affective potential while maintaining certain aspects safely distant and contained. The auctions seek to harness the indexical value of drug trafficking while not being seen as, in fact, directly indexing it. They do so, as I describe below, by establishing a highly "indirect" indexical relation (Ochs 1992) to the drug trade. The shortcomings in the performative operations put in place for this end, however, illuminate how indexicality is both a necessary relation to attend to and one that always escapes attempts to manage it.

The Making of the Generous Bandit

President López Obrador (AMLO, 2018-2026) was the first leftist candidate to win the presidency since Mexico's democratic turn in 2000. He has baptized his administration the Fourth Transformation, invoking the magnitude of three watershed moments of Mexico's history: the Independence War of 1810, the War of Reform (1857-1861), and the 1910 Revolution. As AMLO has framed it, the transformation he leads consists of a radical redistribution of wealth and power from the corrupt rich to the poor. Such a redistribution is portrayed as a peaceful process, in contrast to the other three war-torn historical turning points, and as consisting of a major moral transformation.

In many ways, AMLO's presidency has been a turning point in Mexican political life. While 2000 marked the much-awaited beginning of free elections, many saw continuities in the administrations that followed vis-à-vis the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or Institutional Revolutionary Party) and its 70-year-long authoritarian regime, particularly in terms of corruption. Two presidential administrations from the right-wing PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional* or National Action Party) followed, Vicente Fox's (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón's (2006-2012).

López Obrador, then belonging to the left-wing PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática* or Democratic Revolutionary Party), became popular as Mexico City's mayor for the 2000-2006 period. Members of the ruling PAN and the PRI actively sought to impede his imminent presidential candidacy over a politicized legal battle, but failed. The 2006 election was marked by a margin of less than 1% between Calderón and AMLO, a hotly contested vote count and accusations of electoral fraud, and AMLO refused to recognize the results for months. Many suggest that Calderón launched the "drug war"—the deployment of the military to combat drug

trafficking organizations, which would bring about unprecedented levels of violence nationwide—to compensate for his victory's precarious legitimacy.

Calderón's deployment of the army to combat drug trafficking organizations, initiated in late 2006, was accompanied by a large-scale media campaign to mobilize nationalist sentiment in favor of the state (see Madrazo 2016). At the center of this campaign was a ritualized press conference, where arrested criminals were presented as the bounty of an apparently powerful, professional, and well-equipped police force. It was mostly high-profile criminals who were "presented" during these conferences, along with the intelligence efforts that led to their capture. Their criminal history was narrated in detail, while the weapons, money, and gadgets confiscated during the arrest were exhibited before them. A display of hyper-masculine force would surround the handcuffed detainee(s)—a plane, a tank, and a helicopter, and a group of heavily armed policemen would fill the hangar of the Federal Police, and it was from one of these vehicles that the detainee emerged and into which he (usually a man or a few men) was taken back. After the Q&A with the press, a moment of silence followed, in which the camera gave the detainee and his former belongings a close look.

This spectacle aimed to stage the incorporation of the criminal into a cultural order that the state aims to establish and over which it seeks (to present itself as the) authority (Mazzarella 2013). In this way, the state seeks to subjugate the criminal – that is, by making him appear at a time and place of the state's choosing, by being in control of his movements – and not only vanquish the criminal's charisma but also participate in it as its "master" or "patron" (Ibid). The ritual is meant to be shameful for the criminal, who is rendered an object to be inspected, seen, and presented, handcuffed and diminutive against armed guards.

According to Tomislav Lendo, President Calderón's head speechwriter with whom I spoke to repeatedly, the president's public communication campaign faced a series of dilemmas regarding the representation of the criminals that the state's armed forces were combatting. The first issue was the communicative force of criminal violence. A couple of years into Calderón's presidency, Mexico's public sphere had become overwhelmed by organized crime-related violence. The press had turned an alarmed gaze at the calculated public exhibition of mutilated or hanged bodies in many cities around the country, often with banners bearing written messages. The president and his team eventually accused the press of serving criminals by magnifying their communicative power (Lendo 2019) by publishing pictures of the banners and bodies. A similar genre of semiotic violence (see Fattal 2018) took the form of videos of the torture and murder of people alleged to belong to their executioners' rival cartels and which were often accompanied by spoken or written forms of justification for the exhibited violence (Eiss 2014; Contreras 2016). These videos circulated widely online, evading numerous censorship efforts (Eiss 2014). The press conferences that the federal government carefully orchestrated were thus an important means to counter this force by reasserting the state's sovereign power—which thereby revealed itself as the visible agent of power—over such criminals.

However, these state spectacles inadvertently activated several affective forces. The first one relates to the objective of demonstrating the state's power over criminals. As Lendo described them to me, the press conferences were intended to be "the typical photo of badly dressed criminals, all disheveled, and, in contrast, the federal police look[ing] very professional, and so on." But the criminals photographed were anything but disheveled. For instance, counterfeit copies of the 150 USD Ralph Lauren polo t-shirt that a smiling arrested kingpin, known as "la Barbie," was wearing during his press conference sold massively afterwards (see Fig. 28). His

relaxed and even playful demeanor contrasted with the fear indexed by the balaclavas that the police around him wore, suggesting for many Mexican journalists a performative failure (Baranda 2014; El Universal 2017). Also, by being able to show his face, he exerted a form of personalized power, as opposed to the anonymity of the state's actors. Moreover, his and other drug traffickers' flashiness—highlighted by the confiscated money, weapons and gadgets that were exhibited alongside them—and their power, indexed by the enormous demonstration of police force deployed around them, ended up enhancing these criminals' popular charisma, tipping the balance against the state.

Figure 28: Edgar Valdés Villarreal, aka "la Barbie," during his "Presentation" in 2010 (Source: Unión Jalisco Journal)

The appeal of kingpins like Valdés draws on a centuries-old appeal that brings together revolutionary energies, fantasies of social mobility, criminal charisma, and commodified bling. The press and an abundant cultural production have long constructed old and new bandits' fame by circulating spectacular stories that depict them as popular heroes, due to their capacity to

escape and mock the state, confront the US's imperial power (O'Malley 1986; Pérez Montfort 1997; Vanderwood 1981, 2004), and experience spectacular social mobility, becoming embodiments of capitalist consumption and transgressive power. Taking and embellishing circulating knowledge, folk cultural products present tales of drug traffickers' ascent from poor peasants to rich and powerful kingpins, celebrating their astuteness and bravery, and their confrontation or collusion with state officials (Astorga 1995). For Astorga, the stark (ethical and aesthetic) distinction between the state's and folk cultural depictions of drug traffickers is crucial. While state "presentations" of arrested drug traffickers, which Calderón put at the center of public life, have long sought to display them as/through the idea of the subjugated criminal—dirty and disheveled, just as Lendo imagined them—popular culture construes them as characters worthy of fascination, admiration, and fear (Astorga 1995).

During the drug war, drug traffickers' mythical fame has circulated more widely, in music as well as in television (as I explore in Chapter 3), film, the press, social media, and clothing brands. While this indexicality is partly negated by the framing of his "presentation" in the press conference—indeed, he had to be displayed as a triumph on the federal forces' part—his aura cannot be fully negated.

As a result, in the opinion of journalists and members of the presidency that followed Calderón, Enrique Peña Nieto's (2012-2018), these press conferences helped promote, even if inadvertently, the appeal of drug traffickers. Against Calderón's accusations that the press put forth an apology for crime (*apología del crimen*) by mass mediating criminals' acts, Calderón was now being accused of making an apology for crime by producing spectacles out of criminals' arrests. The spectacles empowered these figures by presenting them "as if they were relevant members of society" (Baranda 2014). And indeed, these criminals were relevant for the

performance of state power. But it also demonstrated that the spheres of charismatic power, the criminals' and the state's, were not so cleanly separable.

Indeed, in Peña Nieto's Secretary of the Interior's opinion, these conferences caused "our children and youth [to see criminality] as aspirational: 'I'd like to be like him, handle that huge weapon, face the police, have ill-gotten money'" (Ibid; see also Riva Palacio 2010). Note the multiple meanings of this notion, "face the police:" not only criminals' ability to *show* their faces and not *lose* face, but rather the opposite: *face off* against the police, even if the latter appear to have "won." Peña Nieto's administration not only ended these press conferences, but also avoided broadcasting drug traffickers' names, faces, and assets as much as possible.

A second affective force relates to the fallout from drug trafficking violence. The emergence of social movements of victims' relatives highlighted the mass victimization caused by the government's militarized strategy, challenging President Calderón's criminalization or dismissal of victims as "collateral damage" (Sicilia and Vázquez 2018) (see the Conclusion). Against Calderón's articulation of the "drug war" between the state, on behalf of "good" Mexicans, and "bad" criminals, whose death was supposed to be a necessary sacrifice for the greater good, these movements recognized victimhood through the grief of victims' relatives—regardless of their involvement in the drug business or lack thereof—and the impunity that largely surrounds such crimes. Moreover, these movements articulated the first collective voices to hold the state publicly accountable for the ongoing violence. They condemned the launching of a war by public institutions "that do not protect citizens' security, but are rather coopted in many ways, and in many other ways are one with criminals—a situation that has put the country in a state of national emergency," as the leader of a prominent victims' movement, Javier Sicilia, once declared (Ibid).

Like the 18th century European state spectacle of public execution of the regicide that opens Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1995), the mass victimization produced by the "drug war" linked the state and the violence against which it was allegedly fighting, indeed, as its ultimate cause. The state's use of force, which was not only directed at criminals, but also ended up impacting the broader population, eventually proved "to equal, if not to exceed, in savagery the crime [of the drug business] itself, to accustom the spectators to a ferocity from which one wished to divert them" (Foucault 1995: 9; see also Eiss 2014). As a result, this spectacle—which was the way the state sought the "war on drug trafficking" to be publicly understood and felt—helped to give drug traffickers the characteristics of Benjamin's great criminal: a figure capable of arousing the public's admiration by virtue of bearing witness to and confronting forms of state violence (Benjamin 1978) that had minimal legitimacy left. If the state bears much of the responsibility for the violence perpetrated against the people, then the drug trafficker could appear to be on their side.

Although Peña Nieto's administration avoided as much as possible referring to the drug world and sought to decrease the military's confrontation with drug cartels, it was affected by the crisis unleashed by the drug war and the increasingly visible participation of state security forces in the violence targeting Mexican citizens. It was during Peña Nieto's presidency (in September of 2014) that 43 college students were "disappeared" in the southern town of Iguala, which involved local police and the military. With the slogan "*Fue el estado*" ("The state did it"), this event led to the most infamous instance of the drug war and the clearest public accusation of the state's responsibility in its violence, even in ways that resonate with Mexico's authoritarian past of political repression (see Escalante and Canseco 2019). This was accompanied by two large-scale scandals of corruption involving the president and his close allies.

For the 2018-2026 presidential race, López Obrador inaugurated a political party named *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*, or Movement for National Regeneration, MORENA. His platform divided Mexico's political spectrum into two, discursively bringing the PRI and PAN together into the PRIAN, implying that both parties shared the vices of the authoritarian period, particularly its systematic corruption and the illicit enrichment of its officers, in addition to the infamous neoliberalization of the economy they brought about. A major part of his presidential platform was the promise of bringing justice to the culprits of a trail of acts of corruption accumulated over the last few decades—acts that involved as much the private pocketing of public funds as collusion between state officials and organized crime. In sum, AMLO has defined his political predecessors as criminals, from which he has sought to radically distinguish himself.

In 2018, AMLO won with more than 53% of the votes. During his campaign and the early months of his presidency, he manifested that the state must, and would, demilitarize public security tasks, while seeking to put the violence that accompanied the "drug war" securely in the past. As president-elect, he and his cabinet members met with victims' organizations throughout the country. While the latter demanded justice in the form of police investigations, trials, and imprisonment for perpetrators—in the face of overwhelming levels of impunity—the officials instead encouraged them to forgive those (often unidentified) perpetrators, which led to strong criticism. Early in his presidency, in February of 2019, he declared the end of the "war on drug trafficking" during one of his morning press conferences, even as violence has continued to escalate.

AMLO's administration has also informed periodically, although with decreasing frequency, about crime figures, put forth an amnesty bill for minor crimes, and has publicly given

information about its search efforts for the tens of thousands of people who disappeared. It has also focused its efforts on the investigation of a selection of watershed events of drug war-related violence, mainly the 43 students' disappearance discussed above. However, despite his promise of demilitarization, AMLO's presidency has gradually increased the role of the military in public security, first through the creation of a National Guard and later by completely legalizing the army's undertaking of policing tasks. In so doing, AMLO has continued, in several ways, President Calderón's public security policy, which was heavily criticized for raising the number of homicides to the highest in Mexico's recent history, along with countless human rights violations and disappearances, while it failed to reduce the power of drug trafficking organizations. AMLO has, moreover, given increasingly large public administration tasks to the Armed Forces, an unprecedented shift in Mexican history.

However, the president has been careful to maintain a discourse around security and "drug war" violence that can be condensed in his slogan "hugs, rather than bullets" (*abrazos, no balazos*). As he argues, his presidency's acts of redistribution and moral virtue—in stark contrast with the massive corruption that he situates in the past—will render future criminality unnecessary by attacking the structural causes, rather than the effects of crime. The INDEP is meant to be a clear instance of these political practices and a way of signaling this moral stance. In fact, the ways in which the INDEP's spectacle has been designed are closely related to the spectacle that inaugurated the "drug war." Its planners seem to have taken lessons from the performative failure of President Calderón's (2006-2012) attempt to align public sympathies with his efforts to battle crime.

It is in relation to these ambivalent inversions—from state as protector to perpetrator of violence; of the drug trafficker as negative to positive figure; of rituals of shame to spectacles of

glamour; from the war on drug trafficking to the promotion of drug traffickers—that President López Obrador has configured his populist performance, as we shall see. Seeking to establish a powerful affective connection with "the people," he sought to reclaim sovereign power by rearticulating the signs that indexed the state's relation to criminality in order to redirect their appeal. Since the divide that Calderón had attempted to establish between the Mexican nation and criminals failed, AMLO has attempted to reposition the drug trade, now in partial (and partially concealed) alignment with his image. This, I argue, is what the INDEP's spectacle is attempting to do, to which I turn next.

The Spectacle of Criminal Affect

As the auction was about to start that morning at Los Pinos, attendees moved from the surrounding patio, where the luxury cars were displayed, into the large white canopy located in the middle, where the auction takes place. Inside, a stage was installed at one end, with two podiums where the two auctioneers positioned themselves. Two large screens on both sides of the wall behind them would show the images of the goods as they were auctioned. Before the auction began, a video played on the screens, reminding attendees of the spirit of this event. Over a background of hopeful music, some of the beneficiaries of past auctions were shown, including young indigenous musicians and athletes who had participated in the 2019 Pan-American Games. Two off-screen voices encouraged the audience of potential buyers: "Let's make the impossible happen by helping those in need: those who, with their talent, strengthen our Mexican identity. Those who fight to reach their goals and inspire others to achieve the impossible. And all this, thanks to you." Then, some of the earliest beneficiaries of this program, residents of the country's poorest municipalities in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, gave thanks. The video ended by showing the name and logo of the INDEP.

It wasn't until January 2020 that the INDEP's acronym in large letters welcomed visitors at the entrance of the canopy, after the president had his wish to change this institution's name granted by Congress, despite much reticence from the opposition. As previously mentioned, the SAE (*Servicio de Administración y Enajenación de Bienes* or Office for the Management and Transfer of Goods) had long held auctions of confiscated goods, but had done it behind closed doors, with no publicity, as one of its numerous routine administrative tasks. The INDEP continues to carry out these tasks and hold those other unpublicized auctions.

Prior to the auction, Rodríguez, the INDEP's director, gave a brief press conference. He began by thanking the press for their coverage. "These auctions, and the name of the institute behind them," he began, "are the true mission and spirit of the Fourth Transformation. The president's vision and the effort of those working at the INDEP," he continued, "are to take economic resources to the most marginalized communities in the country, and to give grants to Olympic and Paralympic athletes."

As the auction begins, inside the canopy, to the right, are a few large tables with INDEP employees and their laptops, doing paperwork for bidders. Journalists covering the auctions stand nearby, close to a dozen cameras set towards the middle of the stage, to the left of a small stand that gives out snacks and drinks to all attendees. The entrance beyond the press and snack areas, to the couple of hundred chairs set before the stage, is open to the public, although intended for bidders. They are easily identifiable, holding bidding paddles inside tote bags bearing the INDEP logo. Most onlookers—a couple dozen at a time, Sunday strollers at Los Pinos or passersby—usually stand outside the short fences on one edge of the canopy, barely covering themselves from the sun. They are most entertained—and entertaining—when the bidding is lively, cheering and applauding, enhancing the festive and lighthearted mood of the

auctions. While the mood quickly becomes unexciting when the goods auctioned are less extravagant, such as dilapidated trailers or tons of cardboard boxes, or when goods have no bids, organizers have worked to sustain some excitement throughout these several hours-long events by interspersing goods with no demand with those which garner more attention. While most news outlets only broadcast summarized versions of the auctions, official media transmits the entire event through YouTube. The auctions are thus meant to be a spectacle for those on site as well as for an online audience. It must then be able to sustain people's engagement at any time.

Even if they stay and watch for short periods, onlookers seem curious and entertained. They may direct a curious glance at those who just purchased a good that seemingly indexes the drug trade. For instance, some of the houses whose auctions I witnessed were in towns where drug cartels have a well-known, longstanding presence. In one auction, for example, a middle-aged, fashionably but casually dressed woman wearing a hat, sunglasses, and expensive-looking jewelry bought two Jaguars and a $100,000 house in Culiacán, Sinaloa. Later that morning, a young, working-class looking young man bought a $50,000 house in the same town. They both attracted many inquisitive glances as their winning bids were announced. Most of the other goods, however, bought by middle- or upper-class looking bidders, or purchased over the phone, generally attract less attention.

The INDEP's director repeatedly referred to many of the confiscated goods as *fifí* [posh, preppy], aligning the institute's practices with the president's broader project of articulating a "people" opposed to the conservatives, whom he has described as *fifís* themselves, through these implicit contrasts: posh (*fifí*)/the "people," luxury goods/profits made from their auction, corruption/honesty, leftists/conservatives (*fifís*). Speaking of the auctioned goods' origin, AMLO has recurrently mentioned state corruption, a term he has long associated with the former

regime—which he has defined as *la mafia del poder*, the "power mafia" or "mafia in power"—but he has also made comments that just as easily could be referencing drug trafficking. For instance, during the announcement of an upcoming jewelry exhibit and auction in one of his morning press conferences, AMLO stated that those pieces, "even with all that value [and] luxury, they are nothing but eccentricities… cheap luxury that probably produces fleeting happiness, because true happiness is being at peace with oneself, our conscience, and our neighbor."

After the president's words, the INDEP's director proceeded to describe some of the most notorious of these pieces, starting with a men's 150,000 USD Piaget watch (see Fig. 29). "Why is that Piaget watch so expensive? … That brand has seduced Jackie Kennedy, Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren, which gives you an idea of the brand itself, but besides that, the diamond cut… we're talking about 200 embedded diamonds, more or less… This feature… obviously makes it quite an extravagant watch." After describing some other pieces, he argued that they couldn't be found in the market, only at the INDEP's auctions, because of their custom additions (like those embedded diamonds). These pieces of jewelry are thus not just luxury objects consumed by global elites, carrying a negative moral value of excessive accumulation in the face of an impoverished "people." The added diamonds allude to an excess stereotypically associated with drug trafficking-related aesthetics, signaling a rapid and transgressive accumulation of massive amounts of wealth.

Figure 29: Image and Description of Men's Piaget Watch and Embedded Diamonds (Source: INDEP auction Catalog)

A few other objects listed in the auction catalog—including two gold gun handle ornaments with 580 diamonds, worth 7,500 USD, a 2,000 USD gold bullet-shaped pendant with 450 black diamonds, and a 13,500 USD watch with 385 diamonds on images of marijuana leaves—bore motifs that indexically invoke the drug trade (see Fig. 30). In its description of these objects, however, the catalog does not mention this rather explicit reference. Instead, it describes these objects through their materials. Similarly, the previous owner of the Piaget watch—which, incidentally, could not be sold—was not disclosed beyond a brief statement saying that the case files related to its confiscation were under the control of the Attorney General's Office. Thus, while the origins of these objects are systematically effaced, a general imagination of the drug business as a world of luxury and economic success is still indexically invokable through them.

Figure 30: Gun Handle Ornaments, Pendant, and Watch (Source: INDEP Auction Catalog)

While on the one hand, the INDEP is careful not to reproduce the association between luxury and drug trafficking by not displaying drug traffickers' names or bodies alongside these objects, on the other hand they cannot fail but reproduce, and perhaps even amplify, this pre-existing association in and through these spectacles. They do so not just through their circulation, but also because such emblems of wealth are detached from otherwise negative images tied to the drug business (such as its grueling violence or the shame of arrest) and instead presented as sanitized signs of success even if, despite the state's attempts, they are still presupposed as indexically connected to the drug business. The objects used to showcase the auctions are thus not just commodities but resonant metonyms of whole worlds which they contain and project.

Not all the auctioned goods are exuberant jewelry or cars, however, nor do they originate solely from the drug business. As an INDEP employee told me while she explained to me the bureaucratic process that these goods must undergo, they may have been seized from drug trafficking or corruption. The fact that confiscated goods which originated in either kind of offense can be auctioned off in these spectacles stems from an extensive legal interpretation of the notion of "organized crime" under AMLO. This move promotes the idea that the corruption of previous administrations is a form of organized crime, perhaps the most relevant form for his ideological project. However, as the INDEP's director reluctantly told me during an interview, a good portion of the goods available for auctioning do come from drug trafficking. While the state attempts to suppress such indexical meanings, information about the origin of some of the goods, especially the flashiest and most expensive ones, inevitably travels through what a journalist described to me as *radiopasillo*, or word of mouth (literally, "radio of the hallway"). When I asked police officers working at the event, journalists covering it, or INDEP employees, they all knew about the goods' former owners. The biography of these goods is thus not publicized, but neither is it secret.

The auctioned objects, however, are not meant to possess a single moral valence. Rather, an interference is expected to be produced through the multiple audiences to which the objects displayed and auctioned are directed. On the one hand, there is AMLO's audience, who are expected to see such goods as "bad" in some respect, and thus understand their being sold as a moral rectification. As we shall see in more detail below, the auctions' intended audience are those who observe and may thereby become convinced—or perhaps reaffirm their conviction—of the state's symbolic, and thus material, transformation, and thus continue supporting AMLO's project with their vote. In this, AMLO has been remarkably successful: a notable feature of the

current administration's discursive construction has been its ability to articulate a (large but shrinking) public that loyally aligns with it. This fact contrasts with a public sphere that has been defined by cynicism for decades, perhaps with some fleeting moments of hope—such as the advent of electoral democracy in 2000—but which quickly turned into disappointment. For its part, journalism has long been either largely opposed to power or subjected to the state's capacity to control it through the purchase of publicity and at times outright censorship. As historian Vanessa Freije notes, during the second half of the 20th century and beyond, some of journalism's most important political work in Mexico has consisted of the exposure of illegal acts committed by state officials: corruption, fraud, and extrajudicial violence, among others (Freije 2020). In contrast, Mexico's public sphere during AMLO's administration—in the form of his daily press conferences and discussions with and among journalists, public intellectuals, and active Twitter users, for instance, and even in private conversations among friends and relatives—AMLO's supporters and critics are opposed with increasing strength.

This opposition was replicated among the auctions' attendees, many of whom were journalists covering the auctions for their outlets' publics. Some echoed the president's words in their assessment during our conversations. One such instance involved the journalists from the small, independent medium *Rata Política* (literally, Political Rat), who used rat puppets as their news anchors. They explained the name by arguing that only rats—slang for thieves—could make sense of the kind of rats that Mexican politicians are. One of their colleagues told me that he had never seen an auction like this in his 30-year-long career. "The people cannot be poor while the government is not only rich, but also extravagant," he told me. He strongly approved of this redistribution, and mentioned the municipality where his mother lived, in eastern Mexico, where the roads were full of potholes and there was hardly any water or electricity.

Others related to this spectacle with the old cynicism of earlier administrations. Such was the case, for instance, of a handful of other journalists sent to cover the auctions by larger news outlets, like Mexico's public news agency Notimex or second-largest network TV Azteca. One of them told me that, in his opinion, the auctions were a mere publicity stunt. He then recounted an anecdote that meant to show that this government was no different from the PRI and its 70-year rule, since it also purchased the semblance of massive public support. Like that party would do back in its day, MORENA, the ruling partly, had paid people to attend the 2019 presidential speech. He and his neighbors had been offered 50 USD to attend it and 20 more if he convinced 10 more people to go. He found the auctions to be a good idea but said that the government needed to act on those good ideas, rather than having corrupt politicians in it, like Marcelo Ebrard and Manuel Bartlett—the Foreign Secretary and Director of the Federal Electricity Commission. Like AMLO, these two men began their political careers in the PRI, the former regime they now so starkly meant to oppose, although they did so less than successfully for spectators like this reporter.

Others echoed this argument and noticed the absence of goods related to well-known scandals of corruption, which have not been few and have been frequently discussed during AMLO's administration, given the promise of justice that helped bring him to power. For a couple of other journalists that I spoke to, the goods of former corrupt officials would have better served to exemplify the spirit of the Institute. One of them expressed his skepticism of the spectacle he witnessed by questioning whether the INDEP lived up to its name, doubting that the goods being auctioned had in fact been stolen, since they were confiscated from drug traffickers, and whether the "people" were truly benefiting. "Have you received any transfers on your bank account from this?" he asked me, a fellow Mexican citizen and thus, he considered, a member of

the Mexican "people" who deserved a retribution. His colleague then mentioned that he used to have faith in AMLO. He had covered the president's many tours around the country and seen how people believed in his message. But he now thinks that this spectacle is only meant to collect money for social programs, which in turn have electoral purposes, just like the PRI would do during its time.

The journalist's questioning of the stolen quality of the goods illuminates the ambiguity underlying the spectacle's indexical operations. For instance, AMLO's expansive notion of criminality, which is mobilized in this spectacle, is embodied in three different figures. First is the figure of the politicians of the past, defined as squanderers and corrupt. Second is the figure of the successful drug trafficker, the former owner of the flashy displayed commodities that make the auctions newsworthy. And third is AMLO's administration as the generous bandit. Something similar occurs with the idea of the state—which is embodied by both these corrupt former officials and AMLO's presidency—and the "people"—which raises the questions of who belongs in it and what are its terms of exclusion. Thus, managing these entities as needed poses problems.

Crucial for understanding these journalists' position is also the fact that, in Mexico, political ritual, such as the present spectacle, has historically been linked to corruption (Lomnitz 1995). As Claudio Lomnitz has argued, against the backdrop of an incomplete and fractured public sphere, or even before its advent, political ritual has been the means through which the vitality of both the collectivity and the state are manifested (Ibid: 41). Corruption enters the picture because the patrons of these rituals, which would often take the form of fiestas, had control over local branches of the state (Ibid: 22). In other words, local elites would participate in rituals that materialize political communities under the condition that they appropriate the state and extend

some of the benefits of such an appropriation to the collectivity (Ibid: 41). For these skeptical journalists, then, AMLO's auctions may only constitute another instance of these old-time political rituals and thus involve the corrupt practices that would underwrite them. Instead of signaling a radical transformation, this staging of the relation between the president and the "people" may be just the symbolic counterpart of a more pragmatic arrangement in which AMLO appropriates the state for private gain in exchange for distributing a few perks in the form of social programs.

Coming back to the discussion of the auctioned objects' and their forms of valuation, let's consider how this spectacle also intends them to be seen as "good," desirable in some way. For some attendees, their origin among the possessions of famous kingpins could increase their value, although it also had, as I describe below, the opposite effect. However, for most of the buyers I spoke to—while a considerable portion of them, especially those buying the most expensive goods, bid anonymously over the phone—the desirability of the auctioned goods consisted in their price, which is below market value. For instance, a middle-aged, middle-class looking man from Mexico City who was there to purchase a $4,000 van told me he bought and sold cars for a living and had thus attended these auctions for over a decade, long before they were rebranded and mass mediated. Those auctions were also public, but only attended by those interested in the goods. He recognized several other buyers who were regular attendees as well. It made no difference to him, he said, whether these cars were previously owned by criminals or a crime had been committed in them. He knew they had an illegal past, since the Attorney General's Office had seized them, he told me, but he did not agree that they necessarily were stolen from the people, as the INDEP's name made explicit, since their former owners may have

purchased them with their own money and had them seized for a variety of reasons, including tax-related debts.

Among the several buyers I spoke to, I found one who told me she was there with the purpose of advancing the president's project. As she later told me, she was a Congresswoman from AMLO's party, MORENA, which certainly indicated that his political goals largely aligned with her own. But this did not oblige her to partake in the auction by spending her own money on a luxury good. Neither did she have to defend the president from other persons' dismissal of the event, which is why I found her enthusiastic stance surprising. As potential buyers were standing in line to register as bidders before the auction started, I approached a couple of them who were talking about the auctions. One of them told me that he thought this was all a show, since the percentage of the federal budget destined to alleviate poverty is infinitely superior to the money collected in these auctions. He was critical of the present administration, which for him strongly resembles the PRI, but mentioned he had no party affiliation. To this, the Congresswoman, standing close enough to eavesdrop on our conversation, responded that he clearly did not sound as if he didn't belong to any party. As has become common for the president's sympathizers, who often followed his outlining of the political spectrum, this woman considered critics of the administration to be members of the opposition. For her, it was crucial to support the fundamental political transformation that the country was undergoing, which was indexed in the performative operations carried out in these auctions and subsequent events, to which we turn next.

Purifying the People's Wealth

The Mondays after the auctions take place, the INDEP's director usually presents their results: at the president's daily press conference, he announces the amount of money earned and reiterates its destination. Days later, representatives of chosen beneficiary groups or communities are often invited to the same press conference for a ceremony in which they are usually handed lottery-like giant checks, followed by speeches praising and thanking the president and a photo shoot. In this part of the spectacle, the confiscated goods have undergone a ritual of purification in which the commodities that index criminality have been transformed into a set of goods that can index a virtuous life under the president's patronage, as we will see shortly. In this ritual of purification, the "matter out of place" (Douglas 2002[1966]) is not just misplaced wealth: the extravagance of these goods indexes the immorality of the practices through which this wealth was accumulated. The transformation of luxury cars and diamond watches into economic resources for the poor is also an act of moral valuation and exchange. For example, the first few checks of these auctions' earnings were directed to the construction of rural roads in some of the poorest municipalities of the country and then to Pan-American Games medalists, who index exceptional Mexicans who become world-class athletes with their own, often precarious, resources.

A few months later, young members of traditional music orchestras from the Mixe indigenous people (in the state of Oaxaca) were invited to receive musical instruments from the money earned in the latest auction. On this occasion, the president introduced the event by stating: "I have said this many times before: a flute is a million times better than a rifle [*una flauta es un millón de veces mejor que un fusil*]." AMLO thus underscored the superior moral value of music vis-à-vis the drug trade as embodiments of two potential activities in which

members of "the people" could engage, as he exchanged one for the other. The director of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI) then celebrated that, after a recent visit to the Mixe region, the president had signed a decree that gives the Center for Musical Training and Mixe Cultural Development (CECAM) official recognition and funding. These young men and women were ideal beneficiaries not only because their indigeneity made them quintessential embodiments of "the people," as they are in the national imagination, but also because they could instantiate the more virtuous path to get ahead rather than the false, fleeting happiness that, according to the president, the drug trade had to offer. AMLO rewarded those whom he sees as morally pure by choosing them as beneficiaries, while also offering a moral example to his audience. Thus, two forms of purification are attempted here. First, in opposition to *both* wealthy drug traffickers and corrupt politicians of the past, the state under AMLO figures itself as a generous bandit stripped from, and opposed to, all the negative connotations attached to the idea of criminality. Second, he seeks to purify "the people" by redirecting its path away from the seductive but immoral drug business.

Later in the press conference, an orchestra of around forty young musicians, dressed in traditional clothes, played a few pieces. After this, some of them were called to the stage in pairs to receive an instrument each and take a picture with the president (see Fig. 31), getting rounds of applause—which rarely occurs during these press conferences. This event, like all weekday morning press conferences, was broadcast live on the president's YouTube channel and several news outlets.

Figure 31: AMLO and INPI Director Posing for a Photo with Representatives of an Oaxacan Youth Orchestra (Source: AMLO's YouTube channel)

Speaking of the state of Oaxaca, where many of the INDEP's beneficiaries have come from, the president stated:

> [communities in Oaxaca] have an exemplary social organization. Authorities offer their services for free. Assemblies decide what the municipal government will do. These are places where mutual help is practiced the most [in the form] of non-remunerated community work [*tequio*]. The culture and organization of indigenous towns and communities in Oaxaca and the country are something truly exceptional… We will be [combatting past corruption] with the people's participation, following a premise: the Mexican people are an honest people. Corruption occurs [among the rich], it doesn't go upwards [from the poor to the rich].

As of mid-2020, the federal government was still in the process of conforming a "social cabinet" with members of different secretariats, which will be legally responsible for institutionalizing this process of redistribution. So far, decisions on how the INDEP's money circulates have been heavily influenced by the president's wishes. For instance, several months after the event with the young musicians, I spoke with their school's principal, Aristeo Vázquez,

on the process of receiving this aid. I asked him how his school was chosen as this program's beneficiary. He replied,

> The [gifting of the] musical instruments [was] arranged earlier, when we participated in the event of September 15 [Independence Day]. The invitation was made by the INPI [the National Institute for Indigenous Peoples, whose director is from the Mixe region]. We participated in the *grito* [the president's reenactment of the call to arms] and the president said, "We must support this school, because it comes from an indigenous community…" We kept the 7 instruments we were given [during the ceremony at the National Palace] in our school [and are yet to be handed the rest that was promised] ... CECAM teaches following indigenous principles. […] That way of teaching has made us stand out. That is one of the reasons why I think the president may have chosen us.

As I later found out, the Mixes have been recipients of state aid from at least the time of the Revolution, at the turn of the 20th century. The choice of the Mixe school of music thus makes AMLO's spectacle resonate even more with the political ritual discussed above, as the journalist suggested: the indigenous musicians serve to reinforce the idea of AMLO as "the people's" president and they in turn showcase their artistic talents and receive new state aid. Moreover, from this point onwards, the life of the redistributed wealth receives remarkably little public attention, perhaps because of its lack of novelty and thus newsworthiness, even in the president's own social media.

This is not to say, however, that this spectacle does not break from older forms of ritual political communication. In fact, it is its novelty—and what the current administration seeks to showcase as its own novelty—that is under the spotlight. Beyond seeking to establish a form of patronage for the president, we have seen how the spectacle aims to address the problem of drug trafficking, which has introduced itself in several ways into the relation between the state and the citizens. But choosing to do so by ritually purifying the wealth that indexes the drug trade has its shortcomings, as do AMLO's attempts to distinguish himself from previous embodiments of the state discussed above. Such shortcomings were made evident, for instance, during the auction's

opening press conference mentioned early in this chapter. When director Rodríguez opened the floor to questions from the press, journalists took the opportunity to discuss aspects of the relationship between these goods and drug trafficking. They posed questions like: "Isn't there fear on the part of potential buyers that they might be threatened by organized crime?" "…have you had trouble selling goods [that belonged to] organized crime?" to which Rodríguez replied,

> …there have been no complaints… I recently mentioned that we sold an apartment in Morelos that was truly hard to sell because of its story, what is behind it- even the traces that remained in it… in this institute's history, these houses have been bought because there is a good opportunity to purchase them, and not as much to preserve their stories.

If invoking use and exchange value could efface this house's history of violence and what such violence indexes, then the state would be able to appropriate the house's value, which it has taken from the drug trafficker. However, the indexical value of violence lingers, and it does so because of the structure of the purification ritual itself. If one thinks about ritual as the instantiation of the cosmic or normative in the here-and-now, then one might describe this ritual as involving necessarily entangled, but competing, cosmic regimes: (a) one that invokes the world of drug traffickers and their wealth, success, and bravery; and (b) one that invokes the charity of the state and its populism. Both are necessarily entangled because (b) is achieved by purifying (a); but also because one cannot do (b) without displaying (a), and despite all attempts to efface the value or indexical meaning of such goods, this cannot be done, precisely because it would no longer be a purification ritual. The ritual, thus, presupposes precisely the value it attempts to undermine, and in doing so always partially reproduces it, indeed, reinvigorates it. And it does this because, for such goods to produce value to be gifted to the people, they must be promoted, glamorized; and in so doing reproduce what is known about such goods: that they are

the fruits of the drug business. When so displayed, the cosmos of drug traffickers can resist the attempts to channel it in the directions that the state seeks.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the public auctioning of goods confiscated from organized crime by the INDEP through a populist spectacle conceived by Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). It has explored how the presence of drug trafficking impacts the ways in which a populist formation renders its signifiers concrete and deploys its affective force. In so doing, it has argued for the relevance of indexicality in populist spectacle.

As we saw, AMLO's administration has branded itself as a radical political transformation with respect to past embodiments of the state and what he has condemned as their criminal practices. For the president, these criminal practices are broadly encompassing, from acts like squandering or deviation of public funds to collusion with drug traffickers and state violence. Crucially, the performative strategy that he orchestrated responded to previous administrations' unsuccessful framing of the "war on drug trafficking." The failures in this framing were partly indexical, since they demonstrated an inability to see how broader contexts were carried over that challenged how such framing put forth the distinction between the state and organized crime, their positions as "good" and "evil," the state's role in the violence ravaging the country, and its depiction of drug traffickers as subjugated criminals.

AMLO's performative strategy would then address these shortcomings by transforming and mobilizing the idea of criminality, its affective force, and the ways in which it was attached to certain characters. Importantly, this spectacle sought to indirectly index drug trafficking (Ochs 1992) to harness its charisma for his populist project. This was done through a careful interplay of revelation and concealment that could mobilize certain aspects of criminality through objects,

affects, and imaginaries that index it while keeping others at bay. A purification ritual was carried out to transform property originated in crime into public resources, which the state in turn redistributed to those in need. In so doing, AMLO sought to establish a direct, compelling, and authoritative relation to "the people."

However, this new performative arrangement had failures of its own, which were also indexical. First, AMLO's intention to radically distinguish his administration from its corrupt predecessors was met with skepticism due to the INDEP spectacle's resonances with old-time political rituals, which were underpinned by corruption. That is, AMLO's spectacle of redistribution was interpreted by some not as an uninterested and systematic transference of wealth, but rather as an appropriation of the state for private gain in exchange for the distribution of some of its benefits (Lomnitz 1995). As a result, some have taken AMLO to be more of the same—indistinguishable from the former state officials-cum-criminals he condemns.

Second, the president's intention to harness drug traffickers' charisma by mobilizing the figure of the generous bandit and displaying their former extravagant possessions required the simultaneous avowal and negation of the drug trade as an integral part of his spectacle. However, the drug trade becomes visible in this spectacle not only through its charisma and wealth, but also through its massive and generalized violence, which constitutes one of the most significant political problems in contemporary Mexico and which the current administration has failed to properly address. The semiotic operations that compose this spectacle, then, prove to be incapable of separating the appealing from the unwelcome features of the drug trade, and thus to harness its charisma unpolluted.

The case analyzed in this chapter shows that the signifiers that must be rendered concrete in populist spectacle (Cody 2015; Mazzarella 2019) are often more complex and variegated than

what is required to convey a message. The framing of populist spectacle thus spills beyond itself, onto multiple contexts, and thus meanings and affective forces. Indexicality, then, underpins its success as well as its failure.

Conclusion:

The Politics of Concealment and Revelation

In late January of 2020, the *Movimiento para la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity), a mobilization that emerged in 2011 and was the first to bring the victims of the drug war to center stage, reappeared on the public scene with a three-day event of protest. This movement had become famous in part for challenging then-president Calderón's (2006-2012) dismissal of the increasing homicide rates as "criminals killing each other" early into the drug war. Instead, as we shall see, they depicted the victims of murder and disappearance through the pain of their loved ones. This movement made enormous impact and eventually lost force partly due to internal differences of opinion about the appropriateness of the use of the military to combat organized crime.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, one of candidate López Obrador's (AMLO) presidential promises was to solve the country's crisis of violence, a promise that raised the hopes of many, and certainly had a role in his eventual victory. As we saw, however, his strategy, rather than addressing the issue of violence per se, seemed to be largely geared at its representation. The concrete demands for justice of the *Movimiento por la Paz* were ignored once AMLO took power. Thus, events like the brutal massacre of nine members (all women and children) of a family from a border town in Chihuahua, the LeBaróns, regrouped the movement's energies into a *caminata*, or march, which made its way from the nearby town of Cuernavaca (the hometown of one of its leaders, Javier Sicilia) to Mexico City.

The second day of the events, sympathizers gathered in the esplanade surrounding the *Estela de Luz* (Stele of Light), a monument built on Reforma Avenue by President Calderón to commemorate the bicentennial of the Independence and centennial of the Revolution, and which

has been resignified into the *Estela de Paz* (Stele of Peace) by the movement. Its members have nailed small metal plaques to the floor, recounting the story of victims of murder and disappearance from the past few years, the former in red letters, and the latter in green letters, a color that, as I was told, symbolizes hope.

Figure 32: Plaque on the Floor of the Esplanade (Photo by Author)

Note: The text reads "I am Salvador Trujillo Herrera. I was [forcibly] disappeared in Atoyac de Álvarez, Guerrero, on August 28, 2008 at 24 years of age. I am a cheerful, quiet, and hardworking man. My greatest happiness has been to be with my family, my wife Mari Carmen and my son Jesús Salvador. When I was disappeared, my daughter María Guadalupe was still in her mother's womb. We haven't met physically but I know that my presence is awaited with love. / My brother Raúl, my coworkers Joel, Flavio, José Luis, Luis Carlos and Rafael and I were back from working in Oaxaca and went through Guerrero to get home in Michoacán when a criminal group that was fighting for a turf in Guerrero disappeared us. / I know that my wife, my siblings and my mom María Herrera will look for me until they find me. When you read this, be aware that this can also happen to you; I don't want your family to suffer like mine. / With your solidarity, I demand justice and truth, help me get back home! / Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity / Salvador Trujillo Herrera, March 28, 2014." Photo by author.

Another, more ephemeral act of collective memorialization was also being put together that day. Upon arrival to the esplanade that surrounded the monument, one could see dozens and

dozens of white handkerchiefs, tied to each other by the corners with safety pins, with embroidered letters in red and green that told the stories, again, of murder and disappearance victims.


Figure 33, 34, 35: Handkerchiefs Placed at the Edge of the Esplanade and on a Table (I, II & III) (Photos by Author)

The text in the middle right reads: "A dark-skinned [*tez morena*] man, 1.65 m tall, between 25 and 30 years old, was murdered. He had a wide forehead, short hair, and was wearing a black sweatshirt with a hoodie, a polo-style shirt, and jeans. He was found by the highway between Guadalupe and Calvo Parral, on kilometer 226 + 600 m in Chihuahua. March 21, 2012. Embroidered by: Isela Vera Oranda. 3,503 / 250,000. [Would it be good to insert a sentence explaining the numbers here?] The text on the right reads: One man was killed in a shootout between the Mexican Army and an armed group in the Cumbres neighborhood, Monterrey, Nuevo León, [illegible] 24, 2011." Photos by author.

A few meters away, two large plastic tables had been set where a group of women were embroidering some more of them, which they would carry the next day at the protest. They belonged to an activist collective that sought to embroider a handkerchief for each one of the victims of violence. The news was the source of many of these descriptions, so they were often anonymous and somewhat impersonal: "*cuatro hombres fueron ejecutados mientras viajaban en un taxi en la colonia Lomas de la Laguna. Tepic, Nayarit. 19/diciembre/2010*" (four men were executed while riding a taxi in the Lomas de la Laguna neighborhood. Tepic, Nayarit. December 19, 2010). Others, like the plaque above, were narrated from the point of view of the victim's loved ones. This project, in the spirit of the Movement for Peace it accompanied, equalized all the victims as rightful subjects of memorialization and gave voice to a demand for truth and justice for all of them. By taking their stories out of the news and into this other circuit of

communication, this project also established an intimate connection with all the victims, as these narratives about them were displayed after a long and careful process of passing needle and thread back and forth through the lines and spaces that marked each letter in these small pieces of fabric. As opposed to the forms of knowledge production and circulation explored in this dissertation, this project and the Movement for Peace aim to cut through the epistemic murk to achieve truth and justice.

The next morning, the demonstrators met on the same esplanade and began marching. In contrast to other protests, which are enlivened by chants throughout (as we saw in the Introduction), this was a march of silence, which was only broken when the protesters reached each one of the *antimonumentos* that mark the well-trodden route that protests tend to follow towards the city's main square, the *zócalo*, the usual endpoint. The *antimonumentos* are ten counter-monuments that relatives of victims of different events of violence have erected in memory of their loved ones and as embodiments of their struggle.[1] The protesters stopped by each one of them, shouted *verdad, justicia, paz* (truth, justice, peace) ten times to pay their respects to each of the causes, and then moved on. In so doing, they expressed their solidarity and embrace of each struggle, constituting the *Movimiento para la Paz* as a universal mobilization, for all the victims of Mexico's violence. As was the case with the sign that one of the protesters held in her hands (see Fig. 37), some of the victims of disappearance remembered in this march were police officers themselves. The distinction between the state and the citizenry that is often reimagined was blurred here through the shared trauma of their absence.

[1] These antimonuments are dedicated to the 43 disappeared students; the 49 toddlers that died when a public daycare caught fire in Hermosillo, Sonora in 2009; the country's victims of femicide; the miners who died during an accident in a mine in Pasta de Conchos in 2006; and the student massacre of 1968, among others.

Figures 36 and 37: Protesters March Holding Signs with the Names and Faces of their Disappeared or Murdered Relatives (I & II) (Photos by Author)

The image on the right reads on the top "7 federal police officers and one civilian [were] disappeared on November 16, 2009 in Zitácuaro, Michoacán" and on the bottom "We don't remember them because we have never forgotten them."

As we finally reached the *zócalo*, the city's main square, a group of men and some women barged into the protest chanting pro-AMLO slogans at the top of their lungs and holding large signs in favor of the president. Their noise contrasted with and was meant to break up the march that was reaching its climax with pronouncements by their leaders. Among what they chanted was the well-known pro-AMLO slogan "*Es un honor estar con Obrador*" (It's an honor to be with [López] Obrador), or just "*Obrador*" and even "*fuera Sicilia*" (Sicilia, out!). They chanted aggressively at the protesters, sometimes positioning themselves in front of them, threateningly close, seeking to provoke equal responses. Some of them told the LeBaróns and the relatives of other victims that *they* were the true criminals. A great deal of tension resulted from this encounter. They filled the march with anger, frustration, and noise, and nearly broke it down.

Drawing on his populist politics of confrontation, AMLO and his followers accused the leaders of the *Movimiento por la Paz* of attempting to undermine his political movement, the so-called Fourth Transformation (see Chapter 4). The LeBarón family, who had recently experienced a tragedy (as mentioned above), but had a larger history of victimhood and activism, figured prominently in the protest and the movement. One of its members, Adrián LeBarón, had

attended a march against AMLO a few months back. But the other movement's leaders, such as Javier Sicilia, not only did not oppose the president, but were in fact greatly interested in working with him to begin a process of transitional justice, like those undergone after instances of mass violence in Guatemala and Colombia. As a candidate, AMLO had made promises to this movement, which he had then failed to fulfill. The Movement for Peace thus sought to hold him accountable to his promise.

This Movement did so by emphasizing the unresolved crisis of drug-war violence as a condition that marks the lives of the Mexican people. In both its past iteration of 2011—in which the movement had a stronger and longer-lasting presence in the streets and marched across a vast portion of Mexican territory—and in 2020, the Movement brought together people from all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, as well as from all parts of the country. The Movement thus mirrors the universality of victimhood in Mexico and in so doing highlights this victimhood as something that has come to define a nationally shared condition.

To some degree, the pro-AMLO campaigners were attempting to disrupt the public exposure of this fact. By inundating the march with their noise, threatening demonstrators into chaos and dispersion, they were hindering this display of the magnitude of the violence and its devastating effects. This was, then, in a way, an act of concealment—of maintaining this sight away from the public eye and thus of public discussion. This act of concealment was sealed the next morning by the president himself, who refused to receive a letter from the Movement and condemned its members as "'conservatives,'" the label for his political opponents. By AMLO'S discrediting of the speakers, their message would be discredited as well, and would then vanish. And if the message vanishes, then the president's unwillingness and incapacity to bring a solution to the violence also remains out of view. But the drug war's violence always comes back, bursting onto

the scene every so often and thus marking the limits of this attempt to suppress it. Indeed, as the president has tried to deny, minimize, or ignore the violence, its enormous affective force has punctured the news cycle every now and then and reaffirmed its place in Mexico's public consciousness. Indeed, as this dissertation has shown, the intensity of the affective force of its mediations has the power of organizing public knowledge of the drug war.

The fact that AMLO attempted to silence the protest in this way did not seem to have bothered his unprecedented—although dwindling—numbers of supporters. The president's impressive appeal perhaps stems in part from a shared exhaustion caused by years of ubiquitous violence. His promise of taking care of the violence may be fulfilled, after all, by shifting public attention to something else, as he does every day—to *anything else*, it sometimes seems, like feuds with critical journalists or absurd public policy—and suffusing the public sphere with the feeling that another reality is unfolding, one that is not marked by the drug war's mass death. Every time this bubble is burst, it is remade as the public gaze is always ushered elsewhere.

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Like the instance just described, an interplay of concealment and revelation has been at the center of the knowledge production and circulation around the drug war explored in this dissertation. As pointed out in the Introduction, the patterns of in/visibility of the drug war are largely defined by the fact that any standpoint is necessarily partial and marked by blind spots. But a selective projection of the spotlight onto certain faces of the war can sometimes be the result of agentive work, as we saw above and throughout this thesis's chapters. Concealment and revelation are thus tools through which affective attachments can be mobilized for political purposes in moments of warfare, of populism, and other forms of contemporary governance.

The patterns that an interplay of concealment and revelation can take are multiple and are recruited into a variety of projects, including the protection of cultural value, avoidance of risk, and the projection of power (e.g., Debenport 2010; Jones 2011, 2014; Melley 2012; Myers 2004; Taussig 1999; Simmel 1906). In the narratives analyzed in this dissertation, concealment has taken the form of hiding something from view as well as from discourse. These acts of concealment often take place on a large scale, and must then face the fact that what is meant to be kept secret already travels across different circuits (Jones 2014). Thus, forms of concealment take the form of dismissing and ignoring, in addition to actively silencing. Similarly, more than revelation, what most prevalently occurs in the discourses analyzed in this dissertation is the exposure and circulation of that which everyone already knows (Mazzarella 2006). It is a recirculation of what proves to resonate strongly with publics, showing how visibility is a function of a narrative's capacity to be brought to the fore and impose itself, resonate, provoke discussion.

An interplay of concealment and revelation may carry out crucial epistemic, affective, and political work, as I show throughout the different chapters. The formations of statehood and criminality traced here may be seen in part as the result of such an interaction. For example, as we saw in Chapter 1, a selective in/visibility of local criminal organizations and their relationships to political power not only serves the purpose of allowing them to conduct their business relatively undisturbed, but also as a form to regulate public communication. This concealment and revelation may produce feelings of distance and intimacy, of fear and paranoia, complicating the possibility of giving things their proper dimension (Aretxaga 2004; Jones 2014).

Selective concealment and revelation are not only expressions of power but can also be deployed as a result of anxieties around the overwhelming performative power of what is revealed: as explored in Chapter 2, the Army's display of the drug world's material culture threatens to exert such an incontrollable force that the only form of taming it is by restricting such a display to those presumed immune or those who urgently need desensitizing. Conversely, this same anxious entity can be perceived by some as a necropolitical Leviathan, as not only exerting systematic violence against its own people, but doing so by conjuring a non-existent enemy. In turn, this conspiratorial thinking, as deployed by a group of journalists and scholars, is founded upon oversights of its own, such as the reality of organized crime and the effects themselves of the epistemic murk that pervades what aims to be a total view of the drug war. Thus, concealment and revelation may follow a fractal pattern (Irvine and Gal 2000).

Revelation and concealment may then be of knowledge that is only presumed, suspected, or imagined. As Chapter 3 explores, the alleged revelation of the backstage of the drug war and the intimate lives of kingpins and politicians ends up being hopelessly enmeshed in a tangled mess of fantasy, fiction, conspiracy, and fact. This purported revelation may promote the excitement of transgression and the pleasure of sharing a demystified position, but also anxieties around the glorification of criminals and the debasement of the state through both of their representations. This may illuminate ideological problems for the state: What does it mean, for instance, to depict the drug war through the charisma of its enemy? As Chapter 4 explores, this charisma might be so powerful that the state itself might refuse to subjugate it any longer and instead attempt to mobilize it in its favor. In so doing, it illuminates how the drug war as discursively constructed may be all but completely undone, as the confrontation between these two entities has vanished even from official discourse. But the country is still immersed, and more than ever, in a crisis of

violence that is now claiming more lives of women and children, and doing so in ways that are increasingly unintelligible and unrelated to an idea of *war*, but inexplicable if not tied somehow to this conjuncture.

Moreover, this charisma, despite the Army's allegations to the contrary, is not an act of propaganda with a defined origin point in the drug world, but rather a decentered set of practices—for instance, an industry that trades with the value of a cultural figure, the drug trafficker, which in turn is part the heir of folk cultural production, national ideology, and the allure of outlawry. Thus, the drug world's appeal, however politically troublesome, travels and reverberates in the ways that capitalist value production does—colonizing every frontier, enhancing its affective force, reproducing itself endlessly. It also segments its market for those who might have a penchant for violence, even of the most gruesome kind, and those who would rather not see it.

Something that this dissertation, for its part, may have concealed at certain times or might find itself complicit in concealing is the drug war's violence. While it doubtlessly stands at the center of this entire conflict, violence has a complicated and variegated relation to revelation and concealment. In the ways explored in this dissertation and many more, Mexico's drug war constitutes a productive site to explore the myriad ways in which the affective force of violence manifests and may be mobilized or suppressed towards political, economic, and perhaps merely affective ways, with important political and ethical implications. Some of the dilemmas around the representation of violence encountered by many journalists I spoke to stem from the choice between recirculating organized crime's public displays of violence and thus amplifying their messages and exercise of power, on the one hand (Cody 2015; Eiss 2014), or aligning themselves with the president's desires for their censorship, on the other (see Chapter 4). Indeed,

a war of images constitutes another pattern of communication that may underpin or challenge the sovereign power of the state and criminal organizations, as has been explored in this dissertation. Other dilemmas resonate with old discussions about the power of images to connect or disconnect publics from others' suffering (Linfield 2010; Sontag 2003). For instance, debates are taking place in Mexico about how best to deal with images' power to revictimize by defacing (Taussig 1999) and dehumanizing victims, and the ways in which political work has been carried out to transform them into weapons of resistance, as feminist movements have done.

Displayed in the way they were by the members of the *Movimiento por la Paz*, protesters' images illuminated other relations between violence and in/visibility and their implications for other political ends like truth and justice. What is striking about this gesture is how they were presented to the state, not by accusing it of being colluded with criminal worlds or responsible for the tragedy of the drug war, but rather as the only entity that can enable aspirations for it to come to an end. Transitional justice, which begins to shimmer on the horizon due to the work done by the *Movimiento por la Paz*, might inaugurate another form of revelation, and with it a new regime of truth that could bring much-needed redress.

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