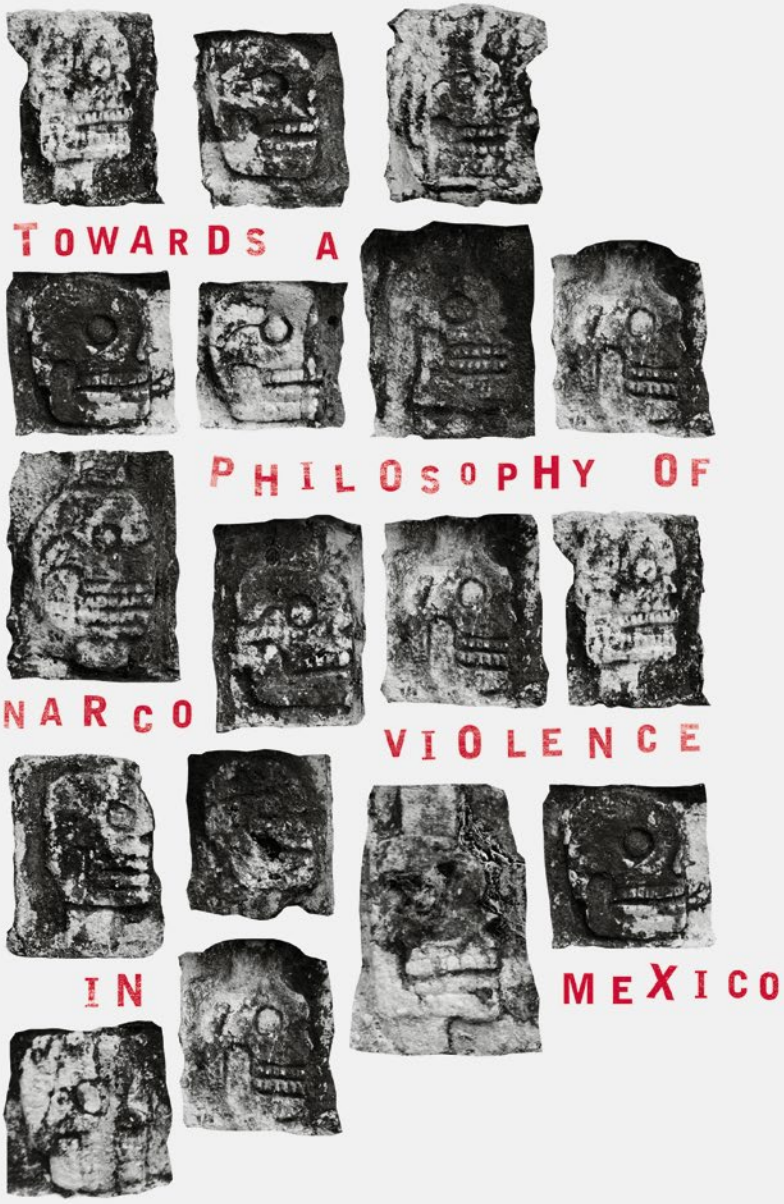

Amalendu Misra

Towards a Philosophy of Narco Violence in Mexico

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For Mark J. Lacy

Foreword

From Damien Hirst to D.H. Lawrence, every outsider who has spent any amount of time thinking about Mexico has invariably been drawn towards and intrigued by the question of death in this country. While contemplating Mexico and its relationship with death, Aldous Huxley rightly asked: 'Why in Mexico is death a congenial and stimulating theme?' (Huxley 1984: 31).

From the pre-Columbian period, marked by human sacrifices, through the war of independence against European colonialism to the present day, Mexico is conspicuous for its excesses of violence. When one thinks of Mexico one thinks of mayhem and death. The sociocultural milieu of violence and its ever-consuming appetite to take life have been an undeniable reality throughout Mexican history. This process, one could argue, is at its most terrifying in contemporary Mexico.

Killing, or the process of taking life, is the central narrative of this book. It covers a wide array of events, undertakings and processes surrounding the act of killing. The questions that it probes concern the premature and violent deaths instigated by various constituencies.

The book is an attempt to understand the power play between death forces in contemporary Mexico. I have not sought to provide a comprehensive account of the history of narco-killing—a subject with an already extensive literature in Spanish and English. What I seek is to develop a theory and philosophy behind this form of killing. If there is a singularity in my treatment of killing, it is because I am less interested in killing as a subjective process, or in the politics surrounding it, than in the nature of death in such contexts.

Narco-killing is a defining process in contemporary Mexican society, as was human sacrifice in its pre-Hispanic past. The book touches on the relentless enterprise of the taking of human life by specific agencies that has evolved through the ages in Mexican history.

The protagonist of this book is death—as ensues from the process of killing. Death is explored as a philosophical question in the context of narco-violence. I extend the narco-orchestrated killing project beyond the question of homicide to consider the philosophy of death.

The exploration of the question of killing and death is not restricted to any specific discipline. I seek to elicit answers from a post-disciplinary perspective. While a lot of reflection in this book draws on my own ethnographic research, the materials are examined from a range of critical positions, from psychoanalysis to philosophy and architecture to religion.

This book may be read as three separate points of departure as well as interpretations. The first concerns the *historical* level: it depicts the actual narration of events. The second relates to the *remembered* level: this part focuses on the experiences and aftermath recalled by victims' friends and relatives. Finally, there is the level of *societal judgement*. By societal judgement I mean the manner in which the individual, as well as the collective, responds to the demise of life in an unnatural manner or, to put it simply, the very process of killing.

While remaining focused on the domain of death, the book introduces the reader to new concepts, such as nacrowar, narcoscape and necropower. These concepts were devised to express a specific existential condition experienced by and imposed upon a given group of people.

The arguments that I present in this book grow out of my struggle to come to grips with the mayhem and horror in Mexico. It is informed by an open stage of experience. It is a product of a coming together of continuous impassioned observations, eyewitness accounts and studied reflection since 2003.

Campo Grande, Lisbon
October 2017

Amalendu Misra

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I dedicate this book to Mark Lacy for his friendship and our conversations that have spanned decades.

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Prologue: The Horror

The process of killing is an inescapable condition of any armed conflict. Little wonder it has been studied in great detail in the context of war and large-scale military engagements between enemy groups and rivals. However, there is one particular domain of killing in contemporary international society which, while it has kept us perpetually fixated, has not yet been assessed or interrogated properly.

The enterprise of killing in Mexico's drugs war is dizzying. As a criminal undertaking it has assumed an entirely new autonomous identity. There is a noose of mayhem across Mexico. Thousands are killed in the country's gangland violence every year, making it one of the most violent landscapes in the world. Since 2007 over 100,000 people have lost their lives in narco-violence in the country. While not in a declared state of war, Mexico is experiencing what one might call the industrialization of death. There, killing takes place on an industrial scale. The cruelty surrounding this turmoil is so harrowing that other contemporary death events—for example, in civil war-affected Syria or war-torn Congo—pale by comparison.[1]

Contemporary Mexico is in the throes of a nacrowar. It exists under a landslide of fear. Nearly two-thirds of Mexican provinces and over 900

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municipalities across the country are controlled by brutal life-denying drug cartels. The ideology and objective of this war have been to impose indiscriminate untimely death on the widest possible mass of people.[2]

At least a third of the murders in Mexico in 2014 bore signs of organized crime-related killings, such as the use of high-calibre automatic weapons, torture and *narcomensajes* (Parish Flannery 2015). Kidnapping, extortion, sexual violation and the mutilation of bodies are so routine across the country that people have become immune to them. Owing to this spiralling violence 'the ante has been raised for the foot soldiers, among them youths in their teens, who are required not only to kill and torture but also to be indifferent to their own deaths' (Franco 2013: 22).

Violence here is sensationalized (Grayson 2011: 5) by spectacular kidnappings, torture, castrations, decapitations, throwing victims into casks of sulphuric acid, burning them alive and other medieval-style methods of torture. When one considers the annihilatory capacity and the attendant cruelty surrounding this carnage, one truth stands out above all others: this savage hyperviolence, the grotesque acts and the decapitations that the narcos have unleashed against their rivals and the civilian population are perhaps unmatchable. The fury and sadism of the killers are of unimaginable horror. Summary execution, ritual beheading and breaking the victim's neck while raping her, as part of some perverse ghastly sadistic sexual pleasure, are all too commonplace in this setting.

Murder here is stylized. The manner of a person's killing has a subtext. The death squads of the drug cartels 'kill in spectacularly gruesome ways, using the violence as a language to deliver a message to their rivals and society' (Booth 2008). There are rituals that precede the moment of violence, which is distended and stretched in slow motion. In this undeclared war the victims are often killed thrice: they are first killed (biologically), then their bodies are shot up in the funeral home and, lastly, their bodies are dug up and shot again.

While 'corpse messaging' has a long tradition in Mexico, what is worrying is that it has now become mainstream and is assumed to be an accepted and expected practice.[3] It is now employed by rivals in the most gruesome manner. Each 'different mutilation on the victim's body

leaves a message. "If the tongue is cut out, it means the person talked too much—a snitch, or *chupro* … A man who has informed on the clan has his finger cut off and maybe put in his mouth. If you are castrated … you may have slept with or looked at the woman of another man in the business (Vulliamy 2010a: 17)."

Naming …

The protagonist of this book is murder. Evaluating murder in the context of narco-violence poses complex definitional and analytical challenges. In the first instance it is not easy to discern if these deaths are the fallout of an undeclared armed conflict or are simple homicidal killings. Secondly, how does one distinguish between war killings and simple murders?

Any unnatural death through the intervention of external agents, as Edith Wyschogrod suggests, 'could become a theme for philosophical reflection' (Wyschogrod 1985: 5). To explain away these killings, therefore, one needs to set this query in a clear framework of explanations. While assessing the process of killing in the narcowar we are confronted typically with three sets of actors involved in this undertaking. Interestingly, if we evaluate the character of these specific actors and the position they occupy in society, it becomes easier to categorize the killings. However, in order to arrive at a particular identification process we first need to identify the actors. In other words, who are these agents of death? What divides one group of actors from another? And, most importantly, when the outcome is the same—that is, death or the taking of an individual's life—why should we put these instrumental agents in separate categories?

I will answer these questions in turn. First, these agents can be identified as (1) law enforcement agents (which may include local, regional and federal police and soldiers/*marinos*); (2) *delincuentes* (drug lords, assassins, petty killers and so on operating at the bottom level of the killing hierarchy); and (3) lynch mobs. While the actions of these sets of actors lead to a common and finite outcome—that is, the random and sudden snatching away of a life—their actions nonetheless fall into different sets of explanatory categories. While the enterprise of killing by *marinos* is different from that of the *delincuentes*, the undertaking of a lynch mob belongs to a singular category of its own.

Secondly, it is the underlying issues such as legitimacy, societal sanction, and general acceptability and unacceptability of these actors that put each death outcome in a given definitional category. One may argue, therefore, that while the killing of a given narco-lord or trafficker by the law enforcement agents is considered a war death, hypothetically the killing of the same individual by a rival gang would be considered murder. Similarly, if the narco-lord is apprehended by a lynch mob and put to death following a communal participation in the process, their killing assumes the nature of sacrifice.

The following is an explanation of this classification. For instance, the death of Person X in the event of an attack by soldiers is a *war death*. The death of Person X killed by a rival gang is a *murder*. A lynch mob bumping off *secuestro* (kidnapper) or *assesino* (assassin) X assumes the categorization of a simple *killing*. In other words, while death is the abiding and constant outcome in these three instances, it is the agents undertaking the endeavour who ultimately give it a specific definitional interpretation.

Interestingly, when examined up close, it will appear that it is the specific sets of values associated with the killing project that distinguish one set of actors from another. In other words, while the outcome may be the same, it is the objective condition behind the actors' undertaking that ultimately determines the nature of the death. Moreover, as highlighted earlier, in this Chapter, the life, and subsequently death itself, is consigned to a given interpretative category depending on its tryst with a specific set of death giver. The killing by the lynch mob or the *marinos*, therefore, is never a homicidal killing. Yet the same death-inducing actions undertaken by a *delincuente* in order to save himself in a life-and-death situation are consigned to the category of homicidal murder.

The nagging question here, of course, is: why are we explaining these identical outcomes in such value-laden categories? The answer again has something to do with a qualitative explanation. Although the undertakings of these specific actors might lead to the same set outcome, it is the qualitative aspect of their actions which ultimately gives a name to the resulting death. A soldier or a lynch mob, therefore, has a higher purpose while involved in an act of killing; but the delinquent does not. The motive, then, is the determining factor in categorizing death.

Further, there is the aspect of legitimacy. The *soldados*/*marinos*, the lynch mob and the *delincuentes* occupy different strata of legitimacy. It is true that the lynch mob does not have the same legitimacy to kill as the *marinos*, but it nevertheless enjoys forms of devolved legitimacy which result in its outcome being defined as 'killed', as opposed to the undertaking of a *delincuente*, which is readily consigned to the category of homicidal 'murder'.

Associated with the above explanation is the issue of 'just' and 'unjust'. The *delincuente*—because of the niche he occupies in the societal understanding of killing—has forfeited any justification surrounding his actions. Unlike the *marinos* and the lynch mob, not only is the *delincuente*'s action unjust, but, simultaneously, he has 'no' right to take another life. While the killing undertaken by the *marinos* and the lynch mob is a product of a 'communitarian desire to save human lives' (Asad 2007: 16), the *delincuente* is devoid of any such intention. He occupies the position of a collective enemy. His 'intent' thus remains always suspect and questionable. His actions are assessed in a moral prism.

Hence, while the overarching narrative is a culture of killing, there are different readings surrounding the whole enterprise. In some ways there is an enforced moral appropriateness surrounding these killings which lends the outcome its specific name. Consequently, given these complex readings of the nature, place and character of agents in the context of narcowar, death is ultimately legitimized as well as stigmatized. It is made subject to different sets of interpretations. Our search for separate and exclusive definitions for death in such contexts, then, rests squarely on (1) the identity of the protagonist; (2) his place in society; and (3) the delineation of boundaries between the objective motivations behind his undertaking. Only when we succeed in establishing these three domains on a clear representational scale are we able to characterize the taking of life in the category of killing, sacrifice or murder.

Taking a backward glance at the dead, one ought to ask if the casualties of these altercations between the state and the cartels on the one hand and between rival gangs on the other belong to the category of homicidal murders or war killing. The answer that one comes up with after the interrogation of the circumstances surrounding the death and the identity of the dead is very complex indeed. Nevertheless, an

overview of the process of killing in the narco-conflict presents us with a four-way representation of the death undertakings. This can be highlighted as follows: (1) soldiers/*marinos* killed in narco-operation; (2) narcos killed by *marinos*; (3) narcos or gang members killed through an exchange of violence with their rivals; and (4) narcos killing civilians. This death interaction and the ultimate conferment of a given title to this death is best shown by Table 1.1.

… and Evaluating Death

There exists a genre of writing since the 1990s that evaluates the place of death in a value-added scale. This scholarship has primarily engaged with the significance of death and the process of dying. Scholars such as Kubler-Ross, Timmermans and Hassan have pondered the question of the quality of timely and untimely death in an armed encounter or some such event from a variety of perspectives that include sociological, religious and political understandings of death. According to these scholars, death itself is filled with qualitative features. By this very fact it can have a subjective interpretation as a *good* or *bad* death. A good death invariably involves the management of the dying process through symptom alleviation, as well as attention to the religious, social and cultural needs of the dying and their loved ones, in order to achieve the normative goal of impending death (Kubler-Ross 1969; Timmermans 2005; Hassan 2011).

Conversely, a bad death can occur under circumstances in which the person has some control over the location, the process and the timing of their death. In such contexts the dying person is an arbiter of their choice of death. Although empowering, such empowerment, according to critics such as Riaz Hassan, is socially and culturally an inappropriate death or a *bad* death. And, he goes on to argue, 'Good death is "normal" and evokes appropriate human emotional responses, mostly of

Table 1.1 Taxonomy of killing

Primary actors	Opponents/Rivals	Definition of death
Soldiers/Marinos	Narcos	War death
Narcos	*Soldados*	War death
Narcos	Narcos	Murder
Narcos	Civilians	Homicidal murder
Civilians	Sequesters	Sacrifice

grief, sadness. Bad death, on the other hand, is "abnormal" and therefore stigmatized and evokes a variety of emotional response including disbelief, anger and revulsion' (Hassan 2011: 80).

To test these hypotheses, let us now turn to a real life/death event. Consider the circumstances surrounding this particular death in the eastern highlands of Mexico. In July 2011 there was a shoot-out in my village between a group of suspected armed narcos and *soldados*. The exchange of fire lasted some 30 min at the intersection of a road leading to the village. According to eyewitness reports, this armed encounter led to the deaths of 11 people (7 narcos and 4 soldiers). The next morning I witnessed blood on the road. To this day, two houses that were close to this battle scene near the village bear the bullet marks on their walls.

To return to the aspect of death, two days after this incident a group of boys from the village, while fishing in the nearby mountain stream, discovered a battered Volkswagen Beetle that had been run off the cliff and was pinned to a tree trunk. Inside the car, in the driver's seat, was a dead man with an agonized look on his face—one of his hands was on the steering wheel and the other firmly gripped a handgun. What sort of death did he have? Where do we place his death according to the framework suggested above?

How does one explain the process of killing in Mexico's narcowar? How is killing introduced by those involved in it? How is extinction/elimination decided upon? Is there a prepared list? Do the messengers of death work through that list? What effect does the ensuing homicide have on those left behind? What is the philosophy behind this infernal violence that perpetuates it? Chapter 2 is an exploration of the process of killing. It is a meditation on murder as a human activity. I argue that to understand the full remit of this phenomenon one needs to situate it within the context of what I call necropower.

Each killing is an autonomous event. It both unsettles and affirms the beliefs of those affected by it in a particular way. In such contexts, 'death and consciousness are allied' (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 134). But what is that consciousness that appears after this specific physical interruption? As the Mexican essayist Octavio Paz put it, 'in some societies death has been an obsession everywhere, even in its most terrifying manifestations, and other times decked out and covered in attributes

that are both laughable and gruesome' (Paz 1999: 930). Death, according to another critic, is 'built into Mexican national identity and consequently it is a national symbol' (Lomnitz 2008; 23). Why is this so? Chapter 3 explores this obsession in the contemporary setting. It is an exploration of the singularly unique Mexican philosophy behind death and dying.

'The history of humanity is the history of a kind of evolution peculiar to sacrificial systems, by which civilisation made a dramatic advance in replacing human victim by a stand-in—first an animal, then certain plants, and finally abstract symbolic entities' (Dupuy 2013: 1010). Yet there are moments of regression or exceptional moments when humanity apes the premodern or prehistoric ritual of sacrificing fellow human beings. In contemporary Mexico, 'killing is not only routine, but also sanctified by prayers to an assortment of deities, patron saints and gods' (Franco 2013: 22). It seems, to quote Žižek, 'as if … God himself has lost his neutrality and "fallen" into the world' (Žižek 2008: 151).

Chapter 4 focuses on this specific enactment of prehistory sacrifice in a postmodern setting. It inquires as to the logic behind the brutal intervention of God(s) in everyday life. Assessing the rise of *La Santa Muerte*, it asks why a section of Mexican society has offered its allegiance to a death deity. It proposes that such religious manifestations, in more ways than one, are a critique of the societal values in the wake of the widespread random violence and people's grudging acceptance of it.

Killing in Mexico's narco-violence is often undertaken as a proactive and empowering act. It is about the admission of one's deeds. It is an open exercise rather than a secret one. It is about what power does. Let us examine the issue of decapitation of the victim and the public display of their body (which has become all too common). 'Decapitation', according to one of the authors of this undertaking, 'is simply a statement of power, a warning to all, like public executions of old. The difference is that in normal times the dead were "disappeared" or dumped in the desert. Now they are executed and displayed for all to see so that it becomes a war against the people' (quoted in Vulliamy 2010a: 19).

At times the actors involved in this killing spree appear to be on a rampage—except that 'rampage' is not just expressive of rage or madness; the rage is purposeful and programmatic. These are 'expressive

crimes that publicise the ideology and power of a specific cartel' (Franco 2013: 225). Carried out at high speed, they are not the sole preserve of the narcos but equally involve the state and wider society.[4]

Chapter 5 engages with the democratization of the killing process in Mexico. Focusing on vigilantism and state-sponsored disappearance, it stresses how murder has become mainstream in contemporary Mexico. It inquires as to why a section of Mexican society feels it 'can't rely on law enforcement agents to enforce the laws'. The chapter argues that the rise of vigilantism in the face of narco-violence represents a questioning process. This questioning is not just about the role of the state but also about its (in)ability to counter the threat posed by the narcos. While vigilantism could be argued to be society's last-ditch attempt to confront an unbearable evil, the society is the same one that has turned a blind eye to a growing and disturbing trend surrounding gender-specific killing.

Why do some societies have a particular take on a given event, which is viewed fundamentally differently in another society? Why, for instance, is an event *shocking* for one and *normal* for another? Is there a relational explanation to this mode of behaviour? In Chap. 6 I problematize the narco-death relationship in the context of funerary architecture. Specifically, I ask why those agents and actors responsible for gruesome corpse abuse (including mutilation, decapitation, dismemberment and wholesale pulverization) wish to have their mortal remains interred in opulent public memorials.

This leads me to the following inquiry: what is the philosophy behind the narcos 'behaving like modern-day pharaohs, and bathe in excess even in the afterlife' (Larsen 2012: 3)? As the old adage goes, 'while "the dead men may tell no tales", their tombstones do' (Kriester 2004: 7). By focusing on the funerary architecture in Culiacan's narco-cemetery *Jardines de Humaya*, this Chapter deconstructs the complex relationship between life and death in Mexico's necropolitics.

This is a book of narrative and theory. It is a philosophical interrogation of homicide in a given setting. It is an exploration of the critical conjunctions between life and death. As such, it seeks to underscore the sovereignty of the death forces. It is an engagement in mapping a

liminal world of violent solitude. While reflecting on death, it simultaneously meditates on the precariousness of the living.

The choice of Mexico as the focus of this interrogation is guided not only by the curious relationship with death that the country shares but also by its unique position in contemporary international society as a setting for unimaginable horror. As the astute reader will realize, I construct a repertoire on killing by linking the present with a past that also was dominated by a culture of bloodshed. This exercise in going back and forth into Mexico's past and the study of its people, in my view, helps us to occupy a platform from which we can intimately deconstruct the semantics surrounding the ongoing carnage.

Notes

1. According to the figures released by the Mexican government in 2015, between 2007 and 2014 more than 164,000 people were victims of homicide. On a comparative scale 'over the same 7-year period, slightly more than 103,000 died in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to data from the *United Nations* and the website *Iraq Body Count*' (Breslow 2015).
2. Some 40 elected mayors were killed by narco gangs in the period 2008–2016 (*The Economist*, 2016a).
3. It is true that Mexico has a long tradition of 'corpse messaging'. During the revolutionary wars of independence the macabre act of flaying the bodies of opposition leaders was carried out regularly. Decapitated heads were impaled on stakes as part of *escramiento*—to instil fear into the general populace. When the independence hero Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and his chieftain were caught by the royalists, they were beheaded, their severed heads salted and transported from the place of their origin, Chihuahua, in the north-east to Guanajuato in the south-west. Later these severed heads were exhibited at the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, the site where Hidalgo's men massacred the city's royalist elite (Lomnitz 2008: 360)."
4. Note, for instance, the slump in murder rates in the border town of Ciudad Juarez. Defying its earlier image as the murder capital of the world in 2015, Ciudad Juarez has registered a temporary thaw in its ever-escalating murder figures. Some Mexicans credit this to the state

fighting its own forces. 'According to this version', in Ciudad Juarez, 'outside police commanders took charge and systematically murdered their most egregiously corrupt colleagues, restoring equilibrium to the city. Authorities deny it' (Carroll 2015).

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2

Necropower

In their myths there is no grace or charm, no poetry. Only this perpetual grudge, grudge, grudge, grudging, one god grudging another, the gods grudging men their existence, and men grudging the animals
(Lawrence 1967: 32)

At the outset a definitional framework of the twin concepts—necropower and necropolitics—is in order, as without a clear explanatory framework we run the risk of muddling the discussion that follows. While necropolitics can be defined as a form of subjugation of life to the power of death (Mbembe 2003: 39), necropower implies various manifestations of the sovereignty of death exercised by its numerous agents in a sociopolitical setting.

Individual life in the modern world is subject to the control of both life forces and death forces. In viable democratic states, it is protected by rules of law. The living, in such settings, are considered sacred, and every effort is made to protect their lives. In some societies, where the world of violence is a norm, such scaffolding that protects individual life is constrained, absent or even missing. Put simply, the agents, institutions, societal framework and, above all, forces that strive to protect

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human life face everyday challenges from an identical set of agents, organizations and forces that try to subvert the work of the former. The narrative of those individuals, groups, organizations and ideological spheres that institute and perpetrate unnatural death on the living can be defined as necropower.

Necropower, then, is that force which subjugates life. Under its aegis life is surrendered to various aspects of violence. It takes from the individual the right to his/her life. While the individual loses control over his/her own sovereign domain of existence, the state and its multitude agents, originally established as the purveyors and guarantors of citizens' lives, find their 'power to protect' severely curtailed. When this mode of existence assumes an everyday reality one could argue the true dominance of necropower in a given society.

It is the absolute and unmitigated ability to strike on a life and deny it further existence that makes necropower so disturbing a force. Necropower is akin to the Black Death. It possesses the ability to reduce a society and a people to a state of absolute desolation and utter helplessness. Evidences of necropower in modern times can be located within the contexts of revolutions, where a given ideology imposes unnatural and indiscriminate death on individuals who it considers subversive. Civil wars, too, spawn a world of mayhem where carnage and death become an irreversible state for the living. Then, of course, we have the context of narco-violence and its nemesis, the counter-forces of the state.

Necropower in the context of narco-violence or the drugs war is characterized by senseless murder sprees. Violence here is internalized. It is both subversive and meaningless. It creates momentary heroes and fleeting victims. It is death and the fear of death that at once binds and subjugates this given society to necropower. While the spell and extent of necropower may not be uniform, for some of the living it may mean a state of being where they are 'trapped in the process of becoming cadavers' (Dorfman 1991: 32). Or, to borrow a phrase from Jorge Luis Borges, under the domain of necropower 'the living are exiled in a labyrinth whose only escape hatch is death' (Borges 1952).

Necropower also operates within a particular framework of understanding. This can be argued to be a necropolitics. If necropolitics is all

about the public principles of the macabre and deathly, necropower is the force that sustains such a scaffold of interaction. In more ways than one, necropower is intrinsically linked to necropolitics that submits, and to some extent subjugates, life to the power of death.

As a combined force, both necropolitics and necropower alter the state of being of the human life. Thanks to their intervention, life as we know it no longer belongs to the domain of the natural state of living and dying, but rather becomes hostage to the conditions created by these frameworks. Necropower facilitates and compels a 'great many mortals to receive their deaths ahead of time and violently' (Cavarero 2010: 14). Indeed, it fundamentally redefines the manner in which inhabitants see themselves and view the world around them. It is not my intention to argue whether necropolitics and necropower establish a state of order or a state of anarchy. What is important, however, is that necropower has been a fundamental aspect of human existence since the dawn of history. Its most potent manifestation in our times can be witnessed in the context of Mexico.

The notion of life and the ways of taking it away have been central to the conception, determination and control of power in all its manifestations throughout Mexican history. More than any other society, Mexico has practised forms of biopower and necropolitics for millennia. Moreover, it is perhaps one of the singularly unique societies that has somehow managed to straddle both life and death in equal vigour in the public sphere. It is a living example of a society that actively pursues and practises forms of ritual that belong to the world of necropower. If anything, the culture of death and the premature taking of human lives that have become commonplace in contemporary narco-violence-dominated Mexico are a testimony to the prevalence of necropower.

In an overarching framework of necropolitics, necropower appears to be a core inscription in the sociopolitical life of Mexico. As such, necropower not only is a reality in an everyday context, but it autogenerates and reproduces in historical cycles (Botey 2009: 11–12). Necropower in the Mexican context can take multiple forms: kidnappers killing their victims and keeping the victim's family in a state of uncertainty; ritualized execution of rival drug gang members; worship of and reverence to *La Santa Muerte*—the goddes of death; and the destruction of the

culture of order that is a precondition of civilized existence in a nation state, with the state's unquestionable ability to order extra judicial killing and, finally, the general public's resigned acceptance of this state of violence as the norm.

Consequently, this politics of death designates the extent to which necropower has emerged as an organizing principle for the conduct of life. The society in the clutches of necropower does not distinguish between clear enemies and legitimate targets. It allows for a framework of interaction where every life is a potential target. Every life exists at the margin between life and death. One encounters the true dance of death when both visible and invisible killings become the norm. To live under the constant fear of kidnapping, physical abuse and ultimately murder, to use Mbembe's phraseology, 'is to experience a permanent condition of "being in pain"' (Mbembe 2003: 39). Admitting to this mental condition is to recognize the prevalence of absolute necropower.

Spatiality and Necropower

In his celebrated work *Primitive Classification* Émile Durkheim proposed a correspondence between social structure and society's notion of space. Studied up-close this mode of interpretation would imply that every corresponding human and societal behaviour, action and ideological affinity, in turn, creates as well as operates within a given framework of interaction which one might call space. While for Durkheim the space-creation is an automatic evolutionary process, another critic, Henri Lefebvre, goes so far as to suggest that individuals and societies deliberately set out to create particular spaces that give meaning to their actions (Lefebvre 1981).

For Durkeheim 'space could not be what it is if it were not, like time, divided and differentiated' (Durkheim 1976: 11). Similarly, for Lefebvre, if the space-creation or 'production of space' is an inevitable process, there is a relentless struggle going on between agents and actors that both try to give meaning to that space and attempt to control it (Lefebvre 1991). Together, Durkheim and Lefebvre provide us with important pointers as to how one might understand conflicts over

social, economic and political space; and how counter-spaces are produced and the nature and character of these spaces.

Turning to the issue of violence and the agents facilitating it, one could argue that both have a clear structural identity. This can be discerned by pinning it down (1) to the physical or geographical area of activity (which is nothing but a space); (2) competition between actors to take control over that space; and (3) resisting submission to rival forces and in the process creating counter-spaces. When there is an endemic and relentless struggle between various agents and actors to control and submit a given physical space, and the people living within it, or alter the notion of good life and so on within it, the process inevitably runs counter to the original evolutionary space which that society had come to recognize.

It is this process of transformation (often forced through barbarism, terror, random killing and everyday violence) that leads eventually to the dominance and the creation of a space which is identifiable with horror and death. One can argue that once this mode of interaction has altered and replaced the original, settled, peaceful existence of the inhabitants living within a given geographical territory, the process has truly led to the creation and production of necrospaces.

One of the key distinguishing features of necropower is its ability to turn vital live and living spaces into spaces exuding violence and death—almost to the extent of turning them into necrospaces. These places are not necessarily a necropolis in the sense of places for the dead, but places where death has a constant presence. Everyday sites and spaces assume the atmosphere of dead spaces where life is devalued and dehumanized. If, for critics such as Lefebvre, the production of spaces is dependent on the primary processes of social interaction and practices (Lefebvre 1991), the creation and evolution of necrospaces are products of such human intervention.

For the non-Aztec tribes inhabiting the immediate frontiers of the Aztec Empire in pre-Columbian Mexico, the empire was a true necropower characterized by its continual threat of death and destruction. For those tribes the Aztecs represented a death force owing to their constant warfare with the neighbouring tribes, hostage-taking and the sacrifice of captives. Put simply, the Aztecs were the life-takers.[1] The Aztec

Empire as a necropower created enormous necrospaces in the form of sacrificial temples and pyramids.

As Edith Wyschogrod put it, 'once the death event comes into existence it becomes a residue of an irrevocable past without which the present is incomprehensible' (Wyschogrod 1985: 57). In contemporary narco-dominated Mexico there is no specific or identifiable environment where this space can be found. There are no modern, clearly assigned slaughterhouses to snuff life in the manner of Auschwitz or Buchenwald. Necrospaces, where necropower operates, are always transient—floating. They are constantly created. They could be a street, a casino, a disco, a warehouse, an international airport terminal, a drug rehabilitation centre, a moving freight train and so on. Such is the pervasiveness of the power of death over life that it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that entire regions of the country are part of these necrospaces. From a narco-related perspective, where there is life there is the possibility to create a death zone.

The spatiality of necrospaces can be demonstrated in the form of a necro-atlas of Mexico. Depending on the level of violence, the physical map of the country can be divided into zones of life and zones of death, based on the frequency and intensity of homicide. The northern half of the country is a clear death zone—a physical space dominated by *coyotes*, narcos and *soldados*. Death here is everyday and ordinary. The eastern region bordering the Gulf of Mexico is the playground of Los Zetas, a cartel who kidnap, extort and kill in extreme, macabre fashion. The western areas of the country on the Pacific Basin are punctuated with private death squads led my militias. And, the central region is *tierra de nadie* (literally, no man's land). Here, various cartels, militias and soldiers all fight one another to maintain their stranglehold. Killing here is a continual occurrence.

There are various versions of this map. They often adorn the walls of law enforcement officials and journalists. But for most Mexicans this map exists in their minds. It is a lesson in behavioural geography. One avoids venturing into these areas. Often people give up federal jobs if they are posted to any of these regions. Those with the means migrate to areas unaffected by the violence. The vast majority of inhabitants of

these necrospaces, however, find themselves condemned to a precarious existence between life and death.

There is a certain feral nature to the cartography of necrospaces. To put our necrospaces in the context of feral urban spaces, the levels of violence—or, when conceptualized within the context of an urban area bounded by law and order, its 'feralness'—are determined by the type of power play that exists within its boundaries (Norton 2003: 99). Such spaces are marked by a prevailing atmosphere of violence and death not due to some pre-existing historical hatred, but, as Tilley puts it, 'from sudden uncertainties and shifting social conditions, particularly the declining capacity of authorities to enforce agreements or police existing boundaries' (Tilley 2003: 24).

What is more, these death spaces defy the conventional interaction between force and outcome. The use of violence does not necessarily lead to the attainment of a sense of security and well-being. In fact, it produces the direct opposite effect; it sends that given sociogeographical space into the embrace of a concentric circle of vendetta, carnage and death. And, consequently, there is a constant demarcation of new necrospaces and a redrawing of ever-changing necro-boundaries.

Take for instance, the discovery in September 2011 of two lorryloads of 50-odd dead and mutilated bodies in Boca del Rio, in the city of Veracruz. Those who carried out the killing not only had the audacity to leave these lorries at a busy intersection in the heart of the city, but also left behind a note with the dead that proclaimed 'this territory now belonged to them. Those who challenge or dispute this new reordering of boundaries will be committed to the same fate as those found in those two lorries' (Beaubien 2011). Two weeks later a rival gang left behind around 35 mutilated cadavers in another busy part of the city, claiming that the area now belonged to them. While at one level this competitive killing is aimed at reducing the physical sphere of influence of a rival gang, at another level it is an act of communication in a predominantly visual culture where such public spectacles of violence have a much more pronounced, and desired, effect.[2]

Furthermore, it can be argued that the physical space is demarcated between spaces that permit life and those where life is hostage to death. These are effectively zones of life and zones of death. Evaluated against

zones of life, death zones have some telltale signs of a mortal environment. Taxi drivers refuse to take clients to these spaces, businesses slowly disappear, children stop playing on the streets, and the agents of law and order express reluctance to step into these areas, where unannounced episodes of violence are a continual threat (Torrea 2011). Paradoxically, these are not necessarily ghost towns; but they are unique in the sense that the inhabitants live in a state of constant threat and sense of mortality owing to the random exchanges of indiscriminate and senseless violence.

Although the Weberian suggestion/sentiment that 'control of the streets means the control of the city' (Weber 1958: 57-8) is not lost on the state, it nonetheless reneges on its original obligation. It is criminals who dictate their will in these spaces, not the state. In fact, in such spaces 'fear becomes the chief aid not of the state, but of those who are trying to subvert it' (The Economist 2008: 13). The state and its agents are often at the mercy of the unknown and unseen assailants in these urban spaces. Here, death lurks behind every wall, window or passing vehicle. According to some critics, for the state, such spaces are 'urban nightmares' (Norton 2003: 101). If you know your enemy you can perhaps control the encounter and the outcome. But what if one is not aware of the identity of the enemy? Is the policeman a real policeman? Is the person offering a quick wash to your windscreen at traffic lights just a worker or part of an informant network? What do you really know about what you know? Are things as they appear?

There exists a 'permanent anxiety around such everyday urban spaces' (Graham 2006: 261). Any reconquest of these death zones or attempts to breathe life back into these spaces through the reinstating of the rule of law is a Sisyphean task. In the first place, recognizing the supremacy of necropower, and their own inadequacy in such areas, the police often fall under the sway of the narcos' authority and influence and become useless and ineffective. Thus the state refuses to give its agents any more power than they already have (Archibold 2011). Secondly, any counter-attempt by the state to bring in soldiers and introduce a slash-and-burn policy in these death spaces, results in further escalation of large-scale violence which spreads like a contagion. An attack on narcos in Ciudad Juarez, for instance, brings death and destruction ever closer to the

surrounding townships or other distant parts of the country (Torrea 2011). Faced with this double-bind situation the state often retreats from these violent topographies.

For critics such as Bowden, these necrospaces have created their own *fantasma*, or ghost—the *boca de todos*, the all-devouring mouth that consumes everything in its way (Bowden 2010a). While for other observers Mexicans are condemned to the inescapability of these necrospaces; there is to be no resurrection from them (MartÍnez 2010: 10). In the end, it is the law and civil society's inability to respond to and control the gangs and their violence that eats away at the foundations of viable towns and cities and which ultimately reduces them to necrospaces.

Voyeurism of Death

If we were to dissect Mexico's past, we would be confronted by the fact that there was something inherently cruel in the Mexican (read Aztec) treatment of life. This aspect is not only visible in the everyday reaction to life and death, but is also something that can be found in its civilizational aspirations. It is true that all civilizations relied on degrees of bloodletting for their consolidation. The Aztecs, however, went a step further in their use of human lives for the furtherance of their aspirations. It was a civilization based on human sacrifice. To meet the relentless demand for the killing machine, they perfected the art of hostage-taking by waging ceaseless wars with neighbouring tribes.

Continuous warfare was recognized as an intimate constitutive element of the body politic in pre-Columbian Aztec society. In his influential work *Violent Cartographies* Michael J. Shapiro suggested that 'given the prestige and ontological depth of warfare and, accordingly, the prestige of the warrior, these societies have tended to make signs of warfare a continuous and legitimate part of everyday life' (Shapiro 1997: 49–50). They established what one would call in present-day parlance a supply chain of killing across the whole of what is today the territory of Mexico and beyond. The gods or civilization needed to be nourished by the stuff of life: blood. Thus it became the sacred duty of all Aztecs to

procure, or take, prisoners for sacrifice in order to obtain human hearts and blood (von Hagen 1958: 163).

According to Georges Bataille, the Aztecs' knowledge of architecture, which enabled them to construct great pyramids, was not developed for the betterment of life, but to take life. Bataille suggests that it was a knowledge that turned against itself—the pinnacle of scientific achievement served as both a metaphorical and a literal site for the immolation of human life (Bataille 1991: 46). In fact, the Aztec was given only one choice by the society and civilization to which he belonged: victory through the taking of his opponent's life or through the sacrifice of his own (von Hagen 1958: 169). Death, indeed, was the be-all and end-all.

For chroniclers of the strange and horrific in Mexico, 'the Mexican enthusiasm for the macabre knows few limits'. The famous painter Frida Kahlo (whose picture now adorns the 500-peso federal bank note) was unable to bear children following an accident and 'was comforted by the gift of a human foetus in a bottle. She called it "my baby boy"' (Marnahm 1985: 104). A former president of the republic Santa Ana sent one of his amputated legs to be carried in procession in Mexico City.[3] The independence hero Miguel Hidalgo's decapitated head was kept on display for nearly ten years in the city of Guanajuato. Compare these events to the practices in pre-Columbian times. The Aztec priests wrenching out the heart from the living body and displaying the throbbing organ to the spectators was as much a representation of a pornography of death as is the spectacle of the narcos crowding the dance floor of a disco in Uruapan, Michoacán province with the decapitated heads of five of their victims.[4] Similarly, 'in the east and south of the country the ultraviolent Los Zetas cartel decorate the streets with severed heads' (Littell 2012: 53). Then, of course, there are the artefacts and imagery which are widely circulated during the *Dia del Muerto* and allow the masses to entertain their own particularized version of dismembered bodies stripped of life and death in their various incarnations in the afterlife. In all these instances 'the control of resources and power of death are articulated' (Franco 2013: 221–222).

Some critics, however, hold a different view. For Cavarero 'there is no more life to rip away from the dead body, only the uniqueness of its figure' (Cavarero 2010: 14).[5] Yet the body stripped of life has a meaning

and importance in necropolitics. It is a message board. Disassembled it can send shock waves through the heart of the enemy/opponent. The cadaver that is defiled, mutilated, sawn to pieces, ripped apart and thrown about creates concentric circles of necropower.

Let us take the case of Maria Elizabeth Macias Castro. Macias Castro was a prominent blogger in the northern Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo. Incensed by the impunity of the narcos and the impotency of the state to confront their power she published a blog under the pseudonym *La Nena de Nuevo Laredo* to disseminate information about the evils carried out by the narcos. She was decapitated and her head placed on a well-known monument in Nuevo Laredo. In 2011 blogs appeared on Macias Castro's site with her headless body next to a set of headphones and a keyboard. A note placed on her site read, 'OK Nuevo Laredo live on the social networks, I am *La Nena de Laredo* and I am here because of my reports'.

Killings related to the drugs war go back as far as the late 1980s. Since then, the manner of killing has evolved into what one might call a sophisticated language of death. For the Aztecs the ripping out of the heart of the enemy was intended to symbolize the sacrificing of the victim to their sun god Huitzilopochtli, and beheading was the punishment meted out to a traitor from one's own community (Prescott 1843). There are uncanny modern-day parallels with the killing plasticized by various drug cartels.

According to Samuel Gonzalez Ruiz, a former advisor to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the cartels use different codes of murder, which tell a particular story. A bullet to the back of the victim's head, for instance, means the victim was a traitor. Conversely, a bullet to the victim's frontal lobe signifies he was a member of a rival gang (see Grant 2012). Beheading and decapitation are techniques favoured by the criminal network of the former paramilitary organization Los Zetas, which operates on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Los Zetas borrowed this practice from the Guatemalan military's special operations force brigade the *Kaibiles*. Some *Kaibiles* (who perfected this art of brutal killing during the country's long civil war, 1960–1996) are said to have joined the ultraviolent Los Zetas. 'Kaibiles are largely responsible for introducing

the ghastly practice of severing rivals' heads and dismembering the bodies of their victim' (Padgett 2011: 31).

If history is of any assistance here, the *Kaibiles* (these especially efficient killing machines) selected this method of murdering their victims in order to impose total terror in Guatemala's (dirty) civil war (Schimmer 1999). For Gonzalez Ruiz, the symbolism associated with *Kaibile*-inspired killing goes beyond the simple aspiration to terrorize. The specificities of these killings send a much more potent message: 'the message is clear: we have no mercy, and we will do whatever it takes to control our territory' (quoted in Grant 2012).

Within the subculture of gangland violence simple killing is an ordinary affair. Killing is generic. But putting a body through a specific process of violence and violation prior to execution offers other possibilities. A particularized killing ensures the killer broadcasts a specific message. The manner of killing is inscribed on the victim's body, and their body becomes a message board.

While simple murder is about eliminating an opponent, putting your enemy through ghastly torture and mutilation ensures a specific form of authority. It is a form of control that does not end with death, but easily extends to the domain of the living. From his exploration of the extreme killing methods among various cartels, Jean Franco suggests 'these are expressive crimes that publicise the ideology and power of rogue groups—a force to be reckoned with' (Franco 2013: 225–226).

Taken together, such practices, while gross and macabre, are nonetheless a form of activism that allows the protagonist to make a spectacle of their powers. The dead body, or the organ, presents here power to the possessor in multiple forms; it is a fantasy of escape, a means to immortality and an instrument of political control.

The Visual Syntax

In his acclaimed play *The Balcony* Jean Genet introduces his reader to an imaginary society that is perfectly at ease with bloodshed and violence. If anything this society is inherently voyeuristic when it comes to the treatment of carnage and horror. With further introspection one could

argue that this fictional society's appetite for gruesome images of death and the public's obsession in following death closely are widely shared in contemporary Mexican society. It is perhaps one of those societies that perfected the art of public exhibition of the tortured and the dead as one of the first mass shows.[6] Violence and death that seem to draw a constituency in has a valid explanation. Since it is not always possible to witness the macabre in person, the public satiates its desire through printed images.

There is no censorship when it comes to displaying the horrific images of the dead and the mutilated in their multiple manifestations. While plenty of Mexicans are gravely distressed and horrified by the unfolding events surrounding the killing spree, there seems no corresponding desire to demand an end to such public displays. There has not been a single mainstream editorial in the past five years denouncing the publication of such offensive images (out of respect for the dead as well as the living).

There is no known public acknowledgement or contemplation of the fact that the publication of such images may be aiding the killers in their macabre enterprise. Instead, every local newspaper devotes a section that highlights this gruesome and horrific practice. And, for those who want every graphic detail, both in words and in images, there are these burgeoning periodicals. There is no sense of public guilt that such crimes should exist let alone that they be flashed across the newspapers in vivid multicolour.

For other cultures, such reality belongs to the class of truths that they simply do not want to know about—less still see displayed in multicolour on their breakfast table. Yet nowhere is the depiction of violence so intimately acknowledged as it is in Mexico. Facets of popular culture, in fact, allow both direct and indirect ways to entertain such visceral pleasure. The personal and institutional interest in macabre death and violated cadavers is an inescapable reality of daily life. In fact, there exists a side of public culture that celebrates and even demands such inhuman excesses.

Weekly necro-pictorials such as *Alarma*, *Nota Roja*, *Mundo Narco*, *Policiaco*, *Asesinan A4*, *Veracruz Orale*, *Vertico* do not reveal their subscription details. However, any newspaper vendor or magazine-stall

manager will confirm that they run out of these periodicals as soon as they hit the news stand. Such is the interest in these magazines that dedicated readers often place their orders in advance of publication.

In his study on bodily violence and reportage John Taylor asks: 'Why is it important that newspapers should sometimes display the body in states of pain, decay or dismemberment? What can be the purpose of such pictures …?' (Taylor 1998: 193). Examining such behaviour from the other side of the divide, it is not entirely clear whether these contemporary voyeurs of the morbid and macabre are afflicted by a moral disease, to borrow a phrase from Primo Levi, or are guided by an 'aesthetic affectation' (Levi 1989). Are these readers engaged in situating the vision of the erotic in such carnages—a community inclined to eroticize the macabre and horror perhaps? Or is it a testimony to a visual reading of horror that delights in the act of examining decapitated, destroyed, decomposing and, above all, incoherent bodies from which life force has been snatched away—abruptly.[7]

According to one critic, 'it is a horror that is almost "recreational"' (Vulliamy 2010), hence the mass consumption of such imagery. A gruesome carnival of dead bodies across the pages of *Alarma*, *Vertice* and the likes is not contemplated as human tragedy. Perhaps for readers of these publications seeing these graphic images is similar to watching the beating hearts pulled out of live bodies from the top of Montezuma's palace of yore. Through this visual imagery an innate visceral urge is satiated. It is part of an affliction which Boltanski would call 'close communitarianism', where closeness to the event requires and even demands an equally strong representation of it (Boltanski 1999).

In a society long used to assigning diminutives to every name and adjective there is an entire vocabulary for this macabre and horror. While robbery or banditry assumes the form of a great deed as *robola*, the higher enterprise such as killing *matar* is affectionately highlighted as *matola*. Similarly, rape or violation becomes *violola* and so on. People not only take pleasure in the open celebration of such morbidity but go a step further in inventing a language that allows every Mexican to associate the experience with something common and everyday. Note, for instance, the popular pleasure in describing the gruesome treatment of a killing. The killer engages in *matola, y le corto la cabeza: hierviola en*

una olla de tamales (not only kills, but cuts the head and goes on to boil it like *tamales*—a popular street food).

Why do some societies have a particular take on a given event, which is viewed fundamentally differently in another society? Why, for instance, is a given event *horrific* and *shocking* for one but *uneventful* and *normal* for another? Is there a relational explanation to this mode of reaction? What does interrogation of these morbid obsessions suggest? Is the Mexican attitude to killing an extension of some perverse pornographic gaze? Is it a violent obsession lurking underneath layers of politeness, hypocrisy and modernity?[8] According to Karl Mannheim there is an intricate linkage between modes of thought and their social origins (Mannheim 1949). If that were so, one could argue that uncovering this connection is the key to explaining individual as well as societal patterns of behaviour and reaction to specific events. By investigating killing from a Mexican perspective one could perhaps posit that the engagement with the visual and linguistic imagery of death, in this particular context, needs to be understood as an extension of life. When surrounded by such a death world,

> a complex relationship governs language behavior. On the one hand, all the patterns of the life-world as we understand them persist. But at the same time signified is also and always death. The signifier collapses into the signified, which is now no longer greater in range than the signifier. (Wyschogrod 1985: 31)

What we have, therefore, is a collapsing of the two worlds—the death world into the life world. These colloquial expressions, and the playful elaboration of death, then, are part of the nation's popular culture (Lomnitz 2008: 26).

The State of Exception

Public narratives about murder, insecurity, kidnappings, assassinations and infanticide reconstruct the ways in which they helped shape Mexican society's views of itself and of its criminals. For Durkheim

'crime shocks sentiments which, for a given social system, are found in all healthy conscience' (Durkheim 1964: 73). But too much of it can immure a society to aspects of crime and violence. In other words, crime as an event has a greater capacity to shock a given society when it is a rarity. However, the moment it becomes regular or frequent it loses some of its power to move the constituency within which it occurs. The first arson attack or kidnapping in a given society is a profoundly moving experience. But, as it becomes a common event in their local communities, people develop a complacent attitude towards it (unless they are directly affected by it, of course).

If this is the case and owing to the regularity of crimes and violence the society within which they occur becomes less sensitive to these events, would it be correct to suggest that the members of this constituency have a less healthy conscience? Measuring the conscience of a community, within either a qualitative or quantitative framework, is a fiendishly difficult task. While a qualitative assessment runs the risk of being marred by the observer's prejudice, one rarely gains a clear and accurate picture of a society's conscience by taking a sample of comments from any number of people or participants in a survey.

What constitutes a crime? Did the Aztec religio-cultural practice of human sacrifice constitute a crime? Does crime between criminal gangs constitute true crime? Should society pay equal attention to or be concerned about the victims when the latter belong to various crime organizations? Probing the discourses that draw distinctions between these divides produces some startling revelations.

When I put the suggestion to a bishop that many of these criminals and their criminal victims were God-fearing individuals, and even in some cases church-going members of society, he was quick to correct me. According to him (Archobispo C) these criminals did not belong to the 'true' folds of religion, even though they were externally religious.

For the general populace the killing or death of a narco or criminal member of the widespread drug-trafficking ring is of little relevance. The life of a narco is 'less' than human. The loss of such a life does not warrant much sympathy or sadness. Even for those families whose son, brother or husband becomes embroiled in drug-related activities and

becomes a narco, or *secuestro*, his eventual death owing to narco-violence is neither an unfortunate nor a surprising event.

One such victim's mother the author spoke to was very clear and transparent in her reaction to the tragedy. 'Those who live by the bullet die by the bullet', she commented very matter-of-factly. 'He knew about the outcome long before he joined the crime outfit … so I am not sad' was the mother's standard reaction. When I spoke to another victim's wife, Marta, the response I received was equally non-emotional. Marta was aware of such an outcome (the violent death of her husband) long before the victim himself could perceive or envisage such a fate.

On both these occasions the respondents saw the events, in their own words, as a providential outcome. While travelling across a country marred by such violence one cannot help but notice such disdain towards the dead. What does that tell us from an anthropomorphic perspective? Is the culture fatalistic? How much is fatalism responsible for such reaction?

The Ideology of Murder

Every conflict, every pre-arranged killing, requires an ideological need to sustain itself. Every war that sanctions death legitimizes it on certain grounds. Looking at it from the perspective of narco-violence, one can imagine that it, too, has a certain exclusive ideological slant on the death machine that it is in charge of.

'Killing', in this infernal world, as Charles Bowden reminds us, 'is not a deviance, it is a logical career decision for thousands floundering in a failing economy and a failing state' (Bowden 2010a: 740). On another plane narco-employed killing equals a certificate of recognition. It is an entry point. It is an act that secures a specific identity for that individual. The undertaking enables the perpetrator to be taken seriously among his peers. Bumping someone off in gangland violence facilitates a sense of empowerment. And, like the fictional world of Hollywood, these mean unsavory characters at times need to engage in indiscriminate killing to be taken seriously. Killing thus becomes a necessity.

The decision to participate in a killing spree is facilitated by the killer's internalized social identities, his exposure to the meaninglessness of life itself and the pressure put on him by the members of the criminal community to which he belongs (Franco 2013: 229). And, at times, this resolve to kill is reduced to the simple act of defending his own life against those who wish to eliminate it, that is, the law enforcement agents or rival gangs.

Moreover, when societal norms surrounding individual behaviour or actions are lax, the protagonist (of that specific undertaking) can find himself doing things that would otherwise be considered abominable. A killer is often an outcast in most societies. But we might have societies where a killer can find himself the recipient of public respectability and honour following a set of exploits. (I discuss this further in the context of *narcocorrido* in Chap. 3). Consequently, the glamorization of private violence in the public sphere contributes to the mindless killing.

The very action of indiscriminate killing by a gang member or an individual within the organizational hierarchy of the narco-world is both individually mediated and organizationally enforced on agents who are in essence involved in meeting certain instrumental goals and acting on their values. But this does not fully explain the killer's behaviour. It does not give us a complete insight into the psychology of killing.

According to Anatol Rapoport, 'an individual's behaviour can sometimes be explained satisfactorily by analyzing his thought process which reveal how his perceptions, conceptions and actions interact with each other' (Rapoport 1995: 97). If this is the case, how does a killer feel once he has killed? Is he affected by the power of death? What is that innermost feeling which takes over when he is face-to-face with death?

Known killers involved in this violence and who were interviewed for this study speak of their enormous sense of fear as well as relief. Often they go blank while attempting to describe their experience—something that is indescribable but real. One finds the fullest articulation of this experience in the words of Elias Canetti: 'The terror at the dead man lying before one gives way to satisfaction: one is not dead oneself. One might have been. But it is the other who lies there. It suddenly

looks as though death, which one was threatened by, had been diverted from oneself to that person' (Canetti 1987: 15–16).

As he stresses further, 'the man who is lying dead is forced out of his ability to exert power. In death he stands defeated. With his death the man standing before him receives all his mortal power. Never is the standing man, for whom everything is still possible, more aware of his standing. Never does he feel better upright' (Canetti 1987: 16). In life the narco is an agonal warrior left completely free (Debrix and Barder 2012: 118) until he, too, is reduced to a lifeless body in some future armed encounter.

The enterprise of killing, then, is a reward in itself. It has saved him from the ignoble death that is now the sole preserve of his adversary. He has not only cheated death but there awaits a reward for his being alive. A killer in the upper hierarchy of this macabre enterprise can expect greater public acknowledgement of his exploits. Mariachis may compose new ballads based on his chilling achievements; the law enforcement agencies may invest more resources towards his capture; he can easily receive sexual favours; and he can rule the hearts of a given constituency in reverence. But what is disturbing is the killer's supposed emotional immunity towards killing with every new undertaking.

'We, the Dead, Accuse!'

According to Herbert C. Kelman an individual's, or let's say killer's, moral inhibitions towards killing tend to be eroded once he/she becomes privy to three interrelated absorptions of knowledge: (1) if the violence is authorized by his/her superior (which he sees as substitute for legal authority); (2) if the action is routinized (with a clear description of his role and the expectation on the part of his superiors that he sees it through or fulfils it to the best of his ability); and (3) the victims of violence are dehumanized (for example, they were dangerous rivals who would not have thought twice about killing him). Thus justification for the action is established (Kelman 1973: 29–41).

One could argue that the killer, by obeying or staying true to these three sets of interrelated dynamics, was not only operating within

a strictly defined domain of disciplinary space defined by rules and rewards, but this framework also freed him from any ongoing, deep-seated moral and ethical pangs. Put simply, it was a production of conduct that foreclosed any innate moral inhibitions and prohibitions.

While this mode of interpretation provides a clear justification clause behind the enterprise of homicide or killing in narcowar, it is not exhaustive. True, it explains the situation or scenario of interaction between two sets of evils, antagonists or rivals. But what about the innocent victim? How does our killer justify his killing mission when he embarks upon a gory enterprise against an innocent civilian?

In his influential work *Mediation of Action* John Lachs (1981) suggests a scenario where one's action is being performed for someone by someone else, an intermediary—someone who stands between the person wanting the act done (but not doing it himself/herself) and the actual action itself. Mail-order killing or homicide from a distance falls into this category. It creates a dangerous precedent where there is a complete void when it comes to owning up to the act of murder or pinning down the person with whom responsibility lies. Moreover, as Jean Franco reminds us, these 'torturers are essentially middlemen who execute orders from higher officials against whom they feel resentment' (Franco 2013: 102); and this explains a specific form of unaccountable carnage.

Let us focus on the case of 43 students from Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College who were kidnapped on 26 September 2014 during a demonstration. They were rounded up on the orders of the mayor of Iguala, Guerrero who was unnerved by their protest and wanted them to be 'dealt with'. The police who arrested the students argued they were acting on orders (of the mayor). The local crime syndicate *Guerreros Unidos* (United Warriors), who received these hapless victims from the police (and who are suspected of having murdered the students), maintained that they were simply carrying out what the police had asked them to do. Here is a classic scenario where the violator would appear insulated from his action.[9]

Take another such incident. In January 2015 a former police officer confessed to the kidnapping and murder of Moises Sanchez, a journalist and publisher of the weekly newspaper *La Union* in Medellin de Bravo

in the eastern Mexican province of Veracruz. Commenting on the kidnapping and eventual murder of Mr Sanchez, the state's prosecutor, Luis Angel Bravo, confirmed that the 'ex-police officer had confessed to participating in Sanchez's murder along with five other people on the instructions of the deputy director of the town's police force, and allegedly at the request of Omar Cruz, the town's mayor' (Greenslade 2015: 7).

The killings in Iguala, Medellin and scores of other contemporary narcoscapes in Mexico fall within the framework of 'mediation of action'. Predictably, this mode of interaction creates a perilous situation. Such events, as Lachs reminds us, create a dangerous precedence.

> The result is that there are many acts no one consciously appropriates. For the person on whose behalf they are done, they exist only verbally or in the imagination; he will not claim them as his own since he never lived through them. The man who has actually done them, on the other hand, will always view them as someone else's and himself as but the blameless instrument of an alien will. (Lachs 1981: 58)

Violator's Violation

A narco's life in many ways is a form of death-in-life. He has no control over the safekeeping of his existence. He owes its custody to several different actors. In the first instance he owes it to his immediate boss. Any misdealing with the boss and swiftly goes his life. Then there are several hierarchies within the network of which he is a part. Everyone in the network is dispensable and the one at the bottom owes the safekeeping of his life to a whole chain of would-be life-takers or life-givers.

Secondly, he owes his life to the rival gang members. If he is to be recognized or, worse still, caught there goes his life. His rivals are prowling the streets, barrios and nightclubs to pounce on him. He must constantly improvise to escape from the inevitability of the snatching away of his life by his rivals.

And, finally, there are the police and soldiers on the lookout to take his life. Within their physicality resides the clear and most potent

manifestation of biopower. These are the ultimate agents of death. Their only job is to seek him out and send that bullet towards him.

'True power', according to Elias Canetti, resides only with that person 'who has the capacity to survive death while inflicting death upon others' (Canetti 1984: 227–228). This sentiment is echoed in equal vigour by Achille Mbembe, who argues that the readiness to kill or exercise that power of mortality 'consists in wishing to impose death on others while persevering one's own life' (Mbembe 2003: 37). If this is true, then our conventional narco—the symbol of terror and death—is in fact far removed from possessing that biopower.

Similarly, seen within the Agambenian trajectory, the physical/biological self of the narco is not a 'complete life'. In fact, it is the truest manifestation of 'bare life', that is to say it, a life which is stripped of all rights as we understand them in the conventional sense of the term, and which is continuously exposed to death. It is the form of life that can be taken legitimately without committing murder (Agamben 1998: 6).

In a cruel (others may suggest ironic) twist of fate 'the life-giver' is in fact the ultimate victim. He may hold the power of life and death over some, but death follows him incessantly and forever. The boon of indestructibility that is usually attributed to *caudillos*, or strongmen, in this culture is denied to him. In fact the power that he holds is the power behind his own destruction. The will to kill is fused with the possibility of forsaking his own life.

Equally importantly, unlike a political terrorist or suicide bomber, there awaits no martyrdom for the life-taking narco. Unlike the body of a martyr, where the body of the deceased duplicates itself and in death, literally and metaphorically, escapes the state of siege and occupation (Mbembe 2003: 37), the body of the narco goes through a series of condemnations.

The narco's sacrifice of his own body in a gang war, police/military encounter or owing to the wrath of the gang boss holds no glory. There is no grief over the loss of his life or any public mourners. In death the narco is twice removed from any glory associated with death. In a culture that is highly respectful towards the body of the dead (Carrasco 2008; Lomnitz 2008) his afterlife body is denied any funerary

reverence. It is dumped in a mass grave, fed to the coyotes or, worse still, handed over to medical colleges for biological experiments.

Consequently, from the perspective of biopolitics and biopower, in some ways the narco is a double victim. First, during his lifetime, when he is physically alive, the sovereignty over his body is expressed by a multitude of actors. Secondly, after death the sovereignty that should have been returned to the lifeless body by way of certain funerary conduct is denied to the dead.[10] Correspondingly, while using the Girardian interpretation of the 'enemy', one could argue that the collective, by banishing the narco (from the world of the living as well as from the world of the dead), is declaring this particular victim to be a polluted object 'whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community and the collective of its ills' (Girard 1977: 95).

Logic of Illogic?

Unlike other theatres of conflict where necropower holds sway necropolitics often manifests itself in the context of the logic of survival, or, as Canetti put it, 'each man is the enemy of every other' (Canetti 1984: 228). In such scenarios necropolitics has a logical form. Here, the extension of death is conditioned by an aspiration to survive.

Paradoxically, as we return to examining necropower in the Mexican context, once again, we notice that there is no such logical explanation. While there is a recognition that 'death is the ultimate violence that can be inflicted on a living being' (Girard 1977: 255), there is no attempt to question this form of violence before administering it to the victims. Death is introduced almost as a plaything. Someone decides to introduce terror in a Hollywood-style fashion—brings a few gallons of gasoline, pours it on every window and door of a crowded casino, and then lights a fire.

Another convoy of killers drives around town shooting at random, killing men, women and children who they never knew. In the province of Tamaulipas, in the north-east, masked gunmen ask passengers on a local bus to disembark and then in a nearby ravine mow them

down with machine-gun bullets. In the tourist town of Acapulco gunmen kidnap a group of men on holiday and leave their mutilated bodies in another part of the city. A gardener who works for me arrived one morning with a solemn face. When I quizzed him about what was wrong, he replied that his nephew in Cuernavaca was gunned down by narcos the previous night in a case of mistaken identity.[11]

The indiscriminate force and face of death can at times be unimaginable on some occasions. Note, for instance, the nameless victims whose lives were reduced to acres and acres of pulverized bones after being processed through barrels of sulphuric acid. Here was necropower at its most effective. It truly was an exceptional condition. While 'victims of massacres are always singular creatures, each with a face, a name and a story' (Cavarero 2010: 20), the dead had no such rights on this occasion. There was no opportunity for those killed to leave behind their details. In this particular instance the protagonist in charge of disposing of the cadavers made the bodies 'undone'. He ensured they lost their individuality. Through this act the man carrying out the task stripped off 'the ontological dignity that the human figure possesses' (Cavarero 2010: 7) and rendered the victims completely nameless in their afterlife.

Evidently, Santiago Meza López—known as *El Pozolero* ('The Stew Maker'), the man found at the heart of this macabre enterprise in the northern city of Tijuana—could not name any firm accomplices, had no exact figure for the number of those he had reduced to this chemical dust—the conservative figure is estimated to be 350—and, most critical of all, gave no clear motives—he simply claimed that he received the bodies from the Arellano Felix cartel and dissolved them in acid in several different locations. In the opinion of Fernando Ocegueda Flores, the founder of the Organization for the Disappeared, piecing together the identities of the dead from acres of ash and a few fragments of bone will be next to impossible (Turati 2011: 16–17), hence the nagging questions surrounding death itself. Who were these people? Which age group did they belong to? Where did they come from? What happens to death itself in such particular contexts? In the context of logical killing death has a meaning: it has to have a meaning. Yet, as Mbembe reminds

us, in such nameless enterprises of death that fail to signify something, or indeed anything,

> [t]heir morphology henceforth inscribes them in the register of undifferentiated generality: simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor. (Mbembe 2003: 35)

The messenger(s) of death while exercising his necropower rarely demonstrates the logic of his killing. His deeds remains, at best, inchoate, indiscriminate, incomprehensible and, above all, illogical. Like the lifeless bodies dumped into deep wells after their hearts have been wrenched out, the living/dead are reduced to mere numbers. Nestled within their terror there is this all-encompassing mindless horror (Cavarero 2010: 18).

Yet politics as the work of death (Mbembe 2003: 16) is no longer the sole preserve of solitary individuals or the narcos. Necropower as an instrument of subjugation, control and, ultimately, the taking of life without due process has lost its monopolistic association with the narcos. If the narcos constitute the non-state deployers of death, their nemesis is the state-sponsored avenger of the narcos and all those who are suspected to be in cahoots with the narcos.

While the narcos are the subterranean agents of death (coming out into the open after nightfall, entertaining their gruesome murders in clandestine locations and disappearing into the darkness after their job), their counterparts, the police and soldiers out on patrol in their 4×4 s, are the true public face of necropower. Sporting black balaclavas, dark glasses and with their finger perpetually on the trigger while scouting the streets on those ominous black armoured personnel careers they are the true agents of death. They have the licence to snatch life away. Whosoever their bullet mows down is a narco—no questions asked.[12] They are at the pinnacle of necropower. They decide who should live and who should die. Their death decisions are absolute. There cannot be any questions about their resolve to seek out potential living targets who can be instantaneously turned into heaps of mangled blood-soaked bodies.

People walk away after witnessing such random acts of death at the hands of the police and military (Gibler 2011). The following day all the local newspapers reproduce the same images of blood-stained lifeless bodies. And, the day after, there is another set of photographs from yet another location. Do we know the number of deaths? Does the state produce evidence as to the exact background of those whose lives it regularly claims on countless occasions in a multitude of locals? Does anybody pursue the investigation beyond the presence of the heaps of mangled bodies? Is there any judicial inquiry into these deaths?

In its attempt to restrict the monopoly of necropower held by the narcos the state itself has become a death machine. The state in this instance has fast appropriated the necropower of the narcos (a theme I elaborate on in Chap. 5). In an ironic twist of fate one could argue that it has become the very machinery that it set out to vanquish. Its actions have turned it into what Deleuze and Guattari (1980: 437) and Mbembe (2003: 32) refer to as a *war machine*.

As the French philosopher Paul Virilio predicted not so long ago, in the absence of external threats, and when unable to engage in transpolitical procedures, some Latin American states will progressively become,

> sites of extermination, training zones for armed forces, incapable of going beyond their boundaries, an insidious form of a 'militaro-police' coalition destined to sacrifice the civic and political power of the people, where in the place of self-sacrifice for the sake of the Nation, these states sacrifice their own population in the name of state or generalised passivity. (Virilio 2008: 161)

The Law Is Dead—Long Live the Divine

The conventional moral and ethical personal responsibility that usually binds an individual to his action in a morally held and law-abiding society has very little meaning in the context of necropower and necropolitics. This does not mean that there is no constraint over one's own actions. However, the action and outcome are not part of the human-mediated and codified set of behaviours. For some sets of actors human

endeavour and participation in certain, and even all, actions are usually, and ultimately, divinely ordained.

The most potent manifestation of this framework can be found in the context of interaction and altercation between narcos and their arch-nemesis—the police and soldiers. Within the overall construction of necropolitics and the attendant issues and questions surrounding it—such as killing, reprisal, vendetta, retribution and all other forms of violent activism while overwhelmingly a construct of the modern secular state such interaction—from the perspective of those in the thick of it, it is ultimately an outcome resulting from the decision-making process of the divine.

Paradoxical as it may seem, both those responsible for upholding the laws of the secular state and those perpetually breaking it are often tied together by what might called a supernatural or divine code of intention. This sentiment finds its everyday manifestation in the *Oracion del Narco y Policia*, a kind of divine mantra. Almost all narcos and many police and soldiers are wedded to the idea that once they are out on their mission they are working for God—*Salgo a trabajar con dios si el permite, regreso si no, me fui con el* (they are working for God and, and if God permits they will return or else they will go the God's place/the death world) is the oft-quoted line one elicits from these sets of actors. In this framework, they (the adversaries) are part of a divine plan. They are, by their own admission, in the hands of fate. Consequently, there is no human responsibility after certain actions. God will permit our actor(s) to continue with his killing and counter-killing for as long as God wishes. As Girard put it, 'it is, in fact, violence's revenge on those who wield it' (Girard 1977: 255).

If these violators absolve themselves from man-made legal responsibilities by consigning their actions to divine interventions, how do private individuals or civilians respond to the violent outcome? Or, to put it slightly differently, if, for the narcos and the soldiers, God is the arbiter of the politics of life and death on the streets, how do civilians who are also in the thick of it consider their own existence? In the frontier towns and cities bordering the USA and in plenty of other places across the country the age-old Mexican Indian response to a commitment

Ultimately, those holding necropower and those over whom it is exercised are bound by what one might call divine providence. The traditional understanding of power and security as the sovereign aegis of the state and the secular is abandoned in the context of necropolitics. For civilians the issues surrounding life and death on the streets and their own ultimate survival do not depend on the agencies of either the state or the necropower of the narcos. They are not concerned with the ability or inability of the state to provide the security that it was originally intended to provide. Such issues are now part of the divine game plan. *Dios quiere* (God willing) is the standard response to the probability of a civilian returning to his/her house at sundown or, worse still, the continuation of their survival until the next day. Arguably, then, that such behaviour is ultimately an indication, and to some extent confirmation, of the loss of faith in the secular and its laws and systems of justice. On closer introspection, in the context of necropolitics, one could argue that the question of life and death is decided elsewhere.

To some observers, however, such an attitude may represent fatalism of the worst kind (Bowden 2010b: 9). Yet when examining it within the context of necropolitics, one could argue that such behaviour is perfectly legitimate, even rational. When death assumes an indiscriminate form through its agents, that is, the cartels, fatalism surrounding the temporality of life becomes a natural condition. The example that follows explains such a condition. In May and June 2008 the ultraviolent Los Zetas cartel sent out electronic messages and distributed leaflets throughout the northern province of Durango, announcing its intention to kill at random. The *narcomensajes*, as they were dubbed in the Mexican press, announced the following:

> 'el ataque es inminente' 'la ciudad de Durango se teñirá de rojo con la sangre de sus hijos' 'cientos de cabezas van a rodar' ahora si nos van a temer!!!! (quoted in Dávila 2008: 15).[13]

While *Los Zetas* did not entirely carry out all the killings in Durango on this occasion, it has been carrying out killing with a degree of impunity across the length and breadth of Mexico and other parts of Central America (in Guatemala in particular). When the spectre of death is so

close and so indiscriminate the masses cannot be accused of paranoia, nor for that matter fatalism.

For critics such as Agustin Basave Benitez this mode of behaviour is best explained as Mexican schizophrenia. He posits that, while elsewhere in the world the law is devised and defined by rationality and held in the highest regard, it loses its central meaning altogether in Mexico (Basave 2010). The utter disregard for the law and the consequential violence, according to Basave, can be interpreted as a collective dysfunctionality in the Mexican system, self and psyche. How else is one to read the actions of the mayor of Ciudad Juarez? While he ruled his city during the day, he went off across the border to El Paso, Texas in the USA every night to sleep (or to avoid the assassin's bullets).

Conclusion

Necropower has been a part and parcel of Mexican society since pre-Columbian times. Various critics have been puzzled, as well as disturbed, by the prevalence of everyday violence and death in this 'beautiful' landscape. Graham Greene called it 'the hidden hate' (Greene 1976: 91) that is hard to come to terms with. For Octavio Paz there exists a perennial deficiency in comprehending it. For him 'it is a Mexico that, if we learn how to name and recognise it, we might one day finish transfiguring it: it shall cease to be that ghost that slips into reality and turns it into a nightmare of blood' (Paz 1999: 291).

What makes necropower singularly unique is its ability to reduce normal life to a temporality. Necropower has enforced a post-political order where people are excluded from the most basic protection. In this state of cold fear the natural discipline of life, as we know it, is constantly violated, ruptured and, worse still, abruptly taken away without there necessarily being a coherent explanation. Necropower has reduced contemporary Mexico to a primitive wilderness.

In his seminal work *The Accursed Share* (1988) Georges Bataille proposed a controversial economic theory of consumption. The *accursed share* refers to the surplus energy that any system, natural or cultural, must expend in order to confirm its distinctive identity. More

importantly, it is a fundamental necessity for that particular society to lose that excess energy—failure to use up that surplus energy amounts to risking its further growth (Bataille 1998: 20). This surplus or excess energy that Bataille refers to can manifest itself in a range of human activities, covering extreme positions, such as abstinence to exuberance and peace to violence. In the end, this killing process is sustained by a ready availability of individuals to be killed.

Notes

1. The film *Apocalypto*, directed by Mel Gibson, offers a graphic, albeit imaginary, version of the juxtaposition of a non-Aztec world inhabited by peaceful noble beings and its subjugation by Aztec forces of death and destruction.
2. As Jean Franco suggests, 'publicity is important to the cartels. In an era of sophisticated advertisement they evoke another era: their statements involve bodies hanging from the bridges, warning issued on crudely painted blankets that are hung from overpass' (Franco 2013: 227).
3. Interestingly, 'when Santa Ana later fell into disgrace, the mummified leg was disinterred and dragged through Mexico City by his enemies' (see Lomnitz 2008: 368).
4. In September 2006 a group of smartly dressed gunmen walked through the sliding doors of *Sol y Sombra* (Sun and Shade), a discotheque popular with the youth of Uruapan, a sleepy little town in the western Mexican state of Michoacán. Instead of asking for a drink or eyeing up the women on the dance floor they simply rolled five human heads onto it, like it was a bowling alley.
5. As Cavarero observes, 'as singular bodies, the repugnance extends to all of us. Whoever shares in the human condition also shares in disgust for an ontological crime that aims to strike it in order to dehumanise it' (Cavarero 2010: 18).
6. From Aztec public sacrifices to revolutionary executions and the contemporary display of killing in its various forms in narco-related violence, there appears to be a continuous chain of cultural demands. The demand for the gruesome is so pervasive that even middle-class mainstream dailies and periodicals such as *La Jornada* and *Proceso* regularly

carry images of killing which would distress even the most hard-boiled western reader.

7. Several avid readers the author interviewed confessed that the experience while going through these horrors in print form was almost like peering at pornographic prints.
8. Jorge Luis Borges understood this obsession with death rather well. In his view death, and the voyeurism associated with it, is a typical Latin American obsession. Note, for instance, the portrayal of violence in the character of Dahlmann in *El Sur.* Dahlmann's existential dilemma is squarely related to death. As the critic Ariel Dorfman argues, 'through death, real or dreamed, Dahlmann encounters his own being and that of all Latin America. It is violence that brings him back to himself' (Dorfman 1991: 232).
9. The collusion between the official agents of the state and criminals is well known and can go to extraordinary lengths. In 2010, in the northwestern province of Durango, prison guards let out convicted criminals to commit contract killing using the former's weapons (The Economist 2010: 30).
10. There are exceptions to this rule, however. In the city of Culiacan, Sinaloa there is an entire cemetery/necropolis dedicated to the deceased members of the Pacific cartel. Here, individual graves are often adorned with replicas of all the gadgets that the dead man adored. And, there are mariachis who sing over his grave on the anniversary of his death. But these are rarities. In general, most narcos die an uncelebrated death.
11. From my interview with the victim's uncle (Lucio Ramirez) in Coatepec, Verarcuz, 7 August 2012.
12. The author is a resident of Mexico and is witness to many such patrols on a daily basis. Such patrols are most prominent in the province of Veracruz. Images of them are available in the public domain, that is, in newspapers, journals, newsreel, TV reports and so on. As an example, see *Proceso*, Issue No. 1772, 17 October 2010.
13. The attack is imminent, the city of Durango will be dyed in red with the blood of its sons, and hundreds of heads will roll. From now on, their fear towards us will be total.

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3

Arguing Death

Death has always been a public affair in Mexican history—both during the pre-Columbian era and after. Unlike contemporary Europeans and Americans, or some other non-Western societies whose denial of death permeates their cultures, a great many Mexicans display, cultivate and celebrate an intimate, jovial and, on occasion, easy familiarity with death. While in pre-Columbian Mexico this was primarily associated with the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, in modern times variants of this association with violence and death can be found in various other modes of undertaking. Contemporary cultural facets of this interaction with death can be located in the religiously inspired, non-violent celebration of *Dia del Muerto*, and in the worship of violent gods and cults, ranging from *La Santa Muerte* to *Jesus Mal Verde*. As was the case in the historical past, Mexicans in the contemporary period—more than any other community of people—continue to display this intimacy with death.

This affinity with death (at times the violent manifestation of it) has prompted some critics to go to the extent of suggesting that death in Mexico is something that people look forward to (Moedano Navarro 1960). If the exterior representation of death were anything to go by it

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would appear that it is a society where profound thoughts about mortality are expressed and accepted with an admirable lightness of touch. Similarly, nowhere in the world is the cult of death as deeply ingrained and with so many manifestations as in Mexico (Moedano Navarro 1960: 32).

Thus the emotional impact of death, in either the political or the sociological context, it is argued by many critics, is less profound on their psyche (Paz 1999; Brandes 2003; Lomnitz 2008) compared to other societies and cultures. The culture of pain and the acceptance of violence and death—to some extent ungrudgingly—in the public domain has a much more profound presence in Mexico than elsewhere; hence the popular death fetish as both an observed reality and a primordializing theory dominates Mexican society (Meade 2008: 120). In some ways every chapter of Mexican history is replete with experiences of such public spectacle and its assessment (Paz 1998; Brandes 2003; Lomnitz 2008).

While there exists a rich array of literature that explores a Mexican view of death from a range of perspectives, there is something lacking in that normative assessment. What is absent is any deep and sustained examination of the idea of killing in the context of narco-violence or the drugs war, and the general Mexican attitude and response to it.

The current wave of narco-inspired violence and killing is perhaps the single most defining moment in modern Mexican history. According to government figures and newspaper estimates, between 1 December 2006 and 31 December 2011 over 50,000 Mexicans were killed in what is termed drug-related homicides. In the year 2011, when the killing rate was particularly high, there was one such death every 35 min (Luchnow 2011).

Using the above statistics as a guiding principle one may argue that despite the overwhelmingly subjective experience with death owing to narcowar, Mexicans have not, as yet, systematically contemplated the collective impact of such violence, in all its interconnected dimensions, on their individual being and on society as a whole. Simultaneously, the topic has not received any sustained critical exploration in anthropology and politics of violence or in other contemporary philosophical inquiry.

Paradoxical as it may seem, even though there exists very little external manifestation of this soul-searching or intellectual inquiry into death, both individuals and wider society may be a part of a deep engagement with the meaning of killing without fully grasping its breadth. Contextualizing death in the milieu of modern warfare Virilio and Lotringer argue that in such milieu 'death is displaced, or rather the awareness we can have of it is displaced' (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 136). If the repertoire of narco-violence is considered a part of the narrative of modern warfare then there are clear indications that, far from being an estrangement from death, a society in the midst of such warfare may consciously use corporeal killing to build an identity that is unique to it. While it is true that Mexicans have been generally impervious to death (Brandes 2003: 127), this imperviousness would appear to have assumed a new meaning in the context of narco-related violence.

The Framework

This chapter draws on four sets of theoretical positions to analyse the context of death from narco-violence in Mexico. In particular it uses Edith Wyschogrod's conception of 'the death event' to interrogate specific discourses and reactions associated with killing (Wyschogrod 1985). It also introduces Joseph Bottum's interpretation of the 'place of the dead in a political community' (Bottum 2007), in order to tease out the place of such narrative in relation to the state. As part of the specific empirical inquiry behind the logic of narco-related killing it uses Claudio Lomnitz's general reflection on the idea of death in Mexico (Lomnitz 2008). And, finally, it turns to 'killing as sacrifice' as envisioned in the works of René Girard.

These four theoretical propositions are used interchangeably throughout this chapter—to develop as well as anchor specific arguments on the war on drugs and drug traffickers, and the accompanying outcome, that is, killing. The use of the abovementioned four theoretical frameworks—belonging to philosophy, political theory, anthropology of violence, and religion—facilitates the debate in moving into hitherto unexplored territories. And, in the process, allows us to see the

dynamics of the politics and anthropology behind the reaction and response to conflict-related death in the context of narco-violence.

In what follows I briefly outline the particular take on killing and death in the works of Wyschogrod, Bottum, Lomnitz and Girard. Such an exercise will allow us to better place the event, experience and response to violent killing and the subsequent outcome of death in a normative context.

Edith Wyschogrod begins her meditation on death by examining it through the prism of life. For her, 'dying acceptably is only possible if death has become ingredient in life itself long before life is extinguished' (Wyschogrod 1985: 2). This would imply some kind of natural life cycle ending in old age. If life is appropriated before its natural completion, then it cannot be acceptable. Premature death, therefore, is not only objectionable from an individual perspective, but it is also unacceptable on philosophical grounds.

Similarly, in general parlance the killing of an individual by another, either through direct intervention or indirect order, is built around the conception of an enemy and threat that results in the imposition of death on the other. The sole purpose of this exercise is the annihilation of the enemy. According to Wyschogrod, this mode of enterprise is, in fact, the enactment and imposition of a death-world upon the living by an actor or sets of actors who cannot tolerate the presence of another set of living among their midst. Such a genre of violence preceded by death is, therefore, not a phantasm. Instead, 'vast numbers of persons are simply marked for annihilation as part of an impersonal process of destruction' (Wyschogrod 1985: 35). But the process of annihilation, while regrettable, nonetheless rakes up an awful lot of questions in the process.

While killing can be banal, especially if the numbers stack up against one another, mass death gives meaning to this process of carnage. The scale of killing or death is all important in any manner of discussion or exploration, philosophical or otherwise. As Wyschogrod argues, 'mass death "lights up" the horizon from which death can be interpreted so that the death of the individual due to the natural hazards of existence seem insignificant when contrasted with ending one's life in an event of mass extermination' (Wyschogrod 1985: 13).

Killing is the most extreme form of personal violence (Spierenburg 2008: 1). But this extreme personal undertaking can often become mainstream. As, Wyschogrod put it, 'the annihilation of persons as an end in itself is the aim not only of the death-world but also of contemporary warfare, thus transforming war into component of death event' (Wyschogrod 1985: 40). Chapter 5, which considers the issue of vigilantism, stresses the above argument. It suggests that the death event is no longer the sole preserve of the cartel members, but is equally endorsed by ordinary people.

Killing, for some political theorists, serves a purpose. The usefulness of killing to further a given political or societal project has a long history. In such contexts it provides the perfect opportunity for a people and a nation to come together—either to denounce it or to take advantage of it. For Joseph Bottum, a contemporary American political theorist, all human civilizations are bound by one particular thread that is its view of death, in both a natural and an unnatural context. And, as such, death has always been a human problem (Bottum 2007).

If that is so, one can infer from this argument that, it is the livng's preoccuation with the dead that defines agiven society's specific understanding of itself, its behaviour and ultimately the larger culture. The dead, in the words of Bottum, 'are necessary for strong communities as they lend life a thick meaning' (Bottum 2007). If one were to agree that death has a domineering and overarching presence on the living, the living's response, reaction and the ways of relating to the dead are critical in terms of defining that culture and, by default, the societal identity.

Traditional historiographies surrounding killing and death provide an intimate insight into the minds of a people. For Lomnitz, some cultures and people may have a greater disposition to killing and violent death in their everyday lives compared to their contemporaries elsewhere who may not share such an experience. In fact, the fearless acquaintance with visceral killing in the public domain usually conditions the very attitude to life and death among that particular people (Lomnitz 2008). When there exists such a level of intimacy with killing and death then it naturally produces an outlook that is profoundly unique and differentiates it from other societies that lack such experience.

Such public mainstream understanding of killing and the closeness with death—acquired partly through inheritance and partly by everyday experience—ultimately contribute to a certain kind of national identity. Thus Lomnitz stresses that 'the inductive method of studying attitudes toward death via close inspection of the history of social practices directly connected to death' provides us with a holistic understanding of that society (Lomnitz 2008: 15).

Turning to Mexico, we realize that there may be some validity in such a line of argument. In the opinion of critics such as Lomnitz, this closeness with death, which permeates all aspects of Mexican society and public life, is, in fact, the cornerstone of Mexico's national identity (Lomnitz 2008).

The big question, of course, is how do we use Lomnitz's interpretation of death and national identity in the context of narco-killing? What happens to attitudes towards death when a society is organized around various motifs related to death? In Lomnitz's view 'the social construction of death—and of killing—is a way of understanding the relationship between experience and expectations, with simultaneous reference to a subjective, a collective, and even trans-societal horizon' (Lomnitz 2008: 19).

Necropower, as discussed in Chap. 2, imposes a specific kind of death. It opens up a unique void. How then is that space occupied? 'Death', to quote Lomnitz, 'is the dismemberment of an individual, a dissolution that makes room for the group or for the species as a whole through the destruction of one of its members' (Lomnitz 2008: 15). Death, then, is an opportunity. It is a provider. While the death of a cartel boss makes space for another to elevate himself and fill the vacuum, the same death for the community can come as a respite.

There is no escaping the fact that death in the Mexican national popular imagination has been constant and pervasive. Yet, as I briefly alluded to this fact in the introduction, reflection on the process of death and dying has remained partial. 'A history of death in Mexico', therefore 'needs to reach beyond the social and cultural history of death and dying into the political and cultural deployment of death and the dead in the very figuration of national times' (Lomnitz 2008: 21). The investigation of killing in cartel violence not only provides us with a

political interpretation of death, it also allows us a wider examination of the cultural responses to such death events.

The central argument in René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* revolves around the suggestion that 'if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies' (Girard 1977). Thus the use of brute violence resulting in death becomes the only way forward in such contexts. If killing is the inescapable condition, or the visitation of death is a given, in such contexts, then outcome may have a lasting positive impact. For Girard, many ancient civilizations considered that through the mechanism of murder, violence really could drive out violence (Girard 1977). If we place this argument right at the heart of the debate on narco-violence we encounter something startlingly familiar.

The Mexican reaction to the culture of vendetta killing between rival narcos is mostly accepted with aplomb and appreciation. Studied up-close it would seem that there is not only an absence of any public mourning towards such unnatural deaths, but the occasion also lends itself to lively informal and private debate in the mainstream that considers the merits of such killing—let evil sort out the other evil or evils. Hence the killing between rival narco gangs is seen as and considered a matter of relief rather than regret.

Heroic Agency

While the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 is argued to have produced modern, industrialized processes of death (Meade 2008: 119), it is from 2010 onwards that this progression has been perfected to almost an art form by the narcos and public agents of death in the context of narcowar. The design, experimentation and infliction of death on the masses in peacetime in a variety of manners would appear to have no contemporary parlance.

If Mexico's liberal elite considered death as a romantic emblem during the war of independence (Lomnitz 2008; Meade 2008), a twisted romance with death would appear to be functioning in the context of narco conflict. While for the revolutionaries courting death was

a personal mission for a higher cause (that is for independence or for defending a particular regime and sacrificing their lives for the state), the narcos, by contrast, romanticize the vision and impose death upon their opponent for personal gains.

For Paul Theoroux, in Mexico a hero is always a dead person (Theroux 2008). According to some critics, premodern armed encounters and wars provide paradigms that are derived from a more or less unitary heroic tradition which enables human beings at least to imagine a measure of responsibility for their own deaths: acts of heroism, the display of tactical intelligence, martyrdom (Wyschogrod 1985: 56–57). A hero in Mexico, according to Theroux's argument, is someone who only becomes a hero following a particularly nasty brush with death.

A natural death in a hospital bed after a long life does not necessarily guarantee public veneration for that individual. In order to qualify for the status of a true hero in the public memory and public imagination the person concerned must have an unusual association with life and death. Thus it would appear that the key institutions of society and the state are built around the claims of the fallen through a violent intervention (Lomnitz 2008).

Focusing on our particular analysis we find that death, martyrdom and heroism in the context of narco-violence is controlled by the person who is capable of playing with death. Death is an instrument in the hands of a select few. And they decide the workings of it as well as the fate of the death-world. The protagonist is the messenger of death—the person in charge of the death machine.

This way of looking at death becomes all too clear if we explore it in the context of *narcocorridos*. These *narcocorridos* and the oeuvre of death that they circulate (to borrow the title from the British artist Damien Hirst's work) are all about the physical impossibility of the death of the hero in the mind of the living.

If anything, as a genre of ballads edifying death and proclaiming the invincibility of the hero in such, *corridos* are not new. For a society that is steeped in folklores, myth and symbolism such *corridos* have dominated the popular imagination at regular intervals—whenever the society was at a crossroads and fell into the hands of brigands and populist figures. Pancho Villa, for instance, with his easy ways of killing,

gave rise to a culture of a 'carnival of bullets', whereas the *corridos* were about killing the adversary in countless ways (both foreign and Mexican adversaries). The proclamations of these *corridos*, always coarse, mocking and eventually finite in their reward of death to the enemy, always contained aspects of a messianic ideology of killing. Note, for instance, the following ballad titled *Pancho Villa at Torreón* (Simmons 1957).

To-day has come your tamer,
The father of Rooster Tamers,
To run you out of Torreón-
To the devil with your skins!

The ability of our renegade hero to inflict pain, suffering and ultimately death upon his adversary and the celebration by the masses of such adventures of killing and death found an easy audience in other theatres of conflict, that is, in individually mediated battles with gringos. Note, for instance, the escapades and killing spree of the border hero Jacinto Treviño of Matamoros. When his adversaries, the Texas Rangers, flee from his treacherous killing spree, he taunts them (Paredes 1958: 3).

Come on, you treacherous Rangers:
Come get a taste of my lead.
And did you think it was ham
Between two slices of bread?

Such individually mediated killing outside the purviews of law—its acceptance, glorification and, above all, celebration by the masses—has a long precedence in Mexico. On closer examination, one could argue that the current wave of killing by the narcos follows this established pattern. As it was in the past, the new *narcocorridos* introduce a unique but subtle message surrounding killing and death.

The popular mortuary *narcocorrido* while it glorifies the valour of the given narco-warlord, it nonetheless does not include him as a subject situated close to this death-world. In fact, the hero in the narco-narrative is one who not only cheated his own death but is enormously

successful in imposing it on a multitude of the living. The heroism and manliness in this context, to use Paz's reflection, are judged according to one's invulnerability to the enemy that manifests itself in deflecting the threats of the outside hostile world (Paz 1998: 31).

As the countless *narcocorridos* that glorify such violence testify, the true hero or protagonist is a figure that possesses the power of life and death. He is not afraid of death, but is in fact in charge of it. Unlike the hero of the national liberation struggle who happily courted death, in the politics of narcowar the 'true' hero is the one who escapes death by imposing its visitation upon others (primarily his enemies). What follows is a sample of such a depiction of a killing machine and death-giving identity:

> *He is short of stature but his brain is bigger*
> *He is hardest among the hard,*
> *and those who do not like him are from rival gang…*
> *The orders are clear, says Shorty, you know what to do, and*
> *if there are any problems*
> *you answer with goat horns ((AK 47))….*
> *Shorty does not need to raise his voice,*
> *His words carry great power.*
>
> —Diego Rivas, El Komander (Corridos de Arranque)

What we have here, in the above *narcocorrido* of Rivas (and countless more by other such singers of this genre), is the construction of (1) a socially declared reality of the enemy; and (2) the ways in which to apprehend such an enemy. It proposes the strategy and methods of extermination of the would-be exterminator and those entertaining such ideas of death against our protagonist.

Such an open, destructive, enemy-centred edifying undertaking, while it may appear mindless and visceral, is nonetheless solidly anchored in a logical framework. By killing and through the subsequent death of the opponent, the killer recognizes in himself the other-'in the one whom he has just murdered or betrayed, and he assumes his personality; he becomes him, his enemy' (Dorfman 1991: 33).

Furthermore, if such cold-blooded killing is 'evil', then the evildoer is guided by a specific set of principles. As Smelser suggests, 'one of the most profound aspects of evil is that he who does the evil is typically convinced that evil is about to be done to him' (Smelser 1971: 17), hence he himself must turn to evil if he is to escape the spell of evil. For the drugs lord, or the protagonist of the *narcocorridos*, introducing death among the masses is a necessary condition. He cannot turn away from it. For 'turning away from death he turns away from life' (Wyschogrod 1985: 7). Life, therefore, is a combat. It is this defensiveness, this readiness to repel any attack and send the death machine in the direction of the opponent and enemy at the slightest provocation, which makes the narco a singularly unique heroic death agency.[1]

Thus in its purest and most evil form such *narcocorridos* are a celebration of narco-messianism of death that recognizes no boundaries. It truly proclaims the sentiment: I am not only the administer of death, but I am death itself. This 'top down terror' (Mayer 2000) imposed by the narco-lord, it would seem, as a principle, a system and an instrument of the governance of killing, is in the end, designed not only to avenge and punish, but also to establish a sovereignty of death over the living.

Owing to the promotion of a culture of violence by the cartels, Mexico is slowly moving in the direction of what one might term an emerging narco-culture (*narcocultura*). According to some observers, such a *narcocultura* 'promises to overtake the country's established culture as the marginalised seek a viable place in the social strata through the emulation of a new mode of interaction' (Sullivan and Rosales 2011). The potent manifestation of this is the prevalence of a video game for the youth in the country's north—the aptly named *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*.

The game is a graphic shoot-'em-up interactive programme that uses all the ingredients of current cross-border conflict and associated violence as the backdrop. According to one teenage (who has played this game and narrated his experience to me) it is almost like being on the street fighting a war. To put it mildly, this video game serves as a form of initiation tool for the would-be killers, assassins, *secuestros* and smugglers. Unsurprisingly, both the US and Mexican governments have

criticized the prevalence of this counter-culture of violence and have banned it—but to no effect.

Owing to a combination of violent tools of acculturation and, subsequently, a new mode of thinking (it would not be an exaggeration to argue), a segment of Mexican population (read youth) has grown up in an extremely gruesome alternate reality. In fact, in parts of the country this narco-culture has assumed a mainstream identity and seems likely to push out the vestiges of Mexico's past culture (whatever that may have been). Consequently, these killers 'fill the popular imagination as demonic antiheroes. Not only do they feature in underground songs in the drug world—they are re-created in *telenovelas*, movies, and even video games simulating their new warfare' (Grillo 2016: 37).

While the drug lords go on with their killing and the masses lap it up through the heroism of *narcocorridos* and *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*, what remains unanswered is the justification of the killing project. Where do those killed sit in this easy violence? Are they located in a clearly demarcated spatial divide between friend and foe? Do the killers and the killed place themselves within a justified wartime discourse on violence—it was 'him' or 'me'? Or, are these simply callous trigger-happy killings—perhaps a cruel manifestation of hidden hatred towards the living?

One former hitman from Ciudad Juarez, who escaped to the USA, agreed, on the condition of anonymity, to feature in a well-publicized documentary, *El Sicario: Room 164*, about the killing fields of Mexico. He gave a rather interesting perspective on this gory state of affairs. According to him, the killer often did not know who he was actually working for; who his immediate superiors were; who his true comrades were. Usually, and very often, this agent of death had little or no idea who benefited from this whole business of killing (Littell 2012: 53). In spite of the absence of a clear logic in this killing project the hitman went on killing nonetheless.

The ambiguous concentric circle of violence in which the hitman/murderer/killer found himself and could not discern enemy from non-enemy, friend from foe, or failed to establish the clear chain of command, was not a unique condition or specific to the current state of narco-related violence. If one were to take a backward glance into Mexican history one could find clear parallels that highlight such

ambiguity related to killing. For critics such as Lomnitz, 'Mexico's colonial and dependent heritage made it difficult to draw a sharp line between the nation and its enemies between inside and outside, between the dead who must be named and honoured and those who are to remain uncounted and anonymous' (Lomnitz 2008: 20).

Interestingly, such a legacy of individually mediated, random killing to instil fear in your adversary is neither new nor specific to the current context. Thus in a heroic/messianic tradition of killing we have seen Pancho Villa shooting his captured prisoners at random, while trying to break the monotony and tedious routine of an inactive everyday life in the mountains, and the regular engagement in cutting off prisoners' ears—for such acts excited him and the people and did not bring any (negative) results according to Villa's own admission (Valdés 2003: 136; quoted in Meade 2008: 148).

Carlos Fuentes, one of Mexico's celebrated writers, puts General Pancho Villa's cavalier attitude towards killing in his opus *Old Gringo* rather well. When Raoul Walsh, the Hollywood cameraman and chronicler of Villa's exploits during the Mexican Revolution expresses apprehension about the available light to shoot a scene of execution, Villa comforts him with the promise: 'Don't worry Don Raoul. If you say the light at four in the morning is not right for your little machine, well, no problem, The executions will take place at six' (Fuentes 1985: 170–171). And then there is, of course, the legendary incidences about Villa shooting his prisoners whom he offered liberty if they could scale a wall ahead of his guns (a feat copied by many B-list Hollywood and Spaghetti Western movie directors—one of those rare instances where art imitated real-life events).[2]

Are the current cartel bosses equally comfortable with their decisions when ordering the killing of their captives? The truth may or may not emerge for a very long time. However, there is no denying the fact that when it comes to a Mexican renegade hero's anger there is no mercy towards his enemies. They must be killed as ruthlessly as possible, even at the cost of reneging on the momentary hero's own words of a promise of leniency. Thus we have political leaders like Huerta who, after seizing power, promised on the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the name of his mother to spare the life of the deposed respective president and

vice president, Madero and Suárez, only to shoot them the next day (Gruening 1940: 306).

Fatalism of the Nomos

If in Fuentes we discern an element of social criticism on the issue of killing, through the mocking treatment of reality, in another of his contemporary writers, Octavio Paz, this criticism becomes even more severe and merciless. In his celebrated meditative work *El Labiriento de La Soledad* Paz suggests that Mexicans' association with killing or their impulse to kill another individual is born out of the assessment that life is of no value (Paz 1998: 58). The barbarism and savagery associated with a given constituency of heroes—be it General Villa of old; or Joaquín Guzmán Lorea, known as *El Chapo* (or *The Shorty*), the leader of the powerful Sinaloa cartel of the present— are, in effect, devoid of any deep heroic purposes. That may be so.

But, on closer examination of the contemporary narco-related killing, we are confronted with a variant of this particular line of argument. While the process of killing may be a result of the non-appreciation of life; the outcome cannot be said to be devoid of any clear meaning. Killing, in the context of narcowar, is not meaningless. While life may not have any value; its ending through violent intervention, and the subsequent outcome, is in itself full of meaning(s). Looking at death from the viewpoint of the narcos, one can almost reconstruct the Pazian assessment by putting it in a Leonian framework that 'where life had no value, death, sometimes, had its price' (Leone 1967).

While majestically macabre—the taking away of life by one group of narcos or another hostile group, or by *soldados* targeting narcos in a bipartite or tripartite mélange of violence—the objective is to attach a meaning not to life but to death itself, for the death of any of these actors ensures a value that was missing when the individual was alive. Thus death, instead of being meaningless, provides the much-needed triumph for those who take life. Similarly, even though they may end up as just a number in an ever-growing set of statistics, to put it bluntly, the dead now contribute to a new imagination which would otherwise

have been impossible if there had not been an unnatural killing or death.

Death in the context of narco-violence is not irreverent. It operates and is expressed within the logic of Zeno's paradox: 'the assumption that there exists an infinite and inexhaustible reservoir of persons to be consumed without end' (Wyschogrod 1985: 56); and the actors involved should be guided in their actions through the remit of such a framework, as such consumption gives meaning to life itself. Thus if one gang in the city of Veracruz scatters five dozen mutilated cadavers on a busy intersection, another rival gang spares no time in hustling up a similar number of living before leaveing their tortured, lifeless bodies in large trailers in another part of this otherwise blasé city.

This manner of such ceaseless killing is perhaps not new. There are strong parallels to an erstwhile pre-Columbian past when killing was indeed the raison d'être for the living. For historian Maurice Collis, 'it is no exaggeration to suggest that the government of (Aztec) Mexico was organised from top to bottom so as to be able to sustain, and thereby mollify, the gods of life and death with as many human hearts as possible' (Collis 1954: 77).

Returning to the present, while the faceless and identity-less cadavers are heaped one on top of another in a crammed lorry, or buried in shallow graves across the country, they present a case of corporeal anonymity that nonetheless contributes to the imagination of the living and their mission—to establish a hierarchy of order. If one were to examine the architecture of any killing project one would realize there are several underlying motives at work. In order for the killing to work, to serve a purpose, it must be visible. Direct. Immediately understandable. And, in the current Mexican context, it must have the capacity to be read aloud. There is no fatigue associated with such deaths: the larger the number of mutilated bodies of rival cartel members the higher the estimation of the cartel that imposed such deaths.

Once again this enterprise of killing may be a throwback to the country's ancient past. It is hard to argue exactly how much of inheritance or history contributes to the presence of a culture of subdued violence among the general public. However, it cannot be denied that there is a certain appreciation of violence and consequently a preparedness to face

it among a good many Mexicans. As Edith Wyschogrod put it, 'once the death event comes into existence it becomes a residue of an irrevocable past without which the present is incomprehensible' (Wyschogrod 1985: 57).

When Aztec warrior king Ahuitzotl dedicated the great temple-pyramid to Huitzilopchtli in 1486, he spent two long years in a military campaign against the Mixtecs in Oaxaca, amassing more than 20,000 prisoner-victims. At the opening of the temple-pyramid their hearts were cut out and held briefly to the sun, still pulsating, before they were deposited in the heart-urn of the recumbent Chac-mool figure (von Hagen 1958: 163). This mode of taking away life served two purposes: it eliminated the enemy and at the same time satiated the needs of the Aztecs' gods. If the Aztec enterprise of killing was meant to establish order, the power of the modern Mexican state to kill (in extrajudicial contexts) is simply a reinforcement of that indispensable order.

Hence, the more *delinquentes* the *soldados* clear off the street through their weaponry the safer they are. And, finally, the greater the number of dead narcos the more there is an assumption of a better and safer society. In all these cases, the connecting and abiding assumption is that, for the the living, meaning of life is facilitated only when there are these corporeal deathly presences all around them. In the absence of this the lives of the living remain suspended.

Nowhere is this need to get rid of *delinquentes* more acutely felt than in the City of Juarez (Ciudad Juarez) in the country's north. Of the total narco-related killings across the country Ciudad Juarez's share has remained somewhere around 10%. This makes it one of the most dangerous cities in the Americas. While two groups of *delinquentes* belonging to two rival cartels, that is, Juarez and Sinola, fight a turf war, the civilians caught in this mayhem pray for as many members of *Barrio Azteca* and their nemesis *Artist Assassins* (or, Double A's) to be killed as possible.

For many, Ciudad Juarez truly captures the spirit of urbicide (Bowden 2010a). The spectre of death all around is reminiscent of Dante's inferno. According to the critic Ioan Grillo, 'If Dante had ever been to Ciudad Juarez he would have unhesitatingly placed it in the

seventh circle of hell, the one housing "violence" and "ringed by a river of boiling blood"' (Grillo 2011).

Mourning Is Another Country

In the politics of killing the dead always maintain a constant presence. All societies have their particular ways of treating their killed. And, so do Mexicans. While it is true that Mexicans in general, as part of their religio-cultural tradition, develop a close relationship not necessarily to deceased relatives but, rather, to an abstract entity known as death (Brandes 2003: 128), this affinity or bond is somewhat loose and, in the cases of those *narcos* and *soldados* killed in the war on drugs, it is completely abandoned. Why is this so?

For Bottum, the fundamental feature of any meaningful organization for any community is a congregation at a memorial service (Bottum 2007). Mourning death collectively in the environment of the churchyard, in a mausoleum or simply in the house of the dead as part of *novenario* reinvigorates the community spirit. In fact, true communities are created when that collective is *able* to and in a *position* to have a shared celebration of the dead (Bottum 2007).

For one group of tribes—the Aztecs, to which a great many Mexicans retrace their ancestry—the death of a member of the community was a defining moment. They had the power to make or unmake the lives of the living.

> [A]ll must be done to obtain the goodwill of the recent dead; their displeasure could have dire consequences and could expose the living to twofold retribution: from the justly-offended recently dead and from fellow clan-members, who collectively would have to suffer the consequences of the dead's anger' (von Hagen 1958: 115). For these ancient tribes a man's dying was more of a survivors' affair than his own. (von Hagen 1958: 115)

But in the context of narcowar the dead belonging to the battle line between the *narcos* and *soldados* are denied any societal participation in

his/her post-life funeral ceremony. There occurs little or no communal participation at the funeral or gathering at the dead's house (as is customary) within the framework of *novenario*. Investigating this up-close we are confronted with an intriguing glimpse into such an oddity. There are two sets of specific logics (one for the narco and one for the *soldado*) that prevent the enactment of public participation in the funeral or indeed in any funeral at all.

For the narco who has been killed in an armed encounter by the forces of the state, his post-life bodily presence is an affront to the human community to which he, until the moment of his death, belonged, the family from which he came and to those *soldados* or rival narcos who killed him. His body, though robbed off and devoid of any power to damage society, is seen still as in possession of a threat. Expressions of public grief or even acknowledging that the dead narco was related to them carry real and actual danger to the family and friends. Here the dead pose a credible menace to the living.

Similarly, the *soldados* who have killed do not expose themselves in public for fear of reprisals from the dead's comrades, that is, gang members. And, finally, the narcos to whose ranks that particular individual belonged abstain from claiming the dead or engaging in any funeral arrangements for fear of revealing their identity and falling victim to the state's forces; hence any hint of public grief or display of the knowledge of the dead is steadfastly embraced by the living.

On another plane the practice of the wholesale destruction of the living's bodily marker by their would-be assassins and executioners leaves little room for mourning once the dead has been robbed of life. For instance, 'one gang in Acapulco removes the faces of its victims. Another in Monterrey hangs victims upside down, and alive, from bridges, and then shoots them from below' (Luchnow 2011), robbing the would-be dead of their final identity even after their death. Since there are no identifiable, visible features and because few of these deaths are actually investigated (Luchnow 2011), the living, upon their passing away, are processed through a variety of treatments—some are dumped alive in shallow graves, others boiled to pulp in sulphuric acid and plenty more are fed to pigs. In such circumstances the traditional relation to death is no longer unified, because instead of visible, identifiable

dead we now have fragmented petrified bodies (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 137) devoid of an identity.

The argument here would be: if the dead have an egalitarian identity through this process of rendering them unidentifiable, does it create a challenge for the living? How critical is the imposition of anonymity of death in unidentifiable cadavers in a culture that reveres the afterlife and considers the dead very much a part of the living? What implications does such corporeal anonymity have on the larger society? While they remain unidentifiable, and the dead are 'denied the substance of death' (Bauman 1992: 25), there is no escaping the process of death. In fact, as soon as death is hushed up, it takes spectacular forms (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 136).

Most societies give priority to mourning as part of an individual's experience of social interaction. In the nature of the political the mourning of the dead leads to a healthy social organization. If mourning implies a commitment to the nomos, then non-mourning implies falling out of the nomos and into chaos. While refraining from mourning, society journeys into a perilous terrain. For Wyschogrod, 'only by taking death into ourselves and no longer confront it as the great negation can we (as a society) affirm the place and unity of both life and death' (Wyschogrod 1985: 7).

The non-mourning is, in fact, what leads to a counter-theme of reproach for the living. The failure to embrace death in the public domain makes 'death stand closer to the surface of the political order/disorder' (Bottum 2007). This absence of mourning in the present is not an automatic guarantor of order. The relegation of the dead to an unvisited and unidentifiable death zone only postpones the question of death to a future date, when the assessment of the contextuality, character and manner of such death is likely to become extremely contentious.

Yet, on balance, this stepping away from the dead and allowing the dead to bury their dead may be a part of a well thought-out critical undertaking. The disdain for the killers, by the larger society, as we shall see throughout this book is a representation of that mindset. If the death of the narco is merely a number, a petrifying cadaver dug up from a mass grave and divested of post-death ritual or mourning, it simply attests to the fact that these people did not have true claim over

their own living. In some ways by abandoning the narco's death society makes a declaration. It puts the fallen narco into a Pazian framework that considers ways of dying as mimicking the ways of living.

In fact it is only in death that life is truly defined. Thus if the narco's death lacks meaning, or if he appears to have died badly, it really serves as a reflection and confirmation of his way of living. In the end, there is no hushing up the dead. If anything, the distancing of the society and the failure to accord the dead their dues is, in fact, an affirmation of the sentiment that 'he got what he was looking for' (Paz 1998: 54). Thus any mourning for such dead is not only out of place but can be construed as a waste.

And the Living …

In the final analysis one can identify two sets of responses from a societal perspective when it comes to assessing the meaning of killing. The first concerns a direct and rational examination of death in order to establish the actual truth behind such an outcome. No matter how severe the conflict dynamics are and how persistent the killings these societies refuse to give into the temptation of developing a laid-back attitude towards exploring the causality of the killing.

These societies consider they have as much responsibility to the person killed as they have towards the living. Put simply, these cultures and societies steadfastly embrace an attitude that is all about *seeking* the meaning of such unnatural deaths in a political, legal and conflict framework. In their search for a rational interpretation of the dead they make sure they are guided by a sense of responsibility and the dead are not simply left to bury their dead.

By contrast we have societies experiencing a vortex of conflict that may exhibit an attitude that is in direct contrast to the one I have just described. To use, the biblical phrase, once again, they may harbour an outlook that might imply 'let the dead bury their dead', hence the efforts of the living in order to examine and establish the truth behind such a death often at best take a back seat or at worst are discarded altogether.

Such distancing from the matters of the *now* dead can be attributed to two sets of interconnected explanations: (1) the society values life very little; (2) it is so tired of the ever-present environment of killing that it sleepwalks into a sense of fatalism. Or, as Paz suggested in his foundational narrative, 'we kill because life—our own or another's is of no value. Life and death are inseparable, and when the former lacks meaning, the latter becomes equally meaningless' (Paz 1998: 58).

This pessimism with the living leads to some uncomfortable truths. For some critics, a culture and society that generally embraces fatalism will also tend to deny meaningful death to its citizens (Button 2007). In other words, such societies may come to associate such outcome as inevitable, a form of providence over which they have little or no control. Consequently, it may come to attach less importance to the upshot of unnatural death compared to those cultures where everything has a rational interpretation.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore how the communal experience of killing can affect the subjective response to such gory outcomes. In particular, it examined the collective's complex relationship with agents of death and those killed.

While the traditional view holds that killing negates the assumptions of order on which society rests, some societies may, nonetheless, learn to appreciate the usefulness of such killing. The death or killing of the narco is seen as a form of sacrifice that society, on occasion, requires in order to consolidate its identity. Similarly, the killing of women who set out to work in *maquiladoras* in the north of the country (as we shall see in Chap. 5) and who defied the male-dominated social order is another instance of society reconsolidating itself through the enterprise of death.

Is death, then, a solution to the maladies afflicting society and the body politic? A cursory backward glance into Mexico's recent past acquaints us with the fact that sacrifices, vendettas and revolutions have been abiding themes throughout Mexico's pre-Hispanic and modern

history. Both death and politics during this long and tortuous period are joined at the root of the mainstream Mexican experience. Given the overwhelming sway of this narrative it would seem that both the governing system and society have come to regard death as the building blocks of a still ongoing national identity formation.

For societies such as Mexico while the *living* are associated with the crowd, the *dead* facilitate the establishment of communities. At the risk of sounding macabre, one could, therefore, propose that the current Mexican attitude, association and interpretation towards narco-related violence might be part of that particular perennial acceptance of the contribution of the dead to the living.

Notes

1. It is as if our contemporary drug lord is re-enacting the life of an Aztec hero of the past. For when an Aztec warrior died, 'he died *for* something, not *of* something' (von Hagen 1958: 174).
2. Villa was not the first one to invent this sadistic cat-and-mouse game. He learned this practice from his lieutenant, Rodolfo Fierro. For an exhaustive account, see (Guzman 1965).

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4

The Gods of Wrath

Evil be thou my Good!
Milton (2000: 91)

So far we have discussed the meaning of death in Mexico's narco-violence in a secular context. This, however, only partly explains the dynamics of such violence. Violence in contemporary narcowar also needs to be explained within the context of the divine. In contemporary Mexico very often it is not only the individual, but also the divine who partakes in the everyday enactment of violence. As we will see during the course of this discussion, divine manifestations, in the scheme of narco-violence, abandon their transcendental positions and throw them into the melee of mayhem.

The issues of life and death have thus become as much their prerogative as those individuals enacting it. Across Mexico a whole assortment of saints, deities and demigods have become the interlocutors between life forces and death forces. In this discourse and activism one deity in particular who has become mainstream is *La Santa Muerte*, 'the Mexican folk saint, who is viewed as the leading narco-saint, the poster girl of the culture of death' (Chestnut 2016).

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This chapter offers a discursive interpretation on the divinity of *La Santa Muerte*. In doing so it introduces the realm of *La Santa Muerte*'s power and authority and its ramifications for the Mexican state and the Catholic Church. This, I argue, is best understood if we examine it in the context of sovereignty. Suffice to say both the Mexican state and the Catholic Church consider *La Santa Muerte* inimical to their interests and subversive to their spheres of influence. It is, therefore, pertinent to ask (1) why the Mexican state views this belief system and its followers in a given light?; and (2) what challenges does *La Santa Muerte* pose to the Catholic Church?

Before we examine these broader questions, it is important that the concept and meaning of sovereignty are explained in order to facilitate this analysis. There are multiple meanings associated with sovereignty and there are as many implications of sovereignty. The normative notion of sovereignty is understood in the context of an authority or agency's ability to govern those under its domain, without any interference or restriction from within or outside.

While sovereignty can have various meanings and interpretations it is in the context of violence that sovereignty acquires its fullest meaning and exposition. Sovereignty, too many, is the very instrument of violence. The agency wherein sovereignty resides enjoys the monopoly to use unrestricted power. Sovereignty consists in the ability of the sovereign to exert legitimate force without limits. For critics such as Walter Benjamin, 'sovereignty consists in the sovereign's ability to use legitimate violence without fear or hindrance' (Benjamin 1994: 277). In essence, sovereign's violence is the means by which sovereignty is instituted and preserved.

In addition, the sovereign's power is both tangible and all pervasive. Thomas Hobbes grounds the very conception of sovereignty in the justification of the sovereign's ability to do what it wishes to do. It is the clearest manifestation of the justification of the power of the strongest and the legitimate. Sovereignty thus consists of one specific authority's ability to silence all other competing power centres and claimants to its authority. Interestingly, those under the control of the sovereign expect him to use violence as a necessity. It is argued that it this ability to exercise unrestricted sovereignty by which the sovereign succeeds in

establishing a uniform order across society. Consequently, even the most violent undertaking by this specific agency may be regarded as justified, legal and legitimate.

There has always been a fundamental linkage between sovereignty and power. Power in this framework alludes to what Agamben terms 'jurisprudential violence' (Agamben 1998). Its legitimacy is grounded on the fact that it is the one and only appeal to justice.

Sovereignty is a decision expressed by the agency whose remit is all-encompassing. It is, as Benjamin proposed, expressed in the context of law-making violence and law-preserving violence (Benjamin 1994). While an agency can claim sovereign authority in these two domains internally and externally, it may not always be able to enforce that claim, especially if the claim to its monopoly is restricted by criminal forces, or divine manifestations. In this context one who undermines the order not only challenges the sovereign, but also questions the source of its legitimacy. If the 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception' (Schmitt 1985: 5) under this new state of affairs the sovereign's monopoly on the use of violence is challenged.

In the modern context these very characters of sovereignty are primarily associated with the state. 'State', according to Weber is a 'human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (Weber 2004: 21). Yet if unrestricted justification of violence is the very raison d'être of the state then it runs into difficulty where this specific faculty is challenged or usurped. This leads to the infringement of sovereignty and, consequently, the emergence of competing sovereignties and the loss of order.

Sovereignty in the Mexican context has two readings. In the first instance, sovereignty refers to the unquestionable legal control of the state over its citizens. Secondly, it may denote the unofficial but binding religious authority of the Catholic Church over its followers. Taken together, these two sets of authority and controlling mechanisms represent specific manifestations of sovereignty.

As a rule of thumb, the life of an ordinary Mexican is perpetually controlled by the authority of the state and the dictates of the Catholic Christian religious values enjoined by the Church. Interestingly, the ideology of *La Santa Muerte* demands a form of allegiance from its

followers that both challenges and undermines the traditional sovereignty of the state as well as the Catholic Church. It is this process of eating into, and the chipping away of, the traditional sovereignty of the divine and that of the state which is at the heart of this study.

First, I wish to explain the style and the core arguments presented in this chapter. *La Santa Muerte* is a folk deity. Consequently, the *volk* uses several different names to address and invoke this goddess. Thus, while staying true to the Mexican tradition of the use of diminutives, I have used a host of names to describe her throughout this chapter. I have done this primarily to situate and amplify a specific narrative or discourse pertaining to this deity.

Academic works on *La Santa Muerte* are few and far between. On top of that none of the existing studies has tried to examine it within the context of sovereignty. Consequently, while building this argument, I have depended on a host of theoretical frameworks in order to construct what I would like to call a tentative position. I have liberally adopted several interdisciplinary research methods from the social sciences, ranging from anthropology to political theory. Yet the disciplinary space is not strictly divided nor does it run in a linear fashion.

The Cult of Cadavers

There is no scholarly agreement so far as pinning down the primary identity of *La Santa Muerte* is concerned. *La Santa Muerte* is a spirit. Yet she is a saint capable of performing saint-like duties for her devotees (Kristensen 2014: 10). She is the 'spirit of death' and yet has a visual *physical* presence. *La Santa Muerte* is not a religion in the conventional sense of the term. However, the intense devotion it succeeds in invoking among its devotees puts it on a par with other religions.

Furthermore, *La Santa Muerte* does not embody a doctrinal ethic or philosophy offering its devotees mystical enlightenment. What she does stand for, instead, is a deity capable of fulfilling mortal desires, granting favours and offering rewards to those who turn to her. Thus it contains a physical as opposed to cognitive or mystical dimension of worship. Moreover, devotees engage in their holy/religious practices not to seek

answers to metaphysical questions, but to gain clear physical benefits. Their assemblage before this specific god can be viewed as a pragmatic response to the challenges involving the mundane and everyday. While an instrumental faith (like any other), it is at the same time different from the rest.

Whether one views *La Santa Muerte* as a cult, faith or a religion, 'it is the fastest growing new religious movement across the North and Central American region' (Gonzalez and Baverstock 2014: 2). *La Santa Muerte*'s religious topography is both vast and extensive. The faith that now spreads across Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and 'Greater Mexico' in the USA claims to have over 10 million followers (Campbell 2010: 25; Chestnut 2012; Oleszkiewica-Peralba 2013).

Interestingly, *La Santa Muerte* does not have a Pope. It does not have a Vatican or a Mecca. Unlike the Bible or the Qur'an it does not have a universally acknowledged regulatory scripture.[1] Unlike many other new faiths and cults there is no divinely ordained revelation built into this alternative belief system. Similarly, nor are there any encyclicals, as is common with the Catholic Church that favours revisionist thinking. Perhaps it is this fluidity, the inherent ambiguity surrounding the main tenets of its philosophy and the absence of a mediating authority to regulate and control the faithful that are *La Santa Muerte*'s greatest assets.

Topography of the Underdog

As a manifestation of popular Mexican religiosity *La Santa Muerte* is nothing new in that it represents a long history of popular meaning-making that responds to the practical/symbolic exigencies of hardship. At the same time if one sweeps away the surface-level rites and rituals surrounding *La Santa Muerte* the attractiveness of this cult would seem to be more anchored in complex existential issues than is generally understood.

Sometimes a volatile security situation may prop up alternative modes of worship and divine dependence. In some cultures (primitive and otherwise) people often take sides with evil forces if they feel evil is about to befall on them. It is a form of offensive defence. Here the

overriding belief is that if you are part of the evil, how can evil harm you? Viewed within that framework one may find some explanations to the veering of segments of the population towards these death cults. In this framework a certain crisis of faith in the Mexican state and the dominant religion has contributed to the emergence and consolidation of *La Santa Muerte*. She is the product of a fear of individual/personal insecurity coupled with public indignation over the state and the Catholic Church's failure to address this insecurity.

For the underclass when corruption, disorder, strife, inequality and violence overwhelmed their lives they turned to this faith in the hope that it would be a bulwark against these challenges. To this section of the populace 'she answers to the gripes of modern poverty, promising help in everyday struggles rather than in afterlife' (Grillo 2012: 196). Examining *La Santa Muerte* from a religious perspective one could also argue that since the dominant belief system (that is, Roman Catholicism) and the values it promotes appear inadequate to the everyday needs of the citizenry, it has congregated under an alternative belief system to fulfil its aspirations.

Interestingly, one could highlight some strange parallels between the rise of *La Santa Muerte* and the decline of the Roman state. During the final days of the Roman Empire 'in the ensuing chaos and terror of its decline scores fled from the weakened state to the consolations of religion and found them more abundantly in Christianity' (Durant 1944: 650). Similarly, one could argue that in recent years the violent decline of the Mexican state has pushed a section of its populace into the folds of *La Santa Muerte*.

Lomnitz stresses that the rise of the cult coincides with the receding of the sanctity of the sate (Lomnitz 2008: 493). Interestingly, a spatial study of followers of this cult reveals that *La Santa Muerte* has an increased presence in those areas where the sovereignty of the state is on the retreat. Or, to put it slightly differently, the cult's presence and growth is concentrated in specific socio-economic spaces in Mexico City. These are areas marked by the absence or near absence of the authority of the state. The devotees here often belong to the criminal fraternity: drug dealers, pimps, convicted criminals and ex-prisoners. Why this strange association between criminality and *La Santa Muerte*?

Religious sects across cultures and geography famously attract crooks, weirdos and fantasists, but some very dangerous people venerate *La Santa Muerte* (Grillo 2012: 194). *La Santa Muerte*, as Lomnitz stresses, 'may have started on the fringes of the state—among the criminal element' (Lomnitz 2008: 492). It transgresses the fundamental structure of law and sovereign power. While violating explicit rules held dear by the community it also represents the 'spirit of the community'.

Consequently, as Pamela L. Bunker and Robert J. Bunker suggest in their study, the Mexican criminal fraternity's attempt to project this criminal–spiritual symbiosis is firmly couched in the former's aim at unsettling the power and position of the state (Bunker and Bunker 2012: 78). The semantic content of this relationship is articulated within a framework of reciprocity. 'A lot of devotees pray to *La Santa Muerte* for evil things to occur, or to ask for the suffering of others or for criminal activities to go smoothly' (Gonzalez and Baverstock 2014: 7).

So far as the relationship between the devotee and *La Santa Muerte* is concerned it would appear to operate along the same principles as is the case between the citizen and the state—one exists or is sustained by the other. It is a reciprocal relationship. This interactive relationship, furthermore, is sustained by what one might regard a form of mutual empowerment. A closer evaluation of this relationship brings forth some interesting dimensions. By examining this relationship within the context of sovereignty we are introduced to a specific narrative on power and obligation.

While the devotees are granted protection against the arbitrary use of violence by the state, this favour comes at a price. They, in return, are expected to maintain their unwavering commitment to the Skinny Lady. Failure to live up to that obligation exposes that individual not only to the wrath of the deity of death but also to everyone around him/her. As one self-proclaimed *La Santa Muerte* witch Lukzero Agakhan put it: 'You have to be very careful. If you receive from her but then you do not give what you promised, she will destroy you. She will take away everything from you' (quoted in Gonzalez and Baverstock 2014: 7). It is within this context that the sovereignty of *La Santa Muerte* becomes deeply problematic.

What if the devotee promised something that amounts to cold-blooded murder? In March 2012 persecutors in the north-western province of Sonora found a family who had ritually murdered two 10-year-old boys as part of a sacrifice to *La Santa Muerte*. This gory undertaking was part of a promise that the family had made to the deity. In this instance, 'the victims' blood had been poured round an altar to the idol' (Milligan 2012). According to Jose Larrinaga, the spokesperson for the state prosecutor, 'they (the alleged killers) sliced open the victims' veins and, while they were still alive, they waited for them to bleed to death and collected the blood in a container' and offered it to the deity (*The Telegraph*, 31 March 2012).

For some critics, those carrying out the killings and sacrifices 'seemingly feel the Holy Death condones such acts and is even pleased by it' (Grillo 2012: 195). What such devotion to *La Santa Muerte* implies is the undermining of secular law as well as the redefining, through individually manipulated divine order, of what is acceptable and moral and what is not. Consequently, the 'executioners describe themselves as God's enforcers', further consolidating the argument that 'evil has now become good; to kill is a divine right' (Franco 2013: 226).

Moreover, such events represent the classic case of fundamentalist religious suspension of the ethical that proposes 'love God and do as you please'. It is like a licence which grants the devotee justification to enact the most barbaric acts and what is generally proscribed by society all in the name of God. For 'if you really love God, you will want what s/he wants what pleases him/her will please you, and what displease him/her will make you miserable' (Žižek 2008: 116). This individually mediated violence hints at a specific divine legitimization that is deeply problematic. Such an undertaking not only undermines the state as the sole legitimate executor of violence, but also restricts the ambit of its sovereignty.

An Omnipotent Sovereign

Within the secular tradition there is only one reading of sovereignty. It relates to the sovereignty of the state. In some societies, such as Mexico, one could talk of two sets of sovereignty. This pertains to

the all-too-familiar dominant sovereignty of the state and, to a lesser degree, the informal sovereignty of the Catholic Church. While the state controls and exercises its sovereignty in the domain of law, order and authority, the Catholic Church expresses a form of non-binding sovereignty over the moral conduct of the citizenry. One must stress, however, that at this juncture these two sovereignties are neither at odds with each other nor are they competing forces. Interestingly, in an avowed secular state these two entities could be argued to be complementary.

This neat equation, however, is undermined by the emergence and growth of *La Santa Muerte*. The new faith has arisen by challenging the dominant legal sovereignty of the state as well as the informal spiritual sovereignty of the Catholic Church. In the process *La Santa Muerte* has itself emerged as a sovereign authority. From the perspective of the state one may ask: how has *La Santa Muerte* eroded state sovereignty? A similar question can also be raised concerning the context of religion. In his study on the 'skeleton saint' Regnar Albæk Kristensen asks: 'How is it possible for this figure to embrace such antagonistic qualities as death and sainthood in a Christian context?' (Kristensen 2014: 1).

I argue that the emergence and continuation of any kind of sovereignty is demand-driven. Sovereignty is a product of necessity. This necessity has its basis in secular as well as divine contexts. People assemble around a particular individual, ideology or system and express their allegiance to these entities or forces in order to receive protection. Evidently, when these sovereigns fail to fulfil their roles people either revolt against the sovereign or simply switch their allegiance to a new sovereign force. Now let us focus on these two narratives of sovereignty, that is, the secular and the divine in turn.

Traditionally, 'the premium on preserving the life of the citizen above all else has been the guiding principle of the modern state' (Lomnitz 2008: 36). The state operates along the principle of the *unitary and illimitable* character of state sovereignty. Following on from Hobbes, one could argue the 'sovereign exists to enable people to preserve themselves' (Hobbes 1982). For, when the state reneges on its role of protecting and preserving life, or is incapable of providing that mortal security, a section of society may turn to alternative systems of governance for

protection. As the sanctity of the state has receded the space left behind has been filled by the sovereignty of this new cult (Lomnitz 2008: 493). Similarly, when a given group finds the power and authority of the state challenging its own modus operandi it may turn to an alternative force to counter this primary sovereign.

To examine this from a religious perspective, one could argue that private allegiance to any religion is predicated upon that divine fulfilling specific individual aspirations and needs. Put simply, very often religion as a framework of interaction is based on individual as well as communal requirements. But how does this framework explain the erosion of the Catholic Church's sovereignty vis-à-vis *La Santa Muerte*?

As a rule of thumb most mainstream organized religions are bound by regulatory principles that do not overlook an individual's personal follies or incorrect life choices. Earthly mistakes are usually addressed in the context of spiritual punishment—often leading to penance. Turning to Christianity we notice the presence of a judgemental divine specifying godly retribution to an act of sin. Traditional religions, in other words, are organized along the principles of sin and retribution.

Interestingly, the foundational appeal behind *La Santa Muerte* may have to do with what I would like to call an *overlook* clause. Questions of sin, retribution and judgement that are so pervasive in other religions are mercifully absent in the cult. In this trajectory she becomes a personalized god. Your personalized god is here to overlook your sins and your questionable actions, for the motto of this deity is *I am Who I am*.

According to R. Andrew Chestnut, the author of the only exhaustive study on the deity, 'since she's not an official Christian saint, you can ask her for things that maybe you wouldn't otherwise ask a canonised saint for' (Chestnut 2012: 17). Devotees are drawn inexorably to the Skinny Lady, as she is supposed to carry the power to grant miracles without judgement—her axiom being 'Help yourself and She will help you', that is, the trust you place in her must be demonstrated in your 'acts'. Here exists a powerful contrast: while the Catholic Church reprimands, *La Santa Muerte* condones the actions of the devotee, whatever they may be (Campbell 2010: 25).

As a deity of death *La Santa Muerte* is an instrumental divine force. It offers hope to people living on the margins and to those abandoned

and left behind by the system. It departs from the traditional Christian theories that equate individual suffering in this life as just punishment for their own sins, whether committed in this life or accrued in some prenatal realm. What is more, not only are questions surrounding sin and divine retribution entirely ignored within this system of belief, but *La Santa Muerte* also offers a very crucial bonus to those who seek shelter under her sovereignty: 'she protects those no one else will protect.'

Consequently, rather than obeying a fixed divine prescription imposed through an institution such as the Church, as is the case with Catholic Christianity, 'devotees have appropriated *La Santa Muerte* and make her serve them in the way they want to be served' (Oleszkiewica-Peralba 2013: 70). Put simply, she is the very personification of a non-judgemental utilitarian god. As a god she is a doer. This is how a follower depicts her presence: 'she loves us and heals us. People come here to ask her for help—a son in prison or with Aids, or something to eat' (quoted in Hernandez 2013). As Harold Bloom suggests, 'if you can accept a God who is a familiar figure in death camps, associated with schizophrenia, and AIDS, yet remains all-powerful and somehow benign… then you have a [divine] and a faith' (Bloom 1996: 252).

In addition, there are other stark differentiations to be made in a comparative religious framework. To her followers *La Santa Muerte* is everything that Jesus of Nazareth or the Virgin Mary is not. She is the very opposite of 'divine providence'. She is not overcome by fear; if anything she is the very personification of fear. She has a muscular presence. She is powerful. She can protect. Her emergence and evolution are based on a reactionary Weberian construct of faith. As Weber put it, 'wherever the promises of the prophet or the redeemer have not sufficiently met the needs of the socially less-favored strata, a secondary salvation religion of the masses has regularly developed beneath the official doctrine' (Weber 1985: 35).

Like the Cathars, who posited the image of an omnipotent infinite divine being who ironically is strangely impotent, Mexicans through the ages have had an innate difficulty in associating with a god or a deity that is not powerful. Their gods were not voluntary victims. Pre-Columbian gods were all vicious and fearsome. They were not cowed by the opponent. They were warrior-like. They did not become martyrs.

They vanquished the opposition. They sacrificed their opponent. Imagine that religio-cultural inheritance making way for a belief where the god is lynched, a god that is nailed to a wooden cross to die—it is, to all appearances, a defeatist faith/god.

> Still today in Mexico, in Oaxaca, one can see the crosses that the missionaries who brought the Gospel there had designed to covert the native peoples, Mixtecs and Zapotecs: simple wooden crosses with the face of Christ at the centre; that is, a head without a body—and therefore without the body of a victim of torture. The Franciscan missionaries sought to avoid portraying their god as a pitiable being, lest he be thought inferior to local deities for seeming to be nothing more than a defeated man, oozing blood. (Dupuy 2013: 95)

Furthermore, to this constituency Christ's death on the Cross is in itself the death of a protecting god (Žižek 2008: 153). In some ways the prevalence and the growing popularity of the Skinny Lady could be couched on the adherents' inability to relate to a god who was incapable of protecting himself. The common man, the downtrodden and the masses need a god who represents physical vigour, resilience and defiance.

Thus the logical extension of that argument could be: if he (Jesus of Nazareth) could not protect himself how can one expect him to protect those who worship him? Working from this model, one could argue that *La Santa Muerte* is the counteragent to a morally good righteous god. Unlike Catholic Christianity she does not expect the devotee to wear his/her suffering as a badge of honour.

Similarly, going by the needs of the devotees, one could suggest that there are two types of divinity: 'One which is prepared to accept even the most severe degree of suffering, for the sake of the higher values which are thus preserved or brought into being, and one which rejects suffering and seeks to overcome it' (Kirwan 2004: 86).

In *La Santa Muerte* the devotees' religious world view, the need for a muscular god, is both spiritual and practical: '[the] greater the devotee's desperation, the stronger her appeal' (Rowlatt 2014). In this context Jesus of Nazareth, or the Catholic Church by extension, is not only ineffective in granting the nefarious wishes of the devotee; he is

downright righteous. This argument is not rhetorical but based on real-life existential questions. For instance, how can the narco whose whole being consists of evil and unrighteousness parlay with a righteous god? How can he take sustenance in a faith where engagement in evil is frowned upon? How can he sustain his spiritual needs in a religion whose supreme figure is himself a victim of foul play? Jesus of Nazareth's emphasis on non-vengeance, which 'frees man from evil, from which he cannot free himself', is problematic. There is a dramatic palpable tension between the world the narco inhabits and the ideology offered by Catholic Christianity.

A Need Based Deity

'God', according to the traditional Christian view put forward by Cleanthes in the *Dialogues*, 'is all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good' (Pike 1990: 38). That may be so, but there is an inherent problem with this traditional Christian God. The emergence and consolidation of the deity are constructed against the background of the self-limiting God and gods of Catholic Christianity.

As Émile Durkheim put it,

> a god is not merely an authority [sovereignty] upon whom [one depends]; it is a force upon which [one's] strength relies. The man who has obeyed his god and who for this reason, he believes the god is with him, approaches the word with confidence and with the feeling of an increased energy. (Durkheim 1985: 47)

Thus while weighing a sovereignty that will not deliver against one that can the devotee takes a bet on *La Santa Muerte*. In the words of Alejandro Herrera, an armed robber who robs people at gunpoint throughout Mexico City: 'I pray to Santa Muerte for success in my crimes and to protect me from the police… The White Lady doesn't judge me for what I do' (quoted in Gonzalez and Baverstock 2014: 7).

According to Father Francisco Bautista, a cleric in Mexico City, this constituency turns to *La Santa Muerte* because they say the primary

deities of the pantheon, the Virgin Mary, the Virgen de Guadalupe or Jesus Christ 'cannot provide what they ask for—which is to be protected from soldiers, police and their enemies' (quoted in Hernandez 2013).

The dependence on a separate sovereign is owing to Catholic Christianity's interpretation of 'a being who is omnipotent and omniscient, yet would have no morally sufficient reason for allowing instances of evil' (Pike 1964: 87). It is this reckoning that makes a believer in *La Santa Muerte* doubt the omnipotence of the Catholic divinity. He strongly feels that in spite of their claims the Catholic gods are not 'master signifiers'.[2]

The 'social teaching' of such death cults is a doctrine well suited to the needs and aspirations of a footloose, morally bankrupt youth, underclass and delinquent subculture. For a drifting, disoriented urban youth exposed to the all-too-regular bouts of indiscriminate violence this alternative belief system confirms the societal realities. If they have veered towards it, it is because they find some familiar ground in its ideological ensemble of objective reality. It is both a reaction to the inability of the Catholic Church to implement its core teaching about piety and equality and a reaffirmation of the attractiveness of a countercultural religious ideal in *La Santa Muerte*.

Then there is the narco fraternity. The narco knows he is evil. He is in possession of the knowledge that his actions are vengeful and thus evil. Yet he needs to bypass the omnipotence of the Catholic god that prohibits evil. His is a search for 'a God who ignores prohibition' (Bataille 1986: 117).

His needs are based on a practical god who turns a blind eye to his evildoing and the evil enterprise he leads. He needs a god/deity that does not judge him for his actions. He needs a patron saint for sinners—a saint of the last resort. He needs a deity that not only does not judge his actions but also is ready to accede to his necessities and demands, however immoral and extravagant they may be. Thus we have the evolution of a need-based omnipotent divine. *La Santa Muerte* 'doesn't distinguish between good and evil' (Gonzalez and Baverstock 2014: 7). She steadfastly refuses to be drawn into the Catholic Christian judgemental framework of sin and sinner.

To the entire legion of cartel members—from the foot soldiers to the *jefe de jefe* at the top—the pull towards an immoral countersovereignty is based on their need to escape the constricting forces of other primary legal sovereignties. But it is worth remembering that the expression and exercise of sovereignty is a two-way process. If the subject can demand a certain favour from the sovereign, so can the sovereign from her subjects. If *La Santa Muerte* can preside over issues of life and death, she needs to be equally rewarded—so goes the logic.

> With stakes so high, the sacrifices and offerings to *La Santa Muerte* have become primeval and barbaric. Rather than plates of food, beer, and tobacco, in some instances, the heads of victims (and presumably their souls) have served as offerings to invoke powerful petitions for divine intervention. (Bunker 2012: 13)

One could mention a whole list of confirmed and unconfirmed gory goings-on surrounding offerings to *La Santa Muerte*. There have been regular reports of *narcosatanicos* carrying out human sacrifices across the country. A powerful criminal figure in the shanty town of Tepito in Mexico City (where she first appeared) is said to sacrifice virgins and babies to the deity once every year; there have been reports of various cartel members taking their rivals to her shrines and executing them as offerings; police in the north-eastern province of Tamaulipas have discovered a skeleton dressed as a bride at a *La Santa Muerte* altar in a house used to hold kidnap victims; and in the northern frontier province of Sinaloa, law enforcement agents have found 50 victims of a mass murder, all with tattoos and jewellery depicting *La Santa Muerte*.

Granted, the narcos and *delinquentes* have special needs. They inhabit contested and competing spaces of life and death. In such contexts the relevance of the Skinny Lady becomes all the more crucial. Perhaps extraordinary times require extraordinary measures (thus the justification of human sacrifice). But what about the masses? How does *La Santa Muerte* preside as a 'master signifier' in their daily lives? It is important that we focus on this 'other constituency' in order to explain the reach of *La Santa Muerte* at a much more general level.

G. is the chief persecutor in one of the southern provinces. Agnostic, of pure European blood, he has a doctorate in rational choice theory from a reputed Spanish university. I am his guest. I travel around the state as part of his entourage for one whole week. We rest in his country house for the weekend. In the middle of the night I wake up to the serial crowing of cockerels. In the morning I encounter many unfamiliar faces in the house. There is a shaman-like lady who has flown in from Mexico City the previous evening. She has prepared a makeshift altar in the living room. Bottles of tequila, cigarette packs, three separate coloured candles, flowers and a parchment of a book all sit in front of the image of the Skinny Lady. Later my host arrives dressed in pure white and sits before the altar with the shaman-like lady. One by one the lady who acts as the priestess slits the throats of the three cockerels who had been crowing outside my window the previous night. Silence. And then follows an elaborate ritual.

G. had enemies. His position made him vulnerable. Although he worked for the government the apparatus of the state did not guarantee complete safety. He needed protection. The religion he was born into, the religion of his forefathers, offered no protection against his detractors' bullets. Thus his sister had to arrange this elaborate ritual for him. Thus the protection of *La Santa Muerte* had to be invoked through this sacrificial rite.

What do we make of all this in terms of a Girardian framework? *What do we make of religion?* 'This means', to paraphrase one critic, 'asking about the origin and function of religion, and it also means getting to grips with a curious paradox' (Kirwan 2004: 2). All civilizations have dabbled with a god of death at one time or another in their evolutionary history. Often the symbolic meanings behind these entities have been to remind people about their mortality. Paradoxically, in *La Santa Muerte* we have a deity of death to which devotees flock in order to seek life.

The pull for situating and entrusting your fate in a new practical god is not simply the result of recognizing the inability of the primal god to address the relevant contemporary challenges. The genuflection before the new god is simply thrown up by the demands of the pervasive conflict in the society. Therefore, what we witness is that out of fear and

necessity the subaltern created a saint, a deity, a personal god, a new sovereign who fulfilled duties that other sovereigns did not. Here the divine legitimizes violence and accepts sacrifice. This is 'not sacrifice for its own sake but for the sake of the living, not for the sake of the divine but for the sake of those who are spared' (Larsen 2013: 3).

If the Aztecs practised ritual sacrifice to connect with the sovereign who then, in turn, kept the universe functioning in an orderly and predictable manner? G.'s sister, in a similar vein, was making sure her family remains protected, albeit through the intervention of another sovereign entity. Her actions, while archaic, were nonetheless very much in line with our own past. Here the human need to endow the shedding of blood for a sublime significance is at once elemental and inescapable. One had to turn to a need-based god. One needed the overarching authority of a sovereign whose authority held sway over all counterforces. For '*La Madrina* will protect and defend them from the unpredictability of sudden attacks, kidnappings, stray bullets, and ruin, and who *is on their side*, no matter the social class or circumstances' (Oleszkiewica-Peralba 2013: 74).

Revenge of the Secular

Domestically, the state looks to its citizens to authorize its claim to sovereignty. What happens if the citizenry fails to or is reluctant to confer their allegiance to that authority? As Weber argues, 'being a state depends not only upon political representation but also upon symbolic representation' (Weber 1995: 124). For Foucault 'sovereignty and disciplinary mechanism are two absolutely integral constituents of the general mechanisms of power in [modern] society' (Foucault 1980: 108). Interestingly, since sovereignty is seen to be coterminous with the state the disciplinary authority is understood to be the sole preserve of this political entity. This relationship then runs into trouble when non-state actors, or in our case a deity, makes a dent in that omnipotent disciplinary framework.

From the perspective of the state one could posit, by embracing the saint of death, that devotees are in effect undermining the systemic

representation of sovereignty of the state. It is problematic because this belief system or faith becomes an enabler or facilitator of illegitimate undertakings that are then clothed as divine interventions, thereby forcing the authority and, legitimacy of the state to retreat further.

Furthermore, contrary to the statist view, *La Santa Muerte* considers violence as interior to humans (a clear departure from the secular identity of the state). By invoking a framework that proposes 'violence as the secret soul of the sacred' (Girard 1979) it undermines the very moral identity of the state. It is the allegiance to a counterforce or a contending power that undermines the authority and reach of the state as the sole abdicator of power in a society.

Hence the skeletal saint can be seen as the 'metamorphosis of Mexicans' manifold relations with power of death' that both contests and, at times, replaces the traditional understanding behind the Weberian notion of the state as the only recognized authority to administer violence or arbitrate on issues surrounding life and death (Lomnitz 2008: 496).

Sovereignty is produced by the expression of power. Simultaneously, it is maintained through the exertion of power on a continual basis. When the entity or agent in possession of this faculty loses its ability to maintain that expression it succumbs to the death of its sovereignty. Therefore, the entity originally in possession of this faculty enters into a permanent state of offensive defence if it sees others trying to usurp its sovereignty or threaten it in any possible manner. By making death mainstream and by displacing the image of the sovereign from the state to the domain of this spurious divine *La Santa Muerte*'s devotees have contributed to the weakening of the existing secular order. As Lomnitz suggests, 'Mexico as a modern state has always defined itself as a nation of enemies. Enemies who procreate. Enemies who must be subdued' (Lomnitz 2008: 19). Predictably, sensing this threat to the state sovereignty from this cult the former president Felipe Calderón described *La Santa Muerte* as religious enemy number one in his war against the drug cartels.

Turning to the realm of religion, one could argue that while *La Santa Muerte* is a challenge to the existing majoritarian religious orthodoxy, it becomes problematic only when it tries to wrest some of the authority

from the status quo. This, in turn, gives rise to contested a power play between faiths, the legality of the sacred and, ultimately, the intervention by the state. Let us focus on two contemporary cases to allow us to situate the above argument.

To a large extent it is the fluidity of the rituals and the absence of a centralized principle, as already stressed, that have facilitated the adherents to engage in defining and redefining the remits of *La Santa Muerte*'s power. For instance, a certain charismatic devotee called David Romo,[3] from the Colonia Morelos in Mexico City, has given *La Santa Muerte* the veneer of an organized legal religion under the banner of *Angel de Luz*, and, in the process, has proclaimed himself as the archbishop of this church. Under his patronage baptisms, confirmations and weddings are performed. Following on from this institutionalization the church has declared 15 August as the annual day of *La Santa Muerte*—coincidentally, this is the day when Catholics celebrate the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.

Predictably, these strides which seek to appropriate a mainstream religio-legal space by new faiths such as *La Santa Muerte* are deeply problematic. Granted religious rites and rituals such as communion, baptisms and weddings lack a clearly defined legal stature before the secular Mexican state. Yet one cannot escape from the fact that for centuries these rites and rituals have been the sole preserve of the Catholic Church. By encouraging and performing these services, and countering the established religious mores and practices, Romo's *Angel de Luz* could be argued to challenge the uncontested authority of the Catholic Church, and, in the process, proclaim the illegality of centuries-old practices of the Catholic Church.

Since religion is a private matter in Mexico the state's authority to control and regulate the religious space is limited, and any move in that direction is not legally enforceable. Hence the Mexican state could do very little if the Catholic Church complained about *Angel de Luz*'s efforts in appropriating various traditional Catholic rites and rituals. However, where the state can and does see a conflict of interest and, consequently, affirms its sovereignty, is with the issue of self-declaration of a national holiday in the secular calendar for *La Santa Muerte*. Accordingly the *Secretaria de Gobernación* (Ministry of Interior) revoked

the permit to *Angel de Luz* alleging 'they deviated from their original goals, perpetrating infractions to the Religious Associations Law' (Oleszkiewica-Peralba 2013: 72).

Counterfeit Divine

While sovereignty is defined in a political context, its manifestation can be explored across several interconnected domains including those of religion, psychology and sociology. Throughout the ages the Catholic Church has posited that 'the world is a creation of a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good' (Penelhum 1990: 69). On the strength of this argument, in some societies the Church came to assume total control over the divine sovereign space. Mexico is one such example. When one assesses the exodus of a given section of the society towards *La Santa Muerte* one naturally wonders about the 'omnipotent', 'omniscient' and 'wholly good' clause that until now dominated the discourse in the Church's dominant divine space. How does one explain the flight from this conception of hitherto omnipotent divinity?

Extraordinary situations often give rise to the emergence of extraordinary forces. One can recognize the surfacing of *La Santa Muerte* as an answer to the prevailing anarchy and egregious violence. As history tells us, during periods of intense unrest Mexicans have flocked to such transitional divinity—for example, the Virgen de Los Remedios and the Virgen de Guadalupe during the Mexican war of independence (Lomnitz 2008).

Why, then, is there a reluctance to accord the same status to *La Santa Muerte*? Why associate this divinity with threat? To its puritan Catholic opponents *La Santa Muerte* is a throwback to a dark pagan age from which society has been trying to dissociate itself for the past half-millennium. To its critics *La Santa Muerte*, this enfeebling pre-Columbian belief, has pushed pious God-fearing Catholics into a world of sorcery, magic and a kind of cosmic catastrophe.

'For Catholics', according to some observers, 'the veneration of *La Santa Muerte* is the work of Satan'. They accuse it of being a cult led by narcos and argue that this diabolical figure has been a driving force

behind Mexico's orgy of violence. As, Bataille argues, 'cults require a bloody wasting of men and animals in sacrifice' (Bataille 1985: 119). True to that agenda, assassins hack off craniums, they claim, in tribute to the death incarnate and 'seemingly feel the Holy Death condones such barbarity or is even pleased by it' (Grillo 2012: 195).

La Santa Muerte manifests an identity of radical Otherness. Hers is an ambiguous identity. As Franco put it, 'she is a symbol of negativity, a grinning death's head that presides over the dark reality lived by the underclasses in a nation that tries to ignore them: eternal death instead of eternal life' (Franco 2013: 228). She is the 'proof of a continued resistance to colonial culture by Mexico's working class' (Grillo 2012: 195).

She is there both to protect and to harm. She does not discriminate between good intentions and bad deeds. She lends herself to be used for evil enterprises as well as harmless personal purposes. It is this faculty to offer herself unconditionally to the devotee and to be a handmaiden for their specific autonomous enterprise which becomes problematic from the perspective of good and bad, right and wrong, malicious and moral. As one critic put it,

> being the representation of a miraculous saint, who is also believed to be a messenger and mediator of death, *La Santa Muerte* is located at the intersection of the wider Christian need to separate 'good from evil' and the Catholic problem of limiting the vitality of the image worshipped. (Kristensen 2014: 3)

In this narrative there are two fundamental issues that sit at the heart of the Church's opposition to *La Santa Muerte*. While the first one is located in the moral context, the second one is theological/metaphysical which, again, finds its voice within the principle of sovereignty. Let us examine these two issues in turn.

First, from the perspective of the Catholic Church, one could argue that there is a great deal of moral ambiguity surrounding this belief system, which is problematic. Her ideology is not constrained by a moral compass. One could argue, it is this turning off of the moral compass, allowing herself to be manipulated by individually mediated evil enterprises, which undermines not only *La Santa Muerte*'s integrity as a

divine force, but at the same time brings discredit to Catholicism for its supposed association. Unlike its predecessors *La Santa Muerte* does not provide a moral vision for the community. It does not promote an ethical value system. If anything, she contributes to the breakdown of the power of the state and that of the Church.

Secondly, by placing their faith in the Skinny Lady and including her in the Catholic pantheon the masses or devotees are suggesting that the deity is indeed a part of Catholic Christianity and this raises complex questions. To begin with Catholic Christian universalism is deeply exclusive. It operates on a no-exit, non-reflexive framework. It adheres strictly to a policy of exclusion, which does not allow any space or place for other, 'particularistic' beliefs. Furthermore, it excludes all those who do not express their unwavering exclusive allegiance to the Holy Trinity. Put simply, it espouses a universalism that 'tendentially excludes non-believers from the very universality of humankind' (Zizek 2001: 144).

Examined through other matrices the contrasts between Catholic Christianity and *La Santa Muerte* are even starker and glaringly obvious. While the Christian god is a god of mercy, love and human dignity, *La Santa Muerte* has no problem being used as a medium of vengeance. She espouses egregious violence. She redefines the very idea of 'divine love'. On the aspect of love, she can be loving to her devotees, but can also cast a deathly shadow on the enemies of her followers. Similarly, as expressions of their love for her, the devotees may legitimize the most horrible violence. It is legitimized owing to the fact that the deity does not engage in any moral pangs so why would her devotees?

Returning to the Catholic Church we encounter the following existential questions: What is it supposed to do if its exclusive divine domain is challenged? How is to defend its cardinal values in the face of subversive morality preached by counterfaiths? How is it to rescue its core systemic divine unity from being hijacked? How is it to reconcile with a belief system steeped in sorcery, blood sacrifice, witchcraft, violence and worship of death—issues that the Church has always tried to distance itself from? More importantly, how is it to consolidate itself and prosper if some of its followers succumb to the temptation of this divisive deity?

During his second trip to Mexico, in February 2016, Pope Francis wasted no time in condemning *La Santa Muerte* and rebuking those who worship her. He stressed: 'I am particularly concerned about those many persons who, seduced by the empty power of the world, praise illusions and embrace their macabre symbols to commercialize death.' He went on to argue that to combat this evil one needs 'prophetic courage as well as a reliable and qualified pastoral plan, so that we can gradually help build that fragile network of human relationships' without which all of us would be defeated from the outset in the face of such an insidious threat.

If we aggregate this catalogue of grievances we notice the Catholic Church's opposition to and denunciation of *La Santa Muerte* is couched in two clearly defined concerns. First, it is faced with a genuine difficulty in placing the deity with its supposed dark powers within its otherwise pious, benevolent and non-violent theological order. As R. Andrew Chestnut argued, the Catholic Church 'views veneration of the Bony Lady as tantamount to Satanism since death is the antithesis of the eternal life that Jesus Christ made possible to believers through the ultimate sacrifice on the cross' (Chestnut 2016).

Secondly, and more importantly, it is afraid of a counterfeit sovereign taking over a hitherto uncontested divine space that the Church has traditionally occupied. Since the main current running through this Chapter is contested sovereignty I will limit myself to the discussion of this second question only. The Mexican Catholic Church's sovereignty, it must be stressed, is rigorously interlinked with a systemic divine unity. This sovereignty, when conferred upon the citizenry, not only oversees the dissemination of that divine omnipresence, but also brings together a community of individuals otherwise divided by a multitude of differences. Consequently, one could argue, whatever dilutes that systemic unity is liable to undermine the Church's sovereignty as well as the composition of that divinely ordained society.

Under the circumstances one would expect a strong rebuttal from the Church against the power and authority of *La Santa Muerte*. From a religious perspective, however, unlike the Mexican state the Catholic Church has neither the power to use violence, nor is it permitted to use force to guard and protect its divine sovereignty. It cannot, for instance,

engage in acts of medieval-style inquisitions. It also cannot ask a secular state to take sides in this battle over souls. Moreover, the Church's sovereignty is contingent. Affirmation of its sovereignty is contingent upon the voluntary submission of the faithful to its religious world view.

The question as to what happens to the Church when this omnipotent sovereignty disintegrates is an important one. It is true that one could argue that the actual sovereign authority of the Church is not undermined, as those who worship *La Santa Muerte* have not completely stepped outside the folds of Catholic Christianity through formal denunciation. But, then again, one cannot deny the fact that by engaging in worshipping a deity that has been banned by the Church they are effectively negating the sovereignty of this institution. In the end, as Lomnitz put it,

> The (Mexican) state today is no longer the absolute symbol of sovereignty, at least not in the imagination of many. God, too, [that is the traditional Catholic God] is a bit remote for the drug lord, and for intensely hybridized urban popular groups that must live on the fringes of legality. Death best represents sovereignty here. (Lomnitz 2008: 496)

Conclusion

The logic of *La Santa Muerte*'s representation concerns the production of specific sets of meanings and outcomes—be they religious, personal or political. One could perhaps use Blaise Pascal's notions of sovereign as a mindset in order to situate the exactness of *La Santa Muerte*'s legitimacy and sovereignty. To paraphrase Pascal, 'masses do not treat a certain being as sovereign because s/he is sovereign—it is rather that this certain being appears as sovereign because people treat him /her as one' (Pascal 1995). In a precise, well-defined legal and metaphysical context the deity of death may have a lot to answer for as to the exactness of her sovereignty.

The political economy of *La Santa Muerte* reinforces the argument that in spite of the 'indivisibility clause' associated with sovereignty, in the end sovereignty mutates. An interconnected cosmopolitan world

places multiple demands on citizens and offers complex possibilities. This emerging state of affairs, in turn, facilitates the mutation of the earlier immutable character of sovereignty. Some states and institutions accept this as inevitable, while others tend to resist it.

Furthermore, there can be multiple readings of *La Santa Muerte*, depending on the approaches within the disciplinary divide. When analysed within political theory it raises some fundamental questions related to issues such as power, authority and control. As Machiavelli put it, 'where there is no vision, people will perish'. In our case flocking to a new sovereign is symptomatic of the loss of faith in the state as well as in the primary religion. If the sovereignty principle is organized within a framework of rights and obligations what we witness with the Mexican context is the inability of the state to ensure rights associated with human security. Consequently, there has developed a dependence of the devotees on a de facto sovereign, which has replaced the de jure sovereign. Needless to say it is this dependency on a non-state sovereign that appears to restrict the ambit of the original secular sovereign, that is, the Mexican state.

It is true that 'folk saints have long been tolerated in Christendom as a way for the faithful to reconcile their beliefs with local traditions' (Grillo 2012: 190). In a largely Catholic country, with its associated morals and meanings, the framework of interaction and the autonomy of thought that *La Santa Muerte* presents are at best an oddity and at worst subversive. Traditionally, the axiom of 'rule of God' in the context of Christianity has come to imply the exercise of the sovereignty principle of a specific deity over his subjects. Yet for both the Catholic Church and devout Catholics *La Santa Muerte* would not be problematic if her devotees broke away from the mainstream religion and established a separate exclusive religious identity. It is this espousal of a counternarrative of the 'Kingdom of God', while not shedding their original Catholic identity, which sits at odds with the sovereignty principle.

In the end there lies an antinomy in the relationship. If *La Santa Muerte* is regarded as subversive—both by the Mexican state and the Catholic Church—then it is primarily because of its ability to introduce a new narrative among the devotees that undermines the existing status

quo of power and position of the state and the Church. Paradoxically, it is this seditious identity that constitutes the bedrock of its appeal.

Notes

1. There is evidence of a book called *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte*. But the content varies from region-to-region, colonia-to-colonia, and people-to-people. The content is often made up of several different need based orations to suit specific individual needs and necessities.
2. Note, for instance, a devotee's rational-choice argument in a divine context: 'I also believe in God, in the Virgin, and all the saints, but I am more devout to [Saint] Death. She is the one that helps me the most' (quoted in Hernandez 2013).
3. Incidentally, Romo was arrested in 2011 by the Mexican police along with five associates for alleged kidnapping, extortion and links to the dreaded drug cartel Los Zetas. For a detailed account, see 'Drug wars, civil unrest and now Mexico has to deal with a Holy Death Cult: High priest arrested over kidnapping and extortion', *The Daily Mail*, 5 January 2011. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1344235/Holy-Death-Cults-high-priest-David-Romo-arrested-Mexico-City.html last accessed 03 March 2015.

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5

Necessary Murder

Necropower in Mexico has assumed a new dimension in the form of open vigilantism. Since 2010, against the backdrop of unending violence, collusion between cartel bosses and law enforcement agents, and the inability of the state to provide basic security cover, desperate local citizenry in parts of the country have embraced the protection of community-based vigilante activism. As a result, we witness civilian 'citizen self-defence' militias taking control of villages, homesteads and towns in parts of Mexico which were once no-go areas for state authorities and which until recently were firmly under the suzerainty of drug cartels and their operatives. 'In communities across the country, groups of men have donned masks, picked up rifles and machetes, and begun patrolling their neighborhoods and farmland' (Asfura-Heim and Espach 2013: 50).

The primary objective of these groups, going by the name of *auto-defensa* organizations, is to substitute the state where it has dissipated and failed to provide law and order. Made up primarily of peasants, returning immigrants from the USA, itinerant businesspersons and unemployed youth these are armed, rural community forces dedicated to protecting lives and property and, whenever possible, ridding their villages and towns of the menace of the narcos.

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'We Don't Need No Stinkin' Badges'

Extralegal local self-defence (*autodefensa*) groups have long been common in rural Mexico, particularly in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Once the sole preserve of indigenous communities this new activism is now more mainstream. Community-led self-defence groups or vigilante outfits operate openly in 17 different provinces and in over 90 municipalities across the country. But the real number could be much higher.

In the western province of Michoacán, which has seen a higher level of activity by *autodefensa* groups and vigilantes than the rest of the country, the moral fuel to their self-proclaimed righteousness has come from an old anti-colonial rhetoric. The old nationalist motto, *We inherited Freedom, We Bequeath Social Justice*, is openly bandied about to morally justify their actions before the state as well as before the general public.

This individual resolve to take up arms against the narcos is often an act of defiance in the face of abject desperation. It occurs in an environment where there is 'a distance between the force and the population' (Bergman and Whitehead 2009: 17). Very often it subverts the relationship between the police and citizens. This is an occasion where citizens do not consider the police as a force for good.[1] The prevailing distrust necessitates the individual to militate against the oppression and anarchy. Consequently, it becomes a self-ordained task where he (the citizen) assumes the responsibility to reinstate order. Hence, he (the insecure citizen) defines his objective, in the context of *el derecho a defenderme* (the right to defend myself).

The need to provide personal security would seem to be the very raison d'être behind the growth of vigilantism. Those buying into the logic of vigilantism do so because they feel the state has utterly failed them in providing security.[2] Across Latin America this is a sentiment shared by many. The distrust towards the law enforcement agents (the police in particular) has forced a constituency of citizens to engage in violence that they unhesitatingly term 'legitimate'.

Yet, in the case of Mexico, the rise of vigilantism is much more complex. The need to take up arms is a direct result of the collusion between the police and the narcos. Consequently, rather than the

object of veneration, many consider law enforcement officers to be the 'scum of the earth for society because they are evil and corrupt' (Bergman and Whitehead 2009: 17). Therefore, it is the ineffectiveness of the state to guarantee security, combined with the law enforcement officers' failure to enforce the law, that has pushed a section of society to vigilantism. What follows is Gregorio Sanchez's depiction of the state of affairs in the narco-dominated era. One evening he was attacked by the *delincuentes* and told by one of them: 'I like your wife very much, I will take her and then come back … while we are out you should bath your daughter,'cause she will stay with me for several days.' Having lost both his wife and daughter to the narco and caught in a world of resignation and violent destruction, Gregorio had no hesitation in joining the local *autodefensa* group when they appeared on the scene. His defenselessness denies the justice of his desire for revenge. He wanted to return the violence to the violators. It was, by all accounts, a form of justice-seeking personal retribution clothed in the framework of social vengeance. In those settings where crime, violence and corruption become mutually reinforcing, civil society is affected through the creation of a 'negative equilibrium'. As some critics remind us, a 'negative equilibrium' becomes the norm 'when the components of public security, its linkages and feedback, remain unreformed and the overall legitimacy of the political unit is weak or absent' (Bergman and Whitehead 2009: 20).

The rise of vigilantism needs to be assessed in the context of accountability. The groundswell of popular support for the vigilantes is based on the recognition that they have been successful where the state has failed As one critic put it, 'the Mexican state has failed to develop a criminal justice system capable of, or interested in, locating, arresting and successfully prosecuting those charged with serious crimes' (Volk 2015: 28). It is this lack of commitment to persecute the criminals which has consolidated vigilante politics.

In Mexico 'the weakness of the state has meant that justice has often been delivered through informal channels' (Lomnitz 2008: 20). According to Alberto Suarez, the archbishop of Morelia, Michoacán (which has seen a steep rise in vigilantism) the vigilante movement 'is understandable … [it is] understandable that they (the vigilantes) are

fed up and want justice and to be able to defend themselves' (quoted in Wilkinson 2015). Armed with this self-appointed mission in provinces such as Michoacán these *autodefensa* groups appear to be breaking the monopoly of power held by the local drug-trafficking organizations, something the federal government has been unable to accomplish on its own (Horton 2014: 4).

Between 2012 and 2015 hundreds of people were lynched and openly murdered in the most brutal manner. Those targeted by this vigilantism are often those belonging to the narco fraternity or associated with their nefarious enterprise. While vigilantism targets those individuals who escape the full force of law or those who remain above it, the mechanism spawns a dangerous precedent. In January 2015, in the province of Michoacán, at least 25 people were killed in a string of ambushes, clashes and other shootings 'involving vigilantes, narcos, civilians and the army and federal police'.

In May 2015 hundreds of masked gunmen from an *autodefensa* group converged on the sleepy village of Chilapa, Guerrero and abducted 13 young men, claiming they were narcos. Later the dismembered bodies of three of the abducted were found outside a cemetery in a nearby village (Tuckman 2015a, b). Owing to the rising levels of vigilantism across north-western Mexico, stories of similar atrocity and crude violence have become commonplace.

'Desperate times require desperate measures', was the reply of Mauricio Rodriguez Montoya when I confronted him with the question of morality and immorality behind such undertakings in the otherwise idyllic lakeside town of Patzcuaro, Michoacán. An articulate former law graduate he had no faith in the state as an institution being capable of maintaining order in a world consumed by anarchy. Vigilantism in such circumstances may be considered as the coming together of an informal policy and its implementation that aims to minimize the suffering of the community.

It is true that in some areas vigilantes have been able to get rid of local extortionists, criminals, *sicarios* (assassins) and top cartel leaders. While one cannot deny the utilitarian outcomes of such vigilantism, at the same time one cannot escape the larger fallout from this undertaking.

Utilitarian Destruction

As Elias Canetti suggests in his critical work *Crowds and Power*, when society is at such crossroads the crowd might feel that rather than being the problem it is the best liberating agent against ills confronting them and society at large (Canetti 1984). The crowd, in these circumstances, is incited by larger critical social events. Given the dominance of these events, the crowd, in the form of self-protection militia, may feel it needs an indispensable force which can replace the state and protect life, liberty and freedom of the masses. In a state with a long history of bloodshed, but short on justice, vigilantes consider it their civic duty to bear arms and unhesitatingly mow down any suspected *malandro*, or bad guy.

Yet one cannot dispute the fact that vigilantism goes beyond the reasoned organization of violence. 'Vigilantes are generally not known to respect the basic features of due process. As they seek to impose order, it is certain that they will cut procedural corners' (Galen Carpenter 2013: 13). They operate along a very simple logic: destruction of the other is the best means of negating further challenge from that segment of individuals which now sit outside of societal norms and values.

Vigilantism is carried out in these situations as it guarantees the vigilante a context of freedom. The undertaking frees him from all forms of fear. If he wanted to work individually on a specific mission to inflict violence on an opponent this would have created the utmost fear in him. However, working in the mob frees him from any fear of retribution. As Canetti put it:

> It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite. The crowd he needs is the dense crowd, in which body is pressed to body. (Canetti 1984: 15)

In the state–vigilante dynamic, the fundamental problem in dealing with the *autodefensa* groups is a practical one. It is all about addressing the problem thrown up by a 'parallel regime'. If the state tries to disarm the vigilantes, it risks handing control back to the narcos in those

areas where the *autodefensa* groups have managed to get rid of the *delincuentes*. At another level, if the state recognizes the vigilantes and delegates full power to them, then it delegitimizes its own law enforcement agents and, in the process, loses its own authority and credibility. As a result, the *autodefensa* groups or vigilantes pose a dual problem for the government. In the first instance 'political, legal or moral recognition of these constitutes a tacit admission of the state's failure to protect its citizens. Secondly, and more importantly, their continued presence poses a serious threat to the authority of the state and can have a far-reaching impact on the rule of law in the country (Horton 2014: 2).

With killing (of any kind) comes a large burden of justification. An individual, upon carrying out an act of homicide, commits himself to lifelong soul-searching as to the rationale behind this own private undertaking. Furthermore, he finds himself in the unenviable position where he has to provide credible legal justification for his mission. As Canetti reminds us, 'every time an individual carries out a command, a sting is left in him or her where it lodges forever. These stings continuously remind the individual of the commands that were imposed on him or her from outside and which he or she submitted to' (Canetti 1984: 305).

Yet a vigilante is often free from these burdens. A vigilante by its very definition is a mob that has a preconceived goal that it seeks to enact. Therefore, from the outset, it does not entertain any thoughts of guilt surrounding its consequent action(s). It marches towards its goal with a shield of self-defined justification. Once again it is the knowledge surrounding the impending outcome which unburdens the vigilante from any inner doubts surrounding the legality of their action and consequently from any legal responsibility. Crucially, by carrying out extrajudicial killing the vigilante mob not only strengthens its own feeling of being alive, but its imposition of death upon the opponent also frees it from the fear of death itself.

Moreover, vigilantism militates against the idea and belief that there is no escape from the cycle of violence imposed by the state and the narcos. If anything, it offers to its supporters the possibility that there is a way out and progress can be made to alleviate the surrounding security challenges. Thus it is difficult to defend the argument that vigilantism is

a counterbalance to the growing menace of narco-violence. As a strategy to end conflict it may appear, in the face of the government's ineffectiveness, to address the basic human security needs of its citizenry; however, such uprisings can never be actions aimed at balancing history.

If a comparative overview of past experiences across Latin America is any guide, vigilantism, while it addresses the short-term security needs of a desperate citizenry living in a world of perpetual anarchy, is, in the long run the very strategy that may come back to haunt them. Individual or society-led security undertakings suffer from two key maladies. First, they can never be legitimate and thus cannot replace the authority of the state. Secondly, without any controlling mechanism they eventually metamorphose into death squads preoccupied with issues of private vendetta and communal aggression (as was the case in Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s).

In any event, beyond the utilitarian outcome vigilantism, either at the group- or state-level, speaks of a crisis of difference. It spells out a collapse or breakdown in the distinction between good and bad. This is a simple matter of the transference of violence. It draws its sustenance from an enforced binary of mutual accusation and reciprocal violence. Mob violence is a mimetic plot. It re-enacts the killing project of the narcos, albeit through a separate set of actors who sit on the opposite side of the divide. Furthermore, this mimetic desire to kill is not recognized by individuals or groups. They refuse to acknowledge that when killing the *secuestradores* or narco that desire is itself a monstrous double of their victims.

Killing as Sacrifice

In *Death and Politics* Joseph Bottum inquires: 'in what sense could society *rest* on the death of men, rather than being damaged or threatened by human mortality?' (Bottum 2007). The answer to this fundamental, yet deeply unsettling, question can be found in the works of the celebrated French anthropologist of violence René Girard. For Girard such killing, although it might appear egregious from an external perspective, may have a necessary purpose in a given society. Examined

up-close, in the Girardian framework of mimetic violence, in which the victim (or in this case the narco or *soldado*) is killed/sacrificed, society may come to associate such deaths as a process of cleansing—something fundamental to the needs of the society; perhaps a necessary condition (Girard 1977)?

If one were to consider the narco as the victim—though there is no doubt that in terms of a Girardian framework he is the *source* and *origin* of the crisis that society faces—his killing or sacrifice ensures this *miracle* of peace (that eluded society while the victim was alive). While the brutal elimination/sacrifice of the victim/narco results in a reduction in the appetite for violence that possessed many in society, in the aftermath of the killing society as a whole feels appeased and is at ease with itself.

If sacrifice/killing is the point of departure for a given society, with the killing/death of certain individuals purging from society the cause of extreme anxiety, uneasiness and anarchy, the effects are such that the killing is tolerated. The sacrifice and the toleration of the killing of certain criminal elements contribute to the coming together of society. Moreover, national grief that follows, for example, the assassination of a key figure, egregious killing or genocide often contributes to the reinforcement of an identity that previously was missing or in short supply in the narrative of a given society or nation and its past.

The Aztecs lived in a state of perpetual war. This society very much relied on killing in order to justify its existence.[3] Killing through sacrifice was the glue that held the empire together. They had to find ways to obtain victims. In the opinion of one critic, without being in a state of eternal war how else could they (the Aztecs) obtain still-beating human hearts (von Hagen 1958: 163)? They killed in order to nourish their beneficent gods. Killing was a natural condition; the society was built and based on human sacrifice. They did not have an exit principle from this cult of killing. The abandonment of this practice would mean the destruction of society itself.

In a manner of speaking, the dynamics of vigilante violence in contemporary Mexico introduce us to the articulation of a premodern idea. The Aztecs sacrificed prisoners of wars in their rituals. It was a justifiable objective to retain order. Held up in that mirror the actions of vigilantes

seeking out their adversaries would appear as another attempt at establishing that missing order.

The social benefit of killing is that, in the wake of it, this undertaking provides the vital glue that cements a community or a people together. As, it was then, so it is now. Note, for instance, the lynching and burning alive of three supposed *secuestradores*/kidnappers in San Mateo Hitzilzingo, Toluca, Mexico on 4 February 2012. Interestingly, the mob that incited this violence was led by a group of six women and a teenager who kept encouraging the killers by shouting *Justicia, Justicia, maten a estos secuestradores* (Justice, justice, kill these kidnappers) (Mackenzie 2012). According to the state prosecutor Alfredo Castillo, the residents of San Mateo Hitzilzingo rang the church bells that summoned around 600 people who gathered in the town's main square with sticks, machetes and bottles of gasoline, and who later lynched the suspected *secuestradores*.

If this particular event is held up to the Girardian mirror it offers these three sets of images. First, the killing here was born out of an existential necessity. Secondly, the killing of the *secuestradores* was not only a conditional requisite, but also an occasion and framework of reference that oversaw the coming together of the society through the formation of a firm communitarian identity that until now had been missing.

Thirdly, and most importantly of all, the sacrifice of the *secuestradores* had the power not only to establish a civil society (albeit of a lynch mob variety), but in the subsequent process it, nonetheless, facilitated order and tranquillity—it helped rid society of the threats and also sent a message to *secuestradores* and would-be kidnappers throughout the polity—hence, the communal participation in such ritual sacrifice of the other. In addition, on those occasions where the masses were not direct participants in the killing, they observed it from the sidelines of the concentric circle of narco-contra-narco or *soldado*-contra-narco violence and secretly rejoiced in the sacrifice of the protagonists.

The gang–society relationship, it is argued, is often dynamic (Bailey 2009: 270). While the gang feeds off the populace's insecurity, the community uses the former as sacrificial bait when the occasion arises. Given this configuration, the sacrifice of a select group of people, out of necessity for the greater good of society, is both recognized and

actively encouraged by the military and some political parties. Patrolling armoured personnel carriers across the country often distribute pamphlets to civilians, asking them explicitly to denounce the narcos and *secuestradores*.

Such *noticias* guarantee both anonymity and reward for an informer. This is, in fact, a legal writ provided by the military to the citizenry to impose death from a distance upon a suspected evildoer and sacrifice him at the altar of society.[4] There are, of course, no statistics available on the number of victims rounded up by the military/*marinos* as a result of civilian informants. Nevertheless, there is a widespread belief that the individuals picked up by the *soldados*/*marinos* on the basis of information provided by the masses are swiftly dispensed with. For when politics abandons the administration of the politics of death and hands it over to the military then the latter naturally becomes the high priest of the death rite it administers (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 138).

If the right of extrajudicial sacrifice/killing is now delegated to the military there is one group that demands the civilians or the state to be the ultimate arbiter of this process of public killing. *Partido Verde Ecologista de México* (the Green Party, or PVE), which speaks out on the protection of the natural environment, interestingly also demands the cleaning up the human environment by putting the narcos and *secuestradores* to death.

Thanks to popular pressure, a country that has long shunned the death penalty, however heinous the crime, has, on more than one occasion, been forced to reassess its position in the context of narcowar. In 2014 the PVE put up huge hoardings across the province of Veracruz demanding that the state ensures '*Secuestradores* kidnapping schoolchildren [are] to be hanged'.

Its ideological raison d'être is summed up in its banner demanding policy change: *Porque nos interesa tu vida pena de muerte para asesinos y secuestradores* (Because we care about your life—the death penalty for murderers and kidnappers).

Those who support it see it as a war against tyranny. It is viewed as a bulwark against the totalitarian violence of the narcos. It is morally just because it dispenses with the bad guys. It is utilitarian in its scope and dynamism. According to Doty,

> citizens can engage in a politics of exceptionalism that feeds into official government action, in which case the sovereignty of the state and popular sovereignty become inextricably linked to one another. (Doty 2009: 10)

One could also provide some anthropological explanation in such contexts. For some critics, some massacre societies, in their ancient archaic past, adopted such killings first as ritual and then moved on and placed such actions in the legal domain by making executions authoritative (Virilio 2008: 163). In this case, the relationship between the lynch mob and the political party advocating capital punishment would appear to be two constitutive elements of such a linear progression.

According to Virilio and Lotringer, 'the last point on which death still has a relation to politics is capital punishment. Politics conferred death by law. The absence or abolishment of death penalty, then, is critical insofar as it is simultaneously a means, on the part of the State, of abolishing/abandoning the question of death' (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 135). If this is the case, the resurrection of the death penalty or capital punishment by the state can be regarded as the return of the political to an active engagement with the question of death. The PVE's demand for the Mexican state to reinstitute the death penalty for the narcos and *secuestradores* could then be argued as an attempt to bring death back into the political realm.

The demand for capital punishment is also a demand for sacrifice. It seeks to bring back a form of pre-Columbian human violence that was expelled with the arrival of the Spaniards. Support for capital punishment, and the seeking of its implementation, is not a collective murderous fury. It is an aspect of collective humanism that defends the community in general. Pre-Columbian Aztec human sacrifice was about establishing order, re-establishing peace and instituting calm after a sustained campaign of war. They sacrificed the captive enemy warrior to win divine favour.

Some scholars argue that the experience of death, which some modern industrial states have 'dodged', should be brought back into the everyday domain of political existence. Put simply, capital punishment is a necessary and inescapable condition according to this line of argument. Why should the state have blood on its hands? Why should it be the

high priest of death? What is the rationale behind this? Georges Bataille argues that the absence of capital punishment from the political implies not only its disappearance from the everyday administrative context, but also its very absence from the field of consciousness. In Bataille's visual representation of the argument, 'we have to make the cut visible, instead of shamefully erecting a pyramid' (Bataille 1991: 231).

The state, then, is expected to legally enforce death for an explicit purpose. The intention behind this undertaking is to send a specific message to the citizenry. The state's association with this endeavour is aimed at creating a specific consciousness among those living within its politico-juridical boundaries. By upholding the death penalty or capital punishment it unequivocally declares that it is wedded to the principle of a tooth for a tooth or an eye for an eye—that it does not believe in correctional measures (such as life imprisonment) for certain crimes. Furthermore, the state's ascription of this ideal/ideology creates a cognizance among the citizenry that it alone has the legal and spiritual authority to decide matters of life and death.

What happens if the state abandons its preserve? 'Once capital punishment is abolished, politics ceases to have any relation to death. Finished. Death no longer has any intelligibility' (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 135). It ushers in a state of void. It allows criminals to commit the worst kind of crime unrestrained. Moreover, it facilitates the ushering in of what Girard called an 'era of essential violence'. An era of essential violence makes its mark when hierarchies are toppled and old distinctions and obligations vanish. By giving up the death penalty, or by relinquishing its role as the supreme arbitrator in the question of life and death, the state makes the decision-making process a free-for-all.

Walter Benjamin talks about 'historically acknowledged sanctioned violence, and unsanctioned violence' (Benjamin 1986: 279). Using this framework is it not possible to equate capital punishment with legally sanctioned murder by the state? Is it not a political ritual that superimposes the murdering capacity of the state over the brutality of the now incarcerated victim? 'Imagine the demonstrative effect it has on the kidnappers and killers', argued one jurist in the southern provincial city of Chetumal when I expressed my moral angst over the state's ability to take an individual's life. Capital punishment, then, is part of

the collective will. Symbolically, at least, it represents the state or nation placing a noose around the evildoer's neck. Such an undertaking is based on the Girardian premise that 'it restrains violence by means of violence' (Girard 1977).

While at one end the demand to bring back capital punishment, and the mass participation in pushing forward this legislation, could be seen as the identification of human sacrifice with the resurgence of a now moribund society, at the other end it could be seen as a representation of the general societal mood for such sacrifice. Interestingly, one mainstream newspaper, *El Universal*, which carried out a survey on the above campaign, found out that 70 % of respondents supported bringing back the death penalty (Bonello 2008). Furthermore, if the survey is any indicator of the national mainstream thinking the lynching of three suspected *secuestradores* in San Mateo Hitzilzingo in February 2012 should not be regarded as an isolated or a freak event.

Given the public acceptance and participation in the exaltation of such a theme, it becomes pertinent to ask whether this construct is shaping the traditional ideas of death and sacrifice in society. Interestingly, the 'totem' and 'tutelary sign' of death that defined Mexico through the ages would seem to be slowly appropriated by this new social and cultural construction represented by *noticias* of PVE and the actions of the lynch mob.

The Anti-State

In an anarchical society, or a state that experiences failure, forces that constitute power centres seek out the less powerful as targets, and eventually it becomes a site of restraint, control and oppression. If the narcos can make people disappear one by one, and in their busloads, so can the state. How do you establish whether the police or *soldados* who took away a family (whose remains were later found in a sugarcane field) were *delincuentes* masquerading as police? Similarly, how do you know they weren't police and they were actually wearing their own uniform? Contributors to the anthology titled *When the States Kill,* stress, how 'contemporary Latin American states have practiced different forms of

terror … in a politically rational, calculated modern fashion (Menjivar and Rodriguez 2005: 3–4).

It is easy to make an opponent of a state disappear. It is easy to make your own enemy disappear. There need not be the formality of going through one's crimes. There is no requirement to round up a judge and jury. There are telephone numbers plastered everywhere. On highway billboards, on crumbling public walls and on most military and police vehicles. These are hoardings asking the citizens to denounce the suspect. All one has to do is ring the number. One has to denounce. You could pretty much denounce anyone you like. And death is likely to follow.

War, if it signifies legitimate killing, is usually an undertaking that falls into the category of last resort (Walzer 2004: 53). If that is the case, all other options in resolving differences should have been explored. If Walzer's argument is justified, the state is legitimate in its employment of forces to carry out killing, for it has exhausted all other options to minimize a threat to itself and to its citizens from non-state actors. This legitimacy to kill, however, is denied to those fighting against the state.

Walzer has a rather simple explanation for this, that is, 'the militants or *delincuentes* (in our case) fighting against the state and carrying out acts of egregious violence against civilian population have not been through the necessary conditions to justify their actions as being a last resort' (Walzer 2004: 53). By using this yardstick of evaluation one can argue that the actions of the *delincuentes* amount to homicidal murder rather than justifiable killing, which is the sole preserve of the state in this context.

Felipe Calderon's government (2006–2012) can be argued to be the regime that fully recognized the threat the narcos posed to the Mexican state and society. The Mexican state's anti-narcotics activities (during the period of President Calderon) saw instances of the excessive use of violence. In the view of many observers, the army and the law enforcement agents had a free rein in terms of their right to kill anyone who was remotely suspected of being involved in the drugs trade, kidnapping and extortion. Was the state violating its own core principles while engaged in such an undertaking? Was it legally justified in its killings of *delincuentes*?

From a practical perspective perhaps the state had no alternative but to engage in reactionary violence when faced with the menace of the drug cartels and their band of killers who were operating across the length and breadth of the country. It was a civil war situation. Thus the regime concerned was acting in the name of the state and had no alternative but to resort to the use of fire power to bring the menace under control.

But if we go beyond the mere strategic offence argument and inquire into the moral and legal bases of such an undertaking, we come up against some serious questions. According to some critics,

> The right to kill is the right to behave in violent ways against citizens who break the original covenant as well as against the uncivilized 'others' who pose a threat to the existence of civilized order, and their killing provides security. (Hasan 2011: 68)

Viewed within the Weberian trajectory, the state not only has the monopoly over violence, but also has an equal, uncontested right to kill. While the use of violence is seen as a necessary condition for the state in order to defend itself and its citizens from attacks by criminal agents; killing by contrast, can be argued as a received power. As some critics have argued, the state's unquestionable right to kill assumes meaning and is validated when 'morally independent individual's right to violent self-defence is yielded to the state and the state becomes the sole protector of individual liberties, denying to any agents other than the state the right to kill at home and abroad' (Hassan 2011: 68).

The state, in this instance, can defend its actions on the following two counts. First, since the state is both legally and morally responsible for ensuring the security of its citizenry and defend itself from attacks by non-state forces, its actions surrounding killing is justified on legal and moral grounds. Second, their use of violence or killing is directed not against civilians but individuals and groups who have forfeited their right to call themselves civilians by taking up arms. Thus the state is justified in its actions—even if they lead to the indiscriminate killing of opponents.

As Benjamin suggests, 'the meaning of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence is not immediately obvious'

(Benjamin 1986: 279). The right to kill if seen from the perspective of the state as well as the drug gangs presents us with the following contrasting narrative. While the state can justify its actions under the broad framework of war—which is both morally and legally sanctioned under the traditional international law the gangs can take recourse in no such norms. Hence while the actions of the state leading to death is branded as justifiable killing that of the gangs and *delincuentes* summarized as homicidal murder.

Killing in war is considered a justified or justifiable act and consequently escapes from being classed as a murder (Walzer 2004; Hasan 2011). Since the state in most instances is at the helm of affairs of war its actions, involving taking away of civilian or criminal lives is not categorised as murder.

However, this legitimacy or right to death over its opponents it enjoys, is not only denied to the gangs involved in their armed confrontation with the state but their actions are simply put in the category of unlicensed illegitimate killing or homicide.

At another level, since the gangs have not openly declared their war against the state they cannot take recourse in the rule of war. In other words, whilst the state can exercise its monopoly of violence and kill without being accused of its actions as part of homicidal murder a similar undertaking on part of the gangs puts their actions in the category of manslaughter/homicide/homicidal killing.

Civil Society and Anti-Killing

Killing in the name of God or for the purposes of expanding an economy of narcotics has always had its opponents. Throughout ancient and modern history a select group of Mexicans have raised objections to the mindless killing in the form of either human sacrifice or gangland violence. Netzahualcoyotl, the greatest of the Texcocoan kings, statebuilder, law-giver and patron of all cultures, tried to put a stop to the exaggerated display of violence and the institution of human sacrifice (Collier 1947: 50–51).

Similarly, the great mythical Toltec king Quetzalcoatl, ruling long before Netzahualcoyotl, had enjoined his people against ceremonial killing and blood sacrifice. For both these figures violence and the taking of life through religious sanctions or cultural practices went against the core philosophy of good living. During their reigns these two figures from the ancient past, and perhaps many other unrecorded individuals (who we will never be able to trace), represented what one might term an anti-killing movement.[5]

The context of anti-killing is important in order to appreciate the reaction of a constituency of Mexicans against the everyday onslaught of violence that is arising all around them. Anti-death may be defined as an urge to communicate directly with the forces of violence. As a social movement it may seek to articulate and amplify the raw concerns of the masses on this aspect of *la Violencia*. While there were powerful statesmen and leaders in the country's colonial past, in the contemporary period the votaries of this movement include civil society organizations, journalists, poets, religious leaders, the masses and politicians. Taken together, their activism can be said to reflect the growing concern of society as a whole.

It would be useful, therefore, to assess the behavioural patterns of assorted members of this constituency; the *inseguridad*—insecurity characterized by violence, barbarism and impunity surrounding the organized killing project of the present day—has its critics in Mexico. The momentary hero of this anti-death movement and the cause célèbre was the author Javier Sicilia whose son fell victim to the violence. His personal quest to denounce the randomness of violence had a country-wide appeal. But it was a short-lived movement.

It is true that the Mexican intelligentsia can recall the bravery of journalists such as Anabel Hernàndez, Marcela Turati, Jorge Carrasco Araizaga and many others who have struggled and strived to make Mexicans aware of the 'evil' surrounding the killing machine. One can also talk of journals and newspapers such as *Contralinea*, *La Jornada*, *Proceso*, *Zeta* and so on, who have courageously stood against the crime wave and have consistently denounced the power of the cartels and the resultant narcocide (dugs-related killings). For their stand against

narco-violence some have come under direct attack from the criminal organizations—as was the case with the *El Norte* newspaper in San Pedro Garza Garcia near the northern city of Monterrey.[6]

However, the courageous stand of newspapers and journals engaged in denouncing cartel violence has not generated a nationwide wave of sympathy for these professionals. Most Mexicans have remained more or less passive to their plight. It is only educated professionals and intellectuals who have voiced their opposition to this state of affairs. The absence of mainstream support for their cause has led those involved in the profession to tone down their denouncements of the cartels.

In fact, one could argue that, by and large, those opposed to narcocide have accepted a form of fatalism associated with the inevitable. Note, for instance, the reaction of one of the newspapers on the front line of reporting narco-violence. In an editorial in 2010, after one of its photographers was killed by the narcos, Ciudad Juárez's *El Diario* asked these agents of death (the cartels): What and What is not OK to publish? Reading between the lines it could be seen as an acknowledgement of the narcos' overwhelming and undisputed power of death and the publication's readiness to subsume to their wish.

Similarly, following the murder of several high-profile journalists in the eastern province of Veracruz some of the veterans in the journalist fraternity decided to take a back seat in terms of reporting the truth surrounding the violence. What follows is a quote from a journalist of over 30 years published in the May 2012 issue of the reputed national periodical *Proceso*; is sums up that self-censorship:

> No pensaba salirme de la reporteada. Tras el asesinato de Miguel Angel Lopez Velasco y su familia comence a analizarlo. Con la muerte de Yolanda Ordaz me decidi. No quiero saber nada del periodismo. Menos de la nota roja. Estoy valorando mi vida. Mis historias y vivencias en la fuente se quedaran guardadas un buen tiempo. (Araizaga 2012: 31)[7]

The lack of pointed societal anger towards narcocide and the grudging acceptance of the inevitability of the cartel-sponsored killing machines operating across the country can also be underscored in the following example. In the 2012 presidential election there was a countrywide

student movement that went by the name of *Yo Soy #132*. The movement was opposed to one of the candidates, Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI, who was unfairly using the television networks to his electoral advantage. It was by far one of the strongest student movements to emerge in the country since the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City.

While students and the youth are often the main targets we have seen no significant and credible surge in student protest against narco-violence. A much-publicized killing of four young students at the Universidad de Guadalajara in 2011 petered out (Cobián R. and Osorio M.: 2011: 12–15). Contrast that with the countrywide student sit-in demonstrations outside government edifices following the defeat of presidential aspirant Andrés Manuel López Obrador in the 2012 presidential election. Bluntly, the students appear to have no interest or appetite to introduce, undertake and carry forward a concerted movement against such everyday violence.

What is true of students is also true of the general masses. Of the 27 demonstrations outside the Palacio de Gobierno in Xalapa, Veracruz the author recorded between the months of July and September in the period 2010 to 2015 only five demonstrations devoted to the issue of disappearance and narco-related killing. The rest were about the local municipality police demanding higher pay, farmers asking for bigger subsidies, an evicted property owner who sought justice against evictors and so on.

If one were to seek evidence of anger in the masses against the randomness of killing it would appear to be in short supply. The Mexican youth, more than any other young group in the developing world, are well versed in modern information technology. Proportionately, they spend an awful lot of time communicating with their friends and family via online chat portals such as MSN, Yahoo Messenger, Whatsapp and, more so, Facebook. However, one is yet to see a movement emerging through this Facebook revolution that questions and aims to counter the violence.

Similarly, on another plane, when confronted by the machineries of death during revolutions, civil war and social unrest it is the women in society who often assume the role of the vanguard against such violence. In Argentina and Chile we have had *Madres del desaparecido* who for nearly a quarter of a century unceasingly protested outside their

respective presidential palaces to seek justice and to demonstrate their opposition to the violence perpetrated by the paramilitary and the state.

In Guatemala we have had Rigoberta Menchu and a whole social movement led by women against paramilitary violence in Central America in the 1980s. Turning to Mexico, we find very few concerted, countrywide, female-led oppositional movements decrying such killings.[8] Suffice to say in some parts of the country it is women who are the overwhelming victims of such violence.

Femicide

While narco-violence is inescapable in contemporary Mexico, it is also accompanied by pervasive gender-based murder, known in the scholarly literature as feminicide, femicide and *feminicidos* (Peña 1997; Adams 2012; Volk 2015).

Femicide is the violent killing of a woman by a man for reasons related to her gender. It is a condition governed by the deliberate killing of a woman because of her gender (Padgett and Loza 2014). Accordingly, feminicide can be explained in the context of the 'murders of women and girls [as] founded on a gender power structure, rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities' in Mexican society (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010: 5).

While violence against women has always been a familiar feature of Mexican society, there is now a systemic growth in the kidnapping, violation and killing of young and vulnerable women across the country. Many experts and human rights groups fear that Mexico's femicide problem is spiralling out of control (Beaverstock 2015).

Although women represent only a fraction of the total number of victims in Mexico's spiralling homicide figures, what makes this issue problematic is that the state and 'the authorities have failed to take misogynist violence seriously—in effect, turning a blind eye to the murder of women' (Tuckman 2015a, b). To a large extent, the government refuses to fully acknowledge the problem and, for the most part, the national media has remained silent over the issue.

According to the National Citizen Femicide Observatory (OCNF), a coalition documenting crimes against women, six women are murdered in Mexico every single day (Beaverstock 2015; Matloff 2015). Between the years 1993 and 2014 there were 1,530 femicides in Ciudad Juarez. In the central province of Mexico, since 2005, the state government figures indicate that more than 2,443 women have been murdered in the state, with a further 4,281 reported missing (MacGabhann 2016). The district of Ecatepec, on the outskirts of Mexico City, boasts three times the national homicide rate and eight times the Mexican average for female murders. In fact, Ecatepec district has a murder rate for women that is eight times that of the national average.

In the south-western province of Guerrero there has been a steep rise in femicide in recent years. Available figures suggest,

> An average of 14 women per 100,000 are murdered annually in Guerrero—four times the national average. The most recent official statistics saw an astonishing 343 per cent increase in femicide on the previous 3 years, with more than 500 mothers, sisters and daughters being murdered annually. (Beaverstock 2015)

There is almost an epidemic of femicide sweeping across Mexico. 'Femicides are a pandemic in Mexico', asserts Ana Güezmes, a representative of United Nations Women, the agency devoted to gender issues in Guerrero (Matloff 2015).

There are multiple explanations behind the exponential rise in such killings. Not all gender-specific killings within Mexico's necropolitics are rooted in cartel wars. The drugs trade, in other words, does not fully explain the underlying violence against women (Volk 2015: 27). If one were to expound this violence in the context of misogyny one must provide a rationale behind this undertaking.

According to some scholars, 'the widespread incorporation of women into the workforce, the scarcity of jobs for the youths and males, changing patterns of control and child rearing practices, family disruption, and dramatic shifts in the labour market have all contributed to higher crime rates' (Bergman and Whitehead 2009: 16). For some critics, 'in

the case of murdered women in Ciudad Juarez, it is clear that, as female workers in Mexican assembly plants, they disrupted what had been a sexual division of labour' (Franco 2013: 21).

This perception is reiterated by some observers who have spent considerable periods of time in these landscapes. In their observations, the killing of women has 'more to do with the killers than with the victims'. These crimes are 'committed to assert masculinity before an audience' (Franco 2013: 222). According to Ed Vulliamy, 'these feminicidios across the gendered zones of death 'ultimately signal a crisis of masculinity but, not a crisis with women' (Vulliamy 2011: 162). In the opinion of yet another critic,

> The independent roles and assertive public behaviour of these young women run counter to Mexican tradition, and seem to have aroused a murderous backlash among some men. Tradition-minded men and women alike contend that these women are 'asking for it' by dressing provocatively or walking the streets at night without a male escort. (Jones 2009: 119)

Femicide is all about the killer's use of extreme violence to denigrate their victims while they are alive and also after their death. Predictably, an examination of the victims' bodies from across the country overwhelmingly reveals the story of 'domination, terror, social extermination, patriarchal hegemony, social class and impunity' (Monárrez Fragoso 2003: 154). According to Jorge Pacheco, the news editor of the journal *Vertice* in the western state of Guerrero, 'we've been amazed not only by the increase in female victims, but also the terrible ways they are murdered' (quoted in Beaverstock 2015). 'Female bodies are often found badly mutilated, with particular attention paid to sexual organs and breasts, and dumped among garbage and waste' (Gebreyes 2015).

At another level the eye of femicide, the site of the tortured, violated and snuffed out bodies of women in places like Coacalco, Ciudad Juarez, Chimalhuacan, Ecatepec and Matamoros represent 'the denationalized spaces'. These are places where the state has dissipated, where the social networks are feeble or non-existent, and consequently where

life has very little value and is thus accorded little protection. These *colonias*, *distritos* and *ciudades* are true 'denationalized spaces' in the sense that they are full of migrants, itinerant labourers and drifters, and inhabitants lack the social networks they enjoyed in their native communities.

These locations are indeed *tierra de nadie* (no man's land) in the truest sense of the term, where women in particular live in 'a state of exception'. Here the female body is an icon and an object of annexation. The *femina sacer*, as one critic put it, are 'vulnerable inhabitants in denationalized spaces, deprived of full citizenship rights, and reduced to the barest elements of existence within their far-flung slum dwellings or colonias' (Volk 2015: 26–27). Removed from the protection of both the state and the community, and in the absence of someone to look over them and look out for them, they are easily turned into a 'disposable non-citizen' (Franco 2002: 13).

As Humberto Padgett in his highly engaging co-authored study on femicide argues that in such settings in these 'gendered zones of death … women can be murdered and it does not matter' (Padgett and Loza 2014: 186). The message here is very clear: 'It (femicide) does not matter because no one will conduct any serious investigation and put the murderer of a woman in prison' (Padgett and Loza 2014: 187). The mutilated and violated bodies dumped in shallow graves and putrid canals 'publicise the killers' power and impunity' (Franco 2013: 21).

To a large extent, impunity is the main motor of the gender crime (Franco 2013: 217; Matloff 2015). Lydia Cacho, a Mexican investigative journalist who exposed the link between organized crime and the institutions of the state, especially in the context of gendered violence, has been systematically condemned and accused of being 'an enemy of the state' because she has 'demonstrated institutional weaknesses, high levels of impunity, corruption and violence—including gender-based violence, the increase in torture and use of the justice system as a punishment tool against political enemies' (Cacho 2012: 131). Coupled with this is the social acceptance of gender violence.

What started as 'an event' in Mexico's lawless border towns and valleys is now mainstream and territorially dispersed. In a macho society such as Mexico plenty of Mexicans hold the view that women's lives,

or their social position, is not equal to that of men. Consequently, their killing does not raise much concern or soul-searching. It is a society that would appear to be 'murdering its own women' (Padgett and Loza 2014: 13). While misogyny and corruption have stalled most cases of femicide from being brought to justice, it is the society's grudging acceptance of this phenomenon that is most worrying.

Such public acceptance of the killing of innocent members of its own community speaks volumes about the society's attitude to the enterprise of death. For Jones, one can only lament the persistence of such mindsets, and the violent pathologies that they fuel (Jones 2009: 119). The aggregate of such murders, according to Sergio Gonzalez Rodriguez, author of a definitive study on the killing fields of the country's north, is sponsored as well as perfected by a communally accepted death machine. This death machine in its activism eventually extracted institutional impunity for such crimes and even legalized them (Rodriguez 2012). Consequently, in the subsequent process we have ended up with a society of legal disappearances. Instead of correcting these crimes, the state in crisis has become a part of it.[9]

Aside from this acceptance of killing by the civil society there is one larger issue that exists, that is, a lack of interest in engaging with the issue (Rodriguez 2012). When the ailing airline Mexicana went bust, some of its former airhostesses brought out a pin-up calendar to highlight their plight—a modern-day feminist denouncement of retrenchment in the workplace, perhaps? Whether it was in response to the nude photographs or something else there was an overwhelming nationwide outpouring of sympathy for these women.

If strangers and the masses could be moved by such incidences of loss, why have we not seen a countrywide women's movement demanding justice for all these murdered women?[10] It is this very absence of civil society participation in denouncing death, or failing to take a resolve to do something about it, which sits ill at ease with the Mexican attitude towards life and death, and prompts critics such as Jones to emphasize the murderous tendencies within a section of the Mexican society (Jones 2009: 118–120). Sometimes doing nothing is the most violent thing to do (Žižek 2008: 183).

So Far from God …

What about religion and religious institutions? Isn't Latin America synonymous with the Catholic Church and its high priests taking a stand against inequality, exploitation and egregious violence in its chequered recent past? Did the continent not introduce to the world the ideological activism called liberation theology? Wasn't liberation theology a beacon of hope when all civil society organizations and bodies had either been made impotent or been forced into oblivion by the all-powerful military juntas and paramilitary organizations at the height of Central America's civil war decades?

The pertinent question that crops up here is, of course, a decidedly simple one: what is the reaction of Mexico's religious establishment to this mayhem and barbarism? On closer inspection, the reaction of the Catholic Church in the unfolding violence would appear to be a muted. On the eve of the visit to the country by Pope Benedict XVI, the respected weekly *Proceso* dismissed the head of the Catholic Church's visit as a 'calculated one' aimed primarily at 'reinforcing the political position of the then ruling PAN (Vera 2011: 23–28). When Pope Benedict XVI did visit the country in 2012 he avoided any loud statements that could be interpreted as denouncements of the drug cartels, their narcocide and the government's war on the *delinquentes*.

This may, at last, be changing. Mexicans feel that the current pope, as a Latin American, may be able to make a direct connection with the miserable state of affairs on their behalf. Pope Francis visited Mexico twice during his term. During his second trip he mused: 'The Mexico of violence, the Mexico of corruption, the Mexico of drug trafficking, the Mexico of cartels, is not the Mexico our Mother wants.' Similarly, he urged Mexicans 'to fight every day against corruption, against trafficking, against war, against division, against organised crime, against human smuggling'.

Reflecting on the rising tide of femicide in the country, Pope Francis stressed the need to get rid of this societal and institutional insensitivity to the murder of women and its deep permeating acceptance across the society. 'Reserving special mention for women 'unjustly robbed of their

lives', in these 'spaces of exception' Pope Francis reminded the Mexican government it had a duty to provide 'true justice' and 'effective security' to Mexicans.

Why has the local Catholic Church not taken a proactive role in addressing these societal ills? Why throughout this turbulent period has it maintained an ambivalent relationship with the cartels? Why does the Mexican Church need to be prodded from the top as to what it must do?

The answer to all these questions may have something to do with the Church's dependency on the cartels. The Mexican Catholic Church has no state patronage. 'Long dependent on gifts, but often less than discriminating about where they come from, at the local level, the co-dependency of the church and the cartels is public knowledge (Cave 2011). The cartels are often the builders of the churches. They ensure the maintenance of the churches and regularly turn up within its walls to seek penance.

The Church's silence over the politicization of the country's narcowar is largely based on the philosophy of *No meterse en la política* (Don't get into politics). According to Father Valdemar—who works closely with Mexico's conference of bishops—the cartels are engaged in money laundering and 'the church has no formal strategy for how to deal with the cartels in their midst and no plan to develop guidelines for priests struggling with munificent killers (quoted in Cave 2011).

It is true that one can blame the Catholic Church for doing too little to fight the murderous cartels in Mexico. Yet the Church's reluctance to go into overdrive and denounce the cartel violence is a practical one. Often it finds itself in a scenario where the laws of God are 'regarded with as little respect and as much contempt as the laws of man'. Cartel members regularly beat and murder clerics. Over the past one-decade, dozens of priests have been kidnapped, tortured and killed by the gangs.

When it comes to the Church's relationship with the cartels the former would appear to be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Where the local Church has failed the Pope has intervened. He has taken it upon himself to confront the cartels. According to one observer, 'The Pope literally believes the devil walks free in Mexico, cultivating

death, misery and resignation, and he believes the state, the church and the narcos have been accomplices in that' (Chestnut 2016).

Yet, on balance, although the Church may not be making loud noises condemning the killing spree across the country, it would be wrong to suggest that it has not contemplated the situation. In a massive public drive it has, in recent years, distributed millions of leaflets in its Sunday services, and through the work of hundreds of thousands of dedicated volunteers produced a small pamphlet that sums up the questions that Mexican's face today. *Oracion por la paz en México* implores the all-powerful God:

> Misericordia Señor, porque hemos pecado contra Ti cerrándonos a todo tipo de maldad. Es por eso que ahora no tenemos paz, ni en las familias, ni en la sociedad. El amor al dinero ha endurecido nuestros corazones y nublado nuestras mentes, dando como resultado injusticia, corrupción y mucha violencia.[11]

This is a holistic inquiry. It covers almost all manner of the challenges and threats Mexicans face in their everyday existence. In sum, it does not shy away from the fact that the country, as well as society, is at a crossroads. And, it cannot go on with the current state of affairs. It argues,

> México necesita de paz; México necesita de tu paz, oh Senor: Mexico no puede continuar viviendo sin Ti, Sénor de la misericordia.[12]

William Prescott, when recounting the history of the Aztec monarchy (in a manner of speaking the Aztec state itself), argued that 'it fell by the hands of its own subjects. That human institutions, when not connected with human progress and well-being, must fall … by then hands of violence from within or from without (Prescott 1843: 273). In some ways the Catholic Church's message highlighting the need for divine intervention to end the crisis in the country may be an indication that the human institutions invented to attend to individual and societal needs have themselves patently failed.

Conclusion

A *delincuente*, *secuestrador* or narco is an individual who inhabits two distinct worlds. He is an *outsider* because he imposes a reign of terror on civilians. If he were a part of the world of civilians or the peaceful citizenry he would not engage in his violent enterprises.

For society at large, the narco's identity is articulated within a framework of 'embodied enmity' or as Achille Mbembe put it, 'the idea of an enemy, a foreign body, that must be expelled or eradicated' (Mbembe 2003). He is also a *surplus* because the system has propped him up—his emergence although a product of the challenging times is nonetheless unnecessary. Since he is a surplus he can be legitimately dispensed with. In the world view of the vigilantes, who are consumed by the constant abiding violence of the *delincuentes*, the latter constitutes a useful wealth. He can be consumed profitably for the greater general good.

If we consider vigilante killing as a morbid ritual of the mob then such ritual has the virtue of bringing out into the open the intimate participation of the sacrificer(s) and the victim, leading to the dissolution of the servitude that the masses have experienced at the hands of the *delincuentes* (the now sacrificed victims). While the government has recognized that the vigilantes' actions are a cause for concern, its support for their undertakings may be in line with the public demand. If anything, the public attitude to these new modes of legalized murder also introduces us to new insights. 'People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. What is culpable can be made honourable through cognitive reconstrual' (Bandura 1998: 163).

This brings us to the next important question: when can killing in the form of capital punishment be considered free from self-censuring restraints? The answer to this question has its widest manifestation in the context of narcowar. To its supporters the egregious violent landscape that the narcos have instituted in the country creates the condition for legalized killing. Such a condition necessitates the lowering of self-censuring restraints on the part of the state and society. Since the situation is one of legally killing the bad elements in society, or being

killed by them, it is the obligation of the state to restore order through the imposition of capital punishment.

Notes

1. The distrust towards the law can be summed up from the confessions of a Mexican policeman. In his view, it is societal and deeply entrenched. As a child 'when I used to see policemen on the street, they never symbolised security, but rather inspired my mistrust' (quoted in Azaola 2009: 166).
2. According to one study, 'of the 1.5 million criminal complaints filed in 1998, only 149,000 arrest warrants were issued, and only 85,000 were actually served, a rate of less than 6%, and this ignores countless charges that were never filed because of the known futility of the action. A survey by the Tech de Monterrey (Monterrey Institute of Technology) estimated that fully 98.5% of crimes in Mexico in 2009 went unpunished' (Volk 2015: 28).
3. One could, of course, dismiss this killing project as the Aztecs' mistaken belief that the rise of the sun depended on continual human sacrifice.
4. It is true that all states fighting terrorism, guerillas and anti-state agents often require the assistance of their citizenry to provide information to capture the wrongdoers. While some of these states undertake public trials to determine the course of justice, some do not. In Mexico there are, as yet, no established public trials for those caught in the act of narco-violence. On those occasions when information is made public it is usually for high-profile cases. Note, for instance, the trial of the French national Florence Cassez, sentenced on charges of kidnapping and extortion (for details, see Moran 2008).
5. Although both powerful figures Netzahualcoyotl and Quetzalcoatl were failures in so far as putting an end to the Aztec and Toltec practice of human sacrifice. They were a minority whose voice of opposition against the practice was drowned by the demands posed by the priests and society at large.
6. For details, see 'US worried by organized crime attacks on Mexican Media', bbcnews.com, 31 July 2012, accessed 1 August 2012.

7. I did not want to give up reporting. It was after the Miguel Angel Lopez Velasco and his family's assassination that I started to consider it. After Yolanda Ordaz's murder I decided on it. Now I don't want to know anything about journalism, and less about the red note. I cherish my life. I will keep my stories and experiences confined to the ink of my pen (and not put it on paper).
8. There are a few exceptions. Rosario Ibarra de Piedra's *De la Intervencion del Gobierno Federal de los Desaparecidos en Coahuila* is an excellent example. However, such movements remain provincial and lose their momentum as soon as they are launched—becoming isolated and ineffective in the long run. For a detailed discussion, see José Gil Olmos, 'Iban hacia el norte…', *Proceso,* No. 1772, 17 October 2010. More recently, there was another long march undertaken by mothers of those killed and disappeared immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in the northern state of Chihuahua. For a detailed discussion, see Marcela Turati, 'Una marcha con 10 mil ausentes', *Proceso*, No. 1854, 13 May 2012, pp. 36–9.
9. According to one study, in 2010 only 20 per cent of the homicides in Ciudad Juarez were solved (Sullivan and Rosales 2011). In other parts of the country the figure is much lower or unavailable.
10. In 2013 President Enrique Peña Nieto acknowledged the issue of femicide plaguing the country. He declared a 5-year plan (2013–2018) to combat this evil. But, at the time of writing, there has been no progress towards alleviating the problem.
11. Have Mercy on us Lord, because we have sinned against you. We have locked ourselves in all kinds of evil. We do not have peace, because of our sins; neither within our families nor in the society. Love towards money has hardened our hearts and blurred our minds. This attitude has led to injustice, corruption and unimaginable violence.
12. Mexico is in need of peace. Mexico is in need of your peace. Oh Lord of Mercy, Mexico cannot continue living without You.

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6

Necropolis

At the end of a complex and tiring investigation into a murder, Philip Marlowe, the hero of Raymond Chandler's *Big Sleep*, ruminates on the body now devoid of life and lost someplace. Gazing into the wild vegetation where the dead is likely buried, Marlowe enters into a monologue to convince the deceased of his state of being:

> What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. (Chandler 1979: 1992–1993)

In a manner of speaking it is immaterial for the dead how they end up in their post-life phase. Like most cultures and societies the dead once they are dead—no matter how death was brought upon them—have little effect on themselves. For they are dead: dead, dead and dead!

Yet across cultures and communities there has always existed a differentiated attitude towards the dead. Sometimes the dead can be forgiving and cannot be bothered by the fact as to where they lie once they are

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dead (for obvious reasons, of course). Yet it is the living who might, at times, find the disposition of the dead in a particular manner offensive both to the now departed and to the sensibilities of the living. As the homily goes, 'a funeral is for the living'.

With death comes the attendant burden of addressing the remains of the dead. For the survivor, the death of a member of the family, clan or larger society complicates everything. Every society is unique when it comes to the treatment and the handling of the dead. They are often guided by sustained patterns of reaction and behaviour that is exclusive to it. The survivors have to do penance in many ways for the unsocial act of their kinsman's dying. The detailed study of exchanges during and after burials provides a vantage point for comprehending social culture (Lomnitz 2008: 2). Little wonder the 'rituals that every society has in place to prevent the dead from disappearing from the world of living' (Bauman 1992: 1) are steeped in their own particular conception of the dead.

How does a section of Mexican society 'engage with the void that opens once life ends'? The dead body has been a constant metaphor in the country's sociocultural and political processes. The manner of its treatment—its consecration or desecration—is fundamental to understanding the overall sociocultural and political processes. Unlike other cultures the death event in Mexico is as important as the life event. Put simply, the manner of a person's remembrance following his/her death is determined by his/her success or failure when he/she was alive. That being the state of affairs, in the past 'families had free rein to make funerary monuments for their dead, while friends, allies, and, detractors moved skeletons or picked them apart in order to control or destroy their charisma' (Lomnitz 2008: 368).

While the public desecration of a specific individual's mortal remains has lost some of its appeal, there exists, nonetheless, a burgeoning funerary monument creation for the dead. Up 'until [the] 1950s, most Mexicans could expect to be buried either in small-town or village cemeteries or in urban municipal cemeteries in which romantic funerary architecture thrived' (Lomnitz 2008: 479). While economic and space-related pressures have dented this architectural practice among ordinary Mexicans, it is very much alive in the context of fallen and dead cartel

members and bosses. This chapter interrogates some specific contemporary death events through architectural observations. It focuses on one contemporary obsession with funerary architecture in Mexico as manifested in certain burial practices among the cartel fraternity.

The chapter is concerned with topographies of the afterlife. Through a detailed interrogation of the places of the dead, that is, burial grounds and the surrounding architecture, it proposes an ontology of death. In particular it asks if the memory-places for the dead are objects? If they are, do they constitute an object of study? Following on from this, it inquires into what constitutes the identity of that object? And, how does it gain and retain meaning?

By dwelling primarily on the profuse burial architecture of *Jardines de Humaya* in the city of Culiacan, in north-western Mexico, this chapter inquires into how an ontological meaning of society can be discerned through an examination of the architecture and attendant engagement of the living with this death space. According to many observers these are kitsch places that represent very little except for wasteful and puerile thinking devoid of any real substance.

I, however, argue that such architectural designs postulate the linkage between object and meaning. They imply an underlying convention. In these instances such architectural objects can be understood as such, 'not because it has a certain inherent meaning which is "natural" to it, but because meaning has been attributed to it as the result of cultural convention' (Agrest and Gandelsonas 1996: 117).

This chapter posits that, in the case of these private mausoleums, the ontological dimension of remembrance is not figurative, but literal. It is an exclusive space and a place for enunciation of life—albeit from the realm of the dead. It is an identity marker as much for the dead as for the living. These spaces serve as a rational/instrumental articulation in which the ontological can be discerned through the examination of the process of human engagement. The architecture and the enterprise behind them speak in a certain way so as to dispense with words. The structure gives meaning to the space. It is a gesture whose meanings are suffused with layers of interpretations. These are posthumous appearances in the 'public space'.

Ontology of the Crypt

Tombs are a means to carry over the corporeal into the visual. The transposition of the human body through cultural and religious concepts into the field of architecture is perennial to human history. In classical architecture the human body served as part of a myth of origin through its use as a figural and proportional model for projection into planned organization (Nesbitt 1996: 63).

At another level such monuments are ontological formations. They exist at the temporal, corporeal, spatial and performative level. At the temporal level the basis of communication is economic. One could argue that there is a material explanation that conditions the living to erect these monuments. The living may take on the responsibility to build these monuments in order to express their gratitude to the dead for having provided economic riches to their family and friends. If it was not for that person (now fallen) the living might not be in a position to enjoy the opulence they are currently in possession of. This attitude is, in fact, a direct throwback to the country's cultural past. In the Meso-American cultures many people believe that their dead directly affect and are involved in the reproduction, health and well-being of the community (Lomnitz 2008: 1580). In Mexico such funerary pomp for the dead can imply loyalty to the dead, a communal or public demonstration of the worth of the deceased and, perhaps, their likely future contribution.

The monument, then, is a symbol of determinism. It represents both the life-choice of the dead and the consequent lifestyle of the living. Both are, in fact, existent entities. The very being of the living, in other words, exists in correlation to the one lying in the crypt. Conversely, the dead can only expect to reside in a certain spatial context provided the living enables that context. They are formed by what one might call categories of consciousness leading to categories of being. It is a performative space for both the dead and the living.

If one were to focus on some narco-instituted, custom-made necropolises in contemporary Mexico, such as *Jardines del Humaya*, we may realize they offer an ontological performativity. Visually, this necropolis

is a glittering assemblage of extravagant crypts with spiral staircases, towering cupolas and Juliet balconies. In Natalia Almada's documentary *El Velador* (2012) we are introduced to a scene where a widow follows the everyday routine of cleaning and washing her dead husband's two-storey crypt, while her children play hopscotch on the flat gravemarkers on the less prosperous side of the street. A gardener is found watering the lawns in front of another grand mausoleum. And, as the daylight retreats a watchman materializes in a far corner of this necropolis to perform the duties of the sentinel to the dead for the night.

Added to this is a steady stream of wailing visitors, vendors outside the cemetery gates selling refreshments and the occasional curious scholars studying this curious space through their specific academic lenses. These events and occasions are coherent from an ontological dimension of performativity. They represent an explicit and visible articulation of a subjective behaviour. Here, life is performed for the benefit of the dead. The necropolis doubles as a living space both for the dead and for the living.

Both the living and the dead live in a symbiotic relationship. There is a certain cooperation between the two. In the case of both 'there seems to exist the assumption that the dead and the living must satisfy similar needs even if the former now belong to a supernatural stage of existence' (Fernandez-Kelly 1983: 528).

Maria Susana Flores Gamez, a 20-year-old beauty queen from the troubled province of Sinaloa, was gunned down in an armed encounter in 2012. She was romantically linked to a well-known Sinaloa cartel boss, El Cholo. Upon her death her mother had her buried in the town of Guamuchi in a custom-made mausoleum with Murano gas lamps and marbled walls. She also placed a red suede chair resembling a throne inside this private chapel 'for the queen' (Gomez Licon 2013).

In his monumental work *Last Landscapes: The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West* Ken Worpole argues, 'the cost of dying may come only once in a lifetime, but it often comes unexpectedly, and it invariably comes in one go' (Worpole 2004: 7). While in the West 'in matters to do with the public and architectural culture of death, innovation in design, landscape and architectural aesthetics remains rare (Worpole 2004: 9)', one can see its continued presence in Mexico.

There are no strict unifying codes surrounding bodily disposal and commemoration across cultures. One abiding theme that cuts across cultures, however, is the fact that wealth determines the manner in which the dead are disposed. As with many other aspects in modern life, the death of funerary architecture or its presence may have something to do with the supply-side of economics. There are three ways, Worpole reminds us, in which one can dispose of the dead, or in which the dead may wish to be disposed: 'burn, bury, or build a place for their own' (Worpole 2004: 13).

In the cultural economy of the necropolis, the creation of such elaborate architecture can be argued to be dependent on the deceased or his family's access to unrestrained sources of wealth. Throughout history the access to wealth and extravagant funerary architecture went hand-in-hand. Building elaborate mausoleums fitted with the lifestyle of the nouveau riche. At the turn of the nineteenth century a particular class of people who had made their millions very often commissioned custom-built tombs in the fashionable … of New York. A certain background and particular philosophy influenced the building of these extravagant architectures. According to one observer,

> they were showing off by building themselves these mausoleums. These were people who started off poor and hungry and ended up millionaires. (Swaine 2011: 3)

Then, as now, such extravagant non-living spaces in mortar and steel, concrete and marble were self-testaments to success in a particular field and the manner in which it was achieved. The reason why we ended up having architectural feats such as pyramids, tombs and so on has to do with the choice of those who invested huge sums of money to commission and, in some instances, force their subjects to build these architectural structures before their death. 'With people less prepared to spend large sums on funerals, the capital and operating costs of establishing and maintaining cemeteries and mausoleums seem incompatible with good design and high-quality levels of maintenance' (Worpole 2004: 11).

On Dead Spaces

Ideology and architecture are intimately linked. Very often architecture reflects the ideological disposition of its creator. Funerary architecture is not simply about an abode for the dead. It is also a statement. From the perspective of the dead (or the living who commissioned it) this newly created space is the embodiment of the ideas and ideals he/she considered dear. Architecture is the translation of a specific ideal in mortar and marble. Thus while they may fulfil the essential role of providing a certain kind of space for the deceased, they are also ideological statements. At one extreme, according to critics such as Georges Bataille, such architecture 'is always representation at its most dictatorial ideological idealism; the covering of the site of a crime with a pile of rocks, the hiding and folding of death in discrete monuments, temples, and churches' (see Hollier 1989: 31).

Yet man-made structures gather meaning to them owing to their particular functionality. As Bevan argues, 'they can have meanings attached to them as structures, or sometimes, simply act as containers of meaning and history. Each role invokes memories' (Bevan 2006: 15). The built environment is intrinsically associated with a people. It is 'a prompt, a corporeal reminder of the events involved in its construction, use and destruction. The meanings and memories we bring to the stones are created by human agency and remain there' (Bevan 2006: 15). Here, through a specific architectural form, one is introduced to a blend of individual and collective memories. There is a narrative interdependence through bricks and mortar, motifs and murals. Or, as Lefebvre put it, 'buildings are to monuments as everyday life to festival, products to works, lived experience to the merely perceived, concrete to stone, and so on' (Lefebvre 1991: 223).

A simple burial place, a graveyard interns its dead below ground. A necropolis, by contrast, is different from a graveyard or cemetery. A graveyard is an assemblage of simple graves. It lacks elaborate design. It is conspicuous by its simplicity. A necropolis, while it may contain the dead buried below ground, is significant owing to its architectural representations that rise very high above ground. A necropolis is what a

graveyard or cemetery is not. It is ostentatious. It is grand. It celebrates the dead. A necropolis is that specific physical space to which the living looks forward to being placed following their demise—if the burial site is sophisticated and elaborately arranged.

A necropolis is a city specifically designed for the dead, and similar to the cities of the living. It is consciously planned. It is grandiose in its execution. It is a memorial site over a simple location for remembrance.

In some cultures a necropolis may come to signify a regenerative site where the living assemble to worship their revered dead or fallen and draw inspiration. A necropolis is an assemblage of the living who while they are not always the kith and kin of the dead, nonetheless, return to these locations in regular intervals to reconsolidate, draw inspiration and make a resolution in the name of the dead interned in that space.

'Tangible space', as Lefebvre put it, 'possesses a basis or foundation, a ground or background, in the olfactory realm' (Lefebvre 1991: 197). A necropolis, in such a framework of interpretation, is a statement. It is a site of acknowledgement. It speaks about the hierarchy surrounding death. Death here, in these particularized spaces, is not an admission of defeat. It is, in fact, a celebration of life. Within its confines death is elevated from ordinary to uncommon. It is about spectacular deaths. And, as such, a necropolis presents itself as a unique visual memory. As a visual space, in its specificity, it contains an immense world, a veritable hoard of objects, things and bodies. It is celebratory in its discourse surrounding the dead. It underscores the manner and style through which the dead are to be disposed of within its physical space. This objective sets to task the living to engage in ways to recreate that discourse through the creation of specific monuments that, at times, privilege the living above the dead.

There may be a correlation between the untimely death and the killing of the individual and the subsequent attempt by the living to recreate the memory of the dead through the assignation of the dead in some kind of mausoleum or necropolis. Or, it may be a conscious outcome following the orders of the dead while he was alive. A necropolis is a communicative space. It is a message board. It speaks a specific language and sends out particular information about the dead.

A necropolis is a produced space. It can be like any other place. For place is 'an integral part of our existence—it is a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and colour' (Norberg-Schulz 1976: 414). As Lefebvre put it, 'these are spaces which are fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities during a finite historical period' (Lefebvre 1991: 73). While kitsch, they have their own evocative subtleties for three sets of people: the person lying inside it, those who come to visit it and, finally, society at large. Following architectural theorist Aldo Rossi's argument, 'such architectural spaces or built environments are representation of collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects, events and places' (Rossi 1982: 37). Embodied in its features are the communal and collective unconscious—of inherent ruminations of the lived reality.

According to Kriester, 'visual symbolism on grave markers has been present as long as such memorials have existed, and the process remains vital and ongoing in our own time' (Kriester 2004: 1). If the symbols and motifs etched on the stone in the past were meant to remind us of our mortality, the ones found in personalized narco-graves are much more than a wink or a nod to that past inheritance. The narcos' graves are jam-packed with funerary symbolism. They are the documentation of a life half-lived.

Norbert Elias stated,

> there is an intrinsic loneliness in the act of dying. As a rule those dying slip beyond the reach of the social world they inhabit. Death ushers in a formal and forever dissociation from the lived reality. Dying, in other words, is the experience of slipping beyond the social world of affects and signification. (Elias 1985: 17)

These death spaces, then, are attempts at keeping open that closure. Hence, like the dead pharaohs of the past, here the dead seek matters and materials to see them through in the afterlife. Here, death simulates the imagined condition of the living. It is a desire to remain glued to the world left behind. Bottles of whisky, the finest tequila, Italianate

marble floor, replica guns, motorbikes half encased in the wall, all represent that frantic and futile attempt at negating that dissociation.

Evocation

Liminality of this architectural space, a place where every day can be reenacted, is very much the raison d'être of this architecture. As Vidler reminds us, 'the loss of the body as an authoritative foundation for architecture' (Vidler 1994) seems to have been countered through its rescue in the necropolis and other funerary architecture in the narco-world. 'Death', as Wyschogrod argues, 'is a biological circumstance which man transforms into an event of Spirit' (Wyschogrod 1985: 67). Seen from this lens the concrete and mortar memorial space is an event that celebrates that spirit. Here, life and death are presented in unison. Here, death is exposed. The spirit of that now dead body is brought alive through this architectural representation. It is made socially visible. For architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz,

> Our everyday life-world consists of concrete "phenomena." It consists of people, of animals, of flowers, trees and forests, of stone, earth, wood and water, of towns, streets and houses, doors, windows and furniture. And it consists of sun, moon, and stars, of drifting clouds, of night and day and changing seasons. But it also comprises more intangible phenomena such as feelings. This is what is "given," this is the "content" of our existence. (Norberg-Schulz 1976: 3)

The ontological commitment and spiritual reverence of these death spaces are both figurative and irrational. The architecture of a necropolis is both facilitated and sustained by what Rene Girard and Jacques Lacan might call a 'mimetic desire' (Girard 1977; Lacan 2006). 'Human desire', as Lacan put it, 'is always the desire of the Other, in its entirety: desire for the Other, desire to be desired by the Other, and most significantly, the desire for what the Other desires' (Lacan 2006: 689–93). To be a part of that specific architectural space, therefore, is a desire, which is based on another person's desire. It draws its sustenance from

the principle that 'we desire what others tell us by their own desires is desirable'. 'We desire an object because the desire of another tells us that it is something to be desired' (Dupuy 2013: 11).

In life, one cartel boss is affected by the vanity of the dead who is now ensconced in a grand mausoleum-like architecture. He has two choices as to what happens to his mortal remains post-life. He can either focus on the life here on earth or completely ignore the question as irrelevant. Yet he is incapable of escaping the burden of the question of the treatment of his body post-life. There is this pressure of 'mimetic desire'. It is a question of pharaonic proportion. He is consumed by it. In some ways 'the identification of what constitutes an attitude toward death must deal with the distinction between the point of view of the individual and the (im)personal society of which he is a part and the competing value systems' (Lomnitz 2008: 15).

A narco or the drug kingpin not only wants recognition in this life, but is equally moved by the desire to be observed and attracted in post-life. He wants to have a tomb that is both imposing and impressive. Thus he ends up taking a decision where his mortal remains are given the same importance in both life and death. It is reported that 'top drug cartel lieutenants sometimes buy dozens of burial plots in advance at the *Jardines de Humaya*, to make sure there is space for their people when they meet their end' (Daily Mail 2015). The dead begins his life in a private mausoleum.

The private tombs are observable architectures. These are monuments to themselves—the cult of the person's personality. They fall into the category of intentional commemorative monuments. These are instituted/erected to be observed. Architectural theorist Norberg-Schulz reminds us that the identity of a person 'is defined in terms of the schemata developed' (Norberg-Schulz 1976: 9). Thus very often he leaves behind instructions on how he wants his mausoleum to be. They contain particular guidance on specific aesthetic rules to be followed in the architectural design.

Demand for and creation of such custom-made spaces have strange effects on some individuals. For one thing, such an architectural undertaking 'unleashes a particular desire'. In life, cartel bosses compete and try to outdo each other. Interestingly, this competition is carried over

even after death. During their lifetime narco bosses commission specific grandiose architecture while keeping a keen eye on that of their rivals. Families continually compete with the tomb of their neighbour to build ever-larger structures for their deceased. Then, there is, competing architectural styles—baroque to minimalist and classical to modernist—all seeking to dazzle and outdo the other.

Once limited to the Sinaloa Cartel, the commissioning and erection of these 'expressions of excess' have become mainstream in the cartel fraternity. The once secretive Los Zetas, notorious for their brutal murder campaign, is a case in point. One of its leaders, Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, alias 'Z-3', constructed a huge mausoleum as his final resting place in Tezontle, Pachuca in the province of Hidalgo, Mexico.

Analysing it from a historical perspective the fascination with the creation of formal mortuary architecture for the dead may well have something to do with giving the person a larger-than-life identity. Throughout Mexico's modern history a dead hero is not only a hero because of his deeds; he is a hero to the public only when his mortal remains are interred in a grand monument (Lomnitz 2005: 363–366).

Admittedly, the hero status and the grand mortuary edifice devoted to that person were synonymous with each other in Mexico's revolutionary past. One could tease out the importance of a visual architecture in the context of myth creation in this specific context. The logic of the public perception of a hero is only assured when these visual physical reminders are present. Often the slain leaders of the country's war of independence were unceremoniously buried without any meaningful ceremony. Corpse abuse as I highlighted in Chap. 3 was routine. Yet these individuals could escape the ignominy only when their bones were interred in special custom-made tombs or mausoleums afterwards.

The creation of these grand necro-spaces, then, is an attempt at replicating the lessons from the country's past. If the hero and the ostentatious dead monuments are synonymous with each other what the cartel member or the bosses are trying to do is to engage in that specific sociocultural practice. Hence the narco obsession with the creation of these visual monuments can be argued to have a direct correlation with that psychology. By interring the dead in these extravagant architectural

structures or by commissioning one when alive, the person, is in fact, creating an identity of a certain kind.

If in life he escaped public attraction owing to a self-chosen clandestine existence, in death, at least, he can break out of that circumscribed being. The architecture of the grave thus doubles as the residing place for the mortal remains as well as a free legal space of convergence. It becomes a meeting point, a place free of legal constraints, a collective space that offers him and the world the opportunity to interact. In the end it is a project on immortality of oneself.

To the living who has gone to a great length to erect that certain structure in the necropolis, the monument then represent both the life-world as well as the intangible world of feeling.

For Ignasi de Solà-Morales,

> Dwelling which begins as a process of putting an end to our uprootedness, ultimately leads to construction. The end of dwelling is residence, and the process of construction is thereby to erect a residence, a home, a place that constitutes a spiritual or moral core, and in which life engages things. (Solà-Morales 1999: 46)

The erection of and desire to reside in a mausoleum are about dwelling. It is a task to be fulfilled. As Heidegger put it, 'mortals have to learn to dwell'. Dwelling is about ending one's rootless existence. At the levels of vital existence of the life world, to paraphrase Wyschogrod, the narco's life suffered a severe condensation of meaning (Wyschogrod 1985: 20). An evaluation of this architectural death-world gives meaning by way of contrasts and limitations that ruled the narco's life-world. In life the narco was a fugitive. He had no fixed abode. Although rooted in the life world he could dwell in a fixed address. Unlike the rest of humanity he could not claim an open dwelling. His was a clandestine existence.

In death, however, he is rewarded the right to dwell in an acknowledged space. What eluded him throughout his mortal existence is available to him post-life. Now he can dwell. The mausoleum here doubles as a life-space as well as a death-space. Committed to this fixed dwelling, interred within its walls, he can be visited by people close to him—without obstruction. In death he is beyond the law. The authorities

cannot confiscate his death space, nor can they demolish his dwelling. It is rightfully his—in perpetuity.

Moreover, the manner and the specifics surrounding the dead's presence in the burial space send a particular and unique message to the world outside. He can now speak from a burial place that is beyond ethical questions of right and wrong. As Edith Wyschogrod put it, 'to speak from the burial place is to inhabit a terrain that is not a terrain, an exteriority that is the no-place of ethics' (Wyschogrod 1998: 17).

A necropolis is a testament by the dead. It seeks to give meaning to a life that is no more. Curiously, the dead in these dwellings would seem less interested in the afterlife and more keen to engage with a life that was forever unavailable. The mausoleum, or for that matter the elaborate grave, is a response to the primary existential need for a rooted, constitutive dwelling, and a rejection of the flotsam abode. Situating these dwellings within a Heideggerian framework one could argue these to be qualitative dwellings. In this architecture the dead occupy the space between the earth and the gods—just as Heidegger had called for in the context of the living.

Embodied Place

If 'all buildings inevitably carry meaning' (Broadbent 1996: 125), what does the ontology of a narco-instituted necropolis tell us? Contemporary debate over representation in the fields of architecture and the built environment reiterates, 'we seldom look at our surroundings' (Vidler 2001, 81). While the spatial architecture is there, we exists in what Walter Benjamin termed 'an optical unconscious'. Very often these monuments are little more than backgrounds for introverted thought, passages through which our bodies pass 'on the way to work' (Vidler 2001: 81).

If this is true, is a necropolis nothing more than a space of distraction? Is it no more than extravagant bling in stone? In his masterful work *The Fate of Place* Edward E. Casey asks: 'Is it possible to institute an architectural work without fitting it out to be habitable?' (Casey 1998: 318)? Then again, as the necropolis in *Jardines del Humaya*

reminds us, architectural places need not be habitable spaces. They can be event places. They can be participatory spaces. For those moved by the heroism of the now fallen narcos, these are the places where one needs to be.

According to Juan Carlos Ayala, an academic at the State University of Sinaloa, these monuments are representations of 'a desire to show the power they (the cartel bosses) had, and the need to carry that on. Through the commissioning of these extravagant mausoleums 'they (the now fallen narcos) feel that that opulence of the crypt could be a way to keep their memory alive among people' (Daily Mail 2015). It is an attempt to bring the subject and object together. The creation of any kind of formal architecture, as Lefebvre reminds us, 'claims to produce a space wherein something is accomplished—a space, where something is brought to perfection' (Lefebvre 1991: 281). If that indeed is the primary purpose of architecture, what does a funerary architecture serve? More specifically, what is the function of the elaborate mausoleums for the fallen narcos? What message do they convey?

All memorials serve as a site of remembrance—a past to connect to; a life to celebrate. And, usually, they hold on to a life, ensuring it from moving beyond the living memory. As the old Mexican saying goes, *No muere hasta que te olviden* (You are only truly dead when you are forgotten). Memorials therefore are a heritage. Returning to these private mausoleums we are introduced to the fact that here architecture is an event. These are testaments of grandeur. They are there for posterity. They invite us to marvel at the life and times of the narco interned in these given spaces. The mausoleum is in partnership with the mourners. It is an affective space. It celebrates with the mourners the life of the now deceased through a specific architectural motif.

This is not a simple case of stone and mortar. The monumental space creation in this context is not something that is plain and ordinary. It is a map of conspicuous achievement superimposed on the geography of power. These are not disinterested spaces. The ambience here is anything but neutral. These are spaces that manifest public self-representation. Here the dead's heroics and merits are spoken through columns and aisles. They represent a referent and therefore embody a truth. Architecture here is a ledger of achievements. Such necro-structures

address the straightforward case of architecture. This is the architecture of built places that situate achievement. If it were just plain extravagant architecture it would not be a place. A place is only a place when it is etched in human memory and receives the presence of the living in one form or another.

While extravagant, they are a psychological construction. These are unambiguous spaces laden with psychological and metaphorical meanings. These are spatial-memorial spaces. These are inclusive spaces that allow the living among the narco fraternity to relate to the dead. These monuments not only articulate the community's awareness of its primary identity, they also reinforce its common fate. These are fraternal places. These are spaces of remembrances, celebrations and melancholia all rolled into one. A monument here is an affected space, which contains memories of several deaths, both that of numerous victims and that of the killer now united in this monument to death.

In some other cultures such elaborate architecture may be dismissed as not far from phantasmagoria. Yet in the Mexican cosmological representation of life and death these are indeed places of shelter. How is this so? It is true that these are not places that provide shelter in the way traditional architectural structures have come to signify. Yet one cannot deny that they provide a symbolic and anthropomorphic shelter to the living as well as to the dead.

For Mexican society the dead, the spirits of the dead reside in or make a trip to specified architectural spaces—in this instance the pantheon or cemetery. A cemetery becomes a place for the living once every year, on the *Dia del Muerto* or the Day of the Dead, which falls on 2 November. Unlike the Hindus, who cremate their dead and immerse the ash in a river or sea, thereby denying a specific architectural abode for the dead, the dead in Mexican culture need a physical place to call their own.

Yet one needs to specify what the apparent logic is behind this elaborate paraphernalia in the tomb. To borrow Giulio Carlo Argan's theorization on the typology of architecture, 'these are instances in which symbolic content is sought of consciously as a link to an ancient formal tradition' (Argan 1996: 243).

If funerary architecture is a symbol of the community, one cannot escape the logic of the collective identification of a people with that physical form. These spaces are, in essence, a metaphor for society and its subjecthood. These are panoramic spaces of history. The monuments in the custom-made cemetery are both visual and tactile spaces. Here perspective on life and death collapses into one. To paraphrase Samuel Weber, these are spaces 'where things are brought together according to their meaning; indifference to their being there' (Weber 1996: 94–5).

Thus the narco-instituted necropolis sits at the intersection between the unsung ordinary life and the violent conflict of Mexico's drugs wars. The stillness of the dead, lying in various architectural representations, speaks of the astonishing reach of necropower in all its possible dimensions. In such architectural contexts 'the space of a social order is hidden in the order of space' (Lefebvre 1991: 289). While for the living it is not a steady space for inhabitation, it is, nonetheless, a place to come back to. This is a place organized along the principle of return. It assumes both meaning and significance as it succeeds in bringing back a devoted stream of mourners. It is, then, a place that is at once alleviated, condensed and embodied.

As Lefebvre argues, 'any relationship to things in space implies a relationship to space itself (things in space to dissimulate the 'properties' of space' (Lefebvre 1991: 288). Death, in the catacombs of a custom-made cemetery for the fallen narco, is an agreeable state of affairs. In many ways it symbolizes the continuance of life; with state-of-the-art architecture, flat-screen plasma TV, mariachis glorifying his deeds, and family and friends assembling regularly in his dead abode it is by some stretch of the imagination far from purgatory of torment. 'The graveside *ofrenda* and the ongoing exchanges and visitations between the living and dead' (Lomnitz 2008: 467–468) that these spaces permit, one could argue, is in fact, a natural continuance of the fullness of life.

While on the surface this may suggest that the dead, like the ancient Egyptian pharaohs, are merely replicating a tradition, there is much more to this undertaking. The logic of such material incorporation into spaces for the dead is in many ways a representation of the relationship between the body's organic constitution and that of its spatial constitution or organization (Lefebvre 1991: 196). To put this into context,

there are some obvious and typical Mexican explanations behind such elaborate funerary arrangements.

If, for instance, during the *Dia del Muerto* the living can legitimately go to the pantheon to offer food, drinks and sweets to the dead, why cannot one take liberty on such a tradition? Using that same logic one could argue sharing *tamales* on a given day of the year and interring a Cadillac in the dead narco boss's grave could amount to the same concern for the dead. Both symbolize placing the dead body or the deceased into an already defined social/religious space. The only difference is that in such spatial contexts the traditional, subdued mortality symbolism, or mourning imagery, is replaced by overt, garish and this-worldly preoccupation—hence, the walls of the individual graves being festooned with cars, custom-made guitars and replica AK-47 guns.

Catholicism, the Church, and the Crypt

Symbolically, at least, all cultures regard cemeteries as spaces where a communion with the dead can be performed. In some religions, such as Christianity, they may signify a functionalist objective undertaking. This raises one obvious question: are these sumptuous custom-built death spaces representations of forms of spiritual and psychic communion? Far from it.

While following the age-old pre-Hispanic tradition that defies the occidental interpretation of time (birth as the beginning and death as the end of a human existence), those who decide to have a place in these cemeteries and those who come to pay their visits simply celebrate the fact that the 'past is not dead'. Taken together both the dead body and the architectural space surrounding it represent a united whole. In such architectural contexts 'the body serves both as point of departure and as destination' (Lefebvre 1991: 194). That is only made possible owing to the presence of such funerary space. These cemeteries, then, are symbols of the continuation of life in another form. Since neither the dead nor the living make any distinction between *this life* and the *afterlife* the architecture for the dead replicates the exact condition of the architecture of the living. 'You have to enjoy life, because it's short', in the

words of Mexican singer Eden Muñoz from a ballad about the drug-dealer culture: 'Keep the party going, while God lets us.'

Yet the question as to how the dominant religion and the institutional framework behind it, that is, Catholicism and the Church, view this practice assumes supreme importance in this context.

How is such opulence for the dead by the living (as well as the living's obsession to end up in a site of such architectural splendour) viewed by the country's all-pervasive Catholic Church? Since most of the cartel members profess Catholicism, and the cemetery is a part of the Catholic tradition, it is worth following this line of inquiry. Primarily, the Catholic Church sees this extravagant and obscene funerary extravaganza as pseudo-religious. According to Estaban Robles, a young priest in Culiacán, Sinalola dioceses, 'the Church has never encouraged people to hold these sorts of celebrations'. Moreover, 'in reality, the people they mourn are not there, but the mourners (visitors) act as if they were' (quoted in Thomson 2010).

In a predominantly Catholic country one would imagine the Church would have the final say in what is sacred and profane, right and wrong. Interestingly, the Church in many instances has been found to be glove-in-hand with the cartels. Not only do Catholic priests officiate over the funerary rites of the fallen narcos, but many of the dioceses receive direct financial contributions from cartels.

Robles says the near obsession with the dead goes far beyond established Catholic ritual, and has turned into a pseudo-religious phenomenon. In a culture that borrows from several traditions this mode of celebrating the dead has not found any overt criticism from the religious establishment. Then again, it has not told them to stop it, either—in part as that would be too dangerous, but also because nobody would take any notice.

Conclusion

On balance, one could argue that parading death and violence in one form or another is elemental to all societies. It belongs to the most basic human exploitations and experiences. However, different societies have

specific ways of reacting to and coming to terms with such public spectacle. Very often it is the cultural traditions that condition our overall assessment of death and the bodies of the dead in the communal context.

'Almost all architecture in the ancient world had something to do with death or afterlife' (Kriester 2004: 17). Funerary architecture, then, is an attempt to connect to an event. It provides a sideway glance into the process of dying, burial, mourning and commemoration. Therefore, while it may appear novel, the narco-instituted ontology of a necropolis is in tune with the historical objective enterprise surrounding the erection of such structures. In all cultures necropolises are, by and large, mnemonic devices. They are theatres of memory. They not only stand as monuments for recollection but also assist in the organization of a specific kind of knowledge. They are conceived to articulate a specific discourse.

If 'life becomes transparent against the background of death' (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 17), what do these monuments attempt to convey? If anything the *Jardines del Humaya* suggest a relationship between violence and society that is at once vocational and semiotic. It is vocational because it is a space dedicated to a group of individuals involved in a specific enterprise. The extravagant crypt or opulent mausoleum is a mode of communication between the dead, the family and friends left behind, and the larger society. These are architectures of communication.

As one critic argues, 'we humans cannot exist without representation, including that of the body itself. The number and variety of such representation are immense. A history of the human body, therefore, would be virtually coextensive with a history of human beings' (LaFleur 1998: 37). In this framework, the loss of the human body could be argued to slip into a domain where it assumes an authoritative foundation for a particular kind of architecture. Here architecture serves both as a medium of representation and as a space that counters the inevitability of the physical destruction of the body. These private mausoleums double up as memory spaces.

The monument to the dead is a thing. It is an ontological space signifying a specific identity. These are in essence places of plea. Whether simple roadside markers with an iron cross or opulent mausoleums

all these memory-places seek to speak to a live audience. As Worpole writes, architectures of remembrance are primarily pleas to 'reintegrate the places of the dead into modern lifeworlds' (Worpole 2004, 17). As the philosopher of space Henri Lefebvre has argued, in the critical and intimate relationship between architecture for the dead and the larger society '[m]onumental space offers each members of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or social visage' (Lefebvre 1991: 67). Without that space he/she slips out of memory. There is nothing to hold on to. One cannot seek any belonging. These architectural spaces, then, are places of belonging.

In this context the necropolis of the *Jardines del Huamaya* is anything but banal. These tombs are imagery. They are the dead's language of expression. These are also metaphors of a specific time. As architectural conceptions they are expressions of an exaggerated conjunction between the signs of the dead and the living. They correspond to an ideology of heroism, albeit a twisted one. They are signposts to a society's way of living and dying. They represent 'alternative deathways in the contemporary international imagery' (Lomnitz 2008: 467).

As Yi-Fu Tuan argues, 'a place requires a space to be a place' (Tuan 2001). *Jardines del Huamaya*'s state is dependent on that space/place intersection. The dead can rest or make peace with the living only when they are interned in a recognized, autonomous physical space. True death is accomplished only when that correlation between the lifeless body and the physical space is affirmed. Thus we end up with a specific architecture from prehistory to the present which we have called the grave.

Moreover, examined within the Heideggerian theory of explanation, the meaning this bridge between life and death acquires ultimately determines its value as a symbol and its referential existence. In a similar manner the necropolis only assumes its true meaning when it gathers certain objects. If this were a pantheon with just functional headstones to mark the resting place of the dead then it would have remained basic, pedestrian perhaps—unable to achieve its fullest possible meaning. The architecture and artefacts 'of a culture are part and parcel of the collective identity of their producers: their history—how they understand

themselves, where they came from where they are going' (Bevan 2006: 210).

The critical message that this form of architecture serves, as buildings intended to articulate thought, is to assist in the recollection of those who commissioned them in the first place. To their criminal fraternity these dead are larger-than-life characters. In a country that is perpetually fascinated by its dead heroes the narco lords (even if at times they are Robin Hood-like characters) lack open public approval and legitimacy. Since the space or place for them is sealed in the civic or public space the dead's underlings turn to specific cemeteries to enact the architectural representation they would have liked to have see in the public domain. Consequently, the pantheon here becomes a surrogate building to display and fulfil the longing for hero worship.

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What Now?

We 'humans are the only creatures who not only know, but also know that we know—and cannot unknow our knowledge' (Bauman 1992: 3). That the culture of killing has assumed a permanency in Mexico is now widely known. It is the recognition of the permanency of the death force that is the most disturbing aspect of this knowledge. Yet the mayhem and the macabre associated with Mexico's narco-violence are expressions of a zeitgeist that cannot be grasped fully. The consolidation of this knowledge has assumed unheard-of forms.

'In a contest of violence against violence', argued Hannah Arendt, 'the superiority of the government has always been absolute' (Arendt 1970: 48). Yet she reminds us that 'this superiority can last only as long as the power structure of the government is intact—that is, as long as commands are obeyed and power disseminated in a transparent manner' (Arendt 1970: 48). The gravest danger posed to Mexico under the aegis of narco-sovereignty is the emergence of a culture of impunity.[1] To its critics it is a 'textbook example of a criminal network-driven political system'.

It is alleged that some provincial governments in the country colluded with the drugs gangs in order to line their own pockets.[2] But these are not isolated events. Such collusion extends across various strata of the administrative and bureaucratic machinery. And, at times, this nexus goes to extraordinary lengths. In 2010, in the north-western

A. Misra, *Towards a Philosophy of Narco Violence in Mexico*,
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province of Durango, prison guards let out convicted criminals to commit contract killings using the former's weapons (The Economist 2010: 30). It is this unholy linkage that has undermined the sanctity of the state and its position. While in the past politicians decided who, when, where and how cartels could operate, more recently 'it is the cartel bosses who decide where and how they operate and consequently the extent of violence they use' (Nieto 2012: 30).

This collusion between the politicians and the narco fraternity has led to a general culture of enforced silence. Silence in this context is offered as an individual choice. Anyone harbouring the intention to speak out against the cartel is given the option of *plata o plomo*—while *plata* refers to silver and, consequently, a bribe, *plomo* (lead) simply denotes a bullet to the back of the head. Narco-sovereignty is defined within the context of 'take a bribe or bullet' for your silence. Since both are effective options in securing silence there is very little scope for the truth to surface. As a result, newspapers don't publish stories of murder, as they are on the payroll of the narcos. The government does not speak about the deaths, as it is on the payroll of the cartels. The priests do not talk about the killings, as they receive generous largesse from the cartels.

As Carl Schmitt's oft-quoted passage reminds us, 'the high points of politics are simultaneously the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy' (Schmitt 1996: 67). The question, of course, is when and how did the Mexican state truly recognize the narcos and *delincuentes* as the true enemy of the state and society? Unfortunately, in a political culture firmly rooted in corruption and perpetual collusion with criminal elements there exists little or no such clarity. Predictably, in this ambiguous space and the miasma and mayhem spawned by the narco-violence the institution that seems to have lost its relevance is the state itself.

Traditionally, the state played a vital and irreplaceable role in providing security to its populace. It not only maintained sole monopoly over power, but it proclaimed: 'I will confront death for you' (Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 120). This was because by confronting violence and the death forces from within and from beyond its domain, the state was reinstating its legitimacy before its citizenry. In the context of Mexico,

however, necropower has transgressed the fundamental structure of law and sovereign power. If anything, it is the pervasive presence of death forces operating within its jurisdiction with absolute immunity that has severely curtailed the Mexican state's traditional legitimacy.

Necropower is about denial and the loss of control over events, actors and situations. It forces the individual to be at the mercy of the unknowable. The disposition of necropower assumes its fullest possible manifestation in the context of what Jean-Paul Sartre called 'fatal instant'. The 'instant' here 'is the reciprocal and contradictory envelopment of the before by the after. One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life' (Sartre 1964: 10).

Moreover, sovereignty of necropower in Mexico is absolute. It is much more pervasive than the power of the legal de jure sovereign, that is, the state. It speaks to society in a way that an authoritarian or dictatorial state cannot. It exercises unrestrained power as its most visible self. As a result, necropower manifests itself in the context of what one may call phobic fear. Thanks to the retreat of the Mexican state, necropower has unveiled a form of sovereignty that is like no other. The nation and its constituents are paralyzed by fear. On a protest march following the murder of Rubi Marisela in Ciudad Juarez 'many of the demonstrators covered their faces for fear of reprisals' (Franco 2013: 217). Users of the free press, which may include Facebook, Twitter and so on, are afraid to speak out, as the narcos constantly monitor those uploading stories about the all-too-frequent homicides and massacres.[3]

Killing always affects 'the fundamental values of those who participate in and witness the act, thus providing valuable information about culture, social hierarchy, and gender relations' (Spierenburg 2008: 1). By democratizing the process of killing, whereby a street-side vendor is as vulnerable to the process of violent murder as is the heir to a millionaire, the gang-led necropower has instilled among the masses a sense of fatalism. In spite of their supposed 'closeness' to death and the death world (as seen, for example, in their celebration of *Dia del Muerto* and the worship of *La Santa Muerte* by some) there exists among the general populace a palpable acknowledgement of their physical and corporeal

vulnerability (Butler 2006) to necropower. Interestingly, when confronted by such violence up-close they do not consider it to be a product of human evil, but an outcome of divine providence.

Murder is no longer a surprise. A massacre in Mexico tends to have a short news life. In the narco-culture of gangland violence the normal life has little or no value. Those bystanders caught in the crossfire between rival groups are simply 'unpeople' (Curtis 2004). They matter very little. Or, not at all. Perpetrators vanish and their deed is eclipsed by the next atrocity, and the one after that. Horrors unfold so quickly that 'they lose definition and morph into a single, numbing narrative' (Carrol 2010). This state of affairs further reinforces the Mexican world view that 'death makes a mockery of us all' (Lomnitz 2008: 21).

This sovereignty of necropower in Mexico, to borrow a phrase from Mbembe, is all about the 'generalised instrumentalisation of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies' (Mbembe 2003: 13). What is particular to necropower in Mexico is the fact that those exercising it have not passed through the same stages that the evolution of power in the West underwent. They have remained somewhat attached to the first monarchical model of punishment: the destruction of the body, or, better still, the public torture of those who attempt to transgress, as opposed to the invisible power laws interiorized and institutionalized in the system (Foucault 1991).

Examined up-close the periodic and mindless mass destruction of human life is an experience that is unique to Mexico. Egregious violence and a culture of ritualized, pitiless killing have been a permanent feature of Mexican society since pre-Columbian times. While the indigenous people of the country mastered it as an art form within the context of religious ritual in the post-Columbian period, it was the political uncertainties and revolutions that spawned a culture of random violence. Certainly, it is a singularly unique topography in the sense that instead of life-giving it confers upon the inhabitants of the country a state of permanent terror and violence and thus forces them to inhabit a potential death world. Theirs is a true state of exception. It is a form of violence that has denied full humanity to both the violator and the violated.

Ultimately, when one weighs up the nature and character of necropower there arises two mutually exclusive positions in the interaction between the dead and the living. In Malcolm Lowry's celebrated Mexican novel *Under the Volcano* a voice on the radio plays out to our drunken protagonist again and again—*¿Quier usted la salvación de México?* (Do you desire the salvation of Mexico?) Perhaps the individual and the collective in Mexico are both a willing as well as a forced hostage to the totality of necropower. For the moment, salvation is perhaps not necessarily an acceptable condition for either of these constituencies. Neither is ready to wake up from the slumber induced by necropower. Waking up from this slumber is like an anti-catharsis. So long as society is trapped in this affliction, necropower in all its manifestations remains constant and even a necessary condition.

Notes

1. An astonishing 99% of all crimes in Mexico go unpunished (The Economist 2016). It is a state colonized by organized crime (Carrol 2010). In a global impunity index Mexico came 58th out of 59 countries (The Economist 2016). Mexico's political fraternity is harnessed to criminal society (Franco 2013: 224).
2. For instance, the governor of the north-eastern province of Tamaulipas was indicted to the USA. The governor of the province of Quintana Roo on the Caribbean Coast was shot dead, allegedly by rival narcos. Similarly, the governor of the important province of Veracruz is accused of being the leader of the dreaded Los Zetas.
3. The following narrative provides a glimpse into the ambit of that sovereignty. In 2010 *El Diario*, the most popular newspaper in the northern city of Ciudad Juarez, published a full-page editorial in order to engage the killers on the existential question of life and death. It urged the narcos as follows: 'You are, at present, the de facto authorities in this city, because the legal institutions have not been able to keep our colleagues from dying. We do not want more deaths. We do not want more injuries or even more intimidation. It is impossible to exercise our role in these conditions. Tell us, then, what do you expect of us as a medium' (quoted in Valencia 2010).

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