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## Narco-Trauma: The Phenomenology of the Mexican Drug War among Binational Students at the Border

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**Special Issue: Forum on “The Border in the Classroom: Approaches to Border Studies”  
Edited by Benita Heiskanen and Andrae Marak**

Narco-Trauma:  
The Phenomenology of the Mexican Drug War among Binational Students at the Border

By

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Short Title: Narco-Trauma at the border

Abstract: In this article, I present research conducted among 242 university students living in the binational metropolitan area encompassing El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, that has been affected by drug violence. The particular focus is on narratives of social suffering and lived experience in the context of drug violence.

Keywords. Mexican drug war, Hispanics, US-Mexico border, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, narrative, experience, phenomenology

## Introduction and Background

In this article, I present qualitative data from mixed methods research among students at the University of Texas, El Paso, and the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, conducted between 2010 and 2012 in El Paso, Texas. The research focused on lived experience and the mental health effects of the Mexican drug war on 242 young adults living in the border region. Because of the risky and lethal relationships of power in contemporary Mexico, the safest and most compelling way to examine the drug war in Mexico is through the phenomenology of its effects on citizens.

After 2006, President Felipe Calderón escalated efforts to curb drug trafficking by implementing military actions. These intensified into a country-wide armed conflict with the drug cartels outmanaging, outgunning, outmaneuvering, and outspending any show of force the military could deliver. The area in Mexico most affected by the ensuing brutality and violence, and the chaos it has created, has been the border state of Chihuahua, stretching across the New Mexico and Texas borders with El Paso and Ciudad Juárez at the midpoint. The city of Ciudad Juárez, as the prime trafficking landscape or *plaza* through which to reach the lucrative consumer market in the United States, was convulsed by vicious violence tantamount to domestic terrorism between 2008 and 2012 as two cartels struggled for control. The Mexican military entered the fray in 2006 but only succeeded in putting civilians at further risk while committing serious human rights abuses.<sup>1</sup>

The Trans-Border Institute of the Joan B. Kroc Center for Peace Studies at the University of San Diego has published one of the more informative academic reports on the Mexican conflict. According to Molzahn, Ríos & Shirk, the Mexican government identifies a homicide as

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Watch World Report 2012," in *World Report* (New York, NY, 2012).

drug-related by one or more specific features: the victim was killed with a high-caliber weapon, killed at the scene, or in a car; the body was wrapped in a sheet (*encobijado*), bound with tape and gagged, or showed signs of torture, beatings or severe wounds; the homicide occurred after a kidnapping (*levantón*), ambush or pursuit; homicides within penitentiaries involving criminal organizations; or a “*narcomensaje*” (narco-message) was left on or near the body.<sup>2</sup> As of 2011, drug-related violence accounted for more than 50% of all homicides in Mexico with increasing numbers of vulnerable populations, such as children, among the victims. For every 47 people killed each day of 2011, three were tortured, one was decapitated, two were women, and ten were young people under the age of thirty.<sup>3</sup>

### Summary of Study

In the quantitative portion of the study, participants were interviewed and surveyed for symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress using the four-part Harvard Trauma Questionnaire and the 25-item Hopkins Symptom Checklist.<sup>4</sup> These instruments provide clinically-significant assessments of emotional health, can be administered by clinicians or non-clinicians alike, and were designed for implementation in conflict situations. Part Two of the

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<sup>2</sup> Corey Molzahn, Viridiana Rios, and David Shirk, “Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis through 2011,” in *Justice in Mexico Project*, ed. Davis M. Shirk (San Diego, CA: Trans-Border Institute, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, 2012), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) were chosen as survey instruments because they were designed to be implemented by clinicians and trained non-clinicians alike. The HTQ and HSCL surveys have been used widely to assess the psychological effects of war, genocide, armed conflict and civil unrest, and have been validated extensively.

There are several advantages to these two surveys, which are generally administered together. First, the HTQ and HSCL provide the ability to obtain a preliminary clinical mental health assessment with instruments that are sufficiently nimble and inexpensive to be implemented in large-scale screenings and in low cost clinical settings; yet are also suitable for research. Second, the HTQ is a mixed methods instrument and includes the solicitation of narratives, a number of which are shared in this article, to establish the precipitating event or events that may cause a post-traumatic stress reaction. Further, sharing a narrative in a safe and neutral setting may provide some therapeutic advantage to the participant. Fourth, the survey instruments may be administered with facility by trained non-clinicians, both in widespread screening in cases of mass trauma and also for research. Fifth, the HTQ and HSCL are relatively brief, which is an advantage when considering participant/patient burden in terms of time and emotional investment. Finally, the ability to measure symptoms of anxiety and depression using the HSCL is important as these issues frequently co-occur with post-traumatic stress as part of a PTSD cluster.

Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, the qualitative section of the survey, invites the participant to share voluntarily a narrative describing a frightening or hurtful event. The narratives were recorded, transcribed, and translated. Participants were allowed to talk as long as they wished. Excerpts form the basis of this article.

Student participants at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) were recruited to participate in the study through convenience and snowball sampling, a methodology that lends itself to confidentiality and working with hard-to-reach populations.<sup>5</sup> The majority of participants ranged in age from 18 to 22; with gender proportions at about 60% female to 40% male. It was assumed that participants were primarily middle-class by virtue of their attendance at university, although data on socioeconomic level was not collected for this study.

Participants were divided into five groups. Two of the groups were controls (n=64): Hispanic students with no connection to Mexico (HN) and non-Hispanic students (NH) from the UTEP sample. The other three groups were “cases” (n=178): Hispanic students who either commuted to UTEP from Ciudad Juárez (HC, n = 36); Hispanic students with close relatives in Mexico whom they visited regularly (HR, n=102); or Hispanic students studying in Juárez (UNI, n=40).

The Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL), containing a ten-item anxiety scale and a 15-item depression scale, was administered; likewise the four-part Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ). Part One of the HTQ assesses trauma exposure with a 43-item questionnaire regarding lifetime traumatic events. Geography mattered: the most frequently reported traumatic events among the young adults who lived in Juárez (the UNI and HC groups; n=76) included being

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<sup>5</sup> C. Gulsen, J. Knipscheer, and R. Kleber, “The Impact of Forced Migration on Mental Health: A Comparative Study on Posttraumatic Stress among Internally Displaced and Externally Migrated Kurdish Women,” *Traumatology* 16, no. 4 (2011), 111.

confined to home because of danger outside; and the murder or death due to violence of a family member or friend. Commuters and UACJ students differed slightly by group in the top three traumatic events reported: the commuters reported feeling traumatized as a result of being confined to their homes because of the dangerous environment, suffering robbery or extortion, and the murder or death due to violence of a family member or friend; while the UACJ students reported extortion or robbery, being confined to their homes and serious injury to family or friends because of the conflict, as top three traumatic events.<sup>6</sup> Approximately half of the total participants who resided in Juárez reported feeling like they were in a war or armed conflict. Among young adults with close relatives in Mexico (HR, n=102), the top three traumatic events reported were the murder or death due to violence of a family member or friend; the disappearance or kidnapping of a family member or friend; and being confined to home because of the dangerous environment. Among controls, the main traumatic events reported were open-ended responses to the final item: “another frightening situation.” These included family illnesses and deaths, car accidents and military service unrelated to the conflict in Mexico. There was a statistically significant association between the number of trauma events reported and negative mental health outcomes.

Rates of clinically-significant levels of depression symptoms in all groups hovered around the US national average of 30% for disabling depression among college students, a finding that merits further exploration.<sup>7</sup> Symptoms of post-traumatic stress were highest among commuters and UACJ students at 27.7% and 32.5% respectively. Anxiety among the UACJ group was at 37.5%; among commuters, 30.5% and among the HR group, 29.4%. By

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, Maricarmen Vizcaino, and Nora Angelica Benavides, “Mental Health Outcomes of Mexico’s Drug War in Ciudad Juárez: A Pilot Study among University Students,” *ibid.* (2013), <http://tmt.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/07/29/1534765613496647>.

<sup>7</sup> “Depression and College Students,” National Institute of Mental Health, 2012, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/depression-and-college-students/>.

comparison, the Hispanic students with little or no connection to Mexico reported anxiety and post-traumatic stress at rates of 12.1% and 9.1% and the non-Hispanic students reported clinically significant anxiety symptoms at 25.8% and post-traumatic stress at 12.9%. Statistical analysis with combined groups (divided as close ties/no close ties) showed that young adults with close ties to Mexico suffered significantly higher levels of anxiety; greater numbers of traumatic events and thus higher levels of post-traumatic stress.

### **Narratives of Everyday Violence**

Many participants reported experiencing or witnessing violent and traumatic events; as well as robbery and extortion; or the death, injury or disappearance of family and friends. Narratives such as the following illustrate the phenomenology of emotional distress, social suffering, and the banality of violence as the normal course of things, spoken with faltering words and often tears:

Participant 1: My cousin worked as a driver for a lawyer here in the city. We turned on the TV and all over the news was the story that they had found him and the lawyer he worked for in the trunk of a car with the “*tiro de gracia*” [a single execution-style shot to the head], and there were no traces found of who could have done it or how it could’ve happened.

Participant 2: I was working in a [well-known restaurant]; I was a hostess and two...two guys with...with a handgun... they arrived and sat behind a man, and then one of them stood up and put the gun at the head of the man and shot him 6 times...and then we all threw ourselves on the ground and they got out of there pointing their guns at us saying that if we tried to stop them...well, they were going to.... Well, they were going to hurt us and they left and they had the body there like three hours ... they wouldn’t let us go until they took the body out of there.

Participant 3: I was in my friend’s wedding, and four men with guns arrived, and we were all on the ground, and they took the groom and another two...two from the wedding and they killed one of them right there.

Narratives of extortion were numerous and cruel:

Participant 4: We have received calls at home and my dad's business asking for money saying I'm this from that cartel and I want this amount of money, we know you live at this address and that you have these kids and that your kids are blab, blab, blab and my parents have never, that I know of, paid any money. At Christmas I was with my mom setting up the tree and she received a call on her cell phone from a young man that was crying and yelling asking for his mom, my mom got really scared thinking it was my brother, so my dad took his cell phone and called my brother and [my brother] told him, "No, I am fine, I'm not in danger," so my mom and dad hung up their phones. Things like that have happened very often.

Participant 5: One of my best friends, ...they have like a car shop and he was working there, ...him and two other brothers and the dad were there and uncles work in there, ...*sicarios* [hired assassins] came in and demanded to give them the monthly fee or what's called the "cuota" and they kidnapped them, well they had them inside for around two days. [My family] gave them some money but eventually they burned down the place.

Participant 6: Because they have people's information, we think it's the same neighbors that are doing it. They would tell my mom, "We have your daughter," and they would put a girl crying on the phone, but my mom reacted - because I do not call my mom "mom," I call her "ma"; but the girl from the phone call kept on saying "mom, mom" so that's when she hung up.

Most troubling is the erasure of the disappeared and social suffering caused to families and communities. The ability to confirm the death of a loved one provides closure for family; not ever knowing leaves a significant gap that complicates and compounds the phenomenology of grief.<sup>8</sup> With 5,000 missing and presumed dead, this represents an exponential increase in individual suffering: 5,000 families left with a painful, unforgettable mystery for the rest of their lives. Narratives of kidnappings and disappearance represented one of the most common theme shared by participants:

Participant 7: [There was] a family friend that was kidnapped and we witnessed when he was saved. He was all like, he had a big beard and he was like gone, he

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<sup>8</sup> A. Tamer Aker, Pinar Önen, and Hande Karakiliç, "Psychological Trauma: Research and Practice in Turkey," *International Journal of Mental Health* 36, no. 3 (2007), 44.

didn't know where to run, like a dog when you flash a light to its eyes, and he was all skinny, a human like that, that you think, he is going to die. I have seen several deaths, but none like ... this family friend.

Participant 8: My cousin has been kidnapped in Juárez, cuz they own businesses over there and fortunately he was able to escape before they killed him, right, while they were in the truck [taking him] to kill him, so he ... jumped off the truck and they didn't notice...

Participant 9: So this guy [a neighbor] was going out of his house to work, and a car picked him up outside of his house. His daughter was there, very small, playing in the park in front of his house, and she saw when they were taking him, and started screaming [for] her mom. And his wife started running behind the SUV and yelling, but nobody would help her, the kidnappers didn't even ask for a ransom. The next day his body appeared.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Since the 1980s, global health professionals have begun to examine seriously the psychological trauma caused by natural and human-initiated disasters, including genocide, armed conflict, civil war, and disasters such as the Indonesian tsunami.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the long term emotional suffering caused by trauma, disorders such as PTSD, depression and anxiety are significant not only because of disability due to lost productivity and quality of life, but also pragmatically, because these conditions increase the risk of metabolic disorders such as diabetes, obesity, atherosclerosis, and heart disease as well as cancer. Trauma can also become routinized: individuals lose the ability to feel shock and traumatic situations, becoming emotionally numb, as exceptional events become normal and normative:

Participant 10: I am not really scared of a shooting or anything like that. Well, if it was my turn, well, too bad.

Participant 11: The thing is that you become so accustomed and used to all these things. Like, for example, my mom that's still over there and the news and

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<sup>9</sup> R. F. Mollica et al., "Mental Health in Complex Emergencies," *Lancet* 364, no. 9450 (2004), 2058.

shooting happens and oh...just another one you know? Like its normal, it's become part of your daily life.

Participant 12: I told my mom you know we should buy dogs for the house because my garage and back yard are connected and my mom was like "No; why do you want dogs?" What if someone tries to jump into the yard, or come into the house? I mean, we should do something else and my mom was like, it's just because you are not used to it anymore. Like for us it's like, oh, another death; oh, another shooting. And I ...couldn't sleep because of the shootings and my mom is like it happens at least two or three times a week ...we even can identify if it is a far away shooting or it's close enough to be scared, and then you hear and it's - oh, far away, oh okay, and you keep going like nothing happens....so that's what scares me the most and startles me that they're so used to it, so normal.

The use of violence and intimidation to accomplish political or economic goals and the forceful assertion of biopower eclipses both the Mexican state and the larger binational community. Social suffering is not contained by a political border: spillover *physical* violence may not have affected El Paso; but the reality is that spillover *emotional* violence has been felt deeply on the northern side of the border where families are worried about loved ones living in Juárez; making the daily cross-border commute; or afraid of the unpredictable events leading to family separation and loss:

Participant 14: I honestly felt they were going to come and kill my dad and I was going to see him die in front of my eyes and it was horrifying to have to hear so closely and feel that [starts to cry], and feel that your dad can die, and I mean, and sometimes I guess we don't really understand what's happening in Mexico because we are still there and but everyone is living through this. And my parents decided, I mean I always tell them to come over here, live over here together we can live in my apartment. But I don't know if it's their honor that they don't want to leave, but it is so hard..., when you go, when you pass the bridge, or when you're driving over there it's like, who's following me? Maybe I shouldn't go this way, I always go this way, and I should go another way. It's this feeling of anxiety, and if you never know it could happen... I wouldn't go to Juárez anymore if my parents weren't there. And I always tell them, you're not only putting yourselves at risk, you're putting me at risk because I keep on coming over here. And I understood all of this when I came over here to El Paso, like, it's not normal; I understood it's not normal to live like this.

Participant 15: For me, the thought that my family is still in Juárez makes me feel very anxious; something could happen and I couldn't get there quickly, like if I

had to cross the bridge that it would take me a long time to get there. So sometimes I feel that this ties me down, to not be able to, if I am far from them and all, but I feel all the time this worry that something will happen and I am far away; I feel this worry.

### **Psychological Risks of Violent Conflict**

Specific risk factors that occur in the context of armed conflict and that have particular relevance in Mexico have been outlined in the literature. The most destructive mental health risk includes the deliberate terror and brutally violent public acts committed by drug trafficking organization (DTOs) meant to destabilize civilian society. Nurse-anthropologist Jody Glittenberg, writing on torture, argues that the goal of the excessive brutality is to “strike fear in the community” so that community members will be too frightened to interfere with criminal or terror activities.<sup>10</sup>

Sophisticated use of the media, particularly social media, and the use of terror tactics aimed at generating the most media exposure are among the hallmarks of the Mexican conflict and serve as a means of controlling the public through fear.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, perpetrators act with apparent impunity and with reported collusion from police, military, and the Mexican government.

Victims rarely have an opportunity to seek redress and justice. An ongoing sense on the part of victims that perpetrators enjoy impunity constitutes a risk factor for mental health problems by creating unresolved moral outrage, anger, and fear of the recurrence of violence, emotions that impede successful recovery from trauma. The sense that perpetrators will never be prosecuted, that there will never be justice for victims, and that victims have no legal or social recourse, increases the risk for traumatization and retraumatization among victims of human rights abuses

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<sup>10</sup> J. Glittenberg, “The Tragedy of Torture: A Global Concern for Mental Health Nursing,” *Issues Ment Health Nurs* 24, no. 6-7 (2003), 631.

<sup>11</sup> Boaz Ganor, “Terrorism as a Strategy of Psychological Warfare,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 9, no. 1-2 (2004), 33-43; Glittenberg, “The Tragedy of Torture: A Global Concern for Mental Health Nursing,” 627-38; Gabriel Weimann, “The Theater of Terror,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 9, no. 3-4 (2005), 379-90.

and armed conflict. In a human-initiated disaster such as the drug war, social disorganization and post-traumatic stress result when victims must remain living in the areas where they were traumatized<sup>12</sup>. After the Shining Path conflict in Peru, one of the main health complaints in the community were ulcers, as victims could only swallow their anger while continuing to live as neighbors to former Shining Path terrorists. Thus violence and trauma do not simply end at the point in time in which they occur but assume a temporal nature as post-traumatic sequel extend into the future:

Participant 15: [After being kidnapped several times], my brother gets a lot of anxiety attacks and we can't really wake him up when he is sleeping because he has panic attacks.

Participant 16: I dream a lot about his funeral. I dream about his family. I dream that he talks to me. I mean, cuz in a way you feel guilty about it; you do. Conscious and unconscious you feel guilty, so it's always in my mind him, him.

Participant 17: [After sharing her narrative] I'm, like, shaking.

Third, family units and social networks have effectively been destroyed, compounded by poverty and the lack of social capital. Husain et al. writing on Sri Lanka, asserted that armed conflict destroys social networks and family unity, contributing to long term psychological consequences<sup>13</sup>. This is a significant outcome for Ciudad Juárez as many binational families have been definitively separated, not by a geopolitical border but by fear.

Finally, and arguably the least favorable indicator for the recuperation of civil society, is the loss of the moral<sup>14</sup>. Beiser noted that the destruction of the moral world, such as can be seen in the

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<sup>12</sup> M. Beiser, O. Wiwa, and S. Adebajo, "Human-Initiated Disaster, Social Disorganization and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder above Nigeria's Oil Basins," *Soc Sci Med* 71, no. 2 (2010), 221-27.

<sup>13</sup> F. Husain et al., "Prevalence of War-Related Mental Health Conditions and Association with Displacement Status in Postwar Jaffna District, Sri Lanka," *JAMA* 306, no. 5 (2011), 522.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Kleinman, *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19-25.

breakdown of the social order in Ciudad Juárez, is an additional and significant risk factor for post-traumatic stress.<sup>15</sup>

## Historical Perspective

The violent drug trade currently destabilizing Mexican border culture in fact is merely a continuation of a long history of smuggling in the area. Border banditry between Juárez and El Paso dates back a century or more. El Paso, *El Paso del Norte* (the pass of the north) was so named because it is located in a pass through two mountain ranges. Part of the sixteenth-century king's road, *el camino real*, the area is geographically suited to move goods and people from south to north with facility through a harsh terrain: only the merchandise and profit margin have changed over the years. Astorga writes that the close relationships between the Mexican government and drug smuggling began during the time of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the drug trade is hardly a new phenomenon.

Further, the United States has played a significant role in the development and success of the business. In the late nineteenth century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, opiates, marijuana and cocaine were legal and used medicinally in Mexico and in the US. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US began to criminalize drugs; although Wald writes that opium production was encouraged throughout World War II, to be processed into morphine for the war effort.<sup>17</sup> The criminalization of drugs dates to the 1909 Shanghai Opium Commission, a global conference to stop British sales of

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<sup>15</sup> Beiser, Wiwa, and Adebajo, "Human-Initiated Disaster, Social Disorganization and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder above Nigeria's Oil Basins," 225.

<sup>16</sup> Menno Vellinga, ed. *The Political Economy of the Drug Industry* (Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 2004); Luis Astorga, "Mexico: Drugs and Politics" in *The Political Economy of the Drug Industry*, ed. Menno Vellinga (Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 2004); Carlos Monsivais, *Mexican Postcards* (New York: Vero, 2000 (1997)), 148-55; Elaine Carey, "Transcending Violence: A Crisis of Memory and Documentation," ed. Fernando Herrera Calderon and Adela Cedillo, *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas* (New York: Rayo, 2002), 50.

opium to China. Cocaine has been illegal in the United States since 1914, heroin since 1924, and marijuana since 1937. Mexico followed suit on narcotics around 1930. The struggle to stop the importation of drugs to the United States thus originated in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The criminalization of drugs, however, merely created a flourishing black market and established drug trafficking as a profitable business venture; the increased profits compensating for added risk on the supply side.<sup>18</sup> By the time drugs became illegal, elite Mexican families with ties to the political power structure had already long been involved in acaof their wealth, they were considered untouchable, above the law; a feature of the social hierarchy based on family and money characteristic of Latin American cultures that contributes to the sense of impunity enjoyed by the wealthy and favored classes in Mexican society.

Just as smugglers before them, drug traffickers are believed to enjoy the protection and collusion of Mexican elites, including the government.<sup>19</sup> I argue that the transformative nature of this war brings to the fore the legitimized and legitimated role played by criminal actors in the inner workings of Mexico's political structure. The drug conflict holds up a mirror to Mexico: showing not how Mexico sees itself but what it really is.<sup>20</sup> The experience of this war embedded

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<sup>18</sup> Tony Payan, *The Three Us-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security* (Westport CT: Prager Security International, 2006), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Astorga, "Mexico: Drugs and Politics"; Luis Astorga and David M. Shirk, "Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.-Mexican Context," (Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies (San Diego), Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center (Washington DC), El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (Tijuana), El Colegio de México (Mexico City). 2010), 6-9; M. Delal Baer, "Mexico's Coming Backlash," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (1999), 95-96; Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press 2009), 7; Alfredo Corchado, *Midnight in Mexico: A Reporter's Journey through a Country's Descent into Darkness*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2013). Kindle edition; John Gibler, *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from inside the Drug War* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2011), 91-95; Victoria Malkin, "Narcotrafficking, Migration, and Modernity in Rural Mexico," *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 4 (2001), 102; Monsivais, *Mexican Postcards*, 148-55; Stephen D. Morris, "Corruption and the Mexican Political System: Continuity and Change," *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1999), 629-30; Terence Poppa and Charles Bowden, *Drug Lord: A True Story: The Life and Death of a Mexican Kingpin*, 3 ed. (El Paso TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2010), 3, 11, 15, 42, 136, 56, 305, 09; Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda, *Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy* (London: Zed Books, 2012). Kindle edition.

<sup>20</sup> James Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology (Kindle Edition)*, 1 ed., Studies in Philosophy (2009).

in Mexican sociocultural structures entraps civilians in an exceptional existence, unable to look in that mirror.

### **Violence, Wars, and Experience**

The phenomenology of violence has been one of the major themes in research about violent civil conflicts, where victim and community survival over the long term is at issue. “Making and unmaking” a local world through individual and intersubjective response to traumatic events defines how—and whether—people and communities survive brutality.<sup>21</sup> Becker, Beyene and Ken write that traumatic memory makes and unmakes the world for those who have suffered, in a shifting landscape of experience and re-experiencing, where memory is never moral or neutral but rather a symbol of the self.<sup>22</sup> Kimberly Theidon, writing about the extremely brutal and destructive Shining Path movement in Peru, asks the question, “How do people unmake violence?”<sup>23</sup> How indeed, do communities traumatized by armed conflict unmake the experience of violence, the memory of trauma? How do people process emotionally and survive socially, under violent conditions in which unidentifiable perpetrators enjoy apparent immunity; in which total uncertainty reigns as to who might be involved, or with what allegiances; in which friends might transform into traitors; in which families or neighbors inhabit opposite sides of the same brutal conflict; in which community life comes to a full stop because it is too dangerous to go outside? I heard regret and loss when participants talked about their city, Ciudad Juárez, and narratives of unmaking:

Participant 18: When I lived in Juárez, I have beautiful memories from there; the food is amazing! You know I have a really good friend that I keep in touch with—up to now, you know, her family and everything, they were my neighbors when I

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<sup>21</sup> Kimberly Theidon, “The Mask and the Mirror: Facing up to the Past in Postwar Peru,” *Anthropologica* 48, no. 1 (2006), 87-100.

<sup>22</sup> Gay Becker, Yewoubdar Beyene, and Pauline Ken, “Memory, Trauma, and Embodied Distress: The Management of Disruption in the Stories of Cambodians in Exile,” *Ethos* 28, no. 3 (2000), 323.

<sup>23</sup> Kimberly Theidon, “Terror's Talk: Fieldwork and War,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (2001), 20.

lived in Juárez, and they were so nice, and you know to see the city turn into that, it's so sad . . .I never thought it would turn out like that. It used to be beautiful; it was the escape from El Paso but now it's horrible.

Participant 19: There are no more bars left, no clubs nothing, after 10pm there is no life on the streets nothing, zero, because so many people have been killed in bars and places, actually if you drive by those places you can still see the bullet holes and how everything is closed.

A significant percentage of participants considered the conflict a “war”:

Participant 20: The war is supposed to be against [the drug traffickers] and it looks like it is a war against us.

Participant 21: Before nobody would do anything, and everybody lived. I mean you knew that the bad people would kill each other, and nobody would get the good [people] involved. They would do their thing, but in the ugly places, and nobody would tell them anything until they decided to say, “You know what? Let's declare war on them!” And even though a lot of people say, no, it is not a war, I say the people that say that it is not a war haven't experienced being followed, a shooting, that someone in their family gets hit, getting someone kidnapped or disappeared. Me, I can go to my city and see the houses, everything with bullet holes and I say, you can't tell me it is not a war, it is a war, the fact that they want to cover it up is something different.

Participant 22: I had a friend that four years ago when all the **war** started, he was kidnapped with his dad, and he was tortured...he was only 18, they said he received more torture apparently to make his dad suffer and then they killed his dad and him as well.

The drug “war” in Mexico is a conflict that has been minimized by government on both sides of the border, along with the media, and also by many civilian residents. I make that claim based on the number of deaths and disappeared compared to what appears to be a feeble response disproportionate to the amount of social suffering. Estimates based on official Mexican government statistics put the death toll at 50,000 as of 2012;<sup>24</sup> sources deep into the conflict claim that upwards of 100,000 people have been killed.<sup>25</sup> Even conservative homicide estimates

<sup>24</sup> Molzahn, Rios, and Shirk, “Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis through 2011,” 1.

<sup>25</sup> Corchado, *Midnight in Mexico: A Reporter's Journey through a Country's Descent into Darkness*.

amount to more deaths in Mexico between 2006 and 2013 than US casualties in the entire Vietnam War, or in the Sendero Luminoso conflict in Peru, and more than all the terrorist or wartime attacks on US citizens since 1920 combined, including Pearl Harbor and the attacks of September 11, 2001. The deadly seriousness of the Mexican conflict nevertheless remains oddly ephemeral in the media, engendering insufficient aggregate outrage to effect change. Among those closest to the drug war, whether physically or emotionally, the brutality of the conflict and the new sovereignty of drug cartels create a false consciousness; the distorted memory that is a legacy of the Dirty War;<sup>26</sup> a means of getting by and getting through. The tacit understanding that perpetrators enjoy social and judicial impunity is at the very heart of the tepid response of the government to the loss of tens of thousands of the nation's citizens.

Participant 23: The truth is, I don't hold out much hope for the new president. Yes, completely, completely, because I believe that they have demonstrated that they are part of the cartels, part of these organizations, I believe that it is more than obvious and more than anything, it's because we are in a city where nothing changes, where it's the border; run by the United States and forgotten by Mexico.

Participant 24: Where I lived, behind my house there was a really nice apartment complex, and I guess it felt safe because it was a nice neighborhood, but it turns out that the military went in there and broke in and that's where they held people they were kidnapping. So we found out that they had the majority of the apartment complex rented out and they were just keeping people there. I don't know if it was the same owners or if people that were just renting it out, but the military kind of invaded the apartment complex and since we lived right next to it my dog kept barking—he was a Great Dane—and they told us that if we didn't bring the dog inside and calm him down that they were going to shoot him.

Participant 25: Two very young guys came out of nowhere and wanted to rob me, one of them had a gun and he was the one threatening me, insulting me, the other guy was looking down, it seemed as if he didn't want to be there, I was able to run away, without thinking of the consequences, but thank God nothing happened to me, but I felt really frustrated when I ran into some cops and told them what has happened to me and they didn't do anything.

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<sup>26</sup> Fernando Herrera Calderon and Adela Cedillo, "The Unknown Mexican Dirty War," ed. Fernando Herrera Calderon and Adela Cedillo, *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Wars, including drug wars, are the instrumental in nature, with objectives at stake that are so consequential that must be accomplished through violence, according to James Dodd.<sup>27</sup> War, argues Dodd, is transformative and not merely instrumental or expressive: war provides the possibility of becoming something new, of achieving goals. In the case of the so-called drug “war” in Mexico, these goals are intrinsically economic rather than political or social, yet have engendered sociopolitical results: the drug trade is part of the community<sup>28</sup> and through co-optation of the monopoly on violence, has taken the place of the state.<sup>29</sup> Dodd writes that violence underscores the weakness of the government that permits it, and that we as witnesses err when we believe that violence will eventually wither away under the weight of the moral. How will this drug war re-make a post-conflict Mexican society and culture? Can the experience of violence be un-made? The suffering caused by the violence is not limited to an individual, a family, one city; the suffering is social, endemic. With each of those 50,000 or 100,000 dead and disappeared, there are parents, siblings, loved ones, neighbors; and thus suffering pervades the entire society:

Participant 26: You see that they kill people on the streets—I once saw a head on my way home, they put a guy’s head, only his head hanging from a bridge, and they put a message that said this is what happens to the ones that mess with us. That was when the violence barely started, and you see it and you say, oh well, whatever! But that *whatever* was someone’s dad. You don’t get it until it happens to you.

According to Dodd, war is a mirror, revealing people to themselves: who we are determines how we fight, as evidenced by former President Felipe Calderón’s use of military

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<sup>27</sup> Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology (Kindle Edition)*.

<sup>28</sup> Payan, *The Three Us-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security* 49.

<sup>29</sup> Molly Molloy and Charles Bowden, *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), 14.

forces to grapple with drug cartels; the false consciousness that empowers corruption and organized crime; and the devastatingly expensive, ineffective shadow play that is the War on Drugs in the United States. Dodd argues that the experience of war defines the self and existence, engendering a “politics of becoming.”<sup>30</sup> War dissolves the notions of citizenship and identity, problematizes the connection between freedom and the self, and creates a “spiritual crisis,”<sup>31</sup> an exceptional existence; a state of exception where the rule of law is suspended.<sup>32</sup> The local world of organized crime in Mexico is a world in which the exceptional is normative and normalized:

Participant 27: My sister is like, oh yeah, like three days ago there was another shooting, oh, and my sister looked out the window and she said that she saw a truck [playing] *narcocorridos* passing and then she just turned off the light.

Participant 28: I don't see the news, I hate it, I don't like it, and I mean I have enough stress with school, my work and regular life problems. People fool themselves saying things are better, it is *not* normal, I mean I saw a news where there was a shooting and a kid there said that he was picking up the bullet cases and it was very fun for him, like if it was something exciting, something fun and that other people say oh there was a shooting, I mean how can it be so normal?

Foucault's notion of biopower suggests an interpretation of the lethality of the conflict.<sup>33</sup> Instead of the sovereign, biopower has been co-opted by drug cartels, who are the new metaphors for the sovereign, the “ubiquitous Caligulas”.<sup>34</sup> Victims are killed twice: first a death of the body, then a second death through the perverted production of local truth, deliberate slander linking victims to the drug business and blaming them for their own deaths, to provide reassurance that the violence is somehow happening “over there,” to “them” not to Us:

<sup>30</sup> W. E. Connolly, “Suffering, Justice, and the Politics of Becoming,” *Cult Med Psychiatry* 20, no. 3 (1996), 251-77; A. Varadharajan, “Afterword: The Phenomenology of Violence and the Politics of Becoming,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008), 124-41.

<sup>31</sup> Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology (Kindle Edition)*.

<sup>32</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* 1ed. (Palo Alto CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 27; *State of Exception* 1ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* trans. Robert Hurley, 5 ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 143-44.

<sup>34</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and the Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States, and the Philanthropic Ogre* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 373.

Participant 29: With 500 or 1000 pesos (around 30 or 50 dollars) you tell someone go and kill this or that and they kill him/her, and *they cover it up by saying oh maybe he/she was involved with the drug trade.*

Participant 30: I know there has been a lot of people, but *I believe that only a very few are accidents.* There are lots of people you grow up knowing and you know they are something like consumers or move it a little or something so it doesn't surprise you when, of course it hurts because you don't wish nobody dead, but *it doesn't surprise you who the victim is.*

Violence underlines the multiple and nested subjugations in societies, strictly enacted by the Mexican social hierarchy, framed by family and money. At once a representation of biopower and sovereign exclusion,<sup>35</sup> the traditional Latin American architecture of power relations lends itself to “the secrecy of brutality”<sup>36</sup> that represses civil resistance and fosters disinformation or lack of information, impunity, collusion, and corruption—all effective ways to subjugate civilians and ensure the success of the drug business. An extreme example can be seen in the notorious unsolved femicides of Ciudad Juárez in which hundreds of young women were brutally tortured and killed; crimes that could not have been accomplished without someone protecting the killers:

Participant 31: One of our cousins disappeared; ... she had just come to Juárez to work because where she comes from there's hardly any employment so umm...she barely had like two weeks and then she disappeared. And we went looking for her and we put a lot of pictures of her, looking for her, and we didn't find her, and then eventually they went over to our house and showed us her clothes and [they] were all damaged, burned, full of dirt, and full of blood, and she had been killed... I think she was 19 at that time... she was from Zacatecas, it's like a little town, a very little town... They found her body like two weeks [after she went missing] but they didn't say it was her they just said we found a body and she had ... a mole ... It was her ... and the DNA came in like two more weeks later... The body was so decomposed and it was so bad cuz they broke all her bones, like to tie her back, like the clavicle to tie her back; her hands and her feet together, so that's how they tied her. And her body was so decomposed and they didn't let us open the casket, so we didn't see her at all after that; we didn't see her after the last time that we saw her.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Nail, “The Crossroads of Power: Michel Foucault and the Us/Mexico Border Wall,” *Foucault Studies* 15 (2013), 113.

<sup>36</sup> Carey, “Transcending Violence: A Crisis of Memory and Documentation.”

After this murder, the young woman was too afraid to return to Juárez to visit her grandmother. Another kind of death: the metaphorical death of cherished family relationships and the loss for the grandmother of not one, but two granddaughters:

Participant 31: This summer I was supposed to go to my grandma's. Because of [her cousin's horrific murder] I kind of stopped going and I don't want to tell my grandma and she says why don't you guys want to come? Like she thinks it's *her* that we don't want to go, but I would like to say that we panicked.

Foucault uses the changing nature of war as a heuristic for analyzing fluid power relations.<sup>37</sup> These shift along with the shifting fortunes of criminals and those attached to them, and the shifting identity of the actors as criminals move easily into the role of the sovereign already set up for them by the existing social structure,<sup>38</sup> with power over bare life.<sup>39</sup> Baer, writing in 1999, predicted the possibility of Mexico falling into the hands of drug traffickers;<sup>40</sup> writing that even foreign aid funding has been eclipsed by the amounts of drug money changing hands. The drug war maps out a self-perpetuating pyramid scheme of victimization and trauma within Mexican social structure, as poverty provides low-level personnel to a top-down business structure reinforced by generations of family relationships. What is missing in this conflict is Foucault's notion of resistance: resistance in this drug war is an "invitation to a beheading."<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The results of the study, and particularly the harrowing narratives, provide a window onto the drama with which young adults at the border have been contending since 2008 when the drug

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<sup>37</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* 135-45.

<sup>38</sup> M. Sanchez, "Insecurity and Violence as a New Power Relation in Latin America," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 606, no. 1 (2006), 180.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* 8-12, 82-83.

<sup>40</sup> Baer, "Mexico's Coming Backlash," 95-96.

<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: GP Putnam & Sons, 1965).

war accelerated. That year, Ciudad Juárez became “Murder City” with a homicide rate reaching 4000-5000 in that year;<sup>42</sup> and more than 3,000 or eight souls per day at the height of the violence in 2010. The sheer numbers and staggering viciousness of the violence obscure significant risk to civilian mental health, and the outcomes remain understudied, underfunded and underserved.

That between a third to more than half of the young adults surveyed had suffered a death in the family due to homicide, had been robbed or extorted, witnessed a dead body in the street, and felt themselves to be in the midst of an armed conflict, demonstrates the scope of the violence that has defined Ciudad Juárez, and Mexico as a whole, for the last half decade. Homicides rates rival mortality rates of Vietnam; yet the Mexican government eschews the assistance of international peacekeepers or other foreign involvement, with the exception of the highly flawed Mérida Initiative, a security agreement between the United States and Mexico aimed at combating drug trafficking, under which Mexico was granted 1.9 billion dollars by the US Congress to bolster the Mexican judicial system and improve Mexican military resources. In addition, cultural responses such as the desire to move along, deny the problem, and know without knowing; the inscrutable, hermetic Mexican reserve described by Octavio Paz,<sup>43</sup> inform social discourse. In a psychiatric world, this response might amount to a cultural epidemic of avoidance, one of the criteria for PTSD to which Hispanics have been found to be most at risk:<sup>44</sup> an argument for discretion in the use of psychiatric diagnostic categories outside the Western European habitus.

The most significant finding of the research was that being confined to home because of a dangerous environment created feelings of trauma for participants, and was a significant risk

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Bowden, *Murder City: Ciudad Juarez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 17.

<sup>43</sup> Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and the Other Mexico, Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude, Mexico and the United States, and the Philanthropic Ogre*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> A. E. Norris and K. J. Aroian, “Avoidance Symptoms and Assessment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Arab Immigrant Women,” *J Trauma Stress* 21, no. 5 (2008), 472.

factor for depression and anxiety. Being confined to home means one feels unsafe fulfilling basic life tasks such as shopping for food or visiting a doctor, or commuting to school. For the elderly, the chronically ill, and parents with small children, this relative imprisonment creates significant health risks in addition to the potential of being caught in crossfire. Being unable to safely visit friends, see a film, or commute to university in El Paso because the environment outside the home has become too dangerous curtails the ability to complete a degree or to enjoy social networks and support so crucial to good emotional health. It comes as no surprise that the participants living in Ciudad Juárez suffered the most traumatic events and significant correlations between trauma events and mental health issues, because of their increased exposure traveling back and forth across the violent and risky “narco-scape.” The study showed that the closer participants’ connection to Mexico at the moment that this data was collected, the greater the risk for anxiety and PTSD, but that college students in general report higher rates of depression than the general population. Participants were not only concerned for themselves; they worried about loved ones: the results showed that the risk of depression and anxiety was significantly correlated with reported injury, kidnapping, or murder of family members and friends. Depressive symptoms were linked to feeling themselves in an armed conflict or combat situation as young adults witnessed their home and social world deteriorate.

Is the drug war a “real” war? Approximately half of the participants believe so, and this perception increased the risk for depression in our participants. As the conflict was raging, business and government interests in Mexico, with strong interests in minimizing negative impressions of Mexico’s safety and stability, downplayed the seriousness of the problem to mitigate losses in the tourism industry and foreign investments. But this begs the question: how often do civilians in industrialized countries come across dead bodies in the street?

Any conflict situation should be resolved before it spirals out of control. Recent history shows us this is rarely the case. Too frequently, conflicts are motivated by economic interests and greed; or post-colonial ethnic rivalries that have been brewing for decades or centuries because of artificial social controls imposed by colonial forces. Further, it has been shown that internal armed conflict fosters global denial that discourages humanitarian intervention, leading to international bystanding, hand-wringing, and enormous loss of life.<sup>45</sup> The conflict in Mexico over drug profits—for it is the obscene profits, not the trafficking nor the drugs, that has created these violent circumstances—plays into an entrenched social hierarchy in which wealthy elites enjoy impunity and enormous power over the social and political landscape. The legal system is weak and corrupt, rarely investigating, much less punishing, the criminals at the top of the pyramid. And so it goes: the American wife of Mexico's top drug cartel boss, an individual who has been featured in *Forbes Magazine's* billionaire's list, enters the US to give birth with ease and impunity. El Paso ranks second only to New York for cash banking deposits. Tangled and shifting complicities on all levels and on both sides of the border remain unexamined. Although the acute conflict appears to have moved south from Ciudad Juárez as of 2013, the social suffering left in its wake will continue for generations.

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<sup>45</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* Reissue edition ed. (New York: Harper, 2007).

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