

Living with the *Narcos*: The “Drug War” in the El Paso- Ciudad Juárez Border Region

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***Abstract:** During the years 2008-2012, the El Paso, Texas-Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua border region between the United States and Mexico saw a wave of violence that occurred as a result of the so-called “drug war” between the Juárez and Sinaloa drug cartels. As the criminal organizations began recruiting local gangs for their enforcement strategies, the violence soon spiraled beyond the context of the drug trafficking industry, generating mayhem and social decay throughout Ciudad Juárez. In four years, the death toll in the city amounted to 10,882, with 3,622 bodies in 2010. This article discusses the impact of the violence in the region as experienced by border residents and in relation to policy responses by the U.S. and Mexican governments. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews conducted in January-May 2010 with members of the border community, it focuses on the interviewees’ experiences in 2010. The discussion of violence is contextualized as a global crisis, with ramifications upon urgent issues of citizenship and political and human rights across national boundaries.*

***Keywords:** El Paso-Ciudad Juárez—U.S.-Mexico border—violence—drug war—human rights—corruption*

Introduction¹

Historically, borderlands regions have been susceptible to political instability resulting in frequent occurrences of violence.² The El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border between the United States and Mexico has witnessed harrowing occurrences of violence during the past three decades. In the 1990s, Juárez saw an unsettling wave of gender violence, when the cadavers of hundreds of women started appearing mutilated, tortured, and often sexually abused in the peripheral zones of Juárez.³ The victims included girls and young women, mostly from humble origins; some of them were students, but many had come as migrants from other parts of Mexico to work in the *maquiladora* (border assembly plant) industry in Juárez. These murders became known worldwide as “the femicides” or *feminicidio* in Spanish. Because most of the Juárez femicides are uninvestigated to date, we know neither the true number of the victims nor the identities of the perpetra-

- 1 I would like to express thanks to the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies (CIBS) at the University of Texas at El Paso for research support during my fieldwork and interviews for this article in January-May 2010. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Ricardo Blazquez, A. Cesar Carmona, Blanca Gamez, Miguel Juárez, and the late Moira A. Murphy for their assistance, dialogue, and hospitality during my stay in the border region. Thanks also to the Faculty of Humanities and the Institute for History and Civilization at the University of Southern Denmark, both of which funded parts of my research trip to the United States. I have presented papers based on this research at the 6th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in May 2010; the Oral History from the Ground Up: Space, Place, and Memory Summer Institute at Columbia University in New York City in June 2010; the 7th Ethnology Days at University of Jyväskylä in Finland in March 2012; and the 14th Maple Leaf and Eagle Conference at the University of Helsinki in May 2012. My special thanks go to the thoughtful comments and suggestions of the anonymous peer reviewers on this article as well as Johanna Leinonen, Riitta Laitinen, and Aileen El-Kadi for reading an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, I want to thank my research assistant, Malla Lehtonen, for tracking down secondary sources for this article.
- 2 On twentieth/twenty-first-century border history and society, see Joan B. Anderson, *Fifty Years of Change on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Growth, Development, and Quality of Life* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Paul Ganster and David E Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border into the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); and Oscar J Martínez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006). On statistics of homicide rates in the border region from the 1930s to the present, see also Diana Washington Valdez, “Special Report: Calderón Years Trail Others for Mexico Homicides,” *El Paso Times*, January 26, 2012, accessed March 26, 2012, http://www.elpasotimes.com/juarez/ci_19824147.
- 3 Femicides also occurred in other parts of the state of Chihuahua and Mexico; they are widespread in Guatemala, and occurrences have been reported elsewhere in Latin America. See Jarmo Oikarinen, “Femicide in Mexico and Central America,” European Parliament, Directorate General for External Policies of the Union Policy Department, September 2011; Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, eds., *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2010). See also Benita Heiskanen, “Ni Una Más, Not One More: Activist-Artistic Response to the Juárez Femicides,” *JOMEC Journal: Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies* 3 [Online], Section 1, Article 3, June 2013, <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/jomecjournal/3-june2013/Heiskanen_Femicides.pdf>.

tors.⁴ In the 1990s, scholars pointed to the structural conditions of Juárez—NAFTA, the growing underground economy, and corruption—as root and cause of the violence spreading in the city. In 1998, the border journalist Charles Bowden described the spiraling problem as follows: “The scenes are everywhere. The street shooters of Juárez spend very little time waiting. The banks are robbed between 8 A.M. and 3 P.M. The killings fill the nights—one Monday while I was there five went down in five consecutive hours.”⁵ Similarly, feminist activists in Juárez were calling attention to linkages between women’s murders and the widespread impunity that began to impact all strata of society in Ciudad Juárez.⁶

During the years 2008-2012, the region saw a major spike in violence because of a turf war between the Juárez and Sinaloa drug cartels, led by Vicente Carrillo Fuentes and Joaquín “Chapo” Guzmán, respectively. As these organizations began recruiting local gangs for their enforcement strategies, the violence soon spiraled beyond the context of the *narco*-industry, generating mayhem and social decay in all of Juárez.⁷ According to statistics released on February 20, 2013 by the New Mexico State University, the death toll in Ciudad Juárez amounted to 10,882 in the years 2008-2012, with 3,622 bodies during the height of the violence in 2010. The year 2011 saw a slight decrease in the death count with 2,086 killed, and a major decrease in homicides took place during 2012, with an estimated 797 deceased.⁸ According to one estimate, approximately 124,000 Juárezenses left

4 Plausible culprits include street gangs, organized crime syndicates, powerful families, a satanic cult, underground snuff film industry, and the police. See Amnesty International, *Intolerable Killings: Ten Years of Abductions and Murders of Women in Juárez, Chihuahua* (New York: Amnesty International, 2003); Diana Washington Valdez, *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women: The Truth About Mexico's Bloody Border Legacy* (Burbank, CA: Peace at the Border, 2006), 166-169; and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Report of the Commission of International Experts on the Mission to Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico,” November 2003.

5 Charles Bowden, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (New York: Aperture, 1998), 97.

6 See Julia Monárquez Fragoso, “Feminicidio Sexual Serial en Ciudad Juárez: 1993-2001,” *Debate Feminista* 25 (2001): 279-308; Melissa Wright, “The 2010 *Antipode* RGS-IBG Lecture: Wars of Interpretations,” *Antipode* 44-3 (2012): 564-580; and idem., “Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border.” *Signs* 36-3 (2011): 707-73.

7 The violence is also rampant in other parts of the state of Chihuahua and has spread to other states in Mexico, especially ones with strong presence of drug cartels. For the purposes of this article, however, I will limit my discussion to the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso border region.

8 Molly Molloy, “Yearly Death Rates in Ciudad Juárez,” *Frontera-List*, Archives/Ciudad Juárez, February 20, 2013, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://fronteralist.org/category/ciudad-juarez/>. See also Cory Molzahn, Octavio Rodriguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk “Drug Violence in Mexico

the city to other parts of Mexico or the United States as a result of the violence, while some 10,000 children were orphaned because of it.⁹ Over 23,000 Mexican nationals sought political asylum in the United States as a result of the violence, although less than two per cent of them successfully obtained it.¹⁰

While the most notorious turf war in El Paso-Ciudad Juárez was fought between drug cartels, local gangs, and their affiliates over the drug trafficking corridor into the United States, a less obvious turf war forced border residents to struggle over their daily maneuvering in urban space on an everyday level. This article discusses the impact of the violence in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez region as experienced by border residents and in relation to policy responses by the U.S. and Mexican governments. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews conducted in January-May 2010 with members of the border community, it particularly focuses on the interviewees' experiences of "living with the narcos" during the height of the violence in 2010.¹¹ The local, state, and federal police—as well as the Mexican military—that alternated patrolling the streets of Juárez had little impact on preventing the violence, and most of the crimes remain unresolved to date. Law enforcement agencies were recurrently accused of corruption, of providing back-up operations for criminal organizations as well as of performing criminal acts themselves.¹² Ciudad Juárez, then, was grappling with a culture of impu-

Data and Analysis Through 2012" (San Diego: Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, February 2013) and Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Ríos, and David A. Shirk, "Drug Violence in Mexico Data and Analysis Through 2011" (San Diego: Trans-Border Institute, University of San Diego, March 2012).

9 See Maria Cristina Morales, Oscar Morales, Angelica C. Menchaca and Adam Sebastian, "The Mexican Drug War and the Consequent Population Exodus: Transnational Movement at the U.S.-Mexican Border," *Societies* 3 (2013), 80–103.

10 *Ibid.*, 89.

11 All of the interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity and that the sources' identities will not be revealed in publications resulting from this research.

12 On discussions of corruption in conjunction with the drug war violence, see Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, *La Fábrica del Crimen* (México: Planeta Publishing, 2012); Anabel Hernández, *Narcoland: Mexican Drug Lords and Their Godfathers* (London: Verso, 2013); Molly Molloy, "The Mexican Undead: Toward a New History of the 'Drug War' Killing Fields," *Small Wars Journal*, August 21, 2013, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-undead-toward-a-new-history-of-the-%E2%80%9Cdrug-war%E2%80%9D-killing-fields> 2013; Charles Bowden and Molly Molloy, "Friends Can Also Betray You: Mexicans Pay in Blood for America's War on Drugs," *Denver Westword* (July 26, 2012), <http://www.westword.com/content/printVersion/2190021/>; and Christian Berndt, "Assembling Market B/Orders: Violence, Dispossession, and Economic Development in Mexico," *Environment and Planning* 45 (2013): 2646-2662.

nity, one that not only legitimized violence, but also systemically fostered it, resulting in a human rights crisis beyond the nation-state.¹³

The failure of the nation-state to enforce security within its territory calls into question the nature of violence as a national security issue alone; rather, it might better be understood vis-à-vis the nexus of transnational human relations of which it is a part. Instead of focusing on the national security aspects of the violence on either side of the border, this article points to its complexity as a global crisis, with ramifications upon urgent issues of citizenship and political and human rights across national boundaries. To do so, it conceptualizes violence, and its impact, on three levels: as physical realities, representational manifestations, and as what Slavoj Žižek refers to as “systemic violence,” subtle forms of coercion that sustain “relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.”¹⁴ While physical violence is real on the bodies of the victims, systemic violence is without an identifiable agent or target; without a perpetrator, it becomes faceless and anonymous. This article, then, underscores the intersection between the multiple levels (individual, collective, and systemic) of violence at various geographic scales (local, cross-border, and global) that are tangled up together. The violence in Ciudad Juárez from the past few years did not appear out of thin air nor was it an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is best understood as a part of a broad historical continuum.

Everyday Experiences: “Dante’s *Inferno*”

Although the violence ravaging the U.S-Mexico border region was frequently described in public discourses as a “drug-war,” whose casualties were allegedly affiliated with criminal organizations, the devastating social consequences for the local community soon became evident on both sides of the border. What first began as distant rumors, and then developed into

13 The past decade has seen an array of literature dealing with the so-called drug wars and their global consequences. See, for example, John Bailey and George Chabat, eds., *Transnational Crime and Public Security: Challenges to Mexico and the United States* (La Jolla: University of California at San Diego Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies Press, 2002); Charles Bowden, *Murder City: Juárez and the Global Economy of Killings* (New York: Nation Books, 2010); Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); John Gibler, *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from Inside the Drug War* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012); and Ed Vulliamy, *America: War Along the Borderline* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010.)

14 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence : Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 8.

personal experiences of killed family members and visible displays of violent crime, ended up in large-scale kidnappings and extortions among the community. During the course of a few years, violence in Ciudad Juárez gradually penetrated the residents' everyday surroundings, turning into a seemingly continuous and permanent state-of-affairs.¹⁵

Border residents recount incidents of killed family members, kidnappings, car jackings, extortions, and witnessing of displays of mutilated bodies. Consider, for example, the following experience recounted by a student: "I know a boy who found his father hanged in Juárez; his body was tortured, an ear missing, gagged, fingers gone. His mother made her way to El Paso as a cleaning woman, after being forced on gun point to give over her husband's land and businesses in Juárez."¹⁶ Equally disturbing is the following Juárez resident's description of a public execution of his family members:

My cousin was out with some of his cousins and uncle when they dragged them inside a truck to drive them somewhere in the middle of nowhere. They were on their knees facing a wall when all three of them were shot in the head. People that saw what had happened said they couldn't help them because the truck had come back just to make sure they were dead.¹⁷

In another example, a source recounts the loss of several family members within a span of a couple of months:

In February 2010, my cousin—a 33-year-old male—was taken from his home; he left his two-year-old little girl out on a street corner, sparing her life. Two days later, the body of my cousin was found across town in black garbage bags. In March 2010, another cousin from my mom's side was killed, and my mom's 26-year-old niece was brutally murdered at her nine-year-old boy's baseball game ... shot eight times at close range.¹⁸

15 Although my focus is on the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border region, many other regions, and their residents, are experiencing violence and the consequences of the narcotics industry in their lives. See, for example, Shaylih Muehlmann's *When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Sarah Cortez and Sergio Troncoso, eds., *Our Lost Border: Essays on Life and the Narco Violence* (Houston: Arte Público, 2013); and Wil Panster, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in the Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

16 Anonymous student testimony 1, the University of Texas at El Paso, May 3, 2010, original in possession of author.

17 Anonymous student testimony 2, the University of Texas at El Paso, May 3, 2010, original in possession of author.

18 Anonymous student testimony 3, the University of Texas at El Paso, May 3, 2010, original in possession of author.

Such stories were as tragic as they were common. Alongside the escalating crimes, however, individual tragedies behind the deaths became obscured, as stories of personal loss were turned into body counts. As one interviewee puts it, “It’s just a way of life now. Kids that walk out of their home say that there was a dead body in the front lawn—of their home!—and they just turn around and go back inside. It’s not shocking anymore.”¹⁹

The impunity with which criminals were able to maneuver within the city resulted in the spreading of crimes to various different levels; for example, financial crimes became commonplace during this period. A typical scenario for a business-owner was to be ambushed by criminals, who demanded a share of their profits for protection money, known as *cuotas*, as exemplified by the following account: “My dad has a restaurant in Juárez, and they went to his restaurant with guns and asked for money. They said they were of [the gang] La Línea. My dad wasn’t there, and they said, ‘Tell him if he doesn’t give us 30.000 dollars by tomorrow, we’ll burn down the place.’”²⁰ In addition to the local gangs, to whom extortions became a lucrative source of income, the people interviewed for this article allege that some law-enforcement officials were capitalizing on such crimes: “You have a lot of cops that are involved. My uncle knows this one guy that steals cars; he dismantles cars. The head of the police went to him and said ‘You need to give me a piece of the pie.’”²¹ Because of the prevalence of the *cuotas*, some people went as far as claiming that they should no longer pay taxes to the government, as they were already being “taxed” by both the police and criminal organizations.

Given the impunity with which organized crime and law enforcement operated in the city, it was not long before impostors began taking advantage of the situation. The following interviewee’s most peculiar experience attests to the ways in which conmen took advantage of the general lawlessness:

My husband’s mom was visiting her sister at the hospital; she was sitting in the hospital room and somebody came in and said: “I’m really sorry to tell you this, but you’re going to have to leave the hospital; we can’t keep your sister alive—unless you bring back 5000 dollars tomorrow.” ... She went back the next day and talked to the hospital administrators, and they said “We have no idea what you’re talking about.”²²

19 Interview with author, February 18, 2010, El Paso, Texas, notes in possession of author.

20 Interview with author, April 20, 2010, El Paso, Texas, notes in possession of author.

21 Interview with author, February 22, 2010, El Paso, Texas, notes in possession of author.

22 Interview, February 18, 2010.

The fact that the most vulnerable people—the sick lying in hospital beds—were taken advantage of was not only morally outrageous to the victims but spoke to the pervasiveness of the lawlessness in the city.

On both sides of the border, kidnappings became commonplace:

The precautions that we take now, you get leery of people that come near us. They can be watching us when we drop our children off; they will see our comings and goings. It's already happened twice at our school [in El Paso]. The mother of my son's friend was supposed to pick up her kid as usual. It was five o'clock, and she still hadn't picked up the kid. Later that day they found out they had kidnapped her. She returned after three days; they paid a ransom.²³

Another interviewee testifies to the ingenuity of the locals in dealing with the criminals:

All of us on the border know someone who has been a victim of violence. For example, my grandfather was kidnapped last year in late March. He is a businessman, and he went to church, and when he got out of the church there was a van waiting for him, and they took him away for three days. They called my family to ask for a ransom. But since he knew other local businessmen in the area, who had already been kidnapped, they recommended an "anti-kidnapping specialist" to my family. So we didn't call the police, but we called this woman, and she helped us negotiate his rescue.²⁴

This excerpt exemplifies the resourcefulness of Juárezenses in developing various self-help strategies on a grassroots level to tackle the crimes as well as to the failure of state agencies to adequately respond to the citizens' concerns.

The refusal to investigate the murders, prosecute the perpetrators, and to take measures to prevent future atrocities, frustrated all parties involved, in particular the victims' families.²⁵ Because of the pervasiveness of corruption, most of my interviewees vowed to steer clear from the police, even if they became targets of violence: "Whatever you do, do not call the police!" Stories about criminals working in cahoots with the police were widespread. As one reporter pointed out,

How can a convoy full of armed men move around unnoticed in a city patrolled by 10,000 soldiers and a few thousand more federal and state police? How can they roam around

23 Ibid.

24 Interview with author, May 19, 2010, El Paso, Texas, notes in possession of author.

25 The historian Oscar Martínez cites a survey in the newspaper *El Diario de Juárez* according to which 73 % of Juárezenses do not trust the police. Martínez, *Troublesome Border*, 144.

the neighborhood and shoot at a group of young people celebrating a birthday party, get back in their vehicles, and escape in a timely manner just a few minutes before the arrival of the military?²⁶

Several of my sources shared their disbelief about a pattern by which the police seemed to arrive soon *after* a violent incident was over, but rarely on time. And, to complicate matters further, one source wonders, “Do we really know that these are legitimate law enforcement agencies? In some cases they have proven to be impostors, using uniforms and vehicles seized by the narcos to set up bogus detachments of phony police.”²⁷ Because the violence penetrated all levels of society, it was no longer possible to even try and identify either its perpetrators or potential targets. In Juárez, anybody could be a criminal, anybody could be a target of a crime, and frequently one became the other.

The most tangible everyday impact of the violence for the transnational community was the restriction of individuals’ sense of mobility. The twin cities, which were only bridges apart from each other, traditionally functioned for the border community as one large metropolitan area. Before the violence broke out, border residents were able to go back and forth across the bridge regularly for shopping, doctor’s appointments, or visiting friends and family by showing ID-cards alone, but in 2009, passports were reintroduced as the only valid documents for those crossing the border by foot. In this way, the geographic border was reinstated into the everyday lives of the residents and people without passports could no longer legally trespass the border from one side to the other. While getting a passport might in principle seem like a simple affair, one interviewee explains the complications involved: “Here we have a lot of families with kids, so it’s not just one passport but like six passports that they have to get. So you have a lot of people who become disconnected from their normal lives, because they can’t get a passport.”²⁸ As a result of the violence most people from the U.S. side stopped crossing the border into Juárez entirely:

26 Jose Luis Sierra, “War on Drugs or War on Mexicans?” *New America Media*, February 6, 2010, accessed May 14, 2011, <http://newamericamedia.org/2010/02/war-on-drugs-or-war-on-mexicans.php>.

27 Anonymous student testimony 4, the University of Texas at El Paso, 3 May 2010, original in possession of author.

28 Interview, February 22, 2010.

There was a really big change once the violence started. I know I stopped going once all that started. It doesn't matter what plates [you have] or who you are. They'll pull you out of your car; either because they want your car, or they want your purse. Or you look like somebody, or you look suspicious, or they are gonna do something to you."²⁹

The curtailing of mobility had inevitable consequences on binational families: relatives could no longer visit one another; families could not be a part of social functions on the other side of the border; and some people were unsure whether their relatives were dead or alive. As the violence brought the transnational flow to a virtual halt, tourism in the state of Chihuahua also plummeted.³⁰ Even if many Juarenses chose to leave the city, the situation for those remaining was all the more devastating. As one source puts it, "Just when you think it can't get worse it does. It's almost surreal; it's some kind of Dante's *Inferno* going on."³¹ Given the prevailing disillusionment, borderlands residents were left to fend for themselves.

State Responses: "Securing" the Border

Because of the geographic distance between the borderlands regions and the national capitals, their interrelationship was often fraught with tensions. On the one hand, there is a discrepancy between the everyday experiences of border residents and various incongruous national policies decided in Washington D.C. and México D.F. Both the United States and Mexico insisted on treating the violence as a national security issue. Across the political spectra in the United States, the focus was on "securing" the border against a possible "spillover" of the violence across the border; among the conservative ranks, in particular, the violence was politicized for border security projects. Border analyst Tom Barry comments on the financial logics at stake: "Alarmist cries by border politicians about spillover violence and insufficient federal attention to the border have successfully pressured the federal government to direct large flows of funding to state and local law enforcement agencies, creating not only a gravy train of federal grants

29 Ibid.

30 "FNS: Ciudad Juarez/Chihuahua News 2010: Turning Points in Chihuahua," *Frontera NorteSur*, December 29, 2010, accessed April 19, 2012, http://groups.google.com/group/frontera-list/browse_thread/thread/e86bc521f31390de.

31 Interview with author, April 17, 2010, Austin, Texas, notes in possession of author.

but also a platform for right-wing populism.”³² While policy analysts urged both governments to steer the focus toward the interrelationship between such aspects as immigration, the so-called war-on drugs, and border security, the insistence on the primacy of national security won over the debate.³³ This focus led to various measures to militarize both sides of the border as well as to fund transnational security plans. The main contribution of the United States to this effort was the so-called Mérida Initiative, which was to provide \$1.5 billion in assistance for Mexico and Central America in their fight against crime. Signed into law on June 30, 2008, its official purpose was to 1) break the power and impunity of criminal organizations; 2) to strengthen border, air, and maritime controls; 3) to improve the capacity of justice systems in the region; and 4) to curtail gang activity and diminish local drug demand.³⁴ In practice, its function was largely to fund the operations of the Mexican military.

The Mérida Initiative, also known as “Plan Mexico,” became a target of an avalanche of criticism. From a human rights’ perspective, the situation was untenable, for money from the United States was being channeled to the very same military that was accused of abusing its citizens in Mexico.³⁵ As border analyst Laura Carlsen put it: “[W]hy ... would the U.S. government continue to concentrate its aid to Mexico in a way that demonstrably empowers corrupt security forces, violates Mexican human rights, and leads to an increase in violence?”³⁶ Other criticism leveled against the current U.S. and Mexican policies argued that not only did the existing strategy not work but that it demonstrably increased the violence throughout Mexico. In the words of Mike Whitney,

Plan Mexico—as Merida is also called—has increased the incidents of gang-related crime and murder by many orders of magnitude. The military is uniquely unsuited for

32 Tom Barry, *Border Wars* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), xvii.

33 On the intersection of these policy aspects, see also Robert J Bunker, ed. *Narcos Over the Border* (London: Routledge, 2011) and Tony Payan, *The Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland* (Westport, Ct.: Praeger Security International, 2006).

34 Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea, “U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond” (Congressional Research Center, August 2011), accessed April 17, 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41349.pdf>, 8.

35 *Ibid.*, 34.

36 Laura Carlsen, “Perils of Plan Mexico: Going Beyond Security to Strengthen U.S.-Mexico Relations,” *Americas Program*, November 23, 2009, accessed April 20, 2012, <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/1925>.

tasks that should be handled by criminal investigators or the police. That's why the death toll keeps rising. The bottom line is that the troubles in Juarez have more to do with Plan Mexico than they do with drug-trafficking. This is "policy-driven" carnage and the United States is largely to blame.³⁷

In Mexico, critics pointed out the disproportionate cost of lives in the country in comparison to the successes of the military:

After the loss of 50,000 lives [in all of Mexico], what do the U.S. and Mexican governments have to show for it? Despite measureable improvements on certain measures—eradication, drug seizures, and arrests—overall flows of drugs remain relatively uninhibited by these efforts. U.S. and Mexican officials have rarely managed to eradicate or interdict more than a minor share of overall production and consumption, with the supply and accessibility of drugs to consumers remaining at sufficiently reasonable prices to sustain fairly steady rates of consumption.³⁸

Yet another major issue that went unaddressed for in the Mérida Initiative was the rampant corruption that plagued all levels of Mexico's official sector.³⁹ Speculations implicating the police in the crimes were reconfirmed publicly on both sides of the border as both former law enforcement officials and criminals turned informants began to take the witness stands at narco-trials. In 2010, for example, a former Juárez police captain testified in a U.S. District Court that the police in Juárez were on the payrolls of drug cartels. Even those who did not want to accept money, he claimed, had to obey orders, or be killed."⁴⁰ Tony Payan explains the reasoning as follows: "The strategy has long been the same: '*plata o plomo*' (silver or lead). In other words, you either take the bribe (silver) or bullet to the head (lead)."⁴¹

In the book *Dreamland*, the writer Charles Bowden, in turn, cites a former cartel hit man (*sicario*), Guillermo "Lalo" Ramirez Peyro, who claims that the police in fact *do* most of the killings for the cartels, because they know how to avoid "the actual investigations that would come forward."⁴²

37 Whitney, "Why the Death Toll in Juarez Will Continue to Rise."

38 Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Ríos, and David A. Shirk, "Drug Violence in Mexico Data and Analysis Through 2011," 28.

39 See Gabrielle D. Schneck, "A War on Civilians: Disaster Capitalism and the Drug War in Mexico," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 10-2 (2012): 927-979.

40 Diana Washington Valdez, "Former Police Captain: Juárez, Chihuahua State Authorities Took Cartels' Cash," *El Paso Times*, March 5, 2010, accessed May 18, 2011, http://www.elpasotimes.com/juarez/ci_14517158.

41 Tony Payan, *The Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security*, 39-40.

42 Charles Bowden and Alice Leora Briggs, *Dreamland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 89.

A particularly cautionary tale of the collaboration between the cartels and the military was that of Los Zetas criminal organization, which consists of former Mexican Special Forces, who began operating as the enforcement arm of the Gulf Cartel, but subsequently formed its independent cartel, based in Tamaulipas. Beyond such rogue forces, in February 2012, the news reported of a Mexican army general and soldiers, who were sent to fight the cartels, being charged in military court with “carrying out killings, torture, drug dealing and other crimes.”⁴³ According to a Human Rights Watch report, out of 3,671 past investigations in the military justice system, only 29 soldiers have actually been convicted of crimes.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding such revelations, the United States did not change its policy regarding the Mérida Initiative. This was particularly striking in light of Seelke and Finklea’s claim that exactly the opposite was the case from the mid-1980s through the end of the 1990s, during which “bilateral cooperation stalled due to U.S. mistrust of Mexican counterdrug officials and concerns about the Mexican government’s tendency to accommodate drug leaders.”⁴⁵

Until recently, a conspicuous point of view missing from the corruption discussion was the increasing corruption on the U.S. side of the border.⁴⁶ While corruption in Mexico was typically explained by the prevalence of (object) poverty, few discussed the incentive for corruption for people of regular middle-class incomes. Yet, according to available statistics between 2004 and 2010, over one hundred U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers were arrested or indicted with “mission-critical corruption charges including drug smuggling, alien smuggling, money laundering and conspiracy.”⁴⁷ Akin to Mexico, the corruption charges in the United States ranged from the federal and state levels all that way down to local agents. Although a couple of the corruption cases received a modicum of media attention; few pointed to the systemic aspect of the corruption.

43 Randal C. Archibold, “Mexican General and Troops Charged in Border Town Atrocities,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2012, accessed March 26, 2012, sec. World/Americas, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/americas/mexican-general-charged-in-border-town-atrocities.html>.

44 Archibold, “Mexican General and Troops Charged in Border Town Atrocities.”

45 Seelke and Finklea, “U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond,” 7.

46 On the role of the United States in the drug war, see Julien Mercille, “Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico,” *Third World Quarterly* 39-9 (2011): 1637-1653, and Gian Carlo Delgado Ramos and Silvina María Romano, “Political Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Colombia Plan, the Merida Initiative, and the Obama Administration,” *Latin American Perspectives* 38:4 (2011): 93-108. See also note 13 above.

47 *Ibid.* 28.

In September 2010, Martha Garnica, a border agent moonlighting for La Línea, the arms wing of the Juárez cartel, was sentenced to twenty years in prison for smuggling, human trafficking, and bribery.⁴⁸ The same fall, Michael A. Atondo, an Arizona agent, was sentenced to 40 years in prison for conspiring to import marijuana with the intent to distribute.⁴⁹ Similar stories soon surfaced from other border states as well. In June 2011, a *BBC* news report described corruption as a growing problem on the U.S.-Mexico border where agents were targeted by cartels with “bribes and sexual favours [sic].”⁵⁰ The corruption was explained by the massive post-9/11 hiring surge of border patrol agents, on which resulted in compromised background checks, lack of polygraph testing, and insufficient training of the employees.⁵¹ The U.S. government responded by passing S. 3243 (111th): Anti-Border Corruption Act of 2010 to mandate polygraph tests from everybody applying to border security jobs; however, drug trafficking operatives had already infiltrated into the workforce. In February 2012, a high-ranking law enforcement officer was arrested in El Paso on suspicion of being a member of a drug trafficking ring. Guillermo “Willie” Gandara Jr., the El Paso County Commissioner and candidate for the Texas House of Representatives, faced charges of distribution and money laundering.⁵² Although corruption in the United States was still regarded as an exception, rather than the rule, critics underscored the importance to recognize its ramifications, albeit on a lesser scale than in Mexico where it was now impacting all strata of society.

Just as the worst U.S. policy blunders seemed over, the media came out with another stupefying scandal in 2011. A Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) initiative in Phoenix labeled “Operation Fast and the Furious” had knowingly allowed suspected criminals (through

48 Ceci Connolly, “At Border, Corruption of U.S. Officials Leaves an Open Door for Drug Cartels,” *The Dallas Morning News*, September 13, 2010, <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/state/headlines/20100913-At-border-corruption-of-U-1678.ece>.

49 Monica Alonzo, “Mexican Smugglers Exploit the Corrupt Reputation of U.S. Border Officers,” *Phoenix New Times*, December 1, 2011, accessed April 25, 2012, <http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/2011-12-01/news/mexican-smugglers-exploit-the-corrupt-reputation-of-u-s-border-officers/5/>.

50 “Mexico Drugs War: Corruption Grows on U.S. Border,” *BBC*, June 10, 2011, sec. Latin America & Caribbean, accessed April 25, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-13723991>.

51 Alonzo, “Mexican Smugglers Exploit the Corrupt Reputation of U.S. Border Officers.”

52 “Arrest of Texas Official Raises Questions of Cross-Border Corruption,” *U.S. Open Borders*, February 28, 2012, accessed April 23, 2012, <http://usopenborders.com/2012/02/arrest-of-texas-official-raises-questions-of-cross-border-corruption/>.

so-called “straw purchasers”) to smuggle firearms into Mexico in an effort to disclose gun trafficking conspiracies through a tracking system during 2009-2010.⁵³ Because some of the information was erroneously entered into the system, the tracking device did not function correctly, and many of the weapons could not be recovered in Mexico; out of a total of 2,020 firearms, 1,430 went unaccounted for.⁵⁴ This “gun walking” scandal became public when an AK-47 assault rifle used to kill U.S. Border Patrol agent Brian Terry on the Arizona border in December 2010 was traced back to the Operation Fast and the Furious. In April 2011, 40 weapons linked with the ATF operation were found in the home of José Antonio Torres Marrufo, allegedly a Sinaloa cartel enforcer of the Juárez operations.⁵⁵ Many more were discovered in violent crime scenes elsewhere in Mexico.

Because Mexico prohibits the sales of assault weapons, criminal organizations relied mainly on illegal arms trafficking from north of the border; according to Mexican authorities, two thirds of recovered firearms were traced back to the United States.⁵⁶ A report by the U.S. House of Representatives released in January 2012 revealed that the Fast and the Furious was among a series of similar operations conducted since 2006, each with similarly flawed results.⁵⁷ As the scandal unfolded, critics were outraged by the fact that innocent people were daily losing their lives because of the operation. The operation also seemed untenable from a U.S. policy perspective, as it undermined the very efforts to “secure” the border that the Mérida Initiative rested on. Amid public controversy, the Operation Fast and the Furious was closed down in 2011.

The interviewees for this article expressed little faith in the power of the state institutions to resolve the issue of violence, for just as surely as illicit drugs continued to find their way into the United States illicit firearms continued to find their way into Mexico. One interviewee explains the situation

53 Seelke and Finklea, “U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond,” 12-17.

54 Ibid, 17.

55 Richard Serrano, “Fast and Furious Weapons Found in Mexico Cartel Enforcer’s Home,” *Los Angeles Times*, accessed April 30, 2012, October 8, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/oct/08/nation/la-na-atf-guns-20111009>.

56 Julian Aguilar, “ATF: Two-thirds of Guns Recovered in Mexico from U.S.,” *TucsonSentinel.com*, April 26, 2012, accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.tucsonsentinel.com/nationworld/report/042612_atf_mexico_guns/atf-two-thirds-guns-recovered-mexico-from-us/.

57 Elijah E. Cummings, “Fatally Flawed: Five Years of Gunwalking in Arizona” (U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, January 30, 2012).

as follows: “The narco trade is so powerful. It’s bigger than the biggest corporations here in America; it’s a large part of what fuels the economy in Mexico, whether we want to admit it or not.”⁵⁸ In addition to border residents’ utter distrust in law enforcement’s will or capacity to enforce public safety for the border community, some sources expressed distrust toward the Mexican government: “There’s been a lot of rumors that President Calderón is behind some of the puppeteering that is going on. It is believed that there is a chosen cartel, and that’s the cartel that in the end is going to stay afloat and control the territory here on the border.”⁵⁹ Such claims were officially acknowledged by analysts in the United States as well:

At the same time that organized crime groups have splintered and fractionalized, the authors note that at least one large, powerful drug trafficking organization—the Sinaloa Cartel—remains relatively unaffected by high-level government arrests, and retains tremendous capacity to traffic drugs into the United States.⁶⁰

Given that the ATF gun walking operation provided the firepower for the Sinaloa cartel, the role of the United States in reinforcing its reign was disconcerting. According to some of the sources for this article, the only person capable for ending to the violence was El Chapo Guzmán, the Sinaloa cartel’s infamous leader, who—until his capture in February 2014—was considered to be winning the war in the border region, after having debilitated the local Juárez cartel.⁶¹ Border “security” had imploded from the inside, and the residents were paying the price for the ill-conceived policies.

Conclusion

Based on the border residents’ accounts, there was an obvious discrepancy between the region’s grassroots realities and policy responses implemented by the national capitals. The question of national security seemed inconsequential from the residents’ perspectives, for the narco-industry had already

58 Interview, April 17, 2010.

59 Ibid.

60 Cory Molzahn, Viridiana Ríos, and David A. Shirk, “Drug Violence in Mexico Data and Analysis Through 2011.”

61 Ignacio Alzaga, “El Cártel de Juárez está Debilitado, Revela ‘El Pariente,’” *Vanguardia*, April 22, 2012, accessed April 29, 2012, <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/elcarteldejuarezestadebilitadorevelaelpariente-1271363.html>. See also “The Capture of Chapo Guzmán,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2014, accessed April 30, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/25/opinion/the-capture-of-chapo-guzman.html?_r=0.

penetrated both countries; otherwise they could not operate there to begin with. The stash houses were mostly located along the U.S. Border states, and the cartels had affiliates in all major cities through their distribution networks. According to available federal crime statistics, narco-style violence, including beheadings, had been carried out in U.S. cities along major drug-trafficking routes, although these were not reported in the mainstream media.⁶² Even so, the operations and visibility of the drug-trafficking organizations had to be adjusted in the United States, where the “rules” were different. To quote Lisa J. Campbell’s assessment of the operations of Los Zetas: “Their presence in Mexico is in stark contrast to their presence in the US—as overt in Mexico as it is shadowy in the US.”⁶³ From the Mexican grassroots perspective, an equally irrelevant “national security” question frequently posed was whether a narco-insurgency was imminent in Mexico. If entire regions of Mexico were already controlled or under siege by criminal organizations—whether by conjoining, superseding, or eradicating the existing political structure—then some level of “insurgency” had already occurred.

It seems that not only was the focus on national security insufficient in explaining the violence that was at stake; in point of fact, it prevented any conceivable solution to the issue. By insisting on the national security aspect alone, the nation-states effectively became agents of systemic violence. For that reason, studying the everyday ramifications of violence on members of the border community as well as the tangible effects it has on individuals and families on both sides of the border is critical. In addition to the fact that people from the U.S. side stopped crossing the border into Juárez for everyday errands, work, and social contacts, Mexicans’ cross-border mobility was also restricted by policy measures. Some people were forced to permanently cut ties to their families. This halting of the transnational flow had long-lasting social, cultural, and economic consequences to the border community. Notwithstanding their hardships, it is important to point out that border residents were not without agency in the situation; on the contrary, many came up with ingenious networks and tools with which to

62 Bill Conroy, “Drug War-Related Homicides in the US Average At Least 1,100 a Year,” *The Narcosphere*, March 10, 2012, accessed May 3, 2012, <http://narcosphere.narconews.com/notebook/bill-conroy/2012/03/drug-war-related-homicides-us-average-least-1100-year>.

63 Lisa J. Campbell, “Los Zetas: Operational Assessment,” in Robert J. Bunker, *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels, and Mercenaries* (London: Routledge, 2011), 61.

continue their daily routines, albeit under extreme duress. Moreover, various grassroots organizations sprung up to address the growing concerns of insecurity by the citizenry.

To such an effect, the Mexican poet Javier Sicilia, whose son died as a result of the narco-wars, launched a mass protest movement labeled as “the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity,” in 2011. Tens of thousands of Mexicans chanting “No more blood” demonstrated in Mexico City and some twenty other cities across the nation in an effort to take the Calderón government to task.⁶⁴ In May 2012, the poet reissued a call for a grassroots social movement by pointing to the broader power dynamics: “It’s not just Felipe Calderón, It’s all the political parties ... whether it’s the PRI, PAN or PRD, all the governments, whatever their color, continue to govern in a patrimonial fashion ... If there were clean, political elections and political processing in the state, the reality would be different but wherever you turn, you see the same thing; the same impunity, the same insecurity, the same corruption. It’s a result of patrimonialism, [the] abuse of power as a way to legitimize criminality.”⁶⁵ Sicilia’s movement drew attention to the transnational context within which the violence was occurring, complete with a protest caravan moving from San Diego to Washington, D.C. A grassroots movement organized by Mexican activists, and supported by a broad global human rights coalition, brought visibility to the plight of the citizens, even if not an actual solution to the root and causes of the violence.

While there are never simple answers to any complicated questions—let alone violence—as American Studies scholars, we would do well to bring a complex set of voices to the fore in explicating ongoing societal crises. This article has attempted to establish a link between everyday lives and political discourses to bridge the gap between grassroots realities, policy-making, and scholarship. Such an interdisciplinary focus presents an alternative to more conventional approaches that examine issues of violence solely from the viewpoint of nation-states and law enforcement. The human dimension is particularly important, because it does not reduce the notion of national

64 Keph Senett, “Thousands Join Mexican Poet in Anti-Violence Demonstrations,” *PV Pulse*, April 7, 2011, accessed May 3, 2012, <http://www.pvpulse.com/en/news/mexico-news/thousands-join-mexican-poet-in-anti-violence-demonstrations>.

65 “Mexico’s Poet, Javier Sicilia Calls for Unity to Help Combat Mexico’s Violence,” *La Lista*, May 3, 2012, accessed May 4, 2012, <http://latinalista.com/2012/05/mexicos-poet-javier-sicilia-calls-for-unity-to-help-combat-mexicos-violence>.

security to an abstraction but, rather, calls attention to the residents' own agency in living with it under the existing power relations. Ultimately, *national* security never entails solely military and law enforcement interests but necessarily comprises a complex web of issues combining perspectives. Indeed, the tension between everyday experiences and national security on the U.S.-Mexico border reveals a nexus of geographic, political, socio-economic, and military issues that matters far beyond nation-states and geographic boundaries.