

National Security Expertise, and Borderland Saints: Policing Religion and Police Religion

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Abstract

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A skeletal saint graces the side of DEA collectable coin, busts of a mustachioed bandit fill sets of crime-drama television, white blocks of cocaine top shrines during police press releases. Images of borderland religion have arrived in United States popular media, the news cycle, and its defense culture and US law enforcement officers routinely profile migrants who practice these forms of Catholicism. Saints like Jesús Malverde and the now infamous Saint Death, Santa Muerte, have entered into the American cultural consciousness. Termed “narco saints” by law enforcement— these informal saints have been appropriated into the professional cosmologies of police and security practitioners as representations of alterity and threat, resulting in religious profiling and arrests of devotees. Through ethnographic and textual analysis of recent religious profiling incidents, police training manuals, and online culture in US security communities this project uses mixed-methods to ask why these religious communities have become visible in law enforcement spaces. This project argues that as state agents link religious beliefs to forms of crime and violence, they reflect a robust ideological defense culture that resists reform efforts and emotionally rationalizes state policing of already vulnerable individuals and communities.

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As I state above, this dissertation is a product of many, and not just those who touched it directly. My family— Mama, my sisters Susan and Molly, Uncle Dennis, Clairra, and many others—have been forever supportive of my subsequently longer academic endeavors. All that led up to this project is possible because of you. Though this project took me far away, your belief in me has been felt and appreciated no matter the distance. I love you all.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my father, who woke early to walk the dog and read in the morning quiet. Who invited me to read and walk with him, and shared his love of history during those fog-soaked strolls.

And it is dedicated to my mother, who taught me to embrace a challenge. Mama, I watched and continue to see you approach the frightening with curiosity, I see you persevere without losing gentleness. I did this for myself, but was able to because of you.

Introduction

A Preface

In 2016, when this project was only a research interest, I attended a networking event for recipients of particular interdisciplinary fellowship. Not more than a month into my PhD program, and coming from a practitioner-focused Homeland Security Masters program I did not know what to expect from such an academic event. It turns out, these events largely consist of “elevator pitching” one’s fledgling dissertation topic on repeat to people with varied levels of interest, and them doing the same to you, over the course of several hours. There was nothing exceptional about that night, except I remember a singular interaction I had towards the end of the evening. I was considering whether a third glass of wine would seem unprofessional, when a polite fellow fellowship recipient asked the question I had become used to over the evening. “So what do you research?”

I had been practicing different versions of my “pitch” all night. This time I began with the inciting incident of my research interest, the discovery of two distinct legal cases where devotees of the saint Jesús Malverde had been pulled over and searched by State Troopers, and then appealed their later convictions because State Trooper’s initial search justification include religious medallions.¹ These religious medallions hung from the driver’s rearview mirrors, and depicted the small likeness of a mustachioed man in a white collared shirt, his black hair short and his expression mild. The 2012 appeals cases of defendant Manuel Meza-Garcia and Jose Maciel were, in my interpretation, abject examples of both racial and religious profiling. And I had found more, hundreds of examples where items associated with borderland saints Jesús

¹State of Oregon v. Maciel, 092084AFE, A145086 (Jackson County Circuit Court 2012). Jose Maciel is also known as Fabian Villalabos-Cantu. State of Oregon v. Meza-Garcia, 09CR1720FE, A144513 (Douglas County Circuit Court 2012).

Malverde and Santa Muerte had been used to justify searches of private property. Moreover, I started recognizing names, like Robert Almonte who provided testimony on these “narco saints”, and Dr. Robert Bunker who had authored an FBI bulletin on the “ritualistic killings” ascribed to Santa Muerte. I wanted to know more about these experts fueling what I suspected were blatant examples of religious and racial profiling.

It was here that my conversation partner stopped me. “Why this topic though, do you think you can actually change police behavior?”

The question was probably well-intended and decidedly intimidating. Police operation and the culture that informs it is notoriously resilient to change, challenge, or reform. And in truth, I did have small hopes, as I believe most scholars who study modern problems do, that my research might “fix” something, anything really. I didn’t have an answer then, I believe I shrugged and stammered something about “in an ideal world”, and then asked him about his research.

As I finish this dissertation that began with my happening across the Meza-Garcia and Jose Maciel appeals cases I have changed, expanded, modified, and cut many things from that project I envisioned in 2016. It is now motivated by the belief that before things can be changed, challenged, or reformed it’s a good idea to have a lay of the land. For that reason, this dissertation project provides a view what I, and others, have called the United States securityscape—a nebulous network where career law enforcement experts help create video games, private companies build and arm State borders with concrete and data collection, and travel journalists, entertainers, and academics prime citizens to accept police into daily life.

The Project

This dissertation explores the intersection of security, religion, and expertise role within the expansive category that is the United States securityscape and the experts. In the hands of security experts and practitioners, “narco saints” have been molded into a constitutive “Other” that serves to rationalize the border as a place where individualism, masculinity, and whiteness are at once both threatened and supreme. To examine how securityscapes is created and reproduced, I focus on the experts who train law enforcement officials, inform border policy, and publish research on “narco saints”. These chapters do not track the reality of “narco saints” in the United States—that is how, why, or when these saints are revered by devotees—nor does this research in any way seek to make any statement about these saints’ origin, legitimacy, or alleged connections with criminality. There are other works of scholarship, both of good and bad quality, that tackle those questions. Instead, this dissertation is interested in the idea of “narco saints” as held and utilized by security, defense, and law enforcement fields in the United States and how those ideas manifest in traditionally non-security genres. A large amount of narco saint material exists not only in the legal appeals and law enforcement training materials related to narcotics cases, but also in popular nonfictional and fictional depictions of the US Mexico borderlands and criminal activity. This project uses this prevalence as a case study to help explain how the security field in the United States is neither as bounded nor siloed as traditional understandings would indicate.

The following five chapters build to argue that the ideologies that inform law enforcement expertise on informal borderland saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde — and inform the targeted arrests on their devotees— are an expression of deeply held beliefs at the core of law enforcement culture. These beliefs display the characteristics of religious belief, and this dissertation argues that there is a religiosity inherent to the modern law enforcement field

and the militarized culture of border enforcement. This unique law enforcement religiosity shapes and enables a deeply personal investment in the work of policing and border security. As experts use a religious rhetoric steeped in conceptions of whiteness, masculinity, and individualism to inform their audiences of security threats, they characterize the conflict with metaphysical stakes and grant divine justification for acts of violence against racial and religious others. An understanding of the formative ideologies that construct the moral motivation and self-concept of state agents is necessary to address contemporary issues of stagnant police reform, bloated security fields and private industry, and the costly yet ongoing obsession with border militarization and the war on drugs.

The Archive of the Securityscape

As my chapters reflect the interdisciplinary nature of this project, so do the methods I use. From this project's inception, it was about text. Court and appeal cases formed the majority of my data at the beginning of my project, and began me asking the question "why are these saints showing up in narcotics proceedings", then I expanded the archive into popular media pieces, news coverage, law enforcement training materials, and cultural artifacts associated with border security and narcotic interdiction to answer this question. Most of this was text, though visual mediums like image and video are prevalent too. This is my archive. These documents were bound by similar origin, the testimonies in the appeals came from law enforcement training instructors, news coverage linked to their articles, popular media blogs directed their readers to law enforcement and security scholarship to learn more about the fictionalized religion they'd seen on the newest episode of popular television shows like *Breaking Bad*. But still I was working with documents, painstakingly accessed through half a decade of online reconnaissance, requests to law enforcement libraries, and Google alerts, I traced these law enforcement experts

through their publications, testimonies, and online presence. As I attempt to locate the origin of this securitized religious expertise, my research follows specific training materials, norms, and discourse from training room, to highway-side arrests, to court room, to television set and internet news coverage.

Court appeals, government publications and history, news articles, and law enforcement training materials make up the majority of data available to researchers who wish to address law enforcement operation on both sides of the U.S. Mexico Border. At the beginning of this project I collected eighty-eight court and appellate cases which cover a period from 2003 to 2018. Each of these cases involve incidents or discussions of religious profiling related to the informal saint Santa Muerte or Jesús Malverde. Many of these cases include expert testimony from the law enforcement experts, or references to their training and training materials. In addition to the court records, I analyzed law enforcement training material and publications that seek to inform law enforcement agents about the reverence and practice surrounding informal saints. I selected training materials intended for use by security communities as well as formalized training courses usually held at local police departments, but also at High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA)s and Border Security conferences. The training materials, publications, and courses were easily identifiable due to their almost singular origin, most are created by either Robert Almonte, Robert J Bunker, Tony Kail, or similarly common security experts and personal associates found in their productions' bibliographies. These artifacts are available through their institutional websites, their training courses online blogs, or sold online through their publishing site. I have access to the training video used in all of Almonte's training courses, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," as well as other training pamphlets, federal

bulletins, and many of the self-published publications that are circulated throughout HIDTA training rooms, border security expos, and other law enforcement communities.

The trainings that inform the afore mentioned appeals cases are held throughout the United States and usually marketed solely to federal, local, and international law enforcement agents, those involved in intelligence and the production of training materials are invited to register as well. The course offerings specifically cater to law enforcement agents operating in the US Mexico borderlands and instruct the trainees to identify religious practices and iconography associated with the narcotics trade for the purposes of recognizing and then apprehending narcotics traffickers. These religious practices primarily include devotion to informal Catholic Saints such as Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde. The training instructors are primarily ex-law enforcement agents who have privatized their expertise and encounters with narcoculture and religion. They inform and disseminate pseudo-academic security publications that associate these informal beliefs with cartels and terrorist organizations, both through the training classes and their own organization's press. These training sessions have informed officers involved in the religious profiling cases across the United States, and the instructors serve as expert witness in the courtroom when officers' religious profiling is called to be defended or justified. Many of these trainings are held at law enforcement and border security expos and sold as part of the border security industry alongside new surveillance and apprehension technologies.² These spaces have only become more restricted and closed to outside eyes, I suspect in response to the controversies and divisive border security and policing practices occurring in the last five years. As federal, state, and local law enforcement close ranks,

² Todd Miller, *Border Patrol Nation: Dispatches From the Frontlines of Homeland Security* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2014).

so have the private industries that serve and sell to them. The training held at these events are pertinent to my research, as are the ways private training companies engage with the United States security apparatus and seek to attract federal funding. This engagement comes in the form of selling not only border security products but a narrative that necessitates those products.

As I try and understand the narrative that arises from these security spaces and its effects, I seek out specific sites where this narrative is being created, fostered, and disseminated. These trainings are given directly to law enforcement agents and impact the arrests they make and the interactions they have with those they police. Throughout the court cases, arresting officers cite their “training and experience” as the means through which they recognize religious material associated with the narcotics trade and build enough reasonable suspicion to justify searches of personal property. This “training and experience” also exists as a legal standard by which expert witness testimony is accepted or rejected, experts must validate their professional and personal experiences and education to be accepted as an expert. Tracing back the “training and experience” the arresting officers used identify religious material as drug paraphernalia requires an understanding of this “training and experience” and where it comes from. These training courses and associated training material lead directly to arrests, and the training materials advise arresting officers on the ways in which to leverage these associations between religious material and criminality in order to increase arrests and drug interdiction. General training courses and professional education are normal requirements for advancement in law enforcement careers, and these specific “narco saint” trainings occur every month across the United States.³ Though not an everyday activity, these career trainings are routinely performed and attended as they are

³ “All Current and Upcoming Training,” Almonte Consulting & Training, accessed March 2, 2019, ; Fairchild, “National Culture and Police Organization ; Glenn et al., *Training the 21st Century Police Officer: Redefining Police Professionalism for the Los Angeles Police Department* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003). Weiss, “From Cowboy Detectives to Soldiers of Fortune,”

required for officer advancement on all federal, state, and local levels. Due to the way these trainings impart common policing sense, specific knowledge, and legal expertise, an understanding of the spaces in which this “training and experience” is fostered and imparted to agents could provide unique insight into this knowledge production process.

I read these materials with an ethnographic sensibility, inspired by critical approaches to the archive like those put forward by Stoler, Burton and other (citations) . Adopting an interpretive search for meaning requires the researcher to be present and immersed in the space of observation.⁴ The researcher looks for what their subjects take for normal or commonplace, allowing the research to understand the logic, meaning, and symbols that serve their subjects’ senses of self and understanding of norms. This methodology allows the researcher to understand another’s point of view through their casual lived existence, versus their action or statements deliberately stated in an interview or quote.

Throughout this project I found myself interacting with security scholarship and the intellectual community that creates it. The 9/11 attacks in the United States centered security discourses and hyper-vigilant common sense in policy discussions, international relations, and human rights discourse—and the demand for security scholarship bloomed funded by an expanding sector devoted to war and defense.⁵ This rise of a security paradigm has prompted scholars across disciplines to address the lack of research regarding the internal operations of the military, police, and state intelligence communities.⁶ With the carceral and military state spreading into social services like addiction rehabilitation, homeless persons support networks,

⁴ Geertz, "*Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture.*"

⁵ Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror.*

⁶ Feldman, “Location, Isolation and Disempowerment: The Swift Proliferation of Security Discourse among Policy Professionals,” in *The Anthropology of Security: Perspectives from the Frontline of Policing, Counter-terrorism, and Border Control*, ed. Maguire, Frois, and Zurawski (London: Pluto Press), 62-82. ; Goldstein, “Toward a Critical Anthropology of Security.”

and child protection services, into the lucrative private industry with the rise of defense industry consultants, and into itself through police militarization, big data policing, and joint training programs between federal, state, and local law enforcement, researchers who take a constitutive approach are uniquely suited to understanding an amoeba-like state.⁷ This spread of the entity known as the state presents problems for researchers and theorists across all disciplines, but particularly security studies as the state becomes both a principal actor and too large a category to be useful. However, seeing the state with an ethnographic sensibility open up new ways of theorizing security:

Perhaps one of the most important contributions made by ethnographies of security is to map the relationships between distinct purveyors of security, evidencing the necessity of moving beyond the state to study (in)security. Though, even this notion of moving “beyond” the state elides clandestine and inconsistent relationships between state and non-state actors—lines that are increasingly blurred and that ethnography is indispensable in mapping. Ethnographic research is arguable the best (and perhaps the only) methodology that can get at the clandestine relationships between criminal, civil, and state actors, and describe the fuzzy boundaries between these categories.⁸

Inspired by ethnographic approaches to security, this study also aspires to can follow people across social worlds and understand the ways in which the negotiate, challenge, or perpetuate securitized networks.⁹

Ethnographic exploration of security spaces is not new, but it does present considerable challenges.¹⁰ The ethnographic requirement for immersion is complicated by law enforcement’s

⁷ See, among many, McKim, *Addicted to Rehab.* ; Rodriguez, *Fragile Families: Foster Care, Immigration, and Citizenship* ; Stuart, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest.*

⁸ Hanson, “Ethnographies of Security.”

⁹ Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys.*

¹⁰ Herbert, *Policing Space: Territoriality and the Los Angeles Police Department.* ; Nolan, “Ethnographic Research in the U.S. Intelligence Community,” ; Provine et al., *Policing Immigrants: Local Law Enforcement on the Front Lines .*

natural vigilance and wariness of outsiders, and general laws and restrictions against civilians in security spaces.¹¹ Risk management and threat assessment is at the center of the security paradigm and a nosy academic researcher is often viewed at best with annoyance, and at worst a considerable danger to their operations.¹² Researchers have to be careful how they present themselves to security and law enforcement agents, often far before they enter into the field. Law enforcement critical media posts and past academic projects may bar future work with law enforcement, intelligence, and security individuals who do not want to take on the risk of being critiqued. Agencies' attempts to manage spin and public perception create a field where any request for information is highly circumspect, and this creates severe access issues for potential ethnographers who are required by their methodology to immerse themselves in their subjects restricted spaces.

My own experience attempting fieldwork in even 'public' security spaces confirmed these access issues, even basic attempts to initiate contact and simply observe training areas from a distance were met with active distrust and bullying behavior designed to force me out of the space. During the training conference for narcotics officers at a San Diego hotel, I observed the edges of the training spaces and industry exhibition hall, and took notes on general attendance and participant population.¹³ I was there for four days from conference start around nine am to around 5pm when the conference. Though I kept to the public spaces of the hotel, my presence was noted and actively discouraged not just by the security personnel of the event, but by

¹¹ Skolnick, *Justice Without Trial*.

¹² Lippert and Walby, "Getting to the Frontiers: Methodologies," in *A Criminology of Policing and Security Frontiers* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2019), 11-28.

¹³ My attempts to gain access to this training conference was motivated by a few training sessions instructed by one of the law enforcement experts I discuss above, Robert Almonte. My efforts to attend were hampered by the restriction that all attendees were required to be "sworn" officers, no allowance was given for members of the academic community and press were strictly prohibited. Attendees were marked by badges worn around the neck and sheathed in distinctive red plastic.

attendees who took it upon themselves to ask what I was doing and point out my lack of credentials. I suspect my age and gender had something to do with my identification as an outsider, as most of the attendees were male, and the women I observed were generally older consistently travelling in groups. In addition, while there a few people there by themselves, most walked and socialized in set groups, implying they had travelled to the conference from the same department. My lone position may have tipped observers off that I did not belong. My attempts to start conversation were cut off with curt statements that “we don’t talk to the press”, despite my introductions as a PhD student. My attempts to get closer to the training rooms, still in the public spaces of the hotel, were stopped by red-shirted security personnel who despite being unable to tell me the hotel was closed, stepped close physically and were firm about not letting people “loiter”. Throughout my time there I was consistently watched, an interesting phenomenon as I was the one supposed to be doing the observing. But attendees in particular made efforts to peer at what I was writing, stopped me as I walked through the lobby, and consistently requested to see my badge, all in the public spaces of the hotel. Though the hotel was not a security space, the presence of law enforcement, even off duty law enforcement, made the space a securitized one.

The vigilance I observed at the conference and in limited discussions with training instructors falls in line with what scholars have long observed about law enforcement communities, police’s hyper-sensitivity to danger creates competitive and agitated interpretations of everyday events.¹⁴ Furthermore, as law enforcement are deeply concerned with the control of space and this could account for how, even off duty and far away from their home departments and territory, my presence in a perceived law enforcement space was taken to be an issue.¹⁵ The

¹⁴ Skolnick, *Justice Without Trial*.

¹⁵ Herbert, *Policing Space*.

prospect of an outsider in spaces designated for law enforcement training prompted the community to independently try and expel me using aggressive, bullying behavior. The hotel staff were notified of my presence twice, but unlike the off-duty law enforcement officers, they did little besides ask me if I needed anything.¹⁶ Overall, the off-duty law enforcement present at the conference took it upon themselves to try and monitor my activity and get me to leave the hotel lobby. There was little I could do to convince the conference attendees that I was not a threat, much less that they should give me their time—and the prospect of attention to their training regimens sparked aggressive and annoyance on the part of both attendees and staff. Before I ever spoke, I was considered an outsider and a potential threat to be effectively shut out. Eventually, faced with continued harassment and at the risk of compromising future work in the community I left early a few of the days. Interesting as these observations on closed spaces and vigilant subjects may be, the closed nature of the community presents a problem for my research as ideally intended. For this reason, I turn to new methodologies that are not traditionally ethnographic, but may still yield a contextual and immersed understandings of social life and norms.

The current and ever-growing archive of training documents, associated publications, testimony, videos, popular media pieces of movies and television, news coverage, and court records remain available and fruitful to analysis. On a methodological level, I intentionally follow scholars who dissect underlying meaning and veiled narratives in official state documents and archival sources. These hidden narratives may be at odds with the historical records that

¹⁶ It was my hope to secure an interview with Robert Almonte and this was one of the reasons I poised in the lobby. Following past conversations with Mr. Almonte, I was somewhat optimistic he would be willing to meet with me, but despite my attempts to contact him again via phone and email immediately prior and during the conference, he never showed. When asked what I was doing in the lobby by law enforcement attendees and one hotel staff member I told them I was a PhD student waiting for a dissertation interviewee.

contain them, but are invaluable when addressing often obscured realities of state operations and the culture behind those operations.¹⁷ To understand the spatial and temporal location of this narrative, researchers should pay attention to the multiple temporalities at work in the creation of any collection of documents, materials, and expertise. Local border politics, individual officer experience, border culture, crime, and large-scale ideological trends interact in these events, which are all informed by the current and past history of the US Mexico borderlands. Taking into account the many, often conflicting, narratives present in the region, this analysis focuses in on their presence within text, video, and online media. These methodologies can reveal shifting notions of "common sense" at the core of these documents and the ways in which these notions may be rooted in deeply entrenched ideas about race, religion, and class. By applying these methodologies not only to official court records and government releases, but to pseudo-academic expertise and training materials as well, I seek to understand these new interconnected webs of knowledge production and how they affect the border. As my work with documents and text benefit from traditional historical methodologies that critically read state works, my issues with access may find an unlikely solution in the newly explored methods used by historians to engage with archives and access communities that are temporally unavailable. Historians by nature access communities that are separate from them in time, distance, and lifespan, and they often do so to discover the same things ethnographers do: common sense, norms, and the hidden facets beneath the surface of everyday goings on. History is the study of unavailable communities, and it is done through documents.

It is for this reason I looked to new historical methodologies that treat the archive as a space worthy of ethnography itself, and requiring the same reflexive and modest approach as

¹⁷ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

more traditional ethnographic work. Fairly new methodological and theoretical trends in the field of history inform my prospective attempts to immerse myself in the archive these experts have inadvertently, and I suspect at times purposefully, created. I propose that an archive can construct a conceptual space its readers occupy and learn within. Therefore, a researcher may immerse themselves in that space and conduct ethnographic observation of the words, silences, and spaces articulated in texts and artifacts of that archive. This does not lack the human element, however, as a researcher may find ethnographic insight into the “interiorities” of an archive’s creators by immersion in that archive. An archive can reveal shifting notions of common sense, anxieties, motivations, and their imagined place within their society. This requires a researcher to pay due attention to the interplay between the documents, the irregularities, and the things not said, much as an ethnographer would do when immersed in their field of study. Historian Ann Stoler urges scholars to read “along the archival grain” to achieve an ethnography of state archives that reveals the social life of the state agents who created it.¹⁸ This is an ethnography of the conceptual space created by text, visual image, and other stated and unstated presences in the state documents.

My interest is not in the finite boundaries of the official state archives but in their surplus production, what defines their interior ridges and porous seams, what closures are transgressed by unanticipated exposition and writerly forms.¹⁹

This type of analysis requires immersion in the language, norms, and customs of the archive. Stoler and the historians she inspired highlight the reflexivity required for this sort of analysis, and many scholars have expanded on Stoler’s many forays to continue what has been called the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

“archival turn” across various disciplines.²⁰ This turn allows for documents to be utilized not just as sources, but as subjects that can be studied with a full array of methodologies. Archives are not organic, apolitical, or sterile things, they come with the intensions, aims, mistakes, and common sense of their creators. Because of this, further attention into these unstated, but present aspects of the archive are necessary for contextualized and comprehensive understanding of the social life behind these documents. Proponents of this archival turn highlight the benefit of ethnographic practice, such as reflexivity and positionality, as a way to address problems within the historical field. The “ethnographic stance” is a mindset, and one that can be used to better represent the peoples and communities that researcher—whether geographer, anthropologist, or historian – studies.²¹ Not only is ethnography beneficial to research within the archive, scholars part of the archival turn argue that ethnography is a necessary component in any archival study, without it key voices are taped over and dominance is never addressed.

The anthropologist and the historian are charged with representing the lives of people who are living or once lived, and as we attempt to push these people into the molds of our texts, they push back. The final text is a product of our pushing and their pushing back, and no text, however dominant, lacks the traces of this counterforce.²²

Attention to these resistances and where they have been ignored echoes ethnographic work that by nature, works to understand all facets of a social field, even those that are understated and only implicitly understood. As I turn to my own subject matter and archive, I am heartened by the embrace of ethnographic methodologies within the archive.

²⁰ Stoler has long worked with archives in her published works before *Along the Archival Grain*, but it was this piece that spoke to the growing archival turn which was gaining momentum in the history field. See Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, 1st ed. (Duke University Press, 2005).

²¹ Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal.”

²² *Ibid.*, 189.

In regards to the nature of these spaces, there are many times I refer to security or law enforcement spaces. I consider the training spaces where security expertise is created as a security space. Though held in varied locations— hotel conference rooms, high school auditoriums, local law enforcement stations, surveillance industry trade shows— these trainings are attended by law enforcement professionals and held by private companies selling security expertise. Though I do not wish to create confusion by conflating security and law enforcement spaces, over the last thirty years these categories have blurred with the militarization of police, borders, surveillance, and drug interdiction efforts.²³ All levels of law enforcement convene in these spaces and engage with intelligence agents and federal agencies like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CPB), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This blurring is furthered by the rise of private industry and their role as defense consultants, military suppliers, border security purveyors, and law enforcement trainers. These training sites are security spaces, they are law enforcement spaces, they are private spaces, they are intelligence spaces, they are religious spaces. In a way, I am studying this confusion.

What is the Securityscape?

This project is about security expertise, how it is created, and what ideology it leverages and in turn communicates. This project is also about the State and its experts, who come from various backgrounds, academic or career pedigrees, and hold different relationships to the knowledge they produce. They are not an easy bunch to locate because they operate, teach, and publish across different fields. Likewise, the ideas they present can be located in policy hearings about border militarization, television shows featuring drug kingpins, legal debates about racial

²³ See Chapter 1.

and religious profiling, twitter beefs, law enforcement training curriculum, video game plots about surrounding transnational cartels, and scholarship that seeks to describe and corner the market on emerging new religious movements. However, all of the above has in common a myth about the border and borderlands, as well as the saints that are revered there. This myth has a long history of enabling State violence against those perceived as Other, and this history stretches into the present as security fields have diversified. To best capture the nebulous and diverse articulations of frontier myths, this project uses the framework of a securityscape to locate and gather a wide array of texts for analysis.

The securityscape remains the best place to locate the privatized expertise of the narco saint experts, their collaborators in academia, and the wide variety of media their ideas inform both directly and indirectly. Coined by Hugh Gusterson, and refined by Robert Albro, a “securityscape” refers to the “asymmetrical distributions of weaponry, military force, and military-scientific resources among nation-states and the local and global imaginaries of identity, power, and vulnerability that accompany these distributions”.²⁴ This includes the arrays of expertise-producing individuals and institutions, such as entities like thinktanks, “techno-scientific assemblages”, and self-made experts that, as discussed previously, are entwined, generative, and supported by the state. Where the security field is bounded with distinct forms of capital and barriers to entry, the securityscape is a porous and expansive entity that better captures how expertise is produced, spread, and leveraged across our privatized, networked, and information-soaked world. Moving away from narrow definitions of fields, as well as the State and its components, a “scape” allows us to see the working elements within that include a wide variety of actors and fields across law enforcement, media, military, academic policy, and private

²⁴ Albro et al., *Anthropologists in the SecurityScape*, 11.

commercial spheres. In particular, this project stretches this concept of securityscape to include and understand how security, religion, and knowledge production interact, brush against one another, and create a resilient culture that cannot be located in just one field. This project explores how fringe expertise can have echoes well past the fields it was produced in, and how the securityscape is a built and expanded with these echoes.

Religion in the Securityscape

The weight of the secularization thesis still affects the common conception of how religion and belief operate (or doesn't operate) in United States politics, public life, and the defense fields. Words like private, defense, and expertise conjure associations with hawkish rationality, economic profit, and calculated violence on the part of the state and its private industrial allies. The Enlightenment idea that religion would withdraw from matters of state developed into the 20th century secularization thesis suggested that religion will continue to retreat to private and personal lives behind church and home doors, its influence waning from political, civil, and public life in general.²⁵ Distinctions between old and new forms of religiosity developed within the thesis as it evolved from the monolithic conceptions of Weber and into contemporary religious studies classrooms with more nuance.²⁶ Now highly challenged in many social disciplines and particularly by scholars of religion in the Americas, assumptions of secularization affects the popular ability to recognize religion's still active and pervasive role in various facets of public and social life, including the activities of the United States security scape.²⁷ Similarly, the popular characterization of conservative political parties as voices of hard

²⁵ Rundell, "Review Essay-Charles Taylor and the Secularization Thesis,"

²⁶ Swatos and Christiano. "Introduction — Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept."

²⁷ United States government and legal systems failure to recognize "little r" religion, that is religion not officially associated with a church or large tradition, is the subject of *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018). For challenges and critique of the secularization thesis see, among many, Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.,"; Reaves, "Peter Berger and the Rise

fiscal sense and facts over “feelings” allows the effective obfuscation of the ideology behind their actions.²⁸ However, historians, religious studies scholars, and social scientists who study the borderlands, racial politics, and the knowledge production of the securityscape have always challenged this and illuminated the beliefs, imaginaries, and myths behind the rational-guise of state expertise.²⁹

Despite the lack of research on just how religious the average police department, police officer, or general state agent is, the law enforcement expertise community is clear on the high value placed in spirituality in policing. The law enforcement community, news sites, and published training bulletins all routinely devote articles, segments, and panels to matters of individual officer spirituality, religious motivations for policing, and spiritual resilience against enemies and workplace strain.³⁰ These pieces are marketed towards law enforcement officers and departments and provide statistics on the effects of religious and spiritual mindsets on their

and Fall of the Theory of Secularization.” ; Tamaru, "The Problem of Secularization.” ; Müller, “Secularisation Theory and Its Discontents.”

²⁸ Hong and Hermann, “FUCK YOUR FEELINGS,” ; McIntosh, "4 Crybabies and Snowflakes," in *Language in the Trump Era: Scandals and Emergencies* (2020), 74.

²⁹ To name a few, Chavez, *The Latino Threat*. ; Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*. ; Lorentzen, *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana*. ; D León, *La Llorona's Children: Religion*. ; Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice*. ; Martín, *Borderlands Saints*. ; De León, *Land of Open Graves*. ; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

³⁰ Jonathan Smith and Ginger Charles, “The Relevance of Spirituality in Policing: A Dual Analysis,” *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 12, no. 3 (2010): 320–38. ; Dan S. Willis, “Focus on Training: The Practice of Spirituality and Emotional Wellness in Law Enforcement,” *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin*, December 1, 2010.; Cary A. Friedman, “Value of Spiritual Survival Tools for Law Enforcement Officers,” *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 13, 2016; High Priority Targeting, Inc., “Police Books - Police Spirituality and Religion,” accessed November 24, 2020.; Samuel L. Feemster, *Spirituality: The DNA of Law Enforcement Practice*. (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007).; Samuel L. Feemster, “Wellness and Spirituality: Beyond Survival Practices for Wounded Warriors,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Behavioral Science Unit, 78, no. 5 (May 2009); Jeffrey G. Willets, “A Brief Introduction to the Language of Spirit and Law Enforcement.” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 78, no. 5 (May 2009).; Inez Tuck, “On the Edge: Integrating Spirituality Into Law Enforcement,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 78, no. 5 (May 2009): 14–21 Ginger L. Charles, “How Spirituality Is Incorporated in Police Work: A Qualitative Study” (Ph.D., United States -- California, Saybrook University, 2005); Fred Travis, “Brain Functioning as the Ground for Spiritual Experiences and Ethical Behavior,” *FBI L. Enforcement Bull.* 78 (2009): 26.; Licole R. Robinson, “Police Officers’ Perceptions of Spirituality for Managing Occupational Stress and Job Performance” (PhD Thesis, Walden University, 2019).

policing, their handling of stress, and ability to deal with mental illness related to the strains of their professional life. These texts encourage officers to incorporate religious values into their policing to withstand hostility and violence they receive from the public, and proposes they see themselves as “guardians” who uphold a “reverence for the laws” within the population they police.³¹ These publications are part of the larger “community policing” reform movement which has been popularly implemented across the United States. Law enforcement expertise in the form of academic policy papers and police bulletins advocate for a different police mindset, turning from “warriors” to “guardians” and the move to encourage spirituality and reverent mindsets on the job in individual officers is part of it. The police and criminal justice experts who encouraged this “empirically supported” mindset within community policing reforms reference ways civil religion may inspire the public to respect laws and norms, and that police officers should see themselves as protectors and exemplars of this.³² In support of these reforms and associated good publicity initiatives that are at the core of “community policing”, police officers undergo training curricula that encourage spirituality in their personal and work lives. In the height of the community policing push, US President Clinton praised community policing and referenced sacralizing “thin blue line” rhetoric, saying that “the safety of our citizens in their homes, and where they work and where they play . . . it all rests on that line”.³³ The “community policing”

³¹ Rahr and Rice, *From Warriors to Guardians*.

³² The community policing reform movement has been criticized by scholars and activists who study policing and crime for obfuscating the systems that cause crime and violence behind palatable language, whilst these reform efforts expand the policing apparatus into previously more distant fields of housing, mental health, and child protective services. However, the community policing agenda has been largely embraced by local police departments, and these changes have been publicized to response and assuage critiques of police violence, particularly against communities of color. Stuart, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest*.

³³ Wall, “The Police Invention of Humanity.” ; See also Carolyn Curiel, “Law Enforcement Vigil 5/13/93” (Office of Speechwriting), Clinton Digital Library, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/32958>.

trend and its focus on inspiring “reverence” and officer spirituality is just one example of the extent to which religious imaginaries and ideas are imparted and integrated into the securityscape, and the extent to which a closer understanding of police religiosity is warranted to understand the complex nature of the US securityscape. This project seeks this closer understanding of police religiosity and its presence in previously assumed entirely irreligious and secular fields.

Securitized Border Cosmologies

On October 12, 2018, a group of central American asylum-seekers departed Honduras in route to the Mexico-US Border. Fleeing violence and instability, these refugees gained widespread attention by the US Media. The “caravan” as it was labeled by both liberal and conservative news outlets and the US Trump Administration, revived the simmering discourse surrounding immigration, border militarization plans, and nationalism in the United States.³⁴ White Christian evangelical response to these asylum-seekers has been overwhelmingly reactionary, expressing the threat and danger outsiders and “weak” borders pose through biblical rationale and example. The Trump’s administration’s continued promise to build a US Mexico border wall and curb the spread of dangerous immigration was similarly popular among white Christians.³⁵

There is a long historical relationship between citizenship, race, religion, and border-crossing in the US Mexico borderlands. The Naturalization Act of 1790 depended entirely on categories of whiteness to determine candidates for citizenship, and prospective Americans from Mexico occupied a tentative place within that category.³⁶ The annexation of Texas in 1845 was

³⁴ Burton, “Several White Evangelical Leaders Reject Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric,”.

³⁵ Boorstein and Zauzmer, “White Evangelical Christians Fail.”

³⁶ Gregory Carter, “Race and Citizenship,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Immigration and*

spurred by religious and racial motivations by US leaders and border governors; Texas was taken both to “civilize and Christianize the world”, and because, as Pennsylvanian senator James Buchanan put it, “our race of men can never be subjected to the imbecile and indolent Mexican race.”³⁷ Historians have highlighted Christian Protestantism’s deep ideological role in motivating the founding and expansion of the United States; manifest destiny and the subsequent Christianization of the frontier pushed the border of the United States west, north, and south from the coast of the Atlantic Ocean onward.³⁸ This resulted in vast amounts of religious conversion efforts and a wide cultural genocides as Indigenous children were separated from their homes and placed in religious schools.³⁹ During and prior to this occurring in the United States, Mexico and the Catholic Church had a long history of similar violent efforts against indigenous communities, so much so that the Missions where this conversion, forced labor, and separation occurred have been emblemized into contemporary sanitized field trips taken by Southern Californian children as part of their primary education.⁴⁰ Similarly, the Southern Californian “Padres” San Diego baseball team draw their name and mascot from the friars who systematized and facilitated this region’s Christianization. That same baseball team wears camouflage on every Sunday home game in honor of the armed forces and their presence in the San Diego region. Religion provided the intimate tools and motivations for state agents and para-state agents to form and exercise empire in the United States since its inception.

Race and religions entwined relationship is visible within historical and modern productions, rhetoric, and actions of the US security scape, and in the historical imaginaries that

Ethnicity.

³⁷ Pinheiro, *Missionaries of Republicanism*, 43.

³⁸ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*.

³⁹ Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race*:

⁴⁰ Personal experience. Also quick Google searches. See also Keenan, “Visiting Chutchui.”

connect these temporal entities. As scholar María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo observed, the historical specter of "indios bárbaros" reflects colonial anxieties still very present in the minds of North American states.⁴¹ Tracing these anxieties from the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of the Americas to 1990s NAFTA in the 2000s military action against Al Qaeda, Saldaña-Portillo points out that the contemporary United States and Mexico still label terrorists and cartel leaders with code names drawn from indigenous resistances. In the process of colonization, indigenous peoples were either to be defended against, or incorporated into a Christian hierarchy by white settlers. As the imaginary of the "indios bárbaros" is repeated in law enforcement and state expertise, this specter of chaos and violence provides a useful rhetorical framework as the state imagines itself as a civilizing force even as it reveals imperial anxieties.

Saldaña-Portillo reveals how Mexico and US state agents saw themselves as paternalistic defenders against the invasions of barbarism, not oppressors or conquerors. Early colonists were required to internalize this role and individually advocate for Christianization through domination.⁴² This "defenders" language is present in contemporary large-scale policy initiatives that have characterized border security over the past thirty years; such as the title nomenclature of Operation Hold the Line, Gatekeeper, and Safeguard and the way the US state deputized citizens into individual and private state functions policing the border.⁴³ And as this project argues, this state project of border-making continues with similar cosmologies. These cosmologies delineate civilization from wilderness, and the people in these geographic imaginaries between individual saviors and barbarians. Unique to this case study are the law

⁴¹ Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies Across Mexico and the United States*.

⁴² *Ibid*, 36-51.

⁴³ Huspek, "Production of State, Capital, and Citizenry." ; Chavez, "Spectacle in the Desert: The Minuteman Project on the US-Mexico Border," in *Global Vigilantes* (London: Hurst, 2007), 25–46 ; Walsh, "Watchful Citizens: Immigration Control, Surveillance and Societal Participation." ; Walsh, "Border Theatre and Security Spectacles."

enforcement experts and securityscape allies that incorporate borderland saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde into the above Manichean cosmologies, further extending border making into everyday religious life. Religious studies scholars have long noted the weaponizing of the category of superstition and “primitive” religion to justify colonial and imperial action in virtually every geographic locale of the global world.⁴⁴ North America’s contemporary borders were created through conquest and violence both intimate and grand, both military and religious. As early violent conversion tactics sought to “modernize” Indigenous peoples with Christian education, this genocide was complemented with religiously motivated ideas of destiny that extended United States borders to the Pacific coast through conquest of Mexican and indigenous territory.

Just as US colonists, state agents, and soldiers imagined the frontier as open and dangerous space in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, painting both the Nation and indigenous peoples there as barbarians, modern security experts have taken great pains over the past decades to characterize Mexico as a failed and insurgent state that needs to be managed and guided by the United States. These characterizations are articulated with all the sensationalism of historical frontier conquest, actively centering those who set themselves up to navigate the unknowable and dangerous spaces just outside of imagined US civilization. This is partially facilitated and motivated through religious distinctions between modern and primitive religion, creating new classifications like canonized and uncanonized, and drawing on old labels of superstition to connect law enforcement opponents with historical ideas of a barbarous, yet conquerable frontier.

⁴⁴ For a few examples see Rivera and Pagán, *A Violent Evangelism*. ; Kuper, *Reinvention of Primitive Society*. ; Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire*.

Scholars of religion in the Americas were especially vocal in contesting the claim that societies became irreligious as they modernized, citing the increasingly diverse nature of religious life in the United States and Latin American countries.⁴⁵ The Americas are a sign that not only was religion present in the modern world, but that it was an evolving phenomenon with emergent areas still to study. The surge of Christian Nationalism over the past twenty years has garnered attention, especially after the United States presidential election of 2016, where religious voters turned out for the right-wing candidate Donald J. Trump and his symbolic renewal of “law and order,” in record numbers.⁴⁶ However, long before Trump’s cinch of the evangelical vote, scholars noted the “paranoid style” in American politics and the pseudo-religious apocalypticism that derives from it.⁴⁷ This apocalyptic millennialism has been found in Christian theology, politics, and lived religious experience since even before the founding of the US; apocalypticism has been a constant feature of the the lifespan of the United States.⁴⁸ Now into its third century, the US continues to express distinct apocalyptic and Christian Manichean religious ideology in mainstream politics and utilize religious rhetoric to justify large-scale security initiatives both domestically and internationally.

⁴⁵ Gustavo Morello SJ et al., “An Enchanted Modernity: Making Sense of Latin America’s Religious Landscape,”; Sonya Sharma, *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*; David Voas and Mark Chaves, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?,”; Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,”; José Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,”; Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research,”; Manuel A. Vásquez and Marie F. Marquardt, “Globalizing the Rainbow Madonna: Old Time Religion in the Present Age,”

⁴⁶ Jessica Martinez and Gregory a Smith, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” *Pew Research Center* (blog); Gregory a Smith, “Most White Evangelicals Approve of Trump Travel Prohibition and Express Concerns about Extremism,”; Gregory a Smith, “Among White Evangelicals, Regular Churchgoers Are the Most Supportive of Trump,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), Also Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump.”

⁴⁷ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”

⁴⁸ Meulemann, *Two Faces of American Religious Exceptionalism*.

The concern for national homeland and the positioning of that territoriality within a particular religious cosmology is a fixture of religious nationalism.⁴⁹ United States Christian nationalism is an ideological agenda that seeks to align national identity, iconography, and policies in the US with evangelical Christian doctrine and cosmology.⁵⁰ Though there remains work to be done on the adherence to Christian Nationalism within police and security forces, there is a definitive link between Christian Nationalism and punitive attitudes towards perceived deviance and criminality. In an examination of Christian nationalism and attitudes toward punishment, Johua Davis finds that the conflation of religious and national identity leads individuals to support capital punishment, desire harsher punishment for law violations, and a general opinion that there is a need for society to “crackdown on troublemakers.”⁵¹ Furthermore, belief that the establishment and progress of United States has an inherently Christian purpose positively correlates with the belief that police brutality is not a significant issue for people of color.⁵² Christian nationalists of any race are more likely to oppose interracial marriage, hold negative opinions of immigrants, Muslims, and other perceived “ethnoracial out-groups”.⁵³ Just as scholars observe high police sensitivity to perceived deviance, Davis observes the similar sensitivities among those who espouse Christian Nationalist sentiments, suggesting that Christian nationalism ideology solidifies in-group boundaries in ways that heighten the perceived threat of deviant behavior.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ O’Donnell, “The Deliverance of the Administrative State:.”

⁵⁰ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make America Christian Again.” ; Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance, in the Age of Identity and Empire.* ; Grace and Heins, “Redefining Refugee.”

⁵¹ Davis, “Enforcing Christian Nationalism: Examining the Link Between Group Identity and Punitive Attitudes in the United States.”; Davis, “Funding God’s Policies.”

⁵² Davis, “Funding God’s Policies.”; Davis, “Enforcing Christian Nationalism.”

⁵³ Perry, Whitehead, and Davis, “God’s Country in Black and Blue,” 132. ; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle, “Divine Boundaries.” ; Perry and Whitehead, “Christian Nationalism and White Racial Boundaries.”

⁵⁴ Davis, “Enforcing Christian Nationalism: Examining the Link Between Group Identity and Punitive Attitudes in the United States.”

More broadly, religious purpose, frameworks, and motivations are deeply tied to hegemonic projects of racial violence, as they have long been within the US securityscape. For example, Jonathon O'Donnell and Bruce Lincoln argue that discourses of alterity, what they call "demonologies", communicated through various discourses have real effect on how the target group operates, "...a given group reshapes its consciousness (of self, other, morality, and purpose) through select acts of discourse such that its members feel licensed ... in pursuing material advantages in increasingly aggressive ways."⁵⁵ These discourses are present in "spiritual warfare" texts and manuals, which are sources that frame "demonic activity as structural and determining of the material conditions of everyday life".⁵⁶ Scholars have discussed the ways spiritual warfare explains modern evangelical influence and action within domestic and international United States political movements.⁵⁷

This project is not about Christian Nationalism, or at least as Christian Nationalism has been approached by scholarship before. "The Law Enforcement Religiosity" explored in this dissertation shares the apocalypticism and binary cosmology with United States Christian nationalism, but this project examines the sociology of knowledge that is complementary to the ideological work of Christian Nationalism instead of the thing itself. ⁵⁸ The police as an entity are constructed as a perquisite for this civilization itself, effectively *creating* as well as holding the line between predatory primeval and modern civilized life.⁵⁹ As the securitystate experts look outward to its borders both geographic and conceptual, this cosmology becomes demonology in "an unflinching attempt to name, comprehend, and defend against all that threatens, frightens,

⁵⁵ O'Donnell, "The Deliverance of the Administrative State."

⁵⁶ O'Donnell, "The Deliverance of the Administrative State."

⁵⁷ Holvast, *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina*. ; Christerson and Flory, *Rise of Network Christianity*. ; McAlister, *Kingdom of God Has No Borders*.

⁵⁸ Cuéllar, "Deportation as a Sacrament of the State." ; Davis and Perry, "White Christian Nationalism and Relative Political Tolerance for Racists." ; Davis, "Enforcing Christian Nationalism."

⁵⁹ Wall, "Police Invention of Humanity:"

and harms...”⁶⁰ In defining what is civilized, human, and religious, they also define what is not—what is deviant, evil, chaotic, and superstitious—and narco saint experts specialize in both sides of this, creating and defining the normative and deviant with religious means and religious terms. As this project shows, expertise has the ability to shape domestic and international projects of empire.⁶¹ How this expertise is communicated, how its framed with moral religious imperative, shapes and enables a deeply personal investment in the work of policing and border security. As experts deploy rhetoric similar to Christian Nationalists, they both shape the conflict with metaphysical stakes and also grant divine justification for acts of violence against racial and religious others.

Saints, Narco Saints, and Experts

This project is not about “narco saints”, as saints such as Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde have become commonly known, but instead about the experts and the archive that calls these religious personas “narco saints”. But understanding the saints’ presence, their “narco” label, and the discourse they exist within is important for determining where the security and police experts deviate from reality when they act as authoritative sources on these religious borderland figures.

People who religiously seek out Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte for protection are accessing a larger Catholic system even as they pray to personalities condemned by that larger system. This larger system is the Cult of the Saints, where saints, and more importantly their physical and visual manifestations in the real world, provide touchstones or points of entry to the divine. Those who revere saints do so within their Catholic faith and devotion to folk or informal

⁶⁰ Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*. ; O’Donnell, “The Deliverance of the Administrative State.”

⁶¹ See Chapter 1.

saints and approved official saints are not mutually exclusive for most Catholics.⁶² The choice to seek aid from an uncanonized saint is not inherently based in defiance or any rejection of Catholic doctrine; instead, a miracle attributed to any saint will confirm that saint's legitimacy in the eyes of a devotee, informal or not. Divine aid and perceived results are achieved, a sign in and of itself that the larger divine hierarchy was successfully accessed through the saint. Although noncanonized and often condemned by the Catholic Church, Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte's amulets and statuettes occupy the same shelves as Our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Francis in the shopfronts of botanicas across the United States and Mexico.⁶³ Devotion to noncanonized saints, like other practices within popular religion, is not necessarily intended to subvert official doctrine, but is meant to supplement it when that doctrine does not fill its devotees' needs.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the reputation of informal saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde as narco saints is housed within larger discourses of criminality, race, citizenship, and borders.

Scholarship that analyzes these discourses often do so by addressing the larger cultural movements of the US Mexico borderlands. Cultural entities rarely come from a singular point of origin or sole creator, but instead are mutually constituted and refined through conversations and negotiations between their adherents, supporters, and detractors.⁶⁵ Similarly, the specific defense experts who produce knowledge about specific religious practices and personas, do not exist in a vacuum, and are often in conversation with the devotees they profile, target, and arrest and the communities they police. The formation of culture does not go one way, so as a large portion of

⁶² David Kerr, "Pope Praises Noncanonized Saints of the Church," *Catholic News Agency*, accessed April 4, 2015.

⁶³ Luís León, "'Soy una Curandera y Soy una Católica': The Poetics of a Mexican Healing Tradition," in *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*, ed. Timothy M. Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 114.

⁶⁴ Van Ham, "Barrio, Borderlands, and Beyond."

⁶⁵ Sack, "Power of Place and Space,".

this project focuses on how narco saint experts construct narco saints to justify their own presence and the larger US militarization and securitization projects on the border, it is important to understand they are merely one part of this conversation.

The conversation surrounding narco saints exists within a larger debate between scholars and defense experts about the existence and popularity of narco culture, and the extent to which those who ascribe to the culture are also part of the illicit narcotics trade. “Narco Culture” is a blanket category for the symbols, practices and cultural signifiers associated with the North American drug trade as it exists in both the United States and Mexico. This includes styles of dress, television and film that entwine cartel politics in the personal drama of its characters, music that lauds or mourns significant figures in the trade, and other media and culture. Early scholarly discussions of narco culture explain it as “the cultural imaginary surrounding the drug trade”.⁶⁶ Although definitions differ, narco culture derives from the pervasive nature of the trafficking, buying, and selling of narcotics throughout both the United States and Mexico and the harsh, yet every day, realities of the illicit trade. Shaylih Muehlmann stresses the intimate, domestic nature of the narcotics trade that is rarely captured in the sensationalistic news coverage, police outlook, or political analysis applied to the illegal industry. People who operate the lower-levels of the narcotics industry distribute out of homes and personal vehicles, and entire families are affected and contribute in small ways to the ground-level of the trade, covering for family members, hiding product, and facing associated violence. The drug trade operates “crucially through networks of ordinary people and legitimate businesses, in ways that profoundly imbricate everyday life.”⁶⁷ Muehlmann’s research challenges the distinction

⁶⁶ Zavala, “Imagining the U.S.-Mexico Drug War.” ; See also Rojas-Sotelo, “Narcoaesthetics in Colombia, Mexico, and the United States.”

⁶⁷ Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots*, 7.

between informal and formal economies, conceptions of guilty and innocent, and victim and perpetrator, and this approach is valuable, even necessary to understand the appeal of something like narcocultura. Differentiating between those who traffic narcotics and those who do not “is complicated by the profound interlocking of legal and illegal sectors and by the web of social and economic connections that characterize everyday life in the borderlands”⁶⁸ Thus, narco culture is born from that intervention into everyday life, and the responding quest to reestablish security.⁶⁹ Narcocultura represents much more than the drug trade, it reflects the complexities of socio-economic marginalization, a lack of social mobility, and a social life where inescapable ugly aspects of the drug trade are recontextualized and reclaimed with aesthetic tragedy, honor, and fame.⁷⁰

Narco culture allows people to cope and build communities around the shared experience of living within the drug industry’s sphere of influence, and is far more nuanced than the overt glamour, conflict, and myth the most visible aspects—songs, television, and merchandise—of narco culture display. The symbols, practices and cultural signifiers that make up narcoculture speak to everyday resistance, perseverance, ambition, and tragedy more than insurrection or any large-scale upheaval of society. Narcoculture maintains a realistic and somewhat pessimistic view of upward social mobility that reflects the socio-economic inequality experienced by those affected by the narcotics trade, and the fictional and fictionalized stories it contains do not shy from the gendered violence and danger associated with the trade.⁷¹ While commercial mystification of the drug-trafficker persona within narcocorridos, which are songs that account the lives and natures of both fictional and real drug traffickers, usually include themes of

⁶⁸ Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots*, 182.

⁶⁹ Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta, “Corridos and La Pura Verdad.”

⁷⁰ Cabañas, “Imagined Narcoscapes: Narcoculture and the Politics of Representation.”

⁷¹ Durante, “Can the Subaltern Fly?”

masculine resistance, defiance, and fame, these songs are constructed to contextualize drug violence and poverty that exists with or without narcoculture's presence. The process of song-writing, creating art, and receiving positive attention as a result, rewrites the narcotics trade's unpleasant reality into a palatable culture which can then be communicated and shared.⁷²

Scholars of borderland culture generally conclude that those who listen to narcocorridos or display images of narco saints do so out of an attachment to the values of self-sufficiency and independence inherent in the illicit profession, and to cope with the pervasive violence, more than any direct support of said violence or any large-scale societal insurgency.⁷³ Agency and the retaking of agency is at the core of narcocorridos, and inherent in all narcocultures' products and general popularity.⁷⁴ Mark Edburg discusses the cultural formation of the narco trafficker identity in his research of male participants in narcoculture. Edburg makes a distinction between a determinate culture and a shaping culture, discussing the extent to which narco culture indicates criminal behavior or whether it merely shapes the values associated with that behavior. He argues that narcocorridos are an example of the latter, and that the songs and music industry are deeply affecting as they shape how people place themselves for or against specific power structures and institutions, but the author argues that consumption nor production of this music should not be taken as indicative of distinct behaviors, illegal or otherwise.⁷⁵

Narco saints, and the narco culture many argue these saints exist within, form from a dialectic between devotees, law enforcement, structures of power. Laura Roush points out how devotees possess a keen sensitivity and positional awareness of the attention that is paid to Santa

⁷² Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta, "Corridos and La Pura Verdad."

⁷³ Carey, *Women Drug Traffickers*, 7 ; Muehlmann, Villalobos, and Ramírez-Pimienta, "Corridos and La Pura Verdad." ; Muniz, "Narcocorridos and the Nostalgia of Violence."

⁷⁴ Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta, "Corridos and La Pura Verdad."

⁷⁵ Edburg, *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border*.

Muerte by institutional powers like the Catholic church, state governments, and federal and domestic police forces. Devotees of Santa Muerte are aware that violent acts will be attributed to them and work to change this narrative through their rare public performances, which are more common in Mexico than in the US. These rites are themselves acts of visible rhetoric designed to counter harmful narratives of Santa Muerte's transgressive violence, as much as they are public rituals to remind devotees that they are part of a community. The rites are both religious practice and a rejection of claims that, "the Santa Muerte cult embodies a hidden will to do harm, that the devotion has an invisible leadership that is cruel."⁷⁶ The collective ritual engages with the discourse surrounding narco saints, actively acknowledging and rejection associations of violence. This responsiveness in turn has deeply shaped how devotees exercise their belief. Not only is this contention present, Roush argues that the tension has been generative and transformative; Santa Muerte cult's leadership, informal though it is, has shaped religious practice into rhetorical responses against overt accusations of illicit activity, maintaining and negotiating the cults presence within conversations of borderland violence and criminality, as well issues of race, gender, and class within Mexico. Additionally, opposition against Santa Muerte's reverence by organized religion, the secular state, and law enforcement agents have in turn shaped the worship itself into a deeply appealing religious movement. The collective identity of the cult, formed from indignation at Santa Muerte's misunderstood nature and similar awareness of their own position within social, economic, and political hierarchies, drew numbers of devotees and made it possible for the religion to go public, where it had not before. The persecution, experienced by all those subject to oppressive authority, pressurized loose practices into a cohesive religious belief.⁷⁷ Similarly, reverence to Juan Soldado and Jesús Malverde has

⁷⁶ Roush, , "Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo,"132, 130.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

developed from mythic stories about crime, wrongful punishment, and resistance to hegemonic structures, shaped by a discursive back and forth between the policed and those policing.⁷⁸

Located on law enforcement side of this dialectic, this dissertation examines the production and circulation of ideas about folk borderlands saint and their relationships to crime, deviancy, race, and their place on the border. Similar in approach to the way Edward Said located “orientalism” not in the “orient” but in the production of knowledge in the West, I locate my examination of knowledge-production about narco-saints in the networks and writings of mostly white, male, experts in the US who have crafted narrative about these religious figures that can be found in police trainings, television series, video games, and social media.

Organization of the Work

The following chapters ask many questions, but those questions center around explaining how security experts, often marginal ones, managed to monopolize understandings of informal borderland saints in ways that deeply affect their own fields, police operation, and the safety and rights of the devotees. As with most sociological or historical questions, the explanation arises from a complex interplay of history, individual action, and the molding pressure of culture. This complexity is reflected in the organization of my chapters.

Chapter one explores the “securityscapes” and draws upon theoretical frameworks that best contextualize narco experts and their expertise within larger discussions of defense experts, border history, state violence, and knowledge production. This chapter provides the history of the US Mexico borderlands and the US security state as it pertains to privatization trends, border expertise, and the creation of the narco saint expertise field itself. The “securityscape” offers a

⁷⁸ Dahlin, “Socio-Economic Indicators and Patron Saints of the Underrepresented.” ; Creechan and De la Herrán Garcia, “Without God or Law.”

way to examine the intersections and connection between chapter seemingly disparate fields of industry, state institutions, legal systems, media, and geographic borders into an interconnected assemblage that operates as a generative site of knowledge production.

Chapter two examines the “experts” at the center of the story. Somewhat biographic in nature, this section focuses in on these people, their careers, and the interactions with the subject of their expertise. Specifically, this chapter explores how border imaginaries have shaped their self-conceptions of their own position on the geographic and professional borders, and enables these experts to leverage their liminality to create authority. Using biographic details, external interviews, and online footprints this chapter is a deep dive into the positionality, history, and motivation of specific narco saint experts.

Chapter three dives into the pedagogical archive of these experts. It is an investigative analysis into the documents published and disseminated by narco saint experts, teasing out the ideas and concepts within to better explain how experts have monopolized legal, defense, and popular cultural discourse with their version of narco saints. Using content analysis of training materials, this chapter works to understand what is old, and what is new about these discourses and in so doing unearths the presence of the deeply religious nature at the core of law enforcement culture. This chapter is the core of this project and outlines the law enforcement religiosity that is the main intervention of my work.

Chapter four addresses the popular depictions of narco saints such as Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde as they are communicated to the public through television, news media, travel journalism, and video games. These chapters address how the “fruit” of narco saint expertise is consumed in general spaces beyond its initial audiences, and then impacts conceptions of the border, and the lives of migrants and marginalized religious communities.

Chapter five approaches the complicit nature of academic expertise in projects of State violence, using the case study of Dr. Andrew Chesnut, a Virginia Commonwealth University professor and collaborator of one of the narco saint experts discussed in the project.

This dissertation closes with a final discussion of what the “blue line religion” as exemplified by this exploration of narco saints means for the modern state of policing and border enforcement in the United States. It posits that there is considerable research needed on the state of modern police culture, particular the religiosity of State agents, but also puts the case studies discussed in this project in context of the larger implications of the securityscape and its expertise.

Chapter One: Small Wars, Securityscapes

On a Monday in El Paso, Texas, three-hundred local police, DEA agents, and border patrol agents filter into Bowie High School's auditorium. At the front of the auditorium before the stage long tables are set up and display over a hundred religious amulets, statuettes, prayer cards and even some pop culture characters.⁷⁹ A skeleton dressed in holy robes looms over one end of the display while smaller statues and images represent bandit saints, aspects of the Cuban-West African Santería, and the cartoon Tweety Bird are spread before the audience. The screen is pulled down and ready to show video. The man standing in front of this display and ready to present this law enforcement training seminar is Robert Almonte. Up before the sitting attendees in a dark blue suit, Almonte explains to the group and the news crew following him that narcotics traffickers pray using the items collected on the tables for protection against law enforcement, and that many of these devotees conduct dark and violent acts as part of these rituals. According to Almonte, these items can alert patrolling law enforcement agents to the presence of dangerous narcotics traffickers and be used as evidence to justify searches of private property. This section of the training course consists of an explanation of the collection and then a video produced by Almonte himself which details the saints allegedly revered by drug traffickers as well as grisly images of their purported rituals. Longer training seminars can last days and include separate sessions on narco culture, such as narcocorridos, fashion, and other cultural signifiers of the drug trade, as well as more traditional law enforcement topics from other instructors employed by Almonte's private consulting training company. Following forced removal from his appointed position as the US Marshal of the San Antonio district, Almonte

⁷⁹ Daniel Borunda, "Drug Cartels Seek Help from Catholic Saints, Santa Muerte, Expert Says," *El Paso Times*, November 7, 2017.

founded the private company, Almonte Consulting, that provides this law enforcement officer training, teaching at these local seminars and conducting sessions at law enforcement conferences on a monthly basis throughout the United States. In addition to running the company and providing its training instruction, Almonte consistently serves as an expert witness in criminal proceedings where law enforcement officers have used borderland religious material to discover illicit narcotics in the vehicles, residences, and personal possessions of devotees.⁸⁰ In these testimonials, Almonte argues that saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde are not real Catholic saints, but violent superstitions that threaten border security and US communities, and thus, these religious practices are subject to use as evidence of wrongdoing. Almonte is one of a small group of parastatal security experts operating in the United States who have come to be known by their expertise regarding now controversial informal borderland saints. They draw their experience from careers as state agents, education in military studies programs, and personal travel journalism. Though their names are consistently cited in any news coverage that discusses Narco saints, they exist largely on the margins as independent consultants, loosely-affiliated defense intellectuals, and entrepreneurial hobbyists. Lacking the polished attachment to defense thinktanks and policy institutes, and also without the loud rugged spectacle of border vigilantes, self-styled experts like Almonte represent a unique space in the border discourse of the US Mexico borderlands.

Almonte is not the only expert operating in this industry, but he is one of the most visible. Narco saint experts operate on the fringes of a much larger industry of private consultants, security professionals, and technology companies that outfit the border security apparatus of the

⁸⁰ United States v. Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014).; U.S. Department of Justice, “Mexican National Sentenced to 135 Months in Prison for Methamphetamine Trafficking Conviction,” News release, October 12, 2012, http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/usao-nm/legacy/2013/04/15/2012-10-12_bobadilla-campos_pr.pdf.

United States. This chapter historically and theoretically locates this marginal and parastatal expert community of pseudo-academics, private entrepreneurs, law enforcement personalities, and hobbyist influencers currently operating in the US Mexico borderlands and the publications, ideas, and knowledge they produce. To do this, this chapter maps out the broader historical trends of border securitization, privatization, and the current polarized discourse within the region that allows these experts to operate. Their place within border security discourses has been created and facilitated by the history of the US Mexico border and rising militarization of both geography, government, and expertise over the last fifty years. Within these securitization trends, these experts have come to utilize a very specific professional positionality to become “knowledge makers” regarding specific religious practices—but this positionality is enabled and informed by the security apparatus of the United States. Unlike traditional defense intellectuals who operate with institutional oversight and credentials, these experts produce and disseminate expertise as largely independent actors. Though some have affiliation with United States universities and thinktanks, their publications, media presence, and public testimony regarding informal religious practices in the US Mexico borderlands are produced independently without peer review or substantial publishing standards. The result of this production are ideas that are easily sold to the state to support its dominant discourses of race, threat, and military necessity on the border, as well as the amplification of fringe and bigoted perspectives in popular and legal spheres.

Foremost, this chapter is a discussion of knowledge production, but it is also a discussion of State reach and State disavowal. The sociology of knowledge, specifically its approach to discourse and small expertise producing communities, provides an understanding of why these experts matter and how their expertise travels beyond their own security field to affect the

culture and conceptions surrounding the US Mexico border. The privatized nature of this expertise allows the state to concurrently utilize the knowledge produced to increase arrests and militarize the border region, but also rely on the privatized and contractual nature of the industry to disavow the consequences. Just as these experts position themselves in the role of knowledge specialist, they occupy a tenuous place in the US security apparatus and its adjacent legal systems. The history of US Mexico border militarization and privatization provide the backdrop to the presence of these experts and their role in the region. These experts present themselves as an alternative to the critical scholarship of the academy, and represent a shift of the US security apparatus towards loosely affiliated private enterprise and independent contractors, a shift which is mirrored in the last thirty years of economic neoliberal policy and development.⁸¹ To locate these experts and the expertise they produce, I situate them within the sociology of knowledge production, border studies, and discussions on the privatization, neoliberalism, and militarization of the US Mexico borderlands in the past fifty years. Considering the yet understudied nature of these marginal yet influential epistemic communities, various academic disciplines provide theoretical insight into these experts' place in border discourse and the US security apparatus and the ideologies which affect many levels of the US Security State.

This chapter draws upon theoretical frameworks that best contextualize individuals like Robert Almonte and his expertise within larger discussions of defense expertise, border history, state violence, and knowledge production. This chapter provides the history of the US Mexico borderlands and the US security state as it pertains to privatization trends, border expertise, and the creation of the narco saint expertise field. The arrival of narco saint expertise has less to do

⁸¹ Avant and Nevers, "Military Contractors & the American Way of War," 88-99; Hill, "The Environmental Divide," 157-87; Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, "Neoliberalism, Militarism, and Armed Conflict," 1-17; Paley, "Drug War," 109-32.

with the rising popularity of narco saints or the supposed danger of these religious practices the experts defame, and more to do with the history, culture, securitization the border beginning fifty years ago.

Marginal “State” Expertise and Cop Knowledge

Narco saint experts are part of a larger for-profit industry and movement to militarize the southwest border in the United States. Their expertise can be seen as concurrently serving state interests, as well as building themselves up as entrepreneurial experts, albeit with differing levels of success and observable effect. This small expertise field remains at the margins of a much larger defense expertise industry, which is in turn part of the defense field. To understand this system of fields and subfields, it is important to consider the development and bureaucratization of security over the past fifty years, as well as the impact of law enforcement and security paradigms have had in terms of the Bordieuan concepts of field and capital.

Security Landscapes and Paradigms

The bureaucratization of security over the past three decades has dramatically shifted and diversified how security experts produce knowledge. This bureaucratization, defined as the ordering and standardizing of routines, led to the codification of the security knowledge field as a distinct epistemic community.⁸² This process has evolved over time as those who study, practice, and provide security formed into epistemic communities with great impact on policy, international relations, and the practice of security.⁸³ These communities of like-minded experts create shared understandings, their theoretical and practical ideas become political expectations that can and were acted upon on by the state.⁸⁴ These epistemic communities were formed with

⁸² Roth and Wittich, *Economy and Society*

⁸³ Haas, *When Knowledge Is Power*, 1-35.

⁸⁴ Adler, "The Emergence of Cooperation," 101-45.

both state actors and non-state actors from varied fields, and often emerged to act in tandem and in complement to the state, but not under its direct control. Academic institutions are examples of this independent cooperation.⁸⁵ In their impact on policy and state action, the state is both acted upon by these epistemic communities, but also depends on them to study, practice, and “do” security in ways that have become privately marketable. This is not to say that all expertise communities have become privatized, the diversification is felt unevenly throughout the broad field of expertise. Some federal intelligence agencies are institutionalized and are dominated by singular professions and high barriers to entry, where as other security expert communities, for example cybersecurity, are dominated by non-state actors and heavily influenced by market and competition.⁸⁶ Overall though, the market for security expertise is growing, becoming highly specialized, and more informal in a “proliferation” process where experts from a wide array of backgrounds compete for federal dollars and attention. Due to the diversified and bureaucratized nature of the security fields, and the many fields that have since become similarly bureaucratized and securitized fields, such as migration, drug treatment, social work, and even many academic fields, the local of the securityscape remains the best place to locate the privatized expertise of the narco saint experts. Coined by Hugh Gusterson, and refined by Robert Albro, a “securityscape” refers to the “asymmetrical distributions of weaponry, military force, and military-scientific resources among nation-states and the local and global imaginaries of identity, power, and vulnerability that accompany these distributions”.⁸⁷ This includes the arrays of expertise-producing individuals and institutions, such as entities like thinktanks, “techno-scientific assemblages”, and self-made experts that, as discussed previously, are entwined,

⁸⁵ Adler, "The Emergence of Cooperation," 101-45.

⁸⁶ Neumann and Sending, "Expertise and Practice,"

⁸⁷ Albro et al., *Anthropologists in the SecurityScape*, 11.

generative, and supported by the state. Moving away from narrow definitions of the state and its components, a “scape” allows us to see the working elements within that include a wide variety of actors and fields across law enforcement, media, military, policy, and private commercial spheres.

Despite the pervasive presence of their rhetoric, experts like Robert Almonte have yet to gain attention in academic circles. Due to their marginal nature and often independent operation outside of typical sites of state knowledge production in thinktanks or academic circles, these experts produce work for limited audiences. However, their work ripples out into different areas of expertise, news circuits, legal spheres, and cultural fields. In addition, their work often serves the state’s interests and their ideas are articulated and reified in policy, criminal courts, and the popular culture of both law enforcement circles and the general public. For this reason, this project works with theoretical understandings of knowledge and expertise in relation to the state and its agents. The production of science and knowledge encompasses many actors and publics. Few have discussed the specific expert communities who operate at the margins of their own fields and networks, who have yet to completely dominate or competitively sell themselves to the state.⁸⁸ To address this gap, I turn to the sociology of knowledge and discussions regarding terrorism experts, policing expertise, and border security knowledges within it. The production of expertise has often been tied to production of policy and the interests of the state. The two formed “symbiotically” according to theorists like Michel Foucault and many others.⁸⁹ Foucault asserted that the basis of modern governance is dependent on experts who categorize and problematize populations through the classification systems that they produce. The production of

⁸⁸ Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.

⁸⁹ Foucault, *Discipline And Punish*; Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*; Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*; Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.

knowledge, disciplines, and expertise is an integral part of what allows governments and their agents to police, or discipline, its people.⁹⁰ For some scholars, the state and the intellectual field are inseparable; Capitalist state apparatuses in particular completely control knowledges and expertise to reproduce productive, and unequal, power relations.⁹¹ In these systems the scientist state has a “permanent monopolization” over knowledge and how that knowledge is used, and actively controls the intellectual fields to maintain that power through the use of technocratic facts, science, and expertise.⁹² Additionally, as discourse is monopolized by a single group, their expertise may become codified into norms that can easily extend beyond their original field and influence larger portions of society.⁹³

Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of fields and symbolic capital introduce a more nuanced understanding of the different spheres within something so large and nebulous as the state and its operations. Bourdieu’s ideas have been deeply influential in the sociology of knowledge as well as the more concrete security studies, the latter of which often overlaps policing theory and border security studies.⁹⁴ Bourdieu defines a field, like the one experts like Almonte use to interact, influence, and learn from law enforcement agents within, as a “network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” which are occupied by actors.⁹⁵ This field acts as a series of intersecting relationships between these actors’ positions and their normative behaviors. These internalized norms form what Bourdieu called, habitus or “dispositions [actors in a field] have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of economic

⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

⁹¹ Rose and Miller, “Political Power Beyond the State,” 271–303; Zafar, *Coin-operated Anthropology*.

⁹² Ar, Hall, and Camiller, *State, Power, Socialism* 57-65.

⁹³ Stampnitzky, 2013.

⁹⁴ Didier, “Internal and External Security(ies),” 91–116.; Frowd, “Field of Border Control,” 226–41.; Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity*; Williams, *Culture and security*

⁹⁵ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 97.

and social condition.”⁹⁶ This habitus has been commonly used to discuss police subculture and the racial, gendered, and class conceptions that police operate from and are restricted by.⁹⁷ Agents within a field compete for symbolic capital characteristic of their field, symbolic capital being described as “any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and recognize it to give it value.”⁹⁸ For example, applied to “narco saint” experts, these experts leverage their position on the borders of their geographic and intellectual fields to explain their exclusive knowledge of little known religious practices. They justify their presence within legal and government discourse through purported authority on “spiritual beliefs” that few others acknowledge the danger of.⁹⁹ Experts may operate across and between fields, rendering Bourdieuan field theory less useful when explaining marginal actors. Much of Bourdieu’s work concerns relations within one field where social actors operate and may vie for different forms of capital, however this theory does not aptly encompass actors who remain uncompetitive or marginal in their respective fields. Scholars have also noted that the practice of applying Bourdieu’s theory to real world examples is made difficult by the sometimes inexact bounds of concepts like habitus, where its presence is easily observable, but its parts remain hard to codify into concrete analyses.¹⁰⁰ Despite the fluctuating nature of knowledge and culture, experts and expertise are still generally studied through their institutions or disciplines. This can let experts who operate between or across different fields, or experts in small newly established spheres of knowledge and expertise, fall through the cracks. These marginal experts however,

⁹⁶ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 105.

⁹⁷ Chan, *Changing Police Culture*; Ganapathy and Cheong, "The “Thinning” Blueline,” 277-94; Manning, “The Police”; Ostermann, "Communities of Practice at Work,” 473-505; Wood, "Cultural Change in the Governance of Security," *Policing and Society*, 31-48;

⁹⁸ Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Farage, "Rethinking the State,” 1-18, 8.

⁹⁹ More on this content in Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁰ Herbert, "Police Subculture Reconsidered," 343-370.

have a distinct ability to affect operations of the security state in various ways. Fledgling fields that have yet to establish their brand of symbolic capital, or whose experts are still trying to independently construct their field, yet still operate and produce expertise, remain understudied. This presents a problem when studying liminal or restricted knowledges, like the narco saint expertise produced over the last thirty years. Even with these contentions, Bourdieu's concept of *field* remains useful as a place where actors struggle for credibility and codification of the subject matter, even as others expand these theoretical concepts to account for expertise produced outside and between traditional sites of knowledge production. Centering this discussion within defense fields, I seek to draw attention to small actors who have managed to affect legal, security, and popular discourses despite their marginal, circumspect, and contentious status within larger fields of defense and knowledge production, and discuss the historical shifts and securitization trends that have enabled the amplification of their ideas.

The 9/11 attacks in the United States centered security discourses and hyper-vigilant common sense in policy discussions, international relations, and human rights issues. This rise of this security paradigm has prompted scholars across other disciplines to address the lack of research regarding the internal operations and culture of the military, police, and state intelligence communities and their associated expertise.¹⁰¹ As scholars expand varying disciplines to understand how the state creates, impacts, and controls expertise in regards to foreign intervention, border security, and development, small quiet expert communities that cater to traditionally closed audiences, like law enforcement and defense professionals, still remain

¹⁰¹ Greg Feldman, "Location, Isolation and Disempowerment: The Swift Proliferation of Security Discourse among Policy Professionals," in *The Anthropology of Security: Perspectives from the Frontline of Policing, Counter-terrorism and Border Control*, ed. Maguire Mark, Frois Catarina, and Zurawski Nils (London: Pluto Press, 2014): 62-82; Goldstein, "Toward a Critical Anthropology."

understudied.¹⁰² Nonetheless their expertise effects and informs the operation of policy makers, law enforcement, and border security agents they teach and produce to. Research institutes, universities, and military scholars formed communities of experts that dominate the discourse regarding what terrorism is and how to combat it. Critical approaches often label terrorism expertise as government propaganda, implemented through expert proxies in direct service of state interests.¹⁰³ These scholars emphasize the self-perpetuating reach of the state through the tools of expertise. Lisa Stampnitzky takes a deeper dive into this terrorism expert community in the United States as they have attempted to legitimize their field into a discipline over the past fifty years.¹⁰⁴ Stampnitzky's work challenges past scholarship that views terrorism studies as a similarly highly coherent and bounded industry with a hierarchical structure of expertise. Instead of viewing experts simply as state proxies, the aims and motivations of the experts themselves reveal an independence from the state that complicates past scholarships assertions that expertise production is wholly a state enterprise. Past studies on knowledge production focus on the stable and measurable nature of institutional sites, missing interesting instances of irregular knowledge and incompetence that have shaped how we conceive of phenomenon like terrorism.¹⁰⁵ These power-centric analyses of terrorism experts have not taken into account the interplay between experts' ambitions, the "practices of knowledge and governance" they create, and the violent events that shaped public perception and fear. This interplay lead to the classification of terrorism as a "moral" issue despite experts' attempts to purify the discipline into a social

¹⁰² Exceptions like Stampnitzky's 2013 *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism"* provide a window into marginal or "liminal" expertise communities that sought, and failed as she argues, to discipline their subject matter expertise into a cohesive and reputable discipline.

¹⁰³ Herman and O'Sullivan, *The "Terrorism" Industry*. ; Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats*.

¹⁰⁴ Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*, 2013.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

science.¹⁰⁶ In these instances, many experts worked against the state's labeling of terrorism as unknowably evil. The moralistic discourses surrounding the subject of terrorism and the lack of credentials required of experts prevented the study from attaining respectability amidst other established scholarship fields. In comparison, Stampnitzky gives the example of counter-???insurgency studies, which has been embraced and made credible in academic circles, yet maintained its ties and funding interests with the state. Scholarship has taken for granted that security experts operate as extensions of the state, when the reality the connection between these expertise communities and the state is more complicated; experts vary in their impact to and independence from the state's apparatus.¹⁰⁷ In the 1970s and 1980s when theorists of the state and its knowledge production, such as Foucault, studied the phenomenon, insurgency experts worked closely and often uniformly with government throughout the Cold War.¹⁰⁸ However, progressing past this era, the production of the knowledge has since become more outsourced to non-governmental actors. Through both neoliberal privatization of the government functions and the globalization of knowledge through technologies like the internet, the industry of knowledge production has become less centralized around the state itself, though perhaps not from its interests.¹⁰⁹ While experts still work in conjunction with the state, the degree of independence varies and should not be assumed across all fields.

“Training and Experience”

Keeping in mind these assumptions, I look to expert communities more marginal than Stampnitzky's terrorism experts. Unlike the communities that rose to prominence in the 1980s

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 5, 10-11.

¹⁰⁸ Price, *Cold War Anthropology*. ; Stahl, "Think Tanks, Foreign Policy."

¹⁰⁹ Carnoy and Castells, "Globalization, the Knowledge Society."

following an obsession with terrorist activity on the international scale, narco saint experts become visible in the early 2000s.¹¹⁰ This visibility begins after a decade of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) interest in securing the US Mexico border against illicit trade and Robert Almonte's testimony in criminal court cases and his training sessions start to appear in the wake of the much-analyzed border security initiatives of the 1990s. Almonte and his fellow experts draw their authority as experts from quoted "training and experience" as law enforcement officers and professional involvement with military, federal, state, and local agents. Their data, research, and analytical experience regarding "narco saint" religious practices are drawn from anecdotal observations during their professional time in the field as and alongside law enforcement personnel. This means that their opinions and views of religious personas such as Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde were shaped by law enforcement and defense conceptions of safety, deviance, and acceptable behavior that were in effect during their early careers in the 1980s and 1990s. These experts, while producing expertise similar in structure and subject matter to terrorism and insurgency experts, did not and do not seek engagement with peer-reviewed sources or research. Unlike the terrorism experts who continued to rise from academic institutions, narco saint experts have made little effort to bridge any divide between state and academic bodies of knowledge.¹¹¹ Instead, Almonte, Bunker, and others in this fledgling subfield present themselves as alternatives to academic research, viewing information produced by the

¹¹⁰ Both Bunker and Almonte begin their careers as narco saint experts in the early 2000s, and it is during this decade where religious material associated with known "narco saints" become visible in criminal courts and used as proof of wrong-doing and drug trafficking. Prior to this, both were associated with active members of law enforcement, border security, and defense communities.

¹¹¹ The lack of academic engagement will be discussed further in Chapter 2, but as noted previously, though Bunker markets himself as an academic, he does so without engagement with traditional disciplines that might approach religious and cultural practices with nuance or theoretical backing. When engaging with theory, Bunker adopts Samuel P. Huntington's cultural essentialist model that argues for distinct and conflicting cultures incompatible with one another. See Robert J. Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

academy to be out of touch with policing as it truly exists “on the ground”.¹¹² This situates these experts’ work far from fields like sociology, history, anthropology or any body of work that entertains a critical analysis of border conflict, racial profiling, and police work in general. Experts like Almonte and Bunker function and market themselves as translators between large systematic legal and defense systems and state agents on the ground. These experts draw their authority from their time amidst the defense and law enforcement community, selling their “training and expertise” as a more legitimate and grounded understanding of the world as it exists in practice. In this way they reject what is viewed as the failings of academic elitism and out of touch scholarship; theory, method, and reflexive practices are discarded for practical and anecdotal observations of the world as it exists for the police officer or federal agent.¹¹³ This expertise is either presented directly to law enforcement and border security spheres, or dressed with trappings of academic scholarship (ie journal articles, conferences, and fellows), but contains no actual engagement with the academy or adherence to its standards for peer review or citation. And at the core of these products are the experts themselves, because their credentials depend on their own personal experience in defense and law enforcement fields, it is the celebrity of the expert themselves, their soundbites and quotes and presence that is marketed and bolstered by their products. It is their training and experience that these experts use to justify their authority on religious communities they are not part of.

As narco saint experts operate at the periphery of defense expertise fields and actively avoid engagement with academic sources and discourse, in contrast to terrorism or insurgency experts, these experts often come from and engage actively with law enforcement fields. The

¹¹² See Chapter 2 and Chapter 3

¹¹³ See Chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion of the content and active disengagement from academic research and critical analysis.

body of knowledge regarding police norms and defense subcultures are necessary to understand narco saint experts' role as knowledge producers and how law enforcement and defense personnel form standards of threat, deviance, and legality. Law enforcement should not be understood just as enforcers of a normative social order, but creators and consumers of that order as well. Peter Manning published work in 1977 that laid the groundwork for discussions of police as culture creators by discussing the myths that constitute and shape police work.¹¹⁴ Manning argues that police operations reflect how police are organized and socially set-up to process information, not the level of crime or anything else in the environment that exists independently of police work.¹¹⁵ Put more simply, police operation determines what crime is, the crime doesn't determine police reaction. Other scholars have grown Manning's work to discuss how police myths, such as the myth that police are themselves as arbiters of law and safety, allows them to police not just illegality but deviancy, and not just violence but potential violence.¹¹⁶ Still others have challenged typical boundaries between the police subculture and the culture it nests within. Rarely is anyone simply just a police officer, they are a citizen, a consumer of media, a voter, a parent, a community member, and sometimes an expert; law enforcement carry their own morals, motivations, and unconscious desires into and out of their work.¹¹⁷ People carry the lived experiences of one social sphere to another, to understand law enforcement experts, one should understand the social worlds that inform the police officer. Informed by their own social worlds, police operate as subjective producers of knowledge in

¹¹⁴ Manning, *Police Work: The Social Organization of Policing*.

¹¹⁵ Manning, *Police Work*, 20-23.

¹¹⁶ Bittner, *Aspects of Police Work* ; Skolnick, *Justice Without Trial*. ; Karpiak and Garriott, *The Anthropology of Police*.

¹¹⁷ Fassin, "Maintaining Order: The Moral Justifications for Police Practices," in *At the Heart of the State: The Moral World of Institutions*, ed. Didier Fassin, First English language edition (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

their own right, both separate from the experts that train them and in conjunction with them.¹¹⁸

Before Almonte was considered an expert on narco saints, he was a narcotics detective. His policing encounters with the images of Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte informed his views of the saints and their devotees far before he began privately consulting and training state agents or producing formalized expertise. Almonte's law enforcement background is visible in the securitized and risk-centered police mentality of his training sessions and publications.

Scholarship on police culture details law enforcements own risk-obsessed internal dynamics as well as the impact this culture has on other cultural fields.¹¹⁹ Seminal scholarship by Chris Wilson asserts that law enforcement possesses a narrative authority that comes from ability to “tell authoritative stories about crime” that legitimate their own role policing crime and arbitrating law.¹²⁰ Moreover, these authoritative stories allow the police to control narratives of everyday social dynamics, creating widely- accepted common sense regarding the poor and marginalized that are influenced deeply by dominate narratives of race and masculinity.¹²¹ In their institutional study of police work Richard Ericson and Kevin Haggerty explained that despite media portrayals of police as crime fighters, most of their time was spent doing “knowledge work”, or intelligence gathering and processing of information, that was then used by other institutions.¹²² Considering this, ex-law enforcement leveraging their professional skills later as private consultants and analysts make sense. In Ericson's and Haggerty study the police as “knowledge workers” supported the operations of insurance firms, but considering the last thirty years of law enforcement inter-agency cooperation and new developments in big data, their

¹¹⁸ McNulty, "Generating Common Sense Knowledge among Police Officers," .

¹¹⁹ Herbert, *Policing Space*.

¹²⁰ Wilson, *Cop Knowledge*.

¹²¹ Gates, “The Cultural Labor of Surveillance.”

¹²² Ericson and Haggerty, *Policing the Risk Society* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

position as knowledge collectors become all the more influential.¹²³ Prediction through expertise and compiled knowledge has long been a quintessential part of both police work and the regimes of power it supports; modern advances, purveyed by private industry, in surveillance technologies complement these trends.¹²⁴ In any case, “cop knowledge” deeply influences the ways stories are told about crime and security well beyond their own law enforcement fields, and over the past thirty years this knowledge has affected stories about the border, particularly as the US Mexico borderlands has been painted as a site of crime, invasion, and corruption by dominant narratives in the United States.¹²⁵

The field of cop knowledge is not just limited to local and state law enforcement and their role policing communities in the United States. The ongoing militarization of police and borders, and the blurring of jurisdictions between cop, soldier, border agent, and expert in the United States presents an interesting problem for categorizing where cop knowledge ends and security knowledge begins. To understand this blurring, this next section turns to the history of the US Mexico borderlands and the American securityscape over the last fifty years.

The SecurityScape and its Experts

There is little debate that the modern border between the United States and Mexico has been increasingly securitized and militarized over the past thirty to forty years.¹²⁶ Wide portions of the geography remain natural, but the border is patrolled by armed agents and vigilantes and

¹²³ Sheptycki, "Global Cops Cometh."

¹²⁴ Aradau and Blanke, "Politics of Prediction." ; Maguire, Rao, and Zurawski, *Bodies as Evidence.* ; Završnik, *Big Data, Crime and Social Control.*

¹²⁵ Carey and Marak, *Smugglers, Brothels, and Twine.* ; Lybecker et al., "Do New Media Support." ; Chavez, *The Latino Threat.*

¹²⁶ Dunn and Palafox, "Militarization of the Border," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23-44; Palafox, "Opening Up Borderland Studies."

private and government surveillance covers the ground and sky.¹²⁷ New technologies create a web of big data and surveillance designed to both catch migrants and alternatively force them into the deadly straits in the harsh desert wilderness. This securitization is a state project, but it has been implemented in recent decades through a growing private industry that serves the state. To understand the experts who consult, produce for, and train state agents, it is crucial to contextualize them within the private and entrepreneurial securitization trends of the past decades of United States defense and border history. Though borders remain abstract lines in the sand, they are vital to a states' conceptions of sovereignty, jurisdictions, and identity.¹²⁸ The securitized Southern US border began before it was a line on a map, with colonial conquest and imperial aspirations by Europe and then the United states.¹²⁹ Scholars begin their discussion of the modern securitized border at different points of time, but the process has been a continual one that has been increasingly privatized over the past decades. These trends both enable and form the conceptual space where narco saint experts create their expertise.

History of Security

The security of the US Mexico borderlands has been a popular concern since before its establishment and served as justification for the United States' provocation of the Mexican American War. The war was a racial-territorial project of Westward expansion by the United States that sought more defined borders to encompass its growing colonial presence in the region.¹³⁰ The continued presence and movement of colonists westward was viewed as divinely

¹²⁷ "Border Militarization and Corporate Outsourcing," *National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (blog)*, 2018.

¹²⁸ Agnew, "Borders on the Mind: Re-framing Border Thinking.;" Newman and Paasi, "Fences and Neighbours."

¹²⁹ Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism.* ; Walker, "Borders, One-Dimensionality, and Illusion."

¹³⁰ Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest.* ; Hernandez, *Migra: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, 22.

mandated and a racial imperative.¹³¹ The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo restricted and relocated Americans, Mexicans, and Indigenous Peoples across the newly divided territories; Article XI of the treaty in specific established security measure for the policing of the divide and restricting the movement of Indigenous Peoples, called “savage tribes” in the treaty’s text.¹³² The United States established the new border decades later and labeled the Mexican population left within the new United States territory political and biological problems. To do this they used dominant Anglo “scientific” expertise produced at the time. Academics who supported eugenics testified in the congressional hearings and informed 1924 immigrations restrictions.¹³³ Experts such as Lothrop Stoddard published widely and impacted policy that popularized the ideas that Mexican people were not only of a foreign politic and an unassimilable culture, but that they were carriers of deadly diseases, and thus securitization of the United States southern border was the only way to assure the United States’ political and physical health.¹³⁴ Other eugenicists and amateur anthropologists like Madison Grant published “scientifically-based” expertise that warned of competing and incompatible cultures that would corrupt [Anglo] American culture. Both of these racists acted as state experts and were consulted with the drafting of immigration legislation.¹³⁵ Expertise has informed the security of the border from its inception, and certain academics and experts continue to provide US politics and media with racialized and essentialist views of Latinx and Indigenous peoples, spurring further securitization efforts and violence.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Kurz and Berry, “Normalizing Racism:

¹³² “Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; February 2, 1848.” In *Avalon Project*. Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/guadhida.asp.

¹³³ Kurz and Berry, 2015.

¹³⁴ Stern, *Eugenic Nation*.

¹³⁵ Tucker, *The Funding of Scientific Racism*.

¹³⁶ Examples include Kobach, “Reinforcing the Rule of Law.” ; Kobach, *Attrition Through Enforcement*; Huntington, *Who Are We*. ; Hanson, *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*. See discussions of these racist narratives in critical scholarship by Aoki and Shuford, “Welcome to Amerizona.” ; Chavez, *The Latino Threat*. ; Kurz and Berry, “Normalizing Racism,” 153; Molina, “‘In a Race All Their Own’.”; Molina, “Fear and Loathing.”. Further discussion of these narratives and their effect on border discourse to come

The 20th century history of the border was marked by various immigration restrictions, trade and labor agreements, and border build ups that were designed to fuel the US economy and satisfy security concerns, however these securitization pushes were designed and informed with expertise that pushed specific racist ideologies alongside its security and economic concerns.¹³⁷

The Drug War

The War on Drugs was one such example of this mix of security, economic, and racist interests, fueled through expertise in varying levels of service to the state. First declared by Nixon in 1971 and codified into federal priority in the 1980s Reagan era, different US administrations have waged their own battles within the war through varied pushes of militarization, privatization, foreign intervention, and development initiatives and policy in order to curb and control the flow of illegal narcotics into the United States.¹³⁸ The War on Drugs has been a constant of almost fifty years in North America.¹³⁹ This war has been theorized by defense and law enforcement experts, who as they seek to establish their credentials have identified the War on Drug's versions of terrorists and insurgents, religious extremism, spectacle, and unique threat close to US soil.¹⁴⁰ This War on Drugs interacted heavily and overlapped with the economic transformation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the 1990s, and then with the War on Terror launched by George W Bush in the early 2000s, and then with the escalation of drug violence in Mexico created in 2006 during the Calderón administration, and then again with Obama and Trump era immigration policies. The ideological, violent, and

later in the chapter and in chapter 2.

¹³⁷ Johnson and Trujillo, "US-Mexico Border Enforcement," in *Immigration Law and the U.S.-Mexico Border: ¿Si Se Puede?* (University of Arizona Press, 2011), 169-97; Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol.*; Anderson et al., *Fifty Years of Change on the U.S.-Mexico Border.*

¹³⁸ Stuart, "War as Metaphor and the Rule of Law in Crisis."

¹³⁹ Walker, "Borders, One-Dimensionality, and Illusion."

¹⁴⁰ Morales, "The War on Drugs." See also introduction of this dissertation.

expansionist movement of the US War on Drugs is not the focus of this project, but it is the temporal and geographic landscape that gave rise to the narco saint experts who now operate within it.

Curbing the movement of narcotics into the United States has been a federal priority since the 1980s and into the present. Estimates of drug war spending over the last fifty years are around 1 trillion dollars, and local law enforcement in particular have received billions of that federal support in the form of equipment and training.¹⁴¹ From the mid-1980's and the Drug War's dominance in the Reagan Era, drug interdiction, border security was characterized by low-intensity conflict (LIC) doctrine, which was developed by security experts who studied and informed United States foreign intervention and involvement with South American insurgency groups and Cold War conflict.¹⁴² LIC is characterized by limited amounts of resources and manpower, and contains geographic, psychological, and resource-driven limits on the level of violence allowed to combat threats.¹⁴³ LIC doctrine was ideal for contextualizing state military action in domestic and friendly foreign environments, without having to declare official war or *visibly* interfere with sovereign governments. This doctrine was deeply influential in the modern era of border security and continues to be cited in defense expertise and law enforcement training regimens, immigration enforcement, border security, and drug interdiction.¹⁴⁴ It is LIC that drastically militarized the operation of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service

¹⁴¹ Pearl and Perez, *Ending the War on Drugs: By the Numbers*, (Center for American Progress, June 27, 2018). ; Ackleson, "Constructing Security on the U.S.-Mexico Border."

¹⁴² Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border*.

¹⁴³ United States Department of the Army (5 December 1990), Field Manual 100-20: Military Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict, GlobalSecurity.org; Colonel Lee Dixon, "Low Intensity Conflict Overview, Definitions, and Policy Concerns," CLIC Papers (Defense Technical Information Center, June 1, 1989), http://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA209046.

¹⁴⁴ Thomson, "Reagan, Low-Intensity Conflict, and the Expansion of Para-Institutional Statecraft," in *Outsourced Empire: How Militias, Mercenaries, and Contractors Support US Statecraft*; Oseth, "Intelligence and Low-Intensity Conflict."

(INS) and Border Patrol.¹⁴⁵ Regarded as prophetic by military communities, Martin Van Creveld's 1991 *Transformation of War* detailed what the domestic version of Low Intensity Conflict doctrine would include a diffused and privatized surveillance state where everyone should be expected to be stopped and questioned at any time. For the purposes of protecting its own citizens from the new forms of conflict,

the burden of defending society against the threat of low-intensity conflict will be transferred to the booming security business; and indeed the time may come when the organisations that comprise that business will, like the condottieri of old, take over the state.¹⁴⁶

Thus, as LIC experts drew on their expertise and drafted original drug war policy to include on-the-ground policing, they laid the groundwork of the privatized surveillance and knowledge production that informed the US drug war, NAFTA, post 9/11 policy, and currently supports married defense and immigration apparatus at US Mexico Border.¹⁴⁷ These LIC experts informed the layout of battlefield in the US Mexico borderlands when President Ronald Reagan classified drugs as a security threat to the United States in 1986; a move which effectively militarizing not only the material components of drug interdiction, but also the ideology and norms surrounding drug use and trafficking.¹⁴⁸ Reagan's declaration furthered the proliferation of LIC doctrine in practice, and the anti-drug acts that followed led to the establishment of initiatives that allowed military operation to seep into domestic policing in deliberate ways. One of these is the designation of High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA)s, which are regional networks of security professionals and state agents. HIDTA's offer joint training, intelligence, and publications that coordinated local, state, and federal agents for the express

¹⁴⁵ Dunn, "Border Militarization Via Drug,".

¹⁴⁶ Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 207.

¹⁴⁷ Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border*.

¹⁴⁸ Andreas, *Border Games*.

purposes of combating drug use and trafficking across their designated territories. Since their inception into the present, the military has increasingly informed how HIDTA's operate by collaborating with training curriculum and support logistics.¹⁴⁹ Another is the expansion of the INS and Border Patrol and their role policing and containing domestic "dissident" groups, which increased significantly as LIC doctrine became popular across the US security apparatus.¹⁵⁰ The militarization of both equipment, training, and focus served as huge incentives for police departments willing to make apprehending narcotics and narcotics traffickers a priority within their departments.¹⁵¹ The National Journal reported that between January 1997 and October 1999 alone, 3.4 million orders of Pentagon equipment were requested from more than eleven thousand domestic police agencies in all fifty states. Included in those two years of support were:

253 aircraft (including six- and seven-passenger airplanes, UH-60 Blackhawk and UH-1 Huey helicopters), 7,856 M-16 rifles, 181 grenade launchers, 8,131 bulletproof helmets, and 1,161 pairs of night-vision goggles.¹⁵²

Along with additional equipment intended to aid in the apprehension of those trafficking narcotics, a new focus was placed on methods used to detect drug mules and sellers. Investigatory stops, which are designed to "maximize the number of citizen contacts" in order to determine possible, but not suspected criminal behavior, have become an institutionalized law enforcement practice since the 1970s and became widely used in the 1990s.¹⁵³ These stops require subjective judgments by law enforcement agents and are based on conceptions they have of criminal profiles. As many scholars have noted, the inherent possibility for racial bias and

¹⁴⁹ "Joint Counterdrug Operations," Joint Publication (Department of Defense, June 13, 2007), <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3-07-4.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border*, 59.

¹⁵¹ Apuzzo, "War Gear Flows to Police Departments,".

¹⁵² Twohey, "SWATS Under Fire."

¹⁵³ Epp et al., *Pulled Over*. : Segal, "All of the Mysticism of Police Expertise."

profiling has plagued policing far before investigatory stops were ever codified in US policing policy, but the focus on drug interdiction dramatically increased the police usage of traffic stops and stop and frisk practices to police people of color across the United States.¹⁵⁴ Just as federal dollars were allocated to providing the equipment now required by the drug war, this money spurred new training programs that instructed law enforcement in the use of these LIC practices. Subjective stops and searches are heavily based on officer “common sense” and policing norms regarding deviant versus acceptable behavior. These training programs highlighted the identification and profiling of narcotics trade activity within other “normal” policing behaviors such as traffic stops and routine patrolling.¹⁵⁵ Low-intensity conflict (LIC) doctrine and its experts characterized the United States drug war on multiple fronts, dramatically affecting how the US policed its interests both internationally and domestically.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) reoriented a focus on the southern border of the United States as a permeable site of exchange. The movement of both legal and illicit goods, as well as people, characterized the early 1990s alongside a surge of securitization and privatization along the US Mexico borderlands to monitor and control those goods and people.¹⁵⁶ This militarization, defined by Dunn, as "the use of military rhetoric and ideology as well as military tactics, strategy, technology, equipment, and forces" on the border would only increase in later years past what became known as the Gatekeeper Era.¹⁵⁷ Operation Gatekeeper in 1994 which increased surveillance and policing at the twin cities of San Diego and Tijuana, and it coincided with NAFTA and served a complimentary purpose to the economic policy.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Epp, et al. *Pulled Over*; White and Fradella, *Stop and Frisk*. ; Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*

¹⁵⁵ Bacigal, "Brave New World of Stop and Frisk."

¹⁵⁶ This militarization and privatization, as well as its consequences and death toll, have been documented and analyzed in De León (2015), Dunn (1999, 2001, 2009), Nevins and Dunn (2008), Nevins (2000, 2002) Andreas (2009) and Palafox (1996).

¹⁵⁷ Dunn, 1996, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Ackerman, "NAFTA and Gatekeeper," 41, 54.

NAFTA was born with the stated motivations of opening up capital investment, facilitating trade, and opening new markets for private enterprise, and was pushed on both sides of the border by a mix of lobbyists, large commercial interests, US educated financial experts, and bankers.¹⁵⁹

NAFTA's policies themselves did not explicitly account for effects on immigration or illegal trade but the eventually resulting surge in poverty, immigration, and effect on Mexico's rural farmers was not an unintended side-effect. The policy makers and experts that developed the international agreement were well aware of its negative impacts and designed complimentary security policy to offset and obscure its consequences.¹⁶⁰ Analysts from the 1992 The Labor Advisory Committee made it clear that the agreement would have significant and detrimental effects on the Mexican workforce, depleting wages and jobs and increasing migration. Their report, briefing, and findings were ignored by the administration in favor of neoliberal experts that informed the Democratic Party of the time.¹⁶¹ These neoliberal experts upheld "free trade" and leveraged the anti-immigrant sentiment growing along the US Southwest to create support for their party and their solution to drug-war fueled fears of immigrants and drug trafficking.¹⁶²

Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego (1994) was one of a set of initiatives to securitize major points of entry to prevent the predicted effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Similar policies like Blockade/Hold the Line (1993) in El Paso, Safeguard (1994) in

¹⁵⁹ Fernández-Kelly and Massey, "Borders for Whom?"

¹⁶⁰ Noam Chomsky, "The Unipolar Moment and the Obama Era" (Lecture, Nezahualc6yotl Hall, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), University City, Federal District, Mexico, September 21, 2009), <https://chomsky.info/200909211-2/>. See also Lowrey and Corn, "Mexican Trade Bill: Fast Track to Unemployment," *The Nation*, June 3, 1999

¹⁶¹ Preliminary report of the Labor Advisory Committee for Trade Negotiations and Trade Policy on the North American Free Trade Agreement. 1992. Submitted to the President of the United States, the United States Trade Representative, and the Congress of the United States. HathiTrust Digital Library Page i. Accessed 9 July 2019.; See also Noam Chomsky, "Free Trade," in *Secrets, Lies and Democracy*, First Edition (Tucson, Ariz: Odonian Press, 2002).

¹⁶² Mudge, "New Economists, New Experts, New Democrats." In *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism*, 260-303. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018.; Peter B. Brownell, "Border Militarization and the Reproduction of Mexican Migrant Labor," *Social Justice* 28, no. 2 (84) (2001): 69–92.79.

southern Arizona, and Rio Grande (1997) in South Texas were positioned across the Southwestern states.¹⁶³ Operation Hold the Line was implemented first and Gatekeeper used El Paso's deterrence strategy as a model for the militarization at the San Ysidro port between Tijuana and San Diego.¹⁶⁴ Though not first, Gatekeeper's measures were some of the most visible with increased fencing and stadium lights set up over large stretches of the border where there had previously been no mark of any definitive boundary set up between the two countries.¹⁶⁵ All of the policies were marketed locally as anti-crime and anti-drug measures and received substantial public support amidst the fresh wave of anti-immigrant and racist sentiment in the Southwest United States during the 1990s.¹⁶⁶ Between the different operations the US Mexico borderlands were transformed through doubling the then responsible Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) budget, allowing for a doubling of active border security agents and fence construction, and a tripling of underground sensors.¹⁶⁷ INS had previously been charged primarily with the prevention of undocumented entry into the United States, and the apprehension of those who had. However, in the 1980s with the rise of the first drug war surge, drug interdiction became a secondary function of the agency with border patrol agents as the enforcement arm of the agency.¹⁶⁸ Gatekeeper and similar policies had firmly married the two purposes. Charged with both immigration enforcement and arresting drug traffickers along a newly enforced border, the lines between law enforcement operation and immigration proceedings began to blur. The second phase of Gatekeeper era policies included the

¹⁶³ Dunn and Palafox, "Militarization of the Border," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*, Oxford Reference (Oxford University Press, 2005), 2344.

¹⁶⁴ Peter B. Brownell, "Border Militarization and the Reproduction of Mexican Migrant Labor,"

¹⁶⁵ United States Border Patrol, *Border Patrol Strategic Plan 1994 and Beyond: National Strategy* (Homeland Security Digital Library, July 1, 1994),

¹⁶⁶ Dunn and Palafox, "Militarization of the Border," 2344.

¹⁶⁷ Dunn, *Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border*. 80

¹⁶⁸ Dunn, *Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border*. 80 ; Peter B. Brownell, "Border Militarization and the Reproduction of Mexican Migrant Labor,"

establishment and development of biometric scanners and databases of “illegal aliens” and any previous criminal records, infractions, or border crosses.¹⁶⁹ The use and contribution to these databases would exponentially increase with the later introduction of the Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (PATRIOT) Act of 2001 and then the prevalence of big data beginning around 2010.

The stated purpose of Operation Gatekeeper and similar initiatives was “prevention through deterrence” (PTD); rationalizing that militarizing and barricading traversable entry points of the border would stem illegal immigration. The experts behind PTD, as outlined in the 1994 Border Patrol Strategic Plan utilized the same Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) doctrine that had informed early drug war policing.¹⁷⁰ PTD’s many critics have cited the political and violent nature of these policies; while the spectacle of new fences and stadium lights reassured private companies they could do business over and across the border, it pushed migrants into dangerous portions of the US Southwest United States.¹⁷¹ Over 7,000 bodies have been found in the Sonoran Desert since the late 1990s and prevention through deterrence strategies are to blame.¹⁷² Activist and scholar Jason De León argues that Operation Gatekeeper and its Prevention Through Deterrence strategies exists as a deliberate and rhetorical act of violence, weaponizing the geographic landscape to punish and hide the bodies of those viewed as racially other.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Office of the Inspector General, *Operation Gatekeeper: An Investigation Into Allegations of Fraud and Misconduct*, (USDOJ/OIG Special Report, July 1998) ; Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond.*; Jack B. Brooks, “H.R.3355 - 103rd Congress (1993-1994): Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994,” Pub. L. No. 103–322 (1994).

¹⁷⁰ De León, *Land of Open Graves*, 33

¹⁷¹ De León, *Land of Open Graves*; Boyce, Chambers, and Launius, "Bodily Inertia and the Weaponization of the Sonoran Desert in US Boundary Enforcement," ; Androff, and Tavassoli. "Deaths in the desert,"165.

¹⁷² Todd Miller, “Over 7,000 Bodies Have Been Found at the US-Mexican Border Since the ‘90s,” *The Nation*, April 24, 2018.

¹⁷³ De León, *Land of Open Graves.* ; Madeline Malloy, “Anthropologist Jason De León Describes the Plight of Migrants in the ‘Land of Open Graves’ at the U.S.-Mexican Border,” *Miami University: College of Arts and Sciences* (blog), November 1, 2018,.

Policy initiatives like Operation Gatekeeper are significant because they highlight an important cultural shift that comes about not coincidentally with NAFTA, but in complement. While the rhetoric surrounding these policies allowed its proponents to reify the border as a historically permanent and ideally impermeable entity, despite the historical proof that this is far from true.¹⁷⁴ By defining the border as a rigid and inherently delineated legal space, these policies paint any border crosser as inherently a criminal, guilty, a threat, and part of the conceptual other. This conceptual othering and criminalization is reflected in the growing number of policies that criminalize undocumented entry and movement in the US Mexico borderlands.¹⁷⁵ The racism and bias present in these policies become recoded as an issue of national and economic security as NAFTA went into effect. US President Bill Clinton justified Operation Gatekeeper by saying “we will not surrender our borders to those who wish to exploit our history of compassion and justice.”¹⁷⁶ Clinton alludes to the economic resources undocumented immigrants would allegedly strain, and he does so because analysts and experts predicted that the opening of Mexico to NAFTA subsidized US agriculture business exports would deeply undermine Mexican farming, resulting in substantial unemployment, urbanization, and poverty, which would then lead to migration towards higher wages within United States territory.¹⁷⁷ NAFTA and Gatekeeper were connected policies that created the idea of the “illegal alien” as something, not necessarily a someone, that could be smuggled alongside illicit narcotics and goods outside the free trade agreements that benefited the US and select elites in Mexico.¹⁷⁸ In this way, Operation Gatekeeper and the concept of an “illegal alien” operated as press for NAFTA and the ongoing

¹⁷⁴ Hernandez, *Migra! : A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, 44.

¹⁷⁵ Some examples include The AntiDrug Abuse Act of 1986, Immigration Act of 1990, Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (“IIRIRA”). See Cuauhtemoc, Cesar, and Hernandez. “Deconstructing Crimmigration,” for a succinct analysis of this progression.

¹⁷⁶ Noam Chomsky, “The Unipolar Moment and the Obama Era”

¹⁷⁷ Noam Chomsky, “Free Trade,” in *Secrets, Lies and Democracy*.

¹⁷⁸ Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*.

War on Drugs. The construction of the “illegal alien” gave the War on Drugs its enemy, a foreign trafficker bringing narcotics and other “aliens” into the United States to hook kids on drugs and steal American jobs. The mobilization of the police, border agents, and non-human actors like geography and border technology increasingly turned the borderlands into a warzone, and therefore the act unauthorized immigration into a conceptual act of territorial and economic invasion. Rhetoric followed, as a particular brand of security knowledge began to label migrants as “aliens” in both official documents and policy, and in corresponding work coming from experts at thinktanks, war colleges, and policy programs.¹⁷⁹ As policy makers framed these issues as threats to national security, health, and territorial sovereignty, all traditional purviews of the state and its military, they laid the groundwork and justification for further “military responses” and securitization of the border and borderlands. As migrants were pushed into the desert to die, crossings at established points of entry decreased and the desert hid the evidence of this deadly and racist policy, effectively creating the illusion that Prevention Through Deterrence had succeeded in curbing immigration.¹⁸⁰ PTD would continue for a decade as the official strategy of the US border security apparatus and is effectively still in place today.

Border scholar Peter Andreas states that the increased border security in the mid 1990’s “has less to do with actual deterrence and more to do with managing the border's image and coping with the deepening contradictions of economic integration” that came about with NAFTA’s implementation.¹⁸¹ Ironically, NAFTA and its complementary Gatekeeper policies bolstered organized crime organizations that made their profits smuggling people and goods over the border. By increasing the flow of legitimate goods over the border, NAFTA provided

¹⁷⁹ Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*.

¹⁸⁰ De León, *Land of Open Graves*.

¹⁸¹ Andreas, “The Making of Amerexico,”.

vehicles and avenues to sneak people and illegal goods through securitized points, as well as incentive for drug trafficking organizations to innovate smuggling methods.¹⁸² More so though, drug and people smuggling on small scales was made more complicated and costly by the United States security measures, while demand, particularly from migrants suffering from the swath of NAFTA farm privatization in Mexico, increased. Recreational drug prices skyrocketed in the United States as well, promising large profits for anyone innovative and determined enough to smuggle narcotics into the US.¹⁸³ Large criminal organizations could take on the overhead involved in getting around US security measures, and these organizations were significantly bolstered from the initiatives of the Gatekeeper Era. NAFTA and Gatekeeper Era securitization are one of the factors that enabled large criminal organizations, labeled Transnational Crime Organizations (TCOs) by defense expertise, to become further entrenched in US Mexico borderlands, and the rising scope and influence of these TCOs became the target and justification for the next surge of United States Drug War funding.

In the years immediately following NAFTA and the 1990s border security Prevention Through Deterrence policies, new cooperation between the military and law enforcement would come about to literally militarize the border. Prior to the 1980s, the US military was largely absent from routine domestic law enforcement duties, leaving it to federal, state, and local policing and intelligence agencies. However, with the nebulous beginnings of the war on drugs, the military began to take a more active role in both domestic and international narcotics investigation and trafficking interventions. These military operations in the US Mexico borderlands and support to border security forces evolved from the military's involvement

¹⁸² Fernández-Kelly and Massey. "Borders for Whom?", 116.

¹⁸³ Maria José Reyes Retana Fernandez, "NAFTA's Impact on US-Mexican Border Security: Drug, Trade and Migration," Working Paper (Observatoire Politique de l'Amérique latine et des Caraïbes, décembre 2017). ; Cottam and Marenin " Management of Border Security in NAFTA,".

fighting drugs overseas in Columbia, Peru, and Bolivia among others. Military funding for drug interdiction in 1996 prioritized the US Mexico borderlands as a site of national security, with 80% of its drug war budget going to domestic interdiction, compared to 20% of its international budget.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, domestic military operation at the border during the 1990 NAFTA/Gatekeeper era received support from law makers and the public, three bills passed the U.S. House of Representatives in the period from 1997 to 2000 that authorized troop deployment to the US Mexico Border.¹⁸⁵ These troops were sent to directly support INS and local law enforcement, and this collaboration deeply affected the culture of border security and those who enact it. Law enforcement operation generally considers legal codes, common norms, and normative order when policing, military action focuses on clearing areas, and the joining of the two created a nexus where civilians were being policed through military action.¹⁸⁶ “Military interrogation techniques, raids, and intelligence activities are typically not designed or conducted with a concern for the U.S. legal system's requirements for safeguarding suspects' rights, but rather aim to eliminate or neutralize an enemy.¹⁸⁷ This direct, on the ground operation ended when a Marine shot Esequiel Hernández Jr. an 18-year-old American teenager in Redford, Texas on unsubstantiated suspicion of wrongdoing on May 20, 1997.¹⁸⁸ Following the racist shooting, and after years of contested conclusions, testimony, and public news coverage covering the teenagers death, the US quietly ceased direct military operation with domestic law enforcement and relegated active military personnel to support activity in the US Mexico borderlands.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Dunn, "Border Militarization Via Drug," 9.

¹⁸⁵ Dunn, "Border Militarization Via Drug."

¹⁸⁶ Phillips, *Police militarization*, viii–ix.

¹⁸⁷ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services. (1989) *Military Role in Drug Interdiction* (Part 2). Washington: Government Printing Office. See also Dunn "Border Militarization Via Drug And Immigration Enforcement: Human Rights Implications," 22.

¹⁸⁸ Correa and Thomas, "From the Border to the Core: A Thickening Military-Police Assemblage."

¹⁸⁹ Samantha Schmidt, "How the Tragic Killing of an American Teenager Halted the Military Border Presence in 1997," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2018, sec. Morning Mix.

These support activities still included training and logistical operations that trained law enforcement and border security agents in military tactics and mindset. These instructors came from the military and defense fields and imparted expertise based on military paradigms of conflict and threat, further militarizing the already security sensitive police normative order. Both active deployment and cooperation and the subsequent post-1999 “limited” collaboration would lay a framework for future cooperation in a Post 9/11 security paradigm where criminality and terrorist activity were understood and policed in the same way, as threats to national security.

Paradigm Shifts, Private Expertise, and DHS

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States World Trade Center and Pentagon arrested attention and would quickly spur the restructuring of the United States securityscape. Following the terrorist attacks, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created and charged with the defense of US borders and territory against the purposefully nebulously-defined threats of terrorism, drug violence, and illegal immigration. On March 21st, 2002 the Bush Administration issued Executive Order 13260 to establish the Homeland Security Advisory Council (HSAC) that would become the “brain of homeland security strategy”.¹⁹⁰ Under HSAC, private actors were allowed direct access immigration policy development. Experts from think tanks, conservative academia, and private technology companies served on HSAC’s subcommittees and created a DHS framework that purposefully relied and contracted with private security, intelligence, and expertise companies. From the Department of Homeland Security’s inception, its many agencies and departments had a private-state relationship created

¹⁹⁰ Koulish, “Blackwater and the Privatization of Immigration Control,” 475.

through private expertise. It is within this relationship and the securityscapes these networks create, that narco saint experts operate, form their beliefs, and market their expertise.

Definitions of security were expanded long before the events on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, by law enforcement practitioners, policy makers, and theorists of the state. These new definitions have better included concepts of expertise produced beyond the security apparatus but still in service of the state, and their intersection into fields such as migration, human rights, dissent, crime, and dispersed and privatized government.¹⁹¹ Adjacent and helpful to these definitions is the idea of security landscapes, or “securityscapes” which perhaps best describes the ever bloating apparatus that is United States Security.¹⁹² As discussed previously, a securityscape refers to the “asymmetrical distributions of weaponry, military force, and military-scientific resources among nation-states and the local and global imaginaries of identity, power, and vulnerability that accompany these distributions”.¹⁹³ This includes the arrays of expertise-producing individuals and institutions, such as entities like thinktanks, “techno-scientific assemblages”, and self-made experts that, as discussed previously, are entwined, generative, and supported by the state. A “scape” allows us to see the working elements within that include a wide variety of actors and fields across law enforcement, media, military, policy, and private commercial spheres and the ways in which 9/11 did not so much begin a securitization trend, but make it visible and popular through performance and spectacle. However, alongside and under this spectacle structural reorganization and substantial funding a paranoid security paradigm, characterized by a diffusion of law enforcement norms and surveillance culture, clawed its way

¹⁹¹ Maguire, Frois, and Zurawski. "Introduction: The Anthropology of Security: Prospects, Retrospects and Aims." In *The Anthropology of Security*.

¹⁹² Gusterson, *Nuclear Rites: Weapons Laboratory at the End of the Cold War*.

¹⁹³ Albro et al., *Anthropologists in the SecurityScape*, 11.

into popular discourse and private imagination.¹⁹⁴ This security paradigm is visible in police shifts towards paramilitary operation, intelligence gathering, and preemption over reactionary or deterrence based policing.¹⁹⁵ It is within this securityscape that 9/11 popularized and cemented a security paradigm that still characterizes border security's daily operation, core ideology, and produced expertise.

The September 11th 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in New York City motivated the United States to push its “borders out”, forward deploying Customs and Border Protection (CBP), newly established Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, and new technologies that policed passengers and cargo before they reached the United States.¹⁹⁶ Terrorists crossing the border alongside the “illegal aliens” of the decade before became a public security concern, and money flowed to the border for militarization efforts of its geographic fence, as well as the outfitting and training of its policing agents.¹⁹⁷ Prior to the attacks the Bush administration had been considering “guest worker” programs and agreements with the Fox administration, but the fledging agreements broke down as the US hardened its border with racialized immigration restrictions in response to 9/11.¹⁹⁸ The concept of terrorist and illegal alien were and remain deeply racialized, both in practice and in popular culture representations of the category, and the expertise that provided understandings of these categories depended on deeply essentialist and orientalist understandings of the “other”.¹⁹⁹ Immigration, more than ever

¹⁹⁴ See chapters three and four.

¹⁹⁵ Kim and de Guzman, “Police Paradigm Shift after the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks,”.

¹⁹⁶ Flynn, “Beyond Border Control,”.

¹⁹⁷ Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*.

¹⁹⁸ Susan M. Akram & Kevin Johnson, “Migration Regulation Goes Local: The Role of States in U.S. Immigration Policy: Race, Civil Rights, and Immigration Law After September 11, 2001: The Targeting of Arabs and Muslims, 58 *New York University Annual Survey of American Literature* 295 (2002): 295-96. See also “Securing America’s Future through Enforcement Reform (SAFER) Act, H.R. 5013, 107th Congress, 2002.

¹⁹⁹ Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*.

before, was now considered a national security threat. Government policy now viewed undocumented foreigners as threats instead of resources, a shift that was quickly mirrored in post 9/11 American popular culture.²⁰⁰ Like the drugs allegedly still flowing over the border since the 1980s, those who crossed the border became a threat to national security.

After the attacks on the World Trade Center narcotic indication was still a federal priority, but now the motivations behind traffickers, migrants, and anyone who crossed the border crossing became all the more interesting to the blooming US security apparatus. A new batch of experts rose to provide the analysis, training, and information the government wanted and would pay for. Previously, intelligence communities had been trained with research centers, such as the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence and the NDIC's Center for Strategic Intelligence Research, with engagement from academics since the Cold War era.²⁰¹ The 2000s began with extensive efforts by the US government to widen their intelligence sphere. New graduate programs in Homeland Security and Intelligence studies were established across the United States, and scholars have documented the increased engagement between traditional academic departments like political science and anthropology with the state and private firms that provide security to the government.²⁰² Experts came from traditional analytic intelligence communities as well as law enforcement practitioner, military, and academic backgrounds and specific programs were put in place to train and funnel experts into intelligence agencies.²⁰³ The 9/11 attacks renewed a security focus on "subversive" and "asymmetrical threats" to domestic national security and United States' strategic and economic interests internationally, as well as

²⁰⁰ Bender, "Sight, Sound, and Stereotype,"

²⁰¹ Campbell, "A Survey of the U.S. Market for Intelligence Education," 310.

²⁰² Marrin, "Training and Educating U.S. Intelligence Analysts,".

²⁰³ Giroux, "The Militarization of US Higher Education after 9/11."

interest in expertise that could better predict and combat threats. This is part of the predictive trend in policing and defense fields that lasts until this day, and is highly dependent on analysts and experts across the US securityscape.²⁰⁴ Conflict-studies scholarship, which generally originates from war colleges and research institutes, proposed new theories regarding potential access points for terrorist organizations via narcotics activity coming out of Mexico.²⁰⁵ The presence of well-funded and highly networked transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) captured the imagination of popular media and defense analysts alike, and modern initiatives still cite the language in justifications for increased military and border spending.²⁰⁶ An obsession with TCOs and criminal insurgencies were bolstered by theories of the “crime-terror convergence” or “crime-terror nexus”, which posits that terrorist individuals and organizations fund their operations through organized crime and collusion with cartels, turned the Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Homeland Security (DHS) towards the borderlands and the transnational crime organizations now deemed to be existential threats to the United States there.²⁰⁷ As the commander of US Southern Command Marine Corps General John Kelly repeated the belief that Mexican and South American drug traffickers were aligning with terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and Hezbollah.²⁰⁸ The term “narcoterrorism” was circulated by narcotics officers and terrorist experts alike. Defined by those who use the term and scholars who study its use, it means:

²⁰⁴ Cohen and Graver, “Cops, Docs, and Code,” 441.

²⁰⁵ Correa-Cabrera et al., “Administrative Surveillance and Fear,”.

²⁰⁶ Some examples among many include Department of Homeland Security, “Congressional Budget Justification FY 2020” (United States Department of Homeland Security, November 12, 2021), <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/congressional-budget-justification-fy-2020>. Michael T. McCaul, *Blueprint for Southern Border Security* (Committee on Homeland Security, US House of Representatives, 2014). See Peter Andreas, “Illicit Globalization: Myths, Misconceptions, and Historical Lessons,” *Political Science Quarterly* 126, no. 3 (2011): 403–25.

²⁰⁷ Riley and Kiernan, “New Face of Transnational Crime Organizations (TCOs),” ; Oehme, “Terrorists, Insurgents, and Criminals—Growing Nexus,” ; Perri et al., “Evil Twins,” 79.

²⁰⁸ United States Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and United States Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, “Iran and Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere: Joint Hearing First Session, March 18, 2015,” § Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North

an understanding that the two phenomena of narcotics trafficking and terrorism are interconnected and subsequently that a coordination of anti-drug and anti-terrorism policy can be used, and is necessary, to effectively deal with both threats.²⁰⁹

Insurgents, terrorists, and drug traffickers were lumped into one category within defense policy and scholarship the United States defense culture subsequently became obsessed with it.²¹⁰ Low Intensity Conflict doctrine, with its focus on asymmetrical threats, non-state enemies, and limits on deadly force, was brought back to bear against the newest enemy in the Drug War, the narcoterrorist.²¹¹ Security experts and professionals called for counterinsurgency tactics due to the proximity to the United States, effectively inviting military response inside the borderlands.²¹² Though generally debunked in critical scholarship fields, theories like the crime-terror convergence were and are still used for justifying increased defense spending at the border and cross-agency cooperation.²¹³ Both border agents and local law enforcement forces that traditionally managed drug investigations and interdiction across the United States were equipped with military grade gear, rationale being that if police officers had to combat terrorists and insurgents on American streets, they should be outfitted as soldiers. In the months following the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Office of National Drug Control Policy began running ads, some of which ran at the subsequent Superbowl, linking the use of recreational drugs to support of terrorism.²¹⁴ The logic went that if drug offenders were keyed

Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fourteenth Congress (2015).; Jim Garamone, "Kelly Warns of Potential Crime-Terrorism Nexus in Latin America," American Forces Press Service, DOD, March 20, 2013.

²⁰⁹ Björnehed, "Narco-Terrorism,".

²¹⁰ Stampinsky discusses this relation to terrorist experts, but some primary examples of this literature from conflict studies are Campbell et al., "Extreme Violence and Terrorism in Mexico,". ; Campbell and Hansen, "Is Narco-Violence in Mexico Terrorism?,". ; Longmire and Longmire IV, "Redefining Terrorism,".

²¹¹ Kan, "What we're getting wrong about Mexico,".

²¹² Kan, "What we're getting wrong about Mexico,".

²¹³ Hutchinson and O'Malley, "A Crime-Terror Nexus?,". ; Kostakos, "Theoretical Issues in the Crime-Terror Nexus Literature." ; Williams, "Organized Crime and Terrorist Nexus."

²¹⁴ Melillo, "ONDCP Ties Terrorism to Drugs," *Adweek*, January 22, 2002.

into or financially supporting terrorist networks, those that punish drug use—law enforcement—should be supported as if they were fighting terrorists, because they were. “We’re in a new era, a new time,...The bad guys are a little different than they used to be” said a New York Sheriff in response to their new gear.²¹⁵ In 2002, the town of Jasper, Florida and its total of seven police officers were given military grade M-16 machine guns through the Pentagon transfer program. The town had a total of 2,000 people and has gone without a murder in over a decade.²¹⁶ A Pentagon spokesman reported that in 2006 alone the Department of Defense(DoD) "distributed vehicles worth \$15.4 million, aircraft worth \$8.9 million, boats worth \$6.7 million, weapons worth \$1 million and 'other' items worth \$110.6 million" all to local police agencies.²¹⁷ Despite being domestic police forces, law enforcement departments around the country were prepared for a war. As law enforcement were outfitted as soldiers, they were trained like them as well.

The years following the 9/11 attacks saw a rush of analysis focused on discovering why, with all the United States’ reach and resources, had the September attacks gone undiscovered and unmitigated. The popular answer amidst defense and popular scholarship was that the lack of interagency cooperation had allowed details to go unshared, leaving different uncommunicating intelligence stakeholders with separate pieces of the same puzzle.²¹⁸ To prevent future oversights new standards and frameworks for intelligence sharing between agencies were put into place. In addition, twenty-two separate agencies responsible for defense were drastically reorganized under the newly established Department of Homeland Security (DHS).²¹⁹ This change affected all levels of law enforcement on local, state, and federal levels and set new precedent for joint

²¹⁵ Balko, “Have Police Departments Become More Militarized Since 9/11?,” *HuffPost*, September 12, 2011.

²¹⁶ Balko, “Have Police Departments Become More Militarized Since 9/11?,” *HuffPost*, September 12, 2011.

²¹⁷ Kain, “Police Militarization in the Decade Following 9/11,” *Forbes*, September 12, 2011.

²¹⁸ Wright, *The Looming Tower*.

²¹⁹ Perrow, “The Disaster After 9/11,”.

training centers and programs between DHS entities and police departments. Fusion centers linked law enforcement operation and border security with public data and varied training regimens and experts from various disciplines.²²⁰ Despite stated intention, these changes have been largely criticized for impeding intelligence sharing and crippling the development and implementation of a coherent intelligence apparatus.²²¹ The diffusion and disorganization of responsibility within the varied entities of DHS dissuades and hinders cooperation with traditional intelligence protocols and agencies like the CIA and FBI. The failure to set standards for intelligence contributed to the development of a messy expertise field with little oversight, credential requirements, or field boundaries. Within the current securityscape, experts are varied in education, training, and credentials, with little oversight as they train and inform the state and state agents.²²² In the years following 9/11 all aspects of defense policy, including the operation of experts, were changed, expanded, and transformed into wide network of nebulous agencies, newly militarized police departments, and private actors that operated domestically and abroad.

The early 2000s engorged the US security market, with new demand for weapons, technologies, and knowledge to define and then combat threats to national security. Intelligence sharing was part of this push, partially due to lessons learned by 9/11, and partially as part of the ever-increasing technological boom of the internet age, security was viewed in the United States was even more of an international issue than before. The Gatekeeper era and its consequences was (and is) still in effect, but critics of the policies were becoming louder as undocumented immigration and drug flows increased under the NAFTA and complementary security policies.²²³

²²⁰ Cohen and Graver, "Cops, Docs, and Code."

²²¹ Perrow, "The Disaster After 9/11," ; Lahneman, "Knowledge-Sharing in the Intelligence Community After 9/11."

²²² Mohr, "A Call for More Humility,".

²²³ See De León, *Land of Open Graves*. ; Andreas, " Escalation of U.S. Immigration,".

What is commonly known as the Mexican Drug War came about in 2006 when newly elected President Felipe Calderón of Mexico's PAN party dispatched 6,500 Mexican Army soldiers to the state of Michoacán against the drug cartels operating in the region.²²⁴ The term Mexican Drug War is misleading as it underplays the role the American Drug War that'd been operating across the border for almost twenty five years played in incentivizing and exacerbating the retaliatory conflict and violence that would come next.²²⁵ Following Calderón's offensive and initial takedowns of cartel lead, a surge of cartel competition and violent spectacle dubbed "Narco- terrorism" resulted as cartels split and fought for control. This overwhelming increase in violence, femicide murders, and narco-spectacle came in stark contrast to the decade before where a long-established understanding between ruling PRI party and Mexico and drug trafficking had supplied the United States' public with their demand for illicit narcotics with relative stability.²²⁶ From early on, US experts and law enforcement were deeply involved in Mexico's drug problems, debating supply/demand methods of curbing drug trafficking and discussing the spillover of violence into US cities.²²⁷ The US and its intelligence expertise adopted short-term strategies based on analyzing the effectiveness of individual Mexican administrations in curbing drug flows, purposefully ignoring long-term analysis that would address and demand-side problem originating the United States.²²⁸ The United States Bush administration placed pressure on Calderón in response to the increased drug flows and bolstered organized crime spilling over into the US in a post-NAFTA environment, resulting in the offensive that incited a particularly bloody chapter of the drug war.²²⁹ It is probable that the

²²⁴ Boulosa and Wallace, *A Narco History*.

²²⁵ Boulosa and Wallace, *A Narco History*.

²²⁶ Wallace and Boulosa, "How the Cartels Were Born,".

²²⁷ Scherlen, "U.S. Evaluation of Mexican Drug War Efforts," 40. ; Carlsen, "Politics of the Drug War."

²²⁸ Scherlen, "U.S. Evaluation of Mexican Drug War Efforts," 36.

²²⁹ Wallace and Boulosa, "How the Cartels Were Born," ; Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots.* ; Correa-Cabrera and Weiss, "El Chapo and Mexico's Drug War Spectacle,".

violence in Mexico worried the US' already increased security concerns and terrorism-on the mind apparatus. And in response Policymakers devised a way, with their new bloated security budget, to buffer their own southern border against violence by equipping Mexico with US security frameworks.

Initially signed in 2008, the Mérida initiative provided the framework and funding for “bilateral security cooperation” between the US and Mexico, “acknowledging the shared responsibilities of the United States and Mexico to counter drug-fueled violence threatening citizens on both sides of the border.”²³⁰ While Mérida was and still is structured around “four pillars” that include civil society engagement, human rights issues, and strengthening Mexican political institutions, policy documentation from the agreements inception and its implementation over the past decade makes it very clear this is a border security initiative and little else²³¹. The concrete actions and aid laid out within the respective pillars, even those based on resilient communities and human rights, were all based on increasing US involvement in the region and instituting security protocols, including Culture of Lawfulness (COL) programs in standard junior high curricula in all Mexican states, citizen monitoring booths in major cities, and the establishment of state and federal academies for joint training between US and Mexico peace keeping forces.²³² Infrastructure and human rights assurance have only been advanced

²³⁰ Clare Ribando Seelke, “Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2019,” Congressional Research Service Reports (Congressional Research Service, July 23, 2018), <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1228554/>; U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Mexico, “The Merida Initiative,” Government Website, U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Mexico, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/the-merida-initiative/>.

²³¹ Sonja Wolf, “La guerra de México contra el narcotráfico y la Iniciativa Mérida: piedras angulares en la búsqueda de legitimidad”, *Foro Internacional*, no. 206 (2011), 669-714.; International Crisis Group, *Mexico's Southern Border: Security, Violence and Migration in the Trump Era*, [Report N66] (International Crisis Group, May 9, 2018).

²³² Clare R. Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea, “U.S.- Mexican Security Cooperation: The Merida Initiative and Beyond”

when it suited United States homeland security interests.²³³ Between its implementation in fiscal year (FY) 2008 and the Trump Administrations pending expansion of the initiative, the United States Congress has appropriated \$3 billion to the “four pillared” approach to joint security.²³⁴ Originally, Mérida encompassed a plan for Mexico and Central America but in 2010 the two regions were split, with Mérida solely for Mexico with the rest covered by the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).²³⁵ Congressional analysts admit that the agreements have “enabled the U.S. government to help shape Mexico’s policies” but that “homicides in Mexico and opioid-related deaths in the United States have surged” and the initiative has failed to create substantial stability in Mexico.²³⁶ Federal agencies like the DEA conduct trainings for United States local law enforcement and Mexican law enforcement, blurring the lines between domestic and international jurisdictions.²³⁷ These joint training programs are ongoing under the still active and recently bolstered Mérida agreements, which also designate considerable federal funds towards border securitization and modernization as well as stipulations for intelligence sharing and cooperation on criminal investigations. Like the rest of Mérida, these training programs are heavily militarized, and prioritize the “hunting” of dangerous groups over peacekeeping and law enforcement efforts that police are traditionally known for. In 2013, the Pentagon created a “U.S.-based special operations headquarters to teach Mexican security forces how to hunt drug cartels in the same way special operations teams hunt al-Qaida.”²³⁸ Certain aspects of the project remain hard to trace, specifically the federal dollars that fund the involvement of retired military

²³³ Ashby, "Solving the Border Paradox?", 487.

²³⁴ These four pillars are (1) disrupting organized criminal groups, (2) institutionalizing the rule of law, (3) creating a 21st-century border, and (4) building strong and resilient communities. All involve US military and law enforcement forces, joint-training, and intelligence sharing. See Seelke, “Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2019.”

²³⁵ Everheart, "Revisiting the Central America Regional Security Initiative," 43.

²³⁶ Seelke, “Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2019.”

²³⁷ Toro, “The Internationalization of Police,”.

²³⁸ Sanchez, "Mexico's Drug "War".

personnel and private security contractors present in Mexico as part of these ongoing agreements.²³⁹ The role of private contractors and training differed between Mérida and similar operations in Columbia and Central America that had more traditional military operations, as the Mexican government pushed back on private security forces, citing that “the Mexican government is not going to allow US contractors to be armed in Mexico”.²⁴⁰ Instead private companies were utilized to provide training, intelligence analysis, and logistical support. US contractors in Mexico trained Mexico’s federal police in drug interdiction, insurgency response, and intelligence gathering. As with similar operations in Columbia, private intelligence analysts trained and coordinated Mexican intelligence remotely from United States territory.²⁴¹ But even with the US restricted presence, the violence increased as US methods and operation were integrated into Mexico’s drug war. Since 2008 with the surge of military personnel, equipment, and training measures, crime and the resulting violent deaths in Mexico have only increased.²⁴² Despite this, Mérida and its corresponding militarization on both sides of the border has effectively been sold to the public.²⁴³ Mérida practices and funding has continued on from its beginning in 2008 through the Obama administration and into the Trump administration with substantial support of its border security purpose.²⁴⁴ On paper, the Mérida agreements initially offered an international solution to transnational crime organizations (TCOs), however many scholars agree the initiative effectively allows the United States to operate their police in another sovereign state, extending jurisdictional borders far past geographic ones in both operation and

²³⁹ Sanchez, "Mexico's Drug "War".

²⁴⁰ Hobson, “Privatising the War on Drugs.”. See also Miroff and Booth, “Security Contractors See Opportunities, and Limits, in Mexico,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2012.

²⁴¹ Hobson, “Privatizing the War on Drugs,”

²⁴² Anna Grace, “10 Years of the Mérida Initiative: Violence and Corruption,” *InSight Crime* (blog), December 26, 2018.

²⁴³ Courtright, “Green for Blue in the Mexican Security State,” *NACLA*, February 15, 2018.

²⁴⁴ Delgado-Ramos and Romano. "Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy." ; Gallaher, "What Does the Trump Administration Mean." ; Seelke, “Mexico: Evolution of the Mérida Initiative, 2007-2019.”

molding foreign government operation to their needs.²⁴⁵ This move perfectly suited the US' now advanced state of security paranoia developed in the decade following the 9/11 attacks and their restructuring of their homeland defense. Initiatives like Mérida allow the US to gain intelligence on potential threats before they neared their Southern border, and create a buffer of US trained foreign policing agents equipped with US weapons far below US territory. This is another example of extending the border out, and how this push is implemented not only with United States boots on the ground and equipment, but by training foreign and sovereign powers to imitate US security. United States expansion through likeness and replication.

The Border Surge.

In June 2013, the United States senate passed the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act which in over 1000 pages set the framework for the largest border policing apparatus yet seen in the United States. US Senator John McCain called this a push for the “most militarized border since the fall of the Berlin Wall.”, and the term “border surge” was used by Senator Chuck Schumer to describe this continuation of post-9/11 security paradigm that prioritized not the deterrence of the last decade, but preemption.²⁴⁶ This act was sold first to the American public as immigration reform that would pave the way for undocumented peoples in the US, but with the long timeline, hefty restrictions, and accompanying border militarization the act was immigration reform only in name. The policy would have allowed for the hiring of 19,000 new Border Patrol agents and the investment of \$46 billion into security technologies and training programs.²⁴⁷ Despite President Obama's vocal

²⁴⁵ Fondevila and Quintana-Navarrete, “War Hypotheses.” ; Delgado-Ramos, and Romano. "Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy.” ; Toro, “The Internationalization of Police.”

²⁴⁶ Gonzales, *Reform Without Justice*. See also Todd Miller, “Creating a Military-Industrial-Immigration Complex,” 2013.

²⁴⁷ Todd Miller, “Creating a Military-Industrial-Immigration Complex,” 2013

confidence in a new era of immigration reform, this bill was more of the same from the past decade. The act never progressed through the house, so the planned \$46 billion never expanded the \$100 billion already spent on border policing measures in the years following 9/11. Though the bill failed, subsequent increases to border security have continued with less and less pretense of immigration reform.

From the creation of DHS in 2003 to May 2019, the federal government has spent approximately \$324 billion on the agencies that carry out immigration and border security functions.²⁴⁸ The federal government spent \$18 billion on immigration enforcement in Fiscal Year 2012, more than the combined budget for the collective spending on the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, Secret Service, U.S. Marshals Service and many others that year.²⁴⁹ The border is forefront in the United States' mind, and has been since the paradigm shift post 9/11, and arguably before that. Since 1993 and the predicted response to NAFTA policies, concentrated border enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border has grown every year, complementing the annual budget of the U.S. Border Patrol steady incline, from \$363 million in FY1993 to more than \$4.7 billion in FY2019.²⁵⁰ The opening statement of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) FY2019 Budget details the first two priorities for Trump administration are border security and immigration enforcement. These border security dollars do not just go to the salaries and equipment of border agents, but to their training and the research that supports their actions. An additional \$704 million is allocated solely to training border security agents, beyond the normal annual training allotments. This training regimen is

²⁴⁸ "The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security," Fact Sheet (American Immigration Council, September 23, 2013).

²⁴⁹ Bergeron et al., "Immigration Enforcement in the United States: The Rise of a Formidable Machinery" (Migration Policy Institute, January 1, 2013).

²⁵⁰ "The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security," Fact Sheet (American Immigration Council, September 23, 2013).

implemented at Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC), and these centers are responsible for training personnel from over 95 law enforcement agencies including state, local, and tribal police departments.²⁵¹ In addition, the annual budget for just the FLETC facility discretionary funds increased 28% from FY18 to FY19, from \$272,759 to \$382,134.²⁵² In addition, private security officers and forces can participate when space allows. The DHS official document goes on to acknowledge the plurality of border security, stating that:

The FY 2019 President’s Budget provides crucial investments in U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) staffing, equipment, border infrastructure, and technology to enhance the overall border security capabilities of frontline operations. No single system can ensure security; security can only be achieved by employing the correct mix of resources. This budget will allow CBP to develop and deploy the correct mix of technology, capabilities, physical infrastructure, and people to detect, target, deter, and respond to threats at the border...²⁵³

These threats on the border include “criminals and terrorists” who pose a danger to the United States “Homeland”.²⁵⁴ Chapter two will delve deeper into the state construction of criminality and terrorism. The looming threats of criminals and terrorists, gathering together and crossing borders informs virtually all of the agencies under DHS’s umbrella. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and the Transportation Security Authority (TSA) make up 44% of the FY2019 DHS budget.²⁵⁵ All of these agencies were created and designed and created to specifically to police and secure borders. ICE and TSA in specific were born with the DHS in 2003 and 2001 respectively. In addition to the 44%, 22% of the DHS

²⁵¹ Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers, “State, Local & Tribal Law Enforcement Training,” Government Website and FAQ, FLETC.gov, accessed July 17, 2019.; Homeland Security, “FY 2019 Budget-in-Brief,” Homeland Security Enterprise, Reports (Department of Homeland Security, February 9, 2018), <http://www.dhs.gov/publication/fy-2019-budget-brief>.

²⁵² Homeland Security, “FY 2019 Budget-in-Brief,” Homeland Security Enterprise, Reports (Department of Homeland Security, February 9, 2018), <http://www.dhs.gov/publication/fy-2019-budget-brief>. 42

²⁵³ Ibid 10

²⁵⁴ Ibid 10

²⁵⁵ Ibid 10

budget is allocated to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for disaster relief and preparedness. However, this large allocation is justified solely with the possibility that terrorists would cross the border and use weapons of mass destruction against US citizens creating a need for FEMA response. Linked terrorist and criminal operation are forefront on the US security apparatus' mind, and this is reflected in their funding allocations. Homeland Security spends most of their funding on the border, a border that is ever being pushed outward to “secure the flow of goods and people” far before they reach United States borders.²⁵⁶ Within the US securityscape terrorism is a blanket threat implemented through foreign criminality and migration, and so border security, as the traditional means through which the US has limited terrorist access to their territory, is extended past traditional territory lines. Through drug war policies and trends such as the Mérida initiative and international information sharing procedures, security measures are used to justify the extension of US jurisdictions and create a larger conceptual borderland that is inhabited by border security threats. In this way, even those outside the US are conceptualized as future terrorists, criminals, and illegal aliens. In a 2016 hearing before the 114th Congress Chief diplomatic officer for DHS, Alan Bersin testified that

We used to see borders as lines on a map, the line that separated us from Mexico or Canada. And in fact, we now come to see because, in fact, we have learned that homeland security is intrinsically transnational. That is to say there is hardly an event that affects us inside our homeland that does not have a cause or effect that originates outside the homeland. So we start to look at border security in terms of not just in lines, but in flows.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ United States, Potential Terrorist Threats: Border Security Challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean: Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fourteenth Congress, Second Session, March 22, 2016 (Washington: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2016), 9

²⁵⁷ Ibid 8

Bersin’s “flows” refers to both people and things, all of which is considered a potential threat to US homeland security. This stance reflects the ongoing conflation of criminality, terrorism, and the movement of people viewed as ‘other’ into the United States. The identification of “flows” that begin outside US borders also reflects a shift towards predicative policing and security that moves away from the deterrence strategies of the NAFTA era. Instead, analysis and expertise in conjunction with big data and private sector technology, have become instrumental in identifying these “flows” and the threats they allegedly represent. This extends the US conceptual borderland where they may justify action against not actualized threats, but potential ones.

To understand how small private experts operate and vie for authority within the border security and defense fields it is important to understand the prevalence of private-sector integration across the United States securityscape. These partnerships are addressed consistently throughout United States budget documentation and the mission statements of nearly all agencies. This cooperation with private industry falls in line with the diffusion and transformation of state services and operation that is quintessential to the dominant neoliberal trends of the past three decades.²⁵⁸ DHS spent \$16 billion on contracts with private companies in FY17 alone. CBP and ICE private contracts make up \$4.5 billion of those contracts.²⁵⁹ These private companies have an integral role in securitizing the border and creating what has been dubbed the border-security complex, modeled after the so-called military-industrial complex.²⁶⁰ Folded within this border industry is the ever growing “migration industry complex”, which categorizes a number of private non-government businesses that sell “migrant detention”

²⁵⁸ Mize, “Interrogating Race, Class, Gender and Capitalism.” ; Ackerman, “NAFTA and Gatekeeper.”

²⁵⁹ “Data Lab – Contract Explorer – U.S. Treasury,” Data Lab, accessed July 17, 2019.

²⁶⁰ Michael Dear, “Beware the Growing U.S.-Mexico Border Industrial Complex,” *UC Berkeley* (blog), (October 6, 2015).

technology, prisons, and expertise.²⁶¹ Though these private migrant detention existed since the 1980s, the 9/11 security paradigm actively conflated terrorism, narcotics interdiction, and all types of migration – effectively linking the potential threat of all three through concepts like the terror-crime nexus to justify wider spending on private resources.²⁶² This security paradigm then saw concrete actualization in the restructuring immigration control and border security operation under DHS and its many private contractors and corporate stakeholders. Border security networks are nebulous and diffuse, including explicit border security agents like CBP and ICE, but also local police departments across the US that share information and train alongside federal agents, tech companies that host government data and develop facial recognition for border stops, private prison and detention firms, and individual experts that court federal dollars with their law enforcement training and subject-matter expertise. ICE contracts are given primarily to private detention firms like GEOgroup, while data storage and information technology companies receive the majority of CPB contracts.²⁶³ Private companies and industry have been involved in border policing since before the NAFTA/Gatekeeper rise of a truly militarized border, and after 9/11 the Bush administration aggressively and ambitiously pursued contracts with leading defense contractors to create a “virtual border”.²⁶⁴ President Bush became known by contractors and government employees alike as the “Outsourcer and Chief” for the amount of defense spending that was left in the hands of private contractors.²⁶⁵ The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Defense (DOD), and Department of Energy (DOE) in

²⁶¹ Miller, *Border Patrol Nation*. See also Golash-Boza, "The Immigration Industrial Complex." ; "Border Militarization and Corporate Outsourcing," *National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights* (blog), (2018). ; Côté-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter, "Border Security as Practice."

²⁶² Koulisch, "Blackwater and the Privatization of Immigration Control," 480.

²⁶³ "Data Lab – Contract Explorer – U.S. Treasury," Data Lab, (accessed July 17, 2019).

²⁶⁴ Golash-Boza, "The Immigration Industrial Complex." ; "Border Militarization and Corporate Outsourcing," *National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights* (blog), (2018).

²⁶⁵ Verkuil, *Outsourcing Sovereignty*, 4.

particular are structured so they are “honeycombed” with private companies who provide personnel training, engineering development, program management, intelligence analysis and various other services as contractors. Migration itself has been outsourced to private companies that handle everything from Visa screenings to deportation transportation.²⁶⁶ This honeycomb structure of government agencies, embedded contractors, and outsourced services have become the norm across defense fields, including border security. Many of these private companies are not primarily border security firms, and instead have separate departments divided between public services and those that serve the state.²⁶⁷ The now accepted and normative presence of private interest with the defense and security fields create a competitive market where smaller private actors, like individual subject matter experts, may sell their expertise with little oversight beyond what is cost-effective and in-line with state interests.

These experts and other private vendors market in very specific ways to the state, drawing on state-approved ways of thinking to sell their services and wares. Commercial events and marketing for both law enforcement training and border technologies provide sites where private actors and state agents consume and exchange border security products, services, and ideas. These “fairs” are comprised of varied actors, but consist primarily of private sellers and the state agents they sell to.²⁶⁸ Private actors, such as companies that provide information technology, training, and security set the stage, so to speak, for these discussions and frame them in a way to better sell to the state and its border interests. Despite the regional expertise offered at many of these events, border security fairs are international productions and attendees from all over the world come to sell and buy secure borders.²⁶⁹ Many of these events include not just

²⁶⁶ Bloom, “The Business of Migration Control,”153.

²⁶⁷ Amazon and Microsoft are two good examples of this.

²⁶⁸ Baird, “Knowledge of Practice.”

²⁶⁹ Baird, “Knowledge of Practice.”

border security products and information, but cater to larger police and military interests with weapon systems, surveillance technology, and policing training from private security companies and independent crime experts.²⁷⁰ These private industry events are deeply important sites of interaction and knowledge production, as they highlight and display on the practices, routines, and norms of border security.²⁷¹ Defense fields are traditionally male dominated, and security fairs reproduce a gender dichotomy that expands this dominant masculinity into languages and visuals of defensive technology and expertise.²⁷² Importantly, these sites are orchestrated by private actors and conducted as a dialogue between private interests and the state, where governments make their needs known and actors cater to them. Private agents then conform to state interests in competition with their peers. In this way, private technology and expertise are as much a part of modern border security as the operation of official state agents and dialogue, which is an open and accepted aspect of these fairs, is indicative how fields have been blurred between security purviews and traditional private/state lines and new practices, norms, and culture come from these sites of exchange. These engagements, how private actors sell themselves and their products to the state, and therefore become a participant in state border security practices and discourse, are able to be studied. Sites of nebulous exchange and status, these marginal places between fields of state and private enterprise, are fruitful sites to analysis as they give a nuanced view of the rationalities, norms, and normal practices of the major ‘power-brokers’ present in border security discourse. These private companies that serve and sell to the state have become deeply entwined with the state project of borders, and the border industry has emerged as a definitive field with its own expertise, mythologies, and imaginaries.

²⁷⁰ Baird, “Knowledge of Practice.”

²⁷¹ Frowd, “The field of border control in Mauritania.”

²⁷² Baird, “Knowledge of Practice.”

And just like any field, there are those that operate and compete at its margins vying for a way in.

Conclusion

Border security is no longer, and has arguably never been, simply a state affair. Despite the dependence of the State on its borders for territorial and ideological identity, border-making is a process undertaken by a wide set of actors, institutions, and everyday practices all with varied distance from the state.²⁷³ Like the securityscape framework used to discuss pervasive defense industry, culture, and state function in the United States, scholars have turned to similar frameworks to understand the many actors, practices, and systems that make up the plurality of the border. The border is at once both everyday practices, an imaginary, and a physical site at the edge of a state. Côte-Boucher et al. explains that

Research into concrete, everyday practices allows for a reconceptualization of security as a set of mediated processes situated at the junction between, on the one hand, the actions and worldviews of diverse border security actors and, on the other, security discourses, strategies, policies and technologies.²⁷⁴

When looking at the defense privatization occurring in the US Mexico borderlands, it is necessary to remain cognizant of this plurality, of the border securityscape created by and influencing those who produce the “security discourses” and worldviews of the border.²⁷⁵ Private actors such as scientists, academics, training personnel are all capable of bordering actions, as are the materials and standards they produce.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Koulisch, “Blackwater and the Privatization of Immigration Control.”

²⁷⁴ Côte-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter, “Border security as practice,” 199.

²⁷⁵ Amooore, “The Politics of Possibility.” ; Connolly, *Pluralism.*; Côte-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter, “Border security as practice,” 199.

²⁷⁶ Bourne, Johnson, and Lisle, “Laboratizing the border,” 309.

But there is one aspect of modern border security that I argue has not gotten the theoretical or critical attention it deserves, and that is effect privatization has had on the content of border security expertise. A growing field of scholars have documented the rise of private defense and security companies in United States foreign intervention and diplomacy. The United States is the largest consumer of private military and security forces, for example half those deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2011 were private contractors, the domestic securitization of the Southern US border remains under-discussed.²⁷⁷ Overall scholarship on Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), though different than the individual private contractor experts discussed in specific by this project, offer an entry point into this discussion as the historical trajectory that bore the narco saint experts led to their existence as well. Their role in the international drug wars waged by the United States is comparable to the militarized outfitting in the US Mexico borderlands, in that it suffers from low-oversight, rampant spending, and dangerous human rights implications.²⁷⁸ Private contractors are not subject to the same hierarchies as those within government institutions. The honeycomb structure of government agencies laden with private contracts and workers is subject to inefficiency, corruption, high-spending, and low returns.²⁷⁹ One of the most grievous examples of this was SBInet, or the Secure Border Initiative Network a project that was cost taxpayers almost \$2 Billion and was cancelled in 2011 after a 2010 assessment of the program that unearthed deep oversight problems, heavy cost, and low effectiveness.²⁸⁰ Similar contracts continue onto this day, and it is not uncommon for the analysis and assessment of contracts to be outsourced out to other

²⁷⁷ Avant and de Nevers, "Military Contractors & the American Way of War."

²⁷⁸ Perret, Antoine. "Privatization of the War on Drugs in Mexico and Colombia," 45.

²⁷⁹ Brodsky, Phillips and Katherine McIntire Peters, "Big Contracts, Big Problems," ; Verkuil, *Outsourcing Sovereignty*, 35- 37.

²⁸⁰ Verkuil, *Outsourcing Sovereignty*, 35- 37.; Randolph C. Hite, "DHS Needs To Follow Through on Plans to Reassess and Better Manage Key Technology Program" (Washington DC: Government Accountability Office, 2010).

contractors and thinktanks.²⁸¹ However, the current data made available by the United States focuses largely concerns only foreign deployed contractors and private companies that provide logistical and intelligence support to US forces internationally. Likewise, most scholarly discussions of this phenomenon lead from this data, and attention to the domestic operation of security has been limited.²⁸² Even more so, discussions of privately contracted domestic expertise and intelligence that produces policing and border security practice has been largely absent. The content of this expertise will be discussed further in chapter two, however with low barriers to entry, self-styled experts are able to draw upon relatively little experience, and with the right marketing, become sought after producers of specialized knowledge within the US securityscape. Couple this with the dramatic increase in federal spending on the border, border security is now a lucrative business that requires relatively little credentials to participate in. The overall trends of the last thirty years have contributed to this climate, and allowed marginal experts to find an entrepreneurial niche.

Throughout the past thirty years in particular with the arrival of the militarized border as it exists now, experts have been an instrumental part of border history. This is unsurprising as state making has been particularly visible at borders, and expertise has always been integral to state making. The state, borders, and expertise exist with close relationship to one another. However, this does not mean that experts are indistinguishable from the state, or that all border-making action is state action. Neoliberal privatization has affected all portions of the defense industry and federal spending, and along with the blurring of police lines and military jurisdictions, this has created a frontier of a field where small actors, businesses, and experts try

²⁸¹ Verkuil, *Outsourcing Sovereignty*, 35- 37

²⁸² “Global Data & Statistics | Private Security Monitor,” Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy, University of Denver, accessed July 11, 2019, http://psm.du.edu/articles_reports_statistics/data_and_statistics.html#usdata.

to establish themselves in a lucrative but already crowded field. Narco saint experts do so by selling marginality. Narco saint experts leverage their liminal position in unique ways that reify conceptions of religious orientalism, racist narratives that depend on threat and danger, militarized state action, and general conceptions of the border as frontier. And they establish this liminality, this cultivated marginalization within their field and industry, by locating themselves within the border and defense history of the United States. Their operation, views, effects, and very presence has developed from threads of border militarization and privatization over the last thirty years. However, they have done so from the margins, reaping small rewards and locale fame, but mostly still operating as small-scale specialists. What makes these experts notable however, is their impact on large religious movements, legal discourse, and border security itself. These experts are culture producers themselves and have leveraged their proximity to the margins, both in field and in geography, to find a niche in an already bloated industry. These experts without knowledge highlight and leverage an imagined position on the border, on the edges and ‘front lines’ of a supposedly dangerous frontier and wild place. This is not without consequence, as racist narratives further border tropes of threat, criminality, and orientalist conceptions of deviant religions.

Chapter Two: Policing in the End Times

In the Summer of 2019, I walked into the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Headquarters in Arlington, Virginia for a scholarship and recruitment event. There along with other women, I listened as established members of the Department of Defense and its industrial partners toasted us as the future of homeland security. These high-ranking members of the United States securityscape expressed hope that we would not join the private industry, or waste our potential behind university walls, but instead pursue meaningful work within, or at least associated with, the United States' many security and defense agencies. If we could brave DC's swampy summers, we would be the main line of defense against a global shift against the United States that was occurring as they spoke. In many words we were told it was us who would decide whether the United States would maintain its dominance in the world, a dominance that no one in the room seemed particularly sure of anymore.

The next day, my fellow attendees and myself met military leaders, intelligence analysts, and defense contractors in DC at another recruitment conference. There, nervous laughter burbled at any mention of China or Russia. The United States' stumbling technology and declining intelligence capabilities were often alluded to, but never openly admitted as different speakers took the stage. The events that week were designed to find new talent, new expertise like the kind my fellow attendees and I offered, to "support the warfighter", a phrase common in the defense industry. Present within all the events of that week was the specter of a US hegemony no longer guaranteed. These recruitment tactics are not new, nor are the imperial anxieties that feed apocalyptic cosmologies a beginning of an era of conflict the State isn't ready for.²⁸³ Whether or not these implicit and explicit anxieties were genuine, or in this case merely a

²⁸³ Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). 4-5; Stewart,

recruitment strategy, these fears represent an apocalyptic anxiety present in the United States securityscape that encourages old nationalism and violence behind the guise of new knowledge and intelligence.

Narco saint experts have yet to make it, so to speak, in the United States securityscape. They remain on the fringes of their fields, and must maintain a constant entrepreneurial energy to maintain their audiences and livelihoods as sought-after experts. Their specialization and focus on still small religious movements keep out competition from other security professionals, but experts like Robert J. Bunker and Robert Almonte leverage a unique positionality to maintain their place within the US securityscape. With this peripheral position comes a sort of liminality, a place on the fringes of both the geographic United States and its security communities.

Liminality and liminal states were popularized in scholarly discourse by the influential anthropology of Victor Turner and his documentation of Ndembu rituals and social transition. It is from Turner's work that the phrase "betwixt and between" is drawn and used throughout different research to describe the state or position of being liminal. For Turner, a liminal position is defined by its "ambiguity and indeterminacy", those in liminal states "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space".²⁸⁴ This position is characterized by revolutionary, or at least generative, potential not just because they challenge structures by their difficult classification, but the ways in which they create communities and networks that can insidiously break down established institutions and norms. The network "narco saint" experts create and operate within is indicative of this kind of community, while some experts have risen to greater popularity and attracted larger audiences,

Kathleen, and Harding, "Bad Endings: American Apocalypse." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 285.

²⁸⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.; See also Rumelili, "Liminal Identities and Processes" 495–508.

their success and position is not based on typical hierarchical positions of office or credential. Instead, these experts leverage and compete for an authenticity based on rapport with law enforcement and defense agents, and proximity to the saints and the border. They elude traditional categories of law enforcement, military, private industry, religious, and academic professionals as they attempt to operate in and across many of these fields with varied challenges to their authority. Narco saint experts that operate in today's securityscape are indicative of this sort of liminality, and though their views reproduce Orientalist categories and discourse that the state has long used to other the borderlands, their unique and liminal position has allowed them influence and authority from outside of traditional sites of knowledge production. This community operates as experts, creating training materials, blog posts, travel journalism, and self-published research that inform policy and law enforcement operation on the ground, as well as popular conceptions of these religious communities.²⁸⁵ These publications consistently inform law enforcement training programs across different High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA)s and other Investigative Support Centers (ISCs), and are used to legitimize sensationalistic news media coverage of arrests associated with narco saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde.²⁸⁶

Scholarship that uses Turner's framework to discuss the position of being "betwixt and between" stress the creative potential and entrepreneurial mindset set that often come with liminality. Those within the grey areas between fields, institutions, and other structures have a

²⁸⁵ Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*; EndPlay, "Drug Cartels Worship,".

²⁸⁶ To name a few examples of news coverage: Daniel Borunda, "Mexico Drug Cartel Violence Flares as Mexicles, Gente Nueva War Rattles Valley of Juárez," *El Paso Times*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/local/juarez/2019/06/19/mexico-violence-mexicles-gente-nueva-gang-war-rattles-valley-juarez/1489874001/>; Daniel Borunda, "Suspect in El Paso Triple-Murder Was on Probation; 2 Victims Had Been Arrested," *El Paso Times*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/crime/2018/09/19/el-paso-triple-murder-suspect-juan-fausto-cazares-probation-prior-arrests/1347909002/>.

motivation to create place and establish authority or capital, and are sometimes able to operate without structural limitations and traditional barriers to entry. However, the understandings of the generative capability of these spaces and those who occupy them are still limited in some aspects. Research on the production of institutional and scientific knowledge has focused on the development of university-based disciplines, private-public partnerships, and non-university private sector growth.²⁸⁷ However, little attention to the rising presence of knowledge “produced in the 'liminal spaces', or 'thick boundaries', between universities and other powerful institutions.”²⁸⁸ Research is increasingly being done in these grey areas and by people who operate between fields to affect social research and public discourse.²⁸⁹ Those scholars that do address these grey areas still focus on fields that are fairly established with mixes of credentialed experts and newcomers, fields that are in the process of solidifying with measurable, if hazy boundaries.²⁹⁰ Narco saint experts operate within even more marginal and less defined parameters, coming from law enforcement and defense backgrounds and defining themselves through individualized entrepreneurship and specialization. Ideas produced in these liminal spaces, betwixt and between, the University, think tank, and established other expertise fields are characterized by its position, as much as any production of knowledge is. I argue that narco saint experts leverage this liminal position between established fields, highlighting their “aleness” fighting on the frontiers of their discipline and on the geographic boundary of US, to increase their authority on the beliefs and practices of marginalized religious communities, and construct

²⁸⁷ Among many, some examples include Berman, *Creating the Market University*; Evans, *Industry Induces Academic Science*; Slaughter and Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism*

²⁸⁸ McLevey, "Understanding Policy Research," 270-93. 271; Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.

²⁸⁹ McLevey, 288

²⁹⁰ McLevey, "Understanding Policy Research," 270-93. 271; Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror*.; See also Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*. Other work on interstitial fields comes from those who study the development of scientific/intellectual movements and irregular contributions to medical science throughout history.

a threat to the United States that requires their knowledge to combat. As their work borrows from historical and racial imaginaries, and the poetics of the border itself, they do so from the edges of their own industry, articulating colonial and imperial anxieties about the frontier. These experts operate on the very geographic and conceptual borders they reify. This position is both determinantal and beneficial, relegating them to liminal spaces between more established disciplines and institutions, but constructing an organic authority derived from being “on the front lines” they utilize to sell their expertise.

This chapter discusses this unique positionality of the narco saint expert community by focusing on two experts who are prolific and visible in their appearances, publications, and impact on the discourse within the United States. Robert Almonte and Robert J. Bunker are not the only narco saint experts, but they form locus points within the narco saint expert community, which is made up of security scholars, defense experts, military and law enforcement enthusiasts, border culture hobbyists, and travel journalists with varying degrees of overlap. Somewhat biographic in nature, this section focuses on these people, their careers, and the interactions with the subject of their expertise. Specifically, this chapter explores how their backgrounds and experience have shaped self-conceptions of their own position on the geographic and professional borders, and enables these experts to leverage their liminality to create authority and affect national-level discourses. The chapter begins with an exploratory discussion of a possible analytic framework for understanding the self-conception of these narco saint experts and their place within the United States securityscape. The details of their early lives and careers demonstrates the tension experienced betwixt and between different fields, and how that has generated an energy capable of creating culture—albeit one that is deeply entrenched in the state, defense and cop logics, and ideas of the frontier.

Apocalypse and Prophetic Stance

Calamity, disaster, and “the end” have been a part of the United States’ consciousness from the country’s colonial history, and a near constant threat of apocalypse characterized Cold War domestic and international policy.²⁹¹ The Eisenhower Administration created the assumption through political rhetoric, new institutional structures, and new expertise fields that the United States would continually face an enemy intent on destroying not just the country, but the ideological foundations of American society; the end was always at hand and the US built its securityscape around the goal of “apocalypse management.”²⁹² Just as Cold War experts and their Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC) deeply shaped post 9/11 expertise on terrorism and border security, so did Cold War conceptions of apocalypse deeply affect the “war on terror” and its associated constructions of “narco-terrorist” and insurgency. The vaguely defined “war on terror” of the early 2000s was characterized as boundless, all encompassing, and it is within this climate that ‘clash of civilizations’ rhetoric began to dominate the US’s understandings of cross-border conflict.²⁹³ Samuel Huntington’s theory of competing and incompatible cultures fit well into this apocalyptic landscape, where not only strategic or economic interests are permanently threatened by an “other”, but also deep cultural and ideological norms.²⁹⁴ Narco saint experts like Bunker and Almonte continue this apocalyptic tradition, arguing their specific expertise speaks to a significant threat more dangerous than those previously conceived by the United States. As Martha Kaplan explained in her 1995 monograph of colonial history, ritual, and imaginary in Fiji, “A ‘cult’—a marginal, dubious, deviant activity—is brought into being in the

²⁹¹ Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity*.

²⁹² Craig, and Logevall, *America's Cold War*; Chernus, *Apocalypse Management*.

²⁹³ Mirzoeff and Nicholas. "The Clash of Visualizations," 185-1210.

²⁹⁴ Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*. For similar and influential cultural essentialist discourse see Huntington, “Special Case of Mexican Immigration.”

imagination not of its practitioners (who have other understandings of what they do) but of its inquisitors, the central authorities.”²⁹⁵ Deviant societal threats, “cults”, are productions of the state that articulate apocalyptic anxieties of imagined corruption, and as Kaplan argues, the narrative process that creates this “deviant” cult echoes the rise of the state that produces it.²⁹⁶ This insight allows a better understanding of narco saint experts as they exist and produce knowledge within the hegemonic United States securityscape, creating deviant entities and threats in an apocalyptic tradition that justifies expanded militarization of police forces and blurring of territorial jurisdictions in the Americas.

As shown above, while these experts do reproduce state goals and consider themselves agents of a lawful and just state, their ideas still remain fringe, borderline so to speak. The United States has yet to officially classify Mexico a failed state and take subsequent military measures to address the cartels that Bunker argues are the single greatest threat to United States national security, nor has the United States legal system consistently upheld Almonte’s assertion that narco saint devotion is indicative of dangerous criminality. The collective network of fringe security scholars and law enforcement experts that develop and publish narco saint expertise exist within a larger securityscape, but must continually prove themselves within this landscape without traditional markers of institutional authority to help them. The tension potentially comes from their subject matter; while these experts argue that narco saints present a religious and cultural threat to the US, this threat competes with other United States security priorities for resources and attention. Narco saint issues have yet to gain traction on national levels beyond their coverage in news media and popular cultural depictions. For Bunker, and to a lesser extent Almonte, narco saints represent an insurgent and widespread cultural shift marked by criminality

²⁹⁵ Kaplan, *Neither Cargo nor Cult*, 203

²⁹⁶ Kaplan, *Neither Cargo nor Cult*, 203

and moral degeneracy that has already occurred in Mexico and has begun to “spill over” past the United States’ southern border. This spillover, according Robert J. Bunker and Robert Almonte has already occurred and is ever reaching northward farther into the United States.²⁹⁷ While fears of drugs and narcotics related violence “spilling over” into the United States has been used to push border security measures and support for the drug war for decades, narco saint experts argue that there is a spiritual and ideological danger in addition to the threat of increased violence and addiction.²⁹⁸ Throughout their publications and testimonials, Almonte and Bunker are both insistent and frustrated with the lack of attention to the danger they see and consult on. They frame their expertise with the purpose of showing defense stakeholders, policy makers, and the public, the “reality” of this criminal and religious threat, what is happening “on the ground”, and the dangers law enforcement brave to combat this threat.²⁹⁹ These experts are cognizant that they are not being listened to, and consider their work “thankless”, they claim their prospective national audience is dangerously out of touch with the realities they see from the their “front line” position.³⁰⁰ They imply that this inattention allows an insurgent threat to seep through the border unaddressed, except for their own efforts and a martyr community of law enforcement

²⁹⁷ Bunker, “Sheriff and State Advisor.”; Dr. Carlos Show. *We Discuss the Cartel and Border Issues with Former U. S. Marshall Robert Almonte*. YouTube, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tcq-NjsIUe4>.

²⁹⁸ Ramirez, et al., “Relation of Drug Trafficking,” 91–105; Paley, “Drug War as Neoliberal Trojan Horse.” 109–32.; Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots*.

²⁹⁹ Robert Bunker, “Sheriff and State Advisor Border Summits | Small Wars Journal.” *Small Wars Journal*, September 24, 2014. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/sheriff-and-state-advisor-border-summits>.; “Editors Note” Robert Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2013.; Jay Dobyns, *S4 Cartels Up Close E2 Narco Voodoo with Robert Almonte*. Vol. S4 E2. Cop Land, 2019. <http://www.buzzsprout.com/354806/1938500-s4-cartels-up-close-e2-narco-voodoo-with-robert-almonte>.; Ricardo E. Calderon, “U.S. Marshal Robert Almonte Gives Special Training to Regional Law Enforcement Officers.” *Eagle Pass Business Journal*, November 10, 2011. <https://www.epbusinessjournal.com/2011/11/u-s-marshal-robert-almonte-gives-special-training-to-regional-law-enforcement-officers/>.

³⁰⁰ Almonte Consulting & Training. *The Culture, Saints & Music of the Mexican Cartels and Gangs [Training Flyer]*. (Regional Counterdrug Training Academy, September 6, 2019), <https://www.cnoa.org/events/view/776>.; See also Robert J. Bunker, *Introduction: Crime Wars and Narco Terrorism in the Americas* to Robert J. Bunker, *Crime Wars and Narco Terrorism in the Americas*.

that protects this “front line”.³⁰¹ This is the origin of the tension they feel within the securityscape of the United States. Despite Almonte’s long law enforcement and then consulting career, and even with Bunker’s many publications and testimony before congress on the security threats beyond and at the border, neither are satisfied with the measures taken to police not just United States territory but Mexico as well.³⁰² Both Bunker and Almonte feel called to their work and seek to affect their professional field and the United States in positive ways. Almonte’s religiously affected law enforcement career, and Bunker’s epochal theories that the US is facing a potential apocalyptic challenge, position these experts uniquely and their potentially prophetic stance may explain why they have risen to prominence amidst their community, and why their ideas have gained some traction in larger discourses.

To explain how the unique position and authority these experts occupy has given this narrative life, I adapt a version of Walter Brueggemann’s theory of prophetic imagination. In 1978, Brueggemann laid out the conceptual framework to understand the revolutionary capacity that Old Testament Biblical prophets operated with, and the conditions from which these prophets arose. Brueggemann’s work is theological in nature, and he explains the critical and energizing nature of alternative religious communities in a manner reminiscent of Victor Turner’s *communitas*.³⁰³ In Brueggemann’s view, prophets harness their position and tension with the dominant culture they exist with, to provide not only a criticism of that dominant culture, but a promise of a future that exists separate and beyond what he labels the “royal

³⁰¹ See Chapter 3 for an indepth discussion of this materials, publications, and rhetoric.

³⁰² Robert J. Bunker, *Criminal (Cartel & Gang) Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: What you need to know, not what you want to hear*. “Has Merida Evolved? Part One: The Evolution of Drug Cartels and the Threat to Mexico’s Governance”. (Congressional testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. Washington, DC, 13 September 2011: 1-25), foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/bun091311.pdf.

³⁰³ Turner, *The Ritual Proces*, 95. See also Rumelili, “Liminal Identities and Processes,” 495–508.

consciousness” of those in power.³⁰⁴ These individuals present a vision beyond justice, social upheaval, or success, but instead create a prophetic imaginary that challenges the very reality and mindset that supports and upholds hegemonic power. Importantly, these prophets are not singularly created, but instead comes from a subcommunity that is part of a dominant community, and participates in the public life of that dominant community but does so with tension and cognizant intention.³⁰⁵

I suggest that Bunker and Almonte are operating in a style that resembles the prophetic one Brueggemann describes, but in an inverse way. For Brueggemann, the work of the prophets “is nothing less than an assault on the consciousness of empire”. These individuals and the communities they grow from and represent are deeply revolutionary and counter-hegemonic, qualities that come from the tension they experience living within that empire. The opposite is true of narco saint expert communities, who adopt orientalist explanations for folk saint devotion used by the United States security state since its colonial history.³⁰⁶ Narco saint experts are optimistic about the US’s ability to address these threats should proper attention and resources be attracted. Both Almonte and Bunker exist in tension with larger fields they envision themselves within, but have yet to be fully accepted by. For Almonte, this is law enforcement work and law, which continues to challenge the authority of his “training and experience” in courtrooms, and ousted him at the height of his career. For Bunker, this is an academic community that refuses to accept his prescriptive and apocalyptic view of crime and migration. Both leverage their work as being more real, grounded in geographical location and hands-on experience than traditional

³⁰⁴ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 21

³⁰⁵ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 21

³⁰⁶ Alonso, *Thread of Blood* ; Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given*.

expertise communities who are out of touch with the moral and dire threat narco saints represent to the United States. These experts are not prophets, but they see themselves as such.

The Experts

Both Robert J. Bunker and Robert R. Almonte are two experts who create, publish, and disseminate narco saint knowledge, and each act as expert witnesses against those found with religious material believed to be associated with narcotics trafficking. These two individuals work in separate capacities, scopes, and produce for somewhat different audiences. However, both produce training materials and expertise publications designed to inform law enforcement operation, actively instruct law enforcement agents in various training events and venues, and operate within the United States securityscape discussed in chapter one as private entrepreneurs. Bunker and Almonte are certainly the foremost of the experts, with the most far ranging effect and presence in border discourses of news media and court cases, but they do not operate alone. Instead, Robert Almonte and Robert Bunker are visible nexuses of this network of parastatal experts, and are part of a close-knit but relatively small law enforcement network that produces expertise outside traditional and established knowledge producing communities such as intelligence agencies and thinktanks. This fledgling field of knowledge includes law enforcement agents, experts from defense colleges, and travel journalists attempting to sell their work to the US state. For this reason, the following analysis focuses on these two individuals and their immediate networks, as their position and expertise has directly informed the larger narco saint expert community, and the discourse around informal borderland saints Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde.

Robert J. Bunker

In the acknowledgments of his edited volume, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities*, Bunker thanks his contributors for braving the disapproval of the mainstream “Western intellectual academy” by contributing to the volume.³⁰⁷ This opening acknowledgment makes sense considering the preface, by Dr. Dawn Perlmutter, sets the collection in direct disagreement with mainstream academic epistemologies. Dr. Perlmutter comes from an art history background but transitioned to a career as a ritualistic crime researcher and true-crime television personality, and has worked to train and advise law enforcement to recognize unsubstantiated connections between satanic child abuse, ritualized crime, and terrorism in the United States.³⁰⁸ Perlmutter claims that rational scientific inquiry is a Western philosophical tradition that has prevented academics from understanding violence from an emic anthropological point of view, and that this collection takes a different approach. For Bunker and Perlmutter, those who study and investigate “barbaric savage violence” and terrorism must depart from mainstream intellectual and academic traditions that attribute

³⁰⁷ Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*:

³⁰⁸ Several watchdog organizations have noted Perlmutter’s propensity for spreading conspiracy thinking regarding “false memories” of Satanic abuse, unsubstantiated linking between atheist activism and violent satanism, and prejudicial depictions of satanism in the United States. See False Memory Syndrome Foundation, *FMS Foundation Newsletter*, (Foundation, Winter 2008,) <http://www.fmsfonline.org/index.php>; Diane Vera, “Dawn Perlmutter and Her Institute for the Research of Organized and Ritual Violence,” *Against Satanic Panics*, 2006, <https://www.angelfire.com/ny5/dvera/asp/people/Perlmutter/index.html>. and “Grey Faction- Dawn Perlmutter,” Grey Faction, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://greyfaction.org/resources/proponents/perlmutter-dawn/>; *Religion News Blog* (blog) “Spiritual Sleuth Studies Violent Religions to Fight Crime,” November 13, 2003, <https://www.religionnewsblog.com/5010/spiritual-sleuth-studies-violent-religions-to-fight-crime>. Perlmutter’s academic training as an art historian also calls into question her ability to analyze matters of religion, crime, and social conflict, but nonetheless she continues to write and advise on issues of school shootings, terrorism, false connections between Islam and ritual murder, and transnational crime—contributing to phenomenon seen during “satanic panic” scares. See Dawn Perlmutter, *Investigating Religious Terrorism and Ritualistic Crimes* (CRC Press, 2003) and *Dawn Perlmutter - Has The Feminist Cult Of Victim-Hood Gotten Completely Out Of Hand?*, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://soundcloud.com/thelarslarsonshow/dawn-perlmutter-has-the-feminist-cult-of-victim-hood-gotten-completely-out-of-hand..> .

violence to issues of systemic inequality and colonialism.³⁰⁹ Instead, these practices should be taken for what they are, blood sacrifice and barbarism that exist when groups do not place value in life, happiness, and democracy.³¹⁰ Perlmutter explains that these values are not universal, despite Western audiences assumption they are. Her work and Bunker's explicitly rejects critical theory, in favor of "emic" cultural analysis that leads them to conclude simply that in many non-Western cultures "blood sacrifice as a root cause of violent crime and terrorism."³¹¹ This volume reprints several of Bunker's articles, as well as many written by his frequent collaborators such as Tony Kail a travel journalist and self-made expert, Maj. Lisa J. Campbell, an Intelligence Officer, and Bunker's partner, Dr. Pamela Ligouri Bunker a Small Wars Journal contributor.³¹² The *Blood Sacrifices* volume is just one of many publications that Bunker edits and contributes to. The majority of these volumes are self-published by small organizations and research non-profits who publish law enforcement and security perspectives on crime, conflict, and warfare management. These include organizations like the Terrorism Research Center or the Small Wars Foundation, a non-profit founded by Marines to disseminate law enforcement expertise to the public and practitioners. Bunker's publications are presented to readers as alternatives to academic discourses on crime, violence, religion, and culture, packaged with the trappings of scholarly journals to appeal and speak to law enforcement, defense, and security audiences.

Robert J Bunker positions himself as an academic expert who operates outside constricting and out of touch academic circles, creating expertise and consulting on matters of

³⁰⁹ Dawn Perlmutter, *Preface Analyzing Sacrificial Violence*. In Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities* (iUniverse, 2016). xxv

³¹⁰ Dawn Perlmutter, *Preface Analyzing Sacrificial Violence*. In Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities* (iUniverse, 2016). xxi

³¹¹ Dawn Perlmutter, *Preface Analyzing Sacrificial Violence*. In Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities* (iUniverse, 2016). xxii

³¹² Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*.; Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico*, 1

insurgency, deviant beliefs, and the danger posed by criminal organizations in Mexico and in general Latin America. Dr. Bunker connects his early interest in these phenomena to the 1983 attacks against US Marines barracks in Beirut, Lebanon when he was in his undergraduate studies at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. The attack is remembered by the Marine Corp as one of the deadliest since World War II, and Bunker explains the bombing “struck him hard”, using militaristic language to describe the emotional intimate effect the event had on him. In Bunker’s words, “this was the Marine Corps, part of the strongest country in the world, and they took these [terrorists] for granted and they got sucker punched.”³¹³ It was this attack by violent non-state actors (VNSAs) and his “love of country” that spurred his interest in insurgencies of many forms. Bunker attributes his current work to a paradigm shift brought on during a graduate seminar with one of his mentors at Claremont Graduate School in 1987, where he worked on his PhD in Political Science.³¹⁴ During a class session he and Dr. Lindsay T. Moore “theoretically projected that the United States was going to face a post-modern epochal transition”—a new age of warfare that requires acknowledging new and dominant threats to the US, such as terrorists, cartels, gangs, and other non-state actors. Bunker states that Dr. Moore’s general “appreciation of broader Western intellectual and scientific developments” directly shaped Bunker’s future work and it was the new reality of epochal transition he theorized with Moore that Bunker bases his work on.³¹⁵ Although little information is available on Dr. Moore, as he has few publications beyond those associated with Bunker himself, no current biographical

³¹³ Claremont Graduate University. “Robert Bunker: The Art of (Future) War.” News. *Claremont Graduate University*, March 11, 2015. <https://www.cgu.edu/news/2015/03/robert-bunker>.

³¹⁴ Claremont Graduate University. “Robert Bunker: The Art of (Future) War.” News. *Claremont Graduate University*, March 11, 2015. <https://www.cgu.edu/news/2015/03/robert-bunker>.; *E-International Relations (blog)*, “Interview - Robert J. Bunker,” by Alexandra Phelan, posted May 20, 2016. <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/20/interview-robert-j-bunker/>.

³¹⁵ *E-International Relations (blog)*, “Interview - Robert J. Bunker,” by Alexandra Phelan, posted May 20, 2016. <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/20/interview-robert-j-bunker/>.

information, or posting information available, this thinker had, by Bunker's own admission, a great impact by framing the paradigm shift that focused Bunker's future career. In this shift, Bunker no longer saw "the West" facing off against singular superpowers or even hostile national powers, but instead violent non-state groups such as terrorists, cartels, and deviant cults.³¹⁶ He expands on these theories in his other works, explaining that these violent non-state actors make up a spiritual and societal insurgency that threatens the United States dominance and ability to set international policy.³¹⁷ This insurgency is facilitated by spillover violence from Mexico and Central America, the decrease of "non-Hispanic whites" in the US, rising US prison populations, and seemingly unstoppable drug flows over the border.³¹⁸ To prepare and combat these new, non-standard, and flexible threats which challenge US hegemony, Bunker argues the US must first recognize this insurgent threat, and then coordinate responses across military and law enforcement lines, police these deviant beliefs, and further militarize domestic law enforcement and border security forces.³¹⁹

Since the 1987 seminar, Bunker's work cycles between concerns and solutions for United States national security in his practical law enforcement guides, and conceptual concerns for the future of "the West" in his pieces that approach theoretical understandings that contain

³¹⁶ The following, though listed as authored by Moore, was an unpublished document that *Small Wars & Insurgencies* published as an archival document. Lindsay Moore, "The Structure of War: Early Fourth Epoch War Research." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 13, no. 2 (August 1, 2002): 159–70.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310208559189>. See also Robert Bunker and Lindsay Moore, "Nonlethal Technology and Fourth Epoch War: A New Paradigm of Politico-Military Force." *CGU Faculty Publications and Research*, January 1, 1996. https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_fac_pub/490.

³¹⁷ Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico*, 17.; Bunker, "Epochal Change," 15–25.

³¹⁸ Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico*, 22-23. Bunker seems to adopt Huntington's conceptual understanding of Mexican migration as a threat to the cultural make-up of the United States, see Samuel Huntington, "The Special Case of Mexican Immigration," *The American Enterprise*, December 1, 2000, GALE|A68660166, Gale Academic Onefile.

<https://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A68660166/AONE?sid=lms>.

³¹⁹ Sonja Wolf, "Drugs, Violence, and Corruption: Perspectives from Mexico and Central America," *Latin American Politics and Society* 58, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 146–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2016.00298.x>; Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico*; Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*, 20-22.

discussions of changing culture, religion, and societal norms.³²⁰ This position can be traced back to his mentor Lindsay T. Moore, whose later publication “The Contemporary clash in Civilization” in Bunker’s own edited volume utilizes Huntington’s take on the “Clash of Civilizations” model to explain how the West may successfully or unsuccessfully transform itself again and maintain its inherent ideals of just war against new enemies, which are not necessarily external nations, but the asymmetric groups that would become the locus of Bunker’s research agenda.³²¹ Huntington’s 1993 and 1996 thesis argued that conflicts of the future would be delineated by civilizational and cultural differences above all else; he divides these “fault lines” primarily between the civilizational entity known as the “West” and “the Islamic World”.³²² The thesis was passionately embraced by the terrorism expertise and United States media following the attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in 2001 to explain the violence and prescribe how the securityscape should understand and divide future battlelines along these essentialist lines between “The West” and “the rest”.³²³ Huntington’s monograph *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* became popular in larger defense circles and security studies classrooms, though he was an established political scientist before that time.³²⁴

³²⁰ These are not necessarily divided by collection, but essays and articles that discuss narco saints tend to lean heavily on theorists like Samuel Huntington who predict a “clash of civilizations”, Bunkers own network, and self-made experts. For example see Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico*, 16. Also Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*; Robert J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker. *Global Criminal and Sovereign Free Economies and the Demise of the Western Democracies: Dark Renaissance*. Routledge Advances in International Political Economy. Taylor and Francis, 2014.; Robert J Bunker, *Narcos over the Border : Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2011.

³²¹ Moore, “The Contemporary Clash in Civilization,”.

³²² Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>.; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011). Original edition 1996.

³²³ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” ; *E-International Relations* (blog) “Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ Today: Responses and Developments,” by Jeffrey Haynes, posted May 1, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/05/01/huntingtons-clash-of-civilizations-today-responses-and-developments/>.; See for critique of Huntington and his embrace - Edward W. Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” October 4, 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/>.; and Richard Bonney, *False Prophets: The “clash of Civilizations” and the Global War on Terror* (Peter Lang, 2008).

³²⁴ Kurth, “Soldier, The State, and The Clash,” 320–34.; Richard Bonney, Preface to *False Prophets: The “clash of Civilizations” and the Global War on Terror* (Peter Lang, 2008). 1-9.

The concept of the west as a distinct and imperiled entity that rose and dominated because of its inherent rational and “just” cultural disposition is explicit in Moore’s limited works, and presents more subtly in many of Bunker’s publications.³²⁵ Motivated by the emergence of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) as a concerted threat to the United States, and mentored by Moore, Bunker’s body of work is largely interested in “subnationals hostile to the West”.³²⁶ Bunker has produced defense knowledge prolifically since his time as a student, and while most of these guides focus on law enforcement operational procedure and tactics used on the ground against non-state actors, a substantial percentage of his work is focused on the cultural threat these “subnationals” pose to the cultural entity known as the “West”, at least as it is articulated in the United States. It is within this subset of his work, that he publishes on narco saints and other alleged “Dark Magico-Religious” activities associated with violent criminal behavior.³²⁷

Dr. Robert Bunker has worn many hats, so to speak. In 1996, he helped found the Los Angeles County Terrorism Early Warning Group, an organization part of a larger trend that blurs the boundaries not only between different levels of policing, but also private and government security.³²⁸ Terrorism Early Warning (TEW) Groups are a type of “Fusion Center” that are usually established in condensed urban areas. Fusion centers and High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA)s both fall under the category of Investigative Support Centers (ISCs), which are institutions that enable information sharing, cooperation, and joint activity

³²⁵ Robert J Bunker, *Narcos over the Border : Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2011.; Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, "Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 1 (2010): 145-78.; Robert J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker. *Global Criminal and Sovereign Free Economies and the Demise of the Western Democracies: Dark Renaissance*. Routledge Advances in International Political Economy. Taylor and Francis, 2014

³²⁶ Bunker, Robert and T. Lindsay Moore, “Nonlethal Technology and Fourth Epoch War: A New Paradigm of Politico-Military Force.” CGU Faculty Publications and Research, January 1, 1996. https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_fac_pub/490.

³²⁷ Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*

³²⁸ See Chapter 1 for a larger discussion of this trend

across different law enforcement and defense department, agencies, and teams, specifically coordinating policing efforts between federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) agents as well as “private sector security personnel”.³²⁹ These institutions share training, deployed personnel, technology, and databases for the purposes of detecting, investigating, and responding to terrorist and criminal activity. Though both are ISCs, Fusion center TEW groups and HIDTAs differ (see below)³³⁰:

Table 1. Intelligence, Surveillance, and Training: Fusion and HIDTA Investigative Support Centers

Fusion Centers	High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Investigative Support Centers
Deal with terrorism as well as criminal and public safety matters across multiple disciplines, including law enforcement, critical infrastructure, fire service, emergency response, public health, and private sector security.	Perform specific core intelligence and information sharing functions in support of the disruption and dismantlement of drug-trafficking and money-laundering organizations.
Receive, analyze, gather, and disseminate threat-related information to appropriate law enforcement and homeland security agencies.	Facilitate communication between federal and SLTT law enforcement agencies in counter-drug investigations, eradication, and interdiction efforts.
Produce and disseminate actionable intelligence in support of all-crimes, all-hazards, and terrorism prevention.	Provide narcotics-related investigative case support and lead generation, as well as prepare threat assessments, strategic reports, trend and pattern assessments, and organizational studies.
Owned and operated by state and local authorities.	Created by the National HIDTA Program and sponsored by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) .

³²⁹ United States Department of Homeland Security, *National Network of Fusion Centers Fact Sheet*, (Department of Homeland Security, August 10, 2012), <https://www.dhs.gov/national-network-fusion-centers-fact-sheet>.; Drug Enforcement Agency. “HIDTA.” Government Website. DEA.gov, 2019. <https://www.dea.gov/hidta>.

³³⁰ United States Department of Homeland Security. “Fusion Centers and HIDTA Investigative Support Centers.” Department of Homeland Security, February 7, 2011. <https://www.dhs.gov/fusion-centers-and-hidta-investigative-support-centers>.

Bunker has been involved with both types of ISC organizations as a founder, designer, and trainer; between 2012-2013 he acted as a training instructor at the Los Angeles High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. ISCs represent a larger trend that blurs lines between different forms of the state policing and increasingly characterizes the operation of the United States defense apparatus over the past thirty years, and fusion centers and HIDTA function become less distinct as narcotics criminal behavior is increasingly linked by high level political and security discourses.³³¹ Similarly, Bunker's body of work posits that insurgencies come in various forms, spiritual, criminal, etc – and that these types of threats are best dealt with through the joint efforts that ISCs facilitate. Bunker states that he studies the blurring between criminality and war and is interested in how the two are linked, “What’s a terrorist? What’s a narco enforcer? What’s a Somali warlord? Are they a criminal (sic)? Are they a soldier (sic)? What was 9/11? Was it a criminal act? Or was it an act of war? . . . It’s this whole blending, this whole crime/war gray area that I look at. That’s my specialty.”³³² Just as the past thirty years of security expertise conflated disparate categories of criminal activity, immigration and border crossing, and terrorism, these different levels of policing, defense expertise, and private industry, justifies the blurring and extension of state power deeper into the lives of its citizens as a means to police these blurry categories defense experts like Bunker specializes in.

Bunker received his graduate degrees in Government and Political Science from Claremont Graduate University (PhD), and claims four undergraduate degrees from California State Polytechnic University in behavioral science, anthropology-geography, social science, and

³³¹ Mohsin, Saleha, and Jacobs. “Trump Moves Toward Labeling Mexican Cartels as Terrorist Groups.” *Bloomberg*, December 4, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-04/trump-moves-toward-labeling-mexican-cartels-as-terrorist-groups>.; See Chapter 1 discussion of “crime-terror nexus” theory.

³³² Claremont Graduate University, “Robert Bunker: The Art of (Future) War.” News. *Claremont Graduate University*, March 11, 2015. <https://www.cgu.edu/news/2015/03/robert-bunker>.

history.³³³ Bunker's collaborators often come from law enforcement or defense backgrounds, and completed their degrees in one of a growing number of Homeland Security graduate programs and war colleges that specialize in producing security studies scholars.³³⁴ For example, John P. Sullivan, Bunker's most common co-author and co-editor was a lieutenant with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and received his doctorate online from the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute at the Open University of Catalonia, and describes himself a career police officer.³³⁵ Dr. Bunker has been praised for his knowledge of strategic risks to troops on the ground, his work furthering future policing has been praised by FBI Academy representatives, and Bunker credited with predicting the use of hidden body cavity bombs in attacks by Al Qaeda.³³⁶ In 2005, he established the private research consulting company Counter OPFOR Corp in Claremont California and acted as the CEO and president, naming family members as staff members.³³⁷ His position in the company is somewhat unclear, as many of his bios across varied works and publications provide different answers as to whether the company and Bunker's role in it is an active one, or if the company is still in operation.³³⁸ His prescriptive approach to insurgency and asymmetrical armed combat has been widely accepted as he continues to serve as a law enforcement expert and training instructor at various ISCs, has taught classes at the University of Southern California and California State University, San Bernardino,

³³³ Robert J. Bunker, "Robert J Bunker." Social Media Profile. linkedin, 2019.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/robert-j-bunker-505b3a10a/>.

³³⁴ See "Notes on Contributor section" in various works.

³³⁵ USCPrice. "Dr. John Sullivan." Biography Page. Safe Communities Institute (SCI), 2019.

<https://sci.usc.edu/personnel/dr-john-sullivan/>.

³³⁶ Claremont Graduate University. "Robert Bunker: The Art of (Future) War." News. *Claremont Graduate University*, March 11, 2015. <https://www.cgu.edu/news/2015/03/robert-bunker>.

³³⁷ Small Wars Journal, "Pamela Ligouri Bunker | Small Wars Journal." Bio, 2019.

<https://smallwarsjournal.com/author/pamela-ligouri-bunker>, Robert J. Bunker, *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries*. "Contributors" Routledge, 2019.

³³⁸ Robert J. Bunker, *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries*. Routledge, 2019.; Robert J. Bunker, "The Mexican Cartel Debate: As Viewed Through Five Divergent Fields of Security Studies." *Small Wars Journal*, February 11, 2011. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-cartel-debate>.

is an affiliate at war colleges and strategic research institutions, and continues to advise United States policy makers.

Bunker's consistent self-citation, unverifiable sources, unclear methodologies, and extreme conclusions emerges with when a reader ventures outside Bunker's strategic and prescriptive military content and into his discussions of culture, society, religion, and associated theory.³³⁹ Bunker and his collaborators label these religious traditions "Dark Magico-Religious Activities" in the self-published volume "Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities", and ascribe serious and dramatic claims of brutality and ritual murder to them. Within this collection Bunker imparts the danger of societal insurgency from Mexico to the United States with the following section:³⁴⁰

President Obama in his State of the Union Address in January 2011 addressed the Al Qaeda threat but not even once mentioned anything about what is now taking place in Mexico or near the US Southern border concerning the gang and cartel threat. This concern, however, is of such strategic importance that this author in October 2010 stated:

The drug cartels and narco-gangs of the America, with those in Mexico of the highest priority, must now be elevation to the #1 strategic threat to the United States. While the threat posed by Al Qaeda, and radical Islam is still significant, it must be downgrade to that of secondary strategic importance.

This claim, that Mexican cartels are comparable in threat to an international terrorist organization, is cited with the note "this author in October 2010". That author is Bunker himself, cited from his own opinion piece.³⁴¹ The deliberately misleading tactic creates a sense of false

³³⁹ These issues are consistent throughout Bunker's work on narco saints and spiritual insurgencies, which are collected in various traditionally published, posted online, and self-published collections. Reviewers note these issues when presented with his academically published work. See Gareth A. Jones, "Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War (Book Review)." *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 6 (2013): 762. And Sonja Wolf, "Drugs, Violence, and Corruption: Perspectives from Mexico and Central America," *Latin American Politics and Society* 58, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 146–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2016.00298.x>.

³⁴⁰ Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*, 20.

³⁴¹ Robert J. Bunker, "The U.S. Strategic Imperative Must Shift From Iraq/Afghanistan to Mexico/The Americas and the Stabilization of Europe." *Small Wars Journal*, October 6, 2010.

consensus for Bunker's subsequent claims. Throughout the article, and Bunker's other contributions to the "Blood Sacrifices" volume, his key claims hinge on citations of his own work, and nearly a third of his references come from himself or John P. Sullivan.³⁴² The argument that Mexico is under societal warfare and siege by deviant beliefs and values is carried over from their other publications and any new data cited comes from news coverage of violent incidents without analysis of the news outlets potential bias or position.³⁴³ In another Small Wars Journal Publication "Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and Latin America", Bunker and Sullivan act as editors, but also as the authors of seven of the thirty-three chapters of the four hundred page collection. Chapter 20, "Narco Cities: Mexico and Beyond," has nineteen references, more than half of them are Sullivan's own work.³⁴⁴ Bunker's own chapters follow this design, offering self-reference in the place of scholarly discussion, contention, or agreement. This pervasive self-citation highlights the extent to which these experts cannot engage with the robust scholarship that also tackles these subjects. Interaction with the extensive work that has been done on the harms and failures of the border security complex, or on the nuanced nature of religion, survival, crime, and instability in North America would ultimately refute the bulk of Bunker's claims. And so Bunker is left with his own work, Huntington's outdated cultural essentialism, and the fringes of his own field to engage with.

A large amount of Bunker's work and self-publicization comes from his position as a Senior Fellow at the Small Wars Journal, a publication whose parent foundation the Small Wars Foundation, markets with the trappings of academic work. Though not a founding member of Small Wars Foundation and its associated journal, Bunker has been active in its community since

³⁴² John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker. "Rethinking Insurgency: Criminality, Spirituality, and Societal Warfare in the Americas." In Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*, 20.

³⁴³ Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*, In particular see source list page 26-28 and source list on pages 44-50.

³⁴⁴ Sullivan and Bunker, *Criminal Insurgents*.

its beginnings, and has since been a regular contributor and is listed as a senior fellow along with John P. Sullivan, with whom Bunker co-authors with often.³⁴⁵ His wife, Pamela Ligouri Bunker is also listed as an associate on the site. The Small Wars Foundation and Journal provides a locus where Bunker produces and publishes most of his expertise, though he is just one of many fellows and knowledge producers within the organization. The publication section of the Small Wars Journal (SWJ) website contains an extensive list of books and anthologies that have been published and edited by the organization and its collaborators. The covers of their publications feature men in camo, assembled armed forces in black masks, assault weaponry, and exotified pictures of religious statues.³⁴⁶ These publications are created and marketed towards “practitioners, thought leaders, and students of Small Wars”, and the titles are not abstract, “Hammer of the Caliphate: The Territorial Demise of the Islamic State—A Small Wars Journal”, “The Rise of the Narcostate (Mafia States) — A Small Wars Journal-El Centro Anthology”, and “Mexico's Criminal Insurgency: A Small Wars Journal-El Centro Anthology” are just three examples of the sixteen that are listed.³⁴⁷ Small Wars Journal (SWJ) is a publication associated with the Small Wars Foundation, a nonprofit 501 (c)3 founded by now retired Marines in 2008. The online journal began first in 1998 as “The MOUT” or the Military Operations on Urban Terrain Homepage on Geocities, which was designed by the Small Wars Founder and Editor-in-Chief Dave Dilegge to be an informational guide for Marine and Army personnel working urban operations, and then eventually restructured and renamed with the Marine Corps’ 1940 Small Wars Manual in mind, creating the self-published journal that now houses many of Bunker’s

³⁴⁵ Bunker and Sullivan, *Criminal Insurgents* ; and Bunker, and Sullivan, *Crime Wars and Narco Terrorism* are two examples of many.

³⁴⁶ SWJ, “SWJ Books | Small Wars Journal.” Online Blog. smallwarsjournal.com, 2019.
<https://smallwarsjournal.com/index.php/books>.

³⁴⁷ SWJ, “SWJ Books | Small Wars Journal,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2019,
<https://smallwarsjournal.com/books>.

publications.³⁴⁸ In the first pages of each collection the foundation produces, the opening discusses how the Small Wars Foundation is not a large corporate site or a government organization, but a small nonprofit that produces these publications for the benefit of practitioners, to improve “knowledge and capabilities in the field”.³⁴⁹ These publications offer prescriptive views on organized crime and its relationship to the states they interact with and operate within. The volumes comprise essays by journalists, police officers, weapons experts, and analysts who study terrorism and insurgency, but the organization of these collections mirror academic journals and present their content as research comparable to more traditional academic work, all aimed at law enforcement and security practitioners.

Robert J. Bunker is a consistent editor and contributor to these anthologies, as well as many collections which are similarly self-published. Bunker’s many bibliographies use his Small Wars Journal works to comprise what his biographies state are “hundreds of publications”; however, many are reprints of the same article across the different anthologies. This publishing history is used to bolster his credentials and status as an established expert with easily recognizable signifiers of academic prestige—similar to the way his biographies state that Bunker “hold degrees in political science, government, behavioral science, anthropology-geography, social science, and history”, depending on the quantity to signify his education. The publications are diverse—ranging from books, papers, and short “tactical notes” – but the majority present information and coverage of criminal and violent incidents without analysis or framing of the events and those involved.³⁵⁰ The lack of significant analysis discussions of

³⁴⁸ Ryan Evans. “5 Questions with Dave Dilegge on Small Wars and COIN Cocktails.” War on the Rocks, May 12, 2014. <https://warontherocks.com/2014/05/5-questions-with-dave-dilegge-on-small-wars-and-coin-cocktails/>.

³⁴⁹ Robert Bunker and John Sullivan, *Criminal Insurgents in Mexico*, (vii). See also Small Wars Journal, “SWJ Books” Online Blog, smallwarsjournal.com, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/index.php/books>.

³⁵⁰ For example, Robert J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker “Chapter 10: Mexican Cartel Strategic Note No. 16: Recent Santa Muerte Spiritual Conflict Trends” and Bunker, “Chapter 11: Mexican Cartel Strategic

method, or critical perspective is understandable considering the SWJ states its audience are law enforcement and defense stakeholders, not necessarily scholars in traditional fields like political science, sociology, or policy studies. However, Bunker uses these numerous publications to establish and justify expert authority about marginal religious populations and cultural phenomenon, making claims that reinforce culture essentialism and sometimes even directly repeating white supremacist talking points like the dangerous and false “white replacement” conspiracy theory. His 2011 article “Grand strategic overview: epochal change and new realities for the United States” published by Routledge’s *Small Wars & Insurgencies Journal* claims that “lands won by force of arms from Mexico by the US in 1848, and by additional annexation, are being reclaimed – on a socio-ethnic level – by shifting demographics and migration.” This claim is listed alongside paragraphs warning of rising prison populations, increased illicit drug use, and the “large stick” of American diplomacy being slowly whittled down as the influence of the “Hispanic demographic” forces politicians to play nice with Latin American countries.

Bunker, and his co-senior fellow John P. Sullivan creates content for the “El Centro” subject matter of the website, which focuses on insurgencies and criminal operation in the Americas. From the site:

El Centro is SWJ's focus on small wars in Latin America. The elephant in the hemispheric room is clearly the epidemic criminal, cartel and gang threat, fueled by a drug and migration economy, rising to the level of local and national criminal insurgencies and a significant U.S. national security risk.³⁵¹

Note No. 17: Civil Self Defense Groups Have Emerged in 11 Mexican States,” In, John P. Sullivan, and Robert J. Bunker, *Criminal Insurgents*. See also Bunker’s chapters in Robert J. Bunker, *Crime Wars and Narco Terrorism*. Also Bunkers Chapters 24-36, 42-60 in Robert J. Bunker, *Mexican Cartel Essays and Notes*.

³⁵¹ The website for Small Wars Journal; the “About El Centro | Small Wars Journal,” page, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/node/11323>.

El Centro's many publications draw heavily from the same pool of law enforcement practitioners and self-styled experts and these publications are marketed as on-the-ground alternatives to academic journals, with an explicit emphasis on United States national interest.³⁵² The creators and editors of this content directly appeal to notions that the social sciences, and the traditional academy as a whole, are ill-equipped to handle the violent realities their practitioner audience contends with both professionally and personally. The El Centro portion of the site hosts almost all of Bunker's work, and the other authors and journalists that are linked to on the site never posit opinions or work that might contradict the Senior Fellows Bunker or Sullivan's argument that Mexico has become a failed state manipulated by cartels.³⁵³

Created by Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, in 2011, the FBI Library Subject Bibliography on Santa Muerte, the most popular "narco saint", lists English-language sources in an online annotated bibliography that is available to the public via the FBI website. The list is dominated by security professional and law enforcement viewpoints similar to Bunker's; four of the twenty-one sources come from peer-reviewed publications, the rest are drawn from "gang experts", travel journalists, and unreviewed work from war colleges.³⁵⁴ They are largely organized as testimonials regarding the danger "narco saints" such as Santa Muerte pose to the safety, morality, and security of the United States and its borders. "Sacrifice: The Drug Cult Murder of Mark Kilroy at Matamoros.", "Santa Muerte: Angel of Death in Paul R. Chabot. Eternal Battle Against Evil.", Extreme Barbarism, a Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?" are all titles included in the list.³⁵⁵ These testimonials

³⁵² The website for Small Wars Journal; the "About | Small Wars Journal," page, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/content/about>; Sullivan and Bunker, *Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*.

³⁵³ Online Ethnography and observation of the site and its contributors

³⁵⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Santa Muerte and Mexican Narcocultos," *FBI Library Subject Bibliography*, last modified September 2011 (as of July 2015, the subject bibliography has been temporarily removed for updating).

³⁵⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Santa Muerte and Mexican Narcocultos," *FBI Library Subject*

provide the audience with sensational reading material from the perspective of security-conscious outsiders looking out over dangerous terrain and unsolved murders. The dire characterization of these religious practices is generally overblown, and not supported by research outside defense spheres.³⁵⁶ The echoed citations and limited engagement with alternate viewpoints present in the list is indicative of field of narco saint expertise that dominates popular understandings of these “narco saints.” Of the twenty-one, four sources on the subject matter list come are authored or co-authored by Robert J. Bunker, and more than half are law enforcement and defense experts Bunker himself cites in other publications. The dominance of “experts without knowledge” (to borrow a phrase from Jeff Lesser) in this field is visible in the presence of travel journalist and hobbyist turned private law enforcement consultant and *Small Wars Journal* contributor, Tony Kail, whose two additions to the list explicitly are included to aid law enforcement agents in identifying religious practices for the purposes of “officer safety” and drug interdiction.³⁵⁷ Like many on the list, Kail and Bunker’s additions are graphically titled, prescriptive law enforcement guides whose conclusions contradict the voices of Santa Muerte’s devotees, and the scholars who have put significant fieldwork and research into recording them.³⁵⁸ In reality, devotees of informal borderland saints are diverse in occupation and

Bibliography, last modified September 2011 (as of July 2015, the subject bibliography has been temporarily removed for updating).

³⁵⁶ See for example Roush, “SANTA MUERTE, PROTECTION, AND ‘DESAMPARO’,” 129–48.; Thompson “Santísima Muerte,” 405–36. ; Kristensen, “La Santa Muerte in Mexico City,” 543–66.; Bromley, “Santa Muerte as Emerging Dangerous Religion?” 65. ; Bravo Lara, “We Fly under Your Mantle,” 11–28.; Michel and Park, “The Cult of Jesus Malverde,” 202–14.; Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots*.; Price, “Of Bandits and Saints,” 175–97.

³⁵⁷ Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity*.

³⁵⁸ *The University of Chicago Divinity School* (blog), “Holy Death on the US/Mexico Border,” by Lois Ann Lorentzen.” University Blog, posted May 28, 2009. <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/holy-death-usmexico-border-lois-ann-lorentzen>.; Lois Ann Lorentzen, “Santa Muerte: Saint of the Dispossessed, Enemy of Church and State.” *States of Devotion*, 2016. <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-13-1-states-of-devotion/13-1-essays/santa-muerte-saint-of-the-dispossessed-enemy-of-church-and-state.html>.; Roush, “Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo,” 129–49; Cymene Howe, Susanna Zaraysky, and Lois Ann Lorentzen, “Devotional Crossings: Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco.”

background, and their reverence predates any association with the narcotics trade. People seek out saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde for the same reasons they revere canonized saints: healing, protection, and connection to the sacred.³⁵⁹ In addition, communal reverence to informal saints provides complex human needs for intimacy, representation, and comfort in the face of marginalization and hardship that transcends borders and tradition.³⁶⁰ The prioritization of security perspectives within law enforcement bulletins is not surprising, but the direct contradiction to scholarly understandings of the cult speak to the distrust these fields have of traditional scholarship, particularly the work that analyzes crime and violence through critical lens of race, class, and gender.

More recently Bunker and Sullivan authored a similar “Law Enforcement Primer” on Mara Salvatrucha 13 for the FBI National Academy Associates, a private 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization that is not a part of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), though their website implicitly presents itself has been affiliated with the FBI. This primer includes allegations that the gangs “worship” Santa Muerte and have gone through Satanist phases, citing their origins in teenage counter-culture in Los Angeles and a Santa Murte amulet viewed in photograph of one of its members. The primer then states there is an unknown percentage of the gang that participates in these occult beliefs and rituals, despite “no ethnographic data points presently

In *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities*, edited by Lois Ann Lorentzen, Joaquin Jay Gonzalez, Kevin M. Chun, and Hien Duc Do, 0. Duke University Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391166-002>. Alberto Hernández Hernández, *La Santa Muerte: espacios, cultos y devociones* (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2016).

³⁵⁹ Pansters, *La Santa Muerte in Mexico*; Hernández, *La Santa Muerte*.

³⁶⁰ Cymene Howe, Susanna Zaraysky, and Lois Ann Lorentzen. “Devotional Crossings: Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco.” In *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities*, edited by Lois Ann Lorentzen, Joaquin Jay Gonzalez, Kevin M. Chun, and Hien Duc Do, 0. Duke University Press, 2009.; Roush, “Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo,” 129–48.; Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots*.

exist concerning individual clique dark spiritual affiliations”.³⁶¹ This prose is indicative of Bunker’s style, even as he acknowledges the lack for proof he brings to his claims, he implies the presence of the yet proven truths he predicts.

On the surface, Robert J. Bunker seems to be an established scholar and security expert with a wealth of publications and affiliations. His work on military strategy and tactics are well documented and well received, and he had taught classes at major US universities. However, Bunker has increasingly attempted to build a reputation as an expert on other subject matter outside traditional military and strategic work. Over the past twenty years, Bunker has become interested in what he labels Dark Magico-Religious Activities, which include the cults of Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and the alleged Satanism practices of gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) and worked to build authority on these subjects by claiming they are deeply threatening to United States security and way of life. However, when a reader follows his citations through the small defense and law enforcement communities to the data provided, there exists little in the way of original research. The news coverage and primary sources Bunker cites lack anything beyond “suspected” or “alleged” connections between the religious practices he asserts expertise of, and the criminality he claims is a threat. There is an overt lack of nuance within Bunker’s applied work as he and his collaborators approach complicated topics of police profiling, religion, race, and culture. Even factoring in essentialist cultural theories like Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations, and despite Bunker’s academic credentials, Bunker rarely engages with disciplines that have long studied these subjects in varied ways. This suggests that Bunker is not particularly interested in understanding the nuanced presence and popularity of the

³⁶¹ *FBI National Academy Associates*, (Online Blog), “Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) A Law Enforcement Primer,” by Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, posted March 2018, https://www.fbinaa.org/FBINAA/Associate/MARAPR2018_Feature_1.aspx.

informal cults (cults used in the Catholic traditional sense, see Cult of the Saints) of saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde. In fact, his work disparages academic work that attempts to do so, calling social and critical theories of “narco” saint devotion the result of a “dominance of secular, utilitarian, and behaviorist bias” within the “Western intellectual academy.”³⁶² Instead, Bunker’s approach works to build up the category of “narco saint” and “spiritual insurgency” as a threat to which he is well-credentialed to consult on, as part of an apocalyptic instability that threatens the US and the larger “west”. His publications and general expertise are presented in a manner that provides justification for law enforcement militarization and increased military involvement in policing potential “insurgents” in the US and Mexico, as well his own expertise within the competitively bloated securityscape of the United States.

Robert Almonte

On September 22, 2009, Bianca Sanchez-Caballero and her codefendant Abraham Bobadilla-Campos were pulled over by a New Mexico state police officer in a routine traffic stop.³⁶³ Upon seeing a prayer card with the image of Jesús Malverde, the officer requested a search of the vehicle, which yielded twenty-two pounds of methamphetamine. Both defendants were arrested and charged with narcotics trafficking convictions. In the proceedings Robert Almonte testified as an expert witness, making the argument that Jesús Malverde amulets, shrines, and statues can be considered “tools of the druge trade”.³⁶⁴ In the context of justifying search and seizure of private property by law enforcement, “tools of the trade” refer to items that are legal but may signify illegal behavior like scales, glass pipes, and small plastic bags.

³⁶² Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices*, xv

³⁶³ US Department of Justice, “Mexican National Sentenced to 135 Months in Prison for Methamphetamine Trafficking Conviction,” news release, October 12, 2012 (Press Release has since been pulled)

³⁶⁴ United States v. Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014).

Almonte's argument hinges on the assumption that drug traffickers use "Jesús Malverde paraphernalia" as part of a professional tool kit, believing that the supernatural aid will help them avoid suspicion.³⁶⁵ He characterizes these devotees as suspicious, relying on illicit saints for their illicit behavior, rejecting the idea that "Jesús Malverde paraphernalia" represents legitimate religious devotion or practice outside illegal activity. Alongside his personal testimony, Almonte showed the training video his company produced to train police officers, *Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld*. The video was developed to instruct local police departments regarding the iconography and items used to identify saintly personalities associated with the drug trade and aid in arrests of suspected narcotics traffickers.³⁶⁶ Almonte also provided his expert testimony in the Jason Holmes and Juan Antonio Castañeda Rendon, and Vianey Medina-Copete and Rafael Goxcon-Chagal cases and continues to serve as an expert witness in criminal court proceedings when "narco saint" material is used to justify police searches and arrests.³⁶⁷ Almonte's significant background in law enforcement is the basis of the authority he claims on the subject, but this expertise has been challenged intermittently in legal spheres as judges and legal counsel question the bias associated with his career law enforcement agent. Still, his consulting business continues to grow, securing contracts from police agencies, federal law enforcement like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Forest Service, and military branches like US Army for training services on "narco saints" and profiling procedures.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ United States v. Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014). "Jesús Malverde paraphernalia can be considered as "tools of the trade": these items are perfectly legal, and yet can be used illegitimately in a drug trafficking scheme. See *United States v. Triana*, 477 F.3d 1189, 1195 (10th Cir. 2007) (describing scales, glass pipes, and plastic baggies as "tools of the drug trade")"

³⁶⁶ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,"

³⁶⁷ See Zebert-Judd et al, *Material Representation*.

³⁶⁸ Federal Procurement Data System, Award ID: W912LP19P0015, Dept of the Army. 08/05/2019; Award ID: 1284N819P0029. USDA Forest Service 03/27/2019; Award ID: DJD17PXP0046, Drug Enforcement Administration, 11/26/2017 All Accessed: 6 December 2019.; Training flyers, tracking training schedule via online research, analysis of news coverage of trainings. .

Robert Almonte was born and raised in El Paso, Texas “four blocks from the border”, and in a 2019 interview Almonte recalls crossing the border to the Mexican city of Juarez with his family to enjoy the afternoon, and regrets that Mexican cartel violence prevents similar excursions now.³⁶⁹ He joined the El Paso Police Department in 1978 and as is the norm in these departments, he began his work as a “patrol cop”, working in that capacity for three years until he joined a tactical squad that focused on narcotics interdiction.³⁷⁰ In 1985, he attained the rank of detective, and worked in various undercover operations designed to curb the buying and selling of illicit narcotics. In interviews about his early career, he reminisces over his time as a narcotics officer fondly and enthusiastically, describing himself as a young detective “making a difference, having so much fun”; in one interview, he laughs as he describes the thrill of “taking down these dopers, putting their ass in jail”.³⁷¹ Speaking about his work, he is casual, dropping light profanity and laughing with the host of the podcast he is featured on. The podcast host, Rafa Conde, is an active patrol police officer and runs a lifestyle company and blog “Man of War”, which was founded in reaction to “the progressive demise of the alpha-male and a negative shift in men's confidence” and Conde’s commitment to the “development of an optimum performing alpha-male”.³⁷² The podcast is one of the projects of the blog, and Conde hosts fitness coaches, military personnel, law enforcement agents, and other self-help “entrepreneurs” like Conde himself. Almonte fits well amidst Conde’s other guests, being heavily entrenched in the law enforcement field but also an entrepreneurial personality trying to establish himself as a private expert. Conde and many of his guests fall within the United States

³⁶⁹ Dr. Carlos Show, *We Discuss the Cartel and Border Issues with Former U. S. Marshall Robert Almonte*.

³⁷⁰ Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte.” Podcast. Man of War Podcast, July 30, 2018. <https://www.manofwar.live/mow/85>.

³⁷¹ Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte.” Podcast. Man of War Podcast, July 30, 2018. <https://www.manofwar.live/mow/85>.

³⁷² Rafa Conde, “Founder — MAN of WAR Blog.” MAN of WAR, 2018, <https://www.manofwar.live/founder>.

securityscape, as either state agents or those who market to them. In the 2018 podcast, Almonte shares jokes and police jargon with Conde, speaking of “buy busts” and “reverses” as they connect over their shared professional background.³⁷³ Almonte spent twenty-five years with the El Paso Police Department, eventually retiring as a deputy chief.

Since the 1990s, Almonte has been an implementer and instructor for the West Texas HIDTA which provides information and intelligence sharing and investigation for various state agents across the entire US Southern Border region, which stretches from Southern California to South Texas; this work earned him National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) awards for his involvement in the ISC organization. Developing and leading task forces within the HIDTA, Almonte created new drug interdiction programs and trained law enforcement and federal agents in policing methods.³⁷⁴ Not only did Almonte have a successful career as a local law enforcement agent in El Paso, but he speaks of it as a worthwhile calling that transcended a means to make a living. For Almonte, police work is not a job, and not just a career, but a “mission” that he supports and enjoys working at: being a good cop, a good law enforcement agent is not someone who goes and simply does their job, but someone who does so because they find pleasure in the everyday tasks that go into the work, “I had fun as a narcotics detective, fun out there, working with these guys [other law enforcement]. We kick in doors, there’s a high you get taking these guys off the street, taking money, drugs off the street. I said to them, ‘aint this fun shit, could you imagine the shit we could do if we didn’t have to sleep,” Almonte stated in 2018.³⁷⁵ This type of militarized masculinity plays into not only Rafa Conde’s target audience –

³⁷³ Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte.” Podcast. Man of War Podcast, July 30, 2018. <https://www.manofwar.live/mow/85>, 22 min.

³⁷⁴ Robert Almonte, *Covert Operations Management* (LawTech Publishing Group, 2015). “About the Author”

³⁷⁵ Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte.” Podcast. Man of War Podcast, July 30, 2018. <https://www.manofwar.live/mow/85>, 22 min.

men who idealize violent and defensive roles as part of their masculine identity— but also the “macho” culture that is dominant in many law enforcement departments.³⁷⁶ Almonte’s time as a narcotics detective was not only formative for him, but he characterizes it as an idyllic and dynamic period of his life where he developed relationships and shared devotion to law enforcement mission and practice.

Following successful years as a police officer, detective, and in substantial leadership roles within the department, Almonte served as the United States Marshal for the Western District of Texas when he was sworn in on June 2, 2010, upon being nominated by President Barack Obama and approved by the senate.³⁷⁷ The United States Marshalls service serves as the enforcement arm of the United States federal courts and there is a single United States Marshal appointed for each of the ninety-four Federal judicial districts. Established in 1789, it is one of the oldest law enforcement agencies in the United States.³⁷⁸ Almonte would serve in this position until 2016, when he resigned under pressure of being fired from his post. Almonte had been under investigation since 2014 for conducting unauthorized police trainings with departmental funds, and had failed to cease these trainings even after being told to stop by the U.S. Marshals headquarters.³⁷⁹ Multiple anonymous complaints starting in 2014 began an investigation by the Justice Department’s Office of Inspector General, and on January 21, 2016 the Department produced a partial report that stated Almonte violated several Marshals Service rules such as

³⁷⁶ Jennifer Brown, “From Cult of Masculinity.”; Marisa Silvestri, “Police Culture and Gender.”

³⁷⁷ Guillermo Contreras, “U.S. Marshals Service Chief Here Resigns under Pressure.” *ExpressNews.Com*, May 12, 2016. <https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/U-S-Marshals-Service-chief-for-sprawling-Texas-7465686.php>. See also Robert Almonte, *Covert Operations Management* (LawTech Publishing Group, 2015). “About the Author”

³⁷⁸ “Position classification standard for United States Marshal series, GS-0082” (PDF). United States Office of Personnel Management. June 1973.; United States Department of Justice. “U.S. Marshals Service Fact Sheet, Cont’d.” Fact Sheet. United States Department of Justice, 2019. <https://www.usmarshals.gov/duties/factsheets/index.html>.

³⁷⁹ Yami Virgin. “Departure of US Marshal Almonte No Surprise.”.

using subordinates as personal drivers, misusing United States Marshall Service (USMS) letterhead, maintaining fiduciary relationships with a previous employer, asking employees to contribute money to work functions, and failing to report or get ethics approval for presentations in various border areas.³⁸⁰ These presentations were training lectures on the religious practices, beliefs, and folk saints allegedly used by drug smugglers.³⁸¹ Just four months later Robert Almonte would resign under significant pressure to do so, citing a 2015 climate survey that he claims he was not permitted to see or address. News coverage of the scandal outside El Paso states that this resignation surprised no one, as there had been consistent official movement towards removing Almonte officially from office for years, but the *El Paso Times* remained supportive of the “native El Pasoan.”³⁸² Almonte was given a deadline to resign, or be forced on administrative leave. However, a day prior to the deadline passing or any response by Almonte, all judges within Almonte’s jurisdiction received an email stating that the administrative leave was in effect.³⁸³ *The El Paso Times* reported this strange sequence of events and expressed opinions that this was an attempt to humiliate “a veteran law-enforcement official.” The Editorial Board of the *El Paso Times* documented their support for Almonte in an opinion piece on May 18, 2016, highlighting his long service to the region and the El Paso community at large. In the piece, they were upfront about the publication’s connection to the ex-US Marshall; the news

³⁸⁰ United States Department of Justice, “Investigative Summary: Findings of Misconduct by a U.S. Marshal Concerning Misuse of Subordinates’ Time, Misuse of Position, Participation in Activities Outside His Employment, and Other Matters” (Office of the Inspector General, January 21, 2016), <https://oig.justice.gov/reports/2016/fl60121.pdf>.

³⁸¹ Guillermo Contreras, “U.S. Marshals Service Chief Here Resigns under Pressure.” *ExpressNews.Com.*,

³⁸² Robert Moore and Ramon Bracamontes, “UPDATE: El Paso U.S. Marshal Almonte Resigns,” *El Paso Times*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/2016/05/11/us-marshal-placed-administrative-leave/84257974/>. See also “U.S. Marshal Robert Almonte Being Investigated by Office of Inspector General,” *KVIA*, February 17, 2015, <https://www.kvia.com/news/u-s-marshal-robert-almonte-being-investigated-by-office-of-inspector-general/56470682>.; See also El Paso Times Editorial Board. “Editorial: Almonte Ouster Questions.” *El Paso Times*, May 18, 2016. <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/opinion/editorials/2016/05/18/editorial-almonte-ouster-raises-many-questions/84564170>

³⁸³ El Paso Times Editorial Board. “Editorial: Almonte Ouster Questions.” *El Paso Times*, May 18, 2016.

outlet's then-president as well as one of their senior editors had been members of the U.S. Marshals Service Citizens Academy, which Robert Almonte had organized. In addition, Robert Almonte's former attorney was a member of the Community Advisory Board for the El Paso Times Editorial Board.³⁸⁴ Almonte is very much *of* El Paso, he was born, raised, and has been professionally based in the city that sits directly on the border.

Currently Almonte runs a private consulting company that provides training and consulting services to local, state, and federal policing agents. These attendees come from local police departments, border security organizations, and drug task forces and Almonte is booked monthly to provide training at private events, conferences, and community venues across the United States.³⁸⁵ Almonte's own signature training course, with the corresponding video he produced and developed, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," details the practices and beliefs of those who revere informal Catholic saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde. By instructing law enforcement agents to identify these saints the course claims to increase "officer safety."³⁸⁶ Almonte's training sessions are categorized as restricted law enforcement training courses and the events are usually open to only sworn police officers, federal agents, military personnel, and approved private security professionals. Hundreds of law enforcement and border security agents attend each course and multiple sessions are held across the United States every month.³⁸⁷ Narcotics officer conferences, border security fairs, and HIDTAs are Almonte's most common clients. Almonte's experience as a police officer in El

³⁸⁴ El Paso Times Editorial Board. "Editorial: Almonte Ouster Questions." *El Paso Times*, May 18, 2016..

³⁸⁵ See "Instructors – Almonte Consulting & Training," Business, Almonte Consulting and Training, 2019, <https://robertalomonte.com/instructors/>. And various biographies. Online documentation of training schedule and training coverage from 2016-2019. Almonte claims to have trained thousands of police officers, state agents, and private security personnel.

³⁸⁶ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," narrated by Raymond Mesa (El Paso, TX: Narcotics Training, 2009).

³⁸⁷ Online Observation and media analysis.

Paso deeply inform his work and he cites his upbringing in El Paso and his desire to ‘fight’ bad guys as his reasoning for his past police career and current consulting work.³⁸⁸ Almonte Consulting, his company, offers seven program topics that range from cultural topics like religion and music used to identify drug traffickers and gang members, to more traditional police operational activities like stash-house and locale-based investigations.³⁸⁹ Robert Almonte hires a limited number of instructors alongside himself to cover the breadth of training topics and these instructors. In July 2019, the three instructors aside from Almonte himself with the company draw their experience from careers within the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Border Patrol, and Texas Sheriff departments. These instructors draw their expertise directly from their professional work on the border. None of these instructors engage or are affiliated with any university, US or otherwise. Despite the cultural expertise they claim, none list any anthropological, sociological, or cultural studies training outside a defense or law enforcement field.³⁹⁰ Almonte’s published course, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” alleges that criminals are “praying for protection” and Almonte produces his expertise informed with his law enforcement experience and his Catholic religious identity.

It was during his early career that Almonte began his research on informal borderland religious practices in the 1980s as he actively worked as a narcotics officer, and he cites finding a “voodoo doll” with his partner’s name on it as the moment his crusade against narco saints and

³⁸⁸ Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte.” Podcast. Man of War Podcast, July 30, 2018. <https://www.manofwar.live/mow/85>.

³⁸⁹ “Instructors – Almonte Consulting & Training,” Business, Almonte Consulting and Training, 2019, <https://robertalmonte.com/instructors/>.

³⁹⁰ “Instructors – Almonte Consulting & Training,” Business, Almonte Consulting and Training, 2019, <https://robertalmonte.com/instructors/>.

deviant spiritual practices became personal.³⁹¹ The occult item materialized as threat to Almonte as a police officer—threatening his colleague with personal harm in intent, but also represented a spiritual threat to Almonte who is life-long and practicing Catholic. As theory on policing behavior and operation has determined, rarely is anyone simply just a police officer, law enforcement carry their own morals, personal faith, and unconscious desires into and out of their work.³⁹² When asked how he learned of Santa Muerte and other narco saints, Almonte cites his twenty-five years policing the border region of El Paso, but also his personal religiosity.

I was raised Catholic, attended Catholic school, and served as an altar boy. I was taught that everything about the Catholic religion and Catholic saints was beautiful and involved only good things. However, once becoming a police officer, I began seeing the misuse of the Catholic saints and a perversion of the Catholic religion.³⁹³

Throughout his training materials Almonte consistently characterizes reverence to saints such as Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde as deviant, wrong, and perverted, compared in contrast to normative societal and religious behaviors. Almonte's religious Catholic background is evident in the material he produces, as is his upbringing in the El Paso region and his career there that began in the 1980s. Throughout interviews on the subject of Santa Muerte he argues that her devotees are trying to replace the Virgin Mary with the Skelton Saint Santa Muerte, a goal that Almonte seems visibly shaken and angered by. The optics of the religious two figures work in Almonte's favor as he trains law enforcement across the United States who may have little to no exposure to religious communities outside their own. By juxtaposing Santa Muerte's grinning

³⁹¹ The City of El Paso and Dee Margo, "A Former El Paso Police Department Deputy Chief Is a Frederic Milton Thrasher Award Recipient," *News Release*, August 7, 2018.; Jay Dobyms, *S4 Cartels Up Close E2 Narco Voodoo with Robert Almonte*. Vol. S4 E2. Cop Land, 2019.

<http://www.buzzsprout.com/354806/1938500-s4-cartels-up-close-e2-narco-voodoo-with-robert-almonte>.

³⁹² Didier Fassin, "Maintaining Order: The Moral Justifications for Police Practices," in *At the Heart of the State: The Moral World of Institutions*, ed. Didier Fassin, First English language edition, Anthropology, culture and society (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

³⁹³ Susan Leem, "The Substitute Saints of Drug Trafficking: An Interview with U.S. Marshal Robert Almonte." Onbeing.org. n.p., 7 Aug. 2011. Web. May 2013. See also Alvarez, "Ready to Die."

skeletal visage next to the pious, smooth-faced Virgin Mary Almonte and framing their relationship as competitive Almonte invites his audience to take sides. The core of his work, the training video he developed and published carries a religious goal alongside a professional one, an intersection that characterizes other aspects of his business and presence in media. When speaking about his past law enforcement work, religion usually comes up. In a 2019 interview, after stating that the “Mexican cartels are here [the United States], Almonte claims that because of the cartel activity in Mexico, “One of the most dangerous professions in Mexico is being a journalist, the other most dangerous profession in Mexico, is being a catholic priest,” and warns of this happening in the United States should law enforcement not be permitted to police cartels effectively.³⁹⁴ The only item available in Almonte’s consulting company’s store is a t-shirt depicting the “thin blue line” flag behind a police officer arresting a demonic subject, while Saint Michael the Archangel (the Patron Saint of Police Officers) backs the police officer with protecting hand. The “thin blue line” flag represents a multitude of cop logics, but in the words of LAPD police chief, William Parker: “Between the law abiding elements of society and the criminals who prey upon them stands a thin blue line of defense, your police officers”. Blue-line imagery by law enforcement is about maintaining borders between civilization and anarchy, prey and predators, order and chaos, and within this symbolic landscape, law enforcement like Almonte and those he trains are neither of these categories, but the line between them.³⁹⁵ The inclusion of good and evil religious binary, a protecting patron saint and a demonic adversary, to this already symbolic securityscape in Almonte’s merchandise is particularly interesting

³⁹⁴ Dr. Carlos Show, *We Discuss the Cartel and Border Issues with Former U. S. Marshall Robert Almonte*.

³⁹⁵ See following for discussion of Thin Blue Line imagery: Wall, “Police Invention of Humanity,” ; Ristroph, “Thin Blue Line,” ; Linnemann and Medley, "Fear the Monster!: Racialised Violence, Sovereign Power and the Thin Blue Line." In *The Routledge International Handbook on Fear of Crime*, 65-81. Taylor and Francis, 2017.

considering Almonte's publications and network that extends outside law enforcement officers. The first segment of the training video that Almonte created and produced includes expertise from Monsignor Arturo Banuelas who comes from a Catholic Church in El Paso, and he explains the "Hispanic religious worldview," and the ways false saints corrupt religious relationships, both material and transcendent, that make up everyday life. "These drug dealers are misusing the Saints to justify their destructive lifestyle, not their religious views. In the church we call this idolatry."³⁹⁶ This is not the first time, nor the last that Almonte, his collaborators, and material Almonte's produces makes distinctions between proper religious conduct, and what Almonte and his colleagues view as irreligious, deviant behavior.³⁹⁷ These debates between informal saint cults and the institutional Catholic Church have been common since the latter's inception.³⁹⁸ Almonte's inclusion of a religious authority from his hometown, strongly implies he wants his audience to know these informal saints do not represent what he feels is proper religiosity. Almonte begins the introduction of this training video with a recorded video of himself speaking to the audience, whom Almonte directly addresses as law enforcement agents. Almonte is positioned to the right of the screen, with a candle-lit, winged, and crowned Santa Muerte figure behind him to the left. "The Mexican Drug Trafficker is praying for protection," Almonte states and then clarifies the purpose of the video, which is first to keep the law officer safe, and second to assist in arrests that take more drugs and drug traffickers off the streets. "I hope it helps, be safe and god bless."³⁹⁹ Almonte ends the introduction with the blessing and the title sequence of rushed sepia-toned stills of saints, guns, dead bodies, and piles of drugs begins. Amidst the

³⁹⁶ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," 3:59

³⁹⁷ Ibid "Legitimate Saints" section.

³⁹⁸ See Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix*.; Michalik. "Death with a Bonus Pack." ; Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*. 39-77.

³⁹⁹ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," 00:31-00:40

images of weapons, bloodied bodies, frowning and tattooed young men of color, are unmistakable signs of mundane border crossing; signs for US cities in Spanish, a border checkpoint with a line of cars, a dilapidated border fence are all mixed in with these other violently-coded images.⁴⁰⁰ For Almonte, the border, his hometown, is a warzone that presents significant danger to US citizens, and more forefront on Almonte’s mind, the officers and state agents who patrol the border.

The phrase “officer safety” is used throughout the video and the promotional material for Almonte’s training program.⁴⁰¹ According to Almonte, recognizing specific informal borderland saints and their religious material allows law officers to detect especially dangerous narcotics traffickers who target law enforcement with deviant and bloody religious practices.⁴⁰² The premise that the training course is about officer safety implies that devotion to saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde is dangerous, and practiced by criminals who wish law enforcement active harm. Almonte’s course and training materials argue that devotees of “narco saints” are at best misled, and at worst pose a very real danger to law enforcement as the popularity of these saints spread. Almonte encourages officers to have a “survival mindset” in the field, and his personal stories and anecdotes of past police work highlight the constant danger he perceived he was in, even in routine interactions with those who he pursued and policed.⁴⁰³ This “survival

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid 00:41-01:07

⁴⁰¹ Alameda County Narcotics Task Force, *Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld- 8 Hour Training Class*, [Training Flyer] (Dublin CA. Northern California High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), February 17, 2017), <https://ncric.org/files/EBF/Patron%20Saints%20of%20the%20Mexican%20Drug%20Underworld.pdf>; Indiana Drug Enforcement Agency- Mishawaka Police Department, *Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld*, [Training Announcement](06/06/2017) <https://www.indianadea.com/events/patron-saints-of-the-mexican-cartel-underworld/>

⁴⁰² Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,”00:31-00:40, 52.02-53:50

⁴⁰³ Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte.” Podcast. Man of War Podcast, July 30, 2018. <https://www.manofwar.live/mow/85>.

mindset” echoes what scholarship have theorized regarding the securitized and risk-centered police culture that Almonte exists within and reproduces through his work.⁴⁰⁴ Moreover, the nebulous danger Almonte warns of is a salient example of the apocalyptic anxiety that pervades the larger securityscape, driving and rationalizing the need to prepare, deter, and neutralize ill-defined and unproven threats. His prescriptive solutions further police and state presence into the lives of citizens and non-citizens and the policing of BIPOC culture, religion, and identities.

Almonte publicizes his training as “boots on the ground” advice and guidance from experts and professionals from Almonte’s own Texas stomping ground.⁴⁰⁵ Most of the officers and state agents interviewed in his video training course are El Paso police officers, and it is this regional and geographic network of law enforcement professionals that informs Almonte’s work. The last fifteen minutes of Almonte’s video training course are spent with an El Paso prosecutor as he advises those viewing the video on the best way to make arrests with narco saint material, so that convictions will hold up in criminal and appeal courts.⁴⁰⁶ It is very clear that Almonte drew from his own professional and regional defense networks to create his training course, and El Paso’s law enforcement and legal expertise informs audiences much larger than the El Paso region through Almonte’s training course. These are networks that exist on a geographic border and on the local levels of the national defense field. The testimonials and advice given in the video consistently cite their “front line” expertise as they fight in the drug war.⁴⁰⁷ The border is this front line, which has been crossed according to Almonte.⁴⁰⁸ Almonte’s narrative authority is

⁴⁰⁴ Herbert, *Policing Space*. ; Bittner, *Aspects of police work*. ; See also Patron Saints Video 50:01- 72:00

⁴⁰⁵ “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” *SmallWarsJournal (blog)*, Mon, 02/04/2013, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/patron-saints-of-the-mexican-drug-underworld-training-course> ; See also Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” 50:01- 82:00

⁴⁰⁶ Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” 82:00- 93:52

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid 45:44- 60:21

⁴⁰⁸ Dr. Carlos Show, *We Discuss the Cartel and Border Issues with Former U. S. Marshall Robert Almonte*.

evident in his success speaking to specific border and law enforcement communities in ways that resonate into their own work, and this ability to “tell authoritative stories about crime” comes from the intersection of his “training and experience” on the border, his religious identity, and his belief that narco saints exist as a threat in Mexico that has crossed over into the United States.⁴⁰⁹ Law enforcement agents are more likely to trust fellow officers with patrol, investigative, and “street” policing experience than other sources of information—including the administration of their own departments.⁴¹⁰ When credibility is derived from active law enforcement experience, Almonte’s past position as law enforcement of a large border town makes him an authoritative source that will speak directly to his audience. These authoritative stories detail threats to normative social and moral behavior, and are particularly well received in law enforcement audiences as these stories have historically allowed police to control narratives of everyday social dynamics, and create widely- accepted norms influenced by dominate narratives of race and masculinity.⁴¹¹

In the 2017 trial of Luis Morales-Montanez and Jessica Acosta in an Eastern Kentucky federal court a prosecutor, Roger West, challenged the character of Morales-Montanez and the integrity of his statements by using his association with the alleged narco saint Jesús Malverde saying that “Luis Morales [sic], the worshiper of a deity of a drug trafficking entity who prays for protection from police, prosecutors, court systems and juries. Is he entitled to any credibility for what he said?”⁴¹² In closing Prosecutor Roger West went on to say:

⁴⁰⁹ Wilson, *Cop Knowledge*.

⁴¹⁰ Robert E. Ford, “Saying One Thing, Meaning Another.” ; Doreian and Conti, “Creating the Thin Blue Line.” ; McNulty, “Generating Common Sense Knowledge Among Police Officers.”

⁴¹¹ Gates, “The Cultural Labor of Surveillance.”

⁴¹² United States v. JESSICA R. ACOSTA (18-5207); LUIS R. MORALES MONTANEZ (18-5212); Nos. 18-5207/5212 (2019). <https://www.courtlistener.com/opinion/4619718/united-states-v-luis-morales-montanez/>.

Another shocking thing yesterday was the defendant, Mr. Morales' [sic] testimony. Thou shall not have any Gods before me. I've never ever seen a defendant admit to worshipping Malverde. I'm not going to call it a saint, I'm to use the word and call it a deity. He worships a deity He prayed for protection from police. He prays that he doesn't get caught.

For whatever religious or philosophical reasons, he's still trying to push away from Apartment 172. I wonder how many prayers he has said to Malverde before he walked into the courtroom yesterday. I wonder if what's going through his mind this morning was, I'm going to say another prayer for protection from the jurors of Central Kentucky.⁴¹³

Robert Almonte was not personally involved in this case, instead the Prosecutor at multiple points in the trial used the phrase "praying for protection" in regards to why people may seek out saints like Jesús Malverde. This phrase "praying for protection" is part of a larger tagline included in most of the promotional material for Almonte's training workshops offered to prosecutors and law enforcement agents. Though Almonte did not act as a witness in the above case, his expert testimony has been challenged in the criminal proceedings of 11 defendants in regards to narco saint material and its contested use as evidence of criminal behavior.⁴¹⁴

Almonte's presence itself is sometimes contested within these proceedings, and the legitimacy of his expertise, and therefore credibility as a witness has been successfully upheld and rejected across different criminal court cases, keeping the US legal system divided on the link between narco saints and criminality.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ United States v. JESSICA R. ACOSTA (18-5207); LUIS R. MORALES MONTANEZ (18-5212); Nos. 18-5207/5212 (2019).

⁴¹⁴ For direct reference and challenge see: United States v. Bobadilla-Campos, 839 F. Supp. 2d 1230, United States v. Goxcon-Chagal, 885 F. Supp. 2d 1118, United States v. Guerrero, 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 157691, United States v. Medina-Copete, 757 F.3d 1092, State v. Villa-Vasquez, 49 Kan. App. 2d 421, United States v. Guerrero, 768 F.3d 351, United States v. Huerta, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 1611. Other challenges come from indirect reference to these as legal precedent.

⁴¹⁵ United States v. Abraham Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014), <http://federalevidence.com/pdf/2014/05May/US.v.BobadillaCampos.pdf>; see also United States v. Holmes and Castaneda Rendon, 13-1660 and 13-1661 (8th Cir. 2014).

Robert Almonte's work reflects his upbringing on the border, his long experience in law enforcement, and the fears that "narco saints" growing popularity may corrupt the religious traditions he holds to be important. Though scandal ended his long and beloved career as a law enforcement agent, and his conclusions continue to be contested in the legal system, Almonte has continued the work he began as a law enforcement agent in the private sector with the same regional backing he enjoyed as an El Paso police detective. Like Bunker, he is passionate about combatting the pervasive threat that "narco saints" pose to the United States and stresses their wide-spread corrupting influence. Though Almonte is less ambitious or prolific in his publications than some of his fellow experts, he maintains an active presence in news media of narco saints. Coverage of drug busts and arrests on the border are animated by details of narco saints and their deadly use by narcotics traffickers, whether or not their material was found on the crime scene. These details often come from Almonte or Bunker's archive of soundbites, publications, and past promotional material.⁴¹⁶ A quintessential case of this is the sentencing proceedings and associated public drama attached to Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, who is popularly known as "El Chapo". News coverage regarding the trial, sentencing, and incarceration of the well-known cartel leader often includes pictures of Jesús Malverde and a few sentences noting he is a saint that drug traffickers pray to, despite these details having little bearing on the case.⁴¹⁷ Yet, Bunker and Almonte's ideas and conception of the saint are cited often by this type of news.⁴¹⁸ In this way, these experts and the larger US media help create the dangerous and

⁴¹⁶ Some examples include: Whisenant, "Rowan Couple Arrested on Drug Charges after Traffic Stop in Gaston County." *Https://Www.Wbtv.Com*, January 26, 2018.; Lewis, "Exclusive: Workers Held up at Gunpoint at MS-13 'Destroyer House.'" *WSET*, December 26, 2017.; Borunda, "Mexico Drug Cartel Ambush Kills 4 Police Officers, Wounds 6 in Mountains of Chihuahua." *El Paso Times*, September 8, 2018.

⁴¹⁷ Reuters/ga, "Mexican President Does Not Expect Rise in Violence after 'El Chapo' Sentencing," *Channel News Asia*, July 18, 2019.

⁴¹⁸ Kevin McCoy, "'El Chapo' Trial Jurors Heard the Accused Mexican Drug Lord's Voice — or Did They?," *El Paso Times*, December 20, 2018. ; Kvia Abc-7. "'El Chapo' Guzman's Impact on the

corrupting “narco saint” and justify expanded police action, policing of religious communities, and continued border militarization as a means to curb an imagined threat to US hegemony.

Though narco saint experts like Bunker and Amonte are part of a larger for-profit industry and defense field present near the southwest border and arguably within the larger United States, they remain small players in this field. Different narco saint experts have varied levels of success and observable effect, and though Bunker and Almonte represent the most visible and sought after narco saint experts within the US securityscape, their work remains challenged, marginal, and in many cases, amateur compared to other more institutionally backed and refined knowledge producers that inform the United States border security, defense, and law enforcement industry and fields. The small “narco saint” expertise field is at the margins of a much larger defense expertise industry, despite the scope of Almonte and Bunker’s claims that the holy personas pose severe and large-scale threats to the security, moral backbone, and religiosity of the United States.⁴¹⁹ Due to their contested history and lack of large-scale acceptance in traditional knowledge fields, Almonte and Bunker continue to occupy an interesting place in the larger US securityscape. While both have reached arguable success in their careers, they are still only intermittently sought after as experts by core entities of the United States defense and legal apparatus, and both continually rely on self-publicity and contested credentials to continue their work as experts.⁴²⁰ Serious attention to their expertise reveals the gaps in their knowledge, and the biases that deeply prevent engagement with their area expertise outside the security-conscious and threat paradigm that dominates their

Borderland.” *KVIA* (blog), February 19, 2019 ; Borunda, “‘Chapo’ Guzman’s Son, Jesus Alfredo Guzman Salazar, on DEA Most-Wanted Fugitives List.” *El Paso Times*, September 14, 2018.

⁴¹⁹ See for a direct argument for this interpretation: Sullivan, and Bunker, “Rethinking Insurgency.”

⁴²⁰ See above discussion of Bunker’s inflated number of publications and citations

professional fields.⁴²¹ Yet, this defensive and reactionary interpretation of informal borderland religiosity has convinced specific audiences of its validity, both inside and outside the United States security community. Narco saint experts adopt the apocalypticism of the larger US securityscape they exist within, evident in their dire warnings of deep cultural corruption by narco saints and narco saint devotees.

Conclusion

The idea of prophetic stance and imagination is valuable when explaining the way narco saint experts leverage the tension they experience “betwixt and between” fields. These experts are not prophets, they adopt a prophetic stance. These experts’ ideas are not new or revolutionary, but they market them as such. These expert communities are not marginalized, they are ostracized and challenged in fields they seek to contribute to. Almonte, Bunker, and their community of experts are largely self-styled, both in expertise and in prophetic ability. The exclusion they perceive is turned into evidence of their prophetic position as experts who speak to an emergent, under-acknowledged threat, and the criticism they receive reaffirms their position as martyr speaking hard-truths and doing “thankless” work. These experts utilize this tension, operating at conceptual and geographic borderlands to market themselves as new, innovative, and uniquely necessary; even if in reality their ideas speak far more to historical imaginaries of the frontier than any revolutionary energy. These narco experts see themselves as intellectuals in service of the state, bestowing new and world-changing knowledge to those at the core of an imagined West, and this provides an understanding of the apocalyptic vantage their

⁴²¹ See chapter 1, for an in depth discussion of how cop knowledges and logics affects security communities and the epistemic communities that support them.

content is created from. The next chapter details these core ideas and imaginaries reified and reproduced in their content, publications, and expertise productions.

Chapter Three: Securityscape Religiosity

Dr. Robert Bunker begins his three-part law enforcement FBI bulletin series on the informal borderland saint Santa Muerte with the following text:

Bloodbaptized—in a shroud of human skin;
Raise your wings—as we celebrate the dead;
Sacrifice—in the honour of your wealth;
Reward us now—in triumph we behead.⁴²²

This is not, as its position at the beginning of an article about a religious persona implies, a prayer to the featured saint Santa Muerte. The lines above are lyrics to a song from Swedish death metal group Necrophobic, which Bunker attributes to the music artist only in a endnote at the end of the document.⁴²³ Bunker’s use of the lyrics in this official FBI publication at first seems strange considering the nonfictional and serious subject matter of the bulletin, however the fictionally imagined lyrics above are representative of the ways Bunker characterizes Santa Muerte and other informal borderland saints in his authored FBI bulletins and other publications. The above words are gory, playful, violent, and indicative of the musical genre from which Bunker draws them; they are not reflective of any documented prayers by actual devotees of Santa Muerte or the widely available prayer cards associated with the saint across Mexico and the United States. Prayers by devotees to Santa Muerte lack the overt dramatics of the death metal genre in favor of structure and language more common to the Catholic religion. In example:

Lord, before your divine presence, God all powerful,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we ask your permission to invoke
Santísima Muerte, our Niña Blanca,
we wish to ask you from the bottom of our hearts,

⁴²² This quote begins Bunker’s bulletin series on Santa Muerte. Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,” FBI, accessed December 5, 2016, <https://leb.fbi.gov/2013/february/santa-muerte-inspired-and-ritualistic-killings-part-1>.

⁴²³ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

that you destroy or break any spell, hex, or darkness
present in our persons, our homes, work, and travel.⁴²⁴

These prayers lack the cartoonish levels of violence that Bunker ascribes to the cult via the death metal lyrics and later allegations of blood sacrifice and beheadings within his publications. While there is no official prayer litany or hierarchical liturgical authority associated with Santa Muerte's cults, as she like other "narco saints" are informal and unrecognized within the institutional Catholic church, her devotees have developed popular and widespread practices, beliefs, and liturgical events under the harsh scrutiny of formal religious institutions and law enforcement agencies in both the United States and Mexico.⁴²⁵ While devotion to Santa Muerte is flexible and people revere her across Catholic, Pagan, and varied new religious movements, her documented supplications never invoke the violence Bunker sources with the use of Necrophobic's songwriting.⁴²⁶ One of the most popular prayers to Santa Muerte at the geographic center of her following in Mexico City is as follows:

Santísima Muerte, we believe in you
because we know that you have existed since the beginning of time.
We believe in you because you are fair, and do not discriminate.
You take a young person just as you take an old person,
a rich person just as a poor person.
We believe in you, because you are the mother of all cycles.
All that begins must end, all that lives, dies.
We believe in you because we are sure
that one day we shall meet, and so may we have you within us,
instead of being against you.
We were all born to have a holy death [muerte santa]. Amen.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ Translated by Laura Roush in Laura Roush, "Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo: A View from a Mexico City Altar," *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. January (2014): 129–48.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.* 138

⁴²⁶ Manon Hedenborg-White and Fredrik Gregorius, "The Scythe and the Pentagram: Santa Muerte from Folk Catholicism to Occultism."

⁴²⁷ Translated by Laura Roush in Laura Roush, "Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo: A View from a Mexico City Altar," *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. January (2014): 129–48.134.

Devotion to Santa Muerte is varied and unregulated by any formal institution or clerical hierarchy, and while her associated prayers and iconography do utilize references and images of death, there is little evidence that cult actively utilizes violence, mutilation, or human sacrifice as part of their religious rites.⁴²⁸ Rumors of such have been drummed up through mass media sensationalizing of the cults bad reputation with the Catholic Church and law enforcement agencies.⁴²⁹ Instead, Saint Death is generally seen as a symbolic equalizer by her devotees, and devotion to the fearsome but protective informal saint is multi-faceted and international with shrines in homes, prison cells, and on roadsides.⁴³⁰ As scholars have noted, the cult of Santa Muerte’s syncretic use of various practices both traditionally religious and occult, as well as Santa Muerte’s adoption into popular culture, music, and new religious movements outside of the informal Catholicism that often houses her, allows for many readings of the saint.⁴³¹

As discussed in the last chapter, Bunker’s background and academic affiliation provides him with skills and resources to determine what is and what is not accurate or representative of the cult.⁴³² Bunker chose the evocative use of death metal lyrics to begin an informational bulletin for a reason. The selection, inclusion, and spotlight of playful but violent lyrics are indicative of the way narco experts like Bunker, and the law enforcement they train and inform, view not just the saints themselves, but saints’ devotees, influence, and rising presence in the US

⁴²⁸ See Ibid. Also Wil G. Pansters, *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion, and Society* (University of New Mexico Press, 2019), Lois Ann Lorentzen et al., eds., “Devotional Crossings: Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco,” in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana* (Duke University Press, 2009), 3–38, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391166-002>.

⁴²⁹ Laura Roush. “Don’t leave me unprotected: The heresy of La Santa Muerte in social context”. In metroZones (Ed.), *Faith is the place: The urban cultures of global prayers*. (2012) Berlin: B Books.

⁴³⁰ Pansters, W. (2019). *La Santa Muerte in Mexico : History, devotion, & society*. 18

⁴³¹ Pansters, W. (2019). *La Santa Muerte in Mexico : History, devotion, & society*. 50-51

⁴³² An expert with research experience and skills can uncover the discrepancy between the popular cultural representations of Santa Muerte and documented and confirmed reverence to her holy persona by declared devotees.

Mexico borderlands. This inclusion is indicative of the syncretic undercurrents of an inherently religious aspect of security work that is present not just in Bunker's work, but in other narco saint expertise, security and police culture, as well as mainstream depictions of cop work and border conflict and policing. I examine the actions of specific expert actors, broader cultures and communities of law enforcement, and the "drug war" conflict in which they are embedded to understand this religious paradigm. I identify several consistent themes that I argue allow us to understand narco saint experts and perhaps even the larger law enforcement and border security fields, as a religiously driven community.

These themes are unique to this brand of law enforcement and I make an important distinction here, I do not claim that these communities are inherently Christian, or any other established religious identity, though no doubt many within ascribe, practice, and believe their own traditions. Instead, I argue that these expertise and law enforcement practitioners showcase a cohesive belief especial to their community, one that has a distinctly religious quality in its focus on morality, transformation, and purity. This law enforcement religiosity is present across the training expertise, insider cultural artefacts, and outside representations of policing and border security. This religiosity is hyper visible in the narco saint expertise field, and through close examination of that community and their texts I develop a lens through which broader law enforcement communities can be scrutinized and understood.

Blue Line Religion

Training materials, published guidebooks, blog posts, and law enforcement bulletins initially designed for law enforcement practitioner audiences make up a large portion of the English sources on narco saints available to the defense community and security hobbyists. They come as manuals, pamphlets, training videos, and training courses expressly designed to instruct

law enforcement and defense practitioners in the identification and policing of narco saint devotees and communities. These training materials are created to help various types of law enforcement personnel increase arrests, targeting specifically narcotics traffickers and undocumented peoples on US territory. Outside of these training materials, other forms of spoken expertise become codified and published through legal and congressional proceedings as these experts are brought in to testify on criminal, defense, and security matters. Almonte seeks to train law enforcement, DEA, border security and other state agents to police narcotics and unsanctioned border crossing, threats that Almonte identifies as real threats to United States' hegemony, morality, and religious traditions. Bunker and his *Small Wars Journal* interlocuters present expertise with the trappings of academic authority to inform state training curricula and policy in ways that rationalize their own existence as guides through new ages of warfare and a cosmology of sinister enemies. Like Almonte and Bunker, less well known narco saint experts strive to justify their own presence and authority in defense circles by placing themselves and borderland saints within the same binary religious cosmology. The threats and dramatics they ascribe to saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde are then repeated in news coverage of drug busts and moral scares, and then fictionalized further in popular media as a way of characterizing the borderlands.⁴³³ The image and imaginary of the border as a site of religious conflict has a near ubiquitous presence across all the documents that concern or even mention so called "narco saints".⁴³⁴ These imaginaries present within the below documents construct not just the narco saint and the cults that revere them, but also the individual that polices them. Narco saint expertise paints law enforcement as heroic figures that face both physical, spiritual, and

⁴³³ See Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 for a discussion of the impacts of this expertise within popular media and news coverage associated with "narco saints".

⁴³⁴ See below analysis

psychological danger as they work.⁴³⁵ Historical imaginaries and border tropes that have long motivated the US security scape to colonize, control, and police the border, are cultivated to stress a looming and potential danger that must be policed.⁴³⁶ Imperial anxieties of a dangerous and deviant frontier enable militarization of local law enforcement and state extension into the personal religious lives of those that live and traverse the US Mexico Borderlands. The below discourses needle these existential fears, constructing a spiritual threat to embolden law enforcement agents, attract federal money, and prove justification for the policing of Mexican culture and religion.

Sociologists use the term religiosity as a form of measurement that denotes to what degree a social entity, individual, or institution may be religious. There are several ways these scholars have defined and characterized religiosity, creating a wide array of factors, beliefs, practices, and concerns that all may in some way add up to something or someone being religious.⁴³⁷ Other scholars have pointed out that studies concerning religiosity often fall into the Religious Congruence Fallacy because attitudes and behavior rarely line up completely, in that “people's religious ideas and practices generally are fragmented, compartmentalized, loosely connected, unexamined, and context dependent.”⁴³⁸ For example, high church attendance does

⁴³⁵ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”; Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld - Robert Almonte,” Podcast, *Man of War Podcast*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.manofwar.live/mow/85>; Dr. Carlos Show, *We Discuss the Cartel and Border Issues with Former U. S. Marshall Robert Almonte* (YouTube, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tcq-NjsIUe4>; Robert J. Botsch, “Jesus Malverde’s Significance to Mexican Drug Traffickers”. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (August 2008).

⁴³⁶ María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*.

⁴³⁷ Barbara Holdcroft, “What Is Religiosity?,” *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 10, no. 1 (September 2006): 89–103; Yoshio Fukuyama, “The Major Dimensions of Church Membership,” *Review of Religious Research* 2, no. 4 (1961): 154–61.; Charles Y. Glock, “On the Study of Religious Commitment,” 1962.; Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment*, vol. 1 (Univ of California Press, 1968); Gerhard Lenski, James W. Smith, and A. Leland Jamison, “The Religious Factor,” *Science and Society* 27, no. 3 (1963)..

⁴³⁸ Mark Chaves, “SSSR Presidential Address Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010): 1–14.

not necessarily mean someone holds religious beliefs or acts religiously in other aspects of their lives. Personal devotion and lived rituals often happen outside of formalized religious structures, and yet these aspects of religiosity are still obviously religious behavior to most. For this reason, the term religiosity is better understood as the set of expressions and undercurrents of a community that may or may not officially ascribe to a ‘Religion’ in the big “R” sense, but do exhibit religious motivations, ideology, and ways of understanding their place and purpose in the world.⁴³⁹ Historians, religious studies scholars, and social scientists who study the borderlands, racial politics, and the knowledge production of the securityscape have long illuminated the beliefs, imaginaries, and myths behind the rational-guise of state expertise.⁴⁴⁰

Though there is little direct work on police spirituality or religiosity, Peter K. Manning argues in his influential work *Police Work* that police not only function internally to conserve and bring meaning to the subfield of policing and its internal culture, they have ideological interventions that carry into their parent field, power. These interventions are symbolic in nature and depend on ritualized practices that communicate the police’s national “leviathan” nature through drama and spectacle to the public.⁴⁴¹ Not only is there a resilient and homogenous police culture, but this culture is cultivated deliberately across departments through officer onboarding, training, and socialization. Professional police action itself becomes an enacted symbol of

⁴³⁹ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, “The Impossibility of Religious Freedom,” *Social Science Research Council* (blog), July 8, 2014, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2014/07/08/impossibility-of-religious-freedom/>.

⁴⁴⁰ To name a few; Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, Second Edition. Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*; Lois Ann Lorentzen, *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana: Politics, Identity, and Faith in New Migrant Communities.*; Luis D León, *La Llorona’s Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*; Jon Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence.*; Desirée A Martín, *Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture*, 2014 .; Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*.

⁴⁴¹ Mark Chaves, “SSSR Presidential Address Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010): 1–14.20-21.

internal devotion to traditional values of the state and adherence to Manichean binaries of good against evil, rational violence against chaotic violence—binaries that are replicated across all levels of police socialization.⁴⁴² Manning discusses how the police itself represent this symbol on a macro level, explaining their role maintaining and representing hegemonic power through visible use of sanctioned violence.

They [the police] symbolize as well the continuity and integrity of the society by their visibility and attachment to traditional values [...]. Their actions underscore and implement the intentions of the state – they are Leviathan enacted. The modern police as a rational, bureaucratic force stand ready to enforce the law with the ultimate sanction, violence.⁴⁴³

These policing rituals convey a sacredness and sanction with the police, that enables control over the communities they police and an elevated status within society in general. In contrast, there has been little research into how religious ideology shapes United States security expertise or law enforcement communities, and by extension how this potential religiosity may shape how the securityscape operates to police citizens, non-citizens, and borders.⁴⁴⁴ For the purposes of scope, I am interested in how religious paradigms disseminate through training and expertise to create deceptively religious regimes of police logics and border security practice.

This gap in research does not reflect a lack of religiosity within security fields or religion practiced by law enforcement and other state agents; there is substantial interest within the law

⁴⁴² See discussions of police archetypes in popular culture in Chapter 4, as well as subsequent discussions below. Other scholarship that discusses both formal and informal socialization: Norman Conti, “A Visigoth System: Shame, Honor, and Police Socialization,”; Allison T. Chappell and Lonn Lanza-Kaduce, “Police Academy Socialization: Understanding the Lessons Learned in a Paramilitary-Bureaucratic Organization,”; Robert E. Ford, “Saying One Thing, Meaning Another: The Role Of Parables In Police Training,” Tyler Wall, “The Police Invention of Humanity: Notes on the ‘Thin Blue Line,’”

⁴⁴³ Peter K. Manning, *Police Work: The Social Organization of Policing*. 20-21.

⁴⁴⁴ Some scholarship exists on operational organization of police departments and the role religion plays in facilitating police practice and encouraging officer mental health, see Dave Lee Maggard, “Faith Practices in the Modern-Day Police Department - ProQuest” (Pepperdine University, 2020). But there remains a dearth in any critical scholarship about the role religiosity plays in maintaining the hegemonic structures of policing and potential enabling or curbing police violence.

enforcement community itself in matters of spirituality, religion, and professional religious culture. The law enforcement community, news sites, and published training bulletins all routinely devote articles, segments, and panels to matters of individual officer spirituality, religious motivations for policing, and spiritual resilience against enemies and workplace strain.⁴⁴⁵ These pieces are marketed towards law enforcement officers and departments and provide statistics on the effects of religious and spiritual mindsets on their policing, their handling of stress, and ability to deal with mental illness related to the strains of their professional life. Police books and law enforcement training bulletins consistently espouse spirituality as a means to stave off mental illness among undercover agents and patrolmen.⁴⁴⁶ Prayer and religious fellowship are encouraged by these publications. These texts encourage officers to incorporate religious values into their policing to withstand hostility and violence they receive from the public, and proposes they see themselves as “guardians” who uphold a “reverence for the laws” within the population they police.⁴⁴⁷ More informally, but perhaps more representative of religiosity as practiced instead of as advised, social media posts in law

⁴⁴⁵ Jonathan Smith and Ginger Charles, “The Relevance of Spirituality in Policing: A Dual Analysis,” *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 12, no. 3 (2010): 320–38. ; Dan S. Willis, “Focus on Training: The Practice of Spirituality and Emotional Wellness in Law Enforcement,” *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin*, December 1, 2010.; Cary A. Friedman, “Value of Spiritual Survival Tools for Law Enforcement Officers,” *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 13, 2016; High Priority Targeting, Inc., “Police Books - Police Spirituality and Religion,” accessed November 24, 2020.; Samuel L. Feemster, *Spirituality: The DNA of Law Enforcement Practice*. (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007).; Samuel L. Feemster, “Wellness and Spirituality: Beyond Survival Practices for Wounded Warriors.,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Behavioral Science Unit, 78, no. 5 (May 2009); Jeffrey G. Willetts, “A Brief Introduction to the Language of Spirit and Law Enforcement.,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 78, no. 5 (May 2009).; Inez Tuck, “On the Edge: Integrating Spirituality Into Law Enforcement,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 78, no. 5 (May 2009): 14–21 Ginger L. Charles, “How Spirituality Is Incorporated in Police Work: A Qualitative Study” (Ph.D., United States -- California, Saybrook University, 2005); Fred Travis, “Brain Functioning as the Ground for Spiritual Experiences and Ethical Behavior,” *FBI L. Enforcement Bull.* 78 (2009): 26.; Licole R. Robinson, “Police Officers’ Perceptions of Spirituality for Managing Occupational Stress and Job Performance” (PhD Thesis, Walden University, 2019).

⁴⁴⁶ See footnotes above.

⁴⁴⁷ Sue Rahr and Stephen K. Rice, *From Warriors to Guardians: Recommitting American Police Culture to Democratic Ideals*.

enforcement groups are rife with memes, affirmations, and conversations that use Christian symbols and language to reify law enforcement identities as moral protectors of home and homeland.⁴⁴⁸

A substantial amount of training materials and publications make up the “narco saint” expertise archive. The documents themselves, particularly Bunker’s self-published contributions, can run the length of full monographs and they contain countless examples of the religious language, rhetorical strategies, and arguments details in the subsequent sections.⁴⁴⁹ Many of these examples echo each other, deriving claims from the same documents and sources, repeating similar fears and anxieties of a returned frontier, and express the same sacralized and self-designated role of the law enforcement agent within this imaginary. Some promote the others as sources for further research.⁴⁵⁰ An analysis of the major themes within the many documents can better encapsulates this religiosity within this archive and the larger securityscape of the United States than parsing out each example of telling wording, religious imagery, and appeal for increased security. The specific examples given below are not exceptional, but instead are representative of content that runs throughout the narco saint expert archive I have compiled. This archive consists of training documents, publications, bulletins, videos, and social media posts created by narco saint experts and intended for law enforcement audiences. I pay specific attention to documents that are widely cited and referenced throughout these narco saint expert networks to better represent the consensus and “stance” adopted by this community as they produce knowledge and impact fields outside their own. The below are organized by four specific themes present within the archive, they are:

⁴⁴⁸ Fieldwork and Online ethnography

⁴⁴⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979). See Chapter four and five for a more in-depth discussion of Orientalist tropes at work within narco saint productions and expertise.

⁴⁵⁰ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

Nationalistic apocalypticism and millennialism that centers the role of the state agent. Deeply dualistic cosmologies overlaid on the United States, Mexico, and their border. Syncretic appropriation of other belief sets and religious figures. The importance and authority of “lived” testimony and “on the ground” canon in law enforcement expertise.

All of the above come together within the archive to express the distinctly religious ideology, or religiosity especial to the law enforcement community and the securityscape of the United States.

Apocalypticism

In his 1964 essay, Richard Hofstadter details the “paranoid style” of American politics and the ways in which looming apocalypse – drawn from the Christian religious tradition – characterizes and justifies so much of American political life and action. In specific he addresses the specific purveyors of this paranoid style.

The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point.⁴⁵¹

When Hofstadter speaks about apocalypticism in the American political context he used it to describe the manic fear of those who think or purport they are living in the end-times. These individuals then leverage that anxiety to motivate others to act off that same fear.

Apocalypticism in the religious context – which is never entirely separate from the political in scope – is inherently about transformation and revelation. An apocalypse brings about end-times but also what comes after. Thus, Robert J. Bunker and his work on narco saints exists within a long tradition of United States apocalypticism with its focus on epochal change brought about by new forms of insurgency. This apocalypticism articulates in both civil and religious ways, and Bunker exemplifies each with his focus on spiritual warfare by narcotics traffickers, societal

⁴⁵¹ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1, 1964, <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

degradation creeping over the border, and his concern that the United States security leadership refuses to see the eminent threat to US safety that Mexico represents. Bunker's formative academic years in graduate school began with the prediction that the United States would soon undergo a "post-modern epochal transition", and that this epochal change comes from new forms of warfare that seek to corrupt traditional morals and societal values.⁴⁵² This claim can be seen evolved later into his theories of spiritual and societal warfare, based on the Huntington-like assumptions that specific cultures are incompatible and exist in conflict with one another.⁴⁵³ For Bunker, the United States, Mexico, and the border between the two countries are sites of both physical and ideological conflict at various stages of warfare, ranging from the fallen Mexico, the contested and permeable border, and the threatened and encroached upon United States.

Bunker opens up his 13th of September 2011 testimony before the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere with the statement, "This congressional testimony will posit that the Mérida Initiative as it stands is too myopic in nature given the on-the-ground realities currently present in Mexico."⁴⁵⁴ This two- part hearing evaluated the effectiveness and pertinence of the Mérida Initiative in curbing drug trafficking activity, organizations, and profits across the United States, and to some extent Mexico. In the first part of the hearing, the subcommittee heard the testimony of four experts, drawn from universities, research institutes, and the Small Wars Journal, in regards to the state of criminal activity in

⁴⁵² Alexandra Phelan, "Interview - Robert J. Bunker," *E-International Relations* (blog), May 20, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/20/interview-robert-j-bunker/>.

⁴⁵³ Robert Bunker and T. Lindsay Moore, "Nonlethal Technology and Fourth Epoch War: A New Paradigm of Politico-Military Force,"; Robert Bunker, "Epochal Change: War Over Social and Political Organization," *Parameters* 27, no. 2 (January 1, 1997): 15–25. See also Robert J. Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War*, 16-19.

⁴⁵⁴ Robert Bunker, "Criminal (Cartel & Gang) Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: What You Need to Know, Not What You Want to Hear: Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere at the Hearing 'Has Merida Evolved? Part One: The Evolution of Drug Cartels and the Threat to Mexico's Governance,'".

Mexico and its potential impact on United States national security. Bunker's segment is titled "What You Need to Know, Not What You Want to Hear" and Bunker's document details Mexico's descent into chaos and "barbarism".⁴⁵⁵ To communicate an imagined near end-times geography, Bunker relies on descriptive characterization of Mexico as an origin of apocalypse, a hellmouth spreading into the United States.

If Dante had been our contemporary, we fear he could just have easily have taken a stroll through some of the cities and towns of Mexico and, using those news feeds, could have substituted the imagery for the circles of hell he described in his early 14th century work the Divine Comedy.⁴⁵⁶

Bunker uses a reference to Dante Alighieri's 14th-century epic poem to imaginatively draw visual parallels between one of the most popular renditions of hell's violence and depravity and Mexico. With an almost regretful tone, which fits the title of his testimony title "What You Need to Know, Not What You Want to Hear", he positions himself as the bearer of bad but necessary news – the scenes described in a 14th century epic poem about eternal torment are comparable to something one might see on a "stroll" through modern day Mexico. The hearing is designed to be a forewarning to the United States, using Mexico as a cautionary tale and as a call for increased militarization of foreign relations and border security. In this prepared testimony Bunker more directly argues that criminal organizations are morphing into "warmaking organizations" in insurgent competition with the state.⁴⁵⁷ This associated report argues first that the cartel insurgents are remaking Mexico's values and society to suit their "deviant and criminal values". It is not just the physical threat presented by armed criminal gangs, but that these new, more advanced gangs or "warmaking entities," to actively change and corrupt Mexican government, institutions, and society and,

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid

in the process, [criminals]create their own vision of what the human condition and relationships should be. This is much like a street gang—if viewed as a cancerous form of deviant and criminal values— changing a street over time to mirror its own system of twisted norms and codes of behavior wherein graffiti marks the turf, the strong prey on the weak, public spaces such as street corners are taken over, and young girls are viewed as gang property. This process in Mexico is taking place writ large with the rise of a narcocultura. We are seeing the glorification of narco-violence, narco-corruption, narco-songs, narco-mansions, and narco-saints.

Through the use of frontier tropes of barbarity, vice, and violence, Bunker argues to the gathered US political leaders that it is not just the sovereignty of Mexico at stake but the “hearts, minds, and souls of its citizens.” For Bunker there are moral stakes to the competitive “dual sovereignties” arising from the Mexico’s insurgent population. According to Bunker’s report, Mexico is compromised at both institutional and cultural levels. This is even more of a problem, as Bunker argues, because of Mexico’s proximity to the United States and the short-sighted, border security policies like the Mérida Initiative that do not address the systematic cultural threats that result in “Warlordism, advanced forms of social banditry, cult-like behaviors...sadistic (pleasure killing) and human sacrifice (ritualized killing).”⁴⁵⁸ Bunker acknowledges that these claims may sound like exaggerations, but are not and includes a list drawn from another of his works coauthored with John P. Sullivan “Extreme Barbarism, a Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?” as proof of the phenomenon.⁴⁵⁹ This list includes skinning victims alive, ritual sacrifice to Santa Muerte, imbibing human remains through smoking with cocaine, and outright cannibalism. While Bunker

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid

⁴⁵⁹ In the original piece, Robert Bunker and John Sullivan, “Extreme Barbarism, a Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?,” *CGU Faculty Publications and Research*, January 1, 2011, The list is introduced as a series of suspected activities, and many of the bullet points acknowledge that the incidents and motivations are alleged or suspected. There is no such distinction in Bunker’s Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee.

utilizes these sensational descriptions as a moral call to action, his primary aim is to convince US leadership that the US is facing not just a threat that deserves wartime mobilization, but societal corruption that signifies a new transformative era of threat and warfare.

Narco-saint experts like Bunker replicate these claims with his work on spiritual insurgency and the growing popularity of informal borderland saints. This research, as seen below, is often but not always, self-published and then promoted through online sites and organizations like the *Small Wars Journal*, and are written exclusively from a Homeland Security perspective.⁴⁶⁰ This narco-saint expertise discusses informal borderlands saints solely when they are associated to drug trafficking, criminal enterprise, and threats to US national security. Unlike developed security studies scholarship found within accredited and reputable Universities and War colleges, this expertise bears only the affectations of academic origin. Despite being collected and presented in the format that would imply traditional academic journal and publication standards, these works largely lack rigorous peer-review, discussion of methods, or human subjects disclosure.⁴⁶¹ Bunker's articles, "The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?" with Pamela L. Bunker, "Torture, beheadings, and narcocultos," with Pamela L. Bunker and Lisa J. Campbell, and "The Emergence of Feral and Criminal Cities: U.S. Military Implications in a Time of Austerity", make culturally-essentialist arguments about a growing form of conflict and violence that departs from traditional understandings of warfare. The authors argue that small wars and national security threats come from deviant cultures and

⁴⁶⁰ Robert J. Bunker, *Crime Wars and Narco Terrorism in the Americas: A Small Wars Journal—El Centro Anthology* (iUniverse, 2014). See foreword and blurb about the Small Wars Journal and Foundation.

⁴⁶¹ For example, Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, "Rethinking Insurgency: Criminality, Spirituality, and Societal Warfare in the Americas," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 5 (2011): 757.

spiritualities that incentivize, develop, and signify a divergent societal order growing in Mexico and Central America that is hostile to the United States and the West.⁴⁶²

This warfare— manifesting itself in ‘criminal insurgencies’ derived from groups of gang, cartel, and mercenary networks— promotes new forms of state organization drawn from criminally based social and political norms and behaviors. These include a value system derived from illicit narcotics use, killing for sport and pleasure, human trafficking and slavery, dysfunctional perspectives on women and family life, and a habitual orientation to violence and total disregard for modern civil society and democratic freedoms.⁴⁶³

The operations of criminal networks are described in terms of *warfare* and *insurgency*, and enables thinking of these conflicts in a military scope with military solutions. And this military mindset is more directly engaged as Bunker warns that the upsurge of criminal spirituality and insurgency in Mexico means that “US governmental representatives face the constant danger of being kidnapped and tortured while carrying on their duties inside of Mexico” and that United States will soon have a “narco terrorist organization with an organized fanatical religious component sitting on its very border.”⁴⁶⁴ Bunker presents Mexico as state compromised by deviant morals and criminal factions, more explicitly stating what institutionally established scholars have implied through their crime-terror nexus theory. In the below passage from “The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?”, Bunker makes it clear that the United States is not

⁴⁶² Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 145–78.; Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, “The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?,” in *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2013). This book is a reprint of *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol 22, Issue 4.; Robert Bunker and John Sullivan, “Integrating Feral Cities and Third Phase Cartels/Third Generation Gangs Research: The Rise of Criminal (Narco) City Networks,” *CGU Faculty Publications and Research*, January 1, 2011,

⁴⁶³ Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, “The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?,” in *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2013). This book is a reprint of *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol 22, Issue 4.

⁴⁶⁴ Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*.172-173

just facing a corrupt political entity, but also a corrupting moral force that can and will affect even the “honest”.

Honest men are increasingly accepting bribes and embracing criminality over certain death, in some instances, along with the threat of the infliction of torture. Such is the reality of day-to-day life in many of the sovereign free and cartel controlled zones that now exist in Mexico and Central America. Who can say if those who are willing to compromise their values—and in a sense have already darkened their souls—are not willing to complete the transformational process taking place and accept criminally derived forms of spirituality and religion into their hearts? ⁴⁶⁵

This characterization posits that living day to day in these places is enough to “darken” someone’s “soul” and prime them for a “transformational process” through which their core morality and self is corrupted. What Bunker describes above is a religious conversion; people take part in a dark version of a traditional conversion narrative where people are influenced to “accept criminally derived forms of spirituality and religion into their hearts” and are transformed by it to an extent they reject traditional, or good, forms of morality and behavior in favor of the violent and criminal.⁴⁶⁶ This competition between good and bad religion found in law enforcement and security produced narco saint expertise plays into both their apocalyptic warnings of a looming disaster, and the dualistic borderland cosmologies discussed in the next section.

The above excerpts from Bunker’s work are representative of his larger body of work and presents complementary arguments: that a criminal insurgency is occurring in Mexico and Central America, that this criminal insurgency uses a form of deviant and evil spirituality to recruit, motivate violence, and undermine traditional societal morality, and that this insurgency is

⁴⁶⁵ Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, “The Spiritual Significance of *¿Plata O Plomo?*,” in *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas*.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

a threat to the United States and a “modern Western value system”.⁴⁶⁷ Bunker and his collaborators’ prescriptive solution to what they characterize as dire stakes are not clearly articulated. Instead of direct calls to change policy or affect international action, his publications and public testimony emphasize the existence of the threat itself, pushing the idea that policy makers and high-level defense stakeholders need to accept the existence of the criminal insurgency before it can be addressed. He acknowledges that few in leadership positions have adequately accepted the claims he makes, and the fact that Mexico has been compromised by a chaotic cultural insurgency has yet to be adopted in core defense circles, and states that mainstream security scholarship is hesitant to make such overt claims.⁴⁶⁸ Thus, Bunker argues that these large-scale conflicts do not yet have the visibility they deserve, and people must pay attention before the required large response can be mustered and deployed. That large response – according to another document that claims many cities across the world, including cities in Mexico, have become feral due to insurgency – should ideally comprise of the use of “select auxiliaries from allied foreign nations (with a lower per-soldier cost basis)” as well as the use of non-manned drones, gun turrets, and mobile fighting platforms.⁴⁶⁹ This response is effectively a continuation of interventionist policies and militarization efforts across the US Mexico Border

⁴⁶⁷ Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, “The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?,” This claim is also supported with Sullivan and Metz’s work, both of whom contribute and engage with Bunker’s claims of societal and spiritual insurgency. Metz “The Future of Insurgency, 23-24.”

⁴⁶⁸ Various author notes can be found expressing these sentiments. See Robert Bunker, “Criminal (Cartel & Gang) Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: What You Need to Know, Not What You Want to Hear: Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere at the Hearing ‘Has Merida Evolved? Part One: The Evolution of Drug Cartels and the Threat to Mexico’s Governance.’” 4-5; Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities* (iUniverse, 2016).; Robert J. Bunker, *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries* (Routledge, 2019). Editors Note.; Robert Bunker and John Sullivan, “Extreme Barbarism, a Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?,” *CGU Faculty Publications and Research*, January 1, 2011.

⁴⁶⁹ Robert J. Bunker, “The Emergence of Feral and Criminal Cities: U.S. Military Implications in a Time of Austerity,” Land Warfare Paper 99W (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army, April 2014).

and Mexico itself by the United States, with attempts to utilize the law enforcement, defense, and military capacities of another sovereign country.⁴⁷⁰ This proposed response is not further laid out with any concrete detail. However, considering the scope of the alleged threat to United States national security, and Bunker's other work that suggests increasing cooperation between intelligence agencies, local law enforcement, and military forces, the implied argument is that the US should seriously face this existential cultural threat and collapse of Western values head on. Drawing from Bunker's other work the solution he proposes involves the policing of expanded militarization of domestic police forces, heavier handed foreign intervention in Mexico, and policing and punishment of religious and cultural practices that are purportedly deviant and hostile in relation to a "Western value system."⁴⁷¹

Bunker further develops the apocalyptic presuppositions of the with the US Army War College and the Strategic Studies Institute, from which he published the sixty-page monograph report, "Old and New Insurgency Forms" in 2016. There he details these overarching theoretical understandings of global trends in conflict and hegemonic status, with the addendum that these conclusions have "direct implications for U.S. national security".⁴⁷² The work begins with an extensive and comprehensive record of different types of insurgency throughout the world, both historical and "emergent".⁴⁷³ In the emergent category, Bunker includes the category of "Blood Cultist" insurgency and describes it as a conflict that "represents a fusion of criminality, spirituality, and barbarism". Bunker places violent narco saint devotion in this category, and

⁴⁷⁰ María Celia Toro, "The Internationalization of Police: The DEA in Mexico," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (1999): 623–40. ; Martha Knisely Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham [u.a.: Duke Univ. Press, 1998).; Anna Grace, "10 Years of the Mérida Initiative: Violence and Corruption," *InSight Crime* (blog), December 26, 2018.

⁴⁷¹ Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, "The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?,"

⁴⁷² Robert J. Bunker, "Old and New Insurgency Forms" (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2016), vii

⁴⁷³ *Ibid* xi- xiii

proposes an “all-of-government approach” with either the military or law enforcement heading up the effort to respond.⁴⁷⁴ The rest of the document is a discussion of the counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine utilized by the West to understand asymmetrical forms of warfare, its benefits and failings, and the future of these strategic concerns. Bunker cites one of these key failings as “the contemporary downplaying of spirituality and religion as a fundamental motivator of non-Western tribal based societies.”⁴⁷⁵ Bunker’s larger body of works often works to correct this oversight, stressing the ideological differences between the west and non-west.⁴⁷⁶ Similarly, the document returns often to the point that new forms of insurgency use forms of spirituality, belief, and culture as tools “for increasing social/environmental modification”, with Bunker giving the example of narcocultura in Mexico.⁴⁷⁷ The sterile terminology belies what Bunker is getting at, and states more explicitly in the law enforcement bulletins discussed below and his other works, that what he considers non-western culture and belief are in the process of destabilizing societies close to the United States, and that this “deviance” and “barbarism” will soon encroach into the United States.⁴⁷⁸ Bunker correlates these corrupting cultural changes with demographic racial changes that reclaim US territory for Mexico on a “socio-ethnic” level and an increasing amount of criminals housed within United States’ prison and detention systems.⁴⁷⁹ These claims, about narco saint devotion and the larger culture they exist within, are repeated by junior scholars at

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid xx

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid 5-6

⁴⁷⁶ Robert J. Bunker, *Narcos Over the Border: Gangs, Cartels and Mercenaries* (Routledge, 2019)..; Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos.; Robert J. Bunker, and Pamela Ligouri Bunker. *Global Criminal and Sovereign Free Economies and the Demise of the Western Democracies: Dark Renaissance*. Routledge Advances in International Political Economy. Taylor and Francis, 2014; Robert Bunker and T. Lindsay Moore, “Nonlethal Technology and Fourth Epoch War: A New Paradigm of Politico-Military Force,”; Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities* (iUniverse, 2016).

⁴⁷⁷ Robert J. Bunker, “Old and New Insurgency Forms”

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid 10; Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”; Robert J. Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War*. 22

⁴⁷⁹ Robert J. Bunker, *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War*. 20-23

war colleges and other academic institutions deeply entwined with the US security scape, as they cite Bunker's theoretical frameworks and specific work on informal borderland religiosity.⁴⁸⁰ These junior scholars build off Bunker's large-scale ideological conceptions of "the west". They replicate Bunker's apocalyptic imaginary of clashing civilizations, "socio-ethnic" reclaiming, and criminal-spiritual insurgency within the security expertise communities and knowledge producing institutions they come from. In turn, Bunker self-referentially cites and draws authority from these theses and dissertations, creating the illusion of consensus for the looming apocalypse he warns of.⁴⁸¹

The imaginary of a criminalized Mexican state persists in the United States securityscape and its associated expertise. This imaginary includes the claim that narco saint devotion represents not just an insurrection in the security sense, but also an impending cultural upheaval and that will require the US to continue to blur distinctions between military, law enforcement, domestic, and international action. The alleged presence of an active insurgency or "criminalized State" up against the United States' southern border rationalizes treating Mexico as if it were a hostile power and apocalypse bringer, justifying heavy-handed policies that deploy US law enforcement, private contractors, and military below the southern border. This is deployed on a more pervasive level through "thin blue line" rhetoric in domestic policing, a phrase which has become a rallying mantra across police departments across the United States. When the "Black

⁴⁸⁰ Antonio Salvador Ortiz Cervantes, "Santa Muerte: Threatening the U.S. Homeland," Marine Corps University, 2011.; Kevin Freese. *The Death Cult of the Drug Lords Mexico's Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed*. Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS. 12 October 2005; Ashleigh A. Fugate, "Narcocultura: A Threat to Mexican National Security?" (Thesis, Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School, 2012). ; Koster, A. C. "On the Instrumental Role of Excessive Violence in Los Zetas' Emergence as a Drug Cartel." Bachelor thesis, Utrecht University, 2014. <http://localhost/handle/1874/295139>. See also as an example of critical perspective on their work: Josien Janssen, "La Santa Muerte as a Site of Encounter Between the Licit and Illicit; A Religious Perspective in Border Studies.," July 12, 2016.

⁴⁸¹ Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, "Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos," 165-167; Robert J. Bunker, "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,"

Lives Matter” movement demanded accountability and the end to murders of Black people by police, “Blue Lives Matter” was returned as a reactionary rejoinder, and quickly evolved into a state-backed legislative plan to rewrite hate-crime laws to protect law enforcement officers.⁴⁸²

The “Thin Blue Line” is

political theology to go

along with this

evolution, and has

developed along with the

security expertise of the

past fifty years.⁴⁸³ Its

visual representation, a

horizontal blue line

across a black

background represents

the core ideology behind

the slogan, that police

power represents a

chivalrous and

unappreciated force that is the only entity standing between humanity and death, between

civilization and anarchy.⁴⁸⁴



⁴⁸² Nijah Cunningham and Tiana Reid, “Blue Life,” *The New Inquiry* (blog), September 24, 2018, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blue-life/>.

⁴⁸³ Tyler Wall, “The Police Invention of Humanity: Notes on the ‘Thin Blue Line,’” *Crime, Media, Culture* 16, no. 3 (December 1, 2020): 319–36.; see Chapter 1 for this discussion on security expertise and its impact on modern policing

⁴⁸⁴ Tyler Wall, “The Police Invention of Humanity”

Its visual representation, a horizontal blue line across a black background represents the core ideology behind the slogan, that police power represents a chivalrous and unappreciated force that is the only entity standing between humanity and death, between civilization and anarchy.⁴⁸⁵ The Thin Blue Line represents that “line” that police hold against this chaos, and the imagery and rhetoric fills social media feeds, groups, and bios of law enforcement officers, families, and supporters.⁴⁸⁶

It provides a mythic quality to both law enforcement officers and expands their policing not just past their local enforcement jurisdiction, but into historical nationwide projects of civilization-making, and then further into the metaphysical war between good and evil that will have apocalyptic results. Robert Almonte’s consulting company sells merchandise featuring this blue line, adding a visual religious element of a protecting angel standing with police officers as they make their arrests.

The product description itself names the angel as “Saint Michael the Archangel (Patron Saint of Police Officers)” and describes the police officer “arresting a demon-like subject.”⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁵ Tyler Wall, “The Police Invention of Humanity”

⁴⁸⁶ In addition to personal online fieldwork, see Maurice Chammah and Cary Aspinwall, “The Short, Fraught History of the ‘Thin Blue Line’ American Flag,” *Politico*, June 9, 2020. And Tyler Wall, “The Police Invention of Humanity”

⁴⁸⁷ Almonte Consulting and Training, “Order-Online – Almonte Consulting & Training,” Company Store, Almonte Consulting and Training, 2019.



The apocalyptic outlook present in law enforcement religiosity is particularly visible in narco saint expertise produced by experts like Bunker and Almonte, but still present in large scale cultural productions of the law enforcement field.

Complementarily, a potential looming cultural threat justifies policing and surveillance of activities outside the traditional jurisdictions of police and military, such as an individual or communities' religious beliefs. The looming and on the cusp nature through which narco saint experts deeply resembles the apocalypticism present in various religious traditions, but articulates within the policing field centering the role of policing and security agents in this transformative end-time project.

Borderland Cosmologies

As discussed above, the idea that these saints, and their popularity, represent an invasion coming over the border is consistent throughout the narco saint expertise archive. Important to understanding this rhetoric's function is the way this discourse actively centers the role of the law enforcement officer and other state agents as heroes keeping this invasion at bay. They are rhetorically positioned as the "thin blue line" preventing deviant violence from corrupting the

United States, which itself is assumed by these documents to be an intrinsically lawful, if threatened, geography. Individual state agents are tasked with holding the line (border security initiative naming-convention reflects this explicitly), and the trainings emphasize individual actions and judgements that allow the trainees to participate in the large cosmological struggle to keep corrupting influences out.⁴⁸⁸ Through trainings and training documents the state agent is deputized with a professional policing role but also grounded and motivated by moral imperative to do what is characterized in law enforcement culture as thankless but necessary work. The training offers newfound knowledge and the ability to identify and purify threats from “the streets”, an imagined geography in itself invoked to represent the wide swaths of common United States territory under the police’s jurisdiction and the site of normative American life.⁴⁸⁹ This curriculum constructs strict binaries between good and evil, religion and superstition, moral lawful behavior and unlawful violent deviance. The training does not complicate the binary cosmology it presents with ethical nuance or discussions of systemic causes of crime, violence, or deviance, rejecting such explanations explicitly in some cases and implicitly otherwise.⁴⁹⁰ Instead, these binaries are created from Manichean divides between good and evil as observed in various religions, and scholars have noted the binary’s heavy influence on modern American Christianity.⁴⁹¹ This particular cosmology divides the world into not only two separate

⁴⁸⁸ See discussions of Operation Hold the Line, Gatekeeper, and Safeguard in Chapter 1, as well as in Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. And Gustavo Mohar and Maria-Elena Aicaraz, *U.S. Border Controls: A Mexican Perspective*, in *The wall around the West : state borders and immigration controls in North America and Europe* 139-150 (Peter Andreas & Timothy Snyder eds. 2000).

⁴⁸⁹ For a discussion of similar geographic constructions see Laura Huey and Thomas Kemple, “‘Let the Streets Take Care of Themselves’: Making Sociological and Common Sense of ‘Skid Row’ - Laura Huey, Thomas Kemple, 2007,” *Urban Studies*, July 2, 2016, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1080/00420980701540911>.

⁴⁹⁰ See Dawn Perlmutter, *Preface Analyzing Sacrificial Violence* and Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities*.

⁴⁹¹ A Manichean worldview is the belief that the world and reality exist in tension articulated through consistent wars and contests, both large and small, between good and evil forces and people. In the political context, real world events are seen as the product of this contest between the good and malevolent, instead

categories, but posits that these categories are diametrically opposed and incapable of harmonious existence— each side is viewed in constant opposition and conflict to the other. In addition, other scholars have noted this dualistic cosmology’s differentiating capacity to otherize groups within various political imaginaries such as nation, citizen, and border.⁴⁹²

A large part of narco saint expertise is made up of small bulletins and blog posts aimed at law enforcement and state agents, but also defense hobbyists and other would-be experts who participate in the defense expertise community. The bulletins are formal publications produced by official state agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), or fusion centers which coordinate expertise and information sharing between military, federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement agencies.⁴⁹³ These pieces are also produced by law enforcement and military themed magazines not officially associated with any government agency, but often operated, authored, and edited by ex-law enforcement or military personnel. These documents cover a wide range of law enforcement and defense field topics, “narco saint” articles and entries are just one of these topics. The accounts contained in these documents rely heavily on narco-saint material found at crime scenes and second-hand information passed on from US military and law enforcement agencies, which is then reproduced without critical analysis.⁴⁹⁴ This type of narco saint research is common and more accessible to

of individuals exercising rational choices or systems that constrain or limit human behavior. See J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 952–66.

⁴⁹² Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, Second Edition, 131; See Dianne Kirby, “Divinely Sanctioned: The Anglo-American Cold War Alliance and the Defence of Western Civilization and Christianity, 1945–48,” Sungho Choi and Ji Young Jung, “The Problem of Dualistic Worldviews in a Season of Climate Change,”; Silvio Waisbord, “The Elective Affinity between Post-Truth Communication and Populist Politics,”; Michael F. Mills, “Obamageddon: Fear, the Far Right, and the Rise of ‘Doomsday’ Prepping in Obama’s America”; Douglas Kellner, “9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation,”.

⁴⁹³ See chapter 1 for an explanation of these centers.

⁴⁹⁴ The site description of *Borderland Beat* reads: “If you are seeking extensive information about the drug war on the borderland and the beat police walk everyday, you came to the right place. Follow the chaos and mayhem of the Mexican drug cartels and the law enforcement who seek to destroy them.”; Buggs, “Jesus

the American public than scholarly journals and publications that share its subject, due to the lack of pay walls and jargon, and its visibility online. Narco saint expertise in the form of bulletins and blog posts provide accessible points of analysis because they are meant to be informative and educational to the reader. They are expressly designed to impart a specific kind of knowledge that constructs a very particular perspective, that of the law enforcement officer assumed to be on the side of good. Not only are state agents deputized as enforcers of moral order, but they are characterized as people willing to put their own souls on the line to confront this corruption allegedly present in the United States that has travelled from Mexico over the border.⁴⁹⁵ In a commonly-cited FBI Bulletin, Robert J. Bunker, writes that “Programs and writings concerning wellness and spirituality in policing can provide “spiritual armor” against dark ritualistic crime scenes and altars containing human remains.”⁴⁹⁶ From Bunker’s concern that the US defense apparatus is woefully unprepared for the spiritual insurgency coming out of Mexico, and Almonte’s oft repeated motivation for his training courses—increasing officer safety and educating law enforcement on the dangers posed by narco saints—the spiritual armor above comes in form of their forewarning and expertise. Narco saint experts draw their trainees and readers into a dualistic cosmology of good and evil overlaid on the US Mexico borderlands.

The three-part FBI bulletin series highlighted at the beginning of the chapter was written by Robert J. Bunker as he served as an instructor for the Los Angeles High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), a large fusion center that educates and advises various law

Malverde, Narco Patron Saint,” accessed April 27, 2022. See Paul Rexton Kan, “Mexican Cartels as Vicious Firms | Small Wars Journal,” *Small Wars Journal* (blog), March 15, 2015; Robert Almonte and Robert Bunker, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course: US Law Enforcement Officer Support,” *Small Wars Journal*, (blog), last modified February 4, 2013.

⁴⁹⁵ Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, “The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?,”; Robert Bunker, “Criminal (Cartel & Gang) Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: What You Need to Know, Not What You Want to Hear”; See also Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” narrated by Raymond Mesa (El Paso, TX: Narcotics Training, 2009).

⁴⁹⁶ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

enforcement personnel regarding identification of possible drug traffickers and provides intelligence sharing and coordination between different agencies and departments.⁴⁹⁷ As this three-part bulletin began with death metal lyrics discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it ends with the conclusion:

The rise of a fully criminalized and dark variant of Santa Muerte worship holds many negative implications. Of greatest concern, the inspired and ritualistic killings associated with this cult could emerge across the border and manifest domestically in the United States.⁴⁹⁸

The movement of this threat from Mexico to the United States speaks to the historical and imperial anxieties of a racialized “other”, articulated with the rhetoric of barbarism and invasion not unlike what was seen in 18th and 19th century discourses regarding the newly formed border and its borderlands.⁴⁹⁹ Bunker also thanks Robert Almonte’s “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld” training for the research and “law enforcement practitioner insights” that were used in the bulletin series. The cross-border threat that Santa Muerte represents is brought up explicitly four times over the six-pages that make up the series, explaining that the deviant practices are themselves dangerous, but also represent a larger criminal and spiritual insurgency that threatens US safety and hegemonic control of its borders. Both Almonte and Bunker, and the networks of people they cite, repeat the idea that the increased tensions of the border war have demanded more and more from criminals, and so they’ve turned from normal religious devotion to murder and blood rites.

⁴⁹⁷ Small Wars Journal. “Border School Training Conference Held in California.” Defense Blog. Small Wars Journal (blog), June 27, 2012. Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”; Department of Justice. “Los Angeles Clearing House (LACLEAR).” State of California - Department of Justice - Office of the Attorney General, March 8, 2012.

⁴⁹⁸ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

⁴⁹⁹ Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, Second Edition; María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States.*; Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries*, *Unspeakable Violence* (Duke University Press, 2011); Pablo Vila, *Ethnography at the Border*, vol. 13 (U of Minnesota Press, 2003). See also Chapter 1.

With the stakes so high, the sacrifices and offerings to Santa Muerte have become primeval and barbaric. Rather than plates of food, beer, and tobacco, in some instances, the heads of victims (and presumably their souls) have served as offerings to invoke powerful petitions for divine intervention⁵⁰⁰

The word choice “primeval and barbaric” is particularly telling, and though Bunker’s three-part series is just one of many documents, this FBI bulletin is cited in the FBI subject biography on Santa Muerte, master’s theses from security studies programs and defense colleges, news coverage of informal borderland religion, and throughout Almonte’s training and Bunker’s other publications.⁵⁰¹ The documentation and citation for the blood rites and beheaded offerings Bunker lists are limited to news and gossip magazine articles that present dramatic interpretations of the violence, but do not themselves confirm the motivations, religious or otherwise, for the murders. The analysis of these events as a large-scale turn to baser-instincts and moral depravity is the work of the bulletin and Bunker’s contribution. Of the eight murders in Mexico that the bulletin states are allegedly motivated by devotion to Santa Muerte, only two are cited, and Bunker credits the others to either investigating police’s suspicion or his own fieldwork, neither of which are documented or contextualized.⁵⁰² Bunker starts this list with a second-hand account:

⁵⁰⁰ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

⁵⁰¹ For example: Robert J Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note No. 8: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) Links to Occult Rituals and Santa Muerte Veneration or Worship,” *Small Wars Journal* (blog), January 22, 2018; Josh Whittington. “The Battle for a Nation’s Soul.” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 27, 2014.; Joseph J. Kolb. “The Narcos’ Saint.” Law Enforcement Hobbyist Website. *The Crime Report* (blog), July 11, 2013. Stephen Dark and Kolbie Stonehocker, “Death Becomes Her,” *Salt Lake City Weekly*, October 22, 2014.; Robert Bunker and John Sullivan, eds., *Criminal Insurgents in Mexico and Latin America: A Small Wars Journal-El Centro Anthology* (iUniverse, 2015).; Tony M. Kail, *Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars* (CRC Press, 2015). Antonio Salvador Ortiz Cervantes, “Santa Muerte: Threatening the U.S. Homeland,” Marine Corps University, 2011.; Kevin Freese. The Death Cult of the Drug Lords Mexico’s Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed. Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS. 12 October 2005; Ashleigh A. Fugate, “Narcocultura: A Threat to Mexican National Security?” (Thesis, Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School, 2012)

⁵⁰² No explanation or context is given to these claims beyond footnotes that read, “Story provided to a researcher by a local Santa Muerte follower.” Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic

In the rough neighborhood of Tepito, Mexico City, in 2004, authorities arrested a local car thief who later died in prison. A powerful criminal figure, he killed virgins and babies once a year and offered them as sacrifices to Santa Muerte to gain her favor and magical protection.⁵⁰³

This incident is cited “Story provided to a researcher by a local Santa Muerte follower.” No other details are given, nor are any details regarding the associated fieldwork, research method, or time period included. The sensationalistic nature of these allegations brings to mind the 1980’s Satanism moral panic in the United States, and Bunker is aware of this connection; he mentions early in the FBI bulletin he is aware of the pitfalls that come when discussing “dark spirituality” and how these discourses may cause undue panic.⁵⁰⁴ However, the bulletin series maintains a tone reminiscent of these moral panics and may even engage with the “hyperreality” at the core of these types of conspiracy movements, buying in to reality they themselves are constructing.⁵⁰⁵ Bunker describes devotion to these informal saints as perverse, barbaric, and deviant, and denies the religious legitimacy of saintly personas by characterizing them as “not a fully developed religion”.⁵⁰⁶ Throughout the text, Bunker characterizes devotees of Santa Muerte as either twisted murders who believe blood rites will advance their criminal pursuits, or misguided “typically poor, uneducated, and superstitious individuals” who do not understand the depravity of their fellow devotees.⁵⁰⁷ Other examples of expertise from Bunker, Almonte, and their

Killings, Part 1-3,” Footnote 10.

⁵⁰³ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

⁵⁰⁴ Sarah Hughes, “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000” 51, no. 3 (2017): 691–719; .ibid

⁵⁰⁵ Hughes, Sarah. 2017. “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000” 51 (3). Cambridge University Press: 691–719.

⁵⁰⁶ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

⁵⁰⁷ It should be noted here that rarely is devotion to Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde, or any Saint, canonized or informal, referred to as worship, as it is often referred to within narco saint expertise. In large, Santa Muerte and her fellow informal saints are revered within Catholic religious frameworks, see Lois Ann Lorentzen et al., eds., “Devotional Crossings: Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco,” Worship is reserved for members of the Catholic trinity, and Saints are intercessional figures who guide, console, and advocate, but their holy authority is derived from either God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Thus, devotion or reverence is the more correct term for religious attention paid to these Saints. I believe this word choice reflects Bunkers view that devotees are

community cage similar opinions in less hyperbolic discourse, however this three-part series remains one of the first search results on major search engines when looking for information on Santa Muerte, and the information within is cited consistently by other narco saint experts.⁵⁰⁸ The intensity that Bunker uses serves a rhetorical function, as his main aim is to convince the reader that one, Santa Muerte's devotion represents an moral insurgency that has taken place in Mexico and now threatens the United States as it spills over the border, and that two, further training and mobilization of police officers, narcotics agents, and other federal agents is required to deal with this insurgent threat. Bunker's use of the word insurgency is common throughout this document and his large body of work, and he markets himself as an insurgency expert that specializes in cultural threats to the US.⁵⁰⁹ The term insurgency refers to an active revolt or uprising, implying that Bunker believes that narco saint devotees make up a collective force attempting to overthrow existing power in the regions they exist in. An insurgency is commonly understood as a problem that a country solves through military power – the use of this term in documents like these is an implicit argument for militarization of the southern border. As a scholar of military solutions, Bunker positions himself advantageously as the solution to the

“worshipping” Santa Muerte outside a Catholic framework or belief system. See Robert Bunker biography page at the Strategic Studies Institute, “Dr. Robert J. Bunker,” SCI Faculty Pages, Safe Communities Institute (SCI), 2018, <https://sci.usc.edu/personnel/dr-robert-j-bunker/>. <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/people.cfm?authorID=488>. It is possible that Bunker uses the term “worship” to increase the stakes and otherness of the threat and competing value system he claims Santa Muerte to be indicative of.

⁵⁰⁸ John P. Sullivan, “Criminal Insurgency: Narcocultura, Social Banditry, and Information Operations,” Defense Blog, Small Wars Journal, December 3, 2012,.; Robert Bunker and Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” *ASU Center for Strategic Communication* (blog), February 4, 2013; Tony M. Kail, *Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars*; Tony M. Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities: A Guide for First Responders* (CRC Press, 2008)

⁵⁰⁹ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,.”; Robert Bunker, “Criminal (Cartel & Gang) Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: What You Need to Know, Not What You Want to Hear”.; Robert Bunker and John Sullivan, “Extreme Barbarism, a Death Cult, and Holy Warriors in Mexico: Societal Warfare South of the Border?.”; Robert J. Bunker and Pamela L. Bunker, “The Spiritual Significance of ¿Plata O Plomo?,”

problem he informs his audience of. He does so by hearkening back to border imaginaries of a barbarian frontier that needs to be controlled. Bunker's word choice paints response by the United States as both an urgent practical and moral imperative, with himself acting the as a revelatory prophet of sorts, drawing attention to a harbinger of literal "evil", as he explicitly characterizes the cult to be three times within the series.⁵¹⁰

These bulletins are plentiful examples of law enforcement expertise, and Robert J. Bunker continues to add to this archive. His FBI Academy Associates 2018 primer on Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) is a bulletin designed for "policing, law enforcement, and homeland security professionals" that links the transnational street gang with not only "Santa Muerte veneration and worship", but also with "devil worship and satanism".⁵¹¹ Bunker and his co-author John P. Sullivan, whom he consistently coauthors bulletins and pseudo-academic expertise with, acknowledges the attention the Trump administration has given to the gang but stresses that more focus and mobilization is necessary to combat a potentially emergent and systematically spreading homeland security threat. The link to Santa Muerte's cult is stated within the bulletin, but not gone into in depth. Deeper links between Santa Muerte and Mara Salvatrucha are explored in an article that Bunker and Sullivan wrote for the Small Wars website months earlier, and similarities between the two suggest the first Small Wars Journal developed into this more widely circulated document as they share the same authors and categorize the MS-13 as a "third generation gang".⁵¹² However, the precedent article is confident about the connection between the gang and occult practicing, borrowing language from Bunker's previous

⁵¹⁰ Robert J. Bunker, "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,"

⁵¹¹ Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, "Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) A Law Enforcement Primer," Online Blog, FBI National Academy Associates, March 2018.

⁵¹² Ibid; Robert J Bunker and John P. Sullivan, "Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note No. 8: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) Links to Occult Rituals and Santa Muerte Veneration or Worship," *Small Wars Journal* (blog), January 22, 2018.

work on Santa Muerte as he claims that many MS-13 members embrace “violent magico-religious cosmology” and “now adhere to amoral or even evil spiritual values that invite sacrifice and torture.”⁵¹³ Evidence for this claim is cited with news articles that posit possible connections between MS-13 violence and Santa Muerte rituals, as well as compiled training material published by other narco saint experts like Tony Kail.⁵¹⁴ The bulletin in contrast, does not commit to such a large claim, instead suggesting that the percentage of occult followers is unknowable at the moment.

At present, it is unknown what percentage of MS-13 members can now be considered dedicated occult followers—that is to say, satanists and/or the darker type of Santa Muerte adherents—because no ethnographic data points presently exist concerning individual clique dark spiritual affiliations, ongoing beliefs related to Catholicism or other religious orientations, or adherence only to secular ideologies.⁵¹⁵

This unknowable quantity is an important part of the claim that these beliefs, not just the criminal activity of MS-13, pose a danger to the United States. Throughout the many bulletins and larger body of expertise they represent, these experts never estimate the exact number of ‘dangerous’ narco saint devotees that exist in either Mexico or the United States. These experts often quote Andrew Chesnut, the most visible English-publishing academic on Santa Muerte, and his claims that Santa Muerte’s following numbers in the millions.⁵¹⁶ However, they then cite the single-digit number of incidents that allegedly connect Santa Muerte with violent ritual murder and violence as evidence of her present threat to the safety and security of the United

⁵¹³ Robert J Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note No. 8: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) Links to Occult Rituals and Santa Muerte Veneration or Worship,”

⁵¹⁴ Kevin Lewis, “Exclusive: Workers held up at gunpoint at MS-13 ‘destroyer house’.” *13 WSET*. 26 December 2017; Luis Ángel Sas, “Delincuentes erigen altares a la muerte.” *Prensa Libre*. 2 February 2015; Gastón Pardo, “El culto mexicano de la Santa Muerte gana espacio en la Mara Salvatrucha.” *Red Voltaire (Voltairenet.org)*. 12 August 2005; Tony M. Kail, *Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars*.

⁵¹⁵ Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) A Law Enforcement Primer,”

⁵¹⁶ Andrew Chesnut, “Q&A with R. Andrew Chesnut on Santa Muerte,” Oxford University Press, *OUPblog* (blog), November 1, 2017.

States.⁵¹⁷ These examples are neither quantified nor confirmed, but this nebulous association is more productive in creating an unknowable threat which must be interpreted through experts and their on the ground experience. This ambiguity of these claims serve to increase the emotional impact of the argument these experts are making, ramping up fear through the threat of the unknown. This ambiguity and “unknowable” quantity they claim also serves as a defense against attempts to fact-check these claims. This cosmology, of rational expertise-informed guardians of civilization against unknowable, looming, and violently strange chaos, is both an argument for the value of the experts themselves and for the state agents they train. The change between Bunker and Sullivan’s Small Wars piece and the bulletin meant for wider circulation may suggest that these narco saint experts are aware of the sensationalistic nature of their claims and are aware that more extreme claims will be challenged outside their expert community. Perhaps they understand that the cosmology they create works within the law enforcement field, and would not be as effective elsewhere.

As Bunker makes evocative use of gore and looming threats to civilization within his written narratives, Robert Almonte does so with visual and auditory framing of his training materials. His training course seeks to provide state agents with the “tools” to increase arrests and keep officer safe as they navigate various forms of law enforcement work. Heavy-handed visuals and auditory cues place the borderlands within the same dualistic cosmology that Bunker details in his bulletins. Both of their works task the civilizing police forces of the State with rooting out and purifying the disturbing, deviant, and evil from American “streets”.⁵¹⁸ In the

⁵¹⁷ Robert J Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note No. 8: Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) Links to Occult Rituals and Santa Muerte Veneration or Worship,” Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings, Part 1-3,”

⁵¹⁸ See Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos,”. 146. See also Robert Bunker, “Criminal (Cartel & Gang) Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: What You Need to Know, Not What You Want to Hear”, see also this quote “We kick in doors, there’s a high you get taking these guys off the street, taking money, drugs off the street. I said to them,

promotional material for the course, it cautions potential viewers of graphic material and coverage of the trainings often includes the fact that hardened police officers have fainted during these sessions.⁵¹⁹ The warning is perhaps warranted, considering the visuals of gore included throughout the video's runtime. In one segment Almonte personally dictates and overviews incidents of beheadings, torture, mutilation, and other violence in Mexico that he suspects are committed as ritual religiously-motivated violence in devotion to Santa Muerte. During this portion of the video an anxious tea-kettle whistling noise plays in the background like an alarm as Almonte introduces a crime ring that was allegedly responsible for beheadings in 2006, using Mexican newspaper clips of mugshots to show the four blurry suspects.⁵²⁰ The connection to Santa Muerte was never officially made in the case, but Almonte says he confirmed it personally off the record with the Mexican police. The video then cuts to multiple visuals of mutilated and rotting bodies, each attributed to separate incidents of alleged Santa Muerte cult ritual murder. The visuals are graphic, with naked purpled bodies, mutilated genitals, and headless necks on the screen. Mass graves flash along with mug shots and crime scenes. The aggravated alarm whistle continues throughout the parade of bloody and rotting images, but not when Almonte is visible against the black interview background of the video providing his analysis of the incidents.⁵²¹ Almonte introduces each of these cases in turn, explaining the proximity bodies and heads were found to suspected Santa Muerte shrines, or the Santa Muerte tattoos found on the bodies themselves. In each of the cases, Almonte recognizes after the grisly details and pictures that

'aint this fun shit, could you imagine the shit we could do if we didn't have to sleep,'" - Robert Almonte on Conde, Rafa. "A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte." Podcast. Man of War Podcast, July 30, 2018. 22 minutes.

⁵¹⁹ Guillermo Contreras, "Studying the Saints That Narcos Pray To," MySanAntonio, December 15, 2010. See also Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," narrated by Raymond Mesa (El Paso, TX: Narcotics Training, 2009. 00:31-00:40 .

⁵²⁰ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," narrated by Raymond Mesa (El Paso, TX: Narcotics Training, 2009). 53:27.078

⁵²¹ Ibid 45:01- 59:33

nothing has been attributed officially to the skeleton saint’s informal cult. Almonte ends the Santa Muerte section with the statement, “I just see more violence being associated with Santa Muerte. I think this is something that law enforcement should keep in mind—this could start to occur in the US.”⁵²² The potential movement of this violence – displayed with visceral depictions of taboo-breaking behavior like cannibalism and body mutilation – from its origin in a hellishly-characterized Mexico into the United States civilization is one example of this binary cosmology overlaid on real geography.

The above grisly details are key part of Almonte’s stated purpose for his training course, that is increasing officer safety as these state agents interact with the people they police.⁵²³ The promotional material associated with Almonte’s training sessions throughout the United States and with various law enforcement and security agencies all highlight “officer safety” as the purpose of the course and a key motivator for taking it.⁵²⁴



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Almonte introduces the training video with the promise that the next hour will help the trainees increase arrests, thus getting “bad guys” off the streets, as well as help them return home safely from their shifts doing a job characterized as dangerous to their physical safety and mental

⁵²² Ibid 55:01-56:40

⁵²³ Ibid 00:31-00:40

⁵²⁴ Various promotional flyers and announcements

⁵²⁵ Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,”

well-being.⁵²⁶ This pervasive threat comes from the danger that characterizes the imagined geography of cop work, but also the specific and sinister threat supposedly posed by narco devotees and the myriad violence and deviance displayed in Almonte's video. The knowledge that Almonte imparts is characterized as a weapon against these threats, concluding that a forewarned agent is a forearmed one. In the video, many officers provide testimonials of the usefulness of Almonte's forewarning via training. One testimony, that of State Trooper Nate McVicker, details the search of a commercial vehicle during a traffic stop and the statues of Santa Muerte and San Ramon that the Trooper observed. "Because I had knowledge of the saints and beliefs and their backgrounds according to drug traffickers...I know how scary this one is and its an officer safety thing so I got backup there immediately."⁵²⁷ His manner is instructional as he gestures to the small figure and rationalizes his actions, "I don't know if that's death upon us, death upon organizations but that just tells me I need someone else here." Both Bunker and Almonte help construct a cosmology where Mexico is an embattled or fallen geography complete with new deviant norms and competing demons, all of which threaten to spill over permeable border to corrupt a civilized United States. Part and parcel of this cosmology is the figure of the "officer" as an outnumbered and threatened, but specifically enabled and morally-bolstered, agent of the civilized state.

Not only do these curriculums replicate border tropes of barbarism, superstition, and vice, but the gory images and content used in the trainings make sure these tropes stick and are remembered with fear and disgust. The purpled, headless bodies and blood-splashed crime scenes are memorable in of themselves and intended to viscerally remain with a person.

⁵²⁶ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," 00:31-00:40 , see also Robert Almonte on Conde, Rafa. "A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte."

⁵²⁷ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course, 51.30- 52.02

Promotional material for the trainings includes content warnings about the graphic material, stating that the “training course contains extremely graphic and accurate material that pertains to the brutality inflicted by the Mexican cartels against each other, to those that oppose them, and even on innocent bystanders.”⁵²⁸ News coverage of the trainings often mentions that multiple law enforcement attending the trainings have fainted from the bloody and violent depictions of alleged Santa Muerte murders.⁵²⁹ In contrast, Almonte’s understated disclaimers that many informal saint practices are benign are easily forgotten when juxtaposed with the violent spectacle of catching drug traffickers who use blood rituals. Throughout his training course Almonte continually allows that the items, personas, and practices he frames with blood and violence have many common religious uses outside the drug world. However, the video is clear that these religious materials and practices can and should still be used as probable cause when justifying stops and seizures that may lead to increased arrests. This acknowledgement, which implies that any informal or formal religious practice can be used to justify searches of private property, is deeply indicative the United States security scape and the expanding role of domestic police within that landscape over the past forty years.⁵³⁰ Disclaimers that narco cultural practices and beliefs are widespread and more often than not benign, is effectively contradicted as law enforcement training material and experts’ direct instruction frame these beliefs as irregular, dangerous, and deviant. In an interview with Associated Press, Almonte explains the

⁵²⁸ The Small Wars Journal Blog has an archived version of this promotional content: Small Wars Blog, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” Defense Blog, *Small Wars Journal* (blog), February 4, 2013, but there are many examples from the flyers used to market Almonte’s course to law enforcement around the country.

⁵²⁹ Guillermo Contreras, “Studying the Saints That Narcos Pray To,” *MySA*, December 15, 2010.

⁵³⁰ See Chapter 1. Also Sylvester A. Johnson and Steven Weitzman, *The FBI and Religion: Faith and National Security before and after 9/11* (Univ of California Press, 2017).; and Stephen H. Legomsky, “The Ethnic and Religious Profiling of Noncitizens: National Security and International Human Rights Immigration Law and Human Rights: Legal Line Drawing Post-September 11 - Symposium Article,” *Boston College Third World Law Journal* 25, no. 1 (2005): 161–220.

presence and popularity of the “Santa Muerte is a symbol of the violence that has ravaged Mexico in recent years.”⁵³¹ Within Almonte’s training video, this sentiment is communicated visibly through informal borderland saints and practice juxtaposed with coded visuals that invoke chaotic border crossing, gang violence, and vice. Pictures of normal roadside shrines, people crossing the border on foot at legal and official US Mexico check points, and common bodegas found on both sides of the border are framed with harsh visual editing and discordant ominous music and auditory components.⁵³² Almonte’s introductory and promotional claim that the course is intended to increase officer safety, deeply implies that these religious beliefs pose an active danger to law enforcement officers. The testimonials of law enforcement officers detail the fear they felt when they encountered figurines and amulets on dashboards and inside homes, and the ways this fear as led to valuable arrests of “bad guys”.⁵³³ The threatened law enforcement agent is key to this narrative, as it justifies and perpetuates the fear very necessary for the US security scape to extend into citizens and non-citizens personal and religious lives.

There is a useful drama to this tableau. Considering the training content, it makes sense why a law enforcement officer might react with fear upon seeing a Santa Muerte figurine on a dashboard, if it brings to mind the mutilated bodies and discordant alarm bells they witnessed during their training. While these threats are not well constructed, nor well defined, these trainings hit enough of the known and familiar border trope notes to ring true to law enforcement already steeped in the threat-sensitive culture of the policing field. The frontier narratives above play into “cop logic” understandings of constant potential threat, all whilst remaining nebulous

⁵³¹ McClatchy-Tribune News Service, “Followers, Police See Santa Muerte Differently,” Law Enforcement Hobby and News Site, *Officer.Com* (blog), July 28, 2011.; Associated Press, *Followers, Police See Santa Muerte Differently*, 2011.

⁵³² Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,”

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

enough to remain contestable but not easily disproven in the moment. The assemblage of violent images and coded language in the above training materials evoke the invasion narrative used in both historical and modern fears of the borderlands. These narco saint experts make it clear that narco saints and their devotees are an insidious insurgency of US culture and morality by those beyond its borders. Additionally, this cosmological struggle between good and evil are communicated to the police and state officers these experts train by centering officer safety and authority at the core of these discussions.

Though Almonte’s course is arguably the most widely cited and established law enforcement training course on narco saints with its national circuit, news coverage, and acknowledgement in other law enforcement publications.⁵³⁴ But other courses exist and are marketed to law enforcement, defense, and private practitioners of security. As part of Operation RUSH, an organization that offers training to both law enforcement and private companies, self-made expert Tony Kail offers a one-day course titled, “Narco-Brujeria Drug Traffickers And Religious Culture”.⁵³⁵ According to his limited bio, Kail is a former deputy sheriff, holds “holds a degree in cultural anthropology, and has researched ethnic cultures for more than twenty-five years.” Operation R.U.S.H. is founded by an ex-law enforcement officer who considers traffic stops the “true adrenaline junkie’s high”, and it is this rush that motivated him to continue

⁵³⁴ Richard Valdemar, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld (Part 1 of 2),” *Police Magazine*, June 1, 2010; Russell Contreras, “Meet the Saint Who Is Becoming Patron of US Underworld,” *TheJournal.Ie*, March 10, 2013.; Daniel Borunda, “Drug Cartels Seek Help from Catholic Saints, Santa Muerte, Expert Says,” *El Paso Times*, November 7, 2017; Daniel Borunda, “Who Is Jesus Malverde? Question on Narco-Saint Hangs over ‘Chapo’ Guzman Drug Cartel Trial,” *El Paso Times*, June 18, 2018.; Kirsten Crow, “Police Get Crash-Course on ‘narco-Saints’ Associated with Drug Cartels,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, February 18, 2011; Mishawaka Police Department, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld,”.

⁵³⁵ “Tony Kail,” OPERATION R.U.S.H., accessed November 30, 2020.; “Tony Kail,” Biography Page, Open Road Media, accessed September 22, 2021; “Tony Kail,” Biography Page, TRITECH FORENSICS TRAINING, 2021.

working with law enforcement after his retirement through training and education.⁵³⁶ Kail's course is one of the ten classes offered by the company, and the only one that concerns narco saints. Similar to Almonte's course, Kail's workshop provides law enforcement the ability to recognize specific religious practices, items, and images. In addition to the training course Kail has authored three book-length law enforcement publications, as well as his own travel journalism monograph about Santa Muerte in particular. These books are marketed directly towards law enforcement as operation guides. The content of these works provides overviews of "Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities", for use by law enforcement as they investigate drug trafficking, child abuse, and human trafficking.⁵³⁷ Kail claims that beliefs and practices associated with informal borderland saints, Neo-Paganism, Santeria, Bantu religions, and other non-institutional religions are being used by criminal operations to protect themselves from police and silence their victims, and that this connection creates clear officer safety issues and investigation possibilities.⁵³⁸ The guides are encyclopedic in structure, including glossaries and explanatory chapters each devoted to a different form and belief or practice, and are intended to increase law enforcement's "cultural competency".⁵³⁹ His work is listed in the 2011 FBI Library Subject Bibliography on "Santa Muerte and Mexican Narcocultos" which was curated by Robert J. Bunker, and Bunker provided a positive review of Kail's book *Narco-Cults*:

⁵³⁶ OPERATION R.U.S.H. "About Operation R.U.S.H." Accessed February 11, 2020.

⁵³⁷ See Kail, *Narco Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars* (CRC Press, 2015); *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities: A Guide for First Responders* (CRC Press, 2008); and *A Cop's Guide to Occult Investigations* (Paladin Press, 2003). Biography information found at various trainer biographies, including "Tony Kail," OPERATION R.U.S.H., accessed November 3, 2020.

⁵³⁸ Tony M. Kail, *Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars*.; Tony M. Kail, *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities: A Guide for First Responders*.; See also OPERATION R.U.S.H., "Tony Kail — Narco-Brujeria Drug Traffickers And Religious Culture," Law Enforcement Training Site, OPERATION R.U.S.H., July 3, 2019,

⁵³⁹ Tony M. Kail, *Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars*. xxvi

*Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars.*⁵⁴⁰

Kail continues to operate on the fringes of the narco saint expert community and occupies temporary instructor positions across various private training companies that sell expertise on gang operation and occult crimes. Another of his training courses, “Ritualistic and Occult Crime Scene Investigations” at TriTech Forensics, another private training company that caters to law enforcement and defense agents, was created and co-taught with Dr. Dawn Perlmutter, who provided the introduction to Robert J. Bunker’s collection “Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities”.⁵⁴¹ There Perlmutter criticized academic institutional refusal to acknowledge that blood sacrifice and occult crimes occur because religious practitioners legitimately believe these practices work and operate without intrinsic values of life and freedom.⁵⁴² Perlmutter’s work has earned her the negative attention of several watchdog organizations, as her occult forensics practice continues to perpetuate myths that link repressed memories, mental health, and satanic child abuse.⁵⁴³ Kail’s work was also in the above collection edited by Robert J. Bunker, and his publications are cited by other experts. His work is part of a larger archive of law enforcement expertise that inflates consensus on the threat these “foreign” religious practices pose and their links to violent “satanic” rituals.⁵⁴⁴ These constructed connections between saints of Mexican origin and the specter of satanism and abuse of children

⁵⁴⁰ Robert J Bunker, “Book Review: Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars,” Defense Blog, Small Wars Journal, March 11, 2019; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Santa Muerte and Mexican Narcocultos,” *FBI Library Subject Bibliography*, last modified September 2011 (as of July 2015, the subject bibliography has been temporarily removed for updating).

⁵⁴¹ Dawn Perlmutter, *Preface Analyzing Sacrificial Violence*. In Robert J. Bunker, *Blood Sacrifices: Violent Non-State Actors and Dark Magico-Religious Activities* (iUniverse, 2016); TRITECH FORENSICS TRAINING. “Ritualistic and Occult Crimes.” Accessed February 11, 2020.

⁵⁴² Dawn Perlmutter, *Preface Analyzing Sacrificial Violence*.

⁵⁴³ “Grey Faction.” Accessed February 11, 2020.

⁵⁴⁴ Kail, Tony M. *Magico-Religious Groups and Ritualistic Activities: A Guide for First Responders*. Book description.; See the following for an overview of the phenomenon of “satanic panic”: Sarah Hughes, “American Monsters: Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000”.; Aja Romano, “The History of Satanic Panic in the US — and Why It’s Not over Yet,” *Vox*, October 30, 2016.

serve further to place devotees firmly on one side of the civilized barbarian divide. Likewise, it places the newly-trained state agent as the arbiter of this divide, separating good religion from deviant practice. This religious delineation is completed through lived policing practice as state agents actively are emboldened by private experts to construct their conception of civilization, chaos, and the border between the two. These experts and the private companies they form operate without regulation or discernable standards, yet intend to shape and inform both the physical and conceptual worldviews of their law enforcement students. These trainings present and advise strict, conflictual, and binary ways of seeing the world, themselves, and the people they police. Their curriculums' content is presented as informational and instructional, not dialectic. The content is presented as facts to be incorporated into their professional knowledge. Students are explicitly told that acting upon the information given to them will protect themselves and improve their professional ability to police, but the worldview communicated by the trainings implicitly enrolls these state agents in the emotional and purpose-laden task of securing civilization against an encroaching evil. This task is constructed by the experts and their training material and documents through the use of various rhetorical tools and themes, including the incorporation and appropriation of indigenous and Mexican religious personas to be used as villains in their cosmologies.

Syncretic Appropriation.

Religious studies and borderland scholars generally approach religion in the US Mexico borderlands by addressing the lived and informal devotion that characterize the region, focusing on themes of representation, agency, and identity formation found in Mexican and border religious traditions. Scholars have analyzed the way Catholics throughout the US-Mexico Borderlands exercise independence from formal religious and secular structures through

practices of curanderismo, folklore, non-canonized saint devotion, and espiritualismo.⁵⁴⁵ These informal religious practices cement religious and cultural identities as believers cross borders into often dangerous and unfriendly regions and systems.⁵⁴⁶ Sociologists suggests that American religious life is particularly shaped by high-levels of “cultural availability”, which is a “socially and historically produced inclination towards trying out, borrowing from, or practicing other traditions.”⁵⁴⁷ This results in syncretism, a term that has evolved beyond its original pejorative use into the social sciences to describe the conditions through which religion, ideology, and culture forms through translation, negotiation, and tension that occurs in the “in-between space” of different groups.⁵⁴⁸ Emily Sigalow argues that this penchant for syncretic borrowing and incorporating facets of outside religious practice into one’s own, or “cultural availability” can be described as an example of American *habitus*, drawing from the Bourdievan concept of an internalized, socially and historically produced, shared sensibility or disposition of any given group.⁵⁴⁹ This borrowing is not conducted independent of the social, political, and conflictual climate of the borderlands, and representations of indigenous and Mexican religious communities in white-dominated circles, religious and otherwise, are highly culturally essentialist and adopt the imaginaries of the anglo-centric border discussed previously by various scholars.⁵⁵⁰ The below suggests that law enforcement culture operates with this “cultural

⁵⁴⁵ Luis D León, *La Llorona’s Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004).

⁵⁴⁶ Américo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* By Américo Paredes, ed. Richard Bauman (University of Texas Press, 1995),

⁵⁴⁷ Emily Sigalow, “Towards a Sociological Framework of Religious Syncretism in the United States,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 1029–55; Stewart Charles, Shaw Rosalind, ed. 1994 *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. New York, NY : Psychology Press.

⁵⁴⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004). 38. See also Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, eds., *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, 1st edition (England: Routledge, 2004).

⁵⁴⁹ Emily Sigalow, “Towards a Sociological Framework of Religious Syncretism in the United States,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 4 (December 1, 2016): 1029–55.

⁵⁵⁰ Leo Ralph Chavez, *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation* (University of

availability” like many American religious traditions do; they adopt, integrate, and appropriate external religious to fill out their own cosmologies, casting saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde as oppositional entities to their own sacralized work.

Almonte’s training course “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld” is organized by various segments and interviews with various state agents. These interviews include Almonte himself, a Catholic clergyman, and an El Paso prosecutor who advises the viewer on the best ways to use narco saint material to increase convictions after arrests. These segments are organized around different subjects, saints, and practices that Almonte informs his audience on. The longest portion of the video concerns individual non-canonized saints that Almonte labels as “drug saints”, which include San Simón, Juan Soldado, Jesús Malverde, and Santa Muerte, each with their own section. The video introduces these saints as the icons of “desperate people, hopeless people”.⁵⁵¹ As with the other sections of the video that explained saintly personas and their origins, Almonte narrates his understanding of the origins and significance of each, including amateur video footage taken by Almonte himself of various shrines and religious processions associated with the saints in question. The Jesús Malverde section includes rough footage of a roadside capilla, or chapel, before the video transitions “talking head” testimonies from police officers.⁵⁵² After taking Almonte’s course, a Louisiana police officer was able to recognize a Jesús Malverde amulet. Because of the past training’s instruction, the police officer decided to detain the individual and search the car. Whilst talking to the car’s driver about the amulet, the driver told the officer that Jesús Malverde was invoked to protect “illegal aliens”, but the officer remained skeptical of this statement and insisted on a search of the vehicle, eventually

California Press, 2001).; María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*.

⁵⁵¹ Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” 38:00

⁵⁵² Ibid 23:01-30:00

finding illegal narcotics.⁵⁵³ Another testimony by a New Mexico police officer details how he found money and controlled substances beneath a car engine along with a picture of Jesús Malverde; upon asking what the picture signified to the driver, he was told that “he [Jesús Malverde] is supposed to keep us all safe.” The police officer then replied, “well as much as dope as we’ve been taking off, and money off, the interstate and the amount of times we’ve seen him [Jesús Malverde] I think he’s actually working for us...cause he is showing up on a lot of our dope cases, I think he’s actually on our side.”⁵⁵⁴ These segments which detail the informal, non-canonized saints include video recorded testimonials from law enforcement officers who have taken Almonte’s training course and subsequently used its content to recognize “narco saints” on the job. Moreover, they state that the training instructed and guided searches of private property using those recognized religious practices and materials as “reasonable suspicion” of criminal activity.⁵⁵⁵ In the above interactions between law enforcement agents and devotees of Jesús Malverde, the officers adopted a paternalistic and suspicious position towards the respective devotees they encountered, challenging the devotees own assertions about their belief and religious material in favor of the interpretation supplied by their law enforcement training. In each case, this disregard for the devotee’s explanation was rewarded with a successful arrest—a positive outcome from a law enforcement perspective. The choice to include these anecdotal cases in the course is likely due to authority bestowed by active law enforcement expertise over traditional forms of knowledge, as well as Almonte’s stated assurance that knowledge of narco

⁵⁵³ Ibid 27:21-33:08

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid 29:00-32:47

⁵⁵⁵ Cornell Law School, “Reasonable Suspicion,” Open Access Legal Information, Legal Information Institute, 2020.

saints will help officers increase arrest numbers— a goal that Almonte specifically cites as one of the purposes of his video.⁵⁵⁶

The next two short segments overview San Simón and Juan Soldado and how they've come to be labeled narco saints. Unlike Santa Muerte's subsequent section, which includes grisly stories and sensational news coverage associated with the skeleton saint, San Simón and Juan Soldado remain significantly less visible in mainstream United States culture. Their section is highly dependent on material associated with the informal "drug" saints with little discussion of their devotees or any criminal connections. The camera cycles between shots of candles, statuettes, busts, and amulets associated with the respective saints; these images are either of shrines as they have been presumably set up by devotees, or by arrangements of Almonte's own design for his workshop and course.⁵⁵⁷ Almonte conducts his training course with tables of confiscated religious material set up at the front of the venue, and this religious material provides the filler video and transitions for the training course video. These sections show lit candles flickering off the faces of statuettes before pure black backgrounds, and ominous heavy beating music frames the presentation of San Simón and Juan Soldado's religious materials, as it does in other sections.⁵⁵⁸ San Simón, or Maximón, is a folk deity and religious persona revered as an informal saint in Guatemala, but Almonte claims his popularity has spread into the Mexican drug underworld and now into the United States.⁵⁵⁹ Juan Soldado is a folk saint popular in both the United States and Mexico and is associated with a real-world soldier who was said to have been falsely accused of raping and murdering an eight-year-old girl, and was subsequently executed in

⁵⁵⁶ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," 00:30-0:35

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid 30:06- 33:55

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid 32:20.980

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid 30:06- 33:55

1938 Tijuana, Mexico.⁵⁶⁰ On Juan Soldado veneration, Almonte comments “these people who pray to Juan Soldado and consider him a patrol saint, they believe he was truly innocent, they are not going to acknowledge that he is a child rapist murderer...”.⁵⁶¹ Like the law enforcement officers who provide their professional testimony regarding interactions with devotees of Jesús Malverde, the devotees opinions and professed motivations for reverence are dismissed in favor of the law enforcement perspective that Almonte provides. In addition, the lack of grisly news stories about either San Simón and Juan Soldado requires Almonte to rely on visual and audio cues to frame these two saints as dangerous criminal threats, securitizing them for the purposes of law enforcement.

The portion of the video allocated to Santa Muerte is the second longest within the video’s hour-plus run-time, and begins with the introduction to the “Most widely used drug saint.”⁵⁶² Santa Muerte’s origins are still widely debated and the video acknowledges this, mentioning possible Aztec or prison-gang origins.⁵⁶³ Almonte suggests that her current popularity in Mexico is the result of a church that begun to worship the “Angel of Death” and the associated idol there that overtook the small region’s legitimate Catholic belief in Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Almonte attributes this change in devotion to David Romo, who temporarily claimed a more formalized clergy position within the cult of Santa Muerte’s otherwise informal structure. Almonte explains that under Romo, “people were being forced to worship death.”⁵⁶⁴ David Romo has since fallen from grace with the cult at large, due to controversial choices to rename Santa Muerte in his church as the Angel of Death and his subsequent arrest on unrelated

⁵⁶⁰ Paul J. Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* (Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵⁶¹ Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” 34:11-35:16

⁵⁶² Ibid 37:01- 40:11

⁵⁶³ Ibid 37:01- 39:11

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid 40:12-41

criminal charges.⁵⁶⁵ David Romo continues to be a controversial figure in the cult's history, and his fall from prominence displays the varied and flexible make up of Santa Muerte's following. But the video does not approach this history beyond highlighting the dramatics of the "Angel of Death" motif Romo attempted to rebrand the cult with. Moving from his discussion of Romo, Almonte continues on, explaining that the colors of Santa Muerte's figurines, statues, and candles denote different aspects of her purview, both benign and malign. However, he explains that these coded colors should not matter to an investigating officer. He explains that a white candle, a benign religious tool used to request healing and comfort from Santa Muerte, could easily denote violence and criminality as drug traffickers rarely know the particularities of the superstitions they employ, so even items associated with "good" aspects of narco saint can be signs of criminal activity. This section also includes shaky footage taken by Almonte of a religious procession located in the Tepito neighborhood of Mexico City. Almonte stands in the crowd, drawing comparison between the busy Santa Muerte shrine and her devotees "crawling on their knees in line to basically visit what is a statue of a skeleton", and the near empty shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁵⁶⁶ In the section, Almonte's voiceover and talking head segments bluntly communicate his worries that Santa Muerte is corrupting the proper Catholic practice of the rosary and drawing devotees away from the Virgin Mary. The video, and Almonte's subsequent interviews over the past years, claim that Santa Muerte is not just a symbol or motivator for criminal behavior, but a saint that degrades traditional morality and religion as her devotion spreads from Mexico to the United States.⁵⁶⁷ According to the interviews provided in

⁵⁶⁵ Daniel Hernandez, "Rival Santa Muerte Church Claims Captured 'bishop' Does Not Represent the Mexican Death Cult," *LA Times Blogs - La Plaza*, January 10, 2011.; Pamela Bastante and Brenton Dickieson, "Nuestra Señora de Las Sombras: The Enigmatic Identity of Santa Muerte," *Journal of the Southwest* 55, no. 4 (2013): 435–71.; Roush, Laura, "Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo: A View from a Mexico City Altar,"

⁵⁶⁶ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," 41:12-44:55

⁵⁶⁷ Dr. Carlos Show, *We Discuss the Cartel and Border Issues with Former U. S. Marshall Robert Almonte*

the video and Almonte’s training manuals and public statements, the violence associated with Santa Muerte’s reverence threatens the physical safety of citizens as her penchant for drawing people away from legitimate saints threatens their spiritual lives. Almonte views Santa Muerte as incompatible with the Catholicism—and includes Catholic clergy in his training video to explain as much— despite the fact that many devotees of the skeleton saint still operate within this religious framework and claim a Catholic identity.⁵⁶⁸ The dichotomy between real religion and superstition, deviant practice and proper devotion, is tangible within Almonte’s presentation of Santa Muerte devotion, as is the paternalistic trend to discount devotees’ interpretations of their own growing cult.

At the end of 2017, the DEA released a new “challenge coin” intended to be given out to agents who have served more than twenty years fighting “violent Mexican Drug Traffickers”.⁵⁶⁹ On the coin, the words “Santa Muerte” and “Saint Death will not protect the drug trafficker” are inscribed next to a skeletal, scythe-wielding figure standing on a pile of skulls.



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Challenge coins vary in design, purpose, and importance and the definitive origin of challenge coins remains unknown, but there is a general claim among purveyors and merchants of these coins that usage began in World War I among the United States Army Air Service.⁵⁷¹ Since,

(YouTube, 2019).; Rafa Conde, “A Warrior From The Underworld | Robert Almonte,”

⁵⁶⁸ Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe- Estrella, *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism* (Cornell University Press, 2002) 8–10.

⁵⁶⁹ “DEA SANTA MUERTE COIN IN VINYL POUCH,” DEA Educational Foundation Gift Shop, accessed November 10, 2020,

⁵⁷⁰ Photograph by Author

⁵⁷¹ P. F. Mahoney, “The DMACC Coins,” *BMJ Military Health* 156, no. Suppl 4 (December 1, 2010):

these coins have been used in a semi-formal capacity to mark membership in a unit or denote accomplishments or distinguished service, first in military matters and now in a wide-variety of governmental and non-governmental fields. The use of challenge coins within law enforcement departments and task forces is modelled after the ritualized use in Military settings, often bestowed by leadership to officers by palming the coin and exchanging it hidden within a handshake. Material religious theory offers a theoretical framework with which to understand the emissarial, communicative, and flexible power of religious images and symbols that reach beyond their intended audience.⁵⁷² Visual aspects of popular devotion acquire “multiple readings” as the images move into new spaces and settings.⁵⁷³ Their meanings change and adopt new purviews, sometimes shedding old ones in the process. This rewriting of significance complicates any endeavor to concretely define meaning or assign affiliation to the images as religious image will receive new meaning as it moves from within its religious community into new outside spaces, as popular and accessible images like Santa Muerte are likely to do. Dr. Andrew Chesnut, the Bishop Walter Sullivan Chair of Catholic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, scholar, and active social media user suggests the Santa Muerte challenge coin represents a growing devotion to the informal borderland saint among law enforcement in both the United States and in Mexico.⁵⁷⁴ However, while individual officers may ascribe to this devotion, the use of Santa Muerte’s iconography on an official DEA coin when

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⁵⁷² David Morgan, “The Materiality of Sacred Economies,” *Material Religion* 11, no. 3 (July 3, 2015), Allen Roberts, “Tempering ‘the Tyranny of Already’: Re-Signification and the Migration of Images,” *Religion and Material Culture*, 2010, 115-125

⁵⁷³ Dana Rush, “Eternal Potential Chromolithographs in Vodunland,” *African Arts* 32, no. 4 (1999): 61–96.

⁵⁷⁴ Dr. Death & Divinity, “I Knew It! At Least One Member of American Law Enforcement Is a Santa Muerte Devotee despite Her Reputation as a Narcosaint as Depicted on These DEA ‘Challenge Coins’ <https://t.co/0GtIIMjSq7>,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), November 8, 2017.; Dr. Death & Divinity, “Today I Confirmed What I Had Suspected for Years, That Santa Muerte Also Has Followers among US Law Enforcement. An American-Born Member of Federal Law Enforcement Became a Devotee 3 Years Ago. <https://t.co/07CMQhRFRZ>,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), November 8, 2017.

contextualized with Almonte's training curricula and Bunker's expertise suggest that it represents a very different facet of religiosity and appropriation. Throughout the expertise above and throughout this archive, saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde are represented as oppositional or corrupting figures within the North American landscape. The stories, personal video footage taken by Almonte, and testimonials included in this expertise creates a demonology that complements the idea that law enforcement exist as "thin blue line" that delineates and protects civilization from primitive violence and superstition. This line both protective—keeping those things separate to protect the former-- but also possessive, establishing law enforcement on-the-ground expertise as the ultimate authority on what relationship these saints have to their own policing cosmology.

Even as officers suggest that these saints are "on our side," it is done in the context of a successful arrest. The arresting officer, by his own testimony in Almonte's video, tells a devotee—your saint doesn't work for you, he works for me. Almonte assures his trainees that devotees often don't know their own saints. He posits that many of these devotees have been misled into thinking the personas they venerate are holy, and that it is law enforcement and experts like himself who know better. They present stories of murdered virgins and pictures of purpled and decapitated sacrifice victims as evidence of this and the enemy they have appropriated into their cosmologies. The 2017 DEA Challenge Coin is stamped with Santa Muerte's image because the Skeleton Saint has become a sign of Mexican drug trafficking, dangerous barbarity, and religious deviance in the United States. Originally a religious persona with arguably indigenous origins and now an ever-growing religious following, upon arriving in Law Enforcement spaces Santa Muerte has been stripped of her significance as a grim, yet inclusive saint of the disposed, to be adopted in the United States security apparatus to

emblemize a threat that exists across the border. She, and other saints, have been adopted and instrumentalized into the cosmologies of the securityscape.

Testimony and “on the ground” experience

As law enforcement officers are socialized to defer to the authority of other state agents, deny the expertise of administrative or oversight entities, and actively distrust members of the public—lived testimony from those within their field becomes a core mechanism through which the apocalypticism, morally-defined cosmologies, and syncretic appropriation are communicated to trainees. Testimony in general is simply declarative statements made by speaker to an audience of any size, and this form of knowledge production has been studied widely in both religious and secular contexts by various fields including philosophy, rhetoric studies, history, legal studies and the study of religion.⁵⁷⁵ Testimony is an important vehicle through which beliefs and common sense are formed, and first-hand accounts have been integral to how societies construct knowledge and expertise.⁵⁷⁶ Because of the apocalyptic content, binary morality, and sacred cosmologies of law enforcement against evil present in the training documents, the testimonies given within Almonte and Bunker’s courses and publications can be comfortably compared to religious testimony. Susan Harding, a scholar of United States

⁵⁷⁵ Jonathan Adler, “Epistemological Problems of Testimony,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2008 Edition (Stanford, Calif., November 3, 2006); Peter J. Graham, “What Is Testimony?,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 187 (April 1, 1997): 227–32; Axel Gelfert, *A Critical Introduction to Testimony* (A&C Black, 2014); John Greco, “Religious Belief and Evidence from Testimony,” in *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology* (De Gruyter, 2013), 27–46; John Greco, “Testimony and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,” *Epistemology & Philosophy of Science* 53, no. 3 (July 13, 2017): 19–47; Barbara J Shapiro, “Testimony in Seventeenth-Century English Natural Philosophy: Legal Origins and Early Development,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, Testimony, 33, no. 2 (June 1, 2002): 243–63; Guy Montrose Whipple, “The Psychology of Testimony,” *Psychological Bulletin* 8, no. 9 (1911): 307–9; Aleida Assmann, “History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 261–73; Linda M. Park-Fuller, “Performing Absence: The Staged Personal Narrative as Testimony,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 20–42.

⁵⁷⁶ David Hume, “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (E. Steinberg, Ed.),” *Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (Original Work Published 1748)*, 1977.; Christopher J. Insole, “Seeing off the Local Threat to Irreducible Knowledge by Testimony,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 198 (2000): 44–56.

Christian Evangelical culture notes that narrative practices of preaching and witnessing are the primary means through which fundamentalist Christians “reproduce their cultural modes of interpretation through encountering, reconfiguring, and incorporating specimens of alien, worldly culture.”⁵⁷⁷ Through testimony, and the witnessing of that testimony first hand, the ‘other’ is conceptually adopted into Christian cosmologies, or ways of seeing good or evil within the world. Testimony of witnessed events and spiritual revelation have always been a part of Christian tradition, with core holy texts like the Gospels effectively being witness testimony.⁵⁷⁸ Beginning in the 20th century new forms of public discourse validated social authority based on individual experience rather than traditional forms of objectivity and rationality, and Harding suggests this resulted in a shift of public religiosity where religious authority became dispersed.⁵⁷⁹ Individuals could leverage their religious experiences into testimony that provided a framework for others to follow and adopt—power became decentralized and accessible to those with translatable and engaging spiritual and moral experience.⁵⁸⁰ These practices give potential believers the religious language and frameworks through which to interpret their own experiences.⁵⁸¹ The documents display similar practices within the law enforcement training and published testimonies of narco saint experts, addressing how these individuals leverage ‘on the ground’ experience in training and legal spaces as authority on narco saints and the cosmologies they overlay on the US Mexico borderlands.

⁵⁷⁷ Susan Harding, “Convicted by the Holy Spirit: the Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion” *American Ethnologist* (February 1987); 167-181.

⁵⁷⁸ Nineham, “Eye-Witness Testimony and the Gospel Tradition.”

⁵⁷⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), chapter 9. ; Susan Harding, “Convicted by the Holy Spirit: the Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist ...”; Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp, 79-80

⁵⁸⁰ William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), See also Eileen Luhr, “Witnessing Suburbia: Christian Conservatives, ‘Family Values,’ and the Cultural Politics of Youth” (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Irvine, 2004).

⁵⁸¹ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*, pp, 79-80

Narco saint experts operate as teachers and trainers, both through their published material available online and in text, but also in the courses and instruction they create and present in person. These trainings vary in location, accessibility to the public, and security level.⁵⁸² Narco saint training courses are offered as independent events or as part of large border security and law enforcement industry expos and conferences where there are a variety of other private consulting and technology companies offering their own products and services vying for federal and state money. The physical spaces where these trainings take place are all securitized to some degree, most of these events include formalized barriers to entry such as limiting registration to only sworn law enforcement and defense personnel, or holding the trainings at locations with restricted entry points such as police departments. Security around many of these events, even when held in public locations like hotel conference centers, herd non-attendees or anyone who does not look like an attendee away from even public spaces near the training locations.⁵⁸³ Despite the fact that agents and officers sometimes attend these trainings in plainclothes and use off-duty time to do so, these spaces maintain a securitized control of space, participation, and authority.⁵⁸⁴ Although there may be some confusion in lumping categories of security, defense, and law enforcement spaces together, over the last thirty years these categories have blurred with the militarization of police, borders, surveillance, and drug interdiction efforts, as well as the coordination through joint intelligence and training sites. The use of a “securityscape” framework allows an understanding of how all levels of law enforcement convene in these

⁵⁸² Local police department trainings are held in public venues like high school gymnasiums, whereas large law enforcement organizations pay for Almonte to conduct training at national conferences in the hotel ballrooms and centers where such events are held. Robert Almonte’s private training company conducts this training in police stations, hotels, conference centers, and in high school gymnasiums depending on which agency or organization is paying for the training.

⁵⁸³ See Introduction for discussion of fieldwork and observation of these methods.

⁵⁸⁴ These trainings take different forms, from training sessions with specific law enforcement departments, to a series of trainings for a specific agency, to sessions held within a larger conference structure where various agencies and police departments attend.

spaces and engage with intelligence agents and federal agencies like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This blurring is furthered by the rise of private industry and their role as defense consultants, military suppliers, border security purveyors, and law enforcement trainers.⁵⁸⁵ Despite the private origin of these trainings – Almonte is ex-law enforcement and Bunker is not affiliated with any defense or law enforcement agency – this expertise explicitly leverages on the ground testimonials of law enforcement agents as an important component of their authority. The requirement for “on the ground” experience determines who and who is not suitable to listen to in law enforcement fields. The religious tradition of conversion and communication through testimony creates a space where experts hoping to sell their expertise to law enforcement, border security, and the general securityscape must cultivate this type of authority.⁵⁸⁶ For Almonte this comes from his long law enforcement career with only passing reference to his informal research on borderland informal saints.⁵⁸⁷ Bunker supplements his lack of active service in any law enforcement, border security, or military capacity with connections to those who have active experience.⁵⁸⁸ Furthermore, these so aptly named parables are often a key factor in the media that spreads narco saint expertise from official law enforcement circles into the receptive public and more skeptical institutional fields of knowledge.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁵ See Chapter 1

⁵⁸⁶ Patrick Doreian and Norman Conti, “Creating the Thin Blue Line: Social Network Evolution within a Police Academy,” *Social Networks* 50 (July 1, 2017): 83–97.

⁵⁸⁷ United States v. Abraham Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014), <http://federalevidence.com/pdf/2014/05May/US.v.BobadillaCampos.pdf>; US Department of Justice, “Mexican National Sentenced to 135 Months in Prison for Methamphetamine Trafficking Conviction,” news release, October 12, 2012. See also “About – Almonte Consulting & Training,” accessed December 1, 2020.; Richard Valdemar, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld (Part 1 of 2),” *Police Magazine*; and various training flyers and announcements.

⁵⁸⁸ “Robert Bunker - the FlameClaremont Graduate University,” Claremont Graduate University, March 12, 2015; Robert J. Bunker, *Non-State Threats and Future Wars* (Routledge, 2012). 199.; Robert J. Bunker, “Introduction: The Mexican Cartels--Organized Crime vs. Criminal Insurgency,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 129–38.

⁵⁸⁹ Robert E. Ford, “Saying One Thing, Meaning Another: The Role Of Parables In Police Training,”

Testimony by active or ex-law enforcement is the primary way information is communicated to the audience during Almonte's training. Though Almonte is a private contractor in these training spaces, he speaks using his position as state agent and consistently draws upon his law enforcement experience to justify his interpretation of events he witnessed, and second-hand ones as well. This testimony is accompanied by first-person perspective camera footage taken, often surreptitiously, of shrines and devotees of so-called narco saints. The law enforcement testimonies he includes in his training materials includes the feelings and personal instincts of the officers as they lead the audience through their encounters with narco saints and the "bad guys" they caught by trusting the testimony of Almonte and the fearful instincts they felt as they interacted with narco saint material.⁵⁹⁰ Similarly, a significant portion of Almonte's presence in legal courts comes from the argument that his "training and experience", his front-line time as a law enforcement agent, provides him the authority to testify on the religious matters.⁵⁹¹

Training Course

Discussed above, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Underworld" instructs various law enforcement and defense practitioners to identify practices and beliefs Almonte associates with Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and other saints, both canonized and informal. Robert Almonte conducts trainings using this content dozens of times a year throughout the United States.⁵⁹²

Police Quarterly 6, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 84–110. See Chapter 4 for a larger discussion of this phenomenon.

⁵⁹⁰ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course," 40:01- 58:21

⁵⁹¹ United States v. Abraham Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014), <http://federalevidence.com/pdf/2014/05May/US.v.BobadillaCampos.pdf>; US Department of Justice, "Mexican National Sentenced to 135 Months in Prison for Methamphetamine Trafficking Conviction," news release, October 12, 2012, http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/usao-nm/legacy/2013/04/15/2012-10-12_bobadilla-campos_pr.pdf.

⁵⁹² Almonte Consulting and Training. "Upcoming Training - Robert Almonte". Accessed May 12 2017.

Usually marketed to federal, local, and international law enforcement agents, those involved in intelligence and the production of training materials are invited to register for the course as well. The course offerings specifically cater to law enforcement agents operating in the US Mexico borderlands and instruct the trainees to identify religious practices and iconography associated with the narcotics trade for the purposes of recognizing and then apprehending narcotics traffickers. The training instructors, along with Almonte himself are primarily ex-law enforcement who now teach active law enforcement. The trainings overall run in variable lengths, with some sessions taking up an afternoon and others being conducted over multiple days and including other topics such as “Mexican Cartels”, “Hispanic Gangs in the USA”, “Hispanic Culture and Traditions”, and “Hotel and Motel Investigations”.⁵⁹³ Almonte’s course in particular is complemented with a training video he wrote and produced, and is titled “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld”. The video was published in 2009 and is used in his training curriculum throughout the United States, as well as shown to jurors in criminal courts where Almonte acts as an expert witness.⁵⁹⁴

The video’s sixty-two-minute run time is split between two main sections. The first and longest introduces and overviews specific religious beliefs, practices, and personas with commentary from Almonte and practicing law enforcement agents. The second is a twenty-minute section where an El Paso prosecutor speaks directly to the law enforcement audience and advises attendees on how to conduct arrests that will stand up in court and result in convictions.

⁵⁹³ “Program Topics – Almonte Consulting & Training,” accessed February 10, 2020.

⁵⁹⁴ See account from *United States v. Abraham Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero*, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014), <http://federalevidence.com/pdf/2014/05May/US.v.BobadillaCampos.pdf>. “The Court reviewed the videotape (Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,”) and found it informative and professionally produced. In this overview, Almonte included different “saints” revered by drug traffickers, including Jesus Malverde, as well as the use of different tangible icons used in connection with this underworld.” See also *United States v. Javier Guerro, et al.*, Criminal No. 09-820 AM.

The bulk of the video, however, is spent linking the covered religious personas, images, and material to criminal intent and activity. The video, while giving occasional disclaimers that non-criminal devotees of narco saints exist, is a pastiche of images, stock music, and claims that constructs the US Mexico border into a grisly and colorful landscape. Each segment of the videos is separated by discordant transitions where an array of photographs flash showing guns, tattooed brown skin, crime scene tape, and border crossing images. The DVD case itself states:

The Mexican drug trafficker has increasingly relied on saints and icons to protect them as they transport drugs throughout the United States. This DVD will present information on various legitimate and illegitimate saints and icons used almost exclusively by the Mexican drug dealer.⁵⁹⁵

The description contradicts the narrator's introduction to the video that acknowledges many people revere these "illegitimate saints and icons" independent of the narcotics industry, though the presentation of the video's material is framed in a way that heavily implies the religious practices and images represent a danger to officer safety, the general public, and law enforcement officers themselves.

⁵⁹⁵ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,"



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The opening includes a deep male voiceover as the camera pans and swings beneath statues and figures lit from below to create ominous shadows on their faces. These shots are of Almonte's own confiscated and collected assemblage of narco saint material, which he brings and arrays on long tables in front of the classes and training sessions.⁵⁹⁷ The video includes first a long list of "legitimate" or canonized saints that are recognized by the institutional Catholic church, but still prayed to by drug traffickers, in example El Nino de Atocha, St Jude, the Virgin Mary. According to Almonte's narration, law enforcement officers may still be able to use devotion to and materials of these legitimate saints in discretionary police stops to build justification for searches while looking for narcotics and other contraband.⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁶ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,"

⁵⁹⁷ This assemblage of collected material religion is owned by Almonte and he uses the display in his various training sessions across the country, including when he is featured on local news programs.

⁵⁹⁸ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,"4:10-13:01

Throughout the training video, and the material used to promote the course, the “lived” experience of the training instructor is used as a testimony to the accuracy and the authority of the information presented. A substantial section of the training video is spent imparting first-hand law enforcement officer interaction with Santa Muerte’s devotees and material religion, and their testimony on the real-world violence that Almonte associates with the informal borderland saint. In the video, various law enforcement agents detail arrests that were made possible because they noticed images, items, and spoken prayers associated with religious material and used that evidence to justify official searches of the property, vehicle, or person. One officer followed a suspect for a year and a half after viewing the man’s shrine to the skeleton saint during a discretionary “Knock and Talk” interview.⁵⁹⁹ When initially asked to explain the shrine, the suspect stated “just something I pray to,” and from there the investigating officers spent the next year digging through the suspects trash, reassured they were on the right track as they found used Santa Muerte candles in the trash receptacle outside the man’s apartment. The audience is told that this was a very significant case in the “spiritual world”.⁶⁰⁰ Later in the video, a different detective with the El Paso Police explains step by step how she and her colleagues were eating breakfast in a restaurant and upon seeing someone with “pensive eyes and a Santa Muerte around his neck” left their breakfast to follow him.⁶⁰¹ The detective explains in detail step by step as they tailed the man’s truck, radioing different agencies to help eventually search the vehicle. The story is told through shots of the detective talking and then footage of highways and border signs with her voice over the images included to frame the operation as a chase with a reveal at the end. Narco saints’ reputation in law enforcement spheres spurs investigations and dictates how

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid 46:01- 49:26

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid 46:01- 49:26

⁶⁰¹ Ibid 44:07-47:59

an agent behaves towards those they police, individuals are placed under suspicion where they were not before. In another case, discussed in the previous section as well, State Trooper Nate McVicker viewed a Santa Muerte statuette on a dashboard and quickly saw this religious figurine as indicative of a real and present threat. The video shows the State Trooper, dressed in a suit against a black background and holding up a metal figurine of Santa Muerte, explain the traffic stop as he gestures instructionally to the religious figurine in his hands, “I know how scary this one [Santa Muerte] is and it’s an officer safety thing so I got back up there immediately.”⁶⁰² As McVicker explains it, this small statuette represented a threat to himself and the presence of criminal activity, and he interpreted the driver’s constant eye content with the religious item on the dashboard as prayer meant to harm him. Recalling this, he explains, “I don’t know if that’s death upon us, death upon organizations but that just tells me I need someone else here.”⁶⁰³ Due to the training he received, and clear familiarity with Robert Almonte, State Trooper Nate McVicker was deeply unsettled by a small religious item on a driver’s dashboard, enough to call in other law enforcement officers.

In many of the segments, Almonte includes his own hand-held video footage of shrines, devotees, and processions he witnesses during travels to Mexico. The video is shaky, first-person perspective, and in many cases the footage is taken surreptitiously of people as they visit shrines or seek aid from religious figures. At a shrine to Juan Soldado shrine, which Almonte describes as the “the patron saint of illegal aliens”, Almonte followed a devotee and took distant footage as that devotee received a cleansing ritual from a curandero, or a folk healer. In the voice over as the video shows men with their backs turned, he refers to them as “subjects” he

⁶⁰² Ibid 52:02.

⁶⁰³ Ibid 51:11- 56:45

followed when he saw they were walking into the shrine.⁶⁰⁴ The video is shot from a substantial distance, the men's backs turned from the camera, and Almonte explains that drug traffickers will have cleansing rituals (*limpias*) done on themselves and their vehicles. Almonte proposes that should you [the audience] as a plainclothes officer see a suspect go to a house and break a branch off a tree, it might be before a *limpia* of themselves and their "load vehicle".⁶⁰⁵ This type of advice is used to build probable cause which allows officers to do more through searches of private property.⁶⁰⁶ As Almonte advises using folk healing rituals like *curanderismo* as probable cause when searching for evidence of drug trafficking, he implies that cultures that use these practices are compromised in some way—as any of these cultural behaviors can and should be considered suspicious and indicative of criminal activity. Via this training and the medium of first-person perspective video, Almonte draws his audience to witness his own vantage point first hand trailing the *curandero* and the devotee. Similarly, shaky footage of a procession in the Tepito neighborhood of Mexico City provides Almonte's audience with another first-person vantage from Almonte's perspective. As he walks among the devotees, not talking to them but filming, Almonte explains how the crowd here for Santa Muerte has increased through the years. Viewing people praying the rosary, Almonte voices over aloud "in my opinion they were praying to Santa Muerte", as opposed to the standard devotion to the Virgin Mary.⁶⁰⁷ Almonte pans the hand-held footage between two shrines, one to the Virgin Mary unoccupied in the corner of the square, and the other to Santa Muerte where a crowd had formed crawling and praying. This highlights the contention between good religion and bad/deviant religion present in Almonte's

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid 15:24.298

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid 14:22- 17:01

⁶⁰⁶ Later in the video, an El Paso prosecutor advises the audience on building this probable cause in ways that will not be challenged in court.

⁶⁰⁷ Robert Almonte, "Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,"40:11-47:13

instruction. Almonte's voice expresses disbelief and affront, "crawling on their knees in line to basically visit what is a statue of a skeleton."⁶⁰⁸ Almonte dismisses the reverence as superstitious, motivated by criminal intent, material, and non-transcendent, as opposed to tradition icons like the Virgin Mary, whom Almonte consistently refers to as "queen, mother of god".⁶⁰⁹ In contrast, devotion to Santa Muerte or any of the other non-canonized saints is not characterized as religious behavior throughout the training, and instead referred to as superstition or masking activities used to obscure criminal behavior. Almonte suggests to his law enforcement audience as he gazes at the camera near the end of the segment on narco saints, that "they [criminals] are getting Santa Muerte to take the place of the Virgin Mary."⁶¹⁰

Legal "training and experience" - court cases.

Almonte's testimony suggested that the presence of the prayer was indicative of criminal activity. Although Almonte acknowledged that "people who are not associated with criminal activity also pray to Santa Muerte," his expert testimony characterizing the mere presence of the prayer as "a very good indicator of possible criminal activity" approaches psychobabble and substantially influenced the outcome [of the initial criminal proceedings].⁶¹¹

The above is a quote by Judge Carlos Lucero who presided over the 2014 appeals case of the 2012 criminal convictions of Maria Medina-Copete and Rafael Goxcon-Chagal. Judge Lucero made it clear that the 2012 decision to allow a "cultural iconography hobbyist" to prejudice juries was a mistake, and one repeated throughout various preceding cases of different defendants.⁶¹² The Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal case demonstrates how Almonte's "on the ground" authority does not always hold up in fields outside his immediate law enforcement

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid 44:10-44:13

⁶¹⁰ Ibid 44:13-45:00

⁶¹¹ United States v. Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal, 13-2026 and 13-2035 (10th Cir. 2014).

⁶¹² United States v. Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal, 13-2026 and 13-2035 (10th Cir. 2014).

and border security. However, this case does not represent consensus and Almonte himself and his training has been upheld in following cases, leaving the reception to narco saint expertise in courtrooms remains mixed. But this sub-archive is one salient example of how narco saint expertise, and narco saint experts themselves, occupy a tenuous place in more institutionalized fields where they compete for authority and where law enforcement religiosity does not prime their audience.

Though the governmental and legal testimonies differ from many of the other forms of narco saint expertise, in that they are not explicitly published for direct use by law enforcement practitioners, they represent a form of expertise that deeply affects the operation of law enforcement and how narco saints are viewed by the public. News media reports on the outcomes of these cases, listing narco saint personas with the drug convictions, whether upheld or overturned, in the headline creates immediate associations for the reader. Police will push for searches of private property based on the presence of narco saint material if they think it will be upheld in court, and the previously discussed training video published by Almonte features an El Paso prosecutor assuring the law enforcement trainees exactly that.⁶¹³ The training materials that inform state agents understanding of narco saints push for this operational behavior, assuring law enforcement that their use of narco saint images and materials to justify searches of private property will be upheld and will result in getting more “bad guys off the street.”⁶¹⁴ Increased arrests and officer safety remain major talking points in training videos, testimonials, interviews, and other publications published by narco saint experts and those that spread their message. However, despite assurances by prosecutors like John Davis from Almonte’s training video, and

⁶¹³ “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld A Prosecutor’s Perspective with John Davis” in Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,” narrated by Raymond Mesa (El Paso, TX: Narcotics Training, 2009).

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

arrests based on narco saint expertise, testimony like that of Robert Almonte remains contentious in criminal courts across the United States. His “on the ground” authority meets with institutional push back from defense attorneys, juries, and judges who do not share his law enforcement zeal.

On December 5, 2011, the defense of Bianca Sanchez-Caballero filed opinion evidence regarding her petition for a Daubert hearing, challenging the testimony given by Robert R. Almonte, the then US Marshal for the Western District of Texas.⁶¹⁵ The defendant argued that the testimony given by Almonte during her trial should be inadmissible due to its uninformed content. The original criminal trial concerned the September 22, 2009 arrest of Bianca Sanchez-Caballero and her codefendant Abraham Bobadilla-Campos, where they were pulled over by a New Mexico state police officer in a routine traffic stop and a visible Jesús Malverde prayer card by prompted the officer to search the vehicle.⁶¹⁶ The search yielded twenty-two pounds of methamphetamine and both defendants were arrested and charged with narcotics trafficking convictions. Robert Almonte was called in due to his law enforcement training and expertise and gave a length testimony, which includes the below assertion:

Jesús Malverde paraphernalia can be considered as “tools of the trade”: these items are perfectly legal, and yet can be used illegitimately in a drug trafficking scheme. See *United States v. Triana*, 477 F.3d 1189, 1195 (10th Cir. 2007) (describing scales, glass pipes, and plastic baggies as “tools of the drug trade”)⁶¹⁷

Along with the personal testimony, Almonte showed the training video discussed above, *Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld*, explaining that the video was developed to instruct

⁶¹⁵ United States v. Abraham Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014), <http://federalevidence.com/pdf/2014/05May/US.v.BobadillaCampos.pdf>; US Department of Justice, “Mexican National Sentenced to 135 Months in Prison for Methamphetamine Trafficking Conviction,” news release, October 12, 2012, http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/usao-nm/legacy/2013/04/15/2012-10-12_bobadilla-campos_pr.pdf.

⁶¹⁶ US Department of Justice, “Mexican National Sentenced to 135 Months in Prison for Methamphetamine Trafficking Conviction,” news release, October 12, 2012.

⁶¹⁷ United States v. Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014).

local police departments regarding the iconography and items used to identify superstitions with the drug trade, increase officer safety, and help build cases against suspected narcotics traffickers.⁶¹⁸ The defense for Bianca Sanchez-Caballero challenged the broad definition of “tools of the trade” and the religious profiling present in the original stop and Almonte’s testimony. The court dismissed this concern and were convinced by Almonte’s presentation and testimony that “prayer to Jesús Malverde, as opposed to legitimate saints, holds the dubious distinction of seeking protection from law enforcement. As the Government noted at the hearing, ‘Jesús Malverde is for people that operate outside the law.’”⁶¹⁹ The court concluded that narco saint items and material, such as the prayer card viewed in the defendants’ pickup truck during their traffic stop, can be considered drug paraphernalia. They reasoned that because Jesús Malverde is not officially recognized by the Catholic Church and was “for people who operate outside the law,” as Almonte asserted the saint was, the presence of the narco saint’s image legally justified the initial search of Sanchez-Caballero’s vehicle.⁶²⁰ This outcome came despite previous cases that had successfully questioned and challenged previous utilization of similar testimonies, with the judge decided that previous judges had simply been unaware of “the prevalence of Jesús Malverde paraphernalia in drug cases,” as those courts were geographically removed from the borderlands between the United States and Mexico.⁶²¹ The appeals court found Almonte’s entire testimony and presentation to have met the Daubert requirements for admissible testimony, and the defendant’s petition for a suppression hearing was rejected.⁶²²

⁶¹⁸ Robert Almonte, “Patron Saints of the Mexican Drug Underworld Training Course,”

⁶¹⁹ *United States v. Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero*, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014), ix.

⁶²⁰ *United States v. Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero*, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014), 11.

⁶²¹ *United States v. Bobadilla-Campos and Sanchez-Caballero*, 09-CR-3071 (N.M. 2014),

⁶²² The Daubert standard is used by a trial judge to make a preliminary assessment of whether an expert’s scientific testimony is based on reasoning or methodology that is scientifically valid and can properly be applied to the facts at issue. See *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.*, 509 U.S. 579 (1993). The Daubert standard is the test currently used in the federal courts and some state courts. *Kumho Tire Co. v. Carmichael* 526 U.S. 137 (1999) determined that the Daubert standard could be applied to both scientific

Almonte's ability to meet the Daubert standard is routinely challenged in appeals courts. The Daubert standard was first established as means to evaluate whether an expert's testimony is scientifically valid and pertinent to the trial at hand. This standard has been expanded to include experts outside of "scientific" disciplines in subsequent cases, and is contemporarily and consistently used to assess whether a laymen expert's testimony is comparable to "the practice of an expert in the relevant field".⁶²³ Whether the testimony is based on scientific research, personal experience, or professional studies, all expert witnesses must meet the Daubert standard for their testimony to be admitted.

Almonte has provided similar testimonies for other cases where the presence of narco saint images and objects were used to justify property searches. On January 17, 2014, defendants Jason Holmes and Juan Antonio Castaneda Rendon submitted an appeal stating that admitting the testimony of expert witness, Robert Almonte, on narco saints was a sentencing error committed by the Little Rock, Arkansas, district court.⁶²⁴ Like the Sanchez-Caballero case, Almonte stated that the shrines to Jesús Malverde found in Holmes's and Rendon's private residences were indications of drug activity and criminal intent. The appeals court rejected the defendants appeal, finding that Almonte's testimony on narco saints aptly "explained the significance of drug trafficking iconography located in Rendon's home" because the testimony informed "average jurors with no previous exposure to the drug trafficking business" of the criminal nature of narco saint religious materials.⁶²⁵ However though, the appeals court ultimately agreed with Holmes and Rendon's argument that Almonte's testimony should not have been allowed to affect trial outcomes as it supported the profiling of specific religious

and nonscientific testimony in determining whether an expert witness' testimony was admissible in court.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ United States v. Holmes and Castaneda Rendon, 13-1660 and 13-1661 (8th Cir. 2014).

⁶²⁵ United States v. Holmes and Castaneda Rendon, 13-1660 and 13-1661 (8th Cir. 2014).

practices. Despite admitting that religious profiling had taken place during both the traffic stop and initial trial, the appeals court deemed the error ultimately harmless as narcotics had eventually been found. The defendants' appeal was rejected, and their convictions were sustained.

Two months after the Holmes and Rendon appeal, the afore mentioned *United States of America v. Maria Vianey Medina-Copete and Rafael Goxcon-Chagal* appeals case challenged the previous admission of Almonte's testimony. The defense challenged the 2012 New Mexico court ruling regarding the inclusion of Almonte's testimony, this time regarding a prayer to Santa Muerte that one of the defendants, Medina-Copete recited during a traffic stop.⁶²⁶ Almonte's credentials were described to the jury and those involved in the court proceedings, he was described to them as a law enforcement expert and "cultural iconography hobbyist", and Almonte told the jury that he had spent "easily into the thousands of hours" researching narco saint.⁶²⁷ His testimony on the prayer recited during the traffic stop and the saintly persona prayed to was as follows:

Well, I think it's hard to say exactly what Santa Muerte is, but what I found is that she would be a spirit, or some people consider her the angel of death. Some people have given her saintlike status. Not to say that she's a Catholic saint, because she's not a real person, so she could never be a Catholic saint. So, basically, I think, depending on who you ask, she's going to be any one of those, but pretty much one and the same. Not the Grim Reaper. The Grim Reaper represents death. Santa Muerte is considered the angel of death or saint of death or holy death. A lot of people believe that--they'll pray to Santa Muerte. She'll answer their prayers, whatever those prayers may be. In conducting my research throughout Mexico it became apparent to me that with a lot of people Santa Muerte became more popular than the Virgin Mary, and in some cases more popular than Jesus Christ himself.⁶²⁸

⁶²⁶ *United States v. Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal*, 13-2026 and 13-2035 (10th Cir. 2014).

⁶²⁷ *United States v. Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal*, 13-2026 and 13-2035 (10th Cir. 2014).

⁶²⁸ *United States v. Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal*, 13-2026 and 13-2035 (10th Cir. 2014).

Almonte also testified that prayers to Santa Muerte, such as the one recited out loud at the traffic stop, would be a good indicator of criminal activity, as opposed to a prayer devoted to Saint Jude, a “legitimate Catholic Saint.”⁶²⁹ He picks out several lines in the prayer that mentions fortune among the other content that beseeches safety from harm and illness, reconnection with family and loved ones, as argues that this proves the trip Medina-Copete’s was on when arrested was about money. In this case, Almonte’s testimony was found to overly prejudice the jury against the defendants. Judge Carlos Lucero asserted that Almonte’s “expert testimony characterizing the mere presence of the prayer as ‘a very good indicator of possible criminal activity’ approaches psychobabble and substantially influenced the outcome [of the original criminal trial].” The appeals court found in favor of the defendants’ argument, and their convictions were successfully vacated. This case was later used in other appeals courts to demonstrate the danger of expert testimony by law enforcement officers.⁶³⁰ This case, also mentioned at the opening of the section, stands out because it is one of the only 10th circuit cases, usually friendly to law enforcement testimony, to have accused the initial district court of abusing its discretion in allowing Almonte to testify as an expert witness, despite his psychobabble, prejudicial characterization of the defendants as heretics, and lack of acceptable credentials.⁶³¹

Conclusion

Bunker and Almonte embolden law enforcement, border security agents, and policymakers to exercise religious expertise and authority, effectively spreading this religiosity

⁶²⁹ United States v. Medina-Copete and Goxcon-Chagal, 13-2026 and 13-2035 (10th Cir. 2014).

⁶³⁰ UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, Plaintiff, vs. ERNESTO RODRIGUEZ, Defendant. No. CR 12-3109-10 JB 125 F. Supp. 3d 1216; 2015 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 116787

⁶³¹ Mixcoatl Miera-Rosete, “Officers at the Gate: Why United States v. Medina-Copete Should Be the Rule and Not the Exception,” *New Mexico Law Review* 47, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 184.

through the lived practice of the securityscape. If there are “cop logics”, as so many scholars have posited, shared by the policing field that function as common schemas through which the state agent interprets their world, I propose core aspects of this logic are more accurately understood as a religiosity. These trainings and expertise *sacralize* not just policing, but the role of private experts as missionaries and prophets in arming soldiers against impending spiritual and physical threats. Law enforcement training curricula provides the most robust look at the ways in which the US securityscape has developed ideas of the narco saint, narco culture, and the sacred place of state agents. The creators of these training programs remain private actors unaffiliated with official policing agencies; however, they and their training programs operate as guides and instructors to active law enforcement agents and others who enact security on the border, at the core of the United States, and beyond its official territories. Law enforcement training impacts not just those who receive the training personally, but those individuals and communities those agents police with apocalyptic paranoia and religious cosmologies of good and evil.

The above documents bond controversial but multi-faceted Mexican holy personalities with borderland violence. This bond is used as proof of a growing societal threat that is useful to law enforcement policies that seek to increase arrests of migrants, undocumented persons, and people of color in the US Mexico borderlands. These documents also provide a window into a distinctly religious way that US securityscape operates behind closed doors. This has implications for the general religious landscape in the United States but also the personal lives and freedoms of the people in it. The way these informal saints are presented within training materials, law enforcement bulletins, and these expert’s research limits the ways these saints can be conceptualized outside of associations with criminality, vice, and direct opposition of US

security interests. As Carol Cohn observed while documenting defense intellectuals in the nuclear industry of the 1980s, how something is talked about often sets the boundaries of how something may be thought about.⁶³² The language and expertise surrounding aspects of war, conflict, and security deeply impact how this violence is conceptualized as necessary or justified, both within an individual's conception and within larger policy discourses and state operation. Not only do experts instrumentalize these informal borderland saints into drug paraphernalia that can be used to police both the periphery and core of the United States, they also frame narco saints as a strange and threatening potential, something still largely unknowable that they have first-hand, and rare knowledge of that can be imparted. This paternal and organic authority invalidates other discourses, whether they be that of the saints' devotees or mainstream academics in favor of the credal interpretation of security professionals. From manifest destiny of the pre-border era, to the Low Intensity Conflict doctrine that shaped the drug war from the Cold War into the current post-9/11 security scape, expertise has communicated a unique religiosity especial to the securityscape, and in turn shaped the makeup of border policing and border extension. In each of these cases, moral imperatives, religious cosmologies, and epochal thinking has distinctly affected how the US policing apparatus functions both domestically and across borders. For this reason, it is important to understand these ideologies, too often assumed to be secular in nature, and how they impact the expertise which shapes norms and operations within the securityscape. The work narco saint experts do is distinctly religious, and their crusade against their own subject is a work of weaponized expertise which has greater effect beyond just the conversion of the state agents they teach and train.

⁶³² Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12 (1987): 687.

Taken separately these behaviors and discourses might represent ideologies of select individuals active but on the fringes of the law enforcement and border security fields. However, contextualized within the climate of the “thin blue line” and taking into account the influence these individuals have on law enforcement operation, they show a pattern of behavior that is distinctly religious and especial to the law enforcement field. The next chapter discusses the orientalist perspective of the narco saint expert community and how the archive above affects United States popular culture in visible and pervasive ways. More simply, the following details how the narco saint, the criminalized entity that experts construct, has found its way into United States entertainment and legal discourses to popularize law enforcement religiosity.

Chapter Four: The Gospel of Border War

A Video Game

Sweeping views of the interior of a dark and abandoned Catholic cathedral show a single penitent, a thick-necked man with tattoos covering his bald head and face. He is the Mexican drug lord, El Sueño and is introduced bowed before a towering stone statue of a skeletal figure with wings. Through voiceover, the skeletal saint in a breathy female voice promises El Sueño a successful insurgency, the establishment of a narco-state free of “yankee” involvement or intervention. Through the next sixty to eighty hours of playable content in the popular open world game, Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands, players will assume the role of United States covert soldiers combating the Santa Blanca cartel and its illicit religious spread from Mexico to Bolivia and the United States. Players encounter shrines and graffiti that bear the opening saint’s image throughout the game as they kill religious cultists intent on extending the Mexican-Bolivian narco-state into the United States. The informal saint that motivates the game’s antagonist is named sparsely in the initial game as Santa Muerte although her image is pervasive throughout the immersive virtual world. A collectible and more expensive version of the game comes with a real twelve-inch Santa Muerte statuette, and downloadable content within the game includes a “Santa Muerte pack” skins and costumes to dress up your character, vehicles, and their weapons with skull motifs.

A Television Show

A heavy “straw” filter makes everything in the desert scene yellow including the sky, the horizon of cliffs, the license plate of a luxury cartel car. On the ground down a dirt road dozens of male penitents, dressed in cowboy hats and old jeans, crawl silently towards a rural Santa Muerte shrine while ominous music frames their progress. Two cartel hitmen dressed in cowboy

boots with skull-tipped toes, arrive and join the rest of the devotees, crawling on knees and elbows towards a flower-enshrined hut. The interior of the structure is cast in red from the hundreds of crimson candles, shots show a lucha libre doll, makeshift folk offerings, beer bottles turned into candleholders, and at the center a rough, hand-crafted and life-sized statue of a skeleton idol on a low shrine. The hitmen lay a black candle on the shrine and pin a sketch of the series protagonist to the back of the altar. This is the opening of the opening episode of the third season of the popular show *Breaking Bad*, which aired on March 21, 2010 in the United States. The episode ends with the two hitmen crossing from Mexico into the US hidden in the back of a truck and their murder of the driver and fellow passengers. The identity of the skeletal idol supplicated to at the beginning of the episode is never revealed, except in the many articles and forum posts that followed the long-awaited premiere of the hit television.⁶³³

These are two examples of the visibility of narco saints, the criminalized version of informal saints originating in Mexico, in US popular media. These examples are just a few of many. Across the United States a skeletal saint graces the side of DEA collectable coin, busts of a mustachioed bandit fill sets of crime-drama television, and white blocks of cocaine sit atop shrines lit by fairy lights during US police press releases. Images and representations of borderland religion have arrived into US popular television and film, the news cycle, participatory media, and its legal discourses and code. More often than not, these saints arrive in

⁶³³ Donna Bowman, “*Breaking Bad*: ‘Sunset,’” AV Club, April 25, 2010, <https://tv.avclub.com/breaking-bad-sunset-1798164884>.; Erica Pearson, “Prayer Cards of 19th-Century ‘Narco Saint’ Jesus Malverde Hot Seller in Brooklyn and Queens,” nydailynews.com, June 11, 2012, <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/hell-saint-article-1.1093785>.; Hunter Stephenson, “*Breaking Bad* Recap: Season 3 Premiere ‘No Mas’ Sets Up a Murderous Confrontation,” /Film, March 23, 2010, <https://www.slashfilm.com/breaking-bad-recap-season-3-premiere-no-mas-sets-up-a-murderous-confrontation/>.; Drusilla Moorhouse, “*Breaking Bad* Is Much Darker and More Intense Than Ever,” E! Online, March 21, 2010, <https://www.eonline.com/news/172437/breaking-bad-is-much-darker-and-more-intense-than-ever>.

image, not in name. So, while many in the US have not heard of a narco saint, they have already been introduced by popular media representations of them. The above popular media vignettes are “cultural representations” of the US Mexico border and the drug war of the past fifty years. These vignettes also reflect a religious mythos that United States law enforcement have used to justify, both politically and morally, their violence and presence on US territory, the border, and foreign soil—conceptualized in these productions as extra-territorial “borderlands”. Popular cultural representations of drug war conflict are one of the few mediums where the general public may view the religious themes present in law enforcement culture. While chapter one addresses the historical and expertise landscape these experts exist in, chapter two seeks to understand who these experts are, and chapter three addresses their productions and the religiosity therein; this chapter widens the scope and posits that larger swaths of the securityscape in the United States operate in popular culture to amplify this cosmology⁶³⁴ that justifies state violence against racial and religious “others”.⁶³⁵ Narco saint experts

⁶³⁴ I use the term cosmology instead of alternatives, like ideology, to denote an all-encompassing way of seeing the world that asserts a current organizational form of the world (such as the delineations of good and evil and the moral imperatives of police work) and makes statements about eventual fate or destinies. Chapter three discusses how the ideas found in narco saint expert documents and courses can and should be considered a cosmology.

⁶³⁵ Not only does this policing practice target devotees of Mexican saintly personas, this policing happens within a well-documented climate of racial profiling norms by local, state, and federal agents. For more in-depth discussions and documentation of this phenomenon see Mary Romero, “Are Your Papers in Order: Racial Profiling, Vigilantes, and America’s Toughest Sheriff” LatCrit XV Symposium: The Color of the Economic Crisis: Exploring the Downturn from the Bottom Up: Narratives of Identity, Nation, and Outsiders within Outsiders,”.; Mary Romero, “Racial Profiling and Immigration Law Enforcement: Rounding Up of Usual Suspects in the Latino Community,”.; Pat Goldsmith et al. “Ethno-Racial Profiling and State Violence in a Southwest Barrio,”; Cesar Cuauhtemoc Garcia Hernandez, “La Migra in the Mirror: Immigration Enforcement and Racial Profiling on the Texas Border Symposium on Migration,”. And Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation, Second Edition*. Racial policing at and near North American borders has always infringed upon indigenous communities’ sovereignty and the everyday lives of indigenous peoples, see Thomas Biolsi, “Imagined Geographies: Sovereignty, Indigenous Space, and American Indian Struggle,”; Andrea Gómez Cervantes, “‘Looking Mexican’: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Latina/o Immigrants and the Racialization of Illegality in the Midwest,”; Joseph Kowalski, “Imaginary Lines, Real Consequences: The Effect of the Militarization of the United States-Mexico Border on Indigenous Peoples,”; Heston Tobias and Ameil Joseph, “Sustaining Systemic Racism Through Psychological Gaslighting: Denials of Racial Profiling and Justifications of Carding by Police Utilizing Local News Media,”; Sara Daly, “Bordering on Discrimination: Effects of

instrumentalize and appropriate religious symbols from the communities they police, but popular cultural productions create a public discourse that frames policing these religious activities actions as not only justified, necessary, and heroic, but also a practice that is engaging and available for the US public to consume as entertainment.



Left to right: Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde figurines sold next to mainstream Catholic figures, U.S. DEA challenge coin featuring Santa Muerte, still from AMC crime drama *Breaking Bad* shows busts of Jesús Malverde on DEA desks. ⁶³⁶

Even as they operate on the fringes of the security fields, and specifically market themselves and their work to law enforcement and defense practitioners, the experts' idea of the "narco saint" seeps out into larger public discourses. These saints are presented – often as fictionalized, brief, and anonymous set-dressings for the American crime-television and infotainment – to wide audiences. Then narco saint experts fill in the blanks left by these fictional narratives with their distinctly religious law enforcement interpretation with quotes on media blogs. These experts' interviews and linked publications on news sites, comment sections, and forums explain to the internet who these unnamed shrines and amulets belong to, and what they mean for the soul and future of the United States. Their law enforcement interpretation comes weighted with the binaries, tropes, and historical imaginaries of the frontier, but also the distinct religiosity found in law enforcement spaces. Narco saint experts reinforce the implicit and explicit border narratives already found in popular cultural medias, and these experts expand

Immigration Policies/Legislation on Indigenous Peoples in the United States and Mexico Comments,"
⁶³⁶ Sarah Maslin Nir, "Roosevelt Avenue, a Corridor of Vice,;" "Vanco," *Breaking Bad Wiki*,
accessed June 3, 2022, <https://breakingbad.fandom.com/wiki/Vanco>.

on the canon, providing explanations and deeper frontier mythologies for those interested. These experts inform those who go on to then consult and contribute to further orientalist representations of borderland saints and the equally imagined “geographies of chaos” the saints become a mascot for.⁶³⁷ Through this expertise and its influence, saints and their devotees symbolically become the cause and symptom of the spiritual insurgency taking over Mexico and threatening the United States, and this characterization has spread into American popular television, news, and video games. As with other orientalist imaginaries, these narratives say more about the authors and their conceptions of themselves within the imaginary borderland and mythos they create than they do about the empirical reality they seek to represent. As seen below by the involvement of Hollywood in creating cultural acceptance for domestic and international policing, the securityscape and its security processes are not just deployed via state agents and soldiers.

⁶³⁷ One example of this is Dr. Andrew Chesnut, an American academic who has worked with Robert J. Bunker, provided publicity via Twitter promotion to Bunker, contributed himself to the Small Wars site. He also posted on social media about the game and Santa Muerte’s presence within it while promoting his Huffpost article on the game : Dr. Death & Divinity, “‘Ghost Recon Wildlands’ Goes to Battle in the War on Drugs - My Take on the Updated Game as Propaganda [@AndrewChesnut1](http://Huffingtonpost.Com/Entry/Ghost-Recon-Wildlands-Goes-to-Battle-in-the-War-On_us_58bc61dbe4b0fa65b844b4c7?Ncid=engmodushpimg00000004 #SantaMuerte,” Tweet, <a href=) (blog), April 20, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/855033915513479168>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “My Critique of the Role in Santa Muerte in the Popular Video Game - ‘Ghost Recon Wildlands’ Goes to Battle in the War on Drugs [@AndrewChesnut1](https://Huffpost.Com/Entry/Ghost-Recon-Wildlands-Goes-to-Battle-in-the-War-On_b_58bc61dbe4b0fa65b844b4c7,” Tweet, <a href=) (blog), May 26, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1265253213328023552>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “‘Ghost Recon Wildlands’ Goes to Battle in the War on Drugs - My Take on the Updated Game as Propaganda [@AndrewChesnut1](http://Huffingtonpost.Com/Entry/Ghost-Recon-Wildlands-Goes-to-Battle-in-the-War-On_us_58bc61dbe4b0fa65b844b4c7?Ncid=engmodushpimg00000004 #SantaMuerte,” Tweet, <a href=) (blog), April 20, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/855033915513479168>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “At Least One Santa Muerte Devotee Isn’t Offended by the New Ghost Recon Wildlands Game [@AndrewChesnut1](https://T.Co/Nm9esqPSY,” Tweet, <a href=) (blog), March 12, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/840958965605376000>. The term “geographies of chaos” is drawn from Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2016).

The language and expertise surrounding aspects of war, conflict, and security deeply impact how something is conceptualized, for good or ill. In Carol Cohn's, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals.", the sterile and then sexual, masculinist language surrounding nuclear aggression and defense, first sanitized the associated death toll into something that could be stomached, but then enjoyed.⁶³⁸ She argues that how something is talked about sets the boundaries of how something may be thought about. To understand how popular conceptions of the drug war have been bounded by its cultural representations, this chapter addresses how narco saints are spoken about *beyond* security community expertise. To this end, I include popular cultural products, media, and infotainment that introduce and expose United States audiences to the imaginary of narco saints and the geographic cosmologies those saints represent and find that the "Blue Line Religion" discussed in the last chapter is still largely present outside law enforcement circles. Specifically, this chapter focuses on pieces of media that are popular and visible within US popular culture, and how these representations echo and amplify the religious frontier tropes pushed by the experts discussed previously in this project. Here the "narco saint" travels from closed interactions between experts and law enforcement to more general audiences. Below we see the narco saint expert evolve from a key stakeholder to a figure that takes a back seat. In turn their law enforcement religiosity moves to the forefront as United States audiences are introduced and exposed to informal borderland religion through participatory and engaging media that actively applies the lens of the state agent who opposes those saints and their devotees. The chapter then investigates specific popular media products and other visible mediums that introduce and amplify frontier imaginaries through constructed, but engaging narratives of narco saints and spiritual insurgencies.

⁶³⁸ Cohn, Carol. "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals."

Explaining her own work and its appeal across borders, artist Agnès Varda explains this comes from art's ability to bridge and meld experiences, real and fictional, with internal emotional life. "What culture means is that we are able to associate real things, nature, paintings we have seen, music we have heard, a book we have read, a film we saw, with our real life, our emotional life, which means a lot."⁶³⁹ This succinct explanation does not so much as define culture, but explain why popular culture matters and can help us understand people's social and emotional lives. Cultural analysis invites us to ask why a fictional show about a chemistry teacher cooking meth has resonated within the amorphously defined field of border security and the larger white patriarchal culture assumed dominant in United States in general.⁶⁴⁰

Video Games, Television, Movies

Of the many types of media that represent saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde to wide audiences, television, video games, and movies provide perhaps the most dynamic vehicles to do so, as their creators have license to create entertaining and engaging depictions in the name of fiction. When those fictional productions include representations of North American criminality, the borderlands of Mexico and the United States, and the war on drugs that spans these geographies, popular creators often fall back on frontier tropes of white male individuality and heroism, racialized villains, and imaginaries of binary culture wars. Narco saints are often included in these imaginaries as set dressing—background inclusions that communicate the tone, nature, or setting of the larger narrative—but also sometimes as central plot devices or character themselves. This chapter analyzes a variety of popular cultural productions, both fictional and nonfictional. More importantly, this chapter homes in on the ways this discourse actively centers

⁶³⁹ Varda, Agnès. *Agnès Varda: Interviews*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2014. 133

⁶⁴⁰ Paul Elliott Johnson, "Walter White(Ness) Lashes out: Breaking Bad and Male Victimage," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 14–28.

and characterizes the “us” as the active but equally imagined party against a constructed “other”, throughout the seemingly disparate mediums. The media vehicle changes, but all of these productions in some way encourage active participation from its audience as the “us” within the cosmologies detailed in the previous chapter. For this reason, this discussion evolves from work that recognizes the importance of “intermediality” when discussing the complex interplay of media, historical memory, geographic framing, and popular cultural productions ⁶⁴¹

Intermediality is more “research axis” than theory, and it recognizes the different mediascapes that make up the cultural milieu of modern life and provides a justification for an analysis of different media types (for the purposes of this discussion video games, film, and television) within a single project, while acknowledging the differences between the respective mediums. This axis allows for an analysis of similar participatory ‘othering’ narratives found in both local news coverage and internationally popular video games. These audiences may initially differ, but the narratives of justified violence and suspicion place all viewers into a similar position—one that looks *out* over an Orientalized borderland.

Edward Said famously observes that cultural productions about “the Orient” are more representative of Western self-perception and their perceived relationship to the world, than any definitive truth about the “Orient”. Said uses the metaphor of a theatrical production to display how Orientalism grew and developed into the concrete entity it is now and exists as alleged expertise; housed on an enclosed stage, a production’s role is to “represent the larger whole from which they emanate”, however this play remains affixed to the stage its being performed on, and thus “affixed to Europe” as it ultimately serves European aims and audiences without representing the people it showcases.⁶⁴² Although the concept was used to originally describe

⁶⁴¹ Ana M. López, “Calling for Intermediality: Latin American Mediascapes,”

⁶⁴² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979). 63

European attitudes towards cultures outside its own, United States' representations of its Southern Borderlands fall into this category. As Renato Rosaldo observed, "The U.S.-Mexico border has become theater, and border theater has become social violence."⁶⁴³ The alleged violence and exotic nature of the borderlands is a deep part of securityscape rhetoric and the larger cosmologies they superimpose on the borderlands, Mexico, and Latin America as a whole.

Security professionals, and those in the entertainment industry that echo their ideas, create discourse with an outward looking pretense, but their work in reality reflects inward representations of anxieties, desires, and state interests that may have very little to do with realistic threats to US lives and security. Said argues that Orientalism should be seen not as a legitimate body of knowledge, but instead a constricting thought framework which allows its bearer, in his text "the West", to maintain expansionist mindset as well as prestige within its own social circles and societies.⁶⁴⁴ Though not a field itself, Orientalism is a discourse, and can affect wide swaths of knowledge and expertise, reproducing this restrictive framework in service of further imperialism and racism. It creates sharp delineations between what is the Orient and Occident, what is other and what is standard, deviant and normal, dangerous and safe. The United States securityscape and its productions often fall into this trap, looking inward and exposing its own imperial anxieties about the border under a veneer of vigilance and defense. The hardening of border security, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, spurred scholars to revive Said's analysis in light of the "hypermasculinist, religiously grounded project to save US state identity" that became very apparent in US security and popular media.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴³ Linda Alcoff; Eduardo Mendieta, eds. (2003). "Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism". *Identities: race, class, gender, and nationality*. 33

⁶⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* 42-43

⁶⁴⁵ Meghana Nayak, "Orientalism and 'Saving' US State Identity after 9/11," 43. See also Laura M. Goodall, "The Otherized Latino: Edward Said's Orientalism Theory and Reforming Suspect Class Analysis Comment," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law* 16, no. 3 (2014 2013): 835-60. And Christabel Devadoss and Karen Culcasi, "Orientalist-Settler Colonialism: Foundations and Practices of Post-911 White

Because citizenship and national identity are often expressed at borders, these geographies provide fertile soil for orientalist anxieties, resulting in gendered and racial violence against those perceived and as “other”.⁶⁴⁶ This violence is particularly insidious, as “the other” and the geography they occupy becomes characterized by it, further violence becomes discursively justified as either a norm or in response to the “barbaric” landscape.⁶⁴⁷ This is what is happening when fictionalized narco saints and their equally imagined devotees are used as backdrops or set dressings for Western media. Santa Muerte shrines and Jesús Malverde busts become interchangeable symbols of violence, otherness, and depravity. Their representation within this media not only repeats claims by narco saint experts, but builds and expands this canon and understanding of narco saints in the public sphere.

Wildlands

The first-person shooter video game *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* in particular stands out as an example of how participatory media can engage their audiences within a frontier narrative, affecting how wide swathes of people are introduced to topics like United States foreign and covert intervention, syncretic informal religious practice, and transnational policing and crime. The *Ghost Recon* series, pulled from the popular works of author Tom Clancy, is a video game franchise where each game revolves around a singular group of covert United States agents who work around the globe in different countries and conflicts, always operating as agents who “do not exist”, or “ghosts”. The US fictional law enforcement team up of covert international agents is made up of four codenamed male characters, Holt, Midas, Weaver, and Nomad. A key aspect of the franchises

Nationalism in the United States,” *Handbook on the Changing Geographies of the State*, October 9, 2020. See also Maira, Sunaina. 2009. *Islamophobia and the war on terror: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire After 9/11*, Durham, NC: Duke UP. Print

⁶⁴⁶ George A. Martinez, “Legal Construction of Race: Mexican-Americans and Whiteness, The Teaching, Scholarship and Service: Practicing LatCrit Theory,” *Harvard Latino Law Review* 2 (1997): 321–48.

⁶⁴⁷ Luis Ramos-García, *The State of Latino Theater in the United States* (Psychology Press, 2002).

mythos is that while the United States denies their existence, the Ghosts work and cooperate with many United States agencies including the CIA, FBI, and DEA as well as the US military in their varied missions around the world; the Ghost Recon series has taken its players on a violent tour of various locales including Russia, the Korean peninsula, various East African countries, and Mexico. A key part for the 2017 game's promotional material are promises of authenticity, both in representation of the tactical action and the history of the Latin American conflict that players place themselves in as agents.⁶⁴⁸ Ghost Recon Wildlands belongs to a wide genre, called military/tactical shooters, where players assume the role of soldiers, militia members, and law enforcement agents to secure militarized objectives and complete political missions. Scholars have addressed how this genre represents the world with high levels of alterity and violence.⁶⁴⁹ Ghost Recon Wildlands specifically represents Latin America's political turmoil and drug violence as part of a "Broader Geography of Chaos", these violent geographies act as generic set pieces to facilitate dynamic challenges for players.⁶⁵⁰

There are currently fifteen games in this franchise, Ghost Recon Wildlands is one of the most recent. The game tasks the players with combating a Mexican drug cartel that has taken over Bolivia and corrupted the government into a "Narco-State". Ghost Recon Wildlands is one of the most popular video game titles of 2017, topping charts in both North America and Europe.⁶⁵¹ It

⁶⁴⁸ Ubisoft, "In depth with the narrative designer of Ghost Recon." 2015. <https://ghost-recon.ubisoft.com/wildlands/en-us/news/152-221066-16/in-depth-with-the-narrative-designer-of-ghost-recon-wildlands>

⁶⁴⁹ Vít Šisler, "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 203–20.; Dean Chan, "Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representations in E-Games," 2005.; Nina B. Huntemann, "Playing with Fear: Catharsis and Resistance in Military-Themed Video Games," in *Joystick Soldiers* (Routledge, 2009), 239–52.; Phillip Penix-Tadsen, "Latin American Ludology: Why We Should Take Video Games Seriously (and When We Shouldn't)," *Latin American Research Review*, 2013, 174–90.

⁶⁵⁰ Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2016). 178.

⁶⁵¹ GameCentral, "Ghost Recon: Wildlands Is Fastest-Selling Game of 2017," *Metro* (blog), March 13, 2017, <https://metro.co.uk/2017/03/13/ghost-recon-wildlands-is-fast-selling-game-of-2017-6506384/>.

continues to release downloadable content and has a large online multiplayer base. Though industry reviews of the games content and play have been tepid, the popularity of players is reflected in its high sales, particularly in North America, Europe, and more recently Japan. The game has been played 55.17 million times since its release in March 2017, and on average 5.6 thousand people play it daily. It has been praised for its gameplay by the industry and its open-world setting.⁶⁵² The French studio that produced this game, Ubisoft, is upfront about their aims for authenticity their representations of the drugs war.⁶⁵³ In efforts to create a “living, breathing, open world,” members of the development and design teams not only lived in Bolivia, but also worked step-by-step with both United States and Bolivian military special forces units, following the units on the ground and getting motion capture data so the protagonist and enemy motions were “as accurate as possible” and created an immersive, realistic, experience.⁶⁵⁴ Ubisoft also hired active and retired military personnel as advisors. The game’s writers consulted with CIA officers at the agency’s Headquarters in Virginia, representatives from the DEA in the US Mexico Borderlands, members of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), and spoke with cooperating Mexican drug smugglers to inform the game’s content.⁶⁵⁵ The studio discussed their direct engagement with the drug war’s “complex” history when asked in a promotional interview

⁶⁵² GameCentral, “Ghost Recon: Wildlands Is Fastest-Selling Game of 2017,” *Metro* (blog), March 13, 2017, <https://metro.co.uk/2017/03/13/ghost-recon-wildlands-is-fast-selling-game-of-2017-6506384/>.

⁶⁵³ Robert Rath, “‘Ghost Recon Wildlands’ Draws from the Real-Life Cartel War,” February 28, 2017, [https://www.vice.com/en/article/534m5n/ghost-recon-wildlands-draws-from-the-real-life-cartel-war](https://www.vice.com/en/article/534m5n/ghost-recon-wildlands-draws-from-the-real-life-cartel-war;).; Ubisoft, *Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon Wildlands - Intel: Authenticity [EUROPE]*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAf_mIHnLRc.

⁶⁵⁴ Ubisoft North America, Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon Wildlands: Intel #2 - Experts & Authenticity- BTS - Ubisoft [NA], 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6mPv3fRT8Y>.; Ubisoft, *Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon Wildlands - Intel: Authenticity [EUROPE]*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAf_mIHnLRc.

⁶⁵⁵ Robert Rath, “‘Ghost Recon Wildlands’ Draws from the Real-Life Cartel War,” *Vice*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/534m5n/ghost-recon-wildlands-draws-from-the-real-life-cartel-war>.

with Sam Strachman, the Ubisoft Paris Narrative Designer, how much their knowledge of the drug war impacted the plot and story of the game. This excerpt is posted on their official website:

The story of Ghost Recon Wildlands is of course a work of fiction, but is heavily influenced by the “War on Drugs”, in terms of recent events but especially in regards to the past fifty years. What makes Bolivia so interesting is how the War on Drugs has affected its cultural and political development. It has a long and difficult history involving numerous dictators, an ancient relationship to the coca leaf, and even Nazi captain Klaus Barbie. The War on Drugs is a massively complex issue with no clear solution or end in sight. We do our best to explore as many angles as we possibly can.⁶⁵⁶

The Bolivian government has since filed a formal complaint with the French Embassy over the harmful depiction of their country and the implication that they require United States intervention to effectively combat the drug industry.⁶⁵⁷ In recent history, Bolivia has rejected US intervention in the drug war, expelling the DEA in 2008 and legalizing the agrarian production of coca leaf in 2005. These efforts have resulted in a decrease in coca production and violence against rural farmers, though the United States has been vocally displeased over their expulsion and Bolivia’s “failures” and “insufficient law enforcement efforts” to disrupt the narcotics trade.⁶⁵⁸ The development of Ghost Recon Wildlands was steeped in these politics and discourses of the 2000s and 2010s. Announced at the 2015 E3 video game industry convention, the game itself was in development years before in 2012, placing its early drafting during the breaking allegations of the CIA-led assassination of Enrique “Kiki” Camarena.⁶⁵⁹

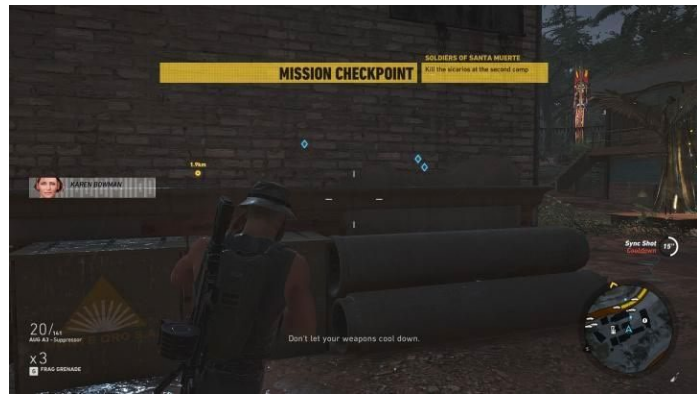
⁶⁵⁶ Ubisoft, “In depth with the narrative designer of Ghost Recon.” 2015. <https://ghost-recon.ubisoft.com/wildlands/en-us/news/152-221066-16/in-depth-with-the-narrative-designer-of-ghost-recon-wildlands>

⁶⁵⁷ Robbie Gramer, “The Diplomatic Dust-Up Between France and Bolivia — Over a Video Game,” *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/03/a-diplomatic-dust-up-between-france-and-bolivia-over-a-video-game-ubisoft-ghost-recon-wildlands-controversy/>.

⁶⁵⁸ Ruxandra Guidi, “Bolivia Stands up to US with Coca-Control Policy,” *Al Jazeera*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/9/30/bolivia-stands-up-to-us-with-coca-control-policy>.

⁶⁵⁹ Russell H. Bartley and Sylvia Erickson Bartley, *Eclipse of the Assassins: The CIA, Imperial Politics, and the Slaying of Mexican Journalist Manuel Buendía*, 1st edition (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015). 411-412; Luke Karmali, “E3 2015: Ghost Recon: Wildlands Announced,” *IGN*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2015/06/15/e3-2015-ghost-recon-wildlands-announced>.; Ubisoft. “A

The entwined histories of the game’s development, its plotted narrative, and the political climate of its release are set within the real events and uneasy unveilings of the drug war that continues to inherit the violence of the past thirty years. The game draws from historical memory to construct heroes and villains to populate their “wildlands”. Phillip Penix-Tadsen borrows and expands on film studies that discuss the importance of place, and its unique place and purpose within the players experience of culture and place.



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[p]lace becomes spectacle, a signifier of the film’s subject, a metaphor for the state of mind of the protagonist.” Setting is cultural as well, the cinematic “spectacle” being dependent in part on the context in which a film’s action takes place. It is in this sense that a film’s setting can function as a “symbol that stands for relationships, values and goals of a group of people, e.g. in the form of national attributes, ... Video game spaces are virtual environments in which actual events occur: areas are explored, discoveries are made, and gaming literacy is increased. Rather than space in isolation or as the setting for the narration of events, video game space is an environmental context for the active creation of culturally contextualized meaning.⁶⁶¹

Message from the Development Team.” 2017. <https://ghost-recon.ubisoft.com/wildlands/en-us/news/152-285321-16/a-message-from-the-development-team>

⁶⁶⁰ Just4Games. “Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon- Wildlands Fallen Angel Figurine.” Accessed June 3, 2022. <https://just4games.com/products/tom-clancys-ghost-recon-wildlands-fallen-angel-figurine>.

⁶⁶¹ Phillip Penix-Tadsen, Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America. 177-178

Video games have the ability drop its audience into the midst of a represented culture, or a misrepresented one, or one gutted for its entertaining pieces and hollowed out to facilitate the narrative fantasy of a player base that is largely assumed to be white and male.⁶⁶² But this element is important to understanding why the representations of Mexican religion matter in all participatory medias. Even if representations of narco saints and narco saint devotees are simply set dressings or background to both fiction and nonfiction, these sensational representations cue how consumers position themselves in relation to the real-world analogs. These representative settings have the capacity to inform and instigate the creation of the law enforcement cosmologies within the general public.

The game itself, Ghost Recon Wildlands is an open world, tactical military shooter game, meaning that the player(s) are free to explore the virtual world and are not “railroaded” through a specific linear plotline.⁶⁶³ As they explore the open world, the player(s) take on military-like missions, securing strategic sites, assassinating key enemies, rescuing hostages, and generally operating as a covert military team. Throughout the game, the player outfits their avatar with weapon, vehicle, and skill upgrades, along with cosmetic “skins”.



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⁶⁶² Shira Chess, Nathaniel J. Evans, and Joyya JaDawn Baines, “What Does a Gamer Look Like? Video Games, Advertising, and Diversity,”

⁶⁶³ Fieldwork. Personal play through.

⁶⁶⁴ Ubisoft. “Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon Wildlands Deluxe Edition PS4 Game : Amazon.Co.Uk: PC & Video Games.” Online Marketplace. Amazon. Accessed June 3, 2022. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Tom-Clancys-Ghost-Wildlands-Deluxe/dp/B06XJTL6HR>.

This cosmetic content, as well as downloadable playable content and promotional material, consistently feature Santa Muerte's image and occasionally her name. A deluxe preordered version of the game came with a physical Santa Muerte statuette suitable for the shelves of the customer, and the skull motif skins included in the game were named "Santa Muerte" and could be applied to the players face and gun.

Throughout the game shrines, ritualized murder, and graffiti marked with her image and name provide the players with dark, dilapidated, candle-lit settings where enemy soldiers and cultists pray to the looming skeletons arrayed with code and pixels.



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A playthrough of the game begins with a video, or cut-scene, of the Mexican drug cartel leader "El Sueño" explaining his vision for a "narco state" where he can actualize his desire for religious and entrepreneurial sovereignty. The view begins in a Catholic cathedral and pans down from a stone statue of a skeletal figure with wings, who the player will learn later is the game's fictionalized Santa Muerte, to a thick-necked man with tattoos covering his bald head and face. This is El Sueño, the game's primary antagonist who explains through visual religious

⁶⁶⁵ Screenshot from personal playthrough.

murals his methods for acquiring a place and business free of “yankee” involvement or intervention. In one of these murals El Sueño is backlit by an illuminated disk and flanked by rows of faceless, masked, armed men as a cornucopia drops money on everyday citizens, to the right of El Sueño, Uncle Sam wields a hammer with a flight of jets overhead, denoting American intervention in Latin America and the drug trade as a whole. El Sueño explains that he provides for his community but will kill any and all who stand against his vision for a transnationally funded narco state. In this way, El Sueño is the typical drug lord constructed by both crime drama and the monster of law enforcement training documents. His straw-man characterization brings attention to American involvement in the drug war and the legacy of covert manipulation of Latin America governments. This acknowledgment is key within the narrative of the game, as the Ghosts themselves are a covert American team directed by a CIA contact. Moving from the visual representation of America militarization to one reminiscent of depictions of manifest destiny, a Skeletal figure extends an aged feminine arm towards a golden disc above a mountain inscribed “Bolivia” and explains with a female voice-over, “Sueño, m’ijo—what if you had your own country?”



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While the religious imagery and the use of Santa Muerte introduces the antagonist, it is another death that brings the protagonists into the conflict with the Santa Blanca cartel. In a helicopter, the second opening cut scene continues and the player character Nomad, and the other Ghosts, speak to their CIA connect, Karen Bowman. Bowman, a blonde young white woman, explains that the Santa Blanca cartel has taken over Bolivia and is in the process of consolidating an operating narco-state that could through its Mexican leadership, infiltrate the United States through the Southern US Mexico border. This threat however, is not why the Ghosts have been called to intervene. Instead, this is a revenge mission. Karen Bowman's close friend and teammate, Ricardo "Ricky" Sandoval was a former US Marine, and undercover DEA Special Agent that was tortured and killed by El Sueño himself. It is Ricky's body the Ghosts must recover his body and his brutal death they must avenge. Karen Bowman, a CIA operative who is masquerading as an aid worker, is the character who justifies the conflicts and the motivations for the Ghosts, helped with the visual rhetoric of El Sueño Cartel's religious and barbaric crimes splattered around the game's setting.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid

The revenge mission undertaken by the Ghosts is framed as politically sterile as the dialogue within the game highlights the Ghost's unwillingness to align themselves emotionally or ideologically with Kataris 26, the proletariat freedom fighters that combat Santa Blanca or the Bolivian government the cartel has corrupted. They are alone, representatives of Bowman's personal vengeance first and United States defensive action only once the plot progresses. At any chance to involve themselves in Bolivian or Mexican politics or internal conflict, the Ghosts are reticent and only grudgingly descend guns, helicopters, and drone strikes blazing. Dialogue in the game has one of the supporting characters complaining that the socialist rebels "ideology always ends up with more bodies in the ground." To which the main character the player operates as, Nomad, explains that "End of the Day, this is a revenge mission. We need to focus and get this done quick before we get stuck between local politics and a firestorm of cartel bullets." What the Ghosts explain away and obscure with this dialogue is the US documented covert interest in Latin American local and national politics which characterized the late 1980s and 1990s; efforts that deeply shaped past and current anti-narcotics efforts on a global scale. The Ghosts, the eponymous team of the entire video game franchise, are an American covert ops team that throughout the franchise that technically "don't exist". They come in, instigate intense amounts of death, destabilize enemy governments and organizations, and withdraw leaving "legends" of their involvement. This is the legacy the player, as they take on the role of Nomad, the American covert op and single parent, continue. At one point, Bowman and the player character acknowledge this deeply entrenched history.

Bowman: "Are you afraid the Socialists are going to get too big for their britches?
You're such a Cold War antique"

Player character: "Says the CIA spook in Latin America"

Despite the fact Ubisoft is a French company that made a game that takes place largely in an imagined Bolivia, Wildlands is deeply saturated with United States historical memory and the

cosmologies of its security scape. The character Ricardo "Ricky" Sandoval is a direct fictionalized analog of a real DEA agent whose torture and murder rationalized a surge of US involvement and pro-drug war sentiment in the United States. The character Sandoval and his death are fictional and wishful takes on the real life, death, and legacy of Enrique S. "Kiki" Camarena. Like his fictional allegory, Camarena served in the United States marines and went on to become an undercover DEA agent, working until he was abducted on February 7th, 1985. His body was found in Michoacán on March 5th, 1985 bearing signs of lengthy torture.⁶⁶⁷ His torture and murder went on to spark an international, high-profile, and complicated murder investigation involving breaches in extradition procedures, implications that Mexican officials had destroyed key evidence, and accusations that the CIA had colluded with drug cartels to silence Camarena.⁶⁶⁸ Camarena's legacy continued in the form of symbolic anti-drug "red ribbon" weeks in the United States, awards given to law enforcement officers, and a turning point for US involvement in the international drug war.

Ghost Recon Wildland does have a single player campaign that winds through the open-world, and the game is built around the task of avenging the death of the fallen DEA agent. The game's progress and immersive emotional appeal is structured around this revenge mission. The main antagonist El Sueño, the Mexican druglord and leader of the fictional and religiously motivated Santa Blanca cartel, had killed the then undercover Ricky Sandoval in the lead up to the establishment of the narco-state in Bolivia. While it is up to the Ghosts to prevent El Sueño from invading the US's southern border through the druglord's extensive network of narco-terrorists and cultists, the plot hinges around retribution for the death of fellow state agent. The

⁶⁶⁷ Gary Feess et al., "The Enrique Kiki Camarena Murder and Its Aftermath," *Sw. J. Int'l L.* 23 (2017): 17.

⁶⁶⁸ Russell H. Bartley and Sylvia Erickson Bartley, *Eclipse of the Assassins: The CIA, Imperial Politics, and the Slaying of Mexican Journalist Manuel Buendía*, 1st edition.

player's missions revolve around intimidating or eliminating these fictionalized narcos, who range from torturers, corrupted Catholic priests, traffickers, amoral beauty queens, pro-narco bloggers, Santa Muerte cult leaders, and assassins. Each are explained, either through the CIA agent Bowman's voiceover the role they played in Sandoval's death or the direct threat they pose to the United States through a weak Mexican border. Bowman tells the player which non-player characters made sure Sandoval was awake during torture (there was evidence that Kiki Camarena was injected with amphetamines that kept him conscious during torture), which corrupt official hid evidence of his death, and which characters did the actual torturing. The player's character is run through the horrific pain Ricky would have experienced in the line of duty. Each of these enemy characters are then killed or intimidated by the player character on their way to El Sueño. At the end of the game, as the non-linear missions stop and the main plot wraps up, the Ghosts learn that Sandoval knowingly sacrificed himself so that the proper agents [The United States, Bowman, and the Ghosts themselves] would have the official justification to intervene against the cartel-suffused Bolivian government and El Sueño, successfully saving both Bolivia and United States from the Santa Blanca Cartel. This frees Ricky Sandoval, and by reference Camarena, of incompetence or error, and justifies the subsequent years of US covert involvement. The infallible state and its agents remain at the core of the story, even in death. The game itself is deeply enmeshed in the history of US intervention in Latin America and the drug war that continues to incentivize this type of action, and this is overtly visible in the ways the game draws its players into a fictionalized world that references but twists real events, people, and geographies into a palatable and consumable product.

Within the narrativized history of the game, foreign non-intervention allowed a Mexican drug lord to grow large enough to threaten the United States and it is intervention through covert

operation, CIA spooks, and Ghost teams that are the solution. Throughout the game American excellence, and therefore the excellence of the player, is highlighted despite the winks and nods to a violent and imperial history. It is the American state, through the Ghost team's covert operation, that take over for Kataris 26 once the campesinos have been revealed as too reckless and disorganized to handle the cartel themselves. It is then that the Ghosts are able to combat the Santa Blanca cartel and their deviant religious beliefs successfully, effectively disabling the organization and its hold on Bolivia's government. The moral imparted by the game's narrative is that only through US active involvement— individual heroism and violence in this case-- is the US safe from the brewing threat Mexican narcotics and crime pose to the entirety of the Western Hemisphere. The smug apolitical nature of the covert team shows they, as agents of the state, are reluctant to meddle in foreign politics, and only do so through necessity. The personal and intimate death of one of their own provides a guiltless entry into the conflict, redeeming the subsequent violence and stretched jurisdiction that plagued the real Camarena conflict and case. The player is introduced and more importantly, invited into the historical legacy of US intervention as not just a viewer, but a necessary and justified participant in that history.

As discussed in Chapter Three, law enforcement training curricula imagines the territories of and between the US and Mexico through a Manichean and settler-colonial cosmology of a threatened civilization warring with encroaching barbarism, all providing a heroic role to fledgling state agents. The places and spaces of associated participatory media exist to entertain white-male fantasies of policing and heroism outside these restricted law enforcement spaces. Video games invite its players into spaces created to mirror real geographic locales and conflicts, but these locales and conflicts are fairly interchangeable and designed with

the façade of regional and cultural specificities.⁶⁶⁹ These settings provide the player with challenges, exciting antagonists, and dangerous stakes through seemingly specific and regionalized details; however, these superficially authentic details and locations are actually vague imaginary settings that easily stand in for one another, which Penix-Tadsen labels a “broader geography of chaos.”⁶⁷⁰ All these locales are united by their role as playground for the player. These places are imaginary, despite being labeled with real geographic names, and are constructed with details and tropes of barbarism, violence, and otherized cultural signifiers that are designed to be accessible to the player in that the images, audio, and landscapes assembled with code are made to be interacted with by the player in some facet. Like the Orientalist literature and expertise that Said approaches, these pieces of media, center the role, heroism, and ego of their audiences, often under the guise of education or representative authenticity.⁶⁷¹ Many video games, but specifically the tactical shooter games that replicate military and paramilitary style-conflict present Latin America as “barren wastelands devoid of civilians and infrastructure in need of saving and U.S. intervention”.⁶⁷² By depicting the settings as ill-used by existing inhabitants and generically chaotic, the game forgives foreign efforts to “fix” the space, and instead incentivizes this action as both necessary and heroic on the part of the players, who occupy the roles of usually United States soldiers. The poverty, disorder, and turmoil displayed in these games is itself weaponized, used to justify the violence of the player characters and invite their presence into foreign conflicts. Within these fictional playgrounds, Latin America is

⁶⁶⁹ Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America*.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid, 182.

⁶⁷¹ Promotional material for these games often includes which military and intelligence agencies were consulted with, promising players representative experiences of foreign combat. These broad geographies instead provide a standard playable experience crafted for audiences that are assumed to be largely homogenously white and male, so much so these types of combat games and promotional material are replicated throughout different franchises.

⁶⁷² Richard King and David J. Leonard, “Wargames as a New Frontier: Securing American Empire in Virtual Space,” in *Joystick Soldiers* (Routledge, 2009), 107–21.

depicted as the insurgency-laden warzone popular in US popular and political rhetoric, perpetuating these narratives at deeply intimate levels as their audience works to achieve said politics in imaginary settings.

Like the narco saint expertise discussed in the last chapter, these game creators leverage long-held historical imaginaries of barbaric borderlands. These settings are filled with racialized criminal and deviant religiosities to engage their audiences with interactive settings that center the white US imagination as violent yet reluctant saviors in this cosmology. As the war on drugs began in the mid-twentieth century, new orientalist discourse developed to mirror and facilitate public outrage against a newly constructed other, those who used drugs and brought them into the United States. These categories of ‘other’ were and still are deeply formed by concepts of race and class, and politicians, news coverage, and media conflated these imaginaries into a “grand-scale demonology” and mythos attached to the use and presence of illegal narcotics in the United States.⁶⁷³ The Nixon-era policy makers and their media allies in the US created an anti-drug culture filled “essentialist” and “externalist” norms that oriented the US against an immoral practice and illegal industry, and the rhetoric that characterized this move has led to the stamina and longevity of the global Drug War the US continues to fight.⁶⁷⁴ The establishment of this particular “orient”, in this case the drug users and dealers that made up those the US was intent on eradicating, was implemented throughout many levels of society including pedagogical campaigns that enforced the ideas that drug use came from inherent individual failings to stand up to peer pressure and temptation, as well as larger policy initiatives that focused policing on

⁶⁷³ Paul Gootenberg. "Talking About the Flow: Drugs, Borders, and the Discourse of Drug Control." *Cultural Critique* 71 (2009): 13-46. 36; Timothy A. Hickman, "Drugs and Race in American Culture: Orientalism in the Turn-of-the-Century Discourse of Narcotic Addiction," *American Studies* 41, no. 1 (2000): 71–91.

⁶⁷⁴ Paul Gootenberg. "Talking About the Flow: Drugs, Borders, and the Discourse of Drug Control." ; Curtis Marez, *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* (U of Minnesota Press, 2004).

visible and petty, but low-level nonviolent crime, as a way to curb further descent into more serious immoral offenses.⁶⁷⁵ Similar in regards to the moral judgement that became attached to the act of terrorism in the early 2000s, drug use was painted as unequivocally evil and against assumed essential American and Christian values, and there for an issue that did not require nuanced understanding or differing viewpoints.⁶⁷⁶ This moral absolutist position is deeply effective in extending state control and policing jurisdictions into private life and past territorial borders, as well as overlaying a lasting cosmology over law enforcement work and its reception by the public.⁶⁷⁷ Though the presence of terrorism and illicit narcotics are generally assumed to undermine the state, their conceptual category and surrounding discourse has enabled and extended state capacity and control throughout the nineteenth century.⁶⁷⁸ In particular, these concepts, married after 9/11 with the crime terror nexus, served as justification to harden the US Mexico border, rigorously police border communities, and criminalize immigration and asylum seekers in order to combat the “other” that existed in and beyond the US’s southern borderlands.⁶⁷⁹ The characterization of narcotics traffickers, and of terrorists, within the US security scape exemplifies an Orientalist perspective where the US projects anxieties and their own role as hegemonic protector into the creation of this trafficker, terrorist, and narco saint

⁶⁷⁵ Paul Gootenberg. "Talking About the Flow: Drugs, Borders, and the Discourse of Drug Control."

⁶⁷⁶ Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism"*; Edward S. Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan, *The Terrorism Industry: The Experts and Institutions That Shape Our View of Terror* (Pantheon Books, 1989).

⁶⁷⁷ Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, eds., *Crack In America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Paul Gootenberg. "Talking About the Flow: Drugs, Borders, and the Discourse of Drug Control." 36; Timothy A. Hickman, "Drugs and Race in American Culture: Orientalism in the Turn-of-the-Century Discourse of Narcotic Addiction,"

⁶⁷⁸ Timothy Brook, Patrick Carr, and Maria Kefalas, eds., *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952* (University of California Press, 2000); Louis R. Sadler, "The Historical Dynamics of Smuggling in the US–Mexican Border Region, 1550–1998: Reflections on Markets, Cultures and Bureaucracies," *Organized Crime and Democratic Governability. Mexico and the US–Mexican Borderlands*, 2000, 161–76.

⁶⁷⁹ Sadler, Louis R. 2000. "The Historical Dynamics of Smuggling on the U.S.–Mexican Border Region, 1550–1998"

devotee—and in so doing establishes a permanent cultural niche for themselves in the policing and conquering of the borderlands.

Breaking Bad

US cultural products that narrativize and fictionalize drug conflict use borderland settings like large stretches of wild desert or dangerous East Los Angeles streets, and pepper those settings with intimidating images of Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde. The saints' images convey the otherness of these locales in ways that are strange enough to be intriguing to audiences, but familiar in their use of frontier tropes. This is achieved through the characterization of what lies beyond the border as a dangerous and uncivilized place where lawlessness incentivizes the use of individualistic violence from both protagonists and their enemies. These imaginaries fit well into the law enforcement cosmologies detailed in chapter three, and the people at the center of these narratives are usually white men experiencing the other through “narco” saints. Orientalist discourse has been leveraged against Mexican citizens and Indigenous peoples since before the border's formation, creating justification for the United States colonial expansion into the region, the resulting war over the territory, and the subsequent creation of the United States Mexico border as it exists today. Anglo peoples characterized themselves as civilizers of a hinterland and controllers of barbarism; they positioned themselves based on difference and claimed that borderland barbarism came from Mexico's mixed blood and Aztec heritage with a propensity for bloodthirst, immorality, and vice.⁶⁸⁰ Long into the twentieth century and beyond historians have associated whiteness with a rational civility and

⁶⁸⁰ Gilbert D Kingsbury, a writer and orator, who wrote on Mexican Anglo relations in the early 1860s included descriptions of “mongrel blood” and lack of work ethic due to this mixed heritage and Aztec ancestry. See De Leon, A. (1983) *They Called Them Greasers* for a more in-depth discursive analysis. It should be noted that these binaries largely flattened all Indigenous identities in Mexico under this blanket category and characterization.

entrepreneurial spirit that allegedly allowed the Anglo-colonial conquest and civilization of the wild Southwest, in contrast with the “cruel streak” these historians trace back to Mexican-American mixing of Spanish inquisition and “Indian” blood.⁶⁸¹ This trope of difference depended on racial binaries that are replicated today, but these binaries depend deeply on Orientalist hopes and anxieties attached to the border and Mexico itself.⁶⁸² Just as the border was characterized as deeply dangerous by proponents of militarization, conquest, and white supremacy, it was also conceived by these same sources as a site of lawless pleasure that Anglo’s were entitled to.⁶⁸³ This is reflected in the productions, correspondence, and policy of the time and to an extent into the present; the delights and dangers of the borderlands as written and popularized in US media center white, and usually male, protagonists at the center of the discourse.⁶⁸⁴ This is Said’s theatre production, seemingly representing the “other” but far more indicative of how US Anglo audiences wish to view themselves in relation to the border, the borderlands, and Mexico.

“I’m in the empire business,” states the protagonist of popular US television series *Breaking Bad* in the sixth episode of its fifth season. Due to its positive reception and widespread viewership, the show received a healthy amount of analysis from cultural scholars who noted the shows adherence to frontier tropes of white exceptionalism, victim hood, and supremacy; as

⁶⁸¹ Walter Prescott Webb (1965) *The Texas Rangers: A century of Frontier Defense* 14. See also Huntington for primary source examples. For discursive discussion of this phenomenon George A. Martinez, "Legal Construction of Race: Mexican-Americans and Whiteness, The ," *Harvard Latino Law Review* 2 (1997): 321-348

⁶⁸² Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, “American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism”.; Jungwan Kim, “The Image of Mexico in Letters from Mexico: Hegemonic Relations between the U.S. and Mexico in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *The Eagle Feather* 13, no. 1 (2016). And George A. Martinez “Mexican Americans and Whiteness” in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader* (NYU Press, 1998).

⁶⁸³ Norma Klahn, “Writing the Border: The Languages and Limits of Representation,” *Travesia* 3, no. 1–2 (August 1, 1994): 29–55. 31

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid*

well as “western” genre narratives of individualistic achievement, penance, and violence, as well as heteronormative depictions of masculinity.⁶⁸⁵ *Breaking Bad* relies heavily on frontier settings and brown antagonists who endanger the white protagonists’ and their foray into meth production and trade, a foray and eventual success enabled by the primary protagonist and anti-hero Walter White’s rational application of simple chemistry and discovered capacity for violence. After getting his cancer diagnosis, high school chemistry teacher White turns with success to meth production to pay for his treatment, in the process individually dominating methamphetamine production and trade in both the United States and Mexico. The show attributes this exceptional conquest of the regional meth market to White’s inherent rationality and scientific ability, and conversely his newly-discovered capacity for violence which he turns against a host of characters throughout the series. But the setting that White conquers, his home town of Albuquerque and the Northern deserts of Mexico, is a frontier complete with cartel sicarios, desert wildlands, stark contrasts between civilized boring American suburbs and dangerous yellow-filtered Mexican streets, and ruthless, but ultimately celebrated white male heroes on both sides of the law. Walter White actualizes his true nature as he tames this frontier with cold rationality, unique expertise, and no compunctions about violence that is usually rationalized through protection of the family unit or his own health.⁶⁸⁶ This self-discovery

⁶⁸⁵ Jason Landrum, “Say My Name: The Fantasy of Liberated Masculinity,” in *The Methods of Breaking Bad: Essays on Narrative, Character and Ethics* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc, Publishers, 2015), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/orbis/detail.action?docID=1890292...>; Stephen Wakeman, “The ‘One Who Knocks’ and the ‘One Who Waits’: Gendered Violence in Breaking Bad,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 14, no. 2 (August 1, 2018): 213–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016684897...>; Mark Bernhardt, “I’m in the Empire Business’: Markets, Myth, Race, and the Conquest of the American West in Breaking Bad,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 5 (2018): 1256–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12716>; Camilla Fojas, “Border Absurd: The End-Times and the End of the Line,” in *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers* (University of Illinois Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252040924.003.0002>. 16-40; Mark Bernhardt, “Three Bumps in the Road The US-Mexico Borderlands and Border Regulation in Breaking Bad,” *Journal of the West*. 56, no. 3 (2017): 45–59.

⁶⁸⁶ Similarly, the character of Gustavo “Gus” Fring, an antagonist to Walter White, is characterized the same way up until White is able to leverage Gus’ well-hidden temper and bloodlust. Gus’ character is an

through violence comes as White shapes the borderlands to his own design, builds his “myth” as *Heisenberg*, and acts as the show’s primary vantage point that viewers experience the show through. The presence of borderland religion in the show is never explained, or even overly acknowledged throughout the series, but instead used as a set piece to show either the danger of brown-skinned men or the competence of white-skinned men. The scene described at the beginning of the chapter is the premiere of the third season by the then hit show; titled “No Más”, this episode is the introduction not just to an anonymous Santa Muerte, but two of her devotees. Leonel and Marco Salamanca, labeled the “the cousins”, are twin brothers and Juárez Cartel hitmen who are introduced through their devotion to Santa Muerte. After this introduction, the twins go on to cross the border easily and in later episodes wage an ominous campaign against the protagonist Walter White. These hitmen creep into White’s home where his wife and infant daughter live, later kill a hapless member of tribal law enforcement, and then finally meet their end as they confront White’s DEA agent brother-in-law in a revenge-driven destructive standoff.⁶⁸⁷ Leonel and Marco Salamanca are depicted in sharp black suits, an axe across one of their laps, sitting on a bland pastel comforter as they wait for the protagonist to emerge from the shower. They do not speak, or rest from their rigid postures – simply stare ahead ready to kill when their target emerges, like machines that have been ordered to do so. Their sharp “otherness” is highlighted by the juxtaposition of the middle-class suburban and mundane set to the dramatic occult and wilderness scene which introduced these characters only an episode before. Not only are these men silently introduced to the show’s audiences through their

Afro-Latin American and portrayed with the same chill calculating personality and rationality as Walter White, and represents a successful and established drug kingpin, whereas White is an amateur within the trade and culture of the drug business. Still, White is able to out-calculate Gus by specifically manipulating Gus’ irrational desire for revenge.

⁶⁸⁷ Hunter Stephenson, “Breaking Bad Recap: Season 3 Premiere ‘No Mas’ Sets Up a Murderous Confrontation,” /Film, March 23, 2010, <https://www.slashfilm.com/breaking-bad-recap-season-3-premiere-no-mas-sets-up-a-murderous-confrontation/>.

crawling and eerily framed supplication to a skeletal saint in the middle of a wild desert, they then easily sneak across an incredibly permeable border and into American suburbs to threaten the place where white women and babies reside with the same implacable desire to do harm.⁶⁸⁸

The Salamanca's devotion to Santa Muerte is not the first time the show introduced its audiences to narco saint. A season earlier, Walter White's brother-in-law, a brash DEA agent named Hank Schrader confronts a coworker about a statue of Jesús Malverde on his desk⁶⁸⁹:

Hank: Hey, what's up with that? (indicating the statue of Jesus Malverde)

Other Agent: Jesus Malverde, patron saint of Mexican drug dealers.

Hank: Well, yeah, hell, I know who it is, okay? Scumbags kneeling down praying to him. (mimicking a thick mexican accent) "Please, Senor Saint. No DEA, please." I'm just-- I'm just saying, why's he on your desk? Going after neo-Nazis, you don't wear swastikas, right?

Other Agent: Sun Tzu.

Hank: Son who?

Other Agent: Sixth-century Chinese general. Wrote "The Art of War".

(quotes from Sun Tzu "The Art of War") "If you know your enemy as yourself you'll fight without danger in many battles."

Hank: Right on.

In the season finale, one episode before the Salamanca brothers are introduced as they crawl through the desert towards a Santa Muerte shrine, Hank has that statue on his desk, signifying he has accepted his coworker's logic that they must know their enemy, and that enemy is those that pray to narco saints. It is Hank that is cornered in a parking lot by the Salamanca brothers in season three, episode seven, and it is Hank who manages to single handedly kill one of the assassins and hospitalize the other in critical condition.

⁶⁸⁸ Hunter Stephenson, "Breaking Bad Recap: Episode 2 'Caballo Sin Nombre' Is Set to the Sounds of America," /Film, April 1, 2010, <https://www.slashfilm.com/breaking-bad-recap-episode-2-caballo-sin-nombre-is-set-to-the-sounds-of-america/>.

⁶⁸⁹ *Breaking Bad*. 2009 Season 2, Episode 7, "Negro y Azul". Directed by Félix Enríquez Alcalá. Aired April 19, 2009 on AMC.



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Coupled with the ways in which *Breaking Bad* centers white, male, and individualistic heroes and the rationalized violence they use to protect and conquer claimed territory, this widely-watched show portrayed informal religion as something to be known and fought. This is the position of narco saint experts like Robert Almonte and Robert Bunker, who sell their expertise as necessary to the protection of law enforcement officers like Hank, and the people those officers symbolically protect in the suburbs of white America. Through the Salamanca brothers, the only devotees of Santa Muerte given more than a single camera shot, the show portrays devotees as inherently dangerous to white households and law enforcement. This portrayal not only enacts long held border tropes of dangerously “others” with eerie beliefs crossing borders, it replicates the expertise of law enforcement experts for large audiences, validated through the narrative of the show.

⁶⁹⁰ *Breaking Bad*. Directed by Félix Enríquez Alcalá.

Other fictional television series have featured included narco saints and their devotees, usually as antagonists. The show *Dexter*, uses devotion to Santa Muerte as backdrop in its fifth season as police investigate the ritualistic and gory murders of the Fuentes brothers, two devotees of the skeleton saint who kill as offerings to their saint in Miami. The show operates from the point of view of the investigating officers, and Santa Muerte's devotion is readily mixed with other narcoculture and borderland religious practices to create a series of exotic shrines and locales the police must discover and navigate. Similarly, the second season of *True Detective* uses Santa Muerte imagery to cultivate the occult atmosphere the show became known for, introducing the saint in the first episode of the season as detectives walk through a suspected kidnapper's house decorated with violent sexual images. The detectives pause before a statue of Santa Muerte, and the criminals they encounter throughout the season invoke her name. Like in *Breaking Bad*, Santa Muerte is introduced first via image, not name, prompting media outlets to run news with headlines like "What's Up With That Creepy Skeleton in True Detective? The Answer Is Deadly"⁶⁹¹ In the 2020 release of the popular "buddy cop" film franchise *Bad Boys*, *Bad Boys for Life*, a "narco-witch" and devotee of Santa Muerte targets the law enforcement protagonists and serves as one of the main antagonists. Dr. Andrew Chesnut was consulted for the film, and the popular scholar broadcasted his involvement on his twitter account to his followers, and gave interviews on this consultancy with news outlets and

⁶⁹¹ Nancy Miller, "What's Up With That Creepy Skeleton in True Detective? The Answer Is Deadly Los Angeles Magazine," *Los Angeles Magazine* (blog), June 22, 2015, <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/whats-up-with-that-creepy-skeleton-in-true-detective-the-answer-is-deadly/>.

podcasts.⁶⁹² As of April 2020, Chesnut has kept a tweet promoting his consulting expertise for this film pinned to his twitter home feed page.⁶⁹³

Other non-fictional depictions of informal Mexican saints come from travel journalism television programming. These mediums strive to entertain audiences with depictions of unknown locales and practices not their own, with various purposes that fall between education and entertainment. These representations are part of the popular cultural archive that introduces informal borderland religion to audiences outside their region and community of origin, particularly in the United States where devotion to saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde remain stigmatized and under-visible.⁶⁹⁴ Unlike the fictionalized representations of Santa Muerte's cult discussed above, these representations are not dominated explicitly by law enforcement perspectives and do not place the audience in the vantage of state agents. Instead, shows like Netflix's *Dark Tourism* and Reza Aslan's *Believer* cast the audience as explorers of unknown and exotic territory as the hosts tour practices and beliefs deemed strange and fringe by the dominant culture those practices and beliefs exist within. This vantage point, while not playing up the danger and threat that serves to bolster overt militarization and state extension, allows the viewer an exploration of the "other" through the secure position of a tourist as the

⁶⁹² Stephen Knight, "Ep#142 – Santa Muerte: Devoted To Death," *Godless Spellchecker's Blog* (blog), June 24, 2019, <https://www.gspellchecker.com/2019/06/ep142-santa-muerte-devoted-to-death/>; Brian McNeill, "New 'Bad Boys' Film Taps Expertise of VCU's Santa Muerte Scholar," *University Blog and News, Virginia Commonwealth University Blog* (blog), January 17, 2020, https://news.vcu.edu//article/New_Bad_Boys_film_taps_expertise_of_VCUs_Santa_Muerte_scholar.

⁶⁹³ Dr. Death & Divinity @AndrewChesnut1 <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1>; Dr. Death & Divinity @AndrewChesnut1 "New 'Bad Boys' film taps expertise of VCU's Santa Muerte scholar - Interview with me and citing co-consultant @ProfKingsbury" 10:02 AM · Jan 17, 2020 <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1218232163365158915>;

⁶⁹⁴ Gerardo Gómez Michel and Jungwon Park, "The Cult of Jesús Malverde: Crime and Sanctity as Elements of a Heterogeneous Modernity," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (2014): 202–14.; Lois Ann Lorentzen et al., eds., "Devotional Crossings: Transgender Sex Workers, Santísima Muerte, and Spiritual Solidarity in Guadalajara and San Francisco," in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana* (Duke University Press, 2009), 3–38, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391166-002>. Desirée A. Martín, "'Santísima Muerte, Vístete de Negro, Santísima Muerte, Vístete de Blanco': La Santa Muerte's Illegal Marginalizations," *Religions* 8, no. 3 (March 2017): 36, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8030036>.

shows' hosts balk at practices they deem deviant or strange, and nervously laugh their way through their participatory role in those practices. These representations range in the nuance they ascribe to the beliefs, practices, and climate these saints are associated with, but still tend to leverage Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde in terms of difference in regards to the position of the audience for the sake of entertainment.

Dark Tourism and Believer

The shows *Dark Tourism* and *Believer* also provides the audience with a stand-in through which they experience the respective content. The two shows experience the other through the vantage point of the irreverent and scruffy journalist David Farrier and public scholar Reza Aslan, as hosts. In the *Believer* television series, the public scholar attempts to adopt a different religion each episode, highlighting religious sects, cults, and groups that are generally deemed fringe or controversial. The third episode of the series is about Santa Muerte and Aslan speaks to different experts such as the anthropologist Laura Roush about Santa Muerte's origins in a sleek modern café, then a journalist who explains the distrustful political climate of Mexico with a backdrop of metropolitan Mexico City, and many devotees of Santa Muerte in various well-lit and clean locales. A narrated voice-over begins the episode with the statement that "men who fear no one tremble before her"; but then goes on to explain that Santa Muerte has a controversial but not monolithic place within the Catholic Church. The introduction lays out the episode's thesis plainly: that Santa Muerte is now a popular saint followed by devotees from various walks of life, but who is particularly looked to by those marginalized by society and understandably distrustful of authority. Even the interview in a crowded prison with an incarcerated devotee is framed in a way that centers the personal and sympathetic motivations anyone might have for following Santa Muerte. Both men are seated in the sunny prison

courtyard, the bright colors of nearby Santa Muerte statues speak to the hope the interviewee has in the skeleton saint, and Aslan speaks very little as the devotee explains his beliefs. This humanizing framing stands in contrast to the yellow filters and dirty streets used by Aslan's counterparts to associate Santa Muerte and her devotees with danger, the poverty-stricken desert, and uniformed superstition. Despite the premise of *Believer*, where Aslan adopts the religion of the week to showcase to viewers, Aslan's initial nuanced and humanizing framing of Santa Muerte's following is somewhat compromised by Aslan himself. The host stands back from a mass led by the leader of the Templo Santa Muerte Internacional, explaining his own part in the prayer that just took place. Aslan, in a partial voiceover against a video of the imprisoned men bowing in prayer, explains with a shaky voice,

I was surrounded by all these prisoners, who have been here for god knows how long. Who are relying on Santa Muerte to get by. All I could pray for was thanks, I was just thanking Santa Muerte for not being here, that I have justice and that I have freedom, and all the things I take for granted.⁶⁹⁵

This explanation, of Aslan's thankfulness at not being in the position of the devotees, is one of difference. Instead of expressing one of the key facets of reverence to Santa Muerte, the equality of all people demonstrated by how death eventually comes for everyone, Aslan takes the moment to value his position as an observer who can return at any time to the comforts and freedom the devotees do not have.⁶⁹⁶ Later, upon buying a Santa Muerte statue in preparation of an annual procession in Tepito, Aslan walks through the city carrying the statue. The last third of the episode is devoted to Aslan's experience doing so and participating in the Tepito procession, marveling at the crowd and the comradery he viewed from the devotees there.

⁶⁹⁵ *Believer*. 2017. Season 1 Episode 2. Aired April 2, 2017. Directed by Ben Selkow.

⁶⁹⁶ Kathryn McDonald, "'We Will All Look Like This Someday': Santa Muerte in Mexico City," *PORTAL* (blog), August 5, 2016, <https://liliasbensonmagazine.org/2016/08/05/we-will-all-look-like-this-someday-santa-muerte-in-mexico-city/>.

While he participates in the procession, visits shrines, and shares food with the other devotees Aslan continuously glances back at the camera inviting the viewer along with him to witness what he is seeing. While Santa Muerte and her devotees are framed with far more empathy and nuance than usually seen in the US media market, the vantage point articulated through Aslan himself keeps the audience outside the cult, looking in like a voyeur.

Dark Tourist describes itself as a sampling of “unusual -- and often macabre -- tourism spots” by journalist David Farrier.⁶⁹⁷ The Netflix show organizes its episodes around regions, and the first is titled “Latin America” and the host, David Farrier, visits two countries total in the episode, Columbia and Mexico. The locales he chooses are based in the illegality of the narcotics trade; Farrier spends the majority of the episode exploring the persona of Pablo Escobar through tours of Medellín, interviews with ex-law enforcement and Medellín Cartel personnel, and visits to associated shrines and Escobar’s old apartment. The next segment occurs in Mexico City as David Farrier, like Reza Aslan, attends the processional at the Santa Muerte shrine in the Tepito neighborhood of Mexico City. The last portion of the episode is spent as Farrier participates on a border crossing “tour” that is supposed to mimic the dangers migrants face in unsanctioned border crossings across the US Mexico border, which includes yelling guides, fake drugs planted on Farrier himself, staged robberies and interactions with the criminal element. Sandwiched between a pseudo-biopic of one of the most infamous criminal kingpins and literal tourism that turns real world border violence into thrills accessible to those with the money to spend on them, the middle segment on Santa Muerte and her following is comparatively tame. It begins with a familiar introduction, first with the controversy and a pastiche of skeletal images as Farrier plays up the macabre rumors of satanism and associations

⁶⁹⁷ “Dark Tourist” (2019). Season 1: Episode 1. Aired Jul 20, 2018. Directed by Colin Rothbart and Ian Hart and aired on Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80189791>

of criminality that usually accompany any mention of Santa Muerte or her following. “I’ve heard about a new dark obsession sweeping Mexico,” Farrier introduces the subject in voice over of a dark street. The urban locale is crowded with quick shots of people wearing skull face paint and wide sombreros. The camera sweeps over the shadowed processional of people with their faces cut out of the shots or shaded by hoods as they bring palettes of flowers and hold up large statues of Santa Muerte. The devotees’ faces are always covered, by paint, or lighting, or simply cut out of shots. However, closeups of Santa Muerte’s face are underlit or backlit by the blurry yellow streetlights. “I want to know what kind of people pray to an evil looking skeleton in a hooded robe,” Farrier says before abruptly cutting to an intermediary segment where he attends an exorcism by a priest who is not affiliated, but opposed to Santa Muerte’s devotion. At the exorcism, Farrier complains of the noise, holding his ears while a woman cries on the floor, makes jokes about waking the neighbors and the potential for vomiting, and his voiceover communicates his discomfort as things get “spookier”.⁶⁹⁸ Throughout the scene, and when the priest offers a blessing to Farrier himself, the host is visibly cringing, holding his face and laughing nervously. Returning to Santa Muerte, Farrier finds a street guide who “has hookups in their [Santa Muerte’s followers’] world.” As they speak with one older man on the street, a devotee of Santa Muerte whose name is not shared, the camera maintains uncomfortably close distance with his scars, facial tattoos, and badly healed wounds over his leg—Farrier voiceover describes this man as the saint’s “hype man” as the devotee walks shirtless and alone through the middle of the street, calling out to those sitting in an uneven call and return prayer. Farrier’s tone changes when he meets Enriqueta Romero, or Doña Queta, who runs the shrine in Tepito and is center to some of the festivities there on the first days of November. “I came here to find

⁶⁹⁸ Dark Tourist. (2019) Season 1: Episode 1.

an evil death cult, but instead I found a group of outcasts strengthened by their faith,” Farrier says as the section closes out, coming to the conclusion that Aslan’s narrative adopted after its opening.⁶⁹⁹ Ultimately, any of Farrier’s attempts to deliver convincing sentiment is compromised by the immediate transition to the faux border crossing he undertakes with similar nervous hand wringing and face clutching. The series as a whole utilizes nervous energy to frame subject matter that ranges from serial killers, animal brutalization with rocket launchers, and race war proponents. However, the same show the same framing is used to introduce communities like Tepito, locales in Indonesia with unique but peaceful funeral rights, and voodoo practitioners in the Republic of Benin, to unfamiliar audiences with the implication that all of these disparate communities are worthy of the same othering and discomfort. The show delivers what the title promises, dark tourism, and show encourages its streaming audience to bask with Farrier through his “narco themed” travels in Columbia, Mexico, and across its Northern desert.

The two series, *Dark Tourist* and *Believer* received similar complaints of insensitive and voyeuristic depictions of culture and place. Aslan’s interactions with Hindu holy sites and priests were met with significant opposition, and critics generally found the tone of the show’s premise of a “spiritual adventures series” to compromise its purported intention to unite different religious traditions through human commonalities in motivation and belief.⁷⁰⁰ Instead the show, like a lot of travel journalism, leveraged audience shock towards purposefully chosen fringe or controversial subjects. Aslan’s Santa Muerte episode was not met with the controversy that other episodes of *Believer* were, and did stray from a lot of the border frontier tropes that

⁶⁹⁹ Dark Tourist. (2019) Season 1: Episode 1.

⁷⁰⁰ Reza Aslan, “Reza Aslan: Why I Am a Muslim,” *CNN*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/26/opinions/believer-personal-faith-essay-reza-aslan/index.html>.

Farrier's episode embraced, instead playing into Aslan's credentials as a popular religious scholar. However, like *Dark Tourism*, the show chooses its subject matter from the fringe and then worked to exotify the material. In *Believer*, this came from leveraging the difference between Aslan and the devotees he talked to, and the shows premise in framing Aslan himself (as the vantage point for the audience) as an adventurer experiencing the strange, macabre, and deviant of the religious world. Likewise, this aspect of difference was consistently communicated in Farrier's nervous laughter, close-ups of his wringing hands and frowns, and voiceovers of halting jokes intended to break the tension created by the shadowy camera angles and flashing transitions indicative of extreme travel television. Like Aslan, Farrier voices his relief at his ability to sample these experiences, and not live them, "Sometimes ... dark tourism is the total realization of just how good I've got it back home," Farrier says in another episode.⁷⁰¹ Unlike the fictionalized media above, these shows attempt an educational veneer over its entertainment, drawing in the audience with promises of authentic experiences that are constructed like any other entertainment source.

Conclusion

Both fictional and nonfictional depictions of informal borderland saints, most often Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde, represent these still marginal religious personas and the communities that revere them to United States audiences. It is probable that because these communities are marginal, and devotion to saints like Santa Muerte remains associated with criminality, devotees remain quiet in large public and popular media discourses, though with some exceptions.⁷⁰² Because of this, these media representations can be the first place that

⁷⁰¹ Dark Tourist. (2019) Season 1: Episode 4.

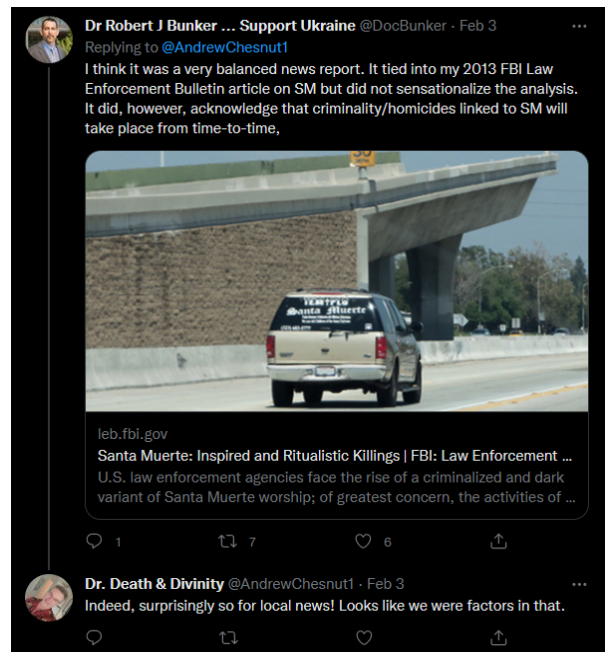
⁷⁰² Roush, Laura, "Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo: A View from a Mexico City Altar," *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. January (2014): 129–48.

unfamiliar US mainstream audiences are exposed to not only the saints that are presented as narco saints, but guided as to how to approach these communities, and what relationship the US has to the communities that revere Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde. Therefore, it is important not just to understand who the audience is, but *what position* the framing and content of the artefact invites its audience think from, *who* does the show invite the audience to be as they view, experience, and participate in the religious practices through the perspective of point of view characters and hosts. As Said discussed, orientalist expertise and the travel accounts of the European colonial powers revealed more about the colonial mindset than any accurate representation of their subject matter. The *vantage* of the author, and that of the consumer of these productions was the truth contained in these artifacts. But the imaginaries through which a power constructs its opponent, or its desired subject, is not inconsequential. Carol Cohn rightly attested, how something is talked about sets the boundaries of how something may be thought about, the framing and discourse around informal saints is an important process in constructing these borderland holy personas into narco saints, and their devotees into something dangerous that white males may either try to understand and/or neutralize. Media like video games and television invite their audience to occupy this active role within this frontier cosmology, stepping into the role of a state (or para-state) agent as they defend god and country. How these saints are talked about affects the way US audiences view themselves in relation to these saints, the borderlands, and the securityscape of the United States. The vantage the viewer is invited to experience the borderlands through is white, individualistic, and male; more often than not, this perspective encourages the vantage-holder to change the geography, make their mark, or find themselves within it. And this perspective replicates and reflects the securityscape rhetoric and the larger cosmologies law enforcement superimpose on the borderlands, Mexico, and Latin

America as a whole. This media allows its consuming audiences, law enforcement or civilian, to see themselves within the cosmologies of the borderlands—self- characterizing and mythologizing themselves as the border itself, a thin blue line.

Chapter 5: Territorial Expertise: To whom do the border and its saints belong?

Andrew Chestnut’s tweet –using the screen name Dr. Death & Divinity --links to a February 02, 2022 local news crime report titled “Worship of folk saint linked to fatal hotel shooting in Baton Rouge” where Chesnut and Dr. Robert J. Bunker’s work is referenced and quoted.⁷⁰³ The news article details a fatal shooting that might have been religiously motivated, arguably “part of a ritual tied to folk saint Santa Muerte.”⁷⁰⁴ Andrew Chesnut seems to think so. His commentary in the article states, “I know of murder cases in Mexico where the perp also said that, ‘Yeah. Santa Muerte told me that I needed to kill this person.



⁷⁰³ Dr. Death & Divinity, “With My Analysis Based on 13 Years of Research on Santa Muerte, the Fastest Growing New Religious Movement in the West <https://t.co/DmSU7V0FyS>,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), February 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1489223026512175104>.; Stephanie Saucier and Johnston Von Springer, “Worship of Folk Saint Linked to Fatal Hotel Shooting in Baton Rouge,” *WBRZ*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.wbrz.com/news/worship-of-folk-saint-linked-to-fatal-hotel-shooting-in-baton-rouge/>.

⁷⁰⁴ Stephanie Saucier and Johnston Von Springer, “Worship of Folk Saint Linked to Fatal Hotel Shooting in Baton Rouge,” *WBRZ*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.wbrz.com/news/worship-of-folk-saint-linked-to-fatal-hotel-shooting-in-baton-rouge/>.

Came to me in a dream or appeared to me in my living room,'" Chestnut said. "So yeah, that's kind of standard operating fare."

In response to the pinned post above, Dr. Robert J. Bunker tweeted back and linked to that FBI Bulletin as well, providing readers with a direct link to the 3-part series.⁷⁰⁵ And back in response, Chesnut agrees and takes credit.⁷⁰⁶

This pinned tweet, on its own, is not any kind of smoking-gun evidence for the impact that experts Chesnut and Bunker are having on the world. As of April 8, 2022, it had been retweeted 14 times, quoted twice, and liked by 30 people. By the standards of our digital age, this was not exactly a “viral” moment. Nevertheless, this pinned tweet and its accompanying links and replies are incredibly illustrative of the themes that this project explores. Through an examination of particular contributions by Andrew Chesnut to the securityscape, this chapter illustrates the work knowledge production does blurring the bounds of entertainment, scholarship, and state propaganda and the particular impact “quasi-populist” social science can have when allied with weaponized expertise. In doing this, this chapter uncovers yet another alliance between popular Orientalism and security studies. According to the narco saint experts and their publications discussed in this dissertation, the cults of Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and other informal borderland saints are not a response to the violence of the drug war, but a cause of it. They enroll the public in this outlook by playing into the imaginaries of sinister

⁷⁰⁵ Dr Robert J Bunker ... Support Ukraine, “@AndrewChesnut1 I Think It Was a Very Balanced News Report. It Tied into My 2013 FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin Article on SM but Did Not Sensationalize the Analysis. It Did, However, Acknowledge That Criminality/Homicides Linked to SM Will Take Place from Time-to-Time, <https://t.co/LDg075CCxg>,” Tweet, @DocBunker (blog), February 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/DocBunker/status/1489297243047743491>.

⁷⁰⁶ Dr Robert J Bunker ... Support Ukraine, “@AndrewChesnut1 I Think It Was a Very Balanced News Report. It Tied into My 2013 FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin Article on SM but Did Not Sensationalize the Analysis. It Did, However, Acknowledge That Criminality/Homicides Linked to SM Will Take Place from Time-to-Time, <https://t.co/LDg075CCxg>,” Tweet, @DocBunker (blog), February 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/DocBunker/status/1489297243047743491>.

criminality already found throughout popular fiction and nonfiction—and those vying for the status of an expert authority are served by replicating it to an already primed audience. This concluding chapter makes the case that such a view—that devotion borderland saints is a deviant and violent impulse-- obscures the crucial role that narco saint experts and their academic allies have in co-creating a securityscape that creates the conditions endless “wars” against culturally distinct Others.

The previous chapters tackled the informal relationship between culture and the constructed category of narco saints—specifically as mascots of a borderland made for white men. This chapter examines another vehicle through which that same imaginary is communicated in ways designed to inform and educate broader publics. This chapter discusses how the public is introduced and informed about “narco saints” through news coverage, security experts, and scholars who collaborate with them. This chapter finds that despite the ‘informational’ nature of these sources that the tropes of difference, danger, and exoticism still pervade the narratives and characterize the personas of saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde. This chapter builds significantly from the previous and continues to investigate how different forms of media construct the border and inform its audiences of their own relationship to it. This chapter departs from the last in that it approaches culture artifacts that are created and disseminated with at least the pretense to inform and educate. Unlike the fiction and television of the last chapter, the genres and examples below make definitive and explicit claims about reality. These products depict conflicts, events, and people as truthful representations, and while many genres aim to entertain their audiences, the assumption is that the “expert” nonfiction first and foremost reflects how things really are. The works reviewed below directly tell the general public who saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde are, where they belong and who they

belong to, and what the relationship the audience has to the saints, the border, and the state violence done in its name. This results in a depiction of borderland saints and those that revere them as a distinct Other that is stated to be quintessentially different in impulse, morality, and culture than the audience is presumed to be. This depiction begs for intervention by the experts to explain this Otherized entity, and for the State to act on that explanation and keep the Other from the Occident. It places the Other under the jurisdiction of the State to be policed, kept invisible and separate by borders, deserts, and prisons. Or visible as comfortable villains to be conquered by white male protagonists and hard-working cops, or nonfictional accounts of one-time encounters to be had by travel journalists. Both serve the preferred status quo of the State. This dynamic is not new, as it was not new when Edward Said coined the term Orientalism to describe the complicity of academics, experts, and entertainers in projects of empire. However, as our modern securityscape becomes more viral with the triumph of privatized defense, social media, and online life, --and also diffuse with experts— we contend with a new vehicle with which the State spreads its influence, justifications, and imaginaries. This iteration of Orientalist expertise, like previous ones, has material consequences for everyone, and particularly those historically and presently viewed as any distinct Other.

Devoted to the Skeleton Saint: Andrew Chesnut

The February 2, 2022 WBRZ2 article begins with the line “Officials are investigating a Wednesday morning fatal shooting at a Sleep Inn in Baton Rouge, believed to be part of a ritual tied to folk saint Santa Muerte”, and below that line Andrew Chesnut, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, is introduced and his analysis continues for more than half the article. The accompanying video features the scholar talking to a WBRZ reporter over a remote call, interspersed with images of Santa Muerte in cemeteries, videos of the suspect David

Mendez frowning, eyes downcast, in a white jumpsuit being led towards the camera by police, and a brief interview with a police sergeant. Chesnut, in a collared shirt, glasses, with a colorful wall hanging of a town with Spanish-style architecture behind him speaks animatedly about Santa Muerte and her growing popularity, affirms her status as a “narco saint”, and discusses her connections to murders in Mexico before and after disclaiming that most devotees are not criminals. As the article quotes in text, he states in the video that people killing others because Santa Muerte told them to do so is “standard operating fare”.⁷⁰⁷

One cannot talk about how the United States public is taught about “narco saints” without discussing Dr. Andrew Chesnut, a Religious Studies professor and researcher at Virginia Commonwealth University who is perhaps the most often quoted scholar (especially in the media) on the subject of narco saints, specifically Santa Muerte. He is a sometimes colleague, sometimes critic of the other narco saint experts outside of the formal academy that have been. After writing an English-language monograph on the Skeleton Saint, which he claims remains the definitive source on Santa Muerte and her devotion— he states in February 2022 “My Book ‘Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint’ Was First Published by @OUPReligion 10 Years Ago This Month and the 2nd Edition, Published in 2017, Remains the Sole Single-Author Academic Book in English on the Fastest Growing NRM in the West.”⁷⁰⁸ Chesnut has been widely accepted as an academic expert on the skeleton saint, her alleged criminality, and her

⁷⁰⁷ Stephanie Saucier and Johnston Von Springer, “Worship of Folk Saint Linked to Fatal Hotel Shooting in Baton Rouge,” *WBRZ*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.wbrz.com/news/worship-of-folk-saint-linked-to-fatal-hotel-shooting-in-baton-rouge/>.

⁷⁰⁸ Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “My Book ‘Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint’ Was First Published by @OUPReligion 10 Years Ago This Month and the 2nd Edition, Published in 2017, Remains the Sole Single-Author Academic Book in English on the Fastest Growing NRM in the West. https://Amazon.Com/Devoted-Death-Santa-Muerte-Skeleton/Dp/0190633336/Ref=sr_1_2?Qid=1644703157&refinements=p_27%3AAndrew+Chesnut&s=books&sr=1-2 <https://T.Co/ZAx8xpM0Aw>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, February 12, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1492620152852074498>.

cult's growth as his soundbites and quotes across multiple genres of journalism display. That said, some devotees and other academics, especially on Twitter, have been critical of his research and taken issue with his conduct regarding the saint and her devotees. Benjamin T. Smith, an academic that focuses on Drug War adjacent topics and is familiar with Chesnut's work and career, created a long Twitter thread critiquing Chesnut's professional relationship with other academics as "snooty", "bitchy", and "territorial", and he reports that Chesnut has been "nasty" to those he disagrees with, and that Chesnut extends this animosity toward those around them as well. In addition to characterizing Chesnut's work as poor scholarship, this thread claims a first-hand account of Chesnut being expelled from a shrine in Tepito after harassing devotees with a camera.⁷⁰⁹ Others have attempted to address Chesnut's "gatekeeping" with him, a journalist who requested to remain anonymous commented on a Chesnut tweet that took ownership of the theory that Santa Muerte had Aztec roots, "How come when I mentioned La Santa's link to the Aztec goddess of death you corrected me and began to question my research? Felt like gate keeping of the worst kind. A white man telling a Mexican woman what is and isn't."⁷¹⁰ The exchange refers to a previous, now deleted exchange where Chesnut dismissed the journalist's research into Santa Muerte's indignity as a "recent trend" among a minority of devotees. Social media conflicts or no, Chesnut remains sought after for information regarding borderland saints. Between Chesnut's collaboration with the security experts, his consistent social media additions to the discourse surrounding Santa Muerte and the drug war, his high-level position in the

⁷⁰⁹ The ephemeral and fluid nature of online discourse makes the distinctions between critique, "twitter beefs", and "shitposting" difficult to adequately assign, and as "blocking" users and deleting posts mid-discussion is a common and accepted practice – observation of these exchanges is at best challenging. Benjamin T. Smith [@benjamintsmith7], "Just Finished Reading This Article <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41603-020-00095-2> on Santa Muerte by @AndrewChesnut1 (Last Seen Standing up for 'Senior Academics' in the Face of Actually Being Criticized) and Dr Kate Kingsbury (Last Seen Leaving Twitter). Couple of Thoughts:," Tweet, *Twitter*, December 10, 2020, <https://twitter.com/benjamintsmith7/status/1336994279034671107>.

⁷¹⁰ After discussing this exchange with the journalist, they requested to remain anonymous.

Academic field, and widespread presence in United States news and media coverage – Chesnut and his contributions provide another site of analysis as this project seeks to understand how religion, security, and knowledge production converge to construct the border and its conflicts in popular conceptions.

Chesnut actively engages with audiences online and provides consistent interviews with popular media and news sites like *Huffpost*, *The New Yorker*, and other more specialized Catholic news sites, and operates a column for Patheos a blog and online media company that covers religious news, culture, and different faiths and belief systems.⁷¹¹ Chesnut extends this public scholarship, actively commenting on social media, news coverage, and online posts that mention narco saints and their associated religious material. He highlights relevant discourses, both that include his analysis and those that do not, making his disagreements visible on twitter in regards to the latter.⁷¹²

With a background in Latin American History, Chesnut wrote *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* which came out in 2012 and was updated in 2017, with its previous version cited by narco saint experts like Almonte and Bunker within their materials and online

⁷¹¹ Andrew Chesnut and Christopher Lomelin, “Jesus Malverde: Not Just a Narcosaint,” *HuffPost*, January 9, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jesus-malverde_b_4567114.; Juan Zamorano, “Cult ‘Anointed by God’ Kills 7 in Panama Jungle,” *Associated Press*, January 19, 2020, <https://www.wcjb.com/content/news/Cult-anointed-by-God-kills-7-in-Panama-jungle-567119901.html>.; Andrew Chesnut, “Mexican Folk Saint Santa Muerte - The Fastest Growing New Religious Movement in the West,” *The Global Catholic Review* (blog), October 1, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/theglobalcatholicreview/2019/10/mexican-folk-saint-santa-muerte-the-fastest-growing-new-religious-movement-in-the-west/>.; Conrad Duncan, “Cult Slayed Pregnant Woman and Five of Her Children ‘by Forcing Them to Walk through Fire,’” *The Independent*, January 19, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/panama-cult-killings-pregnant-woman-children-sacrifice-new-light-of-god-el-terron-a9290886.html>. See also Twitter feed for @andrewchesnut1.

⁷¹² Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “Forthcoming Edited Volume on the Bony Lady Which I Chose Not to Contribute to - La Santa Muerte in Mexico History, Devotion, and Society <https://Unmpress.Com/Books/La-Santa-Muerte-Mexico/9780826360816> @ProfKingsbury @davidbmetcalfe,” Tweet, *Twitter*, July 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1149649489298202625>.

blog posts.⁷¹³ The book operates as an English introduction to Santa Muerte and her following as Chestnut seeks to answer why Santa Muerte's popularity and following has grown so much since the 1980s; the research explains the saint and her cults origins through first-hand accounts and news coverage of the saint.⁷¹⁴ In general, the book is written accessibly in the first person, focusing on descriptions of events, practices, and individual devotees and practices. The book is organized into nine sections, with each chapter assigned a different colored candle – a reference to different aspects of Santa Muerte's reverence. In example, Chapter 5 is “Gold Candle: Prosperity and Abundance” and overviews the merchandise industry attached to Santa Muerte's devotion—t-shirts, figurines, and jewelry, how devotees pray for money and employment, and the material elements devotees construct their shrines with. These chapters also feature detailed record of how Chesnut approaches fieldwork and the object of his study. In a chapter five passage, he details coming upon an unattended shrine:

Unsure of what we might find at an unattended altar on an abandoned-looking lot, I nervously unthreaded the heavy rusted chain and quickly pushed open the door. Again my wife proclaimed “buenas tardes,” but still there was no response from anywhere on the muddy patch, especially from the tiny hovel in one of the corners of the property, which looked too small to fit a bed. Somewhat unnerved by the thought of visiting what appeared to be a semipublic shrine with no attendant on site, I felt even more unsettled upon approaching the altar and seeing that most of the votive candles were lit and that the Marlboro burning at the feet of the Bony Lady dressed in greenbacks had been offered by some devotee or the caretaker himself just minutes before our arrival. Never before had I visited such a shrine where nobody else was

⁷¹³ John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, eds., *The Rise of the Narcostate* (Xlibris Corporation, 2018).; Robert J. Bunker, “Review of ‘Towards a Philosophy of Narco Violence in Mexico,’” *Defense Blog, Small Wars Journal*, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/review-towards-philosophy-narco-violence-mexico>.; Robert J. Bunker, “Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note Number Eight | Small Wars Journal,” *Defense Blog, Small Wars Journal*, January 22, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/third-generation-gangs-strategic-note-number-eight>.; John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, “Rethinking Insurgency: Criminality, Spirituality, and Societal Warfare in the Americas,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 5 (December 2011): 742–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.625720>.

⁷¹⁴ Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012).

present. We both felt it would be good to survey the site as quick as possible before being surprised by a potentially suspicious or angry attendant. So I took some notes, my wife snapped dozens of photos, and I returned the chain to its previous position before anyone else could arrive. It wasn't the first time during my field research that I wondered if the White Girl might be watching my back.⁷¹⁵

The book centers Chesnut's experience as he meets, speaks with, visits, encounters, and experiences the shrines, devotees, and various other forms of Santa Muerte's following and devotion. The prose reflects Chesnut's own vantage as the primary lens through which the readers experience Santa Muerte, with first person language as he details his and his family's encounters with shrines, processions, interviews, and devotees. The observations are largely his own with few references, or even acknowledgement of the robust academic work that has been done on the cultural, economic, religious, and political life of Mexico and the US Mexico Borderlands that he encounters and alludes to. In each, Chesnut includes his emotional state as he encounters what he considers the new, shocking, curious, frightening, and foreign. Moreover, these passages imply that Chesnut is distinctly aware of his status as an outsider, but also considers himself a "semisuperstitious" practitioner.

Every time I think of the tantalizing tandem of Guadalupe and the Skinny Lady I recall how the eyes of the godfather of the cult lit up when I mentioned the two in the same breath during our interview.⁷¹⁶

Mexicans adore flowers almost as much as they love balloons ...⁷¹⁷

As we ambled past the last few paraphernalia stands, taking some videos along the way, one of the vendors called us over to her stand and advised us to hide the camera since the place was "crawling with thieves." Well aware of the danger, we ignored the vendor's sage advice and filmed pretty much everything we could. As we came upon the famous street I couldn't believe it was the same tranquil place I had visited so many times. Santa Muertistas

⁷¹⁵ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*. 146

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71

and onlookers had crammed themselves wall to wall on the narrow street and sidewalks.⁷¹⁸

With such an orgy of imagery it was really hard to remember to keep on the lookout for trouble. My daughter and I seemed to be the only obvious foreigners in the crowd, and, standing five-seven and light-complected, my wife is often mistaken by her fellow Mexicans for a *gringa* or European.⁷¹⁹

A couple of feet away from me, tears streamed down the cherubic cheeks of a teenage goth dressed in black from head to toe and clutching her Santa Muerte as Bride statue in both hands. Trouble at home, I wondered?⁷²⁰

More than happy to explain the significance of color, I noticed her eyes light up when I told her that red symbolizes love and passion. I had barely finished saying the word “passion” when my younger sister darted over to the section where the crimson candles were located. After surveying the well-stocked store and chatting with the clerk, the three of us made our way back to the rental car, where Michelle showed us her new red Santa Muerte candle and said, with a sly smile, “Let’s see if it works.” ... My wife and I joked about how Michelle would be the first *gringa* to ask Santa Muerte to perform love-binding magic.⁷²¹

“Court and Judgement” with “original color powder” is printed on the packet of powder that rests alongside a wooden effigy of the Guatemalan folk saint Maximón as part of my collection of paraphernalia employed in the practice of popular religion in Latin America. As a semisuperstitious professor of religious studies, I bought the powder, which is “manufactured with special ingredients to help you with your legal problems,” a couple years ago when I contested a traffic ticket issued to me by a security officer of my new university on my very first day on campus.⁷²²

The language Chesnut uses is reminiscent of journalist David Farrier’s narration in *Dark Tourist*, it invites its audience to view something distinct from itself through the vantage of an outsider author.⁷²³

Chesnut highlights the otherness and in some cases danger of the scenes above, even as he makes definitive assertions about his knowledge of what he encounters. Each chapter provides a brief historical, economic, or cultural backdrop for what Chesnut encounters and the interactions he details,

⁷¹⁸ Ibid, 85

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, 86. Emphasis by Chesnut.

⁷²⁰ Ibid, 88

⁷²¹ Ibid, 132 Emphasis by Chesnut.

⁷²² Ibid, 181

⁷²³ See Chapter 3 of this Dissertation

and the references reflect this brevity – with only a total of seven pages devoted to the “Notes” and “References” section at the back of the 221 page monograph. His first chapter, “Brown Candle: History and Origins of the Cult” argues that most devotees are not concerned with her origins, but that “a small minority of more sophisticated cult members are interested in the history of their beloved saint.”⁷²⁴ Chesnut states that the book first and foremost seeks to determine “what Saint Death does for devotees.”⁷²⁵ And true to this assertion, the book is organized around the myriad of individual motivations devotees have for their reverence. However, one of Chesnut’s primary interventions is his assertion that Santa Muerte is European in origin – not indigenous to the Americas.⁷²⁶ Despite the fact that Chesnut mentions these various societal, historical, and cultural touchstones, there is no analysis or integration of these socio-cultural trajectories into his description of Santa Muerte’s cult. In this respect, the monograph is neither historical, sociological, or ethnographic –and though Chesnut is a religious studies professor, this work lacks the phenomenological insight that would come from any meaningful inquiry as to how a devotee feels, experiences, relates, and engages with the divine, their patroness, Santa Muerte. Instead, the focal point remains how Chesnut relates to the saint, her shrines, her locales, and her devotees.

Chesnut’s “Devoted to Death” received mixed reviews by his academic peers. Some praised it as an accessible introduction to Santa Muerte and her following, and this possibly sheds light on why *Devoted to Death* and Chesnut is so often quoted in articles that presume its audience is hearing about Santa Muerte or other borderland saints for the first time.⁷²⁷ These favorable aspects of the review highlight Chesnut’s ability to challenge the assumption that Santa

⁷²⁴ Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*. 27

⁷²⁵ Ibid, 27

⁷²⁶ Ibid, 188

⁷²⁷ José Carlos G. Aguiar, review of *Review of Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*, by R. Andrew Chesnut, *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe / European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 96 (2014): 164–66.

Muerte is only revered by criminals through his journalistic reports of devotees throughout “Mexico’s vast urban working class”⁷²⁸ “Others however note the sensational tone, as well as the lack of any theoretical or historical analysis despite the monograph alluding to centuries of history, political upheaval, economic struggle, and religious social movements. David Lehman, for example, takes issue with a “quasi-populist approach”, the “cliché-ridden hyperbole”, and the significant lack of references beyond “internet newspaper sources and one solitary book about folk saints in Spanish America”.⁷²⁹ Lehman is not the only one to note these issues with *Devoted to Death*, with Chris Garces describing Chesnut’s argument as “thin”, and noting overuse of personal detail and prose that characterizes devotees as “naïve” and utilitarian.⁷³⁰ Lehman comments on “the element of surprise” Chesnut leverages with his prose, drawing the reader’s attention to what he presents as new and novel, and without the grounding of socio-economic or cultural analysis as explanation.⁷³¹ This is revealing because it is reminiscent of what bell hooks observed in her deeply influential essay, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” regarding the desire for white patriarchal culture to appropriate the Other as a means to become more, to transcend past colonial guilt, through the consumption, not dominion, of things and people beyond their norm. “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling.”⁷³² That new delight is evident in Chesnut’s description of fieldwork, and in his social

⁷²⁸ Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*. 11; Kristy Nabhan-Warren, review of *Review of Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint, Chesnut, R. Andrew*, by R. Andrew Chesnut, *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 4 (2013): 525–27, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673955>.

⁷²⁹ David Lehmann, “R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Review),” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 45, no. 1 (February 2013): 195–97,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X13000345>; Pansters, W. G. 2019. *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion, and Society*. First [edition]. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 55.

⁷³⁰ Chris Garces, “Chesnut, R. Andrew: *Devoted to Death. Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*,” *Anthropos* 108, no. 1 (March 14, 2013): 304–5, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0257-9774-2013-1-304>.

⁷³¹ Ibid

⁷³² bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 1st

media presence which draws attention to Santa Muerte sightings and anything with his own analysis of the skeleton saint. Reading *Devoted to Death* with bell hooks' essay in the margins, so to speak, reveals a potential explanation for Chesnut's prose and personal "semisuperstitious" attachment to Santa Muerte.

"They [white boys] see their willingness to openly name their desire for the Other as affirmation of cultural plurality (its impact on sexual preference and choice). Unlike racist white men who historically violated the bodies of black women/women of color to assert their position as colonizer/ conqueror, these young men see themselves as non-racists, who choose to transgress racial boundaries within the sexual realm not to dominate the Other, but rather so that they can be acted upon, so that they can be changed utterly. Not at all attuned to those aspects of their sexual fantasies that irrevocably link them to collective white racist domination, they believe their desire for contact represents a progressive change in white attitudes towards non-whites. They do not see themselves as perpetuating racism. To them the most potent indication of that change is the frank expression of longing, the open declaration of desire, the need to be intimate with dark Others.⁷³³

edition (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

⁷³³ bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 1st edition (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

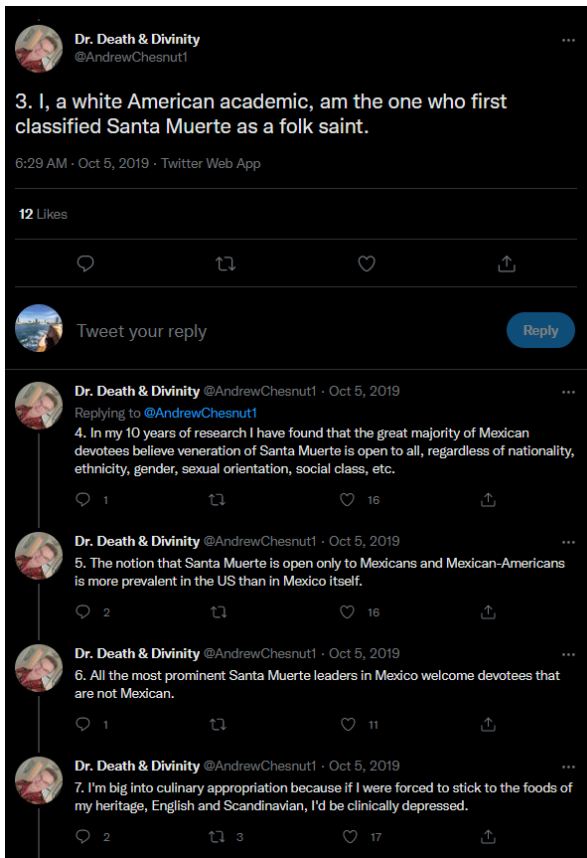


Image Full Text⁷³⁴

A tenured academic and a white man, and therefore ostensibly aware of the growing need to make room for those previously denied space in the academy, Chesnut still actively justifies his role as

⁷³⁴ **Left hand image, full text:** Dr. Death & Divinity “In my 12 years of research in Mexico I have never met a Mexican devotee who didn’t welcome fellow devotees of different nationalities. This racialized gatekeeping is almost exclusively found among a small minority of devotees in the US.” Responding to the Tweet by G. Edgar Stout (hiatus) “are you white and attracted to working with Santa Muerte? cool! reach out to to some white gods of death first. might i recommend Hel? while Santa Muerte is an open practice her focus is on the underprivileged, and you may find that a deity from your own culture fits you better.” Secrets of Santa Muerte Jun 11, 2021 Replying to @AndrewChesnut1 “Absolutely. I have spent so much time in Mexico. I am a gringa. No one ever told me here that la Santa is just for Mexicans indeed people are very keen to point out how she’s for everybody no matter age, skin colour, sexuality, gender etc.” Dr. Death & Divinity Jun 11, 2021, “Exactly! It’s racist self-appointed gatekeepers in the US.”

Right hand image, full text: Dr. Death & Divinity, Oct 5, 2019, “3. I, a white American academic, am the one who first classified Santa Muerte as a folk saint.” “4. In my 10 years of research I have found that the great majority of Mexican devotees believe veneration of Santa Muerte is open to all, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, etc.” “5. The notion that Santa Muerte is openly only to Mexicans and Mexican-Americans is more prevalent in the US than in Mexico itself.” “6. All the most prominent Santa Muerte leaders in Mexico welcome devotees that are not Mexican.” “7. I’m big into culinary appropriation because if I were forced to stick to the foods of my heritage, English and Scandinavian, I’d be clinically depressed.”

the definitive authority regarding Santa Muerte. He is vocal about her reverence as an “open” system, argues that her origins are European—not indigenous to the Americas, and will characterize those who disagree as racist gatekeepers or religious “zealots”.⁷³⁵ Chesnut fights for access to the saint, and is quick to challenge academic or rhetorical arguments that would render her closed to him.

Ultimately Chesnut’s motivations for his adoption of Santa Muerte as a research subject and as a semisuperstitious practitioner himself are his own, as the above is conjecture based off analysis of his work, not his own direct statements. However, the hyperbolic description and characterization of the subject population—a subject population that Chesnut positionally has considerable distance from—found in *Devoted to Death* is visible as Chesnut’s work and research is integrated into news coverage, police reports, and narco saint expertise.⁷³⁶ Chesnut’s

⁷³⁵ Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “Some Zealots Insist Santa Muerte Is Purely Catholic While Others 100% Aztec.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, November 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1191384881672142850>; Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “In My 12 Years of Research in Mexico I Have Never Met a Mexican Devotee Who Didn’t Welcome Fellow Devotees of Different Nationalities. This Racialized Gatekeeping Is Almost Exclusively Found among a Small Minority of Devotees in the US.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, June 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1403336384954482688>; Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “@CressidaStone Exactly! It’s Racist Self-Appointed Gatekeepers in the US.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, June 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1403395394344734723>; Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “Some Zealots Insist Santa Muerte Is Purely Catholic While Others 100% Aztec.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, November 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1191384881672142850>; Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “Without Spanish Catholic Influence There Would Be No Santa Muerte as Her Name ‘Holy Death’ Refers to the Good Death of Jesus as Commemorated in Good Friday Processions with the Figure of La Parca (Grim Reapress) Personifying Death. (1/2),” Tweet, *Twitter*, November 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1191382112341045248>; Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “Most Religious Zealots Are Clueless as to What the Academic Study of Religion Is and Often Confuse Objectivity with Apologetics.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, December 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1205211233756078080>.

⁷³⁶ For some examples, see: R. Andrew Chesnut, “Catholic Cartels? Ovidio Guzman and the Narco-Saints of Mexico,” *The Global Catholic Review* (blog), October 22, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/theglobalcatholicreview/2019/10/catholic-cartels-ovidio-guzman-and-the-narco-saints-of-mexico/>; AJ Abell, “Man Escapes Failed Human Sacrifice to Santa Muerte in Tennessee Mobile Home,” *WZTV*, November 8, 2018, <https://fox17.com/news/local/man-escapes-failed-human-sacrifice-to-santa-muerte-in-tennessee-mobile-home>; Griselda San Martin and John Leland, “Worshipping Santa Muerte, ‘Holy Death,’ in Queens,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/nyregion/worshipping-santa-muerte-holy-death-in-queens.html>; “Drug Cartels Worship ‘narco Saints,’ Making Them More Dangerous, DEA Says,” *WSBT*.

role in the media allows us to see how his work caters to the imaginaries and vantage of the security studies scholarship and law enforcement expertise he will later collaborate with more directly.

Cop Talk

She's the face of death. Cloaked. Bones exposed. But Santa Muerte is no longer in the shadows — millions are following her. "She's got a reputation as a very prompt miracle worker," said VCU professor of Religious Studies, Andrew Chesnut. "That, I would say, is the number one reason for her mushrooming cult."⁷³⁷

The 2012 article “NBC 12 Investigates: The cult of Santa Muerte” starts with a blurry photograph of a small home shrine set with a plastic water bottle, pennies, and a statuette of a black robed Santa Muerte with candy bars at her feet. There is no caption to the photograph, and instead the article begins immediately with the line “NBC 12 Investigates uncovers the growing cult for the saint of death. People are now praying to a saint who's not even real, with a following among many criminals.” The article goes on to overview Santa Muerte’s criminal connections and informal status and quote Chesnut several times, both with the above, and his answer as to why devotees would follow a figure like Santa Muerte-- ““Here you're asking a figure of death, a representation of death, for a few more grains of sand in the hour glass," said Chesnut.”⁷³⁸ The article details no specific crime or incident, but instead is a general investigative piece that centers Chesnut’s quotes along general statements regarding the saints unfriendly relationship with the institutional Catholic Church, her criminal following, and eventually an explanation for the photo the article begins with – its was “snapped by immigration and customs agents”. The article closes with the statement that her devotees are poor and in pain and are “looking for

⁷³⁷ Rachel DePompa, “NBC 12 Investigates: The Cult of Santa Muerte,” *Https://Www.Nbc12.Com*, April 27, 2012, <https://www.nbc12.com/story/17858302/nbc-12-investigates-santa-muerte>

⁷³⁸ *ibid*

immediate solutions”, to which Chesnut words end the article with the explanations that the saint with the fastest solutions “is going to win out in this competitive religious landscape.”⁷³⁹ This point speaks not to just Chesnut’s utilitarian characterization of Santa Muerte’s devotees in *Devoted to Death*, but also his book that came before *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy* where Chesnut proposes a market theory of religion.

Other articles feature Chesnut’s quotes just as prominently, but on topics related to the Drug War in Mexico at large. 2017 articles by the Daily Mail and Fox News on the subject of female cartel assassins sought out Chesnut’s expertise on the subject, introducing him as an expert on “La Santa Muerte - a patroness to drug traffickers” and quoting him saying of the cartel members, “They are ideal killers; young, beautiful and reckless.”⁷⁴⁰ After descriptions of these young women bathing in blood, having sex with cadavers, and pleasuring themselves with the decapitated heads of their victims the article includes a Chesnut quote to explain the behavior.

There's an inextricable link between sex and death in the culture of these female killers in seeking to be the most desired by the narco men, they seek also to be the most brutal among their group of peers.⁷⁴¹

The graphic descriptions in the article aside, Chesnut’s commentary uses the same “element of surprise” of the Lehman observed in *Devoted to Death* to draw the reader to a vantage of a shocked outsider, a shocked outsider who might ask what is being done about these sex and death motivated assassins. Previous chapters have discussed the rhetoric of a blood-soaked drug war and the call to action it represents for the State, and other scholars have succinctly discussed

⁷³⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁴⁰ Alasdair Baverstock, “Drug Cartels in Mexico Being Taken over by Ruthless, but Charming, Women,” *Fox News*, March 29, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/drug-cartels-in-mexico-being-taken-over-by-ruthless-but-charming-women>.; Ekin Karasin, “How All-Woman Squads Are Taking over Mexico’s Drug Wars,” *Mail Online*, March 31, 2017, sec. News, [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/~article-4367692/index.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/~/article-4367692/index.html)

⁷⁴¹ Ekin Karasin, “How All-Woman Squads Are Taking over Mexico’s Drug Wars,” *Mail Online*.

how these descriptions emphasize on danger, sensationalism, and criminality activate the public's desire for State intervention and violence.⁷⁴² The Daily Mail is a British newspaper and Fox News is multinational channel based in the United States with a wide following there. Both entities are known for their graphic and sensational depictions of Mexico, the US Mexico borderlands, and the Drug War in North America. Chesnut's presence within these articles, as a published and tenured academic at a reputable institution, gives these descriptions legitimacy afforded to traditionally trusted sources of knowledge production. There is a reason both articles introduce Chesnut with his affiliation, it tells the reader that this information can be trusted, that the emotional response these descriptions elicit are grounded in reality, instead of the imaginaries of a sexual and bloody frontier that have enabled centuries of State violence against the borderlands and those that live there.

⁷⁴² Stuart Davis, "Slowing Down Media Coverage on The US–Mexico Border," *Digital Journalism* 4, no. 4 (May 18, 2016): 462–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1123101>; Manuel Chavez, Scott Whiteford, and Jennifer Hoewe, "Reporting on Immigration: A Content Analysis of Major U.S. Newspapers' Coverage of Mexican Immigration," *Norteamérica* 5, no. 2 (December 2010): 111–25.; Regina P Branton, and Johanna Dunaway. 2009. "Slanted Newspaper Coverage of Immigration: The Importance of Economics and Geography." *Policy Studies Journal : the Journal of the Policy Studies Organization*. 37 (2). Urbana, Ill. : University of Illinois: 257–73. doi:10.1111/j.1541-0072.2009.00313.x.; Regina P Branton, and Johanna Dunaway. 2009. "Spatial Proximity to the U.S.—Mexico Border and Newspaper Coverage of Immigration Issues." *Political Research Quarterly*. 62 (2). Salt Lake City, Utah : University of Utah: 289–302. doi:10.1177/1065912908319252.; Leo Ralph Chavez, *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation* (University of California Press, 2001); Sei-hill Kim et al., "The View of the Border: News Framing of the Definition, Causes, and Solutions to Illegal Immigration," *Mass Communication and Society* 14, no. 3 (May 1, 2011): 292–314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205431003743679>; Stephen D. Reese and Bob Buckalew, "The Militarism of Local Television: The Routine Framing of the Persian Gulf War," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 1995): 40–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039509366918>; Casey T. Harris, Jeff Gruenewald, and Cody R. Tuttle, "Immigration and Crime in the Local News: Exploring the Macrolevel Covariates of Coverage and Framing," *The Sociological Quarterly* 0, no. 0 (December 2, 2020): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2020.1826002>; Karen Ross, "The Journalist, the Housewife, the Citizen and the Press: Women and Men as Sources in Local News Narratives," *Journalism* 8, no. 4 (August 1, 2007): 449–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884907078659>; Osagie K. Obasogie and Zachary Newman, "Black Lives Matter and Respectability Politics in Local News Accounts of Officer-Involved Civilian Deaths: An Early Empirical Assessment Symposium Issue: Critical Race Theory and Empirical Methods," *Wisconsin Law Review* 2016, no. 3 (2016): 541–74; Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just, *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public* (Routledge, 2004); Travis L. Dixon, "Crime News and Racialized Beliefs: Understanding the Relationship Between Local News Viewing and Perceptions of African Americans and Crime," *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 106–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00376.x>.

Chesnut's utilitarian characterizations of devotees and his academic affiliation do a lot of work for both the experts he collaborates actively with, and those who leverage his work more distantly. To understand this "work", it is important to understand how "coptalk" suffuses and monopolizes news coverage and introduces audiences to the saints, the experts, the border, and the relationships between them. As articles present us with graphic descriptions of sleepy neighborhoods torn apart by violence that came from the outside, they present clear pictures of who is causing problems and who is providing us with information, solutions, and resolutions. Patrick Blanchfield, an academic and journalist, argues that modern journalism uncritically spreads "coptalk", particularly in the wake of visible instances of police violence and murder. Wide swaths of the journalism field, from local news to nationally read newspapers, not just repeat press releases from police departments without modification or analysis, but use the operational language of law enforcement to describe and report any incidents that involve the police and the policed. The latter borrows the vantage of the police and the language that validates their actions and authority, and sets the bounds for how we may talk about things like police corruption, violence, and possible reform.

After each new episode of horror, an efflorescence of coptalk prevents us from imagining any alternative way of defining and enforcing the civil peace. And the starkness of this brand of civilian-grade coptalk demands we think in its own terms alone...Coptalk, in any case, is defined by one paradox above all: a total monopoly on deciding what counts as rationality, alongside the police's conversation-ending deference to their own invocations of that most irrational of affects, fear.⁷⁴³

The above mirrors what Carol Cohn observed about the language of defense intellectuals, the language, particularly when it used repeatedly in a particular field, sets the bounds of how a

⁷⁴³ Patrick Blanchfield, "Policing and the English Language," *The New Republic*, March 31, 2020, https://newrepublic.com/article/156802/coptalk-policing-english-language?utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=EB_TNR&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1635973358-2.

subject is conceived of—how we talk about something will begin to affect how we think of it.⁷⁴⁴ In the instance of “coptalk”, the bounds are set by the culture of fear that pervades the law enforcement and any perceived deviance or even difference becomes frightening to the audience – frightening enough that they become primed to accept overreach and violence from the state if it keeps them safe from that deviance. By allowing the binary myths discussed in previous chapters to impact not just police and border security agent operation, but also how the public may even conceive of that operation, state agents are implicitly allowed to be the ones who concurrently have the authority to define what is both rational and safe, versus irrational and dangerous, and then act on those distinctions.

Blanchfield holds the news industry and journalists culpable for this allowance, but others like Ieva Jusionyte acknowledge that the role reporters and news institutions play is complicated, particularly on local levels.⁷⁴⁵ On one hand, local news reports on issues presented to be of immediate concern to local communities—they provide information that is more likely to impact the day to day lives of their audience than national news vehicles. These local sources also shape conceptions of threat, identity, and exclusion by framing local issues with national discourses of alterity; even independent local news organizations can support regimes of power that often target marginalized and targeted groups. Despite evidence that shows the relative stability, low-crime, and positive feelings of safety experienced by border communities, news media continues to center the danger associated with both the locale of the borderlands and those that traverse them by amplifying law enforcement perspectives over other discourses.⁷⁴⁶ News

⁷⁴⁴ Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” 687.

⁷⁴⁵ Ieva Jusionyte, *Savage Frontier: Making News and Security on the Argentine Border* (Univ of California Press, 2015).

⁷⁴⁶ Ernesto Castañeda and Casey Chiappetta, “Border Residents’ Perceptions of Crime and Security in El Paso, Texas,” .; Sumana Chattopadhyay, “‘You Are Not Welcome Here!’ Understanding News Coverage of Central American Migrant Families in Trump’s America,” 90

media's emphasis on danger, sensationalism, and criminality turns overtly orientalist when it uses informal saints like Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and the communities that revere both as signs that danger, crime, and deviance is present. More often than not images and coverage of borderland saints are presented to complete and enhance tropes of borderland vice and danger that news media use to increase the sensational appeal of their programming. Whether or not narco saint experts are quoted, these tropes are drawn directly from law enforcement cosmologies that orient the audience as a viewer looking out over a dangerous terrain

As displayed by Chesnut's active social media presence which he uses to direct his followers to where he has been quoted, published, discussed, and snubbed, Chesnut actively participates in any and all things that pertain to Santa Muerte seemingly without discretion. This includes contributing and supporting characterizations of Santa Muerte that play directly into law enforcement conceptions of a dangerous, exotic, and ludic border where law enforcement agents are entitled to authority, violence, and self-fulfillment. Examples of this include the article that as of February, 26th, 2022 is pinned to Chesnut's Twitter homepage and this chapter opened with where Chesnut agrees that Santa Muerte inspired ritual murder is "standard operating fare."⁷⁴⁷ This confirmation of law enforcement position is complicated by the fact this does not seem to be Chesnut's academic position in the debate on whether Santa Muerte's devotion is intrinsically linked to drug violence, ritual murder, and deviant criminal superstition. Chesnut routinely and directly challenges the label of "narco" saint in his academic writing and in his critiques of other scholarly work, narco saint experts he does not collaborate with, and popular media depictions of saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde.⁷⁴⁸ However, in practice Chesnut collaborates often

⁷⁴⁷ Stephanie Saucier and Johnston Von Springer, "Worship of Folk Saint Linked to Fatal Hotel Shooting in Baton Rouge," *WBRZ*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.wbrz.com/news/worship-of-folk-saint-linked-to-fatal-hotel-shooting-in-baton-rouge/>.

⁷⁴⁸ Kate Kingsbury and Andrew Chesnut, "Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the

with those who have linked these informal borderland saints with the label, and his voice and work is used to give credibility to law enforcement perspectives.

In some cases, these articles forgo this veneer of academic legitimacy, opting instead for overt law enforcement authoritative perspectives. A 2019 San Antonio, Texas news article begins with the title “Police find guns, Santa Muerte statue in car after Converse chase”, and the short article details a short car chase and the confiscated illegally owned firearms along with the religious statue.⁷⁴⁹ Another article from a different San Antonio station titled, “2 arrested; Guns, Santa Muerte seized after chase in Converse” covers the same incident and expands the information presented only by explaining the significance of the Santa Muerte material with the sentence “The Santa Muerte statue is often associated with drug cartels and is a spiritual figure said to offer protection”.⁷⁵⁰ These type of crime report articles are commonly created and hosted by local news outlets and are a small selection of the crime report articles that include and present informal borderland saints to US audiences. In other cases features are not instigated by any singular crime, and but instead provide their audiences with an explanation of a phenomenon. They are framed as pseudo-educational dives into a foreign religious presence in the United States through law enforcement perspective and operation. These features rely heavily on interviews and quotes from law enforcement experts about Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and

Mexican Drug War,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4, no. 1 (June 1, 2020): 25–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00095-2>; Andrew Chesnut, “Reflections on the First Academic Conference on Santa Muerte,” *Most Holy Death* (blog), November 23, 2014, <https://skeletonsaint.com/2014/11/23/reflections-on-the-first-academic-conference-on-santa-muerte/>; David Metcalf and Andrew Chesnut, “La Santísima Es Justicia – Reckless Reporters Face the Truth,” *Most Holy Death* (blog), May 13, 2016, <https://skeletonsaint.com/2016/05/13/la-santisima-es-justicia/>.

⁷⁴⁹ Dennis Foley, “Police Find Guns, Santa Muerte Statue in Car after Converse Chase,” *KTSA*, May 23, 2019, sec. San Antonio News, <https://www.ksa.com/police-find-guns-santa-muerte-statue-in-car-after-converse-chase/>.

⁷⁵⁰ KSAT. “2 Arrested; Guns, Santa Muerte Seized after Chase in Converse.” *KSAT*, May 23, 2019, sec. News. <https://www.ksat.com/news/2019/05/23/2-arrested-guns-santa-muerte-seized-after-chase-in-converse/>.

other narco culture subjects, and in some cases provide coverage of law enforcement training events.⁷⁵¹ Attached and embedded videos invite the viewer in with colorful text and headlines, “Saints of the Underworld”, “Disturbing Trend: Drug Traffickers Pray for Protection” and “Channel 2 Investigates: Narco Saints,” and the videos affect their message with intro visuals of Santa Muerte statues casting long shadows, masked and bandanaed men holding up automatic rifles in the desert, and blurry amateur footage law enforcement have taken of shrines found on duty. The audio cues include rapid bullet fire, news anchor voiceover explaining that criminal cults are now operating in the US, and the flicker of a flame starting over photographs of Jesús Malverde candles.⁷⁵² Many of these articles and local television segments, especially those located in Robert Almonte’s hometown El Paso, Texas, use video of Almonte’s training sessions, the material he brings, and quoted soundbites as the core of what is framed as investigative and educational features.⁷⁵³ The articles that include video show Almonte against blank seminar

⁷⁵¹ Examples include: AJ Abell. “Man Escapes Failed Human Sacrifice to Santa Muerte in Tennessee Mobile Home.” *WZTV*; Kate Croxton. “Alamance County Law Enforcement Schooled on Mexican Cartels.” *The Times-News*, June 28, 2018. <https://www.thetimesnews.com/news/20180628/alamance-county-law-enforcement-schooled-on-mexican-cartels>; Paul Birmingham. “Digging Deeper: Cartels Look to Saints of the Underworld for Protection.” *KVOA*, September 20, 2019, sec. News. <https://kvoa.com/news/2019/09/19/digging-deeper-cartels-look-to-saints-of-the-underworld-for-protection/>; Guillermo Contreras. “Studying the Saints That Narcos Pray To.” *San Antonio Express-News*, December 15, 2010. <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/Studying-the-saints-that-narcos-pray-to-885365.php>; Mike Sakal. “Expert in Cartel Violence, Cults Trains Valley Officers.” *East Valley Tribune*, April 28, 2011. https://www.eastvalleytribune.com/local/cop_shop/expert-in-cartel-violence-cults-trains-valley-officers/article_b8fd0352-71d7-11e0-a2db-001cc4c002e0.html; KGNS. “Authorities Educate Themselves in Cartel Culture,” September 17, 2019. <https://www.kgns.tv/content/news/Law-en-560609881.html>.

⁷⁵² Mark Winne. “Drug Cartels Worship ‘narco Saints,’ Making Them More Dangerous, DEA Says.” *WSBTV*.; Anthony Sabella. “Drug Cartels Pray to Saints for Protection from Police, Expert Says.” *WTKR*. May 23, 2018, sec. News. <https://www.wtkr.com/2018/05/22/drug-cartels-pray-to-saints-for-protection-from-police-expert-says>; Paul Birmingham. “Digging Deeper: Cartels Look to Saints of the Underworld for Protection.” *KVOA*.

⁷⁵³ Daniel Borunda. “Who Is Jesus Malverde? Question on Narco-Saint Hangs over ‘Chapo’ Guzman Drug Cartel Trial.” *El Paso Times*. Matthew, Hendley. “Arizona Cops Spend the Day Learning How to Combat Voodoo Used by Mexican Drug Cartels.” *Phoenix New Times*, April 28, 2011, sec. News. <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/arizona-cops-spend-the-day-learning-how-to-combat-voodoo-used-by-mexican-drug-cartels-6661593>; Mike Sakal. “Expert in Cartel Violence, Cults Trains Valley Officers.”; Birmingham, Paul. “Digging Deeper: Cartels Look to Saints of the Underworld for Protection.” *KVOA*. <https://kvoa.com/news/2019/09/19/digging-deeper-cartels-look-to-saints-of-the-underworld-for-protection/>.

rooms, suited and speaking to the corner of the camera, having a conversation with the reporter not the cameraman. His array of collected material associated with the religious beliefs he consults law enforcement on is usually in the background set up on folded tables for display, or the video shows Almonte setting these materials out. Like Chesnut, he is presented as an authoritative figure. The collected items serve as trophies that communicate his mastery over the cult—having seized its material elements, his professional and clean dress is contrasted with the prison jumpsuits and blood stained clothes of suspects and victims, and his position standing in front of classrooms and sitting students imply his role as the source of knowledge for others to adopt.

A large amount of these news articles were and are created and hosted by local news outlets, particularly in the Southwest United States, but national news platforms have also reported and presented on the subject and spread law enforcement perspectives on Mexican religious practices and communities. In the past decade, coinciding with the surge in visibility of saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde, these articles have become more common, but also more accessible with the rise of online news platforms. Similarly, as the internet intensified competition across both local and national news fields, outlets found themselves scrambling for paying customers and news media doubled down on sensationalistic coverage to attract readers. Along with the more common local spotlights on crime and law enforcement activity, national and international news sites known for disinformation campaigns have marketed narco saint expertise and law enforcement perspectives to US audiences.⁷⁵⁴ These articles are then copied by

⁷⁵⁴ For primary source examples see: RT International. “Pilgrims Bow down before Saint of Death in Mexico (VIDEOS, PHOTOS).” RT International, August 20, 2017. <https://www.rt.com/viral/400320-santa-muerte-mexico-cult/>; Lana Shadwick. “37 Illegal Aliens, Including 3 Juveniles, Found in ‘Goddess of Death’ Shrine Stash House.” *Breitbart*, May 10, 2016, sec. Border / Cartel Chronicles. <https://www.breitbart.com/border/2016/05/10/37-illegal-aliens-including-3-juveniles-found-in-goddess-of-death-shrine-stash-house/>.

local news sites, repeating headlines, photos, and content at the local level, where they trickle further down into forum boards to be then shared along with *Breaking Bad* gifs and quotes.⁷⁵⁵ This relationship between news media and narco saint experts goes both ways, concurrently supporting each other with content and exposure. News sources quote Almonte and Bunker, and even more prolifically Andrew Chesnut, and provide them publicity and links to their respective sites, blogs, and publications. But also, experts such as Almonte and Bunker and their associates rely on news sources within their publications as their primary means of source information, using local and national news sources to back up their claims within their trainings and publications, provide content for their edited blog, and rationale for their continued existence within the marketplace of the defense, policing, and border security field. In this way, these infotainment creators are a key factor in evangelizing the law enforcement religiosity discussed last chapter even as they are one of the few sources outside the defense field talking about the impact of experts like Robert Almonte, Robert J. Bunker, and the “narco saints” they publish about. News outlets have an ambiguous role, as Ieva Jusionyte pointed out, in “the regime” as they help create a public receptive to law enforcement cosmologies of authority through violence, racialized binaries, and the imaginary of a barbaric frontier right outside their doorsteps separated by a blue line.

Like the fictionalized film and television productions that represent narco saints to United States audiences, local news media does so in varied degrees. In some cases, news coverage uses images of these saints in articles about drug interdiction and law enforcement activity on the

⁷⁵⁵ See previous footnote, and then replication: White, Tyler. “Large Human Trafficking Bust Ends at South Texas Stash House Adorned with ‘Goddess of Death’ Shrine.” San Antonio Express-News, May 10, 2016. <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/us-world/border-mexico/article/CBP-Human-traffickers-busted-bringing-dozens-of-7449825.php>; TxTarpon. “South Texas Stash House Adorned with ‘Goddess of Death’ Shrine.” TexAgs Forum. *TexAgs*, May 11, 2016. <http://texags.com/forums/16/topics/2747886>.

border, whether or not the reported incident involved devotees or narco saint material.⁷⁵⁶ In other cases, a few lines on the history and motivation of narco saint reverence is included within the article's text to expand on allegations that the arrested individual was a narco saint devotee.⁷⁵⁷ Still other articles are centered around narco saint devotion, but overwhelmingly these pieces are used to debate alleged criminality and accusations of satanism through law enforcement perspectives with soundbites and quotes from Robert Almonte.⁷⁵⁸ The majority of the latter type of articles are hosted and spread by local news outlets through both print and television segments, and a large amount of them are based in the state of Texas, Almonte's home state. These articles tend to be highly sensationalistic, leading with headlines that play into the barbarism pushed by narco saint experts. This barbarism is designed to attract clicks and imply a larger exotic danger encroaching into the familiar. Articles like "UPS drug case: Police say severed goat and cat heads found- Consistent with cult of "Saint of Death"", provide no details of any confirmed connection between Santa Muerte devotion found in relation to the reported

⁷⁵⁶ For example: Daniel Borunda, "Suspect in El Paso Triple-Murder Was on Probation; 2 Victims Had Been Arrested," *El Paso Times*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/crime/2018/09/19/el-paso-triple-murder-suspect-juan-fausto-cazares-probation-prior-arrests/1347909002/>; Daniel Borunda, "El Paso Woman Accused of Leading Drug Cell That Smuggled Drugs from Michoacan to Chicago," *El Paso Times*, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/crime/2017/12/21/el-paso-woman-accused-drug-cell-michoacan/975158001/>; Hollie McKay, "Where Does Mexico Really Get Its Guns?," *Fox News*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/mexico-guns-black-market-tepito>.

⁷⁵⁷ For example: Craig Smith, "UPS Drug Case: Police Say Severed Goat and Cat Heads Found," *KGUN*, December 20, 2019, sec. Local News, <https://www.kgun9.com/news/local-news/ups-drug-case-police-say-severed-goat-and-cat-heads-found/>; David Whisenant, "Rowan Couple Arrested on Drug Charges after Traffic Stop in Gaston County," *Https://Www.Wbvt.Com*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.wbvt.com/story/37361528/rowan-couple-arrested-on-drug-charges-after-traffic-stop-in-gaston-county>.

⁷⁵⁸ *KGUN9, UPS Trafficking Case: Police Say Severed Goat and Cat Heads Found*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bS7hM1yDDdU>; Guillermo Contreras, "Studying the Saints That Narcos Pray To," *mySA*, December 15, 2010, <https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/Studying-the-saints-that-narcos-pray-to-885365.php>; Mark Winne, "Drug Cartels Worship 'narco Saints,' Making Them More Dangerous, DEA Says," *WSBTv*; Tom Towers, "Sleepy Town Where Locals Worshipped 'Saint Death' – Leading to Human Sacrifices," *Dailystar.co.uk*, November 14, 2020, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/world-news/inside-town-locals-began-worshipping-23006766>; Fox News, "Drug Traffickers Are Making Human Sacrifices to 'Saint Death,'" *New York Post* (blog), July 17, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2017/07/17/drug-traffickers-are-making-human-sacrifices-to-saint-death/>.

criminal activity, and the article admits the religious element has nothing to do with the convictions associated with the case. Still, the impression has been given that there is something violently occult about borderland saints. That same article does feature video segments that state “FBI sources” have ascribed ritualistic murder to the cult, and these sources turn out to be Bunker’s three-part bulletin series discussed last chapter.⁷⁵⁹ A WBTV article about a North Carolina couple arrested on drug charges twice mentions a shrine in their house devoted to Jesús Malverde, also quoted twice as “the so-called “patron saint of Mexican drug cartels””.⁷⁶⁰ Above the insistent repetition of Jesús Malverde’s presence the article includes a blurry mugshot of a scruffy man and a photograph of a woman, her head bowed to obscure her face as she is led towards the camera by a straight-backed man wearing a jacket emblazoned with a sheriff’s star. The bottom of the article reminds the audience that she, according to investigators she is an undocumented immigrant with permanent residency.⁷⁶¹ A Virginia news site that reports on local news in Lynchburg, Danville and Roanoke reports on an incident where two construction workers were held at gunpoint with the title “Exclusive: Workers held up at gunpoint at MS-13 ‘destroyer house’” and the article and associated video reports within the same segment that police officers found graffiti, “countless alcohol bottles and marijuana blunts littered across the floor”, clown masks, and a Santa Muerte shrine and idol. Those interviewed in the article peer out of their cracked doors as if suddenly fearful of their neighborhood, and placid shots of the street with voiceovers detailing the gang violence paint a picture of normal houses that could reveal themselves to be gang hang outs at any moment.⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁹ Smith, Craig. “UPS Drug Case: Police Say Severed Goat and Cat Heads Found.” *KGUN*, December 20, 2019, sec. Local News. <https://www.kgun9.com/news/local-news/ups-drug-case-police-say-severed-goat-and-cat-heads-found>.

⁷⁶⁰ Whisenant, David. “Rowan Couple Arrested on Drug Charges after Traffic Stop in Gaston County.”

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶² Kevin Lewis. “Exclusive: Workers Held up at Gunpoint at MS-13 ‘Destroyer House.’” *WSET*, December 26, 2017. .

Local news around the United States covers Robert Almonte when his training schedule brings him to these local communities. These segments that center Almonte’s training operate as promotional material, as they heavily quote law enforcement perspectives and usually have limited if any non-law enforcement sources included in their coverage of informal borderland religion. A Virginia Beach broadcast and associated online article, titled “Drug cartels pray to saints for protection from police, expert says” begins with the text “Armed with more than 30 years in law enforcement experience, Robert Almonte is in Virginia Beach this week helping train law enforcement from around the state.”⁷⁶³ Almonte’s quotes make up most of the article, and the small amount of text ends with a warning from Almonte about the drug traffickers and the devotees he addresses in his training in regards to Virginia specifically and the drugs being brought in, “They are here,”.⁷⁶⁴ Another similar article from Austin, Texas “Folk religion with deadly rituals raises safety concerns for law enforcement” quotes both Almonte and Robert Bunker, and shows a video graphic that explains how drugs “flow” into Austin. The article includes interviews with local police officers who despite not seeing any “ritualistic killings” in their area, respond with an ominous and expectant “not yet.”⁷⁶⁵

The work and language of Andrew Chesnut, along with the experts like Robert J. Bunker, Robert Almonte, and Tony Kail, is woven into the cop talk of the articles discussed above. Sometimes these snapshots of expertise provide a few lines of a counterpoint, but more often than not these experts provide a few facts that speak to the prevalence of these dangerous practices or directly support the implications of the article – that something dangerous, new,

⁷⁶³ Anthony Sabella, “Drug Cartels Pray to Saints for Protection from Police, Expert Says.”

⁷⁶⁴ *ibid*

⁷⁶⁵ Erin Jones and Erica Proffer, “Folk Religion with Deadly Rituals Raises Safety Concerns for Law Enforcement,” *KVUE*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.kvue.com/article/news/local/folk-religion-with-deadly-rituals-raises-safety-concerns-for-law-enforcement/269-454757449>.

exotic, and interesting has happened and one of these saints is at the middle of it. Even the snippets of expertise that challenge cop talk are still embedded within the article's text beneath a grisly headline and often a video showing handcuffed men, mugshots, poorly lit shrines, and law enforcement seizures of cash and weapons.

“Meet Santa Muerte”

National news outlet coverage of informal saints like Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde range from journalistic coverage of crime and deviance and culturally investigative pieces that echo the travel journalism television discussed in the previous chapter. This widely read and accessibly promoted type of coverage should be viewed on a spectrum, with crime reporting and un-analyzed repetition of law enforcement narratives on one end, and genuine attempts at travel journalism on the other. Many of these articles still quote narco saint experts, particularly Robert Almonte, but also begin to bring in more non-law enforcement perspectives as they move along said spectrum.⁷⁶⁶ Despite including perspectives from outside the established security field however, these cultural productions still place the audience in the position of looking outward on an otherized “orient” that reaffirm their viewers as the center of these narratives. These national outlets are more likely to cover narco saints during state or local policy pushes to legalize certain drugs, during high-profile cases related to drug trafficking, such as that of Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, who is more commonly referred to as “El Chapo”, or during highly visible holy festivals associated with Santa Muerte that occur in August and November.⁷⁶⁷ The “El Chapo”

⁷⁶⁶ Associated Press. “Underworld Saint Gets Following in U.S.” *USA TODAY*, March 4, 2013. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/04/underworld-saint-becoming-more-popular-in-us/1961615/>; Fox News. “Mexican Folk Religion Involving Human Sacrifice Gaining Status among Criminals.” *Fox News*. July 17, 2017. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/mexican-folk-religion-involving-human-sacrifice-gaining-status-among-criminals>.

⁷⁶⁷ Johnny Magdaleno, “Mexican Drug Cartels May Use Legal Marijuana to Increase Their Presence in Northern California,” *Newsweek*, January 10, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.newsweek.com/2018/01/19/mexican-drug-cartels-taking-over-california-legal-marijuana->

trial saw a surge of articles related to the influential cartel leader devotion to Jesús Malverde by both local and national outlets, contrasting his international infamy with local sentiment from Guzmán's home state of Sinaloa.⁷⁶⁸ In the middle of this coverage spectrum, investigative cultural articles tend to balance law enforcement perspectives with academic perspectives, almost exclusively from Andrew Chesnut. However, all engage the debate and controversy between Santa Muerte, her following, law enforcement, and the institutional Catholic Church for a viewable spectacle.⁷⁶⁹

The exotic and sensational nature of Santa Muerte is always on display. Huffpost invites its audience to “Meet Santa Muerte, The Tequila-Loving Saint Comforting Both Criminals And The Marginalized”, and though the author begins the article with alleged associated ritual murders, they move on to quote Chesnut, and then anthropologist Laura Roush who contextualizes the religious movement within the history of Mexico and the Catholic Church there.⁷⁷⁰ Business Insider's article “Saint Death: The secretive and sinister 'cult' challenging the power of the Catholic Church,” is a primarily photo-based article that begins with Chesnut's

[775665.html](#).

⁷⁶⁸ Jesus Bustamante, “In El Chapo's Home State, Mexicans Bemoan His Punishment Far from Home,” *Reuters*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mexico-el-chapo-reax-idUSKCN1UD03N>. Deborah Bonello, “In His Hometown, Fugitive Mexican Drug Lord ‘El Chapo’ Is a Hero to Many,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2015, sec. World & Nation, <https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-culiacan-guzman-20150810-story.html>.; William Neuman and Azam Ahmed, “Public Enemy? At Home in Mexico, ‘El Chapo’ Is Folk Hero No. 1,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 2015, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/18/world/americas/safe-haven-for-drug-kingpin-el-chapo-in-many-mexicans-hearts.html>. Chuck Goudie, Ross Weidner, and Christine Tressel. “Patron Saint of Drug Dealers Looms over El Chapo Trial.” *ABC7 Chicago*, April 30, 2018, sec. crime-safety. <https://abc7chicago.com/3411083/>.

⁷⁶⁹ Some examples include Amy Guthrie, “Santa Muerte: Rise of a Folk Saint.” *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2016, sec. Life. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/santa-muerte-rise-of-a-folk-saint-1455294789>; Steven Bragg. “Growing Devotion To Santa Muerte In U.S. And Abroad.” *NBC News*, December 29, 2014. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/growing-devotion-santa-muerte-u-s-abroad-n275856>.; Russell Contreras, “Underworld Saint Becoming More Popular in US,” *AP News*, March 4, 2013, sec. Archive, <https://apnews.com/article/9f4ee9262329466386a300d291421ed8>.

⁷⁷⁰ Antonia Blumberg, “Meet The Tequila-Loving Saint Who's Comforting Both Criminals And The Marginalized,” *HuffPost*, 48:46 500, sec. Religion, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/santa-muerte-saint-death_n_6108198.

estimation of Santa Muerte's popularity, and then turns to her criminal associations with photographs of dismembered body parts across crime scenes and photos taken by police of confiscated saint statues and guns. The article then reorients back with further analysis by Andrew Chesnut with tenderly framed photos of white robed Santa Muerte figurines and her devotees with soft expressions bowed in prayer.⁷⁷¹ When these articles discuss the benevolent aspects of Santa Muerte devotion, they are explained as symptoms of poverty, syncretic Aztec roots—though Chesnut argues this is a recent phenomenon and locates Santa Muerte's origins as a European love Goddess— and a deep mistrust in Mexican governmental authority and ability to handle cartel violence. There is little mention of the underlying causes or context of these drug conflicts, leaving the reader unmoored in a sea of Mexican problems without connection to the neoliberal and expansionist history of North America. Even when painting narco saint devotion as a novel religious movement across the continent, these articles understand it as something inherently other and incomprehensible to an assumed US audience normatively far removed from the corruption and violence Mexico is characterized within these narratives.

Other types of narco saint coverage are not overtly dominated by law enforcement perspectives or direct vantage point, preferring to center point of view of the investigative journalists who travel to shrines and visit with the respective religious communities. Vice News has run three articles featuring Santa Muerte, and within these run of articles the authors cite Andrew Chesnut rather than overt law enforcement sources. Nevertheless, the narratives emphasize deviancy, rebelliousness, and differences between Santa Muerte devotees and generally accepted religious, legal, and social norms with headlines like “A Narco-Saint, a Death

⁷⁷¹ Christopher Woody, “Saint Death: The Secretive and Sinister ‘cult’ Challenging the Power of the Catholic Church,” *Business Insider*, March 17, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-santa-muerte-2016-3>.

Cult, and a Lost-Cause Apostle Await the Pope in Mexico”, “Our Lady of the Holy Death Is the World's Fastest Growing Religious Movement”, and “The Cult of Santa Muerte: The Mexican Lady Saint of Death”.⁷⁷² The latter two of which is housed in the entertainment section of the online news platform.⁷⁷³ Vice is known for its leverage of the strange and “other” to promote its articles, so these titles, nor their treatment of Santa Muerte devotion is unsurprising, if indicative of the frontier vantage as it encourages its readers to gawk at the “death cult” and its rebellious rejection of traditionally understood Catholic religiosity. The photos used within the articles follow the patterns of both fictional and nonfictional media, devotees’ faces are cropped, broken asphalt and concrete make up the backdrop, and homemade statues with grinning skulls occupy the center of the shot.⁷⁷⁴ National Geographic’s coverage of Santa Muerte’s cult relies on similar attention grabbing headlines, “Troubled Spirits: In Mexico, the harsh realities of daily life have elevated unholy saints, who now stand beside traditional icons” and “Vatican in a Bind About Santa Muerte”.⁷⁷⁵ Though these collections include the violent imagery of other photo collections, they center around photos framed with devotees faces somber and praying in frame, with children and families near home Santa Muerte’s shrines, and colorful neighborhood shots with blue skies overhead. The shots of armored prison guards and violent murder scenes juxtaposed with the light smiles on devotees faces cuts any message that informal borderland saints are only deviant and dangerous symptoms of institutional chaos. National Geographic’s

⁷⁷² Vice. “Santa Muerte.” Topic Section. Vice, April 22, 2020. https://www.vice.com/en_us/topic/santa-muerte.

⁷⁷³ *ibid*

⁷⁷⁴ Paulas, Rick. “Our Lady of the Holy Death Is the World’s Fastest Growing Religious Movement.” *Vice*, November 13, 2014. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w7pzd/our-lady-of-the-holy-death-is-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-movement-456.

⁷⁷⁵ Guillermprieto, Alma. “Troubled Spirits.” *National Geographic*, May 1, 2010. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2010/05/mexican-saints/>; Guillermprieto, Alma. “Vatican in a Bind About Santa Muerte.” *National Geographic News*, May 14, 2013. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/5/130512-vatican-santa-muerte-mexico-cult-catholic-church-cultures-world/>.

provides a more nuanced view into Santa Muerte's following than most of the news media, however there remains issues of vantage. Considering the United States, English speaking audience of these articles, and the informative and exploratory tone of the text and explanations, there is no acknowledgment of the US drug wars and security apparatus impact on the violence splattered within the photos they include. The cross-country context of the violence depicted throughout much of the articles and collection is absent, once again painting Mexico as a near site of otherness responsible for their own strange, if beautiful, response to their own instability and corruption. Moreover, this infotainment is at its core an orientalist production as it continues to paint the reader as a discoverer of the exotic.

Not every article has to be a history lesson, but when informal borderland saints are cast as the mascots or demons of drug war violence in Mexico again and again for US audiences, and law enforcement and controversial tourists are the only available translators for US audiences, sensational otherness becomes to the frame for understanding personas like Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and other borderland cultural subjects. This in turn emboldens larger projects of alienation and control by the security state, as border militarization initiatives speak to a logic pushed by these productions.

Narco saints are framed at best as a strangeness born from Mexican violence and death, a threat that brings violence with it over the border in these productions. This framing limits how audiences think about these subjects and how they position themselves relative to them. These productions do so by not only framing the narco saint as some deviant other, but the viewer as someone who *should* be shocked by what they are witnessing on their television and computer screens. The various imaginaries presented throughout these different examples of infotainment use the conflict of the borderlands as setting, allowing the reader an uncomplicated and

emboldened role as an explorer of the “other”. Throughout the last chapter, I directed attention to the ways in which experts instrumentalized narco saints and narco saint material in the cosmology of a permeably dangerous border where morally threats to law enforcement are hidden but common. In this way, creators that use the frontier as a setting make a deliberate choice with their inclusion of narco saints.

By including narco saint material and images in bloody crime scenes, rustic eerie shrines, and alongside assassins and silent killers these creators enact frontier tropes of individualist, white masculine heroes against lawlessness, criminality, and barbarism in ways that both bolster the danger and otherness of their setting, but also reify already prejudicial associations between informal borderland religion and criminality and violence. These creators add to a canon of narco saint media that more often than not echoes the trend within narco saint expertise to center a law enforcement agent point of view, a view that rewards violent individualism if exercised by white men.

Owning the Border and its Saints

The coordination, communication, and connections that Bunker, Sullivan, Almonte, and Kail have with Chesnut is a fascinating example of the pervasive and nebulous securityscape, where academics, law enforcement, and security experts interweave scholarly work, news coverage, policy and training material that directly inform practice, and social media to replicate centuries old imaginaries of alterity that in turn enable and justify current practices of State violence and othering. Though Chesnut has criticized and derided Almonte directly in a few blog posts, Chesnut and the ex-sheriff’s quotes build up a landscape of frightening, exotic, if novel, encounters with the other for US audiences. Chesnut’s social media relationship between Bunker, Kail, and Sullivan has been increasingly reciprocated in recent years—and this makes

Chesnut's role in introducing the public to Santa Muerte all the more interesting.⁷⁷⁶ Chesnut has featured Bunker and Sullivan's above expertise on his own blog website and promoted their work via Twitter, where Chesnut has an active following.⁷⁷⁷ On Twitter, Chesnut's increasingly tags John P. Sullivan and Robert Bunker on articles he retweets, and through this often directs their attention to his own analysis with links to violent news coverage of Santa Muerte or Jesús Malverde. Sometimes this online attention is returned, with retweets and likes, but Chesnut routinely instigates these practices of online promotion, tagging both John P. Sullivan (@ZFTWARNING), Robert J. Bunker (@DocBunker), and Tony Kail's (@memphishoodoo) twitter handles on various news articles that connect Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde to criminal activity. In the past year, Chesnut has tagged them in dozens of original posts and promotional retweets. Recently, Chesnut repeated this practice with the more express purpose of drawing attention to the use of their work in his scholarship, linking them with the tweet to his then newest article on Santa Muerte stating:

Here's our free article <https://rdcu.be/b1vbZ> 'Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War' by @ProfKingsbury and me. We cite @ZFTWARNING and

⁷⁷⁶ See among many; Andrew Chesnut. @andrewchesnut1. "LOS CABALLEROS TEMPLARIOS DE MICHOACÁN: IMAGERY, SYMBOLISM, AND NARRATIVES <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/los-caballeros-templarios-de-michoacan-imagery-symbolism-and-narratives> @DocBunker & Alma Keshavarz (eds.) w/contributions by @AndrewChesnut1 @corcoran25 @ioangrillo @hipbonegamer @memphishoodoo @ProfKingsbury @steven_metz @ZFTWARNING et al @smallwars" Apr 16, 2019. 5:44 am.
Chesnut, Andrew. @andrewchesnut1. Twitter advanced search. [https://twitter.com/search?q=\(from%3AAndrewChesnut1\)%20\(%40ZFTWARNING\)%20filter%3Alinks&src=typed_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=(from%3AAndrewChesnut1)%20(%40ZFTWARNING)%20filter%3Alinks&src=typed_query) For specific examples see: Chesnut, Andrew. @andrewchesnut1. "Pentecostal gangsters terrorizing the favelas of Rio de Janeiro? Who knew?! @ZFTWARNING @DocBunker and I map out the bizarre world of Brazil's evangelical narcos who persecute the Afro-Brazilian religions of Umbanda and Candomblé" Nov 19, 2017, 8:11 AM. <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/932280101156327424>; David Metcalf, "Santa Muerte and the Culture of Violence," *Most Holy Death* (blog), June 5, 2018, <https://skeletonsaint.com/2018/06/05/santa-muerte-and-the-culture-of-violence/>. Also Sullivan, John. @ZFTWARNING The Rise of the Narcostate https://amazon.com/dp/198454392X/ref=cm_sw_r_tw_awdb_t1_x_SYVLDbA7YD1ZW via @amazon @smallwars" Oct 4, 2019 1:04 AM. <https://twitter.com/ZFTWARNING/status/1180030948106047488> Retweeted by @andrewchesnut1.

@DocBunker with gratitude to @SSSR religion for the generous research grant. – @andrewchesnut1⁷⁷⁸

The article itself, written by Andrew Chesnut with frequent co-author Dr. Kate Kingsbury, argues that Santa Muerte should be considered to be more than a narco saint in light of devotion the researchers observed to the informal saint by Mexican law enforcement and prison guards. Instead, the authors argue that Santa Muerte should be considered instead a holy “matroness of the drug war” in general, as she provides all involved within the conflict safety and at the very least a good death when that inevitability comes.⁷⁷⁹ Chesnut and Kingsbury use a single article co-authored by Bunker and Sullivan to state that the drug trade challenges Mexico’s national sovereignty.⁷⁸⁰ The associated promotional material and central argument of the article labels Santa Muerte the “matroness of the drug war”, and this is interesting considering Chesnut’s accusations against other scholars that they too closely link Santa Muerte’s popularity to the violence of the drug wars.⁷⁸¹ This 2019 article is not the first time Chesnut has utilized defense research on narco saints. He publicized his collaboration with Robert Bunker in a 2017 “Strategic Note” that was posted on the Small Wars Journal site, and later incorporated into their collected and published anthologies.⁷⁸² These “notes” include news articles, a brief background

⁷⁷⁸ Andrew Chesnut. @andrewchesnut1. “Here's our free article <https://rdcu.be/b1vbZ> 'Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War' by @ProfKingsbury and me. We cite @ZFTWARNING and @DocBunker with gratitude to @SSSR religion for the generous research grant.” Feb 15, 2020, 6:19 AM. <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1228685154098565120>

⁷⁷⁹ Kate Kingsbury and Andrew Chesnut, “Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, February 10, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00095-2>.

⁷⁸⁰ Andrew Chesnut. @andrewchesnut1. “Here's our free article <https://rdcu.be/b1vbZ> 'Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War' by @ProfKingsbury and me. We cite @ZFTWARNING and @DocBunker with gratitude to @SSSR religion for the generous research grant.” Feb 15, 2020, 6:19 AM. <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1228685154098565120>; See also John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, “Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico,” *Articles & Editorials*, 2013, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/45.

⁷⁸¹ Andrew Chesnut, “Reflections on the First Academic Conference on Santa Muerte,” *Most Holy Death* (blog), November 23, 2014, <https://skeletonsaint.com/2014/11/23/reflections-on-the-first-academic-conference-on-santa-muerte/>.

⁷⁸² Dr. Death & Divinity (@AndrewChesnut1) Pentecostal gangsters terrorizing the favelas of Rio de Janeiro? Who knew?! @ZFTWARNING @DocBunker and I map out the bizarre world of Brazil's

information on the topics therein, and then a segment titled “Third Generation Gang Analysis” where the authors discuss the news coverage within their framework of cultural insurgency.⁷⁸³

An interview he provided for the note details the rise of Pentecostalism, demon possession beliefs, and exorcism in Brazilian prisons. Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan and José de Arimatéia da Cruz, the authors of the strategic note, argue that there is a “battle for spiritual dominance and power” occurring in Rio de Janeiro which mirrors the spiritual insurgency and links to satanism in Mexico that Bunker in particular argues for in other publications.⁷⁸⁴

Likewise, Chesnut’s sole-authored work “Saint Nazario and the Knights Templar: The Narco-Evangelicalism of a Mexican Drug Cartel” has been published on the Small Wars Journal site, as has Kate Kingsbury’s companion piece “The Knights Templar Narcotheology: Deciphering the Occult of a Narcocult.”⁷⁸⁵ These works trace the development of the occult and evangelical elements of the Caballeros Templarios, a Mexican cartel who’s religious identity has been compared to terrorist organizations like ISIS and Al Qaeda by Bunker and other Small Wars Journal contributors.⁷⁸⁶

evangelical narcos who persecute the Afro-Brazilian religions of Umbanda and Candomble
<https://t.co/Az0A7yRp7Y> pic.twitter.com/XzkhK45fRO. November 19, 2017 8:11 AM

⁷⁸³ Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan, and José de Arimatéia da Cruz, “Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note No. 6 - Holy War in Rio’s Favelas: Bandidos Evangélicos (Evangelical Bandits),” Defense Blog, *Small Wars Journal* (blog), June 6, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/third-generation-gangs-strategic-note-no-6-holy-war-rios-favelas-bandidos-evangelicos>

⁷⁸⁴ Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan, and José de Arimatéia da Cruz, “Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note No. 6 - Holy War in Rio’s Favelas: Bandidos Evangélicos (Evangelical Bandits),” Defense Blog, *Small Wars Journal* (blog), June 6, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/third-generation-gangs-strategic-note-no-6-holy-war-rios-favelas-bandidos-evangelicos>. Pamela L. Bunker, Lisa J. Campbell, and Robert J. Bunker, “Torture, Beheadings, and Narcocultos,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 145–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310903561668>; Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Rethinking Insurgency: Criminality, Spirituality, and Societal Warfare in the Americas,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 5 (2011): 757.

⁷⁸⁵ Kate Kingsbury, “The Knights Templar Narcotheology: Deciphering the Occult of a Narcocult,” Defense Blog, *Small Wars Journal*, October 13, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/knights-templar-narcotheology-deciphering-occult-narcocult>.; Andrew Chesnut, “Saint Nazario and the Knights Templar: The Narco-Evangelicalism of a Mexican Drug Cartel,” Defense Blog, *Small Wars Journal*, October 18, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/saint-nazario-and-knights-templar-narco-evangelicalism-mexican-drug-cartel>.

⁷⁸⁶ Charles Cameron, “Templarios: Echoes of the Templars and Parallels Elsewhere,” Defense Blog, *Small*

Chesnut's collaboration and active engagement with Bunker and Tony Kail is doubly interesting considering the oft territorial way that Chesnut engages with other scholars in and adjacent to his field. Chesnut is quick to remind his audience that he was the first to label Santa Muerte a folk saint, and will bare long grudges against media, publications, or any coverage of Santa Muerte that do not feature himself or his work. When Reza Aslan, a scholar and entertainer, announced his *Believer* series would include an episode on Santa Muerte, Chesnut was quick to accuse Aslan first of plagiarism and then of misrepresenting the subject matter and did so visibly on social media, his personal blog, and multiple posts on a contributor blog hosted by Huffpost.

Aslan absurdly walking around Tepito with his Santa Muere statue,
total poser #believer

@AndrewChesnut1- [Apr 2, 2017](#)

CNN Thug Reza Aslan loses it - After London Attack, Trump Again
the Center of Partisan Media Combat <https://nyti.ms/2rHOQW0>

@AndrewChesnut1- [Jun 5, 2017](#)

I get plagiarized while Reza Aslan is cited as a Santa Muerte
expert! 🤔👤

@AndrewChesnut1- [Nov 7, 2017](#)

Chesnut, in his critique, refers to Aslan a “creative writing” professor (which is correct, but it obscures the fact that Aslan’s possesses multiple degrees in religious studies) Chesnut also decries Aslan’s alleged focus on Santa Muerte’s criminal following.⁷⁸⁷ Since the first

Wars Journal (blog), January 5, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/templarios-echoes-templars-and-parallels-elsewhere>.; Bunker, Robert, Kate Kingsbury, Marc Tyrrell, John P. Sullivan, and Andrew Chesnut. “Los Caballeros Templarios De Michoacán: Imagery, Symbolism, and Narratives.” *Los Caballeros Templarios De Michoacán: Imagery, Symbolism, and Narratives*, 2019.

⁷⁸⁷ Dr. Death & Divinity, “Creative Writing Professor Lifts My Santa Muerte Research in CNN Trailer [on

announcement of the show's episode, Chesnut has publicly celebrated misfortunes and set back Aslan has experienced and Chesnut has tweeted hundreds of times criticizing and ridiculing the host of the one season show, as well as accusing Aslan of megalomania, trashiness, and plagiarism.⁷⁸⁸ When Aslan's show was cancelled due to the creator's critical tweets of the then United States President Donald Trump, Chesnut – in a perhaps tongue in cheek manner – claimed he'd done his part to mobilize his followers via social media to get the show shut down.⁷⁸⁹

Reza Aslan] <https://Meforum.Org/Campus-Watch/24367/Creative-Writing-Professor-Lifts-My-Santa-Muerte>,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), May 7, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1390691454004174848>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “Reza Aslan’s ‘Believer’ and the Hazy Line between Education and Entertainment - Except He’s No ‘Scholar of Religion’” [Http://Americamedia.Org/Arts-Culture/2017/03/31/Reza-Aslans-Believer-and-Hazy-Line-between-Education-and-Entertainment](http://Americamedia.Org/Arts-Culture/2017/03/31/Reza-Aslans-Believer-and-Hazy-Line-between-Education-and-Entertainment),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), April 1, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/848283036689084416>.

⁷⁸⁸ Of many examples here is a selection Dr. Death & Divinity, “‘Aslan Walking through Tepito with a Statue of Santa Muerte and Not Getting Punched out May Be the True Miracle..’” [Https://T.Co/GsAoHzLMJI](https://T.Co/GsAoHzLMJI),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), April 13, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/852595549907832832>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “We Need Something Akin to Reza Aslan’s Canceled Series but Less Trashy and Not so Focused on a Megalomaniacal Host.,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), April 7, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1115004739295612928>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “I Get Plagiarized While Reza Aslan Is Cited as a Santa Muerte Expert! 🤔👻” [Https://T.Co/UESBrGVmNy](https://T.Co/UESBrGVmNy),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), November 7, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/927953842783817728>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “CNN Drops Reza Aslan Following Anti-Trump Tweets - Great News! Done in by Hubris, Deception and Arrogance” [Http://Variety.Com/2017/Tv/News/Cnn-Reza-Aslan-Donald-Trump-1202460352/](http://Variety.Com/2017/Tv/News/Cnn-Reza-Aslan-Donald-Trump-1202460352/),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), June 9, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/873258081395908608>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “Reza Aslan Cannot Be Trusted - Systematic Rebuke” [Https://youtu.be/E9RmAo6XVAA](https://youtu.be/E9RmAo6XVAA),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), May 15, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/864255665476337664>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “As Much as Aslan Despises Trump, the Two Are Cut from the Same Cloth of Deception and Megalomania” [Https://T.Co/SJeuHx3cAK](https://T.Co/SJeuHx3cAK),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), April 10, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/851419421319073792>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “Reza Aslan on the Stakes of America’s ‘Crisis of Identity’ - Ripping Me off on Santa Muerte” [Http://Vanityfair.Com/Hollywood/2017/02/Reza-Aslan-Believer-American-Identity](http://Vanityfair.Com/Hollywood/2017/02/Reza-Aslan-Believer-American-Identity),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), February 21, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/834134481997066240>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “A Petition to Save the Show Attracted Only Six Supporters so Far. This Piece Ignores the near Unanimous Criticism of Believer by Academics” [Https://T.Co/PpyyJO1ZZQ](https://T.Co/PpyyJO1ZZQ),” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), June 14, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/874983384174538753>.

⁷⁸⁹ Dr. Death & Divinity, “@WanderinBritchz @WyattDerpy Me and the Crew Charged so Hard on Social Media and in the Press That CNN Had No Choice but to Cancel His Show.,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), October 27, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1188485804819173376>.

Aslan is not the only scholar that Chesnut has found issue with. When a conference on Santa Muerte was held on November 2014 in Groningen, Chesnut's initial participation and then withdrawal from the proceedings turned into a grudge played out on social media. Chesnut's twitter presence shows considerable engagement with followers—though some have accused him of talking over, lecturing, and recommending his book to scholars and devotees especially when they question his interpretation of Santa Muerte, particularly when they mention the indigenous origins and following of Santa Muerte.⁷⁹⁰ Another common critique he levels against other scholars who ground discussions of informal saint devotion in sociocultural history is that they are “security types” with simplistic interpretations grounded in drug war conflict.⁷⁹¹ This is particularly fascinating considering his amiable relationship, cooperation, and cross-promotions

⁷⁹⁰ Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “@AztecEmpire1520 @CreeWarrior2010 There Is No Concrete Historical Proof of That. Check out My Academic Book Which Delves into the History of Santa Muerte <https://t.co/WWrEY1uhmI>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, April 10, 2022,

<https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1513302684488638466>. [Anonymized], “@AndrewChesnut1 How Come When I Mentioned La Santa's Link to the Aztec Goddess of Death You Corrected Me and Began to Question My Research? Felt like Gate Keeping of the Worst Kind. A White Man Telling a Mexican Woman What Is and Isn't.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, February 16, 2022.

⁷⁹¹ Dr. Death & Divinity, “Reflections on the First Academic Conference on Santa Muerte <https://skeletonsaint.com/2014/11/23/reflections-on-the-first-academic-conference-on-santa-muerte/> via @MostHolyDeath @MyriamLam,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), March 24, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/845321142655221761>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “@KazOpenshaw @DPremawardhana @emorier @crocha2 Sure, Give Him My Regards Even Though He Went Ballistic on Me Years Ago over My Work on Religious Economy at a U of Texas Conference on Religion in Latin America. I Wonder If He Still Denies That Denominations Compete with Each Other for Members?,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), June 1, 2019,

<https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1134773285516926981>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “The Anthropologist Who Blocked Me for Criticizing His Simplistic Narco-Saint Perspective on Santa Muerte <https://t.co/DaTjJ2tUzQ>,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), June 15, 2016,

<https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/743126225850339328>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “@ProfKingsbury @davidbmetcalfe, Laura Roush, Katia Perdigon, @DocBunker @Dr_ScarletWoman,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), November 1, 2019,

<https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1190300633120858113>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “Bigliardi Is an Islamist and Dilettante in Santa Muerte Studies Who Draws Inappropriately on Catholic Theology While Lorusso Is an Italian Journalist, Not an Academic, Who Could Never Publish His Journalistic Account of Santa Muerte in English or Spanish.,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), November 22, 2021,

<https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1462790031966416909>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “The Creator of the Santa Muerte Tarot Is Italian and Even Plagiarized My Book in His Initial Product Description. This Is the Fastest Growing New Religious Movement in the West and Those Who Allege She's Part of a 'Closed Culture' Are a Tiny Minority, Mostly in the US.,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), October 25, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1320332798788501504>.

with Bunker and Tony Kail. Organizers of the Groningen conference were so struck by Chesnut's conduct that they included this note in the sizable introduction of the edited volume that came out of the conference:

“Other scholars (Jose Carlos Aguiar, Andrew Chesnut) delivered papers and participated in the debates in Groningen but eventually withdrew from the publication project. Thinking back, they contributed to turning the meeting into a fascinating example of “science in action” marked by academic *protagonismo* and touchiness. In hindsight, one sees that this was likely related to the strict focus on the relatively new phenomenon of La Santa Muerte; it turns out that, given the scarcity of novel research topics, competition and rivalry are as common among scholars as among the contending saints on sale in the crowded, esoteric market stalls of Mexico!”⁷⁹²

Chesnut submitted a professional and academic review, published in the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, which was overwhelmingly negative and critiqued the collection for its “poor English” and “lack of engaging field research”.⁷⁹³ Other reviews of the collection did not share his issues with the volume. More prolifically Chesnut detailed these critiques on social media and his personal blog. In a tweet, Chesnut posted a picture of his one-word dismissals written next to each chapter in the table of context— “too long”, “SM absent”, “SM absent “, “vacuous”, “overemphasizes family”, “only solid chapter” and tagged Robert J. Bunker, warning the narco saint expert away from the volume of rival Santa Muerte scholarship.⁷⁹⁴ Chesnut has continued to

⁷⁹² W. G Pansters, ed., *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion, & Society*, 2019, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2155051>. P R E FACE xiii

⁷⁹³ R. Andrew Chesnut, “La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion, and Society,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (November 1, 2020): 751–53, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-8647362>; Rebecca Moore, “Review: La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion and Society, Edited by Wil G. Pansters,” *Nova Religio* 25, no. 2 (November 1, 2021): 146–47, <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2021.25.2.146>; Roberto Garcés Marrero, “Wil G. Pansters (Ed.), *La Santa Muerte in Mexico: History, Devotion, and Society* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), Pp. Xiv + 230, £70.95 Hb.,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 53, no. 4 (November 2021): 808–10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X21000845>.

⁷⁹⁴ Dr. Death & Divinity, “This Recently Published Academic Book on Santa Muerte Is a Major Disappointment. The Only Chapter Worth Reading Is the One on Tattoos. @ProfKingsbury @davidbmetcalfe Hhttps://T.Co/38pKZc1FSv,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), May 7, 2020,

air his issues with the conference and the resulting collection for years after the event, stating that “I was the only one at this conference who had published a book on Santa Muerte - 3 years later none of them has”.⁷⁹⁵ Chesnut has summarized his issues with other academics’ interpretation as “reductionist” approaches that ascribe “the rapid growth of the cult as a mere function of hyper-violence and socio-political insecurity.”⁷⁹⁶ Meaning that Chesnut, like the narco saint experts discussed in the this project, approaches devotion to borderland saints as something independent from the society and events around them. Instead, in their conception devotees are opportunistic and superstitiously interested in quick results, money, health, and protection.

Chesnut’s self-promotion and territoriality is reminiscent of Almonte’s and Bunker’s, which often orients any critical discussion of scholarship back towards their own personal position and laurels as an expert.⁷⁹⁷ This is particularly true when Chesnut approaches scholars who take a critical position of his own claims and arguments.⁷⁹⁸ Chesnut’s relationship to narco

<https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1258373968022646785>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “The Only Chapter Worth Reading in This Book Is the One on Tattoos. My Forthcoming Review in HAHR Details the Myriad Problems with This Edited Volume on Santa Muerte.” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), August 28, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1299336848909754369>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “Just Finished Reading This New Academic Book on Santa Muerte, Which Is Very Disappointing. The Only Chapter Worth Reading Is the One on Tattoos. @ProfKingsbury @davidbmetcalfe @ZFTWARNING @DocBunker <https://t.co/7ThQ5PsXUn>,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), October 26, 2019,

⁷⁹⁵ Dr. Death & Divinity, “Reflections on the First Academic Conference on Santa Muerte <https://skeletonsaint.com/2014/11/23/reflections-on-the-first-academic-conference-on-santa-muerte/> via @MostHolyDeath @MyriamLam,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), March 24, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/845321142655221761>; Dr. Death & Divinity, “@MostHolyDeath I Was the Only One at This Conference Who Had Published a Book on Santa Muerte - 3 Years Later None of Them Has,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), March 24, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1188089555896786945>. <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/845346680258138114>.

⁷⁹⁶ Andrew Chesnut, “Reflections on the First Academic Conference on Santa Muerte,” *Most Holy Death* (blog), November 23, 2014, <https://skeletonsaint.com/2014/11/23/reflections-on-the-first-academic-conference-on-santa-muerte/>.

⁷⁹⁷ Dr. Death & Divinity [@AndrewChesnut1], “As Spelled out in the First and Only Academic Book in English on Santa Muerte, Now in Its Second Edition <https://t.co/PuzIb64t9v>,” Tweet, *Twitter*, September 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1168945265027506178>.

⁷⁹⁸ *ibid*

saint experts like Bunker and Bunker’s common co-authors is interesting as Chesnut has criticized specific academics for associating Santa Muerte and other saints so closely with the violence of the drug war, which the prominent narco saints experts do so routinely.⁷⁹⁹ This double standard only makes sense when one notices the focus on deviant belief that is the common thread throughout Chesnut, Almonte, and Bunker’s research and publications. Chesnut argues for the inherent religiosity of these holy personas, and like Almonte and Bunker –this belief is entirely independent of the socio-economic factors that frame it. Devotees simply revere “narco saints” because they do, because they are attracted to Santa Muerte and Jesús Malverde for material gains or because the saints offer them services other canonized saints do not. Each of these experts do so in different ways, Chesnut divorces Santa Muerte from her socio-economic, indigenous, and Mexican origins to argue that devotion is an “open practice” for any who are interested—including himself as he claims the saint herself “beckoned me to study her.”⁸⁰⁰ But though he acknowledges that devotees are called to reverence for different reasons—those reasons remain Manichean in his analysis, that is they pit evil drug lords against the forces of order. Chesnut describes how criminals buy black candles to invoke Santa Muerte to harm their enemies, law enforcement devotees use white to protect themselves and make money—ignoring the complex layers of drug war complicity whilst ignoring a robust scholarly consensus on the porous borders between illicit and licit life.⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁹ *ibid*

⁸⁰⁰ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012). P 200. Dr. Death & Divinity, “‘Almighty Father, We Call upon You, through the Intercession of Santa Muerte, May You Bind Vladimir Putin from Doing Harm against Ukraine and against Any Other Nation. May He Swiftly Be Removed from Power and His Name Forgotten by Humanity’
<https://t.co/HYxPhrcBcA>,” Tweet, @AndrewChesnut1 (blog), February 27, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AndrewChesnut1/status/1498023933093847040>.

⁸⁰¹ Kate Kingsbury and Andrew Chesnut, “Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4, no. 1 (June 1, 2020): 25–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00095-2>; Wil G. Pansters and Regnar Kristensen, “Letter to the Editor,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, April 12, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603->

There is possibly another facet to the above possessiveness Chesnut displays over his research subject. Chesnut calls on Santa Muerte’s efficacy and miracle abilities both explicitly and implicitly throughout his publications and social media posts on the Skeleton Saint—with the most recent example being his warnings to Russian soldiers that Santa Muerte devotees in the United States have started to curse them upon their 2022 assault on Ukraine.⁸⁰²

As shown in previous chapters, Almonte and Bunker also argue that devotion to Santa Muerte and other narco saints is solely a matter of belief—that is a belief does not derive or even relate to the poverty or violence of pervasive narcotics trafficking, aggressive neoliberal policies in North America, and an ever increasingly militarized border. Instead, this belief is a superstition that reflects moral deviance, ignorance, barbarousness, and an inherent otherness that creeps over the border. Because this devotion is seen a moral deficiency, it enables law enforcement and the experts who train them to continue to ignore the effects of their own operations and those of the State they serve.

Despite his favorable and invested views on Santa Muerte, Chesnut’s work enables law enforcement and defense scholars to view informal borderland devotion as independent belief and practice unconnected with the systematic conditions of poverty and violence implemented through US foreign intervention, economic policy, and drug war politics. Chesnut believes that

[021-00132-8](https://www.academia.edu/49666553/Open_Letter_to_the_Editor_of_the_International_Journal_of_Latin_American_Religions_in_response_to_the_2020_article_Not_Just_a_Narcosaint_by_R_Andrew_Chesnut_and_Kate_Kingsbury); Stefano Bigliardi, “Open Letter to the Editor of the International Journal of Latin American Religions in Response to the 2020 Article. ‘Not Just a Narcosaint’ by R. Andrew Chesnut and Kate Kingsbury,” Letter to the Editor, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/49666553/Open_Letter_to_the_Editor_of_the_International_Journal_of_Latin_American_Religions_in_response_to_the_2020_article_Not_Just_a_Narcosaint_by_R_Andrew_Chesnut_and_Kate_Kingsbury.

For an excellent example of scholarship that explores the hazy boundaries of legal and illegal life, see Shaylih Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the U.S. Mexico Borderlands* (Univ of California Press, 2013).

⁸⁰² David Lehmann, “R. Andrew Chesnut, Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint (Review),” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 45, no. 1 (February 2013): 195–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X13000345>.; See also R. Andrew Chesnut, Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint. P 182. See also @andrewchesnut1 social media presence under his handle Dr. Death & Divinity.

attribution of religious belief to socio-economic factors, and to Marxist understandings of religion as “epiphenomenon of the sociopolitical phenomenon”, are deeply flawed and derive from Western European secularization thesis, which has been long contested within the religious studies field.⁸⁰³ Though narco saint experts do not engage with the secularization debate in particular, divorcing religious devotion from the geographic and socio-economic context relieves any pressure for them to discuss the role the United States, its law enforcement and defense agencies, and state agents may have in creating the unrest they seek to police. Instead, if devotion to Santa Muerte and other narco saints is a matter of ideological belief, it enables theses like Bunker’s that argue a competitive and non-western ideology is at the root of drug war violence, not several decades of intervention, militarization, and neoliberal disenfranchisement of the rural and urban poor. And yet, the cult remains surrounded by discourses of violence and death. Chesnut’s framework rejects a material explanation for this connection, and so do the narco saint experts. For Bunker and Almonte, devotees are drawn to narco saints because of ideology, albeit a darker one than Chesnut ascribes to them. According to the narco saint experts and their publications discussed in this dissertation, the cults of Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde, and other informal borderland saints are not a response to the violence of the drug war, but a cause of it.

Not only does this vantage relieve pressure to interrogate how the United States might be culpable for the Drug War in Mexico and the lives and freedoms lost in pursuit of that war, it also encourages a continuation of this now fifty-year long conflict. As Anthropologist Eric Wolf

⁸⁰³ Andrew Chesnut, “Reflections on the First Academic Conference on Santa Muerte,” *Most Holy Death* (blog). ; William H. Swatos, Jr., Kevin J. Christiano, Introduction — Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept, *Sociology of Religion*, Volume 60, Issue 3, Fall 1999, Pages 209–228, <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.2307/3711934>; Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne, *Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches* (Walter de Gruyter, 2008). 229-235. Jae-Ryong Song, “The Limits of Religious Secularization Theory: In Relation to the Advent of Desecularization Thesis,” *Society and Theory*, no. 7 (2005): 121–50.

explains, “Names thus become things, and things marked with an X can become targets of war.”⁸⁰⁴ Expertise in service of the State does not stay on paper. This knowledge discussed throughout this project is practiced in the daily lives of people. This expertise and the securityscape it feeds results in arrests, in lives spent in prison, in separated families, and in death.

⁸⁰⁴ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, 2nd ed., 2010.7. Wolf finished his introduction with the quoted statement, discussing the “ghastly offspring” of Huntingtonian thinking that essentializes and separates people, geographies, and cultures into categories like the East and the West. It is not lost on me that Robert J Bunker is himself a fan of Huntington when he is in need of theory to justify his theories of a brewing “narco spirituality” that represents an existential threat to Western civilization.

Conclusion: The End of the Myth?

In a Pulitzer Prizing 2019 book, Greg Grandin posited that the myth of the frontier and its motivating power in US policy and politics had dimmed, replaced instead by the symbolism of the border wall. The expansionism of Frederick Jackson Turner had been replaced by the nativist of President Donald J. Trump. Though perhaps walls have displace frontier as governing metaphors in US modern nationalist discourses, I argue that the threat and thrill of a contested frontier persists in the memory and contemporary culture of the United States, specifically within its securityscape.⁸⁰⁵ This is visible in the ways law enforcement and other state agents are trained, but also in the fiction and nonfiction media that depicts these embolden agents as they interact with the border, vulnerable migrants and undocumented peoples, and the sovereign nations beyond the US Mexico border.

The frontier may no longer be wide swaths of what we now know as California, New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona, but is still very much alive in the imaginaries of the US securityscapes. It is visible in the varied productions that envision state agents on the streets of Mexico's cities, fictional narcostates, and accompanying the increasingly militarization of the Southwest United States. The frontier is not gone, it's been re-imagined by and through new technologies and expertise. Imagined and powerful, this landscape centers white male narratives of individualized heroism that do the work of taming of otherized and racialized barbarism. Against Grandin's view that the era of expansion is over, these experts have metaphorically and literally pushed the borderlands outward.

⁸⁰⁵ Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, First edition. (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2019).

The narco saint experts and their intellectual and cultural production is one example of the religiosity of the law enforcement field. There is more work to be done in this growing effort to understand the character and scope of religiosity and policing, work that has real implications for understanding why efforts to reform, defund, or abolish the police – depending on the conversation – have been met with challenges, hostility, and relatively little success. As I have shown the culture of securityscape is centuries in the making and deeply informed by nationalist and racist discourses that are embedded in United States history and operation. Train the police “better” or “more” are unlikely to dislodge the attractive and emboldening myth of the frontier, and may only concretize these sentiments considering the training offered to police departments.

Narco saint experts and their productions are not the only contributors to the mythologized and Manichean “thin blue line” culture discussed in this project, they are but individuals in a sea of privatized and unregulated trainers and experts looking to attract abundant domestic defense dollars, simply make a name for themselves, or are called personally to myth of the frontier and their desire to “eat the other” as bell hooks would say. These experts will play into the same myths that narco saint experts do as these are myths have motivated state agents since before the United States was a nation and there was state to serve. The expertise may vary, but it is clear there is money and a name to be made appealing to “heroic” role of the policer as a man willing to exercise violence in service of civilization.

One of the most high-profile trainers and police experts, Lt. Col. Dave Grossman was spurred after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to create the Killology Research Group which produces expertise on “The gift of aggression” and the heroic nature of the “sheepdog”, who is feared by the sheep but will protect them nonetheless because they, like the wolf, is violent by nature, but turns this violence to generative means instead of destructive ones.

If you have no capacity for violence then you are a healthy productive citizen, a sheep. If you have a capacity for violence and no empathy for your fellow citizens, then you have defined an aggressive sociopath, a wolf. But what if you have a capacity for violence, and a deep love for your fellow citizens? What do you have then? A sheepdog, a warrior, someone who is walking the hero's path. Someone who can walk into the heart of darkness, into the universal human phobia, and walk out unscathed.⁸⁰⁶

Perhaps a somewhat tellingly the “thin blue line”

merchandise that uses the sheepdog as a mascot, rarely uses

the image of shaggy, round, black and white Old English

Sheepdog, instead opting for images and silhouettes of

German Shepherd dogs or the athletic Belgian Malinois –

the standard breed used for police work in the United States

and Europe.⁸⁰⁷ Grossman has had, and still does have,

extensive success marketing his training and rhetoric on

sheepdogs and their unappreciated, lonesome, and noble

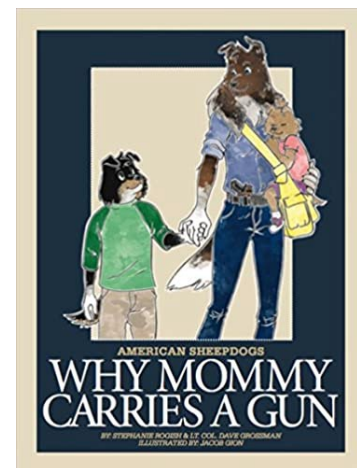
characterization. He has produced defense expertise,

children’s books, and trained state agents across the

country and could be considered an expert who operates at

the core of his field –whereas narco saint experts still

operate on the fringes of their industry and field.



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⁸⁰⁶ Dave Grossman and Loren W. Christensen, *On Combat, The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace*, 3rd edition (Millstadt, IL: Warrior Science Publications, 2008).

⁸⁰⁷ Some examples among many: “Sheepdog Promo - HOME,” Supply Store, Sheepdog Promotional Products, 2022, <https://www.sheepdogpromo.com/>; “Amazon.Com: They Hate The Sheepdog T Shirt Thin Blue Line Police K9 Gift : Clothing, Shoes & Jewelry,” Web Store, Amazon, 2022, <https://www.amazon.com/Sheepdog-Shirt-Thin-Blue-Line/dp/B07FJPHY1R>; Dave Grossman, “Publications,” killology, 2022, <https://www.killology.com/publications>.

⁸⁰⁸ Jacob Gion, Lt Col Dave Grossman, and Stephanie Rogish, *Why Mommy Carries a Gun, American Sheepdogs* (Killology Research Group, 2017).; “They Hate The Sheepdog T Shirt Thin Blue Line Police K9 Gift : Clothing, Shoes & Jewelry,” Online Marketplace, Amazon, accessed June 3, 2022.

But both Grossman and Almonte speak to and use the same myths and existential moral stakes to frame and inform their training materials. This is because these myths still resonate with their law enforcement audiences and the audiences beyond who are treated to the wild, accessible, and ludic frontier that has been sold to US audiences for centuries.

There are of course counternarratives to the romanticized and harmful imaginaries discussed in this dissertation. These counternarratives come in as many forms as their counterparts and their boundaries are equally as blurred. Some, not all, examples include nuanced academic scholarship that considers the impact of its interventions, indigenous art, writing, and activism that continues to advocate for Native communities, land, and voices, archival work that challenges the popular myths of empire, media that depicts both historical and present realities, and the journalism that refrains from repeating “coptalk” uncritically and takes risks in an increasingly hostile and privatized market. I mention them because their presence is important as we face the expansive securityscape, but also because their understated presence in our culture speaks to another reason the securityscape, blue line religion, and the frontier myth remains so prevalent. Frontier counternarratives remain under resourced, threatened, and unprofitable in our profit-driven society. Good information—nuanced, well-researched, ethical, inclusive information – is hard to get. Bad information – created quickly with prejudice or carelessness or only profit in mind – is not only easier to find through its experts’ self-promotion, but it is this information that usually sings the song its audience wants to hear. This is the tragedy of the modern information landscape; the truth is out there but it is behind a paywall.

The myth of the frontier still alive when you look beyond Great Man History and the distracting rhetoric of the wall to the myths that drive and motivate the securityscape. The myth

is also just one aspect of the law enforcement religiosity this project traces within the landscape of the securityscape, honing in on specific narco saint experts that operate within it, to their productions and the ripples of those productions past the obvious bounds of the securityscape in the United States. From the emphasis placed on the “underappreciated” nature of law enforcement as front-line soldiers—an underappreciation they take as their cross to bear, the repeated presence of heartily-embraced violence as means towards a much vaguer goal of safety, and success and momentums framed as victories of individual will, these platforms sell a very specific brand of violent, but noble, masculinity that fits narco saint experts and the mold they use for their trainees and audiences. This imaginary of a dangerous frontier and heroic “lawmen” are sold directly to an already primed audience but then spread to a receptive public that have been reared on myths of a romanticized if wild frontier full of racialized heroes and villains. I bring Grossman’s popular “killology” training into this discussion to posit that “blue line religion” suffuses the securityscape just as the securityscape pervades so much of modern life. The narco saint experts discussed in the project specifically are one case study of this present, diffuse, and persistent phenomenon. The persistent frontier imaginaries of a threatened civilization separated from chaotic violence, with exemplary, rational, and violent individuals standing unflinching between and keeping the two separate is a deeply religious myth. These experts spread this myth to create “sheepdogs”, both through their training programs and with their more widespread expertise, by facilitating the core requirement to be such a creature – the knowledge of the bad guys. It is the acknowledgment of the presence of evil that designates a sheepdog, and so experts like Almonte and Bunker do not just present themselves as sheepdogs, but as the men (individualistic and rational with the law enforcement front line experience required for authority) who can turn others from sheep into sheepdogs. The powerless to the

powerful. This is implemented through expertise and the religiosity that expertise leverages, and it is an act of militarization itself.

The myth of the frontier still alive when you look beyond Great Man History and the distracting rhetoric of the wall to the securityscape. The myth is also just one aspect of the law enforcement religiosity this project traces from the landscape of the securityscape, to specific narco saint experts that operate within it, to their productions and the ripples of those productions past the obvious bounds of the securityscape in the United States. These experts, who occupy an interesting space at the fringes of their fields, enact border and frontier drama at personal engaging levels every day to motivate their audiences and rationalize state agents' presence in the borderlands—and the field and productions of narco saint expertise is just one example of this.

When Frederick Jackson Turner argued the Frontier Thesis in 1893, he imagined the frontier as a source of a democratic energy. Turner's frontier was a vital mythologized landscape that drove and created rugged individualism and community-building ethos that settlers created as they took Native land and also learned Native ways. The thesis has been unpacked at length as a driver of American Exceptionalism and centuries of State violence against racialized Others. This dissertation explores a frontier that is the photograph negative of Turner's thesis. The motivating myth of the frontier is a source, not of democracy, but of danger and insecurity. It invites not freedom, but surveillance. The myth endured, but it has gotten darker and stranger.⁸⁰⁹

⁸⁰⁹ Among many observational, editing, mentoring, and analytic contributions to this project, the poetic observations in the last paragraph belongs to Dr. José Antonio Lucero. Thank you, Tony, I am so grateful.

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