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Necropower

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

(Lawrence 1967: 32)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spatiality and Necropower

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Voyeurism of Death

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Visual Syntax

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The State of Exception

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Ideology of Murder

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'We, the Dead, Accuse!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Violator's Violation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Logic of Illogic?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Law Is Dead—Long Live the Divine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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

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