

# Sharing the “Truth” About Cartel Violence on the United States Borderlands: An Analysis of the State, the Experience of Power, and the Production of Fear in a U.S. Border City

*Brenda G. Garcia, University of Lethbridge*

**Abstract:** Recently, the illegal movement of drugs and cartel violence across the border has characterized the Mexico and U.S. borderlands. Communities on both sides of the border witness power struggle between the state and the drug cartels. Fieldwork conducted in Eagle Pass, Texas suggests that the U.S. state attempts to control cartel threats through assertion of power and authority over the populace. This paper explores the framework of the state on the U.S. side of border and analyses the states’ local and global methods to assert power. It stresses that the implementation of power results in violence, which engenders fears and worries amongst U.S. border residents. It is argued that these fears, although meant to assert state power in the midst of drug war violence, instead reduce credibility of the state.

**Keywords:** Mexico-U.S. border, drug cartels, the state, state violence, power, neoliberalism, Border Patrol, anti-drug policies.

## Introduction

In 2006 President Felipe Calderón deployed the military onto Mexican streets to battle the drug cartels, following his commitment to end drug trafficking in Mexico. Five years into Calderón’s presidency, media reports highlighted the

capture of 2,408 drug cartel members by the Mexican Armed Forces (Excelsior 2011). In 2011 alone, the Ministry of Defense proudly announced the confiscation of 12,584 marijuana hectares and the destruction of 1,575 tons of the plant (Infobae.com 2011). Photographs of alleged cartel members and large numeric quantities of drug substances illustrated the success of the Presidency of Calderón, the Mexican Armed Forces, and Department of National Security on Mexican in the war against drugs.

However, in early September 2011, two mutilated bodies hung from a pedestrian bridge in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. Next to them, a sign read "This is going to happen to all of those posting funny things on the Internet. You better pay attention. I'm about to get you" (CNN 2011). In the same month, a mutilated cadaver with a similar note was located on a public street (Pro 8 News 2011). According to authorities, both threats were directed at two blogs, Blog Del Narco and Al Rojo Vivo, where the public uploaded information anonymously about the drug related crime and possible cartel locations. The blogs were notoriously known for the macabre pictures of mutilated bodies and cadavers, not necessarily the anonymous tips.

Calderón's promise to end trafficking in Mexico resulted in a spiral of drug-related violence concentrated on the Mexico-U.S. border. On one hand, the government used the amount of confiscated drugs and names of captured drug lords to demonstrate the success of the war against drugs. On the other hand, the scenery of tortured corpses, whether hanging on the pedestrian bridges or dumped on the street, contradict the image of a state in control of the drug situation. This paradox that characterizes northern Mexico produces an ambiguous ambience of violence that transcends borders and threatens Mexican and U.S. border communities. In the Mexico-U.S. border, equivocal media coverage suggests that cartels and the state contest power and violence. Residents of

Eagle Pass, a small border city in southwest Texas that neighbors Piedras Negras, Mexico, find themselves in the midst of this contradiction. After all, the only separation between Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras is the Rio Grande River.

This paper examines the efforts of the U.S. state to overcome the power struggle and assert authority over cartel threats on the U.S. side of the border. In this paper, the state refers to the "illusion" (Abrams 1988) composed of a set of practices (Hansen and Steppentaut 2001; Poole and Das 2004) within multiple levels of government, from the local to federal, who work as a collective in securing the nation. To illustrate the U.S. state on the borderlands during times of violence, this paper dissects Federal Institutions such as the Border Patrol and the U.S. Department of State. Furthermore, it is argued that their attempts to control the drug conflict exacerbate the borderland violence.

Although multiple areas of the U.S. border are briefly discussed, this study centralizes in Eagle Pass, Texas. The analysis of international power assertion is explored through the state's neoliberal policies, such as the Merida Initiative and Operation Fast and Furious. The government's local implementation of power and authority is examined through the presentation of Operation Detour in Weslaco, Texas. Ultimately, the effect of global power assertion, through neoliberal rhetoric, reflects on the community by attempting to label individuals as delinquent subjects.

This paper stresses that the U.S. government's attempts to implement power over the cartels engenders violence amongst the populace in Eagle Pass. This paradox of a government who bears responsibility to secure the border from cartel violence, yet secures the border through its own implementation of violence causes paranoia and anxiety amongst borderland residents. This paper argues that in times of conflict, this paradox on the U.S. side of border ultimately causes the state to lose credibility as it attempts to assert power and authority.

## Methods

The inspiration for this research arose from my early childhood experience of constantly living close to and crossing borders. Although I originate from Mexico City and have lived the majority of my life in Canada, the Mexico and U.S. borderlands are not unfamiliar territory. As a child, I lived in Eagle Pass for two years prior to my family's immigration to Canada. Our final move up north forced friends and acquaintances to be left behind and drift away as time passed. Despite my decade-long disconnection from Eagle Pass, I was interested in understanding how recent drug conflicts had affected U.S. borderlands. In this article I will describe how I have built on my childhood experiences and considered this situation from the perspective of an anthropologist.

I searched for a host family who would be willing to reintroduce me to the community of Eagle Pass. I located an old acquaintance of my mother, "Marisol Rodriguez<sup>1</sup>," who, after explaining my research interests and my methods, agreed to help as much as possible. She welcomed me into her family's home and included me her daily activities. Nevertheless, fieldwork did not begin until this project received approval from the Human Ethics Research Committee.

Fieldwork took place in Eagle Pass during August 2011. Participant observation included socializing with my host family as they carried on with their everyday life, as long as they were comfortable with my companionship. Together, we visited the mall, restaurants, flea markets and even the shore of the Rio Grande. Our outings allowed me to observe the effects of contested state power not necessarily on my host family, but in the community of Eagle Pass in general. Government authorities were present in everyday outings. I recall the time where Marisol and I were standing in the Rio Grande shore on the side of Eagle Pass. On the

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1 Pseudonyms are used to protect informants' confidentiality.

shore of Piedras Negras, Mexico, a group of men were casually dipping their feet in the water. In less than two minutes, the Border Patrol arrived on their boats, trucks and ATVs and barricaded the Eagle Pass shoreline. The Border Patrol were unable to take a course of action against the men cooling their feet; however, it was clear they were attempting to protect the U.S. territory against the imagined threat from the imagined delinquents.

My research primarily consisted of open ended interviews. I distributed a form indicating to my interviewees the purpose of my interview, steps taken to protect their confidentiality—such as using pseudonyms, and their right to refuse answering a question or stop participation in the project. Upon their agreement to participate, I distributed a consent form as mandated by my university's Ethics Committee. I initially thought that the consent forms would be a bureaucratic burden to my fieldwork; however, my interviewees were more inclined to participate when shown that an institution supported the project. Indeed, the interviewees' reaction to the form was a pleasant surprise. This article follows the mutual agreement between the interviewees and me. Certain portions of interviews were also omitted upon request of the interviewees.

The open ended interview consisted of four main themes including their thoughts about the new border fence erected in Eagle Pass, their opinions of Eagle Pass's security, their interest in visiting the local flea market, and their input about a newly constructed plaza in Piedras Negras. Their responses allowed me to understand their perspective of the changing social environment amid violence. Recruitment of interviewees occurred through the snowball method; whereby initial interviewees directed me to other individuals who may be interested in being interviewed.

Library research proved extremely valuable in this study to understand the U.S. state in the context of the

drug conflict. Moreover, non-academic literature, such as magazine articles, news reports, and videos, highlight local perspective of violence. The majority of non-academic literature originated from the Eagle Pass Public Library and government offices. These sources are equally important in understanding local interpretations of the state's power struggle in the midst of drug war violence.

### Theorizing the State

During my stay in Eagle Pass, adults expressed worry about the safety and well-being of their children in schools. The possibility that cartels may recruit children in schools was too real and their worries were not in vain. In the first week of school, the *Eagle Pass News Gram* reported that one high school student and four junior high students were arrested for drug trafficking in school. In previous years the police have arrested students International Bridge for attempting to cross border from Piedras Negras to Eagle Pass with drugs.

I am reminded of a time when a friend and I went grocery shopping late at night. It was almost 10 p.m. and we headed to the grocery store where we picked up our groceries and a couple of very sweet cinnamon buns that would be breakfast for the week. Since it was late at night, my friend and I looked for the fastest way to get out of the parking lot, which happened to be drive diagonally over the lines of the parking lot. "Good thing there are not cops around. We could have gotten pulled over;" she said since, technically speaking, we were breaking local traffic laws.

I was a little shocked to hear this. I told her that in Canada, I drive across the parking lot lines when the parking lot is empty all the time. It might be illegal, but no one really cares. The police in Canada - and I figured that this would be true in Eagle Pass too - have bigger things to worry about. "Well, here it isn't really a big deal", she explained.

"But due to the 'situation', the police are looking and pulling people over for whatever reason. They want an excuse to go and search your car." She clarified to me, "things have changed, what is happening in Mexico is affecting us too. For example, I warn my cousin all the time to be very careful and to watch out who he is hanging out with. The cartels, for example, are recruiting U.S. kids, poor or rich, to traffic drugs to them. Last year, one of his classmates got arrested."

If the U.S. public was not worrying about stray cartel bullets in Mexico, they were worrying about what the "real" purpose behind the authorities' protective initiatives. Both the police and the cartels lurked in the city of Eagle Pass making the residents anxious; however, while residents rejected the actions and presence of the cartels, police searches were an accepted practice. This community believes that police are entitled to have such influence; after all, it was for the safety of the community. Worries amongst residents, I soon realized, extended from attempting to pinpoint the "state" in times of drug related violence. As will be discussed, the U.S. government's anti-drug initiative is not different from the cartel's recruitment methods. The presence of both groups fuelled residents' fears.

Before elaborating on any further discussion, the concept of the "state" must be contextualized to understand its role in the experience of fear and violence in Eagle Pass. In the field of anthropology, the notion of the state has been the subject of theorization and study. Phillip Abrams (1988) eloquently wrote about the difficulties social scientists face in understanding the state. Abrams' argued against the conceptualization in which political sociologists and Marxists presented the state as a reification of political practice (Abrams 1988: 63). Instead, Abrams proposed to comprehend the state as an illusion composed of a state-system and state idea (Abrams 1988:82). The state-system, according to Abrams, consists of the structures and institutions which

contribute to the construct of the state. The state idea consists of “projected, purveyed and believed in in different societies at a time” (Abrams 1988: 82). In other words, the conception of a state allows comprehension of the state as a construct.

According Poole and Das (2004), the state consists of political, regulatory, and disciplinary practices which become evident during the treatment of the marginalized others. Their collection of diverse, world-wide based essays suggests that the management of unruly subjects, establishment of an illegible state, and the imposition of bio-power work compose the basis of law making which allows the state to maintain control (Poole and Das 2004: 10). Therefore, Poole and Das posit that the study of state margins highlight composition of the state (Poole and Das 2004: 4).

Hansen and Stepputat argue that in the post-colonial world, the movement of migrants, refugees, globalization of capital and trade challenge state sovereignty and the study of the state (Hansen and Stepputat 1991:2). The authors’ propose that the post-colonial state must be understood in context, in between Foucault’s notion of governmentality and Gramscian notions of hegemony. They refer to refer to this process as “Language of the State” (Hansen and Stepputat 1991:7) which, like Poole and Das, approaches the study of the state as set of practices rather than an encompassing transcendent myth.

In this article, the State, in both the U.S. and Mexico, is an illusionary construct, an idea which results from institutions acting to ensure the safety of the country. The practices of the U.S. federal government and the Border Patrol create the notion of the state on the border. The practices of these institutions bring forth a state that protects residents from the drug cartels. Likewise, the state as an illusion can be understood from Poole and Das’ approach to study the state. The marginality of the U.S. border illustrates the methods in which the state attempts to establish power; that is,



the power imposed upon the populace defines the state on the U.S. border. Moreover, the study of the state in times of the drug conflict must consider globalization, immigration, and flows of goods as suggested by Hansen and Stepputat. Across the border, the movement of illegal substances and cartel violence challenges "state" power in both countries.

In short, the state on the Mexico and U.S. border must be constituted as an idea resulting from the imposition of power, through the means of governments and institutions, over the border residents to ensure safety. Nevertheless, as will be discussed, state institutions' ambiguous role in the drug conflict erodes state power and authority which often results in violence and lack of the state's credibility.

### **In search for the state: Defining ambiguity and establishing power**

Throughout history, the Mexican government has been accused of corruption. Mexican media often accuses government officials of alleged involvement with organized crime and theft. However, the government negates corruption through its implementations against crime or drug trafficking. Peter Andreas indicates that from 1987 to 1990, the Mexican government tripled their drug enforcement agencies (1996:161). Militarization meant increasing arms and violence for a drug "war," yet it did not address nor solve the causes of the drug conflict. Andreas further notes that violent conflict often erupts between the police operating as law enforcers (1996:163). The police are also law breakers, becoming corrupt in their interactions with wealthy law-breakers (Andreas 1996:163). The Autonomous National University in Mexico City reported that cocaine traffickers spent \$500 million a year on bribery (Andreas 1996: 162). With these data it is reasonable to conclude that the drug trade cannot survive without the help of the state.

The Mexican government is not alone in corruption. The online newspaper, *Sin Embargo*, reported that the drug cartels have infiltrated all levels of government in the United States. According to the newspaper, a former member of the border patrol informed ABC news that the cartels had personal informants who worked at the level of the U.S. local and municipal government (*Sin Embargo* 2011). Customs agents receive anywhere from \$4,000-\$6,000 for allowing a car to cross the international bridges in order to traffic drugs. As drug smugglers pay large bribes to law enforcers in Mexico and the United States, the states' ambiguity, as supporter and adversary of the drug conflict, predicts the loss of power and authority.

An interview between two of my informants highlighted the states' ambiguity in Eagle Pass from my informants' perspective. As I sat in the room of Erica, one of my informants, all I could think about was the fact that this was my first anthropological interview and I was conducting it in a private space. I sincerely hoped that my recorder did its job, and that I did mine as well. Since both Erica and I had just met each other, our mutual friend Cecilia accompanied us during the interview for the sake of both our comfort and trust. From my experience living in Eagle Pass, I knew that many residents used to cross into Piedras Negras for everyday occasions such as shopping for groceries, dining with a friend, or going to doctor's appointments. Since both women were residents from Eagle Pass, I asked if they had recently crossed the border for any occasion. Erica replied affirmatively telling me she had crossed the border recently for going shopping. I proceeded to asking if she had felt safe entering Piedras Negras. Her response to my question involved her opinion about the presence of the military in Mexico:

"When we could cross they would be there (the

military), you would see them walking around with guns trying to secure everything. When the Mexican military was there, I wouldn't even trust them. It is very scary, but that's Mexico for you."

Cecilia added,

"And you don't know whether to trust the police or not. I keep hearing a bunch of stories about the police pay them off over there. It's like they have been infiltrated and stuff, like the government. That's kind of scary. This is a weird thing, but I would compare it to Harry Potter to my dad. You know how the Ministry was infiltrated by Death Eaters? I feel it's kind of like that, just because you don't know who to trust and who to turn to. At least over there, I know over here we are kind of safe."

Erica and Cecilia's reluctance to trust the police in Mexico demonstrates how some residents question the presence and authority of the government in Mexico. The problem of the Mexican state lies behind the government's inability to fully assert power and contain cartel violence to ensure the public's safety. The theorization of power illustrates the reasons why Erica and Cecilia do not trust the Mexican state.

The works of Michel Foucault explore the discourses of power, which helps frame state power (and lack thereof) on the border. According to Foucault, power is not a force that can be possessed and then imposed onto a group or individual (1977: 26). Instead, relationships between members of society create and contest power. Furthermore, Foucault posits that power relies on the creation of objectified bodies for economic gains (1977:25). Ultimately, objectification of

bodies makes people into objects of knowledge and control, facilitating their conformity and maximized contribution to society and the economy (Foucault 1977: 2110). Those who hold the knowledge of the bodies have power. According to Foucault, institutions such as the churches, schools, and hospitals hold power and knowledge about the populace (1977:211). The people became objectified bodies.

Ideally, those who hold power in the drug conflict would be the government. However, as the increase of drug-related deaths and unstoppable trafficking of drugs demonstrate, the government and the state are not fully in power. The government on the Mexico and U.S. border must overcome the power struggle by maintaining knowledge. As Foucault argues, knowledge and power are interdependent. As will be shown, the government produces and maintains knowledge through constant insinuation of the drug cartel's dangers, while simultaneously offering protection from cartel threats. The government's constant insinuation of cartel dangers acts as indirect state violence. The resulting angst, worry, and paranoia make the borderland public a subject that accepts and legitimizes state violence in exchange of protection.

### **Power with good intentions: Accumulating knowledge and offering protection**

The U.S. government's knowledge arises through exposing borderland residents to possible cartel threats and providing local and international protection from these threats. Consequently, the protection from these created threats asserts power over the worry-ridden populace. These processes of knowledge-making, state violence, and power will be analysed through an analysis of the Merida Initiative, Operation Fast and Furious, and Operation Detour.

*The Merida Initiative and Operation Fast and Furious: Asserting Power Internationally*

Peter Andreas states that Mexico's illegal drug economy in the mid-90s was an "unintended by-product of the United States" (Andreas 1996:160). In attempting to control the drug routes going through the Caribbean and South Florida from Colombia, the United States shifted the routes to Mexico (1996:160). In other words, the U.S. government became responsible for the increase of drug trafficking in Mexico. As Andreas indicates, drug trafficking increased efforts from the Mexican government to control trafficking and trade also increased, mostly to "pacify its northern neighbour" (1996:161). According to Andreas "Mexico tripled its federal drug policy between 1987 and 1989, and in the 1990s" (1996:161).

Likewise, United States anti-drug policies influence the direction of the current drug war. The implementation of U.S. led governmental anti-drug policies, such as the Merida Initiative<sup>2</sup>, directs the approach of the drug wars in Mexico while asserting state power over the populace. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the Initiative as follows:

And the United States remains committed to helping the Mexican Government go after the cartels and organized crime and the corruption they generate. Our goal is to provide support and help to enable our Mexican friends and partners to be as successful as they are seeking to be. And we will continue, through the Merida Initiative, to provide significant support (U.S. Department of State 2011).

As Clinton explained, via the U.S. Department of State website, the Merida Initiative provided services to aid combat against the cartels. This partnership between the U.S. and Mexico, meant to "disrupt organized crim-

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<sup>2</sup> Signed into United States law on June 30, 2008.

inal groups, strengthen institutions, build a 21st century border, and build strong and resilient communities." The United States provided Mexico with financial, material, and intelligence resources to help the Mexican government confront the drug cartels and restructure the Mexican justice system. According to the U.S. embassy website, the U.S. provided \$465 million in equipment that detects transportation of illegal goods such as drugs, chemicals, and laundered money. Furthermore, the Merida Initiative provided training to Mexican police forces on "criminal investigative techniques, evidence collection, crime scene preservation, and ethics" (Merida Initiative).

Likewise, the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, and Explosives' (ATF) Operation Fast and Furious in 2009 meant to provide information about criminal activity for the drug cartels. Under the supervision of the ATF, firearms and weapons were sold in the United States to people suspected of selling weapons to drug cartels across the border. The ATF allowed 2,500 weapons (NRA-ILA 2011) to cross the border legally and hoped that by keeping track of these contraband weapons they would be able to figure out routes of illegal trafficking that would eventually lead them to the members of the drug cartels.

Although the operation had the intention to protect people from the dangers of the drug wars, this initial plan backfired. Weapons arrived to the hands of the merchants as was the initial plan; however, the ATF lost track of the weapons once they crossed the border. Weapons from the operation made it into the hands of "El Chapo", the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, as well as three other cartels (El Universal 2011). In 2010, the Operation was stopped after an officer of the Border Patrol's Search and Rescue team, Brian Terry, was shot and killed while trying to make an arrest on the border (CNN 2010). Two of the guns found at the scene were registered to Operation Fast and Furious (CNN 2010).

The processes of the Merida Initiative and Operation Fast and Furious demonstrate a state's subtle influence over the course of the cartels and drug related violence. Although meant as protection, these anti-drug policies grew as a response from drug-related and U.S. influenced violence; nevertheless, these methods of protection and defense ensured U.S. state power. Charles Tilly (1985) has discussed this connection between state power and state violence. Referencing the beginnings of early European governments, Tilly discusses the interdependence between government making and characteristics of organized crime to establish governmental power. The governments act as racketeers by promoting or protecting criminal actions and selling protection from danger created. The business of selling protection led to capital accumulation, which ultimately results in power (Tilly 1985:185).

While the U.S. government holds partial responsibility in increasing the flow of drugs across the Mexico and U.S border, policies such as the Merida Initiative and Operation Fast and Furious attempt to intervene in drug related crime the government itself has influenced. Nevertheless as the controversy of Operation Fast and Furious demonstrates, governmental interference exacerbates violence. The death of a Border Patrol agent occurred as the result from the government's attempt to control the drug conflict, and resulting violence demands more border protection. Indeed, the U.S. supply of weapons and intelligence demonstrates governmental knowledge; it induced the threats the drug cartels pose while providing protection from the violence it created. The protection attempts to affirm the assertion of government and ultimately the state's power over the public; however, achievement of control is similar to the cartels as will be shown in the next section.

*Operation Detour: Asserting Power Locally*

Government power-knowledge is asserted locally through public institutions such as schools. The U.S. Border Patrol actively makes the threat of the cartels real through a school presentation entitled Operation Detour, which exposes the possible dangers of cartel involvement. According to the newspaper *El Paso Times*, the Border Patrol created Operation Detour in 2009 to demonstrate the consequences of working for the cartels and trafficking drugs. The objective of the Border Patrol was to present the complete “truth” about the cartels. The Operation included the screening of graphic documentaries which portrayed scenes of high school aged students trafficking drugs in their school for the cartels. The scenes depicted young traffickers suffering brutal punishment, whether being shot in the head or being burnt alive, when they made a mistake or simply became useless to the cartels. Operation Detour is aimed at high school students who live on the borderlands. Perhaps, it is assumed that the young population was more susceptible to the cartel recruitment.<sup>3</sup> Through terror and shock of these documentaries, the Border Patrol builds common knowledge of these real dangers while hoping to scare students from accepting work from the cartels. The question now raised is this: how does the Border Patrol use this fear to their advantage?

I was unable to see a live presentation of Operation Detour in Eagle Pass, since it was early August when I began my fieldwork and the school year had not yet begun. A recording of an Operation Detour presentation was available

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3 In 2012 Fox News San Antonio reported that a new documentary entitled Operation Detour 2 was being filmed. According to Fox News, due to the prevalence that cartels were now recruiting in high schools of major cities, this new documentary would be screened in major cities in all 50 states, unlike its previous counterpart discussed in this paper.



on the Internet for the public.<sup>4</sup> This presentation occurred in the high school gym in Weslaco, Texas, a city close to the Mexico U.S. border.

Just before lunchtime, a group of students was welcomed by a young charismatic border patrol. "Good morning Weslaco Panthers. How y'all doing today?" he greeted them in the front of the school gym. In front of him sat a group of eager high school students, joking with each other, mocking and teasing the cameras that are pointed at them. It was obvious the presentation was being recorded. We can presume that the students were not there by choice. They did not seem to mind; after all it is better than sitting in class. Four fellow male officers accompanied the Border Patrol agent. The presentation began with a conversation amongst the Border Patrol officers:

Why is it that kids like you get involved with the narco smuggling organization? 'Cause of money, easy money right? Three, four hundred or five hundred dollars, but they don't tell you the dangers of doing it. The cartels only tell you the benefits, they don't tell you what is going to happen if you lose the drug load. But that is why we are here, to tell you the truth and the hard-core facts of becoming involved with the organizations.

For the next hour, each of the Border Patrol agents took a turn speaking to the group of students, specifically pointing out the dangers of getting involved with the drug cartels.

Part of the presentation consisted of screening a

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4 This section of the paper regarding Operation Detour is based on an internet video of the Texas Border Patrol presenting and debriefing the Operation Detour documentary to high school students in Weslaco, Texas.

documentary with actual footage of cartel violence. One of the shots showed an interrogation between two cartel members. A scrawny man wearing a red shirt was centered on the screen. He was in front of a tarp, with his hands tied behind his back, and a gun held to his back. A voice off-screen asked in Spanish, "What is a *guiso*?" The scrawny man with the red shirt explained, "*El Guiso* is when they kidnap someone to extract information about drugs, or money. When they take what they want, they take them to be tortured." As the scrawny man in the red shirt provides his explanation, the screen shot changes and there is footage of a man being dragged and placed in a barrel. The scrawny man continues, "When they are done they put them in a barrel, cover them with grease and then they burn them, with different combustibles like diesel or gasoline." After his explanation, the scrawny man in the red shirt shifted his eyes from side to side with a worried look on his face. Perhaps, he was worried that he had given his captors new ideas to kill.

The following footage in the documentary was of a man having gasoline poured on him and being lit on fire. A man exited the scene, presumably the leader of the cartel, smiling and walking away from the ball of fire. The footage ends with the ball of fire consuming a screaming man and his female partner watching in terror. The next scene in the documentary was a photograph of three charred bodies, each in front of three barrels. The voice of a government agent narrates, "The cartels are destroying a part of our country and in some way, we have to stop it." Twenty five minutes, the documentary finished and the students no longer showed the joy of missing class. The Border Patrol agents explained to the Weslaco high school students that one of the charred bodies was the scrawny man in the red shirt, a real life

Zeta<sup>5</sup> cartel member. Some of them looked confused, bewildered and quiet as they waited for the Border Patrol to debrief the documentary.

After the video, the students had the opportunity to ask questions. After watching the macabre documentary, enlisting in the Border Patrol seemed a more favorable option than joining the cartels. Students' questions related to the salary and requirements to join the Border Patrol. An agent explained:

A first year Border Patrol agent gets paid about \$40,000-\$50,000 a year. For the value that is absolutely great. By the third year, you are looking at \$70,000 and if you make it to supervisor you are looking over \$100,000 per year. That is only for going to the Border Patrol Academy for two months. That is if you habla español. If you no habla, then it is four months. But still, for four months and you are making that much money that is a very good deal.

This detailed explanation about the salary raised questions about transportation:

We have different forms of transportations. We have that Dodge Charger, we have Hummers, and we have All Terrain Vehicles. We have helicopters. We also have boats; most of our boats have two engines that have 250 horsepower. We have really good equipment. We do a lot of sponsoring because we are always looking for people to come and join us. We do also sponsor NASCAR as well.

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5 The Zeta cartel is one of the most powerful cartels in Mexico.

### **Sharing the “Truth”: Operation Detour and the racketeer state**

From the beginning, the Border Patrol justified their presence. They are in the school gym to share the “truth” about cartel violence. I remember excitedly telling Marisol that I had found an Internet copy of Operation Detour one day before supper. The amount of violence the documentary had, I commented, was disturbing. Marisol replied, “but that is what the kids need to understand. They need to get scared.” She justified the means in which susceptible young people can be kept safe; however, the result of Operation Detour may have not been a better alternative.

Border Patrol agents offered material goods and possessions. Throughout the whole presentation, the Border Patrol warned the students that joining the cartel was tempting, especially when they offered “respect, fast cars, fast money and sexy women.” Although they do not offer “women or cars” like the cartels, the Border Patrol offered powerful vehicles with a good salary for two or four months of training in the Academy, a “really good value.” As Tilly would suggest, the state adopted similar methods of cartels to lure students into joining the Border Patrol. Essentially, the debriefing offered material goods as alternatives to the material goods offered by the cartels.

In this analysis, it must be stressed that the Border Patrol does not necessarily commit palpable forms of violence in their presentation. The Border Patrol agents do not physically harm nor emotionally injure students; they are simply sharing the “truth” through the macabre portrayal of documentaries. However, in sharing the “truth,” Operation Detour presentation commits another form of equally damaging subtle violence. It can be presumed that state’s gruesome visuals and presentation of potential consequences engender angst, paranoia, and fear amongst students.

Students may wonder who can be trusted. In Eagle Pass, these feelings of distress and uncertainty leading to non-palpable violence are more evident.

The result of this "fighting violence with violence" causes Eagle Pass residents to doubt who is the right person or institution to trust in order to feel safe. A woman once told me that sometimes she felt unsafe in Eagle Pass. "I don't really feel safe anymore. Not to the same extent as I used to. You know what happened with this drug issue with the guy from the high school. He is the son of you know who. She was referring to the 17 year-old son of the local police chief. The week he was arrested, the *Eagle Pass News Gram* reported that the young man was charged for drug possession with intent to distribute. Some people speculated that if the police chief's son was caught with drugs, then the police chief was also involved with the cartels.

The uncertainty caused during the presentation of Operation Detour and my female informant's doubt created feelings of paranoia. This subtle violence does not kill or physically harm residents, yet their fears create scenarios of possible and real dangers, which ultimately influence how residents conduct and shape their life. Michael Taussig (1987) explores this type of indirect, subtle, non-palpable violence amongst an indigenous population being forcibly incorporated into a capitalist mode of production in the Putumayo river area in Columbia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In understanding the gruesome and inexplicable terror that characterized the Putumayo rubber boom, Taussig introduces the notion of death space. Taussig posits that the colonizer's fear of the Indian rubber collectors fuelled the torture and terror imposed on the Indians. In other words, the imagined fantasies built on real dangers increased fear which ultimately engendered terror.

While borderland residents do not experience the atrocities that characterized the Putumayo, the border be-

gins to resemble the death space. The government's subtle violence incites fear amongst residents which shapes relationships, decisions, and actions of their life. Paranoia causes residents to distrust and question their classmates, their neighbours, or their strangers. In Eagle Pass, residents do not cross the border into Eagle Pass because they fear the cartels or the army, as Erica mentioned. Border Patrol agents in Weslaco High School invite students to question their friendships for it is possible their friends are involved with the drug cartels. Meanwhile, government agents blur the lines of safety when accusations are made that authorities are involved with drug cartels. Although the state has the good intention to protect, they also need to assure power. The outcome of these actions destabilizes the community among the residents of the border.

In his lecture, *Politics as a Vocation*, Max Weber (1946) indicated that the state is a "community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." As Weber suggested, the state appropriates use of violence through "legitimate means" in order to maintain authority and control; after all, they are doing so in the best interest of the public. Tilly and Weber's arguments of state power suggest that state violence allows state formation; the opposite occurred on the Mexico-U.S. border. Although the objective of Operation Detour was to deter students from the cartels, thereby keeping the U.S. borderlands safe, the state has scared the young population. If violence truly assured state formation, it would not be necessary to hold events such as Operation Detour to assert authority.

Hanna Arendt's (2004) notion of violence and power, however, may help illuminate the backlash that disturbs government credibility, state formation and state power on the border on the U.S. borderlands. Arendt<sup>6</sup> posits that

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6 Arendt's reflection about violence clarifies the relationship between power and violence, which she argues have erroneously been correlated since the

violence does not lead to power; rather, "power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent" (Arendt 2004: 242). Power, according to Arendt, is a form of rule based not on individual domination over others but from a collective and public agreement. The government is supposed to be a collective of individuals working for the public's common good; therefore, according to Arendt, the government ideally has a superior power than the few who dare challenge it (2004: 238). When there is no combined effort to collaborate for the benefit of the people and support the government, there is a possibility of an "armed uprising" (Arendt 2004: 240). Arendt states that violence can never be legitimate since legitimacy arises from the desire to achieve what the past used to be like (Arendt 2004:241). Violence is justified and not legitimized; in other words, violence is justified to achieve an imagined goal for the future. To say "legitimate violence" is a paradox.

Legitimacy and justification of visual violence makes the government a racketeer. Violence, whether it comes from the government or the cartels, is equally deadly and damaging for it creates a sense of fear, anxiety, insecurity and death among the populace. As Arendt would note, the government's violent racketeer-like characteristic, poses problems for the assertion of power. Although the government claims knowledge over the cartels, it employs violence similar to the cartels to assert control; thereby never fully maintaining power.

The ambiguous nature of a society in a context of violence is demonstrated in another of Michael Taussig's works (2003). In his journal of his stay in Colombia during its

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rise of the nation state. Her argument is a response to the leftist student movements of the 1960s and New Left Order (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 18). Although Arendt's conclusions arise from generalizations of student's strikes and rebellions against European Imperialisms, thereby unrecognizing the complexity of each struggle, her work on violence is relevant to this project.

fight against cartels he notes that the sources of terror were the inability for residents to distinguish the perpetrators of violence, whether it was the guerrilla, the state or paramilitaries. Likewise, the inability of Eagle Pass residents to decipher who belongs to the community is a source of angst. As will be discussed in the next section, residents decipher possible delinquents from legally abiding citizens' personal decisions. Delinquents choose to traffic and use drugs while proper citizens choose to decline the drug life style.

### **The Free Choice of Neoliberalism and State Power**

In the Operation Detour presentation in Weslaco, one of the Border Patrol agents asked the group of students, "What is the greatest gift God ever gave you?"

"Free will!" yelled out a student.

"Yes", the agent confirmed. He continued, "Free choice, free will. When the last time you were in a party and someone came up to you and asked, 'smoke this joint or I'll kill you?' We have never heard of a case like that," the agent said. "Everyone has the power of choice."

According to the Border Patrol agent, when a student decides to not make the correct choice, for example by joining the drug cartels, they are labelled dangerous to the community. After reminding the students about their free will, the Border Patrol mentioned possible punishments for their involvement in drugs including incarceration or felony charges. When Border Patrol agents emphasize that the public has the option to make the "right choice," students embody the basis for neoliberal order.

David Harvey (2005) frames the notion of neoliberalism under a framework of the concept of freedom. He explains that Neoliberal thought grew as a response to the failed "embedded liberalism" (Harvey 2005:11) which arose from economic restructuring after WWII. Embedded



liberalism involved equal participation of the state and private enterprises in ensuring world peace (Harvey 2005:10). However, after the financial crisis of the 1970s, economic practices were restored under neoliberal thought (Harvey 2005:12). Neoliberal values call for the state to reduce its presence from "labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, reproductive activities, attachment to the land, and habits of the heart" (Harvey 2005:3). Neoliberal thought calls for individual freedom from the state, while the state has the responsibility to provide support for capital accumulation in society (Harvey 2005:7).

Neoliberalism values "the supreme worth of the individual" (Harvey 2005:21) which also means each individual is responsible for their own well-being. In a neoliberal society, the state does not provide social welfare; instead, individuals must act for their own self-interests without any support from the state (Kingfisher 2002:36). By reminding students that they have the ability to make "the right choice" the Border Patrol reproduces neoliberal values. The state contradicts itself, however, when the individual makes the "wrong choice" in the eyes of the state and once again justifies its presence through punishment. In reality, some individuals do not have a choice.

To avoid being labelled a delinquent, it is in the best interest of the student to make the "right choice" in an environment constructed to facilitate the "wrong choice." Neoliberal thought does not consider the root problems of poverty or making "poor choices," instead, a penal system is established where "the state ability to incarcerate is used to create deterrence" (Corva 2008: 178). The rhetoric of choice targets the poor and accuses them of their socio-economic status for making the wrong decisions, rather than as a reflection of longstanding patterns of discrimination. Punitive discipline can be taken since they become a threat to neoliberal governance and

ultimately the basis of the U.S. market.

The neoliberal state influences the creation of delinquent subjects while overlooking root problems, which insinuate individuals' incorrect or poor choices. The neoliberal state, however, implements neoliberal values to secure its place in the global free market. U.S. state formation is paradoxical. United States involvement in the Mexican drug wars, as seen in the Merida Initiative and Operation Fast and Furious, highlights neoliberal policies under the name of aid. Latin American countries who receive aid from the United States to fight drug trafficking, must agree to implement neoliberal policies in their economy (Andreas 1995: 75); these countries do not have other options in receiving aid. In both countries, aid to help battle the drug problems was only offered if the recipient countries agreed to reduce state economic regulation and privatize industries. Andreas elucidates this problem:

Latin American countries have been under significant pressure to comply with both liberalisation and prohibition objectives, the first primarily through the financial leverage of US-supported multilateral funding agencies (especially the IMF) and the second primarily through direct US diplomatic and economic leverage (1995: 75).

The paradox of the neoliberal state is further problematized when one connects neoliberalism and the role of the U.S. government in the drug wars. At the global level, the state is highly involved in its protectionist policies while it provides neoliberal "aid" to Mexico in fighting the cartels. At the local level, the state has the influence to create delinquent subjects, possibly influencing relationships amongst borderland residents while asserting and increasing its own power.

## Conclusion

It has been suggested in this paper that the state is not a physical entity, but an idea accentuated by institutions that collaborate to protect the border from the cartels. Anti-drug policies, such as Operation Fast and Furious and the Merida Initiative, co-function to provide safety for borderland residents. Following Charles Tilly's approach to state formation, this paper argues that state security policies fuel conflict and extend the need for protection. Local policies such as Operation Detour establish the presence of the state through means of violence and visual terror. While these initiatives attempt to remind residents that the state maintains power when the cartels wreak havoc, residents experience uncertainty and paranoia insinuated by the state itself.

The U.S. state's subtle assertion of power results in Eagle Pass residents to internalize violence and fear in the present drug conflict. The juxtaposition between state violence and state power on the U.S. borderlands exposes the fact that the state cannot fully hold power during the drug conflict. Residents doubt state authorities. In this way the actions of government or Border Patrol are not different from the cartels. Uncertainty, anxiety, and paranoia do not allow for trust in state authorities and without the support of the residents the state cannot maintain credibility. This paper argued that the state uses neoliberal rhetoric to determine and label individuals as delinquent subjects on the border. In addition, the state continues its influence over the drug conflict by offering aid under the conditions that countries receiving aid, such as Mexico, implement a neoliberal agenda. In the end, this neoliberal agenda influences the lives of local borderland residents.

Future work in understanding the State in the U.S. should consider race, ethnicity and socio-economic class and how these factors affect residents' experiences of liv-

ing on the border during times of ambiguous violence. Most importantly, border studies must acknowledge the role drug cartels have in understanding the state and the Mexico-U.S. border.

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