

**RAINBOW FLAGS AND BODY BAGS: VIOLENCE, TERROR, PRIDE AND
EVERYDAY RESISTANCE IN NORTHEASTERN MEXICO**

by

John Alexander Pysklywec

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Abstract

In 2006, Mexico's then president, Felipe Calderón, declared a war on organized crime, popularly referred to now as a 'drug war', that has resulted in the deaths and disappearances of hundreds-of-thousands of people. In spite of this ongoing hardship and tragedy, in 2012 and 2013, the Northeastern border city of Esperanza (pseudonym) bore witness to the region's first pride march. Why now? Why, in this moment of violence and conflict throughout the city and the region, have members of gender and sexual minority (GSM) communities in Esperanza decided to march for rights and recognition? What does this say about pride and other forms of GSM activism in spaces of violent conflict? In this thesis, as I explore these questions, I recount a story about resistance and celebration of GSM life in the US/Mexico borderlands in a time of increasing fear, militarization, and death. The central argument I make here is that pride, as a form of activism and resistance, is variegated across space and time. That is, pride comes to mean different things in different places, and in those different places, it does different things. I demonstrate this by mounting three supporting arguments. First, I assert that state-directed violence has been a catalyst for GSM activism in Mexico in the past. I argue that the emergence of GSM activism is rooted in times of violence and crisis that, like today in Esperanza, are not specifically directed at GSM communities, but more broadly within Mexican society. Next, I frame the contemporary violence in Mexico as a form of terror perpetrated by powerful state and non-state actors. Through the use of interviewee narratives and my own experiences, I argue that life in Esperanza is being shattered by violence and terror. This shattering is both heart-wrenching and destructive, but is also potentially creative of the conditions for challenging the status quo and societal norms. Finally, I argue that in the violent spaces of Esperanza, GSM activism is challenging hetero/cis-normativity and oppression, but they also become acts of everyday resistance and contestation of the violence and terror of the so-called 'drug war'.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, and independent document authored by John Alexander Pysklywec. The fieldwork conducted for this thesis was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board, identification number H13-00986. The Principal Investigator was Dr. Juanita Sundberg.

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List of Abbreviations

DF: *Distrito Federal*¹

DHS: Department of Homeland Security

FHAR: *Frente Homosexual Acción Revolucionaria*²

FLH: *Frente de Liberación Homosexual*³

GOHL: *Grupo Orgullo Homosexual de Liberación*⁴

GNE: *Grupo [Nueva Esperanza]*⁵

GSM: Gender and Sexual Minority/Minorities

HMNO: *Histórica Marcha Nacional de Orgullo Lesbiana, Gay, Bisexual, Transgénero, Transexual, Travesti, Intersexo*⁶

LGBTTIQQ2SA: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Two Spirit, Asexual (and/or Allies)

LGBTTTI: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite, Intersex

LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning

MNOD: *Marcha Nacional de Orgullo y la Dignidad Lesbiana, Gay, Bisexual, Transgénero, Transexual, Travesti, Intersexo*⁷

PFLAG: Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays

PRT: *Partido Revolucionario Trabajador*⁸

PRI: *Partido Institucional Revolucionario*⁹

SECATUR: *Secretaria del Turismo del Distrito Federal*¹⁰

QUILTBAG: Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Lesbian, Trans, Bisexual, Asexual, Gay

USA, US and/or the States: United States of America

¹ Federal District

² Revolutionary Homosexual Action Front

³ Homosexual Liberation Front

⁴ Homosexual Liberation Pride Group

⁵ [New Hope] Group

⁶ Historic National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite, Intersex Pride March

⁷ National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite, Intersex Pride and Dignity March

⁸ Worker Revolutionary Party

⁹ Revolutionary Institutional Party

¹⁰ Secretary of Tourism for the Federal District

Glossary

I have included this glossary here to help with some of the terms that are commonly thrown around in discussions regarding gender and sexuality and used in the pages that follow. People often feel overwhelmed and/or confused by all the words. This is totally understandable. There are a lot of them! What I present here is by no means an exhaustive list, rather these are the words that I use in this thesis. The majority of the definitions have all been directly quoted from Qmunity's (2013) *Queer Terminology from A to Q*. Qmunity (2013: Np) is a "queer resource centre" in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. It should be noted that these definitions are not perfect, static or uncontested.

Ally: "A heterosexual and/or cisgender and/or cissexual person who supports and celebrates queer identities, interrupts and challenges queer-phobic and heterosexist remarks and actions of others, and willingly explores these biases within themselves" (1).

Asexual: "Someone who does not experience sexual desire for people of any gender. Some asexual people desire romantic relationships, while others do not. Asexuality can be considered a spectrum, with some asexual people experiencing desire for varying types of intimacy. This desire may fluctuate over time. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy, which is the deliberate refraining from sexual activity. Asexual people experience high levels of invisibility and trivialization" (1).

Bisexual: "An individual who is attracted to, and may form sexual and romantic relationships with women and men. A bisexual person may feel equally attracted to each gender, or may experience stronger attractions to one gender while still having feelings for another; this ratio of attraction may vary over time. Bisexuality, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, may be either a period in the process of self-discovery, or a stable, longterm identity. It is not necessary for somebody to have or have had sex with both men and women to identify as bisexual" (2).

Cis-gender: "Identifying with the same gender that one was assigned at birth. A gender identity that society considers to match the biological sex assigned at birth. The prefix cis means

‘on this side of’ or ‘not across from’. A term used to call attention to the privilege of people who are not trans*” (2).

Gay: “A person who is mostly attracted to those of the same gender; often used to refer to men only” (4).

Heterosexual: “A person who primarily feels physically and emotionally attracted to people of the ‘opposite’ gender; also sometimes referred to as ‘straight’” (7).

Homophobia: “Fear or hatred of, aversion to, and discrimination against homosexuals or homosexual behaviour. There are many levels and forms of homophobia, including cultural/institutional homophobia, interpersonal homophobia, and internalized homophobia. Many forms of homophobia are related to how restrictive binary gender roles are (see ‘oppositional sexism’). An example of this might be a lesbian who is harassed with homophobic language for being perceived to be masculine. Many of the problems faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, including health and income disparities, stem from homophobia... ” (7).

Intersex: “Intersex people may have: external genitalia which do not closely resemble typical male or female genitalia, or which have the appearance of both male and female genitalia; the genitalia of one sex and the secondary sex characteristics of another sex; or a chromosomal make-up that is neither XX or XY but may be a combination of both. ‘Intersex’ has replaced the term ‘hermaphrodite’, which is widely considered to be outdated, inaccurate and offensive. An intersex person may or may not identify as part of the trans* community, however the terms ‘intersex’, ‘transsexual’ and ‘trans*’ are distinct and should not be used interchangeably” (8).

Lesbian: “A woman who is primarily romantically and sexually attracted to women. The term originates from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos which was home to Sappho, a poet, teacher, and a woman who loved other women. Although not as common, sometimes the term ‘gay woman’ is used instead” (9).

Privilege: “Refers to the social, economic and political advantages or rights held by people from dominant groups on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, social class, etc. For example, men often experience privilege that people of other genders do not have” (11).

Queer: “A term becoming more widely used among LGBT communities because of its inclusiveness. ‘Queer’ can be used to refer to the range of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people and provides a convenient shorthand for ‘LGBT’. It is important to note that this is a reclaimed term that was once and is still used as a hate term and thus some people feel uncomfortable with it. Not all trans* people see trans* identities as being part of the term ‘queer’” (12). It should also be noted that some LGBTQA people do not identify with the term as it can also be seen as flattening.

Questioning: “A term sometimes used by those in the process of exploring personal issues of sexual orientation and gender identity as well as choosing not to identify with any other label” (13).

Transgender “(Trans, Trans*): Transgender, frequently abbreviated to ‘trans’ or ‘trans*’ (the asterisk is intended to actively include non-binary and/or non-static gender identities [...]) is an umbrella term that describes a wide range of people whose gender identity and/or expression differs from conventional expectations based on their assigned biological birth sex. Some of the many people who may or may not identify as transgender, trans, or trans* include people on the male-to-female or female-to-male spectrums, people who identify and/or express their gender outside of the male/female binary, people whose gender identity and/or expression is fluid, people who explore gender for pleasure or performance, and [for other personal reasons]. Identifying as transgender, trans, or trans* is something that can only be decided by an individual for themselves and does not depend on criteria such as surgery or hormone treatment status” (14).

Transsexual: A person whose sexual identity has moved from male to female or female to male. A transsexual person may change elements of their body through surgery or hormone treatment, but many transsexual people do not make any changes other than their sexual identity. Many folk feel that the word transsexual has medical overtones or is used inaccurately and so prefer the terms ‘transgender’, trans’, or ‘trans*’” (15).

Transvestite: “A medical term that was historically used to label cross dressing as a mental illness. This term is outdated, problematic, and generally considered offensive. A more inclusive and respectful term currently used is ‘cross dresser’” (15).

Two Spirit “(2-Spirit): A term used by some North American [Indigenous people(s)] to describe people with diverse gender identities, gender expressions, gender roles, and sexual orientations. Dual-gendered, or ‘two-spirited,’ people have been and are viewed differently in different First Nations communities. Sometimes they have been seen without stigma and were considered seers, child-carers, warriors, mediators, or emissaries from the creator and treated with deference and respect, or even considered sacred, but other times this has not been the case” (Qmunity 2013:15).

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my Partner, Sergio, our fur child (our cat), Shaky and all my friends and family in Canada and Mexico.

Chapter 1: Introduction



Figure 1.1 ‘War’ – Pride as Everyday Resistance, Photo Credit: John Alexander Pysklywec

On June 27th, 2012, a small group of Lesbian, Gay, Bi and/or Trans, Queer, and/or Questioning (LGBTQ) people and their allies, numbering a few hundred in total, stepped out into the streets of a mid-sized city in northern Mexico located along the border with the United States (US or USA). They moved into the middle of the street and began to march through some of the back streets of the centre of town. Their path was a large circle that would eventually bring them back around to the park at the edge of downtown where they had started their march. Some wore brightly coloured clothes, while others were barely clothed at all. They had enlisted the aid of a DJ who was set up on a decorated flatbed truck adorned and canopied with patches of material assembled to look like a rainbow flag. The DJ provided music for people to dance to as they

wound their way through the city in the hot afternoon sun. A few observers gathered at the streets' edges to take in the goings on of this motley crew of disparate individuals brought together through their mutual marginalization within the dominant heteronormative and homo/transphobic societies of both Mexico and the United States (just a few hundred metres away, across the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande River). When they returned to the park, the party continued late into the evening with a drag competition, live bands, dancing and general merriment. This relatively small group of people made history that day. They were the first people to participate in a pride march in the city of Esperanza or any other city in Northeastern Mexico outside of Monterrey.¹¹

The following year, they did it again. This time, a slightly smaller group of participants marched their way to the main plaza at the centre of the city to demand equality and the end of homo/transphobia. Again, they returned to the same park as the previous year for an evening of music and entertainment. These march participants, activists really, followed the lead of many who had gone before them in pride marches and other forms of gender and sexual minorities (GSM) activism that have been occurring in larger Mexican cities such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Tijuana.¹² However, what these people did that day in Esperanza is still very much a rarity in mid-sized or smaller Mexican cities. These places, as is the case in the larger centres, are still very much spaces of homophobic and transphobic violence and exclusion.

The actions of these activists were powerful and brave, but were they effective? Will a pride march improve the lives of GSM communities in the region? Another aspect of this scene that begs to be questioned is, why now? The conditions under which these marches have been carried out would not obviously lend themselves to be the staging grounds for such events. In the last few years, Esperanza has been the site of sustained, intense and deadly violence related

¹¹ The name Esperanza is a pseudonym. In an effort to protect the identities of the people I worked with for the purposes of my research, I have decided to ascribe all local place names with pseudonyms. This does not include large geographic areas, like states or countries. All names used to identify people or organizations are also pseudonyms, unless the person is famous and/or their identity would not reveal the true identities of the people I worked with or their locations.

¹² Throughout the thesis, I use the term 'gender and sexual minority' (GSM) as explained below.

to Mexico's so-called 'drug war' – a militarized campaign that has brought about the deaths and disappearances of hundreds-of-thousands of people. The majority of whom have been 'collateral damage' of the offensive. At first glance, then, it seems quite unusual to be engaging in a very public display of GSM activism on the streets of a city that sits on a knife's edge waiting for the next sporadic flare-up of violence between armed state and non-state actors.

What follows in this thesis is a story about resistance by GSM communities and the celebration of GSM life along the US/Mexico border in a time of militarization, increasing fear, and death. This thesis closely examines the efforts of a small group of GSM activists and the two pride marches which they planned despite the violence and terror created by Mexico's so-called 'drug war'. Broadly, this thesis demonstrates that pride as a form of resistance is manifold and variegated. That is, pride, as a form of protest, is not the same across all spaces and time. While in some places pride is little more than a circus-like spectacle that is highly contested within GSM communities, in others it is an important (and very dangerous) visible form of protest that not only speaks to homo/transphobic oppression and inequality, but, in particular contexts, to broader forms of violence, terror and oppression that reach across all of society. Therefore, the overarching argument of this thesis is that, while pride marches can be an important aspect of GSM activism and resistance the world over, under particular conditions, these marches become much more significant acts of (everyday) resistance to a wider range of issues facing the society in which they are occurring. Thus, in spaces of violence and terror, such as in Esperanza, a pride march is not only a march to call for GSM rights, equality and the end of homo/transphobia, it is also a form of everyday resistance that contests the violence and terror by virtue of occurring despite (or perhaps because of) the shattering of society. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, carrying out pride marches in such unpredictable and volatile spaces entails various additional forms of everyday resistance in order to get things done. Ultimately, pride means different things in different places; and in these different places, it does different things. When thinking about resistance in general, the insights gleaned from a close examination of the planning and execution of pride in Esperanza demonstrate that what is resistance and the ways people engage in resistance is place specific.

The research I present here is based on fieldwork I conducted in Northeastern Mexico in the summer of 2013. This research was propelled by a set of foundational questions. They are as follows: first, I ask, why now? Why is it that in the midst of the violence and terror of the so-called ‘drug war’, a violence that is sending most people indoors in search of the relative safety of homes and other private spaces, are GSM organizers and communities taking to the streets to demand their rights? What do their actions say about violence and power? More specifically, (how) does the violence and militarization in Esperanza produce the conditions for GSM organization/activism? How are the social landscapes of Esperanza and Sister City, TX, (located just across the river on the US side) transformed generally by the violence and militarization in the region? More specifically, how, if at all, have GSM communities been impacted by this transformation? And finally, what does this story say about life, activism and resistance in conflict zones?

I construct my larger argument through the course of three main theoretical and empirically focused chapters. In these chapters, chapters two, three, and four, I advance three supporting arguments. In chapter two, I argue that the GSM movement in Mexico has emerged from a violent episode in the country’s history, the 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco. Although this violence was not directed specifically at GSM communities, it was a catalyst for GSM organizing. I advance this argument by tracing the historical trajectory of GSM activism through a series of waves and lulls. After a brief look at early forms of GSM artistic and literary activisms, I turn to the massacre at Tlatelolco – the main catalyst for the beginnings of GSM activisms in Mexico – through to the contemporary moment in which GSM activism, primarily in Mexico City, finds itself at a crossroads, if not a crisis. I also interrogate the idea of pride as an effective form of activism in the fight for GSM rights and equality.

While the second chapter focuses on GSM activisms in Mexico in general, and Mexico City in particular, the third chapter switches gears to focus more on Esperanza as a place, the violence that has wracked the city and the stories of people’s courage to survive, carry on with their daily lives and engage in GSM activisms. Inspired by Veena Das’ concept of the individual as fragmented and incomplete, I argue that violence and terror of the so-called ‘drug war’ is

shattering fragmented lives of individuals and society as a whole. I begin this chapter by framing the so-called ‘drug war’ and associated violence as a form of terror that is being enacted by armed state and non-state actors. I situate Esperanza within contested dominant narratives of physical geography, history(ies), and (narco) politics and economy(ies) in order to understand the contemporary violence and terror. I then demonstrate how some of the research participants experience the violence of the so-called ‘drug war’ by sharing a few fragments from their lives. These narratives, or fragments, give a glimpse of the everyday and the intimate ways in which violence weaves itself into the fabric of everyday life. They also provide a counternarrative to the so-called ‘drug war’ and deeper understanding of the context of GSM activism in Esperanza.

In the fourth chapter, I turn to the planning and execution of the 2012 and 2013 marches to reveal moments of (everyday) resistance. I argue that, through their staging of two pride marches and festivities, the activist organizers and march participants in Esperanza engage in forms of resistance. In one way, they are enacting a public display of resistance against heteronormative domination and oppression. In addition to this, the march is a product of acts of everyday resistance to the violence that state and non-state actors are sowing in Esperanza. I demonstrate this by discussing two events, one from each year of the march, which highlight how the activist organizers were engaging in acts of everyday resistance that push back against official and unofficial authority in Esperanza in order to accomplish the march. I then move to examine how the pride march itself becomes a moment of everyday resistance that contests the violence, terror and death of the so-called ‘drug war’. At the end of this chapter I return to the discussion of pride as an effective mode of resistance to pull together my argument regarding pride as a variegated and place-specific form of (everyday) resistance.

An integral part of the discussions related to chapters three and four is a sustained examination of ideas of the everyday. Essentially, the violence and terror created by armed state and non-state actors as a part of the so-called ‘drug war’ is shattering the everyday lives of people and society. I posit that what becomes the ‘everyday’ – that is, sets of relational mundane activities that are carried out on a daily basis – is somewhat difficult to conceptualize in contexts of sustained

violence and destruction. What can be ‘everyday’ when one’s world is liable to explode at any moment? The everyday can be seen as relational and contingent daily practices that are connected to global flows of power, discourses, capital, etc, but the everyday in Esperanza is qualitatively different than before the so-called ‘drug war’ began. Engaging in everyday public acts takes on a different sense of intention when the spectre of violence and death looms large. It becomes a kind of new quotidian. Therefore, the everyday must always be taken in context with whatever happens in a day. This could be nothing remarkable or intensive deadly violence. Thus, in spaces of violence and terror, what is the everyday and an everyday practice is variable, flexible and subjective. And, as I will argue in due course, this same logic applies to conceptualizing (everyday) resistance.

1.1 Context, Methodology and Positionality

Before continuing, an important note about how I approach the work presented here. The production of knowledge is a highly politicized and subjective process. For me, the production of knowledge is an embodied process that cannot really be separated from the place(s) and space(s) – including the space of my own body and mind – in which it is produced. As such, in this thesis I am producing knowledge through embodied experiences that I have collected up to this point in my life, both ‘in the field’ and at ‘home’. The process of producing knowledge is not one that can be compartmentalized or separated from the lived experiences of the knowledge producer. It is not something that happened for a few hours a day when I was working with activist organizers in Esperanza, or months later when I sat down at my kitchen table in Vancouver to listen to recordings of our conversations, to review my notes, or to write this document. No, the process of producing knowledge is all of that and everything else before and in between those moments and now.

As a way of disseminating the knowledge that I am producing here and in an effort to disclose my process, I have included more ‘traditional’ (as in Western academic) modes of empirical analysis, but I have endeavoured to incorporate elements of narrative and storytelling. Stories are important way of conveying a more nuanced understanding of a place, in this case, Esperanza and the immediate US/Mexico borderlands, but also one’s experience of a place. So, while

stories speak of places and speak to larger themes, they also provide insights into the storytellers themselves and how they are shaping the knowledge that is produced. Throughout this thesis I share (self reflexive) moments that speak to my process of producing knowledge as well as the core themes that I am drawing out here. Sometimes the stories I share are embedded in the main body of a thesis chapter, other times they are a caveat at the beginning or end of a chapter. In whatever way they are presented, they are meant to convey many different points about life in Esperanza, the US/Mexico borderlands, and my experience of it. Some of the points that I am trying to make I will explicitly outline, others will be left for you, the reader, to parse out and contemplate.

* * *

One year after the first march in Esperanza, I stepped out of a plane in Sister City, Texas at approximately one in the morning, local time. It had been a very long day of travel from Vancouver. I was tired as I went down the stairs and onto the tarmac. The heat and humidity hit me, enveloped me like a warm, damp blanket. I made my way through the terminal and out to the parking lot to an awaiting taxi. 15 minutes later I was in the lobby of the Borderlands Motel, located just across the street (and a rusted metal border wall) from the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande River, the city of Esperanza and the United States of Mexico.

I had been to Sister City before. Three times, actually. My first visit was in 2011. It was also the first time I had ever spent a sustained amount of time in the US/Mexico borderlands. I was awe struck. To me, the land is beautiful – flat and hot and beautiful. The people and culture are fascinating. It is a place characterized by deep roots in Coahuiltecan, Lipan Apache, Mestizo, Mexican, Mexican American and, to a lesser extent, African American and Anglo American heritage. It is a place where many residents, until recently, live(d) a bi-national life very much in both Sister City and Esperanza. As Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describes the area, it is neither the United States, nor is it Mexico. It is a place where “... the lifeblood of two worlds [is] merging to form a third country – a border culture” (Anzaldúa 1987:3). Anzaldúa notes how outsiders read this ‘third country’.

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’.¹³ Gringos in the US Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they have their papers or not, whether they’re Chicano, Indians or Blacks” (Anzaldúa 1987:3).

Anzaldúa is gesturing to the long history of oppression and exclusion that characterizes this part of the world – on both sides of the border. It is a space that is quite often rejected by both US and Mexican nationals who live further in the interiors of their respective countries.

What brought me to the region in 2011 was another research project investigating militarization and everyday life along the border. The recent militarization of the US side of the border is a consequence of the reaction to the September 11th, 2001 attacks (Alden 2009). Since then, customs, immigration and border patrol became a part of the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the activities of the agencies have been linked to the larger war against terror (Alden 2009). Additionally, in 2006 the US Congress passed the Secure Fence Act, which mandated the construction of a wall along the southern border with Mexico (US Congress 2005). As well as the implementation of other military infrastructure, such as road/pedestrian blocks, the deployment of drones and increased border patrol presence. This was all done in the name of national security – to tighten the border to prevent ‘illegal’ entry of people, products and narcotics and to stop terrorism.

On the Mexican side, increasing militarization along the border has meant the permanent deployment of the military, navy and federal police as a part of Felipe Calderón’s war against

¹³ the crossed

organized crime – a military-style campaign that was initiated in 2006 with the backing of the US and Canadian government (Vulliamy 2010). This military-style campaign has created a very unstable and volatile situation in places like Esperanza where fighting between armed state and non-state actors and/or between groups of armed non-state actors, commonly referred to as cartels, can flair up at any moment. With the financial and moral support of the United States, Mexico's so-called 'drug war' has claimed the lives or disappeared thousands of people. Some estimates place the death toll as high as 130,000 people, with a further 27,000 missing (Molloy 2013). While the state claims that 90% of the dead were involved in organized crime, there is no way to determine how many of these deaths and disappearances are of people who were *actually* involved in criminal activity. Even so, the question still remains: does an individual's involvement in 'criminal activity' – as determined by the state – justify their killing and disappearance? Regardless of the answer to this question, life in many cities in the region has been dramatically affected by the violence.

As a result of the increasing militarization on both sides of the border – wall building, drone flying, and the deployment of militaries and other 'security' forces – many aspects of bi-national life, which had previously been so strong, have stopped. Those who *can* go northward from Mexico to the US still do so to see friends and family or to run errands, etc. Some have permanently moved to the US side, which has caused an economic boom as people bring their lives and businesses northward (Correa Cabrera 2013). Yet, it is difficult to find a person that *still* goes southward to Esperanza on a regular basis. Even people with family on the other side of the border are not going to visit them. For example, an employee at the hotel where I stayed in Sister City had a brother in Esperanza whom they hadn't seen in months, but they were not willing to take the risk to visit him and their brother did not have a visa to cross over and visit. Another Sister City resident described it to me like this:

... that wall, to me, symbolizes that the border life is, is... well, that wall is concrete. It's [border life] not flexible anymore. You know, people aren't going over there and people aren't... that fluid motion of people back and forth are... is gone, you know? And a lot of it is perception also, you know, people just don't wanna go over there because of the

current situation. I think when the wall was first built it didn't symbolize that, but now that there is all this violence across the river, people don't... they don't go [...]. You know, that sense of security is gone. So, I think now, more than ever, basically, that border life has come to a standstill. People on this side are on this side, and people on that side are on that side, and there are very few people that do [still go].

As a result, despite spending a total of four weeks in Sister City over the course of a year, I never once crossed over to Esperanza. I wanted to, but I was just not prepared to take the risk.

During and after my visits to Sister City, I often found myself spending time thinking about what life was like in Esperanza, or what my life would be like if I were a borderlands resident in general. What it would be like for me to have my world and my way of being in it so significantly altered by increasing militarization and violence. This would ultimately lead me to ponder the impacts of this 'border life at a standstill' on GSM communities. Through casual conversation with people in Sister City I learned that there had been an important bi-national component to GSM life in the borderlands. Many GSM people travelled between GSM (friendly) spaces throughout the region and there was a vibrant interconnected life for GSM communities on both sides of the border. Throughout the borderland of Texas and Northeastern Mexico, people moved between GSM spaces, such as bars, nightclubs, bathhouses, and brothels. It has been an integral part of keeping things fresh, interesting and exciting for many people in GSM communities. People would go back and forth from one side to another, sometimes multiple times in an evening. Generally speaking, people would come northward earlier in the evening to hang out at the dance club in Sister City and then the flow would reverse as people headed to Esperanza later in the evening since the bars and clubs there were open later. People also crossed back and forth to maintain other social connections. They would travel between other GSM-friendly spaces such as certain cafes and restaurants, the homes of friends and family and even some churches on both sides of the border. Some people were involved in cross-border romantic relationships and lived their GSM lives on both sides. While for others, the 'other side' (from whatever side they reside on) provided a safer space to explore their gender, sex and sexual identity.

Were any aspects of this bi-national GSM life happening anymore? And what does it mean for GSM communities if this is no longer occurring? In what other ways was the violence and militarization of the US/Mexico borderland impacting GSM communities and how is this different from the dominant cis-gender and/or heterosexual experience?

Back in Vancouver in the fall of 2012, I was doing a bit of searching online to see what I could find out about GSM communities in the South Texas/Northeast Mexico area in an effort to try and answer some of my questions. I came across a very short article about the first pride march in the region. I was surprised to learn that it had occurred in Esperanza only a few months earlier. It seemed to me that a pride march in Esperanza was particularly significant given the larger context of violence and militarization. Furthermore, I was intrigued by the idea of a pride march, a very public display of GSM bodies on the streets in a city that had been the subject of so much violence.

The original plan for my MA thesis was to continue with the research I had started around the increasing militarization on the US side of the border in relation to the construction of the border wall; however, seeing as I self-identify as gay, am married to a Mexican(-Canadian), and used to live in Mexico, I felt a strong connection to the news story about GSM activism in Esperanza. With the support of my supervisor and my partner, I decided to shift my MA research topic to a project that focused on understanding more about GSM activism in Esperanza. Within a few months of reading the article, I had established contact with the organizers via their Facebook page to determine if they were planning a second march and if they were interested in opening a dialogue around my potential involvement in the march and my research project. They were indeed planning a second march and they seemed mildly interested in the project idea! They agreed to my visit and participation in the 2013 march and march planning. In early June 2013, I headed down to US/Mexico borderlands for six weeks to work alongside the march organizers and conduct my research project.

As stated earlier, I had arrived very early in the morning to Sister City. My plan was to stay on the US side until I felt comfortable enough to ‘move’ over to the Mexico side. My first hotel in Sister City, the Borderlands Motel, was a total dive. The first night was rough. As he handed me my room key, the front desk person informed me that my room was two doors down from a permanent resident of the hotel, a local drug dealer, and that I should try to approach my room from the other direction in order to limit my contact with him. Just my luck, as I approached my room I had the pleasure of meeting this person as he was hanging out with a friend in the open-air passage way linking all the rooms. I was nervous, but trying to be cool – I’m sure it didn’t look that way, though! ‘¿Qué pasa?’ he asked me in a somewhat playful, but more intimidating kind of way.¹⁴ I responded, ‘*Buenas noches*’, and slipped into my room.¹⁵ The room was... a little less than desirable. All I will say is that there were blood spurts on the wall and I opted to sleep in my clothes on top of the sheets with an extra shirt covering the pillow! In the morning, I moved to a new hotel a few blocks away.

The funny thing is, I found out after a week or so that my new hotel was actually a brothel. I discovered this one night when I couldn’t sleep. I headed down to the lobby to heat up some food. As I wandered down the hallway, several of the rooms that I passed had their doors open with a person lounging on the bed. At first I thought it was bit strange, but when I reached the lobby, which was full of people in varying degrees of dress, it dawned on me. I didn’t mind too much, though. There were no blood spurts on the walls, the room was clean enough, and I could not see the condition of the mattress through the bedding – out of sight, out of mind. Besides, the brother and sister owners were reasonably nice. Knowing that it was a brothel did, however, help to explain the occasional random visitors at my door in the middle of the night looking for ‘the person who called them’ and was I sure it had not been me who called!

Needless to say I only stayed there for two weeks after which I moved southward into a hotel in Esperanza. The march organizers arranged for me to stay in the hotel that Raúl, one of the march activist organizers who I will introduce in a moment, managed. The hotel was part hotel and part

¹⁴ What’s up?

¹⁵ Good night.

motel, or *hotel de paso* – a place where one could rent a room by the hour if so desired. I opted for the weekly rate!

On the day I moved from Sister City to Esperanza, Carlos, Raúl's partner and fellow organizer, came and picked me up from my hotel. We crossed over the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo River and into Mexico without a problem. As I hopped out of the truck in front of my new hotel in Esperanza, I immediately noticed a small group of people sitting across the street. Some were sitting on the ground, one person was ensconced in a flipped over tire, and a few others were seated in broken chairs. I soon found out that the place where they were gathered is referred to as *el punto* – the point – which functions as a kind of guard station/point-of-sale for the local cartel, the *Cártel del Golfo*. It is a place from which drugs are bought and sold, and where *achichincles* – low level cartel workers – monitor the goings on of the neighbourhood, ensuring that nothing out of the ordinary is occurring. If something slightly suspicious is going on, it is reported by an *achichincle* to other people within the organizational structure who roam around the city in vehicles. They would be called in to 'investigate' the goings on. Before I could even fully comprehend the implications of *el punto* being located *right* in front of the hotel where I was staying, I was assured I would not draw their attention, especially since I was constantly coming and going with hotel staff. The people at the *punto* did eventually come to know who I was since the night cleaner was acquaintances with them and would often spend his smoke breaks over there chatting and sharing gossip. The people at the *punto* would often yell 'Canada' when I arrived or left the hotel. I would smile and acknowledge them, but never really felt comfortable about it.

The hotel in Esperanza was an incredibly transient place (even more so than a regular hotel) with a lot of different kinds of people coming and going – by the hour. But not everyone was a by-the-hour client. After I got settled, Raúl informed me that, despite not wanting to tell me, he thought I should know there were two cartel members staying in the hotel. According to Raúl, this was normal practice in Esperanza. Every so often two or three people came and stayed for a few weeks at a time. They cycle their way through many of the hotels in the region. The more influence and power a person has, the nicer the hotel. I was a bit unnerved by their presence, but

I was assured that I would not even see them since they were staying in a room in the motel part of the hotel while I was on the second floor in another area and because they got up early and returned late. One afternoon while I was sitting in the lobby working on march-related stuff, I did end up seeing these two fellows. It was quite a tense situation seeing as they had arrived to deal with a billing dispute. Everyone was a bit unnerved, but the hotel staff kept their cool and stood their ground. These two people, supposedly from the cartel, paid a significant portion of their bill and then rushed out the door to ‘attend’, as they said, to the people they had waiting in their car. They left a few days later, without paying their bill in its entirety.

There were other kinds of people at the hotel, as well. There were couples, young and old, who would come for a few hours; there was a travelling naturopathic doctor who stayed for a week and ran a clinic out of a meeting room beside the lobby; two male strippers who had come to perform at the local gay club (one of whom went missing while in Esperanza); sex workers and their clients; business travellers; and, a family with three children. It truly was a very interesting place to stay! It was a place where I ended up spending a lot of time. I got to know all of the staff, and even met their family members.

For me, the hotel was a space of relative safety, friendship, companionship and, at times, entertainment. Providing me with these and many other acts of kindness and concern were a part of a larger effort by Raúl and his partner, Carlos, trying their best to accommodate me and make me feel comfortable. I am thankful to them for their care and attention, and I am truly indebted to them. *Mi casa siempre será su casa.*¹⁶

Shortly after I arrived in the US/Mexico borderlands to conduct the research for this thesis, I began to spend almost every waking hour in the company of the activist organizers in Esperanza while I worked side-by-side with them in planning and executing the 2013 march. Because Raúl was the manager of my hotel in Esperanza and there were free computers with internet access and a printer there, most of the planning for the march occurred in the lobby of the hotel. When

¹⁶ My house will always be their house.

we were not at the hotel planning, we were out running errands (both march related and not) and going to meetings. I attended planning meetings with other march organizers, with city officials, and with local business owners. Carlos, and Jacobo, a march volunteer, and I worked to rehabilitate (redesign and paint) three dilapidated floats that had been donated by the city. The organizers also tasked me with raising awareness of the pride march on the north side of the border by contacting various media outlets as well as the Sister City chapter of GSM ally/advocacy/activist group, Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and other GSM groups in Texas.¹⁷ The two days before the march were back-to-back 18-hour days of preparation, and the day of the march was a 20-hour day that entailed setting up and taking down the post-festivities scenario.¹⁸ After the march I spent the next two weeks hanging out in Esperanza, going about quotidian life with Raúl and Carlos, getting to know people more, and conducting interviews. As a result, I would characterize my approach to research as (very active) participant observation.¹⁹

In addition to participant observation, I kept a journal and maintained a field notebook. I also took many photos, mostly of the march. Unfortunately, many of these were taken without any real intention behind them. Many of them turned out flat and lifeless. For this reason – as well as wanting to maintain a degree of anonymity for march participants – I have not included very many of them in the thesis. I would have liked to have taken more photos of Esperanza, but in all honesty I was nervous about pulling out my camera since journalists have been the target of

¹⁷ PFLAG Sister City seemed to be the most active organization north of the border related the GSM community building, advocacy and activism. The group was headed up by a person who I shall refer to as Luzma; a self identified bisexual cis-female in her early 40s. PFLAG's activities in Sister City include the first marriage equality rally in the city as well as a successful campaign to get the City of Sister City to add gender and sexual identity as a part of their employment equity policies. Meaning that, despite Texas law stating that a person may be dismissed from their job based on their gender and sexual identity, the City of Sister City will not do that. During my time in the US/Mexico borderlands I tried to create a meaningful relationship between activist organizers in Esperanza and PFLAG; however, about six month after I left, the Sister City PFLAG chapter closed. When I asked Luzma what had happened, she cited activist fatigue in light of a lack of support from the GSM/ally community.

¹⁸ In hindsight, on the day of the actual march I was so busy (and exhausted) that I really didn't get a chance to fully observe it. I am of mixed feeling regarding this point. On one hand, I like how I was completely immersed in the process and was actively shaping 'the field'. But on the other, I may have 'missed something' by not being slightly removed. The reality is, however, I would have never been able to sit back and 'observe' while the people around me worked tirelessly to pull off the 2013 march. That would have been really awkward for me!

¹⁹ Participant observation is a qualitative research method in which the researcher takes part in community life as they research it (Kottak 2010).

threats and violence in Mexico (the Daily Beast 2014), and I was concerned that I might be mistaken as a journalist. If we had ever been stopped and searched by anyone in Esperanza, I could potentially have had my note pad, a voice recorder as well as a camera with me. These are the same tools of the journalistic trade. At one point during my stay in Esperanza, Raúl suggested that I store these items behind the front desk of the hotel since no one would ever think to look there for these kinds of items, if anyone ever came looking. I did not take him up on this offer, but I did follow his advice that, at the very least, I should hide my camera, voice recorder and note pad under the middle of the bed. In light of this, I was only comfortable using the camera in very specific contexts.

During the six weeks I was in Esperanza/Sister City I conducted 13 semi-structured recorded interviews with a total of 16 interviewees (I have also made use of one other interview from the previous trip to Sister City in 2011). By semi-structured, I mean that I initiated each interview with a few basic questions to get the conversation going. If the interviewee wanted to take the discussion in a different direction I would allow the conversation to flow. If I felt that we were getting too far off topic or that part of the discussion had run its course, then I would return to my list of questions. Each interview lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. Beyond my desire to interview all of the march organizers, interviewees were selected through a snowball method. That is, interviewees recommended or connected me with other interviewees.²⁰ In addition to the more ‘formal’ semi-structured interviews, there are also countless informal discussions with interviewees as well as other march participants, friends and allies of the cause that inform the discussion here.

Upon my return to Vancouver, I began to listen to my interviews. In the interest of time (and my own personal sanity) I did not transcribe and translate all of the interviews in their entirety. Instead, I listened to each interview and took detailed notes, including 5-minute time indicators. In this detailed note taking, I essentially paraphrased the questions and responses into English. I

²⁰ This method was helpful in that there was a certain degree of trust already built for myself and potential interviewees since there was a mutual party that brought us together. There were some drawbacks to this method as well, mainly that the majority of the people I spoke with are self-identified gay cis-males.

then coded my notes and looked for emergent themes.²¹ Next, I went back and listened to the coded sections that were deemed relevant to the analysis to determine what exact quotes I was going to use. I then transcribed and translated the quotes that I felt best spoke to the emergent themes. Finally, I also conducted archival and secondary source research regarding some of the background and historical aspects of my project.

* * *

A few days before the march, I got up very early one morning in Esperanza and wandered down to the lobby of my hotel. Jacobo, a good friend of Raúl's and a volunteer with the march, had agreed to meet with me for an interview. Jacobo worked the night shift at my hotel, so it was easy enough to arrange the meeting. All I had to do was get up, saunter down some stairs and sacrifice a few hours of sleep!

At about three or four in the morning, I joined him at a table in the lobby where he was working on the dress he was making for his drag show planned for the post-march festivities. As we chit-chatted casually, I prepared for the interview. When I pulled out the voice recorder I noticed that Jacobo suddenly became nervous. He glanced down at the recorder and started to fidget with various little things – pumping the trigger of the glue gun, unknotting the beads, folding the turquoise blue sparkly fabric. I looked at him in a funny way that suggested I knew something was up, but that I didn't quite understand. He then noted that he wasn't used to being recorded and wanted to make sure that he said the 'right things'. I assured him that whatever he told me was the right thing. He did not really fully relax, but he consented to carry on with the interview.

After the interview I asked Jacobo if he had any questions for me. He responded with utmost sincerity:

²¹ The interviews were coded into the following themes: business woman, march politics, threats, Pepe Leyal, violence, GSM community, municipality, Grupo Nueva [Esperanza], safe spaces.

*Sí, de hecho. ¿Por qué estás aquí? Quiero entender que si tú estás aquí preguntándome sobre mi vida diaria y eso es interesante para ti, pero para mí es lo normal. Pero obviamente no es normal para ti. ¿Entonces qué es normal para ti? ¿Cómo es la vida allá? Digo, me imagino que también hay crimen y todo eso ¿no? ¿Entonces que es normal para ti?*²²

I could feel my stomach drop. I felt like all of my privilege had been gathered up, placed in a small bag and then used to slap me across the face repeatedly. Not in a bad way. I don't believe that Jacobo meant to make me feel uncomfortable. He just asked a really interesting and key question.

I explained to Jacobo that yes, there is crime where I am from, and there also is organized crime. But, it doesn't impact my life in a way that was so evident to me.

"Ah, okay", he responded.

Suddenly, a client came in through the front door. I seized the moment to say good night and retreat to my room. I felt a bit sick to my stomach. When I got to my room I closed the door and cried for a short while. It fully dawned on me in that moment how messed up it is to do field work in a conflict zone. At the end of my six-weeks in Esperanza I would be going home – walking out of the lives of the people who I had met. Sure we are all friends on Facebook, but I will be worlds away in Vancouver where 'crime doesn't affect my life in the same way'. I also came to think about how, in all likelihood, at a global scale my 'normal' is more of an abnormal, and that Jacobo's 'normal' is probably more normal than not. To this day, I still haven't quite reconciled these thoughts and emotions. If there is one thing that I personally came away from Esperanza with a crystal clear understanding, it is that I come from a position of *extreme* privilege.

²² Yes, in fact. Why are you here? I want to understand why you are here asking me about my daily life, and you think it's interesting. But for me it's what's normal, but obviously it's not what's normal for you. So, what's normal for you? What's life like where you are from? I mean, I imagine there is crime and stuff, too? So, what is normal for you?

I approach this subject matter from the position of a white, male, homosexual settler who was born and raised in what is now known as Canada. I grew up in a relatively conservative city, Calgary, Alberta. When I was 19 I went on a four-month trip to Mexico. It was the first time I had been there and I fell in love with the country. The day I returned to Calgary after my trip I was gay bashed at a party. After that incident, I decided to move to Vancouver – a city that I perceived as more gay-friendly. I became mildly involved in GSM activism in Vancouver when I participated in the planning and execution of a queer awareness week at a local community college, but nothing too serious.

After a few years of living on the coast I decided to head back to Mexico. This time I stayed for two years. During which time I met my now husband. While I was living in Mexico, Canada passed marriage equality legislation (Alberta was the only province to opt out, but eventually they were required to accept it). My partner and I decided to return to Canada to get married. After a short stint in Calgary, we settled in Vancouver, where, admittedly, I have increasingly become more and more disillusioned with GSM activism and pride (in this city).

As a result, in this thesis, at times, I am very critical (maybe even cynical) of pride as a form of effective activist resistance to heteronormative domination – or as a form of resistance at all. For example, I am concerned with the ways in which pride has been co-opted by corporate and political interests, and how it has become a tool through which massive pink-washing can occur while the homo/transphobic scaffolding of society remains intact. My critique is by no means intended to belittle, diminish, or undermine the hard work and determination of the GSM activists here in Canada, in Mexico, or anywhere else in the world. Rather, I hope to reaffirm my own commitments while learning about some of the pitfalls, unforeseen consequences, and/or paradigm shifts in sexual minority mobilizations. I am also critical of the US, Canadian, and Mexican governments in that they are all complicit in the mass killing and disappearance of people throughout Mexico and are able to do so under the guise of seeking peace and prosperity for people in all three countries while supposedly rooting out organized crime in Mexico.

What I am trying to get at here is that I am (becoming) acutely aware that I am only able to mount these critiques or voice my concerns *because* of who I am and where I am writing from. As a white homosexual male, I benefit greatly from a system that is inherently stacked in my favour through processes of systemic racisms and sexism, and while there is no doubt that homophobia still (violently) exists, there have been significant legal changes in Canada that technically protect people like me. As a result, I live in a society that tolerates and generally includes (in a legal sense, at least) the existence of GSM communities. This is a position of extreme privilege in relation to many people around the world.

But my privilege is something that I am trying to contend with and confront – albeit something I will never be able to shed. I am not seeking to downplay it or pretend that it is not there. Instead, I am trying to remain open and honest in my writing in this thesis about who I am, and my thoughts and experiences before, during, and after my time in Esperanza. I endeavour to listen closely to those with whom I spoke and think critically and reflexively about myself, myself in the field, and the knowledge that I produce. I am not claiming that I have resolved any problematic regarding who I am in relation to those I am writing about and what I am saying. But I would like to bring these ideas and issues to the fore. Taking this into consideration, I would like to position this thesis as mindfully anti-homophobic (Sedwick 1990), anti-transphobic and anti-oppressive (Bishop 2006[1994]). By this, I mean I am (constantly endeavouring to become) aware of different axes and intersections of oppression(s) – race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, age, ability – and how oppression can be operationalized from above, but also from within and across marginalized communities. I am mindful that power and privilege flow through bodies and nodes in ways that are uneven across peoples, detrimental to others, and at the expense of certain marked out bodies. These dynamics play out even while one is trying to engage in anti-oppression work. In my life and in my work, I am seeking to expose how I personally benefit from and utilize power and privilege in my own production of knowledge in an effort to mitigate its negative consequences and to remain self-reflexive.

1.2 A Few Very Important People

During my stay in Esperanza, I met and worked with some very dedicated and inspiring people. In this section I will introduce some of those people – those who are officially affiliated with the two GSM activist organizations that executed the 2012 and 2013 marches in Esperanza. While I interviewed every person I mention here, I worked more closely with only a few. If this hasn't already become apparent, then it will as I move through this thesis. Other important people I met with and whose words I share are not mentioned here, but are more fully introduced later on. For now, I will speak to these activist organizers and their respective organizations, Grupo [Nueva Esperanza] (GNE) and Grupo Pepe Leyal.

Grupo [Nueva Esperanza] (GNE) is an organization dedicated to HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, advocacy work for GSM people living with HIV/AIDS, sexual rights and sexual health education, and sheltering homeless GSM youth in Esperanza. The group primarily consists of three main people. There is a larger 'membership' of people who support the group in theory, but tend not to participate or help out in any meaningful way.

The president of the organization is a self-identified gay cis-male in his late-30s who I will call Juan Pablo. He is mainly in charge of the education and advocacy work of the organization. In conjunction with a local HIV/AIDS clinic, he runs workshops related to sexual health and GSM rights. Additionally, more often than not he is the face of the organization to the public and to the media, although he frequently is accompanied by Raúl, the GNE's vice-president.

Raúl is the main coordinator for the organizing of the pride marches. He is in his mid-30s and identifies as a gay cis-male. At the time, Raúl was the manager of the hotel where I stayed. He would typically work or be on site for 12 to 14 hours a day. As a result of this, I spent a lot of time with Raúl and his partner, Carlos.

In addition to being Raúl's life partner, Carlos is the person in charge of GNE's finances and social media campaigns. He is in his mid-20s. While I was there, Carlos was out of work and looking for a job. This meant that he also spent 12 to 14 hours a day at the hotel with Raúl and I.

Between the two of them, Raúl and Carlos were involved in every single aspect of planning and executing the 2013 pride march. I spent the majority of my time with them and I feel like they took me under their wings.²³ Before I moved to the hotel in Esperanza they would come and pick me up at my hotel in Sister City or at the plaza beside the international bridge. They accompanied me almost everywhere I went, and if I wasn't with them then I was with a friend of theirs. They did this because they said an outsider in Esperanza who was not familiar with life under the conditions of the so-called 'drug war', like myself, needed to be accompanied and guided around. To be honest, I wasn't comfortable being on my own either, and I am very grateful for all the time and care they devoted to me.

The only person who I ever got to know from the other organization involved, Grupo Pepe Leyal, was the founder and president, Ernesto. Grupo Pepe Leyal is a group concerned with issues related to elderly GSM people, primarily old-age and end-of-life care, as well as staying connected with others and socializing. Ernesto is a self-identified bi-sexual cis-male in his late-40s. His main role in the organizing committee is his connections with municipal authorities.

These are the members of the 2013 organizing committee, in theory. In practice, much of the work for the march was carried out by Raúl, Carlos, Jacobo, myself and one or two other volunteers. Regardless of who did what and how, all march participants engaged in important work when they showed up on the day of the march, the work of exposing on-going oppression and demanding equality.

1.3 Some Conceptual Underpinnings, Terms and a Note on Language Interpretation

Some of the main themes that run through this thesis are violence, terror, and resistance. These concepts and ideas will be fleshed out in the chapters that come; however, central to them is an understanding of power and subject formation. In formulating my ideas regarding these two concepts I draw from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. In Foucault's influential and paradigm

²³ I also spent a lot of time with Raúl's friend and march volunteer, Jacobo, whom I will introduce with a little more detail in the third chapter.

shifting works, such as *Discipline and Punishment* (1995 [1977]), *The History of Sexuality* (1990 [1978]), and “The Subject and Power” (1982), he lays out a vision of how power operates and how the subject is formed. Foucault advances a view of power as flowing through bodies. Rather than being something that is inherently possessed by someone or something, power imbues the world, like a system that affects all society. Being within society, all people both affect and are affected by this hard to perceive movement of power by being subjected to its repeated flow through bodies, whose particularity simultaneously affects power’s movement.

For example, and most relevant to the discussion in this thesis, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990 [1978]) introduces the concept of ‘biopower’ as a technology of power concerned with the regulation of life – to make live and let die. Biopower is constructed through instruments of power, such as the linking of sexual acts with identity through a myriad of sexual discourses and the subsequent pathologizing of women’s bodies and certain (homo)sexual acts. This rendered those bodies and acts as sick or infirm and therefore subjected them to greater surveillance and scrutiny to ensure their productivity and docile usefulness. Or as Pratt (2004: 13) put it when discussing Foucault’s arguments in *The History of Sexuality*, biopower resulted from the “merging of two forms of power over life, the disciplining of individual bodies (to optimise their capacities, usefulness and docility) and the regulation of the population [...]”. This shift towards biopower created new kinds of subjects, such as the ‘homosexual’, and would also include what are now considered to be all non-heterosexual sexualities and non-gender binary conforming bodies. Those marked by this identification were subsequently subjected to medical discourse and experimentation, illegality, and cast to the margins of society. As such, power flows through certain bodies via technologies of power, such as dominant discourses, which then play out on and are played out by the subject.

Butler (1990, 1993) builds on Foucault’s framing of power and subject formation to trouble predominant notions of gender. Instead of seeing the subject’s identity as given or fixed by sex (i.e. nature), Butler argues identity is constructed in and through discourse. Further, Butler asserts that gender is performative, meaning it is constituted through the repetition of normative discursive practices. This occurs both intentionally and unintentionally by the subject (and the

world around the subject). In sum, then, power and subject formation are neither inherent, given, nor static. They are co-constitutive processes that are forever making and remaking, insidious, yet, also contested. While not entirely or explicitly addressed any further in this thesis, this understanding of power and subject formation undergirds the entire discussion here.

A note on some of the terminology I use in this thesis. First, I have chosen to use the term ‘gender and sexual minority/minorities’ and the accompanying acronym ‘GSM’ as opposed to more commonly used acronyms such as LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning). Another common term is Queer. Queer is actually a word that I use in my personal vocabulary when talking about GSM communities. I also use the word ‘homo’ to describe myself. But these are contested words. The word Queer, while it sounds sexy and edgy, has been critiqued for being a false signifier in that it describes nothing and flattens everything. In an effort to combat this flattening-nature of the word ‘queer’, the use of ever-expanding acronyms has emerged, for example, LGBTTTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite, Intersex) and LGBTTIQQ2SA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Two Spirit, Asexual and/or Allies). While I think it is important for everyone to be acknowledged in the words and terms that are used, long acronyms are not an effective way of dealing with the issue. They are just too long and cumbersome and too nuanced for the full meaning to be easily comprehended by most people. Recently, I came across a new acronym that I was really tempted to use for this thesis. It is QUILTBAG (Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Lesbian, Trans, Bisexual, Asexual, Gay) (Queer Dictionary 2013). I actually really like this one. I think it is funny. Although I am not sure if it is all that helpful or if it resolves the naming/accounting-for/comprehending issue, especially since it does not address certain groups, like Two Spirit people. Perhaps not surprisingly, I decided against using it here.

In the end, I have chosen to use ‘GSM’ because I feel that it most accurately (and efficiently) describes the people who were participating in the march. I also think that heteronormative dominance and the oppression of the gender binary under which many people live their lives is reflected in use of the word minority/minorities, in the sense that it articulates a minority in some

kind of relationship to a majority. Having said this, I am not using the term ‘GSM’ because I am 100% confident that this is the best term, or that it somehow doesn’t flatten the myriad of identities that exist in the world. But, as I have stated, I do feel it is the most descriptive term to use without writing out an entire alphabet acronym (which would still not cover the entirety of all non-dominant forms of identity). I do occasionally include the word queer in the text. This is primarily meant to be read with the same meaning of GSM. I do this where I feel like it flows better with the text. I also sometimes use the word ‘queer’ to describe the act of disturbing, challenging or ‘jamming’ something, as in, to make queer or to queer something.

I would also like to make a quick note about the use of trans-inclusive language and gender neutral pronouns. Throughout this thesis I have tried to stay mindful of the use of gendered pronouns.²⁴ I make use of gendered pronouns only when I have clarified it with the individual as to what they themselves use. As a result, most references made to people who I spoke with or the experiences that I share make use of gendered pronouns since I checked with most people with whom I was in regular contact. However, I have never met many of the academics I mention here and do not know what pronouns they prefer to use. Therefore, in the cases where preferred pronouns are unknown I have endeavoured to use the person’s full and/or last name. At times this will seem repetitive, but the repetitiveness is something I am willing to accept in order to be more sensitive and inclusive to gender variance. In some cases I also use the gender neutral pronouns ‘they/their/them’ to refer to a person. This can be confusing to readers/listeners, so I have limited the use of ‘they/their/them’ as much as possible.

Shifting themes, but remaining on the topic of terminology, another term I use consistently throughout this thesis is ‘the so-called ‘drug war’’. In chapter three there will be a more extensive critique of naming the violence and terror occurring throughout many parts of Mexico as a ‘drug war’. Briefly, in 2006 the Mexican president Felipe Calderón began a violent

²⁴ Rooting out gendered language is, admittedly, a challenge for me. I had originally written this thesis using gendered pronouns even when I wasn’t sure of the person’s preferred pronouns. I realized this after-the-fact and have since come back to edit out the instances of assuming one’s preferred pronouns. This being the case, I may have missed a few along the way. I recognize that this is an issue and that trans-inclusive language is an area in which I need to continue to work.

militarized campaign, which he referred to as a war against organized crime. Since then, the mainstream news media and governments in the US, Canada and Mexico have come to refer to the campaign as a ‘war on drugs’ or a ‘drug war’. There are two primary issues with this framing. First, in Mexico there is a high degree of corruption and impunity at all levels of government and authority. The degrees of separation between state actors and organized crime are very few, if any at times. Thus, the ‘drug war’ framing sets up a false dichotomy in which the government is perceived as a kind of ‘good guy’ and non-state actors *supposedly* involved in organized crime as the ‘bad guys’. This allows for the direct involvement of the government in illegal activities or the impunity offered by people within the governance apparatus to be glossed over and ignored (primarily by the international community).²⁵ In addition to a false dichotomy, framing the conflict as a drug war also provides cover for the killing of more than 100,000 people and the disappearance of tens of thousands by state and non-state actors.

The last term I would like to discuss at this juncture is the word ‘cartel’. Again, there will be an extended discussion of the problematic nature of the word, which I summarize as follows. As mentioned, the line between the state and so-called cartels is fuzzy, at best. Also, people become involved in ‘cartel’ activity in a myriad of ways that are not malicious, but the result of economic necessity or other unexpected reasons (Muehlmann 2014). Hence, labelling groups of (mostly non-elite) actors as cartels renders them illegal and killable, further perpetuating the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ discourse. What’s more, some liken the cartels to paramilitaries as opposed to just organized crime syndicates (Paley, 2013; forthcoming). In light of this, I use the terms ‘cartel’, ‘non-state actor’, ‘armed non-state actor’ and ‘organization’ all interchangeably. I use these terms to describe loosely organized groupings of people involved in organized crime.

Finally, a note on language interpretation. All block quotes taken from interviews are written out here in the language in which the interview was conducted. For those quotes that are in Spanish,

²⁵ In general, based on my personal experience including years and years of casual discussions with friends and family in Mexico, there are very few illusions amongst Mexican nationals regarding governmental benevolence or ‘good governance’ in Mexico. This is not to say that governmental benevolence or ‘good governance’ are necessarily characteristics of Canadian or US democracies; rather many Mexicans have a healthy and well deserved scepticism of politicians and their motivations.

I provide my English-language interpretations in the footnotes. I do this for two reasons. First, there are very few things that I can do as a researcher to *really* give voice to the people with whom I spoke. I have determined the confines of our discussion; I have selected quotes that best represent emergent themes from across interviews; and then those quotes are contextualized by me and through my own experiences and research. Thus, in an effort to bring their voices, their words to the fore, I have left them in the language in which they were conveyed to me. By doing this, I am under no illusions that I have somehow resolved issues surrounding representation in my text. This is an issue that will never be resolved in research that accounts for the experience of other people. But it does capture the words of interviewees as they were recounted to me.

Second, the process of transferring linguistic meaning from one language to another requires interpretation, not translation. In this case, it is *my* interpretation and I am not a professional interpreter. Spanish is my second language and my training has been spotty and sporadic. Hence, I have left the block quotes in their original language so those readers who can read Spanish may interpret the speaker's narrative for themselves.

With these conceptual underpinnings, terms and caveats in mind, I now turn to a discussion of violence, terror, pride and everyday resistance. I will begin with an historical overview of GSM activism in Mexico.

Chapter 2: Marching from History – Tracing Facets of Gender and Sexual Minority Activism in Mexico

It had taken so long to get to this point. The last three weeks of intense activity of planning and preparation was all coming together. At about 4pm, as the sun dipped in the sky and the searing heat of the day was beginning to pass, a group of people started to gather in the parking lot in the park. We had managed to get all three floats to the site where they were joined by two more floats made by other marchers. Sadly, however, one of the floats that we had worked on, the one that had two dolphins pulling a seashell throne, got a flat tire on the way from the work yard to the park. So, we were down to two of our floats, the carousel and the cake, but we still only had one truck to pull them! Eventually, at the last moment, someone stepped forward and offered the use of their truck to pull one of the floats. We hooked it up and headed out on our way.

We started off on a quiet residential side street that lined the edge of the park. We made our way west toward the *Avenida [Internacional]*, a wide avenue that leads to the international bridge. With the assistance of transit police, something not available to the marchers last year, we moved out from the side street, crossing over the northbound traffic and slowly filed into the southbound lanes on the far side of the small decorative wall that divided the avenue. Traffic was at a standstill. The march then turned down *la Sexta*, a narrow but important street that runs through the heart of Esperanza, past the city hall, the main plaza and the cathedral. This was momentous. The march last year was specifically prohibited from entering the heart of the city. Not this year. Raul and Carlos didn't even really ask about it in our planning meetings with city officials. They just informed the mayor's assistant, referred to by the nickname *el Doctor*, that that was where we were going to go, and that is exactly where we went. I was running up and down the line trying to get as many photos as I possibly could. It was amazing to see so many people coming out to celebrate. There weren't many people observing the march, but more importantly, there were about 1,000 brave people marching.

Then disaster struck! The motor of the truck pulling the carousel gave out. The march came to a slow halt as drag queens and other marchers hopped off the downed float. In the spirit of the

march, the queens on the carousel were given a spot on a rival queen's float. We began to move again. Finally, the narrow street opened up and we marched on the main Plaza of Esperanza where people (non-marchers) were enjoying the early evening atmosphere. We marched in front of city hall and then turned east up the side of the plaza. Some people had wanted to march directly in front of the cathedral, but it was decided that that would be too controversial and disrespectful to the church. So, we marched across the plaza from it and along its side. But before we left the plaza the procession stopped and there we remained for about five minutes or so. I climbed to the top of the cake to get a good view. The march formed a long L-shaped line on two sides of the plaza. There were hundreds of small rainbow flags in addition to a giant one that was being held up by a group of marchers. One of the surviving floats had a DJ on it. He was pumping out dance and electronic music as people moved their bodies to the beat, letting out joyful screams and hollers. I leaned over to one of the organizers, Juan Pablo, and asked him why we were lingering in the plaza. He turned to me and said,

*“¡Para disfrutar el momento! ¡Jamás en nuestras vidas habiéramos pensado que pasaría una cosa así aquí en Esperanza! Estar aquí enfrente del palacio municipal y de la iglesia exigiendo nuestros derechos! Ahorita es un momento muy importante para mucha gente aquí hoy”.*²⁶

Once he had told me, it seemed so obvious. I felt like a bit of an insensitive (and privileged) fool for not picking up on the importance of the moment in that specific spot. Gender and sexual minority communities in Esperanza had never stood so united and had never stood in that plaza to call attention to their struggle, to raise awareness, to demand equal rights and to call for an end to homo/transphobia.

That day those marchers made history... again!

* * *

²⁶ “To enjoy the moment! We never thought that in our lives that something like this would happen, to be here in front of City Hall and the Church demanding our rights. This is an important moment for many people here today”.

2.1 Introduction to Chapter Two

In this chapter I follow some of the historical traces of GSM activism and the emergence of pride marches in Mexico in relation to structural and political violence within the country. By tracing these histories I glean insight into the conditions under which GSM activisms are realized and the role of marches in these movements for GSM rights. In this chapter I argue that within a wider and longer history of structural violence, GSM activisms and pride marches were born, in part, of a larger leftist response to political violence perpetrated by the Mexican state that did not specifically target GSM communities, but nevertheless spurred them to action.

This GSM activist history in Mexico may be divided into two waves. The first wave accounts for the period of time from 1968 to 1982, and the second from the early 1990s to the present moment. The period before 1968 was an important time for laying the foundations of GSM consciousness, but does not exhibit any sort of radical or sustained organizing efforts. The period between the two waves from 1982 to the early '90s was a time of crisis and reorientation of activist tactics. The organizing of GSM communities in Mexico has occurred in tandem with, and was possibly inspired by other international incidents, mainly the Stonewall Riots in New York and subsequent commemorative marches, but is not a direct result of them. In my concluding remarks, I posit that present-day GSM activism in Mexico is not yet again at a crisis point, but is indeed at a crossroads. To further complicate this contemporary historical moment, GSM activism in Mexico is variegated in its nature and effectiveness in that what is transgressive and potentially transformational in one place may actually be reinforcing the status quo in another.

This chapter is primarily structured in chronological order. I have divided it into five main sections. The first section deals with early forms of artistic activisms in GSM communities in Mexico City. The following two sections look at the rise and fall of the first wave of GSM activism in Mexico. The fourth section addresses the rise of the second wave of GSM activisms, outlining some of the recent legal successes and examining some of the critiques of contemporary approaches to activism. The final section engages more exclusively with the

expansion of pride marches across Mexico while exploring the tensions and critiques of the pride model as a means of achieving GSM ‘freedom’ (if this is even ever possible) and (legal) equality. This chapter will not address the specific history of GSM activism in Esperanza. Rather, I build on some of the themes and critiques exposed here to elaborate a discussion specific to Esperanza in the chapters that follow.

It should be noted that, by structural violence, a term first coined by Johan Galtung (1969), I mean the inequalities enshrined in the legal systems of government and codes of law, as well as the biases rooted in dominant narratives or morality within society. These institutional and societal mechanisms constitute a kind of slow and insidious violence that generally goes unseen or at least cognitively unconnected to its systemic rootedness even as it prevents certain people from full citizenship or a ‘good life’. That is, structural violence is naturalized and interpreted as a given or inherent when it is really the product of socially constructed processes. My use of the term political violence refers to harmful acts or killing done by or in the name of the state in order to quell resistance to governments and/or pacify and control populations.

A few comments on some of this chapter’s limitations. First, my analysis is very much centred on Mexico City. This is not to say that there is no history of GSM activism elsewhere in the country. From personal experience, I know there are many groups active in other cities. However, Mexico City is the centre of the movement as is the case with many aspects of life in Mexico. The city was an early focal point of documented GSM activity, social life and activism. It is the site of the first pride march in Mexico and the first place in Mexico to grant legal status to sexual minority relationships.²⁷ Additionally, Mexico City is the seat of the national government and nearly one-in-five people in Mexico live in and around Mexico City (roughly 20 million people), which contribute to making it the centre of many forms of social protest and activism.

²⁷ The government of the *Distrito Federal* (Federal District) passed the *la Ley de Sociedad de Convivencia* (the Cohabitation Society Law) in November of 2006, and implemented it in March of 2007 (Esparza Pérez 2006). This law granted many of the same rights and protections that married heterosexual couples enjoy. The state of Coahuila passed a similar law in January of 2007 that came into effect immediately (Esparza Pérez 2006). So, while Mexico City was the first place in Mexico to approve same-sex civil unions, Coahuila was the first place in Mexico where same-sex unions could be legally registered and protected by the law.

Another limiting factor in my research are the silences in the written and archival record. As Lucinda Grinnell (2012) notes, much of the history of GSM activism has not (yet) been committed to paper. Much of this important history remains with the history makers themselves and is passed on, if at all, to curious ears through storytelling. For me, this has made tracing the emergence of GSM activism and pride marches somewhat of a challenge. As a result, for this chapter I have relied primarily on a few academic sources, some newspaper and blog accounts, as well as the stories related to me by one of the older GSM Activists in Esperanza who was in Mexico City in the movement's early days. I do not claim a complete or comprehensive history. A further (almost complete) silence in the historical record are the more specific stories related to Lesbian and Trans peoples and activism. Admittedly, these silences are regrettably and frustratingly continued here. The documenting of these facets of GSM lives and activism in Mexico are the topic for an important and much needed project.

2.2 Early Activisms

There are moments in the history of GSM organizing in Mexico that stand out as important milestones in terms of increased visibility of GSM communities. My research for this chapter identifies the first pride march in 1978 as one such milestone. Yet, other forms of Queer life and activism preceded the emergence of GSM activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It goes without saying that gender, sex, and sexuality variations from what has become 'the norm' have always existed. There have always been manifold ways of being in the world. The sex and gender binary and the domination of heterosexuality are neither universal, nor are they a given. Historical documentation from the earliest days after the European invasion of what is now known as the Americas speak to the existence of indigenous non-hetero/cis-normative ways of life and being; in pre-invasion times, alternative gender, sex and sexuality arrangements were not necessarily frowned upon and often times embraced or even celebrated (Morgensen 2011; Sigal 2003a, 2003b). In what is now known as Mexico, a high prevalence of homosexual relationships existed (and were accepted) among many of the indigenous peoples before the Spanish invasion, notably in what is now Veracruz, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and on the

Yucatan Peninsula (Lumsden 1991).²⁸ As a part of the colonial and later the nation-building periods in both Europe and the so-called Americas, gender, sex and sexuality became increasingly categorized, regulated and articulated as forms of identification (ie. the homosexual) and a means of controlling life, reproduction, citizenship and belonging (Foucault 1990; Morgensen 2011; Sigal 2003a; Stoler 1995). As a result of these (ongoing) colonial practices, members of GSM communities now find themselves categorized as a kind of marginalized ‘other’ from which I/they/we have been contesting and (to varying degrees) fighting back against. As with all societies shaped by or born of a history of (ongoing) colonialism, Mexico is no different in this respect.

In terms of more contemporary forms of governmentality in Mexico, Ian Lumsden (1999:52) points out that ever since the French occupation of Mexico there has been no specific law that illegalizes any one GSM community or homosexuality as in terms of an ‘act’. However, until the early 2000s, the Mexican penal code regulated GSM bodies and spaces through article 201, entitled “Transgressions Against Morality and Public Decency” (*Lumsden’s translation*, also see de la Dehasa 2010a).²⁹ The stated purpose of this law is to protect minors under the age of 18 from moral corruption through the regulation of what non-minors do, such as drugs, alcohol and sexual depravity. Given the Napoleonic legal system in Mexico, which states that you are guilty until proven innocent, and the nearly absolute authority that is invested in arresting officers, coupled with the intrinsically homophobic nature of dominant hetero/cis-normative society, many GSM people were targeted by police simply for being in the presence of a minor. This and other laws governing “obscene books, articles, images, or objects” also became the legal basis for harassing GSM communities (Lumsden 1999:55). Additionally, gun and drug raids were common pretexts for raiding GSM clubs and discos. These legal and policing practices form the scaffolding, the legal support for the structural violence (and inequality) embedded in dominant

²⁸ Lumsden (1991:13) also notes that despite the wide spread acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual relationships among certain indigenous peoples, the Aztecs actually “severely penalized” it.

²⁹ I haven’t been able to confirm the date when the wording of the federal penal code changed, however Lumsden was writing in 1999 and the penal code document I looked at was dated 2014. So the wording has changed at some point during this time period. De la Dehasa (2010a) echoes Lumsden (1999) in his discussion about the Mexican penal code, but he does not indicate the date at which this was changed. The new wording of the penal code removes the legal emphasis on morals and morality (Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, UNAM 2014).

Mexican society. As a result of these legal and policing practices, GSM communities were/are marginalized from national life; ostracised, oppressed, but defiantly living out their self identified gender, sex and/or sexual identities sometimes in plain sight, but most often in bars, clubs, parks and other out-of-the-way spaces that were *marginally* safer.

Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (2009) notes that some of the earliest transgressive efforts to shed light on the struggle of these communities came in the 1920s and 1930s in the pages of the magazine *Los Contemporáneos*. The magazine featured the creative productions of a small group of artists and writers as well as translated works from European writers, which spoke to the themes of GSM love, lust and life in Mexico and beyond. More specifically, the art, literature and poetry of Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia and works of art by Abraham Ángel, Roberto Montenegro, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, and Augustín Lazo were instrumental in foregrounding GSM life and concerns at that time. Following the Mexican Revolution, which ended in 1921, these early GSM activists and social commentators were aggressively criticized in the mainstream Mexican media for being anti-nationalists. These criticisms were rooted in post-revolution, nation-building xenophobic distaste and fear for things that were perceived to be a threat to the fledgling Mexican national imaginary, such as translated literature or ideas of ‘gayness’ which were associated as negative outside influences from Europe and the USA (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2009:17).

Beyond the glimpse I provide here, I have not been able to track down much more information regarding the early activisms and life for GSM communities. Nonetheless, at a national level, the period from the 1920s until the 1990s may be marked out as a time of sustained and intense nation building as the Mexican state cultivated the national myth of the Mexican mestizo ‘people’.³⁰ This national narrative facilitated the consolidation of power and social control that

³⁰ These nation- building forces were more strongly apparent from the 1920s to 1970s. As Minna Stern (2003) notes, the government was deeply committed to fostering the national myth of the mestizo people as the ‘cosmic race’ in order to unify the country under a single national identity. This policy was known as *mestizaje*. It was believed that the strongest qualities of both Western European people and indigenous peoples could be melded together to birth a strong and healthy hybrid national stock. The process of *mestizaje* resulted in the categorization and documentation of various indigenous groups within the country, ranking them into various levels of ‘civilization’ and necessarily required the centring of heterosexuality as key to reproducing the nation. The ‘ideals’

did not go uncontested. In the summer of 1968, in the days leading up to the Summer Olympics in Mexico City, the social and political landscape exploded in a bloody and traumatic nightmare in the infamous *Plaza de Tres Culturas*.³¹

2.3 The First Wave, 1968-1988

*EL 13 DE AGUSTO DE 1521
HEROICAMENTE DEFENDIDO POR CUAUHTÉMOC
CAYÓTLATELOLCO EN PODER DE HERNÁN CORTÉS
NO FUE TRIUNFO NI DERROTA
FUE EL DOLOROSO NACIMIENTO DEL PUEBLO MESTIZO
QUE ES EL MÉXICO DE HOY*³²

-Statement on the plaque at *Plaza de Tres Culturas, Tlatelolco*

What is now known as *la Plaza de Tres Culturas* has a history that dates back more than 2000 years. In its contemporary state, it is a stark, eerie, but beautiful place that has bore witness to devastating atrocities and disasters over the last 500 years. At the time of the Spanish arrival in 1519, it was the location of the largest market in the Valley of Mexico and served as both an economic and religious/ceremonial site (Rios 2007; Toby Evans 2008). It was here, too, that the *Mexica* and the Spanish fought their last battle before the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 (Toby Evans 2008). The Spanish attack was ruthless and bloody as it was executed on a market day, an act that suggests it was intended to inflict the highest levels of death and destruction possible. In 1527 the temple and market complex were demolished and the stones were reused to construct a religious and educational centre that reflected the beliefs and values of the new colonial order. By 1610 the *Iglesia y Convento de Santiago Tlatelolco* and *Colegio de Santa Cruz Tlatelolco* occupied the site. The church, convent and college were home to the Franciscan order and their

of the mestizo nation were conveyed to the masses through state funded arts, literature, archaeology programs, as well as social scientific research and school curriculum (Minna Stern 2003: 193).

³¹ Plaza of Three Cultures – Tlatelolco

³² On August 15, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco fell to the power of Hernan Cortes. This was neither a victory nor a defeat, but the painful birth of the mestizo people that is today's Mexico

‘pupils’ (Rios 2007) – male indigenous youth who were being ‘developed’ and ‘civilized’ into colonial order and society.

As Tenochtitlan was built over and the new city of Mexico expanded, Tlatelolco slowly became the inner city *barrio* of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco. As hundreds of years passed, the condition of the *barrio* deteriorated until it was deemed to be one of the biggest ‘slums’ in Mexico City. In the lead up to the 1968 Summer Olympics the entire neighbourhood was cleared in what was the largest slum clearance to date in Mexico City to make way for the modern *Plaza de Tres Culturas* (Castañeda 2010). The area was once again transformed as people were forcefully removed from their homes to make way for a series of modern midrise apartment buildings and a soaring skyscraper to house the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These new edifices ring the plaza featuring the now excavated original temple platform upon which the colonial church rests. It was at this place – a place that had known bloody invasion, colonial discipline and indoctrination, poverty and displacement – that Mexico would face another dark turning point in its history and national psyche: the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre.³³

As Dianna Sorensen (2002) notes, 1968 was a tense year due to mounting student protests calling for greater participation in university governance and social reform. The Mexican government reacted to the protests in the summer of ‘68 by deploying the military to occupy and gain control of universities around the country. Over the course of the summer, the nature and composition of the protests and protesters slowly transformed the movement into one that spoke to many sectors of Mexican society.³⁴ By October, their calls turned into demands for systemic change to Mexico’s inequitable social order and greater participation in state governance (Sorensen 2002).

On October 2, 1968, just ten days prior to the opening ceremony of the ‘68 Mexico City Olympic Games, more than 10,000 people from all walks of life descended on the *Plaza de Tres Culturas* to protest and demand greater democratization, transparency and equality within Mexican society

³³ During the earthquake of 1985 many of the mid-rise housing complexes collapsed. Again, Tlatelolco was the site of massive loss of life. The buildings were rebuilt in the years following the earthquake after a long and hard-fought battle by community organizations that pressured the government to provide relief and aid to effected citizens.

³⁴ Movements such as women’s liberation, as well as anti-government leftist activism and literature.

(Sherman 1999). At 6:04 pm on October 2, 1968, “green and red flares dropped from helicopters, soldiers burst into the square, tanks blocked the exits and an elite plainclothes battalion stormed the speakers' platform” (Sherman 1999:22). What resulted is one of the worst (publically acknowledged) massacres carried out by the Mexican State and its military against Mexican citizens. Although the official death toll of the massacre remains at 23, other estimates place the count at 500 or more (Sherman 1999). The full details of what exactly happened that day have never been made public and it still remains a silent national trauma.

The political violence of the Massacre at Tlatelolco demarcates a watershed moment in Mexico. It marks a shift in youth culture, which demonstrated increased disillusionment with social and economic inequality.³⁵ This new era was characterized by a growing awareness of and reaction to subject formations that had come into being in the post-revolution/post-WWII era as many leftist (or left leaning) activist groups in Mexico began to form around various social issues (Sorresen 2002) while laying the seeds for emerging concepts like gender equality and freedom of sexual expression and being. At a global level, throughout 1968 there were several other student-led demonstrations rallying around similar causes, especially in Europe and North America. As in Mexico, a major part of this agitation for greater social equality was an increasing awareness of sexual identities, gender and sexual oppression, and identity politics.³⁶ As Lumsden (1991) notes, while movements such as women’s and gay liberation had not yet fully articulated themselves in the United States or in Europe, leftist youth in Mexico were inspired by other events around the world such as the Cuban Revolution and by the aforementioned student uprisings that occurred elsewhere. Thus, in the years after the massacre there was fervent and widespread youth rejection “of anything identified with traditional Mexican institutions” (Lumsden 1991:60).

³⁵ Massive social and economic inequality remains a deeply entrenched feature of contemporary Mexico.

³⁶ Sorensen (2002) argues that the student protests mirror other youth-led protest that had been occurring around the world in 1968; and that this global agitation was a reaction to new subject formations that had emerged since the end of WWII. Yet, Sorensen also elaborates that a total comparison between unrest in Mexico and in other places around the world at that time is not entirely accurate considering the material wealth and other disparities between Mexico, Western Europe and North America.

Not surprisingly, GSM people formed part of the leftist movements that sprung from the repression of 1968. For example, Nancy Cárdenas – a writer, actor, theatre director, activist, and self-identified lesbian – was directly involved in the student organizing of 1968 and social organizing thereafter (Vanguardia 2011).³⁷ Then, in 1971, Cárdenas and a small group of people who had also participated in ‘68 and post-‘68 social activisms formed the first gay and lesbian rights activist group (de la Dehesa 2010b). But before I expand on this important event, I will briefly discuss another equally important incident that occurred in 1969 in the United States which, in addition to Tlatelolco, also heavily influenced GSM activism in Mexico.

On June 28th, 1969, riots broke out after a (*routine*) police raid on a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn in New York City (Carter 2002; Wasserman 2004). The riots lasted for several nights in and around the Christopher Street area where Stonewall was (is) located. News of the riots became a symbol of (mostly gay) resistance and a call to action for many sexual minorities around the United States and the world. Stonewall has been credited with the birth of the Gay Liberation movement in the US, as well as the formation of activist groups like the Gay Liberation Front.

On June 28th, 1970, one year after the riots, what has come to be recognized as the world’s first pride march took place in New York City under the banner of the ‘Christopher Street Liberation Day’. The event was also marked in Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco where hundreds of people marched in protest and solidarity (Carter 2002; Wasserman 2004). The legacy of the Stonewall Riots has reverberated about the world. The riots also made a significant contribution to the formation of a GSM consciousness and fight for equality at an international level.

Although I do not have documentary or archival evidence to link these events directly, I am arguing that the activisms that arose during and after 1968 coupled with Stonewall created an air of optimism and possibility of change for sexual minority communities in Mexico.³⁸ I believe

³⁷ Cárdenas also translated Matt Crowley’s homosexual-theme play “The Boys in the Band” (de la Dehesa 2010). According to Vanguardia (2011), Cárdenas went on to direct the play in Brazil and then later in Mexico. This was the first homosexual-themed play to be performed in Mexico. Additionally, Cárdenas became the first public figure in Mexico to come out of the closet. Cárdenas did so during a television interview in 1974 (Vanguardia 2011).

³⁸ This air of optimism was not solely confined to Mexico.

these events and the general social milieu of the late 60s and 70s would have emboldened people to act and react in ways that may not have been possible before hand. As I will discuss throughout this thesis, what is and is not possible in the everyday lives of people is challenged in moments of violence. The violence of '68 and the social unrest of the years that followed provide the context and the opportunity for GSM consciousness to come into being in a more pointed and focused manner than ever before in Mexico.

This consciousness transformed into organized action when, in 1971 in Mexico City, the Sears Roebuck Company fired an employee for being gay (de la Dehesa 2010a, 2010b; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2009; Negroni 2004). As I mentioned earlier, Nancy Cárdenas spearheaded activist efforts by forming a small group with a number of other artist and intellectuals (de la Dehesa 2010a, 2010b). They called themselves *el Frente de Liberación Homosexual* (FLH) (de la Dehesa 2010a, 2010b; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2009; Negroni 2004).³⁹ Within short order many other activist organizations formed in Mexico City and other large metropolitan centres in Mexico. This trend continued throughout the 1970s. Organizations such as SexPol, Lesbos, *el Frente Homosexual Acción Revolucionaria* (FHAR), *Grupo Lambda de Liberación Homosexual* (or just Lambda), and the exclusively lesbian activist group Oikabeth all emerged as a response to the oppression of sexual minorities by the Mexican state and society at large (de la Dehesa 2010a, 2010b; Grinnell 2012).⁴⁰ These early organizations and their activities form the first wave of GSM activism in Mexico. Much of the earliest activism focused on 'gay liberation' through consciousness-raising among GSM people (de la Dehesa 2010a; 2010b).⁴¹ Generally speaking, the ultimate goal of these groups was to organize within sexual minority communities and call for the transformation of society at large (Dehesa 2010a; 2010b). Towards the end of the 1970s, three main groups emerged as the strongest and most visible activist voices: the FHAR, Lambda and Oikabeth (Lumsden 1991).

³⁹ Homosexual Liberation Front

⁴⁰ Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front, Lambda Group for Homosexual Liberation

⁴¹ I am not too sure how focused, if at all, were the early organizations on Trans communities. Based on their names, I would venture to guess that there was more a focus on gay men and lesbian liberation.

The fledgling GSM movements in Mexico began to closely align with the Woman's Liberation movement in Mexico as well as with the leftist politics and ideologies of the *Partido Revolucionario Trabajador* (PRT) (de la Dehesa 2010a; 2010b; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2009; Lumsden 1991).⁴² These collaborative relationships and activisms, and the explicit political association with one specific political party became a hallmark of GSM organizing in Mexico (de la Dehesa 2010a; 2010b). In particular, the political association was unique to the first wave activism.

The first wave of GSM activisms culminated in 1978 at what is now considered to be the first pride march in Mexico. On October 2nd, 1978, on the tenth anniversary of the massacre at Tlatelolco, the FHAR, Lambda and Oikabeth participated in a larger march against on-going government oppression of marginalized communities (sexual, gender and otherwise) in Mexico (de la Dehesa 2010a, 2010b). In total, there were approximately 100 GSM activists in attendance (Secretaria del Turismo del Distrito Federal [SECATUR] 2011). While the event was not solely undertaken by GSM activists, it was characteristically done in conjunction with multiple activist organizations from across the political left that were all calling for change in Mexican society.⁴³

By the waning years of the 1970s, the sexual minority liberation movement had gone from groups of people quietly meeting and discussing their lives and identities in private to very publically marching against the marginalization of multiple groups within Mexico by Mexican elites and the State. The movement was characterized by many different GSM activist organizations working in tandem with each other, other non-GSM activist groups and political parties with a distinctly leftist, or socialist, ideological perspective. Together, through shifting coalitions formed on the basis of political ideology and/or convenience, GSM activists started to raise awareness and demand change. The increasing visibility of GSM organizers by the end of the 1970s brought with it increasing risk as they were progressively harassed and surveilled by

⁴² Worker's Revolutionary Party

⁴³ GSM activist groups did not always only work in conjunction with non-GSM activist groups. For example, in 1980 GSM activists occupied the headquarters of the Mexico City Police to demand an end to the ever increasing police raids on sexual minority spaces in the city (Lumsden 1991).

police and government agencies (Grinnell 2012). This increased surveillance hinted that the 1980s were to prove to be a new and difficult time for GSM communities in Mexico.

2.4 Crisis and the Moral Renewal, 1982-Early 1990s

The elections of 1982 brought Miguel de la Madrid to power. The administration of de la Madrid brought many changes to the social and economic landscape of Mexico and instigated a period of creeping crisis for GSM activism in Mexico.

Lumsden (1991) recounts that the election cycle was also a kind of high-water mark for the relationship between the PRT and GSM activist communities. In the run-up to the elections the three main GSM activist groups in Mexico City were in full support of the PRT; and in exchange, openly gay and lesbian candidates were placed on voting slates in Guadalajara and Mexico City. Additionally, GSM rights and issues formed a part of the PRT's election platform. Both of these actions were historical firsts for Mexico. Despite these efforts and seeming integration of the socialist movement in Mexico with GSM activism, between 1982 and 1984 the affiliation with the PRT became strained while the GSM activist community entered a period of crisis. While the relationship between socialists and GSM activists assisted in drawing larger crowds to demonstrations and political rallies, the movement did little to impact the ongoing homophobia experienced in everyday life. Furthermore, not all gay and lesbian people were socialists and not all socialists were pro-GSM/anti-homophobic. These factors contributed to increasing tensions between the two 'sides', which in turn led to tensions between the three main GSM groups. By 1984 all ties within and between the three groups and the GSM activists and the PRT had been broken (Lumsden 1991).

This also seemed to signal the end of GSM activism, or at least a massive blow to the movement. Despite the increasing violence against GSM communities throughout the 1980s as a result of aggressive social 'reform', which I will discuss below, the 1988 PRT election platform did not feature any references to GSM rights or issues, nor did they run any open GSM candidates. All the while, GSM lives and activism were pushed further to the margins of public life and society (Lumsden 1991).

The 1982 electoral loss for the PRT was (yet another unsurprising) win for the *Partido Institucional Revolucionario* (PRI). The election of Miguel de la Madrid continued the unbroken dictatorial-like rule of the party that had begun in 1929.⁴⁴ Yet, as Grinnell (2012) explains, the de la Madrid presidency marked the beginning of massive social and economic upheaval within Mexico and the beginning of the end of the PRI's unquestioned rule. By 1982, the heyday of the 'Mexican Economic Miracle' had come to an end. Inflation was high, unemployment was climbing, the economy was stagnating, and rampant corruption within the PRI at every level of the government and law enforcement were taking its toll on the country. De la Madrid campaigned on renewing the economy through the implementation of austerity measures, neo-liberal reforms, and an additional new policy of *renovación moral*.⁴⁵ The policy of *renovación moral* was initially framed as a 'rooting-out' of corruption in the government and police forces. But it became a 'rooting-out' of perceived immorality in society at large. The anti-corruption initiatives were accompanied by a series of laws that rendered immoral and illegal any activity deemed to be against the state or the '*buenas costumbres*' of México.⁴⁶ The terms of the supposed '*buenas costumbres*' were predictably aligned the white, socially conservative elite and the Catholic Church (Grinnell 2012). Zolov (1999:27-28) states that these '*buenas costumbres*' were unwritten rules that reflected the "very patriarchal values of parental authority that permeated middle-class social values".

In these unwritten social rules, daughters were subordinate to sons, and sons to fathers. As a saintly figure, in her abnegation, the mother acted as the moral fabric of the family unit. Through her passed the social values necessary for proper upbringing. The father, on the other hand, instilled respect for authority via a stern benevolence backed by the threat of punishment. This was of course an idealization, but there was a great deal of truth in how such values were manifest in middle-class life. [...] These social values at the familial level reflected in microcosm the idealized patriarchal state, in which the Virgin

⁴⁴ Institutional Revolutionary Party

⁴⁵ moral renewal (or renovation)

⁴⁶ The 'good customs' of Mexico

of Guadalupe (co-opted by the PRI as a patron image of national identity) played the role of the suffering mother, and the president the commanding voice of the father. [...] In particular, however, women bore a disproportionate responsibility for this cultural outlook. They were expected to retain their "purity" (both as virgins until marriage and as suffering saints afterward), while men were expected to demonstrate their [macho] virility (Zolov 1999:27-28).

Rooted in this repressed and oppressive perspective of the 'good customs of Mexico', the de la Madrid policies constituted a major attack on and dismantling of many progressive social policies initiated during the 1970s (Grinnell 2012). Many programs were terminated, such as sex education and family planning (Carrillo 2007). Within the first nine months of de la Madrid's ascent to power, the policing and enforcing of *los 'buenas costumbres'* impacted every aspect of public GSM life, from nightlife and socializing, to activism and the production of printed material (political, social, and/or sexual) (Grinnell 2012). Much of these activities became illegal under the 'Obscene Decree', which "used vague language to criminalize all publications that might contain any material, written or visual, related to sexuality. For example, Article 6 of the decree stated that any kind of 'sexual perversion' displayed or written about in publications would be considered criminal" (Grinnell 2012:92). Essentially, *la renovación moral* constituted a deepening and reinforcing of structural violence in Mexico. It was a magnification of vaguely worded laws governing morality rooted in conservative, hetero/cis-normative, patriarchal, sexist attitudes of pre-existing laws, such as article 201 of the federal penal code discussed earlier in the chapter. This kind of vague, but potent language policed the lives of members of GSM communities as their very existence was considered to be obscene and in contradiction to '*las buenas costumbres*'. As a response to the increasing policing, marginalization, and illegalization of GSM people and lives, the second pride march in Mexican history was held in Mexico City on June 30th, 1982. It was attended by 6,000 courageous people (SECATUR 2011).

In the end, the moral renovation lasted from 1982 to 1988; along with the economic austerity brought about by de la Madrid, it was considered to be a total failure (Grinnell 2012). Corruption continued to infiltrate all aspects of Mexican society; the economy almost seized

entirely, creating one of the most devastating recessions in recent memory; and, economic inequality grew by leaps and bounds. More importantly for the discussion here, however, the impacts of the moral renovation for GSM people have never been forgotten. The increased policing, surveillance, violence and oppression have been openly contested ever since 1982, when the second pride march occurred. It has been held every year as a commemoration of the Stonewall riots, but also as a visual reminder of GSM people in Mexican society and their continued legally sanctioned inequality.⁴⁷

2.5 The Second Wave, Early 1990s onward

Life for GSM communities began to improve slightly as the 1980s came to a close and the policies of *la renovación moral* were abandoned. This new era brought a modification in activist strategy and overall goals for GSM movements. Whereas the first wave was characterized by Gay Liberation and agitating for deep and sustained structural change in society through radical leftist politics, the second wave, starting in the early '90s has disentangled ties between GSM activism and specific political parties. The approach now is towards affecting legal change by working with whoever is in power.

In addition to the unravelling of political ties, another notable shift in the second wave of activism is the increasing influence of transnational activist networks (Carrillo 2007; de la Dehesa 2010a, 2010b; Grinnell 2012). While academics and perhaps activists on the ground have debated the impact and influence of transnational activism in Mexico, there is little doubt as to how these tactical changes to getting the GSM agenda on the table have played out. These tactical changes have coupled with local and transnational discourses to produce a narrative that has linked GSM rights with the liberal modernization of the nation-state (Carrillo 2007; de la Dehesa 2010a, 2010b; Encarnación 2011; Johnson 2002).⁴⁸ This is what Jasbir Puar (2007) terms “homonationalism”. This is a narrative that (very generally) goes, modern progressive, white and liberal nation-states grant rights and freedoms to the GSM population within their

⁴⁷*March Nacional de Orgullo LGBTTTT*: National Pride March Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Transsexual, Transvestite, and Intersex

⁴⁸ Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (2009) argues, and I agree, that these transnational influences have been incorporated into local activism as opposed to local activism dictated by transnational movements.

jurisdiction. Countries that do not grant rights to GSM people remain in the dark-ages, backward, non-white and antiquated – fodder for terrorism and brutality (Puar 2007).⁴⁹

An example of this attitude in Mexican society may be seen in Héctor Carrillo's 2007 study. Carrillo's research indicates that both hetero and homosexual people in Mexico are wary of ever fully identifying with the modern transnational (neo)liberal subject that lives a life of sexual freedom. While identifying the liberal narrative as 'progressive' and 'modernizing', and ultimately the 'right' direction for the country, the people he spoke with also indicated that they themselves did not lead such a lifestyle. Instead they opted for a more 'traditional' self identification (Carrillo 2007).⁵⁰ This preference to frame one's self as 'traditional' harkens back to the era of *la renovación moral*. It also illustrates that there is a strong current in the dominant attitude within Mexican society suggesting there is something wrong, unacceptable and/or intolerable about homosexuality while concurrently placing Mexico in the 'backward' position of a 'traditional' society.

Regardless of the popular view on modern versus traditional values and GSM rights, the 1990s saw the implementation of an anti-homophobia education campaign in publicly funded schools, as well as antidiscrimination legislation that prohibits discrimination based on gender and/or sexuality (Encarnación 2011). More recently, according to Rosa Esparza Perez (2006:148), the constitution was amended in 2001 to prohibit discrimination based on such things as "*género, [...] las preferencias, el estado civil o cualquier otra que atente contra la dignidad humana y tenga por objeto anular o menoscabar los derechos y libertades de las personas*".⁵¹ This (incredibly vague) rewording of the constitution paved the way for other more specific laws to be implemented. In 2002 the *Distrito Federal* created a new criminal code that defined crimes

⁴⁹ This logic can be seen at play in some of the rationale given by Esparza Perez (2006) when outlining the motives for Mexico to sign on to the 2003 United Nation's report, *Diagnóstico Sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos en México* (the Diagnostic Regarding the Human Rights Situation in Mexico).

⁵⁰ I use the term 'traditional' to describe a person that identifies as heterosexual, Catholic/Christian person that (claims to) value(s) monogamy, or a person that may not identify with these characteristics, but believes them to be morally correct.

⁵¹ "gender, [...] preferences, civil state or anything that undermines human dignity, nullifies or impairs the right and liberties of persons"

based on discrimination to include sex (not gender), and sexual orientation. Then in 2003, Mexico signed the United Nation's report *Diagnóstico Sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos en México*, which recommended that the law governing national health care service providers be amended to allow same-sex couples the same benefits and services as opposite-sex couples (although the government has yet to act on this promise).⁵² In 2007, Mexico City and the state of Coahuila enacted civil union laws; however, Coahuila simultaneously banned same-sex adoption (Esparza Perez 2006). 2009 saw the implementation of marriage equality in Mexico City and in the state of Quintana Roo (Encarnación 2011), and the granting of adoption rights to same-sex couples in Mexico City (Castillo 2010).⁵³ In 2010 the Supreme Court upheld the Mexico City's marriage equality laws and adoption laws, while also requiring all states in Mexico to respect same-sex marriage performed in other jurisdictions even if that state does not allow same sex marriages (Castillo 2010). Finally, in the following year the Supreme Court struck down Coahuila's adoption ban.

Many of these legal victories have been hard won by GSM lobby groups, whose battles are largely fought behind the scenes and out of sight of the public eye. This approach has its benefits and its drawbacks. The benefit of this approach is that, from a legal perspective, they have been a success. The law is now beginning to recognize rights of some people within GSM communities.⁵⁴ Additionally, further gains can be more easily obtained within the court system now that there is a foothold of legal recognition. And, as De la Dehesa (2010a, 2010b) argues, legal tolerance leads to societal tolerance of sexual minorities in Mexico.

Although I do not doubt the situation is improving very slowly for sexual minority communities in Mexico and perhaps long held social attitudes are changing, it is important to note that *tolerance* and *acceptance* are not the same thing. Tolerance has not necessarily led to any sort of meaningful large-scale societal acceptance, a complete undoing of structural violence against

⁵² Diagnostic Regarding the Human Rights Situation in Mexico

⁵³ Both the Mexico City and Coahuila bills were tabled by openly gay politicians (Esparza Perez 2006).

⁵⁴ As in many parts of the world, the Trans community continues to be the exception. Transphobia, both legal and societal, is still very prevalent within most Western societies. It must be noted, too, that the cis-gender Gay, Lesbian and Bi-sexual communities are not immune to being the subject of phobia, either. Not in the slightest.

GSM communities, or the expunging of homo/transphobia. In fact, these legal battles were hotly contested and challenged to the furthest degree within the Mexican Courts (Castillo 2011), suggesting there is not widespread agreement as to whether or not GSM communities are truly equal citizens in Mexico. Additionally, there continues to be extreme violence and murder committed against members of GSM communities in Mexico. For example, Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (2009) notes the murders of GSM activist leaders Jorge Armenta in 2003 and Octavio Acuña in 2005. Interviewees in Esperanza informed me of the murder of local activist Jose ‘Pepe’ Leyal in 2004.⁵⁵ Further to things such as murder and abuse, there remains the *threat* of physical harm or discrimination. Many GSM people *still* feel unsafe and discriminated against at home, in public and at work, despite the legal victories (Esparza Perez 2006; Hertz 2011).

For Dean Spade (2008), the continuance of homo/transphobia is almost expected in spite of new laws. Spade asserts that GSM lobbying and activism through the legislative and judicial systems *rely on the very system that oppresses GSM communities* to begin with. The expectation that homo/transphobia will end as a result of new laws born out of a system that is still inherently homo/transphobic or that the use of the same tools and tactics (laws, police forces and prisons) once used by the state against GSM communities will bring about some kind of ‘justice and equality’, is misguided. Relying upon and deploying the very system that remains anchored in oppressive structural violence that once oppressed (and in many ways still does) them/us/me will not lead to deep systemic change. Rather, the opposite can/is occurring, in that incorporation of certain GSM bodies into the legal structure of the nation-state by simply augmenting the law does nothing more than incorporate those bodies into the hetero/cis-normative homo/transphobic status quo and thus strengthens it while weakening opposition (Spade 2008).

⁵⁵ There are various stories that account for the death of Pepe Leyal. One story is that the murder was the result of a lover’s quarrel that turned deadly. Apparently the particularly bloody fashion in which Pepe was murdered (stabbed multiple times) is evidence of a crime of passion. Another, slightly more detailed story claims that the lover was a state politician and that the relationship was a secret. In this version Pepe was murdered because of ‘knowing too much’ and the relationship was starting to draw attention.

2.6 The Marches

Throughout all of these shifts in activist strategies and changes in Mexico's legal landscape, the *Marcha Nacional* has served as a national outlet for GSM communities to raise awareness and consciousness of their plight within Mexico.⁵⁶ Ernesto, one of the march organizers in Esperanza, attended his first pride march in 1982 (the second for the country) in Mexico City. He reminisced with me:

*[La marcha pasó] en el DF. Y fue en el '82, la primera marcha que yo viví, y era la Marcha del Orgullo Homosexual. La organizaba el Frente Homosexual Acción Revolucionaria junto con el Colectivo Guiloixi[?] y el Grupo Lambda de Acción Homosexual [sic]. Eran los grupos que organizaron la marcha de '82. [...] Creo que era la tercera o la segunda. Y bueno, era un orgullo. Marchábamos por el orgullo más que nada. Y en esa marcha del orgullo, pues, sacábamos pancartas donde consignamos cuestiones que necesitábamos: más libertades, este, que no haya tanta homofobia, cuestiones de este tipo. Pero en realidad marchamos por el orgullo de ser homosexual y lesbiana. [...] Pues nada más lo bonito de marchar, caminé y caminé, grité y grité, bailé y bailé, y consignas. Fue como un carnaval mi primera marcha.*⁵⁷

La Marcha Nacional has become the focal point of, or flash point for national discussions regarding sex, gender, and sexuality across the social and political spectrum (Carrillo 2007). It has also served to reinforce GSM activist efforts on the national stage while asserting GSM presence in the national imaginary. In 2010 it is estimated that over 500,000 people showed up to participate in the march (SECATUR 2011).

⁵⁶ National (Pride) March

⁵⁷ [The march happened] in the DF. And it was in '82 the first march that I experienced, and it was the Gay Pride March. The Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front organized it with the Guiloixi Collective(?) and Lambda Homosexual Action Group. They were the groups that organized the march in '82. [...] I think it was the third or second. Well, it was an honor. We marched for pride more than anything. And in that pride march we drew up banners stating the issues (things?) we needed: more freedom, ah, an end to homophobia, issues of this kind. But in reality we marched for pride of being gay and lesbian. [...] Well, nothing more than the beauty to march, walk and walk, scream and shout, dance and dance, and chant. It was like a carnival, my first march.

Pride marches have also occurred in other major cities in Mexico. The local GSM activist group, *Grupo Orgullo Homosexual de Liberación* (GOHL), organized Guadalajara's first march in 1983, however it wasn't until 1996, the year of Guadalajara's second march, that it became an annual event (GAYGDL 2013; Marcha de la Diversidad Sexual Guadalajara 2013).⁵⁸ Monterrey has also been the site of an annual march since 2000 (Marcha de la Diversidad en Monterrey 2013). In the last 10 years there has been a marked increase in pride marches in mid-sized and smaller cities as well. While some of these have not yet turned into annual events, marches have occurred in places such as Acapulco, Cancun, Chilpancingo, Durango, Matamoros, Mazatlan, Nuevo Laredo, Oaxaca, Puebla, Puerto Vallarta, Playa del Carmen, Tijuana, Tuxtla Gutierrez, and Xalapa.⁵⁹

Pride marches, also referred to as pride parades in many cities, especially in Canada and the US, are incredibly important tools for making a visible statement to the dominant society regarding the presence of GSM people and communities within towns and cities *everywhere*. Yet, as an approach to GSM activism and awareness raising, marches may be problematic. From my own experiences of pride in Vancouver, the city where I have made my home on-and-off for the last 12 years, groups that are lumped under the GSM umbrella, or LGBTQ, as it is more commonly referred to in Canada, have started to pull away from the main pride events. The city now has Vancouver Pride, the Dyke March and the Trans March. They are all held on different days and in different parts of the city; and they are all attended by consecutively smaller numbers of people in the order that I have listed them here. Many people, myself included, feel that the pride parade in Vancouver has turned into more of a spectacle than a political statement (Hui 2011; Orton 2012). There are now more corporate sponsors and politicians pandering to the 'pink dollar' and 'the gay vote' in the parade than actual GSM community organizations. In the vein of Spade's (2008) critique of legal rights activism, the spectacle of pride and the 'show of support' from corporations, politicians and other non-GSM social institutions lulls some people in straight and GSM communities into thinking that there is no more homo/transphobia. Another

⁵⁸ Homosexual Pride Group for Liberation

⁵⁹ This is by no means an exhaustive list. These are just the ones that I am aware of. I am unaware if these are annual events in all of these cities or if they were just one-off events.

issue that some identify with pride, in Vancouver and elsewhere, is that it is far too gay-male-centric and that it doesn't truly represent the diversity of all gender and sexual minority communities. Meanwhile, the Vancouver Dyke March and Trans March are both much smaller and more grassroots events.⁶⁰

These divisions and tensions over representation at marches and parades, and party versus politics, are not only present in Vancouver.⁶¹ Lesbian organizers in Mexico City have also started a separate *Marcha Lésbica*, which has been running annually since 2007 (*Marcha Lésbica* 2013).⁶² Additionally, a very public disagreement over the meaning and purpose of pride in Mexico boiled over in 2012 when electoral regulations conflicted with pride organizing.

Since 1983 the *Marcha Nacional*, has been held on June 30th. The elections of 2012 were scheduled to be held on July 1st, the day following the march. On the surface this appears not to be a problem; however, Mexico's *ley seca* prohibits the sale and consumption of alcohol in public establishments the day of *and* the day preceding any election.⁶³ That is to say, no bar, restaurant, corner store, liquor store, etc, is legally permitted to sell or allow the consumption of alcohol the day before or the day of an election. Furthermore, politicians are prohibited from participating in any form of political event on those same two days. In addition to the coveted pink dollar and the pink vote which would have draw politicians and restaurateurs to want to participate in the event, march organizers often have to listen to powerful corporate voices given that they have now become a significant source of funding for larger pride events (Chasin 2000),

⁶⁰ The Dyke March has gotten larger and larger as time has gone by. Last year the organizers were handing out purple lays that had been paid for by an Ontario wine producer. This wine producer is also a big supporter of Vancouver Pride as well as OutTV.

⁶¹ 'Party' and 'politics' are not always oppositional. Kath Brown's (2007) work on Lesbian pride events in Dublin, Ireland and Brighton, United Kingdom suggest that some people view their party *as* politics. In *Esperanza* a difference was made between the two when Juan Pablo addressed the crowd during the post-march festivities. He informed the crowd that pride wasn't all just about the '*desmadre*' (shit-show/wild parties/chaos), but about educating ourselves, too. He then informed people of the workshops that Grupo Nueva Esperanza provides in conjunction with a local state-funded HIV/AIDS clinic. Interestingly, this same issue of party versus politics came up an interview with Lilia, an ally and one of the doctors at the clinic. It made me wonder if she had implanted the notion in Juan Pablo's mind that 'the party' is 'not good' and/or if a perception that GMS communities are all '*desmadre*' was a source of shame or shaming for either one of them.

⁶² Lesbian March

⁶³ The dry law

such as Mexico City. What is good for the business community thus becomes an imperative for GSM communities, or at least those who organize the biggest event associated with them.

According to Heber Galvez (2012), as the *Marcha Nacional* drew closer the organizing committee started receiving pressure from businesses and politicians to move the date of the march so that festivities would not be hampered by the prohibitions caused by the elections. Many businesses, primarily night clubs, complained that they were going to lose large profits, citing newly released data from the tourism bureau of Mexico's *Distrito Federal* indicating that the 2011 pride festivities had an economic impact of approximately US\$2,200,000. There was also indirect pressure from the local government and federal politicians to change the date so they too could participate in the march as political figures (Galvez 2012).

Within the organizing committee there was no consensus. Some organizers wanted to bend to mounting pressure from business and government bodies and move the date to the beginning of the month. Others believed that there was no conflict between the original march date and the elections since the march was not about the sale of alcohol and political pandering, but remembering Tlatelolco, Stonewall and all the efforts made and yet to be made in the fight against homo/transphobia and the oppression of sexual minorities in Mexico. Eventually the pride committee split and two marches were planned: a 'dry' one on the original date of June 30th, called *la Histórica Marcha Nacional de Orgullo LGBTTTI* (HMNO), and a 'wet' one planned for June 2nd, called *la Marcha Nacional de Orgullo y la Dignidad LGBTTTI* (MNOD) (Galvez 2012).⁶⁴

The organizing committee of the 2013 HMNO didn't mince words when they expressed their disillusionment at the state of pride in Mexico City:

*Hace más de 35 años un grupo de activistas creadores del Frente de Liberación
Homosexual denunciaron las razias policiacas, los despidos injustificados, la prensa*

⁶⁴ The Historic National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite, Intersex Pride March, The National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite, Intersex Pride and Dignity March

amarillista y el asesinato motivado por el odio, hoy conocido por crímenes de odio por homo, lesbo, bi y transfobia ¿Qué tanto hemos avanzado, cuántos pendientes quedan aún?

*Pareciera que hemos avanzado, pero en estos 35 años hemos dejado caer el movimiento de manera estrepitosa, le hemos apostado al dinero y al voto rosa, como si fueran las panaceas y nuestra dignidad y derechos estuvieran en un mercado de compra y venta entre empresarios y partidos políticos, entre becas y programas gubernamentales, el activismo se ha prostituido.*⁶⁵

The tension that is exposed in the split of the *Marcha Nacional* is similar to other pride events around the world. It is reflective of what Lisa Duggan (2002) refers to as the “new homonormative”. That is a reiteration of the hetero/cis-normative, racist, sexist, homophobic status quo as a ‘pink-washed’ version of itself which serves to depoliticize GSM communities while incorporating them into the neo-liberal economy (Duggan 2002). Lynda Johnston (2005:1) further captures the sentiment in the following excerpt:

The incorporation of the queer celebration into city promotions and mainstream media may be understood as a kind of ‘homonormativity’, where once transgressive political displays are now corporatized, regulated and controlled. ‘Being proud’, out and visible, can be politically transgressive as well as about being accepted in neoliberal forms of sexual citizenship.

Since the events of 2012, Mexico City continues to have two separate marches. The HMNO embodies what I see as a more ‘old-school’ or revolutionary GSM activism ethic. One that is

⁶⁵ Over 35 years ago a group of activists/creators, Homosexual Liberation Front, denounced the police raids, wrongful dismissal, sensationalist tabloids and murder motivated by hatred, today known as hate crimes gay, lesbian, bi and transphobia. How far we have come, how many are still pending? It seems we have come far, but in these 35 years we have let the movement precipitously fall, we have wagered money and the pink vote, as if that was the panacea and as if our dignity and rights were in a market for buying and selling between employers and political parties, including government grants and programs, activism has been prostituted.

concerned with the disruption of the hetero/cis-normative space within which sexual minorities dwell, a kind of queering of the streets, if only for a moment (Briknell 2000). This more revolutionary ethic is captured in their slogan “*Marchamos Para Protestar*”.⁶⁶ While the MNOD is a kind of hollow political elite and corporate (re)production of an imagined ‘authentic’ queering of the streets that masks the ultimate pacification and money-grab. I am sure that organizers of the event would surely disagree with me, and I do not mean to insinuate that the work they do is not taxing, but I do wonder about its effectiveness. It seems more akin to a pro-sex march that is evacuated of any anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia or anti-hetero/cis-normative politics. Instead, it invites the production of a Mexican GSM subject that can be sold to by corporations, lied to by politicians, got drunk and sent on their merry way. The co-opting of pride marches, not just in Mexico, but all over the world for the purposes of political and economic profit is a failure of GSM activism. The separation of the *Marcha Nacional* into two separate entities encapsulates the crossroads of GSM activism and subject formation within Mexico and internationally.

This guides me to the question: can pride marches be an effective political tool to assist in creating a sustained and fundamental change within society? Absolutely! As Kath Browne (2007: 64) indicates, “Extra-ordinary acts [such as pride marches] may resist and subvert everyday hegemonic power relations and are therefore understood as ‘political’ and a vehicle for change.” But, I would add to this by asserting that this is contingent on context and a careful and conscious articulation as such. That is, a pride march can create fundamental change if it does not get hijacked and pink-washed for powerful corporate, political and other interests. Is a pride march in Esperanza the same as a pride march in Mexico City? I would argue not. The rest of this thesis is dedicated to expanding on this idea – how pride comes to mean and do different things in different places and times, but for the discussion in this chapter I will illuminate two primary reasons. First, Mexico City is a large metropolitan centre that has been the site of concerted activist efforts for nearly 50 years. Esperanza is a small city on the border with the United States. There has been little GSM activism in the city, and, until recently, what little

⁶⁶ We march to protest.

there has been was carried out primarily by one person who was subsequently murdered. And second, this march has not been co-opted by large corporations or by politicians, which is not to say that it cannot or will not be. But for the time being it is still very much a (positive) disruptive force in the streets of this very conservative city. What this means, then, is that GSM activist space across Mexico is variegated. What is transgressive in one space may be creating a “new homonormative” (Duggan 2007) in another if manifested in certain ways. This does not mean, however, that pride or GSM activism is dead, over, or predetermined to follow the same path everywhere. As I will demonstrate, pride has the capacity to be an important and transgressive form of action for social change, GSM rights and equality, but it can also come to signify a larger message of contestation against violence, terror and oppression that reaches across all of society. Pride neither *means* the same thing, nor does it *do* the same thing everywhere.

In terms of what the discussion here in this chapter means for GSM activism in Mexico City (and other population centres around the world), again, I return to the words of the HMNO 2013 organizing committee:

Hace años se pedía la eutanasia al Movimiento y se comentaba lo que sucedería con un estado de coma indefinido. A 35 años de la primera marcha el Movimiento sigue en coma, con respiración artificial y en cuidados intensivos... ¿será hora de darle la eutanasia o nos pondremos realmente a trabajar autogestivamente y ser corresponsables de él? La moneda está en el aire.
*MARCHAMOS PARA PROTESTAR.*⁶⁷

2.7 Conclusion

Mexico has a long and complex history of GSM activisms and pride marches. In this chapter I trace some of these histories. In doing so, I argue that modern GSM activism in Mexico has

⁶⁷ Years ago they requested the euthanasia of the (GSM) movement and commented what would transform into a state of indefinite coma.... 35 years since the first launch, the Movement is in a coma, on life support and in intensive care... Is it time to give euthanasia or do we really get to work, consciously, and be stewards of it [the Movement]? The coin is in the air.
WE MARCH TO PROTEST.

arisen from both targeted structural violence and from the smoke and ruin of political violence carried out by the state that was not specifically directed at GSM communities but nevertheless spurred them to action. This action was strengthened and deepened by incidents of GSM oppression and activism at the global scale and further repression at home. Because of these events, GSM activism and pride marches in Mexico have come about as a result of, and have always been linked to, the remembrance and defiance of state oppression.

I have organized the history GSM activisms in Mexico into two predominate waves. These waves are preceded by a time of early GSM consciousness building and separated by a short period of crisis. The first wave is characterized by an alignment of GSM activism with leftist politics and political parties. It was a time when a demand for total societal change was seen as the path to GSM 'liberation'. The second wave was a shift to working within the current legal systems. This shift in activism has heralded significant legal tolerances within Mexican society, but has failed to do away with homo/transphobia. Instead, it is creating the conditions for a new homonormative and homonationalism within a homo/transphobic society that remains to be hetero-dominant. My concluding analysis asserts that present-day GSM activism in Mexico is at a crossroads, but not a crisis or a loss. Rather, GSM activism in Mexico is variegated and uneven in its nature and effectiveness, by which I mean that what is transgressive and potentially transformational in one place may actually be reinforcing the status quo in another. In the end, I believe that (pride) marches may be an effective tool if deployed mindful of the past, the treachery of the present, and with an ultimate goal of deep systemic societal change.

In the next chapter I will continue and extend the discussion of violence(s). I will also bring the concepts of terror and the everyday to bear on the local context of Esperanza and the so-called 'drug war'.

Chapter 3: Shattering Spaces – Violence and the Everyday in Esperanza



Figure 3.1 'Stop the Violence', Protest Art in Esperanza, Photo Credit: John Alexander Pysklywec

When I arrived in Esperanza, the activist organizers were just starting to get ready for the 2013 events. One evening Carlos, Jacobo and I were driving back to my hotel after a long day painting floats for the upcoming march. The three of us were sandwiched into the front cab of Carlos' father's truck. Jacobo turned to me and asked, "*¿Entonces? ¿Qué te parece Esperanza? ¿Tranquila, no?*"⁶⁸ I hesitated for a moment. I thought about the Twitter reports from the evening before informing people of the general location, including neighbourhoods and streets to avoid temporarily, of an ongoing shoot out in the south end of the city. I then thought about the caravan of speeding cars that raced past the work yard where we had been preparing the floats and the knowing glances that were exchanged between Jacobo and Carlos. From the glances they exchanged I had deduced that the speeding cars probably represented more than just people trying to get somewhere in a hurry! I replied to Jacobo, "*Creo que es tranquila. No me siento inseguro ahorita, pero...*"⁶⁹ I paused for a moment and Jacobo responded, "*¿Ya ves?! ¡No es tan mal como dicen!*"⁷⁰ I agreed with him, not wanting to press my concerns.

A few days later, in the early evening, I sat on the floor of my hotel room with two hotel employees, Marisol and Sofía. The curtains were drawn and the lights turned off. Downstairs a group of armed men were ransacking the hotel. They were from a local cartel – the Gulf Cartel, and had come to 'investigate' a large group of business travellers to see if they were members of a rival organization, Los Zetas.

Marisol leaned forward and informed me that down the hall and to the right there was a window that looked out onto a neighbouring building. If we needed to, we could break the window, jump on the roof of the building and slip out the back and onto the street behind the hotel. We sat for a moment in silence listening to the commotion outside – people yelling and screaming, running around in the halls – while Sofía played a game on her cell phone. Marisol and Sofía then began to discuss the game and whether or not Sofía was doing well. She was. Feeling that the

⁶⁸ So, what do think about Esperanza? It's tranquil, no?

⁶⁹ I guess it's pretty calm. I don't feel unsafe right now, but...

⁷⁰ You see, it's not *that* bad here! It's not what like they say!

conversation was a bit strange given the circumstances, I asked them if they were scared. Marisol assured me that she was. She then pointed out that Sofia's ability to play her video game via the internet meant that the military had not arrived. If the military had already arrived to engage the cartel in combat, they would have immediately jammed cell phone signals, which would have prevented Sofía from playing her game. For Marisol the absence of the military meant a significantly reduced chance of a gunfight, which, for us, meant a significantly increased chance of getting out of that hotel room alive. We sat and talked quietly. After about an hour there was a knock at the door. Marisol and I stood up and looked at each other nervously, not knowing who was there. Marisol pushed me towards the door, to be the one to open it up and face the unknown threat on the other side. I responded by pushing her towards it, too. She rolled her eyes and made a move for the door. Immediately a wave of guilt and self-disgust came over me as I realized I could have just pushed her into the barrel of the gun. I then grabbed her by the arm and we both went to open the door. Thankfully, it was Carlos, who had come to tell us it was safe to come out.

We went down to the lobby and walked into a scene of what seemed to be barely controlled chaos. Several guests from the large group of business travellers had congregated in the lobby. Emotions were running high. Some people sat on the sofa with long faces, while others looked as though they had been crying. In the middle of the lobby, a group of the business travellers engaged in a heated exchange over their collective next steps. Several people wanted to leave immediately and head to Monterrey, a three-hour drive away. Others were not interested in venturing out onto the streets of Esperanza at night, let alone the highway between Esperanza and Monterrey, which crosses from Gulf territory into Los Zetas territory.

Over the course of an hour or so, more and more people from their group came to the lobby, many of them with their bags packed. It was decided that they would all leave that night for Monterrey. They were going to pile as many as they could into one truck and the rest were going to travel by bus. Raúl interfered. He told them, as he had done earlier, that he recommends outsiders travel in groups of no more than four at all times, and to include at least one woman. Somehow, apparently, that sex/gender combination would garner less attention. Therefore, there

would be no over-loading of a truck. The truck was going to take the three passengers for which it was designed. The rest would go by bus. After a little bit of pushback, they agreed with him. After all, none of them were from Esperanza, so what better did they know. Raúl arranged for an appropriate number of taxis to come and pick the guests up and take them to the bus station. One by one, groups of three and four guests left in their respective taxis until they were all gone. It was quiet again in the lobby. Raúl was visibly upset, as were the other employees. Nevertheless, there was no time to dwell on what had just transpired. Raúl, Carlos and I were off to a birthday party and we were running late.

* * *

3.1 Introduction to Chapter Three

The previous chapter outlines a general history of gender and sexual minority activisms and pride marches in Mexico. What I want the reader to carry forward into the remaining text is that GSM activisms in Mexico sprang from violent times in the capital, Mexico City. Since then, GSM activisms and pride marches have slowly manifested in other parts of the country. However, in Northeast Mexico there has been little to no visible GSM activisms outside of the city of Monterrey. In more recent years, given the terrible violence in the region, it would almost seem more likely that pride marches and festivities would not be undertaken, especially since many aspects of public life in Northeast Mexico have retreated from the streets to the *relative* safety of private homes.⁷¹ Yet, in Esperanza, the exact opposite is occurring. Here, within a context of unpredictable violence, GSM activisms are emerging in a place where there had been very little before. Moreover, this is not only occurring in Esperanza but in other population centres in the region. Many of these places are sites of even more violent conflict than Esperanza, yet they are also bearing witness to GSM activisms and pride marches.⁷²

⁷¹ In interviews it was related to me that people are opting to stay at home and engaging in various forms of entertainment instead of going to public events. It should also be noted that, despite this apparent tendency to stay indoors, there has also been a concerted effort by the municipal government of Esperanza to continue with an annual celebration of border life, which takes place at the same time as a similar event in Sister City, Texas.

⁷² One of the Drag performers at the march in Esperanza related to me that they had attended a pride march the day before in another border city.

In this chapter, I explore Esperanza a little more closely, focusing on the geographies of this place in relation to everyday life and the violence and terror associated with the so-called ‘drug war’. Inspired by Veena Das’ (2007) idea of the individual as fragmented, I argue that violence has the capacity to shatter fragmented lives. However, I move beyond the lives of individual subjects to consider how violence may be shattering society as a whole. I also am asserting here that the violence in Esperanza, and by extension Northeastern Mexico is, in actuality a kind of terror-making or a reign of terror perpetuated by armed state and non-state actors. I begin by giving a brief analysis of the history and political economy of Esperanza as a place. Next I turn to the ‘narco-political economy’ of the so-called ‘drug war’ with a focus on how it has unfolded in Esperanza. In these two sections I am situating Esperanza in a contested field of physical geography, history(ies), politics and economy(ies). By doing so, a deeper understanding of Esperanza as a place comes into relief allowing for a nuanced perception of the contemporary terrorizing violence and people’s courage to survive and carry on with their daily lives and GSM activisms. These sections also set up the last part of the chapter in which I discuss how some of the people with whom I spoke experience the violence and terror of the so-called ‘drug war’. By sharing some of these moments in the lives of march participants I hope to achieve two things. First, these narratives give a glimpse of everyday life and the intimate ways in which violence and terror weaves itself into the fabric of that ‘everyday’ life. Second, these narratives provide a deeper understanding of the context of GSM activism in Esperanza. Before I continue, however, I will first briefly discuss what I mean by violence, terror and the everyday.

3.2 Thinking about Violence, Terror and the Everyday

Ideas about violence and experiences of violence have everything to do with the person who is contemplating or feeling them. However, the subjectivity/positionality of the thinker or feeler can blind that person to the violence conceptualized and experienced by others. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004:5) state, “structural inequalities and power relations are naturalized by our categories and conceptions of what violence really is”. Furthermore, there are many ways of interpreting, classifying or categorizing violence. Violence is insidious, it is blatant, it is discrete, it is obvious, it is hidden, it is structural and it is personal. It can have all of these qualities or none of them. And this is to say almost nothing, really, of

what violence *is*. There may also exist attempts to categorize and quantify kinds of violence in an effort to understand violence as a concept, or to determine gradients of violence. Yet, an attempt to engage in the classification and quantification of violence runs the risk of a race to the bottom, to the ‘worst’ or the ‘most violent’. Such a process devalues the lived experience of people who know themselves to be impacted by or survivors of violence. Therefore, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois’ (2004) concept of a continuum of violence is helpful.⁷³ Rather than thinking of violence as a hierarchy of different kinds of violences, from the least to the most violent, a continuum allows for a more horizontal interpretation. Thus, understanding what violence *is* and *how* it is experienced becomes the task at hand, rather than a quantification and classification of brutality and suffering. It allows space for a more fluid understanding of the concept.

In this chapter, I use the term violence in various ways, which I will gesture to at the appropriate times to signal and/or clarify what I mean. In general, however, in this chapter and throughout the rest of my thesis, I use the term violence to describe political violence and criminalization. That is, the turmoil, destruction and bloodshed resulting from military style campaigns by the Mexican military, marines, federal and local police launched in the name of combating organized crime. This is an approach to ‘security’ that has claimed the lives of thousands. I also use the term violence to describe the conflicts that occur between cartels, which is always directly or indirectly a result of the state’s militarized action and/or support through on-going injustice and impunity – two aspects of governmentality in Mexico that I will be exploring throughout this chapter.

Yet, I am not solely interested in what is and is not violence. I am interested in what violence *does*. I do not mean this question in the sense of the physical marks left by violence and not entirely in a psychological sense either. I mean it more like what might be some of the purposes of violence. What work does violence perform? Violence often leads to fear, a fear of more violence, a fear of those who perpetuate violence, a fear of acting out because of the threat of

⁷³ The idea of a continuum will be one that is revisited in the following chapter, as well.

violence. Fear and violence are forms and tactics of terror. And for those who wield terror, it means control. The Oxford English Dictionary (2014) defines terror as “The state of being terrified or extremely frightened; intense fear or dread; an instance or feeling of this. [...] The use of organized repression or extreme intimidation; terrorism”. Further on, beside the phrase ‘reign of terror’, it states “a period of remorseless repression or bloodshed during which the general community live in constant fear of death or violence”. In this chapter, I use the terms ‘reign of terror’ and ‘terror’ somewhat interchangeably and as outlined here. I do so in an effort to trouble the narrative of the so-called ‘drug war’. I suggest the so-called ‘drug war’ is yet another form of terror that is being unleashed upon people in Mexico.

As I move through this chapter, I want you, the reader, to keep ever present a critical eye on the idea of the so-called ‘drug war’. As discussed in the introductory chapter, simply calling the situation in Mexico today a war on drugs does not explain what is going on. It creates a false dichotomy in which the ‘good guy’ government is fighting the ‘bad guy’ drug lords, when in reality the situation is far more complex. For example, Dawn Paley (forthcoming) meticulously lays out the commonalities between Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative, two separate programs that are concerned with security in Colombia and Mexico, respectively. Using Naomi Klein’s (2008) theory of the shock doctrine and disaster capitalism, Paley demonstrates that the so-called ‘drug war’ in Mexico, as in Colombia, and the violence it brings has become a vehicle through which to push ‘economic reforms’, such as Peña Nieto’s massive reform and semi privatization of the nationally owned oil company, Pemex.⁷⁴ Paley also links the terrorizing of people who live in resource rich areas with the expansion of mining and other extractive industries in those same regions. Paley asserts that the violence and chaos created by the so-called ‘drug war’ *is also a tool* to obtain greater security for trans-national corporations, primarily Canadian-based mining corporations, in order that they may move in and set up shop. This terror-as-tool tactic also simultaneously pacifies or even displaces the people in the region (many of whom may be against such economic activities). It is difficult to say exactly how

⁷⁴ Klein (2008) argues that in situations of shock and disaster, like the attacks of September 11th or a drug war, neo-liberal economic packages and reforms that would normally be subject to greater scrutiny or protest can be ushered in under the guise of national security, for the national interest, or with little or no attention in light of the distraction/shock of the disaster

much, if any activity between armed state and non-state actor is coordinated – as in a direct and intentional collusion between armed state and non-state actors to terrorize and displace people from their homes. Yet, reaping economic benefit from the devastation and destruction makes the violence an instrument of neo-liberal reform and governmentality rather than an unfortunate by-product of a war on organized crime. Therefore, it is almost impossible to call the situation in Mexico a ‘drug war’, since this is not what is actually happening.

Paley also troubles the idea of ‘the cartel’, by asserting that they are paramilitaries in service of those who pay, as opposed to (only) being involved in organized crime syndicates centred on an illegal narcotics trade (also see Paley 2013; Malloy and Bowden 2011). While I hesitate to frame all (of what are commonly referred to as) cartels as paramilitaries, I would agree that under the conditions of the so-called ‘drug war’ the activities of some organizations are paramilitary-like, which may or may not be pushing other groups in the same direction. Additionally, as Shaylih Muehlmann (2014) demonstrates in *When I Wear My Alligator Boots*, there is a high degree of corruption and interconnectedness within Mexico which makes parsing out the difference between actors, politicians, civilians, police/military officers and people involved in organized crime a near impossible task. That is to say, many, if not most people are connected to organized crime in one way or another. This could be a very direct connection or a connection through a loved one or close friend, or it could be more indirect such as a friend-of-a-friend, an acquaintance or relatively unknown neighbour (Muehlmann 2014). Thus, attempting to compartmentalize actors in the so-called ‘drug war’ and categorize them as good or bad is nearly impossible. I want to make it clear that I am not claiming to know exactly what is going on. I am not sure anyone *really* knows the full extent and exactly what is happening. Even those with the most intimate of perspectives.

Ultimately, my concern in this chapter is to discuss how the present regime of violence and terror came about, and also to examine what *people do* in these times of violence and terror. Veena Das (2007) is also interested in such a question and their book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* has *inspired* the framing of this chapter. Das is interested in the ways “the [violent] event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the

recesses of the ordinary” and how this relates to “the larger possibilities of phenomena and the singularity of lives”. Das is primarily concerned with the long-term psychological and cultural impacts of trauma on the individual in relation to historical events that have occurred in the (relatively) distant past. An event within a person’s lifetime, perhaps, but that has more or less come to a close (save the affected people for whom the event is never entirely over). I would like to shift this framework of analysis slightly to work with memories of more recent and ongoing events and to incorporate the idea of terror into the discussion.

According to Das, the subject, as in the individual, is a ‘fragmented’ composition, meaning people are made of different parts, fragments. The fragments constitute different moments in one’s life and different ways of being in the world – thoughts, emotions, etc. This is not to say that the fragments can be stitched together to give a totalized understanding of the subject since a person is never completely made. These fragments are also world-making in that they shape the limits of the subject’s world and represent the world at that moment. They represent the memories and lived experiences that one carries with them and the lens that one can live life through. A cataclysmic event in one’s life may shatter these fragments apart. Thus, one of Das’ (2007:6) central questions, and one I find very relevant to my own work, is “[w]hat is it to pick up the pieces and to live in this very place of devastation?”

For Das (2007:7), the only way to understand how violence weaves its way into the lives of people, pulling at the fragments of the individual (and society), is through a “descent into the ordinary”. That is, to understand violence, everyday practices and how these practices are influenced or changed must be examined. Fragments of people’s lives are an access point to the ‘ordinary’ everyday. As Gyanendra Pandey (2005) notes, through the fragment(s) of people’s lives, a counter history can emerge to contest the dominant narrative. Fragments “constitute [...] at least potentially a 'disturbance', a fracture in the narrative, which might enable us to prise it open and read it differently” (Pandey 2005: 225).⁷⁵ This is to say, the shattering fragments of

⁷⁵ In their article, Pandey (2005) is speaking to historians, but I would argue that their insights ring true for all social scientists who are engaging with stories and narrative, archival or oral.

people's lives, in this case of those with whom I spoke in Esperanza, tell the story of everyday life in a reign of terror and violence.

Therefore, in this chapter, I am using some of Das' ideas of the fragmented individual as a descriptive device to visualize the argument that I am advancing here regarding the shattering of lives and society by the violence and terror associated with the so-called 'drug war'. I am simultaneously using the term fragment in two different ways. On one hand, I am deploying the term as a kind of descriptive metaphor. That of a person, or group of people, who are made up of different parts, different experiences, knowledges, and memories, but are never quite complete in their making, and whose lives have been shattered, or are shattering, as in significantly changed, impacted or challenged by the violence (and terror) of the so-called 'drug war'. On the other hand, the fragment is also a narrative, and through an analysis of the fragments of people's lives – the memories and stories they shared with me – I will try to descend into the ordinary to pull together a counternarrative to the so-called 'drug war' that exposes it as a reign of terror and demonstrates a shattering of society – a breaking down of societal norms, a society in flux. Having said this, I think it is important to reiterate Pandey's (1995) point that fragments can be complicated, messy and seemingly contradictory, as are the people who are made up of them. A fragment is not an ultimate truth; rather, it is the "possibility of another kind of history" (Pandey 1995: 227) and truth. It is a counter narrative. Pandey (1995: 227) states:

Contrary to common-sense belief they [fragments] do not give us any simple, direct access to the 'authentic' voice and history [...]. They are in this respect no different from other 'sources' for the historian [and social scientist]: they too need to be 'read'. For they too are shot through with contradictory, naturalizing features: the constructions of the dominant and the privileged [...].

The fragments of people's lives can be pulled together, not easily, and not always entirely coherently to create a counternarrative that accounts for the possibility of another kind of history, or in this case, the possibility of another narrative of contemporary events which reveals a shattering of society in Esperanza. This shattering, however, is not necessarily only negative. It

also represents possibility. As individuals and society as a whole pull themselves together again, or pick up the pieces and live in the devastation, new configurations of collective life become possible, even if only for a moment as the fragments jostle and settle. Thus, the shattering is also a potential for new ways of collective being. When worlds are shattering, new ones become possible as the pieces come back together again (or not).

In sum, then, I am using Das' to think of (or visualize) the individual as constituted of fragments (the stories and the experience that make and shape a person). These fragments can be shattered apart, both literally and metaphorically. In a more literal sense in that a person's life can be changed in significant ways/disrupted/destroyed by violence and terror, but also in a metaphorical sense in that the fragments are the stories and experiences that people chose to share with me in response to the questions that I asked about their lives and experience under the conditions of the so-called drug war. These stories of shattering lives can be pieced together to demonstrate how there is also a shattering that is occurring at the level of society, a disruption of everyday life-as-before and many of the social and societal norms of that previous way of life.

Finally, before I turn my attention to Esperanza's geographies, I address what I mean by 'the everyday'. I liken this term to Alison Mountz and Jennifer Hyndman's (2006:447) use of the 'intimate,' which they frame as the "embodied social relations that include mobility, emotion, materiality, belonging, alienation" rooted in day-to-day practices. Crucially, these day-to-day practices, or intimacies, are connected to other forms of "everyday intimacies in other places and times" that articulate with political and economic geographies at a global scale. In the case of Northern Mexico and Southern Texas, things such as 'border security' and 'the war on drugs' mark the lives of people who inhabit this space and shape the ways they live their lives – for better or for worse. However, these contemporary processes cannot be unhinged from the long histories of oppression, aggression and colonization that produce this area as a bi-national territory of separate, bounded and contested imagined communities (Anderson 1983). Nor can these everyday practices be separated from the processes that propel the demand for drugs and guns as well as the corruption at multiple levels of government and authority that participate in the movement of such goods in the region.

Thus, the everyday is a set of practices and relations that connect people, places, and histories in intimate ways at multiple scales from the local to the global. Yet, in the context of ongoing violence and low intensity warfare that is occurring within a short living memory of a relatively more peaceful time, such as the situation in and around Esperanza, the everyday should also be thought of as a set of day-to-day practices alongside whatever (potential violence and destruction that) happens in a day. That is, the everyday can never really be anything more than whatever happens in a single day, since the threat of terminal violence is ever-present as one goes about one's day-to-day activities. As I will explain below, in Esperanza, the everyday may be nothing more than a mundane, uneventful and ordinary rhythm of life as before; it may be eight hours of street-to-street combat that brings the city to a grinding halt; or, it may be death. The violence and terror throw everyday life and previously established social norms into flux. The effect of this shifting, shattering meaning of the everyday reverberates through all aspects of individual and society life, which I hope to elucidate here in this chapter. In chapter four I will move to more fully develop my attempt to trouble the idea of the everyday in contexts of ongoing violence and terror, which I am presenting here. For the moment, however, what I want to foreground is that notions of the everyday are challenged and placed in flux as a result of the violence, terror and the shattering of individuals and society. With this in mind, I will now move to an analysis of (the dominant narratives of) the histories and political economies of Esperanza.

3.3 Place Making in Esperanza

Esperanza is a mid-sized Mexican city located along the US-Mexico border. As of the 2010 census, the Municipality of Esperanza had a population of 489,193 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía 2010). The municipality consists of the main city of Esperanza and 468 other towns and villages and has a total land area of 4,045.62 Km² (Gobierno del Estado de Tamaulipas 2014). The municipality is situated on the southern banks of the meandering Rio Bravo (known as the Rio Grande River in the US) in a wide, flat coastal plain relatively close to the Sierra Madre Occidental. According to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Michael Hogan (2013), the ecosystem is classified as subtropical, semi-tropical and semi-arid scrubland, an eco-region known as Tamaulipan mezquital or Tamaulipan thornscrub. The native vegetation

consists of spiny shrubs and trees, such as mesquite or sabal palms, as well as a strong presence of different grasses, and succulents (WWF and Hoggan 2013). The climate is hot, at times unbearably so, and humid.

The political geography of the city and surrounding area can be articulated through multiple lenses. Through the lens of indigenous political geographies, the land on which Esperanza is located was/is the traditional ancestral lands of the Coahuiltecan peoples and the Lipan Apache peoples. Richardson (1999) notes that at the time of the Spanish Invasion of what is now known as the Americas, the Coahuiltecan peoples had several communities in the region surrounding the Rio Bravo. For more than 200 years, the Coahuiltecan peoples aggressively prevented any sort of permanent European settler population from establishing itself in the region (Richardson 1999). In the early 1700s, the Lipan Apache people moved into the area after a forced migration that began 100 years earlier by the Comanche people from the Great Plains via the present-day San Antonio area (Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas 2014). Many Lipan Apache peoples agreed to Spanish land grants brokered directly with the Spanish Crown in what is now southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico (Tamez 2010).

Through the lens of (ongoing) settler colonialism, by the mid 1700s permanent settler populations began to make their homes in the region (Richardson 1999). The city of Esperanza was founded in 1774 (Gobierno del Estado de Tamaulipas 2014), and, at the time, was located deep within the Spanish colony of New Spain. According to Richardson (1999:6), by 1850 the Coahuiltecan peoples were “exterminated” from the region; however, I have personally met people in the area that claim Coahuiltecan heritage. It is more likely that many Coahuiltecan peoples now identify as Lipan Apache (who remain in the region today and are a legally recognized tribe in the state of Texas), or have been purposefully ‘erased’ from history by political elites through on-going processes of colonization. This erasure is not necessarily literal, but discursive through the figurative ‘obliterations’ of the Coahuiltecan peoples into the larger

categories of ‘Mexican’, ‘mestizo’, ‘Mexican American’, ‘Latino/a’ and/or ‘Hispanic’.⁷⁶ Within the logics of colonial settlerism and governmentality, it is easier to steal a people's land if they do not ‘exist’ anymore to claim it. There can be no such thing as indigenous rights and title if indigenous peoples don’t ‘exist’ anymore (in a discursive legal sense). As Ndé Lipan Apache activist and scholar, Margo Tamez, pointed out (personal communication, March 14, 2012) when speaking about the experience of indigenous peoples just across the border in the contemporary US:

The state conveniently ignores the indigeneity of those it identifies as ‘Mexican-Americans’, ‘Hispanics’, and ‘Latinos’ – as well as treaty-based Native Americans – as part of its longer practice of obscuring indigenous peoples’ special status claims to lands and mineral resources. The business of masking indigeneity under government-imposed identity theft is a contested arena [...]. The state’s impacts are incredibly disempowering, demeaning and diminishing in their short and long-term effects on the psyche.

Over time, as Zárate Ruiz (2005) outlines, Esperanza has been at the crossroads of conflict and war. Meaning that, throughout the history of colonial settlement, the city has been the centre from which colonial violence and terror was executed. It has also been at the centre of the violence of decisive battles between warring (neo)colonial powers. In addition to the continual displacement of indigenous peoples from their land and their resistance to such processes, the city was the site of several battles during the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821), Texas Independence (1835-1836), the French invasion and the ‘Pastry War’ (1836-1839), the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the American Civil War (1861-1865), and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921).

At the end of this more than 100 years of fighting and violence, much had changed in Esperanza. The city found itself at the edge of the Republic of Mexico as a result of the peace treaty at the

⁷⁶ Tamez (2010:148) also indicates that indigenous communities, including the Lipan Apache, “went underground as a steady form of resistance and as a strategy to stay on their lands in the Rio Grande [or Rio Bravo], Conochos and Nueces river watersheds”.

end of the Mexican-American War. The peace treaty, known as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, or the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement between the United States of America and the Mexican Republic designated the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande River as the international boundary between Mexico and the US. As a result of its new status as a border town, Esperanza became a crossroads of international trade and commerce, and was fast growing into a centre for cotton production. A period of relative peace from 1921 onwards allowed for new development projects (Zárate Ruiz 2005). One such peacetime development project was the diversion of some of the Rio Bravo flow into irrigation channels. The irrigation system allowed for a more intensive cotton industry as well as other forms of industrialized agricultural production to take hold firmly in the years following the Mexican Revolution (Zárate Ruiz 2005).

After 1921, a burgeoning population of farm labour began to arrive in the city to permanently reside and fill the demand for workers in the domestic cotton industry and the international demand for temporary farm labour in the US. At the outset of the Second World War, there was a relaxing of immigration policies to allow for temporary farm labour to enter the United States to work for the harvesting season and then return home – often to Mexico’s borderlands region (Scruggs 1963). After the war there were calls within the United States and Mexico to regularize the program and for tighter controls, which resulted in the creation of a temporary agricultural worker program called the Bracero Program (1942-1963), implemented in Texas in 1947 (Scruggs 1963).⁷⁷ In the early to mid-1960s, the city and region was hit hard by the collapse of the cotton industry (Zárate Ruiz 2005). Around this same time, the United States ended the Bracero program (Mac Lachlan and Aguilar 1997). The northern border states of Baja California Norte, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas became the primary receivers of the more than 200,000 people who suddenly found themselves without work (Mac Lachlan

⁷⁷ According to Scruggs (1963) Mexico was not interested in the Bracero Program or the ‘open border’ policies during WWII, yet there was a powerful and effective farm lobby in the United States that was successful in establishing the program. Mexico stipulated that the program be for temporary labour. Texas joined the program late due to the initial protest of farmers who preferred the previous system of ‘open borders’ which allowed for labour exploitation. Even when Texas acquiesced to the program, Mexico refused to allow Bracero workers to be sent to Texas citing high rates of worker exploitation, mistreatment and extreme racism. In 1947 the Mexican government agreed to send workers to Texas after a ‘goodwill’ trip made by the Texas governor.

and Aguilar 1997).⁷⁸ As a result, the Mexican government responded with the Border Industrialization Program and the maquiladora industry, a program that brings about industrialization and industrial growth through tax/tariff free import/export manufacturing zones (Mac Lachlan and Aguilar 1997).

Zárate Ruiz (2005) notes that some of the very first maquilas developed along the border were located in Esperanza. Yet, from the very beginning of the maquila program, the city has been the site of the most basic and rudimentary of manufacturing processes. Components of larger products were/are produced in Esperanza and shipped across the border to nearby cities in the USA where higher-paid, higher skilled labourers carried out the more complex or technologically advanced parts of the manufacturing process. The skill sets required for maquiladora sector jobs in Esperanza remained basic due to a lack of (or desire to invest in) appropriate infrastructure, ie. training and/or technical schools. Consequently, wages in the maquiladora sector in Esperanza were/are extremely low. While this is a characteristic of the maquiladora sector at large, Esperanza in particular attracted the very lowest of wage labour jobs, offering jobs to those who were made redundant in the agricultural sector. Over time, the low skill/low wage employment offerings began to give way to more skilled, higher wage labour with the development of education and technological infrastructure. The city's industrial sector was hit hard by an economic downturn in 2000, from which it has never recovered. The city today remains surrounded by agricultural land of which the primary crops are maize, okra (of this, the region is the largest producer in the world) and sorghum, and there still exists a maquila sector (Zárate Ruiz 2005), but these economies are beleaguered.⁷⁹ The region is characterized by intense, grinding poverty and extreme socio-economic disparity.

⁷⁸ Scruggs (1963) noted that more than half of the entire labour force enrolled in the Bracero Program was working in Texas. Although I cannot confirm this, I would imagine that this would have translated into those states in Mexico bordering Texas would have also received more than half of the unemployed workers who chose to stay in the region.

⁷⁹ Zárate Ruiz (2005:145) notes that other crops include aloe, beans, cabbage, canola, carrot, catnip, cilantro, chilli, cucumber, lettuce, melon, onions, several different kinds of oranges, pumpkin, purslane, radishes, rosemary, rue, sesame, sugarcane, sunflower, walnut, watermelon, quelites, and many other vegetables.

What is important to note from this brief political and economic history is that Esperanza is a place rooted in historical structural violences and terror that began with the colonial exploitation and dispossession of indigenous peoples and continues to the present with a neo-colonial dispossession of many of its citizens, both indigenous and not, from the possibility of any real measure of economic security. A long history of oppression and marginalization has produced an area of massive contrast and huge inequality where multiple and insidious forms of on-going mundane violences (contemporary colonialism and economic disparity) constitute the everyday rhythm of life. As Gloria Anzaldúa (1987:3) puts it, “the U.S-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds”.⁸⁰ I frame this history as a kind of (low intensity or creeping and insidious) reign of terror that has ebbed and flowed over time perpetrated (and perpetuated) by economic and political elites. This reign of terror has sought to marginalize and control the people of Esperanza by maintaining a status quo of dispossession, poverty and deprivation, while offering false prospects of *la buena vida* through low wage and exploitative labour.⁸¹ Yet, this is not the only way of understanding and interpreting the historical, political and economic geographies of Esperanza. There is another geography of place making that is completely intertwined with the story I have told thus far. It is that of organized crime, state collusion and militarization. These geographies are equally important to understand since many of the conditions under which they are crafted and permitted to flourish are in direct relation to the elite actors that populate, and largely determine the geography of place making that I have just described.

3.4 Another Kind of Place Making

This other geography of place making in Esperanza is that of the dominant narrative from governments and popular (news) media that places the city at the heart of a long-held stronghold of the *Cártel del Golfo*, also referred to here as the Gulf Cartel, or the Gulf.⁸² The organization

⁸⁰ ... is an open wound...

⁸¹ the good life

⁸² I use the term ‘cartel’ here because the organization is referred to as specifically the *Cártel del Golfo* (CDG), or Gulf Cartel. This is also how the organization refers to itself when signing *narco-mantes* (large banners with message from armed non-state actors). It should also be noted that, while I am framing this history as a dominant narrative woven by governments and popular (news) media as a way to bring a critical eye to the story, it does not mean that I think the entire narrative is false or untrue. Rather, it should never be forgotten that there is a high

began as a whisky bootlegging operation during the US prohibition era of the 1920s and 1930s (Castillo Garcia and Torres Barbosa 2003). The organization trafficked in whisky all along the international boundary between Texas and Tamaulipas. Because of this long-standing history, the Gulf Cartel has maintained deep and significant ties to Esperanza, which may often appear contradictory. On one hand the Gulf Cartel has been a source of violence, fear, and terror within the community and, on the other, it is a source of income and at times even great wealth for some people. It is often engaged in charity work within the community (Brophy 2008; Castillo Garcia and Torres Barbosa 2003), such as sponsoring *Día del Niño* celebrations in several towns in the region (Brophy 2008).⁸³

It was not until the 1980s when, under the direction of Juan García Abrego, the cartel became more directly involved in the trafficking of drugs into the US through their associations with the Colombian based Cali Cartel (Brophy 2008; Castillo Garcia and Torres Barbosa 2003). According to Lisa Brophy (2008), the role of the Gulf Cartel was primarily to transport and ensure the successful delivery of drugs, mainly cocaine, to Cali-affiliated distributors in the United States in exchange for a fee. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the relationship between the Cali and Gulf Cartels strengthened significantly, as the Cali Cartel drew on the service of the Gulf more heavily to transport goods via Mexico in response to the increasing efforts of US authorities to disrupt the Caribbean trafficking routes. During this time, Garcia Abrego brokered a major deal that would shape the power of the Gulf Cartel and the scope of its operations for almost the next 20 years. The deal determined that instead of paying for the transportation and protection service of the Gulf Cartel, the Cali Cartel would forfeit half of each cocaine shipment to the Gulf cartel. The Gulf would then be able to sell the drugs at their own risk, but for their own profits. As a result of the deal, the Gulf Cartel's wealth and power exploded (Brophy 2008). At one point the US Attorney General's Office attributed 20% of all illegal drugs consumed in the United States to Gulf Cartel smuggling activity (Castillo Garcia and Torres Barbosa 2003).

degree of state involvement in the creation and perpetuation of organized crime syndicates and that parts of the story may have come to prominence in an effort to provide cover for such and other activities. Simply, there may be (or, there is) more to the story than what is commonly circulated.

⁸³ Children's Day

In 1997, the formal relationship with the Cali Cartel ended (Castillo Garcia and Torres Barbosa 2003). Lisa Campbell (2010) notes that in about the same time, under the leadership of Osiel Cárdenas Guillen, the Gulf Cartel began organizing an ‘armed wing’ to act as a kind of security detail and enforcer.⁸⁴ The cartel was successful in recruiting Lieutenant Arturo Guzmán Decena who brought 30 soldiers from the Mexican Army’s *Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales* (GAFE) (Campbell 2010).⁸⁵ The GAFE is an elite air force unit. The US School of Americas (SOA) at Fort Benning trained at least one third of the force. The SOA is a US military school famous for teaching some of the most notorious and violently oppressive dictators and military officers in torture, population control and counter-insurgent warfare techniques (Negrete Lares 2003; SOA Watch 2012). This new security/enforcement group would become known as Los Zetas. By 2003, Los Zetas had expanded their forces to include an additional 300 members, but remained under the control of the Gulf Cartel. With Los Zetas, the Gulf Cartel expanded its territory and influence into at least 10 Mexican States as well as parts of the US, Central and South America (Brophy 2008; Campbell 2010). In 2010, Los Zetas separated from the Gulf Cartel. The separation has sparked a long and protracted battle over territory, especially in Northeastern Mexico, the cradle of Gulf power and authority (CNN Mexico 2011).

The increasing power of the cartel trafficking operations, and the violence associated with it, has long been a feature of life along the US/Mexico border and in Mexico more generally. It has been estimated that the drug trade in Mexico generates approximately three or four percent of the country’s annual gross domestic product, and it provides direct employment to at least half a million people (Shirk 2011). The growth and division of the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas has not occurred in a vacuum. The Mexican State has been involved, either publically or more invisibly in this rise of (internal) violent strife and terror. In addition to massive amounts of corruption throughout the entire state apparatus and impunity offered for the terror reaped by the armed non-state actors, in 2006, the state’s role in creating violence and strife dramatically increased when President Felipe Calderón declared war on organized crime (Lee 2014). This war has since

⁸⁴ This is the part of the dominant narrative that does not seem to add up entirely, since the *Cártel del Golfo* was already ‘armed’.

⁸⁵ Airmobile Special Forces Group

become known in news media and more popularly as the (so-called) ‘drug war’. That is, federal police, military and navy involvement in a supposed effort to end the activities of organized crime – primarily drug trafficking, but also other activities such as money laundering, extortion, and kidnapping. There had been militarized approaches to confronting organized crime in the past, such as President Fox’s Operation Secure Mexico, which was launched in Tamaulipas in 2005 (Davidson 2005; Vulliamy 2010). Yet, it is the scale at which the recent violence related to the so-called ‘drug war’ is occurring, the terror that it is creating, and the meticulous discursive framing of the state’s action as a ‘war on organized crime/drugs’ that mark this as a significant shift in policy.

This so-called ‘drug war’ has been executed with the massive support of the United States (Lee 2014). The US Department of State (2013) has cited Mexico as being “a major transit and source country for illicit drugs destined for the United States (including cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine), and as a centre for money laundering”. It has also brought about the deaths of at least 130,000 people and officially 27,000 disappearances (Molly 2013). Another by-product of the so-called ‘drug war’ is that some of the largest ‘cartels’ have now splintered into smaller groups that are no longer able to effectively coordinate drug trafficking on a large scale, but are still capable of engaging in other forms of criminal activities such as kidnapping and extortion (Guerrero Gutiérrez 2011).⁸⁶ Furthermore, the state’s actions have also thrown (and are constantly throwing) delicate structures of power within these organizations of armed non-state actors into chaos. This usually results in violent conflict as people vie for positions of authority and control. These times of internal strife are often accompanied by aggressive actions from rival organizations as they try to exploit moments of structural weakness to make grabs for territory and/or other spoils of war. Thus, Mexico’s so called ‘drug war’ has actually produced more of what it purports to be ending while concomitantly bringing about more insecurity, violence, terror and death for citizens who are in the crosshairs of the conflict.

⁸⁶ At the time of writing, in addition to many smaller splinter groups, some of the larger and more well-known crime organizations in Mexico include the Gulf Cartel, the Juárez Cartel, the Knights Templar, the Sinaloa Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel and the Los Zetas Cartel (Lee 2014).

The region surrounding Esperanza first saw a marked escalation in organized crime related violence in 2004 and 2005 when the Sinaloa Cartel attempted to take control of an important trafficking corridor (Glaister 2005). Later in 2005 the government launched the military campaign, Operation Secure Mexico. The campaign consisted of deploying 700 security forces in the Esperanza area, setting up multiple check points and raiding more than 150 buildings (Davidson 2005). The operation resulted in several arrests and seizures of drugs and weaponry (Davidson 2005). Yet this was not the end of military and federal police presence in the city. According to multiple interviewees there has been a strong presence of regular federal forces in Esperanza ever since. The military and navy have been permanently stationed in the city since 2010. Their presence is not entirely viewed as a positive development for residents in the city, nor is there a sense of greater security. When I asked Alejandro, a march participant, how he feels about the military and if he feels safe with their presence in the city, he responded as follows:

La verdad, no. Los servidores públicos tienen muy mala fama en México. Entonces, era algo incómodo. No sabías si en realidad están allí para defenderte o si va a haber algún problema con ellos o si te van a querer extorsionar. Quiero pensar que es mejor que esté allí el ejército. En la policía hay mucha corrupción. No digo que en el ejército no la haya, pero como están más entrenados a su disciplina y eso. Sí hay rumores, como siempre, que están con tal cartel o tal otro, y así, pero son rumores. No puedo afirmar nada, pero tampoco lo dudo.⁸⁷

I followed up Alejandro's statement by asking who he believes offers the people of Esperanza more protection, the military or the Gulf Cartel. He responded: ¡“Muy buena pregunta! ¡La

⁸⁷ The truth is no! Public servants have a bad reputation in Mexico. So, it was uncomfortable. You don't know if they are there to defend you or if there'll be some kind of problem, or they're going to want to extort you. I want to think that it's better that the military is there. There is a lot of corruption in the police. I'm not saying that there isn't [corruption] with the military, but seeing as they are trained to be disciplined and all that. Yes, there are rumours, as always, that they are with this cartel or that one, and whatever, but they are rumours. I can't confirm anything, but I don't doubt them!

*verdad, no sé! Más bien creo que cada quien de ellos protejan sus propios intereses sobre el pueblo”.*⁸⁸

I asked Carlos the same question to which he responded in a similar fashion as Alejandro.

*Con nadie porque todos están juntos. Todos son... nunca sabes si son honestos. Ninguno de ellos son honestos. Todos son revueltos. Entonces, en cada lugar hay gente del cartel, tanto como la policía, los soldados, tratando de tomar hierro. Entonces nunca te puedes sentir seguro aun que hay ejército, tanto como los marines porque no te puedes sentir seguro porque entre ellos mismos hay ‘gente’ [corrupta].*⁸⁹

The presence of the military in Esperanza brings about a certain degree of instability and insecurity. As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, there is a palpable fear that the arrival of the military in certain moments means a dramatically increased possibility of violent conflict.⁹⁰

In addition to the violence wrought by the military, the violent internal conflicts have divided the city along the fault lines between the now warring Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas. Given that prior to 2010, Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel operated as a single unit there was no conflict over territory between the two. After their split in 2010, the cartel’s political geography changed drastically. Subsequently, Esperanza has been the site of innumerable street battles between the two warring groups.

⁸⁸ Very good question! The truth is that I don’t know! More than anything, I believe that each of them protect their own interests over the people.

⁸⁹ With no one because they are all together. They are all... you never know if they are honest. None of them are honest. They are all corrupt. So, in every place there are people from the cartel, and likewise the police, the soldiers, so you can never feel safe even if there is the military or the marines. You can’t feel safe because within them [police, military, marines] there are always [corrupt] people.

⁹⁰ Anecdotaly, people also commented to me that, although the military presence in the city is not entirely welcome and the need to completely disband the police was concerning, their break up has meant that there is (or there feels to be) less targeting and extortion of gay people by authorities. This does not seem to be the case for Orquídea, a trans women with whom I spoke with, as she noted, sadly, that she is still harassed on a regular basis by military and other ‘security’ forces in Esperanza.

As a result of the multiple, interconnected, violent military/navy and armed non-state forces in the city there have been several intense shoot outs within and between cartels and authorities, including massive shootouts that have engulfed the entire centre of the city (BH 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Burnett 2009; MM 2011a; MM 2011b; Ortiz 2013; Vulliamy 2010). In addition to the shootouts within and between armed non-state actors and/or the military, there also have been instances of beheadings and the disposal of mutilated or burned bodies in public areas around the city (El Universal 2012), as well as several grenade attacks on public spaces. The targets of grenade attacks include the General Hospital, the downtown pedestrian mall, a police station, a car dealership, two schools, multiple times on multiple television stations, as well as multiple times on the Attorney General's office (Borderland Beat 2011; BH 2011; Chapa 2012; KRVG 2012; MM 2012a; MM 2013b; VMS 2012).

This is the state of place making in Esperanza. It is a place on the frontlines of the so-called 'drug war' in which the violent actions of armed state and non-state actors coalesce to create a reign of terror that brings with it fear and death. It is a place that is shattering as a result of unpredictable and sporadic violence and ongoing terror. But this frontline does not just mark the city; it also marks people's bodies. It marks the bodies of those who are injured during conflict. It marks the minds and memories of those who witness violent events, or hear about them from friends, family and acquaintances. These are times that will not be easily forgotten.

At the beginning of the chapter, I shared one of the scariest and most surreal moments of my life. It is something I will never forget; my fear, my shame, and my disbelief at what was occurring right outside my door. That is a part of my story, but what of the stories that were shared with me? I will now turn to some of these stories to illuminate the more personal and intimate ways that everyday life is being shattered by the violence in Esperanza.

3.5 Violence, Terror and the Shattering of the Everyday

My argument in this chapter is that recent violence and terror in Esperanza is shattering the lives of individuals, and shattering the collective life of society. By using the term 'shatter/ing', I do not mean to suggest death or complete breakdown. This just simply is not a reflection of

contemporary life in Esperanza. What I mean by shattering is akin to a rupture or discordance with the rhythm of life as it was before. This is not to say that before was non-violent and now is violent. This is not the case. As I have mentioned, many different kinds of relatively insidious forms of subdued violence pervade life in Esperanza. The foundation of the rhythm of quotidian life is this insidious violence. Esperanza now confronts a different kind of violence – a vastly more deadly and war-like violence that terrorizes and has broken from life as it was before. For me, the only way to understand the impact of the violence and terror is to listen to the stories told to me, to share some of them here, and to think about how people's lives are impacted by the destruction that occurs to and around them. In this way, I believe, a multitude of shattering geographies at varying scales comes into relief.

I will begin with a few stories from Alfredo, a 34-year-old gay cis-male living with AIDS and an HIV/AIDS activist. He participated in the march as a marcher, but also as a dancer in some of the post-march festivities. I have chosen to begin with Alfredo's stories because he offers a broad and sweeping analysis of life in Esperanza that captures some of the historical narratives discussed earlier. Alfredo and I met one day in the early afternoon at my hotel.

Tengo toda la vida aquí en [Esperanza]. Soy originaria de de [Esperanza]. Tengo muchos amigos y muchos conocidos. Es un ambiente que al principio fue muy tranquilo, pero actualmente, en cuestiones de seguridad y de delincuencia, sí se vio un poco afectado. Estamos hablando alrededor de hace cinco o seis años cuando se vio un diferente status de seguridad. Entonces, sí antes, vamos a decir que hace diez años, cuando yo era más joven, salíamos al antro, salíamos y no teníamos el problema de caminar un kilómetro o dos kilómetros de distancia y sin ningún problema. Ahorita en la actualidad no podemos salir ni a tres cuadras porque ya hay un enfrentamiento o hay algún incidente de inseguridad. Entonces, sí hay que cuidarnos un poquito más. Las noches aquí en [Esperanza] antes eran muy dinámicas, entrabas a una discoteca y luego vas a otra, era de estar conociendo diferentes puntos, pero ahorita en la actualidad estás en un lugar o estás en otro. Entonces sí ha cambiado mucho la dinámica de la seguridad aquí en [Esperanza]. La gente es... cuando yo era chico me recuerdo de que era

prácticamente toda la población era de aquí de [Esperanza]. No había población foránea. Luego empezó la industria maquiladora aquí en [Esperanza]. Empezaron a llegar muchas gentes de otras partes del país, de Veracruz, del Yucatán. Llegan, estabilizan y luego hay unos movimientos [de los carteles y/o violencia] y empiezan a ir los maquiladores a otras partes, y se empieza a ver un desempleo, empieza a ver más de esos movimientos. Entonces mucha de la gente se opta a dedicarse al comercio informal y/o a la delincuencia organizada. Entonces, sí antes [Esperanza] hace unos quince años era un [Esperanza] mucho muy diferente de lo que es ahorita en cuestión de seguridad, en cuestión de empleo, en todas las cuestiones. [...] Aparte de ver a la violencia, la forma de reunirse ahorita ya es diferente a como era antes. Ya no nos reunimos como antes de que nos reuniéramos en una discoteca y eran las cuatro, cinco, seis, o siete de la mañana. Entonces sí ahora es mucho muy diferente de cómo era antes. No me ha tocado afuera de mi casa que en algún convivo que regrese que me encuentre un militar o alguna autoridad porque trato de siempre estar en los caminos, no me voy a topar con este tipo de movimientos.

Hace aproximadamente cuatro años cerca de mi casa, que es tu casa, hubo un enfrentamiento en donde murieron alrededor de quince personas. Este, se escuchaba como si estuviéramos en Iraq o como si estuviéramos en una zona de guerra, sí, con granadas, disparos. Mi familia y yo con el pecho a tierra, sí, acostados para que no nos pasara nada, ninguna tragedia, ninguna lesión. Entonces, de allí mi mamá, 'no salgas, no salgas, no salgas'. Pero siempre lo he dicho, a donde andes, aun andes con amigos, aunque andes comprando el mandado para la comida, donde estés puede llegar a suceder algo. Sí, es muy diferente anteriormente la vida en [Esperanza], pero ya con la llegada de los movimientos militares se puede sentir según un poquito más seguros pero a la vez con la desconfianza que en algún momento puede haber un enfrentamiento. Nunca esperábamos estar en esta situación.⁹¹

⁹¹ I have been in Esperanza my whole life. I am originally from here. I have a lot of friends and acquaintances. It is a place that was tranquil at first, but actually, in questions of security and delinquency, yes, I see things being affected. We are talking about five or six years ago when I started to see a difference in the state of security. So, if before, let's say 10 years ago, when I was younger, we would go to the bar, we'd go out and have to walk a distance of a kilometre or two without any problem. Right now, in actuality, we can't even go three blocks and there is a

What strikes me about Alfredo's story is the definitive demarcation of time. There is a distinct 'before' and 'after', 'then' and 'now' in his narrative. The awareness of a different time in Esperanza when life was different – *más tranquilo* – gestures to the shattering of everyday life and of society.⁹² In Alfredo's narrative, there is a disconnection from what things used to be like and what they are like now. He alludes to a time when going out into the streets, whether this be for a night on the town or to run day-to-day errands was not a cause for concern or worry. He also notes a change in the way people go out and get together with one another. Yet, there also has been a change in what 'going out' comes to signify – it becomes a much more conscious and deliberate act. Alfredo demonstrates an awareness that violence can unfold at any moment. Additionally, Alfredo incorporates imagery of other situations of war suggesting that, while he may not see his circumstances as the same as those who live in an 'official' war zone, he does see them as comparable, or at least that the historical moment in Esperanza is indeed war-like. Finally, towards the end of this passage, Alfredo subtly challenges the idea that the military presence in the city is actually bringing about peace and security. In fact, similar to Alejandro

[violent] clash or some kind of security incident. So, yes we have to take care a little more. Before, the nights here in [Esperanza] were very dynamic, you'd go to a disco and then later go to another, it was about getting to know different places, but now, you are in one place or the other. So, yes, the security dynamic has changed a lot here in [Esperanza]. The people are... when I was a kid I remember that almost the entire population was from here in [Esperanza]. There weren't any strangers. Then the Maquiladora industry started in Esperanza. Then lots of people started to arrive from other parts of the country, from Veracruz, from the Yucatan. They arrived, then stabilized, and then later there were some [cartel and/or violent] movements, and then the maquiladoras started to go to other places, then we started to see unemployment, then we started to see more those [cartel and/or violent] movements. So, lots of people opted to dedicate themselves to the informal sectors and/or organized delinquency. So, yes, [Esperanza] 15 years ago was an [Esperanza] very much different from what it is right now in questions of security, in questions of employment, in all aspects. Now that we see the violence, the way we get together now is different from what it was like before. Now we don't get together like before in a disco and be there until four, five six, seven in the morning. So, yes, it is much more different than what it was like before. It hasn't happened to me where I've encountered military or any other authority on my way home from a get-together because I always try to take the routes home that I know I will not be stopped by those kinds of [people].

Approximately four years ago, close to my house, which is your house, too, there was a clash where about 25 people died. It sounded like we were in Iraq, like were in a war zone, yes, with grenades and gun shots. My family and I were with our chests to the ground, yes, lying down so that nothing would happen to us, no tragedy, no injuries. So, after that my mom [said], 'Don't go out, don't go out'. But I told her, wherever you go, even if your with friends, even if you're out shopping for groceries, wherever you are something could happen. Yes, life before was very different in Esperanza, but now with the military movements you can feel a bit safer, *apparently*, but at the same time with the distrust that at any moment there can be a clash. We never thought we'd be in this situation.

⁹² more tranquil

and Carlos, he is distrustful of the ‘security’ forces, and like Marisol, he knows that with the military comes a heightened risk of violent clashes.

The identification of a ‘before’ and ‘after’ is not unique to Alfredo. All of the people I spoke with, on both sides of the border, spoke in terms of ‘before’ and ‘after’ or ‘now’. When I asked people when things began to change, there was consensus that it was about three or four years prior. Despite there being no specific date that delineates the beginning of the way things are now, there is one moment in particular that seems to stick out as a watershed moment. It is the moment when shattering life in Esperanza and has never really been the same since. According to one of the South Texas border city newspapers (BH 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), on November 5th, 2010 the city of Esperanza was rocked by approximately eight hours of fighting. Huge portions of the city were effectively shut down as the supposed recent break-up of the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas spilled into the streets of Esperanza. The military and other security forces were quick to get involved, making the situation even more explosive and dire. The fighting resulted in at least 50 deaths, caused the closing of the international bridges between Esperanza and Sister City and the university in Sister City (BH 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). One resident of Sister City told me that there was so much thick smoke from the explosions and gunfire that it filled the streets of Sister City. Alfredo related to me his experiences of that day:

Hace dos años hubo un enfrentamiento muy feo en que cerraron calles, cerraron avenidas, los puentes. Yo trabajaba a las afueras de la ciudad y para llegar a mi casa fue muy difícil para llegar, porque cada calle donde yo llegaba estaba tapada. Tenía que buscarle un alternativo para llegar a mi casa. De mi trabajo a mi casa hacía media hora; en ese día hice cerca de dos horas y media para poder llegar a mi casa. Sí, fue un momento muy difícil, un momento muy feo en donde observaba que todas las calle principales, todas las avenidas que yo transitaba estaban bloqueadas pero no por automóviles de dependencias del gobierno o automóviles de seguridad. Sí, no por camiones, por tráileres, colectivos, autobuses, cosas que en [Esperanza] jamás se había visto así de esa magnitud. Donde yo trabajaba era un extremo de la ciudad, y la oficina central de mi trabajo estaba en otra parte y hablé para ver lo que estaba pasando y mi

compañera me dijo, oye, parece que estamos en Irak porque hay balacera y estamos escondidos en el cuarto de baño. Sí, la oficina estaba a la orilla de la calle donde estaba el enfrentamiento y ellos tuvieron que ir hasta el fondo a una bodega adentro de un baño para esconderse para que les pasara nada. Cerraron la oficina, cerraron todo y se fueron hasta el fondo y más que nada por el miedo que no pueda pasar algo. Te digo, este día fue como un día de película, con camiones volteados... era muy feo el panorama de ese día. Fue muy fuerte. Fue muy fuerte. Y cuando salí de mi trabajo mi mamá me llamó, 'oye, vente con cuidado, toda la ciudad está bloqueada'. Pero donde yo estaba en las afueras de la ciudad en ese momento no se sentía nada de eso, pero nos dijeron, 'saben que, vamos a cerrar temprano porque hay mucho movimiento y va a ser difícil para ustedes llegar a su domicilio'. Y yo, 'bueno, está bien, nos vamos'. Ya saliendo de allí entrábamos a la ciudad, a la zona centro [...] y me tocó la ocasión de estar en bloqueo. Subió una persona del crimen organizado y nos dice, 'de la manera más atenta se les suplicamos que se bajen del transporte porque va a haber un bloqueo y vamos a utilizar el transporte para bloquear esta calle, así que sin hacer ni un grito ni nada les pido que por favor que bajen del transporte y continúen con su trayecto'. Fue muy amable y no fue agresivo. [...] Pero sí, me tocó una persona del crimen organizado que me dijo 'bájense de la manera más atenta porque el camión ya está tomado para bloquear una avenida'. Bueno, pues, ni modo. Teníamos que hacerlo, y no hacer ningún escándalo. Pues, vámonos y seguimos con nuestro camino. Y había bloqueo, tras bloqueo, tras bloqueo. Si no estaba una calle, tenía que dar la vuelta por otro lado y si no... era como un juego de Tetris que tenía que ir buscando la salida para poder llegar a mi casa. Y había gente buscando a sus hijos o tratando de recoger a sus hijos en las escuelas. Sí fue un escenario muy difícil.⁹³

⁹³ About two years ago there was an ugly clash in which they closed streets, they closed avenues, the bridges. I worked on the outskirts of the city and it was very difficult to get to my house because every street that I tried to take was blocked. I had to look for alternatives to get to my house. From my work to the house would take 30 minutes, but that day it took close to two-and-a-half hours to get to my house. Yes, it was a very difficult moment, a very ugly moment when one observes all of the streets, all of the principle streets that I would use were blocked but not by government vehicles or security vehicles. No, but [they were blocked] by busses, by trailers, collective transit, and interurban buses, things that I had never seen before in [Esperanza] to such a degree. Where I worked was at the extreme limit of the city and the central office was in another part. I called to see what was going on and my co-worker told me, listen, it seems like we are in Iraq because there is a shootout. And we are hiding out in a

Alfredo relates his experiences to that of a video game or movie. It is as though the listener (or the reader) is required to suspend their expectations of reality. And yet, he complicates the stereotype of the ‘gangster role’ in this life-as-a-movie scene by noting the politeness of the person who hijacked the bus he was on. This fragment of Alfredo’s life provides a glimpse into the process of making sense of one’s life when the world around you is being torn asunder. By placing his experiences in relation to something known and safe, like video games or movies, Alfredo is able to rationalize and normalize (to the best that one can) the violence and terror that he is experiencing in his life. By relating the experience to everyday norms or more familiar and mundane activities or objects, a semblance of ‘normal’, life-as-before is created.

Lilia, an ally to the activist organizers, elaborated more on this process in our interview when we were discussing negotiating violent situations and the prospect of death that they present. She states:

Interiormente estás consiente que sí hay riesgo, pero tu consciencia te protege de una manera y dices, ‘a mí no me va a pasar.’ Lo ves lejos de tu realidad o lejos de tu

room in the bathroom. Yes, the office was just around the corner from where the clash was taking place and they had to go to the very back of the office and into a storage closet in the washroom to hide to make sure that nothing would happen to them. I’m telling you, that day was like something out of a movie, with buses flipped over... it was an ugly panorama that day. It was very hard. It was very hard. And when I left my work my mom called me [and said], ‘listen, come with care, the whole city is blocked’. But where I was on the outskirts, in that moment it didn’t feel like any of that, but they told us, ‘You know what, we are going to close early, there is a lot of dangerous movement and it’s going to be difficult for you to get home’. And me, ‘well, it’s okay. Let’s go’. And leaving from there we entered the central zone of the city [...] and I then had the occasion to be a part of a blockade. A person from organized crime got onto the bus and he told us, ‘We request that you get off the bus because there is going to be a blockade and we are going to use this bus to block this street. Just like that without even a scream, I am asking you, please, to get out of the bus and continue on your way’. He was very nice and he was not aggressive. [...] Yes, I had a person from organized crime that told me, ‘Get out in an attentive manner because this bus has been taken to block this avenue.’ Okay, well, that’s the way it is. We have to do it and without making a scene. Well, let’s go and we carried on our way. There was blockade, after blockade, after blockade. If one street was blocked then we had to turn around and take the other way, and if not... it was like a game of Tetris that I had to go looking for the exit in order to arrive at my house. And there were people looking for their children or trying to get their kids from their schools. Yes, it was a very difficult scenario.

*enterno. [...] A lo mejor lo relacionas con algo irreal, pero te da la tranquilidad de alguna forma. Entonces, eso es como nosotros lo manejamos.*⁹⁴

These are the fragments of shattering life in Esperanza. November 5th, 2010 has become an infamous day in the history of Esperanza. It is a moment in which people will always recall where they were and what happened.

Two march participants, Marco and Orquídea, also related their experience of that now notorious day in Esperanza. Marco is a young gay cis-male who moved to Esperanza about 8 years ago from the city of Veracruz. He also is a talented clothier and designed some of the most stunning dresses (in my opinion) for the performance at the post-march festivities. Unfortunately, his talents have yet to earn him enough money to support himself, so he works at a clothing store in the city. Orquídea is a middle-aged trans woman who owns and operates her own beauty salon. She moved to Esperanza about 30 years ago from Monterrey, where she was born and raised. In addition to the beauty salon, Orquídea is an entertainer and used to work in bars and clubs throughout Northeastern Mexico but in recent years has kept closer to home. Both of them were at work in the city centre, Marco at the clothing store and Orquídea at her beauty salon, when the street combat erupted.

For Marco and Orquídea the memories are vivid enough to recall not only the visuals of that day, but also the specific time of events and the sounds associated with them. Orquídea told her story with much enthusiasm and excitement. She laughed and smiled as she recalled the events.

Marco's expressions were a bit more sombre. He chuckled at some of the facial expressions and hand gestures that accompanied Orquídea's story, but was straight-faced when he told me about his experience in the store. He did not share much, only what I have quoted below, and did not seem interested in sharing too much more. Orquídea did most of the talking. They shared their stories with me one evening at Orquídea's salon:

⁹⁴ Inside yourself, you are aware that there is a risk, but your conscience protects you in some way and you say, 'nothing is going to happen to me'. You see [the situation] far from your reality, or far from your inner self. [...] It could be that you relate it all to something unreal, but it gives you tranquillity of some kind. So, that's how we handle the situation.

Orquídea: *Eso fue un Noviembre tremendo, eh, la verdad. ¡Y tú estabas en la tienda!*

Marco: *Sí, de hecho, a mí me tocó estar en mi tienda a unas dos cuadras de donde fue todo. Y si fue muy fea [la situación].*

Alex: *¿Duró ocho horas, no?*

Orquídea: *Sí, empezó en el sur de la ciudad como de la 10:30, 11 de la mañana y las cuatro de tarde seguía. Fue un recorrido por toda la ciudad.*

Marco: *En el centro empezó como las 2:30. Y te digo, estaba trabajado como unas dos cuadras y estuvimos encerrados desde las 2:30 y no nos dejaron salir hasta las seis o siete de la tarde.*

Alex: *Que fuerte.*

Orquídea: *Sí, fue mucho tiempo. Y ese día yo tenía [a una clienta] que se iba a casar este día. La maquillé, y la peiné y puse su velo, y dejé las pestañas hasta a final. Puse una y estaba a punto de poner la otra veo que empiezan manotear una señora afuera. [Me dijo] que no sé qué, que no sé, que los automóviles. Dije, ¿qué pasó? Y me fui a tocar la ventana y me dice que hay balazos. Y con eso escuché, tak-tak, y taka-taka-taka-taka. Una cosa impresionante. ¡Muy impresionante!*

Alex: *Bueno, hasta que en [Sister City] tiene historias de este día.*

Orquídea: *Sí, pero muy impresionante.*

Marco: *Se escucharon, de hecho, granadazos, helicópteros y todo eso. Se escuchaba bien feo.*

Orquídea: *Yo estaba a unas cuadras más retirado de la balacera, pero se escuchaba como si fuese aquí en frente. Era impresionante el sonido y ese lugar con su techo de madera. Y mi clienta estaba tratando de comunicarse con su teléfono y su radio, ¡y no le contestaban porque cortaron la señal!*

Marco: *No había señal, no había recargas, y allí yo estaba con toda la gente que quedó adentro encerrado en la tienda con un pánico que ves en la gente. De hecho me tocó ver cuando llevaron a un chavo cargando todo ensangrentado y todo eso.*

Orquídea: *Y yo aquí en este lugar con las ventanas grandes y el techo de madera, y ni donde de esconderme. ¡Gracias a dios nada me pasó!*

Marco: *Y de hecho, en este mismo mes después de la balacera, a unas dos semanas, es cuando tiraron las granadas en la peatonal. Y se creció más el pánico de que pasó la balacera, y a dos semanas otra balacera, y luego los granadas. De hecho ya fue allí en la peatonal, y ya sabes que bastante gente transita por allí. Entonces, fue un tiempo en de que la gente ya no salía, y después nos vamos acostumbrando, ya pues empezó a salir. Ahorita ya lo ven mas como cotidiana.*⁹⁵

The consequences of that November 5th, 2010 reverberate far beyond the personal lives and stories shared by a few residents in Esperanza. Shortly after that day, the local police force in Esperanza was permanently disbanded due to corruption. According to Adam Isacson and Maureen Meyer (2013: Np), the Calderón government unilaterally disbanded the police forces in several cities, including Esperanza, as they were seen to be “incorrigibly controlled by organized crime”. Since then, the military and marines have become a permanent fixture in the city.

⁹⁵ Orquídea: The truth is, that was an awful November. And you were at the store!

Marco: Yes, in fact, I was in my store, which was two blocks from where it all happened. And yes, it was really ugly.

Alex: It lasted for eight hours, no?

Orquídea: Yes. It started in the south of the city at 10:30 or 11 in the morning, and at 4 in the afternoon they were still carrying on. It was a tour of the whole city.

Marco: In downtown it started at 2:30. I’m telling you I was working two blocks away and we were enclosed in the store from 2:30 and they didn’t let us leave until six or seven in the evening.

Alex: How horrible!

Orquídea: Yes, it was a long time. And that day I had [a client] that was going to get married. And I was putting on her makeup, doing her hair, I put on her veil, and I said, I’ll leave the eyelashes until the end. I put on one and I was just about to put on the other when I saw a woman waving her hands at me. I don’t know, I don’t know, something about the cars. I said, what’s going on? So I went to the window and she says to me that there’s a shootout. And then I heard tak-tak, and taka-taka-taka-taka. It was striking, very striking.

Alex: Well, even in [Sister City] they have stories about that day.

Orquídea: Yes, it was very striking.

Marco: In fact, huge grenades could be heard, helicopters, all that. It sounded so ugly.

Orquídea: I was a few blocks further away from the shootout, but it sounded like it was happening right here in front. The sound was terrible and [being] in this place with its wooden roof. And my client was trying to use her phone and her radio, but nobody answered because they had cut the signals.

Marco: There was no signal, there were no recharges, and there I was with all the people all closed up in the store in a panic that you could see in the people. In fact, I saw them carrying away a young guy all bloody and all that.

Orquídea: And me, here in this place with the huge windows and the wooden roof and nowhere to hide. Thank God nothing happened to me!

Marco: In fact, in that same month after that shootout, like two weeks after, is when they threw grenades on the pedestrian mall. And then the panic grew because there was the shootout, and then two weeks later another shootout, and then the grenades. In fact, it happened there in the pedestrian mall, and you know there are a lot of people there. So, that was when people were not going out, but after we became accustomed to it and then people started going out again. Now people see it as a part of the quotidian.

However, as mentioned earlier, these government forces do not necessarily represent security, peace and tranquillity. Many of the people I spoke with, as well as myself, have deep reservations and mistrust of authority in Mexico. In addition to the ramping-up of militarized forces, the Gulf Cartel was significantly weakened that day by the death of one of its leaders, Ezequiel ‘Tony Tormenta’ Cardenas Guille (BH 2010c). According to information gathered through informal conversations with people in Esperanza and Sister City, the death of Cardenas Guillen created a power vacuum that was followed by more fighting within the Gulf Cartel, more attacks by Los Zetas trying to exploit the weakened position of the Gulf, and more campaigns by the military.

It is not only life in Esperanza that is shattering because of violence and terror. The conflicts born out of warring armed state and non-state actors have significantly altered life elsewhere in the state and throughout Mexico. The violence and terror in the countryside keeps many people from travelling between cities, especially at night. Jacobo shared his experience with me while he was working the night shift at the hotel where I was staying. Jacobo is a good friend of Raúl and Carlos, and when he fell on hard times a few months prior to my arrival in Esperanza, Raúl offered him a job. I came to know Jacobo reasonably well given that he worked most nights, but he also worked long hours during the day with Carlos and I on the floats. He is a funny and talented 32-year-old gay cis-male and former (and the first!) winner of the Miss Tamaulipas Drag Queen competition. One very early morning we sat in the lobby and he shared a few stories with me. The following is an excerpt from our discussion regarding why he no longer travels around doing drag performance:

Lo que pasa es que, yo gané un evento, se llama ‘Miss Tamaulipas’, entonces, cuando uno gana este tipo de evento, se dedica a viajar a muchas partes, sí, todo lo que es el estado, Monterrey, México, todas partes. Entonces, en este entonces cuando yo gané el evento me hablaban mucho para ir a Ciudad Mante, a Tampico, Monterrey, Victoria, todo eso, a [otras ciudades en la frontera]. Este, entonces viajaba mucho, prácticamente cada fin de semana, o cada 15 días, o cada mes, depende de los eventos que me contrataba. Entonces, como antes no había mucha inseguridad yo viajaba mucho, y de

un cierto momento de por acá, estoy hablando de hace cuatro, cinco años, empezó a ver mucha inseguridad, mucha, mucha inseguridad en todos parte. Por decir, viajaban por la noche, y había muchas historias en las noticias que se subían [los de los carteles] a los camiones y los asaltaban o secuestraban a unas personas o desaparecían familiares – mucha inseguridad. Entonces, el miedo de la gente era a viajar porque tal vez les puede pasar algo. [...] Entonces, no viajaba porque se ponía feo en otras partes, pero viajaba mucho todavía a [ciudades cercanas por la frontera]. Entonces una vez fui a hacer un show hace como dos años. Andaba en mi carro con una amiga. Se nos hizo fácil, pues vamos. Y nos fuimos. Y como ella y yo tenemos años de viajar por allá, y no había ningún problema en el camino. Entonces, al regreso oímos en las noticias que estaba muy feo por allá. Y en el regreso a nosotros se nos hizo muy raro que no había ningún carro ni nada. De hecho antes de irnos la gente nos decía que tuviéramos cuidado, que no nos viniéramos por allí, pero nosotros nos venimos por allí. Y había en la carretera carros quemados, carros volteados por todos lados. No había gente, no había ningún carro. Entonces, sí nos dio un poco de inseguridad. Digo, nada nos pasó, pero vimos muchas cosas que no nos gustaron. Entonces ahora sí tengo que ir a Ciudad Mante o algo así, llamo a mis amigos para ver cómo está la situación, y me dicen que no, que está muy mal, que el camión está mal, pero tal vez me voy, pero luego no puedo regresar o algo me pasa en el camino. Mucha gente me dice, está muy feo, entonces me quedo ya. [...] Pero no es normal. Nosotros queremos una ciudad más tranquila, queremos salir, convivir y viajar. ¡Queremos estar libres de expresión, vaya! Pero mucha de las veces por las balaceras o cosas de ese grado, la gente se asusta.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ So, I won an event called ‘Miss Tamaulipas’, and when one wins this kind of event they dedicate themselves to travelling to many different parts, all over the state, to Monterrey, to Mexico City, all over. So, back then, when I won the event I was getting calls to go to Ciudad Mante, to Tampico, Monterrey, Victoria, all these kinds of places, to Nuevo Laredo. So, I travelled a lot, almost every weekend, or every 15 days, or once a month, depending on the events that contracted me. Given that there wasn’t much insecurity I would travel a lot, but at some point in time, I’m talking like four or five years ago, we started to see a lot of insecurity, a lot, a lot of insecurity all over. I mean, people would travel at night and there were stories in the news that people from the cartels would hijack buses and assault people or kidnap them or disappear family members – a lot of insecurity. So people were afraid to travel because something might happen to them. So I didn’t travel because things were getting ugly everywhere, but I did still go to [close-by border towns]. One time, I went to do a show about two years ago. I went in my car with a friend. It seemed easy, so we went. She and I had been travelling on that road for years and there wasn’t a single problem on the way there. When we went to return we heard on the news that it was really bad around there. And

The reluctance to travel has impacts on the broader community. There is a hesitation, at the least, if not outright fear to travel from one place to another. For the most part, this fear applies to travel in between communities as this often means crossing through disputed territory or across fault lines between armed actors. Yet, this can very often mean a hesitation to travel within cities as well. In economic terms, the fear of travelling to Esperanza, or between Esperanza and other places in the region has severely affected the tourism sector. In addition to a stemming of domestic tourism, there has been almost a complete halt of tourists from the US to Esperanza (Rodriguez 2014). This has led to the closure of restaurants, bars, hotels and shops. The fear of travel also places strains on family ties. For example, Raúl had gone many years without visiting his aging parents because of the terrorizing violence that occurs in and around his home town of San Fernando. Another example is Alfredo who has not seen his sister or nephews for three years because they live in the US and refuse to come to Esperanza, and Alfredo does not have a visa to travel to the US. This is but another way violence and terror affects everyday life. It tears at the fabric of family and other social relations by instilling a fear to engage in everyday activities, such as travelling to visit people or going out for a night on the town. Ultimately, this has direct impacts on the maintenance of social ties with family and friends.

These wide-spread impacts of the violence and terror affect all of society, yet they play out in particular ways that create deeper implications for GSM communities. The following quote from Jacobo sheds light on this difference:

on the way back it was very strange because we didn't see a single other vehicle. In fact, before we left people were telling us to be careful and to not go that way, but we went that way. And on the highway there were flipped over cars and burnt out cars all over the place. There was no one on the road and no other cars. So yes, it made us feel a bit insecure. I mean, nothing happened to us, but we saw a lot of things that we didn't like seeing. So now, if I have to go to Ciudad Mante or something like that, I call my friends to see about the situation and they tell me that it's ugly or that the road is bad, I might still go, but later I won't be able to get back or something might happen to me along the way. Lots of people tell me that it's really bad, so I stay put. But this is not normal. We want a calmer city; we want to go out, to be with people, to travel. We want to have freedom of expression. But because of the shootouts and things of that nature, the people get scared.

Sí había más gente que venía tanto de [otras ciudades de la frontera], venían de Monterrey, de Rio Bravo, de Tampico, de hecho sigue viniendo, pero no como antes, de Brownsville, de Harlingen, de McAllen. [...] Sí afecta la comunidad [queer] porque nosotros queramos, queremos ver a gente nueva, queremos ir a lugares nuevos. Antes vinieron y les gustó nuestro ambiente, nuestros shows. [...] Antes hacíamos eventos internacionales Como Miss Tamaulipas cuando venían del todos lados de Tamaulipas, hubo un Miss Gay Internacional y venían de muchos partes también. Sí venían y ahora ya no por el miedo de inseguridad. Prefieren quedarse de donde ellos son y no viajar por tener miedo que algo les va a pasar. De hecho hay muchas ciudades como Mante, Ciudad Mier, Valle Hermoso, San Fernando donde no hay lugar gay para salir, y no pueden salir del pueblo porque sí está muy feo en estas partes.⁹⁷

Jacobo was not the only person to complain how boring ‘the scene’ – as in, people out and in the gay bars – has become in Esperanza. In quite literal terms, people are tired of seeing the same faces all the time. Before the violence and terror there was a lot of travel to and between larger population centres visiting GSM bars and night clubs. This included trans-national bar hopping since the legal age for alcohol consumption in Texas is 21 versus 18 south of the border. Also, clubs in Texas are required to close much earlier than their Mexican counterparts. Since the violence and terror began, this intra-regional and international life has almost entirely come to an end. The ability to travel to and/or between GSM spaces in cities around the region would have provided variety and excitement. Yet, there is more at stake here than just the ability to see new faces and places. Severely curtailed is the ability to explore one’s own gender and gender identity somewhat more safely and comfortably. In a relatively small place like Esperanza, and especially in the smaller population centres in the region, precious anonymity and privacy is

⁹⁷ Yes, there were more people that came from [other border cities], they came from Monterrey, from Rio Bravo, from Tampico, in fact they still come, but not like before, from Brownsville, from Harlingen, from McAllen. [...] Yes, it affects the [queer] community because we want to see new people; we want to go to new places. Before people would come and they liked our ambience, they liked our shows. [...] Before there were international events like Miss Tamaulipas when people would come from all over the state; there was Miss Gay Internacional and people came from many different places. Yes, they came, and now not, because they are afraid of the insecurity. They prefer to stay put where they are rather than travelling because they are afraid that something will happen to them. In fact, there are many places, like Mante, Ciudad Mier, Valle Hermoso, San Fernando, that don’t have any gay places to go out to and they can’t leave their towns because it is very ugly in those parts.

paramount. Thus, GSM places that are farther from home provide distance, a degree of anonymity and some safety from unknowing or intolerant and rejecting family, friends, acquaintances, employers, etc. This possibility has been limited, both directly and indirectly, by the terror sown by state and non-state actors and their violent conflicts. I can only imagine how difficult this must make certain aspects of life for GSM people living in communities where there are no GSM spaces or resources and where life is far more violent than in Esperanza.

This is the reality. Life in Esperanza is relatively calm in comparison to some of the other towns and cities in the area. Many of these places are controlled by Los Zetas. Places such as San Fernando, Raúl's hometown. San Fernando has been the scene of some of the most terrorizing activity of Los Zetas. In 2010 and 2011 mass graves were discovered in San Fernando. Literally hundreds of bodies were uncovered. It is believed that the murders were committed by people affiliated with Los Zetas, and that at least 72 of them were migrants passing through the area from Guatemala presumably on their way to the border region or into the United States (Evans and Franzblau 2013). It later came to light that there were members of the San Fernando Police who were involved in covering up the massacres and that the federal government had downplayed their knowledge of this in order to distance themselves from being held responsible for the massacres (Evans and Franzblau 2013).

As I mentioned earlier, Raúl had gone several years without seeing his parents; however he was given the chance to see them when they came to Esperanza from San Fernando a few days before the march. Unfortunately, their visit was under the auspice of very sad and disturbing circumstances. They had come for the funeral of his aunt and cousin who had been gruesomely murdered in San Fernando by members of Los Zetas for failing to pay the full amount of their demanded *cuota*.⁹⁸ Raúl attended the funeral with his parents where he got to see many other family members and friends who he had not seen in a very long time. When Raúl returned to the hotel from the funeral he indicated he was disturbed by the stories shared with him about the contemporary life of sheer terror in San Fernando wrought through armed state and non-state

⁹⁸ A *cuota* is a sum of money that business owners are 'required' to pay to stay in business and/or stay alive.

actors engaged in a vicious cycle of violence and impunity. He said no one should have to hear those stories, let alone live that reality. He sat quietly for the rest of the evening, staring into the space between himself and the rest of us while we chatted about anything but the elephant in the room.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I suggest violence and terror in Esperanza is shattering life and society. I demonstrate this through an analysis of history and political economy of Esperanza that situates the city in its (contemporary) colonial moment of dispossession – both in terms of land, but also in terms of economic disparity. I also position the city as a focal point for long-standing cartel activity and at the centre of deadly clashes for territory and control between warring state and non-state actors. To begin to understand how these violent geographies play out and shatter the lives and society in Esperanza, I also shared the personal stories of people I spoke with.

Indeed, life in Esperanza is shattering. Life is no longer the same as before. And this is the context in which gender and sexual minority activism is taking place in Esperanza. It is a city thick with tension where some, possibly all residents live in terror and under the threat of violence and armed conflict erupting at any moment. Yet, to say that life is shattering, both on the level of the individual and society is not to say that the people of Esperanza are helpless victims at the mercy of corrupt authorities and powerful actors who are all engaged in organized crime and terror. It is not to say that people do not possess agency or the capacity to act in their own lives to try to make things better. In fact, I see it as quite the opposite. The people I spoke with are *not* falling apart, although the world around them has changed in very drastic and violent ways. They continue to survive and to live their lives publicly despite their fears and/or dangers that might exist. They are continuing with their quotidian lives, as they know how to under the conditions in which they find themselves. The stories they shared, some of which I have committed to paper here, give a glimpse into the way people have survived and carried on within the destruction. It is about, as Veena Das suggests, picking up the pieces and living in the devastation.

But what of this shattering? What does asserting that a society is shattering *do*? To take my argument further, I am asserting that from shattering life new configurations and new ways of being are possible as society pulls itself together again. Therefore, asserting that life is shattering in Esperanza is to highlight how violence makes space and creates possibility despite the terror. It is the space for resistance and the possibility for new worlds or new ways of being in the world. For me to assert that one's life or one's society is shattering allows for the possibility of a reconfiguration of life as pieces are picked up again. It provides opportunities that may not have been there before, or that can be operationalized in ways that may not have been previously possible. In the next chapter, I explore these very spaces of possibilities that are opened up amidst the violence and terror. In these spaces, GSM organizers are operationalizing and capitalizing on opportunities in order to get activist work done in the context of ongoing violence and terror. These are moments of everyday resistance to the violence and terror that armed state and non-state actors perpetuate.

I close this chapter with one more story from Orquídea. While the context of the story is dark and sad, as can be gathered from the other narratives shared here, this story makes me laugh aloud. It did when she told me and it does again, now. It is not only the story that makes me laugh, but also remembering how Orquídea related it to me, which involved her running around her salon acting out the story and imitating noises. While not many people joked around with me in their recorded conversations quite as much as Orquídea, her use of humour in discussing 'heavy' subject matter is not unique to her. The use of humour harkens back to Lilia's analysis of how one goes about rationalizing, making sense of, and surviving the violence and terror of the so-called 'drug war'. It is a way of distancing one's self from what seems to be unreal or too far out of the realm of possibility to conceive of fully. It is also a way of lifting the spirit, staying grounded, and, in a way, talking back to the violence and terror. It shows the fragmented complexity, diversity and quotidian-ness of shattering life and living in the devastation.

¡Déjame platicarte! que en una ocasión yo estaba trabajando y pues con la secadora y la música y el aire. Entonces, de repente escucho un ruido extraño, así como que, taka-taka-taka-taka-taka. Dije, '¡ay!, ¿qué está pasando con este aire acondicionado? ¡Ya

no está funcionando!’ ¡Sí, te lo juro eso es lo que pensé! Y me acerqué al aire acondicionado y lo escuche y dije, ‘¡Ay sí! El abanico se escucha raro’, y seguí secando cabello y trabajando. Vi muchos coches sobre la calle, dije, ¿habrá desfile? Era la temporada de diciembre, pensé que era el desfile navideño, pero al día siguiente me enteré que a la vuelta de donde yo estaba laborando había sucedido un percance. Y estaba a unos cuantos metros y ¡no me percaté de lo que estaba sucediendo!’⁹⁹

Orquídea then threw her head back and laughed while clapping her hands.

⁹⁹ Let me tell you! This one time, I was working and, well, with the hair dryer, and the music and the air conditioning. Then all of the sudden I heard this strange noise, like, taka-taka-taka-taka-taka. I said, ‘Ay! What’s going on with this air conditioner? It’s broken down already!’ Yes, I swear to you that that is what I thought. So I went over to the air conditioner and I listened to it, and I said, ‘yup! The fan sounds weird’, and then I continued on drying hair and working. I saw a lot of cars in the street, I said, ‘is it a parade?’ It was December and I thought that maybe it was the Christmas Parade. But the next day I was told that around the corner from where I was labouring there was a shootout. And I was just a few meters away and I didn’t even know what was going on!

Chapter 4: Beauty Shops, Bombs and Blockades – GSM Organizing and Everyday Resistance

[La marcha] Es un tipo de expresión así a la gente que nos acepte y no nos discrimine. También darnos derechos como ellos. No somos gente mala! Podemos convivir con cualquier persona que queramos o ellos [gente heterosexual] también convivir con nosotros. Para nosotros es tipo de expresión para hacernos notar y que nos miren, que nos tomen en cuenta. Es algo padre. El año pasado estuvo padre [también]. A lo mejor no era todo lo que ellos querían, pero este año se agregaron más y hubo más cosas, hubo más gente. Entonces, lo que yo noté que hubo mucha gente, como familias, niños, gente de la tercera edad, señores, gente buga, gente derecha, y personas que a lo mejor todavía no se aceptan gays. Entonces, vi a mucha gente. Mucha gente a que le gustaron nuestros shows, les gustó que hubo este día. Nada más, en el año pasado, sí hubo un poco de inseguridad, como era el primer año había temores que no iban a salir bien las cosas. Entonces, como ahora es el segundo año y los organizadores se esmeraron mas hacer las cosas ya la gente no tiene miedo de que va a pasar o no va a pasar. [...]

Entonces, para la gente es algo diferente porque es algo que no miran en la vida común. No miran a las personas arriba de un carro alegórico vestido de mujer, o a lo mejor no nos miran públicamente hacer un show travesti, porque aquí no está permitido eso. A la luz pública no está permitida mucho la travesti. Ahora con la marcha, marchamos por lugares que jamás nos hubiéramos imaginado en el pasado, por la plaza, por la catedral, exhibirnos a gente para que nos miren. Antes había ese temor que si salíamos nos iban a insultar, y ahora no, ahora salimos y se toman fotos con nosotros, conviven con nosotros. Los niños nos decían adiós, la gente nos saludaban. Para ellos estamos saliendo de la obscuridad de donde estábamos. [...] Lo que queramos es que nos acepten tal como nosotros, nada más. Es lo único que pedimos.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ [The march] is a type of expression so that people accept us and they don't discriminate against us. And to give us rights like them. We are not bad people. We can live with whomever we love and they [heterosexual people] can coexist with us, too. The march is so that we can be seen and that they take us into consideration. It's something cool. Last year was cool [too]. Maybe it didn't turn out to be what they wanted, but this year they incorporated

The quote on the preceding page was taken from my early morning conversation with Jacobo, a march volunteer and drag performance artist

* * *

On the first night I met with Carlos and Raúl, they did me a favour by agreeing to cross over to the US side of the border to have our meeting. I had been in Sister City, Texas for two days and I had yet to venture across the river to Esperanza. I'll be honest. I was nervous. I did not know what to expect in Esperanza. I am not from the US/Mexico borderlands, and although I had been to Sister City three times before I had never crossed over to Esperanza. It did not help my nerves that many people in Sister City, even people with family on the other side, made it very clear to me that they did not think it was worth the risk to head over to Esperanza. To them it just was not safe enough. Additionally, I had never met Raúl or Carlos face-to-face. Up to that moment, I had only exchanged a few emails and Facebook chats with Carlos. As a result, I was hesitant about crossing over to Esperanza, especially all on my own or without a friend who was familiar with the city and its specific cultural landscape.

Raúl, Carlos and I arranged to meet in the lobby of my hotel at around 8pm. Despite being nervous, I also was excited. When they arrived, I went down to the lobby to meet them and we then returned to my room where we could talk in private. We all sat on my bed and chatted for about 30 minutes.

more. There were more things, there were more people. What I noticed was that there were lots of people, like families, children, senior citizens, middle-aged people. Many people liked our shows; they liked what there was that day. Last year there was a bit of fear about security because it was the first year and people were afraid that things wouldn't turn out good. But now that it's the second year and the organizers strove to do more things, and now the people aren't afraid of what may or may not happen. [...] So for the people it's something different because it's something that they don't see commonly. They don't see people dressed as women on floats, or they have never seen us dressed up in public because here that is not permitted. In public it is not permitted to dress in drag. Now, with the march, we marched to places that we would have never imagined before, to the plaza, to the cathedral, we showed ourselves off so that they see us. Before there was fear that if we went out that they would insult us and now, no. Now we go out and they want to take photos with us, coexist with us. The children and people say hello. For them we are coming out from the darkness where we have been. [...] What we want is acceptance for who we are. That is the only thing that we ask.

Almost immediately, the conversation turned to their organizing efforts in Esperanza and the question of why they started to organize the march now, during such violent times. Why now? Why, when other sectors of Mexican society are seemingly retreating from the streets of the cities, are GSM communities taking to the streets of a city that has been particularly hard hit by violence in recent years? Raúl was quite blunt about it. He was not going to hide in his house. Life had to go on! Admittedly, somehow this statement did not seem that profound. I did not really get the importance of it. Perhaps I was hoping for a more powerful statement of resistance to the violence and terror, or a call to affront heteronormativity.

Over the coming weeks in Esperanza and in the months after I returned home, I came to learn a few things. One such thing is that discretion is more Raúl's style. As will become apparent in this chapter, he is a feisty character, but he also is very pragmatic. Grand statements of resistance and defiance did not really seem to be a part of his strategy unless he felt he needed to express something, and even then, it was often in private. Another lesson I learned was that my own privilege and ignorance of what life is like in a conflict zone blinded me in multiple ways. First, the very question 'why now' is a privileged one to be asking, indeed. To a person like me, a (privileged) outsider who has never grown up or lived for any considerable amount of time under the conditions of on-going war-like violence and terror, the actions of GSM activists seems perplexing and counter-intuitive. 'Why aren't they hiding?' 'Why aren't they protecting themselves or moving away?' etc. But to a person who intimately knows life under these conditions, the answer to the question is most likely obvious and the question may not even seem worth asking. Basically, the answer to the question is, why not! What else is one supposed to do? Hide away? Live in paralyzing fear? NO! This stance toward living (everyday) life in the context of violence and terror is significant. Second, I was blinded to more subtle forms of resistance. What I was to come to realize is that resistance is manifold and diverse in its forms. And what I have come to appreciate is that everyday life in a conflict zone is one of these forms of resistance.

* * *

4.1 Introduction to Chapter Four

In Chapter Two, I outline some historical facets of GSM activism in Mexico. My primary concern is to demonstrate that GSM activism and resistance in Mexico are rooted in a history of state oppression and the massacre at Tlatelolco. Since then, they have gone through periods of relative strength and weakness as different tactics and ideological approaches are employed. In the third chapter, inspired by the work of Veena Das (2007), I assert that the violence and terror related to the so-called ‘drug war’ is shattering the lives of people and society in Esperanza. The chapter closes with a few thoughts about what happens as people and society begin to pick up the pieces and live in the devastation. I suggest that the shattering of life provides an opportunity for new ways of being – for the individual, but also for society as a whole – as the fragments of shattering life are pulled back together again. Any new reconfiguration of life, however, is contingent on many forms of resistance to the reinstallation of the status quo, conscious or inadvertent, but born out of new possibilities.

In this chapter, I turn more expressly to ideas and the possibilities of resistance. The stories and experiences that are shared here represent the moments of opportunity that the shattering of society through violence and terror produces. This is not to say that these moments of resistance *necessarily* flow from the violence and terror, since this would be impossible to prove. Rather that this is a logical possibility since there would be no need for one without the other. What I am saying is that some of the possibilities that may be opened up in the context of on-going violence and terror are moments of (everyday) resistance. It is these kinds of possibilities to which I now turn.

In the text that follows, I look more specifically at the marches in Esperanza and the process of preparing for them. I examine how the pride marches and post-march festivities materialized in Esperanza through acts of everyday resistance. I argue that during the process of planning and executing the marches, GSM activists/the organizing committee engaged in acts of everyday resistance that challenged and contested regimes of power and violence that flow through Esperanza. Furthermore, through this process the marches themselves became a moment of contestation and everyday resistance by queering the space of violence in which it unfolded.

That is to say, while the marches themselves are a direct confrontation with hetero/cis-normative dominance, organizers also actively negotiated with, shifted and troubled relationships of power in very particular circumstances. By capitalizing on and exploiting these opportunities, the activist organizers were able to pull off a larger form of protest – the pride marches – which may be read as a form of protest against the violence and terror. Thus, the political message of the pride marches and festivities can be seen as a form of direct resistance to hetero/cis-normative dominance, but also an act of everyday resistance to the violence and terror perpetuated by armed state and non-state actors.

I begin with an examination of the debates that surround the slipperiness of the concept of resistance. This is followed by a closer look at the idea of everyday resistance and how I am using it here in this chapter. I then share two narratives, one gleaned from my interviews with march organizers and the other from personal experiences during my time in Esperanza. I use these two stories to highlight the everyday resistance within the process of planning and executing the marches. Next, I turn to a discussion of pride, in general, as a form of resistance and pride in Esperanza as everyday resistance. I then conclude with some thoughts on the politics of thinking about and naming resistance.

4.2 Understanding Resistance

During the 1990s, the concept of resistance captured the attention of scholars from across the social sciences. Interest in the debates around what is and is not resistance have dropped off during the early 2000s. More recently, however, some scholars (Seymour 2006), in a similar call to those made in the 90s, have begun to draw attention back to what can be seen as a lack of sustained examination of what resistance *is*. In this section I will wade through some of the ideas that circulate regarding resistance before turning to a more focused discussion of everyday resistance.

Let me begin with a seemingly simple question: What is resistance? The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014, original emphasis) defines ‘resistance’ as (among other things):

1a) the action of resisting, opposing, or withstanding someone or something; an instance of this.

b) Organized (in later use usually covert) opposition to an invading, occupying, or ruling power; (an organized body of) individuals engaged in such opposition

2a) the impeding or stopping effect exerted on an object or substance by another, or by a force; the susceptibility *to* such an effect on the part of an object or structure

3a) power or capacity to resist something

To me, this definition suggests three things: first that resistance is an agentive act, second that it is an act in opposition to something and finally, that it is intentional. I will not dwell on the first point. I agree that resistance is an agentive act. All life (and some non-living things) possess agency, a point supported by the work of Bruno Latour (2005) and others. Regarding the second point, the notion that resistance is conceptualized as inherently oppositional seems logical. Yet Steve Pile and Michael Keith (1997) challenge this position. Instead, drawing on Foucauldian notions of power, they call for an analytical approach to resistance that unmoors it from an oppositional relationship to the thing that is being resisted. For Pile and Keith, thinking about resistance as actions in their own right and not as reactions to some sort of outside force sheds light on the nuances of what constitutes resistance and why people resist. Seen in this way, they argue, “the term resistance draws attention not only to the myriad spaces of political struggles, but also to the politics of everyday spaces, through which political identities constantly flow and fix” (Pile and Keith 1997:xi). In this chapter, I would like to respond to Pile and Keith assertion by drawing attention to one of these “myriad [of] spaces [...] through which political identities constantly flow and fix” (Pile and Keith 1997:xi). That of everyday queer life and the mundane spaces in which GSM activism occurs. My aim is to glean a deeper understanding of what compels people to resist and resistance in general.

The third point taken from the *Oxford* definition is that resistance is an intentional act. Intentionality is one of the biggest conundrums in defining resistance. While for some scholars intentionality is key, for others it is not a necessary defining feature. For example, Susan Seymour (2006) argues that the intentionality of one’s action is paramount for understanding

what is (and is not) resistance. Seymour believes that a psychological anthropological approach is needed in order to understand why individuals engage in resistance. James Scott (1985), whose concept of everyday resistance I will be discussing in detail very shortly, acknowledges intention in his discussion of what is resistance. Scott even goes so far as to state, “Where there is strong evidence for the intention behind the act, the case for resistance is correspondingly strengthened” (Scott 1985: 290). Yet, a few sentences later, Scott asserts, “The insistence that acts of resistance be *shown* to be intended, however, creates enormous difficulties [...]” (Scott 1985:290, original emphasis). Scott then suggests intention may be implied by interpreting people’s action or placing their actions in a wider context; nonetheless, the actor does not need to intend their action to be a form of resistance. While this does not rule out the need for there to be an identifiable intent, it does trouble the idea.

This raises an interesting question. What if intention is *not* a hallmark of resistance? In reviewing and elaborating on Scott’s work, Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson (2013) break from Scott’s somewhat inconclusive position on intentionality by essentially throwing out the idea that a person needs to consciously or intentionally engage in resistance in order to resist. They assert that “...it is the resistance act, the agency itself or *the way of acting* that counts” (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013: 18, original emphasis). When analysing (everyday) resistance “no particular effect or outcome should be mandatory; only the *potential* of undermining power” (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013: 18, original emphasis). Thus, even the smallest of actions, often done without the intent of overt disobedience, have the potential to be forms of resistance if the act could undermine power – even if not intentionally.

While I find this notion of agency without intention compelling, others may (and do) wince at the idea since it raises a crucial issue – one that is not easily resolved. If any action may be coded as resistance, then what is and is not resistance? Pile and Keith (1997) worry that if almost every action is seen as resistance, the ability to discern effective and ineffective political resistance, and/or coordinated collective organizing may be hindered or (unnecessarily) complicated in unhelpful ways. Ultimately, as Juanita Sundberg (personal communication, June 15th, 2014) indicated to me:

This discussion revolves around how the subject (the human) is conceptualized; in other words: how agency is imagined along with how structures of power are imagined. The structure/agency debate is one of the oldest in the Western intellectual tradition, so it is no surprise it presents challenges!

Hence, I do not believe that I can resolve this debate here! And I am not entirely sure if the debate will ever be resolved. I believe that much of it depends on a person's philosophical or political stance. But outlining where I stand on the agency/intentionality issue in relation to resistance is important. As I stated earlier, I agree that things, human or not, possess agency, and enact that agency both intentionally and unintentionally. I wonder, though, if worrying about intentionality obscures other issues pertinent to the discussion. There are many reasons why a person may or may not consciously articulate their actions as resistance. For example, the word resistance is a powerful and potentially dangerous one to use. There may be very real life consequences, ie. (the threat of) death if a person presents one's self as a resistor or in resistance. Therefore, a person may not even recognize their actions as a form of resistance in order to protect one's self from believing that they are in harm's way or engaging in dangerous activity.

What I believe is important is the impact of certain actions over longer periods of time *and* the view from history. As in, what does it matter if in the moment the intent of an individual is to resist or not? What ultimately matters is the effect of a person's actions.¹⁰¹ This does not mean, though, that understanding someone's motivations is not important, but rather that their motivations do not need to map onto some kind of (radical and) conscious form of resistance. For me it is helpful to think of resistance as a continuum (Baines, personal communication November 22nd, 2013). Similar to a continuum of violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), a continuum of resistance allows space for multiple kinds of actions to be conceptualized as resistance and valued as such. In this way, activities such as highly organized and coordinated groups of armed actors fighting against a well-defined oppressor, a spontaneous and unplanned

¹⁰¹ I also want to recognize that not all acts of resistance create change. There is, in fact, as Keith (1997) points out, much resistance *to* change.

road blockade, or even foot dragging (wilful procrastination as a means of flouting authority) may all be thought of and conceptualized as resistance.

One form of resistance within this continuum is that of everyday resistance. In his controversial and influential work, *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott (1985) examines the impacts of state intervention in rice paddy production relative to class relations for peasant farmers and rural labourers in Malaysia. In the course of his analysis, he coined the term everyday resistance. Scott (1985: 29) conceptualizes everyday resistance as a “prosaic, but constant struggle” between the dominant power and those who are subjected to that power. It is a kind of struggle that “stop[s] well short of collective outright defiance” and is characterized by “little or no coordination or planning” (Scott 1985:29). Everyday resistance often takes the “form of individual self-help” and “typically avoids any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or elite norms” (Scott 1985:29). Scott identifies subtle acts such as gossip, negotiation, foot-dragging, reduced effort, false compliance, conscious ignorance and/or petty theft as forms of everyday resistance.

In a more recent piece, Susan Thompson (2011) uses Scott’s concept of everyday resistance when discussing everyday life for peasant farmers in post-genocide Rwanda. In the article Thompson discusses Rwanda’s official Policy of National Unity and Reconciliation, which is intended to promote unity between the dominant ethnic groups in the country. In reality, however, the policy works against the interests of rural peasant farmers by denying victim status for some while also becoming a mechanism for greater elite control and policing of those who oppose reconciliation on the government’s terms. Thompson argues that by “Focusing on everyday acts of resistance among the rural poor, it demonstrates that despite the appearance of widespread popular support, many peasant Rwandans consider the various mechanisms of national unity and reconciliation to be unjust and illegitimate” (Thompson 2011: 239). In this piece, Thompson explicitly defines everyday resistance as “any subtle, indirect, and non-confrontational act that makes daily life more sustainable” (Thompson 2011: 446). What is particularly relevant in Thompson’s discussion to my conceptualization of everyday resistance, which I will be laying out more fully below, is this: “Everyday acts of resistance include some

combination of persistence, prudence, and individual effort to accomplish a specific goal” (Thompson 2011: 239). For Thompson, everyday resistance is deployed as a form of action when open resistance is not possible. Thompson (2011: 446) is careful to highlight that everyday resistance is not pursued because open resistance may be illegal; rather it is pursued as “a calculated risk to maintain or enlarge their position vis-à-vis the state or representatives of its power”. Thompson (2011: 450-455) provides examples of how people in Rwanda actively keep a low profile by not getting involved in certain forms of community life in order to avoid engaging with local and national officials, a form of everyday resistance that Thompson terms as “Staying on the sidelines”. Thompson also suggests that when community members comply with authorities, they often do so with an ‘attitude’, which Thompson categorizes as “Irreverent compliance”; the use of intentional silences is another way to resist, which Thompson terms “Withdrawn muteness”.

In their discussion of Scott and other scholars’ emphasis on the covert and subtle nature of everyday resistance, Vinthagen and Johansson (2013:5) draw attention to the idea of “publicly declared resistance” and everyday resistance as “disguised resistance”. Publicly declared resistance would be things such as “open revolts, petitions, demonstrations, land invasions, etc”, whereas everyday ‘disguised’ resistance is akin to “low profile, undisclosed or ‘infrapolitics’” (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013:5).¹⁰²

I use everyday resistance to encompass much of these same logics, but I also trouble a few aspects. I follow Scott and Thompson by defining everyday resistance as uncoordinated or unplanned acts that are ‘self-help’-like. I also incorporate Thompson’s (2011:446) assertion that acts of everyday resistance are acts of “calculated risk [undertaken by an oppressed generally disempowered actor] to maintain or enlarge their position vis-à-vis the state” or other powerful non-state actors. This includes “some combination of persistence, prudence, and individual effort [make life more sustainable or] to accomplish a specific goal” (Thompson 2011:446).

¹⁰² In his book *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Scott (1989:19) introduces the idea of “infrapolitics”. He defines this term as a “wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name” (Scott 1989:19).

However, I want to challenge, but do not completely disregard the notion of everyday resistance as *necessarily* disguised. In the context of war-like violence and terror, I am widening the scope of everyday resistance, or more carefully including acts of unplanned direct defiance or confrontations that occur in low-stakes conflicts that explicitly challenge authorities. While it may very well be the case that there is little to no confrontation in certain moments of everyday resistance, I am convinced that under certain circumstances, everyday resistance may be more direct and overt.

This specific intervention is necessary as a way to complicate and interrogate ideas of the everyday and everyday resistance in shattering spaces. In Chapter Three, I assert that the everyday encompasses relational and interconnected sets of practices that need to be considered alongside whatever happens in a day. Meaning that in a time of terror and sporadic violence, the ‘everyday’ takes on a different quality since the spectre of death may be perceived as more of a real possibility than before. For example, in the previous chapter I shared a few fragments from Alfredo’s life. In his framing of contemporary life in Esperanza, he laid out a clear delineation of time into ‘before’ and ‘now’. His conception of the past was one where everyday life was different. It was a time when things were safer, or at least felt safer. Whereas now, carrying out the everyday(-as-before) has changed in significant ways from what it once was. For instance, in one fragment, Alfredo relates the story of a shootout just outside of his home and how his mother reacted afterward when he would try to leave to go out. He states, “*Entonces, de allí mi mamá, ‘no salgas, no salgas, no salgas’. Pero siempre lo he dicho, a donde andes, aun andes con amigos, aunque andes comprando el mandado para la comida, donde estés puede llegar a suceder algo*”.¹⁰³ As I indicate in the previous chapter, simple quotidian activities – running errands, seeing friends, getting groceries – become more intentional acts in which one is acutely aware of the possibility of ‘something’ violent happening.

Another example of this comes from Lilia, an ally to the activist organizers. In an interview at her office, she shared her sense of personal safety in Esperanza:

¹⁰³ So, after that my mom [would say], ‘Don’t go out, don’t go out’. But I told her, wherever you go, even if your with friends, even if you’re out shopping for groceries, wherever you are something could happen.

Yo no me siento segura. Creo que nadie se siente seguro en la ciudad. O sea, ni en la ciudad, ni el estado. [...] O sea, tranquilidad ya no tenemos en general. Se acabó. [...] Pero como buenos mexicanos, intentamos de reírnos un poco de la situación con canciones, con chistes. Obviamente tenemos un respeto a la muerte. La celebramos, pues. Pero tenemos en dicho, que cuando te toca, te toca, ni aun que te quites. Y cuando no te toca, no te toca, ni aun que te pongas. [...] Es un sentido falso de seguridad que nos damos, pero de una manera u otra, tenemos que sentir protegidos. [...] O sea, tengo que seguir con mi vida. Así que, cuando me toque, me va a tocar ¿no? Por lo pronto, tengo que seguir con mi vida diaria, no puedo estar encerrada en mi casa tratando de protegerme de algo que no sé ni siquiera si me va a pasar a mí o no.¹⁰⁴

What is revealed through these quotes is a distinction between quotidian-as-before from a new quotidian. The new quotidian is similar in nature, but qualitatively different. In this way, one's choice to carry out the everyday-as-before in the context of war-like violence and terror becomes an act of resistance. But it also means that what is 'everyday' can only ever be what happens in that day because of the ever present terror and possibility of deadly violence – in a kind of live-for-the-day sense. Ultimately, when thinking about the everyday in contexts of violence, it is hard to articulate what is and is not everyday since everything is thrown into flux as a result of terror and the ever present specter of violence and death. This makes other, previously impossible seeming events to become (more) possible and possibly even the everyday, or everyday-like.

¹⁰⁴ I don't feel safe. I believe that no one feels safe in the city. Not in the city and not in the state. I mean, in general, we don't have tranquility any more. That's over. [...] But like good Mexicans, we laugh a little about the situation with songs, with jokes. Obviously, we have respect for death. We celebrate it. But, we have a saying that when it's your turn, it's your turn, even if you get out of the way [of harm]. And when it's not your turn, it's not your turn, even if you get in the way. [...] It's a false sense of security that we give ourselves, but one way or another, we have to feel protected. [...] I have to continue with my life. I mean, when it's my turn, it's going to be my turn, no? I have to continue with my daily life. I can't be enclosed in my house trying to protect myself from something that I don't even know will happen!

Expanding on this notion to complicate ideas of (everyday) resistance, if an individual's notion of the everyday becomes disconnected from notions of what may have been a kind of stability, familiarity, and regularity as a result of violent rupture or terror, then a space of possibility becomes apparent. The terror and violence breaks from the past, from life-as-before, but it also threatens the previous behavioural norms and status quo, or at least creates the possibility of threat to such norms. Thus, what may be thought of as resistance, and in this case, everyday resistance, becomes flexible too. That is to say, today's everyday resistance may be foot-dragging, whereas tomorrow's everyday resistance may be, as can be seen from the quotes above, carrying on with the everyday-as-before despite the violence and terror, or it may be something more direct like engaging in negotiations with armed non-state actors or an impromptu citizen's blockade of a political rally in order to plan and execute a pride march. These are direct but spontaneous responses to oppression, but they are everyday nonetheless when situated within the broader context in which they have occurred.

I make this specific point to differentiate my conceptualization and to push ideas and definitions of everyday resistance in different ways. Whereas Scott and Thompson do theorize everyday resistance in spaces of certain kinds of oppression, violence and terror, the war-like nature of the violence and terror in Northeastern Mexico calls into question the very meaning of what constitutes the everyday and, as I am arguing, everyday resistance. Thus, under the conditions of shattering life and the shifting meanings of the 'everyday' that violence and terror produce, small acts of direct resistance become a part of the everyday as a means of survival and of getting things done. Taking this idea a bit further, then, if what is the everyday becomes flexible in situations of war-like violence and terror, then previously extra-ordinary events, like a pride march, also come into the realm of everyday possibilities. Hence, a pride march may be seen as a form of overt resistance against homo/transphobia and heteronormativity, but also a form of disguised resistance, an everyday resistance against the violence and terror of the so-called 'drug war'. Therefore, I employ the term 'everyday resistance' to describe acts of direct resistance in which individuals push back against structures of power to get things done, but getting those things done also involve forms of everyday resistance. These acts of everyday resistance are not intended to bring down the system in that moment, but to persist with both the quotidian as

before and the ‘new quotidian’ within the context of widespread violence. With this framing in mind, I now move to unpack these ideas more fully by turning to discuss two moments of everyday resistance that occurred while activist organizers were preparing for the marches.

4.3 Bomb(shell)s and Beauty Shops¹⁰⁵

In 2012, Raúl, Carlos, Juan Pablo, and Ernesto – the activist organizers – organized the first pride march in Esperanza. As the day of the march drew closer, a threat appeared on the organizers’ Facebook page stating that the Gulf Cartel was going to blow up the march. The threat was taken seriously since, as mentioned in the previous chapter, there had recently been grenade attacks on schools, businesses, a TV station, military installations (Chapa 2012), and the pedestrian mall downtown (Borderland Beat 2011). Raúl explained:

*Hubo unas amenazas en el Facebook, en los redes sociales del grupo de aquí de [Esperanza], del grupo malo digamos, como aquí se le dice, ah, en cuestión que iban a tirar unas granadas para acabar de unos jotitos. Digo, ‘ah, mucho jotos en [Esperanza], allí van a estar todos juntos, vamos a meter unas granadas para acabar con unos cuantos’. Y nosotros borramos estos comentarios para que nadie se dé cuenta.*¹⁰⁶

After deleting all traces of the threats, the organizers began to investigate the source. They started their search at the beauty salons where many of their GSM friends work.¹⁰⁷ This may not

¹⁰⁵ The details of the following were gathered over a series of informal conversations with some of the organizers as well as during a more ‘formal’ interview with Raúl.

¹⁰⁶ There were some threats on Facebook and other social networks from, what we’ll call, ‘the bad people’, like we say here in [Esperanza], that they were going to throw some grenades to kill off some faggots. ‘Oh look, lots of faggots in Esperanza, they’ll all be together. We should throw some grenades to finish off a few’. We removed those comments so that people wouldn’t notice.

¹⁰⁷ While it may seem that I am pulling on a stereotype by asserting that certain GSM people, ie. gay cis-males, trans people, work in beauty salons, in Esperanza there are many, many salons that are owned, operated, and/or staffed by various people from GSM communities. When I asked Juan Pablo, one of the march organizers, why it might be that so many people from GSM communities work in salons, he explained that until recently in Esperanza, hiring practices have generally excluded effeminate men and trans people. While I am unable to conclusively prove that homo/transphobia is at the root of historical forms of economic exclusion in Esperanza, this was a claim advanced by Juan Pablo and other march participants with whom I spoke. Juan Pablo also made this claim publically on television while being interviewed by one of the local news broadcasters. However, the union representatives for maquiladora workers refuted his claim. Alfredo suggested labour discrimination had been occurring in Esperanza, but that this trend was changing, especially, in his opinion, in the maquiladora sector. Alfredo works as a fitness

seem the most obvious place to start, but there are two primary reasons for approaching the matter in this way. First, as previously mentioned, there is no police force in Esperanza. It was disbanded two years earlier when the Mexican military began to permanently occupy the city. Consequently, police assistance was not an option.

Second, organizers focused on beauty salons because they are sites of gossip and information exchange. Those who work in salons are often afforded special positions in their clients' lives, as they have simultaneously entrusted stylists with massive amounts of personal information as well as the task of enhancing their beauty. In the context of Esperanza and the so-called drug war, this places stylist in the unique position of being privy to some of the personal lives of cartel members given that many local cartel members have sisters, girlfriends and wives who frequent beauty salons where they share personal information and form friendships with the beauty shop employees. As a result, GSM stylists who are friends with activist organizers became a link to clients who have connections within the cartel, including powerful leaders within the organization. Because of these links, the source of the threat within the cartel structure was quickly identified.

In addition to using these links to identify and silence the person who was making the bomb threats, the organizers went one step further to ensure safety at the marches by inviting some the well connected clients to be judges at the drag queen competition that was held after the first march in Esperanza. When I asked Raúl about it, he explained it to me this way:

Pues mira, en el año pasado hubo un concurso de travestis y modo de protegerlo fui invitando a unas señoras, amigas, como jurado que eran esposas de... de, pues, estos tipos de personas aquí en Esperanza se dice que son malos. Entonces, esos que hicieron las amenazas, los llamamos achichincles, que son el gato, del gato, del gato, del gato, del

instructor in various factories in the city and related to me a sense that GSM people were a visible portion of the work force and appeared to be accepted by their fellow co-workers. Regardless of these apparent recent trends, historical hiring practices rooted in homo/transphobia (not necessarily exclusive to any one particular sector of the economy in Esperanza) have made gaining employment difficult for members of GSM communities. Thus this drives people to take up work in certain (sometimes more precarious) jobs and/or industries such as beauty salons, the informal economy or sex work.

gato, del patrón! Entonces son los que hicieron esos comentarios y se creen muy chingones aquí en [Esperanza], pero no... los jefes no hacen esos comentarios que van a acabar con nosotros o que nos hagan algo. Al contrario, son gentes que no quieren problemas, los meros jefes, verdad, que no quieren problema. Para ellos es mejor evitar cualquier problema en cuestión de llamar la atención. Pero los trabajadores del gato del gato, te digo, los mínimos, los más allá al fondo, son los que causan los problemas y se creen bien chingoncitos y eso. Pero cuando llega a los oídos del mero jefe. Pues ponen un alpacón, los aplacan de que están haciendo. Y es un modo de proteger el evento, de teniendo [sic] estos tipos de damas, de señoras como invitadas. Entonces, cuando supe de una persona que había escuchado que nos iban a hacer algo, le mandé a decir, 'mira nada más quien va a estar allí, porque allí va a estar fulanita, santanita, y te vas a meter en un gran problema, vas a acabar con la esposa de tu jefe? Digo, tu porque eres un 'X', eres el trabajador del trabajador, y ni cuenta te dan, pero fíjate que gente esté [allí]'.¹⁰⁸*

As can be gathered from Raúl's statement, it turned out that the threats came from a relatively low ranking cartel member – an *achichinle*.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, organizers were able to utilize

¹⁰⁸ Well look, last year there was a Drag Queen contest and the way to protect ourselves was to invite some 'ladies', some friends, as judges, who were wives of those types of people, as they say in [Esperanza], the 'bad people'. So, the people who made those threats, we call them *achichincles*, they are the cat of the cat of the cat of the cat of the cat of the boss.* So, they are the ones who made those comments and they believe that they are the big men here in [Esperanza]. But their bosses don't make those kinds of comments or threats. To the contrary, they are people who don't want problems, the *real* bosses, they don't want problems. For them it's better to avoid problems that call attention to themselves. But, for those who work 'for the cat of the cat', I mean, the most minor of people in the cartels, those who are the farthest down at the bottom, they are the ones that cause the problems because they think of themselves as 'really big little guys' and whatnot. But when their bosses hear about that, they give them a tranquilizer, they placate them. So, it's a way of protecting the event – to have these kinds of ladies, these *Señoras*, as invitees. So, when I knew of someone who had heard that they were going to do something to us, I would tell them [to tell whomever], 'look at who is going to be there [...] you're going to cause yourself some big problems because you're going to kill your boss's wife. I mean... you are some random person, some worker of some worker and they don't even know who you are but you should pay attention to who is [going to be] there'!

*As in, the lowest down the chain of command.

¹⁰⁹ According to interviewees, an *achichinle* is the lowest person, of among the lowest of persons, in the chain of command within the cartel structure. However, as Sundberg (personal communication July 3rd, 2014) points out, this definition assumes a well-organized hierarchical structure and that there is a high degree of coordination, control and obedience within groups of armed non-state actors. Sundberg notes that in this situation "the person who made the threat felt at liberty to do so. If the 'cartel' is so well organized, he or she would not take such liberties. Just because there are people who are called bosses and are situated in positions of power does not mean that there is a

their indirect ties to people with more power and/or control within the organization to keep low ranking cartel members in line and quell the threat of violence. However, nothing in this world is free. In exchange for the guarantee of safety, the organizers accepted the cartel's demand to sell alcohol at the post-march festivities. This additional value generated for the cartels also provided the incentive for their participation and (potential) protection at the following year's march.

Engaging in negotiation with powerful actors may not seem to be an obvious form of resistance to the violence occurring in Esperanza. Yet, when seen as a refusal to be kowtowed into scared submission by the threat of violence, I suggest it is. Furthermore, I equate this to an instance of everyday resistance because of the relatively mundane and low-key, or 'disguised', way in which the threat was quelled. There was no dramatic event, no getting outside authorities involved, instead it was a 'self help' approach that required some inquiries between friends and clients of friends. There was no direct organizing, just calculated risk and an abiding stubbornness that compelled a group of activists to persist with their organizing efforts despite the threats made against them.

Raúl's narrative also points to an acute awareness of the power differentials within the cartel structure and how these differentials can be used and manipulated to accomplish a specific goal in the specific (often violent) contexts of Esperanza while enlarging the activists' position somewhat in relation to powerful non-state actors. He and the other march organizers were able to effectively identify, understand and exploit these differentials between the upper echelons of the cartel and lower ranking members to end the threats against the march *and* protect march participants' safety. Once *los jefes* were made aware of *achichinle* activity, the threat was quelled by *los jefes* supposed desire to remain somewhat discrete in matters that are not directly related to them.

well structured chain of command". I would add that things such as the individual's socio-economic position, life histories, mixed with ideas of power and control, masculinity and machismo coupled with access of fire arms, explosives (making materials) and the know-how must also be taken into consideration when thinking about who and why such threats might be made.

By taking action regarding threats made against the march, organizers laid the foundations for a working relationship with one specific group of armed non-state actors. The cartel's demand to sell alcohol at the post-march activities ended up being of mutual benefit for both groups. The organizers had not originally intended to sell alcohol at the event due to the difficulty in getting the proper permission from municipal and state authorities; however, members within the cartel had already made the necessary arrangements to obtain such licences through one of their businesses. Additionally, these people were already in possession of all the necessary equipment and labour to staff the bar area (chairs, tables, and a truck to sell the alcohol from). For the organizers, it was literally no extra effort or expense other than the forfeiting of profits from the sales of alcohol (which they never intended on having), while gaining a greater measure of safety and security. The presence of alcohol at the post-march festivities arguably may have changed the ambiance at the event to a more 'festive' one, but this may have drawn more people to the event. Thus, because of the organizer's efforts to ensure march safety, which led to wider support from cartel members, the event attained an air of a party with politics – as similarly noted at other pride festivities around the world (Browne, 2007). That is, a party that also simultaneously pushes the politics of GSM rights.

In this incident, the organizers were able to parlay a potentially dangerous situation into a benefit for themselves while garnering tacit support for their cause and increasing participant safety at the marches by refusing to stand down. Thus, in 2012 the march was successful in the sense that it was accomplished – it wasn't blown up and the organizers fought hard to ensure that it was able to safely take place. Yet, it was limited in its success because the municipal government did not grant permission for the march to block any major roads or enter the main plaza in the city centre. Instead, marchers were directed through the side streets of a residential neighbourhood at the edge of the city centre. Regardless, having 'dealt' with the threat of violence from armed non-state actors *and* executing the first ever pride march in the city were major milestones and far more than had ever been achieved before.

4.4 Institutional Blockages and Parking Lot Blockades¹¹⁰

In the lead up to the 2013 march, municipal authorities became the focal point of the activist organizers' everyday resistance. This is the subject of my second story. Because of the work done by activist organizers for the 2012 march, local armed non-state actors posed little to no threat to the 2013 march.¹¹¹ The same relationship was pursued in the 2013 march, but this time another member within the organization also provided porta-potties for which there was a small charge. This was convenient for the march organizers since the city refused to allow access to public washrooms. Despite the refusal to allow access to public washrooms, however, municipal authorities appeared to be much more agreeable to work with the organizers in the preparations for the 2013 march. Yet as the organizers and I were to discover, this was primarily an *appearance* of support. This next story addresses the moment when the true nature of the municipal government's intentions became apparent to the activist organizers.

Before I begin the story, however, I note the context in which preparations for the 2013 march were taking place. Despite the ongoing violence within and between rival armed non-state actors and those actors and the military, municipal elections were scheduled for July 2nd, just two days after the 2013 march. The election was turning out to be a tight race between the candidates from two of the main political parties, the *Partido Acción Nacional* or PAN and the party that currently held municipal power, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI. In Mexico, a political leader can only hold the office of mayor for one term of seven years. So, for the out-going mayor the political stakes are a bit unique. On one hand, the out-going mayor is not concerned with saving their job, but, in theory, party politics dictates that they be concerned with getting as many of the party's candidates, including the mayoral candidate, elected.

In the weeks prior to the march and related festivities, the organizers had met with several officials from the city government, including the mayor's assistant (referred to here by the nickname, *el Doctor*); the director of culture and sport; and the PRI elections campaign director. In these meetings, the activist organizers were adamant that they did not want to play party

¹¹⁰ This story is based off my own direct personal experiences as well as interviews with Raúl and Carlos.

¹¹¹ No threats were made against the 2013 march.

politics and anything the city did for the event would be acknowledged, if at all, as the work of the ‘Municipal Government’ and not the PRI specifically. The city authorities seemed to be fine with this arrangement. Over a series of meetings, the activist organizers and municipal authorities established, first and foremost that the 2013 march was going all the way downtown and that it was going to block the principle avenue to the main international bridge as well as the main street to the city centre.¹¹² The city not only agreed, but also offered to provide a transit authority patrol unit to assist with blocking traffic. Additionally, the mayor’s office voluntarily offered to provide three used floats that could be rehabilitated by the organizers, chairs for people to watch the post-march entertainment, large tents to protect march participants from the sun, *and* a group of city workers to help with setting up chairs, tents, and tables.

In the first meeting with the city, which was before I knew the city had not done anything to assist with the previous year’s march, both Raúl and Carlos maintained a serious demeanour. They did not request things; they informed the municipal authorities of their intentions. They also spoke casually of their ‘security arrangements’ (with local armed non-state actors), and let them know about the sale of alcohol. To which the city requested that there be a more concerted effort to clean up bottle and beverage cups this year. Their confident, but relaxed body language and assertive oral communication led me to assume that none of this was new for them. They carried themselves with an air of ‘of-course-this-is-what-you’re-going-to-do-for-me’-like attitude. After that first meeting, I learned that the city’s seemingly helpful and supportive position was a massive about-face from the year before. I was astonished since Raúl and Carlos had not acted surprised or delighted by the newfound support. Perhaps life experience had led them to be dubious and not to get too excited about government promises for assistance.

I asked Raúl why he thought the city was more supportive of the second march. He noted two reasons. First, since the 2012 organizing efforts were successful and the event went off without any major issues, violence, or counter protest, Raúl thought that maybe the city was more willing to support the organizers. Further to this, given the hard times in which the city found itself, any

¹¹² This is a significant win for the march as many interviewees expressed the importance of reaching the main plaza of the city – something that had not been achieved in the 2012 march.

sort of colour or celebration could be seen as a positive thing, according to Raúl. Secondly, he suspected city officials were supportive because the out-going mayor (and their entire administration) had less to lose in a political sense since there was no possibility of re-election and he could potentially gain a few votes for his political party from GSM communities by showing muted support.¹¹³

The march was planned to begin and end in the parking lot of an auditorium located in the middle of a large park close to the city centre. The day before the march, six of us gathered up six large tents that had been donated by the street vendors' collective and made our way over to the parking lot where we were going to unload them for the city crew to install. The group consisted of three march organizers – Raúl, Carlos and Juan Pablo – two of their friends, and myself. To our surprise, we arrived to a flurry of activity in the auditorium and the parking lot area. We learned that that evening the final political rally before the election was to be held for one of the PRI city councillor candidates.¹¹⁴ Although annoyed that they were blocking the area where we wanted to set up, we were able to unload the tents and mark off an area for the tents to be raised.

We then sat in the shade of a tree beside the parking lot and waited for the group of city workers that had been promised to help assist with the tent's assembly.

We waited... and we waited... and waited.

¹¹³ I should also note that there were many rumors about the out-going mayor's sexuality. And while I never saw mayor, not even a photo, apparently, as I was told by multiple people, they were *muy bonito* – very pretty. Yet, even if the out-going mayor was gay, I do not believe that this would have necessarily translated to more visible support, since the out-going administration would have still been concerned with getting their candidates elected and, unfortunately, I do not believe visible support for GSM communities would win any substantial votes for the party.

¹¹⁴ This had come as a bit of a bitter surprise since the march organizers had requested from the city the use of the auditorium, which offered a large open-air stage and sound system. The request had been denied because the auditorium was apparently considered too dangerous since it had not been used in a few years and had supposedly fallen into disrepair. Clearly, this was a lie.

While we waited, Raúl periodically attempted to reach *el Doctor*, to inquire as to the whereabouts of the promised crew of workers, but to no avail. *El Doctor* was not picking up their cell phone and their secretary claimed to be unable to get in touch with them either.

After approximately 90 minutes, Raúl decided to take action. We all headed over to the auditorium where a group of city workers were busy preparing for that evening's political rally for the PRI candidate. Raúl marched straight into the middle of a cluster of workers and demanded to speak to the person in charge. The rest of us hung back by the entrance. Raúl and a supervisor spoke for a few moments. He explained our situation with great energy and expressive body language, gesturing with a sternly pointed finger to where the tents were supposed to be standing in the parking lot. Raúl told the supervisor he was unable to reach *el Doctor* and that he knew that the supervisor could likely do so. Raúl then informed the supervisor that if he did not contact *el Doctor* – or anyone else who could resolve our situation by tracking down the long awaited work crew and the promised chairs – then we would be taking action by blocking access to the auditorium, the parking lot, and the PRI's political rally. The supervisor responded with a few calming hand gestures and promptly got on the phone. The supervisor spoke for a short time with someone, hung up and assured Raúl that *el Doctor* would be in contact with him shortly.

The supervisor was correct. Within a few minutes, Raúl received a call from *el Doctor* assuring him that the crew of workers would be on site in 60 minutes or less. We returned to our spot in the shade and continued to wait for the crew. In the meantime, people began to trickle in for that evening's final campaign event for the PRI city councillor candidate.

After more than an hour not a single worker had arrived. Now Raúl was very angry, but he knew what to do. He instructed us to move the tents and tent supplies to block one of the auditorium parking lot entrances. As Juan Pablo and his friends did this, Carlos jumped in his truck and pulled it in front of the other entrances to the parking lot. While they moved things into place, Raúl got on the phone to call *el Doctor*, again, as he and I made our way to the doors of the auditorium.

Once more, the secretary informed Raúl that *el Doctor* was not available.

Clearly exasperated, Raúl informed the secretary that the workers had not arrived and consequently we were blocking the door to the auditorium and the parking lot entrances. So, the secretary could let *el Doctor* know that no one was going to get in, and everyone was going to know what the PRI had done! And then he hung up!

El Doctor called back almost immediately to assure Raúl that the crew was on their way. Regardless, we stayed firmly in position, blocking the parking lot entrances and the auditorium doors. In reality, however, seeing as the entrance to the auditorium was quite large, there was no way that only the six of us could have effectively blocked the entire door. We actually blocked part of the door while we heckled people entering, letting them know about the situation and saying the PRI does not keep its promises! But *el Doctor* did not know this. All they knew was that we meant business!

Our blockade lasted only a few minutes; shortly after Raúl ended his call with *el Doctor*, a crew of 10 workers arrived to assemble the large tents. We retreated to our place in the shade to watch the tents go up.

While the municipal government's actions (or lack of action) are not a violent form of oppression, they are oppressive acts nonetheless. It is a kind of dominance and oppression rooted in hetero/cis-normative logics that deems a march for the rights and dignity of GSM communities to be inconsequential and of little importance – something that may be swept aside. In this instance, I find the direct confrontation with municipal power remarkable. While in many ways, the municipal authorities were far friendlier than in the previous year, their friendliness did not translate in to actual support or cooperation. Given that neither the city administration nor the march organizers were publically admitting the city's 'support' of certain aspects of the march, there was no real sense of accountability. This lack of accountability provided the space for the mayor's office to (attempt to) back out of their commitments to the march. Yet,

organizers were able to capitalize on an unexpected moment in which a weakness in the tenuous power of the municipal authorities was exposed. That is, blocking a final political rally just days before the election in which the PRI could have, and eventually did, lose power.

The blockade of the PRI's political rally was an instance of everyday resistance in which the organizers exploited the potential weakness and malleability of power presented in the moment to confront, resist, and overcome attempts by the municipal government to hamper and disregard the pride march. The mini-blockade is an example an unplanned and barely coordinated low-stakes, but direct 'self help' action that "enlarge[d] their position vis-à-vis the state" (Thompson 2011:446). By threatening and then taking action, the march organizers were able to disrupt and impact the relationships of power and dominance in which their activist work takes place. This moment of shifting power relations is fleeting. Its fleeting nature, however, is a part of what makes this an act of everyday resistance. A crack in the structure of dominance appeared, and the activist organizers, mainly Raúl, forced it wider open in order to make possible their event and to keep political elites to their word.

This is an example of a small instance of pushing back, which perhaps, over time accrues and eventually results in a larger systemic form of change. In real terms, however, this was a moment of everyday resistance that permitted the march to continue as originally envisioned by the organizers. The following day, a group of approximately 1000 to 1500 marchers made their way down the streets of central Esperanza. They arrived at the main plaza of the city where they stood (and danced) for several minutes in protest against the oppression of gender and sexual minorities.

Taken together, these two examples of everyday resistance speak to how the violence and terror of the so-called 'drug war' bring about shifting tactics within relationships of power and governance. That is, the more overt use of terror and violence cloaked in the discourse of a drug war/war on organized crime as an instrument of power brings with it a destabilizing element that challenges every aspect of life-as-before. The violence and terror of the so-called 'drug war' throws (everyday) life into flux, including previously established relationships of power and

governance. If these relationships are now destabilized, this opens up the possibility for moments of everyday resistance. If the terms of the relationship are somewhat still unclear and/or unsettled, then it is possible for previously disempowered actors to undertake actions that push the boundaries of, or renegotiate, if only temporarily, relationships of power and governance within which they operate. This is evidenced through the unplanned, but calculated risks (the negotiating with cartels and the mini-blockade) undertaken by GSM activist organizers in Esperanza as a part of a greater effort to accomplish their specific goal of executing a pride march under the conditions of on-going violence and terror. But what does all this mean for the pride march itself? I will now shift my analysis to address this question.

4.5 Pride as (Everyday) Resistance

Up to this point in the chapter, I have discussed some of the theoretical arguments surrounding the idea of resistance and the concept of everyday resistance. I have also shared stories that speak to these ideas. I have done this in an effort to show moments of everyday resistance, those that occurred before the marches and which were crucial to the event becoming a reality. But, what about the marches themselves? Are the marches also a site of everyday resistance? I suggest they are. I am asserting that through the sites of everyday resistance before the marches *and* the context of terrorizing violence that challenges the very idea of the everyday, the marches also become sites of everyday resistance. In this section, I discuss this aspect of my argument. I start by addressing how the marches are forms of resistance, in general, and then move on to addressing it as a moment of everyday resistance.

In the final section of chapter two, I argue that pride marches may be a form of effective GSM activism and resistance to hetero/cis-normative oppression, although not all pride marches/parades are the same. Indeed, given the vast amounts of money and political support often required to pull off an event such as a large pride march (or parade), many have been co-opted by corporate interests and politicians and/or have turned more into a spectacle than political action (Browne 2007; Chasin 2000; Johnson 2005). For the march organizers in Esperanza, there was an acute awareness of how easily pacified the political message of pride

marching can be, as well as how the march can be co-opted by commercial interests and profiteering. Raúl explains:

Mira, yo, el año yo me involucré en la marcha porque esta la traía una señora. [...] Ella ni es gay ni nada, pero es una comerciante de aquí de [Esperanza] que tenía un fin lucrativo. Entonces empezó a moverse con amistades travestis que trabajaban con ella cuando tenía eventos y eso. Y empezó a promover eso, 'ah por qué no hacen un evento así como en México, bla, bla, bla. Los convenció, y ya andaban organizados. Pero les faltaba alguien que tomara el mando. Ya sabían que querían hacer pero no sabían cómo iniciarlo. Y así duraron varios meses hasta que me invitaron. Y yo ya me encargué del evento, ya se los organicé. Ya me hice cargo totalmente. De hecho, las personas que a un inicio estaban a cargo ya no continuaron porque no pudieron con el evento en cuestión de que se les hizo mucho trabajo y no tenían el tiempo suficiente para involucrarse. Ya me hice cargo. Esta persona, lo hizo con fines lucrativos en cuestión de, como te digo, comerciante, y estaba viendo el modo de bajarnos recursos del municipio para lograr esto, como ella tenía, o tiene influencias dentro de la política. Pero no le salió como ella quería. Igual, porque tampoco le permitimos que así fuera. Ella, cuando nos invitó, nos invitó con un fin: de la comunidad, de ayudarnos, y ella atrás de todo eso había otro fin para ella. Y como yo nunca se lo permití y se le salió de control todo eso a ella yo me apoderé en cuestión de que, '¿sabes qué? No, las cosas no son así. A mí me invitastes [sic] y me dijistes [sic] hay que hacer esto. Okay. Y lo hicimos y mi objetivo en este es no cobrar [por el evento]. O sea, tu quieres hacer cobrando eso y eso. No vamos a cobrar, es gratuito. Y es así, es así, y es porque vamos a alzar la voz para los derechos. Yo sé que tú [a mi me] dices 'al motivo que tú quieras', pero tu motivo es otro. Y, este, y ya así empezó todo. Luego salimos mal, muy mal, ya no nos hablamos ni nada de allí los que anduvimos allí. Nos dimos cuenta que nada más nos utilizo. Lo único que le agradezco es que si ella no hubiera empezado con todo esto, no lo hubiéramos hecho. Jamás tenía la motivación de hacerlo. [...] Y me di para adelante, y de ahí me gustó la aceptación de la gente, me gustó que fue muy familiar. Entonces, dijimos, no pues, vamos cada año. Vamos a hacerlo para adelante para hacer

*valer nuestros derechos y que nos escuche la población y nos escuchen nuestros gobernantes, más que nada ¿verdad? ¡Y así fue!*¹¹⁵

As Raúl suggests, the marches were initiated as a money making scheme. A local businessperson who is not a member of any GSM community in Esperanza originally started to push the idea of a pride march. Only after Raúl started to participate in the planning did it become apparent that this businessperson was doing it as a way to make money. Eventually Raúl wrested all control of the event from that person and continued forward with the marches as free events and as free as possible from corporate and political influence.

The concern for keeping the marches as free as possible from (direct) political and corporate influence was a theme that ran through much of the planning and fundraising for the 2013 events. However, a few businesses in Esperanza made contributions both materially and/or financially. For example, the stage and sound system were donated as was most of the paint for the floats and the decorations. Some of the money went to purchasing tools, paint and random

¹¹⁵ Look, last year I got involved in the march because some lady had the idea. [...] She's not gay or anything, but she is a businessperson here in [Esperanza] who had lucrative ambitions. So, she began planning with some drag queen friends who worked for her at some of her events, and she started to promote the idea: 'ah, why don't you do an event like in Mexico City, blah, blah, blah'. She convinced them, and they started to organize. But, they were missing someone to take command. They knew they wanted to do it, but didn't know how to start. And that lasted for several months until they invited me to join. And I took charge of the event and I organized them. I took over completely. In fact, the people who initially were in charge of the event were no longer involved with the event because it was a big time commitment. So I took over completely. This person, she did it for profit, as I say, she's a businessperson, and I was seeing how she was trying to get resources from the municipality, given that she had, or has, influence in [local] politics. But it didn't work out like she wanted it. I mean, we weren't going to permit it. When she called us, she invited us with a plan: for the community, to help us. But behind all that she had another purpose for herself. And because I never permitted it she lost control of it all and I took over, and I said, you know what? No, things aren't this way. You invited me, and you said to do this. Okay. And we did it and my objective was not to charge [for the event]. So, you want to be charging for this and that. We are not going to charge, it is free. And that's the way it is because we're speaking out for our rights. I know you say [to me] 'whatever you want', but you want another thing. And that's it and so it began. Later, it went terribly bad [with her] and now we don't talk to anyone who was there in the beginning. We realized that we were being used and nothing else. The only thing that I appreciate is that without her we would have never started all this. We wouldn't have done it. We would have never had the motivation to do it. [...] So, we carried on. And I liked the acceptance from people, and I liked that it was very family oriented. So we said, well, let's do it every year. We're going to do it, make our rights matter and make the population listen to us and more than anything, for our leaders to listen to us, right? And that's how it was!

materials as needed. As a result, the 2013 events featured the logos of the businesses that had donated money or materials on television screens that adorned the stage.¹¹⁶

In addition to the march, organizers also offer workshops on various themes such as sexual health, legal rights for gender and sexual minorities in Mexico, and Trans health. At the post march festivities, Juan Pablo, one of the organizers, explicitly mentioned the need to move beyond the pride party and towards greater self-empowerment through education. Two days after the 2013 march, organizers held a sexual rights workshop. In the days after the 2013 march I spoke with Juan Pablo about the education and workshop aspect of their activism. He stated:

*Sí, no hace falta poner módulos de información en la marcha para informar. Que no nada más se salga del contexto y se haga lo que son todos las marchas de México de que es puro desmadre y que la fiesta, y que 'ah, vamos a salir y que todo el mundo nos vean'. No. Hay que seguir informando, hay que poner módulos. Por eso empezamos a hacer los talleres para la gente que fue a la marcha, también vengan. ¿Sabes qué? Hay que hablar de esto, esto, esto, y esto. Para que no pierdan lo que es el sentido de la marcha.*¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ All of the businesses that donated were locally owned and operated. There were no large corporation or multinationals involved in any way with the march or the post-march festivities. Most larger monetary donations were in the neighbourhood of MX\$1000.00 (or approximately US\$85-90.00); however, the company that provided the stage and sound system donated the labour costs, which constituted a very large savings for the overall cost of the event. In exchange for their donations, business' logos were featured on television screens that were placed in various positions around the stage area. There was a further corporate presence at the post-march festivities via the cartel involvement with the selling of alcohol since it was a local bar owned by a cartel member that was there doing business. No politician or corporate sponsor participated in the actual march, but representatives from the PRI campaign showed up unexpectedly and Ernesto allowed a campaign rep to say a few words. The message from the PRI was brief and somewhat paternalistically condescending. The campaign rep stated that the PRI has done a lot for GSM communities and this should not be forgotten when people are casting their votes. It should be noted, however, that the PRI, at least in Esperanza, has done very little for GSM communities. Raúl, Carlos and Juan Pablo were not please about Ernesto's actions that permitted the PRI campaigners to air their political messages that given that they are committed to keeping the march free of party politics.

¹¹⁷ Yes, but we are missing information stands for the march to inform people, so it doesn't lose its meaning, so that it doesn't become like all the other marches in Mexico, a shit-show, and the party, and 'oh, let's go out so that the whole world can see us'. No. We have to stay informed. We have to put [information] stands. That's why we started doing workshops, for people who went to the march to come [and say to them], 'you know what? We must talk about this, this, this, and this'. So that we don't lose the essence of what the march is all about.

Further to being marches of gender and sexual minorities through a mid-sized, generally conservative city in a country that has very little in the way of legal rights or protection for GSM communities, the marches in Esperanza may be viewed as a form of potent resistance in other ways, as well. As the quotes above indicate, the organizers' efforts to maintain the grass roots nature of the marches and bring education to the fore imbue the marches with a stronger sense of standing for something political. Yet, it is a balance of marching for rights and respect, gaining the strong support within GSM communities, and creating allies through political protest and colourful performance and entertainment. The activist organizers are trying to take a cue from other pride events from around Mexico and the world by launching fun and festive political action, while also being cognisant of the ineffectiveness of the *desmadre* that so often seems to accompany other marches and parades.¹¹⁸

The marches in Esperanza are a form of direct resistance to hetero/cis-normative oppression, homophobia and transphobia. By taking (to) the streets and momentarily claiming them for the production and celebration of gender and sexual diversity, the marches and march participants queer the heteronormativity of public space(s).

This is not an everyday occurrence in *any* city or town around the world, let alone in Esperanza. Yet, as I am arguing, in the context of ongoing violence and terror in of the so-called 'drug war' in Esperanza, the marches also become an act of the everyday and of everyday resistance. They become so in multiple ways. My assertion that the march is also a form of everyday resistance rests upon my earlier discussion of what becomes of the everyday in the context of war-like violence and terror. What is and is not the everyday is thrown into flux. Thus, as previously mentioned, what was once considered to be outside the everyday can become a part of the everyday given that there are no longer clearly set boundaries. The violence and terror challenge any and all previously set notions related to the everyday – relationships of power, governance and subservience, mundane day-to-day activities, the connections between individual lives and global flows of goods, capital, and ideas, as well as forms of resistance. Thus, the march is

¹¹⁸ Shit-show

simultaneously constituted as an act of everyday resistance through both the previous acts of everyday resistance that paved the way for its successful execution, as well as the destructive forces of the violence and terror of the so-called drug war that challenge the very notion of what is and is not the everyday.

Further to this, the pride marches are, in a way, acts of everyday-ness. By this I mean that a pride march is more a 'peace' time/ a 'before the violence' kind of activity. No question that it is something that is new and different for a city like Esperanza, but in a way, a pride march harkens to a sense of normalcy. The fact that the marches have been occurring brings with them a sense that things are 'normal' enough for them to occur at all. Thus, successfully carrying out the marches in the context of ongoing violence and terror are indirect acts of resistance, or acts of everyday resistance, that queers the spaces of violence and terror created by the so-called 'drug war' and weaves a new kind of queer normalcy, if only for a moment.

When thinking through the idea of these pride marches as moments of everyday resistance, it is also important to remember that none of this would have been possible if it had not been for the hard work and courage of the activist organizers. They engaged in acts of everyday resistance to confront official and unofficial authority head on, and resisted attempts to derail or destroy their fight for GSM rights. They successfully executed the marches despite violence, despite the threats, despite the fear, and despite the terror. That 'despite it all' quality of the marches is another component of what makes them unique and inspiring acts of resistance against hetero/cis-dominance, while simultaneously against the violence and terror and the so-called 'drug war'.

Even further, there are other, more concrete (obvious) ways in which the march becomes an act of everyday resistance. The marches are the product of everyday activities. The hundreds of hours of planning, organizing, running errands, setting things up, phone calls, emails, discussions, discussions and then even more discussions. Furthermore, the marches themselves (and the festivities afterwards) are constituted by a series of everyday activities (walking, dancing, singing, merriment). These everyday acts take on different, additional political

meaning in the context in which they are performed – in this case, that of the terror resulting from the so called ‘drug war’. In violent times, these everyday activities may be risky activities in the streets of a city that might explode at any moment. The choice to carry on with life-as-before to the best of one’s ability or engage in acts that harken to life-as-before *is*, as noted, a form of everyday resistance. Returning, again, to my discussion of the everyday, if the everyday is a set of day-to-day practices and whatever transpires in a day, then a pride march *is* an act of the everyday *and* an act of everyday resistance. It is no less the everyday than the street battles that have gripped the city of Esperanza in (at times) paralysing fear. Ultimately, when seen as an *assemblage of activities* – day-to-day and perhaps not so day-to-day, but everyday nonetheless – which come together in ways *that are always contingent, contextual, and sometimes unexpected*, pride becomes an act of everyday resistance that queers, contests, and critiques the violence and terror of the so-called ‘drug war’.

Here, I have come full circle. I return to a discussion that was started in chapter two, that of pride and what pride comes to mean in different spaces. When seen through the lens of pride as variegated and taken in the context of Esperanza and the so-called ‘drug war’, the pride marches are not only marches for the rights of GSM communities and a call to end homo/transphobia, but they also are marches against the violence and terror perpetrated by state and non-state actors. By not submitting to, but actively fighting back against intimidation and indifference while successfully staging a form of colourful and festive protest, activists engaged in a kind of everyday resistance that contests and queers the (hetero/cis-normative) violence and oppression of the so-called ‘drug war’. They did so without the direct support of any dominant power, but by utilizing the simultaneous legitimacy and illegitimacy of the authority of state and non-state actors and exploiting the potential malleability of power in these uncertain times. Despite the violence and despite the attempts to scare or derail their efforts, march organizers and participants raised their voices to contest their marginalization and the violence of the world that surrounds them.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue that during the process of planning and executing the 2012 and 2013 pride marches in Esperanza, GSM activists engaged in acts of everyday resistance that challenged and contested regimes of power and violence. Through these moments of everyday resistance the marches themselves become forms of everyday resistance against the terror and oppression of the so-called ‘drug war’ by queering the spaces of violence with colourful and festive activism and pride marching. I support my argument with narratives of those pivotal moments in the planning and executing of the 2012 and 2013 marches in which organisers refused to be silenced by powerful actors within the so-called ‘drug war’ and, as a result of these actions, were successful in staging the pride marches. The discussion here weaves its way into my larger argument in this thesis that pride is a variegated form of activism that comes to mean different things in different places, and in those different places, does different things. In the case of Esperanza, pride is both a direct and public form of resistance against hetero/cis-normative dominance, GSM inequality and homo/transphobia, while also a more disguised everyday resistance to the terror and violence of the so-called ‘drug war’.

* * *

To conclude this chapter, I offer a few closing remarks about the politics of identifying and naming (everyday) resistance. First, it may be hard to imagine that after writing this chapter I am a bit uncomfortable with defining what is and is not resistance. I consider this to be a very privileged discussion to have. I am able to ask this question and challenge the classification of people’s actions as (or not as) resistance because I myself am standing back at a very comfortable and distant position. For my research, I, as a naive and privileged MA student and fledgling social science researcher, was able to stroll in and stroll out of the fear, violence and terror described in this and the previous chapter. I am able to sit back in the safety of my home and consider if and how what I witnessed was, or was not, a form of resistance. But who am I to say that something is or is not resistance? To this point in my life I have never been in a position where I have been *made* to live with sustained violent conflict. During my six weeks in Esperanza I was exposed to a few moments of life under those kinds of conditions and I heard

many stories about it. But I left there. I do not know what it is like to remain. In reality, leaving is not a viable option for many of the people I spoke with for various reasons, mainly economic or family ties. Yet, within my limited experience and knowledge I do not understand how the very act of surviving and carrying on with everyday life, let alone organizing and executing a pride march, can be anything *but* a form of resistance to the multiple kinds of violence and terror occurring in Esperanza (and beyond).

Ultimately, resistance and everyday resistance are ambiguous and slippery concepts. I openly embrace the ambiguity of (calling something) resistance. The ambiguity of the concept allows for ample space to interpret and apply it. And yes, I am consciously choosing to interpret the actions of the people who I met and worked with as a form a resistance. To an extent this is a political choice. I am humbled and inspired by the organizers and march participants in Esperanza. I want to foreground their agency and bravery. This is my politics, but undeniably, the political is a part of the naming and understanding of (everyday) resistance.

;MARCHAMOS PARA PROTESTAR!

Chapter 5: Conclusion



Figure 5.1 ‘Peace’ – Protest Art in Esperanza, Photo Credit: John Alexander Pysklywec

Two weeks after the march I crossed back over to Sister City. I decided to stay at the home of a friend, Luzma as a way to save money. It was strange being back on the US side again. I had spent just over three solid weeks in Esperanza, during which time I was accompanied at almost all times. I had four days left before my flight home. I spent most of that time just hanging out with Luzma. I also went to visit another friend in a nearby city on the US side of the border. It felt bizarre, though, not being with Raúl, Carlos or Jacobo. I had spent so much time with them since I had arrived in the borderlands region and especially over the past three weeks. It felt kind of lonely.

On my last evening along the border I crossed back over to Esperanza to meet up with Raúl and Carlos one last time. We met at the small plaza right next to the *aduanas*.¹¹⁹ They picked me up in Carlos' father's old Chevy pick-up truck. We drove to one of my favourite places in town for dinner, a little *cenaduría* called *Las Tres Marías* with the best quesadillas in Esperanza!¹²⁰ After dinner they took me to a famous local institution, a large department store that has been in operation for more than 60 years. I bought a few souvenirs for friends and family, including the cheapest looking souvenir mug advertising Esperanza I could find to add to my tacky mug collection. From there we went to meet up with Jacobo. He had recently quit the hotel to go manage a new strip club that was opening up – *El Diamante* – the only one in town that would not be owned by the cartel. It was a risky business, but a good opportunity to make Jacobo a lot more money. When we arrived, one of the employees told us that he had gone out to run a few errands and that he would be back shortly. We waited there for about 30 minutes, but he never showed up. So, we left. I never got to say goodbye.

It was getting late so we headed back towards the bridge. As we approached the drop off area there was nowhere to park. Carlos pulled up and double-parked the truck in the side lane, blocking traffic. We exchanged gratitude. I was thankful for the opportunity to work with them and for their willingness to take me under their wing. They were thankful for the work I had done with them. I was hoping they would get out of the truck to give me a hug, but it didn't feel like that was going to happen. Traffic was building up behind us. A car honked. I think we shook hands, or maybe we just waved. I hopped out of the truck and closed the door behind me. Raúl slid over to occupy the seat I just vacated. He rolled down the window.

*¡Adiós! ¡Gracias! ¡Cúdense mucho!*¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Customs

¹²⁰ There really isn't a word for this in English, but a '*cenaduría*' is a restaurant that specializes in serving popular Mexican cuisine at dinnertime.

¹²¹ Goodbye! Thank you! Take good care of yourselves!

We waved once more to each other as they drove away. I didn't linger there too long, a moment or two. I crossed over the bridge back into the US and met up again with Luzma. Very early the next morning I flew home.

* * *

The central argument I advance in this thesis is that pride, as a form of activism and resistance is variegated across space and time. That is, pride means different things in different places and in these different places it does different things. In some places, pride is a parade of spectacle that has, arguably, been co-opted by corporate and political interests which has resulted in pride becoming a mechanism of pinkwashing – that is, the appearance of acceptance and equality while systemically very little has changed in terms of dismantling structures of homo/transphobia. In other places, places like Esperanza, pride takes on a manifold of meanings and purposes. Pride becomes a tool for resisting hetero/cis-normative dominance, as well as a form of everyday resistance, contestation, and critique of other kinds of oppression and violence that reach across many people and lives in a given society. In Esperanza, as I argue in chapter four, this pride-as-everyday-resistance contests the violence and terror of the so-called 'drug war' carried out by state and non-state actors.

In constructing this larger argument, I advance three supporting arguments. First, I suggest that, historically, the GSM movement in Mexico has emerged from a situation of state violence that was not directed specifically at GSM communities, but was a catalyst for their organizing nonetheless. While I would hesitate to say this is a pattern or that in some way this is history repeating itself in a different place and time, I assert there are some very general similarities between the two moments of GSM activism. Mainly that, once again, at a different time and with slightly different actors, there is an emergence of GSM activism under circumstances of violence that is not directed specifically at GSM communities, but still impacts them. This leads me to ask, does state-directed violence produce conditions that allow for new kinds of activism and protest that appears unrelated to the violence that was seemingly not possible before? My answer to this question is yes.

These historical insights, in part, addresses my question of ‘why now’, but not entirely. It could be said that state-directed violence and terror produce the conditions for resistance, and that, somehow, these are the conditions that seem ‘right’ for GSM activists to take up their cause. Perhaps it is ‘safer’ to engage in GSM activism when there are many voices calling out against powerful actors for a wide array of reasons than to be the lone voice of dissent. However, if this is the case, I am not sure what specific qualities of violence contribute to any sort of an effect that compels GSM activism in particular to emerge. Nor am I suggesting that all violence creates the conditions for the emergence of GSM activism. Ultimately, as I suggest early on in chapter four, the question ‘why now’ is formulated from a perspective of privilege. I can only ask this question and be perplexed by the actions of GSM activists in Esperanza because I am privileged to live a life of safety and security. I do not live in a space of war-like violence and terror. So, the response to the question ‘why now’, if there must be one, is, why not?! What else would one do?!

Another aspect of the discussion related to the historical trajectory of GSM activism in Mexico is addressing (my) concerns about the effectiveness of pride as a form of activism and resistance. Do I think Vancouver and Mexico City’s pride marches are effective tools for protest and resistance? No, not entirely. Does this mean that the marches in Esperanza are different? Cautiously, I would say, yes. For now, a very grassroots pride march in a conservative city is very much more of a disruption and symbolizes resistance. Yet, the threat of cooptation is there and, as I explained in chapter four, there have been attempts to co-opt the march in Esperanza since the moment it was conceived.

I begin mounting my second argument by framing the so-called ‘drug war’ in Mexico as a form of terror and violence that is being carried out by armed state and non-state actors. I argue that the violence and terror in Esperanza is shattering the lives of individuals and of society as a whole. By describing contemporary life in Esperanza as shattering, I am not suggesting that it is completely destroyed. It is not. Life does go on despite the violence and terror. Rather, it is a place and time that is violently in flux. Things are in the process of change, maybe even break

down, including old structures of political power, both state and non-state power, which represents a potential challenge to the status quo. Thus, the shattering violence and terror occurring in Esperanza also is an opportunity for change. In a way, the violence and terror can be seen as a vehicle through which previously unimaginable kinds of discussions and activisms can be manifested. Yet, the realization of such discussions and activisms is key for there to be any sort of change in dominant society as (when) the fragments of civic life jostle and resettle again. Ultimately, my argument here is about a reality and the possibilities of change within that reality.

My third argument is that, through their staging of two pride marches and festivities, the activist organizers and march participants in Esperanza are engaged in forms of resistance. On a more obvious level they are engaging in a public display of resistance against heteronormative domination and oppression. However, I am also arguing that the march is, and is a product of, acts of everyday resistance to the violence and terror that the state and non-state actors are sewing in Esperanza. This everyday resistance is not just the unwavering efforts of activist organizers to bring about the marches and post-march festivities despite bomb threats from armed non-state actors and the apathy and disregard from municipal authorities. It is the activist's direct engagement with these actors to incorporate them into the activist agenda through understanding and utilizing structures of power internal to the state and non-state authorities. These agitative acts of confrontation and everyday resistance held these authorities accountable for their words and actions while bending them to the needs of the march and march participants. Both cases involved direct action and negotiation, but never any real compromise – or any sort of compromise that came to the detriment of march politics. The organizers knew what they wanted and that is what they were able to obtain.

Central to these discussions of violence and resistance in Esperanza is an examination and troubling of ideas related to the everyday and everyday resistance. In that, if the violence and terror created by armed state and non-state actors as a part of the so-called 'drug war' is shattering the everyday lives of people and society, then the 'everyday' is placed in flux and becomes difficult to conceptualize. As I state in the introduction, what is the 'everyday' when

one's world is liable to explode at any moment? I assert that the everyday may be seen as relational and contingent daily practices connected to global flows of power, discourses, capital, etc, but that the everyday in Esperanza is now qualitatively different than before the so-called 'drug war' began. Thus, engaging in acts of the everyday signifies something different when the spectre of violence and death are ever present. It becomes what I call a new quotidian where previous notions and boundaries of political and social norms are challenged and shifting. Therefore, the everyday must be taken in context with whatever happens in a day whether that be similar to the quotidian-as-before or violent conflict. Ultimately, what is the everyday becomes flexible in contexts of violence and terror, and by extension, so too does what is (everyday) resistance.

Together, these three arguments build on one another in that the first situates the pride marches in Esperanza within the broad history of certain violences and GSM activism in Mexico. The second argument analyzes the contemporary violence and terror in Esperanza and the impacts it is having on the lives of the people I spoke with. This, in turn, situates the marches in Esperanza within their specific terrorizing and violent contexts. The third argument speaks to the strength and resistance enacted by people in Esperanza and the determination of a few to make life better in small but significant ways. Taken together, these arguments point to my larger argument that pride is a variegated landscape of resistance that signifies and enacts different things across space and time.

I see my work as contributing to the important and ongoing academic discussions surrounding GSM activism, violence, terror, the everyday, and resistance to the so-called 'drug war' in Mexico. I also see this work as an intervention into state (and statist) discourses surrounding the so-called 'drug war'. Meaning, rhetoric that downplays the rising death rates as a direct result of government policy and/or attributes the deaths to 'bad people' as if, then, state killing is acceptable. In my opinion, it is not – ever. People and activities are constructed as illegal and their illegality is always a contested arena. I see my work as speaking back to this notion that only criminals are impacted by or dying in the violence by demonstrating this through the stories shared with me by people living in zones of conflict. Finally, I also see this work as a

reconciliation process for myself in relation to my own personal misgivings and disappointments in relation to pride and GSM activism. While I am, by no means, under the impression that pride is a sure-fire effective form of resistance, I am satisfied that it is not entirely ineffective either. Rather, as with most things in life, pride and GSM activism are complicated, messy contingent and contextual.

Regarding areas of future inquiry, in terms of further investigation into the militarization of the US/Mexico borderlands and the so-called 'drug war', I see a need to turn an analytical lens on the relationship between states and cartels in order to fully understand what is actually unfolding in the region, by whom, for whom, and what 'drug war' *really* means. And while this work is being done by a few brave academics, researchers and journalists, I'm sure their work can be supported in a myriad of ways. In terms of research needed for the activists in Esperanza, conversations with them along with my observations suggest there is a need for in depth research, both qualitative and quantitative, into the experience of homelessness within GSM communities, especially amongst youth in Esperanza. Also, qualitative and quantitative inquiries into the experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS, both GSM and not, and the experiences of those who care for them, would be very relevant for people doing activist and advocacy work in the region.

As for myself, when I first returned home from Esperanza I was certain that I was going to go back there again. I, in fact, and assuming that all goes well with my MA, had pondered continuing on to do a PhD centring on one of the aforementioned ideas. At this moment, I have decided not to do so. Upon further reflection, I am not entirely sure that I want to return to Esperanza for the time being. There are a few reasons for this. First, the nature of activist and activist organizations in Esperanza is nebulous at best. Organizations seem to operate in spits and spurts. Seeing that no one is being paid for their activist labour, everyone must maintain some form of economic livelihood. These and other priorities, family, relationships, etc, often demand more attention, which moves activist work to the background. Therefore, it would be difficult to engage in any sort of applied work with an organization, which is something I would be interested in doing. Also, in all honesty, I am concerned for my own personal safety. I am

aware that this is something I can consider only because of my place of privilege. I wish I could say that my politics trump my personal safety, and perhaps if I were not in a committed relationship I would consider returning. But this is not my reality. I would not rule out further work in Esperanza, but for the moment it is something that I will not be pursuing.

* * *

As I write the last few pages of this document, it has been a year since I was in Esperanza. Coming home from field work wasn't easy for me. Upon my return to Vancouver, I went through a mini-depression. I felt conflicted, angry and sad. I had a hard time sleeping and sometimes would wake up with a start. For the first time in my life I *really* understood my privilege and it made me feel angry. It was strange to be back in a city that was so green and orderly. It felt calmer here. There was no tension in the air. Yet, the people who I had just met and now left were still there in Esperanza. They are in a place filled with violence and terror.

A few days after my return home, Javier, a march volunteer, a good friend of Juan Pablo and someone I got to know while in Esperanza, went missing for several days. My mind wandered back to the hotel in Esperanza where one of the male strippers went missing while I was there. I remembered Raúl telling me about the distressed phone calls from his family members. They had not heard from him in several days. Now, from a distance I watched my Facebook page light up with missing person messages and posters to be distributed amongst Facebook friends looking for Javier. In an attempt to explain away why someone would go missing during such a time as the so-called 'drug war' my first inclination was to blame him! I suspected him of being involved in cartel activity or thought he had done something that had put him in harm's way. It is truly amazing how the 'drug war' discourse can be so easily lodged in one's mind and used to justify acts of violence that blames the victim. Thankfully, Javier returned after just over a week, but would not talk – at least not to me – about what happened.

It was an incredibly distressing time for me. I was often emotional and cried a lot in those days. I was trying to make sense of what I had just experienced. I was trying to reconcile the

peacefulness of my own personal life and the intensity and uncertainty of the lives of the people I had left back in Esperanza. I never really did reconcile them, but over the course of a month I eased back into my life and the feelings of guilt and worry were slightly relieved.

Over the course of 2013 and 2014, life in Esperanza has become increasingly dangerous. The government of President Enrique Peña Nieto has recently ramped up the military presence in the region while violence between armed non-state actors and the military continues to rip through the streets of the city (Lohmuller 2014). Every now and then a friend in Esperanza posts an update on Facebook warning people about an ‘SDR’, *una situación de riesgo* in their neighbourhood.¹²² This is a way of getting the word out about violence in the city in the hopes of keeping the death counts low, which has become a citizen responsibility since the government has never reported such information and the news outlets have long been self-censoring.

When I first returned from Esperanza, I had frequent contact with many people there, including regular conversations with Raúl and Carlos. Over the course of the year I have fallen out of contact with most people. The connection seemed to drop off significantly around the time that the violence began worsening. I am not sure what the connection is, or if there is one at all. Even when I try to communicate directly with people via Facebook, I do not get a response. I do not resent the lack of contact, but I would have liked to remain in touch with people. Every so often I get a random ‘hello’ from Carlos and I do speak frequently with Alfredo.

Alfredo has deepened his HIV/AIDS activism by starting up a non-governmental organization that advocates for people living with HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, in the last few months his health has taken a turn for the worse as a result of his own battle with AIDS. At the moment he has taken a couple months break from his work and activism to focus on his health.

Like Jacobo, both Raúl and Marisol have also quit the hotel. I don’t blame them!

¹²² SDR is a Spanish language acronym used in social media to warn people about dangerous situations. It literally means situation of risk, or risky situation.

According to the Facebook page, this year's march and festivities took place at the end of June, in line with the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. One major change was that the post-march festivities were not held at the park at the edge of the city centre as in the two previous years. The entertainment took place indoors at a conference centre. Based on my experience in 2013, I imagine the move inside is in response to the weather as opposed to anything else. In addition to the ever-present (and frequently oppressive) heat, last year before the march began there was a windstorm that blew over some of the tents and damaged some of the decorations. It was nothing too serious, but annoying nonetheless. At that time, Carlos and Raúl spoke about moving the event indoors to avoid such issues. The march, however, was still an outdoor event. The participants began at the busiest mall in the city, and marched down *La Sexta* – the main north-south artery of Esperanza, to the conference centre.¹²³ From the photos I saw on Facebook, the march appears to have been a success in that it was fairly well attended and they managed to slow traffic on the busiest street in Esperanza, but in terms of overall marchers, it seems to have been smaller than the 2013 march.

In addition to the march, based on their posts on their Facebook page, Grupo Nueva Esperanza, the group that Raúl, Carlos, and Juan Pablo run, has been engaged in many forms of activism. More than before, it appears. They have expanded their education programs regarding HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, GSM rights and awareness education, and anti-homo/transphobia workshops. They have been giving workshops in clinics, government agencies, companies and schools. They have also been doing outreach and free rapid HIV testing in market places and plazas throughout the city, with a specific campaign that targets migrant people who pass through the region. They also conducted a marriage equality petition and executed a pool party mixer for GSM communities. As for Grupo Pepe Leyal, they do not have a Facebook page, but I did see Ernesto in some of the photos from the 2014 march, which I take to mean that he participated in some capacity this year.

¹²³ Sixth Avenue

In the end, in the face of the violence and terror of the so-called ‘drug war’, the people in Esperanza are strong. But the GSM communities in Esperanza are even stronger. To me, their courage and strength is inspiring. The activist organizers and the march participants refuse to stay quiet or stay indoors while the streets of Esperanza have become pop-up battle grounds. Instead, they have chosen to stand up, be proud, openly survive, and most importantly, to resist and thrive.

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