



NEW DIRECTIONS IN LATINO AMERICAN CULTURES

Listening to Sicarios

Narcoviolence in Ciudad Juárez,
2008–2012

Arturo Chacón Castañón
Robert McKee Irwin



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Listening to Sicarios

Arturo Chacón:

On the morning of January 31, 2010, a Sunday, my editor called me at six in the morning to alert me about a mass killing that had occurred in the south of the city, and to tell me to get there as soon as possible. I quickly dressed and set out, filled with dread, for a thirty minute drive. My first impression upon arriving in the neighborhood, Villas de Salvárcar, was unforgettable. From the moment I parked and got out of my car, I could see a large number of adults crying inconsolably, wandering about the street. The sun was just starting to rise. In that period of escalating violence, I had been witness to so many different scenes of crimes and violence, but I never managed to comprehend what had happened there.

I walked down the street searching for the address I'd been given, and soon saw a thick rivulet of blood that extended several meters from the entrance to a small and modest looking house. I had never seen so much human blood in the same place. Reaching the house required stepping across it, and I could feel its weight on the soles of my shoes. There was a small crowd of people, many weeping despairingly, out in front. I recall being overcome with the emotional intensity of the scene as I felt their eyes looking at me approach the house.

A heavily armed commando had broken into the house and opened fire on a party of teenage revelers. Most were shot dead at close range; only a few got away. There was blood all over all the bedrooms, and bullet holes everywhere. The building smelled of gunpowder, and was filthy with the viscous drying blood mixed with mud and pebbles that stuck to the soles of the shoes of everyone who entered.

A man stood outside staring stupefied at the house without speaking. Journalists moved about trying to piece together the details of what had happened. I began speaking with the man, who told me he had been at home the night before watching television, when he suddenly heard a torrent of gunfire coming from the residence where his son was at a party. He found him on the floor; he didn't see any wounds and tried to lift him up. He was alive, but couldn't speak. He held his son's head up, but as he took his head in his hands he realized that he had been hit in the nape of the neck. He hugged his son to him as he gasped his final breaths. As he told his story, he broke down sobbing and kept repeating 'they took him away, "they took him away" [this and all subsequent translation from Spanish are ours] while rubbing his face with his hands, still stained with his son's blood.

Then I heard a girl who had been at the party telling people that several people had shown up in pickup trucks and quickly begun firing at everyone with 'cuernos de chivo' (AKA-47 assault rifles). 'Look at the bones,' she lamented. Only then did I realize that the pebbles that I had picked up on the bottom of my shoes were really small shreds of human bone, which had sprayed across the house.

I wondered upon meeting this ordinary looking father and hearing from this ordinary looking teenage girl what this implied about the extent of the bloodshed that was extending all over Juárez. This massacre seemed to mark a moment when everyone realized the violence had crossed a line; if in the past few years it seemed to be always dangerously nearby, but mainly confined to a certain class of young delinquents killing other young criminals of the same class, with the Villas de Salvárcar massacre, it entered brutally into the mainstream of Juárez society. Some early speculation assumed that some of the youth were themselves involved in the narcotics trade; however, this idea proved false. Investigations determined that in the wee hours of the morning, fifteen teens from the CBTIS-128 high school, mostly soccer players from the city's AA league, were mistaken by members of the Sinaloa cartel for members of a rival gang known as Artistas Asesinos, also AA. If high school soccer players could be easily confused with sicarios, i.e. if the sicarios couldn't tell the difference between narcos and teenage soccer players, how could Juárez find the dividing line between good and evil?

LISTENING TO SICARIOS

Much has been said about both drug related violence in general and the specific category of violence by hire, the professionalized serial acts of brutality on demand carried out by sicarios. There are studies focusing on the socioeconomic contexts from which sicarios are recruited with emphasis on such themes as lack of economic opportunities, the appeal of easy

money, the projected glamor of gangster culture, psychological profiles and family histories of violent individuals, the extreme inequities of neoliberalist regimes, among many others (see e.g., Salazar, Ríos, Rivera González). Other studies seek to understand the broader structural components of violence, including those of unchecked globalized capitalism, persistent patriarchal ideologies, ever more rigid social hierarchies (see Reguillo, Reyna, Pérez Mendoza, Cisneros and Robles Rodríguez, Pérez Mendoza). Others focus on the histories and structures of drug trafficking as they relate to chains of production, mechanisms of distribution—at both wholesale and retail levels, including cross border smuggling, and consumption of narcotics across different social sectors, as well as the ways in which narco trafficking interacts with law enforcement, judicial and legislative branches of government, and with other criminal and noncriminal enterprises (see Valdez Castellanos, Bataillon, Hurtado and García Paz).

The extremely antisocial behavior of individuals who seem in many ways to be quite ordinary has provoked a great deal of interest among scholars. Generally speaking, it is believed that most sicarios would never come to commit multiple homicides, perhaps not even a single significantly violent act, were it not for the circumstances that cultivated their emergence and proliferation. Unlike serial killers, sociopaths who would appear to be independent actors compelled by very particular psychological disorders that drive them to commit destructive violence, or mass public shooters, who also are often loners whose atrocities are often motivated by hatred of social groups or institutions, or ideological obsessions, sicarios form integral parts of organizations that control and reward their actions, which have more to do with rivalries for economic and territorial control among different criminal syndicates than personal demons. They are in some ways more like members of military or paramilitary groups than mass or serial murderers, although their alliances with the organizations to which they belong are not based on conventional social contracts that morally justify violence through doctrines of national defense, or revolutionary ideologies in which participants may fervently believe, but rather on economic contracts, monetary compensation. The idea that ordinary people might be led to commit mass atrocities that are deeply damaging to the society in which they themselves, and their own loved ones, live, for financial gain, seems so radical as to be ethically inexplicable to many, who assume explanations must be found in the broader social contexts surrounding the violence.

A handful of books have focused attention on individual sicarios who have offered interviews, most notably *The Hollywood Kid: The Violent Life and Violent Death of an MS-13 Hitman* by Óscar and Juan José Martínez, and *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin* by Molly Molloy and Charles Bowden. Very few sicarios are willing to talk to outsiders; very few feel safe discussing acts that not only warrant severe criminal penalties, but also inspire broad public revilement. Likewise, the terrain of drug related violence is not one into which many academics, especially ethnographers, would dare to venture. No doubt, many researchers would shy away from entering into relationships with individuals who are known for their casual and callous treatment of human life, and for whom extreme forms of violence are part of day to day existence. Stories abound of journalists or even musical artists who had had frequent contact with drug syndicates and ended up murdered: the documentary filmmaker Christian Poveda, journalist Javier Valdez, and the popular narcocorrido artist Vicente Elizalde are a few of the best known. While the above mentioned texts offer rare glimpses of lives that are unimaginable, fascinating and shocking to many readers, and have consequently been best sellers, published testimonial narratives of sicarios remain few and far between. And the vast majority of those that have been published tell the story of a single assassin, whose personal idiosyncrasies may or may not apply widely across the trade—a notable exception being what is often cited as this genre's foundational text, *No nacimos pa'semilla* (published in English as *Born to Die in Medellín*), a collection of a half dozen testimonial narratives of young Medellín based sicarios recorded and compiled by Colombian Alonso Salazar in 1990.

In this landscape, where sicarios are understood as an increasingly critical social problem in need of solving, and in which an abundance of scholarship has weighed in with ideas, theories, and critical analyses, the absence of voices of sicarios is striking. A copious amount of scholarship addresses the issue, but mostly without turning to those best equipped to explain the phenomenon. Arturo Chacón, a journalist turned academic, who had been thrust into narcoviolence on his reporting beat, could not understand how the same kinds of kids he'd grown up with, had seen around town for years, were falling not into drug addiction or patterns of petty crime, but were suddenly becoming professional assassins. Although it was terrifying for him, he felt a need to hear directly from them, to listen to their explanations for how they ended up as sicarios, and what it felt like

for them to follow this path. He sensed that they were both vile monsters and ordinary humans, but was perplexed at how to reconcile these two categories.

Arturo Chacón's field research, which incorporates material from interviews with a half dozen sicarios, is quite extraordinary. The archive he assembled, while not offering a statistically significant cross section of the demographic, does allow the coauthors to identify some patterns and tendencies. And although most of the interviews he managed to gather are not lengthy, there is sufficient material to draw some significant insights.

These insights are based on the assumption that the best source for explaining the choices and acts of sicarios is the sicarios themselves, and the best method of understanding them is to listen directly and closely to what they have to say. Sicarios themselves are the only ones who can speak from experience of their decisions to become killers, of the sensations they feel during and after an assassination, of the moral justifications or rationalizations they apply in electing to carry out violent acts, of their relationships to those who hire them, and of the decisions of some to leave the profession. We approach sicarios not so much as objects of study, but as knowledge producing subjects. We seek here not necessarily to endorse anything they may say as uncontestable facts, but rather to put their ideas and assessments into dialogue with the many theories and assumptions circulating about them, whether in academic or more popular venues. Without aligning specifically with any of the many decolonialist or subalternist approaches to testimonial narratives, much less fetishizing these narratives as somehow nobler, purer, or more accurate than other writings about narcoviolence, including those based on ethnographic, archival or journalistic research, we privilege in this book the voices of the sicarios themselves, not necessarily because we must attribute an inherent authority to them, nor because we can trust them to analyze and express the truth of their lives with any precision, but because among those who have sought to assess the phenomenon of the job category and career path of sicarios within drug trafficking organizations, they are the only ones with access to the thoughts, feelings and desires that have motivated their actions. Our aim here is to bring their own articulations of their lives to the table. We don't want to imagine the motivations and emotions of sicarios by relying a priori on theories or second hand knowledge regarding Mexican narcoculture, gang or cartel related violence, or contemporary youth from low income areas; instead we aim to listen first to what

sicarios have to say, and then put their articulations and constructions of knowledge and experience in dialogue with the perspectives of academic theories and knowledge.

MEETING SICARIOS

The problem from the beginning, as indicated in the anecdote that opens this introduction, was to figure out how to meet sicarios and how to get them to speak in a way that puts neither these young men, nor their academic interlocutor at risk.

Chacón explains:

Throughout my training in the field of communication, and my professional trajectory as a journalist, I have always considered that those things that people can't easily verify or prove themselves are what most get their attention. Observing and documenting social phenomena, especially those that seem most impenetrable to outsiders, has been my habit since college. Ciudad Juárez has been seen as a social "laboratory" due to the duality determined by the intrinsic force of its thriving industrial labor market, and the lure of its geography at the extreme north of Mexico, just beyond the border of the United States, and there has been no better site than Juárez for understanding several different social and cultural phenomena of our times, ranging from the banal (the economics of the maquiladora industry) to the outrageous (femicides and judicial impunity).

What led me to undertake this project for my doctoral dissertation was the desire to understand, first, why it was that so many young men in our city were killing other young men; second, what led them to risk or destroy their own lives in doing so; and finally, to return to the scene of a crime, what I could learn from the killing of a childhood friend.

The state's own deep participation in the exponential rise of deaths in a city that is not that large (at one point three million inhabitants as of 2010, it was Mexico's fifth largest) in a scenario that is not that of war, but rather of a more independently driven form of annihilation, has invited speculation on what was happening there, especially during the presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006–12). It seemed that Calderón's strategy for addressing narcoviolence, which he called a "war," was designed not so much to control, hinder, or eliminate drug trafficking, but rather to eradicate the lowest strata in the chain of command, a social cleansing at ground level and via horizontal means; without noteworthy arrests or seizures of