JESUS MALVERDE: DEVOTION, MASCULINITY AND NARCO JUNIOR IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

By

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For my Father
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As the Mexican drug wars continue to rage, significant attention has been given to the theoretical and social importance of “narco-saints”—Santa Muerte, San Judas Tadeo, and Jesús Malverde. Among studies examining the phenomena of production of these popular saints and attraction to them, scant attention has been given to the interpretation, performance, and portrayal of gender, and masculinities in particular. In this thesis I explore intersecting historical forces that worked to sanctify the figure known as Jesús Malverde, who is petitioned by undocumented migrants and drug traffickers praying for safe travel across the US-Mexico border, with particular attention to the construction and portrayal of masculinity—or masculinitieś—in the saint’s image and among his followers. Malverde has gained a reputation amongst devotees as “el ángel de los pobres” and is also known widely as “el narcosantón,” a name that expresses and resurrects the morally ambiguous character of the legendary figure said to have stolen from the rich to help impoverished citizens of 19th century Culiacán.

I trace the mythic construction of Malverde to a legendary remembrance of two 19th century bandits, and identify the influence of elements from popular culture during
the “Golden Age of Mexican Cinema” (1936-1959), with particular attention to ways in which men’s bodies and behaviors were depicted and idealized. I then explore performance, representation, and embodiment of masculinities in the contemporary cult of Malverde, especially through the proliferation and consumption of material goods such as candles, clothing, and jewelry that bear his image. With attention to Malverde’s identity as “el ángel de los pobres,” I examine the power relations, economic inequality, and place identity associated with Malverde, which allows better understandings of how socioeconomic class intersects with gender in practices of devotion and in the character of his devotees. I argue that devotees petition Malverde for miracles to better cope with quotidian struggles which are constructed by broader societal mechanisms imbued with gendered expectations. And I ask how religious beliefs and narratives work to ideologically naturalize certain roles and behaviors through constructions of masculinity through the image of Malverde.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Every year on the 3rd of May, thousands of people travel to Culiacán, Sinaloa in Northern Mexico from all corners of the country, the United States, and from distant nations such as Japan, Ecuador, Germany, and Canada. The pilgrims converge at La Capilla de Jesús Malverde, the shrine honoring a folk saint who is depicted as a generous bandit who stole from the rich to help the impoverished citizens of 19th century Culiacán before being executed by government forces in 1909. According to legend, after his death, miracles were attributed to his resting place, which soon became a site of local pilgrimage. Since the mid-20th century, pilgrims have come to La Capilla de Malverde to petition and to thank the saint for miracles. The devotional practices of pilgrims, and of the family that operates La Capilla de Malverde, have attracted the attention of the Church and the Mexican state, who reject Jesús Malverde’s legitimacy as a saint, while attempting to co-opt his cult.

Among many narratives that convey the history of popular class struggles and social banditry in pre-Revolutionary Mexico, the story of Malverde is unique as he has come to be venerated as a folk saint. Life stories of Malverde are fragmentary, and at times contradictory—they exist in various forms scattered throughout the memories and experiences of devotees, who often enhance and modify their tellings with experiences from their everyday lives. When the stories come together, they convey messages about resistance, belief, and faith (or lack thereof) in the Church, the performance of masculinity, and local and national belonging. The meanings of these stories are constantly changed, contested, and revised. What has endured is a profoundly personal identification with the death and sacrifice of Malverde. In recent
decades, men have lived that identification by adopting elements of Malverde’s image into an alternative masculinity that challenges aspects of Mexican gender norms.

The cult of Jesús Malverde, simultaneously known as “el ángel de los pobres” and “el narcosantón,” has attracted scholars and journalists alike. I came by this research topic after reading about Malverde in the introduction to Frank Graziano’s *Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America*, a passage that reminded me of the song “mi santito preferido” by Los Cuates de Sinaloa that recounts the tale of a methamphetamine smuggler who petitioned Malverde for safe passage across the U.S.-Mexico border. Not long after my first exposure to Malverde, his bust appeared on an episode of the critically acclaimed *Breaking Bad* where he was referred to as the patron saint of narcs. This episode, which did not include the voices or perspectives of devotees, motivated me to go see and hear the faithful perform and talk about their devotional practices. With a small summer travel grant, I travelled to Culiacán, Sinaloa, settled at *La Capilla de Malverde*, intent on gaining insight into the performance, experience and representation of masculinities in the cult of Malverde.

**Jesús Malverde**

The various narratives and historical interpretations that convey the story of Jesús Malverde will be discussed at length in Chapter Two, but here I provide a brief introduction to the man known in legend as “el ángel de los pobres.” Jesús Malverde was born Jesús Juárez Mazo on December 24, 1870, just outside Culiacán, the state capital of Sinaloa. Railroads arrived in Sinaloa during his youth, facilitating the expansion of large-scale hacienda agriculture—the profits of which were enjoyed by the few elite, while the vast majority of the population faced even greater exploitation and economic strain. In the most widely circulated version of the narrative, Malverde is
thought to have been a carpenter or railway worker during this period of rapid socioeconomic transformation; while other versions have him as the illegitimate and unrecognized son of a wealthy landowning senator. In all versions of the narrative, Malverde turned to a life of banditry after his parents died of either hunger or disease. He quickly earned a reputation as a generous bandit who stole from the rich to give to the poor.

In the most popular version of the legend, the Porfirian governor of Sinaloa, Francisco Cañedo, personally challenged Malverde to steal his sword, promising that if successful, he would be granted a pardon. Malverde passed brazenly through the governor’s mansion stealing his sword and leaving a note stating “Jesus M. was here.” Humiliated, the governor ordered him hanged with his arms tied behind his back on May 9, 1909. As a show of force, local authorities refused to allow Malverde to be buried, declaring that his body be left hanging until the bones fell to the ground. Over time, the local population threw small stones towards his remains as a sign of respect, eventually covering the body. Within a few months of his death, miracles were attributed to the mound of rocks encompassing Malverde’s remains, leading to the development of a small, local religious community.

**La Capilla de Malverde**

*La Capilla de Malverde* in Culiacán, Sinaloa, often referred to as “the authentic chapel of Malverde,” as it is said to be located near his final resting place will be discussed in chapter three. Although many devotees keep a home shrine or wear pendants and clothing bearing Malverde’s image, pilgrimage to *La Capilla de Malverde* to repay the saint for a promise fulfilled is seen as a necessary gesture. The chapel contains two alcoves displaying busts of Malverde, the most central of which contains
the original bust of Malverde commissioned in 1973. The walls are covered in an array of *ex-votos*, religious offerings given in order to fulfill a vow, ranging from handwritten notes to ornate plaques inlaid with gold thanking Malverde for miracles delivered. Inside and outside of *La Capilla* vendors sell an array of religious goods—busts, votive candles, booklets and pamphlets detailing the life of Malverde, hats, and burned compact discs containing corridos about “*el ángel de los pobres.*”

Figure 1-1. Map of Mexico highlighting the location of Culiacán (Photo courtesy of http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/mexico-administrative-map.htm)

**Culiacán, Sinaloa**

Culiacán is the modern, centrally located state capital of Sinaloa which sits along
Mexico’s Pacific coast in the far Northwest corner of the country. It is a fairly small city by Mexican standards with the most recent estimates of the city’s population at 858,638 inhabitants (“Nuestro municipio”), making it the nation’s twenty-third largest urban area as of 2015 (INEGI, “México en Cifras”). The city is surrounded by the foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental to the East and the Sea of Cortés to the West.

With a hot and sunny climate, Sinaloa became the “breadbasket of Mexico as it supplies a large variety of agricultural products it supplies the rest of the nation” (Ortega Noriega 2016, 230), and the United States. The three major legal industries of the state are “food production, textile production, and sugar production,” with 32.5% of these industries located in Culiacán (Ortega Noriega 2016, 231). Other than the agricultural industry, there are few legal economic options for residents of Sinaloa, contributing to the state’s net migration rate of -1.8 (INEGI, “México en Cifras”). In the most recent survey of migrants leaving the state, 95% of respondents reported the United States as their final destination, with 92% of those migrating to the US citing better economic opportunities (INEGI 2010, “Censos y Conteos de Población y Vivienda”). The remaining 8% of respondents cited security concerns due to ongoing drug wars in Sinaloa as a reason for migrating (INEGI 2010, “Censos y Conteos de Población y Vivienda”).

In addition to its reputation as Mexico’s breadbasket, Sinaloa makes up a portion of the “Golden Triangle” of marijuana and opium production, along with the states of Chihuahua and Durango (Beittel 2015, 9). Control of this region has been critical for cartel profit, with various estimates suggesting the Golden Triangle accounts for 40%-60% of Mexico’s narcotics production (Beittel; Jennings; Hope; Gutierrez, 2014). Control
of the region’s narcotics production has rested with the Sinaloa Cartel since the late 1980s, yet their control has been challenged with formal declaration of a war against drugs by president Felipe Calderón in 2006, which subsequently led to an increase in violence in the region. According to the Mexican Interior Ministry, over twenty-six thousand residents of Sinaloa were murdered between 2006-2014 (Vilalta 2014, 1454). The relevance of the drug wars and the Sinaloa Cartel for Malverde phenomena will be discussed in depth in Chapter Four.

**Research Questions**

The questions that motivated me to pursue this research project are diverse and varied, and cannot all be answered here. My reading of narratives surrounding the life of Malverde provoked initial questions: How do devotees interpret and negotiate masculinities in the context of Jesús Malverde? This initial enquiry led to broader questions about gender and folk religion in general. Considering that recent academic studies argued that religion and popular devotions fell largely within the “feminine sphere” (Burdick 1996, 1998; Chesnut 1997, 2007; Graziano, 2007), how can we understand the fervent attraction of thousands of men—particularly young men—to religious devotions that highlight Malverde’s hyper-masculine image and association with *narcoculture*? To better understand how devotees interpret and negotiate masculinities, I employ R.W. Connell’s notion of masculinities, dominant forms that coexist in tension with various subordinate masculinities (2005). In order to understand how masculinities are experienced and interpreted by devotees, I ask what Mexican gender norms are expressed in images of and devotions to Jesús Malverde, and how those images and devotions reproduce and/or challenge currently dominant gender norms? Finally, the answers and stories of interlocutors throughout Culiacán and the
borderlands region led me to ask about the relationship between sacrality and material goods in regards to Malverde? This question arose after numerous devotees expressed opinions that certain material goods not only connected them to the sacred, but facilitated their performance of masculinity.

**Purpose of Study**

This thesis intends to contribute to scholarship and to society in Sinaloa. This project seeks to enrich research concerning popular/folk devotional practices in Mexico by bringing a new focus on masculinities. There has been extensive research concerning popular/folk Catholicism in recent years, in particular scholars have focused on the phenomena of Mexican folk saints. This study seeks to examine the phenomena of Jesús Malverde and its dialectical relationship with masculine identities in variously located places throughout Mexico. I seek to use my study of cultural and religious conceptions of masculinities to better understand conceptions of “manly” behavior that often produce violence or death. This project seeks to contribute to social efforts to produce options for masculinity that are less harmful and violent throughout Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands region. This project will contribute to the academic literature regarding popular Catholicism, gender, identity, and narcocultura, by considering these phenomena in one interdisciplinary frame of analysis. This thesis will also contribute to the understanding of Jesús Malverde, a theoretically and socially important folk saint.

**Methodology**

During June, July, and August of 2016, I carried out a series of research activities in Culiacan, Tijuana and Los Angeles, including interviews with over 30 participants and different forms of observation. At *La Capilla de Malverde*, I conducted fourteen in-depth
interviews. The questions were open ended, and interviews often became impromptu life histories. The average interview lasted roughly twenty-two minutes, but there were two interviews that lasted over two-hours. Thirteen of the interviews took place with one participant at a time, while one had two participants. Participants represented various social classes and occupations, and all but one participant were men.

In between interviews I practiced careful observation of the chapel itself and what went on there. Paying special attention to the objects and actors which filled La Capilla I counted, measured, drew, and described everything that I could observe. In Tijuana and Los Angeles during late July and early August 2016, I carried out brief, structured interviews amongst seventeen botánica\textsuperscript{1} owners. The average interview lasted three and a half minutes, as many participants were busy with clients. Participant observation was generally frowned upon in the botánicas, as owners did not want a researcher poking into their commerce or interviewing their clients.

I took many photographs of the various goods bearing Malverde’s image and of ex-votos in La Capilla de Malverde to gather material for visual analysis, and to help visually demonstrate ways in which sacrality and material goods are connected. These photographs demonstrate the countless gestures, postures, clothing, and belongings that constitute the “manly” appearance of Malverde and devotees. I recorded findings in field notes and daily journal entries. Finally, I consulted primary sources throughout the research process in order to better understand the historical Malverde and the traditions surrounding his cult.

\textsuperscript{1} According to Luis D. Léon, botánicas are “urban storefront healing centers [which] renders U.S. urban space—designed to subjugate working populations and privilege the benefactors of neocolonization—rendering it as familiar, domestic, sacred space by inscribing it with distinct religious grammars in religious processions and other activities that shake the borders between public and private space” (2004, 157).
**Chapter Outline**

Given the diversity of research questions that motivate this work, the following pages bring into dialogue an array of narratives, visions, and voices that intersect around men’s devotion to Jesús Malverde, and that illuminate practices and meanings that change, challenge, and interpret perceptions of masculinity. In Chapter Two, I review literature selected from two fields that have rarely been brought together: popular/folk Catholicism in the Americas and masculinities studies. In the third chapter, I share the multiple narratives of Malverde, examine the neocolonial expansion of U.S. capital in agriculture, mining, and railroads during the Porfiriato, and close with an observation of the ways in which Mexican popular culture shaped the physical characteristics of Malverde’s face. Chapter Four provides material ethnography of *La Capilla de Malverde*, as well as a discussion of Malverde’s role in matters of labor and healing. The fifth chapter traces the growth of the Sinaloa Cartel in the late 1980s which coincided with Malverde’s rise in popularity. This chapter also examines young men’s self-construction and the emergence of a specific form of alternative masculinity known as the *narcojunior*. Chapter five offers a brief discussion of my findings, some concluding thoughts, and restates my main objectives and arguments.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, scholarship concerning devotions and faith communities in Latin America has primarily focused on the religious lives of women. Popular devotions are often described as a space where, although “‘male authority’ is nominally underlined, at the same time the space is dominated and organized by a woman or women” (Norget 2006: 72). The majority of these works pay little empirical or analytical attention to men or masculinities and, as a result, end up reproducing stereotypical notions of homogenous masculinities. In attempts to develop a more empirically complete and theoretically integral understanding, I bring together scholarship concerning faith communities and folk religion with scholarship about gender and changing masculine identities.

This thesis seeks to understand expressions of masculinity in the cult of Jesús Malverde, which will provide an opportunity to better comprehend currents in popular Catholicism, as well as develop a better understanding of how religious beliefs inform and influence the construction of masculinities. This literature review is twofold. The first section provides a historical overview of popular Catholicism in the Americas, with an emphasis on Mexico. The second section provides some historical and contemporary perspectives on masculinities in Mexico, and discusses some of the key debates on gender and masculinities more broadly.

**Popular Catholicism of the Americas**

In recent decades, considerable academic inquiry has been given to manifestations of popular and folk Catholicism throughout the Americas, with special attention given to Mexico. Despite the recent interest in popular Catholicism, the
phenomena is not a recent development as communities throughout the Americas have constructed and believed in local saints for centuries. Generally, these local figures never attain formal recognition from the Vatican; however, the Church often attempts to “re-channel” the faith into canonized saints that share similar attributes as the folk saint in question. For Church leadership, manifestations of popular Catholicism, and the devotees who practice it, are sometimes perceived as deviant and at risk of falling into paganism and superstition. From this perspective, popular devotions are a “‘mixture of religious beliefs with superstition and myths’; they evidence a 'lack of development, profundity, and purity’; and they ‘reduce the Faith to a mere utilitarian contract’” (Graziano 2007: 69).

Early generations of studies that examined popular religion in the Americas tended to agree with the Church’s interpretation of the phenomena, often characterizing popular devotions as antagonistic towards progress. Later, more analytic approaches, are demonstrated by Robert Redfield’s studies of Mexican “folk society,” with its associated concepts of the folk-urban continuum, as well as great and little traditions, that created a series of dichotomies that had popular religion on one end, and the institutional Church on the other (1930; 1948; 1956). The peasant-civilized, rural-urban, superstitious-practical, as well as popular-elite dichotomies, with their associated value connotations, became associated with scholarship on popular and folk Catholicism in the mid twentieth century. It took nearly a generation of thought for social scientists to reconceptualize popular devotions and move away from these hierarchical dichotomies. William Christian Jr. argued that these comparisons have not always proved fruitful, for they involve comparing two very different things—on the one hand, a religion as lived and, on the other, a set of norms
that hardly represents a way of life and that, in fact, may not be lived strictly by any kind of person, peasant or non-peasant [noting that the] distinction between peasant and nonpeasant religiosity has not proved particularly revealing...as peasant religiosity has been found to share many of the same characteristics hitherto considered the domain of the “civilized.” (Christian 2005: 3151)

**Local Religion in Spain**

Christian first articulated these arguments in 1981, with his work *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, where he asserted the key to understanding non-official religion is understanding its local context. Christian argued that each town or village created its own sacred geographies through shrines, chapels, churches, and religious images in order to cope with the precarious nature of human existence in pre-Industrial Europe, which affected the lives of all people, regardless of social class. According to Christian, Spanish Catholicism became centered on saints and shrines, as they were petitioned for health miracles. “Miracles were critical, dramatic evidence of the power of the shrine image” (Christian 1981: 102), to heal the sick, which generated wealth for all levels of the Church. Echoing Kenneth L. Woodward argues that during the medieval period, “the great mass of believers were not interested in saints as moral examples, but as spiritual patrons who protected the populace from storms and plagues” (Woodward 1990: 70).

Christian also examines the mutual relationship between devotee and saint, where “all vows contained some kind of commitment from the citizens—all of them—in exchange for the saint’s protection” (Christian 1981: 57). Christian notes that “many of these vows were unconditional promises to be fulfilled whether or not they resulted in averting the disaster that occasioned them” (Christian 1981: 57). If vows were consistently left unfulfilled, the saint and associated shrine would lose popularity and fade into obscurity. The ecclesiastical acceptance of “lay devotion...directed to saints
almost exclusively through their relics, a local martyr, hermit, or bishop” (Christian 1981: 21), created two levels of the Church in Spain which were not mutually exclusive.

**Popular Catholicism and Colonization**

Building on the work of Christian, William Rowe and Vivian Schelling argue that the popular Catholicism of sixteenth-century Spain was characterized by an emphasis on the “effective presence and immanence” of the sacred in objects, rather than ecclesiastical authority (1991: 68-9). According to Rowe and Schelling, “the saints became vehicles for native meanings [as] the early Spanish evangelizers in Mexico translated ‘saint’ into the Nahuatl word ‘ixitla’, which in fact indicates effective presence and immanence rather than representation” (1991: 69). This, and other linguistic and cultural barriers help foster a Catholicism where saints and native deities were combined as a tool of evangelization (Rowe and Schelling 1991: 70).

While Spanish Catholicism drastically changed Mexico, so too did Mexico change Catholicism. According to J. Jorge Klor de Alva, colonial conversions to Catholicism were not black and white, but rather fell on a continuum ranging from outright rejection to belief. Most people, however fell somewhere in the middle, ranging between accommodation and resistance. Klor de Alva argues that in traditional colonial scholarship “the acceptance of some external Christian forms has been seen as tantamount to conversion; the integration of Christian values and world views [has] been taken for granted” (1982: 346). While experiencing the brutal violence of colonization, popular religion, consisting of elements of native religion and Catholicism “sheltered symbols and narratives and thus protected them from the fatal Christian sword of the colonizers” (Léon 2004: 32). For Léon, popular/folk Catholicism is akin to a borderlands...
religious practice as it “allows other religions to survive and it builds in the sacred places of the older religions” (Léon 2004: 24).

**Contemporary Popular Catholicism**

According to José Manuel Valenzuela, the Mexican-American War (1846-48) created “new heroes and traditions” on both sides of the border. In the United States, war heroes that celebrated the young nation’s military might, and in Mexico, heroes of the lower class “that projected the nation’s desire for resistance and retaliation” (1992: 14). These social bandits soon morphed into folk saints who prospered as a means of coping with the nation’s “collective defenselessness and quotidian misery at the hands of the United States” (Valenzuela 1992: 14). Many of these figures were championed during their lives and venerated locally as folk saints after their deaths, which fostered a feeling of communal identity and inclusion amongst devotees (Valenzuela 1992: 13). Valenzuela argues that the origin myth of these figures “is an integral part of the reality and history of the community of believers…the myth serves as a social, rather than historical function. It allows devotees to define who they are” (Valenzuela 1992: 13). Frank Graziano echoes these sentiments by noting folk saints represent inclusion and self-recognition with the saint (2007: 29-32).

The spiritual power attributed to folk saints generally originates from two activities: tragic death or faith healing (León 2004: 130; Graziano 2007: 15-24). Graziano argues, “tragic death is critical to folk sainthood not only because its shock arouses compassion, but also because it cancels debt in the economy of sin and atonement. Unjust or unwarranted deaths are a kind of purgatory on earth that cleanses sin and sends one soul directly—or at least more quickly—to heaven” (2007: 21). As many of these figures’s lives were filled with suffering, God awards them saintly powers
in the eyes of devotees. For folk healers, they are gifted with the power of healing directly from God, and are obligated to heal the needy free of charge (Léon 2004: 140). After the death of a folk healer, goods associated with their image can continue to heal, or curanderos can channel the spirit of the deceased (Léon 2004: 138).

**What is Folk Catholicism?**

While examining the topic from an array of academic disciplines including history, anthropology, sociology, and religious studies, the numerous scholars that research these forms of religious expression are faced with similar questions: What differentiates folk Catholicism from popular Catholicism? What exactly is a folk Saint? In my own conceptualizations of these questions, I understand folk Catholicism to be a form of popular Catholicism where saints and other objects of devotion are non-canonized, and often actually condemned by the Church. Marked by fewer institutional trappings, folk Catholicism allows devotees the freedom to express their religious devotion in ways they see fit, fosters a feeling of community and inclusion, as many folk saints were real individuals whose historical memory lingers. This familiarity with local community and history, together with distance from the Institutional Church, allows the petition of folk saints for nefarious deeds (Graziano 2007, 43-47). Luis D. León has referred to this process of belief and construction in folk saints as “religious poetics” where “religious actors can manage the often harsh and potentially overwhelming conditions they confront—the battle for survival and more, dignity, love, freedom—by deploying the most powerful weapons in their arsenal: signs, myths, rituals, narratives, and symbols” (Léon 2004, 5). In this sense, folk Catholicism can be understood as a means of reinventing and reinterpreting existing religious institutions to conform with the quotidian struggles of devotees.
A seemingly simple question, the debate as to what a folk saint is has generated a multitude of definitions with various theoretical underpinnings. Frank Graziano’s definition that “folk saints are deceased people, some of entirely constructed identity” (2007, vii), was heavily frequently cited for nearly a decade, yet his definition is severely limited in its scope and somewhat contradictory, as a deceased person cannot be of constructed identity. Graziano’s definition does not account for physical objects imbued with religious power, nor does it account for Santa Muerte, the most prominent folk saint who is “a Mexican, female personification of death” (Chesnut 2012, 6). In my own conceptualization, I consider folk saints to be characters that index the lives of purported individuals, spirits, or phenomena which often manifest themselves in physical objects.

**Early Interpretations of Masculinities in Mexico**

Recent scholarship in the field of gender studies has recognized “masculinities as constellations of qualities, behaviors, attitudes and accomplishments that—within particular communities of interpretation—are associated with the gender category ‘man’” (Paulson 2016: 145). Previous literature concerning masculinities, especially in the case of Mexico, recognized a variety of masculinities, but often stigmatized a certain type of male character. Writing in the 1930s, Mexican philosopher Samuel Ramos wrote of *el pelado*; a violent, sexist, poor, dirty, and uneducated man who “was the most elemental and clearly defined expression of national character” (1962: 58). Ramos theorized that *el pelado*’s behavior was a result of feelings of powerlessness that began during the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Hence, the predominant idea of Mexican masculinity was racialized as *mestizo* and blamed for the nation’s underdevelopment.
Expanding on Ramos’s theories, Octavio Paz wrote of el macho in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Paz theorized that the character of el macho was the result of the racial rape of indigenous peoples during the conquest (1985: 82-83). According to Paz, the essential attribute of el macho was power, which “almost always reveals itself as a capacity for wounding, humiliating, and annihilating” (1985: 82). While el macho relies on open displays of power and aggression, he must deceive and hide his emotions to protect his identity. Paz argued that el macho is a “dissembler” whose “role requires constant improvisation, a steady forward progress across shifting sands. Every moment he must remake, re-create, modify the personage he is playing” (1985: 40). This early understanding of gender as performative was later developed by Judith Butler and will be discussed further below. While both Paz and Ramos theorized about masculinities using race, class, and gender, their ideas were highly infused with the predominant form of masculinity in the nation— a form that was racialized and stigmatized as a problem.

Of the early theorists who wrote about masculinities in Mexico, there is perhaps no work more influential than Oscar Lewis’s 1961 *The Children of Sanchez*. Speaking to Lewis about being a man, a research participant named Manuel noted that “in a fight, I would never give up and say, ‘Enough,’ even though the other was killing me. I would try to go to my death, smiling. That is what we mean by being ‘macho,’ by being manly” (1961: 38). This quote informed a generation of thinkers on Mexican masculinity, yet it was simply one quote from one man. There is no mention of fatherhood, familial obligations, or labor; to be a man in Mexico is to be a fighter—and to suffer pain.

Writing in the early 1970s, Evelyn P. Stevens continued the narrative of a racialized machismo, arguing that it “seems to flourish in areas where cultures of two or
more great continents mingled: the urbanized, mestizo sectors of the ‘Indian’ countries as well as countries of the African-European mixture” (1973: 58). According to Stevens, “in countries populated chiefly by Europeans or their descendants, the machismo behavior patterns exists in a somewhat attenuated form” (1973: 58). Stevens differentiates her argument from Ramos and Paz by arguing that manifestations of machismo exist in all economic classes, and draws parallels with machista behavior and the seven deadly sins. For Stevens, the power of el macho rested in his ability to drink, fight, and especially display his virility (1973: 57).

Paz arguably was the first theorist to define the term macho, yet over the decades the term’s definition has been debated and applied in contradictory ways. Stevens defined machismo as “the cult of male virility” noting that “the chief characteristics of this cult are exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships” (1973: 57). Stevens’s definition relies on a heteronormative view of sexuality, yet Paz argues that el macho can be homosexual. According to Paz, “masculine homosexuality is tolerated, then, on the condition that it consists of violating a passive agent” (1985: 40). In both versions, machismo is associated with negative character traits that purportedly define the majority of Mexican men.

Many of the early theorists of identity and gender in Mexico focused on biological sex rather than social gender. Like popular discourse, scholars essentialized the sex-gender system in Mexico into two categories, the masculine macho and the feminine marianista. These early theorists could have looked to the historical record to see that gender in Mexico has always been more complicated than this. Víctor M. Macías-
González and Anne Rubenstein use the case of Catalina de Erauso, *la monja alférez*, to illustrate the fluidities of gender in colonial Mexico. According to Macías-González and Rubenstein, de Erauso was a “novice nun [who] ran away from her Basque convent to live for several years as a cross-dressed conquistador in Peru, until she was caught in 1619” (2012: 1). After being accused of breaking her vows as a nun, de Erauso petitioned Pope Urban VIII “that he was truly male and thus should not be returned forcibly to the convent” (Macías-Gonzalez Rubinstein 2012: 1). Pope Urban VIII heard testimony concerning de Erauso’s seduction of women and murder of men in the Andes, and ultimately “granted him permission to live as a man for the rest of his life” (Macías-Gonzalez Rubinstein 2012: 1), where he retired to a medium size ranch in the Valley of Mexico.

The story of *la monja alférez* soon became a part of Mexican folklore, yet early theorists of gender in Mexico still overlooked cases where the categories of social gender did not line up neatly with those of biological sex. Ramos, Paz, and Stevens (informed by Lewis) all considered *macho* as a defining constellation of behaviors in the masculine sphere. For these early theorists, *macho* “connotes men who expect the superior place in a vigorously defended gender hierarchy and the societies informed by such a hierarchy” (Macías-Gonzalez Rubinstein 2012: 1). While the character of *el pelado* or *el macho* may or may not have existed in Mexico, definitions of masculinity associated with those images are troubling as they reproduce negative stereotypes concerning Mexican men and are based on racializations that locate *el macho* in an animalistic, brown masculinity.
Contemporary Interpretations of Masculinities in Mexico

While a generation of thinkers essentialized the dominant masculinity in Mexico as pathological, a new generation of scholars has worked to overturn this notion and halt the reproduction of stereotypical caricatures of Mexican men. Matthew C. Gutmann's *The Meanings of Macho* considers working class Mexican men (and women) as complex, individual actors whose ideas on masculinities and femininities are influenced by a range of external and internal factors. Rather than treating masculinities as static entities, Gutmann utilizes Antonio Gramsci’s formulation of “contradictory consciousness” which provides a “starting point from which to develop a fuller understanding of how male identities develop and transform in societies like Mexico’s today” (2007: 14). According to Gutmann, “contradictory consciousness is a descriptive phrase used to orient our examination of popular understandings, identities, and practices *in relation* to dominant understandings, identities, and practices” (2007: 14). Gutmann argues that “working class men and women share both a consciousness inherited from the past—and from the experts—that is largely and uncritically accepted and another, implicit consciousness that unites individuals with others in the practical transformations of the world” (2007: 15).

Working in the *colonia* of Santo Domingo in Mexico City, Gutmann found Mexican men to hold varying capacities for sexism, hard drinking, fighting, and womanizing. Speaking with an interlocutor named Toño about virility, Toño noted that “For me, having a lot of kids to prove you’re macho is *una chingadera*. Those ideas are forty years old” (2007: 116). While *machista* ideas concerning masculinities were present, Gutmann’s findings indicate an erosion of stereotypical *macho* behavior being replaced with a multiplicity of behaviors and ideas.
One of Gutmann’s key theories regarding masculinities in Mexico is how “whether physically present or not, female identities often serve as the central point of conscious and unconscious reference for men in the development, maintenance, and transformation of their own sense of what *ser hombre* does and does not mean, and what it can and cannot mean” (2007: 257). This stands in stark contrast to the previous generation of scholars who considered the stereotypical Mexican man as a loner, whose identity was based on power and brute force, and on exercising power over other men. Gutmann’s theories not only recognize the contradictory consciousness of individual actors, but analyzes “the face-to-face character that is a permanent feature of the family and the household for many women and men” (2007: 257).

While Gutmann demystified and provided a more nuanced approach to the figure of *el macho*, Macías-González and Rubenstein argue that the term “may be a useful category for understanding some kinds of gendered identities and interactions, but it is far from being the only useful category” (2012: 2). Echoing Gutmann, Macías-González and Rubenstein claim that “gender serves to construct and give meaning to social groups, particularly when those groups interact with each other. It creates relations of power—domination and subordination—that change over time” (2012: 3). In their edited volume, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico* Macías-González and Rubenstein provide a collection of essays that examine the ways in which masculinities have changed in Mexico from the *Porfiriato* to present day.

In the second essay of their collection, Macías-González examines the construction of modern Mexican masculinities through an analysis of Porfirian bathhouses in Mexico City. According to Macías-González, the construction of public
bathhouses was a method for dealing with the working class, racialized *machos*. The urban working class was viewed as dirty and in need of ablutions. The elites associated bodily cleanliness with morality and racial purity, and public bathhouses were to “whiten” and civilize mestizo bodies. The vast majority of mestizos never used these public bathhouses, and they quickly became the space of an urban, homosexual elite (Macías-González 2012: 29-31).

Macías-González argues that the word homosexual entered the Mexican lexicon in the late 19th century, concurrently with the construction of public bathhouses. According to Macías-González, same-sex displays of affection were frequent and acceptable in Porfirian society prior to the construction of bathhouses. The word homosexual developed to describe the effeminate, powdered, and perfumed homosexual of the bathhouses; implicit in this definition was the idea of the passive actor during sexual encounters. Macías-González argues that homosexuality persisted, but was driven underground after the “de-queering of bathhouses occurred in the early 20th century.” While the Porfirian government attempted to replace the lower-class, non-white masculinity of *el macho*, it instead fostered a thriving homosexual cruising culture. The *Porfiriato* then attempted to celebrate the urban middle class man, but efforts were thwarted by the Mexican Revolution, which celebrated the stereotypical *macho* (Macías-González 2012: 41-45).

In her essay “Mariachis Machos and Charros Gays,” Mary-Lee Mulholland examines sincerity and sentimentality in mariachi music in contemporary Mexico. In particular, Mulholland analyzes the performance of masculinity and *machismo* by Vicente and Alejandro Fernández, who represent “not only an idealized Mexican
masculinity, but also of Guadalajara’s claim as cradle to that masculinity” (2012: 254). According to Mulholland, “sincerity and sentimentality…are important characteristics of an idealized macho mariachi,” along with his reputation as a heavy drinking womanizer. (2012: 255). Mulholland argues that while Vicente and Alejandro Fernández represent an idealized masculinity to Mexico and the greater Hispanosphere, “authentic tapatio mariachis” consider the Fernández’s “inauthentic, contrived performers of the macho,” as their excessive crying was seen as a sign of weakness, and perhaps even homosexuality (2012: 254).

Mulholland examines the delicate balance required for a successful gender performance by noting that sentimentality is required for the idealized macho, yet excessive crying and vanity can cause the macho mariachi to become the charro gay. This demonstrates how idealized and normative performances of masculinity can simultaneously express queerness. According to Mulholland, the performance of masculinity by the Fernández’s “is a reflection of the complexity and ambiguity of male sexualities in Guadalajara and Mexico in general” (2012: 256). Through interviews with informants, Mulholland notes that homosexuals can be considered mariachis machos, as long as they are the active agent in sexual encounters, echoing Paz’s theories on the homosexual macho.

Amongst contemporary anthropologists and sociologists, there is open debate as to what el macho entails and how it operates in Mexico, yet all agree that the character is more complex and nuanced than previously believed to be, if it exists at all. Once considered the dominant form of masculinity in Mexico, el macho is now considered one type of masculinity on the gender spectrum, or one set of norms and expectations
coexisting with others. Previously characterized as a racialized, working-class mestizo masculinity, the character of el macho has also expanded to include diverse political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances. Gutmann argues that, "consensus will rarely be found as to whether a particular man deserves a label such as neither-macho-nor-mandilón. He will probably think of himself in a variety of ways, none of which necessarily coincides with the views of his family and friends" (2007: 238). For this new generation of gender theorists in Mexico, masculinities are relational and performative, rather than static and unchanging entities.

**Masculinities and Gender Performance**

The majority of contemporary theorists of gender and masculinities in Mexico are explicitly influenced by the works of Judith Butler. In particular, many authors cite “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” In this article, Butler argues that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (1988: 519). Butler argues that “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and constituted through time,” hence the body cannot be considered “a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (1988: 523).

While gender cannot be considered a predetermined essence or fact, Butler argues that we live in a society where “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performance and fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (1988: 528). In this society, the incorrect performance of one’s gender “initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender
identity after all” (1988: 528). It is through this process that hegemonic masculinities and femininities are created.

R.W. Connell applied the theme of gender performance to masculinities by characterizing certain patterns of expected performances as hegemonic masculinities, and others as either subordinated or marginalized masculinities. The term hegemonic masculinity was initially used to refer to a currently dominant model of manliness that could only be performed convincingly by men who exercise superior political, economic and physical power. With time, the idea evolved to encompass more complex dynamics of gender hierarchies that shift over time and space, and to emphasize the physical and social embodiment of gender norms and expectations that make men’s qualities and desires seem natural—a key requisite for hegemonic status.

In her early work, Connell argues that gender performances of homosexual and effeminate men can be characterized as a type of subordinated masculinity, relegating men who display them to the lower ends on the hierarchy of masculinities. Connell would later oppose this sort of universalized masculinity ranking system, and instead advocate for understandings of masculinity based on local gender systems (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 847). Other patterns of expectations and performances may be associated with marginalized masculinities, which might consist of men of color or men with disabilities. While these men do not have access to the power that accompanies a full expression of hegemonic masculinities, they still support the model and subscribe to its norms (Connell 2005).

Connell then describes the two forms of masculinity that sit atop the hierarchy, hegemonic and complicit. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is the most
dominant and culturally valuable form of masculinity in society. Some of the features of hegemonic masculinity are aggression, the suppression of emotions, physical strength, and whiteness. According to Connell, complicit masculinity is the broadest category, and includes men who do not possess all of the qualities of hegemonic masculinity, yet do not challenge the status quo as they are beneficiaries of the hierarchy as they sit near the top.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony suggests dominance attained through consensus rather than regular force or the threat of violence (Gramsci 1971). Thus, the consensus of “hegemonic masculinity” is constructed by those who benefit from the promotion of masculinity and patriarchy, regardless of their relative position of power within the gender system. Connell argues that it is a historically specific mode of being and argues that “when conditions for the defense of the patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded” (Connell 2005: 77).

Throughout this thesis, RW Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as an analytical tool to identify attitudes and practices amongst men which perpetuate gender inequality. Hegemonic masculinity works to legitimate patriarchy and guarantees the subordination of women and the dominance of some men over other groups of men (Connell 2005: 77). It is to be understood as a:

culturally idealized form, it is both a personal and collective project...It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained. While centrally connected with institutions of male dominance, not all men practice it, though most men benefit from it. Although cross-class, it often excludes working-class [men] and [men of color] (Donaldson 1989: 645).
Although there are many valuable points to be taken from Donaldson’s understanding of hegemonic masculinity, I take issue with the claim that most men benefit from it. I argue that a select few benefit from it in some ways or others, while the majority of men think they benefit from it.

In “A Thousand Miles from Kind,” Connell argues that “organizational gender is not homogenous. Different masculinities are produced in different organizational contexts, including different units and levels of the same organization” (2008: 242). According to Connell, the overwhelming majority of institutions can be characterized as a “‘masculinity vortex,’ where masculinity is strongly thematized and may become coercive” (2008: 243). While Connell does not explore the topic of churches and masculinities in depth, she notes that “the organized opposition to the ordination of women or gay men in some contemporary churches” (2008: 242), is a response to a perceived challenge to the “masculinity vortex.”

Connell continues her analysis of masculinities and institutions by noting that neoliberal globalization has “de-institutionalized economic life which has left large numbers of young men in precarious conditions.” (2008: 248). According to Connell, the disappearance of the welfare state, the social safety net, and a secure labor market has relegated a generation of young men to the lower ends of the hierarchy of masculinities. In her analysis, these men are characterized as subordinate masculinities, who often turn to violence as a way of expressing power associated with hegemonic masculinity (2008: 248-9).

In conversation with Connell’s theories concerning institutions is Susan Paulson’s, “Gender and Territory as Interacting Socio-Ecological Processes.” According
to Paulson, gendered meanings and power can be identified “through labor, knowledge, physical and social spaces, all kinds of assets and their distribution, social roles, bodily presentations, government structures, social movements, economic mechanisms, wages and media, among other phenomena” (2016: 140). While each of these elements influence the gender system, “it is the structure and rules internalized by a community of interpretation that enable components of any semiotic system to gain meaning, power, and functionality” (Paulson 2016: 140). Therefore, when there are changes in the institutions or communities, there are changes in the gender system. Accordingly, Paulson argues that, “efforts to understand gender identity or conditions by observing just one group or part of the system allow only a limited grasp of the structure and dynamics” (2016: 140).

Butler, Connell, and Paulson agree that the gender category of “men” should not be considered a homogenous group. All three theorists offer an intersectional approach to the study of gender and masculinities, where experiences of gender cannot be separated from place, class, race, community etc. While the authors differ in their interpretations of gender and masculinities, all seem to agree that the interpretations and experiences of gender performances work to naturalize “roles and relationships between individuals and social groups” (Paulson 2016: 155).

**Discussion**

In the first section of this chapter, I presented some of the historical and contemporary views on popular Catholicism in Mexico, and concluded the section by presenting my own conceptualizations and understandings of folk Catholicism and folk saints. I then presented various historical and contemporary perspectives on masculinities in Mexico and discussed some of the key debates on gender and
masculinities in the broader academic lexicon. I examined the ways in which thinkers in the early 20th century such as Ramos and Paz problematized predominant forms of masculinity in Mexico as the related, yet unique, characters of *el pelado* and *el macho*. In this early interpretation of masculinities in Mexico, mestizo masculinities were problematized as the source of underdevelopment and backwardness in the nation. These early theories influenced a generation of academics who studied masculinities in Mexico, and influenced the ways popular culture and the international media portrayed Mexican and Mexican-American men.

I then briefly examined the decades that followed the publication of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, when academics such as Lewis and Stevens attempted to offer a more nuanced approach to masculinities in Mexico, even as they inadvertently reproduced many of the negative stereotypes surrounding Mexican masculinities. Fortunately, a new generation of scholarship led by Gutmann demystified the figure of *el macho* by noting that this type of masculinity was but one model among many in contemporary urban Mexico. Macías-González, Rubenstein, and Mulholland all examined the different manifestations of *el macho*, even noting that the contemporary *macho* figure can be homosexual.

Finally, I explored some of the theories concerning gender and masculinities more broadly from the authors Butler, Connell, and Paulson. All three authors call for an intersectional approach to the study of gender and masculinities and examine the interconnectedness of gender performance, masculinities, and institutions. For these authors, the construction of social gender is place specific and based on relationships with other individuals. The study of masculinities and religious institutions is of particular
interest for my research. While Connell and Paulson briefly explored the issue, there is a lacuna in the literature concerning the construction and interpretation of masculinities through religious institutions and devotions.

The majority of the academic literature concerning gender and religion has focused on the religious lives of women. This raises the question of whether or not contemporary academics studying popular devotion in Latin America are inadvertently reproducing the stereotypes of the masculine sphere of *el calle*, and the feminine spheres of *la casa y la iglesia*. For this reason, I situate this thesis within the work of Gutmann, Butler, Connell, and Paulson, as each author examines nuances and different forms of masculinity in relation to community and other structures. I seek to understand expressions and interpretations of masculinity in the cult of Jesús Malverde, which will provide a better opportunity to understand masculinity in popular Catholicism. This can provide a deeper understanding of currents in popular Catholicism, as well as how religious beliefs inform and influence the construction of masculinities.
CHAPTER 3
NARRATIVES AND VOICES

Señores voy a cantarles una historia verdadera
de un bandido generoso que robaba donde quiera
Jesús Malverde era un hombre que a los pobres ayudaba
por eso lo defendían cuando la ley lo buscaba

—Saul Viera
Jesús Malverde

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am going to sing you a true story
about a generous bandit that stole wherever he wanted
Jesús Malverde was a man that helped the poor
That’s why they defended him when the law looked for him

—Saul Viera
Jesús Malverde

Figure 3-1. Two representations of Malverde with rocks, devotional candle, toy truck, & flowers (Photo courtesy of author)
The myths and legends of Jesús Malverde began as oral traditions amongst devotees, giving rise to multiple versions of the narrative surrounding the life and death of el ángel de los pobres. The stories vary greatly in their narration of the life of Malverde, but there are various similarities found in all versions of the myth. These are: Malverde was born Jesús Juárez Mazo, he is said to have been orphaned as a teenager, to have worked as a carpenter or railway worker, to have been a social bandit, and was murdered on May 3, 1909 after humiliating the governor. The following section examines the “authentic story” of Malverde, followed by two “alternate” versions that are disputed by the González family—founders of La Capilla de Malverde in 1973 (Garcia S. 2006: 12). The three variations of the Malverde legend that will be explored are the most common versions of the story, yet there are numerous other narratives surrounding Malverde. Following the three legendary narratives, two historical narratives concerning the lives of Heraclio Bernal and Felipe Bachomo will be discussed, as elements from their lives are found throughout Malverde legends. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the pre-Revolutionary economic situation in Sinaloa, as well as an examination of the physical characteristics of Malverde and Mexican popular culture. I argue that these historical intersections helped create and spread the image of Malverde.
The “Authentic Story” of Malverde

Figure 3-2. Devotional candle depiction Malverde hanging from mesquite tree (Photo courtesy of author)

The following account of Jesús Malverde is called the “Authentic Story of Jesús Malverde,” by the founders of *La Capilla de Malverde*, the González family. This version is printed and sold at *La Capilla de Malverde* in a twenty-eight page pamphlet called *Crónicas de Jesús Malverde*, and nine out of fourteen interview participants recounted
According to current capellán Jesús González, son of founder Eligio González, this version of the legend was told to his father by the first caretaker of Malverde’s grave. The original caretaker, Amadita, is said to have personally known Malverde and cared for his grave until her death in 1972, at the age of one-hundred (Personal Interview, 6/18/2016). This section contains portions translated and paraphrased from Crónicas de Jesús Malverde.

Jesús Juárez Mazo was born on December 24, 1870, in Mocorito, Sinaloa (Garcia S. 2006: 4). His parents worked and lived on the hacienda of a local patrón with a reputation for violence. Life was difficult, yet the family survived. When Malverde was a teenager, a railroad was built, incorporating the once isolated region into a new, national economy where campesinos were forced to enter into the system of wage labor. The hacendados expanded their wealth, while the majority of campesinos, struggled to make ends meet. During this period of rapid socioeconomic transformation, Malverde and his father were employed either as carpenters or railway workers, yet, the wages they received were not enough to provide for the family. In order to ensure the survival of their children, Malverde’s parents skipped meals and/or medical treatment, which eventually caused their deaths (Garcia S. 2006: 5).

After the deaths of his parents, Malverde began to notice the “humiliation and suffering” of his fellow campesinos by hacendados and railroad company bosses (Garcia S. 2006: 5). Seeing the wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, Malverde decided he would steal from the rich and give to the poor. He began his career as a bandit by conducting highway and train robberies, where he was known to disappear “like a ghost” after escaping with money (Garcia S. 2006: 5). His success as a train
robber made him (in)famous, eventually earning him the nickname Malverde as he used green palm leaves to disguise himself as a tree (Garcia S. 2006: 5).

Malverde’s reputation as a highway and railroad robber became so great that governor Francisco Cañedo ordered troops on all trains and highways (Garcia S. 2006: 6). Undeterred, Malverde began to rob the homes of the wealthiest citizens in Culiacán in a spectacular and bold fashion, which only increased his reputation (Garcia S. 2006: 7). As Malverde redistributed ever greater quantities of wealth amongst the region’s poor, his reputation and confidence surged. After stealing from nearly ever mansion in the city, Malverde publicly declared that he would break into the governor’s mansion and steal Cañedo’s sword (Garcia S. 2006: 7).

Enraged by Malverde’s perceived arrogance, Cañedo devised a trap for Malverde promising that if he successfully stole the sword he would be pardoned of all crimes. Cañedo fortified his mansion with extra guards who were order to kill Malverde on sight however, Malverde passed the guards with ease, located the governor’s sword, and left a note that read “Jesús M. was here” (Creechan and Garcia 2005: 8). While sneaking out of the mansion, Malverde noticed an open door that belonged to Cañedo’s teenage daughter. The encounter is described as consensual in *Crónicas de Malverde*, however, some devotees believe that Malverde sexually assaulted the governor’s daughter.

With his manly honor compromised, Cañedo ordered a search party to find and kill Malverde, but Malverde’s popular support among the *campesinos* provided ample hiding spaces throughout countryside. After a day of hiding in the home of a friend, Malverde fell gravely ill (Garcia S. 2006: 7). Knowing that Cañedo’s forces would find
him and punish his friend, Malverde waited until nightfall and hid in a cave. That evening, Cañedo’s forces found Malverde, tied his arms behind his back, and hanged him from a large mesquite tree (Garcia S. 2006: 7). Under orders from the governor, Malverde’s body was to be left hanging from the tree as a warning to those who might challenge Cañedo’s authority.

Weeks passed with Malverde’s rotted body hanging from the mesquite tree, when a local muleteer came upon the remains while searching for his lost mules. The muleteer recognized Malverde’s clothes and remembered how he had helped the campesinos in the region. Saddened by the disrespect given to Malverde’s remains, the muleteer promised to bury the body if the ánima of Malverde would help him find the lost mules (Garcia S. 2006: 8). Immediately after the petition, the mules emerged from a thicket behind the mesquite tree. Astonished by the miracle, the muleteer immediately cut down Malverde’s body and covered it with large rocks (Garcia S. 2006: 8). The muleteer was so thankful for the miracle, that he spread the news to all who would listen. Within months people from all over Sinaloa began to visit the tomb (Garcia S. 2006: 8).

**The Betrayal of Malverde**

Only two participants cited this narrative during interviews, and it does not regularly appear in literature concerning Malverde. This version diverges from the “Authentic Story of Jesús Malverde” in the course it takes after Malverde is said to have humiliated Cañedo. After escaping to the countryside, Malverde found refuge with his oldest friend and soon fell ill with a fever. While Malverde was incapacitated with fever, his friend learned of the ten-thousand peso reward on his head. As Malverde slept, his friend used the governor’s sword to cut off the bandit’s hands and feet before dragging
him through the countryside to collect the reward (Jaime, Personal Interview, 7/20/2016). After reaching the governor’s mansion in the middle of the night, the Cañedo personally awarded Malverde’s betrayer the ten-thousand pesos in his nightgown, but forgot to wear slippers (Quinones 2001: 227). Three days later, the recreant died of unknown causes, and thirty-three days later Cañedo died after succumbing to pneumonia after going exposing himself to the cold desert night without his slippers (Quinones 2001: 227).

**Malverde the Illegitimate Son**

Cited by three participants, this narrative has not appeared in the literature, however all three participants told strikingly similar versions of the story. Similar to the previous narrative, many details from the “Authentic Story of Jesús Malverde” are found in this version; however, here Malverde is the illegitimate and unrecognized son of a wealthy, landowning senator. For unbeknownst reasons, the man who raised Malverde is said to have angered the senator. A violent and cruel man, he punished the man who would raise Malverde by whipping him until he passed out from blood loss (Joaquín, Personal Interview, 7/12/2016). This act of violence did not satisfy the senator, hence he kicked in the door of the Juárez Mazo home and raped the man’s wife, impregnating her with Malverde (Carlos, Personal Interview, 7/21/2016). Ashamed of what had transpired, Malverde’s mother and her husband agreed to hide the truth of her attack and raise the child as their own. I was not until his parents were on their deathbeds that Malverde’s mother recounted the story of her attack and his biological father. After realizing he was the first born son of the senator, Malverde demanded his rightful inheritance and official recognition (Daniel, Personal Interview, 7/17/2016). When the senator refused, Malverde turned to a life of banditry to humiliate and undermine his
biological father. This version of the myth is has been told with both endings—Malverde being hanged or betrayed.

**The Historical Malverde**

In spite of the multiple narratives surrounding the life and exploits of Jesús Malverde, there is no archival evidence of a man named Jesús Juárez Mazo, or Jesús Malverde ever existing in Sinaloa. However, there is ample historical evidence that corroborates the socioeconomic conditions expressed in Malverde mythology—specifically, the collapse of the social order based on *hacendado* clientelism via government sponsored modernization campaigns (Ortega Noriega 2016: 206). Local responses to the modernization campaigns that intensified exploitation of natural and human resources included the raising of militias by men intent on returning the Porfirian State to an idealized past characterized by an “independence that many Mexicans sensed they had lost or had never enjoyed” (Vanderwood 1992: 90). In Sinaloa, no bandit gained more popular support than Heraclio Bernal, known as the Thunderbolt of Sinaloa (Vanderwood 1992: 90). I argue that Jesús Malverde is a legendary recollection of Heraclio Bernal, combined with elements from another, lesser known bandit named Felipe Bachomo.

**Heraclio Bernal**

According to Paul J. Vanderwood, “Heraclio Bernal toiled as a youth in Sinaloa’s silver mining-district. He knew the harshness of that life, but state politics nudged him into banditry” (1992: 92). With the presidency of Porfirio Diáz and the installation of Francisco Cañedo as governor of Sinaloa, large-scale foreign investment in mining and railroads came to Sinaloa. These foreign corporations—predominantly from the United States—privatized lands that had been common pool resources, agitating rural people
throughout the state. Low level resistance to the railroad and mining companies included the breaking of mining tools, tearing down telegraph poles to burn as firewood, and the stealing of copper wires to sell at junk shops (Vanderwood 1992: 89). As a response to the sabotage of foreign investments, “the Mexican congress [passed] a draconian law that allowed immediate punishment, even death, without formal trial for those who tampered with” rail, telegraph communications, and mining equipment (Vanderwood 1992: 89). Seeing the anger amongst campesinos, Bernal sensed a political opportunity and raised a militia of one-hundred men intent on expelling foreign corporations and changing national law (Vanderwood 1992: 93).

Bernal’s activities were not limited to raiding silver mines and haciendas throughout Sinaloa and Durango. He formed an effective counter government that challenged and taunted the Cañedo government through a series of pranks and misdeeds. The most famous prank occurred when “the governor sponsored a state dinner for a visiting official, Bernal organized in a rural village an even more sumptuous banquet for his followers,” and tricked Cañedo’s guest into attending the rural banquet over the state dinner (Vanderwood 1992: 92). His counter government was known to redistribute the spoils of raids throughout rural areas of Sinaloa, and in 1880 he raised popular support against Cañedo in the gubernatorial race (Vanderwood 1992: 92). Although Cañedo remained governor, Bernal attempted to transform his popular support into a government position in 1885 (Vanderwood 1992: 93). According to Vanderwood:

He got word to Diáz that in return for his loyalty he wanted to be named jefe político of a Sinaloa municipality, He also demanded 30,000 pesos to finance himself and a security unit, and the release of gang members held by the government, including his bother. The president scoffed at such presumptuousness. Díaz did not have to bargain with robbers. Bernal might be
pardon if he surrendered, but there would be no promise of employment. The rebel rejected such adverse terms. (Vanderwood 1992: 93)

Figure 3-3. The body of Heraclio Bernal. (Photo courtesy of author)

After the rejection from Díaz, Bernal increased his raids on foreign companies and wealthy individuals throughout Durango and Sinaloa. As his coffers expanded, Bernal hired mercenaries in an effort to build a revolutionary army that could overthrow the Porfiriato (1876-1910) (Vanderwood 1992: 93). In contexts of increasingly authoritarian rule over territories under his control, popular support evaporated. The governors of Sinaloa and Durango each contributed 5,000 pesos to fund a 10,000-peso ransom on the head of Bernal. Two of his gang members helped the Mexican army set an ambush on Bernal where he died on January 5, 1888 (Vanderwood 1993: 93).
Felipe Bachomo

Felipe Bachomo was born in small Mayo indigenous community outside of Los Mochis, Sinaloa around 1883 (Diazmuñoz & Ortiz de Zárate 2002: 12). Although Bachomo is remembered as a social bandit that fought for the rights of all campesinos in Northern Sinaloa, historical evidence shows he was a shrewd political strategist who often made political alliances with U.S. based investors. His political alliances reflected anxieties over Porfirian indigenous policies which often separated the Mayo people from ancestral lands, allowing hacendados to exploit their labor (Gill 1955: 313). Bachomo’s alliance with U.S. plantation owner Benjamin Francis Johnston allowed the bandit to build an indigenous militia which raided haciendas throughout Sinaloa and Durango (Ortega González 2010: 392).

Bachomo and Johnston entered into a “natural alliance” in 1910, as Johnston sought to weaken the political power of hacendados and expropriate their land holdings, while Bachomo’s aim was a return of community lands now privately owned (Gill 1955: 314). Through this mutual alliance, Johnston supported and armed Bachomo in their aim to weaken the hacendados (Gill 1955: 314). The alliance was short-lived as the rhetoric of revolution, particularly land redistribution, soured the relationship between the two men. Bachomo aligned his group with a Villista militia, while Johnston staunchly opposed the Revolution (Gill 1955: 314). After weapons and funding were cut off, Bachomo attacked the home of his former patron in 1915 (Gill 1955: 315). Aware of the impending attack, Johnston escaped and raised a bounty of 10,000-pesos for the head of Bachomo (Ortega González 2010: 392). On October 24, 1916, Bachomo was shot and killed outside of Johnston’s home (Diazmuñoz & Ortiz de Zárate 2002: 12).
His supporters throughout Los Mochis, began to call Bachomo *el Cristo Negro*, as he sacrificed himself at the age of thirty-three for the perceived good of his community (Diazmuñoz & Ortiz de Zárate 2002:12). His body was entombed with large rocks with local people venerating as a site of miracles. The burial mound grew to ever greater sizes, as devotees brought large rocks as part of a *promesa* with the *ánima* of Bachomo (Diazmuñoz & Ortiz de Zárate 2002: 12). In 1922, the Revolutionary government got word of the “improper” burial for Bachomo—now considered a Revolutionary hero, and ordered his remains interred in a cemetery (Diazmuñoz & Ortiz de Zárate 2002: 12).

**The Breakdown of Rural Clientelism**

The political instability that characterized the decades following Mexican independence has been attributed to political leaders who promised “community lands and autonomy,” and instead codified laws supporting privatization (Tutino 2008: 804-805). This process of privatization weakened community management of common lands and resources and indigenous territory yet introduced large-scale wage labor to Sinaloa, in which landowners particularly expanded the exploitation of the labor of rural men. Tutino argues that this liberal “development promoted a culture of patriarchy, yet it assaulted young men’s ability to claim patriarchy in families and communities” (2008: 806).

In 1876 former general Porfirio Díaz took control of the nation by force, with strong support amongst indigenous and rural men (Tutino 2008: 806). While consolidating power, Díaz promised “to right injustices in land privatization…and proclaimed that he would redistribute estate lands” (Tutino 2008: 806). Within his first year of power, Díaz broke his promises “of municipal autonomy and land redistribution,”
and implemented a policy that encouraged liberal development marked by foreign investment, market production, and the expansion of railroads to create new sources of labor through forced integration of traditional and rural communities into a modern, capitalist system (Tutino 2008: 807). The Porfiriato was hailed as an international symbol of successful modernization—the benefits of liberal development policy were put on display for the world to see by sympathetic journalists from the United States. “Yet for the rural majority, most benefits went to others, while they struggled to find ways to produce, sustain families, and, for men, to hold patriarchy they believed their birthright,” argues Tutino (2008: 807). The modernization project was a nationwide effort, yet industrialization was concentrated in the Northeast, whereas states such as Sinaloa experienced an expansion of neo-hacienda labor and mining industries—further entrenching multiple axes of exploitation and inequality (Ortega Noriega 2016: 206).

**The Porfiriato and Inequality**

Although championed as a success story, the economic growth facilitated by liberal reforms during the Porfiriato not only concentrated wealth in the hands of the few, but facilitated the expansion of U.S.-owned businesses in Sinaloa—particularly in the agricultural sector. According to Ortega Noriega,

Farming practices in Sinaloa from 1877-1909 were similar to techniques from the early part of the 19th century. Namely, production for the direct consumption of *sinaloenses* and traditional agricultural technologies employed by ranchers, small-scale *hacendados*, and *campesinos*. Hence, the *sinaloense* diet during this era consisted primarily of corn, beans, and wheat, as well as some fruits and vegetables. (2016: 190)

In the latter half of the first decade of the 20th century, the sugar industry drastically altered the landscape and social order of Sinaloa. Through a clever interpretation of Porfirian law, the U.S. led sugar industry appropriated large swaths of indigenous lands
and uncultivated hacienda lands, as they were not considered productive (Ortega Noriega 2016: 206). The U.S.-owned sugar firms soon dominated the agricultural sector and introduced wage labor to Sinaloa, a state which previously had “a substantial portion of the population operating outside the monetized economy” (López-Alonso 2007: 84).

As men entered into the system of wage labor, subsistence agricultural and caloric consumption suffered throughout the majority of the population causing a significant decrease in adult height. Some scholars have used height comparisons between campesinos and members of the upper class during the Porfiriato to measure economic inequality (López-Alonso 2007; Esquivel 2011; Riguzzi 2009). In her analysis of men’s heights from in Northern Mexico, Moramay López-Alonso found campesinos to be an average of four and a half inches shorter than wealthy, urban men from 1880-1910 (2007: 102). López-Alonso’s findings also show near parity of heights between campesinos and urban men in the decades before the Porfiriato, illustrating the growth in inequality that marked the region (2007: 103). According to López-Alonso, height rates amongst campesinos did not increase until the 1950s (2007: 103), when Mexico’s Gini coefficient was 0.60, making it one of the most unequal countries in the world at the time (Mulder 2001: 189).
As previously discussed, on May 3, 1909, Malverde fled the city of Culiacán with governor Cañedo’s forces close behind him. Although he escaped the city, the governor’s forces caught and hanged him from a mesquite tree, and refused to allow his body to be buried. When passing Malverde’s remains, people threw stones as means of covering the body, and eventually a mound accumulated and a small cross was erected.
Within weeks of his death, miracles were attributed to the mound of rocks surrounding Malverde’s body and it soon became a local pilgrimage site. However, there is no archival evidence confirming the existence of Malverde’s tomb until 1954 when a reporter from Mexico City briefly mentioned a pile of rocks venerated by local campesinos (Garcia S. 2006: 7). The strongest evidence corroborating the existence of the mound of rocks prior to that report comes from lifelong resident and politician from Sinaloa, Manuel Lazcano y Ochoa (1912-2002). In his autobiography, *Una Vida en la vida Sinaloense*, Lazcano y Ochoa recalls his first encounter with the tomb of Malverde:

> The entire area where the administrative offices of the State of Sinaloa were built a few years ago used to practically be scrub, and nearly inaccessible. The road to Navolato used to go through that hilly thicket, and there was a small, unimportant little cross that people would stop at and leave stones. This was Malverde’s cross. I was very young the first time I saw the cross. People would come to pray to it, at first mostly humble people, even though it was no gathering place. The reason all of these people came to the cross, was their belief that he was a generous bandit during his life. They said he would come up from the depths of Bachigualato and go to the rich neighborhood to steal and then give money to the poor. They thought he was a *Chucho el Roto* type, although Malverde was unimportant and did not really exist.\(^1\) (1992: 215)

Noticeably absent from this description of Malverde’s tomb are any mentions of the saint’s physical characteristics—the only marker was a small, unassuming cross.

Malverde’s physical appearance was a recurring theme in interviews, and similar to the various narratives of his life, vary depending on the who is telling the story. On the morning of July 12, 2016, I had a long conversation by chance with Joaquín, a fifty-six year old lawyer. Joaquín subscribed to the Malverde as illegitimate son narrative,

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\(^1\) *Chucho el Roto*, born Jesús Arriaga (1858-1894), was Mexico’s most prominent criminal throughout the 1880s and early 1890s. He was employed as a cabinet maker in Mexico City until he was about twenty years old. After kidnapping and raping a wealthy teenage girl he turned to a life of banditry. His exploits were covered in newspapers during his life, and multiple films after his death (Vanderwood 1992; 2004).
and Malverde’s face proved this could be the only version of the story. When I asked what he meant by this he responded

Just look at his face and his gaze! He has that proud, noble look that only someone of high class can have. You can see how handsome, brave, and proud he is just by his face. He has ojos claros and he’s white, of course he was the senator’s son. He did not have to help the people, he had enough money, but he did it because he was a good man. (Personal Interview)

For Joaquín, Malverde’s whiteness signaled his power and bravery, but also his tender and caring side, just as much, if not more so, than his role as a bandit.

The conversation with Joaquín was my first interview and it forced me to investigate the origins of Malverde’s face. The week after my interview with Joaquín, I had a brief, yet informative conversation with current capellán Jesús González, son of La Capilla de Malverde founder Eligio González. When I asked about Malverde’s face, Jesús explained:

Well, before my dad built this, there was an old lady who ran the tomb of Malverde. Her name was Amadita, and she knew Malverde. She kept a picture of Malverde and when my dad told her he was going to build this, she let him borrow the picture. My dad took the picture to an art student at the local university and commissioned the bust that sits in the main alcove. After the bust was made in 1972, she died and the picture was buried with her. (Jesús, Personal Interview, 6/18/2016)

This narrative corroborates the story as told in Crónicas de Jesús Malverde, a book sold at La Capilla which covers the history of Malverde and the González family. However, in a recent documentary from the Colegio de la Frontera Norte the sculptor of the original Malverde bust claims Eligio González instructed him to make “a handsome white man who is regal and brave, without fear or arrogance—the prototype of a Sinaloan man” (Valenzuela Arámburo 2013). The conversations with Joaquín and Jesús, as well as the

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2 Ojos claros is an umbrella term for eyes that are not brown. The literal translation is “light colored eyes.”
statement from the sculptor made me wonder who the “prototype of a Sinaloan man” could be. The answer appear to be in the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema.

Figure 3-5. Pedro Infante (Photo courtesy of http://remezcla.com/lists/film/6-golden-age-films-starring-pedro-infante-mexicos-most-beloved-movie-star-epoca-de-oro/)

Malverde and Infante

Pedro Infante was the first modern celebrity obsession in Mexico, starring in sixty films and singing over three hundred songs. In his most common role, he played the charro a character who exuded authority based on his physical strength and grace, but also his talent as singer and a musician. These attributes proved his masculinity, and underlined his “manly” appearance and good character. His personal life was tabloid fodder, as he often oscillated between what were/are considered male archetypes—at times he was the devoted father and son, caring for his mother, wife, and children, while sometimes he was the hard drinking womanizer, openly dating women who were not his
wife. Sergio de la Mora argues that even today “Infante, is considered the maximum embodiment of Mexican masculinity and the archetype of the working-class heterosexual male” (de la Torre 2006: 15).

Infante was obsessed with his body and was a dedicated weightlifter—every movie he made during the last seven years of his life had at least one scene displaying his unclothed torso (de la Torre 2006: 37). His shirtless scenes ignited an interest in weightlifting throughout the country, and his body became the goal of affluent Mexican men (Rubenstein 2001: 210). A known adrenaline junkie, Infante became interested in aviation and eventually purchased a military grade bomber that he used as his private jet. On the morning of April 15, 1957, Infante crashed his plane and his body was burned beyond recognition. This immediately led to rumors that he had faked his death, due to the financial strains of caring for fourteen known children, from four women (Rubenstein 2001: 224). Although Infante remained popular in the years following his death, there was an explosion of interest in his life and films in the early 1970s, as rumors swirled that the masked wrestler “El Santo” was a disguised Infante (Rubenstein 2001: 226). Just as Malverde’s image was being crafted by a young art student, Infante’s idealized masculinity re-entered Mexico’s lexicon of popular culture.
At 10:00am the temperature hovered around 100°F without a single cloud in the sky, setting the scene for an exhausting two kilometer trek to the bus stop. Although the mind is wont to wander in such extreme heat, the three similar steel and concrete crosses that dotted the road to the bus stop grabbed my attention. Flanking the crosses were concrete vases which contained an assortment of fresh and/or imitation flowers, always red or white. Each cross sat on a three sided concrete box roughly one square...
foot in size containing a plastic statue or votive candle depicting San Judas Tadeo, the patron saint of lost causes. In two of the three boxes, next to the depictions of San Judas Tadeo were pictures of men murdered in those locations—one man being only seventeen and the other thirty-eight years old at the time of death. It soon became apparent that the cenotaphs of Culiacán’s dead were an integral part of the city’s geography—unavoidable reminders of the drug war.

Once at the bus stop, I noticed that the large wall in the median was covered with an advertisement reading “Kanguro Potencia Masculina,” which showed a cartoon kangaroo wearing boxing gloves, and a local phone number. The next day I learned that Kanguro is advertised as “an all natural viagra preferred by porn actors worldwide, with results lasting five to seven days!”1 While the thought of cenotaphs and kangaroos occupied my thoughts, the bus finally arrived at 10:45am. During the roughly thirty minute bus ride, I attempted to count the roadside cenotaphs I saw through the window, but quickly lost count.

I disembarked in front of the Palacio de gobierno del estado de Sinaloa, the former site of the Capilla de Malverde and began the four block walk to its current location, noticing a cenotaph of a fifteen year old boy along the way. As I finally entered the Capilla de Malverde, I was overwhelmed with images of young men holding Kalashnikov rifles, bundles of cash, or displaying marijuana. Many of these ex-votos gave thanks to Malverde for his assistance with safe passage across the border. However, the majority of these photos were accompanied by messages written by

1 https://www.nutricuerpo.com/tienda/suplementos/kanguro-potencia-sexual/
mothers imploring Malverde to help their sons quit drugs and become good fathers once again.

**Labor and Health**

When asked about miracles received from Malverde, eight of the thirteen men I interviewed described assistance with labor, while the remaining five cited a health miracle concerning a loved one. In a conversation that took place around noon on July 12, an interview participant named José demonstrated some of the ways in which performance of masculinity through labor can be facilitated or prevented via a sustained relationship with Malverde:

I am thirty-six years old and Malverde has always been with me. He has always been in our family; my father brought us here when we were very young and now I bring my children. I am Catholic and go to mass when I can, but when I have problems I come to him because he has always been there. Malverde helps with everyday things, little things you know? But he helped me get to the United States *como mojado* and I did construction there. I was there for a few years making good money, but I was arrested for drunk driving and was deported. Fortunately, I was able to save up enough money to buy a house for my family here in Culiacán before I got sent back.

The *ánima* of Malverde cares about the people because *he* cared about the people, he robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. Look around and see all the pictures of the ways he still helps the people. Every year they save up all the donations to buy toys, clothes, medicine, and food for poor kids in the city. I donate when I can because he has helped me so much.

Malverde even saved one of my children’s lives. When my son was an infant he had a very high fever and no medicine could break the fever. We took him to the hospital and they told us there was nothing they could do and that he would die. We came here to ask the *ánima* of Malverde to save our son and he did. We brought Malverde flowers once a week for a month after that and promised we would come every week after that.

Even though he saved my son, he can be vengeful. I stopped coming and he became very angry with me. He started visiting me in my dreams, but I did not listen. I still work as a construction worker and all the sudden I could not find work and could not put food on the table. It was a very tough time and I did not know what to do, but after about a month, Malverde came to me in a dream and told me I was being punished for no longer visiting him. The next day I brought him flowers and within a week I had work again. (Personal Interview)

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2 A colloquial term for undocumented migrant. The literal translation is “as a wetback.”
What José felt comfortable sharing with me, a gringo researcher ten years his junior, and what he chose to omit from our conversation demonstrates the way he conceptualizes and performs his own masculinity. Absent from our conversation were any details about the mother of his children, yet he enthusiastically recounted details of a DUI conviction, the fact that he fathered multiple children, and his ability to provide an income and build a house through manual labor. R.W. Connell notes that “heavy manual labor calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness, and group solidarity. Emphasizing the masculinity of industrial labour has been both a means of survival, in exploitative class relations, and a means of asserting superiority over women” (Connell 2005: 55). By twice mentioning his employment as a construction worker, José was telling me that the bodily performance of his masculinity through “manly” labor was not to be questioned—his body’s economic prowess afforded his family a home.

José made sure I understood that when he could not find work it was not due to injury, but rather punishment from Malverde. This punishment not only challenged José’s bodily performance of masculinity, but it challenged his role as family breadwinner—possibly disrupting the gendered power dynamics within the home. When José drifted from Malverde, he faced economic crisis and a crisis of identity. Once he fulfilled his obligation to visit Malverde, order returned to his world through the performance of “manly” duties. In this sense, the relationship between saint and devotee works to reproduce an array of behaviors and activities “associated with the gender category ‘man’” (Paulson 2016: 155).
Curandersimo and Malverde

Of the remaining five interview participants who cited a health miracle, three described instances where Malverde healed a sick child, while two recounted healings of elderly parents. Although the cult of Malverde does not have an officially sanctioned prayer for healing, curanderismo, or folk healing, via direct connect with the ánima of Malverde is widespread. León characterizes curanderismo as “a synthesis of pre-Tridentine Catholicism and Spanish-Moorish medicine, combined with ancient Mesoamerican medicine and religion...[which] emphasizes the body and restructures the order of the world through gifting, reciprocity, and exchange” (Léon 2004: 131). For devotees, material gifts and offerings to Malverde—whether at La Capilla in Culiacán, or a home altar—work to entice the ánima of Malverde into a reciprocal relationship of gifting and healing. As evidenced by José’s experience, the relationship must be sustained for fear of reprisal from Malverde.

The ánima of Malverde is often consulted as a last resort, as the burden of gifting and exchange can be quite demanding. Potions, holy water, perfumes, and herbs bearing Malverde’s image are usually the first choice for minor health issues. For devotees throughout the U.S.-Mexico borderlands region, these goods can be found at some botánicas, although Malverde is rapidly losing self space to Santa Muerte. Only six of the seventeen botánicas I visited in Tijuana and Los Angeles carried images bearing Malverde’s image. When I asked about Malverde in a botánica in Los Angeles, I was told that “we don’t really carry him anymore, he is not as popular as he used to be. Six years ago he was the number one seller, but now people don’t look for him. Its all Santa Muerte now” (Antonio, Personal Interview, 8/5/16).
A Google Maps search indicated there was a *botánica* in the Huntington Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, that doubled as a Malverde chapel. I arrived at the storefront early, hoping to speak with the owner before customers arrived, but the sign read “Botánica Reina del Mar.” Inside, the shelves were stocked with figures depicting spirits from the Afro-Cuban religion *Santería*, yet there were no goods associated with Malverde. When I asked the owner about my Google Maps search, she replied:

The ánima of Malverde came to this place twenty years ago, but it has since left. I had a chapel and people would come and leave offerings to Malverde, business was good too. But around ten years ago fewer people would come to pray to Malverde and more people would ask why I did not sell Santa Muerte. I held out for as long as I could, but eventually I started selling Santa Muerte. The same people who bought her would ask Shangó, so now I sell things for Santería. At the time, no one was buying Malverde, and a lot of people did not even know who he was. The people do not want Malverde now, so I just changed name of the place. (Norma, Personal Interview, 8/5/16)

Norma pointed her finger to a large framed picture of Malverde and remarked, “this is all I have left of him here” (Personal Interview, 8/5/16).

While *botánica* owners replace Malverde with Santa Muerte for economic reasons, some of Malverde’s own devotees petition Santa Muerte for miracles as she is considered more powerful than Malverde. Although she is considered more powerful, to enter into a relationship with her can be quite dangerous, as she is considered much more demanding than Malverde. In a conversation with Joaquín at *La Capilla* about Santa Muerte, he remarked, “I don’t mess with that stuff. That kind of thing is not for me and I wish they did not sell her here. I don’t trust people who are into her, they’re always up to no good and are nothing but a bunch of brujos” (Personal Interview, 7/12/16). As uncomfortable as Joaquín was with the presence of Santa Muerte in *La Capilla*, the spread of goods bearing Malverde’s image is often legitimated through proximity to
Santa Muerte. Legitimation-through-Santa Muerte was observed everywhere Malverde was sold—the most frequent depiction has Malverde sitting on a throne in-front of Santa Muerte. These products rely the reputations of both figures as narcosaints, and generally do not speak to the spiritual needs of the average devotee.

![Figure 4-2. Jesus Malverde sitting on a throne surrounded by marijuana leaves with Santa Muerte behind. (Photo courtesy of author)](image)

La Capilla de Malverde

The formerly scruffy and nearly inaccessible region where Malverde’s tomb once rested is now occupied by the Palacio de gobierno del estado de Sinaloa. The ultimate fate of Malverde’s original tomb is emblematic of Mexico’s rapid economic transformations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In a conversation with current
capellán Jesús González, son of founder Eligio González, I was told the story of how La Capilla de Malverde came to occupy its current location:

Before this was here, Malverde’s tomb was across the street where those buildings are. They left his tomb alone while they were building the Palacio de gobierno. A lot of people who were working were afraid to disturb Malverde, so they did not remove it until the end. The guy who was supposed to destroy his tomb was so scared that he was crying and he had to get drunk before getting in his bulldozer. When he tried to run over the tomb, the bulldozer broke down and started smoking! The guy was so scared that he refused to try again. By this point it was night and the crowds gathered to see Malverde’s tomb destroyed had gone home. They brought in a second bulldozer and were able destroy his tomb.

The next day all of the windows on the brand new building were broken. Not long after that, a large area of dead grass appeared and no matter what, nothing would grow there. People started to say that this is where Malverde’s original tomb had been and people brought rocks again. The mound of rocks was here up until a few years ago. You know the McDonald’s up the street? That is where the second tomb was. (Personal Interview, 6/28/16)

After the original tomb was bulldozed was bulldozed in 1979, the governor faced protests and frequent harassment from devotees. After direct negotiations with Eligio González, the government of Sinaloa agreed to donate a small plot of land adjacent to the former site of the tomb and provide the González family with an unspecified amount of money to build a chapel (Creechan & Garcia 2005: 8).
La Capilla de Malverde is now located in a modern section of the city surrounded by government offices and international banks. The cinderblock, glass, and sheet metal structure is painted green on the interior and exterior, and eight concrete benches have the letters “MALVERDE” painted on their backs facing traffic. An awning covers the sidewalk directly in front of the entrances to La Capilla where three vendors sell Malverde merchandise. Flanking the entrances are an additional three vendors with small storefront stalls selling a wider variety of goods. The exterior walls display concrete ex-votos thanking Malverde for initials received which depict the initials or surnames of devotees.
Inside, there is only one floor, yet the ceilings are strikingly high. This design feature allowed the González family to build three stories of small concrete booths which were sold to families or individuals. Each booth has lockable glass doors and displays the family’s name on a small plaque. The contents of these booths vary, but most contain an assortment of figures depicting Malverde, San Judas Tadeo, and Guadalupe—three booths only contained depictions of Santa Muerte. Booth owners are charged roughly one-hundred dollars a month in rent—should they not pay, their booths are emptied and sold to the highest bidder (Jesús, Personal Interview, 6/28/16). In total, there are thirty-seven privately owned booths in La Capilla.
As private booths are limited, the majority of devotees attach *ex-votos* to the walls of *La Capilla* as anything can be posted so long as nothing is removed from the wall. Throughout the space, the diversity of *ex-votos* and miracle petitions is quite remarkable—there are handwritten notes, currency from across the globe, polaroid pictures, framed portraits, tiles, and ornate wooden plaques with gold inlays. Petitions for miracles operate under the logic of sympathetic magic where “like produces like.” As such, health miracles often contain photographs of the ailing family member, while employment miracles contain effigies of, or less frequently, real dollar bills and pesos.
In the center of *La Capilla*, there is a small rectangular room with three entrances that serves as a waiting area for the primary alcove. On the back wall there is a door that leads to a tiny alcove. The alcove has enough room to fit three standing adults, but the room often has up to nine visitors in it at once, as there are two benches. Against the back wall sits a table where from left to right sit representations of San Judas Tadeo, El Niño de Atocha, a small bust of Malverde, the original bust of Malverde from 1973, holy water, an array of fresh flowers and candles, and an additional bust of San Judas Tadeo. There is a padded kneeler in front of the table flanked by two donation boxes. To the right of the table there is a window to a small shrine dedicated to San Judas Tadeo and Jesus Christ which contains two representations of Christ and three
representations of San Judas Tadeo. The wall behind these figures is adorned with a poster made out of crushed velvet depicting Malverde in a field of marijuana framed by dollar bills.

To the right of the primary alcove, sits the most prominent vendor who sells effigies of Malverde and Santa Muerte, some of which are over six feet tall. Next to her storage closet sits the secondary alcove which contains a bust of Malverde wearing a cowboy hat. Identical to the primary alcove, there is a padded kneeler with a donation box on both sides. Walking to the opposite side of the space, I counted three donation boxes placed at random intervals. Next to the largest donation box is a column with a hand painted message reading “this is your donations at work!” The column itself is covered in photographs of Capilla vendors handing out clothing, food, and school supplies to young children.

On the opposite side of the space, there are two long tables where lit devotional candles are placed after being removed from the primary alcove. Walking towards the back wall of La Capilla, there is black steal door which an alcove only opened for festivals and special occasions. There are five tables in the room, with the table against the back wall the tallest and the one near the door the shortest. The majority of goods on the tables depict Malverde, however on the Friday evening I was given access to the room, there were four depictions of Santa Muerte, and one of Gauchito Gil. Past the alcove reserved for special occasions there is a hallway leading to bathrooms. The walls in this location have a few petitions and ex-votos, but they do not share the same

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3 Gauchito Gil is a folk saint from Northern Argentina. His story shares many similarities with Malverde, however he is not widely known outside of Argentina. When I asked about his presence at La Capilla, no one was sure how his image got there.
quantity as the rest of the building. Most visitors do not venture back this far into the building, causing most devotees to avoid posting here.

![Figure 4-7. Floor plan of La Capilla de Malverde. (Photo courtesy of author)](image)

The “Authentic” Capilla de Malverde

Amongst devotees, La Capilla de Malverde in Culiacán is often referred to as “the authentic chapel of Malverde” as it is in close proximity to his final resting place. When I asked about the Capilla in Tijuana, I was always given some variation of “it is not the real thing.” A vendor named Berta explained the situation for me:

This is the authentic Capilla de Malverde, only here in Culiacán. There is a man from Ecuador who comes every May third and he says built a small Capilla in his hometown, but we have never seen the pictures. Even if he built it, it would not be the real thing. This is the only real Capilla, if you are a devotee of Malverde you must come here. Malverde is well known in both the United States and throughout Mexico, but it is because of all the people from here who live there. They might have capillas, but the ánima of Malverde is only here. On May 3rd, they all come back here to say thanks, not to the ones in Tijuana or Los Angeles. (Berta, Personal Interview, 7/27/2016)

The authenticity of La Capilla de Malverde in Culiacán is tied not only to place, but utility. All other chapels are considered places of petition, rather than places of giving thanks. These sentiments were echoed at La Capilla in Tijuana, as the few notes left
upon the walls asked Malverde for assistance with safe passage across the border. The notes plastered upon the walls promised Malverde that if a successful crossing the border, the devotees would eventually return to Culiacán and make a donation to La Capilla and bring the saint flowers. While the ánima of Malverde imbues material goods bearing his image ultimate thanks must be made at La Capilla in Culiacán.

Figure 4-8. La Capilla de Malverde Tijuana. (Photo courtesy of author)

**Devotional Practices at La Capilla de Malverde**

During the first two weeks of fieldwork, I often visited La Capilla around noon, yet there usually were no visitors at that time of day. After learning that most people do not venture out of their homes or places of work at that hour due to the heat, I limited my observation sessions to the mornings (8:00am-11:00am) and evenings (5:00pm-
8:00pm). After reevaluating my fieldwork strategy, I was able to observe more devotees, however observations from Thursday to Saturday were more fruitful than the rest of the week. Roughly sixty percent of the daily visitors were men, and the average duration of a visit was four and a half minutes, regardless of gender.

A visit to *La Capilla de Malverde* is somewhat transactional for most devotees, as they go straight to the primary alcove to offer a votive candle or bouquets of flowers to Malverde. They then kneel before the bust and recite a brief prayer before washing the bust with holy water. Generally, most devotees deposit ten to twenty pesos in the collection bin in the primary alcove, before leaving the chapel. Before recognizing the distinction between those wishing to spend time with Malverde and devotees quickly petitioning for a miracle, I asked a young man for an interview about Malverde. He responded that would like to, but he had to get to surgery and just wanted to stop in and ask Malverde to ensure his operation went well. He promised an interview next time we were both at *La Capilla*, but I unfortunately never saw him again.

Those wishing to spend time with Malverde often bring him beer or tequila, which they often consume as well. I had a conversation with a young man named Daniel who had left six unopened beers at the original bust of Malverde and was drinking from his own six pack. Daniel explained, “I like to come hang out here and spend time with him. *Tecate Light* is his favorite beer, so I bring him a six and I figured I could drink some too. Today is my day off, so I thought I would enjoy it” (Personal Interview, 7/17/16). In these extended sessions with Malverde, the devotee usually sits on the bench next to the original bust and sometimes plays music or has a conversation with the saint. Some of these sessions could have been fulfilling a promise to Malverde, but out of the four
devotees who spent extended periods in the primary alcove and agreed to an interview, three commented that they just liked spending time with Malverde.

On three occasions, individual young men who demonstrate characteristics associated with criminal organizations visited La Capilla while while I was conducting fieldwork. Three of these men were dressed in cowboy boots and expensive looking black suits with half-unbuttoned white shirts and large belt buckles. Two of the men drove black Ford F-150 pickup trucks, while the other drove a white Hummer—both popular choices amongst narcos. The wheels on all three trucks were adorned with chrome rims. I did not seek interviews with these young men due to safety concerns, but intently observed their actions in La Capilla. On all three occasions, the men deposited a large wad of pesos into the donation bins as their wives or girlfriends photographed them. As the men entered the alcove waiting area, devotees in the primary alcove took notice and quickly ended their session with Malverde. Upon entering the alcove, the men washed the bust of Malverde with holy water before sprinkling it on themselves. After kneeling before Malverde and reciting a brief prayer, the men posed for another photograph with the bust of the saint. The men then left the alcove for their vehicles, spending an average of six minutes in La Capilla.

**Malverde and Commodity Fetishism**

As is the case with most folk saints, the primary means of devotional expression involve material goods such as busts, candles, prayer cards, and incense. To understand relations between devotees and material goods bearing Malverde's image, I find it useful to apply Taussig’s notions of commodity fetishism. Taussig observes:

> Fetishism denotes the attribution of life, autonomy, power, and even dominance to otherwise inanimate objects and presupposes the draining of these qualities from the human actors who bestow the attribution. Thus, in the case of
commodity fetishism, social relations are dismembered and appear to dissolve into relationships between mere things...Definite social relationships are reduced to the magical matrix of things. (Taussig 1980: 31-2)

In Mexico, where “around 58 percent of the economically active population was employed in the informal sector in 2014” (Laurell 2015: 258), the fiction that “labor is only another name for a human activity that goes with life itself” (Taussig 1980: 9), becomes reality, and employment categories become the defining characteristics of humans—unemployment, underemployment, and poverty work to further human alienation, as individuals are stripped of identity.

In an interesting twist on Taussig’s findings, devotion to Malverde illustrates the relationship among subjugation, power, and resistance in the context of structural adjustments which damaged the Mexican economy, severely affecting working class people’s economic security. The religious machinations of Malverde work to “reproduce modes of empowerment and mechanisms of domination…sometimes facilitating tragedy and suffering, enabling people to passively (or prayerfully) accept, or even become agents of their own oppression and more” (Léon 2004: 5). This clearly illustrates Marx’s notion that “religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions” (Marx 1978: 54). An interview participant named Fernando echoed Marx’s sentiment in a conversation on the afternoon of July 26th.

Well, I first came here after I lost my job. I had been to the cathedral downtown, I asked Guadalupe, then San Judas Tadeo, as they have both helped me before, but nothing worked this time. A friend of mine has been a devotee for a long time and he recommended that I ask Malverde. I did not have anything to lose, so I asked Malverde for help and I lit a candle. I found work within a week. That is what got me started, but I will never leave after he saved my father. He was very
sick and we did not have the money for medicine. We all thought he was going to die but, we all prayed and came here to bring Malverde flowers. It was a miracle, my father was on his deathbed and he is fine now. (Personal Interview)

Building on Marx’s theory of religion, Taussig argues that:

Magical beliefs are revelatory and fascinating not because they are ill-conceived instruments of utility but because they are poetic echoes of the cadences that guide the innermost course of the world. Magic takes language, symbols, and intelligibility to their outermost limits, to explore life and thereby to change its destination. (1980: 15)

The magical beliefs in Malverde devotional practices are most frequently expressed through direct contact with the spirits or ánimas which inhabit material goods. The anima of Malverde supplements and expands the Catholic cosmology and is often petitioned as a last resort, or for miracles that would be inappropriate for a canonized saint (Taussig 1980: 105). A charm depicting Malverde on a one-hundred dollar bill, popular with those seeking an employment miracle, illustrates the ways in which devotion is both an expression and protest against economic inequality. Hence, “social relations between persons become disguised as the social relations between things” (Taussig 1980: 26), further bolstering the economic system that exploits devotees.

**Transnationalism and the Struggle for Place**

As will be discussed in chapter four, the rise in popularity of devotion to Malverde, and thus the proliferation of material goods depicting his image can be correlated with the emergence of drug cartels in the context of structural adjustments and free trade agreements. While NAFTA facilitated the flow of transnational capital and goods and services, it did not allow the free movement of persons across borders. Many of those most disaffected by Mexico’s economic shifts and instabilities were forced to become undocumented migrants to the United States, bringing with them beliefs, customs, and rituals from Mexico. As undocumented migrants feeling doubly disaffected
and vulnerable, many found religion to be one of the few safe spaces available. But how do we conceptualize a religious safe space with devotion to Malverde in geographic locations far from the only major chapel and community existing in Culiacán? I argue that material goods inhabited by the ánima of Malverde empowers individuals. Subaltern voices are given the opportunity to express themselves, to construct and reenact the world “as it should be” (Hobsbawm 1969: 21).

Just as the historical Malverde and Pancho Villa reacted against the neocolonial push in the early twentieth century, Malverde provides miraculous solutions to the economic insecurity throughout Mexico and amongst Mexicans in the United States. Migration caused by economic disruptions have fostered a yearning for Mexico of the mythic past—a Mexico marked by agrarian life, community, and patriarchy. In Malverde, the confluence of these three characteristics can be found, which allows devotees to commune with an imagined past where they are empowered actors, rather than marginal victims of the influx of foreign capital and competition.

Mircea Eliadae argues that:

To settle somewhere, to inhabit a space, is equivalent to repeating the cosmogony and hence imitating the work of the Gods, it follows that, for religious man, every existential decision to situate himself in space in fact constitutes a religious decision. By assuming the responsibility of creating the world that he has chosen to inhabit, he not only cosmicizes chaos but also sanctifies his little cosmos by making it like the world of the gods. (1959: 65)

While the refuge provided by the Capilla de Malverde cannot be replicated, the possession of material goods bearing Malverde’s image allows devotees create religious safe spaces wherever they may be—material goods inhabited by the ánima of Malverde bring order to the chaos of economic crises and migration. The process
migrants attempting to order their world facilitated Malverde’s conversion from a regional folk saint into a transnational figure.
Hay un aspecto que quiero reseñar (sic). Los medios de comunicación le han endilgado el mote a Malverde de “El Santón de los Narcotraficantes” cosa con la cual no estoy de acuerdo. Malverde es un santo de todo el pueblo, y se le atribuyen milagros mucho antes de que subieron los primeros narcotraficantes. Pero hay que reconocer que los narcos se han identificado con Malverde por que se consideran bandidos como él. Ellos van a la capilla y pagan horas y horas de música en honor de Malverde. Además, ellos han llevado su efigie y su veneración fuera del país, a Estados Unidos, a Colombia, a Europa, etc. Pero considero que Malverde es un santo del pueblo y para el pueblo en general, independientemente de la profesión de cada quién.

—Leonides Alfaro
Crónicas de Jesús Malverde

There is one thing I want to highlight. The media has given Malverde the nickname “the patron saint of narco traffickers,” something I don’t agree with. Malverde is the saint of all people, and miracles were attributed to him long before the rise of the first narco traffickers. But we must recognize that the narcos have identified themselves with Malverde because they consider themselves bandits like him. They come to the chapel and pay for hours and hours of music in honor of Malverde. Also, they have taken his image and veneration outside of the country, to the United States, to Colombia, to Europe, etc. But I think that Malverde is a saint of the people, and for the people in general, regardless of their profession.

—Leonides Alfaro
Chronicles of Jesús Malverde

Figure 5-1. CDS hat. (Photo courtesy of author)
I had been at La Capilla for around three hours as the sun began to set. It was very slow for a Friday evening, with only three visitors during my observation period. The six piece Norteño band was absent, and most of the vendors had closed early. Disappointed by the lack of action, I decided to head for the bus stop when I noticed a hat hanging from the lone remaining vendor’s stall. The black baseball cap had thick, gold colored stitching which read “CDS: Cartel de Sinaloa.” I approached the vendor with numerous questions about this hat racing through my mind, but all I could verbalize was “is this a big seller?” Luckily, Berta was friendly and enthusiastically answered all of my questions. I eventually became quite close with Berta, and we shared many informal conversations during my time in Culiacán.

Berta is a lifelong devotee of Malverde who can remember accompanying her father to La Capilla when it was first built. She married into the González family over twenty years ago, and has worked as vendor at La Capilla selling religious goods bearing Malverde’s image ever since. When I told Berta about my project she was excited, yet serious as she wanted “to make sure a gringo got it right this time” (Personal Interview, 7/29/2016). After I explained that I had no intention of sensationalizing or lying about Malverde and his devotees, Berta responded:

Good, it is important that you know the real story because so many people come here and get everything wrong. Look around at all the pictures and look at all the money on the walls. There is money from Canada, Switzerland, Japan, from all over the world. Do you think all of these people are narcos? Well, you have all of these journalists who come here every May 3rd, they ask us about Malverde, they see all the people from all over the world, and then all they can say is Malverde is the narcosantón. He is for everyone, not just narcos.

You know, it all depends on the person. I won’t deny that some narcos come here, but it just depends on what they believe. We welcome everyone here and we don’t ask questions. Those evangélicos that hand out their pamphlets in front of La Capilla every Wednesday, some of them are devotees of Malverde, but we don’t tell their pastor, it’s not our business. They come here
because they know the truth. If they go to their pastor and ask for food or for medicine—any kind of help, their pastor does not help them because he only cares about money. Here we help them, we give them food and medicine if they need it. They know Malverde can deliver better than their pastor. As long as you are faithful, he helps—it doesn’t matter who you are. (Personal Interview, 7/29/2016)

Every devotee I interviewed echoed Berta’s sentiments that Malverde was for everyone, even narcotics. As previously discussed, the presence of young men affiliated with international criminal organizations cannot be avoided in La Capilla whether it be in the form of ex-votos which contain pictures of young men holding automatic weapons or fields of marijuana, or young men who appear to be involved with the drug trade. The attraction to drug cartels by young men devoted to Malverde cannot be denied, and will be explored in-depth below.

Figure 5-2. Ex-voto depicting young man holding a Kalashnikov rifle. (Photo courtesy of author)
The Sinaloa Cartel and the Rise of Malverde

During the last decades of the 20th century, Mexico endured political economic shifts and instabilities that brought devastating challenges for material well-being and humiliating loss of power vis a vis neighbors to the north. According to Asa Cristina Laurell, “the 1983 debt crisis marked the beginning of neoliberal structural adjustment, when the Mexican government accepted a two-stage orthodox IMF prescription...aimed at reducing inflation and stabilizing public finances” (2015: 250). In the following decade, rather than improve the debt crisis, the situation was exacerbated by waves of economic crashes, a one-hundred percent devaluation of the peso, and the collapse of numerous national banks—finally culminating in full economic collapse in 1994 (Laurell 2015: 251). A $50 billion bailout was constructed by the United States government as incentive for Mexico to sign and implement the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would further deregulate and privatize Mexican industries such as railroads, oil, and the national bank—all nationalized by the revolutionary government (Laurell 2015: 251).

Among locally-felt consequences of NAFTA was the loss of small to medium sized agriculture, as “peasants could not compete with U.S. capital-intensive subsidized agribusiness” (Laurell 2015: 251). As a Nation, Mexico lost its hard-fought food security and became a net food importer: a move from sovereignty to subordination. The decimation of some forms and areas of agricultural production was linked to expanding production of marijuana and opium nationally that allowed cartels to build a vertically integrated supply chain (Laurell 2015: 252). Control over domestic production and reduced reliance on primary material imported from Colombia further strengthened the
political and economic power of the cartels in ways that worked to undermine the nation’s sovereignty from within.

The economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s mirror those in pre-revolutionary society in several ways. Echoing the dramatic growth of inequality under the Porfiriato, the Gini coefficient jumped from 0.48 in 1984, to 0.54 in 1995 (Esquivel 2011: 156). In this extraordinarily trying period marked by a loss of community due to economic migration, economic uncertainty, questioning/weakening of national pride and sovereignty, and alienation, many sought refuge in regional customs and beliefs, such as devotion to folk saints. Devotion to Malverde evolved as a local phenomena from around 1910 until the late 1980s, when the Sinaloa Cartel became a power player in the narcotics trade. According to James H. Creechan and Jorge de la Herrán Garcia, Mexican cartels “gained international notoriety with the implementation of Operation Condor in 1976,” and eventually, “became more powerful than their Colombian suppliers” (Creechan and Garcia 2007: 24). As a way to differentiate themselves from Colombian and regional rivals, the Sinaloa Cartel began celebrating local customs and traditions—none more so than Jesús Malverde, as his masculine image harmonized with their narco aesthetic.¹

Sinaloa Cartel leaders/members deliberately appropriated Malverde’s image as part of their public relations strategy. According to Creechan and Garcia:

*Jefes* could enthusiastically appropriate a mantle of benevolent thief from Jesús Malverde and promote themselves as defenders of their own against outside forces seeking to demonize local traditions; second, the external emphasis on Malverde provides an effective decoy that deflects scrutiny away from the more

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¹ For sake of brevity, I provide a brief definition of narco aesthetic. Narco aesthetic is array of behaviors, fashion, music, and style embraced by those involved with the cartels. This array is characterized by high-risk, masculine behavior such as gun toting, heavy drinking and fighting—sometimes in conjunction with drug trafficking.
sinister and sophisticated aspects of the criminal organization. (Creechan and Garcia 2007: 25)

The appropriation of Malverde’s image and investment in community infrastructure allowed the Sinaloa Cartel to create a Robin Hood like image for their organization. While local citizens identified these investments as caring for the community, Creechan and Garcia argue that, “the actual motivation for investment in the local community may be more related to security than benevolence,” as this allowed cartel leaders to gain significant political influence, and win the favor of the national government (2007: 25).

Although the cooptation of Malverde’s image and myth supported the cartel’s quest to gain political clout throughout Sinaloa, the use of his image did not end there. Association with Malverde amongst leadership in the cartel was encouraged as it left outsiders with the impression that kingpins of the Sinaloa cartels are nothing more than simple and superstitious rural peasants who cannot possibly direct complex crime organizations. The embrace of Malverde’s image by the most powerful men in Sinaloa, and arguably by variously located people throughout the entire nation, led to a surge in his popularity—particularly amongst young men who adopted the *narco* aesthetic as model of masculinity. This alternative masculinity can be seen in the character known throughout Mexico as the *narcojunior*. The *narcojunior* is generally a young man who not only adopts the style and dress of actual narcos, but emulates their violent and aggressive behaviors as a means to be seen, and possibly recruited by the organization. While this has the potential to greatly reduce their life expectancies, young men associated with organized criminal activity often receive an extraordinary amount of respect by their peers.
Alternative Masculinity and the Narcojunior

What type of young man becomes a narcojunior? Safety concerns prevented me from locating and interviewing narcojuniors, but even then it would be impossible to know the socioeconomic background of these young men. The life histories of actual narcos are often embellished to conform with the image of “a self-made man” who worked his way up from poverty, regardless of actual socioeconomic background. The dominant narrative surrounding young men associated with drug cartels suggests that “the major precipitative factor [for involvement] is the denial of legitimate economic opportunity” (Muncie 2004: 109), however this analysis does not account for well-off or middle class men who adopt the narco aesthetic. In their study of high school boys from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds from across Mexico, Vilalta and Martinez found no statistical difference between working class students and well-off students who self reported involvement with criminal drug trafficking organizations (2012). Messerschmidt and Sanders (2000; 2005), noted that young men may be attracted to criminal lifestyles as a means of reinforcing masculinity. Building on their findings, I argue that amongst some young men, gun toting, fighting, and heaving drinking—characteristics associated with the narcojunior—allows them to gain a reputation as being “tough” or “manly,” outweighing the risk of incarceration or death.

There were an array of masculinities observed at La Capilla de Malverde, yet for many devotees being a good man entailed providing for one’s family. Although drinking and related crimes, especially drunk driving, were common topics of discussion, no interview participant brought up violence. Most of the men I interviewed were working class and often struggled to find formal labor, yet they conceptualized their labor as a selfless act for their families. As an interview participant named Saúl observed,
“Malverde helped me find work across the border. It was hard work and some days I worked for sixteen hours, but I was able to send my family money and put my kids in a better school” (Personal Interview, 7/08/16). Toughness and physical strength is still highly valued by these men, but their selflessness is critical to understand the narcojunior, as the character traits of violence, aggression, and self-centeredness, whether truly embodied by the narcojunior or only perceived by others, are key for the conservation of this oppositional masculinity.

For working class devotees, Malverde’s role as social bandit who provides for the poor is paramount, while narcojuniors identify with Malverde the outlaw. Although both working class devotees and narcojuniors identify with different aspects of Malverde’s character, the uniting factor for each group is the saint’s role as a labor mediator. Undoubtedly, “there is an element of excitement and entertainment [in drug dealing and trafficking for] the younger men. But for the most part it is a kind of work” (Connell 2005: 98), a kind of work that is often accompanied by a considerable amount of prestige. One cannot simply walk away from gendered expectations of labor for fear of familial and social disapproval, thus, the narcojunior establishes an alternative claim to respect where fear and violence produce an income much greater than any working class occupation can provide.
When I began this project, I wanted to expand my understanding of Jesús Malverde and *narcocultura*, yet I was unsure how, or if this research could contribute to the broader study of popular Catholicism and gender systems in Mexico. Having completed the fieldwork, the primary objective of this project has shifted from expanding my understandings, to raising awareness on masculinities and violence in contemporary Mexico. As previously discussed, I hope this work contributes to efforts that might motivate variously located actors across institutions to create less harmful and violent options for masculinity. Next, in the words of Berta I hope this work “gets it right” (Personal Interview, 7/29/2016), and offers a more complete understanding of Malverde and his devotees. Rather than viewing these individuals as criminal sympathizers, this project offers a vision of devotees who petition Malverde for miracles to better cope with quotidian struggles constructed by broader societal mechanisms and gender systems.

I have presented various expressions and interpretations of masculinity which devotees constructed and performed on a daily basis. For working class or wealthy petitioners, the ánima of Malverde facilitates—and sometimes prevents—the performance of duties associated with the gender category “man.” The diversity of narratives that surround the life of Malverde affords devotees the opportunity to correlate aspects of their lives with that of the saint. In this sense, the masculine image of Malverde serves as a panacea for men seeking supernatural reinforcements of masculinity. For *narjuniors*, the criminal aspects of Malverde’s life are most appealing and finds parallels with the lives of famous *narcos* such as Chapo Gúzman and Manuel Torres Félix. Rather than subscribing to a subordinate masculinity associate with
positions of little political or economic power, these young men establish alternate
claims to respect based on "manly" and "tough" behavior like fighting, drinking, and
violence.

When considering how images of and devotions to Jesús Malverde reproduce
and/or challenge currently dominant gender norms in Mexico, I again invoke the words
of Berta; “it depends on the person” (Personal Interview, 7/29/2016). Identities are
complex and relational, and it is indeed possible that the working class devotee might
conceptualize his own identity as a challenge to dominant gender norms, as he does
not have the same opportunity to participate in "manly" activities like drinking, fighting,
and philandering. Likewise, the narcojunior might conceptualize the immense power
and wealth held by narco bosses as the dominant gender category. In spite of these
nuances, the narcojunior directly challenges Mexican gender norms through their
attraction to violence and crime. An array of material goods sold throughout the U.S.-
Mexico borderlands which depict Malverde surrounded by marijuana, rifles, and
handguns reproduces this masculinity which challenges Mexican gender norms.

As previously discussed, it would be difficult to examine the socioeconomic
background of young men who become narcojuniors. What is possible is to examine the
ages of young men who have died in Sinaloa over the past decade due to drug
violence. From 2005 to 2010, Sinaloa experienced a decline in diabetes and cancer
mortality that statistically should have raised life expectancy overall amongst men by 0.5
years (Manuel Aburto et al., 2016: 91). Rather than experiencing an increase, life
expectancies amongst men between the ages of fifteen and fifty fell by an astounding
three years (Manuel Aburto et al., 2016: 90). The number of deaths experienced by men
and boys between the ages of fifteen and twenty is indicative of the violence this age group has endured, and one can surmise that at least some of these young men were involved in the drugs trade. Vilalta observes that “drug dealing in Mexico is indeed an adolescent’s job” (Vilalta 2010: 264), which heightens young men’s risk of experiencing violence or death.

Based on these statistics, it is clear that the formation of an alternative masculinity of the *narcojunior* begins at a young age. But what type of policies can be implemented to foster options for masculinity that are less harmful and violent throughout Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands region, especially when adolescent boys from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds are attracted to the *narco* aesthetic? It is perhaps too early theorize solutions to such a complex and multifaceted problem, however, I hope that this project can expand understandings on gender systems and violence in contemporary Mexico. Hopefully, an expanded knowledge and understanding of this violence will unite actors from various social positions to create less harmful and violent gender systems.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christopher Lomelín was born in Richmond, Virginia. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Latin American Studies magna cum laude at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2013. He graduated with a Master of Arts degree from the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida in 2017.