

This is the accepted version of the following article:

Boudreau, Julie-Anne. In print. « State Theory from the Street Altar: The Muscles, the Saint and the Amparo. » *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. doi: 10.1111/1468-2427.12694.

First published by John Wiley & Sons; © Urban Research Publications Limited 2018, which has been published in final form at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-2427.12694>

State theory from the street altar: the muscles, the Saint, and the *amparo*

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Acknowledgement: I wish to acknowledge here the invaluable assistance of Natalia Hernandez, Hugo Hernandez and Itzel de Alba, with whom I spent countless hours walking these neighborhoods. Natalia Hernandez and Juana Martin Ceron produced our initial cartography based on these walking registers. And of course, this paper owes everything to artists Rodrigo Olvera and Daniel Vilchis.

Keywords: state theory, protection, materiality, urban religiosity, Mexico City, urban ethnography

Abstract: What are the effects of state practices at the street level? Instead of asking: What is the state, where is it located, or what does it do? This paper identifies state traces in three urban neighborhoods of Mexico City. By ethnographically and visually describing how protection is performed, the paper argues that the state is not only “somewhere” in specific functions, actors, or institutions. The state also has materialized effects produced by a web of conflict-ridden relations. Discussion about the state in the global South generally revolves around its failures and its informality. The proposal here is that by analyzing the state from the standpoint of urban space, the question is not whether the state works or not, or whether actors are formal or informal. The question now becomes: how is protection performed and through which operations, relations, objects and actors. Based on ongoing ethnographic work and a collaboration with two visual artists in Mexico City, the paper analyzes three protective processes: “muscles” (involving actors such as police officers, gang leaders, and fathers and husbands), the “saints” (involving caring for statues of various saints and other clientelistic chains), and the “amparo” (involving the rule of law in a personalized manner for the management of interpersonal conflicts). These three sets of practices are embedded in the history of state formation since colonization.

Introduction:

It is early February and the sun is at its peak. People are eating on the street. Children are coming out of school in their shabby gray and green uniforms. There is a humming buzz coming from the *tianguis* street market. It is a high-decibel mix of music, pirated movie dialogue and the voices of commercial supervisors doing their rounds on motorbikes and shouting into walkie-talkies. The cacophony remains trapped under the yellow plastic roof and circulates through the narrow maze of piled merchandise displayed on tables and hung on racks. The smell of frying oil wafts from the taco stand, and with it comes the distinct odor of *tortilleria*. The noise of the tortilla machine is repetitive. A young woman with a pink and white apron pushes the heavy corn masa into its jaws and flat tortillas come tumbling out the other end to be

gathered by her colleague who then wraps them in paper while they are still steaming and warm.

I like the yellowish light of the burning sun passing through the old plastic fabric that serves as an improvised roof on the street. The air is stuffy, humid and hot. The sidewalk here has just been cleaned with Piñol, a cleaning product with a strong pine odor. My toes are covered with the white foam produced by the broom of an old lady scrubbing the uneven sidewalk. She is fighting to control the dust produced by the mass of people wandering the maze and the constant car traffic running nearby.

When I exit the *tianguis* and see daylight again in the rare streets of Tepito that are not covered by makeshift plastic roofs to protect vendors from the brutality of the afternoon sun, the level of decibels drastically drops. Tepito is the *barrio bravo*, the rebellious, marginalized yet highly attractive neighborhood that is home to generations of indigenous and lower class workers toiling to make Mexico City work since colonization. Tepito is located just to the north, walking distance from the historical center of town. It is the mythical home of the famous *luchadores* and boxers, *sonideros* and drug lords. Tepito is also a neighborhood known for its intensely visible religiousness, mixing popular Catholic practices with urban devotions to the Santa Muerte, Afro-Cuban Santería, and a host of other unofficial Saints peopling its streets.

On this February afternoon, about 200 meters from the exit of the *tianguis*, a woman of roughly 30 years is standing just outside the front door of her lime green house. She is screaming at a neighbour on the other side of the street. The neighbour is about 50, his belly is sticking out of his shirt. He wears plastic sandals and navy shorts. A dozen neighbors are standing in the street. They join the woman in scolding the man in plastic sandals.

- What happened? asked my friend Natalia to an old man sitting on a plastic chair branded with a red XX (*Dos Equis*, a popular beer).

As we continue walking slowly, we see two police cars parked at the end of the street. They are just leaving, and about five men in uniform are loading a scooter into their van.

- There was an *operativo* and they took the scooter.

An *operativo* is the arrival of an imposing contingent of police officers who raid a house or a business. This time, they took a man's scooter. His wife, standing in front of the lime green door to her house is livid. She accuses the man in plastic sandals of having snitched on her husband. The whole street joins the wife in accusing the man of treason. The atmosphere is fraught with anger though no-one is physically violent. What feels violent is the massive presence of police officers and their militarized gear. The blue scooter disappears along with the sound of their sirens.

We pass an imposing altar next to the sidewalk featuring the Virgin de Guadalupe in the center, a Christ on the cross to her right, a small statue of San Judas Tadeo and several family photos. Natalia is worried about another man in uniform, standing nearby, observing silently on the sidewalk under the shade of a small tin roof.

- Why is this police officer still here? she whispers. He will be lynched.

Although the neighbors were mad at the man in plastic sandals, it is more likely that violence may be directed towards police officers. An old man observing the scene from his window responds:

- He's just a PA. Everyone knows he's not involved.

The *policia auxiliar* (PA) is a local police institution that is independent of the metropolitan and federal police who are the one that conduct the *operativos*. PAs are often hired to guard specific buildings, a little like private security guards. They are in fact part of the local scene and neighbors know them personally, unlike the anonymous *operativos*. Because of their anonymity, their number, and their brutal force, *operativos* are much more threatening than local figures such as the PA. *Operativos* are intruders. To protect themselves, neighbors tend to cage in their cars and belongings. This way, the police can't confiscate the caged cars during their *operativos*. The blue scooter was not caged and it was taken by the police.

This scene is typical in Tepito. It is replicated in many neighborhoods across Latin America: police officers are despised and local protection is largely organized “outside” of the state. Based on an ongoing ethnography in three neighborhoods of Mexico City, this paper zooms in on protective work to understand not so much “what” the state represents (its “inside” and its “outside”), but rather its materialization in neighborhoods such as Tepito. Instead of asking what the state does, where the state is located, or how it works, I prefer to focus on ‘protection’, a specific and materialized outcome of state-citizen relations. By describing how protection is performed, we can begin to see that the state is not only “somewhere” in specific functions, actors, or institutions. Rather, I will argue that the state is not an autonomous set of institutions, actors, and policy documents, which in the case of Mexico, endlessly fails to comply with its own principle. State functions and the actors implementing them, as well as state ideas embedded in laws and policies, are of course central to any understanding of state practices. But in addition to this institutionalist approach, this paper offers a complementary reading, which, I argue, might be more fruitful in the so-called global South where it is very difficult to isolate it from other power-ridden social relations. The state exists through a series of material objects: buildings, computers, monuments, walls marking international borders, but also history books, bullet proof vests and police uniforms. It exists through embodied people—politicians, civil servants, teachers and immigration and police officers. These objects and actors mediate between the idea of the state (its laws, sovereignty and nation) and its effects on the street and on people. Here, I wish to explore one of the many effects of state-citizen relations: protection. From the point of view of a specific performative effect (in this case protection), we can easily see that the state cannot be isolated from its web of relations with citizens and objects. It cannot, therefore, be analyzed from an outside (informal) and an inside (formal) perspective. The state comes into being through the material objects and people on which its power rests.

After a brief explanation of the methodology used in this paper, the first section begins by discussing the irony of discussing protection in a country where death constitutes, as Lomnitz so beautifully puts it, “the very idea of the nation”.¹ Inspired by Foucault, Lomnitz traces a genealogy of the relationship between life, death and state formation. In Mexico, the Church's role in controlling life and death, and thus in the development of the modern state, was evident as soon as the Conquistadores set foot in America. Reacting to the brute and animal violence of

¹ Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Books, 2008)

Spanish Conquistadores, the priests rushed to save the Indians from “damnation.” This initial intervention was performed through gestural acts of care whereby the priests would use their own bodies to convert dying Indians and ensure they would not go to Hell for dying unbaptized. This gradually evolved into a territorialized system of hospitals to care for the droves of dying Indians. These were the first forms of state-like administration of life and death. Lomnitz traces the history of how death continues to be at the core of the Mexican state and popular culture until today. This is an argument that can somewhat provocatively be extended to most Latin American countries. Arias and Goldstein argue for instance that violence and coercive forms are compatible with representative democracies.² In order to understand how this intertwining between death and a democratic state, I follow their methodological call for ethnographic work. Henceforth this first section suggests thinking of state theory from the perspective of relational materialism and the urbanity of the state.

In the following section I turn to the presentation of Rodrigo and Daniel’s visual work, along with empirical descriptions of three sets of protective practices visible in the three neighborhoods. The first set of material and embodied practices is called the “Muscles,” referring to what Iris Young calls the masculinist logic of protection.³ The second set of protective practices is called the “Saint” and explores protective care work. Lastly, I discuss legal sets of protective practices through the instrument of “amparo” as embedded in the Mexican constitution. The paper ends with a comparison of the three neighborhoods and more general reflections on state theory.

A methodological note

Because of its focus on the materialization of state performance, this paper is based on visual studies produced by a young Mexican artist, Rodrigo Olvera, and on my own ongoing ethnographic work in Mexico City. Since 2012, I have been living in the Colonia Roma Sur, a middle-class neighborhood teeming with hipster shops, creative workers, and alternative active learning schools, located just southwest of the city center. The area contains many two-level Art Nouveau and Art Deco houses, rapidly being converted into 6-8 floor apartments by voracious real-estate companies. Since 2014, I have begun recording field notes from my various visits around Tepito. The area was heavily affected by the earthquakes in 1985 and saw the subsequent construction of many social housing projects. I began my ethnographic work in Santa Martha Acatitla more recently, in 2016. This neighborhood sits on the eastern periphery of the city. It is an urbanized indigenous village, combined with self-built settlements located on the northern side of one of the major routes out of the city.

For this paper, I walked every single street and alleyway of these three neighborhoods to record the material signs of protection.⁴ I recorded everything that might indicate some form of

² Enrique Desmond Arias and Daniel M. Goldstein (eds.), *Violent Democracies in Latin America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010)

³ Iris Marion Young, “The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 1 (2003).

⁴ I wish to acknowledge here the invaluable assistance of Natalia Hernandez, Hugo Hernandez and Itzel de Alba, with whom I spent countless hours walking these neighborhoods. Natalia Hernandez and Juana Martin Ceron produced our initial cartography based on these walking registers. And of course, this paper owes everything to artists Rodrigo Olvera and Daniel Vilchis.

protection without using a prior categorization. It was decided from the beginning that physical elements of protection such as bars and wires will not be recorded because they are present everywhere. Their ubiquity makes a comparison between the three neighborhoods less meaningful. I began with public institutional buildings and civic organizations because they indicate the presence of the state or organized groups that are active in some form of social protection. I also recorded police presence (patrols, kiosks) and surveillance cameras. Seeing homemade posters warning that neighborhood vigilante groups are active, reminded me to also record government, civic or party advertisements that make social or legal programs visible. What is most striking in my database is the presence of religious artefacts including churches, but also posters, murals, and most notably, shrines and altars in the two poorest neighborhoods (Table 1).

Table 1: Typology of material elements for protection mapped in each neighborhood. Compiled by the author based on ethnographic observations between Oct.2016 and March 2017.

	<i>Colonia Morelos-Tepito. (Population: 32,509)</i>	<i>Colonia Santa-Martha-Acatitla-Ermita Zaragosa (Population: 31,363)</i>	<i>Colonia Roma Sur (Population: 17,435)</i>
<i>Sidewalk Altars</i>	113	97	11
<i>Visible altar on private property</i>	72	42	14
<i>Altar in a shop or business with religious name</i>	25	11	14
<i>Religious mural, graffiti or posters</i>	36	48	13
<i>Churches or temples</i>	10	9	7
<i>Total religious elements</i>	256	207	59
<i>Public security cameras</i>	22	2	26
<i>Public or civic institutions</i>	31	9	5
<i>Governmental or political party advertisements, civic announcements</i>	4	10	19
<i>Total public elements</i>	57	21	50
<i>Private security cameras</i>	0	0	159
<i>Total private elements other than bars and wires*</i>	0	0	159

*Bars and wires on windows and doors were not mapped as they are on almost all properties in the three areas.

These objects were categorized and mapped.⁵ When comparing the three neighborhoods, it is striking how the two lower income communities of Tepito and Santa Martha present many more religious elements on their streets than the higher income community of the Roma, where private security cameras play a dominant role. Notable also is the regular distribution of religious objects (or private cameras in the case of the Roma) across the study zone. Finally, the relative absence of public objects in the peripheral neighborhood of Santa Martha with comparison to the central zones of Tepito and Roma speaks to unequal state presence. I will come back to these comparative differences in the conclusion to this paper.

I gave these maps to Rodrigo who followed them to walk these neighborhoods, systematically throughout the neighborhood of Roma Sur, more like a situationist “derive” in the more complex urban tissue of Santa Martha. This reconnaissance work was accompanied by a local resident in Tepito. From his own photos, he produced collages of what he saw as protection in

⁵ Julie-Anne Boudreau, “Prácticas de protección en espacios públicos: dispositivos de seguridad, artefactos simbólicos y el discurso ciudadano en la Roma Sur” in *Gestión urbana y política de vivienda*, ed. L. Salinas Arreortua (Mexico City: Instituto de Geografía de la UNAM, forthcoming)

each neighborhood. These collages were then passed to Daniel Vilchis, an ex-voto artist⁶, who painted a summary of each neighbourhood's protective practices. I chose to work with Rodrigo because of his reflective work on urban insecurity, especially on the periphery.⁷ Daniel Vilchis is a neighborhood painter who sells his work on the streets of Tepito. In addition to exploring the religious medium of the ex-voto, Rodrigo and I were interested in his representation of neighborhood space and identity.⁸ What follows is a conversation between these street objects, their representation through Rodrigo and Daniel's visual work, field notes describing my observations and informal conversations with area inhabitants about shrines, saints, the police or insecurity more generally, and recordings of conversations between Rodrigo and me as we were interpreting our data.

Theorizing the state through the performance of protection

In his excellent summary reflection on the state, Jessop organizes the broad field of (mostly Western) state theory into six approaches: 1) a focus on the comparative historical formation and evolution of states; 2) a focus on the formal constitution of states (for instance the relation between market and state, or a differentiation between political regimes); 3) a focus on institutional analysis and design; 4) a focus on the agency of specific actors within different institutional settings and the balance of force; 5) a focus on the social embeddedness of the state over the long term and on the relationship between the state and civilization; and 6) a focus on the state as an idea (political imaginaries) and a project.⁹ Disciplines such as political science, public administration, political history, sociology, and even the anthropology of the state, can also be placed in this typology.

Absent from this typology is the work produced by political geographers. They tend to approach the state with an emphasis on its territorialisation: studying state spatiality in terms of "inside" and "outside." Political sociologists and political economists would prefer to liken this to a discussion of the formal-informal binary. Another variant of political geography focuses on the state as a scaled geography of power, from the local to the global levels.¹⁰ More recently, some British political geographers have suggested thinking of the state as topological power, that is,

⁶ Ex-votos are popular paintings in Mexico since the 16th century. They narrate a miracle and are generally ordered from local artists as an offering to a Saint who has granted someone a favor. They are usually painted on scrap metal.

⁷ Please refer to one of his projects: amarillopublico.com

⁸ Interested readers may read the history of Alfredo Vilchis and his son, Daniel, here: <http://contenido.com.mx/2016/09/conoce-al-da-vilchis-mexicano-pintor-exvotos/>

⁹ The work of Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) exemplifies work on the comparative historical formation and evolution of states. The work of Peter A. Hall and R.C.R. Taylor "Political Science and the three new institutionalisms" *Political Studies* 44, no. 4 (1996) exemplifies the focus on institutional analysis and design. The focus on the social embeddedness of the state over the long term and on the relationship between the state and civilization is illustrated by Michael Mann, *The sources of social power, vol. 1: A history of power from the beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and S. Rokkan, *State formation, nation-building and mass politics in Europe: The theory of Stein Rokkan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Finally, Bob Jessop, *The State. Past, Present, Future* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016) exemplifies the focus on the state as an idea and a project.

¹⁰ Neil Brenner, *New state spaces: Urban restructuring and state rescaling in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

not so much with an “inside” and an “outside” but rather as a series of connected spaces with differential power reaches.¹¹

The proposal of this paper stems from my own disciplinary origin: urban studies. Although many urbanists will focus on state institutions, actors and functions, urban studies also provide opportunity for a different entry point: the materiality of everyday situations. This requires thinking of the state based on ethnographic material collected by immersing oneself in everyday urban situations. By comparison, the anthropology of the state begins by observing the daily workings of a specific state site such as a welfare office or a police station.¹² Here, I similarly use ethnography, but I did not start from an identifiable state site or actor. I began instead on the streets of three neighborhoods, tracing the state and its interrelations in the performance of spatialized protection. This entailed recognizing that “locating” the state in specific institutions or actors always provides an incomplete view of the state’s performative traces. Instead, I wanted to locate the state in urban space.

In recent years, a growing number of political theorists inspired by the work of Latour called for a less ideational, instrumental and formal understanding of the state by focusing on material relations.¹³ With the idea of urban assemblages, this work sheds light on the various objects, people, and spaces that produce urban systems.¹⁴ Consequently, the state is positioned as only one among many elements producing a specific system or performative function. This approach complements what Mitchell already argued in the early 1990s: relations between various objects and actors generate the illusion of a unified state system or apparatus of power that would somehow appear separate from society. Yet, this is only an illusion. The state cannot exist without close relations with various actors, objects and spaces that are typically located “outside” the state. The illusion of the state’s autonomous existence is what he calls the “state effect;” it is a mechanism specifically deployed to produce this distinctly modern illusion.¹⁵ Yet in place as “baroque” as Mexico, such clear distinctions between the state and society, the formal and the informal, the inside and the outside are impossible to sustain.

Indeed, Ecuadorian philosopher Bolivar Echeverria, who spent most of his career teaching in Mexico City, qualifies Mexico, and Latin America in general, as practicing a form of “baroque modernity.” This civilizing project is at once capitalist and constructed on a Catholic view of life. Mexico is formally a secular state. Yet, many historians, jurists, and anthropologists have shown that its formation was largely influenced by the Catholic Church.¹⁶ While, as Weber famously argued, North American and northern European states were constructed through Protestantism, Latin American states remained attached to medieval Catholicism. In other

¹¹ John Allen and A. Cochrane, “Assemblages of state power: Topological shifts in the organization of government and politics” *Antipodes* 42, no. 5 (2010); D. Asher Ghertner, “When is the state? Topology, temporality, and the navigation of everyday state space in Delhi” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107, no. 3 (2015)

¹² See for instance the excellent book by Javier Auyero, *Patients of the State: The politics of waiting in Argentina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012)

¹³ Bruno Latour, *La fabrique du droit. Une ethnographie du Conseil d’État* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002) and *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

¹⁴ Ignacio Fariás and Thomas Bender (eds.), *Urban Assemblages. How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵ Timothy Mitchell, “The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics” *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1, 1991: 77-96.

¹⁶ Lomnitz, *opcit.*

words, “the Catholic Church intended to construct its own religious modernity based on the revitalization of faith [during the Counter-Reformation period led by Spain in Europe and in its colonies], positioned as alternative to abstract individualistic modern characteristics of capitalism [and the liberal state].”¹⁷

Baroque modernity entails inconsistency and ambiguity in all aspects of everyday life and institutional formations. This blurring is caused by the tense cohabitation of Catholicism and capitalism, which Echeverría calls the baroque ethos. It introduces dissent, confusion, and indecision into everyday life. This uncertainty, he argues, is inherently political and the state is an integral part of this confusion. Echeverría sees the quotidian as the locus of the political (*la politicidad*). Politics, he argues, is either “sacred” when it consists of “extraordinary” moments of articulation (such as revolution), or “profane” when centred on everyday life. In turn, “profane” politics includes two aspects: ‘real’ politics involving citizen relations to the institutions framing their everyday lives, and ‘imaginary’ politics based on everyday symbolism. Both real and imagined politics are visible from the street altar and this, I would like to suggest, sheds new light on state theory.

Coming back to the opening example, protection is produced by neighbors in solidarity with the wife whose husband lost his scooter at the hands of police officers. The authority of the *operativos* is strongly contested by this show of solidarity and the rejection of the man in sandals who broke the bond. Perhaps the man in sandals was tempted into giving information to police officers, or perhaps he was coerced. The fact is, protection is produced by resorting to alternative sources of authority such as the relation between community bond and religion. As a profoundly affective and aesthetically visible object, the street altar does not primarily represent the authority of the Church. Instead, it works through a specific modality of power: providing a seductive sense of existential security.¹⁸

From this perspective, protection (as a series of operations and embodied practices) becomes visible through street-level materiality. Protection is performed through the intertwined relations of state objects (uniforms, police vehicles, bylaws), state actors (the difference between *operativos* and *policia auxiliary*), vernacular objects (cages protecting cars, street altars), and embodied relational practices such as neighbor solidarity or the use of dogs to protect private property. The state is visible not simply in its institutions, uniforms, and policy documents, but mostly through its effects on the street, in everyday life. The state is enacted through the production of protection in specific places. This entails not only studying protection programs, institutions, and instruments and the interaction between police officers and residents, but also by incorporating a myriad of objects such as street altars, in the production of protection. In this sense, protection is not ascribed to specific institutional mandates or actors, but is understood as a materialized and localized effect of state-citizen-object-space relations in three neighborhoods. In everyday life, protection is at once real and imagined to use Echeverría’s

¹⁷ Bolívar Echeverría, *Modernidad, mestizaje cultural, ethos barroco, Bolívar Echeverría*. (Mexico City: UNAM/El Equilibrista, 1994), 29. Translation is mine.

¹⁸ John Allen, *Lost geographies of power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Jack Katz, *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). I explore how this type of seduction works in greater detail in Julie-Anne Boudreau, “Artefactos que marcan a las vecindades en su búsqueda de protección en la Ciudad de México: Una conversación materializada entre lo religioso y lo estatal” *Nueva Antropología* (forthcoming)

categories. It has real material effects when crime rates drop, violence is contained, or inhabitants eat in community kitchens, receive food vouchers or a public housing unit. It has strong symbolic effects when a resident receives a protective court order (*amparo*) or when a Saint present in a sidewalk shrine offers spiritual protection against evil forces.

Based on my ethnographic material, I explored three sets of intertwined protective practices and their materiality: the “Muscles”, the “Saint”, and the “*Amparo*”. “Muscles” refers to protective practices through militarization, surveillance and control. Materialized in *operativos*, street gang rackets, and surveillance cameras, these protective practices follow what Iris Young calls a masculinist role characterized by courage, responsibility and virtue. Young argues that this protective role at home is always accompanied by a dominative and aggressive role abroad (through war). She suggests that the masculinist logic of protection entails subordinate forms of citizenship which sustains masculine superiority.¹⁹

The second set of embodied and materialized protective practices we will discuss are grouped under the heading of the “Saint.” They refer to protective care work undertaken by various actors: solidarity between neighbors, local associations, clientelist chains of fidelity, and care for a protective saint. This personalized regime of patronage based protection and religious artefacts has a long history. In places like Mexico, where the modern state is based on a rule of law that cannot be separated from popular culture, protection is something we familiarly recognize through patronage and clientelism. People usually work with mediators (a charismatic local character, non-elected representatives such as civil servants, or a statue of a saint) to make their claims heard.²⁰

Finally, protection is provided through the rule of law. Various legal instruments are designed to protect residents: laws, bylaws, urban plans, the city constitution, and so on. These instruments are further bolstered by specific institutional programs ranging from police reform to civic participation and from anti-corruption programs to legal socialization. For this paper, I choose to focus on one such instrument, the *amparo*. As a legal instrument enshrined in the Mexican constitution, the *amparo* serves to protect the rights of individuals by giving discretionary power to judges to block the application of a law that would otherwise impede basic rights.

These three sets of protective practices are interdependent. This is particularly clear in countries such as Mexico, where the rule of law coexists and depends on masculinist militarization and a long tradition of local ‘bosses’ providing paternalistic care. Protection also involves private security guards, dogs, and public investment to improve precarious housing conditions, however we will not focus on these here. The point is that from the standpoint of the street, observing which material and embodied practices are deployed to ensure protection, particularly

¹⁹ Young, “The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state”

²⁰ See for instance: L. Adler Lomnitz, “Informal exchange networks in formal systems: A theoretical model” *American Anthropologist* 90, 1988: 42–55; Diane Davis, “Irregular armed forces, shifting patterns of commitment, and fragmented sovereignty in the developing world” *Theory and Society* 39, no. 3, 2010: 397-413; V. Guarneros-Meza, “Mexican urban governance: How old and new institutions coexist and interact” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33, no. 2, 2009: 463-482; MM. Tosoni, “Notas sobre el clientelismo político en la Ciudad de México” *Perfiles Latinoamericanos: Revista de La Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Sede México* 29, 2007: 47-69.

in a place as “baroque” as Mexico City, one can only begin to understand what is the state by examining how it works, and what traces it leaves.

The Muscles: Protection Through Territorialized and Gendered Violence

Protection through muscles is a form of protection that depends on the use of violence. Whether the protector is the police officer or a street gang, the use of violence to protect against violence corresponds to what Iris Young analyzes as the masculinist logic of protection. Protection in this logic is based on the mobilization of fear to exact submission and compliance. This logic is highly gendered and territorialized. The “good” man (the father, the police officer, the gang leader) will protect his children, citizens, or neighbors against the “bad” man (the aggressor, the criminal, the rival gang leader). The “good” man exerts violence outside (his home, his country, his neighborhood) to benevolently protect his territory. This territorialized division of the inside versus the outside enables the use of muscles on the outside in return for submission and compliance on the inside.

Such muscular protection is commonly used on the streets of Mexico. Mexico is a dangerous place. “*El tamaño del infierno*” (Hell’s dimensions) is the title of Arturo Alvarado’s study of violence and criminality in Mexico City.²¹ The title says it all. According to the *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública* (ENVIPE) 2016²², 34% of households across the country have had at least one family member fall victim to a crime in 2015, while only 10.5% of all crimes were reported. For Mexico City alone, the survey showed that 70.5% of respondents point to insecurity as the city’s most important problem compared to 32.6% of respondents who felt it was corruption and just 32.5% of people who responded unemployment. Violence is something anyone living in Mexico City feels either through abstract stories about *la crisis*, through sensationalist media coverage, through graphic government campaigns, through rumors and urban legends, or through direct or indirect victimization. Much of the violence in Mexico is perpetrated by the state itself through abuse, corruption, and extortion.²³ In this context, police work and militarization raises much suspicion among residents.

- Insert figure 1 here

In this collage (Figure 1), Rodrigo superposes two photos he took in Santa Martha: the rejection of the police (*putos polis* with the drawing of a phallus) and the caring figure of Jesus drawn next to the open landscape of the volcano known as the Popocatepétl. The volcano has a strong connotation in Mexico. It represents the openness of the ‘natural’ landscape to be found outside the cement of the city. It is also an appeal to supernatural forces, the force of Popocatepétl (the

²¹ Arturo Alvarado Mendoza, *El tamaño del infierno. Un estudio sobre la criminalidad en la zona metropolitana de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2012)

²² This survey generated by the national statistical agency questioned 95,714 households.

²³ 20.2% of crimes reported in Mexico City are extortion, 10% are fraud, and 49.4% are theft or assaults occurring on the street or on public transportation (EnviPE, 2016).

fuming mountain in Nahuatl language). According to Aztec mythology, Popocatepetl was in love with the princess Ixtaccihuatl. The king manipulated both Popocatepetl and his daughter to avoid their marriage. They both died and their bodies were covered with snow and transformed into the two volcanoes surrounding Mexico City. When the Popocatepetl erupts, it is said that he is filling the city with his burning rage. In this collage, we can sense various forces of protection in tension: sexualized police officers symbolizing corruption and brute force against a caring Jesus, territorialized police work against the open spatiality of the volcano, human police force against the supernatural forces of lava.

In Rodrigo's collage, the territorialized logic of muscular protection is challenged by the volcano and by Jesus. What this image says is that "nature" and "Jesus" are everywhere. They do not know boundaries nor inside/outside divisions. Protection, they say, does not need to rely on territory, submission or the use of violence. This imaginary politics of symbolic protection, to use Echeverria's category, is intensely poignant in the context of Santa Martha Acatitla due to the imposing presence of one of the largest female prisons in the city. In Daniel's depiction of Santa Martha Acatitla, we see the imposing presence of the prison and its territorial limits. The gate is juxtaposed with the church on the one side, and the mountains in the background. However, the territory delimited by the gate is physically transgressed by the mural of the Virgen de Guadalupe painted by the neighbors (Figure 2).

- Insert figure 2 here

In Santa Martha Acatitla, Tepito, and to a lesser extent in the Roma Sur, protection is performed through muscles. Via the deployment of a territorialized and masculinist use of violence. This performance is visible through the competition between "protectors": police officers, organized crime, and jealous husbands. This muscular protection does not come without resistance. Other forms of protection operate using a more benevolent, relational, and aesthetic modality.

The Saints: Protective Care Work

- Insert figure 3 here

In this small corner shop in the Roma Sur, Rodrigo captured the altar at the exact moment when Jean Claude van Damme appeared on television (Figure 3, left). This striking photo perfectly illustrates how the masculinist logic of protection through muscles (represented by van Damme) comingles with other sets of protective practices on the streets of Mexico City. What Rodrigo narrates in this collage is the visible presence of saints and angels in shops, on the sidewalk and in people's stories about ghosts and spirituality. In his collage, Rodrigo expresses this ghostly presence that regulates garbage on the sidewalk (right photo, figure 3). This catholic presence is much less intense in the Roma Sur, where altars are mostly confined to shops or built by informal street vendors and where angels and virgins tend to be part of heritage homes more than active faith (center photo, figure 3), than in Santa Martha or Tepito (Table 1). Regardless

of this reduced intensity, the Saint as a form of protective care work is as much a reality in richer Roma Sur as it is in the rest of the city.

To understand how the saint protects, it is useful to dwell a little on how Mexico's baroque modernity was constituted. As New Spain entered the Baroque era, almost every household had a domestic altar. When the Catholic church faced capitalist modernity, it reacted by reinventing itself and taking advantage of the baroque aesthetic that characterized everyday Mexican life in the 17th century. Promoting the image of the Virgin Mary as an intermediary between humans and God, the Church was able to "restore faith" and produce symbolic value by opening a direct relationship between God and the people through the saint (and not only through the priest). In addition, as a response to people's unequal access to Church burial sites (strictly reserved to those who could pay for their redemption), communal organizations destined to pool resources for the caring of souls as a form of burial insurance were created. These *cofradías* constitute the roots of the contemporary system of protective care work based on patronage, corporatism, and daily interactions with the saint. Even the triumphant post-independence Liberal state did not succeed in proscribing popular religion and the very visible practice of entering in relation with statues of the Saint constructed on the street in the 19th century.

Catholic saints, and in particular the Virgin of Guadalupe who has come to embody Mexican identity,²⁴ still play a very important role in Mexican popular culture today. But people have further created their own saints without the formal approval of the Catholic Church. The Santa Muerte cult is probably the most debated. As Alfonso Hernández, inhabitant of Tepito and urban chronicler suggests, the Santa Muerte "*represents the death of the state. All the functions that the state no longer assumes, including the distribution of justice and social security, are associated to the Santa Muerte.*"²⁵ The saint participates in the formation of the Mexican state and continues to work with, against, and perhaps even in negotiation with it.

- Insert figure 4 here

In this collage from Rodrigo (figure 4), we feel the presence of the many saints peopling Tepito. A statue of the Virgin de Guadalupe (right), San Judas Tadeo (center) or the Santa Muerte (left) should be understood as much more than a representation of an absent saint.²⁶ The statue itself is alive: it walks, eats, cries, sweats. In her ethnographic work, Roush vividly describes how the Santa Muerte is "activated" in a newly bought statue: "Cradling it in their arms as a child would cradle a doll, or as a parent would cradle an infant, they put the cigar or cigarette or joint to her (albeit absent) lips, as if they were giving a bottle to a baby, gazing tenderly into her lack of eyes and blowing their own smoke gently and lovingly over her face, the way an adoring parent

²⁴ Echeverría, op cit.

²⁵ Alfonso Hernandez, "Quince años de convivencia con la flaquita. Miradas de un hojalatero social" in *La Santa Muerte. Espacios, cultos y devociones*, ed. Alberto Hernandez (Tijuana and San Luis Potosí: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte and El Colegio de San Luis, 2017), 205. Translation is mine.

²⁶ Serge Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes. De Cristóbal Colón a "Blade Runner" (1492-2019)* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013).

seems to get lost in the face of an infant.”²⁷ The saint offers a doubling of oneself, acts as a prosthesis.²⁸ The statue is understood as the unknown part of oneself. Through caring work, one can better oneself.

The statue lives on the street, protects the home, the street corner, or one’s body. The statue owner brings it onto the street for regular rosaries and events organized around a local public altar, or even directly at the saint’s home in a specific church. Altars on the street have various functions. It is not simply that they prevent certain crimes from being committed because they illuminate a dark corner (an **instrumental-urbanistic function**). Neither do altars directly empower inhabitants to claim their rights and ask for recompense should they suffer discrimination for instance. They do however provide zones of legibility and comfort in a chaotic city. They provide a mode of experiencing the city and identity-markers, saying to the state “This is who we are.” Altars have a **communal function**: they serve to foster community identity and local organization because building and maintaining them requires resources and coordination. They further provide a personal interlocutor (the saint) for those who barely have voice when facing the state. They protect inhabitants from physical and supernatural dangers in specific places (**spiritual affective function**). Enmeshed in the various chains of faith governing the city, from patronage to *caudillismo*, the Saint offers protection in exchange for recognition. Altars serve to make this gratitude visible when a favor is granted by the Saint (**contractual-fidelity function**).

Each of these functions stimulates conversations with the state. For instance, altars provoke relationship with local institutions such as the urban planning bureau and police officers, by the mere fact that they use public sidewalks without permission. In the case of other informal appropriations such as street vending, these relations can be violent. But given their spiritual function, altars generally do not bring the wrath of local institutions. Instead, their communal function enables a more organized conversation with the state; it enables the state to more easily identify its interlocutors. Altars also serve to expose, and sometimes weaken, citizen’s enmeshment into various patronage networks and other fidelity chains by providing an alternative source of protection: the Saint. They empower the subject facing the state or other governing figures such as the local boss.

In place like Mexico City, where violence is palpable, protective care work thus includes gendered care for those held close (children, neighbors, the elderly), as much as caring for a protective statue: cleaning it, perfuming it, dressing it, feeding it. The appropriation of sidewalks for the performance of protection points to inhabitants’ agency and local efficacy in the face of unsatisfactory muscular protection.

The Amparo: Protection Through Rule of Law

The concept of *amparo* entered Mexican legal language at the beginning of the 19th century with the first constitution following the independence. Refuting anything Spanish, in admiration

²⁷ Laura Roush, “Santa Muerte, protection and *desamparo*: A view from a Mexico City altar” *Latin American Research Review* 49 (2014), 144.

²⁸ Silvia Mancini, “Sobrevivir con la Muerte: ecología de una práctica “pagana” en el valle de México” *Arteloge* 2 (2012)

of the newly founded United States of America, and influenced by the work of Tocqueville that had been recently translated into Spanish in 1831, the young and mostly unexperienced Liberals who drafted the Mexican Constitution dreamed of a country where the judiciary would effectively counter-balance the executive and legislative powers.²⁹ They saw this as the only safeguards available to individuals against abuse of power. Initially, the *amparo* was meant to give the judiciary the power to declare a law or an executive decision unconstitutional, especially if it violated human rights. However, the initial project (1840) was amended in 1848 to restrict the court's power to just the specific case at hand, and not to declare a law unconstitutional across the board and beyond the specificities of an individual complaint (this is known as the Otero formula). In 1856, the procedure was extended past the constitutionality of laws to any administrative or judicial act. It was only in 1994 that judiciary reforms enabled an *amparo* procedure to be considered more generally as a declaration of unconstitutionality beyond the specificities of an individual case. This had the immediate effect of enabling various state institutions to fight one another.

Currently, the *amparo* is the judicial procedure most used at the federal level; there were close to 760,000 cases in 2012.³⁰ More than an unreachable constitutional tool, the *amparo* is part of the services offered by legal offices across the city, just as legal advice is given for insurance or divorce.

The term itself recalls religious language. In Catholicism, *amparo* means refuge or protection. Prayers often serve to ask for “*un paro*.” As I was attending a monthly gathering at the Templo San Hipolito y Casiano, the home of San Judas Tadeo, located just north of the Alameda plaza, squeezed between the Bellas Artes and Tepito, someone gave me a little paper with a photo of San Judas and a prayer. The prayer identifies San Judas Tadeo as the “lawyer of desperate cases”. For devotees, a “*paro*” is offered by the saint-lawyer as protection. In return, they will offer the saint a gift: fruit, cigarettes, tattooing oneself, an altar...

Just as the saint-lawyer offers protection in a personalized manner to his devotee, the judicial *amparo* serves to protect the rights of individuals by giving discretionary power to judges to block the application of a law that might impede basic rights. A formal *amparo* procedure will generally be received by the courts only if the judges decide the claimant is directly affected by a state action.³¹ In other words, there is a tendency to reject *amparo* claims to protect public goods. Instead, the procedure generally works only if it refers to its personalized aspects (Otero formula). In this sense, it differs from similar constitutional procedures in the United States of America.³² In practice, the *amparo* remains a judicial instrument for the mediation of interpersonal conflicts, even though since 1994, it can theoretically be used more generally. This is why in everyday language, it also refers to a negotiated deal struck by intermediaries to protect individuals against an impersonal bureaucratic system or a hostile third party.

²⁹ Carlos A. Echanove Trujillo, “La procédure mexicaine d’amparo” *Revue internationale de droit comparé* 1, no. 3 (1949)

³⁰ Antonio Azuela, C. Saavedra, and C. Herrera, “Tumulto de sentencias. Una exploración cuantitativa del litigio urbano en México” in *La ciudad y sus reglas: sobre la huella del derecho en el orden urbano*, ed. Antonio Azuela (México: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2016), 339-378.

³¹ Azuela et al. “Tumulto de sentencias. Una exploración cuantitativa del litigio urbano en México”

³² Although with their localized nuances, similar procedures also exist in Brazil (mandato de segurança) and elsewhere (mandamus, Writs).

As anti-Liberal and unsecular as it may sound, through this personalized logic of protection, the *amparo* works in ways similar to the personalized relationship between a saint and its devotee, or organized crime and their territorialized clients. In contrast, other judicial instruments, such as complaints to the Human Rights Commission, function in a depersonalized manner. The Human Rights Commission protects against discrimination as its social category is based on collective attributes such as gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on. Though protection by the Human Rights Commission works for personal cases of discrimination in specific situations, its logic is to protect an entire category of people who have been discriminated against and in turn, it depersonalizes the protection. This is not, however, a judicial procedure that is used as extensively as the *amparo*. There are other state programs dedicated to better citizens' access to justice and protection. For instance, *Justicia para ti* is a web portal dedicated to provide information on what to do if one is victim of a crime, accused of committing one, or when state authorities do not function properly. Another example based on the idea of legal socialization aiming to foster a culture of legality, the *Programa para Peques* offer pedagogical resources to teach children about corruption and ways to avoid it. But these programs have very little impact compared to the *amparo*.

The *amparo* complements the “saint” and the “muscles”, providing further protection on the streets of Mexico City. Street vendor organizations, for example, will generally hire a lawyer to secure an *amparo*. This court order will enable them to continue using the sidewalk against local bylaws. When police officers will come to chase them, the organization leader will present the *amparo* and the police will have to abandon their *operativo*. In return for this protection, the organization leader will receive a sidewalk tax from his street vendors. Generally as well, organization leader will also pay a *mordida* (extorsion) or a formal tax to state officials. The muscles, the saint and the *amparo* function together. The Mexican state, and Mexico City in particular, can count on solid legal instruments for the provision of protection. But in practice, the *amparo* does work in very personalized manner, through logics that resemble both care work and territorialized protection. This is visible in Daniel's depiction of Tepito for instance, where we see the intertwining of judicial elements such as the *amparo* which we can imagine is what provides assurance to the vendor supervisor on its scooter near the DVD stand, and this fidelity chain of patronage. But because of its judicial nature, the *amparo* is not directly visible in the street scenes. It is something which is referred to, but its material effects are more subtle.

The Amparo, the Muscles, and the Saint in Three Neighborhoods

The interrelation between these materialized and embodied protective practices vary spatially. Certain neighborhoods, such as Roma Sur, rely more heavily on the *amparo* than on saints, while in others, the preference might be for muscles or the saint. If we look at Daniel's painting of protection in the Roma Sur, we can sense the formal presence of the rule of law more than in his representation of Tepito (Figure 5). As a public institution of protection, the hospital is central to the Roma painting, streets are green and clean representing protection from pollution, sidewalks are free of informal use. Daniel used a state-like banner to identify the neighborhood, signalling the stronger embeddedness of the *amparo* in the Roma Sur. In contrast, Tepito's streets are covered with plastic makeshift roofs covering the *tianguis*, which represents informal and illegal commerce. There are no trees, no protection from filth and pollution. The altars are much larger, marking a much less visible presence of the state, except in the form of a muscular

operativo taking place near the soccer field. Finally, Daniel's depiction of Santa Martha (figure 2) gives a central place to muscular state practices in the form of the prison. But caring saints are larger and stronger than this muscular prison. Here, informality is less present than in Tepito. The neighborhood does not have the same reputation for criminal activities. Instead, it is depicted as a *pueblo originario*, a traditional village close to nature (the mountains) and visibly-identified by the entrance gate representing a fisherman because the village was once a fishing village by the now dried-up lake. Protection here is represented through tradition and care work.

- Insert figure 5 here

In addition to their socioeconomic differences, these three neighborhoods have distinct spatialities and urban histories. The Roma Sur is part of what Duhau and Giglia call the “city of debatable space” characterized by its heritage value and a strong mistrust of land-use change. Tepito would best be categorized as the “city of collective space” with its many social housing units. This space is recognizable for its shared goods, community organizations, and clientelistic networks. Santa Martha is located in the “city of negotiable space,” the informal city characterized by insecure land tenure and constant land-use transformation through self-construction. This spontaneous evolution of land-use according to the immediate needs of commerce and informal work tend to bring a pragmatic acceptance of multiple uses of public space for private needs.³³

These different spatial histories influence the combination of territorialized, religious, and judicial practices at play. In rich Roma, the debatable city, inhabitants tend to protect themselves using legal-administrative means. In contrast, in the collective and negotiable cities of Tepito and Santa Martha, inhabitants tend to resort more to material objects such as altars. There, people do not like to formalize a conflict. The habit of negotiating a solution develops by moving objects in their proximate spaces in order to spatially signify their (dis)agreement to a specific situation. For instance, erecting an altar on the sidewalk can signal many things to neighbors: the moral and social status of the owners, their community importance, pragmatic solution to garbage accumulating on the sidewalk. In the Roma Sur, spirituality also differs. If street altars are less common, they are replaced by yoga studios, tarot reading cabinets, orientalist shops, gurus and alternative health clinics.

In short, class, urban spatial histories, and geographical distance from the city center lead to different needs for protection. In the Roma Sur, inhabitants will seek protection against changes in their spatial routines, their quality of life or the loss of their class privilege. They also seek to protect themselves from the “other” (the informal city): street vendors, corrupt politicians. In order to find this protection, the *amparo* is efficient. In Tepito and Santa Martha, people seek to protect themselves from abuses of power and violence, imposing the saint to negotiate with the muscles. They also seek protection from precariousness and lack of recognition, or the loss of

³³ Emilio Duhau and y Angela Giglia, *Metrópoli, espacio público y consumo*. Ciudad de México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016.

status within a patronage network. This is when the *amparo* comes handy. In Tepito and Santa Marta, protection is largely sought as correction for injustices.

Conclusion

Writing state theory from the perspective of the street altar means being attentive to traces of the state in urban space. My objective here was not to define the contours of the state: where it is located in terms of institutions and actors, or what it does and how. Neither was I concerned with explaining why, in the case of Mexico, it continues to fail in complying with its own institutionalized principles. Following Azuela's subtitle in an excellent collection of essays – *The city and its rules: on the traces of the rule of law in the urban order*—I see the state as a trace that orders the city.³⁴ The metaphor of the state trace is compelling because it sheds light on the performative aspect of state work. Discussion about the state in the global South generally revolves around its failures and its informality. While these analyses are certainly valid, having participated in them myself, Azuela's call for analyzing the traces or the effects of laws and policies, beyond the fact that they may not be efficiently implemented, is extremely urgent. Laws, and the state in general, have concrete and materialized effects even though they do not function properly. What are these effects?

This is not to exclude institutional or actor-centred analysis. But in cities of the global South, it is very difficult ethnographically, to isolate state effects from other sets of materialized relations. Inspired by Echeverría's materialist theory of the political as the production of use value in everyday spaces, and by political geographers' work on the topology of everyday state spaces, I suggest that to best identify state traces, we should begin not from state sites or actors, but from localized urban spaces. From this standpoint, the question is not whether the state works or not, or whether actors are formal or informal. The question now becomes: how is protection performed and through which operations, relations, objects and actors.

In the case of Mexico City, I have shown how protection is performed through “muscles” (involving actors such as police officers, gang leaders, and fathers and husbands), through “saints” (involving caring for statues of various saints, but also other fidelity chains), and through the “amparo” (involving the rule of law in a personalized manner for the management of interpersonal conflicts). These three sets of protective practices are grounded in the long history of state formation since colonization: from the embodied gestural care of early priests against the brutal violence of conquistadors, to the patron-client system of indulgences, to the domestic altar enabling personal exchanges with God, to the post-revolutionary culture of negotiation and social rights at the cost of individual rights, and finally to the loss of state prestige and its desacralisation under democratization and neoliberalism in the 20th century. As a materialized web of relations, the Mexican state works through personalized protection involving the rule of law, the use of violence, and religion.

In sum, though the case of Mexico is specific, there is much to be learned from its extensive experience with baroque modernity. My hope is that this ethnographic exploration of protection

³⁴ Antonio Azuela, *La ciudad y sus reglas: sobre la huella del derecho en el orden urbano* (México: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2016)

be useful for the study of the state in other contexts where clientelism, religion, and informality greatly complicate reflections on state theory.³⁵

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³⁵ And I might add in liberal democratic contexts as well. In his intriguing study of the transformations of the rule of law and judicial work in the U.S. in the contemporary "age of digital baroque," Sherwin argues that "to counter the uncertainties that afflict the baroque mind, in what follows I seek out those cultural and cognitive resources that may help us to recognize (and display) visual eloquence." Richard K. Sherwin, *Visualizing law in the age of the digital baroque: Arabesque and entanglements* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 4.

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Figure 1: "Putos Polis" (Police whores) + mural representing Jesus by the volcano near Mexico City, Santa Martha Acatitla. Photo collage by Rodrigo Olvera, June 2017.

Figure 2 : Left- Ex-voto painted by Daniel Vilchis representing Santa Martha Acatitla. Right – Mural of the Virgen de Guadalupe painted on the prison wall, photo by Rodrigo Olvera, June 2017.



Figure 3: Jean Claude van Damme's muscles and the altar + parking space + garbage control by a ghostly saint, photo collage by Rodrigo Olvera, Roma Sur, May 2017.



Figure 4: Saints inhabiting Tepito. Collage by Rodrigo Olvera, June 2017.

Figure 5: Ex-voto of the Roma Sur (left) and of Tepito (right), painted by Daniel Vilchis, June 2017.

