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# Narcocorrido

SERIES PITCH OF THE MONTH





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# Narcocorrido

—Jesse Scoble

*“You need a new kind of prayers [sic] to negotiate with this land.”*

—Ofelia Zepeda

## Nutshell

*Narcotraficantes* and the Border Patrol circle each other on the imaginary line that separates North and South, probing for weakness under the merciless sun. Assassins are made the heroes of pop ballad *narcocorridos*, and most fame and fortune ends with a buzzard circling a shallow grave.

## Characters

*“Yuma sector Border Patrol agents will tell you they patrol the deadliest landscape on earth; Tucson sector Border Patrol agents will tell you they do. It’s a peculiarity of Arizona—the worse it is, the prouder they get. Kings of Nowhere, they each want to claim the crown. To El Negro’s boys, it was just more damn desert.”*

—Luis Alberto Urrea, *The Devil’s Highway*

*Narcocorrido*’s main cast centers around one of the principal groups tied up with the border:

- a law enforcement group such as Border Patrol or Mexican Federales
  - a criminal element such as La EME (the Mexican Mafia), Los Zetas, or the Sinaloa Cartel
  - Coyote smugglers
  - an independent operator like *Breaking Bad*’s Heisenberg
  - a “Light Up the Border” citizens’ militia
- Players should also decide what draws their characters to this particularly harsh and

unforgiving region, tying these into their Desires.

- An officer tries his or her best to work within a broken system.
- Or an agent has decided it’s okay to bend and even break the system to his benefit, as long as the right people get punished at the end of the shift. And if he benefits in the process? All part of the tools in his kit, and his reward for creative problem solving.
- When the once-normal workaday-world of mediocrity shatters due to one of life’s great tragedies, it sends the citizen spiraling into chaos and crime.
- A refugee from the violence and terror of Latin America who isn’t afraid of gringo police in his quest to take it all.
- A relative was lost North, or South, and must be found to ease the family’s fears and pain.
- Desperate punks looking for an easy score, where every move digs them deeper into the hole.
- Normal folks sick of the militarization of the border and the arms race of the agents and drug lords.

For a law enforcement agency, players might create characters such as:

- Signcutter: the best trackers in the field, armed with GPS units and satellite phones, who can read the “bug-sign” and follow a man through the hungry desert.
- BORSTAR: Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue are the highly trained medics and pilots who fly in like the air cavalry.
- BORTAC: Search and Rescue’s dark shadow, these are the SWAT members or “hunter-killer units,” kitted out with



- infrared goggles, dressed in commando-unit blacks, and driving monstrous SUVs.
- DEA Agent: a special agent of the Drug Enforcement Agency trying to make a dent on the War on Drugs.
  - FBI Agent: an agent on an anti-gang taskforce dealing with the criminals who flow back and forth across the porous border.
  - Federale: a Mexican federal officer (more accurately called a Federal, but Federale is a back-formation from Federales), who might be on loan to a US agency, or launching investigations from the South side of the wire.
  - Mexican Police Officer: someone with local jurisdiction, and probably a strong moral compass (if not necessarily a heart of gold), trying to do the right thing and preserve order in one of the greatest bastions of chaos in the world.
  - Bounty Hunter: more independent than official, bounty hunters may be self-described good guys, who slip across the border to haul criminals back avoiding messy “extradition” charges. Or you might be a shadier operator working for the highest bidder.

For a criminal organization, players might create characters such as:

- The Boss: the head of the cartel, who employs and controls, all the various pawns beneath him. The most dangerous and effective bosses have done it all, at some point or another, and aren't afraid to get their hands dirty.
- The Lieutenant: the boss's right-hand, who often deals more directly with the day-to-day operations, and may have to step in and run things when the heat gets too intense, or if the boss is brought down.
- The Cleaner: the boss's muscle who acts as protection, runs security, and performs key missions, such as making payoffs, cleaning up war zones, and removing those who are in the way.
- The Cook: the key chemist of a meth lab, who might be head-and-shoulders smarter than his colleagues and rivals,

using chemistry and physics as his tools and weapons.

- The Sidekick: assistant to the Cook, he is often more street-wise and world-weary, having grown up in the ghettos or the slums. He may have more heart than any other character, and with proper support could turn his life around, or else fully embrace becoming “the bad guy.”
- Coyote: a smuggler of flesh and guide to the badlands, who knows how to survive the worst of the desert and how to avoid officials on both sides of the wire.
- Corrupt Military Soldier: originally trained as a Special Forces operative to combat the drug cartels, life on the side of the drug empires has proven to be far more lucrative.

## Setting

*“The barrio was the Wild West. The missionary ... told me of his Saturday nights—he and the addicts in their plywood church and dorms, looking into the pitch-black canyons below them, watching the gunfire flash, listening to the yells and shouting. ‘Everything happens here on Saturday nights,’ he said. ‘Anything you can imagine. Anything.’”*

—Luis Alberto Urrea, *Across the Wire*

The US/Mexico border is 2,000 miles of harsh, rugged terrain; 2,000 miles of fences, guards, spotlights, rivers, cities, and deserts. A solid line on a map, it bisects urban and desolate areas alike, but also forms a phantom line marking differences of culture, money, crime, and fear.

As night falls greedily over the border, bedlam erupts across the beaches and canyons, suddenly swarming with thousands of bodies: illegals looking for work, or to return home; smugglers moving drugs, weapons, and women; and bandits preying upon the desperate and powerless.

The ever-changing, never-changing border comprises the world of *Narcocorrido*. Key locations include the twin cities of Tijuana and San Diego, two metropolises of a million-

plus each. One is a wealthy 21st Century Tomorrowland; the other is lodged a hundred years or more in the past. Its river of easy money buoys up a flotsam and jetsam of bodies, blood, and bullets. It's a barricade of razor-wire fences, rust-colored walls, blinding spotlights, buried motion and heat sensors, hunter-killer drones, and black-clad guards.

The land itself seems sinister and tormented, and out to get you. The *Camino del Diablo*—the Devil's Highway—places you in a hostile terrain of desert flats, shifting sand, and craggy lava rock. Abandoned mineshafts may suddenly open up into sinkholes, or worse, release hidden secrets that do not want to be disturbed. Unexploded munitions from long-forgotten field tests, and forsaken military projects littered here and there in this no man's land, threaten silently beneath the surface.

Here you find few trustworthy landmarks and no sources of safe water. Even the plants are vicious and full of spines. Beware the devil cholla, a type of shrub, that grows together to create vast walls of spines, in myriad colors, all of which end in razor-sharp quills.

### Set-Up

*"The road to justice is twisted."*

- tagline to *"The Shield"*

Start with a hook and figure out how it ensnares your group and characters appropriately.

- Each night as the sun sets, Coyotes lead their "chickens," the helpless and hapless migrants, into the perilous desert plagued by man-made terrors. US agents arrive to investigate the moonlit desert and try to put an end to the endless robbing, raping, and killing of desperate migrants by banditos.
- In an American border town, the drug violence has flared to epic heights, and the local officers find themselves caught in the middle of a gang-war fueled by the great stacks of drug money as the Mexican cartels seek to expand northwards. Can you break up the fight between La EME, the Texas Syndicate, and the Latin Kings?
- In Mexico, it's not a neighborhood dispute or occasional gunshot-filled night, but something closer to all-out war that lasts month after month and year after bloody year. The Mexican government deployed a US-trained commando team to deal with the cartels, and instead the commandos decided to take over. Now, Los Zetas have carved out a blood-drenched empire through brutal tactics backed by military-grade armaments. Rival drug lords and civilians all fall to the indiscriminate slaughter, and you have to navigate a hot zone directly across the border from Laredo, Texas.
- In Mexico, rugged and well-meaning police officers stop a drug transport, arresting the couriers and confiscating some top value product. When this draws the attention of a high-ranking Mexican military officer, do the police officers find themselves at the vanguard of a new anti-drug strategy, or as pawns in one corrupt official's private army?
- In America, a powerful politician—perhaps the new Drug Czar himself—discovers to his dismay that his daughter has become involved with a bad seed and developed an expensive drug addiction. Can the law enforcement agents pull these kids out of a bad situation, or do things only get worse when the girl runs away, or is kidnapped, and ends up across the border?
- Some say there's no end to the Devil's Highway, and that you can follow it up out of the Sonoran Desert's ironwood and saguaro to end up far beyond Arizona, California, or Texas. Aided by the American highway system, travelers can reach into Ohio, Michigan, Seattle, or New England. How do these white enclaves respond to an influx of Latinos, and when someone is killed in seemingly racial-related violence, how far back does the road lead?



## Themes

*“You either run from things, or you face them... I learned it in rehab, it’s all about accepting who you really are. I accept who I am.”*

*“And who are you?”*

*“I’m the bad guy.”*

—Jesse Pinkman and Walter White,  
*Breaking Bad*

- Actions Have Consequences
- Political and Police Corruption
- Glorifying the Criminal
- Life on the Ground is Different than the High Level View
- Doing Your Best in a Broken System (aka Giving a fuck when it ain’t your turn to give a fuck)
- Stuck between the la Migra and the Narcotraficantes (the rock and a hard place)

## Tightening the Screws

- A famous singer of *narcocorridos* (drug ballads) goes missing. Was he kidnapped because he angered someone by making fun of them in a lyric? Or was he abducted by a patron who wants to increase his own fame by forcing the singer to write songs about his deeds and reckless fearlessness?
- Crossing to the North, one might stumble into a self-identified “citizen patrol.” ***Are they farmers and ranchers just trying to defend their property? Or full-on racists who happily call each other “Aryan?”*** This people’s militia patrols the scrubland carrying squawking radios, high-powered flashlights, and powerful rifles. While perhaps effective against obvious illegals, they might not have the patience or temperament to deal with a delicate police operation, especially if those undercover officers look *brown*.
- Coyotes lead their clients (“chickens”) past *la migra* to find shelter in drop houses. These may be private houses owned by friends, or abandoned properties providing shelter to anyone passing through. Coyotes overstuff these tiny,

falling-down “coops” with 10, 20, 30, even 100 *pollo* migrants. The only luxury is that it is near a highway, connecting them with the wider world.

- The great junkyard called the *dompe* spills out of the city to birth a new, messy ecosystem and social hierarchy, complete with trash lords and violent psychopaths, and the most abject form of victims—*los olvidados* (the forgotten ones). Neither law enforcement nor cartels can simply blaze their way in. If they try, the inhabitants scatter like rats, as the shantytown collapses in a terrible landslide or wildfire, consuming whatever MacGuffin drew them in.
- Tortilla riots rip through the major towns as tens of thousands come out to protest the rising price of the foodstuff that so many poor Mexicans depend on to survive. As production of ethanol and other biofuels sends corn prices surging the people protest, hoard, and revolt.
- Beyond even the rock star status of the BORTAC SWAT unit are the Shadow Wolves. This legendary patrol unit claims that every member is a full-blooded Native American tracker, and that each puts the best signcutters to shame. The Shadow Wolves can follow a Coyote, drug smuggler, and anyone else for days and nights across the most unforgiving terrain.
- Death comes in infinite shapes and sizes along the Devil’s Highway. Unprepared travelers freeze in the biting cold nights. But some are killed by cars, or trucks, or trains in the blinding dark. Or fall off cliffs. Or drown. Or are bitten by deadly animals. Or die by hyperthermia—death by sunlight.
- “Blood in, blood out” is the belief of most Mexican gangs. To be taken into the Family, blood must be shed. And the same is true of those who want to get out—often this means a severe beating, and even death, of the member that wants to exit.

- The animals come out at night, because the boiling sunlight is just too deadly. Coyotes, rattlesnakes, coral snakes, black widows, tarantulas, brown recluse spiders, giant centipedes, scorpions, Gila monsters, and even killer bees!
- ***Do you want to escalate your series into a grim near-future?*** The Border Patrol isn't content to just watch, round up, and return those who dare to cross their line in the sand. They've moved to a high-tech system of inserting computer ID chips under the skin, and sending out predator drones to watch for those foolish enough to risk a second try.

## Twist of the Knife

***“[the ancient inhabitants of Bogota] called the victims of ritual ceremonies quihica. Quihica meant ‘door;’ the death of each chosen victim opened the door to a new cycle of 185 moons.”***

**—Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America***

While the actual border is a fascinating, deadly, endlessly surprising place, a group can always step sideways into a darker tale filled with urban fantasy and magical realism.

- A new cartel has sprung up from the ashes of betrayal and bloodshed—the *Caballeros Templarios* (Spanish for the Knights Templar) are strong practitioners of Santeria, that blend of Catholicism and Yoruba mysticism, which is so prevalent in Latin America and the Caribbean. ***Do their history and beliefs actually go back to the Templars of the Middle Ages, or the 18th century Freemasons, or is it simply a modern group taking a cool name?***
- A *curandera* (healer and witch woman) is sought out because she alone can help a sick loved one. She lives in the badlands, and rolls a raw egg over the infirm, then breaks it into a bowl. If the yolk comes out black, the disease was sucked out. If not...
- Before crossing the border to the North to perform a hit, a pair of well-dressed assassins crawl in the dust of a small Mexican town, supplicating themselves before a shrine to the black-robed skeletal Lady of Mictlan, Santa Muerte, or Saint Death. This could be the players seeking a blessing before embarking on a difficult mission, or the targets the players are after.
- Through the *dompe* shamble the horrors called *cementereros*, glue and paint sniffing zombies whose minds are shattered. They cannot be bargained with, and swarm like an angry hive if disturbed.
- Rich gringo vacationers come south looking for adventure and whatever taboos they can afford. But instead these Canadian tourists get caught up in a crazed cannibalistic Santeria cult drug gang. Depending on your group premise, you might rescue them—or seize them from the cannibals to victimize them yourselves.
- Preparing for the great journey north, one can't help but hear rumors of *la migra*—immigration agents as terrifying bogeymen. They tell of migrant workers who went north to never return; rumors of young women molested and murdered along the riverbanks; *la migra* roaring up out of the freezing night on monstrous SUVs, ATVs, motorcycles, even horses, faces distorted by huge goggles, blasting their guns, running down everyone they see. Those they capture are stripped and sent back along the highway naked and without water. And those that fight back are staked out in the desert for the *chupacabra*.
- *Rateros* is a Spanish word for thieves, but it also can be translated as “rat-men.” These *rateros*, whether simple burglars or hybrid man-beasts, prey upon the vulnerable in the *dompes*, slums, and even out beyond the lights of the border towns.
- In certain apocryphal texts God buried the rebel angels in a vast desert, called Desolation. Some believe the hellish Yuma Desert might be this place, where giants are entombed beneath the cracked lands and shifting sands; a terrible presence that permeates the Devil's Highway.
- The Spanish conquistadors named this



place Dark Head, or Cabeza Prieta, for a large, lava-topped, head-shaped, granite peak on the western border. Is it just a natural formation, or is it the face of an angel, devil, or other spirit?

- The Spanish believed the strange natives who lived in this inhospitable climate must be barbaric savages who feasted on human children.
- The indigenous Yaqui, who trace their heritage back to pre-Columbian times, believe their ancestors, a tiny race called the Surem, lived underground in peace for time out of mind, until they were threatened by the savage invaders.
- Catholic apparitions, such as a white woman bearing a cross, and la Mujer Azul (the Blue Lady), haunt the region and visit ragtag travelers. One folktale says the Blue Lady appears once in a generation, coming

forth from a hidden chamber beneath the Alamo, to seek out a woman of pure heart, smart, wise, strong in faith, and of course a native Texan. The Blue Lady gifts this woman with the power to see the true heart of all things.

- Saint Toribio helps those trapped in the desert, bringing them to food or water, hiding them from la migra, even giving them a ride in an ancient truck. Toribio is also called Santo Pollero (the Holy Chicken Wrangler), and appears as a light-skinned young man with blue eyes, who speaks perfect Mexican Spanish, sometimes current, sometimes archaic. He was a priest from Jalisco, murdered in the early 20th century in the town of Tequila.

## Names

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Use modern names with street flare or historical weight. Nicknames are common, and of course names and nicknames are both heavily flavored by Spanish culture.

### Given Names (Men)

Vic  
Shane  
Lance  
Jimmy  
Guillermo  
Luis  
Jorge  
Jeronimo  
Juan  
Walter  
Gustavo  
Hector  
Marco  
Tucó  
Maximino

### Given Names (Women)

Tina  
Daniella  
Emolia  
Alma  
Ana  
Helena  
Rosario  
Salma  
Isabel  
Azalea  
Maria  
Teresita  
Sierra  
Shakira  
Reina

### Nicknames

El Negro / La Negra  
Lemon-Head  
Santi  
Guardo  
Cruz  
Armadillo  
el Toro (the bull)  
Juan-in-a-Million  
Bella  
Little Insane  
Big Insane  
Flaco (skinny)  
Chicken Man  
Tortuga (the turtle)  
Saint of Cabora  
Cabron (the bastard)  
el Chapo (shorty)  
Pepe  
Las Monjitas (the little nuns)  
El Pelavacas (Cow Skin Peeler)  
El Indio (the Indian)  
El Rey del Corrido (King of the Ballad)

### Surnames

Aceveda  
Galas  
Garces  
Ramos  
Pezuela  
Quintero  
Sandoval  
Flores  
Mirabal  
Escobar  
Salamanca  
Gomez