Introduction

The Methamphetamine Imaginary

You are normal. It’s the speed that made you a freak.
—Jerry Stahl, “Bad”

February 2014: According to local news broadcasts, the Benson family of Union County, Illinois, got the “scare of their lives” when “drug agents” raided their home expecting to find a methamphetamine lab. Laura Benson described the scene and her surprise, explaining, “I heard the dogs barking. And I knew that meant somebody was outside the house. And I looked out the windows and I seen a truck coming up the driveway fairly fast. And an Anna police car right behind it.” Apparently a few blue plastic barrels and tubing near some of the trees on the property had led one of the Bensons’ neighbors to alert police. “I think my neighbors on their way to church see the buckets and stuff and think we’ve got a meth lab operation going on here,” Benson explained. Much to the chagrin of the “drug agents,” the barrels and tubing had nothing to do with methamphetamine and instead were used by the Bensons to collect tree sap to make maple syrup. “They [the police] pointed to the buckets and I told them my husband has a hobby of making maple syrup. Of course they realized it once they seen it,” Benson explained. “But I was quite startled this morning.”

A few months later and several hundred miles away, another misguided raid driven by the anxious desire to police methamphetamine unfolded. This time, a nineteen-month-old boy was permanently disfigured and nearly killed by a “flash-bang” stun grenade carelessly tossed into his crib by a member of the Habersham County (Georgia) Sheriff Department’s Special Response Team. Earlier, a confidential informant sent to the home by police had purchased approximately fifty dollars’ worth of methamphetamine from one of its residents, Wani...
theva. Because of a previous weapons charge, when the Special Response Team returned to arrest Thonetheva, they entered the home behind a battering ram and assault weapons in the familiar no-knock fashion. Not only did they ignore signs that Thonetheva’s relatives were visiting from out of town, terrify the family, and maim a young child, but police also failed to make an arrest or find any illegal drugs. Even more troubling is that a Justice Department investigation into the circumstances leading up to the raid found that a Habersham County Sheriff Department investigator falsified information in order to obtain the initial search warrant. Neither these cases nor the hundreds similar, however absurd or tragic, should be dismissed as simply the unfortunate outcome of corruption or as human error or even regarded as all that unusual. Rather, all emerge from a shared political and cultural history stretching back decades, leading to a present in which police, politicians, and well-meaning neighbors see the risks and dangers of drugs like methamphetamine everywhere.

For the better part of two decades, I too have been looking for and perhaps seeing methamphetamine everywhere. For most of my childhood, I called Marysville, a small farm town in northeast Kansas, home. Of the nine small towns in Marshall County, Marysville is by far the largest, with a population of around 3,000. These are working-class communities, where most folks manage small family farms or look to the service industry, light manufacturing, and the Union Pacific Railroad for a paycheck. The county has been home to my family since the turn of the last century, and the farm that sets a mile or so off the west bank of the Big Blue River has been worked by my family since the 1920s. In the 1960s, when my mother was in high school, the county population was around 16,000. By the 1990s, when I was in high school, the population had dipped to 12,000 and now sits around 10,000. Leaving for college, I intended to be one of the many out-migrants never to return. But just a few years later, I found myself back home, working as a probation officer covering the four-county judicial district stretching across the top-right-hand corner of the state. This was the late 1990s, and widespread social anxieties over home-cooked methamphetamine were on the rise. At state-mandated trainings, I heard from doctors and dentists who graphically described how the drug literally dissolved the brain, flesh, and teeth of users and
from “proactive” narcotics officers and social workers who described how meth was dissolving communities like my hometown, one family at a time. None of this was much of a surprise. Growing up in the small farm town, I had heard whispers of older kids taking “speed” to perform on the football field or wrestling mat and of bikers and rough locals who peddled “crank” out of local taverns. Because meth moves through the body so quickly, to “catch” probationers using it, my supervisors instructed me to drug test as much as possible, alternate routines, and “surprise” them whenever I could. As I was still learning the job, one of my supervisors led me on several dead-of-night excursions to visit probationers living in the tiny farm towns dotting Nemaha and Brown Counties. One night, after relentlessly banging on the doors and windows of a small run-down trailer home set yards off a muddy road, we managed to rouse a supposed “meth head” out for his court-ordered drug and alcohol tests. Because the home did not have electricity or running water, I collected the urine sample in a similarly run-down lawnmower shed, shining a flashlight on the man as he straddled a five-gallon bucket. As I read the results of the field test aloud—marijuana, cocaine, opiates, phencyclidine, methamphetamine—all negative, my supervisor could hardly contain his disappointment, offering the man no encouragement for passing, no apologies for forcing him out of bed, just an acerbic “better luck next time” as we packed up and moved on to the next home.

Encouraging, in fact demanding, such tactics while simultaneously ignoring years of the state’s own data showing that only a tiny fraction (2.7 percent) of “high-risk” probationers are “caught” using methamphetamine, we might say that Kansas, like my supervisor and I, stubbornly refused not to see methamphetamine in the lives of probationers. The same would hold for the citizenry of Kansas and other states across the country. In the coming years, nightly news broadcasts were overrun with reports of lab seizures and meth-fueled violence, while everyday journeys to work or the grocery store were interrupted by shocking anti-meth billboards and checkout-counter bulletins warning to “be on the watch” for customers buying meth-making ingredients. After nearly fifteen increasingly frustrating years of work in criminal justice and social welfare, I left for a career in academia, as methamphetamine skulked in the background, not far from sight.
Seeking advice on my fledgling research agenda from a highly regarded criminologist, I explained my interests in the consequences of mass imprisonment for rural America, to which he replied, “Well, you’re going to have to get to know methamphetamine then.” However quick and misguided his rural + crime = meth calculus may have been, I still took it seriously, setting out to situate the so-called methamphetamine epidemic within a broader culture and politics of drug control and mass imprisonment. Toward the project’s beginning, I returned to the family farm curious if my aunt or her neighborhoods had meth-lab trash dumped on their land or had anhydrous ammonia stolen. Though neither she nor her neighbors had any such experiences, my aunt did provide a particularly interesting anecdote. One afternoon a man identifying himself as a Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) agent drove up her mile-long dirt lane and asked my aunt’s permission to hunt on the farm. As they made small talk, the agent remarked that he could not believe how many “meth heads” he had spotted as he passed through a nearby town. As he saw it, “nearly every other person in town” looked as though they were on meth. Perhaps the agent had mistaken a few, particularly rough-looking characters on their lunch breaks from welding at the trailer factory for burned-out junkies. Perhaps he was just trying to curry the favor of my aunt and uncle so he could hunt their land. It could even be that he truly believed he had encountered ground zero of the meth epidemic. And though the state’s own records show that police in the county have encountered just three meth labs in the past twenty years, the agent saw methamphetamine, and because of that, my aunt saw it too, retelling the story as certain fact.

This sort of conjuring, searching for, and seeing methamphetamine, whether it is there or not, continues in rather interesting ways. As the criminologists Rodanthi Tzanelli and Majid Yar describe, a cottage tourist industry has sprung up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, around the hit television series *Breaking Bad.* Here “televisual crime tourists” mind-walk through the city, imagining important scenes and characters, mapping them and the broader narrative of meth-fueled crime and violence onto its landscapes. Not unlike police who raid homes hoping to seize drugs, only to come up empty-handed, *Breaking Bad* tourists produce a distinct sort of materiality, projecting fantasy onto Albuquerque’s streets—experiencing the imaginary as real.
All of this cultural work serves as a conceptual reference point for what I call the methamphetamine imaginary. To be clear, invoking the imaginary in no way suggests that the problems associated with drugs are not real and thus without consequence. Rather, imaginary describes important yet often-overlooked mediated dimensions of social life. Taking a cue from the philosopher Charles Taylor, who understands the social imaginary as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations,” we can say that the methamphetamine imaginary encompasses the many ways in which methamphetamine mediates the social world—how individuals imagine themselves and their relations to one another through this particular drug. A dynamic generative practice, the methamphetamine imaginary encompasses the taken-for-granted, commonsense knowledges and everyday affects that surround methamphetamine, its users, and those who are concerned with controlling, treating, and punishing both. Mapping the imaginary then helps to explore the materiality of methamphetamine and the innumerable sites where meaning is made, remade, consumed, and contested. As I will show, the methamphetamine imaginary and the broader drug-war imaginary of which it is a part are circumscribed and animated by literature, television, film, news media accounts, public-service ad campaigns, word of mouth, and the pronouncements of police and politicians. So, for instance, in a speech designating October 1986 Crack/Cocaine Awareness Month, President Ronald Reagan uttered the rhetorical template that has structured the imaginary dimensions of the drug war for decades. He pleads,

Cocaine poses a serious threat to our Nation. Long masquerading as glamorous and relatively harmless, cocaine has revealed its own deadly truth—cocaine is a killer. It can cause seizures, heart attacks, and strokes. It is indifferent in its destruction, striking regular users and initiates alike. . . . Despite the best efforts by law enforcement officials, cocaine continues to come into our country at alarming levels, supplied by ruthless criminals who draw their power from public acquiescence. Bigger supplies and lower prices have put cocaine in the hands of people who were never before tempted to use it.
Today an even more devastating form of cocaine—“crack”—has appeared. Crack is smoked, producing immediate effects in the user. It is relatively inexpensive, but is so powerfully addictive that the user, even a first-time user, feels an overwhelming compulsion for more. Crack is used by people of all ages. Tragically, it is sold to and used by even 11 and 12-year-olds. To mothers and fathers, boys and girls at this age are children. To a cocaine dealer, they are just another market.¹⁰

While a month dedicated to broadcasting the ills of crack/cocaine may now seem odd, Reagan’s logic, language, and grammar are all too familiar. The warning goes, because of the irresistible laws of supply and demand, a “new” drug, somehow more potent, dangerous, and deadly than the last, threatens the very fabric of American social life. Its spread must be stopped and its peddlers punished. We know now, of course, that regardless of the veracity of this warning, the American public heard it loud and clear, roundly supporting a vicious narcopolitical project¹¹ the consequences of which are still uncounted and unpaid. Looking back through nearly four decades, Crack/Cocaine Awareness Month is one of many sad, ultimately futile moments in a history of disastrous, indifferent social policy. This is of course no revelation. It is no longer a radical position to cite the many failures of the drug war,¹² advocate for some form of harm-reduction strategy, or call for outright legalization of some drugs or all. Even among mainstream commentators, it is now conventional practice to describe the drug war as a literal war³³ or Jim Crow oppression born anew.¹⁴ A history replete with contradictions, falsehoods, and failures makes the next and more recent chapter all the more disquieting. Twenty years and one month after Reagan’s proclamation, George W. Bush named November 30, 2006, National Methamphetamine Awareness Day. While the drugs had changed, the panicked and desperate language had not. Bush pleads,

Methamphetamine abuse shatters families and threatens our communities. On National Methamphetamine Awareness Day, we underscore the dangers of methamphetamine and reaffirm our collective responsibility to combat all forms of drug abuse. Methamphetamine is a powerfully addictive drug that dramatically affects users’ minds and bodies. Chronic
use can lead to violent behavior, paranoia, and an inability to cope with the ordinary demands of life. Methamphetamine abusers can transform homes into places of danger and despair by neglecting or endangering the lives of their children, spouses, and other loved ones. Additionally, methamphetamine production exposes anyone near the process to toxic chemicals and the risk of explosion.¹⁵

Bush, like Reagan before him, confronts an epidemic driven by a new powerfully addictive drug that elicits violence, paranoia, and dependency from its users, shatters families, and destroys communities. Unsurprisingly, large swaths of the American public again took these warnings seriously, enlisting in the “meth war” taken up here. Yet, given the outcome of the “crack panic,” perhaps another bit of Bush’s sage advice—“Fool me once, shame on—shame on you. Fool me—you can’t get fooled again”¹⁶—would have been more apropos. When it comes to illicit drugs, it seems as though the American public is indeed fooled and fooled again. This is particularly the case if we look beyond the Nixon administration, the point that many commentators mark as the drug war’s beginning. If the historian Kathleen J. Frydl is correct, we should instead mark the 1930s and the proto-drug-warrior Harry Anslinger’s Bureau of Narcotics—if not 1914 and the Harrison Anti-Narcotic Act—as the drug war’s beginning.¹⁷

So the question persists: If the American public knows its history, why does it seem that it is not only condemned but perhaps committed to repeating the mistakes of the past? Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the American public is monolithic or that each and every citizen secretly supports the drug war. Rather, I simply suggest that the drug war is something we (and hence the world) in the United States suffer to varying degrees, whether we like it or not. Is it that the drug war is simply the will of a state too formidable to oppose? Recent progress made by grassroots movements toward decriminalizing marijuana might suggest otherwise. What if the coercion, dispossession, and violence so often decried by people on the left and right as altogether avoidable products of bad policy are not the fault of the drug war at all? Could it be that we attach everyday violence, social exclusion, and death to the drug war because the alternative is much more terrifying?
What If We Need the Drug War?

Consider a question posed by the radical philosopher Slavoj Žižek: “Who among us would be able to continue eating pork chops after visiting a factory farm in which pigs are half-blind and cannot even properly walk, but are just fattened to be killed?” Žižek believes that once people witness a system of such brutality, suffering, and injustice, few could continue to participate in it. And though the horrors of factory farms are no closely guarded secret, animals are still mistreated, slaughtered, and consumed en masse. Why is this? For Žižek, it is not that we are blind or indifferent to the suffering of others. On the contrary, it may be that out of some sense of powerlessness to intervene in the horrors that surround us, we have developed a way to forget or ignore what we know to be true, if only so that we might continue to live our lives as we wish. Žižek calls this cultural-cognitive process the “fetishistic disavowal.” Here we say, “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know.” Could it be that the drug war operates in this way? This is not to suggest the American public is simply mystified, in denial, or willfully ignorant of the drug war’s causes and consequences. Rather, the objects of the drug war, drug users and the drugs themselves, operate as fetish objects—symbolically articulated knowledge ignored by the subject—permitting the public to disavow and endure the many, in Žižek’s words, “dirty compromises of American life.”

The drug war du jour, an inexhaustible reservoir of constituents—marijuana, heroin, crack, meth, “bath salts,” “krokodil”—helps displace that which we know to be true. It is our participation in the violence, coercion, dispossession, and inequality of late-capitalist life that is denied. Displacing these inequalities onto methamphetamine or another from a veritable menu of fetishes permits the American public to act as if it did not know. With that, we can perhaps better understand why, even though it probably knows better, the American public seems ever willing to entertain the dangers of the next drug epidemic. And because the fetishistic disavowal obscures more immutable inequalities, we might also predict that so long as capitalism is the fundamental organizing principle of American social life, there will be a war—drugs, crime, terror—or several. It is no coincidence, then, that the American experiments with prohibitionist and punitive drug-control strategies did not begin with
the Nixon administration but rather grew in lockstep with the inequality, unrest, slums, and ghettos\textsuperscript{21} of early industrial capitalism.\textsuperscript{22} Much like Marx’s understanding of religion, the drug war is not the cause of human misery but a symptom, the “sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions.”\textsuperscript{23}

Methamphetamine, Epidemic, Emergency

Of course, methamphetamine is very much a part of this broader drug-war history and hence not all that unique. Like all drugs, illicit or otherwise, methamphetamine is really distinct only in terms of chemical composition and its effects on the human body. This might seem terribly obvious, but we should be clear from the outset about what methamphetamine is and what it does, so that we can better understand what it is not, what it does not do and, ultimately, for what it should not be blamed.

First synthesized in 1919, N-methyl-alpha-methylphenethylamine is just one of a number of stimulants in the amphetamine family.\textsuperscript{24} Like the others, it improves concentration and wakefulness and increases blood pressure and heart rate in users to levels that are similar to those produced by vigorous exercise. Methamphetamine-hydrochloride, sold under the brand name Desoxyn since the early 1940s, has a number of legitimate medical uses. For decades, militaries have used it to keep soldiers awake and flying and fighting longer. Even in methamphetamine’s illegally produced, “street” form, it is nearly identical in chemical structure to the prescription drug Adderall, widely used to treat ADHD and narcolepsy.\textsuperscript{25} Yet it is not the composition or physiological effects of particular drugs but rather their culture and politics that offer a unique lens through which to view the social world.

In the United States, illegal manufacture of methamphetamine in clandestine laboratories began in the early 1960s. Long thought to be the purview of outlaw bikers, “speed” or “crank” was a relatively common street drug throughout the 1970s. Perhaps because it was supposedly only consumed by working-class whites, available in similar forms legally, and not imported in large quantities into the United States, meth remained somewhat off the radar of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which at the time focused its attention on heroin, co-
caine, and marijuana. It was not until the supposed emergence of “ice” or “crystal” meth in the late 1980s, according to the historian Philip Jenkins, that federal authorities began to take notice. From the late 1980s until the mid-1990s, what Jenkins has dubbed the “ice age,” a variety of politicians and journalists pushed the crystal meth issue despite the lack of a significant change in either production or consumption in the United States, outside of Hawaii and some parts of California. These observations led Jenkins to predict that the methamphetamine problem would reemerge from time to time regardless of how much of the drug was actually used by the American public.\(^{26}\) Jenkins’s predictions in 1994 proved true in the coming decade, as politicians like George W. Bush and New York senator Charles Schumer began to sound familiar warnings. As Schumer once claimed, “It’s 1984 all over again. Twenty years ago, crack was headed east across the United States like a Mack Truck out of control, and it slammed New York hard because we just didn’t see the warning signs. Well, the headlights are glaring bright off in the distance again, this time with meth. We are still paying the price of missing the warning signs back then, and if we don’t remember our history we will be doomed to repeat it, because crystal meth could become the new crack.”\(^{27}\)

Borrowing Jenkins’s metaphor, like a glacier’s steady creep, the methamphetamine problem in the United States has advanced over decades, perhaps exceeding that of crack cocaine but not in terms of use and users. If there has been an “ice age” or methamphetamine epidemic in the United States, it has been one of culture, discourse, and imagination. Everyday news reports that frame the issue in dire terms as “a matter of life and meth,”\(^{28}\) as well as aggressive policing and reactionary legislation, fix the broken language of war and epidemic in the public’s imagination. Known colloquially as “poor man’s cocaine,” “redneck coke,” “white man’s crack,” and so on, meth appears frequently in popular culture and everyday discussions as the “white trash” cousin of cocaine.\(^{29}\) My own ethnographic work bears this out. For instance, when I asked a small-town Kansas police officer why meth seemed so resilient in out-of-the-way rural towns, he explained, “I say its economics. Cocaine is an expensive drug by comparison to meth. Meth is a poor man’s drug. If you look at what we’ve been talking about and what we’re dealing with, we’re dealing with the disabled, welfare, those types of folks. They
have limited resources.” Following this thinking, the poor, mostly white, rural folks said to be the primary producers and consumers of meth, like 1980s “crack heads,” are seen as the cause or consequence of all manner of social change—job loss, withering populations, and unequal economic development. In a recent documentary on the drug war, David Simon, the writer and producer of the critically acclaimed television crime drama *The Wire*, echoes this sentiment, offering this comment on the political economy of methamphetamine:

A funny thing happened on the way to the twenty-first century, which is that we shrugged off so much of our manufacturing base, so much of our need for organized labor, for a legitimate union wage, for union benefits, for the types of jobs with which you could raise a family and be a meaningful citizen. We got rid of so much of that, that oops, we marginalized a lot of white people. And lo and behold, white people, when they are marginalized, when they are denied meaning, when they are denied meaningful work, they become drug addicts too. They become involved in the methamphetamine trade, they start turning themselves over to the underground economies, the only ones there to accept them. Capitalism is fairly color blind, in the end. Our economic engine, when it doesn’t need somebody, it doesn’t need somebody, and it doesn’t give a damn who you are. White people found out a little later than black folk, but they found it out.

While Simon’s attempts to link crack and methamphetamine to growing class inequality are admirable, we should be cautious of adopting a causal logic that holds that when work disappears, the jobless instinctively turn to drugs, either as vocation or escape. Other than not necessarily being true, the problem with this sort of thinking is that the drug, the gang, or whatever the pathology linked to economic decline quickly becomes the focus and fetish. Perhaps even more fundamentally, given that the federal government’s own data suggest that just a sliver of the US population uses the drug regularly, it would seem that alarmist warnings of “meth epidemics” are largely misplaced. For instance, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) estimated the number of regular or “past month” methamphetamine users in 2013 to be 595,000, or 0.2 percent of the US population over twelve years old. Similar rates
were estimated for 2012 (440,000, or 0.2 percent), 2011 (439,000, or 0.2 percent), and 2010 (353,000, or 0.1 percent). In fact, estimated rates of regular methamphetamine users have not exceeded 0.5 percent since the government began making such estimates. By comparison, the most recent estimates place regular marijuana use at 7.5 percent, cocaine at 0.6 percent, and the nonmedical use of prescription drugs around 2.5 percent of the population over twelve years told.\textsuperscript{32} Even if the estimated number of regular methamphetamine users is grossly inaccurate, we could double it and double it again and still come nowhere close to the estimated number of people who abuse prescription drugs. Of course, this is not to suggest that we should refocus our attention on another drug but rather simply to build some context in which to confront persistent warnings of “epidemics.”

Critical of meth’s mythology, researchers such as David Erceg-Hurn have pointed to the ways in which state drug-control agencies and non-state intervention programs keep meth’s dangers alive in the public’s imagination as part of broader ideological and market-based projects.\textsuperscript{33} In keeping with many of the themes taken up here, the anthropologist William Garriott’s ethnographic work in rural West Virginia shows how methamphetamine control helps order social life outside the usual drug-war terrains. For Garriott, the narcopolitics of methamphetamine control are not concerned with crime or law but with the potential threats the drug is thought to represent. The shift to threats, risk, or “precime” is a significant perversion of the criminal law as he sees it. No longer concerned with redressing grievances, the police power\textsuperscript{34} focuses on “prevention and incapacitation,”\textsuperscript{35} or what I would describe as policing insecurity.\textsuperscript{36} In the United Kingdom, the criminologists Tammy Ayers and Yvonne Jewkes have documented claims of a coming “meth epidemic” that are nearly identical to those in the United States. Appropriating the mug shots of suspected meth users, British news media warn, “these horrifying pictures reveal the ravaging effects of the dance-sex drug poised to sweep Britain.”\textsuperscript{37} As I have done, Ayers and Jewkes are quick to note that the British Crime Survey shows methamphetamine use to be quite low, with about 0.05 percent of people surveyed having used the drug in the past year. Nevertheless, they recognize that this sort of claims making—part propaganda and part myth—helps solidify “deadly crystal meth” as a lived reality of everyday British life.
But what of epidemic, a word that is almost always included in any discussion of illicit drugs? The US Centers for Disease Control defines epidemic rather ambiguously as “the occurrence of more cases of disease than expected in a given area or among a specific group of people over a particular period of time.” Given the numbers of regular users described earlier, most people would be hard-pressed to validate notions of a meth epidemic. However, if we see the problem as the state does, that is, through the desire to impose outright prohibition of any unauthorized drug use, legal or otherwise, then the threshold of epidemic is quite easily satisfied. Since the prohibitionist state expects, in fact demands, no unauthorized drug use of any kind, any sort of transgression in this regard can be seen as an epidemic. And so the methamphetamine epidemic spreads, not in the number of initiates but in the imaginary, the pulsing background of social insecurity, animated by newspaper editorials, news broadcasts, investigative journalism, documentary films, and the word on the street, all of which speak of the drug in dire and spectacular terms.

Drug War, Real and Imagined

Returning to the idea of the imaginary, my aim here is to broadly theorize the ways in which the methamphetamine and drug-war imaginaries are at work within a boundless governing strategy encompassing foreign and domestic, local and global. What the book does not provide is a detailed history of methamphetamine or an analysis of contemporary use patterns. While it is critical of current policing practices, it also does not systematically evaluate particular strategies, nor does it offer specific policy remedies. Likewise, the book does not spend a great deal of time contemplating why people use methamphetamine or exploring the various avenues for drug treatment. Though it draws widely on political and cultural theory, the aim is not to document or define subcultural traits unique to methamphetamine users. And while cultural representation is a primary concern, the book does not aim to adjudicate the real or objective facts of methamphetamine. In other words, this book is not intended to be a work of empirical social science or one that abides by particular disciplinary boundaries. The focus here is on the ways in which the methamphetamine imaginary animates the politics
of fear and insecurity across a variety of seemingly unrelated social fields.\textsuperscript{40} From the environmental dangers of discarded chemicals and volatile clandestine laboratories,\textsuperscript{41} the corporeal and racial insecurities provoked by the drug’s effects on the body, and coalitions mobilized to protect children, families, and the boundaries of traditional morality to the politics of mobility, border, and nation, produced and reproduced by police who hunt traffickers across landscapes of all kinds, as part of a broader politics of security, the methamphetamine imaginary links small-town streets to distant battlefields, setting out homeland battlefronts in a global drug war.

To more fully elaborate what this means, it is perhaps a useful exercise to explain my approach through a brief comparison to recent sociological/criminological writing on methamphetamine. In the fine book \textit{The Methamphetamine Industry in America: Transnational Cartels and Local Entrepreneurs}, authors Henry Brownstein, Timothy Mulcahy, and Johannes Huessy aim to describe how “methamphetamine markets evolved in the United States over more than a decade given changes in public policies and practices and changing public opinion.”\textsuperscript{42} One chapter in particular sets out to document all that goes into the methamphetamine industry—local recipes, knowledges, languages, tastes, preferences—in short, its culture:

We live in a world that is made up of stuff. . . . The stuff also includes the words and actions you use to communicate, maybe to describe or explain something. The point is that all this stuff has shared meaning for the people who use it and the people around them who share the world they live in. In that way they can be part of a group or collective of people that shares the same time and space and has the ability to collaborate or even cooperate to accomplish things, or at least work around each other. Every society and every subgroup of people has their stuff. This is also true for the subgroup of people who participate in the methamphetamine industry.\textsuperscript{43}

Conceiving the culture of the methamphetamine industry as the “stuff” of this particular “subgroup of people” is in keeping with longstanding sociological understandings of culture. However, one of the many problems with this approach is that it understands culture as rather
fixed and uniform—a deterministic structure—something that just is. The view of culture as something discrete and distinct to a particular group ultimately defines the boundaries necessary to exclude members of that particular group as separate, alien, Other. This becomes all the more apparent in the authors’ discussion of modes of “communication in the methamphetamine industry”: “The developments in modern communication technology have been as important for doing business in the methamphetamine industry as they have for most other areas of social life. Respondents as far apart as Atlanta, Georgia, and Salem, Oregon, told us about cases of meth deals being set using code transmitted during an online game involving Xboxes. Others mentioned iPods and Skype for communicating information to set up meth deals.” Here it seems as though Brownstein and colleagues are surprised to learn that people in the “methamphetamine industry” communicate in the same ways as those in “other areas of social life,” an assumption that subtly upholds the view of a distinct and separate “methamphetamine culture.” As I argue here, in theory and application, this could not be further from the truth. One way around this is to view culture not as fixed and determined but as a collection of resources or a repertoire, a dynamic ongoing process and accomplishment, rather than something to which one takes part or is born into. As researchers and writers, Brownstein and colleagues draw on methamphetamine culture to understand and accomplish things in the world, while also helping to shape how others understand it. In fact, having much to say about methamphetamine, the book and its authors are as much a part of its culture as are the police, dealers, and users whom they describe (the same is true for this book as well).

The view of culture—dynamic, performative, produced, consumed—taken up here is very much in keeping with the views advanced by the sometimes-disparate collection of writers gathered under the edifice cultural criminology. Simply put, cultural criminology is a perspective aiming to critically engage with and intervene in the politics of meaning surrounding crime and crime control. Whereas scholars from a functionalist perspective might hold the rather-contradictory view that the very existence of a “methamphetamine culture” actually signals an absence of culture, a pathological failure of socialization into collective meaning, cultural criminologists see such transgressions as a way to
more fully understand and challenge social inequalities. As the cultural criminology stalwarts Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward, and Jock Young are careful to explain,

The two ways of understanding culture are not irreconcilable; both highlight the collective construction of shared meaning, if in different domains, and both suggest the ongoing, contested negotiation of morality and cultural identity. For some, this negotiation calls forth a collective belief in tradition, an emotional embracing of stasis and conformity, and the ideological mobilization of rigid stereotype and fundamental value. For others, it calls forth against this conformity a gnawing disbelief in the social order itself, and so a willingness to risk inventing collective alternatives. For cultural criminologists, both are of interest—and the moments when the two collide around issues of crime and justice form a significant subject matter for cultural criminology itself.48

Tensions between the two views of culture outlined here lead to another key point that must be untangled. Just as we cannot break the “culture of the methamphetamine industry” cleanly from the broader culture from which it emerges, neither can we so neatly separate the facts or an objective reality of methamphetamine from the innumerable ways that it is imagined, represented, and understood. Here we can say that human behavior and actors themselves determine social worlds and social reality. Always conditioned by the past and shared histories, the present and future are active processes, an unfolding narrative or script, written and rewritten through social interaction. This does not mean the aim here is to theorize culture and representation to the point of the hyperreal, where there is no shared meaning and hence no future. On the contrary, the aim is to understand the self as a constellation of representations and constructed meanings conditioned by the broader society. As Majid Yar puts it, “Representations cannot and should not simply be dismissed as instances of ideological misdirection or ‘false truths,’ but should instead be taken seriously as socially situated and contextually relevant forms of sense-making that both reflect and shape our shared world views. It is precisely in their resonance with common existential and moral concerns that they find their purchase in the imaginations of their audience and offer us an important window into
collective sensibilities.”

Observing Yar’s warning, the imaginary as I conceive of it here is distinguished from the traditional Marxist view of ideology, which is a sort of false consciousness that can be dispelled by truth or supplanted by revolutionary politics. In other words, we should be concerned not with finding an objective reality of methamphetamine but rather with how its representations are put to use by people in order to understand and create their social worlds. So, for instance, as the philosopher Louis Althusser set out in his famous *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,* state power and authority operate through what he called repressive state apparatuses (RSAs), institutions such as the police and military, which dispense violence in order to maintain the position of the ruling classes. Ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) also do the work of repression on behalf of the bourgeois classes and state power, but rather than through direct coercion and violence, they do so by means of an active process Althusser called “interpellation.” The act of interpellation or becoming a subject of state power, according to Althusser, occurs at the moment one responds to or recognizes state authority. So when the policeman addresses the citizen, “Hey, you there!” at the precise moment of recognition, the citizen is interpellated by the police power and thus actively creates his own subjectivity. And so Althusser understands ideology not simply as false consciousness but as a dynamic political and cultural process of habitual subjection—in which individuals reaffirm their subordination to state power and authority. By engaging in particular social and cultural practices—education, religion, economy—we become the subjects of particular institutions, while simultaneously reconstituting them. Yet in order to be addressed by state power, one must understand that one is always already subject to it. Here we might again draw on the work of Žižek, to expand on the Althusserian understanding of interpellation. Building on the Lacanian “big Other,” Žižek asks how ideology might prefigure or predetermine interpellation. For Žižek, the “very positing of the big Other is a subjective gesture, that is, the big Other is a virtual entity that exists only through the subject’s presupposition.” Whereas Althusser’s aim was to describe the material relations of ideology as interpellation between state and subject, Žižek would add another level of abstraction, a third figure, and argue that the state as “big Other is, on the contrary, ultimately virtual and as such, in its most basic dimension, ‘immaterial.’” Also through
the example of the policeman, Žižek explains, “The ‘third figure’ which intervenes between us ordinary citizens and the policeman is not directly fear but the big Other: we fear the policeman insofar as he is not just himself, a person like us, since his acts are the acts of power, that is to say, insofar as he is experienced as the stand-in for the big Other, for the social order.”\(^53\) So for Žižek, the “third figure” or big Other represents a totality of Althusserian ideological state apparatuses, which is to say immaterial relations internal to the individual, which prefigure the police and state power. This returns us to the imaginary.

Police and state power do not exist in a vacuum, nor do they emerge naturally; there is always a preexisting internal and imaginary dimension. As Žižek puts it elsewhere, “ideology is not constituted by abstract propositions in themselves, rather, ideology is itself this very texture of the lifeworld which ‘schematizes’ the propositions, rendering them ‘livable.’”\(^54\) The drug war is enacted and thus made livable not only by state coercion and propaganda but also by the background of routine symbolic cues, signs, habits, narratives, actions, and immaterial utterances that structure the ways people imagine their social existence and their relations with others—the imaginary. So when a shopper buying a box of over-the-counter cold medicine inquires as to why the clerk needs his identification card and learns that it is because “people use it to cook meth,” the methamphetamine imaginary is invoked, rendering the drug war a livable part of everyday life. Likewise, when police announce major busts, complete with trophy-shot photos triumphantly displaying large amounts of seized cash, drugs, or guns, and online commentators gleefully join in, offering praise without questioning the legalities of civil asset forfeiture, “policing for profit,” and primitive accumulation, the drug war in its most problematic, ideological form is reproduced. This is at least a starting point. By dispelling the false dichotomies between consent and coercion and the real and represented, we move away from a simple top-down ideology/propaganda model of drug control and better understand how subjects put methamphetamine and the drug war to work as part of a dynamic repertoire of everyday life.

Understanding the methamphetamine imaginary as a collection of images, gestures, cues, utterances, and dispositions that can be put to work in the material practices of everyday sense making returns us to what we might call the act of *pretending to pretend to believe*. Here,
Žižek’s oft-used example of the relationship between parents, children, and Santa Claus is useful. Žižek insists that children, beyond the youngest and most naïve, know that Santa Claus does not exist, but continue to play their part in the myth well past the point of realization as part of habituated ritual and custom. For adults, performing the Santa Claus myth “for the sake of the children” actually helps disavow, for a time, their need to believe in the existence of innocent and gullible children, making the adults themselves, not the children, the true subjects of ideology. This sort of disavowal—pretending to pretend to believe—helps us better understand why the drug war exists in spite of a perpetually expanding collection of evidence speaking to its deleterious effects and impotence.

Thinking in crude binaries for a moment, we might imagine how people from the left and right understand the drug war. On the right, a conservative politician might be dedicated to the drug war, wholly believing the consumption of illicit substances to be the cause of many social ills, crime, violence, dependency, unraveling moral order, and so on. And so the conservative politician supports aggressive policing, draconian punishments, and the politicians who peddle them. Whereas on the other side of our crude binary, a more liberal politician might be suspicious of official doctrine and instead understand the drug war as rooted in the legacies of racism and divisive politics and choose to work toward undoing the consequences of bad policy and toward the restoration of civil liberties. What both share in common is a collection of social ills—crime, violence, poverty—-associated with drugs and the drug war. Regardless of how one chooses to address these problems, positioning them as things to be solved by solving the drug war divorces them from the much-larger systems of violence and inequality in which they both participate. Though crime, violence, and poverty are preexisting conditions, drugs and the drug war enable people from the right and left to disavow their embeddedness and thus their complicity in the inherent social inequalities of life under capitalism. It is therefore not enough to search for and find the objective reality of methamphetamine on which to build a better drug war; rather, we must map its immaterial dimensions and apprehend how it fits within existing structures of power and inequality, in order to begin to imagine a world not only without the drug war but unfettered by the vicissitudes of predatory capitalism.
Through an exegesis of perhaps the best-known contemporary meth story, AMC’s wildly popular *Breaking Bad*, chapter 1 outlines the form, force, and effect of the methamphetamine imaginary and the place of the drug war in contemporary American social life and begins to theorize it, not only as governing logic or racial caste but as death wish, a compulsion arising from a disavowal of the many inequalities of the present social order and the certainties of human mortality. Rather than simply seeing *Breaking Bad* as an entertaining program about methamphetamine, we might better understand it as part of a cultural imaginary of spectacular self-destruction, which permits the voyeuristic public to live through and reproduce the drug war in the real and everyday.

By way of two well-known antimeth advertising campaigns, chapter 2 engages the burgeoning field of visual criminology to show how crime-control projects use the image to draw on and reproduce disparate subject positions and social relations. I describe how the popular Faces of Meth program and the Meth Project’s “Not Even Once” campaign actively (re)produce meth’s powers of monstrous transformation. Structured by and embedded within already-existing cultural anxieties about the figure of “white trash,” these crime-control projects produce meth’s visualities, the ways of seeing the supposed ills of meth use, and carve disparate race/class hierarchies from relative homogeneity.

Focusing on one year and an antimeth legislative campaign in Kansas, chapter 3 details the political problematization of the methamphetamine imaginary and the ways in which a seemingly disparate group of political actors engage it as part of broader governing strategies. Relying primarily on news media accounts, the chapter illustrates how by overstating the realities of meth use, politicizing official statistics and reframing key events, authorities link local meth control to the wars on drugs and terror, themes that are taken up in earnest in subsequent chapters.

Treating police as important cultural producers, chapter 4 asks how the drug war is made a livable part of everyday life in small towns across the rural Midwest. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews focusing on police officers’ attitudes about community and their beliefs about the causes of crime and drug use, the chapter identifies a narrative
of rural decline attributed to the producers and users of methamphetamine. This narrative, it is argued, reproduces punitive and authoritarian sensibilities making the drug war a lived reality for small towns far removed from what is considered typical drug-war terrains. As such, the cultural work of rural police provides important insight into the shape and direction of late-capitalist crime control beyond the familiar terrains of the city and its “ghettos.”

Focusing on the cultural production of space and particularly long-standing notions of idyllic rural landscapes, chapter 5 shows how the methamphetamine imaginary, crime control, and police power combine to fabricate the affective landscapes of the rural United States. Beginning with a critical reading of the *New York Times* best seller *Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town*, the chapter aims to expand cultural criminology’s urban focus and to work toward a cultural criminology of the rural.

Engaging the emerging concern for “Mexican meth,” chapter 6 shows how the methamphetamine and drug-war imaginaries, interlaced with the terror war as “narcoterror,” bolster nationalistic arguments for “border security” and lay the ideological framework for economic and military intervention beyond the United States’ borders. Positioning current counternarcoterror projects in Mexico within a longer history of counterinsurgency and pacification in Central America and Southeast Asia, the chapter describes the drug war as an ideological gesture obscuring and justifying neoliberal trade policies and capital accumulation by dispossession.